

Editorial

THE AGE OF WISDOM

It is surprising to consider some medical statistics. About the end of the Second World War, the average life expectancy in America was sixty-three. Not much time for the average person to gain wisdom or exhaust the Social Security fund. In 1970, just a generation ago, average longevity in the United States was 73 years for women, 72 for men, a gain of 10 years. Now, it is at 79 for women and 78 for men; another gain, and still climbing.

Some civilizations have revered age and the wisdom of age, as we have not. It was a statute among the ancient Jews: “You shall rise before the gray headed and honor the presence of an old man” (Lev. 19: 32). In Chinese culture respect for age, which must have had its origins in the Ancient Church, was carried to an extreme as it degenerated into ancestor worship. A couple of millennia ago, the Roman Senate, a body of councilors whose very name is derived from a word meaning “the old men,” led that Republic to its heights.

But in our time it is not usually an honor to be old. This is a sad commentary on modern life. While it is true that medical science has learned to keep the elderly alive longer, and society has provided means whereby the aged are protected from physical want, appreciation for the deeper values of old age has declined. Who wants to be old?

This is confirmed by increasing emphasis on the youth culture. People in later years seem to be occupied mostly with efforts to stave off the inevitable inroads of old age.

Certainly, there is nothing wrong with maintaining our good health or enjoying a vigorous life at any age. But so far as we set our hearts only on the things of youth we are misled by the world. We lose sight of the values and uses of age and deprive ourselves of the unique benefits that come from our contact with

older people. The important uses of old age should be embraced rather than down-played.

“What,” we may ask, “is the use of old age?” The so-called “golden years” often are filled with “labor and sorrow.” As we advance into our eighties or nineties we may secretly pray to the Lord in the words of the 71st Psalm: “Do not cast me off in the time of old age; do not forsake me when my strength fails.”

The Lord hears. He does not forsake us in our old age. In fact, even though we may decline in body or mind, the Lord uses this period of life, even as He uses every period of life, to further the development of our spirit in preparation for the life to come, “a person’s spirit,” we are told, “being perfected by age as his bodily powers diminish” (*Arcana Coelestia* 4676).

What makes old age unique in human development? It is a time in our life for the development of wisdom and a state of innocence in wisdom. The Writings teach that from the age of sixty and beyond a person who seeks to follow the Lord enters a new state of willingness to be led and may gain a beautiful humility and trust.

Mere passage of years does not guarantee wisdom. We must strive for it. When properly sought, the state of old age is a state of wisdom. The Writings describe this as a state in which we are “no longer concerned about *understanding* truths and goods, but about *willing and living* them, for this is to be wise” (*Arcana Coelestia* 10225 emphasis added). The good of life takes on a new importance.

From the spiritual point of view, then, old age is not a decline but a culmination or completion of development. In spirit, we are never “past our prime,” but always approaching it. Old age puts the finishing touches on our life. The Lord never “casts us off.”