



A BIBLICAL, SERVANT LEADERSHIP PERSPECTIVE FOR VENERABLE FACULTY

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This article explores the biblical perspective of honoring aging faculty. A biblical interpretive approach is taken to tease out relevant biblical passages and truths that might assist college and university administrations in making decisions from a broad philosophical approach concerning aging faculty. The aim is to show effective and wise approaches to respect faculty while also meeting university needs.

Keywords: faculty, aging, biblical, servant leadership

Three-fourths of higher education baby boomer faculty members plan to delay retirement, or never retire at all (Fidelity, 2013). This raises the question of how to best resource education for tomorrow's students and whether there are biblical principles to help guide institutional decisions. Since the topics of aging and retirement are not specifically discussed together within a biblical passage, it is practical to take a theological approach in relation to work and aging. This article: (1) explores the biblical perspective of honoring aging faculty by teasing out relevant biblical passages and truths from a broad philosophical approach and (2) engages relevant research that offers some recommendations that align with a biblical perspective in a work-to-end approach.

BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

Concerning a biblical perspective of aging faculty, in the Old Testament God mandates "work." It is a gift, a fulfilling purpose which involves struggle and brings about joy, benefiting others. The opening words of Genesis describe God creatively at work for six days, ceasing on the seventh day (Gen. 1:1–2:2). God created man and woman

in his image—his representatives—to work the garden that God himself had planted and to subdue and rule the earth (Gen. 1:27; 2:15). The authority and activity that God ordained was good, but as a consequence of sin, God cursed the ground resulting in land that produced thorns and thistles (Gen. 3:18). The work for Adam would be difficult and laborious—he would work the land rather than gather produce from a garden that God had planted. Work outside the garden brought limitations and caused a dependency on God. Redekop (1983) described this reality as work limiting man's creatureliness. Even though man would sweat from the brow (Gen. 3:19), his labor would bring purpose and joy, a gift from God (Eccl. 3:12; 5:20). Redekop (1983) summarized the nature of work as good, honorable, fulfilling, and that which brings glory to God. This gift of work is not limited to an age group. For long life—gray hair—is associated with a life lived righteously and with wisdom (Prov. 16:31 and Job. 12:12). The Psalmist describes an Edenic-like state for the elderly who serve God, those who are upright—they are “green and full of sap;” they “bear fruit and flourish” (Ps. 92:10; my translation). In addition to work's intrinsic value, productive work keeps scarcity away and benefits the poor in the community who receive provision (Exod. 23:11–12; Lev. 19:10; and Prov. 24:33–34). An aging faculty member who seeks to live in accordance with God's plan will enjoy the work that God provides.

In the New Testament, particularly the Pauline Epistles, work is also presented positively. Work is an expression of faith and right living before God. A believer lives out faithfulness by providing for his family (1 Tim. 5:8–9), a responsibility that ensures nourishment (2 Thess. 3:10). Purposed labor keeps a person on a right path deterring from the temptation of idleness or stealing, and being useful with the hands leads to generosity and meeting others' needs (2 Thess. 3:12 and Eph. 4:28). Work is a means of serving and honoring the Lord with the whole heart (Col. 3:23). Believers have a high purpose as God's workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God has prepared in advance (Eph. 2:10). Thus, the gift of “work” is meant for life-long service.

More specifically, the Bible makes no mention of “retirement” or a phase of life where production ceases. All of the patriarchs, though being limited in eyesight or hearing, were active in their later years (Gen. 25:8; 35:28; 47:28; and 50:26). Moses began his work as a leader of Israel at age 80, and his predecessor Joshua lived and served beyond 100 years of age (Exod. 7:7; Josh. 24:29). Some of the prophets and kings of Israel continued to serve as they aged (2 Chron. 24:15; Luke 2:25–38), and the apostles—Peter, John, and Paul—continued to minister in their later years without any indication of stopping until their death (John 21:18; 2 Pet. 3; and Philem. 9). The point is not to compare life expectancies but to show that the Bible is silent concerning “retirement” and replete with explicit and implicit references to diligent service throughout life. In fact, “retirement” is a fairly new social phenomenon (Hendricks, 2000)—it was Germany's chancellor Otto von Bismarck in 1889 who decided the age of 65 to be the age when the government would begin paying benefits to the old-age survivors (it was a political move since the average life expectancy was 55 at the time (Hendricks, 2000)).

