

Faith Pulpit

Third Generation Christians

“And also all that generation were gathered unto their fathers; and there arose another generation after them, which knew not the Lord, nor yet the works which he had done for Israel” Joshua 2:10.

Regarding those who may be described as third generation Christians, they appear that way not so much by numerical succession as by attitude. A fifth generation believer may maintain the freshness of his salvation and discovery. A second generation believer may leave the convictions of his parents, take everything for granted, and thereby compress decades of Christian experience into a fraction of a lifetime.

A chief lesson of the past is that nothing stays put. The pyramids of Egypt are still there, but the facing blocks are long gone. The Puritan experiment in New England the Bible commonwealth, lasted only about a generation. After only thirty years they found it necessary to accept the Halfway Covenant; there simply were not enough church members to provide the voters to represent the people in the colony.

Harvard was founded to train ministers for New England, but it cooled in two generations, and Yale cooled in about one generation. Andover Seminary was founded in 1807, with strong safeguards and two statements for faculty and board members to sign. The seminary had two boards, Trustees to set policy, and Overseers to keep an eye on the Trustees. Every five years all board and faculty members signed the doctrinal statement and the Westminster Confession. Yet in only six decades teachers were teaching outright Liberalism.

Along the way of that aging progress in both individuals and in institutions, we may note certain attitudes that believers have toward their tenets and positions. These attitudes seem in general to change according to the time that the believer has been in the faith.

First Generation Christians

The newly-converted believer tends to show a convert's zeal. He has a sense of deliverance, a strong awareness of the power of the cross to free him from his past. He has a keen sense of what he came from and of the wonder of what Christ did for him.

Those attitudes and awarenesses carry over into group life. Young churches are often made up of new believers, and as a body the young church often shows a notable joy and enthusiasm. The members are more aware of the issues surrounding salvation and the founding of the church.

The newly converted are more aware of the costs of leaving the world and of following Christ. It was a crisis to break from friends and sometimes from family. It costs for a newly-gathered church to go from living room to storefront to a building program. The charter members never forget what it was like. In the case of a new church coming out of a convention, similar costs had to be paid. Years ago a seasoned pastor told of speaking to a Baptist associational meeting in Indiana. He pressed the pastors to leave their apostate convention. He remembered that some forty-five pastors did just that, leaving their retirement, and undertaking to pull their churches out into the new Association. Such costs tend to etch themselves on the memory of those who paid them.

Second Generation Christians

The pattern is not quite the same for those saved in a newly-Christian home. The reality of salvation is compelling, and the changes in mom and dad may still be there to be seen.

The children may well remember what things were like before Christ came in. Such people grow up with a sense of security, of love in the home, of order, of church in the weekly schedule, of bills being paid, and of a measure of faithfulness to one another

The second generation Christian has a heritage to preserve. To the extent that he takes the things of Christ seriously, he tends to do what his parents did. He is dimly aware that he has a faith to pass on to his own children. He may accept the costs of discipleship and even give himself for vocational Christian service; but the tang is not the same as it was for his parents. A similar pattern reveals itself in churches and institutions. The young members know something of the cost that someone had to pay, so that the church might be free and vital. They are aware of the value of the Christian life as well as that of the organization in keeping them from the evils their parents had been delivered from. Church matters to them; the association matters likewise. They still know something of what the church and perhaps the association cost.

During the second generation, however, we may note a certain tolerance that comes with the confidence that they have in themselves and in their church. Since the situation is basically so good, they need not be fussy about details. Specifics of personal separation begin to become options.

Andover Seminary, for all its safeguards, began to mellow in four decades, when the trustees ruled that adjunct faculty need not be compelled to sign the doctrinal statement. Second generation churches tend to accept the easy propaganda that the old taboos were evidence of legalism.

Third Generation Christians

To the third generation believer, all is familiar. He has the shelter and the security of a Christian home, and he probably receives Christ in Sunday school. He has Christian friends, perhaps from church to daycare to Christian camp to graduation. He knows dozens of verses and can pray fluently. He may show success as a soul-winner. He is sheltered from the world until he confronts it on the tube or in the neighborhood. In his teen years he goes through a crisis of rebellion and questioning; and if he survives, he rejoins the youth group and perhaps goes on to Christian higher education. His pattern changes, however. He does not take the old commitments so seriously. Personal separation is more from habit than from devotion to Christ. He prepares for a life of comfortable affluence.

At that point, familiarity breeds tolerance, whether in one's personal life or in the corporate. The old positions now become negotiable. Personal separation is a matter of preference, no longer of devotion. The church doctrinal statement becomes a set of loose guidelines. The association's values and bylaws, hammered out after hard experience, are replaced by others, more pragmatic, and its preaching becomes calm. It becomes important to keep up with the times, and the moves away from the founding purpose seem to pass unnoticed. As Northwestern Schools went through the transitions of the 1950s, closing the Bible college and the seminary, the word was, "This is what Dr. Riley would have done had he lived." Unlikely that he would have, but a predictable justification.

Fuller Seminary showed how the process can be accelerated. Marsden's informative book *Reforming Fundamentalism* tells how Charles E. Fuller and Harold Ockenga put the seminary together in 1947. They began with a faculty of near-Fundamentalists. In just fifteen years the school was deeply split between its second-generation-type and third-generation-type faculty, leading to the crisis of December 1962, to control by the radicals, and to the profound regrets of its founder, Charles E. Fuller.

It is a matter of attitude, not of numerical sequence. In the third generation the importance of deliverance and of the founding issues gets less and less. With that shift in people's attitudes, they take their families and churches the more casually. For the church or the association, one would think that the new members would preserve the freshness and zeal. If however the new members take on the attitudes of those already there, history is going to repeat itself. Despite rotating the members, the third generation will have brought about the end of the founders' dream.

Does history have to repeat itself, or is there a way to arrest the process? It looks as if interrupting the process will have to come along two lines. First, those who would arrest the process will have to do a serious ministry of teaching history. If the coming generation does not know the past, it will have little

basis on which to appraise or preserve anything. Yet when seminaries have recently updated their curricula, the history courses were among the first to be streamlined out.

The second line has to do with motivating, with preaching such a walk with God that the young will have some reason beyond their own pleasure for doing God's work, even when it costs them. We must offer something more substantial than fun. We must make the Word so vital that they will not repeat the patterns of those who outlived Joshua and the generation who entered the land. If we fail to teach and to motivate, let us not be surprised at the spiritual chill of our young and at the subversion of our institutions. If we are to reverse history, we will not reverse it in the easy drift of events.

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Dr. Robert Delnay (Th.D., Grace Theological Seminary) was a distinguished theologian, educator, and author whose ministry spanned over seven decades. A graduate of Wheaton College, Dallas Theological Seminary, and Grace Theological Seminary, Dr. Delnay served in numerous leadership and teaching roles, including at Faith Baptist Bible College, where he was a beloved professor known for his commitment to expository preaching and biblical scholarship.

A prolific author, he wrote several books and articles, leaving a lasting legacy of theological insight and pastoral wisdom. Dr. Delnay's deep love for God's Word and his dedication to training the next generation of Christian leaders impacted countless students and ministries worldwide. He went home to be with Christ in 2023.