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Sermon Transcript

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The Next Generation

I told the students this week that sitting down at the general conference of elders gave me a renewed empathy for what they are experiencing in our rather intensive seven month ABC program. Sitting down that length of time is not easy in spite of the fact that we had a good, very good general conference of elders with some very fine material. You will hear a little bit of that later in today's service. Things went well.

I wanted to take off on one of the sessions that was presented in the evening by a young lady by the name of Julie Zutes. Some of you may have heard of her. The elders of the conference heard of her and got to know her. I remembered her from Ambassador College. She now lives, I believe, up in the Boston area. She's a graduate of Ambassador College, and she gave us a very helpful presentation titled, "Dealing With the Net Generation." Very interesting. Now you can classify yourselves, if you'd like to. She very kindly faxed me her handout material, and I printed it out this morning as I was preparing for this message. Page 20 of her handout, she's got the generation's summary.

We all fall into different generations in the United States of America.

The "matures" are the ones who were born between 1909 and 1945. It's a nice name for the "matures." Right Mr. Taylor? Characteristics: teamwork, commitment, sacrifice, discipline, financial and social conservatism. Markers: World War II, the Great Depression, the New Deal.

The "baby boomers," the next younger generation. 1946-1964, the dates of birth. We've heard a lot about "baby boomers." Characteristics: idealism, individualism, self-improvement, high expectations. Markers: Viet Nam War, television, Woodstock, Watergate, sex, drugs, and rock and roll. So if you fall in that category, that's what shaped you.

Doesn't sound too terribly good, does it?

"Generation X," born 1965-1978. Characteristics: pragmatism, diversity, savvy, entrepreneurial, quality of life. Markers: AIDS, MTV, internet, divorce. So that's "generation X," people roughly in their 30s.

Then the youngest generation is the "net generation" born in 1979 up to the present, and I hope nobody's going to get offended by any of these. These are, of course, broad generalizations. Characteristics: neo-traditionals, busy lives, ritual, optimism, technology, volunteerism. Markers: OJ Simpson, Monica Lewinsky, Columbine, multi-culturalism.

Anyway, we had a very fine presentation presented by Julie Zutes, and she was talking specifically about the "generation X-ers" and also about the young people, the "net generation." What I'd like to do in the split sermon this afternoon is to talk not so much about the "net generation," but about the next generation, and the next generation of leadership in God's church.

We are going to need, unless Christ returns, and he may well do so, but we're going to need a new generation, a next generation, and some of that next generation is going to come from the "net generation," and the "net generation" with their way of life and they're way of doing things, and their approach to life has just begun to come into that potential leadership age, and we see some of them at Ambassador Bible Center. One of the things that stood out for me over the last year and a half in teaching at ABC, you're aware of the fact that we've had mixed groups, different age groups, and one of the things that's become very clear is that people of different ages learn differently. People of different ages learn differently. You may not be aware of that. Take myself as an example, I'm auditory. I can remember some of the things that I heard in classes back at Ambassador College. I remember who said it. I remember when he said it. I remember specific scriptures, and I can remember the intonation with which he said it.

Many of the younger people, this is a generalization, but many of the young people are visual. They learn differently. They like to do things in groups. They like to get together and research things. They like to find the answer to a particular problem, and the ones who are up in years very often would like to simply sit and receive the information. Now there's nothing wrong with either of those learning styles, but they're certainly very different learning styles. Some of the characteristics, let me give you a few of the characteristics of the "net generation."

What is the "net generation"? Again, reading from Julie Zutes handout, ages 2-20, 88 million people. The largest demographic group in the United States. The first generation to grow-up surrounded by digital media, authorities on the internet. Well, how many of us are authorities on the internet? You know, we've probably struggled and gotten mad at our computers, and maybe, you know, tried

to suppress the urge to curse at the computer from time-to-time. Profoundly different notions of work, reward, responsibility, and collaboration--82% have used a computer. I think probably the more advanced age groups do not; we don't have an 82% user rate.

"Generation X"--15% fewer than the "boomers." The highest rates of unemployment. They earn less in real terms than the "boomers." They grew up under legislated equality.

They've seen the highest levels of leadership brought down by scandal, weak economic, and bleak social events. Their characteristics--they're good at collaboration, consensus building, and multi-tasking. They focus on the big picture, priorities, aggressive communicators, media centered, the mind-set spanning between the "boomers" and the "net generation."

