

Intergenerational Communities and a Theology of Accommodation

By Gareth Crispin (Chapter 2 in “Intergenerate” book)

Every now and again on The Antiques Roadshow, someone brings along a piece of furniture or art they've owned for years that they thought was worthless. After it is dusted off and brought out into the light to be observed, it turns out to be of value after all. That is somewhat akin to what can happen when rummaging around in the attic of historical theology, a place people do not normally visit to find inspiration in contemporary Christian mission and ministry. Here can be found theology that has been known for years, but whose practical theological value has perhaps gone unnoticed. This chapter explores how the historical theology of accommodation is one such discovery. It's not an overarching theological framework for intergenerational ministry, but it does provide theological resources to aid in the implementation of intergenerational practices. In this sense, it is simply one possible piece of the jigsaw puzzle that might be used to help construct this picture of church life that we now call intergenerational. This particular piece of the puzzle suggests that in forming intergenerational communities, it will be important for all within the community to adopt a posture of accommodating others. However, it also suggests that as a person's knowledge of God and authority within the church increases, so does their responsibility to accommodate. What Is Accommodation? The word accommodation simply means to make room for someone or something; but hidden within this concept is the assumption that someone is doing the accommodating. This common sense understanding of the word lies at the heart of the meaning of accommodation as a theological category, where God is the one who does the accommodating by making room for humanity. In theological language, God “comes down” rather than “moves over,” but accommodation still captures the sense of movement. Theologically speaking, accommodation is necessary because of God's transcendence; that is, God is infinite and holy, and humanity is finite and unholy. This being the case, God cannot be known by humanity without some movement on God's part to communicate, act, and appear in such a way that humanity might know God. Humanity needs God to come down—hence the title of this chapter. Accommodation requires some kind of coming down, some form of stooping. Accommodation in Historical Theology There are layers of richness within the theology of accommodation; layers that have been laid down over centuries. In the patristic period, the church was familiar with accommodation. Origen, for example, pictured accommodation as akin to when we speak to small children; we adapt ourselves “to the weakness of our charge.” God seems to deal with us, says

Origen, in the same way, “making the capacity of the hearers, and the benefit which they were to receive, the standard of the appropriateness of its announcements [regarding him].”¹ God adapts, says Origen, accommodating what he says in such a way that humanity can understand. Calvin also spoke of the need for accommodation in terms of God’s transcendence and echoed the idea of asymmetry found in the adult-child relationship, asserting, “As nurses commonly do with infants, God is wont in a measure to ‘lisp’ in speaking to us.” Calvin suggested, “Such forms of speaking do not so much express clearly what God is like as accommodate the knowledge of him to our slight capacity. To do this he must descend far beneath his loftiness.”² Calvin took things in an interesting and crucial direction that Origen only hinted at. Yes, God’s accommodation is communicative, said Calvin, but it is also behavioral; God acts in an accommodating way. This can be seen in God’s provision of sacraments for humanity. Calvin says communion, for example, involves “physical signs, which thrust before our eyes, represent to us, according to our feeble capacity, things invisible.”³ In addition, Ford Lewis Battles argues that, for Calvin, the everyday ministry of the church is also part of God’s accommodation to humanity: “The very choice of a human ministry to proclaim the saving message and to nurture us in spiritual growth is in itself an act of accommodation by God to our capacity.”⁴ John Balserak takes this further by showing how, for Calvin, the pastoring of the people by human leaders is another example of God’s accommodation “so that they do not need to run around . . . in search of revelations, and at the same time that they might be taught familiarly according to their capacity.”⁵ Accommodation in Biblical Theology Of course, historical theology is not devoid of biblical theology, but a more direct look at biblical theology reveals a number of crucial steps we need to take on our journey toward the practical, theological application of accommodation to intergenerational mission and ministry. The Bible itself is an accommodation; it comes to us from God but via human authors, in human language. However, within the story of the Bible, we also see an accommodation of humanity in God’s actions and the beginnings of a basis for accommodation as a principle governing practice in the church. God accommodates in creation; Romans 1:20 tell us that the visible creation shows us qualities of God that we would not otherwise know. After the fall, God’s presence is so dangerous to humanity that God constrains his presence by housing it in the tabernacle and temple (a literal accommodation) allowing safe relationship between God and people. God’s accommodation to humanity is also evident in the Old Testament theophanies. The injunction against seeing the face of God (Exod. 33:20) and the promise that in the new creation God’s people will “see his face” (Rev. 22:4) suggest that the theophanies of the Old Testament are an accommodation needed because of humanity’s fallen state. Ultimately, however, it is in the incarnation where God most fully accommodates himself to humanity for “no one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who

