GENERATIONAL APPROACHES TO HERMENEUTICS

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INTRODUCTION:

The Need for this Study – Generational Conflict

Times have changed, philosophy and culture has changed, advances in technology have altered the way people think and operate. Some of these changes, while not inherently bad, have been used by some people to abuse technology, twist and distort truths, and begin to change traditions long held by religious institutions. With each new wave of adjustments and cultural tweaking, previous generations are left to a decision.

Each generation must decide if they will learn and adjust to the changes or resist the changes, clinging to what they know and have become comfortable experiencing. This produces a tendency for older generations to feel superior because their traditions and customs have worked so well, so why should they change. “If it isn’t broke, don’t fix it.” The younger generations, on the other hand, see new and better ways of being more efficient or productive. These generations sometimes become fixated on being right, which leads to more philosophical discussions between generations using to words such as absolute truth; or phrases such as, “in my opinion.” These differences of thought lead to conflict between the generations, especially in a religious setting, where truth and opinion are directed by what God has spoken in the bible.

Perhaps the most visible display of generational conflict within the Adventist Church is seen on a boarding academy campus. Take Mount Pisgah Academy for example, the campus has an average of 150 students at the secondary education level. The campus is situated in a diverse community containing age, gender, educational, and cultural differences. The local church has about 280 who attend regularly. The neighboring retirement community and assisted living center provides parishioners for the church, as well as employment for the academy students. The majority of the church members are over the age of 50, providing very few children and
grand children to feed the future population of the church. The academy provides between 100-
130 students on any given Sabbath for worship. Making up nearly a third of the church body on
Sabbath, the academy students represent a significant age demographic and influence on this
church. The conflict which arises in this church is directly connected to differing interpretations
of the bible. Small issues such as what is an appropriate Sabbath activity? What does the word
*moderate* mean in relationship to dress and adornment? What music is considered “biblical?”
These issues are not isolated to the Mount Pisgah Academy campus alone. Every church that has
young people has needed to address these issues at one point or another. These issues all come
down to the church’s hermeneutics.

According to the book *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, “hermeneutics involves
interpreting or explaining. In fields like biblical studies or literature, it refers to the task of
explaining the meaning of a piece of writing. Hermeneutics describes the principles people use to
understand what something means, to comprehend what a message written, oral, or visual – is
endeavoring to communicate.”¹ Ultimately, a hermeneutic is directed by the bible. However, a
church’s hermeneutic is also effected by its member’s education, culture, experiences, and
religious background. With so much external force shaping the way each person reads and
interprets the bible to produce their hermeneutic, and because of the changes in time and thought,
it is necessary to address the differences in hermeneutics that each generation possess. In
understanding the differences between each generation’s hermeneutic, it becomes possible to
begin healing some of the cross-generational conflict.

**The Need for this Study – The Graying of Adventism**

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Recently, certain portions within the Adventist church have been discussing a phenomenon called the *Graying of Adventism*. Put simply, the Graying of Adventism is the term used to say that the majority of the members within the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) church are old and getting older. Researchers at the *Center for Creative Ministry* produced a newsletter in 2006, which stated that the median age of Seventh day Adventists in North America is 58\(^2\) years old … among native born white and black members the median age is even higher.\(^3\) This figure is striking considering Monte Sahlin and Paul Richardson claim that the median age in the United States of America is only 36 years old.\(^4\) The Seventh-day Adventist church is old and dying off. If this statistic is not troubling enough, the church’s younger generation is leaving in startling numbers.

According to Roger Dudley’s research, “at least 40-50 percent of Seventh-day Adventist teenagers in north America are essentially leaving the church by their middle 20s. This figure may well be higher.”\(^5\) This fact is confirmed by Sahlin and Richardson’s research, which reveals that there are more than 1,000 Adventist congregations with no members under the age of 50. There are many factors which are leading to the loss of the youth in the Adventist church, which will be addressed later on in this paper. This graying of the Seventh-day Adventist Church suggests that the youth are dropping out of the church, and the old will continue to get older and eventually begin dying off; unless things change, within a decade or two there will be a drastic decline in the Seventh-day Adventist church in North America.

\(^2\) This figure only counted baptized members within the church. Another study done by Sahlin suggests that the average age for all baptized and unbaptized people within the denomination, from youngest to oldest, in North America is 51 years of age. This includes young children, and a significant immigrant population.

\(^3\) Center for Creative Ministry, *INNOVATIONewsletter*, 12(19) [Electronic Newsletter], November 11, 2006.

\(^4\) Monte Sahlin and Paul Richardson, *Seventh-day Adventists in North America: A Demographic Profile* (Lincoln, NE: Center for Creative Ministry, 2008).

