

# A GENERATION APART — THE GAP AND THE CHURCH

*James N. Kimball*

*James N. Kimball currently resides in St. George, Utah. He has taught young people at the University of Utah and the B.Y.U. Division of Continuing Education as well as in various Church classes.*

From safe within the geographical and philosophical matrix that is the Church, it is often difficult for people my age and older to realize that such a thing as a “generation gap” may in fact exist. We tend to regard “generation gap” as a catch phrase — the result of a distortion that makes good press copy — or as the result of some form of social hysteria. To propose that any sort of generation gap may exist in the Church itself is an idea which deserves only a slightly raised eyebrow, nothing more.

This attitude persists until we take an afternoon from our busy lives to try to understand (or enjoy — or both) the music from *Hair*, 1969’s most successful Broadway show, or a “new morality” movie such as *Easy Rider*. Or, in an even more meaningful experience, to pick up a flower child hitchhiker on our way to work some morning and attempt to communicate with him.

The last was my introduction to the “now” generation, and I came away from it convinced that the generation gap is tangible reality and no semantic fad.

It was a most enlightening experience. The young man was dressed in typical hippie summer garb: large leather hat, Levi’s, tee-shirt, deep red velvet vest, and sandals. I asked him where he was going and where he had been. He told me he had left Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, in the early spring to hitchhike west and work with Caesar Chavez and the grape-pickers in California for a year.

When I asked him what he hoped to accomplish by that, he told me — articulately and kindly — that he wanted to do something meaningful in life, and he felt time was running out on him. Money didn’t matter much

to him; he was more concerned with rectifying some of the social inequalities that exist in this country. Quite frankly, he was so persuasive I almost went with him.

That encounter made me a believer. There *is* a sizable void between my generation and his. There *is* a great difference between the things that have influenced my life and the things that have influenced him. And the void cannot be bridged or explained away by saying, "What this country needs is more woodsheds," as I heard a United States Senator do recently. Student unrest and alienation are not simply matters of discipline, so I can't agree with the Senator. Instead, I propose that we examine the elements that relate directly to the cause of the gap, especially in terms of its importance to young people in the Church, for the gap is not found only on extreme edges of society, and not exclusively outside the Church. Many normal, intelligent young people, some L.D.S., are challenging the institutions and values of society, and even questioning the ability of their elders to govern.

The gap is the result of two factors. The first and most important factor is economic. There are relatively few people under twenty-five in America who have known anything but material abundance. On the other hand, those over thirty may have some sharp memories of financial distress. My father, who is over sixty, remembers the depression in grim detail, with the lack of jobs, the Hoovervilles across America, and the long breadlines. I am over thirty and I can recall with little effort the effects of the second World War — rationing of food and gasoline, tin can drives and the gathering of milk pods from fields around my home.

These things are not realities to a person under twenty-five. The closest America has been to any financial crisis that they can remember was the recession of 1958. In contrast to the lack of affluence of former generations, young America spent nearly twenty-five billion dollars for clothing, cosmetics, automobiles, records, and other essentials in 1970. They feel no guilt about this; they have no qualms. This is because they are part of a generation that has never felt economic pressure. As with all things, no void remains for long, and the absence of worry over financial issues has given young people freedom to think about social issues, and time to find a cause to champion. Thus, they relate more and react more to social injustice than did my generation, or my father's generation.

In the parlance of the young, I am "hung up on materialistic things." I remember the war, and I remember by father's advice, gleaned from the experience of the depression: go to school, get a good job and get out of debt. The fact that ROTC training in school took up far too much time, or that most of the drills were meaningless, was only an annoyance. I thought about it as little as possible, and felt no strong urge to occupy by force the ROTC barracks on campus. I was at school to get an education so I could find a good job and surround myself with the economic benefits America had to offer. So when Simon and Garfunkel, in "Sounds of Silence," sing, "And the people bowed and prayed to the neon God they'd made," they are ac-

cusing me, and I must admit that I am probably guilty as charged. However, I think I understand why there exists a gap between today's young people and the institutionalized values of their country.

The second factor contributing to the existence of the gap may well be found in some of those institutions. Our institutions of higher learning have been dealt some rude shocks in the recent past, and most have been the result of their own policies. Not only have they contributed to what I call the education gap, but they have unconsciously offered themselves as prime targets when students began to realize that they were being cheated. Many of our students are simply too smart for the plastic-coated, assembly-line educations we try to palm off on them today. And the situation is rapidly getting worse. By 1975 American colleges will enroll nine million students, each seeking a personal, quality education. In 1975, ninety percent of all high school students will graduate. This means a highly educated young people — relative to past generations.

Perhaps *aware* is a more accurate word, for the young are becoming just that through the massive extra-curricular thrust provided by television, and the millions upon millions of general and special interest magazines and books young people read each year. A student enters school today better prepared and progresses faster than students of former generations. Because of the knowledge to which they have access, our young people tend to see the world in terms of challenge and change. They are not satisfied with simple, vapid half-answers to complex problems. They want to test new methods and try new theories, and they are impatient with what they consider to be a stale and outmoded status quo.

Their belief in confrontations and demonstrations as means to finding an end to war and campus problems may be clumsy, their methods awkward, but more and more mature Americans on both sides of the gap are beginning to agree with the ends they seek and the changes they demand, in spite of the methods used. If their approach is a bit naive, and they fail to offer viable alternatives to the problems they deplore, the young at least have served as our vocal conscience. For that we should be grateful to them.

