



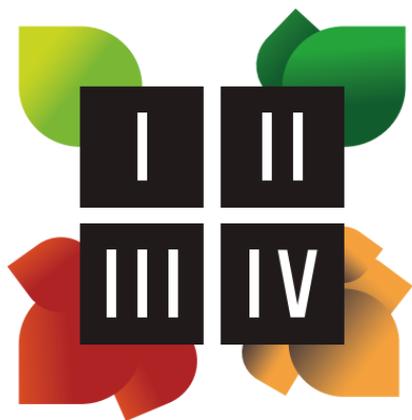
LIFE IN

FOUR

STAGES

**A BIBLICAL CELEBRATION
OF CHILDHOOD, YOUTH,
ADULTHOOD, AND AGE**

R. ALBERT MOHLER JR.



LIFE ^{IN} FOUR STAGES

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Life in Four Stages

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Editor's Note

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THE FOUR STAGES OF LIFE

One of the strangest aspects of the biblical worldview is the progression of the human life through stages. Why must we grow? Why must we develop? Why must we begin as infants and grow through stages towards adulthood? We might think God instituted the progression of life as an act of judgment after the Fall. In the garden of Eden, however, God commanded Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply (Gen 1:28). Eve would have given birth to an infant that that infant would have progressed through the stages of life. Even in the garden, therefore, God endowed dignity within the different stages of human life. Mortality came as a verdict of the Fall as God had promised. The process of life, however, is a gracious gift of God.

Human life inevitably progresses through four stages: the wonder of childhood, the energy of youth, the endurance of adulthood, and the glory of age. If each stage of life comes as a gift from God, then Christians must embark on the worthy task of thinking biblically about life's progression.

There is a stained glass window called the *Seven Stages of Man* at the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C. If you were to see it, you would notice that there is a boy on the left pane that becomes a man of age by the time you progress to the right pane. The first few lines of the monologue of Jacques in Shakespeare's play *As You Like It*, are represented in this window. I want you to see these stages of life more closely in the lines of this play. He begins:

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages. At first, the infant,
Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms.
Then the whining schoolboy, with his satchel
And shining morning face, creeping like snail
Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,
Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad
Made to his mistress' eyebrow. Then a soldier,
Full of strange oaths and bearded like the pard,
Jealous in honor, sudden and quick in quarrel,

Seeking the bubble reputation
Even in the cannon's mouth. And then the justice,
In fair round belly with good capon lined,
With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,
Full of wise saws and modern instances;
And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts
Into the lean and slippered pantaloon,
With spectacles on nose and pouch on side;
His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide
For his shrunk shank, and his big manly voice,
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes
And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,
That ends this strange eventful history,
Is second childishness and mere oblivion,
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

So says Shakespeare. In this soliloquy, Shakespeare captures the stages of humanity and the progression of life. What are we to think of this? What would the Bible have us to understand about the distinctive features of these stages? The God of the universe fashioned each stage of life with precious glory. The Bible summons its readers to not only recognize the stages of life, but to live in them as God intended for his glory. We now turn to the first stage of life: childhood.

THE WONDER OF CHILDHOOD



I will take any excuse to talk about my grandsons, Benjamin and Henry. If you could see a picture of them, you would see the joy they radiate. The exuberance of a child helps to demonstrate why even the face of one child demands a theological answer.

John 3:16 says, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” This verse encapsulates the joy of the gospel and the promise of salvation. God gave his Son to secure salvation for all who would believe in him. When the Father gave his Son, he not only gave him as a sacrifice for sin. He gave him first as an infant. We talk about this at Christmas. Christians around the world cele-

brate the season known as “advent.” Christians, however, fail to recognize the wonder of the truths declared in the Christmas season. The Word of God, the divine Logos, the One who spoke the cosmos into existence, the One who as Paul said, “who has all creation under his feet,” broke into the world not as a mighty man, or even a child. He came as a *newborn infant*.

Luke 2:40 makes clear the progression and growth of Christ. Luke records, “And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom and the favor of God was upon him.” In that very same chapter, we have the account of Jesus as he was in the temple as a 12-year-old. At that stage of life we read of him: “And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man.”

It is important for us to recognize that in the incarnation, Christ himself, in becoming as we are, became as we are as an infant. The most stunningly clarifying aspect of infancy in this regard is the fact that of all the live birth organisms we know in the cosmos, the most helpless and incompetent one is a human infant.

The evolutionary worldview has to handle this and has to explain why babies are as they are, whether they’re animal babies or human babies. So evolutionists long ago made the argument that the reason why infants and the reason why the young of every species are cute is so that we will see them as cute and give them attention, because if we didn’t give them attention, they would wither and die.

Evolutionists note that the young of almost all species have certain common traits, and those certain common traits come down to outsized heads and outsized eyes. The evolutionists so inclined us that we are attracted to outsized heads and to outsized eyes. Someone brings a little bundle with an outsized head and outsized eyes, and we immediately say, "That's cute," whether it is a brother or a sister or a hippo. With that big head and those big eyes, you just say, "Isn't that cute?" You want to hold it, and you want to tickle it.

Of course, the evolutionists will say the whole point is you want to feed it, you want to take care of it, and you want to protect it. This reveals, on the one hand, the ingenuity, and on the other hand, the sterility of the evolutionary worldview. The evolutionists are saying that all there is in terms of a mother's attachment to her baby is just attachment that leads to nurture. This attachment cannot even be described as love in the evolutionary worldview. It is just that a baby is seen by its mother, and the mother sees the big head and the big eyes and says, "I'm going to take care of this rather than abandon it." Is that all it is?

I do not think that is very plausible. The biblical worldview tells us that childhood and infancy is a part of God's plan, and thus reflects God's glory. God's glory is demonstrated in the fact that we are born as an absolute need, but first as an absolute gift.

Children are a gift

The first thing to see in terms of what Scripture says about a child is that children represent “gift.” Every single child is a gift from the Lord. In Psalm 127, we read, “Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord. The fruit of the womb, a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one’s youth. Blessed is the man who fills his quiver with them. He shall not be put to shame when he speaks with his enemies in the gate.”

The Bible’s witness is absolutely consistent. Every single child is made in the image of God. Every single child at every single stage and age is an undiluted gift and is to be celebrated. Every single child is to be cared for and welcomed. Even though this child is primarily the responsibility of its parents, the child is actually the responsibility of all. Contrast that view of children with what is going on in our society today. First of all, the horror of abortion where children are being killed in the womb because they are not welcomed or celebrated is occurring all around us. Then the pernicious and maligned neglect of so many children also signifies that there is an unwelcome sentiment towards children in general.

In recent days on my podcast *The Briefing*, I talked about a New York Times story about the fertility rate in the United States continuously dropping. This story is particularly interesting because the rate is even lower than what women want. Now what does that say? It says this declining trend is not really even about babies that might be defined as

inconvenient. It is just that babies are not valuable to even the women who want them. What kind of sick society produces that kind of headline? It is not a society that is ruled by Scripture. It's not a society that is imbued with what the Scripture gives us as the glory of God in the child. Every single child is to be seen as a gift. Every single child, regardless of whether or not that child meets the expectations of the society as "acceptable" or "beautiful," is to be celebrated.

Consider the fact that the vast majority of babies diagnosed with Down syndrome are now aborted in the womb. It was recently announced that Gerber, the baby food company, has chosen a little boy with Down syndrome from Dalton, Georgia, as its spokesbaby for the year. That is a great and glorious thing. But what kind of society celebrates and applauds a company that puts a picture of such a child on baby food while it also fights for the so-called right to terminate the lives of those babies in the womb? It is a kind of sociological double-mindedness.

Christians understand a particular responsibility to celebrate every child. That is why across this country, across most of Europe, and across so many places in the world, many of the first orphanages, and often the only orphanages, were established by Christians because of the distinctive Christian commitment to babies and to children.

We're living in a time when constrictions and threats to religious liberty make it far more difficult for Christians to establish institutions and agencies to do that crucial work.

It is, however, important to recognize that the difficulty does not prevent the Christian church from its involvement in and commitment to the care of children. This care extends not only to the children in its own care but also to the children in its community and the children everywhere. It is because we see them as more than only a human being. We see them as a human being made in God's image and as a gift to be celebrated.

Even as children are to be representative of gifts, children are representative of "need." It should humble us to recognize that of all live births, our infants are the most helpless. I love the way that anthropologists put it: "The least competent." Consider the crocodile. An infant crocodile has to develop some independence very, very quickly. Otherwise, the crocodile is eaten.

You see mothers taking care of and nursing their children in the mammal world. That is a part of what makes a mammal a mammal. You knew that already from your biology classes in middle school and high school. There is something wonderful about seeing other mammals nurse. Right behind the house where I grew up was a pasture. The pasture allowed me to observe the cycle of life right there in the cattle. I saw cows and their calves, and I saw them nursing and nurturing. I even think those cows were proud of their calves. I would like to think, just by God's gift even to the beasts, as Scripture calls them, there is something more than just a drive to thrive and survive. I would like to think

there's more. But I know this: Amongst human beings made in God's image, there is more, and there has to be more.

There has to be more because our infants are the least competent. They cannot do anything. A human infant left unattended for hours, maybe even minutes after birth, will die. Then the story gets even more puzzling because there is no immediate grasp of competence. Little horses are up and running right after they are born. You can watch giraffes and elephants be born, and within a short time, they are on their feet, walking around.

