

A Cultural and Moral “Whirlwind of Barbarism”¹

I was born 81 days after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. The Great Depression was barely ended; the chicken-in-every-pot promise hadn't “panned” out, and we were at war. Tough times; stressful times: rationing, Civil Defense drills; mothers holding their breath every time a Western Union courier turned his bicycle up their streets; women moving into factories, taking on what previously had been “men's work” [maybe that's how we won the war] . . .

And then Johnny came marching home, and the baby boom started, and the American dream took off. My generation, the Silent Generation, bought into the values and the work ethic of our parents' generation—the GI Generation—Tom Brokaw called it “The Greatest Generation.”

The economy was booming; prosperity was widespread; the Middle Class was emerging; progress was our most important product; Sputnik announced that “Space: The Final Frontier” was about to be explored... It was a time of great hope, and my generation reveled in it.

But my generation, and the Baby Boomers after us, blew it—sold out to “success”—or, at least to the corporate image of success—and that image became a major part—the “critical mass”—of character formation for Generation X—born between 1964 and 1985.

Every generation has some character forming event that forms its general character and perspective and expectation: the Great Depression, WWII... For my generation it was the Cold War and the Space Race.

Generation X was the first generation of TV kids—most of them have never lived in a house without a TV. They've been called “consumer trainees”: they could hum TV commercial jingles before they could sing “Jesus Loves Me” or “The Star-Spangled Banner.” And what were the character forming events that most impacted their lives? Vietnam, Kent State, Watergate, the assassinations of JFK, RFK, MLK, Jr... all brought into their living rooms: up close and personal on TV.

In 1994, Gen-Xer, Janet Bernardi co-authored a book about her generation. She wrote, “We were born in the Nixon era and have never known national trust in leadership. In fact, we have seen corrupt leadership ever since: in everything from PTL ministries to the LAPD.”²

A few weeks ago in our adult Sunday School class we were talking about stress, and I began to realize that, with some exceptions, most of the stress stories I hear are coming from people from Generation X.

¹ William Mahedy & Janet Bernardi, *A Generation Alone* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1994), page 175.

² *Ibid.*, p. 18

A whole generation that's never known trust or worldwide peace... By the time they graduated from high school they had seen more murders on TV than any previous generation had seen in a lifetime of movies and newspapers and magazines.

They encountered obsessive expectations of success, ironically realizing they would be the first generation in American history that wouldn't have it better, financially, than their parents' generation. A part of that success model included both parents working; so, they were the first generation of latch-key kids.

More than half of them have lived through the divorce of their parents. Fewer than half of them grew up in a home with both birth parents. One-third of them—one third—have been abused or molested.

Now, I have a working knowledge of generational theory; and yet, until that conversation a few weeks ago, I kept wondering why the millennial generations seem so stressed!

And, Generation X was the first generation to give up on the church—one reason was that the church in the middle of the 20th century also bought into the corporate model of structure and success. Oh, there's the Mega-Church thing: generally speaking a church movement of, by and for Generation X. But even though some Mega-Congregations number in the thousands of participants, most of whom are Gen-Xers, there is huge turnover, and the numbers represent a tiny minority of that generation.

As the title of Janet Bernardi's book suggests, they are *A Generation Alone*. And that aloneness becomes isolation, which is a major factor in depression; and depression and stress are very closely related.

Bottom line: in the last chapter of that book are these words:

"We began this book with a lot of 'gloom and doom,' ennumerating the ways in which Generation X has come into young maturity in a cultural and moral 'whirlwind of barbarism.' We have been unsparing in our description of the wasteland Generation X has inherited. We have talked about broken homes, sexual abuse, economic decline, ecological problem, political ineptitude We have examined the impact on the young of moral decay in a society permeated with greed."

Now, the history and sociology lesson is important, because it establishes context, and as I've said and will continue to say, in real estate, the three most important factors are location, location, location. And in biblical studies, three of the most important factors are context, context, context.

Now, this is Jim Robinson speaking. I don't have much hard data to support what I'm about to say; but, the longer I live, the more I understand those connections: isolation; depression; stress.

The people in the church at Ephesus were dividing up into parties, based upon their spiritual gifts—very similar to what was going on across the Aegean Sea in Corinth. They were divided, because they were confusing unity with uniformity. Each party thought everybody ought to be the same: “just like us.”

And I see the same thing happening in the world in general; but in America in particular: we are dividing up into parties and groups, and becoming more and more belligerent toward any person or party or group that isn't “just like us.” Whether it's racism, gender issues, or partisan politics, America is a house divided.

Paul fought that mentality in virtually every church he served: we all gotta' be the same.

And so he wrote to Corinth and said, “We're a body—the body of Christ. If the foot says to the hand, 'You're not part of the body because you're not a foot,' that doesn't make the hand any less a part of the body. In the body it is essential that each part fulfill its unique function and work toward the effectiveness of the whole body, and if any one part suffers, the whole body suffers.”

And he wrote to the church at Ephesus and said:

Ephesians 4:4-6 (NRSV) There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, ⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

I've used Generation X, and the isolation they sometimes feel, to illustrate the general separation, isolation and alienation that characterizes so much of American culture at large, and so many individual Americans. And I suggest that feeling of isolation is a major source of stress.

Last week I said we are not without resources; and, a primary resource against stress is a recognition and acknowledgement of a presence: “I will be with you;” “nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.”

Today I share a resource from our text, namely the realization that we are connected. We are not isolated, if only we can recognize and accept that. There is...

One Body: We are not isolated individuals! We are joined together, like the separate parts of our own bodies. Fingers, toes, brain, intestines, bones, muscles... and retain their individual uniqueness; but, each is a part of the whole. We can choose NOT to be alone and isolated. We are part of one body!

In contrast, across the Aegean Sea in Corinth, Paul gave some instruction about the Lord's Supper. In those days, it was a whole meal—kind of a pot-luck. It was called the “Agape Feast”. Corinth was a conflicted church, divided into parties and cliques. Evidently, the Lord's Supper had become somewhat competitive: each family bringing its own basket and trying to outdo the other families. The rich were bringing caviar and foie gras, while the poor were bringing beans and

cornbread; and, apparently, each family sat by itself, or maybe there were small groups getting together.

They were separated. There was alienation and antagonism; there was no unity. The Body of Christ was broken. And so, Paul wrote and said, "Whatever you're calling what you're doing, it's not the Lord's Supper, because you're separated. And when you do it that way, you're bringing judgment upon yourself for not discerning the Body" (I Corinthians 11:29).

A body is not complete if any part is missing; and no part can survive alone, apart from the body.

It's not about coming to church. It's not about agreeing with everybody about everything. It's not about everybody being the same; in fact, it's precisely the opposite: we need those differences. As Paul reminded the Corinthians, if everybody were a nose, how would the body see? If everybody were an ear, how would the body taste?

It's about being a part of the body. It's about being connected.

Stress is partly a response to conditions in which one feels alone and isolated and overwhelmed. It's a passive condition, in which we allow pressures from without, and sometimes within, to take over. We begin to deal with stress by recognizing and accepting a presence that transcends ourselves: "I am with you always" (Matthew 28:20); "nothing can separate us..." (Romans 8:35, 39).

And we begin to become proactive when we connect with the Body.