

# Aging

Christian Reflection

A SERIES IN FAITH AND ETHICS

BAYLOR  
UNIVERSITY

---

GENERAL EDITOR	Robert B. Kruschwitz
ASSOCIATE EDITOR	F. Matthew Schobert, Jr.
ART EDITOR	Heidi J. Hornik
PROCLAMATION EDITOR	Joy Jordan-Lake
REVIEW EDITOR	Norman Wirzba
WORSHIP EDITOR	Terry W. York
PRODUCTION ASSISTANT	Julie Bolin
DESIGNER	Eric Yarbrough
PUBLISHER	The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University PO Box 97361 Waco, TX 76798-7361
PHONE	(254) 710-3774
TOLL-FREE (USA)	(866) 298-2325
WEBSITE	<a href="http://www.ChristianEthics.ws">www.ChristianEthics.ws</a>
E-MAIL	<a href="mailto:Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu">Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu</a>

All Scripture is used by permission, all rights reserved, and unless otherwise indicated is from *New Revised Standard Version Bible*, copyright 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

---

ISSN 1535-8585

*Christian Reflection* is the ideal resource for discipleship training in the church. Multiple copies are obtainable for group study at \$2.50 per copy. Worship aids and lesson materials that enrich personal or group study are available free on the website.

*Christian Reflection* is published quarterly by The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. Contributors express their considered opinions in a responsible manner. The views expressed are not official views of The Center for Christian Ethics or of Baylor University.

The Center expresses its thanks to individuals, churches, and organizations, including the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, who provided financial support for this publication.

© 2003 The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University  
All rights reserved

# Contents

Introduction	6
Robert B. Kruschwitz	
Caring as Honoring	9
Anne E. Streaty Wimberly	
Aging from the Perspective of the Cross	18
Stephen Sapp	
When Suffering Continues	26
Robert V. Rakestraw	
Declining with Grace	36
Robert C. and Elizabeth V. Roberts	
God's Call in Later Life	43
Beth Jackson-Jordan	
The Gift of Years in Christian Art	48
Heidi J. Hornik	
<i>Godly Susan</i>	
Roger Medearis	
<i>Moses</i>	
Michelangelo Buonarotti	
<i>Presentation in the Temple</i>	
Ambrogio Lorenzetti	
Then Dawns the Light	55
Terry W. York and C. David Bolin	
Worship Service	58
David M. Bridges	
Aging with Hope and Wonder	65
Terry Thomas Primer	
Other Voices	70
What's Retirement For?	73
William L. Turner	

*continued*

---

Come, Let Us Worship	79
Terry W. York	
Caring for Aging Parents	83
Dennis R. Myers	
Spirituality of Aging	88
Mark A. Peters	
Advertisements	92
Editors	94
Contributors	96

# Additional Resources

These study guides are available by free download from our website [www.ChristianEthics.ws](http://www.ChristianEthics.ws). They integrate Bible study, prayer, worship, and reflection on themes in this issue.

## **CARING AS HONORING**

Congregations are “soul communities,” in which young and old are soul-mates bound together as an extended family of God. How can congregations assure that senior adults are cared for and honored as resourceful contributors to community life, wisdom-givers, exemplars of the faith, and worthy recipients of care?

## **WHEN SUFFERING CONTINUES**

As we or loved ones endure chronic illnesses we wonder, “Why do these long-term afflictions come to God’s people?” and “How should we pray for healing?” Often we struggle with the book of James’ teaching on health, healing, and faithful living in times of suffering.

## **DECLINING WITH GRACE**

When facing the losses of old age, some people “handle” the change from competency to dependency with serenity and composure, others with bitterness and disorientation. Gratitude and generosity—virtues that acknowledge we are not all strength and independence—prepare us for better adjustment in situations of loss.

## **AGING FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE CROSS**

The cross Jesus Christ bids his followers to take up includes the ordinary, everyday sufferings of human life—including those associated with aging—when they are borne as Jesus bore his sufferings.

## **“OLD AND FULL OF YEARS”**

If contemporary society is going to continue to keep people alive and at the same time tell them that they no longer serve any useful purpose, then dying “in a good old age, old and full of years,” in the biblical sense will be a thing of the past.

## **WHAT’S RETIREMENT FOR?**

Even though later years can burden us with serious illness of self or spouse, retirement may be our best chance to know ourselves and how we are shaped by our relationship to God, to use ministry gifts in new ways, and to discover new gifts and fresh energy.

# Introduction

BY ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ

Informed by our biblical heritage and a realistic look at aging, we can take seriously the losses that we suffer as we grow older. Yet we will continue to listen for God's call to contribute to the Kingdom, and enjoy "a good old age, old and full of years."

---

**B**aseball Hall of Famer turned American sage, Yogi Berra, once observed, "It ain't over 'til it's over." Yet, when "it" is our earthly lives, we are unsure how to apply the Yogi's insight. Many people in our culture encourage us to defend ourselves from aging. "Aging is inevitable," they admit, "but we needn't welcome it, or even try to understand and endure it patiently; instead, we can postpone, deny, and (above all) control it."

But how should Christians think about the coming of old age? If, with the Westminster Larger Catechism, we interpret all of our humanity through the belief that our "chief and highest end is to glorify God, and fully to enjoy him forever," how does our aging come into this view? Does it play a profound and mysterious role in our Christian calling?

Our contributors remind us that our congregations are called to be countercultural institutions, "soul communities" in which the young and old are soul-mates bound together as an extended family of God. They should assure that older adults are cared for and honored, Anne E. Streaty Wimberly observes in *Caring as Honoring* (p. 9), "as resourceful contributors to community life, wisdom givers, exemplars of faith, and worthy recipients of care."

Stephen Sapp, in "Aging from the Perspective of the Cross" (p. 18), develops a realistic approach to aging that takes seriously the problems of suffering which we experience as we grow older. "The discipleship of the cross," he writes, "recognizes that the cross Jesus Christ bids his followers

to take up includes the ordinary, everyday sufferings of human life—including those associated with aging—that are borne as Jesus bore his sufferings.”

Robert Rakestraw, who suffers from a degenerative heart condition, tackles the hard questions of all Christians afflicted with chronic illness: “Why do these long-term afflictions come to God’s people?” and “How should we pray for healing?” In *When Suffering Continues* (p. 26) he offers a wise interpretation, born of much intellectual and experiential struggling, of the book of James’ teaching on health, healing, and faithful living in times of suffering.

Gratitude and generosity—two virtues that acknowledge we are not all strength and independence, but also (and very basically) weakness and dependency—can prepare us to “handle” aging with serenity and composure, rather than bitterness and disorientation. “The practice of giving away, of seeing regularly beyond oneself to the needs and interests of others,” Robert and Elizabeth Roberts observe in *Declining with Grace* (p. 36), “is a kind of practicing-up for the inevitable losses that await us in old age.”

Terry York’s new hymn, *Then Dawns the Light* (p. 55), looks honestly at old age, yet also recognizes that “our aging is received as gift, our aging has a reason.” With the tune, KETY, composer David Bolin honors his Aunt Ida, a generous woman who always welcomed her nieces and nephews with hospitality; she died earlier this year at the age of 92.

*God’s Call in Later Life* (p. 43), by Beth Jackson-Jordan, begins our exploration of this reason and purpose that we can find in old age. “While the retirement industry aggressively markets retirement as a time of leisure and play,” she writes, “people of faith should consider how these years could be a time of spiritual growth and renewal—a time for ‘harvesting life.’” William Turner continues this theme, asking *What’s Retirement For?* (p. 73). “Retirement may be our best chance to know ourselves and how we are shaped by our relationship to God, to use ministry gifts in new ways, and to discover new gifts and fresh energy,” Turner suggests. “Even though later years can burden us with serious illness of self or spouse, retirement may be a wonderful season of grace to grow toward both the ‘being’ and the ‘doing’ of mature faith.”

The elderly are often wonderful resources for their families and younger generations, sharing wisdom and modeling faithfulness. Heidi Hornik reflects on this aspect of aging through the diverse artwork of Roger Medearis’ affectionate painting of his grandmother, *Godly Susan* (p. 48), Michelangelo’s famous sculpture of the powerful law-giver in *Moses* (p. 50), and Ambrogio Lorenzetti’s depiction of the prophets Simeon and Anna in *The Presentation of Jesus in the Temple* (p. 52).

