

## SIX FAITHFUL GENERATIONS IN THE NT

Some years ago my study of movements within recent Christianity made me aware that some people today do not see any real historical development and change within the NT itself. The common wish to 'Get back to the real Christianity of the Early Church' is quite understandable but it is a yearning for a static idealised church which never actually existed and cannot exist this side of heaven itself. The NT is real history, warts and all, with real historical change from generation to generation, and this leaves us a legacy of challenging questions which will reward our closer study.

Here is the question for you: 'How many faithful generations do you think can be separately identified in the NT?' Your answer will tell you a lot about how you are going to read the NT as a whole. Let us say there are three identifiable generations – they will not experience exactly the same things – they will receive the same basic message, but differently, and look upon the past differently, experience church life differently and face different social and political challenges – but they will all appear somewhere on the pages of the NT. So how many generations can you find? No need to write a big book about it – just pick a number.

I claim to have found six faithful generations and I hope I can explain each of them in one fairly short essay. The best way to view these generations is as a computer-generated cascade of 'tiles' where each one partially overlaps both the one before it and the one which follows – human generations do have these fuzzy porous edges but nevertheless we in the modern West claim to be able to discuss them separately, for example The Depression Generation; War; Baby Boomers; Gen X; Gen Y; Gen Y Not? In the NT of course it may well be that generations of *faith* do not correspond exactly to those of human biology or to changes in secular history.

### Gen 1 The Generation of Symeon and Anna, Luke 2:25--38

Luke alone records these two and he doesn't give us very much information, but we are much the richer for having what he does give us. Symeon and Anna are relics of a disappearing generation but they are there in the temple as solid testimony to the fact that there were many faithful in Israel in each generation. These two must surely have known each other – possibly very well and for a very long time – and the high point of their long service to God comes as, together, their eyes light upon one little baby boy among the thousands they have seen over the years. This one looks like all the others but somehow, unknown to us but clearer to them, this one is different.

Why are Symeon and Anna brought into the story at all? It is because of their testimony – their witness. Both Matthew and Luke in their narratives of the infancy of Jesus (and later of his trial and death as well) are very careful to bring in witnesses

of the highest calibre – witnesses who are widely known and respected as good Jews who themselves respect the Temple and the Traditions, who know and keep the law of Moses and are well spoken of by all – and such were Symeon and Anna and such was the testimony they bear to Jesus – it was as watertight as anyone, especially a Jewish reader, could wish for. And so we see this amazing thing happening – the word of these two witnesses becomes God's word and their judgement becomes God's judgement. That's the way it worked and that's the way it has always worked since the early chapters of Genesis – the Lord God speaks through human witnesses.

Symeon is introduced in Luke 2:25 as a man in Jerusalem, just and pious, who is on the lookout for something. He is looking for the comfort and consolation of God's people as promised in Isaiah 40:1 and 49:13. There were many other faithful people, unknown to us but known to God, who had the same desire but Symeon is special because, as Luke tells us, the Holy Spirit was upon him and with him. This matter of the presence of the Holy Spirit, and the way it happens and is written about, must be noted because it is one of the ways in which the generations in the NT will differ from each other. In Symeon's case he was given an oracle or sure statement by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he saw the Christ. On this special day Symeon comes into the Temple 'in the Spirit,' which is the sort of phrase that Luke often uses to describe a person who is about to do things or speak words which are inspired by the Lord, and he encounters a couple who have already in the story been shown to be godly and sensitive to the Law and who are there to present their baby as was required. Symeon surprised everybody who may have been watching when he took the baby boy in his arms, gave praise to God, and said: 'Now Lord you are letting your Servant come home in peace, because my eyes have seen your salvation (Isa 42:5 and 52:10) which you have prepared before the face of all the peoples – a light of revelation for the nations and the glory of your people Israel.' His words clearly show that he knew he was holding his ticket to freedom and they also strongly suggest that he was an old man longing to go.

