

The Senior Years for a Ministry Family

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Introduction

A recent Barna survey reported that for the first time there are more ministers in the U.S. over 60 years of age than there are under 40. This seems to be true in our fundamental conservative churches as well. As we Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) grow older in ministry, we are both still ministering to our senior generation and also have become one of them. This presents new and important challenges for ministry.

I. Growing Older

There is no shame in growing older. Everyone will eventually. In fact, the Bible admonishes believers to respect their elders above most other people. The senior years become a new journey which God has asked us to walk. We can do it with grace and wisdom.

- **Challenges** (Ecc. 12). Growing old isn't for sissies. There is no age in life more misunderstood than old age. Solomon lists the physical challenges that come near the end of life. They are unavoidable since death has been assigned to all of us and death comes when the body wears out and the spirit leaves (2 Cor 4:16).
- **Benefits** (Psa. 92). The date palm tree brought benefit to travelers until the day it died. It lived to be about 200 years and produced 100 lbs of figs every year. "They shall bring forth fruit in old age; they shall be fat and flourishing" (vs 14). In older age, though our bodies are failing, we have wisdom, godliness, faithfulness, boldness, and a love of God to Whom we are going, more than for the world from which we are leaving. David Jeremiah wrote, "I believe young people today are looking for an older generation of adults who can prove by their lifestyle that life is worth living, no matter how many candles light up the birthday cake."
- **Attitude** (Psa. 90). This is the only Psalm that Moses wrote and it is about older age and death. God gives us 70 or 80 years and then "we fly away" (vs. 10). But the admonition in verse 12 is, "So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts to wisdom." It is the Christian that has the right attitude about mortality. We number our days and redeem the time and use it to the fullest for God's glory and service.

A.W. Tozer: "O God, let me die rather than to go on day by day living wrong. I do not want to become a careless, fleshly old man. I want to be right so that I can die right! Lord, I do not want my life to be extended if it would mean that I should cease to live right and fail in my mission to glorify you all my days." *Mornings with Tozer*, May 31.

Acts 20:24: "But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God."

II. The Priority of Family

According to Scripture, the senior years, especially the grandparenting years, are some of the most important years of service that we have. Our ministry is now to those who are coming after us. “O God, thou hast taught me from my youth: and hitherto have I declared thy wondrous works. Now also when I am old and grayheaded, O God, forsake me not; until I have shown thy strength unto this generation, and thy power to every one that is to come” (Psa. 71:17-18).

- **Marriages that last.** Ministry marriages last best when a man and a woman decide to perform God’s dominion mandate for the age of grace. They were walking shoulder to shoulder (*phileō*) before they stood face to face (*eros*). They made a marriage covenant with God as witness that they would be faithful in this service “until death do us part.” “It has been said that you don’t marry just one person—that is, the man or woman who stands at the altar with you—you marry several people, or whom your spouse will become through the phases of your life together.” Jim Newheiser, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage*, p. 83.

- **Kids and grandkids.** Psalm 78:1-8 is a blessed passage about passing our faith on to our children and grandchildren, even to four generations. “For he established a testimony in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers, that they should make them known to their children. That the generation to come might know them, even the children which should be born; who should arise and declare them to their children” (vss. 5-6).

Josh Mulvihill, in his PhD dissertation on grandparenting, did a survey on what Christian grandparents think is their primary role with their grandchildren. He was disappointed in the low percentage of those who saw it as passing on their faith.

- Encouraging voice: 16%
- Supportive partner: 32%
- Loving friend: 28%
- Disciple maker: 24%

- **Grandparenting.** Sadly, in our churches we have tended to ignore the importance of the grandparenting years. Mulvihill wrote, “One of the most shocking findings was the silence of pastors on the topic of grandparenting. Every grandparent from the sample population was asked how their church has equipped them to be a grandparent; not a single grandparent could remember a sermon preached on the subject, and only one could remember a Sunday School class or seminar taught on grandparenthood.” *Biblical Grandparenting*, p. 193.

Since the post-WWII years, many seniors have deserted their kids and moved away (a late 20th century phenomenon). The new social contract is: non-interference, emotional independence, and personal autonomy. This is largely due to social security, large retirements, and the availability of places like Sun City, AZ, and The Villages near Orlando, FL. The Villages has everything one needs including 30 golf courses, its own radio and TV stations, and newspaper. It takes up 3 zip codes and 2 counties. The only thing it doesn’t have is children. No one under 18 can live there.

III. The Priority of Ministry

Those of us who have given our lives to the ministry and are now “too old to die young,” realize that ministry has many twists, turns, and decisions to make along the way. There have been blessings, regrets, good times and not so good times. In it all, family and ministry have been our priorities.

