Inspiring Intergenerational Relationships: Aging and the New Testament from One Historian’s Perspective

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Abstract: The Christian New Testament contains surprisingly few references to age and aging, and what readers do encounter is usually read through the lens of their own experiences and assumptions about age. In this article, I approach the New Testament from my vantage point as a historian of early Christianity to glean meaning relevant for aging and intergenerational relationships today by engaging a contextual approach to the reader and the text. I begin with a sketch of the diversity of attitudes and approaches among people who may have interest in finding meaning in the Bible as they age and among caregivers who want to nurture meaning as they care for older family members or clients. I then consider older age in the New Testament, noting that we find relatively few older individuals or inspiration for aging in the texts of the New Testament. However, focusing on one text in particular (1 Timothy) through a lens of storytelling, I argue that a historically and culturally sensitive reading of the biblical text in its own context opens new possibilities for finding meaning related to aging. Namely, I reflect on the value of three relational aspects of intergenerational interaction that may inspire such relationships today: (1) the power and wisdom of storytelling, (2) the importance of fictive kin, namely surrogate grandparents, parents, children and grandchildren and (3) the value of legacy, which includes instilling and transmitting inherited traditions.

Keywords: aging; sacred texts; hermeneutics; meaning-making; New Testament; First Timothy; storytelling

1. Introduction

It is perhaps strange to have a historian of early Christianity add a voice to contemporary experiences of aging. I am not a practitioner, nor do I work primarily with qualitative research. I am trained in religious studies, engaging in textual research with questions about age and aging in the first and second centuries within the ancient Mediterranean. However, these historical interests inevitably prompt me to think about age and aging in the twenty-first century and about what, if any, meaning might be derived for or about aging in early Christian texts, particularly in the New Testament. The Christian Bible has a complex history of interpretation, including inspiration and consolation for many generations of Christ followers, but also connections to the legacies of colonialism and harmful applications for people who have been marginalized. Thus, I begin with contextualizing the Bible within contemporary multicultural and multi-faith realities to highlight the importance of the identity and lens of the reader(s) of the text. My own lens places my historical and contextual reading within a paradigm that questions harmful hierarchies and values meaningful relationships.

Though I began my doctoral work looking at older age within the cultural and historical context of the first Jesus followers and early Christians, I soon realized that to understand older age in that context, I needed to understand age structure—how people understood aging and age-related roles—in the ancient Mediterranean world. The two most striking aspects about the ancient Mediterranean experience of the life course are related to younger children and older adults. There was a very high rate of death in infancy.
and childhood; more than one-third of children died before they reached the age of five (Parkin 2011, p. 185). With regard to older age, without modern medical interventions for disease and infection, only about 5–10% ten percent of the population was over sixty (Parkin 2003, pp. 49–50, 224). This reality starkly contrasts the experience of most Canadians today (my own context), where there is about a 0.5% chance of death in children under five, mostly attributed to infant mortality (under one year old), which is 0.45% (calculated on the basis of 2016 data; Figure 7 in Shumanty 2018). Adults over sixty currently make up 26% of the population (calculated on the basis of 2021 census data; Statistics Canada 2021).

These demographic realities are, however, not readily evident in the New Testament texts, nor are there very many texts that mention age at all. Thus, modern readers generally tend to substitute their own assumptions about age into their reading. One might wonder what can be gleaned, let alone found to be meaningful, about age in the New Testament. My goal is to find meaning through a careful examination of first century historical and cultural aspects of one particular text, namely a letter ostensibly written from Paul to Timothy known as 1 Timothy. More specifically, I examine aspects of intergenerational relationships that relate to and may be inspiring for modern experiences of aging.

