

The Thirteen Generation: A Theological Reflection

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Thirteenth Generation: Theological Reflection

During these past weeks, I have been reading much about the so-called Baby Busters, or, as others call them, the Invisible Generation, or the Thirteenth Generation. Generally speaking, people born between 1965 and 1983.

Much of what I have read is confusing. Some of it is self-contradictory. But in all this reading there is one point that has come across quite clearly: This generation will be forced to face up to the issue of limits.

One author puts it thus:

Most Americans did not grow up with the disheartening feeling that they will never be able to achieve their dreams. But that is how most Baby Busters feel: surprisingly hopeless in a world seen by their elders as possessing virtually unparalleled opportunity.

A world possessing virtually unparalleled opportunity. That was the world in which I grew up. It was the world of the post-war economic boom. It was the world of Buck Rogers, with ever more worlds to conquer. I well remember the day the Russians launched their first, and surprising, sputnik. I was at Yale at the time, and the place was buzzing with what we then called “the conquest of space.” Some of the top scientists at the University were giving interviews about the enormous implications of this momentous step.

Then I went to class, and one of this country's great prophets, by the name of H. Richard Niebuhr, opened his lecture with what turned out to be the most profound statement that I heard that day:

There once was in the middle of the Pacific a great freighter tossed by wind and wave, its vast hold carrying a million pounds of potatoes. There was in one of these potatoes, in a sack deep in the hold, an enterprising and hungry worm. It happened that one day this particular worm ate through the skin of its potato and, having looked at the skin of the next potato, came back to its fellow worm, and proclaimed with awe: "we have conquered space!"

I thought I understood what he meant and laughed at his wit. But I was so caught up in the spirit of modernity and of my own generation that I did not really understand. Space was out there to be conquered, just as the supposedly Wild West had been conquered, just as famine and illiteracy would soon be conquered. More than a decade later, when the first astronaut walked on the moon, my heart thrilled at the famous words: "One small step for man; a giant step for mankind."

Today, quite apart from the obvious sexist language of that statement, I have come to realize that what was happening was precisely the opposite of what was thought. That supposedly gigantic step, rather than a new beginning, was the end of the modern dream of the conquest of space. For all practical purposes, we had come very close to our limits. True, we have continued sending probes into space and even building a space station. But if there is anything we have learned it is that those other potatoes are much farther away than we thought, and their skin much thicker than we had imagined.

Much of the tension and frustration of this generation is that it has been told --is still being told-- that there are no limits, and yet at every turn it is bumping up against limits that should not be there.

In very concrete terms, as one of them put it, "Perhaps the cruelest joke played on our generation is the general belief that if you went to college, you'll get a job and be upwardly mobile."

But that is just part of the joke. The bigger joke is the very notion that by reaching for the unreachable star you could actually reach it. It was a lie. And we now fault this younger generation for telling us that it was a lie. The lie began a long time ago, and almost every generation until the present one had more and more reason to believe it. It began as the lie of modernity, that somehow through the use of reason and science we would create and continue creating an ever-better world, *ad infinitum*. It continued with the so-called conquest of the West, where a nation was formed in the myth that there were and would always be new frontiers to conquer, and that their conquest would support unlimited growth. It was reinforced by the age of neocolonial expansion, when nations became prosperous on the basis of an uneven relationship with the rest of the world and never even recognized it.

Now this new generation must face up to the truth: There are limits. Ours is a time of limits. We are learning that the earth has ecological limits and that we trespass on those at our own

peril. We are learning that there are limits to economic growth. Politicians might still say that this is the result of bad economic policy and that the trend could be reversed with proper management. But the fact is that there is a limit to economic growth and that, even though we might push at the limits here or there, the limits are still there. We are also learning that there are moral limits. Part of the myth of modernity was that morality could be reduced to rational standards. The problem is that we who think we are so good at reasoning are even better at rationalizing and very poor at telling the difference.

We have increasingly educated entire generations into the modern myth that the best and perhaps the only moral limits are those we set ourselves, that the goal of life is self-fulfillment --and we have reaped a society of greed, violence, and destruction.

Now we have come to a generation that can no longer ignore the truth that there are limits. That the earth cannot and will not sustain unlimited economic growth. That society cannot survive without moral limits.

As a result, two things are happening, and neither of the two is pleasant. First, we have come to a younger generation that is deeply frustrated because the myths in which it was formed no longer work, and it has no new myths by which to guide its life. Second, we have an older generation --ourselves-- that hates the younger generation for beginning to expose the myths

by which we have lived. We have set them up with impossible goals, and then we fault them for failing. We fault them because their failure shows the intrinsic lies in our success.

