

**GENERATIONAL APPROACHES TO HERMENEUTICS**

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## INTRODUCTION:

### The Great Diversity in the Church

According to the dictionary, the word *diversity* is defined as the state or fact of being diverse, unlikeness; multiformity; and a point of difference.<sup>1</sup> There has never been a more *multiformitous* time in Adventism like today. We have more *points of difference*, and *unlikeness* that has sprung up as a result of the great diversity that makes up the Seventh-day Adventist church. Despite the fact that the church has an entire fundamental belief statement dedicated to the attempt to be Unified as a Body of Christ<sup>2</sup>, there is a glaring absence of conversation and tolerance in regards to that diversity. This diversity is evident in nearly every heterogeneous setting, if you are willing to admit that it exists. The diversity that exists within the average church in the North American Division takes two major forms of diversity: the type of diversity that you can control, and the type of diversity that you cannot.

Diversity that cannot be controlled are things like being born into *that* family, *that* ethnicity, *that* gender, *that* personality type, *that* learning style, *that* generation. A person cannot control their genetics or the external forces that have an influence on their early development. Diversity that can be controlled are things that a person chooses to subject themselves to for one reason or another, such as *that* educational background, *that* career path, *that* socioeconomic level (often influenced by other factors, but still in large part due to the choices that a person makes), *that* geographic region lived in, *that* political affiliation, *that* religious belief system, and the beliefs about *those* social issues. All of these aspects of diversity have a tremendous influence on how a given person sees and relates to the world around them. This is especially

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<sup>1</sup> Dictionary, "Diversity," Dictionary.com, October 30, 2014, <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/diversity>

<sup>2</sup> General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. "Unity in the Body of Christ." Seventh-day Adventist world church. Last modified 2014. <http://www.adventist.org/beliefs/church/unity-in-the-body-of-christ/>.

important to everything that follows in this paper. Diversity has an influence. To ignore diversity and to say that everyone is the same, or should be, ignores our humanity and stifles the body of Christ.

Addressing diversity at the church in Corinth, the Apostle Paul begins the book of Corinthians by saying; “I urge you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to agree together, to end your divisions, and to be united by the same mind and purpose.”<sup>3</sup> Later Paul dedicates an entire chapter to discuss the importance of every member belonging to the body, despite the differences and gifts each brings to that body. After explaining the importance of the different members and the value of even the most insignificant part, Paul says “now I will show you a way that is beyond comparison,” and then he begins what has become known as the Love Chapter. Diversity is an opportunity for God’s people to love. True, it can be ignored in effort to avoid conflicts. However it can also improve the body to make it more loving and more Christ-like. It is with this foundational understanding of the importance of diversity that I would like to focus on only one aspect of the great diversity present in the Seventh-day Adventist Church that is so often overlooked. This single aspect of our diversity that I would like to begin a discussion on is the impact of generational diversity and how each generation has been configured by the times they grew up in, how their life experiences have shaped their view of God, and how it has shaped their unique religious behaviors as a result.

### **The Need for this Study – Generational Conflict**

It seems like every generation struggles with how to adjust to the next. I remember my grandmother constantly chiding my choices in music and entertainment when I was in junior

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<sup>3</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:10 NET

high. I would often go over to her house after school until my parents got off of work and could take me home. Grams and I would sit on the couch together and fight over which tv show we were going to watch. My choices were too crass and sarcastic, while her choices were too boring and old school for me. This conflict of interest was not just limited to television, we also disagreed on music, books, and even how things were done at church. Anyone who has spent much time around generational diversity will know that there are some major differences in the way different generations see things. The way people think has changed. Advances in technology have altered the way people operate and approach the world around them. While some of these changes are harmless, other changes could be twisted to abuse technology, twist and distort truths, and begin to change traditions long held by institutions. With each new wave of adjustments and cultural tweaking, previous generations are left with a decision of how to respond.

Each generation must decide if they will learn and adjust to these changes, or resist the changes— clinging to what they know and have become comfortable experiencing. At best generations could come to terms with the differences and live in harmony, or at least avoidance of the issues. At worst, this could produce a tendency for older generations to feel superior because their traditions and customs have worked so well, an attitude of “why should I change” or “If it isn’t broke, don’t fix it” could start to develop leading toward an eventual hard stance on issues thus creating more conflict. The younger generations, on the other hand, might see new and better ways of being more efficient or productive. However, this generation could lean toward a new form of arrogance based on being “more relevant” than previous generations. There is the possibility of all of the generations becoming more fixated on "being right" instead of developing community. This would lead to more philosophical discussions between

generations using words such as *absolute truth*; or phrases such as, “in my opinion.” These differences of thought lead to conflict between the generations. This generational conflict is especially evident in a religious setting, where truth and opinion are directed by what God has revealed in the Bible.

Perhaps the most visible display of generational conflict within the Adventist Church is seen on a boarding academy campus. I have spent nearly ten years working in Adventist schools as an Academy Chaplain and Bible Teacher. One thing that has remained constant wherever I have worked is that many of our schools are located in a nest of generational diversity. The common theme seems to be that our campuses are situated in diverse communities containing multiple aspects of diversity (age, gender, educational, and cultural differences, etc) which creates diverse thinking as well. The local churches tend to have a larger population of older generations as well as the academy students. Many of our schools have neighboring retirement communities and assisted living centers that also provide parishioners for the local church. Being over the age of 50, the majority of the local church members have already supplied the children that fed the future population of the church many years prior. The average academy also provides between 100-130 students on any given Sabbath for worship, making up nearly a third of the church body on Sabbath. Because of this, the academy students represent a significant age demographic and influence on the local church.

The conflict, which arises in our churches, is often directly connected to differing generational interpretations of the Bible. In the grand scheme of things, the issues discussed are quite small in comparison to the world’s problems and the bigger picture, but the issues are discussed nonetheless. Issues such as “what is an appropriate Sabbath activity?” Or, “What does the word *moderate* mean in relationship to dress and adornment?” And also, “What music is

considered ‘Biblical?’” Opinions on these issues are often more directly influenced by the generational characteristics rather than a biblical standard. Just in case you are wondering, these issues are not isolated to your Academy campus and local church alone. Any church that has a significant population of young people may be addressing or may need to address these issues at some point. These issues discussed, with such passion at times, all come down to a conflict of hermeneutics.

