

SOME REFLECTIONS ON RETIREMENT

Adjustments and Potentials

Geriatrics, the study of the aging process, is an area of inquiry which has received special attention lately, along with the kindred theme of Death and Dying. Whether this increased interest in the declining years of life is symptomatic of something significant I am not sure. It is, however, an awakened interest in a very common human experience, that of growing old. If a person lives long enough he will eventually grow old, and age, like every other phase of living, has its own adjustments to make and its potentials to realize.

Growing older ourselves (my wife and I) and realizing a while ago that some changes in activities and in life-style would be necessary in the near future, we took some steps which seemed to be right for us at the time. I had been in the EFC ministry for a half century. They have all been good years giving us a large reservoir of memories and a host of friends. It has been one of the comforts of these days to look backward over a life time invested in the Lord's service.

The symptoms which spurred us to action are so well known: the persistent weariness which afflicts not only the body but the spirit as well, the slow deflation of youthful enthusiasms, the awareness that not all of one's youthful dreams will be realized, the fading of the fascination with earthly things and place, the feeling of loss as old friends leave, a strange longing for love and understanding, and the consciousness that the pace of life was slowing down and a certain sense of relief that it was so.

The above symptoms, and some others, were beginning to show like the red blotches of a good case of measles. It seemed the time was approaching when we should seek a more permanently rooted place for ourselves. So we are now most comfortably at home in a lovely townhouse purchased in quiet Oakdale, Minnesota, a suburb of St. Paul.

We did not think of this step as a retirement in the usual meaning of that word. It was so announced by some, however, even to a note in the BEACON. Who ever likes to admit they have reached retirement age? We thought of ourselves as leaving one area of service, confident that God would open another to us. It has been so. We have been happily engaged this past year in serving two of our EF Churches who have been awaiting the coming of their newly called pastors.

We do feel, however, that we are now living in a transition time, a sort of limbo, retired but not retired. Its a delightful experience in many ways, standing as it were on an eminence, looking both backward and forward. It is from this perspective that we record a few observations and insights on the general theme of retirement from the viewpoint of a pastor.

First of all we must mention the ever growing sense of restfulness which undergirds every hour of every day. It is a rest in God's faithfulness. Now, in a deeper sense than ever before, we are in His hands. God has guided and provided up until today. Surely He will do the same in the days to come. "As He has been He forever will be," and herein we rest.

There are certain things by which and for which men live, and without which life is boring and often meaningless. There is the necessity for achievement, to be engaged in something significantly worthwhile. Men labor, too, toward a sense of security, the feeling of having a place, of belonging, of being needed. One of the most urgent needs in life is the need to love and to be loved. These things seem temporarily lost at the time of retirement and some compensation must be found.

For a pastor this period of life is exceedingly trying. Congregations may not always realize how much their pastor is dependant upon them for his emotional support. Where this is withheld or stintingly given the pastor and his family will often suffer from loneliness and depression, a condition which by the way is not limited to this relationship of pastor and people alone.

At retirement when a pastor suddenly finds himself bereft for the first time in his ministry of a congregation, he often experiences a traumatic and indefinable emotional let-down. He no longer has a congregation. His place is gone. His status position has evaporated. He must adjust to this and find some other means of emotional support. If he is wise he will not seek to find this in pursuing human encounters alone. A sublimation must take place where he finds his help in the Lord, even as he himself has so often preached to others.

It can be generally said that the phenomenon of change is one which every person must continually adjust. The adjustment to change, however, is probably most difficult in the latter years of life. It is particularly so in this modern age. Never has change come with such speed and fury to every facet of life as it has in the last quarter century.

Life styles have changed and with them moral codes and behavior. New ideas and ideals need to be absorbed. The old does not always seem to be the best. There is an inevitability in change - one can never go back. In the life of the church, change is the order of the day. Church music is changing. Goals and priorities in church life are changing. The pastor's role in the church has changed. Methods and mechanics of church ministry and church government are changing. The content of sermons are not what they were and the theological emphases of the evangelical church is not what it was even a quarter century ago. This is not to say that all change is to be regretted. But it demands a heart searching adjustment on the part of the "older brethren" and an unusual degree of discernment and charity.