Meanwhile, when we are born, this incompetence persists for a long time. Not only that, the incompetence becomes more and more apparent. Infants do not rapidly mature and progress overnight. You do not expect that all this is going to happen in a hurry because you know what human infants are like. Infants turn into toddlers, and toddlers are called toddlers because they toddle. They are not walking around. They are not like the baby horses that run a few hours after birth. They have the traveling stage where they just go from one piece of furniture to the next, and we look at that and say, "That's adorable."

Baby animals, however, do not toddle around the forest from tree to tree. If that were the case, they would be called prey in the animal kingdom. But amongst human beings, you have this toddling stage, and then after they toddle, they are still not much more competent because they wear diapers. If you want proof to know that humans love our children, just

consider diapers. I won't dwell on that, but we have to be their sanitation service as well. Then even when they learn, they are still not so competent. Preschool teachers will tell you that potty training is not a perfect art or science. What kind of species could survive these humiliating needs and shortcomings at such an early age? We are supposed to be the big-brained people, not animals.

Children have needs

Children also represent need. They need provision, and they need it instantaneously. They need to be kept warm. They need bonding and skin-to-skin contact. They need to be fed often. Their little tummies and their digestive systems are unable to take very much, so you must feed them every few hours. Their immune systems are very weak, and that is one of the reasons why they thrive on their mother's milk.

When a young couple has a baby, the father recognizes he is not so useful in the process for a while. That is just the way God made it, and it is the glory of motherhood. Mothers are immediately useful. It is a miraculous picture of the glory of God in the marriage, in the man, in the woman, in the mother, in the father, in the child, and in the fact that the mother and the father interrupt the course of their lives to take care of this incompetent creature who's likely to be followed by other incompetent creatures at different stages of incompetence and sometimes incontinence. That is just the way it works.

Parents do all of this because it is simply what we do. The amazing thing is that by God's common grace, every thriving society, every thriving family, regardless of where it is found and whether or not it has the gift of special revelation, finds its way to take care of babies, toddlers, and children.

Children need provision, and protection as well. All infants of all creatures are born in vulnerability, and that vulnerability is marked. So it is interesting that in the animal kingdom the father of a litter will have very little interest in the litter until someone threatens them. In that case though, the teeth are bared, the roar is given, the warning is alerted, and the claws are soon out. Every human father knows exactly what that is like.

We understand that children need protection. Of course, they need protection physically. They need protection from disease. They need protection from those who would do them harm. They need protection from the elements. We also protect them morally. We protect them as much as we can emotionally. We understand the need for protection because what the child represents, even in the various stages of childhood, is a continued vulnerability. The child is incompetent to take care of his or her own affairs. The child is vulnerable to all kinds things.

I often remind people that the fairy tales are often incredibly dark. For instance, think of the fairy tales by the Brothers Grimm. The reason why those fairy tales are dark is because parents told them to their children to serve

as warnings of very real dangers. You do not go out into the forest alone. You do not trust people and go with them alone. The warnings of wolves dressed as kindly old women and the other facets of those tales are just reminders of the fact that there are people who will do horrible things — like cook children.

You look at those fairy tales and you recognize we still live in that kind of dark age. We have not outgrown that. You look at the headlines and you realize that there are still those who will harm children, and the children need our protection. They need our protection in multifarious ways, and that is one of the things that marks a child in distinction to other stages of life. In later stages of life, the responsibility is to give protection, but children are not responsible for their own protection. We are to protect them.

According to Scripture, children also need teaching and instruction. This is clear in Scripture. One of the primary responsibilities first given to Israel is to teach its children. You see this in Deuteronomy 6. “When your son asks you in time to come, ‘What is the meaning of the testimonies and the statutes and the rules that the Lord our God has commanded you?’ then you shall say to your son, ‘We were Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt. And the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. And the Lord showed signs and wonders, great and grievous, against Egypt and against Pharaoh and all his household, before our eyes. And he brought

us out from there, that he might bring us in and give us the land that he swore to give to our fathers.”

Over and over again in the wisdom literature of Scripture, the teaching of children, the instruction of children in wisdom, laws, and the commands of God is given as a primary parental responsibility. Deuteronomy 6 also says, “You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.” Shifting to the new covenant, that responsibility continues. It is also the responsibility of the Christian church to instruct and to teach children in the law of God.

I am reminded of Martin Luther who would at times argue that to preach the law is to deny the gospel. Early in the Reformation, he argued that it would be wrong for a Christian ever to preach the law. It ought never to be preached. What changed? He had children. He had a son, and guess what? He discovered the utility of preaching the law.

In his catechism for children, what is the first thing he says before presenting the Ten Commandments? “The head of the family should teach it in a simple way to his household.” Just as we can see a covenantal history from infancy to maturity, we also see the responsibility of covenant parents, of Christian parents, to raise children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

There is a stage in life where, “Because I said so,” is going to have to be quite enough, because telling the child not

to stick a screwdriver in an electric outlet does not require a lengthy explanation in the relationship between conduction and the power of electricity. No, all you need is the parental, “No.” The parent must learn to use the word and make it stick, because along with the instruction and the teaching the child needs, the child needs discipline.

This too is made very clear in Scripture, in such a way that there is no embarrassment. In this sense, the child becomes a picture of the Christian life since discipline is a part of the Christian life until our glorification. But in particular, children are in need of corrective discipline. The Bible is very honest about this. It is not that the child might sin; it is that the child will sin. And when the child sins and disobeys, corrective discipline is called for. The Bible is unashamed about that truth. The Bible goes so far as to say that the parents who do not correct and discipline their children fail to *love* their children. The pathologies around us are abundant evidence of that.

The child also needs affection. Children cannot thrive without it. It might be, in the animal kingdom, even in the family of mammals, that attachment is enough. But for the human infant and for the human child, attachment is not enough. Affection is necessary for the child to thrive. We look at that need and we say, “Well, that doesn’t appear to be hard.” Our affection for children, beginning with our affection for our own children, is something so powerful that we can hardly imagine any earthly power that could come

close, but how then do we explain so many children who do not experience that affection. How do we explain that so many children do not know the unconditional, faithful, enduring, constant love of a mother or of a father?

In the Old Testament, the most vulnerable are the widow and the orphan and the alien. One of the noblest acts of any human is adoption-- a supreme act of love and affection providing comfort and security to a wayward child.

Children must be cherished as children

How do we handle the child? Is the child just a little adult? This has been a recurring tension in the history of Western civilization.

There was a period in English-speaking European history, particularly even in Victorian Britain, where the child was understood to be a miniature adult. The problem is that children do not play the part of an adult very well. You can dress them like little men and little women, but they won't act like little men and little women. In that Victorian stage it is very sad to say one of the achievements of couples, if they had enough money and social status, is that they did not ever have to see their children. Often, nannies took care of their children, and then as soon as they were old enough, they sent them off to boarding school.

The end of this kind of parenting is one of the things we should recognize as a gift of the Reformation. Martin and Katie Luther demonstrated in their home what it was to

welcome children, celebrate them, and to admit the chaos of children into one's life. Even when Luther was talking about serious theological subjects with his students, his children would be scurrying about. Luther did not want them out of sight and out of mind. Children are cherished as children.

1 Corinthians 13 is important in this context. Though we normally read it in the context of marriage, it speaks to parenting and children as well. 1 Corinthians 13:11 says, "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways."

The way we typically read that verse, and how we generally preach it, focuses on the idea that we are to move quickly from childhood to adulthood in the Christian life. It is appropriate for a child to be a child, but when he or she is no longer a child, when a child becomes a man or woman, the child should put aside childish ways. That is how we normally read it. That is the direction of the text, but look at it backwards for a moment.

The Apostle Paul says that what we should expect of children is that they be children. Specifically, he speaks of the child who spoke, thought, and reasoned as a child. It would be irrational and also unbiblical to expect a child to speak, think, or reason as an adult.

Instead, we understand that children celebrated as children are going to speak as children. They are going to say inopportune things. They do not have the filters that adults

have. They do not have the vocabulary adults have. Just about every parent has a story of being in the grocery store and having a child make an observation that was not politically opportune. If an adult said that, it would be absolutely rude.

Paul says, “When I was a child, I thought as a child.” One of the things we will see in the second chapter about the energy of youth is that what marks adolescence from childhood is the development of complex, analytical reasoning. Children think in simple, linear terms. You can move the child from point A to point B to point C. You can add fact upon fact, but what you can not do is define a fact.

Again, this drives the evolutionists crazy. They say that one strange thing is that the greatest points of resistance to evolution is found among young children because they seem to have a design prejudice. What they mean by that is children look at the world around them and think, “I think someone did this. Somebody built our house. Somebody made our car. Somebody must have made the world.” The evolutionists say that this is simply a very difficult, evolutionary-produced pattern of thinking that needs to be reversed. It is, in fact, a very difficult to reverse because the child is reasoning from the understanding that there is a world and that someone must be responsible for making that world. That is why the catechisms get to answer that question very quickly: “Little child, who made you?”

So, we glory in the child speaking as a child. We glory in the child thinking as a child. We glory in the child reasoning

as a child. It would not do very much good to try to take a first grader through a class in logic. That big head and those big eyes are going to blink at you a lot. You are going to entirely frustrate the child. Why? Because the child speaks as a child, thinks as a child, and reasons as a child.

