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# Speaking Across Generations



Messages That Satisfy Boomers,  
Xers, Millennials, Gen Z,  
and Beyond



InterVarsity Press  
ivpress.com

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Press, Downers Grove, IL. [www.ivpress.com](http://www.ivpress.com).

## Generational Science and Its Many Benefits

It nearly shook me to my core when I finally noticed what was happening. By this time, I had been promoted. No longer was I a twenty-something youth pastor giving oversight to students at four campuses. Now, I was an almost thirty-something campus pastor responsible for shepherding one campus. The church campus I was pastoring was diverse in the ages of the people who were actively attending. I would regularly ask myself, “How did this happen?”

I feared losing the respect of people old enough to be my parents and grandparents. I pondered so many anxious questions like: Would they take me seriously? Could my normally silly personality be viewed as juvenile? Could they accept Holy Communion from someone wearing Jordan 1s and slim-fit jeans? *Maybe I should wear a robe and be more serious*, I thought. *But then*, I feared, *I might lose myself and my organic connection with those in my own age group*. Not to mention that my years as a youth pastor lingered in my mind as the glory days where I could easily connect with an age group otherwise foreign to many adult communicators—teenagers. I

was not ready to let go of whatever it was about me that helped teens see me as someone they enjoyed hearing.

For almost seven years, I pastored and preached with these thoughts influencing almost everything I did. One Sunday, I would wear a cassock and wingtip boots. The next Sunday, I would wear a T-shirt and jeans. My frantic wardrobe choices reflected on the outside the tug of war I was feeling on the inside. After years of fretting, the generations kept coming and the Lord kept blessing our fellowship. Finally, the Spirit led me to investigate and inform myself on what it meant to preach effectively to all generations.

Pastors and preachers of all ages have experienced anxieties like mine. Some well-known faces have undergone wardrobe changes. Others have massively renovated their pulpits and platforms. Preaching novices have undertaken years of academic rigor. Then there are those who have apprenticed and served faithfully on church staffs to gain much-needed experience. The seasoned preacher still wants to appeal to the young. The preaching phenom yearns for the respect of the aged. All the above, and more, are practical moves preachers of varying capacities make to maintain their ability to connect with their audience.

Perhaps you picked up this book hoping to learn something that would help you reach a generation or age group you fear you are missing in your church. If so, I ask you to sit with the findings and concepts in these pages before you do anything else. Prayerfully engage the content before you makeover your look, upgrade your stage, or hire more people from the generation you hope to reach. If you can help it. For as long as it takes you to read this book, put your fears and anxieties on pause. I am only asking you to consider doing what I have done too.

The findings in this book stem from insights I have gained from focus groups within the metro-Atlanta congregation<sup>1</sup> where I

serve and results from a survey conducted across America. The nationwide survey was uniquely developed and organized by me in collaboration with the research team at Barna Group, who disseminated it nationwide. In addition to the questions we asked, we played audio snippets from sermons of multiple preachers. We then correlated the clips preferred with the age and generation of the person who selected them. What we discovered is that generations have their own language they prefer to hear from communicators. I will name these languages and give examples of how to implement them in the wording and reasoning of our sermons.

Before we get there though, let's look at what I learned from my congregation. As I put my own anxieties aside, I learned that the characteristics that made me an effective intergenerational preacher were not primarily aesthetic at all. My worries about wardrobe were not as important as I feared. The stage could have used some upgrades, but people continued to attend and happily look at a traditional pulpit with a wooden podium. What I learned is that there were traits that the people in my church most appreciated. These traits were valued highly by people across every generation. I learned from my congregation what I was doing by mistake and without intentionality. Gaining clarity on these traits helped me to focus my efforts on effectiveness and not aesthetics.