To add to the problem of the losses in membership, the church’s evangelistic endeavors are not able to meeting the needs of these losses. Monte Sahlin noted in *Adventist Today* that:

About one in three converts through public evangelism are former members rejoining the church and another 20 percent are the children of church members. There are very few real converts among the cultural mainstream of America – less than one per congregation per year. That is an accession rate so low that it would likely occur if the organization did nothing about evangelism and spent not one dime on outreach.  

If the evangelistic efforts are not bringing in enough new members to fill the void of the old and young, than there will be a tremendous loss to the membership of the SDA church in North America within a few decades. The worst case scenario would be that within twenty years the older generations have died off and the youth have left the church leaving only around 36 percent of the current total membership. Roger Dudley’s study does suggest that around 1/5 of the drop outs will return to the church after having children, which does give some hope to this situation.

The key to this dilemma is to keep as many current members as possible, while reaching out to potential members. This requires a better understanding of the people the church is trying to recruit. This also requires, among other things, a better understanding of generational hermeneutics. Each generation will need to feel accepted and valued; they will need to feel as though they are contributing to the religious community as a whole.

**THE PURPOSE OF THIS PAPER:**

The purpose of this paper is to raise awareness to the differences between the four generations, how these differences effect each generation’s approach to interpreting the bible,

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7 Which actually works well for people who believe in the literal 144,000 that will be saved.  
8 Roger L. Dudley, *Why Our Teenagers Leave the Church: Personal Stories From a 10-year Study* (Hagerstown, MD: Reveiew and Herald Publishing Association, 2000), 35
how these differences effect the doctrines they hold as valuable and finally, how it effects ecclesiastical life as a whole.

**METHOD OF THIS PAPER:**

This paper will begin by discussing the differences between the Boomers, Baby Boomers, GenXers, and Millennial generation. Each generation sees religion from a different worldview that has been shaped by the culture around them. This paper will seek to reveal how culture has influenced each generation, has set them up to conflict with each other, and that these differences also shape each generation's approach to the scriptures.

The first part of this paper will reveal how culture has shaped each generation's use of the bible. The second part will show that these different approaches in scriptural interpretation lead to conflict within our churches today. The third part of this paper will provide bible teaching methodologies for each generation. The fourth part of this paper will discuss the conflict that stem from each generation's application of scriptures. Issues such as the Sabbath, Prophets, Worship, and Entertainment all revolve around the application of each generation's hermeneutic. These differences require an education of each generation in regard to how to relate to each other, as well as educating cross generational hermeneutics in effort to promote unity. The millennial generation is the future of the Seventh-day Adventist church; therefore the fifth and final section of this paper will describe the potential church of tomorrow. This study will focus on the Millennials and their use of the scriptures in attempt to show potential trends for the future of the Seventh-day Adventist church.

**DESCRIPTION AND COMPARISON OF GENERATIONS:**
There is some debate as to what a generation actually represents. The *Webster’s New World Dictionary of American English* describes a generation as “the average period (about thirty years) between the birth of one generation and that of the next.” On the other hand, Robert Wuthnow defines a generation as:

A biological age group which (a) shares a ‘common location in the social and historical process’ which limits it to ‘a specific range of potential experience, predisposing it for a certain characteristic type of historically relevant action’; (b) has a ‘common destiny’ or interest just as that of a socioeconomic class; and (c) exhibits ‘identity of responses, a certain affinity in the way in which all move with and are formed by their common experiences.’

Establishing beginning and ending dates the four major generations is also challenging because so few researchers agree on exact dates for when these generations begin or end. For example, in the August 20, 2009 issue of the *Adventist Review*, Bruce Manners states that the Boomers are born from 1946-1961; while researchers for NCLS Research date the Boomers from 1942-1961. Because of these disagreements this paper will approximate the dates for each generation to the nearest decade unless directly quoting a source.

It is also important to note that these generational characteristics are not universal and must be understood in light of the fact that there are literally thousands of factors that shape a person. Just because a person’s birth date places them in a particular generation, does not mean that every person in that birth range is going to be characteristic of a particular generation. In a paper entitled *Embracing Generational Differences*, Pam Foster states the following valuable information regarding distinguishing generation:

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One should keep in mind that generational beliefs are not absolute. Significant differences may vary from rural to urban settings and low to high economic backgrounds. It is also important to note that being born early or late in a generational era may also alter one’s viewpoints and opinions. Persons born within two to three years of a generational divide are referred to as ‘Cuspers’ and may favor and display characteristics from the past, next or even both relative generations. They are the folks that cement generations together. They function as mediators, translators, and mentors.\(^{13}\)

Ronald J. Allen confirms this statement and states that, “some persons, in fact are genuinely transgenerational… a pastor needs to recognize the characteristics of each generation are not frozen. A cohort’s view of the world is affected while it lives. Therefore, a preacher needs to pay attention to changes in generations as they evolve.”\(^{14}\)

