

TENSION BETWEEN GENERATIONS



by John Gelding

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Trinity Sermon No. D26

National Library of Australia Card number
and ISBN:

0 86945 0263

Published by the

TRINITY PUBLISHING SOCIETY

87 North Terrace,

ADELAIDE, South Australia, 5000

a non-profit organisation within Holy Trinity Church,
working for the extension of the Gospel by Christian literature.

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Tomorrow commences the National Marriage and Family Week in Australia, and ever since 1961 when it was first formed from various denominations and social organisations within the community, the Council has sought to affirm that a strong and secure family life is a prerequisite for the welfare of the nation.

Somebody once said that a nation is only as strong as its families. Therefore, it seems appropriate that this year's theme has been well chosen as "Tension Between Generations".

It would be foolish to deny that we live in a young people's world. It has been estimated that between 1950 and 1970 the teenage population in Australia will have increased by 80%. There is a vast difference between yesterday's world of the crystal set and the portable transistors of today; of the steam-driven engine and the turbo-jet; of Bing Crosby and the Beatles.

In a recent editorial of 'The News' we read, "The key-of-the-door-at-21 attitude is way out of step with today's teenagers. They work more responsibly and spend money more widely than their parents dreamt of doing." The Editor then pointed out the move to lower the age for drinking, betting, driving, marrying and voting. Yes, it's a young adult's world.

But the tragic fact about this world of teenagers and the world of the adult is that both are growing rapidly apart. There appears a great gulf fixed between the two. Each fears the other and is ignorant of the fears, hopes and problems of the other.

As we turn to the 5th and 6th Chapters of St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians, we get some idea of the home as it should be, and some idea of the role of each member of the family.

5:22 "Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord"

5:25 "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the

Church and gave himself up for her"

6:1 "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honour your father and your mother (this is the first commandment with a promise), that it may be well with you and that you may live long on the earth. Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord".

For a moment, let us look at the tensions that exist between the generations. They arise in both generations because of:

A LACK OF COMMUNICATION.

To communicate means that we share something of ourselves with others, either through words, letters or deeds. This is something very personal because sometimes it means we share our moments of victory and our moments of despair, and somehow, difficult as it may be to express ourselves, there comes a feeling of release - a sense of happiness and peace, because we have allowed the tensions inside to come out. We all know how invaluable such a friend is who simply 'listens' and not 'dictates', to tell us where we are wrong.

To communicate means that we enter into a personal relationship and an encounter with another being. We commit ourselves to one another.

Consider for a moment one of the most tragic family stories in the Bible. It is the story of David and his son Absalom. He was David's third son, and because of an immoral act by Amnon his brother towards his sister Tamar, Absalom killed him. From that incident, the family was never the same. David took it to heart. He regarded himself somewhat responsible. In the midst of confusion, bereavement and bewilderment, Absalom fled from home; he was left no choice. David breaks down in tears, and in the end we read that the spirit of David longed or yearned to go to Absalom. But the

story of that home did not end there. We capture something of the tension in that family as we read II Sam. 13-18. Tragic to say, because both men could not get together to communicate, there came a time when there was no turning back for father and son. And then there came a day when Absalom met his death in a most humiliating way. David, deeply moved on hearing the news, was heard to say on his way to his chamber, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I have died instead of you, O Absalom my son, my son!" (II Sam. 18:33).

Here is pathos and spiritual poverty in this family. Too late to turn the hands of the clock back. All because the situation in that family was not rectified in the early days. "Indeed a sad home" says Dr. John Hercus in his book 'David' "if ever there was one". No communication; no round-table conference talks after dinner or lunch to sort out their problems and difficulties, but instead a collection of jealousy and conflict and tensions which led in the end to sheer open hatred.

I have often wondered whether David had been too busy building his empire - politically, socially and economically, in favour of spending time with his own family, and specially God's gift of children. It was said of David and Jonathan (who was Saul's son - somebody outside the family), that because they spent time with each other and communicated on all kinds of subjects, their hearts were knit together.

