

QUEST FOR FATHERS

By Paul Vieira

It's always about fathers. For every messed up person you see in the world, there often is an abusive or absent father partly to blame. All of us need a good one, but they are hard to come by. My own father is one of the best. I am one of the fortunate ones. Yet as a young man, something inside me longed for a spiritual father, someone to help me grow and mature in the faith. I have no doubt that God led me to such a person. He was a prominent church leader in our city, a man of prayer, who carried fatherly authority. Things were wonderful in the beginning. For two years I apprenticed under him, admired him, and sought for his approval and praise. The risk of putting your life in the hands of mortal men opens a person up to a great potential for pain and disillusionment. Although I indeed got hurt, I know it was not this man's intention. Our relationship broke down primarily because of our inability to understand the difference in mindset between his generation and mine.

A few years ago, some of the old gang from my youth came together and we shared our stories with one another. It seemed like most of us went through a sort of "wilderness" period, since the days of 'Come to the Cross.' The common experience that we all shared was a feeling of neglect and abandonment from our spiritual fathers. We longed for their affection and for personal relationship, but discovered that we were mere appointments in their day-timers. We found in them a reluctance to share what they had with us. They also seemed threatened and resistant to the new ideas and values that we possessed. Our mentoring relationships came to a halt.

The infamous 'generation gap' is a primary hindrance to the revolution that the emerging generation is bringing to the expression of the church. As I have already postulated, younger people are less likely to uphold the religious paradigms of their parents. My purpose is to devote this chapter to describing how we can move forward together in God's purpose, with different generations walking together.

GENERATIONAL CYCLES

The Hebrew word for “generation,” which is *dor*, literally means a period or revolution of time. It carries with it the idea of returning to where you started, coming full-circle. It is a cycle. Having understood this, I came to believe that there are three primary generation cycles in our lifetime. The first cycle begins at birth, and continues until you reach that moment where you find yourself back in the delivery room having your own children. In our culture, this typically occurs in our twenties and early thirties. At some point in those early years of marriage a transition takes place from the first generation cycle to the second. The second cycle continues until your children have children of their own. You are now grandparents and the third cycle has commenced. This usually takes place with individuals in their fifties. (I also include great-grandparents in this cycle.) It is my observation that both the twenties and the fifties can be very tumultuous years, for they are years of transition from one generation cycle to another.

The apostle John picks up on these distinctions in his first epistle, chapter two, verses twelve to fourteen, where he writes:

*“I write to you little children, because your sins are forgiven you for His name’s sake.
I write to you, fathers, because you have known Him who is from the beginning.
I write to you, young men, because you have overcome the wicked one.”*

*“I write to you, little children, because you have known the Father.
I have written to you, fathers, because you have known Him who is from the beginning.
I have written to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you. And you have overcome the wicked one.”*

He writes to three groups of people, ‘little children,’ ‘fathers,’ and ‘young men.’ I suggest that these categories correspond with the generation cycles previously mentioned. ‘Little children’ refer to those in cycle-one, which I call the *formation stage*. Cycle two is characterized by John’s exhortation to ‘young men’, the *occupation stage*. Finally, the title “fathers” describes cycle three. I have called this phase the *consultation stage*. Although these distinct groupings in 1 John represent levels of spiritual maturity, I also believe that there is a close correlation between spiritual maturity and actual

physical age. Presumably, the number of years a person walks with the Lord should reflect a greater degree of maturity in that individual. There are always exceptions, but I believe that generally this is true.

It is crucial to understand the differences and purposes that each one of these generation cycles possess. When we fail to recognize the unique position of these levels of maturity, there will undoubtedly be trouble. For example, you can not expect something from 'little children' that only 'young men' can attain. You certainly should not continue to behave like a 'young man,' when you ought to be stepping into your role as a 'father.' I propose that it is at this exact point that we find generations "clashing" with one another. I will explain, but first, permit me to go on to define what characterizes each generation cycle.

First we have what I call the *formation stage*. This is the phase of a person's life that gives them all the tools they need to fulfill their purpose and destiny. The events experienced in this stage become a part of a person's make-up and worldview. This stage can also handicap a person from fully maximizing the following stages of one's life. Many people, later in life, through therapy or counseling, attempt to correct the negative patterns of behavior that have their roots in destructive experiences of the formation years. In a sense, the formation stage is the social and moral womb, creating an environment determining who a person is and what he or she will do in life. It is in this stage that most of our major life decisions are made. What will you do for a living? Will you get married and to whom? Likewise, most people arrive at some sort of conclusion about God in those years.

