

Christian Reconstruction

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CRITICAL MASS

Part VII: Senior Citizens of the Kingdom

by Gary North

And about the eleventh hour he went out, and found others standing idle, and saith unto them, Why stand ye here all the day idle? They say unto him, Because no man hath hired us. He saith unto them, Go ye also into the vineyard; and whatsoever is right, that shall ye receive. So when even[ing] was come, the lord of the vineyard saith unto his steward, Call the labourers, and give them their hire, beginning from the last unto the first. And when they came that were hired about the eleventh hour, they received every man a penny. But when the first came, they supposed that they should have received more; and they likewise received every man a penny. And when they had received it, they murmured against the goodman of the house, saying, These last have wrought but one hour, and thou hast made them equal unto us, which have borne the burden and heat of the day. But he answered one of them, and said, Friend, I do thee no wrong: didst not thou agree with me for a penny? Take that thine is, and go thy way: I will give unto this last, even as unto thee. Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? Is thine eye evil, because I am good? So the last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen (Matt. 20:6-16).

The point of reference of this parable was the coming offer of the gospel to the gentiles. The Hebrews had been brought into God's covenant in the days of Abraham. Gentiles had remained outside the covenant, not bearing the mark of the covenant and not seeing their heirs of the promises. The Jews were warned by Jesus in this parable that the coming of the gospel to the gentiles would place gentiles on equal covenantal footing with Jews.

But the Jews had gained entrance first. Didn't that count for something? Jesus' parable made it plain that when God hands out the ultimate reward – access to heaven – it makes no difference who responded to the gospel first.

Jesus was not dealing with the question of distinctions of individual personal rewards beyond soul-salvation. Paul did.

For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble; Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is. If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire (1 Cor. 3:11-15).

The parable of the hired men should warn us: with re-

spect to the question of salvation by grace through faith, there is no difference between (1) the person who is converted young, lives a productive life, and dies in the faith and (2) the person who is regenerated two minutes before he dies. The last shall be first.

The Hypocrisy of Pietism

The pietist asserts that the Great Commission refers only to personal salvation. It supposedly has nothing to do with social transformation. A correspondent from Oklahoma wrote to me in January, 1992, to instruct me that "Satan wishes men to be diverted from the great commission, that of seeing individuals of all nations following Him, being baptized and disciplined for His kingdom. The more time spent on earthly pursuits, i.e. politics, studying vain subjects, social actions and filling our brains with more useless knowledge, the less time there will be to do His work. He left for us to do." This culture-rejecting theology is refuted in detail by Kenneth Gentry in his book, *The Greatness of the Great Commission* (1. C. E., 1991). But very few fundamentalists have read the book, and if they were to believe it, they would no longer be fundamentalists.

If all souls are equal, but some souls are running out of time, then "souls-only" evangelism should concentrate on the most judgment-threatened members of society. If the Great Commission were exclusively about the saving of souls, then the absolutely crucial form of evangelism would be evangelism to the aged. These people have little time remaining. There is no second chance beyond the grave. "And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment" (Heb. 9:27). If they do not hear the gospel soon, and respond to it in faith, there is no hope for them. Zero. Young people have a comparatively long time to hear and respond; the aged do not.

The fact is, the "save only souls" view of the kingdom is really not believed, or if it is believed, it is not taken seriously institutionally. The doctrine of tithes and offerings is far stronger than the doctrine of souls-only evangelism.

Question: When was the last time you saw a Baptist Sunday school bus ministry to the aged? Dozens of blue buses criss-crossing the city, bringing the elderly from the rest homes to church! Ho, ho, ho. And, I might add, ha, ha, ha.

Why do churches concentrate on evangelizing the young and those under age 65? Because churches know who pays the bills: employed people. The aged are unemployed. They will stay unemployed. People in old folks homes have little money to give, and their children are strapped by rest home expenses. Rest home residents have been sent into the equivalent of the elephant burial grounds; they are unlikely to escape except by death.

A few churches may put on a once-a-month Sunday afternoon hymn sing at a local rest home, but I have never seen any church develop a systematic program of evangelizing a rest home the way churches develop programs to evangelize neighborhoods, local businesses, or local public high schools – the theological hell-hole which the children of most of the congregation's members attend. A hymn sing is better than nothing, but it is peripheral evangelism. Everyone knows it.