Now, of course, this doesn't describe everybody. We're all individuals, we understand that, but as we go through the generations, things change, and we're heavily influenced by the cultural factors around us, and by the way in which we receive information. When you look at what's happened in the church of God over the last ten years or so, I think we can see that we've suffered a very high rate of attrition among the "generation X-ers." The ministry of the United Church of God has very few ministers in their 30s. In fact, we tend to joke about it. We have a different definition for the word "young" in the United Church of God. We define it differently, and sometimes we say, well, so-and-so is UCG young, but really it's a bit of a problem for the church because we don't have a lot of leaders in their 30s, and at some point, we're going to need them.

Now our hope is, I think we can all say that we would like and we would pray that the next generation, the "net generation" will have a lower level of attrition. We hope, we pray. We would like to see more of them stay. At some point, we have to plan for leadership from the "generation Xers" and the "net generation" who are just growing up and coming out of the teenage years. So where are we going now? What qualities of leadership do we need from "generation X" and the next generation?

I want to outline for you briefly brethren three qualities of leadership that I believe are essential for leadership of God's people, and I hope we'll apply these things to ourselves, whatever our age may be, but these are, I believe, three of the most important characteristics that future leaders of the church of God are going to be needing.

Three qualities of leadership...

Quality No. 1. Wisdom. We've heard a lot about wisdom. Wisdom would be a big enough subject for a sermon in itself. We've heard bible studies on it. What's the

definition of wisdom? I looked in the dictionary. Here are some of the definitions that I found there: Understanding what is true, right or lasting. Insight. One cannot have wisdom without living life. Common sense, good judgment. It is a characteristic of wisdom, not to do desperate things, Henry David Thoreau. It's interesting. Characteristic of wisdom, not to do desperate things. The sum of scholarly learning through the ages, knowledge. "In those homely sayings was couch the collective wisdom of generations." A quote from Maya Angelou. Wise teachings of the ancient sages.

You can see those definitions all seem to revolve around one theme, and we've defined wisdom in the church as knowledge rightly applied. See we've got a lot of knowledge in the church of God. Sometimes applying it gets to be a little tricky, doesn't it? We all know that from our own experiences, and we all face from time to time this question: How do I bring this body of knowledge together with my real life situation? What do I do with it? It's not always quite as easy as Solomon with the two prostitutes, saying cut the baby in half. I tried that when I was working in a high school and two kids were fighting over a ball point pen. I said, let's cut it in half. It didn't work. Not to say that Solomon wasn't wise. He shows tremendous wisdom, and it did work. Of course, he understood, he had wisdom, he had insight into the fact that the one who was really the mother of the baby would be the one who would immediately squawk, so he understood it.

Wisdom assists us in making right decisions. Do we have wisdom? I think we'd all like a little bit more wisdom. We'd like to know how to apply some of the principles, some of the knowledge that we've received. Turn with me if you would please to the book of Proverbs. Proverbs 4. There's a lot of information in the book of Proverbs on this subject of wisdom. Sometimes a little hard to define. What is wisdom? Seems a little abstract conceptually. Proverbs 4. Proverbs says a lot about wisdom. I want to read the first few verses of Proverbs 4 and see how Proverbs, the wisdom of Solomon and various other wise men emphasize. This is something very, very important to go through life and to make wise decisions, to avoid problems, you've got to have this rather intangible thing.

Proverbs 4:1-4. *"Hear, ye children, the instruction of a father, and attend to know understanding. For I give you good doctrine, forsake ye not my law. For I was my father's son, tender and only beloved in the sight of my mother. He taught me also, and said unto me, Let thine heart retain my words: keep my commandments, and live."*

Now this is all very basic. We are talking about law and commandments and a body of knowledge, things that we hear about, and we emphasize in the church of God, but then it goes on to say in verse 5...

Verse 5. *"Get wisdom, get understanding..."*

The Proverbs express this subject of wisdom with urgency. You've got to get hold of it. If you're going to be successful in life, you've got to get hold of it. You've got to make the intangible something tangible.

Verse 5. *"...forget it not; neither decline from the words of my mouth. Forsake her not, and she shall preserve you..."*

Notice that feminine pro-noun, very interesting.

Verse 5. *"...love her, and she shall keep you."*

Boy, this wisdom, this intangible thing does all kinds of good things for you, doesn't it?