“Since growing old is a profound part of our common human condition,” begins David Bridges in this issue’s service of corporate worship

(p. 58), “this service is deliberately very participatory for the congregation. It engages worshipers in symbolically enacting their realization of God’s timelessness and trust in God’s eternal love.” Bridges’ prayers and readings are also suitable for personal and study-group devotion. Many of his suggested hymns may be found in several hymnals. Paired with the worship service is Terry Thomas Primer’s joyful meditation, *Aging with Hope and Wonder* (p. 65), in which she retells the biblical story of Abraham and Sarah’s responding with hope to God’s wondrous calling to them in their later years.

We hope that you will be inspired by the psalmist’s vision, “Old and young together! Let them praise the name of the LORD” (Psalm 148:12-13), to strive for worship in which all ages help plan, lead, and participate in their coming together to adore God, encourage faithful discipleship, and nurture community. In *Come, Let Us Worship* (p. 79), worship editor Terry York points us to several helpful resources for establishing cross-generational worship in our congregations.

Dealing with the increasing dependency associated with aging is a struggle for the elderly and those who care for them. In our culture “the middle aged do not want the elderly to encumber them, and the elderly do not want to lapse into a burden,” William F. May has observed. In *Caring for Aging Parents* (p. 83), Dennis Myers reviews four books that help caregivers “compassionately embrace the independence of an older parent and simultaneously minimize the risks associated with declining capacity.” Peter Jeffery’s *Going Against the Stream: Ethical Aspects of Ageing and Care* outlines a Christian ethical framework, while Harold Koenig and Andrew Weaver’s *Pastoral Care of Older Adults*, and Grace Ketterman and Kathy King’s *Real Solutions for Caring for Your Elderly Parent* provide practical advice to caregivers. *Circle of Years: A Caregiver’s Journal* by Houston Hudson inspires with its sensitive testimony of parent care.

“We cannot start too soon to work on developing a spirituality that encompasses aging,” Mark Peters notes in his review article, *Spirituality of Aging* (p. 88). “The problem is that older adults, with their wisdom, are often segregated, sometimes physically, from the rest of the community of faith, and few people will venture to cross these barriers to learn from them.” To prepare for growing in Christian faithfulness through our later years, Peters commends Kathleen Fischer’s *Winter Grace: Spirituality and Aging* and portions of two anthologies, *Reflections on Aging and Spiritual Growth*, edited by Andrew J. Weaver, Harold G. Koenig, and Phyllis C. Roe, and *Affirmative Aging: A Creative Approach to a Longer Life*, edited by Joan E. Lukens. “We draw not only upon our own wisdom, but also the wisdom of the faithful community that forms us,” Peters says. “This sort of spirituality for aging has importance not just for the old, and may be even more necessary for the young.” ✠



---

# Caring as Honoring

BY ANNE E. STREATY WIMBERLY

Congregations are “soul communities,” in which young and old are soul-mates, bound together as an extended family of God, who love, support, and sustain one another. They should assure that senior adults are cared for and honored as resourceful contributors to community life, wisdom-givers, exemplars of the faith, and worthy recipients of care. How do we make this biblical vision concrete in our lives?

---

A common concern among my close friends, colleagues, and students is how best to care for aging relatives. Sometimes they are concerned for loved ones whose physical health or mental capacities have declined to the point where they can no longer live independently, and wrenching decisions need to be made regarding what to do. They talk about the admixture of feelings, demands, and stresses they’ve experienced when moving a loved one to a nursing home or caring for them in their homes. Still others speak of anxieties prompted by health care providers who, on behalf of dying loved ones, seek end-of-life decisions such as whether to continue extraordinary measures to prolong life. In expressing these concerns, we invariably share stories that disclose not simply our interest as family members for the care of the oldest among us, but the nature and meaning of that care.

The nature and meaning of caring for senior adults goes beyond these personal stories. Mainline denominations, in particular, see the “graying” of congregations and, in some instances, conflict arising in regard to honor-

ing the presence and guidance of senior adult members while, at the same time, tending to needs of the young to lead. Moreover, at the societal level, the reality is that senior adults comprise the fastest growing part of the population in the United States. Because of medical and scientific advances and improved healthcare over the previous century, people are living longer. The fastest growing group of senior adults is the eighty-five plus group.

---

**When we see clearly the image of God in our elders, we understand caring as honoring to be a journey of God's people, the young and old together. It is our "sensitivity to the dual role of senior adults as doers and receivers in the life of the community."**

---

It is also true that the overall increased health of senior adults today has resulted in their remaining actively involved in the affairs of life longer. Through their longevity, senior adults are continuing on as lively contributors to everyday life in community, valuable wisdom-givers in church and

family life, and resources for the historical grounding of our young. Indeed, increasing numbers of grandparents are now raising the children of their offspring. Yet it is also true that the older a person becomes, the more apt she or he is to experience health challenges. Senior adults in minority groups are even more likely than white seniors to be at risk for impoverished conditions and poor social, physical, and psychological health.

Whether in our families, faith communities, or society at large, caring for the oldest among us is important. We are called by God and instructed in Scripture to honor our elders, especially our parents, as a means of assuring our own longevity (Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 5:16; Ephesians 6:1-3). We are also to show respect and care for widows, our own kin, and all elders (Acts 6:1-6; 1 Timothy 5:1-8). The Bible reminds us that older adults are assets to the community, gifts of God, and witnesses to God's blessings through their presence and participation in community (Psalm 92:12-15); and the elderly Anna, in the Gospel of Luke, calls our attention to the older adult as exemplar of faithful worship, the personal life of devotion, and spiritual wisdom (Luke 2:36-38).

Honor-bestowing care is due the oldest among us by virtue of their longevity and because of our commitment to uphold the biblical injunction to honor them. But, more than this, caring as honoring is predicated on our deep knowing that all of humankind was created by God in God's image (Genesis 1:26-27). God's act of creation affirmed human life and value. In God's act of creation, life was given as gift. And as gift, human life is to be

nourished, cared for, and developed. The value assigned by God is not based on age. Indeed, the grounds for honor-bestowing caring are found in the richness of the metaphor “image of God.” When we see clearly this image in our elders, we likewise understand caring as honoring to be a journey of God’s people, the young and old together. The journey of the young with the elders is in preparation for their own continuing journey. It is the whole community’s learning from and responding to senior adults as persons of worth. It is our “sensitivity to the dual role of senior adults as doers and receivers in the life of the community.”<sup>1</sup>

But how do we move from biblical theological understandings to making caring as honoring concrete in our lives?

### **ARRIVING AT MEANINGS OF CARING AS HONORING**

I invite students in my older adult ministries classes to reflect on prominent older adults with whom they related in their years of growing to adulthood and on the impact of these adults in their lives. I also ask them to consider any connection between this impact and their attitudes toward and role in caring for and honoring older adults. Often class members confess that, over the years, they have not called to mind or articulated how special their parents and other elders had been to them. Some of them admit that, in all truthfulness, much of what they have achieved in life has come from the support, encouragement, and inspiration of their parents or other adults. In other instances, individuals tell of caring for sick and terminally ill older relatives, and of being reminded during this period of care-giving of care given to them in times of illness and distress. For still others, the death of a parent or revered elder prompted a flood of recollections. They recall that parents were not always as they wished them to be; there were difficult times, disagreements, disappointments, and the hard seasons of family life. But ultimately, these class members center on what they learned from their parents that has guided their own life patterns and decisions. Often there surface memories of revered guidance by older mentors in school, church, or community.

Invariably, in the process of remembering, and even struggling with the memories, my students arrive at a point of saying unequivocally, as one put it, “We *must* give back to our elders within and beyond our blood kin. We *must* care for and honor them because of the life God gave them and has given us through them, the wisdom shared by them, the needs they have for care, and the opportunity we still have to learn from their lives.” What I have gleaned from this process of remembering is that, for Christians, care that is honor-bestowing moves beyond our internalization of the scriptural mandates to our personally acknowledging the significance of the lives of older persons in general and those around us in specific. Grasping the significance of our elders can come as we reflect on and give voice to our stories of the intertwining of their lives with our own. The signifi-

cance of older adults also becomes clear as we hold within us and keep ever before us the image of them as God's creations, as living beings in whom God breathed life and through whom God's creation of ongoing life—our lives—is made possible. In them we see the image of God as well as reflections of the unfolding of human life.

