

How Church Conflict Stems From the Generation Gap

Clearly, the modern church is in crisis. Regardless of denominational affiliation (or none at all), there are warring factions threatening to tear the church, as we know it, apart.

These factions most often appear in the form of two generations struggling to find enough common ground to keep meeting together under one roof. This battle has led to numerous church splits, restructured programming, frustrated church leaders and wounded sheep.

Is this a new problem or simply a revisited one? Does it indicate a sovereign move of the Spirit or the byproduct of a culture spinning out of control? And the big question is: How do evolving Gen-X leaders confront this crisis and find God's will to the other side?

The answers to these questions lie hidden in the timeless wisdom of God's Word. Specifically, the book of Ruth—viewed prophetically—offers some key insights to guide our course.

The Time of Judges

Historically, the events of Ruth occur during the time period recorded in the book of Judges. This period marked the 300 years following Israel's initial conquest of Canaan under the dynamic leadership of Joshua.

When Joshua and his generation died, the Israelites lost sight of their vision to complete the takeover of Canaan. They compromised the borders God had identified for them and established unholy treaties with neighboring pagans.

Over time, these treaties proved to be the snare Joshua and Moses warned they would be (Deut. 7:16). Instead of

experiencing the promised prosperity they had waited more than 450 years to enjoy, the Israelites found their lives to be a constant struggle of famine and warfare.

Seven times the Israelites fell into compromise, suffered, cried out for deliverance and were met with God's mercy. But their hearts never changed. They never learned to seek God for themselves, and they continued to rely on external sources of holiness and deliverance.

One Representative Family

At this point, the camera zooms in on one representative family—hence, the book of Ruth. This book tells the story of Elimelech and Naomi who, in a period of famine, decided to leave God's ways (represented by the land) and seek the world for help (Ruth 1:1-2). Their decision ultimately resulted in the premature death of both Elimelech and his two sons.

By middle age, Naomi was left with nothing but one loyal daughter-in-law and a land deed in Bethlehem. The book opens with the account of Naomi's returning home.

Naomi's daughter-in-law is named Ruth, which means "friend." Despite Naomi's bitter attitude and insistent orders to return home, Ruth won't leave her.

She won't forsake the relationship or give up on the God Naomi once professed. As bad as their current circumstances appeared, Ruth believed for a better day.

A great friendship evolved from Ruth's persistence. In fact, Ruth and Naomi's friendship stands out among scriptural relationships as one of the greatest examples of Christlike love in the Bible. What's more, their relationship symbolically portrays the future development of the bride of Christ.

Two Women, One Bride

Together, Ruth and Naomi represent the bride of Christ. Ruth represents new believers and Gentiles; Naomi represents older believers and Jews.

The book of Ruth appropriately begins with Naomi's story. Elimelech (whose name means "one intended by God to rule") and Naomi once walked with God.

Their faith grew weary in hardship, however, and as the result of tragedy, Naomi's faith faltered. The book opens with her proclaiming to the women of Jerusalem, "The Lord has afflicted me, and I'm bitter" (Ruth 1:20-21).

Among older believers and certainly among Jews, there are those whose faith has faltered in light of tragedy. No matter how strongly we believe, life's circumstances can and do affect our hope in God.

From time to time, we all need reassurance that God still loves us and will help us despite the circumstances He may have allowed in our lives. Such is the state of Naomi at the beginning of the book of Ruth.

To help Naomi, God brings alongside her a young believer from a pagan background. Ruth was a Moabite, a descendant of one of Israel's greatest enemies. The Moabites were relatives of Israel, but they were worldly and perverse (Jer. 48).

Ruth knew nothing of the formal rituals of Israeli worship, but she loved Naomi with a passion only God could have instilled. Her faith was raw and untrained but passionate.

Ruth's unrelenting passion and dedicated service over time washed away Naomi's hopelessness and revived her belief in God's ultimate goodness. As Naomi watched Ruth day after day, something awakened within her that enabled her to overcome the bitterness of past disappointments and believe God for a yet-unrealized future (Ruth 2-3).

A Modern Application

If you're not familiar with the details of the book of Ruth, I encourage you to go back and read it. God used Ruth and Naomi to secure the seed of Christ through one of Israel's darkest hours—a time not unlike our own.

When studying Ruth, we often focus only on her sacrifice for Naomi. However, Naomi made significant sacrifices for Ruth as well.

Close investigation of Ruth reveals that Boaz, the kinsman who married Ruth and became the ancestor to both King David and Christ, was actually closer in age to Naomi than to Ruth. Because she was a Jew, Naomi had rights to exercise the Israeli law of kinsman-redemption.

If Naomi had chosen to do so, she could have insisted Boaz marry her instead of marrying Ruth. However, Naomi desired to secure Ruth's future and make a place for her in God's family (Ruth 3:1). Like Ruth, Naomi sacrificed her own fulfillment for that of another.

At this hour in the modern church, we face the need to reconcile two very different generations. One, like Naomi, has walked with God a long time in traditions they hold dear.

The other, like Ruth, knows little of tradition and is driven more by the blind passion of desperate need. The younger generation is perhaps one of the most broken, alienated generations ever produced by America. More than half have grown up in broken homes, nurtured by a depraved media bent on seduction, addiction, abnormality and death.

The situation we face, like the one Ruth and Naomi encountered, presents us with little hope. Our past "methods" of religiosity and packaged belief systems have widowed us, and we are seeking to replace them.

We are all having to realize we don't know God as well as we may have thought we did. And that's where God wants us to begin.

The Road Home

The book of Ruth recounts Naomi's journey home and Ruth's starting over. Both women had to sacrifice a lot of pain and tradition to make it work.

It was risky for Naomi to return home with a Moabite. Moabites were not accepted in Jewish culture. Fortunately, Boaz, whose mother had been Rahab of Jericho, was willing to see God in strangers (Josh. 2:1-21; Matt. 1:5). We should be too.

If the church is going to survive, we must adopt the servant's attitude Ruth and Naomi had for each other. We must make room for one another and allow God to work out His will however He chooses.

Neither Ruth nor Naomi could fathom the glorious plan God had for them—a plan that would secure their names in the scriptural hall of fame forever. They didn't realize anything so grand; they simply responded to each other in love and clung together to uphold their faith in God.

The truth is, we should be able to find God in just about any worship song, hymn, ritual or radical embrace, if we really want to. We need to lay down our rights and preferences and submit ourselves to the sovereignty of God's Holy Spirit.

Jesus made it plain to the woman at the well that God does have preferences with regard to how we worship Him (John 4:23-24), and unless we're very sure we understand those preferences, we must keep an open mind. As we seek Him humbly, the Spirit of God will lead us into reconcilable truth (John 16:13).

The greatest accomplishment of Ruth's and Naomi's lives was choosing to invest themselves in another generation. I encourage the younger generation—my own—to realize all you can learn from older saints. You will learn from them as you serve them.

And I encourage the older generation to follow the Word of God. It is His will for you to instruct the younger generation (Titus 2:3-8). They will not listen to you if you are bitter and critical. Resolve your grievances with God and then love those who are struggling to find their way in Him.

The combined sacrifices of Ruth and Naomi led to Ruth's redemptive marriage (representing intimacy with Christ and the birth of His kingdom). Together, they became the bride.

We can do the same. We can make a place for one another and learn from one another.

Moreover, we can love one another, which is Christ's greatest command. Let us join our hearts and our congregations by seeking the unity for which Jesus died.

Read a companion devotional.

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