has made him known” (John 1:18 nrsv). In the recent past, much has been made of the significance of incarnational theology for the mission, life, and practices of the church. However, the incarnation itself has perhaps been overlooked as a paradigmatic example of accommodation that challenges us to reflect on our own ecclesial life and practices in light of Christ’s example. In Philippians chapter 2, Paul presents the incarnation as a model of accommodation for the whole church. In the incarnation, Jesus, though he was in the form of God, “did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:6–8 nrsv). The context of Philippians 2 strongly suggests some measure of disunity and selfishness within the church in Philippi (2:3–4, 14). Within this context, the Philippian church is called upon to have “the same mind” as Jesus (2:5 nrsv),⁶ the humble Christ who altered his very form for the sake of humanity, specifically taking on the form of those he sought to identify with and serve. The church is to be like Christ in its relationships, to humbly change for the sake of the other, to identify with those who are different. Humans cannot take different form in the way in which Christ did, but individuals within the church can adopt a posture of willingness to change for the sake of identification with and service of the other.⁷ And this principle applies to all. In the same way that Paul implores all the Ephesians to “be subject to one another” (Eph. 5:21 nrsv), so he desires all to have that “same mind” as Jesus, willing to change for the sake of identifying with and serving the rest. Everyone within the church should accommodate one another; at root, therefore, accommodation in church life is destined to be, in some way and at some time, a mutual process. Paul also suggests, however, that within this fundamental mutuality, accommodation will vary depending on the circumstances. In much the same way that he spells out what being subject to one another looks like for people in different situations (Eph. 4 and 5), so also we can deduce that accommodation is applied differently in different situations. While Philippians 2 is a formative text for the general principle of accommodation, passages such as 1 Corinthians 8:1–11:1 help illustrate how accommodation varies depending on individuals’ circumstances. The church in Corinth was experiencing problems with how those who possessed knowledge of God used that knowledge. Some people knew that food sacrificed to idols was fine to eat as “no idol in the world really exists” (8:4 nrsv), but they are described by Paul as not knowing this in the correct way (8:2), suggesting that they were not acting rightly in relation to others within the community of faith. Some found it difficult to understand that they were free to eat food sacrificed to idols (8:7), so Paul pleads with those with the knowledge and freedom to eat meat sacrificed to idols to not do so on account of others with a weak conscience (8:13). Those with knowledge were free in the abstract to act how they liked; but in the context of the relationships within the community of faith, they needed to alter their behavior to

accommodate those who did not possess this knowledge. In this context, Paul uses knowledge of God to mean facts about God, but not divorced from relationship with him. The people who “knew” things about God didn’t simply know facts about God; they knew something about God as person. They had knowledge about God in a factual sense, but this was intrinsically linked to their knowledge of God in a relational sense.⁸ Paul then switches from knowledge to authority in chapter 9, where he establishes that he has the rights of an apostle, but has not “made use” of these rights (9:12 nrsv). He will endure laying aside his rights; indeed, he will “endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ” (9:12 nrsv). In not enforcing his rights, he is making an accommodation to those in the churches he has planted; Paul is accommodating from a position of authority. Paul extends this progression to suggest that he will use his freedom to lay aside his rights to win as many as possible (9:19). He is not a slave, but he will become one; he is not under the law, but will become like one who is; he is not a pagan, but will become as one who is; he is not weak, but he will become so (9:19–22). He does these things so that by all possible means, he might save some (9:22). Gordon Fee comments on these categories of people to which “Paul has been willing to accommodate himself ‘in order to win.’”⁹ Applying this to contemporary practice, Fee adds that those in authority might ask in terms of their own ministries how their “use” of their rights might at the same time become a “misuse”—of such a kind that the gospel itself is not so clearly heard in our day. It would not seem to require a lot of imagination to think of several such misuses, even in the most innocent of circumstances.¹⁰ Crucially, Paul finishes this section of 1 Corinthians by tying this principle of accommodation back to Jesus: if you do these things, he says, you follow Christ’s example (11:1). This is, as Peter Richardson puts it, a summary of the argument since the beginning of chapter 8 and “summarizes especially clearly his principle of accommodation.”¹¹ Importantly, “what is unusual about Paul’s view is not so much that he is accommodatory, but that he states his practice unequivocally and expresses it as an important matter of principle.”¹² Knowledge and authority are of course not binary. Knowledge of God is attained gradually over time. There is no point at which a Christian knows everything about God, and also no time when they know nothing. Equally, while there are some important senses in which people do or do not have authority within the church (for example, those appointed as church leaders), authority also exists as a range. People in churches have both formal authoritative positions as leaders and informal authority gained from a variety of means, including long-term participation in church life, general standing in the community, or wealth. This understanding leads to a model that, building upon the foundation of mutual responsibility to accommodate, suggests that people within the church have an increasing responsibility to accommodate as their knowledge of God and their authority in the church increase. Put starkly, a four-year-old does not have the same