According to the book *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, “hermeneutics involves interpreting or explaining. In fields like biblical studies or literature, it refers to the task of explaining the meaning of a piece of writing. Hermeneutics describes the principles people use to understand what something means, to comprehend what a message written, oral, or visual – is endeavoring to communicate.”<sup>4</sup> Typically in a religious conversation on hermeneutics the main focus of study is directed by the Bible. However, a church’s hermeneutic is also greatly effected by each member’s education, culture, life experiences, gender identity, religious background and a number of other factors. With so many external forces shaping the way each person reads and interprets the Bible to produce their hermeneutic; few people, if any, can honestly come to the scriptures without some preconceived thought driving the way they interpret the text being studied. Because of this, it is important to take an honest look at what factors influence our hermeneutics, both as an individual and as a church. A part of that honest look involves the differences in hermeneutics that each generation possesses. In understanding the differences

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<sup>4</sup> William W. Klein and others, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 4.

between each generation's hermeneutic, it becomes possible to begin healing some of the cross-generational conflict and begin a more credible attempt at unity as a church.

### **The Need for this Study – The Graying of Adventism**

Recently, certain portions within the Adventist church have been discussing a phenomenon called the *Graying of Adventism*. Put simply, the Graying of Adventism is the term used to say that the majority of the members within the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) church are old and getting older. While the exact data varies from study to study, the basic facts remain the same. Researchers at the *Center for Creative Ministry* produced a newsletter in 2006, which stated that the median age of Seventh day Adventists in North America is 58<sup>5</sup> years old ... among native born white and black members the median age is even higher.<sup>6</sup> This figure is striking considering Monte Sahlin and Paul Richardson claim that the median age in the United States of America is only 36 years old.<sup>7</sup> The Seventh-day Adventist church is old and dying off. If this statistic is not troubling enough, the church's younger generation is also leaving in startling numbers.

According to Roger Dudley's research, "at least 40-50 percent of Seventh-day Adventist teenagers in north America are essentially leaving the church by their middle 20s. This figure may well be higher."<sup>8</sup> This fact is confirmed by Sahlin and Richardson's research, which reveals that there are more than 1,000 Adventist congregations with no members under the age of 50.

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<sup>5</sup> This figure only counted baptized members within the church. Another study done by Sahlin suggests that the average age for all baptized and unbaptized people within the denomination, from youngest to oldest, in North America is 51 years of age. This includes young children, and a significant immigrant population.

<sup>6</sup> Center for Creative Ministry, *INNOVATION* Newsletter, 12(19) [Electronic Newsletter], November 11, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Monte Sahlin and Paul Richardson, *Seventh-day Adventists in North America: A Demographic Profile* (Lincoln, NE: Center for Creative Ministry, 2008).

<sup>8</sup> Roger L. Dudley, *Why Our Teenagers Leave the Church: Personal Stories From a 10-year Study* (Hagerstown, MD: Reveiw and Herald Publishing Association, 2000), 35.



There are many factors that are leading to the loss of the youth in the Adventist church, which will be addressed later on. This graying of the Seventh-day Adventist Church suggests that the youth are dropping out of the church, and the old will continue to get older and eventually begin dying off. Unless things change, within a decade or two there will be a drastic decline in the membership of the Seventh-day Adventist church in North America.

To add to the problem of the losses in membership, the church's evangelistic endeavors are not able to meet the needs of these losses. One recent study by Barna Group indicates that "evangelism is on the decline among key demographics, especially among Busters and Boomers who make up nearly two out of three active Christians today."<sup>9</sup> Within Adventism specifically, the North American Division office of the Secretary estimates that the church's growth rate ranges from 1.57 to 2.96%.<sup>10</sup> These are not percentages worth bragging about. Monte Sahlin noted in *Adventist Today* that:

About one in three converts through public evangelism are former members rejoining the church and another 20 percent are the children of church members. There are very few real converts among the cultural mainstream of America – less than one per congregation per year. That is an accession rate so low that it would likely occur if the organization did nothing about evangelism and spent not one dime on outreach.<sup>11</sup>

If the evangelistic efforts are not bringing in enough new members to fill the void of the old and young, then there will be a tremendous loss to the membership of the SDA church in North America within a few decades. The worst case scenario would be that within twenty years the older generations will have died off and the youth have left the church leaving only around

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<sup>9</sup> David Kinnaman, "Is Evangelism Going Out of Style?," *Barna Group*, <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/faith-spirituality/648-is-evangelism-going-out-of-style#.UrR1kfZKAXy>.

<sup>10</sup> Bryant, G A. *Secretary's Report, 2013 Year End Meeting*. North American Division Seventh-day Adventists, 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Monte Sahlin, "The Adventist Church In North America Today," *Adventist Today* 15, no. 5 (Sept-Oct 2007): 6.

36 percent of the current total membership.<sup>12</sup> Roger Dudley's study does suggest that around 1/5 of the drop outs will return to the church after having children,<sup>13</sup> which does give some hope to this situation. However, the key to this dilemma is to keep as many current members as possible, while reaching out to potential members. This requires a better understanding of the people the church is trying to recruit. This also requires, among other things, a better understanding of generational hermeneutics. Each generation will need to feel accepted and valued; they will need to feel as though they are contributing to the religious community as a whole.

### **THE PURPOSE OF THIS PAPER**

The purpose of this paper is to raise awareness to the differences between the four generations, how these differences effect each generation's approach to interpreting the bible, how these differences effect the doctrines they hold as valuable and finally, how it effects ecclesiastical life as a whole. Maya Angelou is often quoted as saying, "Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better." As a church, we have an obligation to do better. Not just for our current church climate, but also for future generations of the church. It is my hope that this paper will offer education and solutions to the losses we have seen, and will continue to see in our church unless things change.

### **METHOD OF THIS PAPER**

This paper will begin by discussing the differences between the Boomers, Baby Boomers, GenXers, and Millennial generation. Each generation sees religion from a different worldview that has been shaped by the culture around them. This paper will seek to reveal how culture has

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<sup>12</sup> Which actually works well for people who believe in the literal 144,000 that will be saved.

<sup>13</sup> Roger L. Dudley, *Why Our Teenagers Leave the Church: Personal Stories From a 10-year Study* (Hagerstown, MD: Reveiw and Herald Publishing Association, 2000), 35

influenced each generation, has set them up to conflict with each other, and that these differences also shape each generation's approach to the scriptures.

The first part of this paper will reveal how culture has shaped each generation's use of the bible. The second part will show that these different approaches in scriptural interpretation lead to conflict within our churches today. The third part of this paper will provide bible teaching methodologies for each generation. The fourth part of this paper will discuss the conflicts that stem from each generation's application of scriptures. Issues such as the Sabbath, Prophets, Worship, and Entertainment all revolve around the application of each generation's hermeneutic. These differences require an education of each generation in regard to how to relate to each other, as well as educating cross-generational hermeneutics in effort to promote unity. The millennial generation is the future of the Seventh-day Adventist church; therefore the fifth and final section of this paper will describe the potential church of tomorrow. This study will focus on the Millennials and their use of the scriptures in attempt to show potential trends for the future of the Seventh-day Adventist church.