But, our youth-oriented culture makes it difficult for us to appreciate the significance of our elders. For that reason, we may need to be quite intentional about creating opportunities to reflect together on the older adults in our lives and what they have meant to us. Indeed, a prerequisite to our arriving at meanings of caring as honoring senior adults may well be our resisting the prevailing youth orientation which tends to isolate youth from the larger intergenerational context that includes older adults. Resistance entails overcoming "our propensity to view aging and being old as unacceptable," Temba Mafico observes, and instead "looking at aging and older adulthood as indispensable to the life of the community."<sup>2</sup> This overcoming requires recapturing generational ties through which younger generations not only see elders as models of their own journey ahead, but also see what is needed to improve and sustain the quality of life for present and future senior adults.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, three activities are important in arriving at personal meanings of caring as honoring beyond the internalization of scriptural guides: we need to come to full awareness of the significance of older adults in our lives, to resist the youth orientation that separates the generations, and to recapture generational ties. These three activities are integrally tied together. One cannot exist without the other. And, none can exist without heartfelt comprehension of the scriptural guides to caring as honoring.

### **CONGREGATIONS AS SOUL COMMUNITIES**

In *Honoring African American Elders: A Ministry in the Soul Community*, I place great emphasis on the idea of the congregation as a soul community. This idea builds on the understanding that all people, young and old alike, share a common identity from God in whose image we are created; and it conveys our vitality as God's people, which comes from our hearts (Deuteronomy 6:5, 10:12-13). Because of this shared identity, we are soul-mates bound together as an extended family of God; and, in response to this connectedness, we maintain a communal space for "soul care" where all are loved, supported, and sustained. As such, the soul community is the congregational family who intends for honor-bestowing care to take place. The community assures that senior adults are cared for and honored as resourceful contributors to community life, wisdom-givers, exemplars of the faith, and receivers of care.<sup>4</sup>

The soul community is the Christian congregation whose *heart* is centered on validating the role of *senior adults as resourceful contributors* in its ongoing life. "I want to be able to contribute something of what I have

learned through this life of mine,” one senior adult said. “As a senior in the church, I would like the church to regard me as useful. I would also like it to provide and support ways for me to remain active and involved as long as I am able.”<sup>5</sup> To the extent that the soul community validates the role of senior adults as resourceful contributors, we carry out the call of caring as honoring.

A pastor told me about an eighty-year-old woman of his church who, when the invitation to Christian discipleship was given one Sunday, walked to the altar and said: “I want to give my life to Christ. Oh, yes, I know I did the same thing years ago and that I’ve been a member of this church pretty near all my life. But, I want to do it again right now, today.” The pastor was somewhat baffled by this renewed confession of faith from someone who, from his observation, had been a model Christian and a consistent, powerful spiritual guide for him in his pastoral journey. “I don’t know how long my life will be,” she told the pastor in a follow-up conversation. “But, I know that as long as I live, God has something for me to do. I have just come to new realization that this is so. I wanted God to know that I know it and that my hope is squarely in God’s being with me every step of the way until I go home to be with God.” On further reflection, the pastor concluded, “You know what? My member’s commitment of faith and hope was the most moving testament to me and every age and stage represented in that service. She was the epitome of the wise elder who helped us to know that we are all on a life-long journey; and our fullest embrace of the sojourn depends on our seeing that the road God has set us on continues. It depends on our making a commitment to continue all the way to the journey’s end.”

---

**We need to become aware of the significance of older adults in our lives, resist the youth orientation of our culture that separates the generations, and recapture generational ties. These activities are integrally tied together, and cannot occur without heartfelt comprehension of the scriptural guides to caring as honoring.**

---

This story helps us to understand the soul community’s role in caring as honoring. Specifically, the soul community is the Christian congregation whose *heart* extends to validating the roles of our *elders as exemplars of the faith* and as *repositories of wisdom*. Our validation of these roles constitutes a form of caring as honoring.

However, the *heart* of the soul community must also reach out to senior adults whose physical presence in the gathered congregation is no longer possible, and validate their role as *worthy recipients of care*. This act of caring as honoring is particularly needed with home-bound elders, whose comments are often punctuated by a sense of sadness at the loss of connectedness and by desires for the presence of people from the congregation in

---

**Caring as honoring is demonstrated by intentional efforts to contribute to the inter-related dimensions of our elders' well-being, including spiritual, social, mental, physical, work and economic, recreational, and environmental.**

---

which they were active members at one time. The intentional reaching out to care for the oldest among us who cannot come to us recognizes, as well, that our attention and help tends to lessen or cease as senior adults' involvement in congregations wanes due to debilitating health.<sup>6</sup>

Beyond the soul community's validation of roles of senior adults, the *heart* of this community's caring as honoring is demonstrated by intentional efforts to contribute to the well-being of older adults. Caring as honoring is "soul care" that follows the model of Jesus' ministry in responding to people's concrete experiences and conditions in ways that lead to their well-being. It includes paying attention and contributing to seven interrelated dimensions of our elders' well-being.

*The spiritual well-being of senior adults* is sustained by sufficient and meaningful opportunities for worship, study, and service in which to affirm and deepen their relationship with God, self, others, and all things. Honor-bestowing care that contributes to this aspect of elders' well-being is pivotal to their overall well-being; it takes seriously their desire to express, explore, and even struggle with the beliefs, values, meanings, and commitments that give purpose and hope to the last years of life.

Honor-bestowing care provides for *the social well-being of senior adults* by tending to their positive connectedness with their past and other people as well as their experience of dignity and comfort in their living environment. Focus on this aspect of their well-being encompasses creating opportunities through which senior adults recall and make peace with the past. As they affirm their connectedness with God and others, they can arrive at a wise understanding of the significance of who they are in community and whose they are in God, and can celebrate this self-knowledge.<sup>7</sup>

Honor-bestowing care contributes to *the mental well-being of senior adults* by encouraging them to experience themselves as valued creations of God. This care includes assuring their access to activities that help them deal

constructively with change, crisis, and loss. This aspect of well-being is enhanced when there are opportunities for senior adults to engage their creative and problem-solving abilities, to confront past and present life issues, to deal head-on with life's ambiguities and tensions, and to trust the unfolding of their lives.<sup>8</sup>

*The physical well-being of senior adults* is addressed by offering access to health care, information about care of self and others, and caring responses during times of illness, disability, and end-of-life circumstances. Focus on this aspect of well-being acknowledges the reality that many elders have deficits in health care coverage, lack transportation to health care facilities, and may be reluctant even to seek care out of fear of poor or inattentive treatment. It also takes into account that health promotion and attention to self-care makes possible senior adults' resourceful participation on their own behalf and their ability to enter into resourceful participation with others.

Honor-bestowing care contributes to *the work and economic well-being of senior adults* through ensuring, at minimum, the basic supplies needed for living, tending to their access to economic resources and their ability to sustain themselves and those for whom they may be responsible (as in the case, for example, of grandparents raising grandchildren), and fostering a continued sense of vocation that fulfills God's purpose for their lives.

We care for *the recreational well-being of senior adults* through intentional efforts to provide or recommend accessible and safe places to play, to engage in bodily revitalization and personal enrichment. This care recognizes that joyful *play*, alone and with others, builds up the self, enhances the self's sense of aliveness, contributes to stress management, and contributes to a positive and hope-filled life perspective.

Honor-bestowing care assists *the environmental well-being of senior adults* through efforts that result in access-friendly spaces within the church. It educates about and advocates public policies focused on safe and clean living environments, and care of God's created natural environment, our earth home.<sup>9</sup>

This holistic paradigm provides suggestions for the soul community's honor-bestowing care process. Yet, implementing it requires that we emphasize a view of time that allows soul relationality to emerge and are willing to build a network of care.

