

1961-1981: Our Gideons and Sauls
Judges 6:11-16,
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***“O, Generations!”* SSS**

INTRODUCTION

Today we look at the fourth in the cycle of 4 generations of America: the 13'ers, better known as the GenXers. We cannot understand the GenXers without recognizing the influence style of parenting has on all generations, but especially them. Civic and adaptive generations like the G.I.'s and Silents were reared by overprotective parents. They, in turn, reacting to the strict parenting style of their parents, adopted Dr. Benjamin Spock's permissive style of parenting for their children, the Boomers. This gave Boomers more latitude to rebel. This permissive attitude toward parenting eventually led to the hands-off style used to rear GenXer's. The pendulum had swung from under protecting children (the Lost of the late 1800's) to over protecting children (the G.I.'s and Silents) back to under protecting children (Boomers), finally affecting the GenXer's, who were parented in a similar fashion to the Lost! As we will see next week with the Millennials, the pendulum is swinging back again toward stricter parenting practices. Remember we are speaking in generalities here, not the way *all* children are reared. In every generation there are overprotective parents and

under protective parents. But as a rule, in general, the pendulum swings back and forth in parenting styles.

This cycle has been repeated many times in American history. For now, we are looking at reactive generations like the GenXer's: again in reverse chronological order: the Lost, the Gilded, the Liberty, and the Cavalier. A biblical example of this generation is Gideon, one of Israel's earliest generals.

SCRIPTURE: Judges 6:11-16

Imagine coming to a beach at the end of a summer of wild goings on. The beach crowd is exhausted, the sand shopworn, and full of debris—no place for walking barefoot. You step on a bottle, and some cop yells at you for littering. The sun is directly overhead and leaves no patch of shade that hasn't been taken. You feel the heat beating down on a barren landscape devoid of secrets or innocence. You look around at the disapproving faces and can't help but sense, somehow that the entire universe is gearing up to punish you.' That's how 13'ers feel following the Boom."¹

Some here remember comedian Rodney Dangerfield. Dangerfield ended his jokes with one memorable line: "I don't get no respect." Greet the Rodney Dangerfield Generation, Generation X, the 13er's who "get no respect."

Why the "X"? Drawn from a novel by author Douglas Coupland, "the X indicates that their character and contribution to the nation is still an x factor, an unknown."² Why the 13'er? One could argue 13 because it was this generation's bad luck to be the 13th generation to be born since the

founding of this nation, but we will find shortly that GenXer's or 13'ers are only one in many often luckless reactive-type generations. One GenXer describes his generation as "born on Friday the 13th!"³ But whether known as 13er's, GenXer's, Baby Busters, (1975 was the lowest birth year in the 20th century), New Lost, or any of a hundred other names, "If there's a generalization you can make about us GenXer's, it's that we all hate generalizations."⁴ Remember this is the generation who immortalized the terse answer "Whatever!" They *are* the Rodney Dangerfields of the 4 generations we've examined so far. They truly "don't get no respect."

The sad, truly unfair, part of it all is: to quote Robin Williams' psychologist in the GenX movie *Good Will Hunting*, "It's not their fault." Last week we talked of how Boomers came of age during that period from President Kennedy's assassination in 1963 through Nixon's Resignation in 1974. But 13er's weren't even "of-age" yet. They were mere children. Their first impressions were of a terribly dangerous world of riots, mismanaged wars, and President Jimmy Carter's "malaise." In the minds of GenXer's, adults are not in control and have no solutions. But because 13er's were too young to defend themselves society they got all the blame!

Meanwhile, 13er's were the children of divorce! As I shared 2 weeks ago the decade from 1965-1975 saw a record quadrupling of the divorce

rate. These were the “Home Alone” latch-key kids who came home at the end of each school day to an empty house, locked the door behind them, and turned on TV, making them more influenced by the pop culture they found on TV than by their absentee divorced or double-working parents!⁵

This fact from their childhood has had tremendous impact on their worldview and their emotions. 13er’s often see themselves as survivors of previous generations’ excesses. Adding to their woes is that they came of age just as the AIDs crisis was peaking, leaving even the medical community for a time, helpless to halt it. They understood that no one—not family, not government, not science, not the church—was going to help them. They were on their own, leaving them feeling lonely and neglected.

