

## SPIRITUALITY AND SENIOR ADULTS

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## INTRODUCTION

In the introduction to my book, *Spiritual Formation: A How-to Book for Parents and Teachers*, I describe the various stages of spiritual formation in terms of defining commitments for six age levels. These age levels are not set in concrete. They are flexible and vary from individual to individual and from culture to culture. However, the various commitments will occur in the order presented and during the time that a person is within each age/social level. Hence, my views are basically developmental in that I see a natural progression from one level of commitment to the next, with each new commitment being possible only after any appropriate previous ones have been successfully encountered.

SIX LEVELS OF SPIRITUAL FORMATION  
(OR COMMITMENT)

The defining commitments, commitments which are the highest level possible during a particular stage, follow in this order: (1) Early Childhood (birth to five)—love for Jesus Christ, based upon trust that is learned primarily from the faithfulness of primary caregivers; (2) Later Childhood (six to eleven, or elementary school years)—committing one's life to Jesus Christ, which is possible only after the child experiences a divine revelation of his/her sinful rebellion against God; (3) Adolescence (twelve to seventeen, or junior and senior high school years)—“commitment to the basic tenets of the Christian faith and to the Christian heritage,” which is possible only after a critical evaluation of that faith and heritage; (4) Early Adulthood (from the end of adolescence to the end of the thirties)—“commitment to live the faith” that was “examined and accepted” in adolescence, most commonly occurring after the birth of children and the increased responsibility; (5) Middle Adulthood (forties and fifties)—“commitment to deepen one's

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faith,” a result of “a renewed desire to understand the faith and to improve one’s relationship with Jesus Christ,” particularly because of the crises faced during this period; (6) Later Adulthood (sixties to death)—“commitment to the eternal—i.e., to prepare for departure from this life and entry into the next.”<sup>1</sup>

This list comprises a basic review of the appropriate stages of commitment one should experience along the way to becoming a senior adult. I have previously written concerning spirituality in the life of children, but in this article I will address the spirituality of senior adults. Since in the senior adult years the defining commitment is commitment to the eternal, the senior adult should be involved in efforts to prepare for death and eternity. Some seniors look with fear toward their approaching death; others look with eager anticipation toward what lies ahead. In order to understand the spirituality in the senior adult years, the reader must understand how to evaluate the spiritual level of commitment in the life of the senior adult.

#### EVALUATION OF SPIRITUAL FORMATION IN THE SENIOR ADULT YEARS

The following information concerning evaluation of spiritual formation comes from the conclusion of my above-mentioned book. There are two categories of spiritual formation: positive and negative.

##### Progressing Spiritual Formation

There is only one positive type of spiritual formation. However, there are four negative types. The positive category is “*progressing spiritual formation*.”<sup>2</sup> This spiritual formation is never fully achieved but is always in process as one becomes more like Jesus Christ under the guidance of the Holy Spirit within. Although where the person is in the process of spiritual development is not nearly so important as the fact that the person is progressing, it is assumed that the person progressing appropriately will have completed the expected age-level commitments of previous levels and be in the process of making a commitment appropriate to his/her age level. If the person is not in the process of becoming more spiritually mature, the person falls into one

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<sup>1</sup>Glenn A. Jent, *Spiritual Formation: A How-to Book for Parents and Teachers* (Bangalore, India: Theological Book Trust, 1999), 10-11.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 189.

of four negative categories.

### Arrested Spiritual Formation

The first negative category is “arrested spiritual development.” It is comprised of persons who are not spiritually at the level they should be.

Examples of such persons may be found in nearly every age level. For instance, an adolescent (or even an adult) with normal capability for abstract thought may insist on thinking and speaking of God in anthropomorphic terms—i.e., describing God in human terms. Or, an adolescent (or adult) may refuse to think through and establish a personally-tested faith, preferring instead to trust what authority figures tell them to believe. Such persons may never develop a proper understanding of the Christian faith and never fully learn the value of their Christian heritage. These persons have an arrested, limited view of theology and faith.... They tend to be problematic in the church setting because they are not mature Christians. They are subject to periods of doubts, especially in times of crises, because their faith and theology are not properly developed. Such arrested persons are in need of special care and training, not unlike that required by children or adolescents, so that they might have opportunity to progress once more in their level of spiritual formation. Nevertheless, some persons will refuse to “risk” change for one reason or another. They will remain arrested Christians for the remainder of their lives.<sup>3</sup>