**The Elders (1900s – 1940s)**

The first generation to be discussed is the Elder generation. The Elder generation is also known as the Silent generation, the Builder generation, and the GI generation. For the most part, this generation was born between 1900 and 1940 and lived through several life shaping events, such as the Great Depression and the two World Wars. According to Monte Sahlin & Paul Richardson, the Elder generation makes up about 13 percent of the US population. Within Adventism they make up about 31 percent.\(^{15}\) Dennis Gaylord, director of Chi Alpha Campus Ministries states that the Elders are hard workers, savers, patriotic, loyal to institutions, private, and dependable. Their core values are: dedication/sacrifice, hard work, conformity, law and order, respect for authority, patience, delayed reward, duty before pleasure, adherence to rules

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\(^{15}\) Monte Sahlin and Paul Richardson, *Seventh-day Adventists in North America: A Demographic Profile* (Lincoln, NE: Center for Creative Ministry, 2008), 5.
and honor. In a document called *Generations At Baker*, Alison Rhoads and Linda Gough, state that, “members of this generation were not interested in conquering the world as they saw their elders do, but instead were intent on keeping their heads down, their noses to the grindstone, and their lives steady. They constantly looked to others for ideas on how to behave and what to think, preferring the ideas of others to their own.”

The Baby Boomers (1940s – 1960s)

The second generation to be discussed is the Baby Boomer generation. This generation gets its name because of the large population boom that occurred in the 1940s. Sahlin and Richardson, state that the Baby Boomer generation makes up about 27 percent of the US population. Within Adventism they make up about 30 percent. Gaylor states that the Baby Boomers were shaped by: the cold war, the civil rights movement, the space race, and the Watergate scandal. The majority of the troops in the Vietnam War were from the Baby Boom generation. The Baby Boomers are educated and desire quality in whatever they do. They are independent, cause-oriented, and fitness conscious. Baby Boomers have a tendency to question authority. Their core values are: optimism, team orientation, personal gratification, health and wellness, personal growth, work, youth, and involvement.

Rhoads and Gough state that this generation “has always existed in a world of their own making and design. Members of this generation are used to being the center of America’s

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18 Ibid, Monte Sahlin and Paul Richardson, *Seventh-day Adventists in North America: A Demographic Profile*.

19 Ibid., Dennis Gaylor, *Generational Differences*. 
attention at all stages of their lives…they have never been an ‘ignored’ generation.”

In *Generations*, Strauss and Howe note that “the Boomer ethos remained a deliberate antithesis to everything [Elder]: spiritualism over science, gratification over patience, negativism over positivism, fractiousness over conformity, rage over friendliness, self over community.” In the August 20, 2009 edition of *Adventist Review*, Bruce Manners, describes his view of his generation:

> We were out to change the world. We marched in political protests, openly brought sex out of the bedroom and marriage, and challenged authority. Individually, though, we soon settled into a lifestyle remarkably similar to that of our parents, the job, the marriage, the mortgage. Yet unlike our parents, we live with a certain restlessness. We change jobs regularly, our divorce rate is much higher, and our personal debt has skyrocketed…Boomers have been called the most selfish generation ever. Unfortunately, there’s some truth in the accusation. It’s a truth that’s reinforced every time a boomer says their main aim in life is to spend their kids’ inheritance.

**Generation X (1960s – 1980s)**

The third generation to be discussed is the first wave of children from the Baby Boomer generation called Generation X, or GenXers. GenXers (also known as Baby Busters and Generation 13) are born between 1960 and 1980. Sahlin and Richardson, claim that GenXers make up 16 percent of the US population, but only 10 percent within Adventism. Gaylor describes them as being shaped by Roe vs. Wade, the space shuttle Challenger disaster, the fall of the Berlin Wall and Communism, AIDS, and the Clinton Administration’s sex scandal. GenXers are characterized by their parental neglect, self reliance, loyalty to relationships, and skeptical natures. This generation is also known as the “latch-key” generation, because their

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20 Ibid, Alison Rhoads and Linda Gough, *Generations At Baker*


23 Ibid, Monte Sahlin and Paul Richardson, *Seventh-day Adventists in North America: A Demographic Profile*. 
parents were often at work or not home, so this generation was left to fend for itself. They are survivors, often stressed out, and seriousness about life. Their core values are: diversity, thinking globally, balance, techno-literacy, fun, informality, self-reliance, and pragmatism. The GenXers are the first generation to take on the Postmodern view of life.24 Frances Kunreuther, of Harvard University, does a great job comparing the GenXers and the Baby Boomers:

