

Salt and Light Papers provide important information and analysis to help Christians and Churches to engage with 21st century social issues

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AGEISM: THE CULT OF THE YOUNG, THE LIMBO OF THE MIDDLE-AGED, THE DEMISE OF THE ELDERLY

Suddenly, old age is in the news, as departments of government, a variety of interest groups, and the press and media, try to interpret a rush of new facts indicating that a crisis is looming, as serious and inexorable as global warming. Here are just some:

- Research commissioned by the Alzheimer's Society estimates that 1.7 million people in the UK will suffer dementia by 2051. It is already costing £17bn a year to treat and care for the existing 700,000 sufferers, but this figure would be higher if it wasn't for family carers who save the State £6bn. *[Guardian Unlimited web site, 27 February 2007]*
- A study by a team from University College, London, has led to the conclusion that doctors in the NHS are guilty of ageism, denying older people treatments they would offer younger patients. *[BBC News web site, 14 February 2007, quoting the Quality and Safety in Health Care Journal, in which the findings were published]*
- A joint report by the Audit Commission, Healthcare Commission and Commission for Social Care Inspection, found that elderly people were being neglected and poorly treated and that the NHS and care services treated older people with a lack of dignity and respect. *[BBC News web site, 27 March 2006]*
- It is estimated that five-and-a-half million carers [men, women and children] hold down a day job or are in full-time education in addition to looking after another family member. It has also been estimated that 6,000 new carers join their ranks each day. *[Guardian, 6 December 2006]*

The rapid growth in the elderly population has brought inevitable challenges both to public services and to public and private attitudes to older people. From the latter has emerged a concept known as 'ageism.'

In the following article, **Roger Hitchings** describes ageism, considers its origins and implications, and offers a biblical alternative.

'The glory of young men is their strength, grey hair the splendour of the old.'

This statement from the book of Proverbs would almost certainly raise eyebrows were it to be used to describe an ideal society to a modern secular audience. The surprise would be even greater if it was then explained that 'grey hair' is a reference to wisdom and insight.

Yet that is what it is. The Bible is telling us how generations will differ and yet how they should essentially be in unity. One certainty is that this is not the way things are in our present society. Few of our influential institutions would see it as a model to be emulated.

What Is Ageism?

Age differences have been distinguished and discussed since time began. So we read of Elihu speaking in that ancient book of Job:

'I am young in years, and you are old... I thought "Age should speak; advanced years should teach wisdom."' (Job 32:6-7)

Hesiod, a Greek poet from 8 BC, observed: *'Society could have no future if it depended on the frivolous youth of today, for certainly all youth are reckless beyond words.'*

Peter the Hermit, 1117, concluded: *'Youth has no regard for old age and the wisdom of the centuries is looked down upon both as stupid and foolishness. The young men are indolent; the young women are indecent and indecorous in their speech, behaviour and dress.'*

While there have always been differences between the various age groups – and even some antagonism – these tensions were never considered to be ageist until the 1960s, when Robert Butler introduced the concept into public discussion. His definition of it appears in the *Encyclopaedia of Ageing* published in 1987:

'Ageism – a process of systematic stereotyping of, and discrimination against, people because they are old, just as racism and sexism accomplish this for skin colour and gender.'

Elsewhere he writes:

'Ageing allows the younger generation to see older people as different from themselves: thus they suddenly cease to identify with their elders as human beings and thereby reduce their own dread of ageing...'

The key words in Butler's view of ageism are 'stereotyping', 'discrimination', 'old' and 'identify.' Many examples of all of these are seen every day in our contemporary society. The way in which old age is presented in the Media is one example of stereotyping:

Victor Meldrew in *One Foot in the Grave*, Compo in *Last of the Summer Wine*, and programmes like *Grumpy Old Men/Women* have associated old age with a degree of incompetence to produce a totally negative mindset.

This attitude is prevalent throughout society – people express surprise that someone with white hair should be welcomed in schools and be reasonably good at communicating with teenagers.

Public policy is also greatly influenced by stereotypical presuppositions. There is a tendency to patronise, and to see older people as a group for which others have to do things. This leads inexorably to the assumption that the elderly need to be regarded as a dependent group.

Discrimination in respect of the elderly is rife. Why should the elderly not be able to judge dog shows, to be an exam invigilator or a school governor? For them, these activities were all brought to an end as a result of reaching an age point. Competence and physical capacity were never the issue – just age.