Seniors who fall in this category tend to be very naïve in their faith and, hence, are very shallow spiritually. These people generally are very religious in their conversations and in their outlook on life. They may give simplistic explanations of their faith and tend to turn thinking persons away from the church. Their answers to life’s struggles usually are little more than pious platitudes or memorized answers that are not adequate. When such persons personally are afflicted by some physical struggle, they likely will not endure the suffering and heartache very well. When the trials of life come, they oftentimes complain about God not treating them fairly. They may complain that the church people (and the leaders) do not care about them. They may not be happy in their faith. They tend to live miserable lives when bad circumstances arise.

Mature Christian leaders need to provide spiritual training for such people so that they may grow beyond their infantile understanding of the faith. Such people may actually survive quite well with this arrested faith. However, when they try to share their faith with someone else,

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 189-90.

the hearers will not likely consider their faith worthy of examination. It will prove to be inadequate to anyone who has great need.

### Regressed Spiritual Formation

The second negative category is “regressed spiritual formation.” Such people have, for one reason or another, retreated into the security of a previous spiritual outlook on life.

There may be a variety of reasons this regression occurs, but the most likely cause would be a crisis of some kind. The crisis may be spiritual (for example, an adult who, because of sin, begins to doubt an earlier salvation experience) or emotional (for example, the death of a loved one which causes a person to question God’s love and to consider no longer loving and serving God). The crisis may be psychological (for example, stress from loss of job which causes one to lose a sense of self-worth and personal identity), or physical (for example, the discovery that one has terminal cancer, which causes one to doubt the presence, or existence, of a God who cares). Persons in times of crises may regress to a previous level of commitment; however, that regression may be only temporary. With proper love and care from those Christians who share life with them, most will become progressing Christians again.<sup>4</sup>

Regressed spiritual formation is an interesting phenomenon in which a person may actually retreat to a less mature, previous spiritual level in order to avoid the pain experienced in the present. It is an inappropriate course of action that will actually defer, or even deter, a mature response to life’s crises. Christian leaders need to be able to assess this problem when it occurs in order to help persons overcome such limitations. Seniors adults who respond negatively in such a fashion may actually become spiritually paralyzed for the rest of their lives. It is tragic to see a physically mature Christian who is immobilized because of spiritual immaturity. Good biblical training and good theology can help a person to avoid this problem, for bad theology and/or a lack of understanding of Bible truth can actually cause or deepen the numerous struggles in life. Seniors need to continue to have Bible classes throughout their lifetime in order to help them have proper understanding of how to respond to the crises of life. In spite of our best efforts, some will still have insufficient faith for the trials of life and will regress. Because of their spiritual weakness, these people will certainly need mature Christian friends to help them, to

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 190.

encourage them, and to guide them away from inappropriate feelings. In this way, they will be much less likely to create problems in the church or to fall by the wayside.

### Unaddressed Spiritual Formation

The third negative category is “unaddressed spiritual formation.” There are two different groups of persons that fall into this category. I will present each one separately for ease of understanding.

### FAILURE TO RESPOND TO THE GOSPEL

There are many persons who fail to respond to the call of God when they hear the message of the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. They may not respond for a variety of reasons.

They have heard the claims of Jesus Christ upon their lives, but they choose to ignore those claims. Some may think those claims are little more than man’s projections of his own psychological needs. Others may think they want to live a life free of religious restraint. Still others may simply want to live their own way for a little while longer. Whatever the reason, they have heard the Bible message and have rejected it—at least for the present time. This sub-group needs to experience love and care from God’s people, not condemnation or rejection. They need to see the love of God flowing out of God’s people so that they begin to see the reality of God living in His people. They need to experience caring concern for them from God’s people, even though they are not yet (and may never be) a part of God’s family.<sup>5</sup>

Many people are aware of the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ. However, not everyone who hears is responsive and obedient to the Word of God. Actually, Jesus indicates that more will turn away from the gospel than will accept it and become believers (see Matthew 7:13-14). This is no less true of senior adults. Many of them have heard the claims of God upon their lives, but they simply refuse to turn from their own way. Some enjoy living a life of sin even into their senior years. In one church where I was the pastor, one woman was married to a man who went out to meet a nineteen-year-old woman at one of the taverns every Saturday night. Another man enjoyed his alcohol so much that he would not become a Christian because he realized he would have to quit drinking. Sin is not age-related. Some senior adults have grown hardened by repeated refusal to heed the call of the Holy

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 191.