### **DESCRIPTION AND COMPARISON OF GENERATIONS**

There is some debate as to what a generation actually represents. The *Webster's New World Dictionary of American English* describes a generation as "the average period (about thirty years) between the birth of one generation and that of the next."<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, Robert Wuthnow defines a generation as:

A biological age group which (a) shares a 'common location in the social and historical process' which limits it to 'a specific range of potential experience, predisposing it for a certain characteristic type of historically relevant action'; (b) has a 'common destiny' or

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<sup>14</sup> Victoria Neufeldt, ed., *Webster's New World Dictionary of American English* (Cleveland, OH: Webster's New World Dictionaries, 1988), 562.

interest just as that of a socioeconomic class; and (c) exhibits ‘identity of responses, a certain affinity in the way in which all move with and are formed by their common experiences.’<sup>15</sup>

Establishing beginning and ending dates for the four major generations is also challenging because so few researchers agree on exact dates for when these generations begin or end. For example, in the August 20, 2009 issue of the *Adventist Review*, Bruce Manners states that the Boomers are born from 1946-1961<sup>16</sup>; while researchers for NCLS Research date the Boomers from 1942-1961.<sup>17</sup> Because of these disagreements this paper will approximate the dates for each generation to the nearest decade unless directly quoting a source.

It is also important to note that these generational characteristics are not universal and must be understood in light of the fact that there are literally thousands of factors that shape a person. Just because a person’s birth date places them in a particular generation, does not mean that every person in that birth range is going to be characteristic of a particular generation. In a paper entitled *Embracing Generational Differences*, Pam Foster states the following valuable information regarding distinguishing generations:

One should keep in mind that generational beliefs are not absolute. Significant differences may vary from rural to urban settings and low to high economic backgrounds. It is also important to note that being born early or late in a generational era may also alter ones viewpoints and opinions. Persons born within two to three years of a generational divide are referred to as ‘*Cuspers*’ and may favor and display characteristics from the past, next or even both relative generations. They are the folks that cement generations together. They function as mediators, translators, and mentors.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Robert Wuthnow, “Recent Patter of Secularization: A Problem of Generations?,” *American Sociological Review*, 41, 1976, 850-1.

<sup>16</sup> Bruce manners, “What’s Next, Boomer? Maybe Conformity is Catching up,” *Adventist Review*, August 20, 2009, 27.

<sup>17</sup> Ruth Powell and Kathy Jacka, “Generations Apporach Church Differently,” *NCLS Research Occasional Paper* 11, (January 2008): 5. <http://http://www.ncls.org.au/default.aspx?sitemapid=6270>

<sup>18</sup> Lynne C Lancaster and David Stillman, *When Generations Collide 2003*, Harper Buisiness, New York, NY; quoted in Pam Foster, “Embracing Generational Differences,” *Building Connections*, <http://http://buildingconnections.tamu.edu/a%20Embracing%20Generational%20Differnces-Abstract.pdf>.

Ronald J. Allen confirms this statement and states that, “some persons, in fact are genuinely trans-generational... a pastor needs to recognize the characteristics of each generation are not frozen. A cohort’s view of the world is affected while it lives. Therefore, a preacher needs to pay attention to changes in generations as they evolve.”<sup>19</sup> This statement gives credence to the proposition of this paper, that generations have been influenced by the times in which they have lived, and that this influence also effects their theological understandings and behaviors. This statement also gives the church hope for adjusting, healing, and the possibility of finding common ground to compromise over our differences.

#### **The Elders (1900s – 1940s)**

The first generation to be discussed is the Elder generation. The Elder generation is also known as the Silent generation, the Builder generation, and the GI generation. For the most part, this generation was born between 1900 and 1940 and lived through several life shaping events, such as the Great Depression and the two World Wars. According to Monte Sahlin & Paul Richardson, the Elder generation makes up about 13 percent of the US population. Within Adventism they make up about 31 percent.<sup>20</sup> Dennis Gaylord, director of Chi Alpha Campus Ministries, states that the Elders are hard workers, savers, patriotic, loyal to institutions, private, and dependable. Their core values are: dedication/sacrifice, hard work, conformity, law and order, respect for authority, patience, delayed reward, duty before pleasure, adherence to rules

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<sup>19</sup> Ronald J. Allen, “Preaching to Different Generations,” *Encounter* 58.4, Autumn (1997): 369-370.

<sup>20</sup> Monte Sahlin and Paul Richardson, *Seventh-day Adventists in North America: A Demographic Profile* (Lincoln, NE: Center for Creative Ministry, 2008), 5.

and honor.<sup>21</sup> In a document called *Generations At Baker*, Alison Rhoads and Linda Gough, state that, “members of this generation were not interested in conquering the world as they saw their elders do, but instead were intent on keeping their heads down, their noses to the grindstone, and their lives steady. They constantly looked to others for ideas on how to behave and what to think, preferring the ideas of others to their own.”<sup>22</sup>

### **The Baby Boomers (1940s – 1960s)**

The second generation to be discussed is the Baby Boomer generation. This generation gets its name because of the large population boom that occurred in the 1940s. Sahlin and Richardson, state that the Baby Boomer generation makes up about 27 percent of the US population. Within Adventism they make up about 30 percent.<sup>23</sup> Gaylor states that the Baby Boomers were shaped by: the cold war, the civil rights movement, the space race, and the Watergate scandal. The majority of the troops in the Vietnam War were from the Baby Boom generation. The Baby Boomers are educated and desire quality in what ever they do. They are independent, cause-oriented, and fitness conscious. Baby Boomers have a tendency to question authority. Their core values are: optimism, team orientation, personal gratification, health and wellness, personal growth, work, youth, and involvement.<sup>24</sup>

Rhoads and Gough state that this generation “has always existed in a world of their own making and design. Members of this generation are used to being the center of America’s

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<sup>21</sup> Dennis Gaylor, “Generational Differences,” *AGTS*, Chi Alpha Campus Ministries, [http://http://www.agts.edu/faculty/faculty\\_publications/articles/creps\\_generations\\_chart.pdf](http://http://www.agts.edu/faculty/faculty_publications/articles/creps_generations_chart.pdf).

