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The Word for everyone

Ministering to an intergenerational congregation requires a conscientious effort to clearly communicate the message to the listeners. Not limited to a single style or type of sermon, intergenerational preaching involves first understanding the congregation's needs and then responding to them in a way that everyone can understand.

“Only take heed to yourself, and diligently keep yourself, lest you forget the things your eyes have seen,” Moses wrote, “and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life. And teach them to your children and your grandchildren” (Deut. 4:9).¹ He wanted succeeding generations not to forget what Israel had already experienced.

Author Ellen G. White describes the teaching of Jesus: “Old and young, ignorant and learned,

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could catch the full meaning of His words.”² She indicates that the way He taught employed language that every generation could clearly understand. Both passages emphasize that generations that did not walk through the desert or listen to Jesus teach can still learn from the past. Today’s teachers and pastors must present God’s Word in a manner that our hearers can not only understand but also apply to their own lives.

Before getting into the basics of preaching to the intergenerational church, it is important to clarify that the following principles do not mandate only one type of sermon. Also, every generation has its own cultural setting and learning style. However, certain basic elements should be present when preaching in an intergenerational context.

Preaching to the intergenerational church

The fact that younger generations are losing interest in church is due, in part, to the way much preaching is done. Most of the topics and the language used mainly target adults. But John Roberto, editor of *Lifelong Faith*, maintains that “children will benefit greatly by learning together with their parents and the other generations of the Christian community.”³

Speaking of children should remind us of one of the most effective preaching tools: stories. More than just illustrations, stories capture the listener’s attention, make ideas come alive, and linger in the mind long after whatever else the minister might have said. No matter how young or old people are, we love stories. But such stories, along with the rest of a sermon, must have certain fundamental aspects.

Effective intergenerational preaching has three basic elements: theological, relational, and practical. When we center those components on the person of Jesus Christ, the message will become real and personal to everyone.

The theological component

The theological component deals with what the text means. A simple definition of preaching

is that it teaches the meaning of the Scriptures in a contemporary setting. It is fundamental that all sermons preached in our churches are based on the Bible. Traditionally, Adventist preaching has focused on prophecy and lifestyle. Unfortunately, that kind of preaching has often led to fear and a futile search for perfection. Such content has resonated better with older generations than with younger ones. Compounding the problem, the younger generation may not understand the language used. Does that mean we water down intergenerational messages? The answer is an absolute *no*.

What the theological content pleads for, first, is to make the truths of the Bible part of one overarching story. Second, we must present them in a language that all people can grasp. Jere Phillips, editor of *The Journal of Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary*, states, “Preachers cannot assume everyone understands the terminology we use when preaching. . . . Biblical illiteracy extends to every age group.”⁴

When God spoke to Moses about health principles for the Israelite camp, He used simple language to describe the new sanitary laws and offered concrete illustrations. For instance, when dealing with clothing and furniture stained by bodily fluids, God said, “ ‘ ‘Whoever touches his bed shall wash his clothes and bathe in water, and be unclean until evening’ ’ ” (Lev. 15:5).

It is interesting that God did not tell Moses, “Those who touch clothing stained with such fluids need to be treated with antibiotics to prevent infection by microscopic bacteria.” If the Lord had, Moses’ first reaction may have been, “Micro . . . what?” Neither did God announce, “Make sure to have alcohol and penicillin in your first aid kit.” The microscope had not yet been invented. God’s intention was not to confuse but to give a clear message that anyone could understand during that time and in that place. By telling the people they would be impure in that situation, God was preventing further infections among the people. We know, through recent scientific discoveries,

that microbes have a lifespan outside of organic matter of about 24 hours. By telling them that they should remain outside the camp until the next evening (the next day), God was making sure infective agents would die and not spread throughout the camp.

Every message preached should have a theological element. Such a biblical foundation does not need to be shallow. In fact, we should always strive for biblical depth. Ellen White says, "The third angel's message reveals the great saving truth for this time. Its truths are constantly unfolding, and it is God's design that even the children and youth shall understand intelligently what God requires, that they may distinguish between righteousness and sin, between obedience and disobedience."⁵

All theological content needs to be presented in clear, simple language that all generations can grasp.

The relational component

The relational component addresses the question, "What does the passage have to do with me?" Unfortunately, at times, sermons have become lectures on theology. When that happens, far from being a channel that can lead the people closer to God, they have become a display of the preacher's knowledge on a topic, often with little relationship to the listener. When Jesus preached, He employed elements from the lives of His audience. He told stories and used illustrations that captured their interest, made things clearer, and left lasting impressions on their minds.

The Sermon on the Mount is one example. Warning of the danger of wrong teachings and false prophets, Jesus declared, "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves" (Matt. 7:15). Jesus uses an illustration embedded in Jewish history. Abraham was a shepherd; his descendants in the time of Joseph were shepherds; and even prominent historical figures, such as David, had been shepherds. Life among the sheep was familiar for the Jewish people. Seeking to drive the lesson home, Jesus did so with an image everyone in His audience was acquainted with.

Every message preached should have an element that its listeners can relate to. It helps guide the audience to discover their personal relationship with God and with others in their own context.

The practical component

The practical component demonstrates how the message of a sermon speaks to daily life. Often, sermons share beautiful and insightful information, but they are just information because they include little or no practical application. Gospel preaching seeks to change lives. That means that the message needs to show how the biblical and relational elements affect actual life. It can be said that the theological and relational components meet when the application in real life happens.

Scripture offers many examples of how to relate its messages to real life. Jesus speaks about walking a second mile (Matt. 5:41); paying Caesar what belongs to Caesar (Matt. 22:21); and, of course, the well-known golden rule. It is said of Paul that "he illustrated in a practical way what might be done by consecrated laymen in many places where the people were unacquainted with the truths of the gospel."⁶ Constantly, the apostle used elements that his readers could apply in the life of the church.

His story

When the theological component is solid, the message has value. When the relational component is present, people of all generations become engaged. When the practical component is applied, the message becomes part of life. Stories and other illustrations make these more vivid. When all three components are present in a sermon centered on the Person of Jesus, the message becomes especially alive. Jesus is the fulfillment of the Scriptures. It is His wonderful story. In Him, all Scripture receives its meaning, making it possible to preach the Word to everyone.



- 1 Scripture is from the New King James Version.
- 2 Ellen G. White, *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1913), 240.
- 3 John Roberto, "Becoming Intentionally Intergenerational: Models and Strategies," *Lifelong Faith* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2009), 44.
- 4 Jere Phillips, "Multigenerational Preaching," *Journal of Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary*, 5 (2018), 87.
- 5 Ellen G. White, *Manuscript Releases*, vol. 9 (Silver Spring, MD: Ellen G. White Estate, 1990), 292.
- 6 Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1911), 355.

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