First Timothy has the richest age-related material in the New Testament; however, it is a text that is perplexing at best and often seen as out of sync with modern sensibilities, particularly with respect to its directives to keep women quiet and performing domestic duties as wives (2:11–15, 5:14). As a historian, my task is to dig deeply into a historically and culturally sensitive reading of the biblical text in its own context in order to open new possibilities for finding meaning. It is in this depth that I seek to find meaning relevant for aging within a contemporary context, recognizing that readers—including older adults and caregivers—come to the text with their own experiences, backgrounds and worldviews. Derived from a contextualized reading of 1 Timothy, I reflect on the value of three relational aspects of intergenerational interactions that may inspire such relationships today: (1) the power and wisdom of storytelling, (2) the importance of fictive kin, namely surrogate grandparents, parents, children and grandchildren and (3) the value of legacy, which includes instilling and transmitting inherited traditions.

2. The Contexts of Contemporary Readers

This article was inspired in part by my involvement on Jane Kuepfer’s doctoral committee as she explored spiritual resources for Baby Boomers as they age. Kuepfer’s research suggests that when it comes to meaning-making, Baby Boomers have a diversity of approaches and interests (Kuepfer 2020). It is with such diversity in mind that I hope this study on the New Testament and aging will be of interest. Though my research focuses on the context of the text, I have come to realize the importance of the identity of the reader themselves in the task of interpretation. Meaning is derived not just from reading or hearing the text, but from the reader’s experiences, identity, as well as present and past influences. What the reader or hearer brings to the text, individually and in community, affects their interpretation as much as the words themselves do (see Medina et al. 2019).

I envision three broadly defined audiences who may find this article of interest: (1) those who regard the Bible as a meaningful sacred text and desire more guidance in finding meaning in the Bible; (2) those who have previously had little interest in or rejected Christianity earlier in life, but are renewing an interest in Christian faith and/or the Bible; and (3) caregivers who provide comfort and meaning as they work with clients, patients, residents, parishioners or family members who value the Christian Bible or are curious about what it may have to offer. I want to recognize that among these groups, there are those who hold the Bible dear, but also those who have rejected the Bible as a tool of oppression and others who have an ambivalent or indifferent attitude toward the Bible. And some experience a bit of each of these at the same time, as I have seen with many of my graduate students.

The legacy of colonialism complicates this picture. For example, in a Canadian context, Christianity has influenced the structure of civic life, such as holidays (e.g., Christmas and
Easter holidays; Sundays as a typical day for closing businesses), the legal system and the education system. Christian institutions (church and government) are at the root of the colonial legacy of residential schools and other forms of oppression, cultural genocide and attempted genocide of Indigenous peoples. Slavery of African peoples was justified in the Americas in part through Christian interpretations of the Bible, and the legacy of white authoritarianism continues (see Parker 2021). The continuing mistreatment and misunderstanding of members of 2SLGBTQ+ communities is often justified by unfounded and unfair interpretations of biblical texts (see Keesmat and Walsh 2019, pp. 321–63). The legacy of anti-Jewish sentiment among Christian majorities over the centuries, but beginning with an uninformed reading of the New Testament, have contributed to anti-Semitic attitudes and behaviors (see Fredriksen and Reinhartz 2002). Many have justifiably questioned the role of the Bible in oppression, both past and present. Still, others recognize and denounce the harm, but have also found hope and guidance toward reconciliation and healing as they read the Bible.

I want to acknowledge that Christianity is one of many faith traditions and expressions of spirituality, each with their own central focus, some with a sacred text, others with sacred stories, ritual, ceremony or other practices. What applies to Christianity may or may not apply to other traditions, rooted in other ways of being and engaging the divine and one another. It would be inappropriate to expect that sacred texts in all religious traditions could be read and understood in a monolithic way, through one particular lens, because texts are incorporated and understood within the context of each tradition and there are variations, of course, within regions, ethnic groups and sects. In some faith traditions, sacred texts provide a central source of meaning and inspiration, but each is read and understood within a particular framework of that tradition. The Qur’an, for example, is understood within Islam as the direct words of God given to humanity through the Prophet Mohammed. The Qur’an is interpreted alongside Hadith, which are stories and sayings of the Prophet and his closest family members and followers. Which Hadith are authoritative differs according to which branch of Islam one belongs to. In Judaism, the Tanakh is the central sacred text, the same set of texts, though in different order, found in the Christian so-called “Old Testament,” and the Bible known to Jesus and the earliest Christians. As a shared text, I refer to it as the Hebrew Scriptures. Whereas Christians read the Hebrew Scriptures through a lens of the New Testament and the fulfillment of God’s plan through Jesus, Jews study the Hebrew Scriptures through centuries of rabbinical teaching, Talmud and Midrash. Other traditions, like Buddhism and Hinduism, have central stories, often told within ritual and spiritual teaching (like the life of the Buddha or the Ramayana, an epic tale of Rama and his wife Sita). Though these stories have written forms, the written versions are not authoritative in the way that the Bible, Tanakh or Qur’an are in their respective traditions. Indigenous traditions of Turtle Island give central place to ceremony, prayer and elders, including honoring stories and the art of storytelling, especially of the elders. The list could go on, but this provides some range in the variety of how texts—and stories—differ radically from tradition to tradition (Bowker 2011; Coward 1998).