## **CREATING TIME AND BUILDING NETWORKS**

As the reality of our fast-paced, technological, and productivity-driven world seeps into our everyday living, it distorts the priorities our churches and we, as individuals, choose. This can minimize or forestall the attention that needs to be given to the older generation, and undermine our caring as honoring. We need to reconceive time so that our emphasis is on *relational time*.<sup>10</sup>



*Relational time* is intentionally structured to be a deeply felt, receptive, and responsive presence with senior adults. We give their presence priority and choose to reach out to them as well as responding to their reaching out to us. A key quality of *relational time* is *being present* with senior adults through conversation. This quality is demonstrated in congregational life by the openness with which church leaders, young laity, and senior adults

---

**“Relational time” has an improvisatory quality, as we create an environment for elders to proceed on the journey faithfully and imaginatively, as that old spiritual says, “to see what the end will be.” It becomes “sacred time” wherein we welcome our unfolding life together as a gift from God.**

---

receive one another in group meetings and by the care taken to work through ways of sharing responsibility. Yet, when elders can no longer be fully involved in the life of the congregation and become infirm and separated from the gathered congregation, *being present* with them conversationally entails a different sort of quality. What becomes pivotally important is listening to and sharing

the stories of life’s journey, engaging in moral discourse where it is called for, and participating with them and family members in discerning answers to difficult life and death questions.

Regardless of the situation, fulfilling *relational time* requires the willingness to listen. It always has an improvisatory quality, as the family of God creates an environment for elders to improvise, or proceed on the journey faithfully and imaginatively, as that old spiritual says, “to see what the end will be.” In this way, *relational time* becomes *sacred time* wherein, together, the people of God surrender to God a certain degree of control, and welcome our unfolding life as a gift from God.

A relational orientation to time also understands that churches must become network builders, connecting senior adults with resources churches cannot provide, but are available in the wider community. Being a network builder means that we forge links with public groups that provide assistance, support, and guidance to enhance the well-being of senior adults. When we create time to build a functioning network, we enable our congregations to carry out “soul care” in a fuller manner. Through the cooperative relationships we forge with public agencies, we help make known God’s presence through us. In this way, we extend and bring fullness to our caring as honoring.<sup>11</sup>



## NOTES

1 Quoting from p. 6 of Anne E. Streaty Wimberly, "What Honoring Elders Means: A Call to Reenvision the Church and the Soul Community," in Anne E. Streaty Wimberly, ed., *Honoring African American Elders: A Ministry in the Soul Community* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, Inc., 1997), 3-17.

2 Quoting from p. 22 of Temba L. J. Mafico, "Tapping Our Roots: African and Biblical Teachings About Elders," in Wimberly, ed., *Honoring African American Elders*, 19-33.

3 Wimberly, 13.

4 See my "The Church as a Soul Community," in Wimberly, ed., *Honoring African American Elders*, 35-53.

5 Quoted on p. 64 in Anne E. Streaty Wimberly, "Creating an Honor-Bestowing Elder Ministry," in Wimberly, ed., *Honoring African American Elders*, 55-71.

6 The tendency on the part of churches to withdraw over a period of time from elders whose involvement decreases because of debilitating health is well documented in a number of studies, including L. Chadiha, E. Proctor, N. Morrow-Howell, O.K. Darkwa, and P. Dore, "Religiosity and Church-based Assistance Among Chronically Ill African American and White Elderly," *Journal of Religious Gerontology*, 10(9) (1996), 17-36.

7 See Anne E. Streaty Wimberly and Edward P. Wimberly, "Wisdom Formation in Middle and Late Adulthood," in Anne E. Streaty Wimberly and Evelyn L. Parker, eds., *In Search of Wisdom: Faith Formation in the Black Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 125-139.

8 Ibid., 129.

9 Howard Clinebell offers a comprehensive catalogue of dimensions of well-being in *Anchoring Your Well-Being: A Guide for Congregational Leaders* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1997). I summarize differing aspects of the holistic paradigm in "Creating an Honor-Bestowing Elder Ministry," 64-66; and "The Role of Black Faith Communities in Fostering Health," in Ronald L. Braithwaite and Sandra E. Taylor, eds., *Health Issues in the Black Community*, second edition (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2001), 129-150.

10 For an exploration of time, see Anne E. Streaty Wimberly, "Creating Time," *Circuit Rider* (January/February 2002), 16-17.

11 For a fuller exploration of network-building, see Anne Streaty Wimberly, "Building a Helping Network," in Wimberly, ed., *Honoring African American Elders*, 125-136.



**ANNE E. STREATY WIMBERLY**

*is Professor of Christian Education and Church Music at the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, Georgia.*

# Aging from the Perspective of the Cross

B Y S T E P H E N S A P P

Informed by our biblical heritage and a realistic approach to the phenomenon of growing older, we can take seriously the real losses that we suffer as we grow older. The discipleship of the cross recognizes that the cross Jesus Christ bids his followers to take up includes the ordinary, everyday sufferings of human life—including those associated with aging—that are borne as Jesus bore his sufferings.

---

**I**n their attempt to be optimistic, supportive, and “pastoral,” many Christian writers refuse to take seriously the very real problems which we experience as we grow older. They are overwhelmingly affirmative, emphasizing that aging is a process of fulfillment, maturity, and completion, and old age a time to be eagerly awaited and warmly embraced. For example, “We believe that aging...overarches the human community as a rainbow of promises,” write Henri J. M. Nouwen and Walter J. Gaffney in their highly regarded book, *Aging: The Fulfillment of Life*. “Aging is not a slow decaying but a gradual maturing, not a fate to be undergone but a chance to be embraced.”<sup>1</sup> And Alfons Deeken seeks to show “that old age, far from being an embarrassment, is in fact a golden opportunity for human growth, fulfillment, and deep happiness.”<sup>2</sup>

Though these hopes for “senior citizens” are certainly commendable and diligently to be sought, our experiences do not warrant such untempered optimism. Old age is not such a wonderful experience for most

people, especially those who live in poverty, loneliness, and neglect.

The truth is that aging is the deterioration of the organism that is the human person, hardly something that we desire or welcome. This decline represents the loss of powers that we take for granted, the loss of much that makes us who we are (or at least have always perceived ourselves to be). Considerable pain unquestionably accompanies such loss—first, emotional pain, as friends and relatives, especially a beloved spouse, depart in death, and as we see our powers and abilities fade; and second, physical pain, as more and more problems and ailments appear that have no pill or therapy to cure or even ameliorate them.

We do older people a disservice by painting too golden a picture of old age, a picture that few elderly people will be able to achieve. What about the guilt that may be provoked in those who simply cannot get up each morning, however strong their faith and however hard they pray, and exclaim, “How wonderful it is to be alive another day!” because they are consumed with pain from arthritis or do not even know who and where they are? What of the spouse who must watch a beloved partner of a half century slowly decline into chronic pain or dementia? A little more reality in preachments about old age would be not only more honest but also more in line with authentic Christian faith.

### **DISCIPLESHIP OF THE CROSS**

Christians, understandably, tend to view old age from the perspective of the Resurrection, stressing the hope to which we can cling by virtue of the saving work of Christ. With the Apostle Paul we proclaim that about suffering and death, we need “not grieve as others do who have no hope” (1 Thessalonians 4:13). Yet, for the sake of honesty and of credible witness to those who are actually experiencing it, aging and old age need to be looked at from the perspective of the cross. This approach speaks more accurately to the common experience of growing old than does the Resurrection (though for the Christian the Resurrection does always stand beyond the cross).

Jesus never promised that life would be painless and free from struggle; indeed, his message was the opposite: “In the world you will have trouble” (John 16:33b NIV).<sup>3</sup> Genuine hope, the verse continues, exists only *through* his cross: “But take heart! I have overcome the world.”

What might we, attempting to express this perspective, have to say to those who are growing older? How might we address their needs better than by merely offering encouragement and exhortation to look on the bright side of things? To consider aging and old age from the perspective of the cross means at least to take seriously the call of Jesus: “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23).

Hans Küng goes straight to the heart of the matter: “Discipleship is

always—sometimes in a hidden way, sometimes openly—a discipleship of suffering, a following of the cross.”<sup>4</sup> Not only may disciples be afflicted as a result of identifying with Christ, but in varying degrees they will share in the suffering that is inevitable in the fallen world. What distinguishes Christians’ acceptance of suffering, though, is their understanding it as correlating to or corresponding with the way in which Jesus dealt with his suffering. Küng concludes with a statement full of possibilities for a realistic Christian view of aging:

But what is required of the person who believes in the crucified Jesus is something that frequently recurs and is therefore mostly more difficult than a single heroic act: it is the endurance of ordinary, normal, everyday suffering, which is then most likely to prove excessive. The cross to be borne is therefore the cross of everyday life. That this is far from being obvious or edifying is apparent to anyone who has seen how often a person tries to get away from his own cross, all his daily obligations, demands, claims, promises in his family or his calling; how he tries to shift his cross onto others or suppress it altogether.<sup>5</sup>

Suffering takes many forms, but one of the “crosses” of everyday life that we are expected to bear is renunciation of attachment to the “things of this world,” which is more difficult now than ever, given contemporary society’s materialism and reliance on external criteria as indicators of our personal value. One important aspect of this renunciation is the abandonment of dependence upon the opinions of others as the source of our self-identity and self-worth, the refusal to let our values be determined by such worldly standards as beauty, wealth, power, status, and yes, even youth.

