

Then too I would pack the collection of essays entitled *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts*, edited by Howard Marshall and David Peterson. Acts raises so many queries theologically and here is a wide range of papers which relate its theology to the present day.

As a personal discipline I seek to balance my reading between the devotional, the biblical, the theological, the applied, the sociological and the historical. Two volumes I would choose from the history section would be Michael Watts' 'magnum opus' on *The Dissenters*. The second volume relates to the nineteenth century, an understanding of which is vital to enable us to interpret where we are today. Then I would pick David Bebbington's *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain* off the shelf. It tells a fine story which both inspires and offers some wise cautions for contemporary evangelicalism.

If George Beasley-Murray, in a recent edition of *Ministry Today*, had not chosen the *Dictionary of Jesus & the Gospels* and the *Dictionary of Paul & his Letters*, produced by IVP, I might well have done so. They are like mines full of rich minerals which provide hours of happy digging. But since he did, I might go for the *Dictionary of Ethics & Pastoral Theology*, edited by David Atkinson and David Field. It's another mine in which I would love to quarry. It never ceases to expand my thinking in areas with which I am familiar and introduce me to whole new areas which are uncharted territory.

Derek Tidball is Principal of London Bible College.

THE TRUTH IS OUT THERE! GENXERS & THE XT FILES

Rowland Croucher

(This article is an adaptation of a Commencement Address given at the University of Queensland in March 1998)

Commencement addresses are an interesting genre. They are the 'You're gonna make it' speech by some famous person to the graduating class. The most talked about last year was Kurt

Vonnegut Jr's at MIT: "Ladies and Gentlemen - wear sunscreen. If I could offer you only one tip for the future, sunscreen would be it. The long-term benefits of sunscreen have been proven by scientists, whereas the rest of my advice has no basis than my own meandering experience. I will dispense this advice now."

Our human voyage is a lonely affair. Universities are full of lonely people. Of course, you could do what Rupert Brooke once did when taking a ship from Liverpool to New York. He seemed to be the only passenger with friends on the dock to wave him goodbye. So he ran down the gang-plank, picked out an urchin, and asked, 'What's your name?'. 'Bill,' said the boy. 'Well, Bill, you are my friend, and here's sixpence. Wave to me when the ship goes.' The boy waved a handkerchief in a very grubby hand. So there's one simple solution to the problem of loneliness - pay someone to be your friend (By the way, I'm being serious - this happens in my counselling practice every day).

Generation X

There are more lonely people among Generation Xers than perhaps in any other generation in history. I don't pretend to understand the generation to which most of you students belong. All I can say is that I counsel GenX people, I communicate with them for a few hours each day on the Internet, and Jan and I have had four of them living with us on and off for 37 years! I'm not even a baby boomer - I'm from the generation before that, which grew up with no TV. So I'm in a class you might call 'Old Fogey'!

The term 'Generation X' comes from the title of Douglas Coupland's hip 1991 novel and signifies an unknown variable, a generation still in search of identity. GenXers were born between the years 1961 and 1981. They are as diverse in outlook and style as the baby boomers before them. Some have called them the 'Paradox Generation' because they display characteristics which appear to cancel each other out. The themes and thoughts found throughout GenX material form a complex mix of positive and negative characteristics. According to GenXer Jeff Bantz, GenXers:

are very individualistic, and yet value relationships highly;
don't respect authority, yet long to receive instruction;
are sceptical, yet pragmatic;
have an extended adolescence, yet grew up too soon;
are slow to commit and passionately dedicated;

are a challenge to manage, but are excellent workers;
are apathetic, yet care deeply;
are relativistic and searching for meaning;
are disillusioned, yet are not giving up¹¹⁵ and
they're pro-choice regarding abortion, but pro-life when it comes to
whales and trees!

This is the generation which does not remember where they were
when President Kennedy was shot - either they weren't born yet,
or they were too busy watching TV to notice.

Generalisations about GenXers

This is the most aborted, best educated, most travelled, longest-
living generation in history.

They are the first to grow up with AIDS, MTV and environmental
catastrophes.