God's nature is to reward those who work, a principle he expects to be followed by owners, managers, and leaders. For example, Paul instructs believers concerning a spiritual principle based on a natural reality of God's creation, “Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap” (*English Standard Version*,

2001, Gal. 6:7–9; see also 2 Cor. 9:6 and Hos. 10:12). And the reaping in some sense is exponential in relation to the measure used in sowing (Luke 6:38). And even more so, with the Lord's blessing, the work of the harvest becomes bountiful (Gen. 26:12). Since the Bible seems to advocate a life of service to God, work that God rewards, it would be appropriate to reward those who have invested their lives—hearts and minds—in service to God with continued opportunity to do so.

Another Old Testament principle confirms this reasoning. For God's law reveals his care for his creation: "Do not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain" (*New International Version*, 2011, Deut. 25:4). The animal working the grain ought to be able to eat from what he is helping produce. Since the ox was made for man, Bruce (2000) explains that the ox is not to be deprived of his work so that both man and the animal working the field may benefit. God's design is for Christian workers to get appropriately paid for their work (Mounce, 2000). And while Paul quotes this verse from Deuteronomy to instruct the Corinthian believers that those who preach the gospel have a right to gain a living by the gospel (1 Cor. 9:9–14), the principle of remuneration can be applied to employment in general. Aging faculty have been given a gift to work, to flourish, and to receive reward. Yet this principle of reward does not speak to the aging faculty member whose production has become limited. In this case, honor and care are needed.

The aging person who walks with God is one whom the Lord cherishes. To honor an elderly person is a means of demonstrating one's reverence to God (Lev. 19:32). Just as fathers and mothers are to be honored—a timeless commandment for all generations (Exod. 20:12; Lev. 19:3; and Eph. 6:2)—so also an older man is not to be rebuked but treated as a father (1 Tim. 5:1). Since honoring the elderly honors the Lord, it makes sense that the Lord God honors those who honor him. But when aging faculty no longer produce in ways that benefit the university, it is the family, church, and community who assist.

Biblical instruction indicates that aging adults who need assistance are to first receive help from their adult children and grandchildren—to be honored by them. Charlie Trimm (2017) review biblical texts and related ancient literature concerning the command to honor parents. In sum, honoring parents includes both the physical care of parents as well as a proper attitude toward them (Trimm, 2017). In the New Testament, Jesus confronts the religious leaders' lack of prioritizing the provision for one's parents (Mark 7:9–11). Also, Paul instructs Timothy to direct believers in Ephesus to take first care for their widowed mother or grandmother, which is pleasing to God—before the widow would come to the church for assistance (1 Tim. 5:4). The Christian university is not a benevolence ministry (though a well-administered benevolence fund or team would be an appropriate means to honor employees in need).

Based on Scriptural truths, it seems that lifelong vocation and supporting continued purpose for faculty at work is honorable, that God-given calling spans one's lifespan and is not limited by age. Both Old and New Testament principles emphasize faithful stewardship in service to others, and institutions ought to create opportunities for aging faculty to remain engaged in teaching, mentoring, and service roles based on their capacity and contribution to institutional mission. It would seem, then, that when aging faculty cannot serve productively, the biblical model supports a meaningful way to show respect and dignity, but the family and community are to play a significant role. This raises a practical concern as to what actions an academic institution might take to

honor aging faculty. Below is scholarly discussion and support that align with the above general biblical principle of showing honor.

WORK-TO-END VIEW

For the individual, it is important to recognize the value of this stage of life. Davies (2008) defined the purpose and value for the aging person. To glorify God is the common theme of individuals, and according to Davies (2008), the last third of one's life can amplify the uniqueness of glorifying God, and the biblical perspective intimates that all human life is "precious and sacred" (p. 275). Chronological age does not deteriorate the value of an individual as "aging provides opportunity for increased growth toward spiritual maturity and wisdom" (Davies, 2008, p. 276). The distinctive triumph of those aging is to recognize the beauty at this stage and understand God as faithful and find delight in continued "fruitfulness"—a joy age can bring with greater meaning and "wisdom" (Davies, 2008, pp. 289–91).