### **ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF DEPENDENCE**

As we take up the cross each day in the normal setbacks of human existence, we will encounter what has made the cross of Christ such a scandal (or at least stumbling block) for so many through the centuries. If we accept that the death of Jesus Christ alone is sufficient to restore the relationship between God and human beings, then we must acknowledge our absolute dependence on the unmerited and freely offered grace of God. Indeed, the real root of contemporary Americans’ inability to come to terms with growing older may lie right here, in the “human problem” identified in the biblical tradition. Perhaps the denial of aging—illustrated, for example, by efforts to overcome the loss of youth through whatever means possible and by the growing tendency to institutionalize those whose care is a burden—is only one more example of the human desire to “make it on our own,” to “do it our way,” to refuse to accept the limitations and the finitude inherent in creaturehood.

The elderly bring out our deepest fears, William F. May observes, of

“not merely physical decay, the loss of beauty, and the failure of vitality, but the humiliation of dependency.... The North American compulsion to be independent intensifies the threat of old age. The middle aged do not want the elderly to encumber them, and the elderly do not want to lapse into a burden.”<sup>6</sup> In short, we do not like getting old because it forces us to face the fact that we are not self-sufficient and able to “go it alone.”

In a way matched only by seriously debilitating injury or illness, which are not nearly so common in human experience, aging is thus a model of what it means to be a human being. That is, in the process of growing older we are forced to confront the fact that we are finite, unable to be and do all that we can imagine and desire. “Old age has many compensations, but it is always a discipline,” J. R. P. Schlater notes. “The process by which God pries our fingers loose from their clutch on things material is not entertaining. The closing of the senses, the increasing feebleness of the physical powers, and the pathetic loneliness of great age make up a process of detachment which is stern in its mercy (cf. the frank depression of Ecclesiastes 11:7-8).”<sup>7</sup> Little wonder that middle-aged Americans have so much trouble dealing with their own aging and coping with the rapidly increasing number of older people all around them.

Christianity is all about being dependent, accepting that we do not live on our own and only for ourselves at any point in life, not just when we grow old. Paul’s great statement captures the essence of the human problem and its solution: “It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me” (Galatians 2:20). If we can assimilate the fact that we are totally dependent

---

The root of our inability to come to terms with growing older may lie right here, in the “human problem” identified in the biblical tradition. Perhaps the denial of aging is only one more example of our refusal to accept the limitations and the finitude inherent in creaturehood.

---

throughout life upon the creating, redeeming, and sustaining God, then perhaps it will be easier to accept increasing dependence upon other human beings as we grow older.

### **THE TRUE BASIS OF PERSONAL VALUE**

The accepted view today is that we *are* what we *do*, that the basis of our value is what we produce or contribute, almost always measured by some material standard. This view is the basis for today’s “consumer society” ethic and leads individuals, in the words of Erich Fromm, to “identify themselves by the formula: *I am = what I have and what I consume.*”<sup>8</sup> As we

age, however, we undergo a significant, twofold reduction: first, in what we have (in terms of physical attractiveness, vitality, and the ability to produce, which is the usual means for obtaining material possessions); and second, in what we can consume (in terms both of personal capacity to use and, for many elderly, of sufficient funds to buy what they might want). Thus in the consumer society old age must be seen by the elderly and by

---

**If contemporary society is going to continue to keep people alive and at the same time tell them that they no longer serve any useful purpose, then dying “in a good old age, old and full of years,” in the biblical sense will be a thing of the past.**

---

others observing them as a time of decreased value.

We receive a great deal of education in “having” but precious little in “being.” When we reach that stage of life when attention and energies are virtually forced to focus upon “being” rather than upon “having,” we are little prepared for the assault upon our self-image

that such a change represents. This process, though painful, does not have to be all bad. “The social event of retirement performs a religiously ironic function: it empties out of a person’s life perhaps the most sturdy crutch of self-worth, one’s social role and usefulness,” James Whitehead points out, “In this moment of stripping away, of death to a former style of life, the Church’s ministry must not be that of substituting ersatz identities, but of celebrating this emptying process which leads to God.”<sup>9</sup> Evelyn Whitehead then concludes, “Stripped of these partial sources of identity, the religious person can grow to recognize, even celebrate, a deeper truth—that no one ever ‘earns’ his way, that life’s meaning is more a gift than a reward.” Reflecting the biblical teachings of the creation of all human beings in the image of God and of Christ’s death for the sake of all, Christian theology has always strongly affirmed that our value does not rest in what we *do* or *have*, but in what we *are* in God’s sight.

### **GOD’S DIFFERENT STANDARDS**

Paul asserts in 1 Corinthians 1:18-31 that the Christian gospel is neither a philosophy accessible only to the wise nor a commodity available only to the wealthy and powerful. In fact, the fundamental requirement of the gospel is recognition that God has freely offered forgiveness to all; no effort of our own is necessary (or even possible) to gain salvation. God thus chose the weak and the foolish, “by human standards,” as the vehicle of redemption, in order to demonstrate the insignificance of the “wisdom of the wise and the discernment of the discerning.” The message of this passage is unmistakable: God’s standards are different from those of the world.

The relevance of this point is clear. Granted, Paul did not refer to the elderly in his description of those through whom God chose to accomplish his will; rather, he mentioned the foolish, weak, and ignobly born. However, the elderly today fall into the same category of the “low and despised in the world”; and just as Paul’s words must have given great encouragement to those whom society devalued in his day, so his message offers real hope to the aged who find their worth called into question in numerous ways today. The world still values and admires those who are “wise,” “powerful,” and “of noble birth”; added to this list are “young,” “strong,” “healthy,” and “attractive.” The Christian, however, has no reason to suppose that God has changed his standards, and the elderly can take comfort that God may want to use them to achieve some great (or small) end “so that no one might boast in the presence of God.”

### **“OLD AND FULL OF YEARS”**

Scripture views dying “old and full of years” as a highly desirable goal, not a fate to be dreaded, as is so often heard today both from younger people (“I just hope I go quickly before I get too old”) and from older people (“Why didn’t the Lord just take me before I got this way?”). One might liken the person “full of years” to a vessel full of liquid, that is, at its capacity: it can hold no more and has fulfilled its purpose by containing all that it was designed to hold. Similarly, to die “full of years” is to be satisfied, completed, indeed, “full-filled” in a most literal sense, having lived all the years one was intended to live.

Perhaps people are living beyond the point at which they are “full of years.” Medical technology has become quite adept at keeping the bodily vessel around (and even in relatively good shape). Without an expansion of its capacity, of the purpose it exists to accomplish, however, the vessel cannot help ceasing to function as it should. Consequently it fails to be “full-filled.” If contemporary society is going to continue to keep people alive and at the same time tell them that they no longer serve any useful purpose, then dying “in a good old age, old and full of years,” in the biblical sense will be a thing of the past.

One concrete way in which older people can avoid the trap of an empty old age that modern society seems to have laid for them is to be more careful about the ways they choose to fill their later years. In contemporary American society old age is often a period of role and status attrition. One reason is that retirement often is filled with activities that have a legitimate place as occasional recreation but, as a steady diet, eventually lose their ability to make one feel worthwhile or to be viewed as such by others. Indeed, many typical retirement activities—golf, bridge, travel, and the like—illustrate that narcissistic values continue to thrive in the later years. All of these “pastimes” focus attention upon oneself and do little for anyone else.



How much fuller might old age be if spent in some form of service to others? How much more purpose might be found for the sometimes seemingly endless time if the lost responsibilities of job and children are replaced, not exclusively with self-oriented recreational pastimes, but with activities that contribute to the welfare of others? Qoheleth observed long ago, "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven" (Ecclesiastes 3:1). Our later years well may be the season to answer more fully than ever before Christ's call to serve. This is surely an obvious way of taking up our cross and following Christ.