But he is not finished yet. Symeon blesses the astonished parents and also says to Mary: 'Behold this one here will cause the fall and the rise of many in Israel and be a sign to be spoken against, and a sword will go through your own heart, just as the contents of many hearts will be made plain.' The consolation of Israel is to have its pain and suffering, as the rest of Luke's Gospel makes clear, and this dark side may be yet another reason that Symeon himself is so relieved to be going 'in peace' as the Lord has promised.

Luke's second witness within the Temple is Anna – called a 'prophet' no less – the first prophet of a new age of revelation. Her husband had lived for seven years and she had then lived as a widow until she was now in her 80s – a remarkable age for that era. She was the 'genuine' widow of I Tim 5:5, not leaving the temple and fasting and praying and worshipping day and night. Why exactly? Luke 2:38 makes it clear: 'she talked about him to all those who were looking out for the redemption of Israel,' that is the freeing or buying back of God's people. That is what she was praying about

all those years. Symeon and Anna were not alone and never had been alone – there were always these others at hand who also were looking to God to act.

I have chosen to put these two grand old believers in a generation of their own. Their place in the story allows them to be the bridge between the last of the OT believers and the appearance of the Christ. They were spoken to by the Holy Spirit, the building at the centre of their lives was the Temple, and their human fellowship was with those who wanted to live holy lives while they were on the lookout for the Lord's next move.

## Gen 2 The Infancy Generation

This of course is the generation which produces both John the Baptist and Jesus as babies – the generation of Zacharia and Elizabeth and Joseph and Mary – a time dominated by the political ruthlessness of Augustus in Rome and Herod the Great in Palestine but a time when in one little pocket of the Roman Empire there was a breathtaking spiritual richness as the message of God was heard from the mouths of angels.

The stories are well known because they are rehearsed each Christmas and so I will resist the temptation to expand on them except to say that once again great emphasis is placed on their piety and thus on their reliability as witnesses and claimants – the message here is that God is not working through charlatans or moral perverts or people out for personal gain. This Infancy Generation is separated from that of Symeon and Anna by many decades although they do come together briefly at the Presentation of the baby Jesus in the temple. Mary certainly seems to be the youngest of them and since she would be less than 20 years old when Jesus was born she would have been at least 45 when he was crucified.

We are not told where Mary and Joseph lived before they met but we are clearly told that they lived in Nazareth in Galilee after they returned from Egypt. Their religious life would have been dominated by the local synagogue rather than the Temple in distant Jerusalem and there is no record of any on-going messages from God to the family after they settled in Nazareth. It was different however in the case of John – his parents had a most remarkable and perhaps difficult child on their hands. John had been born with the highest possible references so far in human history and he would be outshone only by Jesus. Note especially Luke 1:14 and 15 – John will be great before the Lord; he will bring blessing to many; he will be filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb. This last statement is often overlooked but one does wonder what sort of a childhood John could have had. And we would not be the first to wonder, because Luke in 1:66 tells us that even then many people were asking 'What then will this child be?' Luke adds that the hand of the Lord was with John, and that as he grew in body he also became powerful in spirit (1:80), and this power will carry

over into and come to its full flowering in our next generation:

### Gen 3 The Apostolic Generation

The NT texts contain far more material on this generation than on any of the others – it forms the greatest part of the Gospels, Acts and the Letters. This is the generation in which most of the action happens, starting with the mature and courageous ministry of John, then of Jesus who was in so many ways John's polar opposite, then the birth of the Jewish church, then Paul and the Gentile expansion and eventual numerical domination, and on into Paul's old age and last letters. The Apostle John may prove to be a statistical outlier in this generation – prominent and revered because he so greatly outlived the others.

This generation was marked by new revelation from God in the form of new teaching but also in new signs and wonders and demonstrations of divine power. John the Baptist himself did no mighty works, so we are told in John 10:41, but first Jesus and then his Apostles made this a time and a generation of amazing miracles. There is no need to elaborate – we just need to read the Book of Acts (and to praise the Lord for its very existence).