It is certainly true that young people today feel that the personal relationships of family life are breaking down. Doris Odlum in her book, "Journey Through Adolescence" writes, "The adolescent in the family group..... often feels that he is misunderstood and rejected".

The other day I asked a number of Secondary School pupils what they considered were the tensions between generations. I received a variety of answers, and as they did not have their names on them, I asked permission to use them.

One, aged 16 wrote that parents, especially fathers, "do not understand you are growing up and have the right of freedom of speech ... I know parents have been through things worse

than us, but why put us down when we are just starting to be adults? (and here comes the sentence about communication). At home I relax, and when I think something is funny I laugh, but I get told off for laughing like this. But Dad can snore while we watch T.V. and we can't say a thing" That's communication!

A girl 15 said, "I think one of the tensions is that you can't completely confide in your parents. I tell Mum a lot of things, but I only tell her what I want her to know. But I would like to tell her everything (she then talks about a boyfriend and a certain problem, and then adds) "I would give anything to be able to discuss this and my feelings, but she'd tell me not to be stupid or something. Who can we talk with (concerning) our personal problems?"

Here is one that I thought was significant. She is 16, and writes, "Complete lack of communication. I can't talk to my parents. They won't listen to me. They accuse me of cheek, disrespect and ungratefulness, and I find myself worse off than I was before. Adults don't seem to realise that when you have to do up to four hours of homework every night you have to let off steam somehow. They keep thinking of what they did when they were young; some things they apparently choose to forget and compare us to them. They seem to forget that we live in a rat-race of a world that they created and we haven't got the same chance. You have to be about 60 to have a say in this world. Most adults are intolerant of world problems like starvation, war, disease, etc., and they resent us because we have the audacity to drag these problems out into the open."

May I read one by a boy, which, although serious, has a note of humour in it. Bluntly he writes, "Adults don't understand our problems. They think we are silly when we view our true feelings towards someone of the opposite sex. Some (parents) are very understanding and know how we feel, but others make me wonder if they have any feeling at all. They seem like a hard, tough lump of meat without any emotions. I think it is better to have someone outside of

the family that you can talk to; someone that is older than yourself, though."

You will notice that in all these, and as many others revealed, that for teenagers what was very important was communication. They felt need to confide, discuss, laugh and cry together, work out their problems, not be talked down at, but respected, given a fair hearing, and perhaps most of all, understood.

Ross Synder in his book says, "Young people are often surprised that it is so good to have a conversation with an adult, and that an adult thought it worth his time".

Perhaps it is things like this that help create the right home atmosphere where every member feels free to speak and share his or her experiences. This does not mean the young person has the right to speak all the time. This would be wrong; but it does mean that each person should be able to speak.

I remember some years ago in Theological College, some students speaking about the reactions they received from their parents when they told them they were going to enter the ministry. In many cases, dad walked out; he wouldn't listen to it. Mum said, "But listen, you will be an embarrassment to the family; what about your present job, your university education, and all the money we spent on your education?"

There was a refusal to hear and listen and discuss, and very often, a refusal to discuss common things.

Communication will help develop those hidden potentialities, draw everyone closer together, reduce the inner tensions and frustrations, and thus strengthen each other. That was the pattern Jesus Christ exercised with the 12 disciples.

Between the generations there is the need to build inter-personal relationships. On this subject, Jesus said, "I give you a new commandment, that ye love one another" (John 15:12,17).

This means that there is the need for feelings of trust, of understanding, of acceptance, of affection in every family. This means that the home is a place where reconciliation and re-building of the family unit is ever going on. It is a matter of building bridges of understanding and love.

I read of a girl aged 18 years who would never say, in the Holy Communion Service, the response "Lord, incline our hearts to keep this law" to the 5th Commandment, "Thou shalt honour thy father and mother.....", the reason being that as a child her mother despised her. Somehow the girl could never forgive because her mother could never forgive. And it was revealed that now, at 18, there were deep-seated guilt feelings, lack of confidence, resentment, and all this meant that she was incapable of being what she desired to be.

