

FANNING THE FLAME?

Who are some of the people who most influenced and impacted you as you were growing up? I know some of those who most impacted my life were older saints who just loved me and were examples of godliness. I remember Dr. Emerson, a large, white-haired retired physician who always wore the same suit every week to church. His huge torso could be intimidating to any young boy, but his gentle nature, kind smile and encouraging words always drew me to him. He loved children, and he loved to give hugs -- hugs which literally smothered a young lad of about 50 pounds. His deep love for God continually exuded from his smile and encouraging words. As I grew up, I thought — "I'd like to be like Dr. Emerson — kind, caring and so enjoyable to be around.

Then there was Tom Perry. Tom always had a stick of gum for us on Sunday morning. He loved to let us sit in his lap. Tom was a big man too — with an even bigger heart. His love for me and other children always made me look forward to Sundays. I missed him when wasn't there.

Cecil and Ethel were two wonderful older saints in my church who loved me and my family with godly love and encouragement. We used to love to sit with Cecil and Ethel in church. Mom and Dad were usually in the choir, so we looked forward to sitting with them. On Easter Sunday we were always invited to their home to hunt for Easter eggs and enjoy a delicious Easter dinner.

There were many others I could point to as well. Dr. White, who challenged me to pray about being in full time ministry; Lew Gras who taught me about integrity and taking a stand for truth; Bob Frederick who was like a father and mentor to me through the early years of my ministry and taught me about patience and prayer. And there were my own grandparents and parents who served as the wonderful examples of the kind of godly living I would want to imitate.

To be sure, there were peers and younger men and women who made an impact upon me. But none meant so much, or made such a deep impression as those older saints who chose to make a difference in a young lad's life. Why did these men and women have such an impact? Why would older people make such a difference in younger lives?

A friend of mine who had been a Navy pilot during the Vietnam War gave me a good illustration of the significance of godly elders in the lives of others. When an aircraft is approaching an aircraft carrier for landing during heavy fog or low visibility, the radar tech in flight control becomes his lifeline to safety. On the controller's radar screen are two lines and a blimp. The blimp represents the incoming aircraft — the two lines represent the safe glide path for approaching the carrier. One line indicates the bow of the ship. If the pilot comes in below that line he will hit the water or the carrier itself. Too much above it and he misses altogether. The other line represents his focus — either to the left or to the right of the landing approach. As the aircraft

approaches, the controller advises when the pilot is outside the parameters for a safe approach. The pilot must then make the necessary corrections. If he overcorrects, then the controller must advise again of another correction needed until the pilot can safely guide his aircraft to its destination. Godly elders (sages) are like the controller. They have the wisdom and knowledge from having lived life so that they can offer corrective and instructive advice to those trying to navigate through the challenges of righteous living in a turbulent, antagonistic world.

As they apply the corrective training and instruction of God's Word, we are able to see by the example of their own life, that what is said is true and redemptive. Not all "older" people have this kind of wisdom and character. But those who do, those who are true *elders*, are essential to the survival and continuation of godly families, spiritually effective churches, and stable communities. Without them we are flying blind towards a destination that is certain to bring catastrophe. Right now, our nation is headed for disaster because we have forgotten God and ignored the value of sage elders in our families, churches and communities. God is calling us to restore that which was provided for our protection and survival.

We are entering an era in this country when those over 50 years of age will comprise the largest segment of our population in America. What an incredible resource. Yet, it is also a time when the majority of our senior citizens will be more preoccupied with a comfortable retirement plan than in making a difference for the future. I am thankful for a growing number of those who know that this is a time of great opportunity, but more are needed. This is a critical time for our families who need older, godly mentors (spiritual fathers and grandfathers) who reflect our Father's loving heart for His children. Many of the children in our families grow up without stable role models. In their place, people of dubious character without biblical values or morals have filled the "role model" void. Christian Grandparenting Network believes the Father is recruiting and restoring older, gray-haired "elders" to shepherd our families and faith communities — elders who will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and show the children the Father.

Mike Delcavo was running the 10,000 meter cross-country race at the NCAA meet in Riverside, California. Coming to a fork in the road, he made a choice to head a direction which most of the participants thought was the wrong way. Mike kept waving at the other runners to follow him, but only 4 out of 127 believed he had taken the right turn. The other competitors ignored him. Later, while being interviewed, he was asked about the reaction to his mid-course correction (the right choice) and his determination to not let the crowd influence him. He responded, "They thought it funny that I would choose the right way."

The apostle Peter told the church, "They think it strange that you do not run with them in the same flood of dissipation, speaking evil of you." (I Peter 4:4) There will be those who will think it strange that older people would give up comfortable retirement plans where they can sit on the sidelines as a spectator in exchange for getting back in the race and making a difference.

For some, the response will be: *"We have done our time. Let someone else do it now."* For the person who truly wants to be faithful to God and finish the race well, sitting on the sideline will never do. It will mean standing against the tide and walking by faith in Him who has called us. As "strange" as it may be, such a path is the way of honor and blessing. Who will walk in it?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer once wrote: "A righteous man lives for the next generation." That is what Christian Grandparenting Network is all about - to ignite a vision and passion among those at mid-life and beyond to live intentionally for the next generation. It is our conviction that godly elders are essential as providers of wisdom and leadership. Old age is not a time to drop out of life and leadership, but a time to fan the flame of God's gift within and set an example by which those who are younger can follow. It is our elders who can stand before us as a body and exclaim *"God is sovereign! His words are life! God is faithful and He will see you through! Trust in Him."* The most productive and fruitful years of a man's life ought to be those of his later years. What are you doing with the wisdom and experience God has given you for this next generation?