In 1991, Douglas Coupland coined the term Generation X in a book that describes a new generation with different values and aspirations from those of the Baby Boomers who precede them…GenXers are characterized as ‘slackers’ who are less invested in their work than Baby Boomers. Those GenXers who aren’t slackers are said to ‘work to live,’ valuing their time away from the job. [As opposed to] Baby Boomer’s [who] ‘live to work’ and tend to overidentify with their job. GenXers who are dedicated to their work are not likely to be loyal to any one organization, where as Baby Boomers tend to stay in one place and expect loyalty to the firm…GenXers work better in an informal environment where they can consult with their peers; Baby Boomers are more comfortable in hierarchical settings. Whereas GenXers are more results oriented, Baby Boomers are more process oriented. GenXers are more technologically savvy and like to get things done quickly. In contrast, Baby Boomers—who rely less on technology—are slower and tend to look at issues more in-depth. GenXers are impatient to show what they can do; they want less oversight and more responsibility. Baby Boomers want to supervise/micromanage GenX and expect them to ‘pay their dues’ before giving them real authority…Both GenX and Baby Boomers think the other generation is materialistic.25

The Millennial Generation (1980s – 2000s)

The fourth and final generation to be discussed is the Millennial generation. Also known as Generation Y, Generation We, and Wave 2, the Millennial generation is the second wave of the Baby Boomer’s children. They are born between 1980 and 2000. Sahlin and Richardson say that the Millennials make up around 26 percent of the US population, and 14 percent within

24 Ibid., Dennis Gaylor, Generational Differences.
Adventism.26 According to Gaylor, this generation has been influenced by the World Trade Center attacks, the Oklahoma City bombings, the Internet, and the death of Princess Dianna and Mother Teresa. They are characterized as entrepreneurial hard workers who thrive on flexibility. Unlike the GenXers, the Millennials were cherished by their parents, groomed to achieve and excel, viewed as heroes. Gaylor claims that this generation has the lowest parent to child ratio in the USA’s history, meaning the Millennials are less likely to have as many siblings as the generations before them. Millennials are more law abiding, socially conscious, educated, upbeat and full of self-esteem. The Millennial generation’s core values are: optimism, confidence, achievement, sociability, morality, street smarts, and diversity, and civic duty. Volunteerism is high among the Millennial generation.27 In the book Generation We, Eric Greenberg and Karl Webber assert that the Millennials are:

A caring generation…the best educated generation and the most diverse of the generations. The political attitudes of Gen We reveal a distinct pattern that is markedly different from that of their immediate predecessors, the GenXers—the most politically conservative cohort in America. History thanks their [Gen We] open-mindedness and their overwhelming embrace of the greater good, Gen We is developing strongly progressive views on a wide range of issues and is poised to lead the most dramatic leftward political shift in recent American history…Gen We is remarkably open-minded and tolerant on social issues…is overwhelmingly pro-environment…Gen We is post-ideological, post-partisan, and post-political.28

It is easy to see how one generation shapes the next. The Elders were a reserved generation who did not get involved, but rather stayed in the sidelines. This made the Baby Boomers step up into positions of authority, which made the GenXers feel the need to rebel. The GenXer’s rebellion and conserving life style was polarized by the Millennials who have become

26 Ibid, Monte Sahlin and Paul Richardson, Seventh-day Adventists in North America: A Demographic Profile.
27 Ibid., Dennis Gaylor, Generational Differences.
more progressive and open-minded putting their energies toward helping others. Each generation has a significant influence on the following generation.

**GENERATIONAL HERMENEUTICS:**

As mentioned earlier in this paper, William W. Klein defines hermeneutics as “interpreting or explaining…the task of explaining the meaning of a piece of writing. Hermeneutics describes the principles people use to understand what something means, to comprehend what a message written, oral, or visual – is endeavoring to communicate.”29 The next section of this paper will look at how each generation approaches scripture differently. For the most part, it will be based on the previous section’s description of the generations, applying views of authority and ethic to the religious setting. This section of the paper will begin by generalizing the way church is done for both the old and the new generations, and then going into specific hermeneutics of each generation. The section will discuss where each generation learns about God. Generally there are only two options, internal and external influences. While God works internally on all of humanity, some generations rely more heavily on external influences whether they know it or not. The final section of Generational Hermeneutics will discuss specific theology unique to each generation.

