

Defining Generations in Early Christianity

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I first met Harold (“Dr. Remus” at that time) during my Master’s degree at Wilfrid Laurier University. Intimidated though I was then, I was delighted he agreed to a one-on-one readings course focused on social theories and social history of early Christianity, and later to be on my Master’s thesis committee. From that time, I considered Harold a cherished mentor.

Harold was careful with language: what we say and how we say it matters. He used to write often to CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation) to correct word usage or grammatical errors. In his scholarship, of course, words mattered. Harold argued for the use of “polytheist” instead of “pagan” when referring to those outside of Judean/Jewish and Christ-following groups (2004). As far as I know, he coined the term “heteronymity” and “heteronymous” (*heteros* = Greek for “other,” so denoting someone writing in an *other* person’s name) in place of “pseudepigraphy” and “pseudonymous” (*pseudē* = Greek for “false,” so denoting someone writing with a *false* name) to suggest a neutral rather than a negative connotation with regard to an author who claimed someone else’s name.¹ I have adopted Harold’s terms in my work on 1 Timothy (LaFosse 2023, 12-13). I hope they stick.

In the course of writing my doctoral dissertation on age and aging, which is now (finally) a book (LaFosse 2023), I began to think about the use of the term “generation” in the scholarship on early Christ groups, giving a paper at the KW Biblical Colloquium (organized by Harold) and SBL in 2013. This is the next iteration of that paper. Though there is more to consider on this topic, in the current paper I propose a fairly simple thesis: given the range of meanings in contemporary scholarship and parlance, the use of the term “generation” should be carefully considered, especially with regard to emic and etic categories in the study of early Christ groups. The concept of “generation” may seem rather simple and intuitive, but it is not.

¹ See also the suggestion of “allonymity” (*allos* also means “other” in Greek) in I. Howard Marshall’s commentary on the letters to Timothy and Titus (1999, 84).

To illustrate: Harold and I were from different generations. With regard to age, Harold was 44 years my senior, a contemporary of my grandparents' generation. Born in 1928, Harold was part of the so-called "Silent Generation" (born between 1922/1925 and 1943/1948); I am part of Generation X (born between 1961/1965 and 1975/1981).² In academia, he was from a different generation of scholarship, just retiring when I was beginning my graduate work. He spoke fondly of the generation who taught him, such as Jaroslav Pelican. I have here identified three aspects of identity that distinguish me from Harold, using the term "generation" in three distinctly different ways. They all make sense, but they each presuppose different contexts and definitions.

"Generation": A range of definitions

Academic definitions of "generation" often fall into sociological terms,³ but I detect at least five different common uses of the term "generation" that span contexts across academia and popular culture.

- (1) The most basic definition of "generation" is a kinship term denoting levels of descent, often based on biological reproduction. A parent and child belong to two different generations. The younger generation overlaps with and eventually replaces the older generation in a generational cycle (LaFosse 2023, 29). Because fertility lasts for a span of time (and there is the possibility of adoption), the older and younger generation can be closer together or further apart in age; likewise, siblings can be many years apart and still be in the same generation. The time span can be even greater for cousins in the same generation when their parents who are siblings have children many years apart. This definition of generation occurs within the family system.

- (2) A "generation" can also be defined as a group of people born around the same time and experiencing the stages of the life course at approximately the same time. This is more accurately called an "age cohort." An age cohort experiences historical events at approximately the same age or stage of life. This differs from the kinship generation because

² There are variations for what years of birth constitute these "generations" (Constanza et al. 2012, 377-78). See also the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2020, 45).

³ This is true even for disciplines like business (Constanza et al. 2012, 376-77). The definition and use of the term "generation" has been debated in the anthropology and sociology for decades (Kertzer 1982). Alwin & McCammon (2007) outline the first three definitions listed here as distinct (though overlapping).

rather than focusing on the family, this notion focuses on people born at or around the same time. Thus, this cohort identity forms outside of the family unit. When an experience is shared by a cohort and exhibits lasting effects through the life course, this is called a “cohort effect.” It is often “cohort effects” that are behind the descriptions of groups like “Generation X.” We might also refer to groups on the basis of particular cohort identities, such a birth cohort (those born in the same year), graduating cohort (those who graduate the same year) or a marriage cohort (those who marry in a particular set of years) (Alwin and McCammon 2003, 26).

- (3) The most popular definition of “generation” within sociological research is about social identity connected to age cohorts. Alwin and McCammon define “Generation” (with a capital “G”) as “*groups of people who share a distinctive culture and/or self-conscious identity by virtue of their having experienced the same historical events at roughly the same time in their lives*” (emphasis in original; 2003, 27). There is a strong connection to the idea of cohort, but the “distinctive culture” and “shared identity” are observable both within and from outside of those who belong to the “Generation.” That is, they do not correspond exactly to cohorts since they depend on common interests and sensibilities. This concept of Generation can only be found within a dynamic culture (peasant culture, for example, changes too gradually to have this sort of Generation).

