

The Elderly Christian as a Member of the Church

In recent years there has been, in my opinion, an over-emphasis on the importance of young people in the church. Youth meetings, children's meetings, separate services for children, and so on, have simply mushroomed. Of course the Bible has a great deal to say about children and the gospel. But I assert there has been an over-emphasis upon young people in recent times. I submit that the Bible order has been forgotten and reversed. Little attention has been paid to the biblical teaching on the position of the elderly within the church. I suggest that the biblical emphasis is not so much on children but on older people. The biblical method is to gain the parents and leave them to deal with their children. In this section of the booklet I wish to try to restore the balance somewhat. I wish to examine the place the Bible gives the aged within the church.

(a) The aged still have a place in the church

The elderly Christian might well feel the weakness of the body and be unable to attend services as regularly as in former times. He may not be able to play such an active part in the life of the local church as he once did. But he is still a member of the church. God regards him as such. He has given abundant testimony to the fact. When Joel was sent by God to call the people back to God's ways, he began his message like this: 'Hear this, you elders' (Joel 1:2). The old people were not neglected. In fact they were first in line! When God promised the outpouring of his Holy Spirit, he included 'old men' among those who would receive him (Joel 2:28).

When Moses wanted to take the Israelites into the desert to worship the LORD, he made definite mention of the 'old'. They were to be part of the company (Exodus 10:9). When Paul wanted the church instructed, he did not omit the elderly (1 Timothy 5:1; Titus 2:2-5). The elderly are included in the biblical call to worship (Psalm 148:12). They are to rejoice in the prosperity of the people of God, alongside the young people (Jeremiah 31:13). When God revived his cause, the 'old men' showed their joy by their tears (Ezra 3:12). Haggai addressed them, with the others, upon the subject and called them all to work for the LORD! (Haggai 2:1-5).

God takes knowledge of his aged saints. They are still part of his people. They are part of his public people, his church. They may feel their own weakness and at times they may feel forgotten by men. Indeed, they may well be cast aside and be forgotten by others. But they are never forgotten by God. He still values their worship. They may sometimes feel left out of much of the life of the local church. But they are never left out by God. He regards them as a vital part of his people. He never ignores them. He never leaves them out. There is still a work that Jesus has for his aged saints to do. As in the parable, some are sent to work for the Master at the eleventh hour (Matthew 20:1-16).

Aged Christians are still a part of God's church. They should not be treated as though they were apart from the rest of God's people. Just as young people should not be separated from the rest, nor should the aged. They must all be kept together as one church.

(b) The aged have an honoured place in the church

The Bible does not regard the elderly Christian as merely having a place in the church in his advanced years. The elderly disciple has an honoured place in the church, an important place. There is a biblical connection between age and maturity (Luke 2:52). The aged Christian can look back on a life of experience (Joshua 23:1-2; Psalm 37:25). This is the great advantage that the old Christian has over the young.

With the young the doctrine of the Bible can be, to a certain extent, mere theory. But to the aged Christian it ought to be experience. God places great value on this matter of experience. Unfortunately, today this value is often forgotten or neglected. The world has largely ignored it in its education methods and it is grievous to see the church copying the world.

The Bible places emphasis on the maturity of the aged Christian as being of immense value to the young. Elihu said: 'I am young in years, and you are very old; that is why I was afraid and dared not declare my opinion to you. I said: "Age should speak; and the multitude of years should teach wisdom"' (Job 32:6). Here we have a younger man showing respect to the maturity and wisdom of experience of an aged spiritual man. See also Job 12:12. Of course, the mere fact of age does not necessarily mean infallibility. There can be such a thing as an old fool (Ecclesiastes 4:13). 'Men of many years are not always wise, neither do the aged always understand justice' (Job 32:9). Nevertheless, the biblical concept is that the elderly Christian is to be honoured for his experience. This is not always done, and in consequence disaster follows. Rehoboam very foolishly rejected the mature advice of the old men in preference to that of the young hotheads (1 Kings 12:6-8). Elderly Christians must pass on their experience to younger Christians, and the young are expected to respect them as their teachers (Titus 2:3-5). It is significant that the highest office in the present-day church, namely that of elder, is known by such a name (Acts 20:17, for example). This speaks of the maturity, wisdom and experience required by such an officer. Of course, it does not mean that every old man is to be an elder in the church. But it does mean that no young, inexperienced man ought to be (1 Timothy 3:6). Thus we can see that the elderly Christian must be given an honoured place within the local church. The aged Christian is a very valuable member of the church. Very valuable indeed.

(c) The aged are still to receive the instruction of the gospel

The elderly Christian is still a part of God's church. Therefore it follows that the elderly Christian must come under the regular instruction of the word of God in the church. This is a twofold matter: (i) The aged Christian still has to be taught the word of God; (ii) The aged Christian still has to be disciplined by the word of God. God does not leave them out. Nor must they 'opt out'.

