
Is the Church One Generation from Extinction?

Tracy Wood
Associate Youth Director
Oregon Conference

Abstract

As we grow older we find ourselves asking questions about the future of our church and its relevance to the lives of our children and grandchildren, especially if they have not embraced our beliefs. The Bible gives a definite generational prophecy concerning the “last days.” Older church leaders can create opportunities to engage and involve youth and young adults in areas of leadership to their generations. But that necessitates a mentoring and then a release with support for these new leaders. By trusting God’s Word, we will allow younger generations, inspired by the Holy Spirit, to see and do ministry relevant to their understanding of Scriptures even though it may be irrelevant to us.

Is the Church One Generation from Extinction?

Who’s asking the question? Is it first generation Adventists? Is it their children—second generation young adult Adventists? Or is it their grandchildren—third generation Adventist youth? For this chapter, the classification of age brackets will be: First Generation—ages 40 and older, Second Generation—ages 20-39; Third Generation—ages birth-19.

Is this a generational question, prompted because our church proclaims the gospel differently now than it did when we first accepted Jesus? Maybe it is because our visions of sharing the gospel have changed over the past few generations. Have our dreams of the gospel become so complex that only experienced people can correctly and effectively proclaim the “Good News” of Jesus to the younger generations? These are first generation-type questions.

Is the church one generation from extinction? If we think that it is God’s agenda that His church is to be like us, the answer is “Yes!” But if we believe the Bible and the prophetic promise of Acts 2:17-18, the answer is a resounding, “No!”

A Biblical Prophecy of Generational Ministry in “The Last Days”

“And it shall come to pass in the last days, says God, That I will pour out of My Spirit on all flesh; Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, Your young men shall see visions, Your old men shall dream dreams. And on My menservants and on My maidservants I will pour out My Spirit in those days; And they shall prophesy.” Acts 2:17-18 (NKJV)

In this passage, God is speaking. It is not Peter’s words. Peter makes sure we understand that these are God’s words and not merely a restatement of Joel’s words (Joel 2:28). It is God who is re-proclaiming his Word. The message contains a fresh prophecy. When God speaks, all things come into existence! It happened at creation (Genesis 1). In the days of Jesus, the centurion understood this when he said to Christ, “Just say the word and my servant will be healed.” (Matt. 8:5-13) When the Trinity speaks, it happens!

Following is a review of these two verses, phrase-by-phrase, considering their meanings. This is not intended to be a full, exegetical study, but simply a reading of the text with some insights from the original language.

“And it shall come to pass in the last days.” This could be translated, “In the last days it will be,” or “It will happen/be in existence/be the experiential reality in the last/final days.” Joel’s record of God’s prophecy states, “And it shall come to pass afterward.” In Peter’s statement of God’s prophecy the word “afterward” has been changed to “last days.” This re-proclamation comes from a different time frame. The application of the day-for-a-year principle could be applied, which would imply it happening in the last days or years. The message can be re-proclaimed once again, in our time today. The context of the following verses both in Joel 2:30-32 and Acts 2:19-20 give support to this time period.

“I will pour out of My Spirit.” Why the verb for “pour out” rather than a verb for “rain down” when talking about the Holy Spirit? The implication is that the “pouring out” is much more than just a sprinkle or a raining down. It is a down-pour—a pouring-down rain.

“... on all flesh.” It is on “all flesh” which is inclusive of everyone. Nobody gets left out. The “pouring out of My Spirit” is for all of us who do not have His Spirit. We naturally “live by the flesh and not by the Spirit” and God wants to flood us with His Holy Spirit in ways that previous generations have never experienced. God is in the process of wrapping up this old world of sin and bringing it to an end so that He can come again!

“Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy.” Both our boys and our girls, specifically both genders, will prophesy. Look it up in the Greek. You will see that the prophecy specifically designates both genders. “Your sons and your daughters” is referring to the third generation, the youngsters, who are the spokespersons for God. They will prophesy! What does “prophesying” mean?

- They will proclaim God’s messages.
- They will speak under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.
- They will preach.
- They will tell of things to come.

They are speaking out for Him. They are telling others what Jesus wants them to say, prompted by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit through them. Both genders are preaching His last-days message. We can expect this in our churches, and outside of them even

more. They are telling of things to come, including last-day events culminating at the second coming of Jesus, and life with Him forever.