The earliest conception of this definition is generally attributed to Karl Mannheim’s 1927 essay (published in 1952), “The Problem of Generations.”⁴ Mannheim’s definition of a

⁴ Mannheim focused on the “social factors” (1952, 285) that interact with age cohorts, for, he argues, “any biological rhythm must work itself out through the medium of social events” (286). He observed that a new generation emerges as the former generation wanes. Each generation has a relatively limited scope of historical experiences—a social location—within which to grow, act and find their identity, and this scope is different for every age cohort because they experience historical events at a particular age and occupy different spaces in historical time. This social location is dynamic, however, as the earlier generation transmits their cultural heritage to the newer generation—a continuous process that is both conscious and unconscious. The younger generation has a “fresh” take, which can result in friction but also in strengthening generational ties (292-302). What is critical for Mannheim (and later interpreters) in defining a generation is awareness of and *participation* in this emerging social group, especially in light of rapid social change. This change, however, is not inevitable, a pattern will not necessarily be evident, and a “generation” in this definition may not form. Societies that change slowly will not have recognizable generations as such (309). He also recognizes that not everyone in the same age cohort participates in the same way. Specific interests and actions result in what he calls “generational units” that form within the generation (304), some of which become more prominent than others (313) and are not only formed from historical processes but contribute to historical processes as well (320). Also influential is the philosophy of José Ortega Y Gasset articulated in his 1931

generation involved the possibility of multiple identities within a (limited) historical timeframe, deliberate participation in a cohort identity, and development of that identity in the formative years of youth. Mannheim's ideas were created within an insider (emic) view of generational change in Europe at the beginning of twentieth century (a time of profound social change in Europe because of the world wars, the Great Depression, and European migration to the Americas), but his ideas have had (etic) applications for subsequent generations, applied specific areas of social interaction like Western constructs of workforce management (e.g., Constanza et al., 2012) and within other cultural contexts (e.g., Wang 2020).⁵ Anthropologist David I. Kertzer argues that this notion of Generation may be a specifically Western cultural expression of how to conceive of one's "social universe" and thus is valuable as "ethnographic data" but not for thinking about cross-cultural notions of kinship or cohorts (1982,41).

This definition undergirds the modern, popular labels of the Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials and Gen Z, defined according to specific attributes of each group: attitudes, couple and family patterns, consumer trends, work habits, entertainment preferences, and so on. However, these labels also fall under the next definition given their specific time frames. This use of "generation" is really a way of grouping birth cohorts over roughly a twenty-year period.⁶

(4) Applying the term "generation" as a measure of a specific duration of time is another prominent definition of a generation. William Strauss and Neil Howe popularized a framework of successive generations in the history of the United States, defining a generation as "a special cohort group whose length approximately matches that of a basic phase of life, or about twenty-two years" (1991, 34). They posit cycles of American generations that predictably fall into a pattern of four types. Although a compelling model in some aspects, it is speculative and based on narrow, carefully chosen case studies rather than empirical evidence (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2020, 42). The most

work *The Modern Theme* (1961), including the reaction of the younger generation to their elders, either continuing the ways of their forerunners or moving toward innovation (16-18).

⁵ See below on "etic" and "emic" perspectives.

⁶ For more on the labels of recent "generations" see National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2020, 42-43).

obvious problem with such a definition is how to decide when to begin the interval, given that social change is a continuous process and kinship generations do not follow such neat intervals on a societal scale.⁷ In reality, kinship generations have a wide range of possibilities depending on many factors (age of marriage, range of years of fertility, as well as adoption practices, which were common in ancient Roman society),⁸ and there is a range of age cohorts participating in public life at any given time.

Measuring time by generations is also evident in the ancient Mediterranean. Greek writers, for example, often (but not always) considered a generation to be thirty years (Jöris 2015, 37, 44). For example, Herodotus used such a unit in his recounting of ancient history, perhaps adapted from Heraclitus, who thought of the time between when a person was born and had offspring of his own as a generation (γενεά) of thirty years (37). As discussed below, the word γενεά had a wide range of meanings, including a measure of time. When used in the plural it indicated a long period of time (37; see also 39-48). The Hebrew equivalents of γενεά in the Septuagint were used in numerous ways (50-67), including but certainly not limited to the “generation” who spent forty years in the wilderness (Num 32:13; Jöris 2015, 57). It is worth noting that this use “generation” generally assumes a basis in active participation in public life that is male and elite.

- (5) Finally, “generation” can be used for objects or groups that succeed one another when the opportunity for innovation arises, such as in technology (e.g., a new generation of a particular cell phone), business models (e.g., Moratis and Melissen 2021) or academic trends (e.g., a new generation of ideology or scientific line of research; White 1992, 38; Hakkarainen 2009).⁹ This is the most nebulous of the definitions, but perhaps the most frequently used in

⁷ Mannheim problematizes Compté’s suggestion that a generation can be counted as thirty years, based on the learning of youth ending at age thirty and the end of a man’s public career at sixty (1952, 278), recognizing that such a number hardly recognizes variation (see 1952, 278n2). Mannheim questions when one might find “the natural beginning of the generation series, because birth and death in society as a whole follow continuously one upon the other, and full intervals exist only in the individual family where there is a definite period before children attain marriageable age” (279)—and have children of their own.