**General Approaches to Religion**

It is clear that every generation is different and has vastly different world views. These differences in world views shape the way each generation worships. Ruth Powell and Kathy Jacka point out that in general, the older generations are more likely to: attend worship services

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weekly; prefer traditional styles of music in worship services; spend regular time in private
devotional activity; have a strong sense of belonging to their denomination; be involved in
church-based community service, justice or welfare activities; and be involved in community-
based service, care or welfare activities. While the younger generations are more likely to: be
involved in small groups; prefer contemporary styles of music in worship services; feel that their
gifts and skills are encouraged; have helped others in a range of informal ways; value outreach,
be involved in evangelistic activities, and actually invite others to church; and be new comers to
church life, have switched denominations or transferred congregations in the previous five
years.30

**Specific Generational Sources for God**

The Elders perceive God and the church similarly to the way they view earthly
authorities, with loyalty. Gaylor describes them as being: committed to the church, support
foreign missions, enjoy bible study, loyal to their denominations, and worship in reverence.31
This Loyalty is good for the denomination, however in extremes this loyalty can lead to close-
mindedness and a lack of independent thinking. Elders are susceptible to following “the church”
blindly, rather than studying God’s Word for themselves. Elders will often view an interpretation
of scripture more because of what the church, or pastor has said rather than studying it firsthand.
In short, the Elder generation’s hermeneutic is what ever the established church tells them it is.

The Baby Boomer approaches religion study slightly differently. While the Elders follow
what the religious authority has said, the Baby Boomer would believe that they could know
better than what the church says. This leads the Baby Boomer to study first hand what a text says
and means. This independent nature of bible study is beneficial to the church because there is a

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31 Ibid., Dennis Gaylor, *Generational Differences*. 
shortage of thinkers in the Adventist church. According to Gaylor, the Baby Boomer’s religious characteristics are: committed to relationships, a want to belong, supportive of people within the church, and a want to experience their faith firsthand. Like in politics, Baby Boomers approach religion similarly in that, where something is broken or not right logically, they want to fix it. Baby Boomers jump in as leaders in the church and take an active role in the development of theology and issues of conflict.

The GenXers do not take their religion second hand. In fact, Colleen Carroll claims that “this may be one of the first generations where faith is a conscious choice.” This generation is fascinated with science and history, which sometimes conflict with traditional religious views, making this GenXers tend to be skeptical of truth and established religion. Because of this, Gaylor claims that denominations are not important to GenXers. They want less structure, and want a faith that meets their needs. Carroll states that this generation wants “the hard gospel. They want a preacher or priest to tell it like it is, to give them morality that they believe is sound and doesn’t simply cater to their whims.”

Because of the influence of postmodernism on GenXers, there is a great hesitancy among this generation to trust the church or its members. Everyone’s ideas become a potential truth, rather than an established absolute. Ronald J. Allen notes that “an upside of postmodernity is its spirit of liberation from dogma and maximization of human freedom. A downside is a loss of confidence that life has ultimate significance or consequences.” GenXers, and the following generations to come, face the biggest obstacles to finding God: How can a person find God if they can not trust that the church, or even a friend, is not bias toward a particular belief system?

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32 Ibid., Dennis Gaylor, Generational Differences.
34 Ibid., Colleen Carroll, The Good News About Generation X & Y, 44.
The Millennial generation seems to see God in people more than institutions. Monte Sahlin gives hope for the future when he notes that the Millennials “have a more positive attitude toward the church than Gen X and greater denominational loyalty.” It seems that the Millennial generations gets its view of God and worship from traditions and stereotypes rather than the bible itself. There are some who believe that the Millennials are drawn toward archaic forms of worship, such as candles and liturgies. However, in an article by the Barna Group entitled *What Teenagers Look for in a Church*, David Kinnaman reveals that “all of the recent attention on young people gravitating to ‘ancient traditions of Christianity’ misses the fact that the vast majority of American teenagers do not express much interest in or appreciation for such traditions in the first place. Teenagers are a pinch-of-this-pinch-of-that generation, so without intentional decisions on the part of youth workers, many teenagers ride out their teen years in fruitless experimentation rather than genuine forms of spiritual development.”

**Generational Views of the Bible**

The single most significant issue in studying generational hermeneutics is how each generation views the bible itself, closely followed by the generation’s view of inspiration. These two issues shape the rest of the generation’s theology. The Barna Group did a study of Christians across North America asking a question about views of the Bible, they found that “A slight majority of Christians (55%) strongly agree that the Bible is accurate in all of the principle it teaches, with another 18% agreeing somewhat. About one out of five either disagree strongly...
(9%) or somewhat (13%) with this statement, and 5% aren’t sure what to believe.”\textsuperscript{38} In an Adventist study by Roger Dudley on College age views of the Bible, a question was posed in relation to the bible. The results were 11.8 percent believed the Bible was to be taken word for word. 83.3 percent believed a middle of the road approach to the bible, that it was God’s thoughts as expressed by men. And finally, 4.9 percent believed that the Bible was only a collection of stories, and therefore should not be taken as seriously.\textsuperscript{39}