Again in connection with public policy, it might be asked:

- Why are women over 70 not invited for breast cancer screenings?
- Why are magistrates and jurors not allowed to serve past the age of 70?
- Why does the Disability Living Allowance stop at 65?
- Why does ageism persist in the Health Services? – Professor Young of St Luke's Hospital, Bradford, wrote in the *British Medical Journal* in September 2006: '*Whenever a clinical stone is turned over, ageism is revealed – for example in cancer services, coronary units, prevention of vascular disease, and in mental health services.*'

The systematic denial of resources is a glaring example of discrimination.

The Commission for Social Care Inspection warned on 11 January this year that many Councils in England are restricting access to provisions such as home care, day services and respite care. This is happening without debate. Many people now have to make their own arrangements because access to services is being tightened to include only those deemed to be in most serious need. People are then left to struggle or are made more dependent on families and friends. All this is happening not because criteria have been changed, but because the same criteria are being more strictly interpreted.

This would never be allowed to happen if children or young people were involved. The emphasis in social provision is not proportionate, and is therefore discriminatory.

Whenever the word 'old' is used, this always puts the emphasis on the chronological factor, and removes any consideration of a person's individuality. In spite of much positive rhetoric, and clearly sincere intentions, the government has yet to address with any seriousness the debilitating impact of the age barrier on the lives of the elderly.

A failure to 'identify' with the elderly is the mechanism by which other age groups cope with their own dread of ageing. Age is perceived by the young and the middle-aged as being very different from 'normality.' An older person is someone from a different culture and with different capacities. Since these characteristics of old age are overwhelmingly viewed by those younger as entirely negative, old age becomes something to be seriously feared: 'Hope I die before I get old!'

The practical challenges arising from *ageing* and *ageism* are undoubtedly compounded by the fact that people are living longer. The following facts are sufficient to illustrate the 'demographic time-bomb:'

- For the first time in history the number of British pensioners over 60 exceeds the number of young people under 16. By 2008 the number of pensioners will have overtaken the number of children and young people under 18.
- By 2016 there will be one million more pensioners living alone than there are now.
- By 2020 there will be three million people over the age of 80.
- By 2030 there will be 36,000 centenarians and four million people aged over 80.
- By 2040 there will be 4.8 million people over the age of 80 and only two people of working age to support each pensioner.
- By 2050 there will be 5.5 million people aged over 80, more than two million of them living alone.

The significance of these figures does not only lie in the number of people in the older age bands, but in the extent of their needs. Already:

- 38% of people aged 65-74 have a long-standing limiting illness
- 50% of people aged 75-plus have a long-standing and limiting illness.
- 63% of the current UK population considers that elderly people living alone are more lonely today than elderly people living alone were 30 years ago.

As medical science and living conditions progress, the elderly will possess an increasing ability to survive. The problem of ageism must be addressed. Rather than perceiving the elderly as a 'dependent group,' society must learn to view them as essential contributors to its overall well-being.

The difficulty is that just when significantly more elderly people need services, there are fewer younger people to provide the resources. The only economic answer to this imbalance is to develop highly-productive, wealth-creating industries able to supply the wealth despite a falling workforce.

The single-word name for this is innovation. While generational perspectives are so starkly differentiated, the danger is that those whose hard work provides the wealth, already possessed of an ideology which devalues age, could grow to resent the proportion of their productivity which goes to meet the needs of the elderly.

The 'generation gap' – an expression which appears to have been first coined by the sociologist Charles Kraft in 1967 – is a popular description of the divide that exists between 'young people' and the adult generations.

These 'gaps' were entrenched into society's thinking so that to be young became the situation of positives, to be middle-aged was to be losing value and identity, and to be old was to have lost all that made life vibrant and good. We might call these three 'ages of man' the cult of the young, the limbo of the middle-aged and the demise of the elderly. Within this hypothesis, old age is no longer seen as part of the continuum of life, but as distinct territory to be dreaded.

The emergence of different cultures for different generations has been a boon to the marketing men of the commercial world, but is also evidence of a fragmenting society needing considerable healing. The political reaction to it has been a strategy of expediency. This is hardly a surprise, since this is a moral and ethical issue, rather than a practical matter to which politicians can easily respond. Governments can change the legislative framework, but not the way people think.