Verse 7-9. *"Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all thy getting get understanding. Exalt her, and she shall promote thee: she shall bring thee to honour, when thou dost embrace her. She shall give to thine head an ornament of grace: a crown of glory shall she deliver to thee."*

So it talks a great deal, I won't read until the end of verse 13, I had all those verses in my notes, but there's an awful lot of information about wisdom and Proverbs is telling us, you've got to get this, you've got to have this if you're going to live a successful life, and wisdom, then, is presented as a woman, somebody who will do you good, somebody who will help you and guide you and be your friend. Of course, the contrast in the book of Proverbs is with another woman a few chapters later. Chapter 7 of Proverbs. Proverbs 7.

Here's another woman. Now the first woman you want to be with, the second woman, you've got to avoid, and I don't want to spend all the time on chapter 7, but you can see the subtitle in your Bible. Here's the harlot. Here's the seductress. Here's the woman who will lead you in the wrong direction by comparison with the woman who's going to lead you in the right direction. This first woman in chapter 4 will give you proper guidance, will help you to make right decisions, will show you how to deal with the tricky situations when you stop and you think, yes, I know the principles, but what do I do to apply it in this situation? And the woman of chapter 7, the harlot, the prostitute, the seductress, comes along and seduces you and tries to get you to go in the wrong direction, and we live in a society where there are an awful lot of seductions of every kind. Sexual seductions, influences, thoughts seducing us, pulling us off in the wrong direction, and so I believe there is a deliberate contrast here between the woman of chapter 4 and chapter 8, who is a woman that we want to be with and the harlot of chapter 7.

The Greek word for wisdom is "sophia." It's a woman's name. Wisdom is presented in this book of The Bible as a woman, "sophia." In fact, it's the capital

of one of the countries of eastern Europe. They named their capital after wisdom. Their capital is named for that. Proverbs 8. What will wisdom do for you? What will this woman do for you?

Proverbs 8:1-4. *"Doth not wisdom cry? and understanding put forth her voice? She standeth in the top of high places, by the way in the places of the paths. She crieth at the gates, at the entry of the city, at the coming in at the doors. Unto you, O men, I call..."*

Now in chapter 7, there was a seductress who was also calling out, but this woman is also crying out to men.

Verse 4-5. *"...and my voice is to the sons of man. O ye simple, understand wisdom: and, ye fools, be ye of an understanding heart."*

Hey, I don't understand how you do this. Well, wisdom will help you through.

Verse 6-8. *"Hear; for I will speak of excellent things; and the opening of my lips shall be right things. For my mouth shall speak truth; and wickedness is an abomination to my lips. All the words of my mouth are in righteousness; there is nothing froward or perverse in them."*

So wisdom cries out and helps us, all of us, whatever generation that we're in, to make wise decisions. Wisdom helps us with regard to friendships. We know and understand, I think this is fairly basic, that friendships can lead us in the wrong direction, friendships can lead us in the right direction. Wisdom shows us who's the one to trust as a close friend and who should not be trusted. Proverbs 8:32-36. Associations, friendships.

Proverbs 8:32-36. *"Now therefore hearken unto me, O ye children: for blessed are they that keep my ways. Hear instruction, and be wise, and refuse it not. Blessed is the man that heareth me, watching daily at my gates, waiting at the posts of my doors. For whoso findeth me findeth life, and shall obtain favour of the LORD. But he that sinneth against me wrongeth his own soul: all they that hate me love death."*

So, wisdom helps us with associations. Wisdom helps us in career decisions. I've talked with some of the ABC students over the last year, year-and-a-half, about career decisions, you know, when you're at the college age, career decisions can be very, very difficult. Very perplexing, sometimes difficult to make up your mind which way you want to head, which way you want to go, what you want your career to be, and you know, weighing it all out, well, I want something I enjoy, and I want something that there's going to be a market for, and I want something that's going to put bread on the table, so you kind of try to balance out the idealism of something you can enjoy and be committed to, and the pragmatic

side of something that's going to put bread on the table and provide for you and your family, and the funny thing is, you know, many of us "boomers," "baby boomers," being a very idealistic generation, tended not to think quite so pragmatically. It's interesting that I find in talking to young people in the church now that the pragmatic considerations tend to come more to the fore. They want to make sure there's going to be money there, so wisdom guides us in career decisions and wisdom will help us to try to find a place where these things inter-connect.