While each generation views the bible slightly differently, there is actually some very common themes about inspiration and the bible. The Barna Group did a study which was published October 19, 2009 called New Research Explores How Different Generations View and Use the Bible. This study states:

There is often more that unites the various generations in American culture than divides them. The Barna research regarding the Bible confirms the central role this revered text has for most Americans. A majority of each of the four generations believes that the Bible is a sacred or holy book. Another commonality is that millions within each of the generations report reading the pages of Scripture in the last week. There is also significant generational overlap regarding people’s views on the nature of the Bible. Similar proportions of the generations embrace the most conservative and most liberal views. For instance, the ‘highest’ view of the Bible – that it is ‘the actual word of God and should be taken literally, word for word’ – is embraced by one-quarter of [Millennials] (27%), [GenXers] (27%), and Baby Boomers (23%), and one-third of Elders (34%). The Extreme view on the other end – that the Bible is not inspired by God – is embraced by proportions that are also statistically close to one another, including [Millennials] (25%), [GenXers] (19%), [Baby] Boomers (22%), and Elders (22%) … While most Americans of all ages identify the Bible as sacred, the drop-off among the youngest adults is striking: 9 out of 10 Boomers an Elders describe the Bible as sacred, which compares to 8 out of 10 [GenXers] (81%) and just 2 out of 3 [Millennials] (67%) … Young adults are significantly less likely than older adults to strongly agree that the bible is totally accurate in all of the principles it teaches. Just 30% of [Millennials] and 39% of [GenXers] firmly embraced this view, compared with 46% of [Baby Boomers] and 58% or Elders … Another generational difference is that the young adults are more likely to express skepticism about the original manuscripts of the bible than is true of older adults… the central theme of young people’s approach to the bible is skepticism. They question the Bible’s history as well as its relevance to their lives, leading many

\textsuperscript{38} The Barna Group, Ltd, “American Christians Do Not Believe that Satan or the Holy Spirit Exist,” \textit{The Barna Group}, George Barna, \url{http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/12-faithspirituality/260-m}…

\textsuperscript{39} Roger Dudley, interview by author, November 12, 2009, Candler, NC.
young people to reject the Bible as containing everything one needs to live a meaningful life.\textsuperscript{40}

\section*{Generational Theology}

Because of the differences described in this paper, it is easy to see how different views of theology can begin to develop within each generation. Beliefs, doctrines, views of the Bible, inspiration, and Ellen G. White are all effected by these differences in the generations. The Elders approach theology from a traditional church stance. They view the theology of the church as foundational, absolute truth, and they are passionate about following it to the letter because it is what the church has decided. Similarly, the Baby Boomers agree with the church’s stance on the majority of issues, not because of the church’s authority, but because they have studied it for themselves and they concur. The GenXers are more skeptical about what the church teaches and form independent ideas which are some times in line with a stance the church has taken and sometimes their stance is influenced more by secular culture. For the GenXers who remain faithful to the Seventh-day Adventist church, a revisiting of the fundamental beliefs occurs where this generation familiarizes itself with the teachings of the church and why the church believes what it does. The Millennial generations, although still skeptical about the dogmas of the church, chooses to find practical applications of the church’s beliefs. Once knowing “the truth,” a Millennial wants to know how they can use it. Millennials, more than any other generation seeks tangible and practical theology.

\section*{ISSUES RESULTING FROM GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES:}

\subsection*{Conflict of Theology}

\textsuperscript{40} The Barna Group, Ltd, “Research Explores How Different Generations View and Use the Bible,” The Barna Group, George Barna, \url{http://http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/12-faithspirituality/317-n...}
One of the first things that happens in a typical congregation when generations collide is an immediate conflict of theology. Sometimes it is visible, most times it is mental. Typically the younger generations do not voice their differences. This leads them to bottle up their thoughts and opinions on a topic until confronted by someone else (whether of their generation or an older one) at that point the differences become visible.

At the Mount Pisgah Academy church, there was a time where the church kept its issues bottled up within certain segments of the church population. Each of these subgroups felt as though they were being oppressed, not nurtured, insignificant. The academy students felt as though their voice was not being heard, that they were not respected in their views or beliefs. The older generations felt as though the academy students were dangerously close to heresy.