- **Benefits of longevity.** My boyhood pastor once told a group of ministers, “Go to a church and stay there the rest of your life, if you can.” That’s good advice but the caveat, “if you can,” applies as well. In the end, it is God’s leading that we must follow. No doubt, longevity allows for stability both for the church and for your family. It also adds the blessing of testimony in the community as well as long-range evangelism and discipleship.

Sometimes we must move, and often this is for the family’s sake. Ken Ham recalls what happened when, as a teenager their church began to depart from teaching God’s Word. “This led me to actions that I have always regretted. Because of this, my father faced a hard decision. Should our family stay committed to the church where I was being led astray by false teaching [his father was the school principal], or should Dad find better mentors for his son? . . . We moved.” *Raising Godly Children in an Ungodly World*, p. 206.

- **Advantages of older age.** If circumstances and health permit, doing ministry into our senior years has many advantages. We are wiser than when we were young; we have adjusted our priorities to fit our ministry; we are undistracted by the world’s allurements and recognition; we are closer to heaven and have finally begun to walk like it. In addition (and perhaps most important), we pray. Prayer is the one thing we can do until the day we die, regardless of our circumstances.

John Flavel: “Prayer honors providence, and providence honors prayer . . . Providences have borne the very signatures of your prayer upon them.” Allen & Chester, *The Glory of Grace: an introduction to the Puritans*, p. 145.

- **When to retire.** Ministers never “retire.” We just change the field in which we work. Paul described himself to Philemon as, “Being such an one as Paul the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ” (Phile. 9). He called himself a *presbutēs*, an aged one. We’ve earned the title of “elder.”

Unfortunately, ministers are so needed in our churches today that older men are working long into their retirement years. But there comes that time when we need to back off, step down, or just change our priorities. This could be for physical reasons, financial reasons, or family reasons.

William Law (on our older years): “Delight in its service and beg God to adorn it with every grace and perfection. Nourish it with good works, give it peace in solitude, get it strength in prayer, make it wise with reading, enlighten it by meditation, make it tender with love, sweeten it with humility, humble it with penance, enliven it with psalms and hymns, and comfort it with frequent reflections upon future glory.” *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, p. 50.

IV. Leaving a Legacy

We only have a short time to live on the earth. Usually we are almost half way done when we realize that. In 2 Cor. 12, Paul was taken up to heaven, before his missionary journeys began, and given a perspective that would last all his life and would carry him through death. Heaven and hell are real and everyone must go to one or the other. God is good, and His mercy endures forever (Psa. 136). Nothing in life is more important than that. That is why, at the end of his missionary journeys, he wrote Acts 20:24.

- **Biblical commands**. We all must pass on a godly example to the next generation. You started with yourself. Then you married and there were two. Then you had children and your work doubled and tripled. Then they had grandchildren and your work multiplied.

- Pass on a godly heritage (Psa. 16:5; 127:3)
- Pass on a godly inheritance (Prov. 13:22; 19:14)
- Leave a godly testimony with your children (Psa. 71:17-18; 78:5)
- Teach godliness to your children and grandchildren (Deut. 4:9; Psa. 78:1-7)
- Leave a posterity to your children (Psa. 22:30; Prov. 11:21)
- Give a lasting memory to your children (Psa. 90:16-17; 145:4)

- **Minister to your own generation**. You still have time to minister to your own generation. Your children will minister to theirs but have a hard time reaching yours. It is important that you be what you are even though the next generation doesn't understand you. The world is going down-hill and you must leave a testimony from your generation.

There are 78 million baby boomers alive (born between 1946 & 1964) or still a fourth of the total population. "Seniors" are the fastest growing demographic. The first boomers turned 65 in 2011 (10,000) and the last will not turn 65 until 2029. Who is ministering to them if you are not? All of our churches ought to have a purposeful ministry to these people. They are some of the greatest Christians alive.

- **Dealing with death**. At the expense of leaving our study on what seems to be a negative note, keep in mind that older age means you are closer to heaven, and this should excite us. The valley of the shadow of death is narrow, but it opens to dwelling in the house of the Lord forever! The saints of the middle-ages faced death so often that the church had a common teaching called *ars morendi*, the art of "dying well."

Philip Doddridge: "I acknowledge, O Lord, the justice of that sentence by which I am expiring; and own thy wisdom and goodness in appointing my journey through this gloomy vale which is now before me. Help me to turn it into the happy occasion of honoring thee and adorning my profession! And I will bless the pangs by which thou art glorified, and this mortal and sinful part of my nature dissolved . . . let me close the scene nobly." *The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul*, p. 319.

C.H. Spurgeon: "O Lord, let them not die without hope, and may thy believing people learn to pass away without even tasting the bitterness of death. May they enter rest, each one walking in his own uprightness." *Spurgeon's Prayers*, p. 114.