Spirit and no longer hear God calling them unto salvation. For them, there is no longer any hope. Whereas at one time they would not respond, now they cannot respond because they no longer hear God's voice. Many people have not addressed their spiritual formation because they have put it off until another day. They continue to do so even in the senior years, as they think they have plenty of time. Then, too, others reject outright the existence of God and will have nothing to do with Christianity and its teachings. There are many people in the world who have unaddressed spiritual formation. Many of them will never change. What a tragedy it is that these people who remain in this condition will leave this life unprepared for eternity with God and have to spend all eternity in hell without God.

### NEVER HEARD THE GOSPEL

The second group that has not addressed spiritual formation is the main reason why the Christian church has long practiced sending out missionaries into the world. This group consists of folk who have never heard the gospel.

They are unaware that they are sinners, that Jesus died for their sins, that He wants them to repent of their sins and trust in Him for salvation from their sins, that He wants to live His life through them. These persons exist in every society, in every culture, in every part of the world. They may be children, adolescents, or adults. They have not yet heard and may not have a positive view of Christianity and Jesus Christ. They may actually have negative feelings because of some Christians they have known or because of the way Christianity and Christians are frequently portrayed in the media. Christians must seek out such persons and present the claims of Jesus Christ to them.<sup>6</sup>

Because of the negative feelings that many people have toward Christianity, Christians need to build a positive rapport with others before they try to evangelize them. Witnessing too quickly may serve only to reinforce negative feelings. Thus, Christians need to practice friendship evangelism as the main approach to winning senior adults to Christ. Direct evangelistic approaches have their place but should not be the primary pattern for evangelizing. Senior adults have many experiences and can readily see the superficiality of some Christians who try to evangelize them. Christians need to earn the right to tell others about Jesus. Then, too, they should not be or act surprised when

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 191-92.

they learn that a person has no idea of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ, nor how to become one.

It is also true that there are many folk who do not know what evangelical Christians believe. They tend to believe the distorted media depiction of Christians as radical and hypocritical. Thus, Christians who wish to witness to their senior friends may have to first dispel the myths that others have of them. Evangelicals need to have a message that is certain, clear, and understandable. It should be delivered in a spirit of love and compassion. Senior adults need Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord because He can help them to have a calm assurance about their future. Also, He promises to be a constant Companion. Senior adults need not fear facing the declining years of life alone. Neither do they need to fear death since they have assurance that heaven is their eternal home. Christianity has much to offer seniors, but what is offered must be offered in the right spirit and at the right time.

### COMPRESSED SPIRITUAL FORMATION

The fourth negative category of spiritual formation is “compressed spiritual formation.” There are also two groups within this category with remarkably different causes and results.

#### Compression to the Present

The first group compresses commitments that should have been made previously into a short time of rapid development of ever-increasing commitment to Jesus Christ until they reach their own level.

Persons in the first sub-group experience compressed spiritual formation because they are persons who have made a commitment of faith in later adolescence or in adulthood. Since they did not make this commitment at an earlier age, they now experience the various commitments appropriate to earlier age-levels in a compressed time period. For instance, adults hear the gospel message and suddenly realize that they love Jesus. They commit their lives to Jesus.... Not only do they suddenly love Jesus, but also they suddenly develop a craving for Bible study—an unquenchable thirst for more and more knowledge about Jesus. They become increasingly excited as they read about the Christians in the Bible. They have a great interest in understanding, accepting, and claiming the Christian heritage as their own. They ask questions about everything—some very embarrassing ones about why their church is not like the churches in the Bible, why long-time Christians are not more excited about Jesus, why no one ever told them about Jesus before, and on and on. The childhood and adolescent experiences are compressed into a brief time in adulthood as they catch up to where they should be in terms of

