

## The Crisis of the Cross

by  
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The fundamental question Jesus asks all of us is the same question He posed to His disciples in Matthew 16:15, “Who do you say that I am?” Just as our predecessors, we of the Baby Bust generation must answer that same question. What will we do with Jesus Christ? Confine Him to the history books as a good teacher, the founder of religion, or even a prophet? Or, accept Him as the Lord and Savior of our lives? The ongoing task of the church is as it always has been to proclaim to those around us the Good News of God’s grace in Jesus Christ. This task is simply stated but not so simply carried out. Part of the problem is that the optimism of divine grace has been replaced by the skepticism of human sin. This pessimism resulting from sin is characteristic of every generation since Adam and Eve. Yet, perhaps Baby Busters understand this pessimism unlike any previous generation. The task of the church, then, is to replace pessimism with optimism: there truly is hope in Jesus Christ!

As the church faces the challenges of a new millennium, we are confronted with the nagging dilemma of dwindling attendance in our worship services among the younger generation. Sociologists have taught the church to look at trends. One trend that is evident in a great percentage of our churches (just look at your own church and see if this is true) is the dwindling attendance among those under 30 years of age. America has become one of the greatest mission fields of the world, not only because of immigration of non-Christians, but because of the shrinking influence of the church among the young. If this perceived trend is true, to which every indicator seems to point, then the church in America is facing a crisis. The church is no longer on the offensive, storming the gates of hell, but on the defensive, hoping hell does not further break down the church’s crumbling walls.

Serious thinkers and skeptics alike want to ask the same question: is Christianity really a religion for the contemporary person, or a religion that needs to be phased out like so much of the rest of culture? An important word on the mind of many younger people today is *relevancy*. We Buster Busters invest time and energy in causes which impact us personally. Thus, if the church does not meet our personal

needs or address our present situation, then it is deemed irrelevant, unworthy to be invested in, and outdated. The church has never been successful living in the past or lauding past victories. Every spiritual renewal has been forward looking. In fact, the first revival in Christian history happened as a result of vision and desire to impact a generation. The early Christians were filled with the Holy Spirit in Acts 2 *after* Jesus had given the great commission of Acts 1:8 (cf. Matthew 28:19-20). The Holy Spirit came upon the disciples with the effect of transforming Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the rest of the world.

The power of the Holy Spirit still transforms people's lives. Some people, even church members, have questioned this -- whether God works in the world like He did two thousand years ago. They may say that surely God chooses to work in the lives of modern people differently than He did in the lives of the early Christians. In this chapter we want to counter this mind set by challenging the pessimism of some in the Baby Buster generation and by awakening the older generations to the cry for relevancy of the younger generation.

### **The Hope of the Cross**

Paul the Apostle may have been speaking about a crisis similar to which the Baby Buster generation faces when he wrote to the Corinthian church in 1 Corinthians 1:18-21:

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate." Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believed (NIV).

Paul's situation was not too unlike our own. Like many modern people, the Corinthian church had a skewed understanding of the cross event. For the Jews, having a Messiah who was supposed to ascend to the throne of Israel and reestablish the lineage of David, but who instead died upon a Roman cross as a common criminal was offensive and scandalous. For the Gentiles, it was utter foolishness to think that a common criminal could save the world from its sins (1 Cor. 1:23). Paul did not compromise the essential message of the power of the cross. True, he says, we cannot fully comprehend what Jesus'

death on the cross means, but let us have faith, for it was upon the cross that we see the power of God.