GenXers are the first electronic generation, having already
mastered laptop computers, the Internet, CD-Roms, faxes,
modems, Nintendo, Sega and Play Station. They have a
tremendous ability to process lots of information at once. Playing
video games while talking on the phone, listening to the radio,
doing your homework and making a snack was an after school
ritual for this generation. This 'parallel thinking' allows 'multiple
tasking'.

This is the first generation to be raised completely by TV (so
'everything is image') and shaped by music: and their lyrics are
often passionate and angry, sometimes rebellious, mostly honest,
sometimes spiritual/religious. There's a pervasive longing for
reality, healing, community and peace. One GenXer said, "Music is
our lifeblood - I'd rather buy music than eat." And they would
rather be at a U2 concert than in church singing hymns.

They're anti-materialistic. So they'll have a succession of jobs,
rather than a career. And they'll put relationships before work -
work is what you do so that you can have a life.

¹¹⁵ *Implications for Mission Organisations of the Sociological Distinctives of
Christians Born Between 1961 and 1981,*

They have insatiable appetites for junk food, junk films, junk ideas and junk culture.

Where baby boomers were critical or suspicious of institutions, GenXers reject them. This is a collaborative generation - hierarchies are 'out'.

No other generation has needed the church so much and wanted it so little. Although they are 'spiritual', they know less about the Bible than any previous generation in the past 1000 years.

They're the first 'latch-key' generation, with most of them coming from two- job families.

They affirm diversity and can live with ambiguity.

Fewer than half of them have lived with two biological parents throughout their childhood.

And there is a fairly unanimous consensus that there are three pervasive feelings among GenXers - despair, confusion and narcissism.

Existential despair

In my book, *The Family*, I wrote that God puts people into families or communities for three reasons: to learn self-worth by being loved unconditionally; to feel a sense of belonging; to give back to others in forms of sacrifice and service.

GenXers have suffered deprivations in all three areas. Young Americans are ten times more likely to suffer from measurable depression than their grandparents. British people are three times more likely to experience depression than in the 1950's. Australia has the fourth highest male suicide rate in the world. Road rage is about to be classified as an official mental disorder by the American Psychiatric Association, together with Internet Addiction Disorder, caffeine induced anxiety disorder, inhalant abuse and telephone scatologia (making heavy breathing noises on the phone).

Choosing careers is a hassle. In earlier times, children grew up taking it for granted that they would probably adopt their parents' occupations. A few generations ago, children began adopting their parents' aspirations instead. GenXers are likely to choose neither.

When the baby boomers were twenty-something, they were ready to save the world. GenXers feel that they are barely able to save

themselves. A composite statement of GenXers frustration might go something like this: Boomers had free love - we have AIDS; they had a war on poverty - we have a trillion dollar debt; they had a booming economy - we have downsizing and pollution.

Confusion

GenXers are post-Christian, post-modern - the first generation to grow up without absolute truths, believing that the highest virtue is tolerance of the views of others.

The key assumption of modernism is that knowledge is certain, objective, good and obtainable. The 'modern' knower tries to stand apart from the world and be an unbiased observer. Information processing is linear, the outlook is optimistic, progress is inevitable and the focus is on the individual.

For post-modern GenXers, there are multiple centres of truth, no truth is true and all truth is true. Everything is relative and everything could be truth. Experience is more important than dogma. Truth is defined by each individual and the community of which he or she is part. So information processing is non linear and fragmented, the idea of progress is illusory and the focus is on community.

The TV series *The X-files* is all about this paradigm shift in Western thought and culture. The show's catch-phrase, 'The truth is out there', is based on the assumption that it's possible to find the truth eventually.

Narcissism

A high school teacher went back to teaching after having children. I asked her if she noticed any difference in how the kids used to be. She said, "They're more selfish these days. We were studying *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and talked about the notion of 'duty' - they had no idea what duty/obligation was all about."

Articles in psychology journals are beginning to suggest that narcissism is the behavioural disorder of the late 1990's. Thirty years ago, guilt was the main psychologicalcrippler. Now I talk to clients who have absolutely no guilt. Instead they are trying to find happiness in the ways the media tell them it can be found. While living hypersexual and hedonistic lives, they're empty inside.

The trend towards excessive emphasis on self-esteem and self-congratulation may be an over-correction from earlier traditions of avoiding complimenting children for fear of making them conceited.