Children are always to be welcomed

Wherever children are found, they are to be welcomed by Christ's people, even more so than everyone else. Our churches should not be places where adults cannot wait to put the children away in order to get to the adult task of worship. One of the scandals of so much of evangelicism is that we send people to their rooms as soon as we get to church. I am not arguing against the utility of a nursery for infants. I am not even arguing against the appropriateness of special programs to teach children. I am saying that when you look at a church, you should see the whole congregation. You should see young people. You should see young couples. You should see older couples and older people. You should see those who are coming into the final season of their life, and you should see those in the beginning season of their life.

You should see people sitting in pews whose feet cannot touch the floor, and we should welcome the wiggling and the squirming in the church. We should hope that what is happening is that the Word of God is reaching those hearts in ways those children do not even recognize. They are

speaking as children. They are thinking as children. They are reasoning as children, but the Word of God can reach where we cannot go.

It is one of the ordinary means of grace that our children who are in church with us will hear the Word of God and the songs of God's people. They will hear the music before they can sing along, and they will find their own voice at the right time to begin singing the songs and hymns of the faith.

We think about this truth, and we cannot help but to hear the words of Jesus in Matthew 19:13: "Then the children were brought to him that he may lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples rebuked the people, but Jesus said, 'Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.' And he laid his hands on them and went away."

Looking back at the beginning of chapter 18, Matthew says,

At that time, the disciples came to Jesus saying, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven," and calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them and said, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea."

Recognize that this is a rebuke to the entire classical Greco-Roman understanding of how an adult ought to behave. In the codes of conduct, well known to ancient Greece and ancient Rome, one of the rules was that a man must never appear as simple as a child. Jesus says that thinking might work in Rome, but it does not work in the kingdom, because in order to enter his kingdom, you have to enter as a child.

Now this is not an exhortation to childishness but to childlikeness. The child hears and believes. The child sees and trusts. The child is drawn to Christ, and Jesus says, “Do not turn them away, for such is the kingdom.”

Children need the gospel

We rightly preach the gospel to our children, and this gets to the biggest theological question of all. Who exactly is this critter? This little creature, this little wonder, is made in God’s image and is conceived in sin.

Much of what we see in modern psychology, going all the way back to the Enlightenment, is an effort to say that the child is not a sinner. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in his famous book, *Emile*, tried to suggest that what marks deformities of personality, misbehavior, and maladjustments is the fact that children are born naturally right and that society and different influences direct them astray.

We understand, according to the biblical worldview, that children are conceived in sin. They are born in sin. This

is Adam's seed with their big heads and big eyes. We love children unconditionally, despite their sin.

There is no question whether or not the child is born in innocence. A child will always show misbehavior. There is something bad in the child from the time the child is born. This sounds sick-souled to the modern humanist psychologist, but it is true. Children are born with a need, and what children need is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Horace Bushnell, one famous liberal theologian in the 19th century with influence well into the 20th century, argued for what he called Christian nurture. He said, "We have to give away and repudiate this idea of original sin, and we have to understand that the child is born in innocence. And we should try, as a Christian church and as Christian parents, to nurture children so that the child would never know a time when he was not a Christian."

Bushnell's idea of nurturing children in this positive, warm-hearted Christianity, which was the liberal Christianity and moralism of the 19th century, is still very much alive today. He said that the child should never know a time when he was not a Christian. Well, you know what the child is? Not a Christian. There is a reason why we sing "Amazing Grace." There is a reason why we speak of being born again. There is a reason why we speak about "before" and "after," and that reason is because the gospel requires a "before" and an "after."

I want to turn Horace Bushnell away from a falsehood into what we know to be true. I have struggled with this for years because Horace Bushnell's logic would be so appealing to parents. "The child should never know a time when he was not a Christian." This idea is appealing because there is something positive and wise in it in the sense that our children should be surrounded by the Scriptures and surrounded by Christ's people in such a way that they never know a time when they were outsiders to Christ's purpose and to Christ's family. But clearly the anti-conversionism at the heart of Bushnell's theology is based upon a completely unsustainable, unbiblical theology.

So how would I put it otherwise? I would say: I believe it should be the goal of Christian parents and the goal of the Christian church that a child born into our family and our church should never know a time when he or she did not love Jesus. Then we work, pray, and witness in view of that day when they will confess Christ.

Those are two different things. There is a reason why we teach children to sing, "Jesus loves me. This I know." We want them to know about that love. But it is not enough that they know that Jesus loves them. We have to tell them that Jesus saves, and we must live before them so that they see the evidence of that gospel and the power of Christ's salvation. This is how we must think about and live before the children around us.

THE ENERGY OF YOUTH



It is something of a mystery to us that God in his sovereign providence has intended that we necessarily begin small and vulnerable and entirely dependent upon others, and then move through stages of life in which we achieve new capacities, experience new growth, and develop new relationships. We also develop a different sense of self and a growing independence that is hopefully accompanied by a growing ethical and comprehensive maturity. As we come to the second major stage of life, we talk about this reality differently than almost any previous human generation. Sociologists speak of the invention of adolescence. By “the invention of adolescence,” they refer to the fact that we now have a distinct

stage of life of some number of years, a growing number of years, that is between childhood and adulthood.

The Bible's customary word for this stage of life is youth. As we shall see by looking at Scripture, the Bible's understanding of youth is not the contemporary understanding of youth. Something is different in the way people think now than in the way Scripture reveals. The transition between childhood and adulthood has always had to take place. There is growth and maturation. There are significant hallmarks of what we would call adolescence, generally identified with the teenage years. As we now know, hormonal changes, and even conceptual changes, occur just before the teenage years and continue into the twenties. That is a story unto itself.

Back in 1995, *Psychology Today* suggested that these changes can be traced back to the 1800s. A pattern can be traced, in which adolescence has been extended by at least one year every twenty-five years of history. With that extension of adolescence has come a new way of understanding adolescence. Every single flourishing society has been required to find a way to encourage and to make certain that children grow into functional, useful adults. If that does not happen, the society will not survive. That has always been a monumental challenge. All you have to do is look in literature and in history through the ages, and you will come to understand that every society has its own stories of individuals navigating the difficult transition from childhood to adulthood.

Sturm und drang is a German term. It can mean storm, force, energy, or chaos. It is emotion, and it is ambition. It is energy — the very energy of youth. Youth is different than adolescence. If you ask a contemporary authority what the hallmarks of adolescence are, that long period of transition from childhood to adulthood, they will generally say that there are two that are the very essence of adolescence. The first is a physical maturity. In one sense, adolescence is the period before the full skeletal growth of an individual is achieved. That is not enough, of course, because in that physical development is also a sexual development, that comes with puberty. The child who is not sexually mature and does not experience those sexual passions is transformed in puberty into an adolescent who does experience those passions.

The second major hallmark of adolescence is intellectual development. That intellectual development is most importantly seen in two different assets: complex analytical reasoning and abstract thinking. To put the matter as bluntly as we might put it, a four-year-old thinks but a fourteen-year-old thinks about thinking. Those are two very different things. This new development leads to a very different understanding of the self.

A child understands identity as it is given to him or her. In that case, identity can almost singularly be traced to the parents, the family, the community, and the extended kinship. Of course, the other involvements of the child all

become markers of that identity, but at that point, identity is not a choice. Identity is a given, and as a given, it comes in simple facts.

With adolescence comes abstract thinking, in which the youth has a complex analytical ability such that the individual can now conceive of other minds, can think inside the heads of other people, and can know not only the world he inhabits but also a world that he imagines. Furthermore, for the first time comes the understanding that people operate with different ideas and out of different worldviews. They come to different conclusions. This is a trauma of sorts because it puts an intellectual responsibility upon the individual, and the adolescent now experiences the weight of having to decide, to evaluate, to analyze, and to think.

This can be extremely troubling, but at the same time, the adolescent is experiencing the experiment of the self. She has been told who she was all of her life. Now she is understanding in a way that may be more intuitive at first but then more explicit later on, especially with the signals coming from the culture, that she is a self. She is the producer of her own drama. She is the center of her own self-project. Her own self is now her responsibility.

Society and adolescence

Our society is largely focused on adolescence to the extent that marketers are concerned about one primary audience when they are selling movie tickets. By the way, that one

primary audience is not teenagers. The one primary audience is teenage boys. No movie can be successful in commercial terms in Hollywood unless it can sell millions of dollars in tickets to teenage boys. The rule in Hollywood is this: If teenage boys will see a movie, then other people will see a movie, including teenage girls and an even broader audience. The blockbuster status requires selling an enormous number of movie tickets to these teenage boys who evidently have the most time and the maximum hunger for entertainment.

Society now worships adolescence in some of the strangest and most unanticipated ways. Whereas in previous generations sons wanted to dress like their fathers, now fathers want to dress like their sons. Similarly, girls wanted to dress like their mothers, now mothers want to dress like their daughters. People in middle age look as if they want to be understood as if they were teenagers. That is a reversal of cultural logic. It leads to juvenilization of the person and, even worse, of a society. It also creates new problems for adolescents, the very adolescents who are so much the focus of the society. When the society focuses itself on adolescence, the adolescents are impeded in their journey towards adulthood. The society that does not hold up adulthood as the norm seems to have fewer and fewer adults who take on adult responsibility.

Throughout most of human history, reproductive and sexual development has come very close chronologically to marriage, which was the near universal expectation. If you

look throughout history for accounts of teenage love and courtship, if you think about Romeo and Juliet, you must understand that the background of that story only makes sense if puberty and marriage are actually very close together. Back in a previous age, the parents of young men and women saw it as their responsibility to get their children to marry well, because the understanding was that once puberty arrives, marriage ought to be close behind. We are now in a situation where, because of all kinds of reasons but mostly because of a general increase in health, puberty is coming earlier than in any previous period in human history.