What does this mean for the church and its ministry among this generation? It means, first of all, that we must learn from them, and confess to God and to them, that the values by which we, as a church, have lived, and the values that we have tried to instill in them, have not always been Christian values.

The value of unlimited growth is **not** a Christian value. The value of upward social and economic mobility is **not** a Christian value. The value of success at all costs is **not** a Christian value. The value of life without limits is **not** a Christian value. Even the value of self-fulfillment, at least as our generation has understood it, is **not** a Christian value.

And yet in many ways our churches have lived according to at least some of these values. This younger generation is experiencing the failure of such values. It is caught in the frustration between their prevalence and their fallacy. And at least part of the fault must be laid at our own feet --and at the feet of the church, which has not always distinguished the values by which it lives from the values which are predominant in our society.

This we must confess.

This we must be willing to correct.

In this the younger generation has a ministry to us and to the church at large: to point out the failure, to highlight the incongruence, and thus to call us to greater obedience.

But then, failure and incongruence also lead to pain. As I read these materials, and as I look at many around me, I find that this is a pained generation. It is a generation without good news. It is a generation to whom society has made false promises and whom society now blames for the failure of those promises.

As I read the materials which churches are putting out regarding this "thirteenth generation," it seems that the big question is: **How** can we reach this generation?

But that is not the real question. The real question is: **Why** should we reach this generation?

You see, the question, **how**, still takes for granted that we have been doing things generally right all along, that what we need is some minor adjustment, a new program, or a new gimmick, or a new approach, or a new office, or a new technique. These might be helpful and necessary. But they will all miss the mark unless we begin with the prior question, **Why**. Why do we wish to reach this generation? Because without them our numbers will continue to decline? Because their presence and participation will allow the church to continue living under the illusion that there are no limits to growth?

All these answers take for granted that what this thirteenth generation is now experiencing is nothing but a bleep on the screen. It is as if we were saying: Certainly, they will not reach the economic status of the earlier generation --but that is merely the result of a temporary recession, or of bad economic policies. Certainly, they are facing the ecological limits of our planet --but soon we'll discover new technologies that will once again allow us to stretch and even ignore such limits. Certainly, they have reason to feel that the church has become largely irrelevant to their situation --but if we pay more attention to them, they will see that we are really concerned about them, and the church will continue growing as it has in the past.

I submit to you that all of these are false assumptions. The conditions that the thirteenth generation is having to face are not a bleep on the screen but rather a clear sign of the future that is rapidly approaching. The time of "virtually unparalleled opportunity" is rapidly passing and will not return. The time of endless economic growth has already come to an end. The time when the land, the air, and the sea yielded unlimited resources is no longer with us and will not return.

What this means is that we must approach ministry with the thirteenth generation in a way that will be radically different from our approach to previous generations. In the past few generations, the task has been mainly one of simply passing on to the next generation that which we had received. Obviously, that is still part of our task, for we must continually pass on to others "what was from the beginning, we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes,

what we have looked at and touched with our own hands, concerning the word of life." That we certainly must continue doing. Yet, what this new generation, and the changes taking place around us, demand is also something different. It is no longer a matter of us telling the new generations how it is. It is now a matter of all of us exploring together, in the light of the Gospel, what it might mean to live as Christians in the new world that is emerging --a new world of limits, where it is clear, not only that more is not necessarily better, but also that more is probably impossible.

There are many passages in Scripture from which we could draw for guidance in this new situation --indeed, there are many passages in Scripture from which we **must** draw. Even more, the new situation is so radically different from the situation of previous generations that we will have to learn to read Scripture in different ways.

This afternoon, as an example both of how Scripture can be a resource and of how it must be read anew in the light of the new situation, I would like to call your attention to a passage in Scripture that is well known. The passage is to be found in Exodus 16, and Paul comments on it in 2 Corinthians 8. It is the story of the manna, or bread from heaven, that God gave to the people of Israel in the desert. I suggest that we look anew at that story, trying to point out, not only what we already know, but also what there is in the story itself that we rarely notice. The story is well known. But precisely because it is known, it is a clear example of the degree to which our "knowledge" of Scripture reflects the perspective from which we read the text.

I have repeatedly tried an experiment that I suggest you try in your own churches. As I visit Sunday school classes, Bible study groups, and even sometimes seminary classes, I ask people to tell me about the miracle of the manna. Invariably, most everybody thinks it is a silly question. They all know that the miracle of the manna is the story of how, when the people of Israel were hungry in the desert, God provided food for them.

Then I press the issue: What else? After some prodding, someone usually remembers that you were to gather only enough manna for the day, and that if you kept it from one day to the next it would spoil. They usually remember also that there was an exception to this rule, for the manna that was collected the day before the Sabbath would keep, so the people would not have to work on the Sabbath.

