

How Can Young Leaders Emerge if Old Leaders Stay in Power?

President Joe Biden is facing the biggest challenge of his 54 years in government. After his disastrous debate performance on June 27, some members of his own party went into panic mode. They realized that the 81-year-old politician may not have the physical stamina or the mental acuity to lead the United States for four more years.

But Biden isn't ready to retire. After the debate fiasco, Biden went into damage-control mode during a July 5 interview with ABC's George Stephanopoulos, saying he is sharp and agile. "Can I run the 100 in 10 flat? No," Biden said. "But I'm still in good shape."

When I travel overseas, I'm often asked, "Why are America's leaders so old?" It's an honest question. If Biden wins in November, he'd be 86 if he stays in office for a second term. Former President Trump, who is 78 now, would be 82 at the end of a second term. Ronald Reagan was 69 when he was elected and 77 when he left the White House.

I'll let the pundits argue about whether presidents should be octogenarians. But this issue has huge implications for the church too. Everywhere I go I notice that we have what I call a "succession crisis." Leaders are getting older and feebler, and young leaders aren't always being trained to fill their shoes.

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This will not end well if something doesn't change. We need three huge paradigm shifts:

– We must shift from a professional clergy culture to a

discipleship culture. In the New Testament church, Paul trained Timothy, Peter trained Mark and all believers in Christ invested their lives in younger people. That is normal Christianity. But many American churches are graying, and older Christians have no interest in fathering or mothering younger believers.

We have also made the mistake of segmenting generations. Teenagers meet in one room, adults meet in another room and interaction is rare. Paul might never have met Timothy if the church in Lystra had that arrangement. As it turned out, Timothy heard Paul preach, and they began a father-son relationship that changed the world.

God's plan was for Elijah to throw his mantle on Elisha. But some older leaders today are hoarding their mantles; they are too insecure to empower younger sons and daughters. We are afraid they might steal the spotlight—without realizing that we were never supposed to be in the spotlight to begin with. So what if a younger leader surpasses his mentor? That should be my goal when I mentor someone half my age.

– We must stop keeping succession in the family. In many denominations, pastors have developed the strange idea that their replacements should be family members. With this mindset, a leader pressures his son or daughter to take his pulpit, and more often than not this triggers a train wreck. God does not create or endorse dynasties or royal families.

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This is not to say that the son or daughter of a pastor can't be the successor of a ministry, but it is not the norm and it should never be forced. The idea that a church is a family business is unbiblical and dishonest, and it produces the rotten fruit of nepotism. Timothy was Paul's spiritual son and

successor, but they were not relatives. Succession is a process that must be guided by prayer and the Holy Spirit, not determined by politics, favoritism, money or family ties.

– **Generations should work as a team.** Priests in ancient Israel didn't stay in power perpetually. Numbers 8:25 (NIV) says of the Levites: "At the age of fifty, they must retire from their regular service and work no longer." Some scholars believe this rule was made because older men didn't have the physical strength to move the tabernacle and its heavy furnishings through the wilderness. The older men still served as consultants and mentors, but they took a back seat and allowed the younger leaders to do the heavy lifting.

In our culture today it's rare to see an older leader acknowledge his limitations and hand over the reins of power. I've even heard elderly ministers brag that they plan to "die in the pulpit," as if we all want to watch such a traumatic scenario unfold on a Sunday morning. No thanks! I don't want to watch anyone have a heart attack while preaching! I would rather watch that gray-haired leader humbly lay hands on the younger person he trained to take his place.

I have a birthday this week, and it's a reminder that I'm not young anymore. I'm not retiring—I will keep writing, teaching, prophesying and going on mission trips as long as I have the strength. But the most valuable thing I can do at this stage in my life is encourage the Timothys who are coming up behind me. Instead of competing with them, I will hand them the baton and cheer for them as they run past me.

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