<sup>22</sup> Alison Rhoads and Linda Gough, “Generations At Baker,” *Baker College*, Baker College Effective Teaching and Learning Department, <http://https://baker.edu/departments/etl/resources/GenatBakerResourceDoc.pdf>.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, Monte Sahlin and Paul Richardson, *Seventh-day Adventists in North America: A Demographic Profile*.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., Dennis Gaylor, *Generational Differences*.

attention at all stages of their lives...they have never been an 'ignored' generation."<sup>25</sup> In *Generations*, Strauss and Howe note that "the Boomer ethos remained a deliberate antithesis to everything [Elder]: spiritualism over science, gratification over patience, negativism over positivism, fractiousness over conformity, rage over friendliness, self over community."<sup>26</sup> In the August 20, 2009 edition of *Adventist Review*, Bruce Manners, describes his view of his generation:

We were out to change the world. We marched in political protests, openly brought sex out of the bedroom and marriage, and challenged authority. Individually, though, we soon settled into a lifestyle remarkably similar to that of our parents, the job, the marriage, the mortgage. Yet unlike our parents, we live with a certain restlessness. We change jobs regularly, our divorce rate is much higher, and our personal debt has skyrocketed... Boomers have been called the most selfish generation ever. Unfortunately, there's some truth in the accusation. It's a truth that's reinforced every time a boomer says their main aim in life is to spend their kids' inheritance.<sup>27</sup>

### **Generation X (1960s – 1980s)**

The third generation to be discussed is the first wave of children from the Baby Boomer generation called Generation X, or GenXers. GenXers (also known as Baby Busters and Generation 13) are born between 1960 and 1980. Sahlin and Richardson, claim that GenXers make up 16 percent of the US population, but only 10 percent within Adventism.<sup>28</sup> Gaylor describes them as being shaped by Roe vs. Wade, the space shuttle Challenger disaster, the fall of the Berlin Wall and Communism, AIDS, and the Clinton Administration's sex scandal. GenXers are characterized by their parental neglect, self reliance, loyalty to relationships, and

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, Alison Rhoads and Linda Gough, *Generations At Baker*

<sup>26</sup> W. Strauss and N. Howe, *Generations: The History of America's Future* (New York, NY: William Morrow, 1991), 302.

<sup>27</sup> Bruce Manners, "What's Next, Boomer?," *Adventist Review*, August 20, 2009, 27.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, Monte Sahlin and Paul Richardson, *Seventh-day Adventists in North America: A Demographic Profile*.

skeptical natures. This generation is also known as the “latch-key” generation, because their parents were often at work or not home, so this generation was left to fend for itself. They are survivors, often stressed out, and seriousness about life. Their core values are: diversity, thinking globally, balance, techno-literacy, fun, informality, self-reliance, and pragmatism. The GenXers are the first generation to take on the Postmodern view of life.<sup>29</sup> Frances Kunreuther, of Harvard University, does a great job comparing the GenXers and the Baby Boomers:

In 1991, Douglas Coupland coined the term *Generation X* in a book that describes a new generation with different values and aspirations from those of the Baby Boomers who precede them...GenXers are characterized as ‘slackers’ who are less invested in their work than Baby Boomers. Those GenXers who aren’t slackers are said to ‘work to live,’ valuing their time away from the job. [As opposed to] Baby Boomer’s [who] ‘live to work’ and tend to overidentify with their job. GenXers who are dedicated to their work are not likely to be loyal to any one organization, where as Baby Boomers tend to stay in one place and expect loyalty to the firm...GenXers work better in an informal environment where they can consult with their peers; Baby Boomers are more comfortable in hierarchical settings. Whereas GenXers are more results oriented, Baby Boomers are more process oriented. GenXers are more technologically savvy and like to get things done quickly. In contrast, Baby Boomers—who rely less on technology—are slower and tend to look at issues more in-depth. GenXers are impatient to show what they can do; they want less oversight and more responsibility. Baby Boomers want to supervise/micromanage GenX and expect them to ‘pay their dues’ before giving them real authority...Both GenX and Baby Boomers think the other generation is materialistic.<sup>30</sup>

### **The Millennial Generation (1980s – 2000s)**

The fourth and final generation to be discussed is the Millennial generation. Also known as Generation Y, Generation We, and Wave 2, the Millennial generation is the second wave of the Baby Boomer’s children. They are born between 1980 and 2000. Sahlin and Richardson say that the Millennials make up around 26 percent of the US population, and 14 percent within

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., Dennis Gaylor, *Generational Differences*.

<sup>30</sup> Frances Kunreuther, “The Changing of the Guard: What Generational Differences Tell Us About Social-Change Organizations,” *Insights* 32, no. 3 (September 2003): 451-452.



Adventism.<sup>31</sup> According to Gaylor, this generation has been influenced by the World Trade Center attacks, the Oklahoma City bombings, the Internet, and the death of Princess Dianna and Mother Teresa. In Thom and Jess Rainer's book, *The Millennials*, they claim that the typical Millennial is not typically religious, but is very spiritual. They are highly educated, have grown up with helicopter parents, and have a tremendous respect for older generations.<sup>32</sup>

Millennials are characterized as entrepreneurial hard workers who thrive on flexibility. Unlike the GenXers, the Millennials were cherished by their parents, groomed to achieve and excel, viewed as heroes. Gaylor claims that this generation has the lowest parent to child ratio in the USA's history, meaning the Millennials are less likely to have as many siblings as the generations before them. Millennials are more law abiding, socially conscious, educated, upbeat and full of self-esteem. Rainer also points out that this generation is motivated in almost every way by relationships, more than any other motivator. This goes for the workplace, religion, service, and politics. The relationship is the primary motivator for the Millennial to be engaged and present.<sup>33</sup>

The Millennial generation's core values are: optimism, confidence, achievement, sociability, morality, street smarts, and diversity, and civic duty. Volunteerism is high among the Millennial generation.<sup>34</sup> In the book *Generation We*, Eric Greenberg and Karl Webber assert that the Millennials are:

A caring generation...the best educated generation and the most diverse of the generations. The political attitudes of *Gen-We* reveal a distinct pattern that is markedly

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, Monte Sahlin and Paul Richardson, *Seventh-day Adventists in North America: A Demographic Profile*.

Rainer, Thom S., and Jess W. Rainer. *The Millennials: Connecting to America's Largest Generation*. Nashville, Tenn: B&H Pub. Group, 2011.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, Rainer, Thom S., and Jess W. Rainer. *The Millennials*, pg. 105

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., Dennis Gaylor, *Generational Differences*.

different from that of their immediate predecessors, the GenXers—the most politically conservative cohort in America. History thanks their [Gen-We] open-mindedness and their overwhelming embrace of the greater good, *Gen-We* is developing strongly progressive views on a wide range of issues and is poised to lead the most dramatic leftward political shift in recent American history...*Gen-We* is remarkably open-minded and tolerant on social issues...is overwhelmingly pro-environment...*Gen-We* is post-ideological, post-partisan, and post-political.<sup>35</sup>

Rainer also points out a major difference between the Millennial and Boomer generations in terms of how they respond to diversity. “The Boomer generation became the generation of tolerance, but the Millennials do not simply ‘tolerate’ those of different skin colors or ethnic backgrounds. They are far more likely to embrace them as friends and to make them a part of their world.”<sup>36</sup> This appears to be true of Millennials in nearly every aspect of diversity. They are much more likely to go beyond tolerance to embrace and accept people for who they are, this is especially important in terms of religious views. Rainer claims that “70 percent say they have friends who have different religious beliefs.”<sup>37</sup>

It is easy to see how one generation shapes the next. The Elders were a reserved generation who did not get involved, but rather stayed in the sidelines. This made the Baby Boomers step up into positions of authority, which made the GenXers feel the need to rebel. The GenXer’s rebellion and conserving life style was polarized by the Millennials who have become more progressive and open-minded putting their energies toward helping others. Each generation has a significant influence on the following generation.

