

Wow...I'm getting old!

Christian aging in hope!

by Johan D. Tangelder

How do we face the twilight years of life? With feelings of dread... or of hope? The French-born film and vaudeville actor Maurice Chevalier (1888-1972) remarked glibly, "Growing old is inevitable for all of us. The clever thing is to accept it and always plan your next move well in advance." His recipe for contentment in old age gives cold comfort. Evangeline Booth had a better perspective on aging. She said, "It is not how many years we live, but what we do with them."

Contrary to the myth about aging, seniors do not necessarily decline in intelligence or lose their decision-making abilities. History gives us countless examples of creative, active, and productive seniors. At 71, Michael Angelo (1475-1564) was appointed the chief architect of St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome. After he was 63 years old, Joost Van den Vondel (1587-1679), Holland's greatest poet, wrote *Jephta*, *Lucifer* and *Adam in ballingschap* (Adam in exile). George Bernhard Shaw (1856-1950), Irish dramatist and author, wrote *Farfetched Fables* at 93. Polish-born Arthur Rubinstein (1888-1982) gave a stunning performance at Carnegie Hall at the age of 90. Like these famous people, there are millions of elderly people who are still productive and active in their own way and want to remain so.

Aging in the Old Testament

Scripture regards great age as the supreme reward of virtue. The aged were shown respect and honor. Old age is a blessing and not a curse. Scripture says, "Rise in the presence of the aged, show respect for the elderly and revere your God" (Lev.19-32). The psalmist testifies to growing old in hope. He says, "The righteous ... 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" (Ps. 92:14-15). Growing old became a symbol of blessing, wisdom, and righteousness – an honorable process by which God rewarded those who were obedient, for example, in honoring their own parents: "Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you" (Ex. 20:12).

In Proverbs readers are essentially promised a long life if their hearts will but, "keep my commandments; for length of days and years of life and abundant welfare they give you" (3:1-2). The very display of gray hair itself, a sure sign of growing old throughout the centuries, becomes in Scripture "a crown of glory; it is gained in a righteous life" (Prov. 16:31).

By pushing the elderly aside to fringes of society, we diminish them and make our society the poorer through the loss of their experience and maturity. When Moses was 80 years old, God called him to lead His people to the Promised Land. At that greatly advanced age, Moses became the historian, leader, and statesman of Israel. At about 85 years of age, Joshua was divinely commissioned to succeed Moses. At his death at 110

years of age, he was deeply mourned and his eminent service widely acknowledged (Josh. 24:29-31).

A New Testament blessing too

In the New Testament the attitude towards aging is no different from that in the Old Testament. Those who reached an advanced age were honored and esteemed in the community. Aged saints have a significant role in the opening chapter of Luke's Gospel. The first characters to appear on the stage are the priest Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth, who were both "advanced in years" (Luke 1:7). They are the instruments of God's purposes and the first interpreters of God's saving acts.

Simeon and Anna are the prophetic chorus welcoming the child Jesus on the occasion of his purification in the Temple (Luke 2:22-38). The remarkable thing is that the aged Simeon dies in the beginning of the Gospel account. His eyes are fixed in hope on the one newly born, in whose life, death, and resurrection the world will know peace. He has long been hoping for "the consolation of Israel," and has been promised by the Holy Spirit that he will not die before he has seen the Lord's Messiah. Anna – an eighty-four-year-old prophetess who frequents the Temple to worship and pray night and day – recognizes Jesus, gives thanks to God, and declares the news about him "to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem" (2:38). As people who have clung to God's promises over many years, they embody the virtues of long-suffering patience and trust in God's ultimate faithfulness. They also exemplify faith and hope, even when circumstances seem hopeless.

Aging was not seen by the early Christians as a "problem" to which some sort of religious solution was required. In the entire New Testament, particularly in the Pastoral Epistles, the respect due to older members of the community is emphasized. The exhortations imply and speak explicitly of dutifully caring for widows, honoring the elderly, imitating their faith, and faithfulness. For example, "Do not rebuke an older man, but exhort him as you would a father." Here we find also specific directives that the community should provide assistance to widows over age of sixty, and that women recognized by the church as widows should devote their energies to prayer, hospitality, and to service to the afflicted (2 Tim.5: 3-16).

In our youth obsessed culture, the elderly are strongly tempted to act youthful. They are expected to get a workout to remain in shape, get beauty treatments to rejuvenate themselves, and to dress in youth fashions. Should seniors long to be young again? I don't think so. For Christians old age is not a dead-end street. As we age, we can still grow spiritually. The apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians "Do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being *renewed* day by day" (2 Cor. 4:16). He said to the Ephesians that we can progressively succeed in putting off the old self and putting on the new self and "be made new in the attitude of our minds." This renewal through the Holy Spirit impacts our mental attitude, state of mind, and disposition with respect to God and His world throughout our life. In other words, we continue to develop our walk with God (Eph. 4:22-24).

Never too old to serve the Lord

Dr. Viktor E. Frankl, who suffered unspeakable horror in Nazi concentration camps, says that there is no reason to pity old people. And he adds this remarkable statement, "Instead, young people should envy them." Why? Because seniors have something young people don't possess. Frankl says that seniors have realities in the past – the potentialities they have actualized, the values they have realized – and nothing and nobody can ever remove these assets from the past.

In Book X of his *Confessions*, Augustine (354-430) calls memory a "vast court" or "great receptacle." The elderly have a rich storehouse of memories, and inner landscape to explore: times lost in idleness, opportunities well used, a fulfilling career, children grown up, and suffering gone through with dignity and courage. What an opportunity for our youth to tap into the memories of their grandparents! Covenantal obligations never cease. The Christian faith is passed on from one generation to the next. It depends on that transmission. There must always be a most intimate relationship between the present and the coming generation if there is to be a future generation of Christians.