This skepticism from Jews and Gentiles resulted from presuppositions influenced by the time and place in which they lived. The Corinth of Paul's day had been rebuilt by Julius Caesar in 44 B. C. after it had laid in ruin for more than one hundred years. As with the previous Corinth, Greco-Roman Corinth served as the central shipping and transportation center between Italy and Western Asia. The older Corinth was famous for its vice and sexual perversity, but the newer one also had its problems with immorality. Furthermore, Corinth was a melting pot of ideas and religions, much as America is today. When the Romans conquered various Greek city-states, they also took over the gods and goddesses of the Greeks. Corinth was well known in the ancient world for its many cults and religious shrines, containing more than 26 various places of worship for the Greek Pantheon and various mystery cults, and also for its practice of sacred prostitution. There was also a small Jewish population in Corinth. According to Acts 18, Paul first went to the Jews in Corinth, as was his practice in many towns. When Paul met opposition in the local synagogue, he shook his clothes in protest and took his message to the Gentiles (18:6). The Jews would have nothing to do with such heretical teaching that Jesus was the Christ (18:5).

When a person turned to faith in Jesus Christ in the city of Corinth, he or she had to overcome the tremendous cultural baggage of cultic teachings, decadent morality, worldly philosophy, and religious legalism. Paul knew first hand from observing the Corinthian congregation the power and impact of the gospel when he later wrote, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, behold the new has come" (2 Cor. 5:17). When the Corinthians became believers in Jesus Christ, they had to overcome an environment that went against many of the basic teachings of the early church. The heart of the issue for the Corinthians was that they had problems appropriating the gospel message in a hostile culture. There was a strong temptation to reject Paul's message because it was viewed as irrelevant. After all, the Corinthians had at their disposal the best wisdom of their time. But this wisdom paled in comparison to the wisdom of God shown on the cross (cf. 1 Cor. 2:6-10).

Moreover, Paul argues that the world on its own power and wisdom cannot come to know God (1:21). God is known only by His self-disclosure. In other words, we can know God only through divine

grace. Humanity can never reach to God; God can only reach to humanity. God has most fully disclosed Himself on the cross through Jesus Christ (1 John 4:9-10). The cross means salvation for Paul (1 Cor. 1:18). The medium of divine disclosure to the skeptical Jews and Greeks now becomes the preaching of the word of the cross. Stated simply, proclamation is the agent of divine grace.

### **The Challenge of the Cross**

Many Baby Busters find themselves in a position of pessimism like some of the Jews and Gentiles to whom Paul is referring in 1 Corinthians. Busters have a basic skepticism at the foundation of their thinking. We Busters have been trained from our earliest days in school to question the world around us through the scientific method of exploration. The scientific method basically argues that life is a series of causes and effects. If the cause can be determined, then the effect can be understood.

This method of understanding our world leads us to question not only scientific matters, but also ethical, religious, and traditional foundations. Some of this questioning is good and important, for every generation must face reality and the message of the Gospel and must translate them into a world-view which it can possess as its own. This is called the discipline of hermeneutics in biblical and theological studies. The basic task of biblical hermeneutics is bridging the gulf between the ancient context in which the Bible was written and the twentieth century in which we now live. The basic premise of hermeneutics is that our culture, made up of social, religious, and philosophical contexts, determines the questions which we will ask of the Bible. For example, someone living in China under communistic rule will ask different questions of the Bible than an American living in a free democracy. Or, an economically poor person will see different messages in the Bible than a relatively wealthy person. That is why a preacher can give a message to one hundred different people and these people receive one hundred different messages or applications. We believe that the Holy Spirit has a vital role in this process of contemporizing the ancient message about Jesus Christ.

Baby Busters, moreover, have a different hermeneutic than Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964), Builders (born between 1927 and 1945) or Seniors (born before 1926). Excellent studies are now

emerging<sup>1</sup> which help us to understand Buster's world view. Understanding this world view can lead the church to formulate once again the message of the cross into a "language" or hermeneutic that Busters can understand, appreciate, and possess as their own.

Every preacher and witness should be interested in this task of translation. Meaningful communication is two-way, between a speaker and listener. The listener reacts either in a desired or undesired fashion to the facts communicated to him or her. When we apply this principle to the task of proclaiming the Gospel to a younger generation, we discover that if we use terms and concepts unfamiliar to Busters, our communication is hampered, and the power of the cross is unable to penetrate the cultural layers built up by Busters. Simply stated, we would be speaking a foreign language to them. But, if we can proclaim the Gospel in Spirit-anointed communication which Busters can understand, we will be calling them to a point of decision. We will be the voice of the Lord asking, "Who do you say Jesus Christ is?" This question, when understood in its fullness, always issues in a response, either a positive one of acceptance or a negative one of rejection.