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<sup>35</sup> Eric Greenberg, Karl Webber, *Generation We: How Millennial Youth Are Taking Over America and Changing Our World Forever* (Emeryville, CA: Pachatusan, 2008), 13-55.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, Rainer, Thom S., and Jess W. Rainer. *The Millennials*, pg. 86

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, Rainer, Thom S., and Jess W. Rainer. *The Millennials*, pg. 87

### **GENERATIONAL HERMENEUTICS:**

As mentioned earlier in this paper, William W. Klein defines hermeneutics as “interpreting or explaining...the task of explaining the meaning of a piece of writing. Hermeneutics describes the principles people use to understand what something means, to comprehend what a message written, oral, or visual – is endeavoring to communicate.”<sup>38</sup> The next section of this paper will look at how each generation approaches scripture differently. For the most part, it will be based on the previous section’s description of the generations, applying views of authority and ethic to the religious setting. This section of the paper will begin by generalizing the way church is done for both the old and the new generations, and then going into specific hermeneutics of each generation. The section will discuss where each generation learns about God. Generally there are only two options, internal and external influences. While God works internally on all of humanity, some generations rely more heavily on external influences whether they know it or not. The final section of Generational Hermeneutics will discuss specific theology unique to each generation.

### **General Approaches to Religion**

It is clear that every generation is different and has vastly different worldviews. These differences in worldviews shape the way each generation worships. Ruth Powell and Kathy Jacka point out that in general, the older generations are more likely to: attend worship services weekly; prefer traditional styles of music in worship services; spend regular time in private devotional activity; have a strong sense of belonging to their denomination; be involved in church-based community service, justice or welfare activities; and be involved in community-based service, care or welfare activities. While the younger generations are more likely to: be

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<sup>38</sup> William W. Klein and others, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 4.

involved in small groups; prefer contemporary styles of music in worship services; feel that their gifts and skills are encouraged; have helped others in a range of informal ways; value outreach, be involved in evangelistic activities, and actually invite others to church; and be newcomers to church life, have switched denominations or transferred congregations in the previous five years.<sup>39</sup>

### **Specific Generational Sources for God**

The Elders perceive God and the church similarly to the way they view earthly authorities, with loyalty. Gaylor describes them as being: committed to the church, support foreign missions, enjoy bible study, loyal to their denominations, and worship in reverence.<sup>40</sup> This Loyalty is good for the denomination, however in extremes this loyalty can lead to close-mindedness and a lack of independent thinking. Elders are susceptible to following “the church” blindly, rather than studying God’s Word for themselves. Elders will often view an interpretation of scripture more because of what the church, or pastor has said rather than studying it firsthand. In short, the Elder generation’s hermeneutic is what ever the established church tells them it is.

The Baby Boomer approaches religious study slightly differently. While the Elders follow what the religious authority has said, the Baby Boomer would believe that they could know better than what the church says. This leads the Baby Boomer to study first hand what a text says and means. This independent nature of bible study is beneficial to the church because there is a shortage of thinkers in the Adventist church. According to Gaylor, the Baby Boomer’s religious characteristics are: committed to relationships, a want to belong, supportive of people within the

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<sup>39</sup> Ruth Powell and Kathy Jacka, “Generations Approach Church Differently,” *NCLS Research Occasional Paper* 11, (January 2008): 5. <http://http://www.ncls.org.au/default.aspx?sitemapid=6270>.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., Dennis Gaylor, *Generational Differences*.

church, and a want to experience their faith firsthand.<sup>41</sup> Like in politics, Baby Boomers approach religion similarly in that, where something is broken or not right logically, they want to fix it. Baby Boomers jump in as leaders in the church and take an active role in the development of theology and issues of conflict.

The GenXers do not take their religion second hand. In fact, Colleen Carroll claims that “this may be one of the first generations where faith is a conscious choice.”<sup>42</sup> This generation is fascinated with science and history, which sometimes conflict with traditional religious views, making this GenXers tend to be skeptical of truth and established religion. Because of this, Gaylor claims that denominations are not important to GenXers. They want less structure, and want a faith that meets their needs. Carroll states that this generation wants “the hard gospel. They want a preacher or priest to tell it like it is, to give them morality that they believe is sound and doesn’t simply cater to their whims.”<sup>43</sup>

Because of the influence of postmodernism on GenXers, there is a great hesitancy among this generation to trust the church or its members. Everyone’s ideas become a potential truth, rather than an established absolute. Ronald J. Allen notes that “an upside of postmodernity is its spirit of liberation from dogma and maximization of human freedom. A downside is a loss of confidence that life has ultimate significance or consequences.”<sup>44</sup> GenXers, and the following generations to come, face the biggest obstacles to finding God: How can a person find God if they can not trust that the church, or even a friend, is not bias toward a particular belief system?

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., Dennis Gaylor, *Generational Differences*.

<sup>42</sup> Colleen Carroll, "The Good News About Generation X & Y," interview by Agnieszka Tennant (Christianity Today, 2002), 41.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., Colleen Carroll, *The Good News About Generation X & Y*, 44.

<sup>44</sup> Ronald J. Allen, "Preaching to Different Generations," *Encounter* 58.4, Autumn (1997): 393

The Millennial generation seems to see God in people more than institutions. Monte Sahlin gives hope for the future when he notes that the Millennials “have a more positive attitude toward the church than Gen X and greater denominational loyalty.”<sup>45</sup> It seems that the Millennial generations gets its view of God and worship from traditions and stereotypes rather than the bible itself. There are some who believe that the Millennials are drawn toward archaic forms of worship, such as candles and liturgies. However, in an article by the Barna Group entitled *What Teenagers Look for in a Church*, David Kinnaman reveals that “all of the recent attention on young people gravitating to ‘ancient traditions of Christianity’ misses the fact that the vast majority of American teenagers do not express much interest in or appreciation for such traditions in the first place. Teenagers are a pinch-of-this-pinch-of-that generation, so without intentional decisions on the part of youth workers, many teenagers ride out their teen years in fruitless experimentation rather than genuine forms of spiritual development.”<sup>46</sup>

### **Generational Views of the Bible**

The single most significant issue in studying generational hermeneutics is how each generation views the bible itself, closely followed by the generation’s view of inspiration. These two issues shape the rest of the generation’s theology. The Barna Group did a study of Christians across North America asking a question about views of the Bible, they found that “A slight majority of Christians (55%) strongly agree that the Bible is accurate in all of the principle it teaches, with another 18% agreeing somewhat. About one out of five either disagree strongly

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<sup>45</sup> Roger Dudley, ed., *Ministering With Millennials, The Millennial Generation: A Demographic, Ethnographic, and Religious Profile*, by Monte Sahlin (Lincoln, NE: AdventSource, 2009), 11.