As we have seen, when Joel preached to the people of his day, he first addressed the old (Joel 1:2). This was not a matter of mere courtesy. The prophet demanded that they pay serious attention to his preaching and that they should act upon it. They, with all the rest of God's people, had to hear the instruction of God's word. Titus had to make sure that the aged received plain instruction on practical godliness (Titus 2:2-3). Yes, instruction right to the end of this life. There are dangers for elderly Christians which can be avoided by attention to the principle. An elderly Christian might think that he has reached the place where he no longer needs any further teaching from the word of God. He has nearly finished his course. He has little influence left within the local church; it is all in the hands of the young people. He has had a long life of experience, and so further instruction is not required. It does not really matter now. He has got beyond it.

All this is wrong. Dreadfully wrong! It is dealt with and demolished by the principle under our examination. The elderly are still very much part of God's church. They must still come under the instruction of his word. Their sanctification is not yet complete. Until their death and entrance into glory, there still remains 'much land to be possessed' (Joshua 13:1). An aged Christian may not have Caleb's physical power, but in a spiritual sense every aged Christian ought to be able to look forward to more spiritual conquests (Joshua 14:6-13). Not only must the elderly Christian come under the teaching of the Bible – the elderly Christian must come under its discipline too: 'Do not rebuke an older man [elder, AV] but exhort him as a father... and

older women as mothers' (1 Timothy 5:1-2). True, the aged Christian must be respected and honoured. He must be treated kindly and gently. But if need be, he has to be disciplined. He must not be allowed to get away with sin, simply because he is old. He must not be allowed to play on his age to indulge himself and impose his whims on the church. The elderly Christian must be treated with respect, but not with fear. There is to be no double standard in church life and discipline – one for the young and another for the aged. All are part of God's church. All must come under its consistent instruction and discipline.

(d) The aged are to be useful members of the church

Not only is the aged Christian to be regarded still as a part of the church, nor just to be dealt with in the course of the regular ministry of the church – the elderly Christian must be an active and useful member of the church. Of course there will be the limitations imposed by the decline of old age. But in spite of that, the elderly Christian must seek to be useful. Aged saints can bring their invaluable maturity and experience into use and benefit all the members.

The aged women too are included and they have their part to play. They are to help in the training of young women. This training concerns the practical outworking of the gospel in the life of the family (Titus 2:3-5).

Thus the elderly Christian has a valuable and useful role to play within the local church. This work will not necessarily be carried out in a public way. (In the case of aged women, that would not be possible, anyway). The nature of the matter to be taught indicates that the teaching might most aptly take place in a private, advisory way. The aged Christian has a life of experience of the practical outworking of the gospel in everyday affairs, and it is this experience that is so valuable to the younger Christian.

But it is not only experience that the aged Christian has to pass on. It is essential that the aged Christian teaches the

truth. That is why the elderly Christian must still come under the instruction of the gospel. Merely to speak of experience is not enough. Experiences of Christians are not always Christian experiences. Experience, even of the old, always must be brought to the touchstone of Scripture. It is fatal for aged Christians to go around advising the younger members of the church, if they are not continually submitting themselves to the regular, consistent teaching and the discipline of the gospel. But if they are, how useful they can be!

Application to an elderly Christian

Do you still regard yourself as a member of your local church? Do you do all you can to keep up attendance at the services? Do you gladly sit under the sound of the gospel, even when preached by a younger man? Are you still attempting great things for God? Or have you packed your bags and are just sitting back, ready to depart this life? Do you live and speak so as to be worthy of the respect, the honour that God has placed upon you as an aged saint? Are you wiser now than in your youth? Have you learned of God through a life of experience with him? Do you rebel at instruction from the word? Do you resist the discipline of the truth in your life? Are you still pressing on to know Christ? (Philippians 3:12-15; 2 Peter 3:18). Do you seek to be useful? Do you pass on, in the right way, your experiences of the Lord? Do you use the Bible in your advice? Do you try to help the younger members of the church, or do you sit and gossip about them and their mistakes? You cannot do all you would. Do you do all you can? Do you pray for the prosperity of the church? Remember you are an example to younger Christians.

Application to a Christian of younger years

Do you realise that the old people in your local church are still very much part of the church? Do you realise that they are very important members? They may be weak and failing, but God regards them as invaluable. Do you? Do you dismiss

them? Or do you bring them into church life wherever you can? Do you visit them if they are shut in at home or hospital? Do you visit them, not only to give to them but also, perhaps more, to receive from them? Do you value their practical advice and experience? Do you test what they say by Scripture? (Acts 17:11). Or do you ignore them? Do you think that they are old-fashioned and their ideas out of date? Or do they know the gospel in a practical way, which perhaps you don't? Are you going to benefit from them all you can, while you can? Are you going to live now, in the days of your highest powers, so that when you are old you will have something valuable to pass on to the young?

Application to a church elder

In your capacity as elder do you treat the church as a whole? Or do you split it up and encourage carnal divisions? Do you so preach and discipline the members in such a way that you minimise the generation gap and even eliminate it? Do you look upon this as a shining testimony for the gospel in a world that so often is riddled with division between the age groups? Do you still teach and discipline the aged, in love? Or do you give in to their carnal desires and excuse it on grounds of age? Is all the church under your care pressing on to know more of God? Do you visit the elderly? Do you make them realise how much you value them? Do you seek their advice and counsel? Or do you ignore it and them? Do you allow for their physical weakness and encourage their spiritual strengths?