

EVALUATING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF FIVE FORMS OF EXPOSITIONAL PREACHING WITH THE FOUR ACTIVE GENERATIONS OF CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

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Seventy-five word Abstract:

The church growth theory that different generations (Builder, Boomer, Buster and Bridger) respond best to different forms of expositional preaching for effective communication of the gospel seems to be generally accepted, but needed to be field tested. This paper presents empirical data and unexpected results from a qualitative study of the responses of two different churches by generation and gender to deductive, inductive, dialogical, dramatic monologue and narrative forms of expository preaching.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to explore one of the critical areas of conflict in our churches today, the problem of generational conflict. One of the recent discoveries is the difference in attitudes, priorities and lifestyles of various generations. Bob Whitesel and Kent R. Hunter, church growth researchers, warn of the polarization of society along generational lines and the consequences of this kind of conflict. They note the same polarization is showing up in churches along generational lines which results in an increasing generational gap. These growing generational tensions result in young people being separated from the needed maturity and experience of the older generations, and the older generations losing the fresh energy and new ideas of the younger generations.¹ These generational differences provide one of the most formidable obstacles to the growth of the church and its fulfillment of the Great Commission in the twenty-first century and is the source of much of the conflict in local churches today.²

According to the church growth experts, the days are gone when church leaders can minister to an entire congregation as a unified group. The generational differences have always been there, but American culture has emphasized our individuality to the point that congregations are now a hodge-podge of generational groups and special interest sub-groups. Each generation has its own set of preferred priorities for: worship styles; sermon forms; Bible translations; use of buildings; church attendance; mission priorities; leadership styles; pastoral care methods; programs; Sunday school versus small groups; use of technology; church membership; and organization models for church government.³ Our culture encourages each individual and generation to express their perceived needs and desires for personal fulfillment to the detriment of the group, church, or community as a whole.

The question is why these generational differences have become such a problem at this time in history. The answer to this question is the current tidal wave of negative values that is sweeping over western society as the world enters this period of Fourth Turning.⁴ This tidal wave of

negative values has been building since the 1920's. The intensity of the tidal wave has been multiplied by the rapidly changing technology of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

The Need

The prevailing wisdom of church growth experts such as Gary L. McIntosh, George Barna, Bob Whitesel, Kent R. Hunter, and others and theologians such as Graham Johnston, Lewis A. Drummond, and others is that different generations require a different form of expositional preaching for the most effective communication of the biblical truth to that specific generation. These theories are based upon secular marketing research and personal observations of church growth leaders. Thus the need was to field test this generally accepted theory. The goal of this project was to evaluate the communicative effectiveness of five forms of expositional preaching most commonly referred to in the church growth literature of Gary McIntosh and George Barna and the homiletical literature of Lewis A. Drummond and Graham Johnston with the four active generations of church membership today in the local church.

Defining the Generations

The word generation is a common term used in a variety of ways. To avoid confusion the author has defined the sociological, church growth, and theological understanding of the word generation used in this paper.

The Sociological Understanding of a Generation

To understand the concept of generations through the sociological perspective, one has to begin by noting how modern social scientists refer to generations as a set of persons born in a limited span of consecutive years.⁵ Strauss and Howe, in their book *Generations*, base the length on a phase of life which averages twenty-one years.

The Church Growth Understanding of a Generation

Historically, four generations often exist together, interlaced in a particular moment in time: young, adult, mature, and senior. Today these four generations are often referred to as the Bridgers, Busters, Boomers, and Builders. According to church growth experts these four generations require different forms of preaching and teaching for effective communication and maximum influence. The result, according to McIntosh, is that "Certain people in your congregation are connected by a place in time, by common boundaries, and by a common character. We can say that those people are one generation. As a generation moves through time, it causes a generational wave."⁶ It is the crashing of these generational waves against each other that causes much of the conflict in our churches and society today.

The Theological Understanding of a Generation

Scripture uses the word generation in three different ways.⁷ The definition referred to by Paul describing David in Acts 13:36,⁸ “For when David had served God’s purpose in his own generation, he fell asleep; he was buried with his fathers and his body decayed”, is the one used in this paper because it refers to a specific group of people at a specific time in history. Such groups can be evaluated as to their response to the gospel.

