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Gerontic Evangelism

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Abstract

Gerontic Evangelism focuses on sharing the gospel with senior adults. Many evangelism ministries are focusing on children, youth, women, and other adult members of society, but few focus on the elderly. Senior adults in most cases are not seen as a peculiar group that needs to be strategically reached with the gospel. Their importance in society and their growing population worldwide should attract the attention of evangelists and missionaries to target them as a special group for gospel witness. This paper argues that winning the senior adults to Christ is a necessity and may open doors for the evangelization and even the conversion of family members and members of the wider community. This research used participant observation and informal discussions to gather the data for this paper. This paper has the goal of calling the attention of the church and evangelistic organizations to see the need to have a focused evangelistic ministry to senior adults.

Keywords: Gerontic, Gerontology, elderly, evangelism, strategy, senior adults, gospel, witness, ministry

Introduction

Senior Adults are very important in society and are precious to God. In some cultures, they are the gatekeepers of their families, clans, tribes, and

or communities. There are prospects of open doors for further witness to people who are within the sphere of influence of the seniors who are won to Christ. The growing population of senior adults worldwide calls for the church to pay special attention to evangelizing them. The National Institutes of Health of the United States reported, "The world's older population continues to grow at an unprecedented rate. Today, 8.5 percent of people worldwide (617 million) are aged 65 and over.... This percentage is projected to jump to nearly 17 percent of the world's population by 2050 (1.6 billion)" (Cire, 2016). This report argues for paying special attention to the evangelization of senior adults. It covers a theology of evangelism to establish the biblical basis for evangelism. Some basic information about senior adults helpful for reaching them with the gospel is also covered. The paper discusses strategies for reaching senior adults with the gospel covering the why, the who, and the how of evangelizing them. The goal is to challenge the church, evangelists, and missionaries to focus on this group that is special to God.

Theology of Evangelism

The concept of evangelism can be traced to the Old Testament prophets who were dedicated to calling the nation of Israel to turn from the worship of idols to serve Yahweh (Isaiah 1:18-20; Jeremiah 7:5-7; Amos 4:6). The preaching ministry of Jesus to all the cities and villages is an evangelistic model from the Master Evangelist, Christ himself (Matthew 9:35). He called men to repentance and transformation; he invited people to be part of the Kingdom. An example of a classical model of evangelism is seen in Christ's encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well of Sychar (John 4:1-42). Jesus' Great Commission includes evangelism (Matthew 28:19-20, Mark 16:15, Luke 24:47) especially through preaching repentance and the forgiveness of sins. Paul wrote, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone that believes..." (Romans 1:16) and "faith comes by hearing the word of God" (Romans 10:17). Evangelism occurs both by proclamation and by living out the truth of the gospel. It should be the goal of every evangelist and all believers.

Scholars in the field of evangelism have expressed the theology of evangelism in diverse ways. Walter Brueggemann an Old Testament scholar writing on evangelism argues that "the ground of evangelism is found in the gospel itself and not in any church condition or societal need" (Brueggemann, 1993, loc. 7). He proposes that "evangelism ...is 'doing the text' again, as our text and as 'news' addressed to us and waiting to be received, appropriated, and enacted in our own time and place" (Brueggemann, 1993, section 8). Doing the text means allowing the voice

of the scriptural text to have a full say in our common life (Brueggemann, 1993, loc. 9). He views the drama played out in the Old Testament (God's promise to the nation of Israel, deliverance from slavery, and the gift of the land) as good news and as being re-enacted in God's victory over evil and sin in the New Testament, the proclamation of that victory in evangelism, and the appropriation of the message by those who accept the message. Thus, the gospel gives true meaning to the Old Testament drama. Connecting Brueggemann's theology of evangelism is Scot McKnight who argues that the gospel is "declaring the story of Israel as resolved in the story of Jesus" (McKnight 2011, Loc. 1143). He insists on the connection between the story of Israel and Jesus who fulfills and completes that story. For McKnight, our part today is seen in the call to believe, repent, and be baptized which is participation in the story of Jesus (McKnight 2011, Loc. 2016). Scott J. Jones on the theology of evangelism further argues that "the ministry of evangelism must be grounded in the love of God and neighbor" (Jones 2003, Loc. 166). This understanding connects the story of Israel and its call by God to love him and to love its neighbors (Deuteronomy 6:4,5; Luke 10:27). In agreement with Jones, we can effectively evangelize people if we truly love the Lord and love them as well. Paul's sufferings on account of seeking to evangelize the lost in II Corinthians 11:21-33 underscore the fact that evangelism is not an easy task. It takes love to effectively carry out this task. Jones further remarks that evangelizing non-Christian persons without loving them fully is equivalent to evangelizing poorly, and that loving them without evangelizing them is loving them poorly (Jones 2003, loc. 216). True Christian love should go beyond meeting only human needs to meet their spiritual needs as well.