Hendricks (2000) asks the question, "How, then, does a modern twenty-first-century believer fit a retirement plan into a work-to-end view?" (p. 134). Hendricks (2000) answers: (1) choose self-determination rather than passivity; (2) choose God's design rather than retirement and glorify him with fulfilling work; and (3) accept the challenge of change as a means of exercising a vibrant faith (pp. 135–37). One of the beneficial ways to show self-determination and faith is to plan for the final career phase by gaining financial education, setting new research goals, keeping up with new teaching methods, looking for ways to mentor new faculty, and working with the administration on areas that help the university, such as pursuing research grants or serving on committees where the faculty member has expertise.

In other words, the aging faculty member represents a valuable and often overlooked resource. As institutions work through questions of workforce transitions and retirement plans, aligning decisions with a more theologically grounded perspective is needed beyond policymaking to respect faculty who have dedicated years of faithful service. It seems that universities often lack the intentional frameworks and trained personnel to develop a culture of values to steward senior faculty well. Investigating practical strategies to honor faculty in a work-to-end approach that benefits the university would be a wise investment.

How, then, does a modern twenty-first-century Christian university fit a retirement plan into a work-to-end approach? Since meaningful work is a gift from God, the faculty member who can produce ought to be honored with continued work in areas where the faculty member contributes. Since God honors those who honor him and since God honors aging faculty who have faithfully served him, it is in the best interest of the university to find appropriate means to honor aging faculty. Yet, it is not the university's responsibility to continue to financially support an aging faculty member who does not contribute in meaningful employment to the institution. Thus, assessment and communication among faculty and administration as well as proper planning are needed for a productive outcome for both.

Concerning aging faculty and production, interestingly, in most fields, journal article publication rates do not decline substantively with age, and in some cases, article publication rates are higher among senior scholars (Savage & Olejniczak, 2021).

Specifically, researchers find that book and chapter publication rates increase markedly with age (Savage & Olejniczak, 2021). The reason seems to be that senior scholars maintain publishing activity levels and tend to shift their focus to the development and evolution of ideas through the publication of longer-format works more so than conference presentations (Savage & Olejniczak, 2021). In addition, student evaluations of teaching in correlation with age of tenured faculty raise no major concerns regarding any deterioration in teaching effectiveness, and teaching evaluations for tenured faculty in the humanities and social sciences improve as they approach retirement (Kinney & Smith, 1992, p. 299). Universities may benefit from viewing aging academics not as employees exiting the workforce, but as those who continue to contribute to teaching, research, and institutional culture, with added value for mentoring (Altman et al., 2020; Teixeira da Silva, 2024). Retaining current high-quality faculty members who provide value-added performance to the institution would be an important aim (Harrison & Hargrave, 2006). Similarly, aging teachers are “persons of authority” who deserve honor for their contribution (LaFosse, 2023, p. 209).

In a qualitative study that examined the retirement decisions and late-career trajectories of 45 baby boomer academics across four countries (USA, UK, Spain, and France), researchers found that almost three-fourths of the aging academicians participating planned to work full-time or in some type of reduced capacity (Altman et al., 2020). Less than one-tenth of the participants planned to fully retire. The findings show that the aging faculty members enjoyed the intellectual engagement in their academic pursuits, they appreciated collegial interaction, and they did not want to give up their role in mentoring younger scholars (Altman et al., 2020). This indicates that supporting faculty members’ desires to continue their engagement would be honoring rather than seeking to move faculty along to full retirement. Senior academicians provide experience in research and teaching and valuable opportunity for early-career colleagues to gain assistance in their own academic pursuits. This requires institutions making an assertive effort to redesign pre-retirement programs which might include phased retirement, or a work focus through a bridge employment opportunity, or emeritus roles—rather than treating retirement as a single endpoint (Altman et al., 2020).

Porter (2014) outlined another avenue for productivity for aging faculty by supporting semi-retirement in a manner where the faculty member increases faculty research (pp. 23–26). Porter (2014) suggested a possible option: the university can reduce teaching and administrative responsibilities, and a professor can focus on research activities with continued access to campus resources, work with graduate students on research projects, or possibly seek grant funding—it seems that the idea is to “make semi-retirement more attractive for the graying faculty” (2014, p. 26). Porter (2014) emphasized that some form of criteria is important before deciding on which aging faculty members could support the university in this way through continued research, and the university would need to develop written policies concerning this process and communicate this process well. It is common sense that aging faculty with decades of experience in their field would bring value to the university before active retirement. And this approach would also allow for younger scholars to be mentored well. The question seems to be a matter of priority.