There are many expressions of Christianity, and yet the set of texts within the Christian Bible is more or less consistent (issues of translation aside). That is, the Christian Bible, comprised of the Hebrew Scriptures (the so-called “Old” Testament or First Testament) and the New Testament, is the commonly agreed upon canon, and it is present, to a greater or lesser extent, in Christian religious practices, rituals, and expressions of belief. It basically took shape as it is today around the fourth century of the Common Era so that Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant churches agree on its contents, though the Orthodox and Catholic traditions add a set of secondary (Deuterocanonical) texts placed between the two testaments.

However, readers and their communities differ greatly with regard to how they engage with and interpret the text. This includes denominational affiliation and one’s acceptance or critique of a denominational lens—of social justice, or evangelism or personal morality, for example. This also includes cultural and ethnic identity and expressions of Christian faith.
that vary widely around the world—including recognizing that white, European identities are one among many expressions around the globe. Ukrainian Orthodox perspectives are quite different from Anglo Canadian United Church perspectives, or Latin American, Korean or Indian Christian perspectives of various denominations. Indigenous persons who identify as Christians or followers of Jesus live out their faith through their Indigenous world views (Charleston 2015), as the newly published First Nations Version: An Indigenous Translation of the New Testament (2021) attests. As one of my students, Sophia Sharara, recently pointed out, a person from a South African Christian tradition sees things radically differently from someone in a West African Christian tradition.

Some traditions make the Bible central in their understanding of their faith, and others consider it one of several central elements of the faith. Some take a very literal stance on how they read it, and others focus on principles or allegory. Christians may encounter the Bible primarily within community settings, with the biblical text woven into various communal expressions of worship, liturgies, rituals (such as communion or Eucharist) and storytelling. Others may focus on personal devotion and study of the Bible. Early Christian historians, too, have lenses through which they view the ancient data. Mine is as a white, Ukrainian-Anglo mixed, straight, cisgender woman, with Protestant Christian upbringing.

Complexities abound, but I sketch all this out to say that how one reads the Bible depends on the experience, influences and identity of that reader. I hope that these complexities prompt us to be curious and respectful, acknowledging that each perspective is one of many and that perspectives can shift over time.

For older people inspired by or curious about the Christian Bible—who want to find meaning in this text as they age—how they view the Bible will depend on their earlier experiences and faith development. Caregivers and practitioners have their own experiences with and biases toward the biblical text. How might the Bible be useful and meaningful to those who wish to engage with it? What kinds of texts might bring meaning? And how might we approach the text to help address matters of aging and spirituality? There is a kaleidoscope of possibilities.

3. Older Age in the Christian Bible

In the New Testament, older age—and age in general—is mentioned very little, even though age was a crucial part of social identity in the ancient Mediterranean (LaFosse Forthcoming). It seems that most of the characters in the New Testament are simply adults who are either younger or seemingly ageless (or perhaps not particularly young or particularly old). We have no idea how old the twelve disciples or Mary Magdalene were, for example.

