



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

- 📖 Aging from the Perspective of the Cross
(*Aging*, pp. 18-25)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to:
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Christian Reflection

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Aging from the Perspective of the Cross

The cross Jesus Christ bids us to take up includes the ordinary, everyday sufferings of human life—including those associated with aging—when they are borne as Jesus bore his sufferings.

Prayer

Scripture Readings: Luke 9:21-25; 2 Corinthians 1:3-7 and 4:7-10

Responsive Reading†

Must Jesus bear the cross alone,
And all the world go free?

**No, there's a cross for everyone,
And there's a cross for me.**

**The consecrated cross I'll bear
Till death shall set me free;**

**And then go home my crown to wear,
For there's a crown for me.**

Must Jesus bear the cross alone,
And all the world go free?

Reflection

When we describe aging exclusively from the perspective of our hope in Christ's resurrection, we may give an unduly optimistic account of old age. Of course, with Paul, we rightly proclaim that about the suffering that attends old age and death, we need "not grieve as others do who have no hope" (1 Thessalonians 4:13). Yet, we can offer a balanced view of aging and take seriously the real losses that we suffer as we grow older, Stephen Sapp urges, if we also look at old age from the perspective of the cross.

Taking up our daily cross in the normal afflictions of growing older would include:

- ▶ *Acknowledging our dependence.* Fearing dependency, we tend to preserve youthfulness by any means possible and to institutionalize those who need care. However, "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," Sapp observes. "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."
- ▶ *Recognizing the true basis of personal value.* Consumerism pressures us to value people by what they *have* (physical attractiveness, vitality, and ability to produce) and *can consume* (in terms of the capacity to use and income to afford). No wonder that retirement threatens to empty our lives of meaning! By contrast, "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...[affirms] that our value does not rest in what we *do* or *have*, but in what we *are* in God's sight." Furthermore, God may call us in old age to some great (or small) task.



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▶ *Accepting mutual responsibility.* “The suffering of each for Christ’s sake,” Sapp writes, “entails the sacrifice of each amid the limitations and suffering that are common to all human beings.” Or, as the Apostle Paul puts it, our afflictions should prepare us to offer consolation to one another. Elderly people, who feel pushed to the fringes of society, may be tempted to withdraw from younger people, adopt an “us against them” attitude, and dodge their responsibilities to their church and to caring for others. Yet the church, “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,” Sapp notes, “surely rejects making excuses for not participating in its work and activities, whatever one’s age.”

Study Questions

1. Have you been inspired by how an older person deals with suffering? Did this person carry “in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible” (2 Corinthians 4:10)?
2. Do you agree that we fear dependence upon others? If so, what are some examples of this fear?
3. Discuss President Jimmy Carter’s statement: “We are not alone in our worry about both the physical aspects of aging and the prejudice that exists toward the elderly, which is similar to racism or sexism. What makes it different is that the prejudice also exists among those of us who are either within this group or rapidly approaching it” (quoted in *Aging*, p. 70).
4. “Whatever our culture tells us about life being an inevitably demoralizing business of falling apart, it is not what human life is about,” Roberta Bondi writes. “Bodies do wear out and our minds do get slower, but human beings are made in the image of God who is love; and God’s intention for us, if we choose to pursue it, is continual growth—growth in love both of God and neighbor” (quoted in *Aging*, p. 71). How does this support Sapp’s “perspective from the cross”?

Departing Hymn: “Abide With Me” (verses 1, 2, and 8)

Abide with me, fast falls the eventide;
the darkness deepens: Lord with me abide!
When other helpers fail, and comforts flee,
help of the helpless, O abide with me.

Swift to its close ebbs out life’s little day;
earth’s joys grow dim, its glories pass away;
change and decay in all around I see:
O Thou who changest not, abide with me.

Hold Thou Thy cross before my closing eyes;
shine through the gloom and point me to the skies:
heaven’s morning breaks, and earth’s vain shadows flee;
in life, in death, O Lord, abide with me.

