

Aging from the Perspective of the Cross

BY STEPHEN SAPP

Informed by our biblical heritage and a realistic approach to the phenomenon of growing older, we can take seriously the real losses that we suffer as we grow older. The discipleship of the cross recognizes that the cross Jesus Christ bids his followers to take up includes the ordinary, everyday sufferings of human life—including those associated with aging—that are borne as Jesus bore his sufferings.

In their attempt to be optimistic, supportive, and “pastoral,” many Christian writers refuse to take seriously the very real problems which we experience as we grow older. They are overwhelmingly affirmative, emphasizing that aging is a process of fulfillment, maturity, and completion, and old age a time to be eagerly awaited and warmly embraced. For example, “We believe that aging...overarches the human community as a rainbow of promises,” write Henri J. M. Nouwen and Walter J. Gaffney in their highly regarded book, *Aging: The Fulfillment of Life*. “Aging is not a slow decaying but a gradual maturing, not a fate to be undergone but a chance to be embraced.”¹ And Alfons Deeken seeks to show “that old age, far from being an embarrassment, is in fact a golden opportunity for human growth, fulfillment, and deep happiness.”²

Though these hopes for “senior citizens” are certainly commendable and diligently to be sought, our experiences do not warrant such untempered optimism. Old age is not such a wonderful experience for most

people, especially those who live in poverty, loneliness, and neglect.

The truth is that aging is the deterioration of the organism that is the human person, hardly something that we desire or welcome. This decline represents the loss of powers that we take for granted, the loss of much that makes us who we are (or at least have always perceived ourselves to be). Considerable pain unquestionably accompanies such loss—first, emotional pain, as friends and relatives, especially a beloved spouse, depart in death, and as we see our powers and abilities fade; and second, physical pain, as more and more problems and ailments appear that have no pill or therapy to cure or even ameliorate them.

We do older people a disservice by painting too golden a picture of old age, a picture that few elderly people will be able to achieve. What about the guilt that may be provoked in those who simply cannot get up each morning, however strong their faith and however hard they pray, and exclaim, “How wonderful it is to be alive another day!” because they are consumed with pain from arthritis or do not even know who and where they are? What of the spouse who must watch a beloved partner of a half century slowly decline into chronic pain or dementia? A little more reality in preachments about old age would be not only more honest but also more in line with authentic Christian faith.

DISCIPLESHIP OF THE CROSS

Christians, understandably, tend to view old age from the perspective of the Resurrection, stressing the hope to which we can cling by virtue of the saving work of Christ. With the Apostle Paul we proclaim that about suffering and death, we need “not grieve as others do who have no hope” (1 Thessalonians 4:13). Yet, for the sake of honesty and of credible witness to those who are actually experiencing it, aging and old age need to be looked at from the perspective of the cross. This approach speaks more accurately to the common experience of growing old than does the Resurrection (though for the Christian the Resurrection does always stand beyond the cross).

Jesus never promised that life would be painless and free from struggle; indeed, his message was the opposite: “In the world you will have trouble” (John 16:33b NIV).³ Genuine hope, the verse continues, exists only *through* his cross: “But take heart! I have overcome the world.”

What might we, attempting to express this perspective, have to say to those who are growing older? How might we address their needs better than by merely offering encouragement and exhortation to look on the bright side of things? To consider aging and old age from the perspective of the cross means at least to take seriously the call of Jesus: “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23).

Hans Küng goes straight to the heart of the matter: “Discipleship is

always—sometimes in a hidden way, sometimes openly—a discipleship of suffering, a following of the cross.”⁴ Not only may disciples be afflicted as a result of identifying with Christ, but in varying degrees they will share in the suffering that is inevitable in the fallen world. What distinguishes Christians’ acceptance of suffering, though, is their understanding it as correlating to or corresponding with the way in which Jesus dealt with his suffering. Küng concludes with a statement full of possibilities for a realistic Christian view of aging:

