
Respect and Appreciation of Culture

Every generation lives within a given culture. Each culture has its own significance, including some elements that would be considered “Godly” and some that would get classified as “ungodly.” Blanket statements condemning a given culture fail to understand that culture simply provides a vehicle for the way we do life. Sinful people will sin in their culture just as righteous people will shine in the same culture. The relationship between theology and culture provides the tools to make evaluations of elements within a culture.

Because culture provides the context in which a person lives, the culture shapes the person and vice versa. Every generation has its own culture. It may be similar to another culture, but it will have its own distinctiveness. As a result, one’s identity gets tied up within one’s culture. This includes the language one speaks, the language one understands, the musical style a person prefers, specific foods, parent-child relationships, respect for authority, dating dynamics, which holidays are celebrated and how? A person’s religion and how it gets practiced also fits within the category of culture. No wonder young people often want to change how church gets done. No wonder older generations resist!

Put-downs, denunciations, generalizations, and even teasing often get taken personally. That’s because *they are* personally offensive. While this can be done comparing one generation with another, the differences might be more noticeable over the generations of immigrant cultures. This shows itself with Hispanics, Koreans, Yugoslavians, Japanese, Russians, Filipinos, Samoans, Haitians—especially those who speak a different language. In fact, the language becomes symbolic of the strength of one’s bond to the original culture. In practical terms, the language keeps one in the mother culture and isolated from the new culture. Those in a transitional generation might find themselves in a third culture by not fully being in the old or the new.

The tremendous risk taken by relocating to a new (and possibly hostile) culture creates a pendulum swing

in which the new immigrant often seeks security and familiarity by living in a neighborhood with others from one’s country of origin. Work options seem limited due to one’s inability to communicate in a new language. The need to depend on God remains constant. Church provides an environment in which the first generation can maintain its previous identity with strength. Why would they relinquish it?

The second generation learns the language early and much more easily by attending school. The second generation can move between two cultures, but often feels caught between two worlds, often getting treated as a second-class citizen by both cultures. Respect and appreciation for “the other” culture doesn’t come naturally or might not be communicated adequately or in helpful ways. Treating those of a different generation with care, love, and acceptance happens more by grace than by grit. The need for God usually doesn’t feel as pressing as it did for the first generation. When an individual feels secure and one’s identity isn’t threatened, openness and acceptance come more easily. Respect might precede acceptance. It may require some coaching. “The first service that one owes to others. . . consists in listening to them. . . Many people are looking for an ear that will listen. They do not find it among Christians, because these Christians are talking when they should be listening” (Bonhoeffer, 1954, pp. 97-98).

The second generation often serves as a bridge for the third generation. For immigrants, the second and third generations usually share more in common with each other than with the first generation. They also are more likely to leave the neighborhood and the church since they are usually assimilated into the larger culture. They tend to relate to authority relationally, which may not be interpreted as showing proper respect. Their faith inclinations lean to the experiential and transformational. Community comes through technological touch points such as texting, Facebook and Twitter. Evangelism must be relational and includes mentoring as well as the sense that they are part of a movement. Ethnic food draws

them back just as requiring the mother language often drives them away.

The first generation relates to authority structurally and approaches faith as information. Evangelism is also information based and denominationally focused. Community takes place within the walls of the church. If only the second and third generations would fall into line, they could be just like the first generation. The first generation immigrants can't conceive that their children and grandchildren would want it to be any different. The children and grandchildren can't imagine being the same as the first generation.

The place of testing respect and acceptance is church leadership. This is true for both Americans and immigrants. Who wants to give up something that is personally significant? Who wants to wait around until an entire generation passes off of the scene, especially when other options are available? "Servant leadership" anyone? The

need for identity renewal within each generation seems obvious but not necessarily easy. A new identity requires taking yet another risk and more change.

Referencing individuals and groups as 1st, 2nd, and 3rd generation proves to be more complicated and messy than one might first expect. In many instances, it has more to do with one's attitude and actions than one's date of birth or date of immigration. The increase of multicultural relationships, births, and the millennial expectation that embraces multiculturalism adds to the complexity. Because of the combination of the generations we can expect changes, sometimes gradual and other times sudden. A "multicultural" culture might leave some feeling like there is no norm simply because their preferred culture is no longer dominant. What seemed "different" and "important" may pale into insignificance, as if a person desired a new buggy whip instead of a new cell phone!

References

Bonhoeffer, D. (1954). *Life together*. New York NY: Harper and Row.