



The John the Baptist generation



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I have lost track of the number of times I have been called a snowflake. It is usually because I am taking a moral position that is on the ‘too much’ side of effort, so a simple retort to ‘stop being a snowflake’ ends any need to engage with the argument at hand. That term, snowflake, seems to have gained traction in the past few years, connected to the rise of Trump and the alt-right both in the USA and across the world, and has increasingly become synonymous with Millennials. Whilst we have been given worse labels, none have stuck as well as snowflake. Indeed, today we are broadly known as the snowflake generation.

I am sure the term is intended to somehow diminish us as safe-space seeking, applause-banning liberals, but I do not mind it. I prefer to think of us as the John the Baptist generation, people in their twenties and thirties who want to hold old authorities to account and work for a better future. We are a voice in the wilderness of the post-postmodern world and we are trying to warn you about what is to come.

Respect

The intergenerational dynamic between Millennials and Baby Boomers frequently revolves the theme of respect. Respect for your elders, respect for what they have experienced and recognition that we are ungrateful for what we have – that, unlike them, we do not have to strive for anything.

It was a recurring theme in my childhood that my late father, a peak Baby Boomer, would quote the

Ephesians 6.1–3 to me, usually when I was offering a dissenting opinion he did not want to hear: ‘Children, obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right. Honour thy father and mother; which is the first commandment with promise; that it may be well with thee, and thou mayest live long on the earth’ (KJV). He tended to forget verse 4 (‘provoke not your children to wrath’); perhaps that did not support his argument quite as well.

This passage in Ephesians is clearly a reference to the commandment, ‘Honour thy father and thy mother.’¹ For Jesus, it seems, this honour equates to loving and providing for parents, even into adulthood. In the Gospels, Jesus chastises those who do not provide for their parents by claiming what they would have given to their parents is instead ‘devoted to God.’² Jesus even goes so far as to quote Isaiah (29.13) ‘these people draw near with their mouths and honor me with their lips, [but] their hearts are far from me, and their worship of me is a human commandment learned by rote’ (NRSV).

Throughout Christian tradition this has been taken further, and within Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant teaching it is widely held that this relationship between parent and child is reflective of the relationship between humanity and our divine Father. For John Calvin, the role of the Father is sacred and bound with the role of God ‘the dishonouring of parents redounds to the dishonour of God Himself, nor can anyone despise his father without being guilty of an offence against God’.

NOTES

1. See Deuteronomy 5.16 and its parallel in Exodus 20.12.

2. Matthew 15.3–8 and Mark 7.9–12.

3. Fr RD Andrews Available, 'Honour thy Father and Mother' available at <http://www.orthodoxytoday.org/articles7/AndrewsParents.php>

4. www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/articles/lonelinesswhatcharacteristicsandcircumstancesareassociatedwithfeelinglonely/2018-04-10

5. www.mentalhealth.org.uk/a-to-z/s/suicide

6. www.mentalhealth.org.uk/a-to-z/s/suicide

7. J Twenge, *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood* (London: Atria, 2017).

8. C Barr, 'Who are Generation Z? The latest data on today's teens' in the *The Guardian* 10 December 2016. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2016/dec/10/generation-z-latest-data-teens>

But what does this honour look like? John Wesley helpfully provides a breakdown of what this honouring should look like, which is broadly consistent with the catechism of the Catholic Church. In his *Notes on the Bible*, Wesley suggests that this honouring takes the form of an inward esteem that is outwardly expressed, an obedience to their lawful commands, a submission to their rebukes, consideration of their advice, direction and consent, and endeavouring to bring them comfort.

Similarly, for Father Andrews, a Greek Orthodox priest writing in *Orthodoxy Today*, in a biblical sense honouring our parents is not about blind obedience. Rather, it is about forgiving them, being grateful for what they have done, caring for them and how the conduct of the child reflects on the parents: 'every time we do something good, just, pure, holy, we bring honour to our parents.'³

For me this boils down more simply to 'honouring' being about love and respect. But respect is mutual isn't it? I remember being approached by a family member at my own wedding a few years back and being asked, 'What are you up to now?' At the time I was a careers adviser, specialising in those most distant from the workplace. When I said this there was an awkward pause, followed by, 'How can you advise anyone? You don't know what work really is.' My age and life experience, particularly that of 'not knowing what hard work is' (a phrase frequently aimed at Millennials), somehow rendered me unable to support vulnerable people into work. But, more specifically, I was not worthy of respect, or at least my knowledge and experience was not.

Life experiences

He was right on some level, my life experience at 27 (as I was at the time) was drastically different to his when he was a similar age. He was already married, a homeowner and on the career path he would follow for the rest of his working life. I, on the other hand, was only just married and was stuck in the trap of privately rented housing. I had no idea what I wanted as a career, or even if that idea existed anymore.

Millennials are more likely to get married later in life, to remain living with their parents and to delay major career decisions. Is it any great surprise though? In the 1980s it would have taken a typical household in their late 20s around three years to save for an average-sized deposit, today it takes around 19 years. As a result, Millennials are half as likely to own a home at the age of 30 compared to Baby Boomers at the same age. A recent Resolution Foundation report found one in three Millennials in Britain will never own their own home. Equally, when we see divorce rates spiking among our parents, and job satisfaction so low, is it any wonder we delay making these decisions until later in life?