Wisdom helps us in selection of a mate, making sure that we do discern, that we know that we can tell what it's going to be like to live with this person, not just this evening's date, not just the next six months, not just a year or two, but all the way through life. Wisdom applies, helps us in all of these things. Wisdom is a synthesis. Wisdom takes biblical knowledge, the experience of other people, and our own experience and synthesizes the whole body and then guides us into coming out with the correct conclusion, and sometimes we have problems because we can get the biblical principal. We can listen to the experience of others, whether our family and friends, whether the examples in the scriptures, and sometimes our own experience seems insufficient still, and we don't know what to trust. We don't know which way to go exactly.

We've all faced new situations and stood there and said, I don't know. I don't have the experience. I've never done this before. Which way do I go? Now the comforting thing about all of this is that God makes a very specific promise. James 1:5-6. I think this is such a remarkable promise in the scriptures. Remember this is one of the building blocks of leadership; this is something that the church will need, not just our families and our careers. Here's a promise. God says he will give wisdom to us when we need it.

James 1:5-6. *"If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him."*

I remember years ago there was a young lady who was a friend of mine at Ambassador College, and she'd had a boyfriend and things went wrong, badly wrong, and then she told me, she said that she got on her knees and she had claimed this promise, and she told me, you know, this promise works. It does. This promise works, but there's a condition.

Verse 6. *"But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed."*

So you've got to be sure. You've got to take God at his word and ask him for wisdom. Wisdom builds leadership.

Characteristic No. 2. I am going to move through these fairly quickly. These are all big subjects, but I wanted to cover a subject like this for a while, partly for the benefit of the ABC students. Luke 18:8. Here's something else that is absolutely essential for the church, for the current leadership of the church, those of us who lead God's people, and it's very, very important for the next generation of the church. It's something rather disquieting. Luke 18:8. Here's this parable of the persistent widow. The widow who kept on coming back to God and kept coming back to him. Jesus makes an interesting comment, talking about God as his judge, although much more righteous judge than the one referred to here. Verse 7 of Luke 18...

Luke 18:7-8. *"And shall not God avenge his own elect, which cry day and night unto him, though he bear long with them? I tell you that he will avenge them speedily."*

And then this little question that is very, very disquieting...

Verse 8. *"Nevertheless when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?"*

That troubles me. I hope the answer is yes. I think the answer is yes. I want to believe the answer is yes. Faith. Jesus Christ is telling us that if we're not careful, when he returns faith will be lacking. Faith is essential for leadership of God's people. You've got to have faith or your not going anywhere. We live in a very cynical generation. We've all been impacted, every generation for that matter has been impacted by cynicism. We sit around, and we talk about politicians. We talk about the entertainment industry, and we're cynical, and I think rightly cynical of some of the people in those spheres of life who make jokes about lawyers and one thing and another. Now jokes have a cynical tinge to them, don't they? And we derive a little enjoyment, but we've got to be very careful not to be so impacted by cynicism, that that cynicism begins to rub off on some of the areas where cynicism is not appropriate.

The context here, in Luke 18, is that God brings equity. Look at it. It's talking about the persistent widow. The widow who kept on coming back to an unjust judge and eventually she got her vindication. One of the big lessons of The Bible. Maybe the biggest lesson of The Bible. God brings justice. God brings equity. Do you believe that? Can you believe that? In spite of whatever you have seen, can you believe that. In spite of whatever you know, see, some of the young people who have sat in the church for a long time have seen a lot, and know a lot, and have been exposed to the very human side of the church. Do you still believe that? Do we all believe that? What are we to believe in?

One of the scriptures that we customarily go to in baptismal counseling is this one: Acts 20:21. That's what faith is about. That's essential for the leadership of God's church now and down through the ages.

Point No. 3. Let's go forward to the book of Revelation. The book of Revelation. Another quality that I think is absolutely essential, and again, a sermon or a bible study could be given on this one quality alone. Revelation 3. Most of us feel, brethren, that these seven messages, seven epistles to seven congregations that existed in Asia Minor back in the first century are not just letters to specific congregations back then, but they have prophetic quality to them as well. Now I know that there are people in the church who don't feel that way, but I think most of us in the ministry, most of the membership of the church believes that these seven churches probably depict the condition of God's church from the establishment of the church on the day of Pentecost up through the very last days in the time of the return of Jesus Christ, and again, there's something disquieting. In Revelation 3, the last era of the church, and I think we know this rather well. I take comfort in the fact, because I do believe that these messages are prophetic, but I take comfort in the fact that what we seem to be reading is the predominant condition of God's people not the universal condition of God's people because if, in fact, you look at these messages it looks as if more than one of these churches goes right up to the time of Christ, but there's, again, something very disquieting in this last message. In fact, the entire message is disquieting, isn't it? Revelation 3:19, Laodicea.