The Administration of the Survey

The five different styles of expositional preaching used in this project were deductive, inductive, dialogical, dramatic monologue, and narrative. The reason for choosing these five is that they are the most common forms mentioned by church growth experts concerning the four different generations.⁹

Each of the two congregations identified the four active generations in their church memberships for response purposes and brought a different perspective to the generational testing. The author has adopted the social scientists Strauss and Howe’s time frames rather than those of the church growth experts, because of the church growth experts’ inconsistencies in time frames for the four generations. Strauss and Howe’s designations and time frames are:

1. The Adaptive Generation born between 1925-1942
2. The Idealist Generation born between 1943-1960
3. The Reactive Generation born between 1961-1981
4. The Civic Generation born between 1982-2003¹⁰

The author preferred to use McIntosh’s designations for the generations instead of Strauss and Howe’s because of their wider usage among the published church growth materials. McIntosh refers to the Adaptive Generation as the Builders, the Idealist Generation as Boomers, the Reactive Generation as Busters, and the Civic Generation as Bridgers.¹¹ The participants’ gender differences are also accounted for through the identification on the response sheets. There were a total of eighty-one participants who completed all of the required response forms and turned them into the author.

The participants selected were given a set of five sermon evaluation forms. The purpose of the sermon reaction questionnaire was to give the participants a tool for evaluating the five different sermon styles. The participants reviewed their forms in order to more accurately evaluate their personal preferences when they made the final evaluation using the final evaluation form. The five sermons were preached in the same order at each church in five consecutive services.

The numerical totals were calculated by giving each participant sermon preference response a numerical value. The participant’s first choice was given a point value of five with remaining choices assigned a point value in descending order. These point values were then totaled and used to place the participant’s sermon preference choices in the order of priority of first through fifth. Those final calculations were then listed in order of priority from the highest point total to

the lowest point total. The highest numerical value for a sermon style was placed first in the list with the numerical total placed beside the sermon preference. Then the second highest rated sermon preference was listed second with its numerical total placed beside the sermon preference. This process was repeated from the third through the fifth sermon preference.

The Results of the Survey

The final evaluation forms were collected, the results collated, tabulated, and placed in tables showing the total number of participants, the breakdowns between the generations, churches, and genders. The following five pages show the charted results of the survey.

Table 1. Total Number of Participant Sermon Preference Responses from Both Churches, by Gender and Generation

CHURCH A		CHURCH B		OVERALL TOTALS	
All Participants					
Male	28	Male	12	Male	40
Female	26	Female	15	Female	41
Total	54	Total	27	Total	81
Bridger Generation					
Male	5	Male	4	Male	9
Female	9	Female	1	Female	10
Total	14	Total	5	Total	19
Buster Generation					
Male	7	Male	2	Male	9
Female	8	Female	5	Female	13
Total	15	Total	7	Total	22
Boomer Generation					
Male	10	Male	2	Male	12
Female	5	Female	3	Female	8
Total	15	Total	5	Total	20
Builder Generation					
Male	6	Male	4	Male	10
Female	4	Female	6	Female	10
Total	10	Total	10	Total	20

Table 2. Sermon Preference Response Totals of Church A Participants,
by Gender and Generation

Church A						
	MALE		FEMALE		TOTAL	
BRIDGER	Inductive	25	Inductive	34	Inductive	59
	Dialogical	15	Deductive	29	Deductive	44
	Deductive	14	Dramatic Monologue	27	Dramatic Monologue	41
	Dramatic Monologue	13	Dialogical	23	Dialogical	36
	Narrative	8	Narrative	22	Narrative	30
BUSTER	MALE		FEMALE		TOTAL	
	Inductive	29	Inductive	30	Inductive	59
	Deductive	22	Dramatic Monologue	26	Dramatic Monologue	46
	Dialogical	21	Deductive	23	Deductive	44
	Dramatic Monologue	20	Narrative	22	Dialogical	42
Narrative	13	Dialogical	19	Narrative	32	
BOOMER	MALE		FEMALE		TOTAL	
	Inductive	36	Inductive	21	Inductive	57
	Narrative	32	Dramatic Monologue	17	Dramatic Monologue	49
	Dramatic Monologue	31	Dialogical	14	Narrative	45
	Dialogical	29	Deductive	12	Dialogical	41
Deductive	23	Narrative	11	Deductive	34	
BUILDER	MALE		FEMALE		TOTAL	
	Dramatic Monologue	24	Dramatic Monologue	17	Dramatic Monologue	41
	Inductive	21	Deductive	14	Deductive	35
	Deductive	19	Narrative	12	Inductive	31
	Narrative	14	Inductive	10	Narrative	24
Dialogical	12	Dialogical	7	Dialogical	19	