In the October 11, 2004 issue of the Barna Update found at www.barna.org, a study confirms that most people who come to Christ do so in these early years of formation: *"The current Barna study indicates that nearly half of all Americans who accept Jesus Christ as their savior do so before reaching the age of 13 (43%), and that two out of three born again Christians (64%) made that commitment to Christ before their 18th birthday. One out of eight born again people (13%) made their profession of faith while 18 to 21 years old. Less than one out of every four born again Christians (23%) embraced Christ after their twenty-first birthday. Barna noted that these figures are consistent with similar studies it has conducted during the past twenty years."*

Every generation must discover God for themselves, and most of that happens in the first generation cycle. In the passage in 1 John, 'little children' are the ones who have experienced their "sins being forgiven" and have come to "know the Father." If we desire to see God bring in a great harvest of people into the kingdom of God, we must realize that this will primarily happen with youth. Whenever I speak to teens, my main purpose is always to provide an opportunity for them to encounter God as their Father, and to envision them toward their destiny. I believe this is God's number one priority in ministering to children and youth.

For those of us who have entered the second stage of *occupation*, the focus is somewhat different. It is a time to embark upon an adventure. We have won our bride or groom, set our course and now its time to sail off into the horizon. There is much to do and time is limited. For it is a season to build, to plant, to establish, and to occupy. These are the years of labor, where we actually have the opportunity to make our mark on the world. As John so aptly described it, we have "overcome" the evil one. We are "strong and the word of God abides in us." It is a time for battle and we are confident in the outcome. This phase should be characterized by vision and even ambition. I have just begun this phase myself. I am zealous to do all that God has put in my heart to accomplish.

The *consultation stage*, perhaps, is the most difficult stage to transition into. I can only speculate, for I have not yet reached it. My parents are now entering that stage along with many of their "Baby Boomer" peers. I think the transition is difficult because it seems that this is a time to slow down. I am not talking about retiring. I'm referring to a change in roles, from occupying to consulting. These are "the fathers" who know the Eternal One. They are marked with wisdom and have learned not only the acts of God, but also His ways. These mature men and women are a voice of caution and encouragement to those on the front lines, still in the heat of battle. Their experience and knowledge are indispensable to the members of the first two stages. Without it "young men" will suffer much grief and, at times, lose their way. These consultants have already been there. They have tried it all before.

I heard someone once describe it as the difference between coaches and players. Any team serious about winning must depend upon the wisdom, experience, encouragement, and perspective of a veteran player, now coaching. Young players on

the field have strength, skill, stamina, and passion. They are at the top of their game. However, they do not have a full grasp on the big picture, which only time and a “side-line” view can give. Coaches are crucial to the game. However, they do not actually play out on the field.

Unfortunately, it is between the members of any two neighboring stages that we see the greatest conflict. This has been my experience. My generation may appear to be indifferent and even resistant to relationship with the generation before us, but the truth is that we not only need them, we want them. The problem comes when two generations are trying to *occupy*, at the same time. Added to this, is the trouble that arises due to cultural differences between the consultants and the occupiers. Very few consultants seem to be able to translate their experiential wisdom into the language of a new culture.

Furthermore, we must understand that God has designed the fathers, young men, and children to relate to each other in specific ways. There is something unhealthy about a son, with a family, still living under his father’s roof. “A man must leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife.” This is not only true naturally with families but also spiritually with the family of God. The truth is that both those in *occupation* and *consultation*, are fathers. The former is fathering little children and the latter is a father to adult children. The fathering relationship changes as the child grows older and matures. Then, there is the grandparent phenomenon. I have not seen my parents so happy in years, now that I have children. Perhaps, in the church, we too would see joy released to all the generations as we find our proper place in relating to one another.

SERVING OUR GENERATION

More than ever I feel this sense of urgency for my generation in accomplishing what God has predetermined for us. I believe each generation has a general calling. Also, every generation has a responsibility to reach and serve its own generation. Acts 13:36 says, “For David, after he had served his own generation by the will of God, fell asleep, and was buried with his fathers.” This being said, it is also very possible for a generation to not fulfill its destiny. Moses and his people were to inhabit the land promised to them by God, but because of their unbelief, God passed on their destiny to

the next generation. Whatever God has purposed for my generation, if we do not rise up to the occasion, the next generation surely will.

One of the dangers challenging my generation is our tension with the previous generation. Assuming the statistics are true, most of the Baby Boomers that will be won to Jesus have already been won. Sensing this, some Boomer leaders are now attempting to build and occupy for my generation. Two generations are seeking to occupy the same territory. We have a conflict in interest. This may explain, in part, why many of my peers have had ill experiences with their spiritual mentors.