⁸ Mannheim (1952, 278n2) cites the work of Rümelin who calculated average “generational periods” according to men’s average age of marriage and the average span of fertility (presumably among men) to arrive at 36.5 years for men in Germany and 34.5 years for men in France. Beyond the evidence flaw of focusing on men, the attempt demonstrates an awareness of how inaccurate such attempts to measure an average generation are.

⁹ White defines this kind of generation as, “a joint interpretive construction which insists upon and builds among tangible cohorts in defining a style recognized from outside as well as from inside itself... recognized through both

colloquial terms. It is used for succession within professions or groups, like generations of music or political movements or academia. It is a way of identifying certain kinds of relationships within the group and may be used to measure the history and/or longevity of the group. It is metaphorical, using the succession of a parent to a child as an analogy. Identifying junior and senior scholars in different generations, for example, denotes a range of age (but not always) and experience in the field that suggests the kind of succession between a parent and child (implied in the term *Doktorvater*, for example). How the term is defined is internal to the specific group (Kertzer 1982) and highly variable.

As Alwin and McCammon note, clearly delineating the various definitions of “generation” does not need mean we need to assess them as better or worse uses of the word; rather clearing up the confusion (as much as possible) should allow us to use the word and theories build around the idea of “generation” more effectively (2007, 221, 233-35).

Emic understanding of succession, γενεά and generation

Harold liked to point out etic and emic points of view. I, too, find this can be a useful heuristic device for working with historical data. The terms emerge from cultural anthropology to differentiate the views of the participant-observer as etic (the anthropologist’s perspective), and the views of their informants as emic (emerging from their perspective). Fieldwork affords the anthropologist a clearer view of these categories than a historian can attain, especially since they can probe the emic view more thoroughly with their informants than can a historian working with limited data. Even so, the distinction is one that is particularly helpful in thinking about “generations.”

I begin with a sketch of some of what we can observe about the emic view of generations for early Christ groups, within a limited scope of early Christian texts from the New Testament and select Apostolic Fathers.¹⁰

interpretive and behavioral aspects. The opportunity for a new generation is events [sic] not gathered in and signified by a previous one” (31). It is possible that a definition of this kind of generation can be found in the conception of philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey, who considered a generation a unit of time outside of calendar and clock time, especially able to measure “intellectual movements by an intuitive process of re-enactment” (summarized in Mannheim 1952, 282).

¹⁰ A more systematic and thorough review would suggest a larger project than I can undertake here.

There are clearly instances in our sources of lines of descent (the first definition above), generations based on literal parent-child relationships, such as in the birth narratives of John the Baptist and Jesus (Mt 2; Lk 1-2). There are many more instance of the use of parent-child imagery, used metaphorically, from Paul (e.g., Gal 4:19) to late first century texts (1 Tim 1:2; 1 John 2:1, 12-14).

In 2 Timothy, Timothy's grandmother Lois and mother Eunice are named, implying they moulded Timothy's faith (1:5), which he has had from childhood (3:15). Faith is an important theme in the letter (1:13, 2:1, 13, 19; 3:8, 10, 15; 4:6), and the fictive Paul's¹¹ enthusiasm in remembering (ὕπόμνησιν λαβῶν) where Timothy's "sincere faith" (ἀνυπόκριτος πίστις)¹² comes from is foundational for Paul's trust in him (1:13-14). The letter itself serves as a kind of succession, encouraging Timothy, Paul's "beloved child" (1:2), in his leadership and teaching (4:1-5) even as the older Paul is near the end of his life (4:6-8). This is a conventional picture of the first definition of generation: succession within a parent-child (kinship) relationship. Similar to 2 Timothy, father-child language is used to convey a sense of two generations in 1 Timothy (1:2, 18) and Titus (1:4). In 1 Timothy, the rhetoric of an older man addressing a younger man is found throughout, conveying lines of authority, trust and succession (see LaFosse 2023, 54, 71-79, 238-41). Timothy has submitted to the council of elders who laid hands on him as way of affirming his gift, presumably for entrusting him with leadership in the community (4:14)—likely a ritual of succession. "Paul" charges Timothy with "guarding that which has been entrusted" to him (τὴν παραθήκην φύλαξον; 6:20) as a kind of spiritual inheritance (similar to 2 Tim 1:12, 14). Having just directed Timothy to instruct the wealthy to be generous as a way of securing a good foundation for things to come (θεμέλιον καλὸν εἰς τὸ μέλλον; 6:19), there is a sense of the importance of transmission and transference not just for the present for the (near) future as well. Beyond the rhetoric of an older man instructing a younger man, we see tensions between different age groups (named and implied in 1 Tim 5:1-25), framed by the analogy of parent-child (and sibling) familial relationships (5:1-2). In particular, 1 Tim 5:17-25 suggests that older and younger men are in conflict (LaFosse 2023, 198-224), similar to tensions in *1 Clement* (LaFosse 2023, 218-20; Welborn 2018). First Timothy represents a

¹¹ I assume the letters to Timothy and Titus are heteronymous (see LaFosse 2023, 11-13).

