

BRIDGING THE GENERATION GAP¹

Half a century ago, I was 15, like many of you guys! And guess what? I always had arguments with my Dad. You want to know what teens and parents argued about half a century ago? Let me tell you

1. How late I can stay out. How many of you argue with your parents about that?
2. I don't like your friends! How many of you have the same problem?
3. You don't study enough, you know when I was your age I used to! How many of you have heard this line?

Let me ask you this question, Have things really changed in 50 years? I told you this story in order to dispel a myth among you. Your problems with your parents are not because they grew up in Egypt and you grew up in Canada. It is not because they were teenagers in the sixties or seventies and now it is the twenty first century.

The real problem is that when we are in our teens we change, and neither we nor our parents understand the change. So, let us talk about these changes.

NEW PERSONALITY:

When I was younger my personality was not distinguishable from my parent's personality. As I approach the teens, I feel the need to form my own personality. So, in a way, I try to divorce my self from my parents or declare independence from my parents. There are problems when this happens:

In trying to form my own personality, I sometimes become a rebel! I rebel against parental authority, I rebel against school authority, against society and sometimes against church authority.

The second problem is that parents almost always over-react. They do not understand that this is a normal evolution that has to be accepted and guided, they only see the rebellion. They often come to Abouna saying, he (or she) was very good a year ago now we don't know what's happened to them? The answer, they are having growing pains! So, what is the solution?

First: I have to explain to my parents this need to form my own personality and that they should welcome this as a step towards maturity.

Second: I have to understand that building my personality does not necessarily mean rebellion. It can be done peacefully by mutual understanding. If parents have to understand my needs, I have to understand that they need time to accept this new world order. The key word is gradually, not overnight!

NEW VALUES:

With the new personality comes the need for new values. So far, my values have been those of my parent's, but as I become a teen, I start rejecting my parent's values as outdated or from another country, another culture ... etc.

¹Address by Father Athanasius Iskander to the youth from 3 Coptic churches in Ontario, February 14, 2003 at St. mary and St. Abraam Church, Ajax , ON

The problem with this line of thinking is that values are not affected by the time we live in, the country or the culture that we were raised in. "Thou shalt not commit adultery" and "Honour your father and your mother" were commandments given by God to Moses four thousand years ago, but they are still valid today. They were given to the Israelis but they still apply to Egyptians and Canadians. They were given in Sinai but they are compulsory even in the new world.

So, the argument that my parents values are not valid because we live in a new country and a new century are not valid.

Many teens start by completely abandoning their parent's values and go on looking for values they can call their own, And after years of searching and experimenting, they come back to the same values of their parents. I know that from experience with teens growing up to become just like their parents.

How many times have you said to your parents, "When I grow up, I'll never treat my children this way!" I had children that were teenagers like you and used to tell me this. But now that they are married and have kids, they treat their kids the same way I have treated them!

So, instead of wrecking everything and starting to build again, why not renovate? Examine your parents values in the light of the Bible, if they agree with the Bible adopt them, make them your own, not bcause they come from your parents but because they come from the Bible. That way you can differentiate between Christianity and Egyptianity, I mean values that take thir root from the Bible versus values that take their root from Middle Eastern culture.

But, having said this, let me tell you that not all the values that cultural rather than Biblical are bad. There are so many good cultural values both in Egypt and in Canada. And there are many bad cultural habits both in Egypt and in Canada. A wise person takes the best of these two worlds.

NEW CONSCIENCE:

One good thing about forming your own values is that you start to develop your own conscience. When you were young, your parents were your conscience, they told you what is right and what is wrong. Now that you have your own values, these values will determine what is good and what is wrong. That is why you should adopt good values, values that agree with the Bible. St Paul tells us, "I exercise myself, to have always a conscience void of offence toward God, and toward men." (Acts 24:16) This means that it is not enough to have my own conscience, it has to be a good conscience.

ACCEPTANCE BY PEERS:

The need to be accepted by our peers is something that grows on us as we become teens. This is something that neither we nor our parents fully understand. Teens start having physical changes and sometimes these changes are too fast for them to accept, and that leads to a negative self image. Teens start feeling they are not attractive enough especially to the other sex. Girls say things like my hair is a mess or I look ugly! Boys may not like their nose! Both will worry about being too fat or too short ... etc. All of these feelings happen to us because we want to be accepted by our peers.

Unfortunately, in our attempt to be accepted by our peers, we blindly imitate our peers. They swear, so we swear in order to be cool. They smoke, so even if we hate smoking we

may be dragged into smoking because it is cool. They wear ridiculous, very expensive and ugly clothes, and we do the same just to appear cool. Many teens tell me that they have two personalities, one for school and one for church and home.