But what is required of the person who believes in the crucified Jesus is something that frequently recurs and is therefore mostly more difficult than a single heroic act: it is the endurance of ordinary, normal, everyday suffering, which is then most likely to prove excessive. The cross to be borne is therefore the cross of everyday life. That this is far from being obvious or edifying is apparent to anyone who has seen how often a person tries to get away from his own cross, all his daily obligations, demands, claims, promises in his family or his calling; how he tries to shift his cross onto others or suppress it altogether.⁵

Suffering takes many forms, but one of the “crosses” of everyday life that we are expected to bear is renunciation of attachment to the “things of this world,” which is more difficult now than ever, given contemporary society’s materialism and reliance on external criteria as indicators of our personal value. One important aspect of this renunciation is the abandonment of dependence upon the opinions of others as the source of our self-identity and self-worth, the refusal to let our values be determined by such worldly standards as beauty, wealth, power, status, and yes, even youth.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF DEPENDENCE

As we take up the cross each day in the normal setbacks of human existence, we will encounter what has made the cross of Christ such a scandal (or at least stumbling block) for so many through the centuries. If we accept that the death of Jesus Christ alone is sufficient to restore the relationship between God and human beings, then we must acknowledge our absolute dependence on the unmerited and freely offered grace of God. Indeed, the real root of contemporary Americans’ inability to come to terms with growing older may lie right here, in the “human problem” identified in the biblical tradition. Perhaps the denial of aging—illustrated, for example, by efforts to overcome the loss of youth through whatever means possible and by the growing tendency to institutionalize those whose care is a burden—is only one more example of the human desire to “make it on our own,” to “do it our way,” to refuse to accept the limitations and the finitude inherent in creaturehood.

The elderly bring out our deepest fears, William F. May observes, of

“not merely physical decay, the loss of beauty, and the failure of vitality, but the humiliation of dependency.... The North American compulsion to be independent intensifies the threat of old age. The middle aged do not want the elderly to encumber them, and the elderly do not want to lapse into a burden.”⁶ In short, we do not like getting old because it forces us to face the fact that we are not self-sufficient and able to “go it alone.”

In a way matched only by seriously debilitating injury or illness, which are not nearly so common in human experience, aging is thus a model of what it means to be a human being. That is, in the process of growing older we are forced to confront the fact that we are finite, unable to be and do all that we can imagine and desire. “Old age has many compensations, but it is always a discipline,” J. R. P. Schlater notes. “The process by which God pries our fingers loose from their clutch on things material is not entertaining. The closing of the senses, the increasing feebleness of the physical powers, and the pathetic loneliness of great age make up a process of detachment which is stern in its mercy (cf. the frank depression of Ecclesiastes 11:7-8).”⁷ Little wonder that middle-aged Americans have so much trouble dealing with their own aging and coping with the rapidly increasing number of older people all around them.

Christianity is all about being dependent, accepting that we do not live on our own and only for ourselves at any point in life, not just when we grow old. Paul’s great statement captures the essence of the human problem and its solution: “It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me” (Galatians 2:20). If we can assimilate the fact that we are totally dependent throughout life upon the creating, redeeming, and sustaining God, then perhaps it will be easier to accept increasing dependence upon other human beings as we grow older.

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THE TRUE BASIS OF PERSONAL VALUE

The accepted view today is that we *are* what we *do*, that the basis of our value is what we produce or contribute, almost always measured by some material standard. This view is the basis for today’s “consumer society” ethic and leads individuals, in the words of Erich Fromm, to “identify themselves by the formula: *I am = what I have and what I consume.*”⁸ As we

age, however, we undergo a significant, twofold reduction: first, in what we have (in terms of physical attractiveness, vitality, and the ability to produce, which is the usual means for obtaining material possessions); and second, in what we can consume (in terms both of personal capacity to use and, for many elderly, of sufficient funds to buy what they might want). Thus in the consumer society old age must be seen by the elderly and by

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others observing them as a time of decreased value.

