



Relating “Cross-Culturally” to Generation Y

As the years go by I realize that it’s more of a stretch for me and other members of my generation to understand the succeeding generation. As a parent and as one who teaches future pastors I keep wondering about how young people experience God. If we don’t understand the experiences and questions of our children, we will offer them answers that are less than helpful. I think it may be wise to think that in many ways we relate to them “cross-culturally” because their experience and development has been so different from ours. Because of societal changes associated with different patterns of work, changes in family structure, and the realities of life in the twenty-first century, we are raising children whose perceptions of reality are different from how we, their elders, see things. Many have grown up more alone and with less connection to others than members of the previous generation. The result is that their ability to form and experience relationships—and

their ideas about relationships—are very different from ours. Given the differences in their life experience, they are different people and, accordingly, they hear and respond to the gospel of Jesus Christ differently than we, their elders, do. Now, how does this difference play theologically? How do young people today experience God? My answer is this: most often, not the way that we do! For most of us well into adulthood, our Christian faith has a lot to do with relief from guilt. We take great comfort in the heartfelt knowledge that our sins are forgiven. We are relieved that God remembers them no more, our guilt is gone, and we

by Ron Nydam
Professor of Pastoral Care



are “adopted as heirs” into God’s kingdom. We know that it cost God the highest price a parent can pay: the life of his child. But God paid it. So a heavy burden (the burden of failure to make the grade) is

lifted from us onto the cross. In our baptism we are delivered from the waters of judgment; in the Lord’s Supper we experience the death of God’s Son as a ransom paid for our sins. We are restored to goodness and can experience peace with God and ourselves. But for many young people of Generation Y, guilt is not felt to be a problem. Experiencing guilt is a developmental step forward

that many youth have yet to make. Let me explain. First, guilt is not a problem because, for the most part, feelings of guilt are not present. To experience guilt demands that you put yourself before a certain set of standards—the Ten

Many young people today don't feel guilty; they feel empty.



Commandments, for example. You interact with a code of behavior and values about living that you believe with all your heart. When you behave in ways that violate those standards (e.g., when you lie to a friend or cheat on a test or cross the line with someone sexually) you feel guilty of sin, as you your self have defined it. Atonement (narrowly defined as forgiveness for sin) matters, be cause atonement spells RELIEF. However, if such standards are never internalized, never written on your heart because no one has been around to do the writing, feelings of guilt may not be present. If you do only “what is right in your own eyes,” as Old Testament Israel in Judges 25, and if you have never been close enough to another per son (such as a parent) to have taken into your heart that person’s beliefs and values, then feelings of guilt may not be there. Many young people today don’t feel guilty; they feel empty. The primary spiritual struggle for many young people is not the heart-rending suffering of someone like Martin Luther who searched for justification before a God who demanded justice and punishment

for sin. The primary spiritual struggle of Generation Y is about mattering: mattering to someone else, to oneself, and ultimately, to God. If you feel empty, you may think that you don’t matter very much. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” is a question that cuts deeper into the hearts of youth today than the words “Your sins are forgiven; go and sin no more.” The cross may be just as much about abandonment, about losing your mom or dad, as it is about being delivered from judgment because of your iniquities. Praise and worship songs today speak of closeness to God much more than forgiveness. Few praise and worship services set aside time for confession. The Ten

Commandments have dropped off the radar screens of many worship planners. The focus is on a close, loving, intimate relationship with Jesus and a heartfelt connection to God. “Open the Eyes of My Heart, Lord,” “I Want to See You,” “Shine, Jesus, shine ... shine on me.” Those songs aren’t about forgiveness; they’re about mattering. That’s why guilt, when it is experienced, is an achievement for many young people. It demonstrates that they have internalized Christian values sufficiently to sense the effect of their behavior on others. In this we see the beginnings of the ability to trust and experience empathy, as well as a foundation for meaningful relationships, including a fuller relationship with God.