Thus, an encounter with Jesus Christ through effective Gospel proclamation brings a response. Baby Busters, however, have a tremendous distrust and pessimism, which if not understood, may lead to an unbridgeable hermeneutic between the Gospel and our time. What does the optimism of the message of the cross say to the pessimism of Baby Busters? Is there any hope of revival and renewal for this generation, or will the downward trend of commitment and church attendance continue? Several challenges face church leaders and theologians when ministering to Busters. As we look briefly at several of these trends, we will find that the Gospel offers hope and meaning to what George Barna calls the "disillusioned generation."

The first trend is *a fear of the future*. We Busters have reason to fear the future. We have never known what it means to live without the threat of nuclear annihilation or the destruction of our environment because of the ineptitude of human stewardship. We are being left with a soaring national debt which will be impossible ever to pay. We hear now that Social Security will be bankrupt by the time we reach retirement in 2030. We are not only fearful but frustrated that the older generations have left us

such a messed-up world. We are pessimistic about the future. There is little hope of reaching the American dream or being better off than our parents. Busters also appear pessimistic in relation to the views of old generations but have an incipient optimism when it comes to their ability to mold their own future. We Busters may not be able to fix the problems left by older generations, but what we plan on not making the same mistakes. The only way the future can be improved will be to take the initiative and aggressively lead the world forward.

Against this gloomy outlook, the cross offers hope and meaning. Peace replaces fear, optimism replaces pessimism, and meaning replaces doubt. The generation in which the Apostle Paul lived also faced major problems. From a human perspective, the mission to evangelize the world was astronomical if not even possible. How could a handful of disciples who had gathered in an upper room on the Day of Pentecost witness to a world controlled by tyrants? How could Paul write to a church in the ungodly city of Corinth about faith, hope, and love (1 Cor. 13:13)? The answer is, "It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God--that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption" (1:30). Busters will join a cause if they see the cause demonstrated in the lives of others and also see the value of the cause for their own lives. The most effective way to reach Busters with the optimism of the cross is for Christians to live the crucified life in which it is not they who live, but Christ living in them (Gal. 2:20). Evidence of the Spirit-filled life speaks louder to Baby Busters than the most eloquent speaker. We must push for the moment when Busters will say to us, "You know, because of you, I really think there is something about Jesus that I want in my own life."

A second trend is the growing *post-modern mind set*. The post-modern mind set, an outgrowth of the secularization of Western culture, takes God and transcendence out of life, with the result of secular humanism. Post-modernism has greatly influenced the way Busters view God. The overwhelming majority of Busters still believe in God, but not the God in whom other generations believe. George Barna notes, "In general, Busters believe in God: 91% profess to believe in God or a higher power. However, the traditional understanding of God--i.e., one all-powerful God who created the world and rules it today--is believed by less than two-thirds of the Buster generation (64%)."<sup>2</sup> God has been

watered down to god (note the case of the “g”). God is viewed as a convenience. He is there when you need Him, ready to do your bidding. God is no longer the personal being interested in the cares of your life.

When we remove God from our lives and keep Him at a safe distance as a positive force in the universe, we undercut the supreme authority in our life. What we are left with is a third trend, an *increase of relativism*. Relativism is the view that there is no absolute truth. Rather, truth is determined by a particular group or person. Truth varies from one time, place or person to another. Usually we hear relativism stated like this: what is true for you is fine, but it may not be true for me. We do not hear the old nursery rhyme, “what’s good for the goose is good for the gander.” Many people, Busters included, would say, “what’s good for the goose may not be good for the gander. Just don’t let the goose get in the gander’s way.” The authority base becomes the individual not an almighty God. So, what we are left with is a plurality of voices calling out for attention. All we need to do to verify this is to open up our local newspaper and see how many different groups or individuals are crying out for attention to their cause.