We receive a great deal of education in “having” but precious little in “being.” When we reach that stage of life when attention and energies are virtually forced to focus upon “being” rather than upon “having,” we are little prepared for the assault upon our self-image

that such a change represents. This process, though painful, does not have to be all bad. “The social event of retirement performs a religiously ironic function: it empties out of a person’s life perhaps the most sturdy crutch of self-worth, one’s social role and usefulness,” James Whitehead points out, “In this moment of stripping away, of death to a former style of life, the Church’s ministry must not be that of substituting ersatz identities, but of celebrating this emptying process which leads to God.”⁹ Evelyn Whitehead then concludes, “Stripped of these partial sources of identity, the religious person can grow to recognize, even celebrate, a deeper truth—that no one ever ‘earns’ his way, that life’s meaning is more a gift than a reward.” Reflecting the biblical teachings of the creation of all human beings in the image of God and of Christ’s death for the sake of all, Christian theology has always strongly affirmed that our value does not rest in what we *do* or *have*, but in what we *are* in God’s sight.

GOD’S DIFFERENT STANDARDS

Paul asserts in 1 Corinthians 1:18-31 that the Christian gospel is neither a philosophy accessible only to the wise nor a commodity available only to the wealthy and powerful. In fact, the fundamental requirement of the gospel is recognition that God has freely offered forgiveness to all; no effort of our own is necessary (or even possible) to gain salvation. God thus chose the weak and the foolish, “by human standards,” as the vehicle of redemption, in order to demonstrate the insignificance of the “wisdom of the wise and the discernment of the discerning.” The message of this passage is unmistakable: God’s standards are different from those of the world.

The relevance of this point is clear. Granted, Paul did not refer to the elderly in his description of those through whom God chose to accomplish his will; rather, he mentioned the foolish, weak, and ignobly born. However, the elderly today fall into the same category of the “low and despised in the world”; and just as Paul’s words must have given great encouragement to those whom society devalued in his day, so his message offers real hope to the aged who find their worth called into question in numerous ways today. The world still values and admires those who are “wise,” “powerful,” and “of noble birth”; added to this list are “young,” “strong,” “healthy,” and “attractive.” The Christian, however, has no reason to suppose that God has changed his standards, and the elderly can take comfort that God may want to use them to achieve some great (or small) end “so that no one might boast in the presence of God.”

“OLD AND FULL OF YEARS”

Scripture views dying “old and full of years” as a highly desirable goal, not a fate to be dreaded, as is so often heard today both from younger people (“I just hope I go quickly before I get too old”) and from older people (“Why didn’t the Lord just take me before I got this way?”). One might liken the person “full of years” to a vessel full of liquid, that is, at its capacity: it can hold no more and has fulfilled its purpose by containing all that it was designed to hold. Similarly, to die “full of years” is to be satisfied, completed, indeed, “full-filled” in a most literal sense, having lived all the years one was intended to live.

Perhaps people are living beyond the point at which they are “full of years.” Medical technology has become quite adept at keeping the bodily vessel around (and even in relatively good shape). Without an expansion of its capacity, of the purpose it exists to accomplish, however, the vessel cannot help ceasing to function as it should. Consequently it fails to be “full-filled.” If contemporary society is going to continue to keep people alive and at the same time tell them that they no longer serve any useful purpose, then dying “in a good old age, old and full of years,” in the biblical sense will be a thing of the past.

One concrete way in which older people can avoid the trap of an empty old age that modern society seems to have laid for them is to be more careful about the ways they choose to fill their later years. In contemporary American society old age is often a period of role and status attrition. One reason is that retirement often is filled with activities that have a legitimate place as occasional recreation but, as a steady diet, eventually lose their ability to make one feel worthwhile or to be viewed as such by others. Indeed, many typical retirement activities—golf, bridge, travel, and the like—illustrate that narcissistic values continue to thrive in the later years. All of these “pastimes” focus attention upon oneself and do little for anyone else.