Tensions between generations are resolved by loving one another, as Jesus said; to love as He loved us. That means there needs to be a constant self-sacrificing love, as Christ had. That is how we build bridges between others and ourselves.

Tensions arise between the generations because of Christian inconsistencies. Why is it that the Bible is a closed book in the home, and prayer is thought of as something totally personal, never corporate?

We say grace three times a day, and yet if visitors come somehow we put it off together with prayers and Bible reading. In a restaurant there is an embarrassing silence before we eat. We laugh at a smutty joke. These things do not go unobserved by our young people. They are the inconsistencies of the Christian life in the world of the adult. We look at the wrong kind of T.V. programmes and enjoy them. In their eyes it does not add up. Teenagers are the first people who notice these things.

Tensions arise because of the so-called new morality.

Our children are living in the midst of a social and moral revolution. Space does not permit to tell of the things the young people wrote this week on sex, mini skirts, etc. I believe many of the things they said are true. They spoke of some of the attitudes parents had towards their children, such as a father to a daughter. I am sure you can imagine them. The old traditional standards, values and commandments are, in the eyes of many, obsolete, old-fashioned, fit for the birds. Concepts of sex, love and marriage are changing. For example, marriage is thought to be no longer necessary. Once it was life-long and unbreakable - it was a relationship for keeps.

There is a film released through M.G.M., called "The Subject was Roses". It is the story about a marriage gone sour. A young man returns home from the war to find everything about his home changed. It was a marriage gone sour. It is interesting to look through entertainment columns to see the number of films on the home or marriage - from "Divorce, American Style", to "Guess who's Coming to Dinner".

Perhaps teenagers are under terrific moral pressures which are greater today than ever before. What are these pressures? Experimenting with drugs; premarital sex; cheating, gambling, alcohol, and many of these indescribable tensions are there because of adults who are literally exploiting our young people.

"Home Life" said this: "Whether better or worse, one thing is indisputable. Never have the temptations and pressures been so open and so attractively presented on T.V., full-colour ads, books and magazines. More free time, extra money in their pockets, the loss of identity in urbanization, the easy availability of cars, certainly makes it easier to yield to these temptations (Sept. 1968).

What is the answer to these searching and difficult problems? Indeed, it is a complex issue, but Paul reiterated some eternal principles that will never change. The young and the old need to look at these, for they show us how our family life, and also our life at work, can be made all the stronger.

St. Paul's writing to Ephesians: "Wives, be subject to your husbands", i.e., respect him. Do you? Your children are watching. "Husbands, love your wives". Is that true? "Children, obey your parents". Young people, are you doing that?

You may be interested to know that some of the teenagers, about 5%, said this week that although their homes were far from perfect, yet there were no tensions. It was a place where co-operativeness between each member was evident. Parents were examples to follow, and such children found there was security, trust and an understanding.

That seems to be the 'ideal' kind of family. This 5% would surely admit that from time to time there are tensions; there are tensions in every family, even in the best Christian family; but they can be solved together, through some of the things mentioned above.

Helen Lee in her book, "The Growing Years", concludes by saying this about our young people. "It is not that they no longer need us (adults). They need our help acutely now, and our understanding and steady love and our prayer, as they step out on an unchartered journey together. They need our homes as a spiritual fortress in whose shadow theirs can be built" (p. 151).

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, help us to build our homes on the foundations and principles laid down in your Word. Where there are tensions, problems and difficulties, help us to use them positively for the strengthening of one another. May our homes be a fortress where there is love, understanding and sympathy. May it be a place where we can share our tensions, our joys and our failures; and this we ask in Jesus' Name. Amen.

If you are reading this because you are interested in promoting family harmony, you will be glad to know there are other helpful publications in this line.

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Conflicts between parents and their children are as old as society, but are perhaps specially obvious today. John Gelding examines the causes for the difficulties, and presents the Christian way towards family harmony.

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ISBN 0 86945 0263

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