

Faith Pulpit

Senior Saints and Sensibility

If you have ever heard someone say, “You just had to have been there,” or, “Hindsight is so much better than foresight,” then you are also hearing what senior saints often think in the church. No one knows how seniors think or feel until they’ve become one, and no one sees from their perspective until they’ve been a senior themselves. I turned 67 this year and only feel that I’m beginning to understand what many of these great saints are saying.

The seniors in our churches were the baby boomers of the post-war years. The Pew Research group says that they are now 28% of evangelical church attendance and make up about one-third of the total population. They also find that boomers don’t consider themselves “old” until at least age 72. On June 1, 2011, it is estimated that 10,000 boomers turned 65, and the trends show they are returning to church faster than other demographic groups. I would say that the percentage of seniors in our fundamental Baptist churches is higher than the national average.

In preparing a series of messages for my church, I collected the following thoughts on where our seniors are and how they should fit in the local church.

Perception: The True and the False

There is a common perception in our churches about seniors. Millennials think anyone over 30–40 is too old. Samuel Rima wrote, “These older parishioners frequently become nothing more than irritating roadblocks to the great church we want to build, and subconsciously we may label them ‘traditionalists’ or ‘complainers,’ who threaten to block our dream.”¹ Seniors seem to be opinionated and insistent on their way of doing things. They are often accused of being “afraid” of change, past their ability to lead, and should be seen more than heard. Some may simply see seniors as those who pay the bills, attend all the services, hold the traditional church offices, and attend the business meetings.

The seniors' own perception is often different. They know one another's physical and emotional struggles. They feel their opinion is important but no one wants to listen. They are often taken advantage of but usually take it with great patience. They often take much more initiative in church than the younger ones, especially in greeting and praying for the members. They probably know that they really do pay for a large portion of the budget.

The Bible's view of seniors is unique. They are "fathers" who have known the Lord (1 John 2:13–14); they are "elders" as fathers and mothers who deserve respect (1 Tim. 5:1–2; 1 Pet. 5:5); they are "aged men" and "aged women" who teach the younger men and women (Titus 2:1–3); they are "parents" who spend and are spent for their children (2 Cor. 12:14–15); they are "fathers" and "mothers" who give instruction and law to their children (Prov. 1:8; 6:20; 10:1); they are "gray haired" saints who are to be honored (Prov. 20:29; Lev. 19:32); and they are "widows" who have been faithful to the Lord over the years (1 Tim. 5:5–16). The Bible also says that we have "three score years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labor and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away" (Ps. 90:10).

Advantages: The Wisdom Seniors Possess

Ravi Zacharias wrote, "The older you get, the more it takes to fill your heart with wonder, and only God is big enough to do that."² All readily admit that seniors have wisdom beyond that of the younger saints, but it is seldom mined for its benefits.

Seniors squarely face the ultimate challenge: imminent death. Like Paul, they know the time of their departure is at hand (2 Tim. 4:6). They have seen this happen to their family, friends, and spouses and yet they face it with realism, courage, and even with proper humor. They have walked with the Lord long enough to overcome "the fear of death" (Heb. 2:14–15).

Seniors possess a hindsight that was impossible in their younger years. They have simply lived longer and have seen more. They have made many mistakes and have learned to make the corrections. Having seen many things come and go in the church, they generally have great patience for the youth and want them to learn and grow. Of the things which they have heard and known they say, "We will not hide them from [our] children, showing to the generation to come the praises of the LORD, and his strength, and his wonderful works that he has done" (Ps. 78:3).

Seniors are more unaffected by peer pressure and cultural mores than younger saints. They don't glory in appearance as much (2 Cor. 5:12–13) because they realize their appearance is fading. Neither do they love the world as much (1 John 2:15) because much of its glory has passed them by. They have learned not to fight their own mortality because they realize it's a losing battle anyway (2 Cor. 4:16).

Seniors naturally possess many of the qualifications required of church leaders. Some are obvious to everyone, and others will follow in due time (1 Tim. 5:25). They are wise, tough, friendly, committed, helpful, generous, godly, grave, and sober; and godliness has brought them contentment in their later years (1 Tim. 6:6). In many ways they are committed to their church more than any other saints, having given of their years, talents, and treasure. They have won souls, built buildings, seen the ups and downs, outlasted most of their pastors, and are model members. They possess the “meekness of wisdom” (James 3:13), and they pray!

Reality: The Plain Truth about Seniors

Seniors also have their failures and shortcomings. The prophet Joel said, “Your old men shall dream dreams” (Joel 2:28), and Alister MacGrath said, “The reminiscences of old men are notoriously unreliable.”³ Most older saints will readily admit the negatives of being old. They are set in their ways and are often outspoken and offensive; they can be long-winded and sometimes self-absorbed; they are not always interested in youthful things due to physical limitations or maturity.

Most seniors will also admit that they have had their failures in ministry. If their own children have gone astray, they bear that burden constantly. Though in their younger years they were very evangelistic, they have often failed to evangelize their own boomer generation in the older years. They don’t generally keep up with all that is going on with “the times” and admit to being old-fashioned in many ways.

Yet, on their behalf, let me also say that seniors often bear burdens that younger people very seldom have. The first being old age! No one can know the physical problems one will face in his/her later years. Seniors most generally face these with extraordinary courage and determination. They will come to the services of the church in pain, inconvenience, and time-consuming trouble. They may also have financial hardships, medical problems in a number of ways, and various forms of unwanted business such as taxes, mortgages, retirements, and needy children.