By contrast, in the Hebrew Scriptures, there are many stories of people who grow old and sentiments of older age. There are the extraordinary ages of the ancestors of Noah, like Enoch, who lived to the age of three hundred sixty five before he “walked with God” (that is, he did not die; Genesis 5:23–24) and Enoch’s son Methuselah, the longest living person on the list, who is recorded as having died at nine hundred sixty-nine years old (5:27). Abraham was said to be one hundred years old and Sarah ninety when she conceived Isaac (17:17, 19:11–12, 21:2). The story of Moses states he died at the age of one hundred twenty in apparently excellent health: “his sight was unimpaired and his vigor had not abated” (Deuteronomy 34:17). King David ruled until he was old (1 Kings 1:1). There are many other older people mentioned as well as a plethora of references to aging. For example, the Wisdom Literature points out that older age brings wisdom (e.g., Proverbs 16:31, 20:19; Job 12:12; see also Sirach 25:3–6). Other texts advocate for respect for those who have attained older age (Leviticus 19:32), provide encouragement about growing older (Psalm 92:14), describe the blessing of growing older, like having grandchildren (Proverbs 17:6), or consider the hardships of aging (Psalm 71:9).

Among the comparatively few New Testament references, the author of the Gospel of Luke has a distinct interest in age. Elizabeth and Zechariah are both old (like Abraham
and Sarah, they are beyond childbearing years; Luke 1:7, 18) when Elizabeth conceives and gives birth to John (the Baptist). By contrast, Mary is clearly a young woman (1:27) who conceives and gives birth to Jesus. Jesus is blessed in the Temple by an old widow, Anna, who was at least eighty-four (2:36–38). Luke is the only gospel to include a story about Jesus at the age of twelve (2:42) and to declare that Jesus “was about thirty” when he began his ministry (3:23). There is no indication of Jesus’ age elsewhere in the canonical gospels, except for the quip that Jesus is “not yet fifty” in John 8:57.

Elsewhere, there is mention of “elders” (older men who hold some level of authority on the basis of their age; Campbell 1997) and widows. Jewish elders are found in the gospels (e.g., Mark 7:3, 8:31) and Acts (e.g., 4:8, 23). Christ-followers who were elders authored letters (2 John 1; 3 John 1), advised other elders (1 Peter 5:1–4) and shepherded the community (Titus 1:5, 2:2; 1 Timothy 5:17–18). Twenty-four elders are featured in the vision of the throne room in Revelation (4:4). Widows are usually older women (1 Timothy 5:3, 5, 9, 16), as younger widows would typically remarry (5:14). Younger people are exhorted to respect their elders (1 Peter 5:5), both men and women (1 Timothy 5:1–2), and older women are expected to teach younger women (Titus 2:3–5).

Even within this summary, we can begin to see the importance of intergenerational relationships, with an emphasis on older and younger community members (see also Balla 2003; Barclay 2007; Welborn 2018).

4. Lessons on Aging from a Contextual Reading of 1 Timothy

For the remainder of this article, I would like to focus on one letter attributed to Paul that has some focus on age, namely 1 Timothy. However, apprehending this letter requires some background work. The letters attributed to Paul make up perhaps a quarter of the New Testament. Scholars split the letters into two categories: disputed and undisputed. Seven letters were almost certainly written by Paul, namely Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians and Philemon. Interestingly, the undisputed letters have little explicit reference to age at all. The only clear instance is when Paul refers to himself as an “old man” in Philemon 9, which is used rhetorically and culturally to persuade the recipient of the letter to heed Paul’s request.

For the remaining six letters (Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus), scholars debate the authorship on the basis of language, style, theology and social setting. These letters, often thought to have been written after Paul’s death, have more age-related references than the undisputed ones. For example, Ephesians 6:1–4 and Colossians 3:20–21 address intergenerational relationships found in the household, namely fathers (parents) and children. The richest references to age, however, are found in 1 Timothy (especially 1 Timothy 5) as well as Titus 1–2. However, these references are rather enigmatic. In addition, these letters are rife with what many today consider hierarchical and sexist language and directives, so many modern readers focus on select verses and ignore the rest.