Henry F. Lyte (1847)

Suggested Tunes: EVENTIDE or MORECAMBE

†From verses 1 and 3 of “Must Jesus Bear the Cross Alone?” Verse one by Thomas Shepherd, *Penitential Cries*, 1693 altered; verse three from *The Oberlin Social and Sabbath School Hymn Book*, by George N. Allen, 1844.

Aging from the Perspective of the Cross

Lesson Plans

Abridged Plan	Standard Plan
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To appreciate how Christians can take a more realistic view toward the suffering that often accompanies old age.
2. To reflect on what it means to bear our suffering as Jesus bore his sufferings.
3. To contrast the perspective of Christ's cross to some popular attitudes today toward dependency, personal value, and mutual responsibility.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Aging (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the hymn "Abide With Me," locate the tune EVENTIDE in your church's hymnal. (An alternate tune is MORECAMBE.)

Begin with a Quote

We "take up our cross daily" and follow Jesus not only when we are afflicted as a result of identifying with Christ, but as we share in the suffering that is inevitable in the fallen world. Theologian Hans Küng has written, "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" (quoted in *Aging*, p. 20).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by praying that members might bear their everyday sufferings in a manner that will bring honor to Jesus Christ and point others to his way.

Scripture Reading

Ask three group members to read Luke 9:21-25, 2 Corinthians 1:3-7 and 4:7-10 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

Looking at aging *exclusively* from the perspective of Christ's resurrection leads many Christians to be overly optimistic about aging and to not deal honestly and seriously with the suffering that often attends old age. Stephen Sapp recommends *supplementing* (but *not replacing*) that approach with the perspective of the cross.

Jesus warned disciples that they must “take up their cross daily” (Luke 9:23). Not only may we be afflicted as a result of identifying with Christ, but in varying degrees *we will share in the suffering that is inevitable in the fallen world*. Our everyday suffering can be “cross-bearing” if it is borne in a way correlating to or corresponding with the way in which Jesus dealt with his suffering. The study guide focuses on three correspondences with Christ’s suffering: (1) acknowledging our dependence upon God and other people, (2) refusing to accept the culture’s false values in relation to suffering, and (3) refusing to use our suffering as an excuse for bitterness or for escaping responsibility to others. As we, through God’s grace, bear our everyday suffering in this manner, we point others toward the way that Jesus bore his suffering. We fulfill Paul’s words: “For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh” (2 Corinthians 4:11).

You may use this lesson to introduce themes that members will explore again in the other lessons. The theme of “acknowledging our dependence” is developed further in another study guide, “Declining with Grace.” The themes of “recognizing the true basis for personal value” and “accepting mutual responsibility” will echo through the study guides “Old and Full of Years” and “What’s Retirement For?”

Study Questions

1. Encourage members to share stories about older family members or church members whom they know personally.
2. Sapp quotes William F. May’s comment, “The middle aged do not want the elderly to encumber them, and the elderly do not want to lapse into a burden” (*Aging*, p. 21). We purchase products that promise continued vitality; we pay dearly for medical research to extend the length of life. Members may discuss how quickly we put the sick, the physically or mentally challenged, the mentally ill, and the elderly into institutions of care. Many are frightened when they visit these institutions.
3. Ask for concrete examples of “the prejudice that exists toward the elderly.” Does this prejudice reflect our fear of dependency and our misplaced valuing of persons on the basis of what they *do* and *have*? Notice that Carter believes some elderly persons accept and internalize this prejudice and devaluation of themselves.
4. Bondi’s comment suggests that even in old age we are called to loving service and responsibility toward others. Because our worth is determined by “the image of God who is love” and “God’s intention for us,” we should ‘see through’ and transcend the false values of our culture, which say that our worth depends on what we *do* and *have*.

Departing Hymn

“Abide With Me,” which is a hymn for Communion, or the Lord’s Supper, reminds us that Jesus’ suffering was for us and that he is continually present with us through worship. It is based on Jesus’ resurrection appearance to two disciples on the road to Emmaus: “But they urged him strongly, saying, ‘Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.’ So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized [Jesus]; and he vanished from their sight” (Luke 24:29-31).

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.