¹² All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

moment in time that highlights the importance of relationships between older and younger members of the community, between two adult generations.

I have argued elsewhere that such texts written around the end of the first century suggest an emic shift toward more visible age hierarchy, such as honouring the wisdom of the elders and seeking connections to ancestors. Why age became more visible is related to a time of profound social change within the movement when those who had a living memory of the founders of the movement were dwindling or gone (LaFosse 2023, 68-74, 246-60). It is important to point out, however, that the notion of age cohorts or an awareness of age cohort experience—the basis for the second and third definitions of “generation”—is not a prominent feature in early Christian texts, likely because strong values of the honour and shame in the ancient Mediterranean meant that kinship tended to trump peer relationships (LaFosse 2023, 282n48).¹³

The word γενεά (*genea*) often translated in the New Testament and Apostolic Fathers texts with the English gloss of “generation,” is found 43 times in the New Testament and 15 times in the Apostolic Fathers.¹⁴ Matthew uses it to summarize his detailed genealogy from Abraham to Jesus (1:17), naming each step in the succession from father to son as a “generation.” This corresponds to the first definition of generation above based on lines of descent within a family.

But the use of the Greek word through centuries of use had a wide range of meanings related to identity and belonging,¹⁵ including a measurement of time (see the fourth definition of “generation” above); belonging to a particular “race” or family; a historical age or epoch; offspring (who belonged to their parents and ancestors); time or place of birth (and the identity this entailed); and a metaphorical idea of “class” or “kind” (Liddell, Scott and Jones 1940, 342). In the limited literature under investigation here, the word is often used in the plural in one of three ways: earlier generations, as in “the other [previous] generations” (Eph 3:5; also Acts 14:16, 15:21; Col 1:26); past generations, as in “the generations that came before us” (*1 Clement*

¹³ The binary conception of “older” and “younger” is ubiquitous (Barclay 2007, 227–32), but not in the sense of strong age cohort consciousness. Generational consciousness in the form of public rebellion of younger men against older men is evident on occasion in Greek and Roman history (LaFosse 2023, 60-64).

¹⁴ For a thorough investigation of this word, see Jöris (2015).

¹⁵ The sense of identity may point to its cognate γίνομαι (earlier: γίγνομαι), which means “come into a new state of being” (Liddell, Scott and Jones 1940, 349).

19:1, *Apostolic Fathers* 2003, 71;), namely people from the Hebrew Scriptures; or “all generations [πᾶσαι αἱ γενεαί]” (Luke 1:48, also Eph 3:21), with a sense of a common identity (and not so much a future sense).

In the Synoptic tradition (the word is not used the Gospel of John), the most common use is the singular “generation,” often referring to a group in the narrative present that is labelled as wayward (e.g., Mk 8:38) or unbelieving (e.g., Mk 9:19), or even evil and adulterous (e.g., Mat 12:39, 42, 45; 16:4, 17:17; Lk 9:41, 11:29).

Especially debated is the declaration by Jesus found in Mark 13:30: “Truly I tell you, this generation [ἡ γενεὰ αὕτη] will not pass away until all these things have taken place” (NRSVUE). The question is around whether Jesus was simply wrong (a failed prophecy) or whether the phrase ἡ γενεὰ αὕτη means something quite different than a modern, literal reading in English would imply. Steffen Jöris’s thorough history and exegesis of this text demonstrates that the use of γενεά (and its Hebrew and Aramaic equivalents) cover a wide range of definitions that only rarely overlap with twenty-first century definitions of “generation.” He concludes that this is not a statement about the imminent end of the world nor about those living at the same time as Jesus (or Mark); rather γενεά refers to a group that opposes Jesus and will at some point cease to exist (2015, 237). Even more convincing, Adam Winn argues that the fact that Matthew and Luke do not change this phrase in their otherwise heavily redacted versions of Mark 13 (Mt 24:34, Lk 21:32) suggests that this term is not equivalent to Jesus’s contemporaries (544). Set within an eschatological framework, the word refers not to a “temporal boundary” or “a literal generation of 30-40 years,” but to “the present evil age and the final apostate generation that comprises it”—an age within which all of the Synoptic authors could see themselves and their readers given their current circumstances (559). Paul appears to use the word γενεά in a similar way in Philippians 2:14-15: “Do all things without murmuring and arguing, so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation [γενεά]” (NRSVUE).