Changes in relationships require heroic efforts of adjustment at retirement time. Relationships to the family and within the family change. Sometimes these relationships blossom to be the boon and blessing of retirement years. Sometimes, sadly, they do not.

Relationships with other people will change. Old friends and colleagues will not always be there now. For the pastor, loss of place in church life and denominational activities means that one is no longer useful

to some and so one will be dropped and ignored. Growing old will in itself place a barrier in relationships, the oft referred to generation gap. Old people are not always appreciated. Loneliness and isolation seems to set in to be lived with the rest of the way in an ever-increasingly troublesome form. I shall never forget the lament of one of our older EFC leaders who said on more than one occasion: "Everyone seems to have dropped me. There is no place for me anymore".

Inner conflicts are a part of each stage of life, but seem most apparent in adolescence and in the latter years. They are particularly devastating in old age if they are not successfully resolved. A pastor friend who has since been called to higher service once commented to a friendly group: "I pray every day that the Lord will help me to grow old graciously". He recognized the temptations to self-pity, disillusionment, bitterness, and self-centeredness which afflicts so many at this time of life. This is the time in life when loss out-balances gain. Health and strength diminish. Old friends pass on. If there is not a growing sense of the reality and value of things spiritual and eternal, life is bleak indeed. Are not grand-children a divinely designed gift to enrich these interesting days?

Turning, however, to the positive side, and there is a positive side, there is so much in this time of life which can make it the most exciting of all the days of our years. There is first the matter of time. Not being constantly pressed by the busyness of an active life, one has for the first time in many years time to do things so long left undone. There will be time to read the many books which have been left unread for lack of time. Now is the opportunity to grapple with and wrestle thru to some acceptable conclusions the theological and philosophical problems which have so long challenged us. There is time now to adequately ponder and absorb that book in the Bible which has been the source of so much spiritual inspiration to us but which we never really plumbed to its depths.

Now, too, is the time to do some writing, even time to finish that book we dreamed of doing awhile back. Developing a significant correspondence is now a possibility. It can become a most fruitful ministry. There is time now to find that peace and inner rest which has eluded to many thru the years,

even ministers of the Gospel. This is the time, if ever it is to be done, to really come to know ourselves. Now there is no longer a need for subterfuge. Now is the time to honestly face ourselves. Now is the time to draw near to God, nearer than ever before. It is the time for earnest spiritual endeavor.

Do we wonder as pastors if we can truly retire? Were not the commitments of earlier years for a life time? Are not the gifts and calling of God without repentance? Then God, who once called and who, as far as can be seen, has not re-called, will open up new avenues of life to us we never before dreamed of. New ministries will open up for which there was neither time nor opportunity nor inclination. Interim ministries may call us. There can be visitation ministries, so much needed and so much appreciated, ministries to the ill and the infirm, in rest homes and elsewhere to people neglected and often forgotten. If there is a heart for people in need, it is not hard to find the people.

So many times what is lost in retirement is recovered in a new beginning. A "place" is again found. Love is rediscovered in most unlikely places. Blessings come as blessings are given. Once again the urge to achieve, the necessity to live with purpose is recovered in a new direction of fulfilling service.

The latter days of life are quite as much a part of God's plan for us as were the days of achievement and accomplishment. It is helpful to know that His will includes these years as it has all the previous ones. For the encouragement of all we quote the following verses from the 92nd Psalm (vs 12-15, NEB):

The righteous flourish like a palm-tree,
they grow tall as a cedar on Lebanon;
Planted as they are in the house of the Lord,
they flourish in the courts of our Lord
vigorous in old age like trees full of sap,
luxuriant, wide-spreading,
eager to declare that the Lord is just,
The Lord my rock, in whom there is no unrighteousness.