
An Age Old Problem

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The glory of young men is their strength, grey hair the splendour of the old (Proverbs 20:29).

Such a view of the significance and complimentary worth of age distinctives would find little support within the prevailing philosophies of our culture, and only an uncertain intellectual assent among most Christian people. A balanced society, such as that presented to us in Scripture, is generally an unappreciated ideal. Even within conservative evangelical churches the fallacy of the youth and beauty culture has a powerful influence and to be old is to lose considerable value.

That this situation exists is a sad indication that in this area of our thinking we have lost the Bible's perspective. What is suprising is that this can happen despite the amount of space given to the issue of old age within the Scriptures. It is important therefore to seek to review this teaching so that we may relate it to the society in which we live and thereby produce a truly Biblical response to what will be a major challenge in the next quarter of a century.

Society's confused perspective

During the first decade of the next century there will be an increase of 1 million (9%) in the number of people over retirement age (60 years of age for women, and 65 for men) in this country. By that same time the number of people over 75 will have risen to almost 600,000. This has enormous implications for our society. If, for instance, we think of the economic demands that this will make on the nation in terms of Pensions, Benefits and Health and Social welfare provision, it can be seen why politicians are becoming increasingly anxious. 51% of pensioner households depend on state benefits for at least 75% of their income. At the same time older people are, both in terms of cost and numbers, the major "consumers" of Health Service and Local Authority Social Services provision.

Yet we also have to recognise that within society in general old age is devalued. There is an emphasis on youth, health and beauty. And whilst we must avoid the excessive claims of the "ageism" debate, we must recognise that to be old is not seen as having anything to commend it. This distaste now affects people over 50 as the mad struggle to avoid becoming old, or at least appearing to be old, rages with an ever increasing intensity (fuelled by clever business interests and advertisers).

Sadly, but almost inevitably, these confused perspectives are found among Christians but the church has largely failed to begin to discuss the issue and its implications. An examination of any Christian book shop will demonstrate this fact. Yet here is an area where a godly perspective can do more than raise questions of our society. It can offer the most constructive, wholesome and practical answers to what many social planners feel is almost the unanswerable problem.

Scripture's balanced analysis

As we turn to the Bible we immediately encounter an entirely different mind-set and approach to age. Generational competition, and even artificial division, is entirely absent. Each generation has its role and ministry and each generation relates to and supports the other. In this scheme old age is viewed honestly, its sorrows and limitations are squarely faced, but throughout there is profound respect. Gone is the divisiveness of our society and in its place is that balanced understanding of Proverbs 20:29.

The vision for old age that the whole of Scripture presents to us is a picture of prosperity and fruitfulness, a time of rejoicing in the mercies of God. It is sometimes suggested that there is a causal link in Scripture between longevity and obedience to the commands of God, and this appears to be the implication of the promise attached to the fifth commandment (Exodus 20:12). Paul, of course, quotes this promise, but in the light of the comment of Deuteronomy 5:16, with an emphasis on quality of life rather than quantity. So we may conclude that this must be regarded as one of those general promises that point to the value of a sensible, careful and godly lifestyle, which undoubtedly has an impact on length of life, since many causes of illness and problems in life will be avoided, (Proverbs 1:8-9; Proverbs 4:1-4; Proverbs 6:20-22).

The best summing up of Scripture's view of growing old is found in those familiar words in Psalm 92:12-14. Commenting on the imagery employed by the Psalmist, Spurgeon says: "The Palm Tree has 300 uses and is at its most fruitful at 100 years old." This picture of value and significance pervades the whole teaching. Even in death, our societies ultimate phobia, there is a positive note. So we read frequently of those who died "at a good old age, full of years". Whilst this may have some reference to physical aspects, the primary thrust of the Old Testament is that of spiritual vigour. And this is clearly paralleled in the Apostle Paul's happy claim, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." Such a sense of contentment and accomplishment is a right and necessary goal (2 Corinthians 4:16). Indeed there is an expectation that spiritual growth and progress continues throughout the whole of life. It is not an impossible ideal but rather that for which we should all be straining. To help us achieve this goal we find many glorious promises which are designed to sustain and motivate us (e.g. Isaiah 46:4; Psalm 71:14-21; Psalm 37:25; *et al*).

The Scriptures' analysis of old age can be broken down into four strands.

1. The value and respect of Old Age

Old people are to be respected, that is the unequivocal demand of Leviticus (Leviticus 19:32). A similar perspective is given by Paul, 1 Timothy 5:1. The mark of a degenerate society is a failure to do this (Deuteronomy 28:50; Lamentations 5:12). But such respect is not merely based on the number of years a person survives in this world, "the sinner who reaches a hundred will be considered accursed". Age has no merit in itself. But with age should come spiritual qualities which demand respect and recognition. So the principle for growing old is set out in Psalm 90:12. This concept of "numbering our days" presupposes an urgency and application to every part of life in order to "grow wisdom", and this is powerfully endorsed by Paul when he tells us "to redeem the time", (Ephesians 5:16; Colossians 4:5). Indeed the development of wisdom is the hallmark of "good old age" (although not its unique province, Job 32:9), and this

is manifested by a righteous life (Proverbs 16:31) and a full experience (Psalm 37:25, 1 John 1:13-14). Such an old age is a mark of great blessing, (Isaiah 65:20). The examples in Scripture of a godly and spiritual old age, which has great effectiveness in the kingdom of God, are many and varied and therefore present a considerable challenge to any culture which would wish to develop a different understanding.