The good news as seen by Darrell Bock (2010, p. 20) is the restoration of relationship with the living God that makes those who believe and have obtained forgiveness part of His family. God extended His love to mankind by sending His Son to die for the sins of the world; he initiated the relationship and accepted us as part of His family. This common relationship as sons and daughters of the Lord enables us to form communities of fellowship as people of God. The restoration of relationships and formation of a community of faith make us part of the Kingdom. William Abraham (1989), while connecting evangelism with the Kingdom, argues that evangelism should be understood primarily as initiation into the Kingdom of God. "We can best improve our thinking on evangelism by conceiving it as that set of intentional activities which is governed by the goal of initiating people into the kingdom of God for the first time" (Abraham 1989, loc. 1142). The word initiation can be confusing; therefore, Abraham explains it by saying, "to initiate someone into the

kingdom of God is to admit that person into the eschatological rule of God through appropriate instruction, experiences, rites, and forms” (Abraham, 1989, loc. 1157). This definition and explanation rightly link evangelism with discipleship. Dallas Willard (2006) notes that the lack of discipleship in the Great Commission is a Great Omission. It is important to conclude the section on the theology of evangelism with the thoughts of Charles Arn (2003) who did very extensive research on evangelizing senior adults. He is an advocate of an approach to evangelism that is “disciple-oriented” rather than “decision-oriented.” He sees the journey toward Christian faith as a process over time (Arn 2003, p. 85). With this approach, he believes senior adults will be more willing to participate in the journey of faith. The command in the Great Commission is for us to make disciples of Christ out of the people we win to Him. The command to reach people with the gospel includes the elderly, who should be won to Christ and become His disciples.

Understanding Senior Adults

Senior adults, as defined in this paper, are sixty years and above. However, they could include younger adults in countries or communities where the life expectancy is low. With advances in healthcare and medical science, the number of senior adults is growing, especially in the West. There has also been growth in some non-western countries. Oswald J. Sanders (1982) in his book, *Your Best Years: Staying Young While Growing Old*, gave the following statistics and projections about the swelling number of senior adults in the United States, which is similar to most countries in the west. He wrote,

In 1850, only 2.5 percent of American citizens were over sixty-five. Today the proportion is 10 percent. Ten years ago; 4.4 percent were seventy-five years old or over. By the year 2000, the number could reach 6.9 percent. The United States today has 25 million people of sixty-five and over. If the present tendency toward a decreasing death rate continues, the number could increase to 38 million by the year 2000. The United States is not alone in this dilemma, similar conditions exist in Europe (Sanders 1982, 27).

The statistics about the growing number of senior adults agree with Arn’s (2003) conclusion that “America is rapidly aging as the baby boomers are growing old, and our population is living longer.” He calls this the “age wave” that “is ushering America into unfamiliar territory that has significant implications for the Church” (Arn, p. 10). The growing number of senior adults the world over requires a conscientious effort by

practitioners of evangelism and mission to target senior adults as a special people group and win them to Christ. Sanders says, "Old age is just as important and meaningful a part of God's will as youth. God is every bit as interested in the old as in the young" (1982, p. 42). There are people who respond to the gospel in their old age and who use their influence to open the door for witness in their families, their communities, and other spheres of their influence.