Churches are after converts who can contribute to the life of the church: donated money and donated time. Ten years ago, I heard of a Southern Baptist evangelist who had adopted this slogan: "A million more in '84, and every one a tither!" This dream is shared by every denomination, though nobody really believes it. One thing is certain: no evangelist has in mind a million more people age 80 and above. "All souls are equal, but some are more equal than others."

Recruiting Chaplains

Little old ladies in nursing homes love to have young people come to visit. They love to hear children's choirs sing a few hymns. But they are unlikely to respond to the gospel message which is presented by a child. Neither will a retired banker. The religion of a child is perceived as childish.

This is why the best lay evangelists to the elderly are the elderly. Next best are the soon-to-be-elderly. Churches need to recruit and train lay evangelists among the senior citizens of the kingdom and send them into this theater of the spiritual conflict. Churches need chaplains for the army of the retired. These recruits need to understand that their tour of duty is unique to their talents. Nobody else can do it equally well. They are not being asked to do what in the public schools is called busy-work: marking time. They must understand that no one else in the church is equally suited to the task. Old people steadily lose their hearing, but one sound becomes progressively louder: the hoofbeats of death. Those who can hear this sound share something unique.

In the antebellum American South, black and white children of the same sex were allowed to play with each other until they were about ten or eleven years old. Then they were rigorously separated, which must have been a wrenching temporary experience for those separated. What is not well known is that the cultural barrier of color was allowed to be breached when people hit the rocking chair stage of life. Getting ready to die is seldom something that younger people have much interest in. The elderly so engaged were set apart socially to pursue their distasteful task. Society understood that when old people had nothing more to give to the earthly causes of life except the wisdom of age (preferably, only when asked), the approach of death would sometimes become a stronger bond than the separation of color and legal condition.

This has not changed. The needs, dreams, and fears of those approaching death are not the same as those of the young. There are few points of contact between the very old and the young unless they share a religion that preaches final judgment. The old are regarded as "out of it," meaning a meaningful life. There are exceptions, of

course. Famous old people get their share of visitors unless senility sets in. They are in meaningful touch with younger people. But most people are never famous. When they are aged, they are alone unless they are part of an organized ministry.

It is time to begin organizing such a ministry.

Recruiting Non-Come

A quarter century ago, my paternal grandmother was in a nursing home. Several homes, actually. She was an invalid, and she had long had a water-retention problem that kept her in the range of 250-pounds. She needed specialized care.

At one of these homes was a resident who was extraordinary. She would dress up in nice clothes every day. She would greet visitors and guide them to their relative's room after they signed in. She would read to the residents whose eyes had gone bad. The employees loved her, since she took extra work off their backs. As I remember, she was a Methodist.

These techniques need to be taught to Christians who are in these homes. Churches could send the equivalent of "circuit-riding chaplains" into the pits of comfortable despair that our better nursing homes are. (Some of these pits are not so comfortable.) These chaplains would be assigned the task of preaching and then training any converts to work as resident "non-corns," the way that lady worked.

The trouble is, churches seem to regard converts in nursing homes as God's vegetables. Cauliflower for Christ. Droolers for Jesus. No one regards these people as God's draftees. God expects them to do something productive for the kingdom in the days remaining to them, just like every other convert. Christians get an honorable discharge out of the army of the Lord only through senility or death.

Conclusion

It is best to be drafted early into the God's army. Solomon wrote: "Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them; While the sun, or the light, or the moon, or the stars, be not darkened, nor the clouds return after the rain" (Eccl. 12:1-2). But this blessing of an early draft is offset to some extent by the principle of "the first shall be last" (Matt. 19:30).

Only about 5% of the elderly in the U.S. are in nursing homes – euphemistically called convalescent homes (as if anyone expected the residents to recover). Most old people are still functional. They are an untapped resource. Because the churches have not recognized the value of this resource, they have not mobilized the aged. This means that except for American T.V. evangelists, whose money comes mostly from women over 60, the churches have either ignored the elderly or have not known what to do with them. The result is a looming disaster: the progressive paganization of the fastest growing segment of the population of every Western nation. Those closest to death, who hear the approaching hoofbeats, have no one to show them how to mount death's horse rather than being trampled by it. Forever.