There is however, a misconception about the meaning of cool. I learned this because I read an article about the word cool! It was coined in the sixties to describe people who are different! Who do things differently. Someone wears his baseball cap backwards, so he is cool. But if everyone else does the same thing, it is not cool anymore because it is not different. Perhaps if you wear yours straight you will be cool!

Choosing your friends is essential. If your close friends believe in the same values you believe in then you will not feel peer pressure anymore.

There is even one further step that we call "positive peer pressure" To explain this, let me tell you a story. A young man whose parents live in the States, decided to study in the University of Waterloo. He started attending our church in Kitchener and became part of our youth group. One day at University, during a break, he saw one of the girls from our youth group, so he said hi and they chatted together. He took out a cigarette and started lighting it. The girl angrily took the cigarette from his fingers, threw it to the ground and crushed it with her foot and left him speechless. He later came to me and told me what happened. He quit smoking because he found out that smoking will make him unacceptable to his peers especially from the other sex.

FREEDOM AND RESPONSIBILITY:

A lot of discussion goes on between parents and teens about freedom. "I am not a kid anymore!" I am fourteen! And on and on go the arguments.

Parents know that as you grow, you need and deserve more freedom. And they will sooner or later let you have this freedom. But, what teens fail to realize is that this has to happen gradually. You can not have complete freedom because you became a teen. When you apply for a driver's license, you are given your licence in stages. Your freedom to drive is tied to your age, how well you drive and how responsible you are. So freedom is not absolute but conditional. Here are the conditions.

First: your age. There are things you will not be allowed to do when you are 14 but will be allowed when you are 16. You have to be patient, don't expect to be allowed to do everything when you become 14.

Second condition is responsibility. You will get freedom as long as you show responsibility, same as the right to drive. If you are given freedom and you abuse this freedom then your parents will resist giving you more freedoms. But, if you prove to them that you are responsible, they will be more forthcoming.

The third condition is trust. Freedom is always linked to trust. You have to earn your parent's trust and there are two important ways of doing this:

1. Be open: By this I mean communicate! Let them know something about your life. For example, suppose your curfew is 10 p.m. and now you're 15 and ask for permission to go to your friend's birthday but the catch is that you want to come home at 11:30 p.m. After a lot of hassle, your parents give in. First of all, don't come home at midnight because that means you're not responsible. Then, next day, tell them about something funny that happened while you were playing that board game, or what one of your friends did. Parents are always paranoid about two things, Is he doing drugs, does she have a boy friend. Small talk can give your parents a

window into your life and make them less paranoid. If you don't talk to them then they will fear the worst. One thing my daughter used to tell me when I asked her what she was doing in the birthday party is this, "You raised me in such a way that you should know that I am not going to do anything stupid."

2. Never lie to them. You lie to them, sooner or later they will find out, you know why? Because the devil who told you to lie will tell them the truth to get you in trouble! Once they find out you lied to them, you're out of luck. Your freedom will be curtailed because they don't trust you anymore.

ARGUING VERSUS NEGOTIATING:

Teens need to argue, I always tell parents this. I even encourage parents to engage in such arguments. There are however rules for the arguments, rules for parents and rules for teens. Here are the rules for teens:

3. Politely: Present your case in a polite way. Don't tell your parents, "you're coming from a third world country" or teens favourite expression, "You just don't understand".
4. No raised voice: Raising your voice means you are losing the argument!
5. Argue from the Bible: If you are not allowed to do something, ask your parents, "where in the Bible does it say so?" But know your Bible before you ask, because this may fire back!
6. Negotiate rather than argue, bargain and barter. Here is how a high school teen did it. He was asking to go out 3 times a week and his parents only allowed once a week. The reason given, "you will not have enough time to study." So he goes, "if I maintain my average above 80%, would you let me go out 3 times a week?" The parents were cornered so they said, "Two times a week" and he agreed. Of course as he continued to excel in his studies, the parents eventually agreed to three times a week.
7. One final advice: get yourself a lawyer! Abouna is your best lawyer! If you confess regularly to Abouna, and you feel that you are not getting enough freedom, go to Abouna and convince him. If you win Abouna to your side, he will convince your parents. But, don't come to Abouna after your parents say no, because Abouna will not ask them to change their minds.

Here is an example: A grade 13 comes to me and says, my school is having a trip to Europe, and I wouldn't dare to tell my Dad. I believed him because in their house, dad's favourite chair is beside the fireplace and hanging above the mantle is a sign saying, "Whatever it s the answer is NO!"

I interceded on his behalf after making him promise that he will act as a Christian.

Many times I become party to negotiations, you get this in return for doing this (parents request) I usually write down the agreement and have both parties sign then I sign as a witness, so that neither party goes back on what they promised or say "I never promised such a thing!"