### **MUTUAL RESPONSIBILITY**

For Christians, the entire discussion of both the role of the elderly in contemporary society and the obligations of younger people toward older needs a radical reorientation. No longer can the issue be the fulfillment of one individual over against another, but rather what the suffering of each for Christ's sake entails—the sacrifice of each amid the limitations and suffering that are common to all human beings.

No alleviation of human misery and no elevation of human hopes can occur if the different generations see their tasks as a competitive struggle rather than as a common enterprise. Sadly, as the elderly feel themselves increasingly pushed to the fringes of society (and beyond), they tend to adopt a "them against us" mentality. They may withdraw from contact with younger people (even into "elder ghettos"), refuse to support school bonds and other taxes perceived as benefiting only younger people, or in general decline to engage in the community. As one older woman, very active in her community, remarked, however, "The old have an obligation to show the young that elderly people still have worthwhile contributions to make. That will not only help the older people to be treated better but also assist the younger to deal more positively and less fearfully with their own aging."

Unfortunately, as Dieter Hessel has pointed out, even "the church does little to challenge relatively complacent older people who assume that they have pretty much fulfilled their responsibilities, and can mark time before claiming the place reserved for them at the Messianic banquet."<sup>10</sup> Clergy, especially in retirement areas, often hear in response to a request for some service to the church, "I did that for forty years; I've put in my time already. Get one of these younger people with children to do it—they're the ones who'll benefit." As Hessel continues, though, "There is no age limit on God's expectation that persons contribute to the coming of the Kingdom, as we are reminded in the parable of the Great Feast (Luke 14:15-24). The feast is ready but everyone (especially the retired?) seems to have an excuse." The biblical concept of a community founded on love—indeed, for Christians a community functioning as the earthly body of its Risen Lord, who has called all his followers to take up their own crosses as he once



did—surely rejects making excuses for not participating in its work and activities, whatever one's age.

A theology of the cross, augmented by the scriptural teachings concerning love and community, suggests a radical reorientation of attitudes about the responsibilities of old and young, in the direction of greater mutuality and willingness to sacrifice. Older people in particular need to remember that Christ's call to serve others knows no time limit. In the process, contemporary Americans are much more likely to discover "a good old age" for themselves.<sup>11</sup>

## NOTES

1 Henri J. M. Nouwen and Walter J. Gaffney, *Aging: The Fulfillment of Life* (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1976), 19-20.

2 Alfons Deeken, *Growing Old, and How to Cope with It* (Fort Collins, CO: Ignatius Press, 1986), 4-5.

3 Scripture taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

4 Hans Küng, *On Being A Christian*, translated by Edward Quinn (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976), 580.

5 Ibid., 577.

6 William F. May, "Who Cares for the Elderly?" *Hastings Center Report* 12 (December 1982), 37.

7 J. R. P. Schlater, "The Book of Psalms [1-41]: Exposition," in *The Interpreter's Bible*, edited by George A. Buttrick, et al., vol. 4 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1955), 127.

8 Erich Fromm, *To Have or To Be?* (New York: Bantam Books, 1976), 15.

9 Quoted in Evelyn Eaton Whitehead, "Religious Images of Aging: An Examination of Themes in Contemporary Christian Thought," *Aging and the Human Spirit: A Reader in Religion and Gerontology*, edited by Carol LeFevre and Perry LeFevre (Chicago: Exploration Press, 1981), 64. The following quotation from Evelyn Whitehead is from the same page.

10 Dieter Hessel, "The Church's Response to Ageism," in Dieter Hessel, ed., *Empowering Ministry in an Ageist Society* (New York: The Program Agency, United Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., 1981), 67.

11 This article is adapted, in somewhat altered form, from chapter four of my book, *Full of Years: Aging and the Elderly in the Bible and Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987). I thank the publisher for permission to use the material.



**STEPHEN SAPP**

is Professor and Chair of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Miami in Coral Gables, Florida.

# When Suffering Continues

BY ROBERT V. RAKESTRAW

Many Christians, like the author, are afflicted with chronic illnesses, and have wondered, “Why do these long-term afflictions come to God’s people?” “Is the illness my fault, at least in part?” and “How should we pray for healing?” Here is a wise interpretation, born of much intellectual and experiential struggling, of the book of James’ teaching on health, healing, and faithful living in times of suffering.

---

I was diagnosed with heart disease at the age of 41. I went to donate blood, as I had done several times in my earlier years. After taking my blood, the technicians became alarmed. My blood pressure had dropped so low that they thought they might lose me. After I recovered they told me very firmly never to give blood again!

While I previously had experienced occasional lightheadedness and fainting episodes, I now learned that I had mitral valve prolapse, a congenital (in my case) condition that allowed a considerable amount of newly oxygenated blood to leak back into my left ventricle instead of being pumped into my body. As a result, as the years passed, my left ventricle grew enlarged and my heart became increasingly weaker in its pumping ability. By the age of 46 the condition had become so severe that I needed open heart surgery. The doctors repaired the mitral valve and expressed hope that my enlarged heart would return to a near-normal size.

But this did not happen. Even though the valve was now working well, my body was not receiving enough oxygen, due to the insufficient quantity of blood pumped with each beat. Increasingly I experienced fatigue,

lightheadedness, and shortness of breath as I moved through each day. Fatigue was the greatest problem—it seemed that every cell in my body was crying for more oxygen continually. It did not help to lie down or take a nap because my problem was not lack of sleep. Usually I rose from a good night's sleep, or from a nap, every bit as fatigued as when I lay down, and sometimes more fatigued.

I struggled to do my work: to teach theology and ethics classes at Bethel Theological Seminary and to serve my students as best I could. Often I would return to my office after class, shut the door, and just sit at my desk breathing deeply to get sufficient oxygen. I tried to attend to such simple responsibilities as filing my teaching materials, answering phone messages, and handling mail. But on most days I had little strength. The adrenaline and excitement of teaching subject matter that I loved kept me going in the classroom, but the physical and mental fatigue between classes kept me from all but essential tasks. Even these were done by “pushing through” rather than by tackling my work with the ease of earlier years.

As time passed, my condition worsened. Eventually I was diagnosed with severe heart failure and, at age fifty-four, placed on the heart transplant waiting list. In order to continue the ministry I loved, I cut back my teaching load by 25%, withdrew from most committee responsibilities, discontinued my preaching and other church ministries almost entirely, and ceased most writing projects. I grieved deeply over these losses, and experienced discouragement and confusion daily. I knew, however, that these changes were the best way for me to continue the work God had given me.

## **QUESTIONS CHRISTIANS ASK ABOUT CHRONIC ILLNESS**

Christians are not immune to the bodily ailments that affect the rest of humankind. Many Christians are afflicted with serious illnesses, and some who are reading this article have suffered to a much greater extent than I have. God's people experience chronic physical pain from such causes as cancer, emphysema, back and joint conditions, digestive problems, and severe headaches. There are other chronic illnesses and symptoms that do not involve physical pain as much as they produce other forms of suffering: ringing in the ears, eye diseases, loss of appetite, fatigue, breathing difficulties, mental disorders, emotional weaknesses, Alzheimer's, and the effects of strokes and heart attacks. While there may not be great physical pain, the suffering that accompanies these conditions may be intense and debilitating. It persists day after day and year after year, and this duration itself becomes a major part of the suffering.

I have thought often about the issues of chronic illness, especially from a Christian perspective. Why do these long-term afflictions come to God's people? Is my illness my fault, at least in part? How should we pray for healing? How aggressively should we pursue healing through traditional medicine? What about alternative medicine? How do we live as faithful

Christians when suffering continues and healing does not come? What is God saying to me through these trials, and how might I be a more effective servant of Jesus Christ because of them? Do I really want to be healed? While we cannot address all of these questions, we will look at some biblical materials on the subjects of health, healing, and faithful living in times of suffering.

## **PRAYING FOR HEALING**

God is in favor of good health. We know this. John, the beloved disciple, wrote to those under his care: "Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health, just as it is well with your soul" (3 John 2). In the gospels we read "Jesus called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases" (Luke 9:1). Numerous other Bible texts reveal God's concern for physical as well as spiritual health (for example, Exodus 23:25-26; Psalm 103:2-5). We know, however, that not everyone who loves God and seeks to live a life that is pleasing to God enjoys good health. The apostle Paul explains that this is because "the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now," and that we are in "bondage to decay" (Romans 8:21-22). The entrance of sin into this world brought disease and decay to all of us.