Even children growing up in stable families intuited this generation-wide anxiety. I’ll never forget my daughter Erica, a Nintendo-second wave GenXer (the first wave is often called the Atari wave), asking me one time whether her mom and I were going to get a divorce. Despite protests we were not, she replied, “Most kids in my class have divorced parents. I’m one of only a couple kids I know whose parents aren’t. I want to know if you and mom are planning to divorce!” Years later she announced, “Before I marry someone I’m going to be sure they take a blood test to prove they

aren't HIV-positive.” By this time AIDs was more predominant among heterosexuals than homosexuals.

Erica said these things when she was but 10 years old. They are the kinds of things 10 year old G.I.'s, Silents, and Boomers would never have even thought, because so many of our parents sheltered us from such bad things! But the late 60's and 70's was an anti-child era. It left many 13er's feeling unwanted or as obstacles to their parents' careers. Disrespected, GenXer's acted out the low expectations adults had of them. Boomers rebelled because they chased their ideals. 13'ers rebelled because of a despair that has haunted them and all reactive generations before them.

Take, for instance, the name “Yankee.” Originally “yankee” was a derisive nickname for the 13-er-like Liberty Generation of George Washington, traitor Benedict Arnold, and “Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death” Patrick Henry in the 1760's. A ‘Yankee’ was a hick or fop. Originally the song *Yankee Doodle Dandy*’ was a scornful British song about idiotic provincials. But true to all reactive generations, the Liberty Generation turned the song on its head and stuck ‘a feather in their caps’ (a twig or a cloth) to identify themselves in battle and announce to the world that, yes, we are scoundrels;⁶ though “Yankee” is far from the only negative label hung around 13er's neck. Many epithets have been hung on GenX-like

generations: “Moron,” “idiot,” and “imbecile in their youth and young adulthood;⁷ “Fogy,” “curmudgeon” and “codger”⁸ in their old age. Their self-esteem has suffered for it. Even the pattern of their lives is lower case. 13ers are the iPod (spelled with a small “i”) Generation who do not give themselves to big Causes but little, hands-on causes (spelled small “c”).

GenX predecessors have been thrown in the front of the bus in the face of many of America’s crises, like war, and most notably the Civil War. It is incredibly sobering to contemplate the losses the 13er-like Gilded Generation suffered in that war. To quote Strauss and Howe:

War hit the Gilded harder than any other American generation. They were the first American youths to be subject to conscription—and led the bloodiest anti-draft riots in American history. Of the 7 million Gilded men who reached combat age, roughly 10% died in the Civil War; 1 in 15 in Union States, nearly 1 in 4 in the Confederate states. Another 5% ended the war in disease-ridden prisoner of war camps. Altogether, the number killed in more than 6,000 Civil War battles—Hear This!—exceeded the cumulative total for all other American Wars: a per capita casualty rate equal to 8 World War IIs combined. Nearly half the Gilded war dead were buried in unmarked graves.”⁹

I’ve seen some of them at Gettysburg.

Their conscription is a reminder of one of the historic biblical characters from the Bible, Saul, who minding his own business, looking for 3 donkeys he has lost, finds himself conscripted to be Israel’s first king.

When told of this appointment, Saul says, “*I am only a Benjamite, from the*

least of the tribes of Israel, and my family is the humblest of all the families of the tribe of Benjamin. Why then have you spoken to me in this way?”¹⁰

But a better example of a 13'er like biblical person is Gideon, called to help deliver Israel from her enemies, the Midianites. Like Saul, Gideon appeals to God's mercy by announcing his clan, Manasseh, is the weakest; but God sets Gideon as the general over Israel's troops anyway. God's choice is wise, as Gideon destroys the altar of the false god Baal.

Historically many of America's greatest generals come from reactive, 13er like generations, with colorful names like: “Old Blood & Guts” Patton, “The G.I. General” Omar Bradley and “Ike,” head of allied forces on D-Day from the Lost Generation; in the Civil War “Stonewall Jackson” for the Confederacy and “U.S.” Ulysses S. Grant for the Union from the Gilded Generation; but perhaps greatest of all was George Washington from the Liberty Generation! And who oversaw the controversial dropping of the Atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan to end WWII? “Give ‘em Hell Harry” S. Truman, from the Lost Generation, whose career was resurrected during WWI from his days as a failed clothing salesman!