By focusing on the letter of 1 Timothy, I endeavor to offer some strategies on reading this letter in context in order to derive meaning beyond a literal or surface reading, especially meaning related to aging through the ideas of storytelling, fictive kin and legacy.

4.1. Storytelling

From the first few lines, we see that this letter itself is centered in an intergenerational relationship between an older Paul and a younger Timothy. Paul addresses the letter to Timothy as his “loyal child in the faith” (1:1). We can surmise from elsewhere that Timothy is not likely to be Paul’s legal or biological child (Philippians 2:22, Acts 16:1). Rather, this is a term of endearment that frames the letter so that we, as readers, are eavesdropping on a fictional conversation between a mentor and his protégé, a conversation in which Paul offers advice and directives in the face of major challenges in Timothy’s community.

If indeed someone wrote this letter in Paul’s name some 40 to 50 years after Paul’s death (perhaps around 100 CE), it is curious that the writer would not address the community...
directly. Instead, he offers an intergenerational guide, in the guise of a letter between two well-known founders of the movement, to address conflict and strife in his community. He chose Paul because Paul was well-known and respected: Paul’s undisputed letters were copied and circulated widely and stories that were told about Paul became pivotal to the tradition (Acts 8:1–3, 9:1–30, 13:1–28:31; see also 1 Peter 3:16). Stories surrounding such pivotal figures mattered for the continuing identity of the group and Paul represented the wisdom of the elders and of the ancestors.

To help frame the rhetoric of the letter, then, I find it most helpful to think of it as a kind of story in which we hear one side of the dialogue between two characters (inspired by J. W. Marshall 2008). Most importantly, the older father figure is wise and the younger son figure is the model of deference (1 Timothy 1:2; 4:12, 14), even as he has his responsibilities in directing the community (4:11, 13, 15–16). In this way, the real, original audience of the letter “overheard” this dialogue and the directives, but would have seen their own situation reflected there (LaFosse Forthcoming).

All good stories have conflict, and this letter was clearly meant to address looming problems in the community. The author wanted his readers to understand the difference between his “healthy teaching” and the unsavory, and perhaps dangerous, teaching of others (1:3–11, 19–20; 4:1–3; 6:3–10, 20–21). In the rhetoric of the story, Paul says to Timothy, “I urge you, as I did when I was on my way to Macedonia, to remain in Ephesus so that you may instruct certain people not to teach any different [things], and not to occupy themselves with myths and endless genealogies that promote speculations rather than the divine training that is known by faith” (1:3–4). Interestingly, the opponents are characterized as promoting their views through the telling of stories (“myths”). Thus, this author uses the well-known, pivotal figure of Paul to bring voice to and promote his story, which directs the faithful Timothy and embodies the teaching that he hopes will be more powerful and influential than those of the opponents. He knows the power of stories to sway “those who hear” them (4:16; LaFosse 2018).

Although it is less obvious, the letter also reveals the power of women’s voices and stories. Unfortunately, since some women seem to be associated with the opposing teachers, the author advocates for shutting down their voices and dissuading the audience from listening to them. Timothy is to avoid “old wives’ tales” (4:7), and women are to “learn in silence with full submission” (2:11), behaving modestly, not teaching or exercising authority over men (2:8–15). Although this story does not start with the words “a long time ago in a land far, far away,” such a sentiment might be helpful because these words highlight a cultural and historical gap between many modern readers and the characters of this story. I want to recognize that these directives about women have been and continued to be used in a literal sense in some Christian communities, but the framework of a story helps us to see that there are other ways to read the text.

