

BOOK REVIEWS

Aging: Growing Old in Church

Will Willimon, Baker Academic, 2020.
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The church continues to age faster than the rest of the American population, and Christians need a sober, wisdom-soaked guide to address all the complexities of growing older. This reality is especially true in an age-denying culture increasingly fearful of dependency, decay, and death. Professor Will Willimon, a former pastor, dean, bishop, and seasoned author, is just that voice. He provides guidance for aging and older Christians who rightly ask: “Where is God leading me in this time of life?” (p. 5).

This readable text is a sober yet winsome analysis of these challenges for individuals and for the body of Christ. By framing aging theologically as a life of discipleship, Willimon avoids vapid cultural messages that seek to ignore or minimize aging yet also criticizes the notion of retirement as freedom from secular and sacred responsibilities. Aging is filled with challenges, yet our lives are a journey toward God, and this gives us many opportunities to serve and be served in the community of faith until our time on earth is complete. This calling is inextricably tied to our membership in the church as the body of Christ.

With wit, wisdom, and wonder, Willimon considers the aging process concretely, considering such issues as physiological decline, memory loss, estate planning, social security, volunteering, intergenerational interaction, serving in the church, and dying. Biblically informed, accessible, and nuanced, Willimon’s arguments are also peppered with contemporary studies on aging and some of his sermons. All this keeps him close to real life, lending his writing a certain poignancy without being preachy or pedantic, and almost reads like ancient wisdom literature. After discussing the biblical perspective on aging in the first chapter, he turns to “the storm of aging” in the next. The remaining chapters thematically address retiring with God, what successful aging looks like, life with God in the last quarter of one’s life, what it means to grow old in church, and finally, our ending in God. The following are a few notable insights.

In the opening chapter, Willimon observes that the Bible’s witness on aging is somewhat ambiguous, but nonetheless a natural, expected process providentially ordained by God. Long life is never viewed as an end in itself but as a means to something better. For example, the psalmist does not pray for a long life, but for a life long enough to tell future generations about God’s power (Ps 71:18). Scripture is honest about the decline and dependency that accompany old age, which may seem threatening to a culture that worships youth and self-sufficiency, with idols that often infiltrate the North American church. And yet Luke tells the story of the baby born in Bethlehem through the “very old” childless couple Zechariah and Elizabeth, as well as

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Simeon and Anna. Though many did not understand Jesus' identity, clearly the elderly Simeon and Anna do. He concludes: "Are older folks the first to get the astounding news of Jesus's birth because after many decades of living they are now unsurprised by the stunts of God?" (p. 11).

In "The Storm of Aging," Willimon reminds us that wisdom does not necessarily come with age. Shakespeare's *King Lear* serves as a tragic and extended commentary on Ecclesiastes' bleak depiction of old age and its follies. Indeed, though we should be grateful for the gift of life, the last act of our lives is marked by the tension between fruition and decay, fulfillment and loss, freedom and dependence. Though well-established character traits may become more pronounced when we're older, aging is not only a test of one's character but an opportunity for increased engagement with God.

In "Retiring with God," Willimon challenges the assumption that retirement means checking out of the rat race to get cracking on that bucket list. For Christians, retirement should be a time to transition from one kind of work into other, more meaningful service in God's kingdom. Here, the cultural idols of productivity, rationality, and efficiency get put in their place. In other words, retirement means freedom *for*, rather than merely freedom *from*. Willimon reminds pastors that it's the church's responsibility to help people think about retirement as Christians, "radically reframing words such as freedom, dependency, and control in light of Jesus Christ and his mission" (p. 39). This is no easy task.

In his chapter on "Successful Aging," Willimon refuses to gloss over the physiological, mental, emotional, and spiritual challenges of growing older. He avoids the lure of inane optimistic messages on the one hand and barren nihilism on the other. Instead, he asks, "Can God give us the grace to see our aging bodies and minds not as cruel biological fate but as God-ordained ways of being human?" (p. 57). A Christian perspective here means caring for our bodies by eating well, exercising regularly, and getting enough sleep to make our remaining years healthier—whether or not such measures increase our longevity. The *telos* of such measures is an ongoing life of discipleship and fulfilling our vocation in God's kingdom. And yet, as the author acknowledges, Christians ought not to think that such measures afford us the control we often crave. On the contrary, he warns that learning to age "out of control" remains one of the biggest challenges. This challenge requires us to cultivate empathy, honesty, and wisdom to number our days aright (Ps 90), virtues best developed within the faith community.

"With God in the Last Quarter of Life" addresses multiple topics, including the importance of the social dimension, personal agency, generational difficulties, remorse, remembering, dependence (where being a burden to others can be a blessing for both), loneliness, grief, gender differences in aging, and church participation. These pages are dripping with wisdom and insight. For example, while also prizing agency as essential to our personhood, the author exposes our culture that too readily absolves older adults of moral self-evaluation and responsibility. Willimon is blunt: "The elderly ought to be granted as much agency as possible and then held responsible" (p. 82). The chapter entitled "Growing Old in Church" fleshes all this out in greater detail, aligning the church with the disempowered and marginalized against the powerful. This chapter alone should be required reading for anyone in church leadership.

The final chapter addresses our inevitable demise, where Willimon looks directly at death and the suffering, sickness, sorrow, and tough decisions that often go with it. Yet even here, those near life's end may serve as faithful witnesses to resurrection hope. Indeed, matters of mortality and everlasting life may be our elders' distinctive testimony for the rest of us who will soon meet the same fate. Any church with aging members would greatly benefit by putting even a few of Willimon's insights into practice.

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