But then I continue pressing the issue: What else? At this point, I usually draw a blank from the participants. Usually, most people say: "That's it." Sometimes others remember some other elements in the story and think that that is what I am fishing for: "There were also quails." Or, "there was also water from the rock." Or, "God was mad, that they were always complaining." Seldom will someone say: "Oh yes, I remember. The people were all ordered to gather a certain amount per person in a household. But they did not obey. Some gathered more than they were supposed to get, and others were not able to gather enough. But when they went back to their tents, they found that they each had what they were supposed to gather --no more, and no less."

You see, in chapter 16 of Exodus there are three miracles connected with the manna. If we rank them in order of our familiarity with them, you can say that the first miracle is that God provided the manna; the second miracle is that God did not allow hoarding for the next day, except when that next day was the Sabbath; and the third miracle is that God saw to it that the manna was evenly distributed among all.

Why is it, do you think, that most of us have heard so much about the miracle whereby God provides and so little of the miracle whereby God distributes? Could it be because that as a society and as a church we can boast of being imitators of God the producer, but we have not been so good at imitating God the distributor? Clearly, no society in all of human history has been as good as ours when it comes to producing. The result has been an abundance such that the question of distribution could easily be postponed, for even those who received a very small proportion of what was produced generally had enough to live --and more than most people in other societies.

Today, however, we are beginning to realize that unlimited increase in production is a physical impossibility. That is ultimately why not only this thirteenth generation but also future generations will find that they cannot reach the standards of consumption of previous generations. The throw-away society, in which everything was disposable, is no longer tenable. Indeed, if one thing should be readily disposable, it is precisely the notion that disposable is better --or even that it is feasible. We cannot keep on producing more and more, and

consuming more and more, endlessly. On the contrary, the end is at hand. And the thirteenth generation will be the first to experience that end, with all the trauma involved --a trauma that comes precisely from the contradiction between the formative myth of endless production and consumption and the reality that the world is limited -- hat the world itself sets limits to production and consumption.

God provided the manna, yes. But God did not provide a limitless supply of manna. God provided --and continues providing-- what was necessary --no more. Furthermore, God was gracious enough to provide enough manna to make a day of rest possible. Rest and leisure are not beyond the scope of God's provision, as some of our Puritan ancestors would have us think, and as some in our production-oriented society would also have us think. God provides enough. God even provides enough that people can really rest on the day of rest.

But God does not provide enough that people can hoard and squander. If you hoard against the future, trusting in your hoard rather than in the God who provides, it rots. If you hoard against others, gathering more than your just share, God redistributes.

That is the story of the manna as it appears in the book of Exodus. It is also the story to which Paul appeals when he is trying to raise money among the Corinthians for the poor in Jerusalem. There is no time here to study that passage. I suggest that you read it later. But, in brief, what Paul tells the Corinthians is that, as believers in the God of the Exodus, they should be imitators

of that God and share their resources with those who are in greater need than they, namely, the poor in Jerusalem.

What does all of this have to do with the thirteenth generation? Plenty, for what is happening in our day is that this thirteenth generation, wittingly or unwittingly, willingly or unwillingly, is leading us into an age when, while God will continue providing enough for all, it is clear that God also provides limits, that God requires that we share God's bounty, and that therefore "success" in life does not consist, as we once thought, in having bigger and more things, but rather in organizing life in such a way that God's graciously abundant provision may be shared and enjoyed by all.

This is not an easy task for the thirteenth generation to face. It is particularly difficult, because we the earlier generations --including we the church of earlier generations -- have bequeathed to this generation a myth of abundance, a myth of fulfillment in growth that the present world can no longer sustain. Thus, the thirteenth generation is caught between dreams instilled in it by earlier generations and the unavoidable reality that coming generations will have to live by a different dream. No wonder, then, that many in this generation are embittered. No wonder then that so many find the church part of a passing order. No wonder then that they look upon earlier generations --including those represented in the church-- as those who made promises they could not fulfill.

And no wonder that we in the older generations find it so difficult to acknowledge what should be obvious: That if anyone is to lead the way into the future, it is this younger generation whose lot it has been to live at a time when a new, fearsome, and glorious future opens before humankind. That we are to be in mission to and with this thirteenth generation, not only because they need the Gospel but also because we need them to come to a fuller understanding of what the Gospel might mean at a time of limits, at a time when the old myths crumble.

Why, then, are we to be in mission to the thirteenth generation? The answer to this question lies in our own limits, which too often we fail to recognize. It lies in that both they and we need the good news --the good news that limits are the context of real freedom; the good news that life can be abundant without abundance; the good news that the same God who has been our refuge and our strength from generation unto generation is still God and is still with us, even though the earth might tremble, and human promises fail, and mountains be cast unto the heart of the sea.