Just to give you a male point of comparison, when Johann Sebastian Bach was choirmaster in Leipzig, he wrote letters to the parents of the choir boys who would come in at a very young age. He said, "You should expect that your son should have to exit the choir singing as a soprano by the time he is seventeen." That is how late puberty came. The boys' voices did not change until the second half of the second decade of life. That change is now coming much, much earlier. You do not see seventeen-year-olds in a boys choir singing soprano.

There are all kinds of scientific suggestions as to why this may be so. The development is coming earlier, so there are children achieving sexual maturity, in terms of physical capacity, while they are in middle school. Meanwhile, marriage has been delayed and redefined. Even as marriage has become merely a lifestyle choice, it is now considered an achievement of adulthood rather than a mark of entry into

adulthood. The age of marriage for most American young people is now dangerously close to thirty, with puberty arriving very close to thirteen. Marriage becoming more and more distant creates an enormous situation.

When you think about the stories being told by Hollywood, when you think about the pastoral responsibility of youth ministry, and when you think of what it means for parents to raise children through the period of adolescence, you understand that the challenges are vast and growing. What was once a short period between puberty and marriage and the assumption of adult responsibilities has been extended into an indefinitely long period.

Juvenile legal authorities now suggest that the young brain is not fully developed in its cognitive functions until the mid twenties. One of the hallmarks of the adolescent brain in its development, especially in the adolescent male, is a disjunction between risk and reality. There is a certain recklessness present. A father of teenage boys told me the scariest words in the English language are when your teenage son says, "Hey, watch this." This mismatch between risk and reality in the adolescent brain is one of the reasons why the most dangerous drivers in the world are the youngest. When you look at all this, you recognize that we have now created a swamp between puberty and adulthood, and it is celebrated in society. It is the very focus of marketers who want it to continue.

God established structures to aid in the development

and transition through life's stages. These structures are most clearly seen in family. For Christians, these structures are also seen in the context of the church. Societies have also seen other structures as necessary, such as Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, compulsory military service, and entry into the workforce. These are ways of channeling the energies of youth into things that are productive, both for the youth and for the society.

The extension of adolescence, especially of the period between sexual maturity and marriage, has become the opportunity for the moral revolutionaries to argue that teenagers possess the same right as sexual creatures to the same sexual autonomy that is claimed by others in society. When you see debates about sex education, understand this is not just about sex or education. It never is. It is about what we believe human beings to be and, in particular, who we believe human beings to be in this period between development and maturity.

Cognitive development in this age is really important because it is the time when we all of a sudden meet strangers in our own house. All of a sudden there is the recognition of self brought about by complex analytical reasoning and abstract thinking. All of a sudden there are recognitions of huge questions that necessarily press upon us. Who am I? Who are my parents? Why do they think as they do?

On any big issue of discussion, there are people with different ideas. Who decides what is right? Why do I believe

what I believe? Why was I taught what I was taught? Is it right? Is it wrong? Is there a better way of looking at this? Of course, this comes with some degree of pushback to the received authorities. Simply asking questions is naturally perceived by parents as a kind of pushback. The child who had always said, “Yes, sir,” and “ Yes, ma’am,” now says, “Why?” This is not the same “Why?” that a two-year-old asks. This is a 14-year-old’s “Why?” The two-year-old’s is quite easily answered. The parents of two-year-olds should never apologize for saying, “Because I say so.” They do not need an abstract discussion about electricity as a two-year-old. But if you are talking to a 12-year-old, it is a very different reality.

Nonetheless, the big questions of life now need and deserve answers in adolescence. The relationship between parents, or any authority, and adolescents is only going to continue in a healthy way if the questions are dignified and if the questions are answered. Of course, this comes with a spiritual dimension. All of a sudden, the adolescent has to ask big theological questions. One of the key questions of the church is whether or not we are there to provide biblical, truthful answers to those big questions.

The identity development that happens in adolescence comes with social development that is very much under the influence of peers. Part of the reality here is that we have created this ourselves. There has always been a peer culture. All of us, regardless of our age, have peers that help to frame

reality for us, peers who we care about and whose opinion we value. We have created an adolescence that requires dependence upon peer involvement or influence. We now have decided to make the problem even worse. In previous societies, adolescents experienced this dependence in the context of the structures of home, kinship, and community. Now, we've decided it's a good idea to take all 14- to 18-year-olds and place them in these giant boxes called high schools with only a few adults sprinkled in. We pool them all together, where, for the greater part of the day, their primary reference point is not the family but is rather other 14- to 18-year-olds. It is an interesting development for which no one seemed to count the cost.

Modern psychologists and modern education theorists celebrate adolescence as the period when the individual can have the greatest impact. They are right about this. We need to understand that whoever reaches the hearts and the minds of adolescents owns the future. That is just the way it works. Whoever conveys the most powerful message to teenagers and young adults owns the future. And a church that does not recognize this truth is a church without a future.

This extension of adolescence has led to the development of a new vocabulary: "emerging adulthood." In previous generations, adults had to emerge because otherwise they would not eat; the emergence of adults is now some kind of remarkable achievement. But what is that achievement? What is adulthood? When we think about the next

phase of life, what distinguishes adulthood from this intermediate period of life? Generally, what marks adulthood is a job. That is a radical thought today. The general hallmarks of adulthood have been a job, a marriage, and a home. The hallmark does not mean owning a home, but it does mean having an independent home. These three hallmarks used to come early in the twenties, even in fairly recent decades, but that is not the case anymore.

Part of this change can be contributed to the growth of higher education. The baccalaureate degree is now replacing the high school diploma as the industry standard of basic ability and adult responsibility. Of course, much benefit has come from that development. This change makes sense in a society that is driven by such a complex social arrangement that is now dominated by such a fast-moving business cycle and that is so dependent on technology that demands that young people need extraordinary ability and extensive knowledge to create that technology.

That extension of adolescence through the college years was the stability in the 1960s through the 1980s, but something has been broken. In about the last thirty years, society now recognizes an extension of adolescence that fails to move into the hallmarks of adulthood and take on adult responsibility until the late twenties. At least one major scientific school of sociology and psychology suggests that adolescence now should be extended at least into the first two or three years of the thirties. Just think about how much

of life happens in this supposedly intermediate, transitional stage. Something is wrong in a society that extends adolescence to that degree.

The Bible and adolescence

We must understand adolescence in the biblical framework. The Bible recognizes this transition between childhood and adulthood as a necessary transition. The customary word the Bible uses is “youth.” What I want to point out is absolutely shocking. It is a part of the scandal of the incarnation. The account of Jesus in the temple in Luke 2 is where we begin. It says:

Now his parents went to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up according to custom. And when the feast was ended, as they were returning, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. His parents did not know it, but supposing him to be in the group they went a day's journey, but then they began to search for him among their relatives and acquaintances, and when they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem, searching for him. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. And when his parents saw him, they were astonished. And his mother said to him, 'Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been searching for you in great distress.' And he said to them, 'Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?' And they did not

understand the saying that he spoke to them. And he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was submissive to them. And his mother treasured up all these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man.

Is it not wonderful that Scripture's paradigmatic demonstration of this transition to adulthood is Jesus? This shows how much God loved us that he sent his only son to be born as a baby in humiliation and humility. He is the very creator of the world and the Word through whom the worlds were made, yet he submitted himself to experience the pattern of growth.

In Jewish society, there is the bar mitzvah. This story Luke tells us about Jesus is not a bar mitzvah. This is the annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem to the temple that is the responsibility of the family, and Jesus is going along with his family. The bar mitzvah does not come from the Old Testament. It does not come from intertestamental Judaism nor from the Second Temple period. No, it comes from far more recent times around the midpoint of the last millennium. It came in eastern Europe where a shortage of men meant that the Jewish community was often short of the necessary number of men to pray, and so they could not have the ritual prayers of rabbinic Judaism. They needed men because of pogroms, persecutions, and plagues.

So, the rabbis had a debate amongst themselves when a boy becomes a man. The closest answer they came up

with was 13. You can understand that with the different hormonal and bodily changes that happen around that time. It just seemed like maybe it was the right number. Then the majority of rabbis decided that 13 was not old enough, so a brilliant rabbi came up with 13 and a day. To show that he could now be a part of a necessary census for the minions so that there could be prayers, the boy would show up and say, "Today 13 and a day. Today I am a man." Squeaking I'm sure, but it worked. There is something powerfully symbolic in that declaration. There is something fairly glorious about a 13-year-old boy showing up and saying, "Today I am a man." Nobody actually believes it, but everybody says, "This is the right direction. This is a good thing. It is a good thing you say it, and it is a good thing we hear it. Now you are numbered with the men."

Jesus is about the same age in this text, but this is not a bar mitzvah. Jesus submitted himself to what it meant to go through this period of life. Adolescent psychologists would say that this story is a classic example of individuation. They say that this is Jesus individualizing himself from his mother and his father. But there is much more going on here than that. Jesus is on a mission to be about his father's business. This 12-year-old did not behave as he did when he was a nine-year-old, and Mary and Joseph recognized that. They could go to Jerusalem safely when he was nine because he would hold on to his father's hand. But now at twelve, Jesus is about his heavenly father's business.

Notice what Jesus models here. Luke tells us that he went back to Nazareth with them after making that declaration. This is an incredible detail. A 12-year-old says, “Did you not know? Why didn’t you know where I was? Did you not know that I would be about my Father’s business?” But after this, Scripture remarkably says he went home with his parents and was submissive to them. Jesus honored his earthly father and his mother even during the time he went back with them. Then as he grew into adulthood, he began his earthly ministry.