It is not true however that the whole story is 'full' of miracles. Such was not the case and nor was it the point. The signs and wonders served the preaching and endorsed the preachers and were never meant to be the main item of interest. Consider the case of Paul in the town of Philippi, where a young spirit-possessed woman followed him around and made life difficult for him (Acts 16:16-18). The poor woman was clearly in great need of Paul's help but he simply endured the irritation and difficulty 'for many days.' His job was to preach and only when preaching became seriously difficult did Paul do anything about the situation. He drove out the evil spirit and set her free, but then was driven out himself, just as he must have feared. Peter and Paul, just like Jesus himself, did not heal all the people all the time.

The Apostolic Age begins with John in the Jordan River Valley, apparently shunning the Temple in Jerusalem and the religious leadership, then passes to Jesus and his ministry, then after his resurrection to his carefully chosen, named and recorded Apostles who were centred in Jerusalem and the Temple, largely observing the Law of Moses while preaching Jesus as the Christ but to Jews only. The next big step has Luke in Acts giving great emphasis to the fact that it was Peter, the leading Apostle, led by the Holy Spirit, who takes the Gospel to the Gentiles in the house of Cornelius in Caesarea. This inclusion of the Gentiles is the great turning point in the early history and Luke insists that it was not caused by Paul and his fellow outsiders but by Peter who was right at the very centre. The last days of Paul will effectively mark the end of the Apostolic Age and we can see him handing over the baton to a younger generation in his letters to his Lieutenants – especially Timothy and Titus.

## Gen 4 The Lieutenants' Generation

I think this is in many ways the most difficult but important generation for modern believers to identify, understand and accept. Many readers of the NT may want to see Timothy as part of the Apostolic Generation but the fact is that he straddles the line – he has one foot in Paul's generation and one foot in the next, and this is what makes him interesting and important. He is not alone, of course, but joined by the unnamed writer of Hebrews, by Titus, Onesimus, Archippus, Mark and many others, possibly even Luke himself. The historical and personal setting of this generation is intriguing indeed. They knew the marvellous things they had seen and heard from their time with the various Apostles, but as the old warriors passed and a new generation was challenged to take their place, the future was far from certain.

Hebrews: The writer of Hebrews, who was a man (some say a woman but this is doubtful) of high intellect, great learning and great pastoral caring, who tells us rather clearly his own understanding of the historical setting of the Jewish Christians who are his target audience. In Hebrews 2:1-4 he looks back to their beginning as Christians. He warns that like untended little boats they are in danger of carelessly drifting away unseen on the night tide, so they need an anchor (and later he will say their anchor point will only be found in the most holy place, where Jesus Christ is, seated at the right hand of God). They must take his warning seriously because what they have pinned their hope on was first proclaimed by the Lord himself, and then it was proved to be valid by the very men who first heard him, while God continued to confirm their testimony with signs and marvels and wonder-works and 'dividings' of the Holy Spirit according to his will.

This was his readers' foundation experience but it is now in the past and there is no suggestion that it will be repeated, so they must not reject it and turn away now. In fact they will not be allowed to come back into the fold if they stray! It is very noticeable that while Hebrews notes these wonderful things in their own past, as well as in the experience of Israel under Moses, the rest of the letter makes no further appeal or reference to them in the present life of these Christians – as far as the writer is concerned their way forward to a sound Christian life does not lie in an expectation of on-going miracles but in a proper understanding of the Old scriptures, as looking forward to Jesus, as interpreted through Jesus Christ and focussed on him alone. His readers are to look back, look up, and look forward, but there is no indication that he thinks their stock of miracles will be added to. The writer of Hebrews mentions Timothy (in 13:23) and may well have known Paul, and he straddles the border between our two generations, #3 and #4, and moves himself and his hearers into the future.

Timothy: We have a clearer picture of Timothy because we know so much more

about him from Acts, from various NT letters and from the two personal letters which Paul wrote to him and which bear his name. In spite of his obvious importance in the NT and the fact that his name appears as a joint sender of Philippians, Colossians and Thessalonians, it is curious that we never actually hear a single word from him or see him do anything. He is rather like poor old Lazarus in the Gospel of John who never gets a word in either! We are told Timothy did much, endured much and travelled much on Paul's behalf and but we never get to see his face as it were or see him in action.