Seniors also face unwanted loneliness. Though many younger saints may find themselves alone for various reasons, seniors will inevitably face the loss of a spouse and close family members and find themselves alone in their most difficult years. Some can handle being alone and many cannot for various reasons. Many suffer with unwanted memories of war, depression, accidents, and a host of unwise choices with which they have had to live. In all of their challenges, I am constantly impressed and amazed at the resiliency of our senior saints.

Challenges: Things That Seniors Should and Should Not Do

A.W. Tozer wrote, “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 of my days!”⁴ I find this would be the desire of most of the senior saints in our churches, but it isn’t as easy as it sounds. As they often say, “growing old isn’t for sissies.”

First of all, don’t give up! The apostle Paul told us to “press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:14). Our senior years are that last quarter of the race where the finish line is in sight, and though the strength is waning fast, we must keep looking unto Jesus Who is the Author and Finisher of our faith (Heb. 12:2). Scripture exalts the worthiness of the senior years, and our generation needs us even if they don’t realize it.

Seniors should act their age! Paul wrote to Philemon as “Paul the aged” (Philemon 9). Use that title with the dignity it deserves. We aren’t teenagers anymore, and it’s unbecoming of us to try to be what we can’t be whether in appearance, language, or culture. Peter encouraged us to adorn “the hidden man of the heart” (1 Pet. 3:4). That is where the real beauty lies. Neither should we become sloppy or lazy. Age has its own curse without us adding to it.

I don’t think it is funny when seniors mock their own cause. I don’t mean that we can’t laugh at ourselves. Seniors are better at that than any age group. But I mean acting out skits and plays or telling stories of mentally handicapped old people, like television commercials do all the time. God has given us power, love, and a sound mind (2 Tim. 1:7), and we should honor that as long as we’re able. Above all things we should not be crude or worldly. We have to be very careful here because we may think we’re above these things. We may think that crudeness is OK just because we’ve become calloused to it for so long. We may think the lust of the flesh doesn’t apply to us, but the truth is that these things are uglier than ever in older saints.

We all know that it is important for seniors to keep their physical and mental senses as sharp as possible because they will naturally diminish quickly on their own. We should stay active with hobbies, activities, even part-time work. We should read, write, memorize, stay computer literate, and keep our minds as active as possible. Keeping active in the local church is both a help to us physically and mentally and also a blessing to the church body.

Opportunities: Good Things That Seniors Can Provide

D.L. Moody once wrote that though godly saints may not be appreciated in this life, “there will be a greater work done after they are gone by the influence of their lives, than when they were living.”⁵ Sometimes there is so much regret for what we did not accomplish in our lives that it keeps us from doing the service we can be doing now. In the last days of his life, living in prison with no hope of release, the apostle Paul asked Timothy to bring him his books and his Bible (2 Tim. 4:13).

Seniors are prayer warriors and Bible students. If every other door is closed to you as a senior, these are not. Seniors have time to pray and have wonderful devotions with God. We have the advantage of years of good learning, experience, and cultivated interest in the things of God. It is not secret why seniors are the most frequent attenders at prayer meetings and even Sunday evening services. Heaven will only tell what great things were accomplished for God through the prayers of senior saints.

Seniors also have time to evangelize. Many of the great churches of history, including Spurgeon's Metropolitan Tabernacle, flourished because teams of seniors were constantly evangelizing their city. Seniors can evangelize seniors and baby boomers better than anyone else. You can speak directly and confidently to those of your own age in a way younger ones simply cannot.

There are services to be done within the church body. There are always shut-ins and those in rest homes who are lonely or need encouragement. Many seniors have skills that can be used around the church or to help those in need. Many church building projects would not be done without the help of seniors who have skills and the time to use them.

Many seniors, certainly not all, have been blessed with the ability to give monetarily at this time in their lives. Paul encouraged them to "be ready to distribute, willing to communicate" (1 Tim. 6:18). What a blessing those seniors are to the church! Yet even those who are not so fortunate in the senior years still have a testimony and an exemplary life to live before the church. Our children and grandchildren need to see us serving God and living by our faith to the very end. We can do this in many ways.

Responsibility: What the Church Should Do

The most needful response of churches in our generation and culture is to treat our seniors in the way the Bible commands. Our culture is not one that honors its seniors as previous generations have done, but this should not be true of our churches. In every age God has commanded us to honor our fathers and mothers (Exod. 20:12; Eph. 6:2). Seniors are to be teachers and leaders, and youth are to be learners and followers (Titus 2:1–6). This is a challenge as we try to minister to a world that doesn't do that very well, but it is still our responsibility nevertheless.

We are commanded to help and support the older saints who are weak or destitute (1 Thess. 5:14; 1 Tim. 5:3–16; James 1:27). We shouldn't see their need simply as a show of good works. Seniors don't want to be patronized. But seniors have very real needs brought on by a phenomenon that they can't prevent and that we all will experience—older age. Our care for them is both a responsibility and an opportunity to do some of the most important work of the church.

The church should also seek to understand the senior saints among them and also to admire their faithfulness. They carry themselves well or at least as well as they can, and often just living through

daily routines is a monumental task. They are tough, but they are also human and need the love and support of their brothers and sisters in Christ. They have a godly faithfulness that is sometimes lost in our current generation of churches.

Perhaps Solomon said it best, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge: but fools despise wisdom and instruction. My son, hear the instruction of thy father, and forsake not the law of thy mother: for they shall be an ornament of grace unto thy head, and chains about thy neck” (Prov. 1:7–9).

Works Cited

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2. Ravi Zacharias, *Can Man Live Without God?* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1994) p. 89.
3. Alister MacGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994) p. 95.
4. A.W. Tozer, *Mornings with Tozer* (Camp Hill, PA: Wing Spread Publishers, 2008) May 31.
5. D.L. Moody, *Spiritual Power* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1997) p. 107.

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