To value old age in this way, and to promote it amongst *all* our congregation, requires many modern Christians to make a massive shift in thinking and emphases. But to fail to do so is to rob the life of the church of a source of ministry, blessing and mutual service that is God ordained.

2. Reality and Honesty towards Old Age

Old age has its problems, failures and great disadvantages (Ecclesiastes 4:13). In its presentation of old age the Bible is totally honest and realistic. There is no sentimentalisation of ageing or avoiding painful issues. Physical and mental decline are both faced. In fact the picture painted in Ecclesiastes 12 must rank as one of the most vivid and painfully accurate descriptions of frailty and confusion ever penned. For some people, though not all, old age is a time of great difficulty and distress in many areas of life. The challenges of coping with the sorrows and losses of old age (Jeremiah 12:5; Psalm 90:10), and the practical implications of decreasing independence (Genesis 27:1-2; Luke 1:62-63) are faced fairly and squarely. In similar manner the spiritual challenges of old age are not shirked and we find loss of assurance, memories of sin and the sense of failure all well addressed (Psalm 71:9), as are the losses of advancing years in characters such as Barzillai (2 Samuel 19:35).

This degree of honesty and frankness are not characteristic of many approaches to old age even among professionals in the world of geriatric medicine and care of the elderly. An all-round view of the person is sadly too often lacking. The Bible's honest but hopeful message provides a level of insight provided no where else.

3. The dangers and sins of Old Age

Whilst considering the honesty of Scripture we must take notice of its concerns over the great dangers and sins that come with old age. Godly men such as Noah, Moses and Hezekiah are all found exhibiting the common failings of old age in overindulgence, impatience and selfishness. There are sins common to the whole of life, and their are sins peculiar to each stage of life. Ecclesiastes 7:10 highlights just one sin, which often starts quite early in life. But to see what *was* as preferable to what *is*, is a real danger, and an implied challenging of Providence. To be over anxious and to engage in self-pity are frequent errors. To be resentful or be always complaining about our declining physical state is to lose sight of the reality of 2 Corinthians 4:17 and Romans 8:18. It is a pastoral duty to attend to such matters with respect and compassion, 1 Timothy 5:1.

The fact is that old age often exposes what people really are. The masks of "our image" are not so easy to sustain when just keeping going demands all our energies. And as we lose strength, faculties, friends and roles, our levels of confidence in the world around, people and ourselves all begin to fall as well. Temptations and questions of assurance become major concerns (Psalm 71:9-12).

4. The blessings and hopes of Old Age

But the last days of life are not intended to be the worst, "the path of the righteous

is like the first gleam of dawn, shining ever brighter till the full light of day” (Proverbs 4:18). What blessings attend those who know that even in old age there is One who “will carry you, will sustain you and will rescue you” (Isaiah 46:4). A life of experience in walking with God provides a ministry peculiar to those who are old (Psalm 71:18; Psalm 37:25). In this they are able to comfort “with the comfort received from God”, (1 Corinthians 1:3-5). Memories rightly used are a marvellous gift and grounds for service, which is not to be despised (although if recounted every day, or a thousand times without thought they lose their value!).

In natural terms old age is the very gateway of heaven. And who has not been blessed by the godly old persons’ expression of delight in the sense that glory is but a step away? Thus it is at this time of life that the greatest of spiritual activities becomes the focus – to prepare to die, to prepare to be with the Saviour.

Perhaps we have lost the delight in the thought of heaven as we are increasingly taken up with things of time. But the presence of active and contributing older people in our congregation should be a corrective to our temporal preoccupations. It is a vital aspect of church life to cultivate a right joy in later years and to enjoy the fruits of the blessedness that old age brings.

Special Responsibilities for the Local Church

Finally we must look at the responsibility that the New Testament places on the local church to minister to and receive from older people. Space forbids even a cursory examination of those passages in the Pastoral Epistles that deal with this, and that blow apart the ageist structures that we have adopted from the culture around us. But there is to be direct teaching of older people; encouragement to them in their battles, fears, regrets and difficulties; challenge to their sins and failures; care for their practical needs (and in these days those who care for them); comfort for them in their distresses and losses; and, most importantly, opportunity to serve and minister within the congregation.

As the full weight of Scripture on this theme is accepted the inevitable reformation of our practice must be pursued. We need to teach our whole congregations about the true nature of old age and give to those in middle years, as well as later years, a vision of what their old age should be. So many are conditioned by the stereotypes of our society, and the misleading emphasies of much social welfare. Is it true, as has been said, “our old people fail us, because we fail them”? I fear it may well be.

Then there are the questions of evangelism of old people, coping with Alzheimer’s Disease and dementia, enabling carers to handle the heavy burdens of frail spouses or parents. Add to this the problems that arise from the break down in relationships (not infrequently due to very difficult old people), the reality of severe anxiety states and the many other areas of life where it is old age which has the highest incidence of social dysfunction. All of these issues baffle our society, which hides that confusion by an obsession with specifics and political correctness, so that a holistic approach is rarely grasped. But for us, whilst there are no easy answers, the Scriptures give us clear guidelines, and precious illustrations of how to respond.

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