God does not abandon us in our misery, but offers help for our physical needs just as he does for our spiritual needs. One of the clearest texts in the New Testament on the subject of healing was written by the brother of our Lord:

Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.

*James 5:13-16*

Many Christians have agonized over this text, regarding both matters of interpretation and matters of application. (Interpretation is what the text meant to the original recipients of the writing, whereas application refers to the way we take that interpretation and put it to use in our present day contexts.) One question coming from the text is whether the oil was medicinal, as it was sometimes used in the first century, or was it symbolic of the Spirit's power to heal? Most commentators favor the latter interpretation, offering the helpful application that such a view does not rule out the

use of medical science, nor does it focus on the oil as the primary requirement for healing.

Another question concerns how we are to distinguish between those who are “suffering” (5:13) and those who are “sick” (5:14). The original word for “suffering” is a general term for experiencing affliction or misfortune. But the word for “sick” literally means “without strength.” While it may refer to any condition of weakness, in this context it most likely indicates serious illness, because the sufferer is apparently too weak to go to the elders. (We should not apply this text so rigidly, however, that we exclude those who come to church and request prayer there.)

### THREE VIEWS OF THE “PRAYER OF FAITH”

The most difficult matter of interpretation and application is the unconditional nature of the promise: “the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up” (5:15). This seems to say that if the right kind of prayer is offered, the sick will be healed. Yet we all know this does not happen every time we pray. Even if we study and apply every word and phrase carefully, seeking to follow these instructions reverently and fully, we do not always see healing. How can we continue to believe in the inspiration and authority of God’s written word while knowing that this seemingly absolute promise does not always lead to recovery?

The text presents several conditions for healing: the elders of the church should be called to anoint and pray in the name of the Lord; there needs to be the “prayer of faith;” there should be mutual confession of sins; and those praying need to be considered “righteous,” not because they live perfectly but because they are “in

Christ”—the righteous One. If we meet these conditions when we pray for the sick, sincerely yielding to God in every way that we know how, we will see remarkable healings at times. Some who are reading this article will testify to this. Others, however, will report that, even after following the biblical conditions, they have not been healed and they have prayed for others who have not been healed.

---

#### “The prayer of faith will save the sick”

(James 5:15), seems to say that if the right kind of prayer is offered, the sick will be healed. Yet we all know that this does not happen every time we pray. How can we continue to believe in the inspiration and authority of God’s written word while knowing that this seemingly absolute promise does not always lead to recovery?

---

The crucial statement seems to be: “the prayer of faith will save the sick.” By “save” the context indicates that restoration to good health is intended. But what is “the prayer of faith?” If we can know what this means, surely we will see more healings than we do. While there are many explanations of this phrase, there are three that are among the most common. One view is that the ones asking for God’s help—whether the sick person or the elders or both—need to have the right kind of faith. This interpretation places the burden on the individuals involved. The sick person needs to believe “hard enough,” without the least doubt, that he or she will be healed. Or the focus is put on the elders: they need to believe “hard enough,” with the right quality and quantity of faith. Whether the primary responsibility is on the sick one or the elders, or both, it is up to them to know what the “prayer of faith” is and to offer this prayer properly.

With this understanding, which we may call the “proper faith” view, if the sufferer does not get healed, it is not God but people who failed. This is a commonly-held belief in many “faith-healing” circles, and it creates a huge burden of guilt for those, either sufferers or those who pray for them, who do not see the healing they desire. Sometimes it is said that if we would only return to the more simple and pure faith of the first-century Christians, we would see the healings that they experienced.

One problem with this view, however, is that it is difficult to believe that the first-century Christians were that dramatically different in their faith than the Christians of the twenty-first century. Many of us have known of very godly and faithful people who asked for healing prayer yet did not receive it. And many of us know of devout Christian leaders who have prayed for the seriously ill without seeing recovery to good health. Do we really believe that the early Christians were spiritually superior to those today who live for God and seek healing from him? No doubt some people are not healed because they, or those praying for them, are not living in harmony with God’s word, or do not believe that God is able to heal. However, “the prayer of faith,” whatever it is, cannot be something so elusive and difficult to attain that even the most spiritual Christians today fail often to obtain it when seeking God’s healing power. We need to be deeply grateful that God *does* answer our prayers for healing quite often, but we also need to recognize that, at times, the same people pray for healing in similar circumstances, yet see no healing.

Two other views of “the prayer of faith” are more satisfactory, even though each leaves us with some unanswered questions. I waver back and forth between these two explanations as I try to reconcile the seemingly absolute nature of the promise for recovery with the observable fact that many devout prayers for healing are not granted in the way the petitioners desire. The first view is that “the prayer of faith” is sovereignly given by God in those situations of illness that he chooses. In these cases, the elders

receive the gift of faith in order to pray for a specific person or persons at a specific time. Neither the sick nor those praying for the sick did anything particularly different from other times. On this occasion, however, God either gave them the confidence that the sick would be healed, or at least assured them that he would work on their behalf in some special way. However they believe and feel, they pray with faith in God's power to heal, and they see the sick recover. In this view, the seemingly absolute wording of the promise is upheld because "the prayer of faith" always results in healing. When God sovereignly chooses to heal, he gives the faith necessary for those praying. We may call this the "sovereign gift" view.

This explanation accords well with 1 Corinthians 12, where we read that certain spiritual gifts, including faith and healing, are given for the common good by the Spirit, "who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses" (12:11). This view does not put undue stress on the sick or those praying for the sick. It honors God as the healer. But it still leaves us with the question of why the invitation of James 5 is presented in such a wide-open manner, urging the seriously ill person to call the elders for healing and expressing such confidence that the healing will come. The illustration from Elijah that follows our text, giving an example of how fervent prayer actually changed the course of nature's rain patterns (James 5:17-18), seems to reinforce the view that it is our faith and our fervency that will bring about miraculous events in the natural world.

The last position on James 5:13-16 states that, while the promise is seemingly absolute, it is, like all other promises in the Bible, subject to the will of God in each situation. We are instructed to pray with confidence, while knowing that God's

thoughts are not our thoughts, nor are our ways God's ways (Isaiah 55:8). We are to ask for healing, knowing that God is able to do what we ask. However, we are to leave the outcome with our wise and gracious God, who may or may not choose to heal in this

---

**We are to ask for healing, knowing that God is able to do what we ask. However, we are to leave the outcome with our wise and gracious God, who may or may not choose to heal in this or that specific instance.**

---

or that specific instance. We may call this the "will of God" view. Jesus said to his disciples: "If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it" (John 14:14). Here is another seemingly absolute promise that has, at its foundation, the truth that God alone decides what accords with divine principles and purposes in this world.

Both this view and the previous one emphasize the sovereignty of God



in healing. But, whereas the former view says that God gives special faith for healing in specific instances, the latter view holds that those praying are not necessarily aware of any special gift of faith, but simply offer their petitions to God to heal according to his will. The latter view does not consider it a sign of unbelief to add “if it is your will” to prayers for healing.<sup>1</sup>

This “will of God” view is the most common among non-Pentecostal Christians, and even among some Pentecostals. It does not have to imply an attitude of resignation to sickness, nor does it necessarily connote a “whatever” attitude that shrugs and says, “Well, it doesn’t hurt to ask.” Properly, understood, this view affirms a disposition of deep trust in God. We come with confidence to the Great Physician, the one who healed the sick in the cities and villages of Galilee and Judea. We take seriously the words in the letter to the Hebrews: “Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so

---

After much intellectual and experiential struggling, I tend to favor the explanation that God’s promises (as well as God’s prophecies) in the Bible are sometimes given in summary form, without the full statement of conditions and factors that may affect their fulfillment. It bothers my Western “logical” mind to affirm this, yet it seems to accord with the realities in God’s written word.

---

that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (4:16). We do not, however, claim to know precisely what God’s will is in every situation. We offer our prayers for healing, seeking to follow the full biblical teaching in James 5 and elsewhere, with the confidence that God does all things well, and works all things together for good for those who love God (Romans 8:28).