There is a shocking thing about the how the word “youth” is used in Scripture. 1 Timothy 4:12 says, “Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity.” Paul instructs Timothy to be an example to the entire church. Notice the contrast to the way we think about adolescence in youth today. Timothy is deployed. Timothy is leaving. He did not just show up and say, “Today I am a man.” He showed up as a preacher and teacher, and Paul describes him as a youth.

In Malachi 2:15, a young man is told to enjoy the wife of his youth. Think about what Scripture is teaching us. If you are a youth and you have a wife, if you are a youth and you are teaching the Word to the congregation, then “youth” takes on a very different idea than the modern conception of what an adolescent is. This biblical youth is one with duties.

The Bible speaks about the energies of youth. We are

told that in the gift of the Messiah, youth will be renewed and young men will run. There is a physical energy, but there is also a spiritual energy. There are dangers, too.

The first chapter of Proverbs tells us that Solomon was writing in order to give prudence, simple knowledge, and discretion to the youth. Though we all need knowledge and discretion, there is a particular sense in which the youth need knowledge and discretion. That is made clear in Proverbs 7:7 where Solomon writes in the context of warning against the adulteress, “For at the window of my house I have looked out through my lattice, and I have seen among the simple, I have perceived among the youths, a young man lacking sense.” Evidently, there is a long-term pattern of young men lacking sense. That is why we need biblical revelation. That is why we need teachers and why we need the disciplines of the Christian life. It is not just that young men lack sense. Old men also lack sense, but it turns out that it is more dangerous when the young men lack sense, partly because a young man has energies that the older man no longer has.

We now experience in our society a collective failure of adolescence. Something has gone wrong. Emerging adults are not emerging on time, if they are emerging at all. What, therefore, can the church do? I have just a few suggestions.

Youth as an evangelistic opportunity

Because adolescents are capable of abstract thinking for the first time and because every single young person is

beginning to ask the biggest questions of life, we need to be there with the biggest and truest answers to the biggest questions of life. We need to understand that there is an enormous hunger for truth in adolescence. If the Christian church is not there to answer that, then we will answer for our failure.

In American evangelicalism, over 95 percent of those who have been baptized and identify as believers in Jesus Christ will date their conversion to prior to age 25. Furthermore, over 90 percent will identify their conversion to prior to age 18. That is astounding. It turns out that most people who hear the gospel and respond to the gospel do so between childhood and age 18. A fewer number respond between 18 and 25, and the statistics continue to decline after that. Does that mean we should not share the gospel with 26-year-olds or 96-year-olds? Of course not. The church is populated with people who have come to faith in Jesus Christ at later ages. We just need to face the reality that the presence of the gospel, of Scripture, and of Christ's people makes a huge difference. That adolescents are surrounded by faithful Christians and hear the gospel makes a phenomenal difference. The greatest change that must take place for a young person between childhood and adolescence to become a Christian is that they must know the distinction between the fact that they sin and that they are a sinner. A child knows that he or she sins, but it takes cognition to understand the self as a sinner and to understand that sinners

are in desperate need of salvation that comes only through Jesus Christ.

Youth as an educational responsibility

During adolescence, the biggest questions of life are being raised. What young people need is more argument, more evidence, more Bible, more theology, and more doctrine. To the shame of many of our churches, this time is when we decide that our young people need even more peer time and entertainment. There is nothing wrong with putting young people together with peers. I was a youth minister in more than one church myself. Rightly construed by Scripture and assisting parents in raising their children, it is a glorious thing. But it is not a glorious thing if it just becomes a superficially Christian replication of a peer culture driven by entertainment. What young people need is the Bible and doctrine. When churches give youth what they really need, the young people do not flee.

Christian Smith, professor of sociology at the University of Notre Dame, following the same young people from adolescence through adulthood for more than a decade of life, said that the theology that they actually received from evangelical churches is moralistic therapeutic deism. What these people actually got from church was just a moralism that taught them that all God wants is for people to behave. They got a therapy that taught them that God wants everybody to be happy, authentic, and at home in their own skin. They got

a deism that believed in God, but in one who is not actively involved in their personal lives. It is the shame of the church that young people can go to church and receive a theology of moralistic therapeutic deism. The only correction to that problem is teaching the gospel of Jesus Christ and the full counsel of God in the Scriptures.

Youth as an apologetic urgency

We need to understand that, especially in a generation with a secular culture constantly pressing so hard upon youth, we need to prepare young people for a constant mode of Christian apologetics. That means Christian youth have to be taught apologetics. They have to be told not to run from the questions but to run into the questions. They have to be taught that the church loves dealing with questions because we have credible answers. If we run from the questions, then we should not be surprised that young people run from the church. The answers have to be credible, biblical, and thoughtful. This is an investment that cannot be made only in a seminar offered on a Saturday morning. It must be a mode of life.

The church's relational strategy

A study done several years ago indicated that the determining question about whether or not young people continued in church after the early twenties is whether or not that young person had a significant relationship with even one adult at

church outside the family unit. It turns out that if a young person has a fruitful faithful relationship with an adult who cares about, teaches, and supports that young person, the continuing faithfulness and Christian identification of that young person is remarkably enhanced. That's very powerful and very humbling.

Think about this in your own local church context. How many teenagers in your church know an adult outside their own family unit who cares about them? Are there adults who care about a teenager's soul and Christian growth? Do teenagers have someone in your church to answer their questions? It turns out that peer relationships do not ensure anything about longevity and Christian faithfulness, but relationships with just one adult may.

The church as a deployment agency

Evangelicals need a deployment agency. We need to understand the church as such for young people. If the church sees youth as spectators, when the youth fail to be attracted to the spectacle, the spectators will leave. Those young people who are deployed in ministry and mission, and who are surrounded by Christ's people, turn into healthy Christians who can then help other youth to develop along the same path.

A church that worships youth will never produce adult Christians. A church that rejects its youth forfeits its future. A church that disrespects youth will reap disrespect. In Ecclesiastes, Solomon wrote to youth: "Remember your

Creator in the days of your youth.” Youth have a unique ability to reflect the glory of God, to serve God, and to know God. That is a good word for all Christians. Solomon does not say that adults do not have to worry about that calling anymore, but he is saying that there is a particular glory in remembering your creator in the days of your youth. May the church be used by God so that many youth will, indeed, rejoice in their creator.

THE STRENGTH OF ADULTHOOD



We experience life in stages. We have already explored the biblical theology of the first two of those stages: the wonder of childhood and the energy of youth. The strength of adulthood and the glory of age remain. It is a symptom of our time that the strength of adulthood to which we now turn would likely be considered the most boring of the four stages. On the one hand, there is a natural appeal to the wonder we see in children and the contagious energy of youth. On the other hand, we live in a society that is growing older and older, where age used to be a brief period of life like adolescence. Now, however, adulthood is a very long period of life that can be very fruitful. But in between youth and age is adulthood, which often just looks boring and really long.

Adulthood begins around twenty-five, and age is not achieved until one reaches around seventy. In between those stages is anywhere from forty to fifty-five years of doing what adults do, which is the hard work of civilization. It is the building up and raising of families, which is carrying the greatest burden for an entire society. Adults are raising the children, tending the fields, running the work, taking the kids to school, helping them to finish homework, and putting a roof over heads for about half a century.

In order to become an adult, every society has to prioritize young people becoming adults. When young people do not become adults, we have a big problem. If you needed any further evidence of the fact that many young people who should be adults are having trouble reaching adulthood, just consider we have a new verb. We have a new participle that the human beings have never known before and the English language never knew before: “adulging.”

The definition in the Oxford English Dictionary suggests that “adulging” means “the practice of behaving in a way that is characteristic of a responsible adult.” We need that, right? But it continues, “especially the accomplishment of mundane but necessary tasks.”

Given the way that society looks at adulthood, it seems that nobody really wants to be an adult. If the entire essence of it is fulfilling mundane yet necessary tasks, then everybody will want to stay an adolescent. “Mundane but necessary tasks” is not an unfair description. That is what adults

do. Adults get up and go to work in the morning. Adults pay the bills. Adults have to get these “mundane but necessary tasks” done.

Every society, every civilization had to privilege, and pour enormous energy into assisting the young to take on adult responsibilities. Throughout history, most societies have had to invest greater energy in assisting boys and young men to take on adult responsibility than girls and young women. This is one of the reasons why, for societies to have that successful transition and not an elongated transition, such things as compulsory military and schooling were intended to produce a successful transition from adolescence to adulthood.

Five hallmarks of adulthood

Adulthood has generally been defined by five hallmarks. Most adults throughout the history of western civilization have accomplished five things. First, most adults have completed education on the threshold of adulthood. Secondly, most adults have had a job in which they contribute to the society. It is important to remember that the Christian understanding of this hallmark goes far beyond merely a job. Luther’s understanding of vocation, which he found rooted in Scripture, was that every person received a calling, a *vocatio*, from God. Society, furthermore, needs everyone fulfilling those callings from God. Each job, from the milkmaid to the prince, had dignity and worth.

The third hallmark of adults in Western civilization is marriage. Of course, some people are given the gift of celibacy, but society as a template has counted on the vast majority of persons being married. Once married, adults become parents and raise children, which is the fourth hallmark. Education, vocation, marriage, and parenthood are joined by a fifth hallmark, which is independent living. If someone is living in his parents' basement, one is probably not "adulthooding." The emergence into adulthood probably has not happened. Longer education has contributed to this to some degree. The necessity of greater education, the length of time education takes, and the cost of education has caused there to be a longer period of time that exists before one is living independently. Twenty-two is no longer the norm for when a person begins living independently and achieves the other four benchmarks of adulthood.