Given the cultural context of this story, the major issue was actually one of reputation. In the patriarchal cultural context of the ancient Mediterranean, women embodied the honor of their families and communities. Ideally, they behaved modestly with self-control and proper deference, but if they were perceived as behaving out of place in some way, this reflected not only on themselves, but on their whole community. There is great, albeit passive, or “illegitimate” power (we might consider it a kind of indirect power) in this embodiment of the community’s honor (MacDonald 1996, pp. 144–54). The reputation of the community was in question, so the author felt he needed to address how women were behaving. Women’s behaviour is mentioned elsewhere, such as younger widows who were “gadding about from household to household”—a major issue for reputation (5:13). The key statement of the whole letter points to the centrality of behavior and the reputation of the community. The story is framed as one in which Paul is hoping to visit Timothy soon but if his visit is delayed, he writes so that Timothy “may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth” (3:15, emphasis added).
Reputation was also embodied in the behavior of younger people, both men and women. If younger people were rebellious, this reflected badly on their parents and the community as a whole. This is evident in 1 Timothy. Leaders needed to have submissive children (3:4–5, 12). Children and grandchildren not caring for their elderly widowed mothers and grandmothers was poor behavior indeed—behavior that is worse than an unbeliever (5:4, 8). Older men and women were to be treated with the respect a younger person would give to fathers and mothers (5:1–2). Older widows with no family to care for them were to be honored (5:3) and cared for by the community (5:16). And Timothy was the epitome of a deferential younger man. He does all the right things: he submits to the laying of hands of the elders for his calling (4:14) and he is an exemplary role model (4:6–16; see also LaFosse Forthcoming).

By framing these letters as part of a larger story and adding cultural context, I hope to highlight the power of the story and of storytelling, but also the adaptability of stories for present concerns. Stories from the past are valuable, including stories from the Bible and stories from older people. In a fast-paced world of change today, older people have wisdom. They may not have seen the kinds of technological changes of younger generations in their youth, but they have lived through profound changes in their own time, well-equipped to think about change and what really matters over time: in relationship, in lifestyle choices and in spiritual matters. Their wisdom may be most potent in the form of stories—stories about where they grew up, how they conformed or rebelled, what they experienced, when they learned life lessons and how they and others around them changed (or stayed the same) over time.

4.2. Fictive Kinship

The second concept I wish to highlight is the importance and function of fictive kin, that is, the substitution of otherwise unrelated people for familial roles. Paul’s address to Timothy as a “loyal child in the faith” (1:1) as well as the designation of the community as a “household of God” (3:15) makes clear that the community is meant to serve as a chosen family, one that functions like family. Timothy is entrusted with solving the issues in this community while respecting the age hierarchy akin to a household. He is told: “Do not jab at an older man but make peace with him as a father, young men as brothers, older women as mothers, young women as sisters, in all purity” (1 Tim 5:1–2, my translation; see also LaFosse Forthcoming).

This is more than a nice sentiment. In the ancient Mediterranean, life expectancy at birth was 20–30 years (Saller 1994, p. 20; Parkin 1992, p. 84; Scheidel 2001, pp. 20–25), perhaps closer to 30 (Woods 2007, p. 34), but certainly much lower than in Canada today where life expectancy at birth is just shy of 82 years (Statistics Canada 2018). Ancient Mediterranean people did not expect to die at 25 or 30 years old (Saller 1994, p. 12) and, as mentioned earlier, this average reflects a high infant mortality rate. If someone reached the age of 15, they had about a one in three chance of reaching age 60, which, in the ancient Mediterranean, was the age at which life expectancy dropped substantially due to old age (Parkin 2003, p. 292). Demographic data suggests that nearly half of young adults lost one or both parents by the time they were in their twenties, more often their fathers than their mothers (Saller 1994). The need for others to fulfill roles of kin was great.

The story of Paul and Timothy hints at families with living kin: a man aspiring to be an overseer should be married to one wife (3:2) with obedient children (3:4–5), and deacons likewise should be married (3:12). Their wives may have had some level of authority (3:11; the word here could refer to wives or to women as female deacons and the latter would not necessarily be married to male deacons). As mentioned above, some older widows had children and grandchildren to care for them (5:4). But there are also suggestions that some older widows were too old to remarry and had no family (5:5), namely the “real widows” whom Timothy was told to honor (5:3). They had no husband, no grown children and, assumedly, no kin. The church community would take care of them (5:16). The community
would get through this crisis if they could relate to one another like a “household of God,”
that is, like a family.

