
The Way We Never Were

"**W**hen I was a kid, everyone went to church and arrived on time. The sermon always hit the spot and the choir sang a special number each week. People got along just fine. We served food for the homeless each month, and children knew they should be seen and not heard. Those were the days!"

"Well, when I was a kid, church attendance increased each year until we had to go to two services, and even then we had to add chairs in the aisles. We always had organ and piano accompaniment with our hymns. I can't recall a time when church offerings didn't exceed our goal, and the community service retirees never argued or fought."

"These days, only a few go to church each week, and even fewer make it on time. People leave quickly rather than sticking around for fellowship. The music is sacrilegious! They use instruments you would find in a nightclub! That only drives God and other church members away. The young people keep demanding that everything has to be the way they want it or they will leave. And our church leaders give them what they want. But they still don't attend very often."

"In my church, attendance keeps dwindling, with only old people present. I expect that within 10 years the last one will die and somebody will just lock the church and walk away. They always ask for money and we never have enough. As a result, we don't do anything as a church except for the weekly, or should I say, weakly church service. A visitor would call this the resting place of the dead God rather than the house of the living God."

These imaginary statements could resemble what some people say, regardless of whether or not they are true. Historians recount stories from the past. When they go back far enough, nobody alive today can verify

from their own lifetime what the historian says. Some documents could be supportive, but those can be misused or misunderstood. Yet what the historian says (or writes) becomes historical facts. When it comes to writing about wars, the winners get to write the history. Not surprisingly, the winners seem to be the good guys while the losers were the bad guys.

When high school or college friends reunite after years of separation, reminiscing about "the good ol' days" can easily slip into gross exaggerations. It takes very little to spice up a story, and each time it gets retold, it seems to become even better! The same holds true when describing how terrible things were at one time. My generation made fun of stories our parents told of having to walk both to and from school, in the snow, uphill both directions!

I know some people who tell incredible stories, and they truly are incredible (lacking credibility). It seems like they want their story to be so good that they will stretch the truth or make up things just to increase the story's impact. They would deny lying, and they actually believe the story they fabricate. As one of my friends playfully told me, "Never let the facts ruin a good story."

When I hear people recount stories that go beyond what seems likely, I call that "selective memory." They remember only certain elements; then they create the rest to flesh out their story. It usually makes for a better story, even if it isn't true.

The more we tell such stories, the more truthful they seem to us, even if they never happened. Stephanie Coontz challenged some of the images American families have of problem-free, forever happy families with ideal husband and wife and two cooperative children (first-born male and second-born female). Based on extensive research on what actually happened during those blissful

1950s, Coontz found that the image proved to be little more than a mirage. That's why she titled her book *The Way We Never Were* (Coontz, 1992).

Perhaps we do a similar thing when we tell the stories of our childhood and the memories we have from those pleasant days. But childhood memories can also be inaccurate. Happy memories may bring a smile to your face, or they could torment you because you aren't able to create that same type of memory for your own children. The image you have of other families who attend your church probably aren't any more accurate than the image you portray with your family.

The next time somebody plagues you by referencing "the good ol' days," direct them to Otto Bettmann's book *The Good Old Days—They Were Terrible!* (Bettmann, 1974). Bettmann used old photographs to show "the rest of the story." For example, horseback riding can create traffic jams much like cars and trucks do today. But horses also leave behind waste that cars don't. You won't want to use your imagination too much or you'll soon plug your nose. City life had challenges with garbage, pollution, noise, crime, crooked cops, terrible mortgage foreclosures, corporate greed at the expense of workers, plus an inordinate amount of beggars and tramps. Country life had its own challenges just to get clean water and grow enough food to be self-sustaining. With no electricity and probably no plumbing, plus the need to work the fields from sun up to sundown, leisure activities rarely made it on the punch list, nor did personal hygiene. Those were "the good ol' days"!

When we use our selective memory, we tell only part of the story. It can leave us wondering why our current families and congregations don't measure up to our memories of the past. How could they? They are incomplete and inaccurate.

Bible stories sometimes contain embarrassing elements. Thank God! We can relate to the inconsistencies, lame excuses, poor track records, and the bad mistakes people made in bible times. God is still good. He continues to forgive. He gives us his Spirit so we don't have to stay in the terrible rut. He forgives again.

Beware of expecting to replicate "the way we were." In reality, a better term for it could be, "the way we never were"!

References

Bettmann, O. L. (1974). *The good old days—they were terrible!* New York, NY: Random House.

Coontz, S. (1992). *The way we never were: American families and the nostalgia trap.* New York, NY: BasicBooks.