Christopher Lasch has written: 'The new narcissist is haunted not by guilt, but by anxiety. He seeks not to inflict his own certainties on others, but to find a meaning in life. Liberated from the superstitions of the past, he doubts even the reality of his own existence. Superficially relaxed and tolerant, he finds little use for dogmas of racial and ethnic purity, but at the same time forfeits the security of group loyalties and regards everyone as a rival for the favours conferred by a paternalistic state. His sexual attitudes are permissive rather than puritanical, even though his emancipation from ancient taboos brings him no sexual peace. Fiercely competitive in his demand for approval and acclaim, he distrusts competition because he associates it unconsciously with an unbridled urge to destroy. He extols co-operation and teamwork while harbouring deeply antisocial impulses. He praises respect for rules and regulations in the secret belief that they do not apply to himself. Acquisitive in the sense that his cravings have no limits, he does not accumulate goods and provisions against the future but demands immediate gratification and lives in a state of restless, perpetually unsatisfied desire.'¹¹⁶

So are today's young people more selfish? In one sense, no. Every generation has its own way of manifesting narcissism - GenXers are more honest about it. Friends, I invite you to be useful, as well as decorative, in this bad, sad world.

Some medicos here will help fight Alzheimer's and many other as yet unconquered diseases. We need some economists here to work creatively on narrowing the gap between rich and poor - and to do something about the unemployed.

Those of you doing media studies might like to think about three areas of violence increasing in scope, severity and frequency on television - increased aggression, increased callousness to the use of violence and increased fearfulness. Do all heroes have to be violent?

¹¹⁶ *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*

Then there are the issues of global poverty and hunger. And you political scientists - there's a crisis in democracy between principles and pragmatism. The trouble is that the people who govern us are human, and for humans power tends to become addictive. After a few years they become unbearably arrogant, begin to believe in their infallibility, lose touch with electors, repel criticism and find themselves surrounded by sycophants. Beware of politicians who don't care whether they're liked or not - and beware of those who care too much whether they're liked or not.

Above all, aim not only to be clever, but also passionate - and never aspire to be either without the other.

The attitudes of Jesus

In a world like this, what attitudes would Jesus suggest his followers adopt? GenXers would have felt very much at home with Jesus. Like them he had no career path, and no place he could call home. His greatest battles were against the dogmas of his day and he showed little faith in institutions, rules and regulations. Rather his message was of a Father full of grace and the context of his work was his personal relationships. He built community across class, gender, racial and lifestyle lines. He liked a good party, spoke against injustice and could not stomach inauthentic people. He thought globally but acted locally.

In Matthew 5, Jesus gave his 'commencement address' to his followers. Each of the so-called 'Beatitudes' starts with the exclamation 'Congratulations!'

Congratulations to those who realise you've got nothing, that you'll never make it on your own. You're not in the system, so you're free of all its trappings. You're free now.

Congratulations to those who mourn because you are in touch with the grim reality of pain in the world. Tears are healing - those who grieve are the ones who are cleansed of superficiality. Richard Rohr, *Jesus' Plan for a New World* says that the young man who cannot cry is a savage; the old man who cannot laugh is a fool.

Congratulations to the meek - they will inherit the earth. Most land was got by oppression and violence, so the peasants could only survive by depending on the landowners. But Jesus says that God actually owns the land. In a sense, we don't possess anything. Mother Teresa owned three saris and a bucket. We who possess so

many things eventually realise that we don't really possess anything.

Congratulations to those who hunger and thirst for justice - they shall have their fill. Those who identify with the poor, the mourners and the meek will as Walter Brueggeman says, work out what belongs to whom and return it to them.

Congratulations to the merciful - they will have mercy shown to them. The God who makes the rules forgives the one who has broken them. Refusing to forgive is our quaint human way of trying to hold onto power, to seek the high moral ground over others. God, on the other hand, chooses to be powerless, to forgive us. In a lifetime of ten thousand surrenders to mercy, we become merciful.

Congratulations to the pure in heart - they shall see God. If your heart is right, your vision will be right - you'll see with God's eyes. With God's eyes, you'll see others as made in God's image.

Congratulations to the peacemakers - they shall be recognised as the children of God. You can't achieve real peace through violence. Violence only creates more violence.