Many Boomer leaders in the body of Christ are asking their Gen-X spiritual sons to carry their vision and are preparing to pass on their baton to the next generation. Some of us, in response, are saying, "but I don't want to carry that baton." Parents often do the same thing with their natural children, who attempt to mold their son or daughter to fulfill their own dreams. But we have our own dreams.

Not only are we not interested in inheriting the ministries of those before us, we should not do so. I do not want to pass my ministry on to my own natural children one day. My ministry will die with me. My role, when my children enter their years of occupation, will be to help them do whatever God has called them to do. The Baby Boomers have done great things. The Jesus Movement is an example of God apprehending a generation. Many of our church leaders today were brought into the kingdom in that movement. However, what reached the Baby Boomers will certainly not reach the emerging generations. God has something unique for us and we must step out into it.

BOOMERS AND X'ERS

Two adjacent generations that have experienced extreme conflict are the "Baby Boomer" and "Generation X." Most people are already familiar with the terms. For the sake of those who are not sure, I will briefly define them. Traditionally, these groups are identified by the range of years that the births occurred. The Baby Boom generation refers to the post-WW2 explosion of babies that lasted for nineteen years (1946 through 1964). Comparatively, from 1965 to 1984 there were considerably fewer babies being born here in North America, thus "the Baby Bust." However, in my opinion, a generation is a group that has experienced the same time period in history,

when certain shared events forge into their minds and hearts, a common mindset and identity. Therefore, more accurately defined, “Baby Boomer” or “Baby Buster” is an attitude, a worldview. Although it does not describe everyone born between the specified years and does express a subculture of that group, these mindsets tend to remain extremely pervasive.

The Baby Bust generation, or just “busters,” has also been termed “baby bummers,” “twenty-nothings,” “slackers,” “the Repair Generation,” “the Marginalized Generation,” “the Recovering Generation,” “the Surviving Generation,” “the MTV Generation,” and the “Generation After.” Then there’s “Generation X,” the title attached to my age bracket by Douglas Coupland in his 1991 novel *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*. We actually resent every one of these labels; however, for the purpose of identification I will reluctantly refer to my generation as Gen X.

Some would argue that using these labels promotes division between the generations, and stems from a spirit of elite-ness. I am not suggesting that one generation is better than another. My purpose is to maintain that there is in fact distinction between the generations, and to seek healthy relationships between the generations, causing those distinctions to work together to create a more effective team. Individuals of the same generation can share common mindsets, since that group has experienced the first generation cycle all together, *the formation stage*. Both Generation X and Baby Boomers were formed in different social and cultural environments. We think differently, and this adds to our tension with one another. Perhaps, finding our place in the generational cycles of life will help.

Something magical happened to me shortly after I turned thirty. I was with my dad one day having coffee together. I looked over at him and this thought came to my mind: “Dad! You’re smart again.” I was caught off guard. I suppose I hadn’t realized that for most of my twenties I thought I knew more than my father. It is a common pitfall of youth: pride. Well, things had changed and I’m not sure when it happened. Maybe my mind was altered as I passed over into the occupation phase. I’m not sure. All I know is that, I need my father. Our relationship has gotten much better since I’ve come to this realization.

Dad has been through so many things. Why should I not learn from him? Not only can I learn from his successes, but even from his “failures.” This is the beauty of

age. Even your failures become useful, in helping the next generation avoid the same dangers, and go further than you did. There is a growing desire in me to see what Dad thinks before I embark on something new.

Baby Boomers have so much to offer the Gen X'ers and we are longing for the fathers to take their place. However, we want our own homes and ministries. There is something that we have that you haven't seen in your life experience yet. It's new and the church or the world will never be the same. God has wired us to understand what it means to live life, faith and spirituality outside the walls of the institutions that you now run. We don't want to take them over. We want to stay where we are, outside the walls.

THE SPIRIT OF ELIJAH

Malachi is one of my favorites of the Minor Prophets. He lived sometime around 450 BC and is the last of the series of inspired prophetic voices of the Old Testament. Malachi was a member of the "post-exilic" Jewish community, when the people were resettling into Palestine after seventy years of captivity in Babylon. The people of his day were living carelessly, immorally and possessed a common disregard for God. Malachi addressed his nation and his generation. What he had to say echoes down the corridor of time to impact at least two other points in history. I believe his words are truer today than they have been for two thousand years. I can relate to Malachi because the circumstances surrounding him are not unlike the things going on right now. His commentary and rebuke to his people reflects the similar sentiments of my generation. Let me continue to expand on this most relevant message to us.