Adulthood and the four biblical movements

Looking at this problem of delayed adulthood, remember that biblical theology follows four great biblical movements: creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. Scripture begins with creation, and when you look in the Garden of Eden you see that creation began with adults. This perplexes some people. Adam and Eve were created as adults. That is not cheating, that is creation. If God had created Adam and Eve as infants, there would have been no human race because by definition infants cannot survive on their own.

God created everything exactly as he wanted it, and he declared it to be good. He created Adam, and out of Adam he created Eve. He declared their creation to be good even as they were created as adults. And then speaking to them as adults, God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.” Babies cannot do that, but Adam and Eve could do fulfill that command. Looking at their creation and the command God gives them in the framework of biblical theology, a very helpful affirmation and picture what adulthood is supposed to be emerges. In Genesis, you see that “adulting” means that Adam and Eve are given an assignment. Their assignment is to have dominion over and stewardship of creation and they are to be fertile and reproduce.

But then comes the Fall and sin. Only three chapters into the Bible, sin raises its head and enters into human experience. Adam and Eve sin and in God’s judgment on that sin he says that “adulting” is going to be a lot harder. After sin entered the world, God said to Adam that he will toil the ground and the work will be harder and harder because the earth is not going to freely give up its crops. Adam and all his sons will have to till the ground. The garden that once produces abundant fruit is now a plot of dirt that will require the hard work of cultivation to produce. Then to Eve, God says that she will bear children in pain. Those necessary adult responsibilities that showed up in such glory in the opening two chapters of Scripture continue after the Fall, but now are much harder. The life of adults carrying the

weight of civilization is much more difficult because of sin and its consequences.

But there is a third great movement of biblical theology and the metanarrative of Scripture called redemption. Redemption is God's purpose from before the creation of the world to redeem a people through the blood of His Son. They are made a new covenant people because they belong to Christ. As we think of redemption in relation to adulthood, it is interesting how adulthood enters into the description of the Christian.

Previously when exploring the wonder of childhood, we saw Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 13:11-12 in which he says that when he was a child, he spoke and thought as a child. But then he says, "When I became a man, I gave up childish ways." What is really interesting is that the verb chosen there signifies giving something up. There is a demarcation between childhood and adulthood in the Christian life as it turns out. We are born again and are babes in Christ. But Christian faithfulness requires that we grow in Christ into the full stature of what it means to be a Christian man or woman. Even this growth into maturity is not the end though. As Paul goes on to say in 1 Corinthians 13:12, "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face."

The final biblical movement is consummation. The completion of God's work of salvation in us, which is called glorification, means that heaven is filled with those who are spiritually adult. Indeed, in the new heavens and new earth,

the people of God will live as perfect spiritual adults having received from God the consummation of salvation, namely, glorification.

Biblical principles of adulthood

The strength of adulthood turns out to be a central theme of Scripture. It shows up especially in the Old Testament where the strength of a man is contrasted with the weakness of a child and where portraits of men and women in their strength are doing those mundane yet necessary tasks. These faithful men and women are completing these tasks when it rains and when the sun shines, when it is convenient and when it is not — simply because these tasks must be done.

There is glory in this work as you see in Proverbs 31 in the portrait the woman in Christ who is a faithful wife and mother. We see strength in the very glorification and honoring of this woman in Proverbs who faithfully does what an adult woman should do. Strength turns out to be a central Old Testament metaphor that often signifies the strength of endurance. We could speak of the endurance of adulthood.

Men and women are created in God's image

The first principle to be an adult according to Scripture is to be a man or a woman created in God's image and assigned a role. That principle is fundamentally important and is clearly seen in the first two chapters of Genesis. It turns out that to be an adult is not merely to be an adult human. To be an

adult is to be either a man or a woman. There is no adulthood without manhood and womanhood. I would suggest that confusion about gender is a part of the problem in our current secular moment, and that confusion reaches far beyond the secular world. Trying to have adulthood is impossible in a society that no longer knows what manhood and womanhood means and that suggests that we do not even live in a binary of manhood and womanhood. Adulthood is impossible in this society because there is no such thing as an adult. There are men, and there are women. When men and women do not show up, adults do not show up.

Biblical adulthood is functional

Second, the Bible's presentation of adulthood is largely functional. It does not give us a picture to identify as an adult, but rather it gives us functions that must be fulfilled. We come to understand that those who fulfill those function are adults. Even as there is no adulthood without manhood and womanhood, there is no adulthood without specific functions that are being filled.

It is very interesting that the word "adulthood," basically does not appear in Scripture, but adults do appear in Scripture. Adults show up doing mundane things and doing glorious things, doing public things and private things, doing things inside the domestic sphere of the family and doing things in the social sphere of the community. The functional aspect of adulthood in the Bible shows up in the fact that

man and woman very quickly take on the roles of husband and wife, of father and mother, of governor, of tanner, and many more. All the different descriptions are about functions. They are descriptions about doing and being.

Another problem with our contemporary society and its lack of adults is that we are trying to make adulthood a one-time achievement like a trophy that is achieved after one has fulfilled other even more important tasks. The society around us tells us those more important tasks revolve around the self. It is interesting that the Scriptural functions and assignments by which adulthood is defined are not primarily defined with reference to the self at all, but rather towards others.

Adulthood is a spiritual reality

Third, adulthood in the Scripture is spiritually defined. In Ephesians 4, Paul writes similarly of the very same concern that he presents in 1 Corinthians 13. In Ephesians 4:15-16 Paul says, “Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.”

The role and responsibility is clearly seen in those verses. Notice that Paul says, “grow up in every way into him who is the head.” Spiritually adulting is growing up in every way

in Christ. But perhaps we ought to look even earlier in the text, because this idea becomes even more clear.

Beginning in verse 11, Paul says that Christ gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers in order to equip the saints for the work of ministry. There is functionality of roles seen in the fact that even in the church there are officers, responsibilities, and callings. Paul goes on to reveal the purpose of these roles. He says, “He gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.”

When “man” is used here, it is used in the context of meaning both man and woman, but notice Paul does not just say “adult” because the Bible does not understand adults outside of the context of being men and women. This passage goes on to explain that Christians ought to attain unity of faith, a deeper knowledge of the Son, and grow up in the fullness of Christ. It is explicitly so that we may no longer be children.

Children are spiritually defined two ways in Scripture. The Bible says that no one will enter the kingdom of God

without being childlike. But it also says that no one will achieve maturity in Christ if he is childish. It is a crucial distinction between being childlike and being childish. In Scripture, childlike means being naturally believing and trusting as a child. It also means being naturally obedient as a child raised in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

Childish, on the other hand, is being spiritually immature. This is what Paul is describing in Ephesians 4. The spiritually childish are defined as those easily tossed about by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, human cunning, craftiness, and deceitful schemes. Therefore, one part of what it spiritually means to be an adult is to be able to resist false teachers and to be able to detect cunning and deceit. To grow up in Christ is to learn to trust the Scriptures and not to trust the messaging coming from the society. The spiritually mature in Christ recognize true teachers who teach upon the authority of the inerrant, infallible Word of God.

The stages of life show up here as well. Even the mature Christian begins as a babe in Christ, but he or she cannot continue that way. Adulthood becomes the picture of mature Christian faithfulness, but the stages of Christian growth are explored even earlier in 1 Corinthians 3 where Paul writes, “But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, for you are still of

the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way?"

The fact that these believers started out as infants is not the problem. The problem is that they were still infants. Paul should have been able to give them meat, but instead he still had to feed them with milk. This is not a compliment. This is Paul chastising them as a father, effectively diagnosing their problem. Their problem is a juvenilization, an infantilization. They are acting like infants and juveniles when they should be growing up in Christ. They are satisfied with spiritual milk when they should be mature enough to receive solid food.

Adulthood has its own temptations

Fourth, adulthood brings its own temptations. The Bible is clear that adults are tempted to a pride that human beings at younger ages do not yet know and those who have reached the glory of age have often already gotten over. There is a temptation that comes to those who are fulfilling the mundane and necessary tasks of society. They are those who are carrying the great weight of society and hold the great stewardship of industry, government, commerce, education, and ministry.

We must be honest and say that adults can be very susceptible to sins, chief among them pride. The derivative of pride, which is self-sufficiency, and the hallmark of pride, which is arrogance follow closely behind. Arrogant teenagers

exist, but they generally fall down the stairs or they have an awkward social moment, which abolishes their arrogance. It is hard to remain arrogant as an adolescent. An adolescent cannot be arrogant for long, but an adult can live in a spirit of arrogance far longer. Having reached a status with reputation and comfort, adults can tell themselves they are self-sufficient and demonstrate that belief in arrogance.

Another one of the sins and temptations that comes uniquely to those who are adults is despair. It is a despair that manifests itself as a lack of pleasure in life and a panic about death. You would think that those who have reached the glory of age might be those who are most panicked about death, but that is not the case. Why would death be more of an urgent panic for those who are forty-five than those who are much older? It is because at this stage of adulthood people often question their own lives. They wonder if they are in the wrong job or if they went to the wrong school or if they married the wrong person. In essence, they wonder if this life is going to give them everything they really want.