Though modern readers may not have the same prescribed gender and age-related roles as in the ancient Mediterranean, the story of 1 Timothy may help us to recognize the importance and function of age-related roles in the family and community. Age-related roles contribute to relational predictability and stability. Churches, friends and neighbors involved with multigenerational engagement can provide valuable connections between different age groups. Today, adult children often live away from aging parents. Older adults may benefit from government financial assistance (which was non-existent in the ancient Mediterranean), but relationships with younger generations is where they can still find social and emotion connections, i.e., through surrogate children and grandchildren. Sometimes these are organic relationships, like with neighbors or family friends, but there is also room for seeking out and cultivating such relationships.

4.3. Legacy

Finally, the story of Timothy is one of intergenerational legacy. Within the story, Timothy is meant to inherit the healthy teaching of Paul, continuing “the faith,” valuing the past and moving it forward and guarding it as a trust even in the face of opposition: “Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you. Avoid the profane chatter and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge; by professing it some have missed the mark as regards the faith” (6:20–21). Here again, we see that the story is about conflict within the community but framed in such a way that the intergenerational trust between Paul and Timothy is understood as the solid foundation for emerging from the crisis. As a text using the authoritative voice of Paul and his legendary relationship to Timothy to address an audience after Paul’s death, the letter itself points to the importance of legacy. The memory of Paul and Timothy is meant to influence the later audience, but also to inspire them.

Many of us may think of legacy or inheritance in financial terms, but there is room to consider legacy in more relational and spiritual ways, transmitting and entrusting to the next generation that which is important to carry into future generations, such as family stories (and secrets), culturally significant rituals, memories, apologies and reconciliation. There may be parts of family legacy to embrace, parts to examine and parts to shift or discontinue. It may be helpful to frame such intergenerational discussions as part of inheritance or legacy.

5. Conclusions

The Christian Bible has a mixed legacy, bringing both hope and harm through the history of its interpretation to this day. Given this complex history, there are questions around whether the Christian Bible, and the New Testament in particular, has meaning for today, including around issues of age and aging. It has been my hope in this article to recognize the complexities of the legacy of biblical interpretation even as I have introduced strategies for different ways to derive meaning from the text. These strategies include: appreciating that it is one of many sacred texts and traditions, acknowledging the diversity of expressions of Christianity globally, recognizing that the reader always comes to the text with their own assumptions, lenses and identity, and finding value in engaging historical and cultural contexts of the text. As for issues of age and aging, the New Testament offers few direct references, but the explicit references tend to look toward intergenerational relationships. Here we find good possibilities for parallels between these texts written two thousand years ago and today.

Turning to the New Testament letter of 1 Timothy, ostensibly written from an older Paul to a younger Timothy, I sketched out how we might find meaning in a particularly problematic text, often dismissed for its patriarchal directives, like keeping women silent (2:12) and strictly in domestic roles (5:14). Despite the challenges, it provides some of the richest sentiments related to age. Through a paradigm of storytelling, I envision a scenario in which the author tells his story by providing one side of a dialogue between
two respected characters, Paul and Timothy. He writes the letter to deal with conflict in the community in a way that his hearers will be convinced of his point of view. This text is rather more hierarchical than my own cultural expression and experience, but it says something about the power and function of intergenerational roles in meaning-making, mentoring and relationship. By focusing especially on the letter’s reflection of intergenerational relationships within its own cultural context and by highlighting the importance and function of age-related roles within this community, I consider the value of three aspects of intergenerational relationships: wisdom disseminated through storytelling, gaps in relational needs met through fictive kinship and a view toward discerning familial legacy that is important to continue (or leave behind).

How to translate these ideas into spiritual or relational meaning, of course, will depend on the readers/hearers of this text today in their own contexts. Considering the historical and cultural context of the text allows for the possibility of seeing the story behind the text, considering the big picture (not just individual verses), having the courage to ask new or different questions of the text and, hopefully, discovering meaning in dialogue, within community and intergenerational relationships.

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**Notes**

1. All quotations from the Bible are from the New Revised Standard Version, unless otherwise indicated.

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