## Characteristics of Effective Intergenerational Preaching

I conducted focus groups of three to eight people per generation and surveyed the entire congregation. I met with elders, boomers, Gen Xers, millennials, and Gen Zers. After conducting the focus groups, the characteristics of an effective intergenerational preacher became clear: one who is characterized by Bible-based

content, aha moments, no emotionalism or manipulation, simplicity, and teaching. To be fair, these insights came from people who were predominantly African American, professing Christians, and members of our church. The main demographical factor though is that they were generationally diverse. Before we explore what each generation uniquely desires, we will look at what all generations desire in their preacher.

People come to church to hear a specific perspective on life: *people want to hear the Bible and its contents in preaching*. It could be that Bible-based content was the most prominent mark because all the people identify as Christians. Or because it is a stated and apparent value of our church. Nevertheless, it is encouraging to know that listeners wanted to hear the Bible. This does not guarantee that the listeners believe in the validity of Scripture or that they will agree with theological principles. That people want to hear the Bible preached does not mean they believe the Bible is inerrant. However, it does indicate that churchgoers value the contents of Scripture when they listen to preaching. People log onto or walk into a church for the purpose of hearing something distinct from what they have heard from other platforms or mediums of communication.

The next characteristic of effective intergenerational preaching is for a person *to experience an aha moment*. People indicated that these moments can be had by way of clarity of understanding or a conviction to change their lives. People desire a clear understanding of how to apply the Word to everyday life. Megan the millennial said she desired “a sermon that is clear . . . that I can understand.” Alex the Gen Xer said he wanted the preacher to “teach and educate me on the Word and to explain” it to him. Brenda the boomer simply stated that she wanted “understanding.” Xander the Gen Zer said, “Preaching that I understand without having to think so much that I’m missing the sermon trying to understand.”

I chose to describe these as aha moments, which are those times when the hearer gets it. People do not want to come to church and feel confused about what is being done or said. Even if they experience one aha moment per sermon they hear, it is worth the time given to the sermon. People remember moments more than they recall words, outlines, or arguments. As preachers we should spend our minutes crafting sermons that create moments.

The third characteristic of effective intergenerational preaching is that it should be *done without emotionalism and/or manipulation*. People can detect emotionalism and sniff out manipulation. Many hearers are suspicious of a preacher's lack of preparedness as the reason for emotionalism. They fear getting money is the aim of manipulation. All generations despise selfish motives in preaching. Emotionalism and manipulation turn off the hearer and prevent, or uproot, an effective transference of the gospel or biblical message. Our sermons can be emotive without veering into emotionalism. We can aim at preaching to move people without trying to manipulate them. There is a distinct difference.

The fourth and fifth characteristics of effective intergenerational preaching are *simplicity* and *teaching*. All generations desire simple teaching. This does not mean that the congregants want the preacher to be a simpleton or for their message to lack depth. Depth does not mean mystifying. Their desire for simplicity lies more in their ability to grasp the message than in the preacher's depth. The deeper the concept, the more clearly people need for the preacher to explain it. For all groups, a preacher's ability to break down complex biblical content so simply that a child could understand is important. If a child can understand it, that increases the probability that an adult can understand too. However, just because an adult can understand it, there is no guarantee that a child can. In John 21, Jesus told Peter to "feed my lambs" before

he told him to “take care of my sheep.” Lambs are little sheep. Younger sheep. Simplicity of understanding means all listeners can learn from the message. Our people want to be taught; so, as preachers, let us teach. These desires for simplicity and teaching align with the one competency offered by Paul in the qualifications of a bishop (1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:9).

The beauty of preaching is like many of life’s noble pursuits—no matter how good we may get at it we can always get better. Mastery is elusive, but we can be committed practitioners. I am committed to a better practice of the five traits we just covered. Working on these things are more important, it turns out, than whether I wear wingtips or Jordan 1s.

## You Can Do This

Are you reading this book because you want to nourish the minds, hearts, and souls of the people you influence? I believe so. Some of you have been serving hearty sermonic content and want to keep doing so. You have done well. Your voices are respected. You have received five-star reviews on your preaching for years. You value the sweat equity invested into your work so much that you want to keep growing. You are a tinkerer. Others look at you and say, “Wow, look at how well you communicate.” However, you hear yourself and think, *This is good, but it can get better*. You also sense the palates of your potential listeners are more complex as the days go by. While you have some nonnegotiables that can never change, you are willing to change some things about your approach to remain effective. This is the continuing pursuit of anyone who is effective in anything, including preaching.

