

Biblical and Spiritual Issues of Aging

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Our twenty-first-century society has a very different view of aging than what the Bible has. What is your image of aging and how does that impact your life and your ministry? In *Aging Successfully, How to Enjoy, Not Just Endure, the Second Half of Life*, ten biblical principles are given to help you build bridges with the 50+ generation (<https://wipfandstock.com/>).

Many small churches are filled with older people, and many other churches have changed their focus to reach today's younger culture. Some pastors are confused and frustrated by this change, and many longtime church members find the shift frustrating. Older pastors find it difficult to understand contemporary styles of worship, and younger pastors sometimes move very quickly toward creating what they understand to be necessary changes within the congregation. The results can often cause frustration and even be hurtful for many.

With all of this change comes an important question: "What is our image of aging?" In the past, the aged were an integral part of family and community life. A substantial pattern of social disengagement and isolation emerged during the middle of the twentieth century. The farm and agricultural culture was replaced with urban renewal, and the family unit changed. Grandma and Grandpa no longer had children close by to help during times of need. Social workers began to take the place of children and family, and care centers replaced home care.

We live in a society that is quick to label people and groups. As attention has been drawn to aging, the idea has developed to label some adults as "old" and sometimes even to make them feel "unnecessary" or "in the way."

Most of us have stereotypes of older adults just sitting back in their rocking chairs. That's a myth. Older adults are incredibly active people today with tremendous experience and resources that we all

too often don't utilize. Many times that is because we hold outdated stereotypes of what aging is. I recently read about a pastor in one of America's largest churches who never talked about the 50+ generation until he turned fifty. Then he began to realize the importance of this neglected ministry. It makes perfect sense. A pastor who has never been married may have a hard time understanding the gut-wrenching conflicts faced in some marriages. A thirty-year-old pastor may find it even uncomfortable to be with seventy- or eighty-year-olds. But it is time for pastors to dump the old stereotypes and catch up; mix with and get to know some elderly folks. I was in a contemporary worship service a while back at a very rapidly growing church of several thousand people and heard the pastor, who was middle-aged himself say, "We don't want any creepy old people coming to this new program." Everyone laughed, except the older people present who noticeably felt uncomfortable and unwanted.

Perhaps we need to start thinking strategically from oldest-to-youngest rather than youngest-to-oldest.

We need to change our vocabulary and make sure that no generation is left behind!

Someone once said, "The best way to cope with change is to help create it." We must never assume that older generations are universally resistant to change. [Read Gordon MacDonald's *Who Stole My Church?* for a wonderful perspective on engaging older generations in the change process.] They have experienced and adapted to *incredible* changes throughout their lifetime. Welcome their input. If changes are biblically sound and God-directed, patiently cultivate and expect their support.

Charles Arn and Win Arn in their book, *The New Senior*, share this insight, "We live in a day when racism and sexism have been recognized as the unwholesome attitudes they are. Yet, unfortunately, ageism is alive and well—even in the church. Although it is no longer considered in good taste to make racist or sexist jokes, old age is still fair game. Ageism is a pervasive, negative attitude toward aging and people who are growing old. Like racism or sexism, it is a destructive and discriminatory form of prejudice that is based on flawed stereotypes. To a large extent, ageism is unique to our contemporary Western culture. For example, in much of Asia it is seen as a handicap to be young,

and ageism is virtually nonexistent. In China, it is believed that the older a person is the wiser and more knowledgeable the person is. When asked, 'How old are you?' a 55-year-old in China might fudge a bit and claim to be 60." [Arn and Arn, *New Senior*, 46]

Biblical Principles to for Boomers and Builders

[These ten principles are amplified in *Aging Successfully*: <https://wipfandstock.com/> and [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com/)]

1. Keep Perspective
2. Stay Balanced
3. Enjoy Mid-Life
4. Prepare for the Later Years
5. Focus on the Biblical View of Aging
6. Understand Loss and Grief
7. Claim God's Promises
8. Keep Your Spirits High
9. Relieve Anxiety
10. Avoid the Temptation of Materialism

Suggested Reading

Arn, Charles, and Win Arn. *The New Senior*. Monrovia, CA: Institute for American Church Growth, 2004.

Gallagher, David. *Aging Successfully*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2012.

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Houston, James M., and Michael Parker. *A Vision for the Aging Church*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011.

Kennedy, John W. "A Senior Moment." *Christianity Today* 55 no. 12 (Dec 2011) 46–49.

MacDonald, Gordon. *Who Stole My Church? What to Do When the Church You Love Tries to Enter the Twenty-first Century*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2007.

McIntosh, Gary L. *One Church Four Generations*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002.

Storm, Kay Marshall. *The Second Half Adventure*. Moody Publishers. Chicago: Moody, 2009.

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