This, however, has led to a mental health crisis among Millennials. By marrying later we spend more time alone, with young people aged between

16 and 24 feeling more lonely than any other age group.⁴ Being stuck in privately rented housing, or living with our parents, and delaying career decisions, we're more likely to have concerns about debt and future prospects, leading to severe mental health problems. Suicide is the leading cause of death among people aged between 20 and 34.⁵

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That for me is the crux of the problem. Just as Deuteronomy implies a one-way system of biblical teaching – 'teach them to your children, and to their children after them' (Deuteronomy 4.9, NIV) – our intergenerational dialogue is rooted in a one-way system of respect. Our desire to stand up, to be heard, to expect recognition and demand respect is rooted in our lived experience of being the first generation to be worse off than the one before. We are labelled as snowflakes because, supposedly, we do not have a sound amount of life experience or have never had to strive for anything. However, that is simply not the case and an ounce of mutual respect from those that look down on us would acknowledge that. We are in crisis; the system is letting us down, and no one is listening. That is why we are the John the Baptist generation, because we are shouting in the wilderness to warn you of what is to come, because it is going to be so much worse. We are not the outliers, we are the warm up act.

Welfare and society

The experience of Millennials has been born out of a time when welfare and social security has been in a state of flux. Our Baby Boomer parents and relatives are living through a period of unprecedented spending on welfare and social security. Around £264 billion is spent on welfare, 34% of all government spending. The majority of this, 42% or a staggering £111 billion, is spent on pensions, with a further £10 billion on elderly care payments. This represents a fraction of what was paid into the system by those now receiving it. This has put pressure on other areas, including health and particularly the NHS, with mental health provision a particular worry, alongside policing and early intervention programmes. The number of people in mental health crisis being detained by the police rather than being given access to mental health services is of huge concern. Just 27% of people who died by suicide between 2005 and 2015 had contact with mental health services in the year before they died.⁶ Despite promises of increased funding, the wider issues facing the NHS exacerbate the crisis. While funding has increased, mental health funding is not ring fenced, allowing

the NHS to use the funding to plug other gaps. Research by the Royal College of Psychiatrists found that in England 62% of mental health trusts reported a lower income at the end of 2016–17, when taking inflation into account, than they had in 2011–12. There have also been real terms cuts in funding for mental health trusts in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Is that sustainable? In an interview in 2012 with the *Financial Times* Angela Merkel said, 'if Europe today accounts for just over 7% of the world's population, produces around 25% of global GDP

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and has to finance 50% of global social spending, then it is obvious that it will have to work very hard to maintain its prosperity and way of life.' This, in political speak, roughly translates as 'this level of spending cannot carry on'. We are staring at the potential collapse of the social security and welfare system as we know it.

This is important because the next generation will need it far more than we ever did. Jean Twenge has highlighted that the perfect storm of lifestyle change, technological development and parenting styles, has created a generation that is at huge risk of mental health crisis: 'rates of teen depression and suicide have skyrocketed since 2011. It is not an exaggeration to describe iGen [Generation Z] as being on the brink of the worst mental-health crisis in decades.'⁷ This is evidenced by a study published in the *British Medical Journal* that found there had been a 68% increase in self-harming among 13 to 16 year old girls between 2011 and 2014. Depression among teenagers has rocketed to 70% in the last 25 years, and suicide among girls and young women aged 10–25 years is up 19%.

Technology and social interaction are a primary cause of this increase. The prevalence of social media and its insidious nature of it sees children's sense of self-worth relentlessly degraded by cyber-bullying, hyper-curated images of each other's lives, and the number of likes they have got on Instagram. Access to news via social media is also causing spikes of anxiety during major global events. Emily Cherry, Head of Participation at the NSPCC said in a *Guardian* interview, 'Online, they [young people] are seeing quite adult-focused news and phoning ChildLine really fearful for themselves and their future.'⁸

This generational disparity is playing out in our crime rates too. Last year, 2018, is likely to be the worst in 10 years for the numbers of young people in England and Wales killed by knife attacks. The West Midlands has recorded the highest number of

youth knife deaths in 40 years. There has been an 11% increase in offences involving possession of a knife or offensive weapon by young people since 2012, and though custody rates for young people are continuing to fall, the reoffending rate among young people is a staggering 42.2%, compared to 28.2% among adults (at the end of 2016–17). Not only is mental health deteriorating in our young people, but increased violence in our cities is inflicting trauma on communities and young people.

That is the perfect storm in which we will find ourselves in the coming years, increasing rates of mental health problems alongside decreasing support and social security from the state. That is why we need to change the dynamic around intergenerational dialogue. Most senior leaders across all sectors are Baby Boomers. If we can change the narrative, and actively listen and respect each other, then together we could make a difference in our society and be witnesses to the truth of the gospel. After all Millennials are socially active, more likely to volunteer than any other generation, and more likely to attend churches with a strong focus on social action. We just need senior leaders in churches to hear what we are trying to say and to help us make a difference.

Churches and organisations like Bible Society will shape what is to come for Generation Z and the generations that follow. Churches will be crucial in providing support to communities as government services are increasingly scaled back, and they must be ready. In 2019 Bible Society will be developing two new initiatives to address emerging crises in our communities. We will be introducing a contextualised trauma healing programme to address severe trauma experienced by communities, including crime, sexual violence, domestic abuse and loss. Trauma healing is a model of contextual Bible reading that offers a holistic approach to healing individual traumas and those experienced by communities. We will also be rolling out a new grants programme to work with churches and mission activists to deliver significant change at home or in communities. This requires churches to be ready to work with us to make change happen.

Conclusion

So that is the challenge. Millennials are not the Snowflake generation, we are the voice in the wilderness warning you of the significant change that is coming and challenging you to be ready. We are here, waiting to be heard, willing to work to make a difference. All it takes is to listen to each other and to work together with mutual love and respect, as a parent has for their child, as God has for us. After all, 'Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven' (Matthew 18.3–4, NRSV).