For others, you know that the reviews of your preaching have not been so flattering. You recall a time when it seemed you were effective, but you blinked, and times have changed. You have not



accepted ineffectiveness as your fate. You have tried to tinker, but it seems like you keep fixing the wrong cog in the process. Despite what you do, there is a growing fear of disconnect. You are not reaching your audience like you wished that you could. You try to reason it away, but your gut feels the pain. *Maybe I am getting too old for this*, you think. Or, *I am so young and in over my head*. This fear of losing your cutting edge could make you envy others who seem to be magnetic. *What are they doing that I am not? What are they doing that I cannot?* Becoming distracted by another preacher's artistry can sidetrack you from the science you can study and apply.

## The Science and Art of It

The connection between science and art impacts every profession. There is a science to filmmaking, but Ryan Coogler has unique artistic ability. Hit TV shows have scientific ingredients, but Shonda Rhimes has the secret sauce. There is a science to leadership, ergo John Maxwell. There is also an art to leadership, ergo John Maxwell. There is a science to marketing. Then there is Coca-Cola, a marketing firm masquerading as a beverage company. All gymnasts are taught the science of tumbling, but somewhere along the way, Simone Biles separated from the pack. Political science can be studied, but there is something about the charisma of John F. Kennedy or Barack Obama. There are fundamentals to shooting a basketball, then there is Steph Curry's flick of the wrist, quick release, and endless range. Artists should be appreciated for their uniqueness. However, world-class talents should not overshadow scientific laws, proven techniques, and learnable principles. These can be applied by all, including you and me. So let us work on our skills to increase the effectiveness of our preaching.

Effective preaching only happens strategically. Even the communicators who make it look easy have put in hard work. Extemporaneous speaking seems to happen off the top of the head but note that the speaker's head is not an empty one. It is filled with experiential knowledge, proven facts, and tricks of the trade. Preachers who speak without immediate preparation can only do so because of compounded preparation. They did not need to get ready in that moment. The best preachers are always getting ready long before “the moment.”

You may never be able to emulate the vocal imprint of your favorite preacher. You may never be able to reproduce their charisma. I have tried to do both and failed. That should not be your goal anyway. Yours is a unique vocal imprint. You have a unique personality. Your desire to be effective should account for these truths.

## Knowing Your Audience

As a preacher prepares their messages, knowing their audience is key. When you know your audience, you can better understand the lens they view the world through. Knowing their worldview is vital to reaching them. While they want to hear what you are saying, their hearts and minds lie behind the walls of their worldviews. To reach them, you must scale, knock down, crawl under, or circumvent their walls, many of which the audience does not even know they have thrown up.

Your approach as a preacher is reflected in the intentional rhetoric and reasoning you use in a message. This rhetoric and reasoning are based on the demographics of your audience. As a communicator, aim to tailor your approach to uniquely overcome the defensive mechanisms of the audience's worldview. Studying the demographics of an audience requires a layered approach. If a

person is complex, an audience of people is even more complex. Most demographic criteria can be learned. Gender, racial, educational, and socioeconomic factors can be easily discovered. A brief conversation with the right questions can also reveal political, religious, and ethnic cultural factors. These demographic factors are all important in studying your audience. But the goal of this book is to explore the demographic factor that even audience members may be unaware of—the generational factor.

Take a moment to write down what you think are the percentages of each age group in your flock. Do not worry about being technical with the age brackets and generational nicknames. We will cover that next.