In sum, within this limited survey, aside from Matthew 1:17, γενεά does not refer to a particular “generation” in the sense of kinship, cohort, “generational unit” or unit of time; rather it has its own semantic domain related to group identity.

On the other hand, as noted above, the fictive use of parent-child relationship points to early Christ followers engaging in (and struggled with) succession as members grew older and

others replaced them. In fact, one of the main ways “generations” are understood in the definitions above is to recognize or define social change, especially with a sense of succession. By the end of the first century, various authors display an emic sense of change and succession within the movement.

For example, in Luke 1:2, the author explicitly places himself as the beneficiary of stories passed to him by those who have gone before him. His written account reflects that which was handed over (παραδίδωμι) from those who were “eyewitnesses from the beginning” (ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς αὐτόπται), and faithful to the group (literally, “having become servants of the word”). Jin Young Kim (2023) convincingly argues that the author of Luke-Acts tells a story that serves to bridge the gap between the young and the old as they process the trauma of the war and destruction of the Temple in different ways.

Similar to the sentiments in Luke’s prologue, Papias, an early second century writer whose work has only come down to us in fragments, apparently composed five books on the sayings of Jesus, not from the apostles themselves, but on the basis of what he learned “from the elders” (παρὰ τῶν πρεσβυτέρων), including interviews with those who were faithful followers of the elders and the apostles (*Apostolic Fathers* 2003, 98-101; Papias 3.2,3,7). Eusebius (a fourth century source for Papias) notes that Papias used the names of his sources and was diligently arranging the traditions he had received (αὐτῶν παραδόσεις; *Apostolic Fathers* 2003, 100-1; Papias 3.7).¹⁶

In both Luke and Papias, as in 1 and 2 Timothy above, passing along stories and other markers of identity (e.g., 2 Tim “the faith”) to those who are younger is clearly evident, sometimes with clear kinship language that is literal (2 Tim) or figurative (1 Tim), and with the sense of succession from an older group to a subsequent one.¹⁷ It is important to note, however, that none of these instances of succession include the word γενεά. The semantic range of γενεά overlaps with the modern English notion of “generation” only slightly.

¹⁶ Malina (see below) cites Papias, using a translation of the fragment in Eusebius that states “Papias, the hearer of John and companion of Polycarp, a man of an earlier generation, testifies to these things” (2005, 64). In fact, the Greek phrase ἀρχαῖος ἀνὴρ (literally, “[very] old man”) that Malina attributes to Polycarp (“a man of an earlier generation”) is in apposition to the nominative noun Papias, as translated in Holmes (2006, 360): “Papias, a man of the early period, who was a hearer of John and a companion of Polycarp, bears witness to these things in writing” and Ehrman’s translation, “Papias as well, an ancient man—the one who heard John and was a companion of Polycarp—gives a written account of these things” (*Apostolic Fathers* 2003, 95).

¹⁷ Much more could be explored here for evidence. For examples, second-century leaders like Polycarp and Irenaeus were connected to important figures of the past, and in some sense carried on a legacy of those who came before.

Scholarly frameworks: An etic use of “generation”

We now turn to the etic use of the term “generation” within the study of Christian origins, keeping in mind the *English* semantic range of the word as defined above.

In scholarship that examines the early Christ groups using a social lens, the language of “generation” is pervasive, especially with regard to categorizing particular texts, doctrine or social development according to movement through time, often rendered as “first,” “second” and subsequent generations. Depending on the area of work, the “first generation” of the movement is generally measured from the person of Jesus or of Paul. The language is so engrained in work that relates to social commentary, there is no way to produce an exhaustive list, so I offer a few examples to demonstrate the variety with which this schema is used.

Because of the distilled nature of the medium, I start with a PBS documentary *From Jesus to Christ*, which has a section entitled “Passing of the First Generation of Leaders” (Part II, 42:48). Michael White states that Peter and Paul (according to tradition) and James, the brother of Jesus (according to Josephus) were all killed “in about the same two or three year period” (around 64 CE). He suggests that “with the passing of this first generation, the expectation that all of those coming events must be close at hand, probably was a concern for a lot of people.” White measures this “first generation” from Jesus and select leaders who join the movement at different times but happened to die (according to tradition) around the same time. An overarching concern in this summary is social change, with a focus on particular pivotal figures.

The second example demonstrates how “generations” within the early Christ groups are assumed. With a primary goal of contrasting two American figures in the twentieth century Disciples of Christ church, Boring outlines three generations of Christ followers as a basis for comparing the contemporary Christian denomination because of their “self-conscious” separation as a “religion group” (1991, 32). According to Boring, the first generation had a “new, magnificent vision” and charismatic leaders (33), and subsequent generations saw them as “pure” (33n11). The second generation “inherited and consolidated” the group, but the third generation was able to recognize problems and struggle with who should be the “legitimate heirs” in the midst of deviance, both doctrinal and moral (as exemplified in Matthew, Luke-Acts, John, the letters to Timothy and Titus, Jude, 2 Peter, and especially Johannine epistles; 33-34). He is not clear what people or texts he would consider part of the first or second generations and provides no citations. Again, the is focus on religious (and social) change.