A realization comes that you cannot go back and start all over again. No one has the opportunity to go back and remake his major life decisions. In a society right now where the moral controls are completely off, the demonstrations of this sin are evident everywhere. If someone believes they are married to the wrong person, they just divorce and marry someone else. There is a profound connection between these issues and the concept of self.

This connection is why the dangerous period of a mid-life crisis often occurs. A midlife crisis is an identity crisis, a dissatisfaction with the self. This pattern of sin that comes uniquely to adults is exaggerated and amplified by a society that tells us that we are a project and that self-fulfillment is our ultimate aim. But self-fulfillment does not work too well in a kitchen full of dirty dishes. Self-fulfillment does not mean much with a baby exploding in the next room. Self-fulfillment does not seem to work very well when you have to go to work day in and day out for years on end. Self-fulfillment does not work when being your child's little league coach becomes more of a chore than a fun activity. These are the mundane tasks the Oxford Dictionary includes in its definition of "adulting." Self-fulfillment for an adult should actually come over a period of time and in the satisfaction of knowing that even all of these mundane responsibilities are gifts. Marriage is a gift. Raising children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord is a gift. Work is a gift. Living in Christian community for the glory of God is a gift.

If Christians were honest though, we would not go back and marry any other person or change the course of our lives because, even in the many long days, we recognize that God is at work in our lives the entire time. The Christian would not trade that truth for anything. The secular society says this life is all that there is and idolizes self-fulfillment. This causes adults to grow tired of carrying out the responsibilities of being an adult. But for the Christian, that is not an

option because we cannot join the cult of self-fulfillment and we cannot consider our lives only to be a project.

The Christian call to adulthood

In light of this Christian understanding of adulthood, we should trade happiness for joy. Children can live by happiness because they do not have to worry about themselves. Someone is going to wake them up, feed them, change their diaper, and take care of them. Children can be bought off with happiness, but adults cannot live on happiness. The biblical worldview tells us that the Christian cannot live on happiness but must live on joy because joy is not dependent upon circumstances. Christians must live on joy because we understand that the constant pressures of adulthood are just a part of what it means to be a man and a woman in a fallen world. We can find joy in vocation because it is God's gift. We understand children as God's gifts that brings joy. Then, in a sweet part of adulthood, you get to see your children having children, and that is a joy.

The society around us wants to define adulthood primarily in terms of rights, whereas the Bible insistently defines adulthood in terms of responsibilities. A society that does not value adulthood is a problem that we cannot entirely remedy, but we can remedy the lack of adulthood in the church. The concern of society is that when adults do not show up, the society begins to wind down. But it is the concern of the church to point everyone to maturity in Christ.

Paul says this in Colossians 1. He says that the very reason we proclaim Christ is so that “we may present everyone mature in Christ.” The church is to be an adult-producing organization. By God’s grace, by the power of the gospel, by the ministry of the Word, and by the ordinary means of grace, the church should produce adults to the glory of God.

That is our goal, and yet it is not enough. As mature as anyone may be in this life, there is the perfect maturity yet to come. In the grace of God, he will make us fully mature and complete one day. But in between now and then, the church must make presenting everyone mature in Christ one of its central purposes. May we toil together to that end.

THE GLORY OF AGE



To be human is to be chronological. We are temporal creatures. We feel it. We see it. We observe it in the world around us and in each other. The naturalistic, materialistic worldview has to look at the human life cycle and say that growing old is what is necessary to replicate the species. Operating from a merely evolutionary and naturalistic worldview, the only reason to explain why people live beyond reproductive years is either because there must be either some kind of benefit to the process of biosis by having older persons present among us or because it is just an evolutionary accident.

The biblical worldview of age is so very different. Scripture perfectly directs itself towards every dimension of life, including the fact that we progress through different stages

of life. However, the church seems to give very little attention to these four stages of life. Childhood is not just a phase of life, it is a dimension of God's glory. Youth is not just a time of energy and drive, it is also a time to demonstrate the purposes of God. The strengthened endurance of adulthood is meant to show us God's glory. The Bible dignifies these three stages, but is also dignifies a fourth stage. As a matter of fact, Scripture probably has more to say about the last stage of life than any other. What the Bible has to say about age is not only counterintuitive, it is extremely and profoundly counter-cultural. One of the first things we come to understand about the theology of age is that age is considered to be both an achievement and a blessing.

An aging society

We live in a time in which the number of old people is rapidly increasing. This reality is not an allusion or perception. There is a vast increase in the number and percentage of aged persons within the society. This increase is occurring for two reasons. First, the increase is happening because of a rapid and very troubling international decrease in the birth rate that threatens to upend economies and create a massive social crisis. In nations such as Japan, the sale of adult diapers now exceeds the sale of infant diapers. That is a sign of the future. That is the direction of the world at large. There will be more aged persons in many societies than children and adolescents put together.

This is a radical social crisis. At no point in the history of humanity has there been a time like this. There is no plan for how so the few working people there are will be able to support the many non-working people. There are reports in Japan that extremely-aged Japanese women are committing crimes just so that they can be sent to prison because in prison they will have community and care. That scenario sounds like a dystopian future, but it is the inevitable result of a society that breaks up the family, minimizes family bonds, alienates the extended family, and stops having babies.

Second, it is not just a fall in the birth rate that has created a larger number of the aged among us, it is also the extension of a lifespan. The lifespan has expanded so much that demographers have created a new category of age classification. It is no longer just childhood, youth, adulthood, and the aged. It is now childhood, youth, adulthood, the aged, and the extremely aged. People are living long enough to become the extremely aged. This is a result of modern medicine, new medical technology, a decrease in violence, and a good diet.

This new segment of the population is significant, and advertisers know it. Many television advertisements are now targeted toward people whose main purpose is to extend their lives. If advertisers are putting that much money into advertising towards that segment of the population, it is a large segment of the population. It is a period of life to which Christians must give attention.

Scripture and age

Scripture speaks of the glory of age. In Psalm 90:10, a psalm of Moses, he says, “The years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty.” Seventy was not even the expectation of age for Israelites in that time. There is very good historical and archeological evidence that reveals that the majority of adults in Israel did not live to age seventy. The average lifespan was probably between thirty and forty. Seventy was understood to be an aspirational age.

The biblical worldview says that to live to a certain age can only be explained by the favor of God. Age is a gift and a blessing in the Christian worldview. According to a biblical theology, age is a sign of God’s favor and faithfulness. In the Bible, many of the patriarchs of Israel lived long lives marked by God’s favor. Methuselah, the oldest person in the Bible, lived 969 years. Adam lived 930. Noah, 950. Abraham, 175. Isaac, 180. Jacob, 147. Joseph, 110. Moses, 120. Joshua, 110. Those are long lifespans. They would require a new age category: the extremely, extremely, extremely, extremely aged.

The modern idea of aging is that we should aim our lives towards achieving maximum leisure with minimal responsibilities and complications at the end of our lives. This modern ideal of aging is to achieve a freedom from responsibilities.

Mary and I grew up in South Florida. Right across the street from my house was a community that could have been the set of a sitcom. It was a community of small, white cin-

der block houses. Each of the houses was identical, except on some of them the colored brick was on the right. On others, a strip of colored brick was on the left. They had identical lights, mailboxes, and white concrete-tiled roofs. The name of the community, displayed on two giant signs as you went through the gates into the little neighborhood, was called Leisureville.

Marketers went to the northeast to attract people to Leisureville. They sold the idea that after you reach a certain point in life, you stop working in New Jersey with all the snow and with all the traffic and you move down to South Florida. You move into a white house with a white roof, next to a white house with a white roof. You move in next to someone about your age with about your interest. You have achieved a planetary eschatology by living in Leisureville.

But in Leisureville, there was no golf course, and it was not near the beach. It was just a little neighborhood of leisure, like a caricature of the kind of cultural ideal that emerged in the United States during the 20th Century.

Christians are called to a biblical understanding of all things, including age. This worldview demands that we have to translate this ideal from mere leisure and longevity, mere rest and retirement, to something far more meaningful. Christians have to confront the cult of retirement. It says that if you work in your job for a number of years and you have the right kinds of savings social security, and pension plan, then

you can retire. Based upon a percentage of the income you earned during your working years, you can live a happy and sustainable life of leisure. This idea of retirement has taken such a firm grip on our society, it created a set of expectations that those in the West in the 20th Century thought was the norm though it had never been normal. From a biblical view, this kind of retirement should not be normal.

Ecclesiastes 12

The Bible is astonishingly and brutally honest about age. Ecclesiastes 12 is a great example of this and is one of my favorite chapters to preach from the Old Testament. It is especially one of my favorite chapters to preach to young people. Ecclesiastes 12:1 says, “Remember your creator in the days of your youth.” The chapter heading in most translations employs this verse as the subject of the whole section, but after this first verse, very little is actually said about youth. There is immediately a contrast. Notice how the chapter continues.

Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near of which you will say, “I have no pleasure in them”; before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return after the rain, in the day when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men are bent, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those who look through the windows are dimmed, and the doors on the street are shut—when the

sound of the grinding is low, and one rises up at the sound of a bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low— they are afraid also of what is high, and terrors are in the way; the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags itself along, and desire fails, because man is going to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the streets— before the silver cord is snapped, or the golden bowl is broken, or the pitcher is shattered at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern, and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it. Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity.

The main point of this passage is to remember your Creator in the days of your youth because those days are not going to last. What follows is not a pretty picture. Everything physical decays; it does not improve. There are inevitable indignities of old age that come after the days of youth.