## Generations See the Same Things Differently

The generational lens is vital to the way people receive communication. Wise communicators take the time to understand the generations. Generational science is important for effective communication. For example, say I have been asked to speak at a youth basketball league’s award ceremony. My idea is to take principles from the greatest basketball player ever and use them to inspire the youth. *This should not be hard to do*, I think to myself. That is, until I arrive. Then I realize that the players are accompanied by their families. I then notice that many of their family members are older than them. Why is this key? Because I built my speech around LeBron James. The millennials might disagree in favor of Kobe Bryant. The Gen Xers might disagree in favor of Michael Jordan. The baby boomers would prefer Larry Bird or Magic Johnson. The elders would argue that Wilt Chamberlain is the greatest. It would not be wise of me to trudge forward ignoring generational science.

Generational perspectives influence the lens through which basketball fans determine greatness. It would be wise for me to think creatively. I could adjust easily. I might decide to use my introduction to create humor around the tension. I could start by polling the room. I could even say, “The principles that make basketball players great keep showing up, generation after generation.” In that way generational science can help me turn a speech into an engaging intergenerational experience.

Generations are shaped by the social events taking place during their coming-of-age years. Agreeing on the greatest basketball player ever is not a serious issue. However, there are more serious issues that generations see differently. Political perspectives, gender roles in society, the nature of marriage, and how to use money are all serious issues. Questions about what activities are age appropriate. Disagreements about the use of corporal punishment. Notions of wrong and right. Civil rights debates and initiatives. All of these can be viewed through generational science because during each generation’s coming-of-age years, these issues and more were being played out in society in ways unique to every other generation’s experience. Do not fret—generational science can be learned. You can grow in your generational intelligence. It is simply the study of different cohorts of people born within a certain time frame and what shaped their age group in their worldviews.

## The Generations

First, let’s look at how each living generation is named and defined. There is some variation in the exact years where sociologists and pop culture draw these lines, but here is how the Barna Group defines the generations.<sup>2</sup> The *elders* were born in 1945 and before. *Baby boomers* were born between 1946 and 1964. *Generation X* was

born between 1965 and 1983. *Millennials* were born between 1984 and 1998. *Generation Z*—which may eventually be renamed, just as Gen Y became millennials—was born between 1999 to 2015. The generation born since 2016 is tentatively named *alpha*.

Second, it is important that we know some facts about how the generations stack up against each other. For example, Generation X is the smallest generation in American history. Millennials, on the other hand, are now the largest generation in American history, a title previously held by the baby boomers. As boomers aged and began to pass on, millennials were coming of age. So not only do millennial births outnumber boomer births, but the population numbers in 2021 reflect this too. Baby boomers are the only generation to be officially named by the Census Bureau.<sup>3</sup> Other generations pick up their names from pop culture and sociologists along the way.

Finally, gaining an understanding of the spiritual and religious dynamics and forces that shaped the collective experience of each age cohort is essential to preaching effectively. In her book *When Anything Goes*, Leslie Williams says, “In the late 1980s . . . the world was now ‘post-Christian.’ Sophisticated and intelligent people no longer believed in the Judeo-Christian metanarrative or the Resurrection.”<sup>4</sup> This is important context to understanding how the generations relate to each other. While elders maintained a predominantly Christian society and may have raised their boomer children with these values, much of the religious experience shifted in the ‘60s and ‘70s. It could be said that boomers started the American post-Christian age, Gen Xers championed it, millennials were raised in post-Christianity, and Gen Z are children of post-Christianity. Barna sometimes refers to Generation Z as the “blank slate” generation—the first in which a substantial proportion were raised without any connection to religious or

spiritual practices or belief. This blank slate can be a positive if we choose to see it that way.

