
Hand Me Down Religion

Did you ever receive “hand me downs” when you were a kid? Maybe an older sibling had outgrown some clothes and your parents quickly saw that they weren’t completely worn out; therefore you got them as “new to you.” But they weren’t new. In fact, they had already been through the family washing machine numerous times. After repeated “shopping sprees” like this, you learned that you should give input to your older sibling’s future clothing purchases. You recognized your vested interest.

I have three sisters and no brothers. As the only boy among the children, I observed the “hand me down” process from a safe distance. With three girls, my parents knew they should buy sturdy clothes. After all, the clothes had to last through three girls! Although there were times I wished I had an older brother, “hand me down” time was not one of those moments.

But hand me downs don’t have to be inferior. I have only one child—a daughter. I remember when a family that certainly had more wealth than ours paid a visit to give us some of the clothes the girl in that family had outgrown. Her mother wanted her to come and visit the little girl who would be receiving her gift. That mother wanted to instill in her daughter a spirit of giving. The clothes my daughter received were much nicer than what we could afford. I wondered if this was what homeless people feel like when middle class families donate clothing to them. I didn’t feel like a beggar. I appreciated receiving the gift. Hand me downs can be better than what we would have on our own.

Because my daughter is an only child, she has given some of her used clothing to others. At times she surprises me with her choice in what she donates and what she keeps. This has given her an opportunity to regularly give to others, and to mature in her decision-making skills. She’s a young adult now, so she makes most of

her own choices in all areas, not just clothing. She picks out clothing for me, which I certainly don’t consider to be hand me downs.

I systematically give away portions of my clothing to various charitable organizations. I also purchase clothing from some of those same entities. I typically do this in anticipation of a short-term mission trip in which I don’t want to worry about what happens to my clothing during the mission trip, and I don’t want to bring it back home after the mission trip. Like so many people, I’m happy to give away what I don’t want for myself.

Hand me downs come from all sorts of motives, such as:

- Gift – something I value and hope you will find to be valuable as well
- Power – I have more than you do, so I (rich one) give it to you (poor one)
- Sustainability – this still has some usefulness, so put it to use
- Better than trash – I was going to throw it away, but maybe you’re better than the trash
- Excess – I don’t have room for all of my stuff, so you can have what’s least valuable to me
- Brownie points – Let everyone know I’m a generous person—I give away some of my stuff
- Duty – somebody told me that I ought to do this
- Manipulation – since I gave you some of my stuff, why don’t you give me some of yours?

- Need – you have a need that I can supply
- Good vibes – I feel better when I give away stuff, so please take this so I can feel good

I'm sure there are additional motivations. Perhaps we mix several of these together when we give hand me downs. But hand me downs often come with a sense of being used or inferior. Instead of shopping for something, somebody already shopped for you. And then they used it before they gave it to you. The receiver often can't demonstrate enough gratitude because there simply isn't much gratitude to exhibit.

What happens when you translate the analogy from clothing or other "stuff" to religion? How receptive are people to "hand me down religion"? That probably depends on how valuable it is—to the giver as well as to the receiver. The motives also come into play. The receiver may wonder, "Why are you giving this to me?" It forces the question, "Do I really want this?" or "What am I supposed to do with it?"

When David went to fight the giant, Goliath, Saul gave him the best helmet, sword and shield in the land (1 Sam 17:38-39). But had David gone into the battle with those, he certainly would have lost. Instead, he went with a slingshot and five smooth stones. Maybe we should encourage the next generation to continue on the path we've already set them on. David learned how to use his slingshot while serving in his family as a shepherd. Instead of handing down something that doesn't fit, we would do far better if we aided the next generation to find their own spirituality.

In the Western World today, we expect that adolescents will need time and experiences to forge their identity. This can be terrifying! But failure to go through the process usually results in an external religion at best, with an immature or dwarfed internal religion. Young adulthood has lengthened that journey for many. Extended education, a terrible job market, and pampering our kids further complicate this transition. One way to demonstrate a new and different identity from the previous generation would be to reject, ignore, or fade from the religion of that generation. Indeed, many in the second generation have done so.

Worship styles, musical taste, what one wears, plus when and where church meets for worship are all avenues young adults prefer to shop for their own choices rather than accept hand me downs from their parents. When people asked Jesus why his disciples didn't do things in the traditional ways, Jesus told them, "No one puts new wine into old wineskins. For the wine would burst the wineskins, and the wine and skins would both be lost. New wine calls for new wineskins" (Mark 2:22, NLT). Wouldn't both generations lose what's valuable to them if we forced them to exhibit a hand me down religion?

Childhood is the time to hand down one's religion. Parents and other adults should provide that emphasis at that time. Youth and young adulthood should be the time the older generation comes alongside them as they search for a brand new wardrobe. Maybe the first generation could assist the second generation in sewing the best fabrics for a custom-made fit. Hand me downs don't do justice for something as important as one's religion.