

Darrell E. Hall

Speaking  
Across  
Generations



EXCERPT



**Speaking Across Generations**  
*Messages That Satisfy Boomers, Xers, Millennials, Gen Z, and Beyond*

April 12, 2022 | \$18, 176 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-0308-4

Different generations communicate differently. With fresh research from the Barna Group on how generations communicate, Darrell Hall sheds light on how each generation receives verbal messages, from boomers and Xers to millennials and Gen Z. Discover how generational science can bridge the gap between speaker and listener so people of all generations can hear clearly.

## Preaching with Generational Intelligence

Preaching with generational intelligence must include understanding how the values and perspectives of the generations shape the languages of the generations. Understanding the language of the generation is important because preaching is supposed to communicate yesterday's truths in today's words. The gospel and Scripture are timeless. The language of the age must be timely. Generational intelligence requires an understanding of language. Why? Because one generation's favorite idiom is another generation's tired cliché. People of one generation insist "a family that prays together, stays together." When people of another generation hear that, they roll their eyes recalling their religious parents who went through a nasty divorce. Preachers who preach without understanding a generation's language "find themselves speaking in a language that is no longer fresh, about concerns that no longer matter to a generation that no longer exists." Even if the generation still exists, it may not be the most prominent or largest generation represented in any given audience.

Knowledge of a culture's language improves the preacher's ability to connect with that culture. Robert Smith says, "We must take time to learn and understand *idiomatic expressions* popular in different cultures . . . we have to appreciate the idiomatic expressions, cell-phone language, and the nuances of the communities in which we preach." This is vital because there are no bilingual generational translators, like those who benefit an English-speaking preacher in a Swahili-speaking culture. The preacher herself must be generationally polylingual. She must become a generational polyglot. One can begin to grasp the language of a generation by listening to its songs, watching its movies, reading its books, and studying its history. However, while those are practical ways to help the preacher, such an approach mostly gives the preacher phraseology—and language is more than mere phraseology.

Preaching with generational intelligence requires an intentionality in the preacher to speak from the text in words, pictures, and ideas of the people being addressed, so that they can hear the text for themselves. The language of a generation goes beyond phraseology to include formulations of thought, which influence the reasoning a group uses. The reasoning a group uses is expressed through rhetoric. This line of thinking gets us closer to heart of what I mean by generational languages.

Preaching with generational intelligence means the preacher knows not only how to delight millennials with colloquialisms but also how to disarm them with persuasion. Why is this important? Because throwing in the newest catch phrase will come across as disingenuous, and millennials can sniff out inauthenticity in a flash. You are more likely to get laughed at—



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*"Speaking Across Generations is one of the most comprehensive books that I have seen out today that deals spiritually with each living generation. Dr. Hall's expansive research is easy to understand and very relatable for anyone serving in a religious community. It is filled with excellent examples and strong research to help ministers who desire to communicate to all generations through the preaching moment."*

—**Bianca Robinson Howard**, minister of children and youth at Zion Baptist Church, Marietta, Georgia

or "cancelled"—than to open their hearts to listen. Tucker explains why the millennial generation, for example, would best hear preaching delivered dialogically: "The emergence of social media in the last ten years has also spawned a preference for dialogue over monologue, discussion over proclamation." Social media users no longer revere the voice of the six o'clock national news anchor as authoritative. They prefer different voices, especially their own. Thus, it could be said that dialogue is the language of the millennial generation.

Take note of this fact. A sermon without dialogue will not reach millennials as effectively as one shaped by it. Why? Because dialogue is the language of millennials. Therefore, dialogical preaching is what they will best respond to. The tone and tenor of dialogue differ significantly from monologue. We cannot approach preaching, in the study or in the pulpit, as a monologue speaking at the millennial congregation. The effective preacher will engage in a respectful dialogue, thinking out loud with the millennial congregation. Think of some of the preachers you see winning with people between twenty-five and forty years old. You may think it is because they are closer to their age—and they may be—but that proximity only gives the preacher the benefit of learning their language intuitively. Even if we are further in age, we can learn another language if we want to.

I was amazed to discover the significant Hispanic population that lives within five miles of the church I serve. Imagine if we wanted to grow our congregation by reaching that nearby Hispanic community. What would we do to overcome the language and cultural barriers? It might be wise to develop a relationship with someone in that community and support them as they lead their people. But how would I develop that relationship? If I were fluent in Spanish, it would make the whole situation a lot easier, but I do not know much Spanish. So, I might purchase Rosetta Stone. Whatever it would cost would be worth it because my aim would be to help my church serve that Hispanic community.

I was also amazed to discover the growing sense of disconnect between people of different generations in our church. So, after hosting the focus groups and discovering the themes they revealed, I shared them with our entire congregation. It was insightful to see how each generation felt alienated by the others. We were all disarmed by sharing the needs, desires, and perspectives of each group openly. The experience brought unity and a sigh of relief. Parents and children felt they better understood each other. I felt like we were a step closer to really becoming the kind of intergenerational church Jesus desires. The costs of conducting focus groups, transcribing the manuscripts, and scouring them for insight was well worth it. Whatever it costs to ensure we serve the elders, boomers, Gen Xers, millennials, and Gen Zers is worth it.

—Adapted from chapter two, "Becoming a Generational Polyglot"



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Darrell E. Hall is campus pastor of Elizabeth Baptist Church in Conyers, Georgia, where he regularly preaches and teaches across five generations. He is an experienced preacher and public speaker who has given messages in venues from local Bible studies to a packed NBA arena. Hall has a DMin from Beeson Divinity School, where his doctoral research focused on generational intelligence and effective intergenerational communication.

## Creating Intergenerational Connections

**What did you see in both older and younger preachers that sparked the idea for this book?**

**Darrell Hall:** I would hear older, successful preachers vulnerably express their fears of disconnect. I also noticed younger preachers being assigned to older congregations that could overwhelm them with expectations. My own ministry journey thrust me before audiences of all ages on a regular basis. I just became curious about how different aged audiences were motivated to give a sermon praise for being good. All this inspired me to encourage preachers through the pages of this book.

**How would you describe this book to others?**

**Darrell:** This book is a primer to stimulate creativity and ingenuity in preachers. It is not exhaustive in its explanation or use of examples. I think it is a seminal work in the converging of generational science with effective preaching.

**Would you share a few main ideas that you hope readers take away from your book?**

**Darrell:** Generations are people groups with their own languages. Every communicator speaks their own generation's language fluently but learning the language of a different generation is a practical way to function as a missionary to a lost group. It's not impossible to do this, but it is also not simplistic. It requires attention to sociological factors. You can do this, if you really want to.



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