Revelation 3:19. *"I am the one who corrects and disciplines everyone I love. Be diligent and turn from your indifference."*

Quality for leadership of God's people. Zeal. Is it possible that a lack of zeal will be a characteristic of many of God's people in the time prior to the return of Christ? Is that possible? I hope not, but if our reading of these scriptures is correct, then there does seem to be a very real danger of that. What is "zeal"? What are we talking about when we use the term "zeal." Definition of the word zeal. Enthusiastic devotion to a cause. An ideal. A goal and tireless diligence in its furtherance. See synonyms at passion.

That's interesting, isn't it? I didn't print out the synonyms of passion, but I got the definition of zeal. Tireless diligence in its furtherance. Commitment. Making a commitment to something, a full commitment. It's impossible, brethren, I submit, to be zealous for something if a part of you says, yes, but. If a part of you holds back and says, well, I would but, I don't like this. That's not how zeal works. Romans 10:2. I see I've got to watch the time here. We will get through in time. Romans 10:2. One of the ABC students was commenting that when she went with one of the church groups to Israel, and she saw some of the orthodox Jews, you know, the very orthodox Jews standing there at the wailing wall, you know, in their long, black robes, and I don't know how they wear black robes in that very

hot climate there, but standing at the wailing wall and swaying and praying, and you know, with their scriptures open in front of them, at how impressed she was with the level of zeal that they had. Now they're not part of the church of God, are they? They've got at best an incomplete picture. They've got the law of God, but some of those people are very, very zealous.

Romans 10:2. *"I know what enthusiasm they have for God, but it is misdirected zeal."*

And then Paul talks about the reasons that they're ignorant of God's righteousness. Zeal. Zeal is a product of a commitment to something bigger than you. What's required of the next generation? What's required of this generation of leadership in God's church? A commitment to something big. We have to absorb the big picture and sometimes that's tough because sometimes the big picture is expressed in words that we hear over and over and over again and words that we hear over and over and over again sometimes wear thin. They lose their punch. They lose their meaning. Jesus Christ is going to return. We're the family of God. We're building character. We're going to govern with Christ. We hear him a lot. Sometimes the very fact that we hear those things a lot causes those words to lose meaning. Let's not relegate the statements of faith to mere clichés. It takes a little bit of effort to take those statements of faith and make something of them. Zeal, the product of committing yourself to something bigger than you. You can't be zealous for your next paycheck. You can't be zealous for your next vacation. You can't be zealous, you can be enthusiastic, I suppose, but you can't be zealous about decorating your home or about your stamp collection. No, zeal requires something bigger than you.

John 2. I want to finish off with this example. I think it's very interesting. Jesus Christ, of course, was zealous. How did he become zealous? We just read he's the head of the church. It's his church. John 2:13-17. Christ was zealous because he kept pointing to something bigger than him. Does that sound paradoxical? Many, many times in the gospels, in John's gospel repeatedly, it's interesting, John's gospel is supposed to be the gospel which sort of separates the Christians from the Jews, you see, but in John's gospel over and over again Jesus keeps on talking about the Father. The Father is greater than me. This is something bigger than me. You've got to be zealous. How was he zealous? He was zealous for something that was bigger than him.

John 2:13-17. *"And the Jews' passover was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem, And found in the temple those that sold oxen and sheep and doves, and the changers of money sitting: And when he had made a scourge of small cords, he drove them all out of the temple, and the sheep, and the oxen; and poured out the changers' money, and overthrew the tables; And said unto them that sold doves, Take these things hence..."*

He was probably shouting. I won't shout. I think he probably was. I'm sure he was very, very angry.

Verse 16-17. *"Take these things hence; make not my Father's house an house of merchandise. And his disciples remembered that it was written, The zeal of thine house hath eaten me up."*

It was his Father's house, you see. And it bothered him because it was big. In one sense, it was something very big. It belonged to his Father. We can only be zealous when we're involved in something bigger than us, and so it requires that we all have the big picture. Brethren, whether you're a "mature," a "boomer," a "generation X-er," or a "net generation-er," or whether you'd like to place yourself in a category different from the one where your chronology places you, God requires characteristics of leadership from you, and God will require leadership for the future of his church. Wisdom, faith, and zeal--qualities of leadership essential in this generation and in the next generation.