Both society and government have therefore embraced ageism, modelling the elderly as dependent, non-contributing and increasingly decrepit. Research recently undertaken by *Contact the Elderly*, revealed that 68% of the population considered that today's society ignores older people and does not value them. This attitude will be endemic until it is seen as unacceptable. If and when that happens, immense changes in perceptions and policies will be involved.

Is There an Alternative Model of Ageing?

How different is the biblical perspective? The Bible gives us a threefold structure for generational relationships:

- Generational Difference Acknowledged
- Generational Cohesion Promoted
- Generational Support Provided

Generational Difference The biblical perspective does not present us with a never-changing society. It recognises that each generation has its developing role. Youthful strength, imagination, vigour and zeal are all praised and encouraged. Wisdom, sagacity, experience and understanding are expected and promoted among the old. The great desire of the elderly David in Psalm 71 is to communicate his experience and wisdom to the rising generation.

The limitations and blessings of age are fully identified (Ecclesiastes 12; Psalm 91). Likewise youth must learn and gain experience, but the potential for making an impact is never denied (Psalm 37:25; Psalm 119:99-100; 1 Timothy 4:12-14).

Generational Cohesion There are innumerable pictures of young men who respect and learn from their elders – Joseph, Joshua, Daniel and Timothy are just a few. Within communities each age group takes its place and yet subscribes to a common bond of love and truth – 1 Tim. 5, 1 John 2.

Those who break this cohesion are deprecated in the strongest terms – think of Absalom and Rehoboam. Hence, young people are to honour their parents because God is a father to us all, and he is to be honoured. Sin in old age is never excused but neither does it give younger people justification to sin. The sons of Noah are an example of this. Each generation has a valid place and contributes its unique gifts and skills.

Generational Support There is to be mutual respect (Leviticus 19:32; 1 Timothy 5: 1-2). Good old age is praised throughout the whole Bible. Youth is an honourable and precious time. In the Bible, community is built around the family where God is honoured and each age group mutually supports the other. The younger care for the older (1 Timothy 5), while the older instruct and enable the younger who willingly submit and learn. In the wider community, mutual acceptance is the key.

Age is then seen as itself developmental – a growing into maturity and fullness. The physical declines of age and the dangers and temptations are real and not to be ignored, but there is also the constant growth that balances and beautifies them:

‘The righteous will flourish like a palm tree, they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon; planted in the house of the LORD, they will flourish in the courts of our God. They will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green, proclaiming, “The LORD is upright; he is my Rock, and there is no wickedness in him.”’(Psalm 92:12-15)

In this perspective there is no ageism – only a coherent and balanced society. Sadly it is not a picture found very often – not even in our churches.

Can We Redress the Deficiency?

The government is trying to deal with this. The new Department for Work and Pensions strategy – *Opportunity Age: meeting the challenges of ageing in the 21st century* – has many good features. But there are limitations.

Legislation will have a useful place and may even in time change public perceptions. But further changes in public values may lead to new social requirements. Euthanasia, for instance, may become accepted, resulting in attitudes to age (as to disability) becoming less sympathetic.

The problem with legislation is that it deals with abuses and excesses and does not affect the heart. Long-term changes in attitude are needed that will safeguard our society from becoming even more brutalised – which is what will happen should euthanasia become acceptable. Society has already been brutalised through the widespread acceptance of abortion.

If, however, ageism is seen as a moral issue, the product of a particular world-view, and a symptom of a fragmenting society, then the true answer lies not in legislation, but in a resurgent moral voice from the Church – a loud proclamation of the dignity of all men as made in the image of God, and all having gifts and value beyond their economic contribution.

The compliance of the Church over the last 50 years with much that has contributed to our current problem is disappointing. Now is the time for the voice of Bible-believing people to speak out with cogent arguments drawn from the world-view presented in the Scriptures. The way we conduct our church life (including our worship), structure our families and speak about society provides an opportunity to demonstrate a more wholesome, satisfying and meaningful response to age and ageing.

Roger Hitchings

Statistics in the above article are quoted courtesy of the Office of National Statistics, Help the Aged, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Contact the Elderly (WPI Research and NOP)

The above was published in The Bulletin [March 2007]

Salt and Light Papers is a series of occasional papers on contemporary issues of social concern. It is published online by the Affinity Social Issues Team. Its purpose is to help Christians to think through questions of relevance to our place in the world around us. The views expressed by contributors are not necessarily endorsed by the Affinity Social Issues Team.

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