<sup>46</sup> The Barna Group, Ltd, “What Teenagers Look for in a Church,” *The Barna Group*, George Barna, <http://http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/16-teensnext-gen/93-what...>

(9%) or somewhat (13%) with this statement, and 5% aren't sure what to believe."<sup>47</sup> In an Adventist study by Roger Dudley on college age views of the Bible, a question was posed in relation to the bible. The results were 11.8 percent believed the Bible was to be taken word for word. 83.3 percent believed a middle of the road approach to the bible, that it was God's thoughts as expressed by men. And finally, 4.9 percent believed that the Bible was only a collection of stories, and therefore should not be taken as seriously.<sup>48</sup>

While each generation views the Bible slightly differently, there are actually some very common themes about inspiration and the Bible. The Barna Group did a study, which was published October 19, 2009, called *New Research Explores How Different Generations View and Use the Bible*. This study states:

There is often more that unites the various generations in American culture than divides them. The Barna research regarding the Bible confirms the central role this revered text has for most Americans. A majority of each of the four generations believes that the Bible is a sacred or holy book. Another commonality is that millions within each of the generations report reading the pages of Scripture in the last week. There is also significant generational overlap regarding people's views on the nature of the Bible. Similar proportions of the generations embrace the most conservative and most liberal views. For instance, the 'highest' view of the Bible – that it is 'the actual word of God and should be taken literally, word for word' – is embraced by one-quarter of [Millennials] (27%), [GenXers] (27%), and Baby Boomers (23%), and one-third of Elders (34%). The Extreme view on the other end – that the Bible is not inspired by God – is embraced by proportions that are also statistically close to one another, including [Millennials] (25%), [GenXers] (19%), [Baby] Boomers (22%), and Elders (22%) ... While most Americans of all ages identify the Bible as sacred, the drop-off among the youngest adults is striking: 9 out of 10 Boomers and Elders describe the Bible as sacred, which compares to 8 out of 10 [GenXers] (81%) and just 2 out of 3 [Millennials] (67%) ... Young adults are significantly less likely than older adults to strongly agree that the bible is totally accurate in all of the principles it teaches. Just 30% of [Millennials] and 39% of [GenXers] firmly embraced this view, compared with 46% of [Baby Boomers] and 58% of Elders ... Another generational difference is that the young adults are more likely to express

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<sup>47</sup> The Barna Group, Ltd, "American Christians Do Not Believe that Satan or the Holy Spirit Exist," *The Barna Group*, George Barna, <http://http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/12-faithspirituality/260-m...>

<sup>48</sup> Roger Dudley, interview by author, November 12, 2009, Candler, NC.

skepticism about the original manuscripts of the bible than is true of older adults... the central theme of young people's approach to the bible is skepticism. They question the Bible's history as well as its relevance to their lives, leading many young people to reject the Bible as containing everything one needs to live a meaningful life.<sup>49</sup>

### **Generational Theology**

Because of the differences described in this paper, it is easy to see how different views of theology can begin to develop within each generation. Beliefs, doctrines, views of the Bible, inspiration, and Ellen G. White are all effected by these differences in the generations. The Elders approach theology from a traditional institutionalized stance. They view the theology of the church as foundational, absolute truth, and they are passionate about following it to the letter because it is what the church has decided. Similarly, the Baby Boomers agree with the church's stance on the majority of issues, not because of the church's authority, but because they have studied it for themselves and they concur. The GenXers are more skeptical about what the church teaches and form independent ideas which are some times in line with a stance the church has taken and sometimes their stance is influenced more by secular culture. For the GenXers who remain faithful to the Seventh-day Adventist church, a revisiting of the fundamental beliefs occurs where this generation familiarizes itself with the teachings of the church and why the church believes what it does. The Millennial generations, although still skeptical about the dogmas of the church, chooses to find practical applications of the church's beliefs. Once knowing "the truth," a Millennial wants to know how they can use it. Millennials, more than any other generation seeks tangible and practical theology.

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<sup>49</sup> The Barna Group, Ltd, "Research Explores How Different Generations View and Use the Bible," *The Barna Group*, George Barna, <http://http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/12-faithspirituality/317-n...>



## ISSUES RESULTING FROM GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES:

### Conflict of Theology

One of the first things that happens in a typical congregation when generations collide is an immediate conflict of theology. Sometimes it is visible, most times it is mental. Typically the younger generations do not voice their differences. This leads them to bottle up their thoughts and opinions on a topic until confronted by someone else (whether of their generation or an older one) at that point the differences become visible.

At many Academy churches, there is a tendency for the church to keep its issues bottled up. Many subgroups (often only a handful of members who speak out loudly for their cause) feel as though they are being oppressed or not nurtured. The academy students often feel as though their voice was not being heard either, that they are not respected in their views or beliefs. Rainer supports this with their research, “they have some resentment about their unused potential... 85 percent felt that they have a lot of unused potential... their resentment is directed toward the Baby Boomers, who they feel are holding them back from accomplishing their goals... and doubt their abilities because of their relative youth.”<sup>50</sup> I have heard numerous members of the older generations express the feeling that the academy students are “dangerously close to heresy” and cannot be trusted to lead out in the church. It is no wonder so many of these young leaders are taking their talents elsewhere, where it is appreciated and used.

At one school that I worked at, due to a transition of power within the church, there were series of “meetings” where issues within the church were discussed. What resulted was a year long battle of hermeneutics (although the people directly involved in these discussions do not know it). Many of the hurt feelings and harsh words could have been spared if the two sides were

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid, Rainer, Thom S., and Jess W. Rainer. *The Millennials*, pg. 169

able to see this conflict as a direct result of conflicting generational hermeneutics and its resulting theology. While these meetings were painful and stirred up a lot of controversy, they were productive and necessary to healing within the church. This began the process of getting things out, in the open so that progress and healing could begin. These issues included, but were not limited to: reverence in church, what should true worship look like, what music/instruments are appropriate in worship, what an Adventist should dress like, what an Adventist should choose for entertainment and recreation, and whether Adventists should wear jewelry. It must be noted that issues are not limited to generational conflict, and that sometimes there is cross-generational conflict on these issues. However, these issues become exaggerated when the old and young conflict.

