

Generational Jesus

A Travel Free Learning Article

By
Ann Updegraff Spleth
Ministry Colleague with The Columbia Partnership
Voice: 317.358.6601, E-mail: AUSpleth@TheColumbiaPartnership.org
Web Site: www.TheColumbiaPartnership.org

Jesus asks: Who do you say that I am? 21st Century Christians answer: "It depends."

It is a well-documented fact of life. You can't pick up a magazine or business journal or listen to NPR without hearing about it regularly. The fact is that generations differ. They differ in how they see the world, in their formative experiences, and in their preferences for music and movies. They differ in their preferences for worship and church life. All of this information has been with us for some time, including in my colleague Eddie Hammett's book ***Reaching People Under 40 While Keeping People Over 60*** (Chalice Press, 2007.) I have worked with these concepts for years in my teaching and writing, updating them from time to time as generations mature and new ones emerge.

One area that has not received as much attention is the question of belief. Do Christians of different generations experience faith differently? Do they believe different things about Jesus? I started with the assumption that they do. Then I began asking questions and exploring the topic more deeply. Before we get to that, let's review the generations of the church today and identify a bit about what we know about them. This information is widely known and is shared here for the purpose of having some common language for our discussion.

Silents

- Born before 1928
- Influenced by the Great Depression
- Loyalty and belonging are key faith tenets
- Respect authority
- 57.7% attend church weekly¹
- 57.1% give to religion

Builders

- Born 1929-1945
- Experienced hard times followed by prosperity
- Endure authority (not necessarily respect it, but don't challenge it either)
- 46.3% attend church weekly
- 72% give to religion

Boomers

- Born 1946-1964
- Largest generation in American history
- Look for options
- Question authority
- Like to make changes and impact their environments
- 32.5% attend church weekly
- 46.7% give to religion

Busters/Gen X

- Born 1965-1983
- Raised on energy crisis, political scandals

¹ Church attendance and giving statistics for each category are from "Generational Differences in Charitable Giving and in Motivations for Giving," a report prepared for Campbell & Company by the Center on Philanthropy, 2008

- May not, as a whole, do as well as their parents financially
- Tired of following in the steps of the Boomers
- 30.8% attend church weekly
- 45.1% give to religion

Millennials

- Born 1984-2002
- Assume diversity in society
- Digital media generation
- Optimistic, civic-minded
- 27.9% attend church weekly
- 41.5% give to religion

You might think it would be easy to project the faith perceptions and understandings about Jesus from these familiar descriptions of the generations. In some cases, the responses are what you would expect. In others, you may be surprised. To get beyond my own assumptions, I conducted an informal survey. Participation was self-selected. I posted the survey on my Facebook page and asked my almost 1000 friends to post the link on theirs.

To achieve more age diversity—I am a Boomer and so are most of my Facebook friends—I also requested that the Christian Church in Indiana (Disciples of Christ middle judicatory office) send the link to the group of Regional Elders that support the pastoral ministry of the region. The link was also posted on the youth ministry page of two congregations. I received 98 responses to the survey. Here is what I learned:

Silents

- Identified their image of Jesus as “Savior of the World”
- Song phrase most describing their feeling about Jesus was “Jesus loves me, this I know”
- Were 10-15 years old when they accepted Jesus as Savior
- Named “I talk with Jesus in prayer throughout the day” as the impact Jesus has on their daily life
- Identify with Paul as the follower of Jesus they are most like

Builders

- Primary image of Jesus is “My personal savior,” followed by “God’s son”
- Song phrase: “And he walks with me and he talks with me...”
- Accepted Jesus at under 10 years of age
- Named “I talk with Jesus in prayer throughout the day” as the impact Jesus has on their daily life
- Identify with John, the beloved disciple, as the follower of Jesus they are most like

Boomers

- Primary image of Jesus is “God’s son”
- “They’ll know we are Christians by our love” is the song phrase most chosen
- Accepted Jesus as savior at age 11-15
- Named “I am comforted by Jesus’ presence” as the impact Jesus has on their daily life
- Identified with Peter, the rock of the church, as the follower of Jesus they are most like

Busters/Gen X

- Primary image of Jesus is “God’s son”
- Were divided in song phrase choice between “Jesus loves me, this I know” and “They’ll know we are Christians by our love”
- Accepted Jesus as savior at 11-15 years of age
- Named “I am comforted by Jesus’ presence” as the impact Jesus has on their daily lives
- Identified with Martha, sister of Lazarus, closely followed by Lazarus himself, as the follower of Jesus they are most like

Millennials

- Primary image of Jesus is “My personal savior”
- Favored song phrase is “I can only imagine”
- Accepted Jesus as savior at under 10 years of age
- Named “I talk with Jesus in prayer throughout the day” as the impact Jesus has on their daily life
- Evenly divided the follower of Jesus they most resemble between Paul, Peter and Lazarus

Obviously, this is not a perfect sample. It is self-selected and made up of primarily mainline church members. However, the responses are consistent with my experience of these groups. A few surprises came in song choice. I expected the Silents to choose “The Old Rugged Cross” rather than “Jesus Loves Me.” I thought that the Busters/ Gen X would name “My personal savior” over “God’s son” as their primary image of Jesus. I expected the Busters/ Gen X to choose a more contemporary song choice.

It is the beliefs that the groups have in common that are most interesting. Look at the responses of the Builder generation and compare it with the Millennials. They have three out of five responses in common. This is consistent with many who have observed that the loyalty and selflessness of “the Greatest Generation” is to be found in their grandchildren and great-grandchildren, the Millennials. Builders and Boomers, on the other hand, have no responses in common. Silents and Builders share only one response in common. In these cases, the generations closest to one another differ the most in their response. That’s why it is most surprising of all that Boomers and Busters/Gen X—two groups that next to each other generationally and often at odds with each other in church and professional life—have four out of five responses in common!

All of this causes me to wonder if there are ways our congregations can minister to multiple generations that go beyond addressing the different preferences in worship style, attire and music choice. Can we reach beyond the differences to call out the things that these groups share? Can Builders and Millennials find common ground in their seemingly similar worldviews? Can Builders and Boomers get over themselves long enough to discover the things they deeply share? How can we foster these connections?

I’ll be reflecting on these ideas for several more articles over the next few months. I’d like you to join the conversation. What conclusions do you draw from this information? What help do you need in bringing generations with different preferences but common beliefs together? How do the generational images of Jesus as “Savior of the World”, “God’s son” and “My personal savior” exist together in your congregation?

Talk to me at AUSpleth@TheColumbiaPartnership.org and/or join the conversation via conference call on October 13th at 2:00 p.m. Eastern time. I can’t wait to hear your thoughts.

Important Things to Know

Ann Updegraff Spleth is a Ministry Colleague with The Columbia Partnership focusing on Developing Resources and Transforming Congregations. She is also an adjunct faculty member for The Fund Raising School at the Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University. The Columbia Partnership is a non-profit Christian ministry organization focused on transforming the capacity of the North American Church to pursue and sustain Christ-centered ministry. **Travel Free Learning** is a leadership development emphasis. For more information about products and services check out the web site at www.TheColumbiaPartnership.org, send an e-mail to Client.Care@TheColumbiaPartnership.org, or call 803.622.0923.