

THE CHURCH IN THE NEXT GENERATION

By Donald Townsley

It is a well-known fact that a generation of people often inherit the good deeds and mistakes of a previous generation. This being true, each generation needs to be keenly aware of its responsibility. This is also true in the church. What the church tomorrow will be and accomplish depends, to a great degree, upon what we do and teach in this generation. Brethren, we all need to realize that just because we are sound in the faith is no guarantee that our children will be !!! If we fail to teach properly in our generation, our children may forsake the Lord !!!

My generation in the church inherited all the failures to properly teach concerning the mission of the church and the church working through human organizations. As a result of this failure to teach, a great percentage of the church has gone into digression. For over twenty-five years now many of us have fought the tide of digression on the one hand, and on the other hand we have had to work hard to convert people to Christ that the church might continue to grow and reach the world with the pure gospel of Jesus Christ. The Lord has been with us and our number has increased. For the last ten years, however, materialism, division, worldliness, the false doctrine of Calvinism, ignorance and indifference has brought us to zero-growth in many places.

What does the future hold for churches of Christ that are striving to preach the gospel without addition or subtraction -- churches that are striving to follow the New Testament pattern in all things? That future depends upon the kind of teaching we are now giving our children. If we take too much for granted and fail to teach and warn, the churches we have worked so hard to build may be lost to digression in the next generation! We must solve our problems and reverse the trends that we have allowed to come in our ranks in many places if we are to leave sound, growing congregations for the next generation.

Israel, in the days of Joshua, is a good example of this kind of failure. Judges 2:10 says, "*And also all that generation were gathered unto their fathers; and there arose another generation after them, which knew not the Lord, nor yet the works which he had done for Israel*". After Joshua died and those who outlived him died (Judges 2:7), "*There arose another generation after them, which knew not the Lord, nor yet the works which he had done for Israel.*" We wonder how this could be! The answer is that the succeeding generation had failed to teach. The next question on our minds is, "Who was responsible for teaching them?" The Bible reveals that the priests bore part of the responsibility. They were to read the law to the people every seven years (Deut. 31: 9 - 13). This would mean that a boy of seven would hear the law again at 14, 21, 28, 35, 42, 49, etc. It is hard to conceive of these people being ignorant of God's law if this had been done. The elders of the people should have demanded that the law be read and observed as God commanded (Num. 11: 16 - 17). The parents were to teach their children at home (Deut. 4:9, 10; 6: 7 - 12). A failure on the part of parents would produce ignorance. The people themselves should have desired that the Law of God be read. All these had failed in their responsibilities. As a result, Israel was ignorant of God's ways (Judges 2:10). They copied the gods of those round about them (Judges 2: 16 - 17), and did that which was right in their own eyes (Judges 17:6; 21:25). They forsook the God who had saved them (Judges 2:13), being inappreciative of His mercy. They did that which was evil in God's sight and caused His wrath to be upon them (Judges 2:11,14).

Who has the responsibility, under the authority of Christ, to teach in our generation? Preachers and teachers of the Word have responsibility. They are to be loyal to God and are not to be men-pleasers (Acts 20: 26 - 27; Gal. 1:10). They have a responsibility to warn about departures from the faith (I Tim. 4: 1 - 6). They are to preach the word "*in season*" and "*out of season*" (2 Tim. 4:2). Elders of the church are watchmen -- they are to teach and to warn (Acts 20: 28 - 31). Woe to the shepherds in Israel who fail in their duty to teach and to warn! Parents must teach their children the word of God and warn them about departures from the faith (Eph. 6: 1 - 4). Christians as a whole should demand that the truth be taught. They should shun evil and all that might bring apostasy.

Brethren, if we fail to properly teach and warn, the next generation will have to drink from the same bitter cup of sorrow that we have had to drink from in our generation! My hope and prayer is that the little boys and girls who are all around me when the saints assemble to worship will never have to know the sorrow and see the bitterness I have seen and known in Israel in my generation! I have seen churches divide, families divide, friendships broken, and sinners confused because of an untaught generation!

What will the church be in the next generation? A lot of what it will be is in our hands today, brethren!! If preachers, teachers, elders, and parents will fulfill their responsibility today the church will be sound tomorrow !!!

From "The Hebron Herald", July 1984