But getting youth today to a place where they honestly feel guilty is a challenge. This is the unfinished business of parenting. The task of being a mother and a father includes the development of conscience in the hearts of their children. Guilt properly experienced is a good and

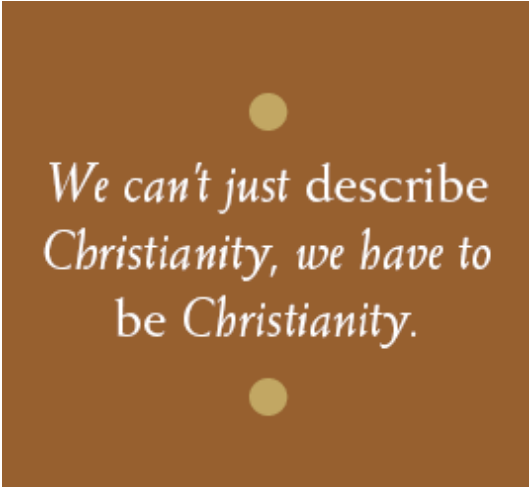
The gospel message that resonates in the hearts of Generation Y is more about abundance than about atonement.



necessary thing. It leads us to turn away from sinful behavior and toward a forgiving, loving God. It means that parents, others, and God have been close enough long enough for God's law to be written on our hearts. If, as I suggest, the spiritual struggle of members of Generation Y is not so much with guilt as it is with emptiness, then how do they appropriate the gospel? How do young people "get" God? How do our youth receive the Holy Spirit? The answer to this question is hinted at in the Greek word *pleroma* (fullness), used by Jesus in John 10:10. Here he tells his disciples why he gave up the splendor of the fellowship of heaven and why he emptied himself ultimately on the cross at Calvary: so that we here on earth could enjoy *pleroma*, the fullness of life in abundance. Living a life chuck-full of meaning. Remember the five loaves and two fishes that fed five thousand in Mark 6, as well as the twelve baskets of food left over? That sign of abundance indicated that the kingdom of God had come. This is the gospel for today's youth—life filled with meaning. Jesus is experienced not so

much as our savior from sin (though he is indeed), but as our friend in time of need (which indeed he also is). That's *pleroma*! It's not so much about what Jesus takes away; it's more about what he gives. The time and care required to raise children brings on the formation of conscience. But that time and care are in short supply these days. This is why churches that are growing in North America today are churches where the gospel of Jesus Christ is presented as the news that God loves us and we matter and belong to him. This is the language of a loving parent and it touches the hearts of youth today. The gospel for today is the good news of relationships. It is about the God who forgives us and who values us! The gospel message that resonates in the hearts of Generation Y is more about abundance

than about atonement. The welcome good news is more about mattering to someone than about forgiveness. The idea of a connection with God strikes more deeply than the offer of freedom from guilt. When the gospel takes on the flesh and bones of others, including the Jesus of years ago, our young people perk up to take interest in a living, loving God. What does this mean for preachers, teachers, and leaders in today's church? I suggest it means we must be aware that in a certain sense we are presenting the gospel "cross-culturally" to members of Generation Y. It may be that the only way to break through to them is to take a more relational path than we have previously. There is a new expectation of more warmth from all of us in church leadership. Many youth are struggling not so much with leaving their parents as with losing their parents. The truth is that parenting today has often been "farmed out"—to daycare providers, teachers, pastors, youth leaders, and so on. We may not feel that it's fair, but it's a reality, and it places new demands on a



*We can't just describe
Christianity, we have to
be Christianity.*



pastor or teacher. It's not efficient; it takes time to get to know young people personally. But the new deal in church work with youth is about care, community, connecting, and being prayed for, as well as the concepts, truths, knowledge, and instruction.

This is what we might call relational learning. We are challenged to incarnate the Lord who loves us: we can't just describe Christianity, we have to be Christianity. The next generation of youth belongs to God. God has a grip on them. God's Spirit is

moving, even helping them to walk on water (even if they do sink a little as they walk). As that happens maybe they will teach us a little about the power of community as they experience the living God in the care of one of us.