Gregory Sterling uses “generations” to build his theory of the authorship of Acts. He proposes that the historical Luke is a “second generation Christian” and “Paul must be a first generation Christian.” A third generation Christian authored Luke-Acts “using Luke as his authority for the latter half of Acts” (1992, 326) at a time when the history of the movement “has a past which can be viewed and understood in relation to time and the world at large” (330; see also Kim 2023, 244).

In Margaret Y. MacDonald’s influential book on the Pauline corpus, she argues that the thirteen letters “probably bear witness to at least three church generations” (1988, 2) representing the “transformation of the church” (6). In this framework, Paul’s undisputed letters form the first generation (the “community-building” phase); Colossians and Ephesians characterize the second generation (the “community stabilizing” phase); and the letters to Timothy and Titus are part of the third generation (the “community-protecting” phase). Here the focus is primarily on texts, again with the goal of providing a framework related to social change in the form of institutionalization manifesting in “attitudes to the world/ethics, ministry, ritual and belief” (1988, 29).

Raymond Collins (1993) considers the Pauline letter of 1 Thessalonians representative of a new era in the Jesus movement: the “first Christian generation.” As the earliest extant writing we have from the Jesus movement, he suggests 1 Thessalonians marks the succession of the movement from this point forward. The “second generation” is identified with the heterographic (pseudepigraphic) letters written in Paul’s name, namely Colossians, Ephesians, 2 Thessalonians and the letters to Timothy and Titus. The “third generation” gathered Paul’s writings together because they had gained authority, as suggested by 2 Peter 3:15-16 (195).¹⁸ Collins suggests that by 70 CE the living voices of those who walked with Jesus (Peter and others) were no longer around and “even some of the second generation Christians had died” (198). However, having established Paul and the Thessalonians as beginning the “first generation,” introducing Peter as “first generation” here confuses the schema.

¹⁸ It is unclear whether the second century Apostolic Fathers are part of Collins’s “third generation,” but they too knew of some of Paul’s letters and perhaps collected them.

Eric C. Stewart offers a picture of Peter as a “first-generation member of the Jesus movement” (2012, 9, 14-15) who also functioned within the second generation (especially in conflict with Paul; 19-29).¹⁹ He notes that:

... “generation” is a bit of a slippery term. I am part of Generation X, but it is not clear exactly what birth years designate the beginning and end of this generation. Generations are frequently defined by things like worldview, outlook, sociological trends, and chronology. In the same way, the generations of the Jesus movement are designated to some extent by their relationships to Jesus and by ideologies concerning him and his movement. (10)

This discussion betrays some of the complications of the term.

Bruce Malina introduces a particularly detailed account of how he organizes people and texts into “generations”: the first generation is the generation of Jesus, including “his core group members, their family members along with friends and followers who belonged to their social network,” along with the Judean leadership of the Jerusalem church, and “presumably” those addresses by Jesus by the phrase “this generation” in the Synoptic tradition (see above). The second generation is made up of “Paul and his contemporaries,” including those who preserved Jesus’s sayings in Q and the parables. The third generation consists of the authors of Mark, Matthew and John “in his own way,” and Luke-Acts forms a fourth generation (2005, 63). Malina uses this framework to apply the notion of “the third generation” as a model, which warrants some background explanation.

In 1937, Marcus Lee Hansen gave an address to Augustana Historical Society in Rock Island, Illinois in which he addressed “The Problem of the Third Generation Immigrant” (printed in Hansen 1987). Here, Hansen uses numbered generations dating back to those who immigrated to the United States from various parts of Europe in the late nineteenth century (namely, Scottish-Irish, German, Scandinavian and Jewish immigrants).²⁰ His thesis was that the second generation (the first to be born in America) was sandwiched between the criticism of their American peers (whose families had settled generations before) and the criticism of their elders (who retained their traditional ways and expected their children to follow suit). This second

¹⁹ Stewart leans heavily on Malina (2005), whose work I detail next.

²⁰ Besides conflating the variations with this groups of people, nothing is said of immigrants from other areas, such as Eastern Europe and Asia.

generation wanted to forget the old ways as they struggled to assimilate. The third generation, however, emerged with “new force and new opportunity” (1987, 15), now appearing less like an immigrant and more like other Americans in speech and wealth. This third generation wanted to remember their heritage and the tenacity of their ancestors. In short, “what the son wishes to forget the grandson wishes to remember” (15).²¹

Malina utilizes Hansen’s notion of the “third generation” to explain the social changes of early Christ groups, with a focus on New Testament texts. He hypothesizes that whereas the “first generation” focused on Jesus as prophet and teacher who pointed to God and a promise of an imminent “theocracy” (that is, on what Jesus did and taught), the “second generation” focused on Jesus as Lord in cosmic terms, rejected the Temple, and pursued redemption for the diaspora (mostly based on Paul). But the “third generation” sought to recover and elaborate on the past, namely the stories of Jesus, recording them in the gospels.