Table 3. Sermon Preference Response Totals of Church B Participants,
by Gender and Generation

Church B						
	MALE		FEMALE		TOTAL	
BRIDGER	Inductive	19	Inductive	5	Inductive	24
	Dramatic Monologue	15	Dialogical	4	Dramatic Monologue	18
	Narrative	10	Dramatic Monologue	3	Dialogical	14
	Dialogical	10	Narrative	2	Narrative	12
	Deductive	6	Deductive	1	Deductive	7
BUSTER	MALE		FEMALE		TOTAL	
	Narrative	8	Inductive	18	Inductive	23
	Deductive	7	Dialogical	17	Dialogical	23
	Dialogical	6	Dramatic Monologue	15	Narrative	22
	Inductive	5	Narrative	14	Dramatic Monologue	19
Dramatic Monologue	4	Deductive	11	Deductive	18	
BOOMER	MALE		FEMALE		TOTAL	
	Inductive	10	Dramatic Monologue	11	Inductive	20
	Dialogical	7	Dialogical	11	Dialogical	18
	Deductive	5	Inductive	10	Dramatic Monologue	16
	Dramatic Monologue	5	Deductive	9	Deductive	14
Narrative	3	Narrative	4	Narrative	7	
BUILDER	MALE		FEMALE		TOTAL	
	Dramatic Monologue	14	Dialogical	26	Dialogical	39
	Dialogical	13	Inductive	24	Inductive	37
	Inductive	13	Deductive	22	Narrative	32
	Narrative	12	Narrative	20	Deductive	29
Deductive	7	Dramatic Monologue	13	Dramatic Monologue	27	

Table 4. Summary of Sermon Preferences at Both Churches by Gender

Gender Responses				
	Male		Female	
BRIDGER	Inductive	44	Inductive	39
	Dramatic Monologue	28	Dramatic Monologue	30
	Dialogical	25	Deductive	30
	Deductive	20	Dialogical	27
	Narrative	18	Narrative	23
BUSTER	Inductive	34	Inductive	48
	Deductive	29	Dramatic Monologue	41
	Dialogical	27	Dialogical	36
	Dramatic Monologue	24	Narrative	36
	Narrative	21	Deductive	34
BOOMER	Inductive	45	Inductive	31
	Dramatic Monologue	36	Dramatic Monologue	28
	Dialogical	36	Dialogical	25
	Narrative	35	Deductive	21
	Deductive	28	Narrative	15
BUILDER	Dramatic Monologue	38	Deductive	36
	Inductive	34	Inductive	34
	Deductive	26	Narrative	32
	Narrative	26	Dialogical	31
	Dialogical	19	Dramatic Monologue	30

Table 5. Overall Sermon Preferences from Both Churches by Generations

Overall Totals		
BRIDGER	Inductive	83
	Dramatic Monologue	59
	Deductive	51
	Dialogical	50
	Narrative	42
BUSTER	Inductive	82
	Dramatic Monologue	65
	Dialogical	65
	Deductive	62
	Narrative	54
BOOMER	Inductive	77
	Dramatic Monologue	65
	Dialogical	59
	Narrative	52
	Deductive	48
BUILDER	Inductive	68
	Deductive	64
	Dramatic Monologue	58
	Dialogical	58
	Narrative	56

The Author's Evaluations

The Generational Differences

First, the results of the survey reveal differences in response by each of the four generations to the five styles of expository preaching used in this survey. While the results did not match the church growth expectations exactly see (Table 6), there were measurable differences between the generations and there were many church growth expectations that did match survey results.

Table 6. Overview of the Expectations and Actual Results for the Four Generations

The Builder Generation (1925-1942).

Expectation

The Deductive Sermon should be their first choice.

Actual Result

The Inductive Sermon first then the Deductive Sermon

The Boomer Generation (1943-1960).

Expectation

The Dramatic Monologue Sermon should be their first choice.

Actual Result

The Inductive Sermon first then the Dramatic Monologue Sermon

The Buster Generation (1961-1981).

Expectation

The Dialogical Sermon should be their first choice.

Actual Result

The Inductive Sermon then the Dramatic Monologue and the Dialogical Sermon was third

The Bridger Generation (1982-2003).

Expectation

The Biblical Narrative or the Inductive Sermon should be their first choice.