Billy Graham (2011), discussing his age, admitted that as age increases, the energy of a person decreases, and everything becomes slower, even recovery from illnesses. It is good to hear him talk about the challenges of old age, "There is no doubt that catastrophic illnesses take their toll on the elderly. Just as our bodies age and decline, so do our minds. In reality, the two are closely connected; as we age, physical changes take place in our brains as well as the rest of our bodies, causing everything from mild memory loss to dementia and Alzheimer's disease" (Billy Graham 2011, p. 154). The writer, having done some participant observation studies with senior adults in 2020-2021, agrees with Billy Graham concerning the struggles the elderly encounter with their physical, mental, and emotional health. Anyone involved in reaching the senior adults with the gospel must know and understand these struggles and find a way to be of help to them.

A better description of the struggles of senior adults can be found in Solomon's description of old age in Ecclesiastes 12:1-7. The Zondervan Study Bible's (2015) commentary on the passage above pointed out three main ways of reading the passage: 1) the allegorical approach in which objects and activities in the passage represent the challenges of old age, 2) a literal reading which sees in the passage a description of death and dying, and 3) a symbolic reading which sees the images in the passage as similar to the language of the prophets. I will prefer the allegorical approach in this paper since we are dealing with the challenges of old age and how to evangelize senior adults within their context. The problem of aging is like twilight gloom; it is the dark side of life for many elderly people, a time of pain and regret. To some, it is a time of loneliness and even desertion. In Ecclesiastes, the arms and the hands which protect the body, as Solomon describes them, shake in old age. The failing memory of the elderly is depicted by the shaking of the head. The legs which are like the supporting pillars of the body become weak and the muscles decline and shrink, making stability a problem. The teeth, as grinders of food, get weak, loosen, and some or all are lost which makes chewing very difficult. The eyes become dim which sometimes results in blindness. Old age brings a loss of appetite and little is eaten. Senior adults have light sleep; a slight

noise like the chirping of a bird may wake them up. Music does not make sense; ear pain and hearing loss may occur in old age. Senior adults fear heights because they can fall. In my experience with senior adults during the participant observation study, I recall times when they fell because they could not maintain their balance; sometimes such falls are devastating. Old age results in gray hair, though not all gray hair is due to old age. The end of the aging process is death. Despite these common phenomena, the aging process differs from person to person due to differences in genetic make-up, accessibility to healthcare, diet, rest, attitudes to old age, lifestyle, and the presence of joy and peace from the Holy Spirit, among many other factors.

Strategies for Evangelizing Senior Adults

Just as there are strategies for reaching children, youth, women, and others with the gospel, a strategy is also needed to effectively reach senior adults. “Effective outreach communicates the Good News in different ways to different ‘people groups.’ (Arn, 2003, p. 75). We need to consider some strategies for reaching the elderly with the gospel. In this section of the paper, we will discuss the why, the who, and the how of gerontic evangelism. This will help put the evangelists who desire to consider this ministry on track.

Why Evangelize Senior Adults?

There is a wide belief among practitioners of evangelism that most Christian conversions occur among children and younger adults. Charles Arn in one of his research findings said, “few Christian adults over age 65 indicate their conversion occurred later in life.” Quoting one of his studies, he found that “only 7% of all Christian conversion occur after age 50; 1% after age 60...” (Arn, 30). The question is, if senior adults are not responsive to the gospel, why bother with them? Reacting to the claim that relatively few senior adults respond to the gospel, David Moore (2007) quoted Dr. William Day who believes that senior adults do not respond because they are not targeted for evangelism like the other groups. He said it is not likely that senior adults will make a profession of faith “unless intentional ministry is directed toward them” (p. 27). One of the objectives of this paper is to appeal for a more intentional effort for the evangelization of Senior Adults. Building upon the claim that senior adults can and do respond to the gospel is the claim of socioemotional selectivity theory which argues that “perception of time is inevitably linked to the selection and pursuit of social goals” (Carstensen & Isaacowitz, 1999, p. 166). The perception of the amount of time left in life can be a motivation for senior

adults to embrace Christ and change their ways.

Arn (2003) presented the following reasons for pursuing the evangelization of senior adults as follows: Senior adults are close to eternity, receptive, care about others, have more available time, are loyal to the church, are geographically stable, and give more money to the church (Arn, 2003, pp. 76-78). In addition to the reasons advocated by Arn, as a participant observer who interacted with both the elderly and their relations, I wish to advance the following reasons in this paper.