Interestingly, Malina defines a generation as “a group of living persons constituting a single step in the line of descent from an ancestor (either person or event)” (2005, 63). Hansen’s “third generation” is based on “line of descent from an ancestor” (the first definition of “generation” above), in this case, the grandchild of the person who immigrated to the United States. But a line of descent related to an “event” is problematic: *descent* presupposes *persons* who are older and younger. Malina connects the first and second “generations” to particular people (Jesus and Paul), but the assumptions behind the “generation” they each represent do not map onto Hansen’s project because Jesus and Paul were not in a familial line of descent, one older and one younger. Nor do they characterize particular age cohorts. The early Christ followers are a subgroup of society comprised of *multiple age cohorts*—for it is most likely that early Christ groups were composed of a variety of ages from the beginning (see LaFosse 2023, 251-59).

²¹ It is worth noting what “counts” as “first generation” with regard to immigration, whether those who emigrate or those who are the first to be born in the area to which they have emigrated. Some people whose parents immigrate to Canada refer to themselves as first generation in Canada, while others call themselves second generation. I have also heard the term “one and half generation.” My great-grandparents immigrated to Canada, and I usually say I am a “fourth generation” settler, but I am the third generation born in Canada. Such labels seem to depend at least on context and age of parents (whether they came to Canada as children or adults). These variations make a difference in thinking about the “third generation” effect—that is, if Hansen’s hypothesis still applies today.

Neither does defining a “first,” “second” or “third” generation on the basis of contemporaries of Jesus or Paul equate to age cohorts (second definition above) or the prominent academic definition of “generation” defined by an age cohort who experiences and participates in particular historical events at around the same age (third definition above). Historical events affecting *an age cohort* within a society forms a “generation.” What Malina is categorizing are different ideologies and foci, but also different populations. He seems to conflate identities that have nothing to do with age, such as differences in geographical location (Jesus was from Galilee and Paul was from the Diaspora in Asia Minor), language (Jesus spoke Aramaic, and Paul was likely primarily Greek-speaking), cultural background (Jesus was a Galilean, and Paul was a Hellenistic Judean), and methodological and epistemological foundations for dissemination of teaching (Jesus was an itinerant teacher using parables, sayings and healings; Paul established communities in urban areas likely through social networks and wrote letters).

In all of the etic examples above, the term “generation” is a label used by scholars (as outside observers) to help organize the social and ideological patterns they see in the historical evidence. It is employed as a heuristic tool to say something about social change, particularly to denote a measure of time in early Christian history, usually associated with changes in social structure, shifts in identity, or in development of views of Jesus apparent in the early Christian texts. However, these divergent examples also demonstrate the variety of ways scholars have defined succeeding generations within Christian origins.

Evaluating the use of the etic term “generation” in early Christian studies

With the five definitions of “generation” in mind, we can point to several problems with the overall etic use of “generation.”

I begin with questioning whether scholars are conflating different meanings of “generation” and whether their use of “generation” is analyzing what they hope to be analyzing. The main definitions of “generation” related to cohort (definitions two and three, outlined above), and examine groupings according to age in society as a whole, conceived within a particular sent of Eurocentric and/or white, American-centric views of “society.” As note above, these definitions cannot apply to the multigenerational groups of early Christ followers. Moreover, scholars often apply their schemas of successful generations to *texts*. Dating texts (an etic task) is often a precarious activity, with ranges of possible dates. Setting texts within a timeline does not necessarily correlate with matters of “succession.”

Second, using “generation” to measure a line of descent presupposes a measure of time in which a younger cohort gradually overtakes an older one as they both move through the life course and as well as through historical time (see LaFosse 2023, 45-50). Though the use of “generations” in early Christian scholarship presupposes movement through historical time, it does not correlate with movement through the life course, which “generation” implies. In fact, we have little historical evidence for the ages of even our most central figures of Jesus and Paul, though the author of Luke-Acts is keen to give them ages (Jesus is “about thirty” in Luke 3:23; see LaFosse 2023, 117, 261-62; Paul is introduced as a “young man” in Acts 7:58; see Kim 2023, 261-64). Jerome Murphy O’Connor would put Paul in exactly the same age cohort as Jesus (1996, 4), though his evidence is problematic (LaFosse 2024, 581, 597-98). Peter’s age is unknown, though, if we can trust the historical details of Mark’s story in Capernaum, he is old enough to be married and young enough to have a living mother-in-law at the time of Jesus’s ministry (Mk 1:30).²² It is unclear how useful the categorization of “generation” is when grouping individuals, events or texts together for the purpose of finding common social or developmental moments along a diachronic timeline.²³

As we have seen, the term “generation” is consistently used to ponder the idea of succession, but it also implies (from its basic definitions) a line of descent. For something like categorizing a set of clearly defined and related texts, like the Pauline texts (MacDonald 1988),