There were a number of complaints that God had with the nation, recorded in this short prophetic book. Two of them seem to stand out above the rest. Firstly, God rebuked the religious leaders of the day for their "spiritual abuse" of the people. Malachi 2:7,8 records, *"For the lips of a priest should keep knowledge, and people should seek the law from his mouth; for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts. But you have departed from the way; and you have caused many to stumble."* Secondly, He declared His strong position against the infidelity and divorce running rampant in the land. Many of the men left the Jewish wives of their youth to marry women serving pagan deities. Here, in chapter

two, verse sixteen, is one of the few times in all the Scripture that God reveals that He hates something, that being *divorce*.

First of all, people tend to not trust the clergy as they once did. We have read too many newspaper articles with horrifying stories of child abuse and secret sins. Most people you talk to on the street would condemn TV evangelists to the category of “despicable,” along with the drug dealer and organized crime boss. Many in my generation do not have any faith in organized religion or the papal system at the heart of it. I have a friend in his mid-twenties, who has spent the last several years trying to undo the devastation in his life, caused by the sexual abuse he endured from a trusted church leader. I know another young lady who hasn’t connected with a body of believers in years, for fear of condemnation. She has felt the sting of judgment from “church people” many times, for the way she dressed and how she expressed her artistic nature. It was reminiscent of a modern day witch-hunt. Everyone has his or her story. It’s all too familiar. We live in a generation that feels the clergy can not be trusted. We have stumbled and are not too willing to get back up again.

Divorce is the other villain. I know why God hates divorce. It is a constant reminder of the separation that exists between Him and mankind. Marriage is not an end unto itself. Matrimony is a reflection and a prophetic symbol of a greater reality. God created this capacity for a man and a woman to connect in order to demonstrate what He desires of us. He created us to spend the rest of His life with Him. We are His suitable “helpmate.” Jesus is coming again for a beautiful bride, that is His body, the church. Throughout the writings of the Prophets, God cries out to His people Israel, “I am married to you.” At one point He requires one of His prophets, Hosea, to marry a prostitute, so that he can empathize with how God feels about the adultery of His people, in worshipping foreign gods. Divorce hits God close to home.

My generation also hates divorce. It must be because so many of us were victims of it. We are the children of broken homes. We are the “fatherless generation.” Half of us experienced the deep pain that comes when Mom and Dad “stop loving each other.” Divorce breeds confusion when it comes to being able to relate to God as our Father. Malachi’s prophecy makes this appeal in the second chapter, verse ten, “Have we not all one Father?” It should be this way. But things get really confusing when families start breaking up. I have friends that have to endure the drama of four or five

Christmas family dinners, in an attempt to see each branch of the family. This is the generation that has spent the other weekend at their other parent's home, redefining the concept of family with relationships such as "dad's girlfriend," "mom's previous ex-husband," "my second step-father," and "my step-brother's father's ex-wife." *"Judah has dealt treacherously, and an abomination has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem, for Judah has profaned the Lord's holy institution which He loves."* (Malachi 2:11)

As a by-product of broken homes, this generation fears loneliness the most. We long to fit in somewhere. I believe this is one reason why the sit-com "Friends" has become so popular. It expresses the deep desire and longing in the hearts of an entire generation. Here you have six young men and women who live in each other's space. This explains why we love to get together in small groups of friends, united by common interest and mutual acceptance. These small groups act as replacement surrogate families.

God's dissertation of hatred towards divorce reaches a climax in verse sixteen, when He says "it covers one's garment with violence." Parents are having a difficult time understanding why kids are so violent today. Forty years ago the greatest concern of teachers for high school students was that they might put their gum under their classroom desk. Today we have the threat of open school shootings and date rape. Video games have become the virtual training ground for young people to sharpen their skills in killing, releasing the anger and bitterness within. In response to all this, I believe that this generation has a special place in God's heart. He has a history of supporting the "underdogs." He does want to heal the children of violence and the "spirit of Elijah" is the cure.

The prophecy spoken through Malachi ends in a very powerful and yet mysterious way. He announces the coming of Elijah, who will "turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the hearts of the children to their fathers." When we examine the nature of biblical prophecy, we must understand that there are commonly multiple fulfillments of any Old Testament prophecy. It touches down and bounces across time like a flat stone being "skipped" on the calm surface of a body of water.