The issue of right worship is no stranger to the church. It is manifested in attitudes on reverence and music as well as the nature of God. A biblical definition, as evident a simple word study, indicates that the word *worship* is to bow, serve, declare worth or value of something in an affectionate way. Most people come to worship not knowing why they are worshipping. Worship is a response. God created, sustains, and has redeemed humanity. This makes God worthy to be worshipped. Worship happens both individually and corporately. The New Testament model describes the people getting together to share their experiences with God during the week.<sup>51</sup> In the Old Testament things get slightly more complicated. There is no description of formal worship, as we see today, described in the Old Testament. What is described is the temple sacrifices and a few public gatherings to address legal issues. There is no order of service, there was no sermon. So when the issue of worship arises, there is no model to follow. No set order of

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<sup>51</sup> See Acts chapters 2

service or laid out format. Worship, or church as it would be called today, becomes very subjective to culture and context.

Because of this subjective nature of worship, each generation will act out worship in different ways. Each generation has its list of bible texts to support their particular views of worship. Older generations might suggest Habakkuk 2:20 to support a silent, reverent attitude while in the church sanctuary. “But the LORD is in his holy temple<sup>52</sup>; let all the earth keep silence before him.”<sup>53</sup> While younger generations may refer to Psalm 47:1-2 which says, “O Clap your hands, all peoples; Shout to God with the voice of joy. For the LORD Most High is to be feared...”<sup>54</sup> These are opposing views, yet both Biblical, and both are frequently used to support a particular view on worship. Both are also influenced heavily by culture and generation.

Reverence is also addressed by Ellen G. White in multiple writings. In *Testimonies for the Church*, she says “when worshipers enter the place of meeting, they should do so with decorum, passing quietly to their seats. If there is a stove in the room, it is not proper to crowd about in an indolent, careless attitude. Common talking, whispering and laughing should not be permitted in the house of worship, either before or after the service. Ardent, active piety should characterize the worshipers.”<sup>55</sup> The generational problem occurs the older generations tend to venerate Ellen White, and universalize her writings. While younger generations tend to contextualize her work and think that while she was a talented writer, her writings do not contain

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<sup>52</sup> It could be argued that this text is referring to a judgment scene rather than a worship service. Therefore this text would become moot point.

<sup>53</sup> Habakkuk 2:20, English Standard Version

<sup>54</sup> New American Standard Bible

<sup>55</sup> Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, (Omaha, NE: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1948), 492.

the authority to change their perceptions or behaviors. This issue with Ellen White is much bigger than just the topic of reverence; it flows into every discussion involving Ellen G. White.

Music often arises as generational conflict. Older generations have used the argument that some instruments are evil and should not be allowed in a worship setting, e.g. drums or some types of guitars. Younger generations argue that in the bible there are no “good” or “bad” musical instruments, only what was available to them at the time.<sup>56</sup> Only the product can be measured as good or bad. The younger generations have often quoted Psalm 100, which says to make a “joyful noise,”<sup>57</sup> and that this is the true measure of worship.

The issue of adornment often arises in generational conflict because times have changed and with it styles and fashion. What is popular for an Elder to wear would not go over well with the Millennials, and vice versa. Biblically, there are only two explicit texts to contribute to this discussion on jewelry: 1 Peter 3:3-4 and 1 Timothy 2:9-10. Both texts speak of moderation rather than prohibition. Implicitly, there are countless texts referring to the sin of pride, and living in a way that a person does not flaunt his or her wealth.

This topic can be seen very clearly through knowledge of the generations in that the Elders will follow what even the church/pastor has ruled on the matter, Baby Boomers will have studied Ellen White’s prohibitions of jewelry and concluded that they agree with her position, the GenXers and Millennials will look to cultural influences and Biblical texts on moderation and not see any problem with wearing a little “bling.”

In a very insightful remark on the nature of young Adventists, Chris Blake says that “younger Adventists believe, deep in their hearts, that virtually all musical styles can laud God.

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<sup>56</sup> Psalm 150:3-6 (NASB)

<sup>57</sup> Psalm 100:1 (King James Version)

That Jesus handed down no specific order of service. That God honors creativity and accountability and love. That the Sabbath exists to launch us into the week. That church is a community of uneven believers. And that what ultimately matters most to God is what happens on streets, in schools, and in homes outside any denominational building...[GenXers'] and [Millennial's] mindset is 'incredibly savvy and unusually jaded.'<sup>58</sup>

While these are only a few of the issues that generations conflict over, there are many more issues that are dividing the Seventh-day Adventist church. While the Bible often gives clear cut ruling on many moral and ethical issues, there are several issues that there is not enough biblical evidence to support a clear "right" or a clear "wrong." It is on these issues that much of the conflict occurs. This is because the only way to interpret a "right" or "wrong" after the Bible stops guiding is by personal interpretation and opinion. Ultimately, this is mostly shaped by each person's generational influences. Many of the issues can be avoided, or at least better understood, by studying how each generation approaches the Bible differently, and those differences are okay.

### **The Great Exodus of Adventist Youth**

It is important to point out that our youth are tired of arguing. They are tired of division. Their generation is one of inclusion and acceptance. They simply cannot understand why anyone would be excluded or diminished in the body of Christ. Thom and Jess Rainer confirm this as well. "The Millennials are weary of the fights in our nation and world. They are tired of the polarization of views. They avoid the high-pitched shouts of opposing political forces. They are

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<sup>58</sup> Chris Blake, "We Need to talk: We continue to lose our next generation, but we don't have to," *Adventist Today*, November/December 2008, 10.

abandoning churches in great numbers because they see religion as divisive and argumentative.

They want to know why we can't all just get along."<sup>59</sup>

This paper has already addressed the issue known as the *Graying of Adventism*, at the root of this trend is the great exodus of Adventist youth from the church. Many youth are in fact leaving the church because of these generational conflicts of theology. Martin Webber did a survey of Adventist youth which shocks to the core of this issue:

...I interviewed a small number of young adults themselves. Their data highlighted the importance of that last principle – Freedom to develop one's own faith. Spiritual Carnage results from lack of freedom, along with a deficit of love and warmth. All but one of these six young adults describes their church experience as: Rigid, not flexible; Closed, not open; Exclusive, not Inclusive; Unfair, not Fair; Cold, not Warm; Dark, not Bright; Dull, not Exciting. These young adults reported significant confusion and despair regarding Adventist lifestyle standards. They seemed particularly distressed about what they experienced as heavy-handedness in enforcing these standards and unwillingness to even dialogue about them. It was interesting to note that most of these alienated young adults still embrace many fundamental Adventist doctrines such as the Sabbath, yet they resolutely reject the church that teaches them. When asked if they might possibly be active members in the Adventist church twenty years from now, if time lasts, all but one of them replied "small chance" or "no chance." ...Together with the data I got from parents, these responses from the young adults themselves highlight what I perceive is a compelling need for a church atmosphere that offers flexibility rather than rigidity and freedom rather than oppression. This is not only essential for avoiding attrition—it's also Scriptural: "Where the spirit of the lord is, there is liberty (2 Cor.3:17)"<sup>60</sup>

In a similar study by the Barna Group, David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons state that young people (outside of Christianity) often perceive that Christianity is hypocritical, too focused on getting converts, anti-homosexual, sheltered, too political, and judgmental.<sup>61</sup> While young people from within the Christian church are leaving because they feel like the church doesn't allow for

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid, Rainer, Thom S., and Jess W. Rainer. *The Millennials*, pg. 153

<sup>60</sup> Roger Dudley, ed., *Ministering With Millennials, Resolving Young Adult Attrition*, by Martin Weber (Lincoln, NE: AdventSource, 2009), 186.