Why so many outstanding field marshals from reactive GenX-like generations? It probably has to do with the savvy reactive generations learned as survivors of parental neglect. Though always testing lowest of

generations on IQ and standardized tests and Grade Point Averages, they are street-wise and ultra-practical. The father of philosophical pragmatism was GenX-like Gilded generation's William James. America's greatest 20th century theologian was the Lost Generation's Reinhold Niebuhr, whose ultra-realist principles are legendary in his renowned Serenity Prayer. Reactive generations have always used their pragmatism to temper Boomer-like idealism. Reactive generations have always been hard-scrabble, willing to literally paint outside the lines, as witnessed by X-ers' fascination with tattoos and piercings to express their identity.

But playing by the rules and painting inside the lines has not historically gotten reactive generations far either. Like that GenXer youth on the beach, reactives have been criticized regardless of where they step. They know that no matter what good they do, they will still be tossed into history's rust bucket. They have the audacity to be young when old age is rewarded and to be old when youth is honored. Take Social Security. It was passed late enough in their life the Lost Generation never enjoyed its spoils. Their plight has made them great risk takers who lost big, like many Gold-seeking 49'ers, and won big, like Standard Oil founder John D. Rockefeller and United States Steel magnate Andrew Carnegie, who funded countless city libraries from his great wealth.

Reactive generations can also be their own worst enemies. Their radical individualism combined with their anti-authoritarian stance prevents them from working co-operatively for change on their own behalf. They become apathetic and bored. Their watchword is the often aggravating “Whatever!” They fail to work in concert with others to achieve goals that could improve their lives. And so, they watch with envy as civic-like G.I.’s work as teams to petition congress and the president for whatever they want. They are 13’er scholar Jean Twenge’s “GenMe” rather than G.I.’s “GenWe,” whose concerted efforts built them the largest lobby in history called the AARP! Instead, reactive generations like the Gilded, Lost, and 13’ers’ non-cooperation and radical independence leaves them with no collective advocates among their own peers. They enter old age exhausted always trying to be some kind of absurd, impossible “Army of One!” Even a non-soldier like me knows that’s a sure recipe for an early exit from life.

Top Box Office actor and GenXer Tom Cruise’s movie titles sound like an autobiography of this generation: *Risky Business*, *Top Gun*, *Mission Impossible*, and *Minority Report*. All these titles speak volumes about GenX and reactivates quick strike, push-the-edge-of-the-envelope, high stakes, survivalist lifestyles. Kermit the Frog, a GenXer, has never found it easy “Being Green,” and GenXers have never found it easy being 13!

But to their credit and to the credit of their survival instincts many X'ers have learned how to turn something negative into something positive. As one GenXer, Gregg Linburg says of being the 13th generation in American history: "My generation was born on Friday the Thirteenth. That's a day you can view 2 ways. You can fear it, or you can face it—and try to make it a great day in spite of the label." The 13th card can be the Ace, face down, in a game of high stakes blackjack. Kings and queens, with their pompous poses and fancy curlicues, always lose to the uncluttered Ace, going over or going under. Aces—like 13ers—are nothing subtle, but can be handy to have around when you get in a jam."¹¹

As we will discover as we talk about the four recurrent turnings in American history, this is true. It may especially be true in the near future as we consider the role 13er leadership will have in the church and in America in the next few decades. They may help the church and America solve problems we didn't even know we had: because at times in all our histories, it's a whole lot better to have someone who understands dark alleys and back streets than someone with a high IQ but knows little of the ways of the world and can't think on their feet. Meet the soon no-nonsense GenXers!

¹Ron Allen and Joey Jeter, "Preaching and Different Generations," *One Gospel, Many Ears*, StL: Chalice Press, 2002, p. 41

²Ibid, p. 40

³William Strauss & Neil Howe, *13th Gen*, NY: Vintage Books, 1993, p. 17.

⁴Ibid., p. 30.

⁵Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith*,

⁶William Strauss and Neil Howe's, "The Silent Generation," *Generations: A History of America's Future: 1584-2069*, NY: Quill, 1991, pp. 165 & 167.

⁷13th Gen

⁸Carl G. Eeman, "The Clash of Ideals," *Generations of Faith*, Washington: Alban Institute, 2002, p. 30.

⁹*Generations*, pp. 210-211.

¹⁰1 Samuel 9:21

¹¹13th Gen, p. 17