appropriate age-level commitment.<sup>7</sup>

This first group compresses from the past to the present. They are “catching up” with others their age. Their level of commitment grows rapidly, and their newfound faith is able to mature rapidly because of adult understanding of what is taking place in their lives. Thus, senior adults may go through the first five stages of commitment in a few weeks, whereas those same five stages require many years for others progressing through them in the normal pattern. There is an air of excitement around senior adults who give their lives to Christ in their senior years. They know how to appreciate their salvation and rejoice in what they have discovered. Of course, there is also a sense of remorse at having wasted so many years of life that should have been lived for Jesus Christ. Thus, people who work with senior adults should be ready to counsel them concerning the importance of forgiving self for past failures. Counselors should emphasize the importance of taking advantage of every day of life that God gives in the present, not the lost opportunities of the past. Unfortunately, some will continue to bemoan the fact that they have wasted many years. Even of greater concern is the negative spiritual influence upon their children. Their children may not listen to their words of testimony, and they may never become believers. The overpowering regret and guilt that can result may cause great psychological and spiritual harm if they are not given good counsel and comfort.

Oftentimes, these new converts will ask questions as to why the present-day church falls so far short of the church in the Bible. They have an adolescent understanding of the ideal church and expect Christians to be perfect. Of course, they soon learn that they were misguided in their thinking. As they mature in their faith, they come to realize that Christians are frail human beings, capable of great good and great failure. They also become more sympathetic as they mature spiritually because they learn that living the Christian life is not as easy as they first thought. The evil one, Satan, comes to attack them in many unexpected ways. They, too, learn that it is too easy to fall back into sin. They, too, learn that they must be careful not to judge others. They soon learn not to judge and criticize, but rather to love and pray for those who are struggling through life.

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 192-93.



### Compression of the Future

The second group consists of folk who have learned of some fatal illness that will cut their lives short. They compress from the present through the future stages that they have not yet experienced.<sup>8</sup> This type of group would not ordinarily fit senior adults. It would be more likely to occur in earlier stages. However, it is possible for a senior adult to learn of a terminal disease and to suddenly become intensely committed to preparing for eternity, giving a sense of urgency to the defining commitment of senior adult years. Prior to that time, the senior may not have thought much about his/her eternal plans. It is obvious that such persons need good counseling and much encouragement as they face imminent death. Christian love and care from others can enable the senior adult to continue to be faithful to the end. Christians dare not leave such persons to face the inevitable alone. True, Jesus Christ will be present to comfort and give assurance. However, the presence of someone who cares is invaluable.

### THE LIFE REVIEW

After more than twenty-five years as a pastor, the last ten in a church with a high percentage of senior adults, I have discovered a very common experience among senior adults. It is called a life review. I think this life review is not unlike the eighth age of man identified by Erik Erikson as “ego integrity” versus “despair.”<sup>9</sup> Some people fear that the elderly person is sick when he/she enters this life review. However, Charles Sell believes it is “a sign of health and should be encouraged.”<sup>10</sup> This life review typically occurs within the last two years of life. It involves a reliving of the significant events of life. It appears to be a time in which the senior adult comes to terms with the life-changing decisions made earlier in life. The person attempts to make peace with himself/herself and previous decisions. The senior may seem to be lost in the past during this time and will remember names of people whom they have not seen for many years (some being dead for a long time). Typically, at the same time they may not

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 193-94.

<sup>9</sup>Erik H. Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York and London: 1959, 1963; Paperback, 1964, 1986; Reissued, 1993), 168-69.

<sup>10</sup>Charles M. Sell, *Transitions through Adult Life* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 225.

remember the names of family members and friends who come to visit them. These adults can sometimes be heard talking with the people in those events and attempting to make peace with them. There is what appears to be a rationalization and justification process occurring. When the senior adults complete the life review, they oftentimes feel a sense of satisfaction with life, or “ego integrity.” They feel confident that they have lived a good life and have made peace with those they may have offended during those events. It is interesting to note that these people appear to be much happier once the life review is completed.

There is a downside to such experiences. If they happen not to be believers, Christians will find it difficult to win them to Jesus Christ because they have already accepted the fact that they have lived satisfactory lives. They feel good about life and, thus, feel little sense of guilt or shame. If Christians try to help them to see their sinfulness, these happy and satisfied persons may quickly reject the idea that they are sinners in need of God’s forgiveness. After all, they have already forgiven themselves. Thus, nothing needs to be forgiven. Basically, what the Christian witness can and should do is tell his/her personal experience and describe what the Scriptures teach. The Holy Spirit will have to convict them of their sinful rebellion against God and their need for Jesus Christ.