The church cannot be the church without the elderly. They are the embodied of the church's story. Of course, we do not expect that all the elderly of the church should express the "wisdom of their years." But there can be no substitute for some old people in the church passing on their wisdom to the younger generation.

The youth simply cannot do without the older generation. In our culture, for a few years young adults may pretend (egged on by social and cultural forces) that they can live forever as autonomous, self-reliant, self-fulfilling beings. The pretence, however, collapses soon enough. The presence of the visible vulnerable elderly is a reminder that they are not their own creators. They too will age. Their dark or blond hair will turn grey. Consequently, young Christians need the elderly so they will not take their lives for granted. The church cannot be the church without the elderly. They are the embodied of the church's story. That's why throughout history the church has frowned on separating the young from the old through conducting youth services. I have even read about a church where no older people were expected to attend. But according to Scripture old and young belong together. They are all part of the great family of God.

Our covenant youth need to hear from their grandparents and seniors in the church what it means to be a Christian. Grandparents know the family traditions and values. They can tell the story of their wartime experiences, their immigration with its hardship and adventures, and the reasons for leaving the country of their birth. Seniors can give to the youth the lessons and spiritual resources that have been harvested over a lifetime.

Our times are so confusing and threatening for our young people. Why not explain to them that the Christian faith is for all of life: hence the founding of Christian schools, colleges, universities, a Christian labor association, Christian magazines and bi-weeklies, and a Christian political party? Why not tell them that doing good works is doing your work well? Why not testify to them how the Lord's promise "Surely I am with you always" (Matt.28:20) is a reality and not a myth? The lessons learned from godly grandparents and other Christian seniors are often long remembered.

Florida does not exist

Some seniors have a phobia about aging. They see their retirement years as a curse of boredom and uselessness. Others see them as an opportunity for the pursuit of leisure. During the winter some seek a warmer climate, away from their family, friends, and their local church. But the church is the kind of community that insists that those who have grown in years are not relieved of moral and spiritual responsibilities. They cannot move to Florida and leave the church to survive on its own. For Christians, there is no "Florida" even if they happen to live there. From the Biblical perspective, seniors are a significant resource God can use for His Kingdom in these critical times. Old age is not just a time to relax and play golf, nor is it a time only to reminisce about the past. (Though relaxation and reminiscence surely have their rightful places in our lives.) Instead, in old age, as throughout our lives, we must continue to pursue the way of service, conforming our own lives to the self-giving pattern of Jesus. The Christian practice of growing old is shaped by the example of Jesus, who emptied himself and became obedient, even to the point of death, for our sake (cf. Phi.2:1-13). Our Lord never promised His followers an easy path to tread. The way of discipleship leads to the cross (e.g., Mark 8:34-38; Luke 14: 25-27).

Seniors can still do so much in reaching a spiritually dark world for the Lord. Some retirees are engaged in volunteer work for a mission agency. They spend time overseas assisting in some building projects. Others volunteer for city mission work in one of the big cities in North America. The volunteers I have met over the years have all testified how blessed they felt in Kingdom service in their retirement years. They still considered themselves useful soldiers in the Lord's army.

Of course, not every senior is able to volunteer for mission or church work. Some have multiple health problems. Their physical disabilities limit them in their activities. Yet they can still engage in spiritual warfare as they pray for the advance of the Gospel around the world. Millions of unreached people are still held captive by the strongholds of Satan. Multitudes are blinded by the "god of this world" (2 Cor. 4:4). Why not encourage seniors to think of the great ministry of prayer available to them? The younger generation can tell them, "You are able to spend more time in prayer than us! You know more about the ups and downs in life than we do. You can pray especially for missionaries on the field. They need your prayer support! And pray for your pastor and congregation. We need your prayer ministry! A missionary leader wrote that one of his greatest fears is the lack of interest in missions by the praying and giving church of North America. Every week I receive via e-mail urgent prayer requests from missionaries and mission organizations. As an old hymn says:

Prayer is the Christian's vital breath,
The Christian's native air,
His watchword at the gates of death;
He enters heaven with prayer.

Seniors can be brought specific prayer requests. The persecuted church requires constant prayer support. Our covenant youth need intercessory prayer. Someone wrote that no other population segment of Christians has more discretionary time for serious, global prayer than the experienced, mature elderly! Prayer offers a wonderful and powerful opportunity for Kingdom involvement.

Hope in Christ

As we age, we become more aware of the swift passing of years. We can either let the fear of death put a mental stranglehold on us or look to the future with hope. The best is yet to come! Jesus Christ, the risen and ascended Lord is the ground of our hope and the promise of our deliverance. The hope of the resurrection lies at the heart of the way in which Christians embody the practices of growing old. We serve a faithful God Who will never forget us! We are strangers and pilgrims on earth, the older we become the nearer we are to our eternal home. This truth encourages even the oldest individual to cherish each moment of life while preparing to relinquish it. Each day is a gift from God. We look to Him for our daily bread while making sure that we seek first the kingdom of God rather than squandering our time and energy on secondary concerns. With the prospect of a glorious future for all who are in Christ, we can identify with Martin Luther's suggestions that "in the purpose of God, this world is only a preparation and a scaffolding for the world to come." I also think of John Calvin's teaching in his *Geneva Catechism* that we are "to learn to pass through this world as though it is a foreign country, treating all things lightly and declining to set our hearts on them."

We all face death some time or another. When we are old, it is more of a reality than in the days of our youth. I pray that our attitude toward death may resemble that of Lutheran pastor, scholar, and resistance leader Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who with shining face in joyful expectation, said to the two Nazi guards who had to come to take him to be executed, "For you it is the end, for me the beginning."