## Generations as People Groups

Each generation should be understood as a distinct people group. How you respond to this claim will determine how you receive the rest of the ideas in this book. Each generation has its own language, culture, and life stage needs. The language and culture of a generation are static; they go with them through life. The life stage needs of a generation are dynamic; they grow with them through life. According to Ken Baker in his book *Beyond People Groups*, “The Lausanne committee uses this definition of ‘people group’: a people group is the largest group within which the gospel can spread as a church-planting movement without encountering barriers of understanding or acceptance.”<sup>5</sup> The most common application of this is with ethnic people groups. It is true that a church can be planted in a Haitian community and spread without language or cultural barriers. Even though Haitians are not monolithic, Haitian culture has generalities that its people understand. A church can also be planted among millennials and spread without language or culture barriers. Generations, like ethnicities, are not monolithic within themselves, but they do share commonalities of experience and perspective. This is key because as we progress further into the twenty-first century, ethnicities may start to blend while generations become more distinct.

The word *gospel* means “good news.” The gospel of Jesus is good news whenever it is preached, wherever it is preached, and to whomever it is preached. This is a distinct quality of the gospel. Think about it—some good news is good news for a limited time only: a store having a sale, a new blockbuster movie on opening weekend, or the features of the newest model of a vehicle. That

good news eventually expires, is surpassed by newer good news, or reaches its manufactured date of obsolescence. Then there is good news restricted to a certain region or jurisdiction, like winters in southern California, low crime rates in affluent zip codes, or spending New Year's Eve in Times Square. California's winters are not good news for New Englanders. People in low-income zip codes do not benefit from the low crime rates in zip codes they cannot afford. Then there is good news that is only good for a select few, like tax laws depending on which political party is in office. With every change in federal taxation some Americans groan while others grin. When the pendulum swings in the other direction, groaners become gridders and gridders start groaning.

The gospel of Jesus is good news for all time, in all places, for all people. There is no era in history, geopolitical territory, or people group where the gospel of Jesus has not been good news. In the Middle Ages, it was good news. In developing countries, it is good news. To every ethnicity, unique subculture, family, or generation, the gospel is good news. However, it must be presented differently depending on the time, place, and group to whom it is preached. This is the essence of contextualization. That is true of generational people groups too.

Viewing generations as people groups might explain why brands generally reach one more effectively than the others. Sears reached the boomers. Walmart and Target reach Gen X. Amazon speaks to millennials. The global pandemic made Amazon's customer base even more intergenerational. Prior to the pandemic though, a higher percentage of millennials had more Amazon Prime accounts than any other generation. Certain brands and businesses better connect with certain generations. This is true of preachers and churches too. Church rosters and seats may be filled with

people predominantly from one generation. In some church traditions, there are even nicknames for congregations that have a generational majority. For example, a gray-headed church is one made up mostly of the aging and elderly. Why do some businesses and churches reach one generation more effectively than the others? I believe it is because people hear in their native generational tongue and receive all communication through a native generational lens. This is not just a hunch.

C. S. Lewis writes, “If you were sent to the Bantus you would be taught their language and traditions. You need similar teaching about the language and mental habits of your own . . . fellow countrymen.”<sup>6</sup> Lewis claims a preacher needs to understand their own people. To become more effective, we could learn more about the language and mentality of people in our own ethnic people group. Remember, generations are people groups too. As preachers we could also learn more about the language and perspectives of our own and another generational group.

## Intergenerational Versus Multigenerational

To be intergenerational differs from being multigenerational. *Inter-* means “together.” *Multi-* means “several.” We could have several generations present without them being together. A multi-locked door means there are several individual locks on a door. An interlocking chain means links come together to form a stronger bond. The world was not created to be multigenerational. The world was created to be intergenerational. Brands are feverishly working to become intergenerational. Major world cities are building themselves into intergenerational hubs. The church, too, was founded to be intergenerational.

In *Generational IQ*, Haydn Shaw asserts, “To fulfill God’s purposes in our generations, we will need to figure out how to speak



the languages of the different generations. The real God is amazing, so we need to be able to explain Him to the next generation.”<sup>7</sup> Viewing generations as people groups will make our communication more strategic. We can learn to speak to the missing generations in our churches. As preachers we can grow to explain God, preach the gospel, and teach the Bible in the native tongue of each generation. We can learn to communicate to each group alone. We could even develop the ability to communicate to all generations when they are present together. That is the essence of effective intergenerational communication.

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