responsibility to accommodate as an adult minister. It should be noted at this point that Paul is not arguing for theological accommodation. He is not suggesting a change in doctrine merely to fit the times or advocating for putting aside right belief in order to make the Christian faith more palatable. Nor is he encouraging mere pragmatism by suggesting the church try out practices to just find out “what works.”¹³ What he is setting out is a principled posture for those within the church to adopt by continually reviewing their communal life and practices.

Accommodation in Practical Theology As this old doctrine of accommodation is dusted off and examined afresh, very striking contemporary resonances appear with the aims and objectives of intergenerational mission and ministry. Alongside the biblical, developmental, and sociological arguments for the “why” of intergenerationality (see other chapters in this volume), there is here a theological foundation for the “how” of implementing intergenerational practices. God accommodates, God comes down in Christ, and we are implored to be like Christ (Phil. 2:5 and 1 Cor. 11:1). So when considering how to implement intergenerational practices, accommodating—making room for the other—will be vitally important. In any one community of faith, a range of tastes, abilities, preferred styles, personalities, and desires will be found. In implementing intergenerational practices, decisions will inevitably be made as to what the community of all ages does when it gathers and interacts, and why. Naturally, this will present instances where someone will not warm to or relate well to particular elements of intergenerational life and practice. As many are discovering, implementing cross-age church practices is not a problem-free process. But if those within the church approach the coming together of the church family with the posture of accommodating others, this transition can be smoothed. As briefly explored above, embracing accommodation as a mutual activity is only one aspect of the process; as a person’s authority in the church and knowledge of God increase, so too does the responsibility to accommodate—and how leaders accommodate will deeply impact the life and practices of the church. Church leaders within local churches will have a particular set of values and cultural preferences that will inevitably (to a lesser or greater extent) shape what the church looks and feels like. In promoting an intergenerational church, a theology of accommodation can help church leaders think carefully about the extent to which church practices reflect their own personal or generational preferences—and what church practices might look like if more attention were paid to accommodating a broader range of preferences. With this broader range in mind, church leaders could review the type and style of liturgy, language, music, media, participation, space, illustrations, and examples used within church gatherings and wider church life. But this only takes us so far. Church members have a range of likes and dislikes and preferences and come from a variety of generations and subcultures. So how can church leaders decide whom to accommodate if accommodating one necessarily implies not accommodating another? This is where

knowledge comes in. According to 1 Corinthians 8:1–11:1, it is incumbent on the Christian with more knowledge to accommodate the Christian with less. Thus a theology of accommodation can provide theological reasoning and motivation for Christians with relatively more knowledge to set aside their own tastes and desires and seek ways to develop church structures and practices that aid those with less knowledge to participate within the community of faith. Naturally, Christian knowledge is not about age per se, but there will be, to some degree, a natural positive correlation between the two; as people get older, their knowledge of God should increase. The correlation may not be one-to-one, but it should be positive. Therefore, in general, a theology of accommodation will often suggest an accommodation of the young by the old (though mutual accommodation will be taught, modeled, and practiced as well). In Paul's example of food sacrificed to idols, this meant the more knowledgeable refraining from eating meat, although eating meat was something they liked and wanted to do—there was a cost to this accommodation. Similarly, when a more knowledgeable Christian accommodates another Christian in some area of church life or practice, they give up something they like, possibly something they more readily identify with and relate to. They do so because they are willing to suffer the loss of the familiar and meaningful precisely because they understand the faith already; they have more knowledge, including the awareness that others might not have such knowledge. Practical applications of accommodation can be taken from any aspect of contemporary church life. Communion, for example, is one area where accommodation can be practiced, with church leaders and more knowledgeable Christians accommodating most. Established liturgical forms of communion are likely to be familiar to church leaders and more knowledgeable Christians; they are likely to relate to and identify with a specific form of communion, if only due to significant repetition over time. However, those less familiar with such forms of communion (including the young) may not understand or appreciate them in the way others do. Church leaders and more knowledgeable Christians may not be aware of this because, as Pete Ward comments, "viewed from within, it is very hard to make a distinction between the gospel and the church's own particular cultural expression of the faith."¹⁵ At the extremes, children and young people might not participate in communion at all due to their lack of familiarity with the form of communion used. As Jonny Baker argues with respect to communion, because language and culture are always changing, "by keeping things the same, their meaning actually changes over time and becomes irrelevant."¹⁶ Explaining church practices and training the young in the ways of a faith community are essential parts of church life. However, this does not mean those practices should remain unchanged over time. Applying a theology of accommodation to the practice of communion might imply changing the form to fit the capacity of the young. This would be worked out differently in each context. It may impact the words used, the music played (if any), the physical setting,