“Your young men shall see visions.” They will have spiritual insights! They will see old things in new ways. They are inspired by the Holy Spirit with fresh applications of God’s love and grace. They will understand and put into action new approaches. They will take the gospel into their world in ways and in places that those before them never could. The term “young men” leads us to think of the second generation—people that adults would consider to be young adults. The second generation contains the visionaries going outside the world of only adults and into the rest of the world with a fresh vision of Jesus and His prophetic message for this time. They are seeing God and experiencing Jesus in ways the older generation is unfamiliar with because “we never saw it this way before.” They are not afraid to be creative and try new approaches of sharing the old, old story of Jesus and His love.

They have the Holy Spirit pushing them outside our church structures and systems. Don’t expect them to be dependent on the organization to give acceptance and approval to their God-given, Holy Spirit-inspired vision. They are not afraid to live on nothing for the sake of the gospel. They see that the “last days” message must be proclaimed in all the world and they rely on God rather than the church organization to make this happen. The Holy Spirit has already opened doors of opportunities far beyond the comfort zone of those first generation thinkers who asked, “Is the church one generation from extinction?”

“Your old men shall dream dreams.” This doesn’t necessarily exclude the older ladies. It can be understood as the “elderly” known as the older generation. This is the first generation believers—those who have walked with Christ for a long time. They have tried many approaches and have determined what works and what doesn’t. They have strong opinions about how and when and where the gospel should be proclaimed. They have a natural tendency to think that those younger than them, their children and grandchildren, need to understand Jesus as they do.

But when the Holy Spirit gives these older people a dream, it goes beyond entrenched thinking. Such Spirit-inspired dreams are “big-picture” dreams that show conclusions to God’s leading. Biblical examples

of these types of dreams include Joseph's dreams which God fulfilled years later. Nebuchadnezzar's dream of the image in Daniel 2 was a big-picture dream that culminates at Jesus' second coming. Most of the time dreams don't reveal the step-by-step details, but rather the final conclusion to God's leading. The Holy Spirit gives dreams which help the older generation not give up nor become discouraged along their journey of life. And older people can share their God-given dreams with the younger generations. They believe and hope that, even though they may not understand what God is doing, He will fulfill His promises.

Times have changed for these first generation believers. But they embrace the prophecy that God's Spirit is poured out on all flesh. Based on God's promise, they have hope even when their children and grandchildren aren't walking with God in exactly the same way the first generation did. When they realize that the Holy Spirit inspires their second generation young adults with spiritual insights (visions) of when and how He wants to work through them to fulfill His final conclusions, hope revives. And when they see their third generation grandkids proclaim their own experiences of the simple gospel of Jesus, fears dissipate and hope comes alive. They know the Lord is leading His people to the conclusions He has shared with them in their dreams.

“And on My menservants and maidservants I will pour out My Spirit in those days.” Notice that God is repeating His promise of pouring out His Spirit in “those” (last) days. Such repetition hints at a second pouring, or God's double portion of the Spirit upon His servants. It is on those who have chosen to be God's servants, who have surrendered their hearts, their minds, and their wills to Him for the purpose of helping others experience the love and grace of Jesus. They have laid down their lives for Christ. They have surrendered all for the sake of experiencing a continual, personal, growing relationship with Jesus. They have chosen to be His servants continually. They receive the double portion of the Holy Spirit! Once again God includes both genders. Generational differences don't even get mentioned in this phrase.

The pouring out of the Spirit on servants can also include the idea that God's Spirit isn't reserved or limited to the elite. Spiritual or social or economic status doesn't determine who receives the Spirit. God even pours out His Spirit on servants/slaves. Caste systems might be the way the world operates, but God won't be limited in those

manners. In a sense, all who follow Jesus have responded as servants. And God gives his servants the Holy Spirit.

“And they shall prophesy.” God's servants, males and females of all ages, prophesy. They proclaim God's messages with power in their various contexts. They speak under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in ways that are meaningful to their gender! They preach inside and outside their Adventist Church the end-time message of righteousness by faith in Christ alone! And they tell others of things to come based on the biblical teachings of Jesus' second coming and life with Him forever! They will not hold back in timidity! They have been filled with the Spirit and so they live out loud for God! They prophesy!

Taking a Look at the Role of the First Generation—Older Folks in these “Last Days”

If you are part of the first generation, you may have walked with Jesus a long time. Your conversion experience with Jesus might have happened many years ago. Perhaps you are the leaders in churches and the teachers in Adventist schools. Maybe you are the ones with the money who support the churches and schools. You probably make the decisions and set the direction for most of what happens inside the Adventist world. You were once younger and visionary, and tried many different approaches that seemed relevant at the time. You figured out what worked and what didn't.