Actual Result

The Inductive Sermon was first and the Dramatic Monologue Sermon second with the Narrative Sermon last

Second, because of the survey results when the biblical text allows, preachers and teachers should use the inductive and dramatic monologue style more often to communicate the Gospel more effectively to all the generations (see Table 5). When preaching to the Buster and Boomer Generations specifically, preachers and teachers should increase the use of the dialogical style of

sermon (see Table 5). When preachers and teachers are targeting the Boomer Generation they should not abandon the deductive style of preaching but recognize that the Boomer Generation does not respond as well to the deductive preaching style as the other generations (see Table 5).

Third, the survey results confirm discernible differences in the generational preferences of sermon styles (see Table 5). The preferred order of sermon styles by all the generational participants combined was inductive, dramatic monologue, dialogical, deductive, and narrative. The most preferred sermon style was inductive for all generations combined. The least preferred sermon style for all the generations combined was the narrative style sermon.

How does one account for the choice by all four generations of the inductive style of sermon over all others? The answer may lie in the research recorded in Rick Blackwood's book, *The Power of Multisensory Preaching*. Dr. Blackwood presents the following neurological research. "Some neurological and cognitive experts believe multisensory technology has created a multisensory-dependent culture . . . Recent conclusions from the research indicate that television may overstimulate and permanently rewire the developing brain to be visually dependent when it comes to attention span."¹² Thus the reason every generation preferred the inductive style of sermon over all the other styles tested may come from the fact that modern communication technologies have significantly affected the way people can hear, comprehend, and retain information.

Anyone who seeks to teach must embrace these neurological facts. Pastors and teachers may wish that their students were more auditory, but the fact is that many are visual and interactive learners. We may wish they were able to learn from our lectures, but the fact is, many cannot. They need to hear our teaching, see our teaching, and interact with it for maximum learning. Multisensory communication meets this multisensory need.¹³

This recent neurological and communication research needs to be incorporated into church growth theory if church growth theory is to be more accurate and helpful in communicating more effectively to all four generations. This will help the church growth researchers to be more accurate in their predictions and the pastors in the effectiveness of their presentations.

The neurological research may also account for the popularity of the dramatic monologue and dialogical sermon styles by a large number of participants. All three styles are basic to modern media presentations.

The Gender Differences

There were gender differences, but they were minor except for the Builder and Buster Generation participants (see Table 4).

The Church Differences

There were generational and gender differences in the preference of sermon styles between the churches, but, generally, they were minor (see Tables 2 and 3).

Conclusion

The purpose of this project was to help pastors, preachers, teachers, and church growth researchers gain some concrete information about the responses of four generations of believers to five styles of expository sermons. Despite its limited scope, this project has produced measurable differences in the responses of the four generations concerning five styles of expository preaching, partially validating previously described generational church growth theory. However, there are some clear variations from the church growth expectations found in the results of the survey. The variations in sermon preferences show the need to do additional research on a wider scale. The additional research on sermon preferences needs to include generational and gender preferences and to factor in neurological research on the impact of technology on the generations to revise the expectations of the church growth theories to make them more accurate in our technologically dominated society. The author hopes to have laid important measurable groundwork on which other pastors, preachers, teachers, and church growth experts can build. The author also hopes this project will provide concrete options for pastors, preachers, teachers, and church growth experts to overcome the growing polarization in our churches along generational lines and more clearly and effectively communicate biblical truth to everyone.

Notes

- ¹ Bob Whitesel and Kent R. Hunter, *A House Divided* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2000), 7.
- ² *Ibid.*, 7.
- ³ Gary L. McIntosh, *One Church Four Generations* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002), 202-209.
- ⁴ Rick and Kathy Hicks, *Boomers, Xers, and Other Strangers* (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, 1999), 215-227.
- ⁵ William Strauss and Neil Howe, *Generations* (New York: Quill, 1991), 44.
- ⁶ McIntosh, *One Church Four Generations*, 15.
- ⁷ McIntosh, *One Church Four Generations*, 11.
- ⁸ Arndt and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 153.
- ⁹ Graham Johnston, *Preaching to a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001), 149-172.
- ¹⁰ Strauss and Howe, *Generations*, Figure 6-6.
- ¹¹ McIntosh, *One Church Four Generations*, 204-205.
- ¹² Rick Blackwood, *The Power of Multisensory Preaching and Teaching* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 36.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 36.