How much fuller might old age be if spent in some form of service to others? How much more purpose might be found for the sometimes seemingly endless time if the lost responsibilities of job and children are replaced, not exclusively with self-oriented recreational pastimes, but with activities that contribute to the welfare of others? Qoheleth observed long ago, "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven" (Ecclesiastes 3:1). Our later years well may be the season to answer more fully than ever before Christ's call to serve. This is surely an obvious way of taking up our cross and following Christ.

MUTUAL RESPONSIBILITY

For Christians, the entire discussion of both the role of the elderly in contemporary society and the obligations of younger people toward older needs a radical reorientation. No longer can the issue be the fulfillment of one individual over against another, but rather what the suffering of each for Christ's sake entails—the sacrifice of each amid the limitations and suffering that are common to all human beings.

No alleviation of human misery and no elevation of human hopes can occur if the different generations see their tasks as a competitive struggle rather than as a common enterprise. Sadly, as the elderly feel themselves increasingly pushed to the fringes of society (and beyond), they tend to adopt a "them against us" mentality. They may withdraw from contact with younger people (even into "elder ghettos"), refuse to support school bonds and other taxes perceived as benefiting only younger people, or in general decline to engage in the community. As one older woman, very active in her community, remarked, however, "The old have an obligation to show the young that elderly people still have worthwhile contributions to make. That will not only help the older people to be treated better but also assist the younger to deal more positively and less fearfully with their own aging."

Unfortunately, as Dieter Hessel has pointed out, even "the church does little to challenge relatively complacent older people who assume that they have pretty much fulfilled their responsibilities, and can mark time before claiming the place reserved for them at the Messianic banquet."¹⁰ Clergy, especially in retirement areas, often hear in response to a request for some service to the church, "I did that for forty years; I've put in my time already. Get one of these younger people with children to do it—they're the ones who'll benefit." As Hessel continues, though, "There is no age limit on God's expectation that persons contribute to the coming of the Kingdom, as we are reminded in the parable of the Great Feast (Luke 14:15-24). The feast is ready but everyone (especially the retired?) seems to have an excuse." The biblical concept of a community founded on love—indeed, for Christians a community functioning as the earthly body of its Risen Lord, who has called all his followers to take up their own crosses as he once

did—surely rejects making excuses for not participating in its work and activities, whatever one's age.

A theology of the cross, augmented by the scriptural teachings concerning love and community, suggests a radical reorientation of attitudes about the responsibilities of old and young, in the direction of greater mutuality and willingness to sacrifice. Older people in particular need to remember that Christ's call to serve others knows no time limit. In the process, contemporary Americans are much more likely to discover "a good old age" for themselves.¹¹

NOTES

1 Henri J. M. Nouwen and Walter J. Gaffney, *Aging: The Fulfillment of Life* (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1976), 19-20.

2 Alfons Deeken, *Growing Old, and How to Cope with It* (Fort Collins, CO: Ignatius Press, 1986), 4-5.

3 Scripture taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

4 Hans Küng, *On Being A Christian*, translated by Edward Quinn (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976), 580.

5 *Ibid.*, 577.

6 William F. May, "Who Cares for the Elderly?" *Hastings Center Report* 12 (December 1982), 37.

7 J. R. P. Schlater, "The Book of Psalms [1-41]: Exposition," in *The Interpreter's Bible*, edited by George A. Buttrick, et al., vol. 4 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1955), 127.

8 Erich Fromm, *To Have to To Be?* (New York: Bantam Books, 1976), 15.

9 Quoted in Evelyn Eaton Whitehead, "Religious Images of Aging: An Examination of Themes in Contemporary Christian Thought," *Aging and the Human Spirit: A Reader in Religion and Gerontology*, edited by Carol LeFevre and Perry LeFevre (Chicago: Exploration Press, 1981), 64. The following quotation from Evelyn Whitehead is from the same page.

10 Dieter Hessel, "The Church's Response to Ageism," in Dieter Hessel, ed., *Empowering Ministry in an Ageist Society* (New York: The Program Agency, United Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., 1981), 67.

11 This article is adapted, in somewhat altered form, from chapter four of my book, *Full of Years: Aging and the Elderly in the Bible and Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987).



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