and, given the image-based culture within which youth and children live, might include a move toward the use of more images. Additionally, whether explaining to youth and children the current forms of communion or seeking to change such forms to suit their capacity, accommodation will imply including young people in the discussion about which forms might work best in this setting. Stephen Cottrell provides helpful material in considering how to “re clothe” communion¹⁷ for people new to faith, but also for children and young people.¹⁸ He suggests ways in which language might be altered and how participation can be fostered to aid understanding. However, ideas for change are only one part of a change process. Also needed are theological resources and frameworks to aid the implementation of ideas. A theology of accommodation is one such resource and framework. Affection for particular ways of doing things can run deep, and the cost of giving up established forms of worship and ways of church life may well be costly for some. However, fostering a culture of mutual accommodation while also adopting a posture of accommodation that increases with knowledge and authority will greatly enhance the likelihood of a smoother transition to a more intergenerational church life.

Notes

1Origen, “Origen: Contra Celsum,” in Ante-Nicene Christian Library: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1872), 236; (Brackets in the original).

2Calvin, Institutes, vol. 13, bk. 1, no. 1, Institutes of the Christian Religion, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 121.

3Calvin, Institutes, 1371.

4Ford Lewis Battles, “God Was Accommodating Himself to Human Capacity,” Interpretation 31, no. 1 (1977): 33.

5John Balserak, “The God of Love and Weakness: Calvin’s Understanding of God’s Accommodating Relationship with His People,” Westminster Theological Journal 62, no. 2 (2000): 191.

6This line of thought follows the “ethical approach” to Philippians 2:5, rather than the “kerygmatic approach,” outlined in Tod J. Billings, Union with Christ: Reframing Theology and Ministry for the Church (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 136–43.

7Even if one is uncomfortable with incarnational analogies due to the uniqueness of the incarnation, it is still possible to see Christ’s humility as a precedent for the Christian life (Billings, Union with Christ, 138).

8In this context, Paul uses knowledge of God to mean facts about God, though not divorced from relationship with him; for Paul, “factual” knowledge about God is intrinsically linked to “relational” knowledge of God.

9Gordon D. Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 423.

10Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 422.

11Peter Richardson, “Early Christian Sources of an Accommodation Ethic: From Jesus to Paul,” Tyndale Bulletin 29 (1978): 125.

12Richardson, “Early Christian Sources,” 141.

13Paul’s approach can be seen in action when he circumcises Timothy for the sake of the Jews in Lystra (Acts 16:3), but is vociferous in his condemnation of circumcision when it is made a condition of salvation by the “circumcision group” (Gal. 5:1–2).

14There are some similarities to Chap Clark’s “adoptive youth ministry” approach here, especially with respect to the relationship between those in churches with power and those without, though the foundation of accommodation is completely different. See Chap Clark, ed., Adoptive Youth Ministry: Integrating Emerging Generations into the Family of Faith (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 2.

¹⁵Pete Ward, ed., *Mass Culture: The Interface of Eucharist and Mission*, 2nd ed. (Abingdon, UK: Bible Reading Fellowship, 2008), 20.

¹⁶Jonny Baker, "Rhythm of the Masses," in *Mass Culture: The Interface of Eucharist and Mission*, ed. Pete Ward, 2nd ed. (Abingdon, UK: Bible Reading Fellowship, 2008), 43.

¹⁷Stephen Cottrell, "Parable and Encounter: Celebrating the Eucharist Today," in *Mass Culture: The Interface of Eucharist and Mission*, ed. Pete Ward, 2nd ed. (Abingdon, UK: Bible Reading Fellowship, 2008), 67. ¹⁸Cottrell, "Parable and Encounter," 69–72.