Busters are right in the midst of this current of thought. Barna notes, “To the typical Buster, there is no such thing as absolute truth. Statistically, 70% claim that absolute truth does not exist, that all truth is relative and personal.”<sup>3</sup> Traditional views no longer hold influence upon this group. Rather, Busters experiment with the latest trends like no other generation. The authority base has been so dismantled that some Busters call themselves the “Grundge” group, meaning that they are totally carefree in dress, music, and ethics, and their appearance shows it.

This mind set should disturb the church. The Christian voice must not dwindle in this environment of a plurality of voices and opinions. If there were ever a time that the church should recognize the One in whom we believe, that time is now. We must say with Paul, “I *know* in whom I have believed” (2 Timothy 1:12). Our Lord Jesus recognized what happens to a person’s life when he or she has no authority base. At the close of His sermon on the mount found in Matthew 5-7, Jesus gave the similitude of the wise and foolish men. The wise man built his house upon the rock. Because his house

had a firm foundation, it stood firm when the rains and floods came. The foolish man, however, built his house upon sand. His house fell when the rains and floods came because it had no sure foundation (Matthew 7:25-27). Jesus knew that obedience to His words offers a person a sure foundation in life. Turning a deaf ear to Jesus, however, leaves one without a foundation. Many people today have the mindset that they can create their own foundation. As we have seen, the world's best wisdom becomes foolishness in light of God's wisdom shown upon the cross (1 Cor. 1:20-21). The life built upon the grace of God seen in Jesus' death upon the cross and His resurrection from the dead has a sure foundation. The church must not muddle its articulation of this life in Christ.

A fourth trend is a *lack of identity*. In response to the lack of a firm foundation in their lives, Baby Busters are looking for meaning and transcendence. They are searching for God, but they do not know how to find Him; if they find God, they do not know how to recognize Him. Busters are also seeking to define themselves. According to Barna, everything the Busters have has been handed down to them, including heroes, fashion, lifestyles, values, and music. "They have no sense of ownership over their own way of life, and feel less important, if not less mature, as a result."<sup>4</sup>

This lack of identity has created a vacuum in the lives of many Busters. The message of grace, reconciliation, and hope in God can fill this void. We believe that we find ourselves only when we are found in Christ. The Corinthian Christians were searching for identity when Paul wrote to them, "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ" (1 Cor. 11:1). Could we of the church say to the Baby Busters around us, "Follow me because I am following Christ"? Can Baby Busters see the transformation that Christ Jesus has made in our lives, or would they see the empty traditions of bygone days? Busters are quick to see through the facade of traditionalism, but they respect sincerity. We who are Baby Buster Christians have a doubled responsibility to live lives consistent with God's transforming grace. Peers and relationships are very important to Busters. When we are in a relationship with another Buster, we act as agents of Christ. If our testimony is consistent and real, our fellow Busters will be confronted with the power of the gospel.

A final disturbing trend among Baby Busters is the *rise of biblical illiteracy*. According to

George Barna, only 31% of Busters read the Bible sometime during the week compared to 51% of older generations.<sup>5</sup> There are a number of possible causes why Busters do not read the Bible much, some of which stem from the trends mentioned above. Busters perceive themselves as having little time to read and reflect. Life in the nineties has become fast paced. With all the activities to do, all the television shows and movies to watch, or all the recreational activities, who has time to sit down and read the Bible? Whatever the cause of biblical illiteracy, the effects are becoming clear. The Bible is no longer an authority in the lives of many people. Some may view the Bible as good literature but irrelevant to modern living. Therefore, we can pick and choose the parts that are deemed relevant for us. If we do not agree with one particular part, say the Bible's condemnation of homosexuality, then we skip it or say that the human authors were wrong in what they said. One result of such a view is liberalism which places human interpretations over divine inspiration. Some in the church have reacted against liberalism with fundamentalism, and by this, have alienated a vast portion of Baby Busters.