As far as the Church is concerned, we have tended to view the problems of the outside world as just that: outside. Whatever may have been applicable to young people in the world was not necessarily applicable to Zion. That viewpoint must now yield. Jet planes invade our mountain stronghold a hundred times a day. The dress standards in downtown Salt Lake City, for instance, are not much different from those of New York or Los Angeles. The television viewing pattern of the Saints is roughly parallel to that of the rest of America. The idea of the Saints being physically set apart is diminishing; we are no longer as peculiar a people as we once were. We are, in a word, integrated.

This integration with the rest of the world, whether we will it or not, has something to do with the generation gap. Margaret Mead suggests that the whole world has become a single community through the speed of modern communications and travel. She says that older generations reflect the

mores and customs of the "old country" from which they or their parents immigrated. The young, exposed more and more to outside ideas, are challenging the use of old world methods to cope with new world problems.

Whether Dr. Mead is right in her analysis of the world as a whole, her thesis fits the Mormon culture. We have been thrust out into the world, to live in it and make do. Similarly, the world has been thrust in on us, and we can't escape it. There *were* peace marches and demonstrations in Salt Lake City. There *is* experimentation with drugs and political radicalism in the valleys of Zion. The extent to which L.D.S. youth participate in these activities is unknown, but they are exposed to the reality of their existence. And we must recognize it.

Taken together, the economic and educational differences in background present a particular challenge to the leaders and teachers of young people today. Those who would communicate with young people must realize that abstract gospel ideals must be related to the real world, that doctrine must be made relevant to the social injustice and racial inequities in our society. Otherwise, young people will point out the window to the world and ask, "But what has all of this to do with that out there?"

We don't need any special revelation to bridge the gap, we have only to discover the immense beauty, vitality, and relevance in a timeless gospel. The Lord doesn't need to be updated, but we may need to be. Teachers, unaware that Zion has been invaded, may not realize that the impatience and idealism of the young may prevent them from harmonizing the gospel and the Church. The imperfection in the institution and the people, may blind them to the lovely and sublime in the gospel.

The Church leader or teacher who wishes to narrow rather than widen the gap has first to accept the fact that a gap exists, even in the bastions of the Church. He next needs to accommodate that fact in his leading and teaching. I once attended what had been billed as an important meeting for M.I.A. age youth, and listened to a talk on the evils of smoking. To illustrate his point, the speaker told a story about a young girl who had a date with a young man who smoked. As she came tripping down the stairs, her father asked, "Before you go out tonight, would you go to the smokehouse for me?" Whereupon the girl replied, "Father, I'm wearing my new white dress. I can't go to the smokehouse like this." "Then," asked the father, "Why are you going with a boy who smokes?" I'm over thirty and that illustration went right over my head. I had to go and ask my father what a smokehouse was before I really understood the message of the story.

One of the reasons a gap exists is that we are not always honest with young people, and they know it. A case in point. Thumbing through the *Era* recently, I glanced at the "Era of Youth" section. A number of pages were devoted to the value of honest and integrity, of fair and impartial dealing. All this was accompanied by photos of fresh-faced and reverent young people. And on most of the photos of young girls, an extra six discreet inches of skirt had been airbrushed in. I counted several gaps there: gaps between what the photos showed and what the young people were. Gaps between

what the editors may have thought of the girls' dresses face-to-face and in the editing room. Gaps between the text and the truth of those photos.

Because of this and many similar experiences, it is easy for me to understand why a young person squirms in his seat as he goes through the typical question and response ritual about material he has known since junior Sunday School that is so much a part of our teaching technique. I can understand why he suppresses a yawn when in Fast Meeting a lady stands to give a testimony that is a carbon copy of the one she has given for thirty-five years about the same and perhaps only faith-building experience she has ever had. I can understand why a young person blushes for a speaker in Sacrament meeting who has no more imagination than to talk on "The Word of Wisdom," or "Dress Standards," using bits and phrases of the missionary discussions he half-learned ten years ago. Young people have little patience for this sort of thing, and it causes them to wonder if their elders are not living in a spiritual past, relying on testimonies that stopped growing years ago. They expect a person who speaks in testimony meeting to testify about relevant and spiritual experiences that happened today — and not in the days of the smokehouse. The teacher who recognizes this is on their side and they know it.

The teacher who would be effective with youth must be both current and available. The most important thing in remaining current is to make sure that one's own spiritual development has not stopped. If a teacher finds himself constantly digging back to his mission for inspiring examples and stories, it is a good sign that he is not current, and young people will know it.

Being available means in part that to teach well a teacher has to remain a teacher. It is lamentable that good teachers often are called to administrative positions which make them less available to young people. While it is true that some effective teachers make good administrators, bishops and stake presidents should be especially sensitive to keeping those who work most effectively with youth in positions where they can have a direct influence.

It is important that teachers do not forget that their essential calling is to teach the gospel. Taking attendance is less important than making sure that every member of the class feels loved. The manual should not be more important than the spirit and impact of the lesson. Where the two conflict (as they sometimes do) the manual should give. Principle translated into practice should be more important than the recitation of abstract theory, or the delineation of law. The emphasis should be on the gospel in action — after all, it is the gospel of love, isn't it?

If the fault line between generations is to be bridged by those of us on the uphill side of it, it will be done by honesty and forthrightness, by a willingness to discuss and relate the gospel to the problems of our times, in the idiom of our times, and in the light of the events of our times. If we can help our youth to be sincerely committed to living the gospel of love, they will teach us much in return about that very principle.