Because your second generation children watched you fulfill your vision as they grew up, most of the things you do now seem “old school” to your children and “boring” to your grandchildren. You might still think it is “cutting edge.” It might be. Or it could be what was “present truth” in the past. One needs to ask whether or not the theological issues and viewpoints that challenged the first generation even make a blip on the current radar of ensuing generations.

Older generations tend to settle into what they understand to be true. They have already passed through the simple gospel that children discover. They no longer need to wrestle with integrating their beliefs—a task that challenges many young adults. When children and young adults don't think or act like older people, one shouldn't be surprised when the older generation asks, “Is the church one generation from extinction?” In a sense the question is, “Will the next generation be just like us?”

The answer to this question is not for the older generation to manage, control, and direct our churches and schools. The answer is to mentor, enable, and empower the next generations to fulfill their call to envision and prophesy to their own generations. As dreamers and prophets, our mandate comes to mentor young adults and youth to reach their generations.

Ellen White has much to say about teaching and training our youth and young adults to be “gospel workers.” We can quote her from compilations such as *Adventist Home, Evangelism, Gospel Workers, Messages to Young People, Testimonies for the Church* and others. White called for a number of actions from first generation believers. Following are two examples of what she calls the first generation believers to do.

“Young men and women should be educated to become workers in their own neighborhoods and in other places. Let all set their hearts and minds to become intelligent in regard to the work for this time, qualifying themselves to do that for which they are best adapted” (White, 1948a, pp. 118-119).

She also admonished that:

“We should educate the youth to help the youth; and as they seek do this work, they will gain an experience that will qualify them to become consecrated workers in a larger sphere. Thousands of hearts can be reached in the most simple, humble way. The most intellectual, those who are looked upon and praised as the world’s most gifted men and women, are often refreshed by the simple words that flow from the heart of one who loves God, and who can speak of that love as naturally as the worldling speaks of the things that his mind contemplates and feeds upon. Often the words well prepared and studied have little influence. But the true, honest words of a son or daughter of God, spoken in natural simplicity, will open the door to hearts that have long been locked” (White, 1948b, p. 115).

The General Conference Youth Ministries Department adopted a new approach to youth ministries in the church. They developed a model with Jesus at the center, surrounded by discipleship, church community,

and mission/service. I consider their concluding comments to be “spot-on”! They read:

“It is our conviction that empowered by the Holy Spirit according to the Divine promise, trusted and supported by leadership at all levels, the youth of the world will stand and take its place at the centre stage of the church. They will honor God in reflecting and proclaiming His Kingdom and preparing the world for His soon coming. For some time now, there has been a sense of renewal among our young people, and the time is right to entrust to them the mission of the challenge of building a church for this generation and beyond” (General Conference Youth Ministries Department, n.d.).

Conclusion

No, the church is *not* one generation from extinction. The church is one generation from explosion. It is the God-given prophecy that in the last days all of God’s servants, both male and female, will prophesy no matter what their age. It is a challenge for the older-generation dreamers of our church not to depend on their own understandings, but to dream God’s dreams and to follow Him as He is actively leading. They must understand their role, as the older generation, to reach their own generation, and to mentor and empower the visionaries (their young adult children), and the sons and daughters (their youthful grandchildren) to reach their generations as well. However, this does not mean that any should exclude themselves from other generations! God’s “last days” prophecy includes all prophesying together. We must be: spokespersons for God, proclaiming His words, preaching, and telling of future things to come! We must be about our Father’s business!

Recommendations for the First Generation—The Older Folks

1. You are Spirit-filled for the purpose of prophesying to your own generation to fulfill God’s dreams in their lives.
2. You are Spirit-filled for the purpose of empowering your kids (young adults) to fulfill God’s visions in their lives.

3. You are Spirit-filled for the purpose of enabling your grandkids (youth) to fulfill God's prophesying through them in their lives.

References

General Conference Youth Ministries, AY model: re-visioning youth ministries. (n.d.). Retrieved September 30, 2011, from <http://gcyouthministries.org/Ministries/AYModel/tabid/325/Default.aspx>

White, E. G. (1948a). *Testimonies for the church, vol. 9*. Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 118-119.

White, E. G. (1948b). *Testimonies for the church, vol. 6*. Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 115.