How can the church help solve this growing dilemma? First, we must recognize what the purpose of the Bible is. We believe that the Bible has the primary purpose of disclosing who God is and how He has interacted with humanity throughout history. The highest point of this interaction is the central point of the Bible, the cross-event of Jesus Christ. Jesus' triumph over the cross and grave discloses God's love, grace, and forgiveness. That is the Gospel. That is the Good News. Everything else in the Bible tells us how to live consistent with God's grace in our life. Another thing the church can do is not to neglect the Bible in teaching, preaching, and personal development. Biblical illiteracy is not an epidemic only with those outside the church; many of our own people do not know the Bible. We must always remember, however, that the reason we must push for people to know the scriptures is so that they may have a relationship with the Living Word, Jesus Christ. But also, we must also consider that this relationship needs the nourishment and direction from the Written Word of God.

### **The Relevance of the Cross**

After this disturbing look at the Baby Buster mentality, we are basically left with two options:

either the cross is an empty symbol from history with no meaning for younger generations, or the message of the cross still contains the hope of mankind and Baby Busters are crying out for it to be made relevant to their needs. Clearly the first option must be ruled out, for without Jesus' death and resurrection our faith is useless (1 Cor. 15:17). Without the cross upon which God has shown His mercy and grace, we might as well be Muslim or Jewish. The first option is the choice of a church fighting for survival, with no vision of changing its world. If the early Christians had not tarried in Jerusalem for the Holy Spirit's cleansing and empowerment, the message of Jesus would have become only a brief fad or a fading memory. No, the second option is the only option for those who take their faith seriously.

I believe Busters are a revival waiting to happen, a generation ready for the gate of challenge to lift so they can run their own race. As I reflect back on my own spiritual journey, I remember life-changing high points. Interestingly at every one of these mountain tops, the message of the cross was proclaimed with relevancy and power. One such spiritual peak was my experience at the Nazarene World Youth Congress (WYC) of 1983 in Oaxtepec, Mexico. At this unique event, more than one thousand excited, dedicated Nazarene teenagers gathered under a large tent in the hot, Mexican summer humidity to listen to the Gospel of Jesus Christ made relevant to them. Most of those teens are now classified as Baby Busters. Over the years, I have seen the results of those meetings in lives of many friends who are now pastors, missionaries, and dedicated lay people. At WYC 1983, my own call to the ministry was challenged and confirmed.

Undoubtably, many of us Busters who have grown up in the church have similar stories to tell, possibly of summer camp experiences, a Nazarene Youth Congress, or other special meetings. Almost every year we hear of revival happening on one of the campuses of denominational colleges. What is different then, for other Busters? Can the message of the cross still change the lives of people? Does the cross contain the message of hope to a skeptical generation? The answer is a resounding, yes!

Without articulating a clear and relevant message, the church is in danger of getting lost in the messy milieu of modern society. The message of the cross goes against the cultural current of today just as it did in the first-century. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's insightfully wrote, "Discipleship means adherence to

the person of Jesus, and therefore submission to the law of Christ which is the law of the cross.’<sup>6</sup> The call to faith in Jesus Christ must be spoken with courage, insight, and power. We should not be ashamed of the gospel demanding too much. If the message of Jesus Christ is worthy of my attention and dedication, then I as a Baby Buster will give ear to it. We Busters have been deceived and deluded by too many trivial and short-lived causes. We want meaning in our life. We are fed up with the pursuit of materialism of older generations. Life lacks meaning. We are a generation calling out for relevancy and application and significance. The church must not portray Jesus only as a wise sage to whom we come to find good teaching about ethical living. Rather, Jesus is salvation. He Himself is the meaning to life.

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<sup>1</sup> E.g., George Barna, *Baby Buster's: The Disillusioned Generation* (Chicago: Northfield Publishing, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>6</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, translated by R. H. Fuller (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1959), 96.