Congratulations if you are persecuted for the cause of justice - the Kingdom of Heaven is yours. Persecution for the cause of Christ is inevitable. If the church, if Christians, are at home in this ungodly, alien culture, we're not being true to the religion of Jesus. He turns conventional values on their head.

My friend, remember that you must die. A good exercise is to write your eulogy honestly as though you knew you were about to die tomorrow. What would your mourning friends and family say about your life? Jesus calls us to live authentically in this world and prepare for eternal life in another. Your longing for another world, as C S Lewis reminded us, is a pretty good sign that another world exists. In *The Problem of Pain* he says: "All your life an unattainable ecstasy has hovered just beyond the grasp of your consciousness: the day is coming when you will wake to find, beyond all hope, that you have attained it, or that it was within your grasp and you have lost it forever".

But enjoy this world. Set some goals - big ones, to change the world. And some trivial ones - they're called hobbies.

Remember that triumph and disaster are both imposters. They tend to vanish with the passage of time. Every day we succeed and fail. Every day we have to work hard to refine and reinforce values. Every day we must remind ourselves that we have intrinsic worth as human beings. Every day we work on our faith and our relationship with God. Every day we struggle to expand our knowledge. Every day we realise that we are responsible for our own positive attitude. Every day we must remind ourselves of the importance of self-improvement. Comedian Lily Tomlin once said: "I've always wanted to be somebody. Now I realise I should have been more specific". Well, you already are somebody, but continued success requires being a bit more specific.

Enjoy learning for its own sake. Develop your mind, but don't forget your spirit. Don't inhabit simplicity this side of complexity for too long - that is to be childish or a fundamentalist. But don't wallow in complexity the other side of simplicity. Rather move from simplicity through complexity - to where the saints are, simplicity the other side of complexity (if you see what I mean).

Be conservative about some things. Know what you stand for, where your faith lies. Hold to Christ. But don't be conservative about everything. Be radical about some things. To be conservative about everything is to have your life dominated by fear. To be radical about everything is to be driven by anger.

Have a world-wide perspective we've all been thrown into the melting pot called the 'Global Village'. Be something of a dissenter, constantly doing battle with what someone has called the 'four horsemen of the capitalist apocalypse - knowledge, freedom, power and wealth'.

Be honest. Pursue excellence. Live with integrity. Have only one ambition - to be a saint.

Own your own stuff. You are mature when you have forgiven your parents for being human. Know that, in your relationships with others, acceptance precedes repentance.

Believe in the spiritually therapeutic value of the 'gentle darkness'. What I hope for you is that you will be able to live there, in the dark place; to live in the place that our rationalising culture of success denies, calling it a place of exile, uninhabitable, foreign; where you critique institutionalised competition, aggression, violence, authority and power. Our roots are in the dark; the earth

is our country. So learn to pray - and pray as you can, not as you can't. How you pray is the best index of who you are.

Faith, hope and love - these three will remain as the greatest of human virtues. And they are the perfect antidotes for confusion, despair and narcissism. Faith is trusting the God Jesus told us about. Hope is the deep conviction that God who promised to be with you through thick and thin will keep that promise. And Love is a gift from God - the relationship between subject and object rather than responding to worth in the object. The greatest of these is love. And never forget - you are an unrepeatable miracle of God's creation. There is only one of you - and that's good. Just as Jesus got his feelings of self-worth and identity from hearing God his Father affirm, 'You are my son: I delight in you!', so you are a delight to God. And never forget - God does not share out love between some of his creatures. God gives all of his love to each of his creatures.

Roland Croucher is a Baptist minister and Director of John Mark Ministries, encouraging clergy, church leaders and their spouses through seminars, writing and counselling.

MY FRIEND, THE OVERHEAD PROJECTOR

Mike Smith

Golcar is a medium sized Yorkshire Baptist church which uses a converted Sunday School hall for worship. Like a number of traditional churches, we have gradually taken on new ideas, but we are by no means an all-singing, all-dancing congregation. Old and new live side by side in reasonable harmony. We have had an overhead projector for some years and this is our experience of it. Here are a few ways in which we use it.

Write suggestions for prayer on the screen before a time of open prayer. It's a great way of getting folk to join in, especially those who would not want to pray out loud. Even visitors feel they can