Unfortunately, some senior adults come out of their life review with a bitter heart and mind. They feel that they have not lived a satisfactory life, they have wasted precious opportunities, and they tend to be unhappy for the rest of their lives. They feel unworthy of love and would not easily accept the idea that God could love them. They tend to withdraw and turn upon themselves. They are unpleasant to other family members and have a strongly negative spirit. In such cases, Christians will find it nearly impossible to direct their hearts and minds toward the love and acceptance of God. They are convinced their lives were failures and will not consider otherwise. Even Christians who try to establish friendships with them will be severely tested because of all of the negative thinking. They feel unworthy of friendship and may think those who seek to befriend them are doing so out of less-than-honorable motives. They may exhibit characteristics of paranoia, in which they may accuse others of being out “to get them.” These people live lives full of pain and brokenness. Only the working of the Holy Spirit can change the heart and mind of such an individual. However, it

is important for Christians to remember that Jesus Christ also died for these persons and loves them just as much as He does the person who has completed the life review with positive results.

### MINISTRY WITH SENIOR ADULTS

Any ministry with senior adults must be predicated upon an assessment of the level of spiritual formation achieved by the participants. Only through many personal contacts and much time spent together will such assessment be possible. Such ministry should be based upon the idea of “with,” not “for,” seniors. Also, inasmuch as is possible, senior adults should lead their own programs.<sup>11</sup> People who work with senior adults need to understand that this group has the capacity to learn. Although it is true that “cognitive functions may be interrupted or hindered by cardiovascular, psychological, or physical malfunction,” senior adults “are vital human beings with gifts and abilities, still growing in their understanding of life and its responsibilities.”<sup>12</sup> There may be limitations, but there are also possibilities. Furthermore, workers ought to remember the developmental tasks that are common to later maturity. Robert Havighurst identifies five tasks: (1) “Adjusting to decreasing physical strength and health,” (2) “Adjustment to retirement and reduced income,” (3) “Adjusting to death of spouse,” (4) “Establishing an explicit affiliation with one’s age group,” and (5) “Adopting and adapting social roles in a flexible way.”<sup>13</sup> These tasks are important aspects of senior adult life. They are some of the foci of interest. Of course, Christians are particularly interested in issues related to their religious beliefs.

Programs, Bible studies, activities should all reflect the spiritual needs of each senior adult and seek to minister to them in the light of those needs. Senior adults are keenly interested in studies about heaven and hell, prophecy, the end times, the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, and the Book of Revelation. When teaching seniors, Bible Teachers should remember the following suggestions:

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 211.

<sup>12</sup>Kenneth O. Gangel and James C. Wilhoit, *The Christian Educator’s Handbook on Adult Education* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1993), 226.

<sup>13</sup>Robert J. Havighurst, *Developmental Tasks and Education* (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1948, 1972), 107-16.

1. Introduce new methods slowly. The personality of your group should guide you in this matter.
2. Choose methods appropriate for the group, the lesson, and the location.
3. Choose methods that tap the experience and gifts of the group.
4. Choose methods that help fulfill goals. Never select an activity because it “fills time.”<sup>14</sup>

It is unthinkable that an adult Bible teacher would adhere solely to the lecture method with a group of people who have a wealth of experience to draw from to enhance the Bible class.

Of course, fellowship activities are always in order. However, senior adults need Bible study. There is no developmental time in life in which persons are more interested in Bible study. The reason for the heightened interest is that they are beginning to realize the importance of spiritual matters and the next step (graduation from this life to the next). Seniors become fascinated with eternity and what life will be like following death. This interest calls for Bible study concerning death and life after death. It involves study of heaven and hell. It involves study of rewards and punishment. It involves study of assurance of salvation.

Senior adults also need to know that younger people, including church staff, care about them—even when they are in their declining years and are no longer able to contribute much to the church. They need to know that they are valued, even when their health restricts them to home or even to bed. People who did not attend church but became believers in their senior years also need to know that they are valued as a part of God’s family.

## CONCLUSION

Younger Christians can learn many fascinating stories and experiences by simply listening to what older Christians have to say. Working with senior adults is not a one-way blessing. Both the workers and the seniors will be blessed in the process. They will be blessed by God and blessed by their relationship with one another. Crossing generational lines is important in the life of the church. It will bring

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 231.

better understanding of how God continues to work with His people from generation to generation. Our God is the same yesterday, today, and forever. He loves us all. He has told us to love one another.