There is always a partial application to the generation that the prophetic word is being spoken to. The events and prophetic overtones of the time form a picture of something greater to come in the future. For example, many of the prophecies in the

Psalms of David, concerning the Messiah that was to come, described in part the things happening with King David himself. He served as a blueprint, illustrating in detail what the real thing was going to look like. David was a type of Jesus, who is the Son of David, and the King of all kings.

Malachi's own generation is a fatherless generation, naturally and spiritually. The spirit of Elijah is the remedy to their condition. Prophecy has micro and macro elements to it. I believe that any generation in history facing similar issues is a candidate for the outpouring of the spirit of Elijah, and a revelation of Jesus is to follow. However, we also hold onto the macro picture. There are two ultimate expressions of this predictive word in history, that being the first coming of Christ and the final consummation of all things at Jesus' Second Coming.

Did Elijah come two thousand years ago when Jesus walked the earth? Indeed. Malachi and the Old Testament end with Elijah. The New Testament begins with Elijah. Jesus clearly revealed to us that John the Baptist, who prepared the way for Jesus, acted in the spirit of Elijah. *"For all the prophets and the Law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to receive it, he is Elijah who is to come."* (Matthew 11:13, 14) *"Indeed, Elijah is coming first and will restore all things. But I say to you that Elijah has come already, and they did not know him but did to him whatever they wished. Likewise, the Son of Man is also about to suffer at their hands. Then the disciples understood that He spoke to them of John the Baptist."* (Matthew 17:11-13)

It is interesting to note that John the Baptist publicly rebuked two prominent and visible groups of his day. He speaks against the religious leaders (Matthew 3:7-12) for their hypocrisy and abuse of the people. He also condemns the immoral actions of the political leader Herod (Matthew 14:3,4) for committing adultery with his brother's wife. Here we have the spirit of Elijah being sent to confront the abuse from spiritual leaders and infidelity and brokenness in the home. Does this sound familiar?

We are told in Malachi 4:6, that Elijah "will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers." The question I asked was "why Elijah?" Elijah carried out his life as though he was a single man, without a family. In his story recorded mostly in the book of 1 Kings, there is no mention of him having a wife, let alone children. When there was drought in the land, the ravens would feed him out in the wilderness. There was no family there with him. He was

single and never knew what it was to be a father. Why is he the antidote for a fatherless generation?

Perhaps, this passage in Malachi isn't primarily talking about restoring the relationships of parents with their biological children. Is it possible that there is a different kind of fatherhood in mind here? Elijah did not have any natural children of his own, but he did have spiritual sons. He was the leader of a group called the "Sons of the Prophets." Elijah was a spiritual father and this can be seen in his relationship with Elisha. Elisha was a spiritual son who stuck with Elijah until the very end of his journey here on earth. Elisha was there when Elijah was taken up to eternity by a fiery chariot. As Elijah ascended, his son cried out "my father, my father." (2Kings 2:1-18) Elisha received a double portion of the anointing that was on his spiritual father's life, and went on to become a powerful prophet of God.

John the Baptist, from what we can tell, was also not a natural father, but did gather to himself spiritual sons. When Jesus gets to the scene, John makes a shift and says "I must decrease and he must increase". John encourages his followers to go to Jesus and become his disciples. John the Baptist drew in every one of the Twelve Apostles (Acts 1:22), then presented them to their spiritual father. Jesus becomes a father to these men. Of course, Jesus too had no biological children. These ones that he cared for were members of his own generation, void of hope, discouraged, and needing guidance. Jesus loved them, taught them, shared his life with them and turned them into fathers themselves. They became like Jesus and went on to do what he did.

I remember the afternoon I first studied this prophecy and uncovered its implications for my generation. I both laughed and celebrated, and wept with the intense sense of destiny gripping me. All these years we were searching for fathers to help us grow and become all we were supposed to be. We longed to have something we did not know. It was like we intuitively understood what Elijah was going to do in our generation, yet not making the proper connection. I don't know if this is something "micro," or if we are indeed the last generation that will usher in the Revelation of Jesus Christ. Either way, the spirit of Elijah is falling upon us.

My thirst for answers about spiritual fatherhood was quenched the day I discovered this prophecy. Jesus spoke these words to me, "all these years you have searched for a spiritual father, and I have wanted to make you one." The miracle of the

Spirit of Elijah is that a fatherless generation becomes fathers and mothers themselves. He is making us what we never had. God is sending this generation to itself and to the next generation. Just as John the Baptist and Jesus were spiritual fathers to their own broken generation, so it must be with us. We are the fathers and mothers, and our friends need us to love, nurture, and lead them to Jesus. Let your heart be turned to the children. The quest is over.