One of God's lessons to us all is that as we reach the end stage of life, we begin to look remarkably like the beginning stage of life again. Just as we need help in the beginning, we need help at the end. The difference is that an infant does not know it needs help, but by the time of the last stage of life, there is a full awareness that the one who was once a helper is now in need of help.

Isaiah 46

Though the Bible does speak honestly about the indignities of age, the main message of the Bible is the glory of age. Isaiah 46:3-4 is a beautiful place to look at the glory of age.

As the Lord speaks through Isaiah to his people, he says, “Listen to me, O house of Jacob, all the remnant of the house of Israel, who have been borne by me from before your birth, carried from the womb; even to your old age I am he, and to gray hairs I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save.”

In this precious word, God reminds his people of his faithfulness. The entire sense of these two verses is God carrying His people through the Babylonian exile. He is carrying them through his covenant promises, carrying them through His mercy, and carrying them through all the ages and phases of their lives from the very beginning.

Notice how God uses gray hair to signify old age. Gray hair is mentioned often in Scripture. It is a sign of seniority and wisdom. When you are looking for wisdom, you want to find gray hair because you will find wisdom there. Consider that in Daniel, God is identified as the Ancient of Days. God is the eternal one and perfect source of wisdom. In order to describe who he is to us, God calls himself the Ancient of Days. God, according to his vision, has gray hair. Perhaps we would describe as white hair, like pure wool. Proverbs 16:31 says, “Gray hair is a crown of glory. It is gained in a righteous life.” This is the biblical worldview of age. Age is a gift and blessing from God and is gained in a righteous life.

Exodus 20

In the fifth commandment in Exodus 20, God instructs us to honor our father and mother so that your days may be long in the land of promise. Paul later refers this to as the first commandment with a promise. The main concern of the commandment is not to obey your parents, but it is to honor your father and mother of age, not of youth.

In Israel, this commandment was lived out with the understanding that it is the responsibility of the family to honor the matriarch and patriarch and to demonstrate respect, care, and affection throughout the entirety of life. It is not fulfilled by children obeying their parents. It is only fulfilled by adult children honoring their father and mother throughout the entirety of their life span. As Paul said, this is the first commandment with a promise.

In Scripture, age is described honestly yet respectfully. The Old Testament speaks of patriarchs, and with the patriarchs were matriarchs. These patriarchs and matriarchs were sources of wisdom for Israel. In the transition from the Old Testament to the New Testament and from Israel to the church, that source of wisdom does not go away. One part of what it means to be the church is that, just as Israel looked to the patriarchs, we also do the same. The church, like Israel, is to demonstrate to the world what it means to depend upon the wisdom that can only be achieved by longevity of faithfulness.

1 Timothy 5 & Titus 2

1 Timothy 5 begins by saying, “Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, in all purity. Honor widows who are truly widows.” It continues in verse 17, “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.”

Leadership in the Old Testament is found in the fathers of Israel. In the New Testament, the keyword describing leadership in the church is the word “elder.” That is not an accident. We too in the church are instructed to look for leadership in those who are elders. The word “elder” points us towards those who have aged in maturity. This describes a spiritual maturity as well. “Elder” is a reminder of the fact that there is a correlation between age and maturity. This passage says to treat an older man as you would a father and to treat older women like mothers. Even as Israel was a nation of tribes made up of families, so also the church is to be a family of families, even to those without physical families.

Titus 2:1-8 says,

But as for you, teach what accords with sound doctrine. Older men are to be sober-minded, dignified, self-controlled, sound in faith, in love, and in steadfastness. Older women likewise are to be reverent in behavior, not slanderers or slaves to much wine. They are to teach what is good, and so train the young women to love their husbands and children, to

be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be reviled. Likewise, urge the younger men to be self-controlled. Show yourself in all respects to be a model of good works, and in your teaching show integrity, dignity, and sound speech that cannot be condemned, so that the opponent may be put to shame, having nothing evil to say about us.

This passage is interesting because it does not say younger men are not to teach. It says that when you teach, you are to teach like an older man. This is an amazing fact. Older women are to teach younger women, and then younger women are to teach as older women when they teach other women. Younger men are to teach, but younger men are to teach like the older men.

There is an important transmission of faith here. The older I get, the more I realize that I am but the sum of all that has been invested in me over the years. This is how the faith is passed along. We intentionally want to be saying the things that Paul said. We have fathers, great grandfathers, and ancestors. We want to believe what they believe because this is how the transmission of the faith occurs healthily in the church.

Remember that Isaiah 46 reminds us that God has a purpose in every phase of life. His purpose is to remind us that we did not produce ourselves. We could not care for ourselves. We exist only because he brought us to be and carried us through life.

Twelve biblical truths about age

There are twelve easy points we need to understand about age.

1. According to a biblical understanding, old age is a gift and an aim. We are to aim to live to an old life. Old age is a blessing from God. We should aim our lives so that we are more faithful when we are aged than when we are young. As we live faithful lives, we should look forward to God's blessing to give us length of days.
2. We should understand that when age is achieved, it is always a divine blessing. Old age is a remarkable blessing directly from God. No one looks at a five-year-old and is astonished at his life, but a 105-year-old grabs your attention. We should recognize in our churches that when we are given the gift of the aged, we are being given the gift of God's blessing.
3. We understand that age does have consequences. Sin explains why there are consequences. Creation is groaning because we will not achieve full blessedness in this life. This fact reminds us that this body is a body we must let go in order that one day this body will be resurrected. By God's grace, those who are in Christ will have a glorified body. A glorified body will not possess the indignities and infirmities we now experience, but our bodies now shows these consequences of sin.
4. Families need aged members who are matriarchs and patriarchs. Every healthy family respects, recognizes, and treasures those of age.
5. The church is the family of faith that needs aged members. A church that is generationally disproportioned is a church that

lacks something very significant. We would be very concerned about a church who is made up of only old people without young families and children. That would be a sign of trouble. But is also a sign of trouble if you have many young people but there are no aged persons in the church. Something is missing from this picture because the church is the intergenerational gift of God.

6. The church needs a biblical theology of age. We need to think about what the Bible reveals about all the stages of life and about age. Age needs to be something we talk about, respect, celebrate, and understand. It should not be the subject about which no one can preach from the pulpit. It should be spoken of openly even as the Scripture speaks of age so openly.
7. The church is an intergenerational community. Intergenerational does not just mean the membership of the church. It also means the worship of the church. We should be careful that we do not segregate the older away from worship, just as we should not segregate the younger from worship as well. The fellowship of the church should be intergenerational as well. It is not wrong for people to have age-related activities and fellowships, but it is wrong if those are the only activities of the church. The theme of the church has to be that we sit together in the pews and that we sing old and new songs together.
8. We should find a congregation of adopted grandparents and grandchildren in the church. One of the greatest deficits in Christ's church today is children, teenagers, and young adults without significant older adult friends. This is a concern that needs to be noted. We, at every stage of our lives, need friends

who are older than we are, and we need friends who are younger than we are. The absence of either leads to a misshapen congregation. The church should be made up of a congregation of adopted grandparents, adopted children, and adopted grandchildren.

9. Elders, both in terms of the biblical office and those who are older, should be looked to as a source of wisdom.
10. We need to understand that the aged in every congregation can give more, not less. There is the assumption that older people need to step back as young people assume new leadership, but in God's economy inside the church, the aged are sidelined too quickly. Seniority is displaced in a culture that worships youth, but a culture that worships youth will not produce a church that honors Christ.
11. We need to redefine our expectation, so that we are aiming for redeployment not retirement. This does not mean that retirement is wrong. We do not want a 100-year-old fireman coming to rescue us from a burning house. We need to give up some responsibilities because younger men need to come and take these responsibilities. But the Christian worldview and mandate must not be to retire and give oneself to a life of leisure, but rather it should be to redeploy to the glory of God and to the service of Christ. Redeployment would transform the church. Leisure should be a reward for effort, labor, and faithfulness, not the normal state of affairs. The aged should be about that labor that leads to leisure, not leisure without labor.
12. Regardless of how old we are right now, we are deciding right now what kind of old person we are going to be. Some people observe

that whatever we are as an old person is just the exaggeration of whatever we were as a young person. The Bible confirms there is truth in that idea.

Years ago as a seminary student, I was assigned to read a text by a young catholic priest who had been assigned to take care of older Catholic priests in an order. He was to go in the middle of the night to awaken them to give them medicine. He said he once went into a room in which there were two elderly men who both had been priests at one point. He awoke the first man, and the man responded with anger and said, “Why are you waking me up?” He said, “I have to give you the medicine.” The old man gruffly took the medicine and dismissed the man. The young man then went to the other bed and woke that man up. That elderly man looked at him and said, “Thank you. I am so sorry you have to come in the middle of the night, being awake yourself to awaken me to take this medicine. God bless you.” The young priest said that he left the room thinking, “I do not want to be that first man. I want to be that second man.” He closed the door and walked down the hall. Before he reached the end of the hall, he realized, as he recorded in his memoir, “but I think I will have to decide right now not to be that first man, but to be that second man.”

God honors age. The Ancient of Days gives age to some of these human creatures as a blessing. These aged persons are a gift to God’s church. We are to honor mothers and

fathers, and grandmothers and grandfathers in the church. We are also to decide right now what kind of old person we intend to be.

May we all, at every stage of life, seek to be faithful and glorify our God.

NOTES

Chapter 1: The Wonder of Childhood

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- 29 Horace Bushnell, *Christian Nurture* (New York: Scribner, Armstrong, & Co., 1876).

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- 50 Christian Smith, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

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