First, the scripture says that it is not God's will that any should perish, but that all should be saved (2 Peter 3:9). Senior adults of all races, cultures, economic, and social statuses who do not know the Lord are precious souls that need salvation. Unlike some religions or cultures where good or influential elders just grow old, die, and join their ancestors, it is not so in the Christian faith. The scripture clearly states that "the soul that sins shall die" (Ezekiel 18:20), hence the need to rescue the perishing who are headed toward eternal damnation.

Second, another reason for considering the urgency of evangelizing senior adults is that some seniors may not live long before they are called to glory. Our joy will know no bounds when we meet these souls in heaven who narrowly escaped hell because of our faithfulness in witnessing Christ to them.

Third, in some cultures, senior adults are highly revered and respected. Oswald Sanders gave this example, "In Oriental culture, age is equated with wisdom. In countries like Japan, the elderly have a respected status and enjoy high prestige. A person is valued for his intrinsic character more than for what he achieves" (Sanders, 1982, p. 22). This respected status is enjoyed by senior adults in most African cultures and in many other cultures around the world. When such influential senior adults are won to Christ, they may use their influence for the evangelization of their families, communities, clans, and even people groups. Some seniors are gatekeepers of their communities or tribes.

It should be noted that in patriarchal societies, the elderly men should be the target while in matriarchal societies elderly women should be targeted. In my discussions in the Tri-State region of Appalachia, I found out that women have a special influence; This was revealed in an informal discussion in April 2022 with Bobby Mercer of Tri-State Bible College, South Point Ohio, USA. If the evangelist understands this, then he or she should target the elderly women who can be a doorway to reaching the men and other members of their community or society.

Fourth, in the introduction, we saw that the number of senior adults in different parts of the world is increasing. This growing number provides

a reasonable justification for why missionaries, evangelists, and churches should consider them as a target group for outreach beyond just caring for their physical needs.

Fifth, saved senior adults who have done very bad things in the past might right their wrongs which will make a positive impact on the community or society and that will give credence to the gospel witness.

Sixth, In some cultures, seniors take care of little children. Children in some cultures gather around grandparents for moral and religious instruction. Because of this, senior adults who are believers can be a great resource for evangelizing children, hence providing hope for the future of the Christian faith.

Having discussed why senior adults should be targeted for evangelism, it is important now to discuss the kind of persons suitable for the evangelization of senior adults.

Who Should Evangelize Senior Adults?

For a strategic and effective outreach to senior adults, the person who should evangelize them is very important. Just as Robert Coleman (2014) observed, people are the most important element of the strategy of Christ for winning the world. “Remarkable as it may seem, Jesus started to gather these men before he ever organizes an evangelistic campaign or even preached a sermon in public. Men were to be his method of winning the world to God” (Coleman 2014, loc. 21). To reach the elderly effectively, the characteristics of men and women who will do the work are important. From my participant observation with the seniors, I have been able to come up with the following qualities for evangelists that will effectively reach senior adults with the gospel.

First, the evangelist must be born again and be filled with the Holy Spirit. One cannot give what one does not have. It is saved people, empowered by the Holy Spirit, who should be evangelizing.

Second, another necessary quality of a person who desires to reach senior adults with the gospel is love. Loving the Lord and loving people is an indispensable quality for an evangelist. The elderly, in particular those who are unsaved, require extraordinary love in order to cope with the changes taking place in their minds, bodies, and overall health. The unsaved senior especially needs to be loved, and this love must flow from Christ through the life of the evangelist.

Third, an evangelist who wants to reach senior adults must be a listener. Elderly people love to tell their stories, whether they be of success or regret, and they need someone willing to listen to them. These stories can serve as a bridge to connect the seniors with the gospel. Wise use of this

resource can result in the successful witnessing of Christ to senior adults.

Fourth, patience is also one of the necessary qualities for an evangelist of senior adults to possess. Patience is especially helpful when the senior adults repeat the same story or when they quickly forget what they were told. Likewise, patience is also useful when one must help them do routine activities or when they sometimes behave like children.

Fifth, anyone reaching out to senior adults must study and understand the problems of old age. This will help him or her to build rapport with them.