Due to a transition of power within the church, in one year alone there were at least four “meetings” where issues within the church were discussed. Although the people directly involved in these discussions do not know it, all of the issues addressed were a direct result of conflicting generational hermeneutics and its resulting theology. While these meetings were painful and stirred up a lot of controversy, they were productive and necessary. This began the process of getting things out, in the open so that progress and healing could begin. The issues included, but were not limited to: reverence in church, what should true worship look like, what music/instruments are appropriate in worship, what an Adventist should dress like, what an Adventist should choose for entertainment and recreation, and whether Adventists should wear jewelry. It must be noted that issues are not limited to generational conflict, and that sometimes there is cross-generational conflict on these issues. However, these issues become exaggerated when the old and young conflict.
The issue of right worship is no stranger to the church. It is manifested in attitudes on reverence and music as well as the nature of God. A biblical definition, as evident a simple word study, indicates that the word *worship* is to bow, serve, declare worth or value of something in an affectionate way. Most people come to worship not knowing why they are worshiping. Worship is a response. God created, sustains, and has redeemed humanity. This makes God worthy to be worshipped. Worship happens both individually and corporately. The New Testament model describes the people getting together to share their experiences with God during the week.\[41\] In the Old Testament things get slightly more complicated. There is no description of formal worship, as we see today, described in the Old Testament. What is described is the temple sacrifices and a few public gatherings to address legal issues. There is no order of service, there was no sermon. So when the issue of worship arises, there is no model to follow. No set order of service or laid out format. Worship, or church as it would be called today, becomes very subjective.

Because of this subjective nature of worship, each generation will act out worship in different ways. Each generation has its list of bible texts to support their particular views of worship. Older generations might suggest Habakkuk 2:20 to support a silent, reverent attitude while in the church sanctuary. “But the LORD is in his holy temple\[42\]; let all the earth keep silence before him.”\[43\] While younger generations may refer to Psalm 47:1-2 which says, “O Clap your hands, all peoples; Shout to God with the voice of joy. For the LORD Most High is to be

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\[41\] See Acts chapters 2
\[42\] It could be argued that this text is referring to a judgment scene rather than a worship service. Therefore this text would become moot point.
\[43\] English Standard Version
feared…”⁴⁴ These are opposing views, yet both biblical, and both are frequently used to support a particular view on worship.

Reverence is also addressed by Ellen G. White in multiple writings. In Testimonies for the Church, she says “when worshipers enter the place of meeting, they should do so with decorum, passing quietly to their seats. If there is a stove in the room, it is not proper to crowd about in an indolent, careless attitude. Common talking, whispering and laughing should not be permitted in the house of worship, either before or after the service. Ardent, active piety should characterize the worshipers.”⁴⁵ The generational problem occurs the older generations tend to venerate Ellen White, while younger generations tend to think that while she was a talented writer, her writings do not contain the authority to change their perceptions or behaviors. This issue with Ellen White is much bigger than just the topic of reverence; it flows into every discussion involving Ellen G. White.

Music often arises as generational conflict. Older generations have used the argument that some instruments are evil and should not be allowed in a worship setting, e.g. drums or some types of guitars. Younger generations argue that in the bible there are no “good” or “bad” musical instruments, only what was available to them at the time.⁴⁶ Only the product can be measured as good or bad. The younger generations have often quoted Psalm100 which says to make a “joyful noise,”⁴⁷ and that this is the true measure of worship.

The issue of adornment often arises in generational conflict because times have changed and with it styles and fashion. What is popular for an Elder to wear would not go over well with the Millennials, and vice versa. Biblically, there are only two explicit texts to contribute to this

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⁴⁴ New American Standard Bible 
⁴⁶ Psalm 150:3-6 (NASB) 
⁴⁷ Psalm 100:1 (King James Version)
discussion on jewelry: 1 Peter 3:3-4 and 1 Timothy 2:9-10. Both texts speak of moderation rather than prohibition. Implicitly, there are countless texts referring to the sin of pride, and living in a way that a person does not flaunt his or her wealth.

This topic can be seen very clearly through knowledge of the generations in that the Elders will follow what eve the church/pastor has ruled on the matter, Baby Boomers will have studied Ellen White’s prohibitions of jewelry and concluded that they agree with her position, the GenXers and Millennials will look to cultural influences and Biblical texts on moderation and not see any problem with wearing a little “bling.”

In a very insightful remark on the nature of young Adventists, Chris Blake says that “younger Adventists believe, deep in their hearts, that virtually all musical styles can laud God. That Jesus handed down no specific order of service. That God honors creativity and accountability and love. That the Sabbath exists to launch us into the week. That church is a community of uneven believers. And that what ultimately matters most to God is what happens on streets, in schools, and in homes outside any denominational building…[GenXers’] and [Millennial’s] mindset is ‘incredibly savvy and unusually jaded.’”

While these are only a few of the issues that generations conflict over, there are many more issues that are dividing the Seventh-day Adventist church. While the bible often gives clear cut ruling on many moral and ethical issues, there are several issues that there is not enough biblical evidence to support a clear “right” or a clear “wrong.” It is on these issues that much of the conflict occurs. This is because the only way to interpret a “right” or “wrong” after the bible stops guiding is by personal interpretation and opinion. Ultimately, this is mostly shaped by each

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48 Chris Blake, “We Need to talk: We continue to lose our next generation, but we don’t have to,” *Adventist Today*, November/December 2008, 10.
person’s generation. Many of the issues can be avoided, or at least better understood, by studying how each generation approaches the bible differently, and those differences are okay.