Timothy is the single most important and instructive figure for us as we try to trace the way his generation took over the leading and shaping of the Christian groups after the death of the Apostles. We have already seen the pattern in Hebrews where the writer has his readers look back in order to move them forward, and this is exactly how Paul shapes his intensely personal advice to Timothy. Paul urges him to remember 'the prophetic utterances made concerning you in the past' (I Tim 1:18) and again 'Stop neglecting the gift you received, which was given you through prophetic utterance when the elders laid their hands on you' (I Tim 4:14), a theme found again in II Tim 1:6 'I remind you to stoke up the fire of the divine gift which came upon you when I laid my hands upon you.' Timothy too, like the readers of Hebrews, must look back in order to move forwards.

These truly remarkable things which Paul is referring to marked Timothy's entry into ministry as a young man and place him firmly in the Apostolic Generation as both an eyewitness and a participant, but in the second letter Paul is older, much surer that he is soon to die, and urgent that both the younger man Timothy and the churches under his care should be equipped to face the future. We don't know how old these two men were so some 'best guesses' are involved but we should allow at least ten years difference in their ages, so by this time Timothy is at least 30 if not closer to 40 and with at least 10 years of mission experience, so he is no longer a young man in spite of the fact that Paul still warns him to flee from the evil impulses of youth (II Tim 2:22).

It is clear that Timothy came to faith in what I would call a 'charismatic' setting, one in which he received special equipping and promises and prophecy, and in which he was an eyewitness to the 'Signs of an Apostle' which Paul and the other Apostles exercised. In regards to 'charismatic' things we know nothing of Timothy and his own abilities but we are given one curious little insight in I Tim 5:23 where Paul tells Timothy to 'drink a little wine for your persistent stomach problems.' We notice that Paul does not heal Timothy (just as he does not heal his other beloved Lieutenant Epaphroditus in Philippians 2:25-28) nor does he mention any faith healing or local miracle healers among Timothy's Christian friends, and this outlook is strengthened when we read the famous requirements for ongoing ministry workers in the emerging churches as set out in I Timothy 5. Protestant Churches today still use this list. When we compare the profile of ministry in this chapter with the earlier scene in First Corinthians we see that the exciting but troubling 'charismatic' elements are no longer

mentioned, and are certainly no longer a requirement for ministry if indeed they ever had been. Things have changed – the Holy Spirit has moved on!

Timothy and Titus and their cohort have a unique identifying characteristic: Just as the Apostles learnt from Jesus but outlived Jesus, so their Lieutenants watched and learned from the Apostles but outlived the Apostles. They were the last Generation to have this great privilege. The living thread back to the Lord Jesus was becoming ever thinner and would at some point disappear. The final two Generations can be discussed very briefly.

#### Gen 5 The 'Post-Lieutenant' Generation

I really don't know what name to give them but this is the Generation which Paul tells Timothy to continue to lead and teach after Paul is gone. The unique identifying characteristic of this Generation will be the fact that they may never have met one of the Apostles but they have got their Christian knowledge from someone like Timothy who did know the Apostles and who was appointed and authorised to teach by an Apostle. In all other respects Generation 5 will have to make their own way in an often unfriendly and changing world and they will have to develop ways to preserve and propagate the truths they have received, the 'deposit' which Paul wrote about. They will also have to provide leadership and find suitable leaders for the next and last Generation.

#### Gen 6 The Documentary Generation

In due course all the first five Generations will have died, such being the will of God. When that happened the last living link back to Jesus will have disappeared and there will even be nobody left who can say 'I knew Timothy' or again 'I was taught by someone who was taught by an Apostle.' For this last Generation there would of course be oral teaching passed on by word of mouth but there would be an ever more urgent need for the Gospel to be written down, and eventually the only certain way to understand Christian teaching would be by documents. That situation need not be so bad – after all we too belong to Generation 6!

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