²² On average in the ancient Mediterranean, women married at a younger age than men (5-10 years in Roman society; for sources see LaFosse 2023, 9), so that a woman’s mother would likely be significantly younger on average than a man’s mother upon marriage. The ages of marriage among Judeans (and Galileans more specifically) might differ based on cultural or other factors. If Peter married at age 23 and his bride was 18, her mother could be anywhere from, say, 35 to 60 years old, but more likely in her late 30s or early 40s (depending, of course, on how old she was when Peter’s wife was born) and thus perhaps 10-20 years his senior. The story in Mark 1:29-31 suggests she was normally high functioning in the household, which may suggest she is not over 60 (though there were certainly women over 60 who were still very active, the age of 60 was the usual threshold for decline in health at that time; see LaFosse 2023, 133 for sources). If Peter were still a fairly young man when Jesus healed her fever, somewhere between 25 and 35, she might have been anywhere from 35 to 55 years old. This is completely conjecture but does place Peter within the range of Jesus’s age according to Luke 3:23.

²³ It is important to note that most definitions of “generation” relate to social change with a focus on changes in an individual’s life (decision making, life transitions) as well individual stability over the life course (retaining certain patterns, attitudes, etc. after the formative years of youth which affect the decisions and attitudes of younger cohorts). One of the most prominent theories of social change related to generations is called the age-period-cohort model, with following elements: (1) The aging and maturing process occurs within the individual. (2) Historical events and processes affect all cohorts (e.g., use of computers), referred to as a “period effect.” (3) “Cohort succession” refers to “the gradual replacement of earlier born cohorts by later ones” (Alwin and McCammon 2003:30). Most elements in this model are focused on individual actors and individuality, the applicability of which to collectivist early Christ groups is questionable, though the notion of cohort succession might be helpful.

the analogy of a line of descent, from parent to child to grandchild, is effective. But if it is used in a broader sense to classify social stages of the early Christ groups or development of Christology (e.g., Boring 1991, Malina 2005), especially if the “actors” involved are only canonized or “proto-orthodox” texts and views, the model oversimplifies the complexities of social and ideological dynamics by seeing them as lines of descent.

However, on an intuitive, heuristic level, the use of “generation” seems to be understandable, even if it is not used consistently. I would suggest, then, that this use of “generation” best fits the fifth definition: a particular group (or object) that succeeds another. That is, scholars seem to utilize a definition of generation not defined in biological, sociological or historical time frames, but defined by change within the entity (objects, organization, or group). This is the least satisfying definition of “generation” because it presupposed a particular event or experience that defines the “succession” and thus the parameters of the “generation.” If a “generation” is defined by events, and the events define “generations,” this is circular reasoning. Perhaps this helps explain why there is no consensus on the use of “generation” in an etic sense among early Christian scholars.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have challenged a simple definition of “generation.” The term might be easily overlooked, in part because it is so familiar: it is a lived experience for us all, within family (kinship structures), within the manifestation of our own age cohorts, and within twenty-first century popular culture, including media views and influences (like advertising). We are immersed in paradigms that highlight how our age cohort functions in particular ways (even across other lines of identity), consciously and unconsciously defined by common formative experiences in our age cohort’s youth (and beyond). My identity as someone who is steeped in Western dominating culture is strongly connected especially to this expression of “generation.”

Emic and etic points of view are helpful tools to differentiate between the potentially observable object of our study and our own frameworks for that study. An emic view of texts written by and for early Christ groups suggests that around the end of the first century, they were evaluating social change as membership shifted over time and recognized the importance of generational shifts between older and younger members, but the use of the word γενεά (often translated as “generation”) does not correspond with most definitions of “generation” used today. The language of generation related to lines of descent within kinship groups (parent and child) is

clearly meaningful when talking about succession, but the modern notion of age cohorts or an awareness of age cohort experience is not strongly present.

Within the study of early Christ groups, “generation” is a term that scholars seem to use rather intuitively for explaining identity and social change. From an etic perspective, scholars examining social change among the early Christ followers have used the concept of “generation” as a framework for categorizing movement or change over time. Though usually measured from a particular person (usually Jesus or Paul), there is no consensus on what constitutes first, second, third or fourth generations. The etic use of the term “generation” for successive, observable change is ubiquitous and seemingly understood intuitively, yet the use of the term “generations” in its most common academic (and popular) definitions does not apply. “Generations” measure either familial or age cohort succession and identity, whereas the Christ groups were composed of people from all ages. It may be clearer to employ other less confusing words, such as “phase,” “stage” or “period,” but it is not likely that scholars will easily shed their use of “generation.” It will likely continue to be used—albeit in a metaphorical way—to describe elements of the movement that appear to succeed one another.

Thus, I have pointed out the sociological and popular definitions and uses, probed the emic concepts, queried our assumptions as scholars, and hopefully helped to define the etic view of “generations” in early Christian scholarship as a (somewhat awkward) way to label social change over time.

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