The challenge of generational change



by David Tasker

THE CHURCH HAS BEEN ROCKED BY MANY controversies. Too many people have been hurt in the crossfire. The question is, "are we able to learn from these and move on, or is it necessary to withdraw into the cocoon of some past golden age?" The answer may be uncomfortable for some, but first let's review the territory.

The controversies seem to fit a pattern beyond the borders of our Church and occur in cycles of roughly 30 years—a generation. To set the stage, let's go back before the Adventist Church existed to the year 1800. This was the era of the great missionary movements and the formation of Bible societies. The world was opening up to the Gospel as never before. About 30 years later, the Great Advent Awakening was unfolding—and it seemed to be gravitating towards an idea of remnancy and exclusivism—quite different to the openness of the previous generation.

Then in 1861, the Sabbath-keeping Adventists chose a name for themselves, and registered a new denomination, bucking the previous trend of not formalising faith. The previous generation had been convinced that as soon as they established themselves into a church, they would join Babylon.

About three decades later there was another stir—the Minneapolis GC of 1888. It was not the business sessions that caused all the excitement but the devotional periods,

and righteousness by faith emerged as the hot item for discussion. A Bible Conference for college Bible teachers convened a generation later in 1919 to discuss the ministry of Ellen White. Its proceedings were so sensitive that they were locked in a vault for the next 50 years.

Fast-forward to 1955 when another major upset occurs. Two visitors to the General Conference office asked the brethren if Adventists were Christian or cultists. A small committee was assembled and the answers developed into a monumental tome called *Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine*. A storm arose from a statement by its editor who explained that only those on the "lunatic fringe" of the Church would disagree with the positions taken in the book. This ill-chosen statement incensed the patriarch of the age, M L Andreasen, who wrote his objections in a series of pamphlets that have since formed the inspiration for the so-called "Concerned Brethren" movement.

The next generation experienced its denominational "earthquake" at Glacier View in 1980. Desmond Ford became the lightning rod for this event. The resulting ripples split faith communities and caused huge numbers of ministers to hemorrhage from the Church. Thirty plus years have passed since that event but it still runs raw for those who went through it.

The tragic thing about this thumbnail sketch is that none of the major events mentioned since 1888 have been resolved. They all still simmer beneath the surface with small pressure groups nursing their hurts, each convinced it is their God-given right to "correct" the aberrations of our history and get the Church back on track. And to make it even more interesting, 1980 was more than 30 years ago. We are due for another "big one".

Is this just a phenomenon of the past 200 years or do we see it in Scripture as well? We indeed see it, in the two versions of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5). When we turn the spotlight on the fourth commandment we observe a significant difference between them. Although the command itself does not change, the rationale for observing it does quite dramatically. Let me stress that point. Organic truth does not change, but the way it is appreciated from one generation to the next does.

The fourth commandment states, "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy" (Exodus 20:8). The reason given is "because in six days God made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and He rested on the seventh day (v11)." Humanity is to rest on the Sabbath because the Creator rested.

However, when the Sabbath command is repeated in Deuteronomy 5, a different reason is given. "Guard the Sabbath day carefully to keep it holy (v12)" because "you were a slave in the land of Egypt and God led you out from there with a strong hand and an extended arm (v15)." The essence of the fourth commandment remains the same, but humanity is to rest on the Sabbath because the Saviour redeemed. Why the change between the two accounts? The law was first given at Sinai in the first few months of Israel's escape from Egypt (Exodus 20), whereas the account in Deuteronomy 5 occurred on the plains of Moab, in the final year of the Exodus, nearly 40 years later. The two different law codes were delivered to two very different sets of people a generation apart. This may provide the key to the difference in rationale.

How would you describe the two Exodus generations? The first generation came directly from slavery. All they knew was restriction and oppression. Their knowledge of religion was largely of the imposing temples and the joyous processions of the gods through the streets of the towns. They had been bombarded with the trappings of the great sun god Ra and the animals closely associated with him—especially the bull. So the "Sinai generation" needed to be confronted with the great Creator-God, and told to "remember" that the God delivering them had created the sun, and the bull and everything else in Creation.

The second generation had very vague childish memories (if any) of Egypt. They had grown up as unfettered wanderers through a vast wilderness. Their religious experience was nurtured by the complaints of their parents against a God who did not satisfy all their food cravings and who kept them walking for years. This second generation needed to be introduced to the Redeemer and to learn how to live in a newly-formed nation in the Promised Land—one based on the unfamiliar values of God's primacy and the sacredness of human life. So they were instructed to "keep" or "guard" this regular memorial of God's action of freeing His people. Their Sabbath rest was to be a reminder of their own origins in slavery and a continuing challenge to treat all people justly (see, for example, Leviticus 25:41,42).

Both Exodus generations clearly demonstrate that values must be passed on but creatively contextualised for the next generation, with a rationale that makes the most sense to them. If Moses, the founding father of the nation of Israel, saw the need to repackage God's non-changing values in a different way for the young, then it is appropriate for us to do the same, rather than sticking to traditional explanations that may become more and more irrelevant with each passing generation.

So, back to the stress points of our Church history. How locked in do we become to a generational perspective? To what extent is each generation blinkered, preventing them from seeing beyond their own experience? What would happen if we removed the blinkers, went back to the Scriptures and re-evaluated God's unchanging truth for the present time? And when the next hot issue to challenge the generations breaks upon us, will we do any better than our predecessors? Will we prefer our ceaseless and comfortable round of activity in the wilderness or will it be the Promised Land this time?

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