Sixth, because of failing strength and illnesses, senior adults need care. The evangelist must be caring. Elderly people need to know you care for them and they appreciate any gestures that demonstrate this care. Our love is manifested in the ways we care for them.

Seventh, an evangelist to senior adults must have compassion for the lost. He or she must care for the eternal destiny of the senior adults.

Eighth, an effective evangelist to senior adults must be a good disciple-maker. Evangelism that is only after conversions is not fitting for senior adults. A good disciple-maker should be able to go over and over the same lessons with the elderly because they can easily forget the material.

Ninth, an evangelist to the elderly must be respectful. Senior adults want to be respected; therefore, any disrespect can close doors for evangelism. One must study and understand what constitutes respect or disrespect to the elderly in the culture of the targeted people group.

Tenth, another quality needed is the means and ability to physically visit the elderly. Some of them feel lonely because of mobility limitations. Visits which allow them plenty of time to talk can open a door for witness. God needs men and women to commit themselves to reaching the elderly with the gospel. This list of qualities needed to evangelize senior adults provides the would-be evangelist with the necessary tools to start.

How to Evangelize Senior Adults?

During my experience of participant observation, I was able to observe the following approaches to reaching the elderly.

First, enlisting and training men and women for ministry to the elderly is essential.

Second, one needs to approach the elderly respectfully with love. Again, learning what constitutes respect or disrespect to elders in their cultural context is required.

Third, listening is an important skill for reaching the elderly. Elderly people have stories to tell us about their life. Our ability to set aside time to sit and listen to their stories is a great blessing to them. Some of the stories may be repeated several times in the same sitting, but we must

listen nonetheless. We should wisely use those stories as stepping stones for gospel witness. We should also be able to ask questions that will connect elderly people with their past, especially with regard to family, profession, friendships, and their likes and dislikes, in addition to asking questions that will prepare them for the future.

Fourth, although some elderly people may want to maintain their independence, many have needs that they cannot meet alone. Some have been out of work or retired for a long time and have no children to care for them. Some have been deserted by their children. Their needs may include food, clothes, shelter, rent, utilities, healthcare, security, household chores, transportation, or running errands. The light of Christ shines in dark places where needs are met with love and care. We become the proverbial hands of Jesus reaching out to meet their needs.

Fifth, a ministry strategy of reaching the elderly includes sharing the gospel message with them, perhaps through Bible study (individually or in small groups) or through praying for their needs, which is often appreciated by people who are not believers. Other dimensions of ministry include counseling and literature evangelism; some old people enjoy reading and may appreciate good Christian titles.

Sixth, in oral communities, storytelling, especially Bible stories, can be a good strategy to reach the elderly. As we listen to their stories, we can also share relevant Bible stories that demonstrate a connection with what they have experienced.

Seventh, caregiving: a church or Christian organization can establish a caregiving center where the elderly, both believers and unbelievers, can receive care, through which the gospel message can be communicated to the unsaved. Homecare can also be established as a ministry to the elderly and can be used as an avenue for witnessing. Believers can take jobs in eldercare facilities or homecare organizations and work faithfully in love to share Christ by word and deed.

Eighth, Charles Arn (2003) suggests training senior adults who are Christians to share their faith and to become effective disciple-makers. This is important because “older people not only interact with few people, but they also interact primarily with people who are well-known to them” (Carstensen & Isaacowitz, 1999, p. 169). This underscores the importance of equipping them to reach the senior adults in their immediate and extended circle of family and friends.

Conclusion

The primary objective of this paper is to challenge Christians and the church to reach the elderly with the Gospel, demonstrating how the elderly

are precious to God. I wish to conclude this article with the words of David Moore who said, “the lack of evangelism which targets today’s seniors is a growing crisis. The number of unsaved seniors will continue to expand unless today’s churches and believers intentionally evangelize these needful individuals that God loves and desires to be part of His kingdom for eternity.” (Moore, 2007, p. 23). Winning the elderly has the potential of opening more doors for witnessing and is thus strategic for the advancement of the gospel. Hence, all scriptural strategies should be used and guided by the Holy Spirit to bring these precious souls to the Kingdom.

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