Kaskie et al. (2017) encouraged universities to recognize aging faculty as institutional assets rather than burdens. Senior faculty provide valuable mentorship, evidence productivity in research, and benefit the institution in a way that brings continued favorable reputation. From this perspective, older faculty are seen as contributors worthy of specific support. In a study based on 187 colleges and universities across the United States, responses were gathered concerning the aging academic workforce by surveying human resource specialists to assess policies and programs, and found that most institutions did not prioritize aging faculty (Kaskie et al., 2017; see also Jonte-Pace & Strage, 2019). In fact, less than 5% of Human Resource specialists made this a top concern, and only one in four Human Resource specialists received any training on aging-related issues (Kaskie et al., 2017, pp. 230–31). The assumption here is that training in this area of aging faculty would provide impetus for relevant programs that benefit faculty and the university. Some institutions do currently provide wellness programs and relevant accommodations for aging faculty as well as counseling and phased retirement options that respect autonomy and faculty experience rather than seek forced retirement (Kaskie et al., 2017). In essence, trained Human Resource staff would serve as a catalyst for honoring aging faculty; rather than inaction as a dishonoring choice, prioritizing the concerns of aging faculty who have served for decades would be a better university investment (Kaskie et al., 2017).

Craigsmiles et al. (2014) listed the various responsibilities, compensations, and benefits that can be considered in phased retirement to reach a positive solution for faculty and institution. These areas include responsibilities of a faculty member (teaching, availability and office hours, institutional committees and faculty meetings, and honorary events), and faculty benefits (compensation, professional funds and sabbaticals, health care and primary benefits, perks and soft benefits). Some of the ways to honor aging faculty include: listen to the faculty as to what issues are most important to them (since what may seem minor to administrators may be of principle concern for a faculty member, and what might not be on the faculty member's mind beyond teaching load and salary might be missed—tax implications, office space, and community engagement), make expectations clear for this phase of employment in the faculty handbook, provide clarity in advance concerning eligibility for phased retirement options to allow for financial planning for the faculty member, provide options for phased retirement such as teaching flexibility, freeing up from administrative responsibilities, mentoring younger faculty, etc. Craigsmiles et al. (2014, pp. 71–71) stressed that institutions can gain by retaining senior faculty who have served well: (1) faculty with whom students are eager to study, (2) faculty who have wisdom and insight that cannot be readily gained from newly hired faculty, and (3) faculty whom alumni wish to renew relationships with, resulting in continued alumni support for the university.

The above strategies counter an approach of forcible retirement of a productive faculty member. But this does not mean that the organization is responsible for rescuing an individual from lack of planning. In this regard, an institution could honor faculty by making available to the faculty quality retirement planning services, such as financial planning and elderly health care planning. The university could also increase matching funds by a certain percentage after a certain time period of employment, such as 10 years and again after 15 years, etc.

CONCLUSION

A biblical perspective concerning aging faculty with respect to "work" provides guiding principles for faculty and administration in taking a work-to-end approach. Both the Old and New Testaments see "work" as a gift that brings about struggle, joy, and fulfillment in a manner that glorifies God. The Bible does not mention "retirement" and instead seems to maintain the view that persons work as long as they are productive in a way that pleases God. Since the Bible advocates a life of service to God, the university can honor God by honoring faithful faculty. While the university is not a benevolence ministry nor responsible for the individual's decisions, it is in the best interest of the university to cooperatively plan and to reward faithful and productive faculty with opportunities to work as long as faculty contribute and produce in line with the institution's mission and goals rather than according to a fixed age. According to current research, most universities lack the intentional framework and trained personnel to develop a culture to steward senior faculty well. But universities would benefit by prioritizing the honoring of venerable faculty by implementing practical strategies in a work-to-end approach—such as phased retirement options, clear written policies, trained human resource staff, and meaningful accommodations—that together reflect a deeper institutional commitment to stewarding those who have given their careers in faithful service to God and the academic community.

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