**The Great Exodus of Adventist Youth**

This paper has already addressed the issue known as the *Graying of Adventism*, at the root of this trend is the great exodus of Adventist youth from the church. Many youth are in fact leaving the church because of these generational conflicts of theology. Martin Webber did a survey of Adventist youth that shocks to the core of this issue:

…I interviewed a small number of young adults themselves. Their data highlighted the importance of that last principle – Freedom to develop one’s own faith. Spiritual Carnage results from lack of freedom, along with a deficit of love and warmth. All but one of these six young adults describes their church experience as: Rigid, not flexible; Closed, not open; Exclusive, not Inclusive; Unfair, not Fair; Cold, not Warm; Dark, not Bright; Dull, not Exciting. These young adults reported significant confusion and despair regarding Adventist lifestyle standards. They seemed particularly distressed about what they experienced as heavy-handedness in enforcing these standards and unwillingness to even dialogue about them. It was interesting to note that most of these alienated young adults still embrace many fundamental Adventist doctrines such as the Sabbath, yet they resolutely reject the church that teaches them. When asked if they might possibly be active members in the Adventist church twenty years from now, if time lasts, all but one of them replied “small chance” or “no chance.” …Together with the data I got from parents, these responses from the young adults themselves highlight what I perceive is a compelling need for a church atmosphere that offers flexibility rather than rigidity and freedom rather than oppression. This is not only essential for avoiding attrition—it’s also Scriptural: “Where the spirit of the lord is, there is liberty (2 Cor.3:17)”

In a similar study by the Barna Group, David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons state that young people often claim that Christianity is hypocritical, too focused on getting converts, anti-homosexual, sheltered, too political, and judgmental. These attitudes have been known to push the younger generations away from Christianity as a whole and should be avoided at all costs!

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What is the value of a young person who is looking for more? The old way is not enough for them anymore, they’ve been jaded, had broken relationships because of how different they are. They are tired of the hypocrisy of their parents and grandparents generation that says things have to be their way. They are tired of being wrongly judged as “worldly” and “irreverent.” The result, they abandon their faith. Not always their faith in God, sometimes just the church that contains God’s people.

**COMBATTING GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES**

The future of the Seventh-day Adventist church in North America is being shaped by the graying of the Elder and Baby Boomer generations as well as the losses of the GenXers and Millennial generations. The lack of tolerance for differing views is shaping a culture of elitism and oppression. Studies have shown that within two decades the older generations will begin to die and the younger generations will continue to leave. The result will be a Church in North America that has greatly reduced in numbers, unless these trends can be reversed.

The solutions to this predicament are education, tolerance, respect and love. The educating of all generations as to the natures of both themselves and the other generations is essential in understanding these problems from the beginning.

The second part to this is a true tolerance of diversity. There was a professor at Union College in 2004 who said that “true tolerance is being so aware of what you believe that nothing can shake your core. You become able to discuss openly, ideas that may be contrary to your own views or values and yet, no insecurities or oppression will exist.” This type of tolerance is hard to come by these days.
The third solution to the current and future condition of the Seventh-day Adventist church is to recognize that all humanity was made in God’s image, and that is a pretty big image. Ellen White noted that “every human being, created in the image of God, is endowed with a power akin to that of the creator—individuality, power to think and do.”51 Because humanity was made in God’s image, everyone is deserving of respect and individuality. To often people falsely grow a feeling of superiority because of their education or experiences. There are far too many under respected people in every generation. Life experiences are not limited to any age category; therefore everyone’s experiences and views become equal.

This leads to the final and most important of all solutions to the present church’s condition, Love. John 13:35 could not be clearer “By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”52 When the church has love for each other, it will act like it. Respect will flourish, tolerance will bloom, and people will see the Seventh-day Adventist church and know that we are God’s people. Our differences will complement, not divide. They will unite us, rather than divide us. We will be more effective in ministry and efficient in community. Without love we are just become “a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.”53

CONCLUSION:

Research indicates that Elders, Baby Boomers, GenXers, and Millennials are all different and approach the bible differently. These differences, for the most part, are not moral issues or even wrong. With the help of educating people of each generation’s hermeneutics, generational conflict and the graying of Adventism can begin to subside. All of this is only possible with education, tolerance, respect and most importantly, love.

51 Ellen G. White, Education (Omaha, NE: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1903), 17.
52 NASB
53 1 Corinthians 13:1 NASB
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