<sup>61</sup> David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *UnChristian: What A New Generation Thinks About Christianity... And Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007).

doubt. They also feel like the church is exclusive, anti-science, overprotective, shallow and repressive.<sup>62</sup> These attitudes have been known to push the younger generations away from Christianity as a whole and should be avoided at all costs!

The Barna Group continued this study in their book, *You Lost Me*, to include reasons why young people are leaving churches. What Kinnaman found was that young people leaving the church feel like the church is anti-science, repressive, overprotective, exclusive, shallow, and do not allow for doubts to exist.<sup>63</sup> In the Youth and Young Adult Retention Study, commissioned by the North American Division in conjunction with the Barna Group, Kinnaman found that within Adventism the youth exceeded the US average in agreement with each of those six categories. The biggest agreement being that the Seventh-day Adventist Church is anti-science (47%), repressive (37%), and is overprotective (36%). This in-depth study revealed that our Adventist youth have a lot on their minds. If we as a church wish to keep them around, we have to change the way the conversation is being conducted. David Kinnaman concluded the presentation with a simple question, “Do you care more about your children, or your traditions?”<sup>64</sup> This is a question that every church must consider. This is a question that every generation must address.

What is the value of a young person who is looking for more? The old way is not enough for them anymore, they’ve been jaded, had broken relationships because of how different they are. They are tired of the hypocrisy of their parents and grandparents generation that says things have to be their way. They are tired of being wrongly judged as “worldly” and “irreverent.” The

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<sup>62</sup> Barna Group, *Seventh-day Adventist Millennials: Up or Out?* NAD Conference, Silver Spring, MD, November 2013.

<sup>63</sup> Kinnaman, David, and Aly Hawkins. *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church-- and Rethinking Faith*. Grand Rapids, Mich: BakerBooks, 2011.

<sup>64</sup> The Barna Group. *Seventh-day Adventist Millennials: Up or Out?* Youth & Young Adult Retention Study. North American Division. November, 2013.

result, they abandon their faith. Not always their faith in God, sometimes just the church that contains God's people.

### **COMBATTING GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES**

The future of the Seventh-day Adventist church in North America is being shaped by the graying of the Elder and Baby Boomer generations as well as the losses of the GenXers and Millennial generations. The lack of tolerance for differing views is shaping a culture of elitism and oppression. Studies have shown that within two decades the older generations will begin to die and the younger generations will continue to leave. The result will be a Church in North America that has greatly reduced in numbers, unless these trends can be reversed.

The solutions to this predicament are education, tolerance, respect and love. The educating of all generations as to the natures of both themselves and the other generations is essential in understanding these problems from the beginning. As mentioned prior, "when we know better, we do better." Education removes ignorant excuses and allows for knowledgeable exchange to occur.

The second part to this is a true tolerance of diversity. One of my professors in college said that "true tolerance is being so aware of what you believe that nothing can shake your core. You become able to discuss openly, ideas that may be contrary to your own views or values and yet, no insecurities or oppression will exist." This type of tolerance is hard to come by these days, but essential in building an authentic cross-generational community.

The third solution to the current and future condition of the Seventh-day Adventist church is to recognize that all humanity was made in God's image, and that is a pretty big image. Ellen White noted that "every human being, created in the image of God, is endowed with a



power akin to that of the creator—individuality, power to think and do.”<sup>65</sup> Because humanity was made in God’s image, everyone is deserving of respect and individuality. To often people falsely grow a feeling of superiority because of their education or experiences. There are far too many under respected people in every generation. Life experiences are not limited to any age category; therefore everyone’s experiences and views become equal. In his two part article, *Crossing the Generational Divide*, Seth Pierce states that “the fifth commandment was given to all generations to learn how to share leadership in one community — not kids leaving the old folks in a retirement community or the elderly leaving the young in their online community. This commandment calls for mentoring, discipleship and trust between generations — multiple generations moving as one.”<sup>66</sup> Seth goes on to ask questions and give recommendations for each generation in part two of the article. For the elder generations he asks, “what happens when the leaders no longer have the strength to lead? Who is being disciplined? Where is the energy, creativity and fresh perspective coming from?” For the younger generations, Seth recommends that they “listen, connect and find ways to bring the retired leadership with you on the journey God has called you to take.”<sup>67</sup> A mutual respect and cooperation is essential to authentic cross-generational cooperation in the church. It is only with this cooperation that the church will be able to truly move forward as one body of believers.

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<sup>65</sup> Ellen G. White, *Education* (Omaha, NE: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1903), 17.

<sup>66</sup> Pierce, Seth. "Crossing the Generational Divide, Part 1." GleanerNOW. Last modified November 21, 2013. <http://gleanernow.com/news/2013/11/crossing-generational-divide-part-1>.

<sup>67</sup> Pierce, Seth. GleanerNOW. Last modified January 28, 2014. <http://gleanernow.com/news/2014/01/crossing-generational-divide-part-2>.

This leads to the final and most important of all solutions to the present church's condition, Love. John 13:35 could not be clearer "By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."<sup>68</sup> When the church has love for each other, it will act like it. Respect will flourish, tolerance will bloom, and people will see the Seventh-day Adventist church and know that we are God's people. Our differences will complement, not divide. They will unite us, rather than divide us. We will be more effective in ministry and efficient in community. Without love we are just become "a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal."<sup>69</sup>

### **CONCLUSION:**

This study has only touched on one element of the great diversity that makes up the Seventh-day Adventist church. We are an incredibly diverse body of believers! Every aspect of our diversity demands to be acknowledged, studied, and appreciated as we strive for true unity in the body of Christ. However, more study is needed in order to honestly and thoughtfully address the other aspects of our diversity. In doing so, we will gain a better understanding and appreciation of our fellow believers.

While research indicates that Elders, Baby Boomers, GenXers, and Millennials are all different and approach the Bible differently, further research is needed to understand the matter more completely. Understanding that these differences, for the most part, are not moral issues or even wrong will help the average church member or pastor better relate with all of the members. With the help of educating people of each generation's hermeneutics, generational conflict and the graying of Adventism can begin to subside. However a more in-depth study is required before full conclusions on the impact of each Generation's theological views can be established.

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<sup>68</sup> NASB

<sup>69</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:1 NASB

Once this matter is understood more clearly, there is a greater chance that true unity can occur. However, true unity will only possible with education, tolerance, respect and most importantly, love.

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