As true as these statements are in themselves, I must admit that this view still leaves me somewhat troubled by the seemingly absolute wording of the promise in James 5:15: “The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up.” If the “will of God” view is correct, why doesn’t the text say: “The prayer of faith will save the sick *if that is what God knows is best*”? This is why I tend to revert to the former view at times: God sovereignly gives the gift of faith for healing when he pleases. Yet, I wonder how often this “sovereign gift” really is given. One well-known pastor friend of mine, now in his fifties, said that he has never felt that he had been given this gift of faith for healing prayer, yet he holds the “sovereign gift” view. Similarly, I do not believe I have ever been given this gift,



although when a beloved young pianist from our church was dying of cancer, I did everything in my power to “believe” that she really would be healed as we anointed and prayed. She died several weeks later.

And so, after much intellectual and experiential struggling, I tend to favor the “will of God” view, accepting the explanation that God’s promises (as well as God’s prophecies) in the Bible are sometimes given in summary form, without the full statement of conditions and factors that may affect their fulfillment. It bothers my Western “logical” mind to affirm this, yet it seems to accord with the realities in God’s written word. We read, for example: “when the ways of people please the Lord, he causes even their enemies to be at peace with them” (Proverbs 16:7). We know from biblical history and from experience, however, that in some cases the relational harmony promised is never attained.

All of God’s promises are true, including James 5:14-16, but we cannot claim to understand every aspect of God’s divine plan nor every nuance of the biblical texts. I am to go on asking for my own healing, and praying for others to be healed according to James 5 and other relevant scriptures, knowing that God is mighty and gracious, and in favor of good health. Even though I cannot “make myself believe” what I do not know for certain (that I or someone else will surely be healed physically as I pray), I can live and serve each day with total confidence in my gracious and wise everlasting Father.

## **A PERSONAL CONCLUSION**

On this note I am happy to say that my health has improved somewhat in recent years. I am reluctant to write of this, lest I discourage those readers whose condition seems to be worsening. I am also concerned that I do not present my situation in some self-congratulatory manner, as though I figured out the right way to get a measure of healing, which others need to follow to find improvement. Having offered these cautionary remarks, I want to give glory to God for his work on my behalf.

After being placed on the heart transplant waiting list, I became increasingly concerned that such a drastic solution to my problems might not be the best route to follow. Something within my spirit seemed to say that God had another way for me. I continued to follow the doctors’ instructions, however, regarding each step of the transplant process. I wore my beeper that would signal the time to go immediately to the hospital. But I also pursued seriously a number of therapeutic measures, most of which I had already been doing to some extent.

Chief among these measures was prayer—my own and the prayers of others. Numerous times I deliberately asked God for healing, seeking forgiveness and cleansing from my sin. Several times I requested the elders (in my own church and in others) to anoint me with oil and pray for my healing. I continued to cultivate a life of joyful intimacy with God, seeking

to “trust and obey” as I lived each day. Physical exercise (in my case, walking on the treadmill or outside) was also important, as was getting proper sleep. As I had for years, I continued to research the wide world of nutritional supplementation, spending considerable amounts for those products that seemed to provide some relief from my ever present symptoms. I cut back on all essential responsibilities, learned to say “no” even when it hurt,

---

Even though I still had to live with the symptoms that placed me on the heart transplant list, I celebrated the degree of healing God had given. While I continue to struggle daily with fatigue, light-headedness, and shortness of breath, I rejoice with deep gratitude to God. I live by God’s grace, putting one foot in front of the other as I move through each day.

---

avoided unnecessary stress in every way I knew how, sought to enjoy relaxation without feeling guilty, and focused on peaceful relationships with family and friends.

Surprisingly, and to my delight, my cardiologist discontinued most of my medications. (I had frequently wondered if these were part of the solution or part of the problem.) As time progressed, my heart began

to improve. While the heart failure persisted, there was enough of an improvement to have me removed from the transplant list. After nearly two years of wondering when my beeper would go off, I now felt free. Even though I still had to live with the symptoms that placed me on the list, I celebrated the degree of healing God had given. While I continue to struggle daily with fatigue, light-headedness, and shortness of breath, and even though the doctors are concerned about my heart rhythm (I now have a defibrillator-pacemaker implanted), I rejoice with deep gratitude to God. I live by God’s grace, putting one foot in front of the other as I move through each day.

Our God is a faithful and merciful God. We can trust him to do what is best for us, whether that means total healing, partial healing, continuing as we have been, further deterioration of our condition, or going home to glory.<sup>2</sup> Our Great Physician still stands with arms wide open, gently urging: “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28).

## **SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY**

Not only the sick, but also their caregivers, suffer in the context of chronic diseases or debilitating conditions. Two helpful articles on caring for Alzheimer’s patients (with

applications for many other long-term illnesses) are: Robertson McQuilken, "Muriel's Blessing," *Christianity Today*, 5 (February 1996), 32-34; and Glenn D. Weaver, "Senile Dementia and Resurrection Theology," *Theology Today* (January 1986), 444-456.

I have struggled with the question of why these long-term afflictions come to God's people in "Why Does God Permit Suffering?" *The Standard* (October 1988), 8-11.

Two books helpfully develop the themes of this article: Peter Kreeft, *Making Sense Out of Suffering* (Ann Arbor: Servant, 1986), and Charles Olrich, *The Suffering God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1982).

## NOTES

1 Douglas J. Moo presents this "will of God" view well (although he does not call it this), while recognizing the "sovereign gift" view as included within it. "Prayer for healing offered in the confidence that God will answer that prayer does bring healing; but only when it is God's will to heal will that faith, itself a gift of God, be present." *The Letter of James* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 245.

2 Concerning our acceptance of chronic illness and even impending death, we sometimes need to have enough faith *not* to be healed!



**ROBERT V. RAKESTRAW**

*is Professor of Theology at Bethel Theological Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota.*

# Declining with Grace

BY ROBERT C. AND ELIZABETH V. ROBERTS

When facing the losses of old age, some people “handle” the change from competency to dependency with serenity and composure, others with bitterness and disorientation. Gratitude and generosity—two virtues that acknowledge we are not all strength and independence, but also (and very basically) weakness and dependency—prepare us for better adjustment in situations of loss.

---

George and Steve are two men whom Elizabeth served when she was working as a hospice social worker in Illinois. Shortly before Elizabeth met George, he had moved to Arizona, to an active retirement community where he expected to live a vigorous life with his new friends. He had left his daughter and her family in Illinois and was trying to get some emotional distance from his failed marriage; now he was ready to settle into some real living. When a brain tumor sneaked into his life, landing him back in Illinois and reducing his world to a nursing home, George had no resilience. He had fully expected to be in control of his life, and the idea of being disabled had never even flashed across his radar screen. He felt ambushed. All he could do was mutter, “How could this happen to me?”

Steve was shocked by his diagnosis of stomach cancer, but it did not leave him entirely without resources. In the weeks following the diagnosis he and his wife lived with the hope of good days, even of many good days to come. But they were also aware that they couldn’t count on that, and they rearranged their priorities. They spent time with their children and

grandchildren. They worked on legal and financial affairs together. On days of needed rest they enjoyed watching the birds in their back yard. During one of Elizabeth's visits they showed her their travel pictures of Europe on the big-screen TV in their living room. You had the sense that in the face of disability and death, life was going on and was still basically good.

## THE HUMAN SITUATION

Human lives have two aspects—dependence and independence—and the task of living well and maturely is to integrate and balance them. When we are born, we are in a state of such dependency that we would die immediately if we weren't in intensive care by round-the-clock caregivers. We humans remain in helpless infancy longer than any other organism on earth. But then we grow to be relatively independent, active rather than passive, strong, able to care for ourselves and for others, and in all likelihood we do take care of others when they are helpless. However, after gaining such "self-sufficiency," we may again have periods of weakness and dependency. Accident or illness may reduce us to a state almost like that of a small child. And then, in most cases, we recover our strength and become active and independent again. But sooner or later, if we live long enough, we go into physical and mental decline, and may revert to a weakness very much like the infancy from which we emerged.

Of course, even in periods of life when we are most self-reliant, our dependency clings to us. That very competence, that ability to be intelligent, independent, active decision-makers, depends on our having had a minimally decent upbringing; we are never-endingly indebted to our early caretakers for our basic abilities and well-being. A spouse and circle of friends continue to be a key to a well-lived life, as recent studies seem to show. And think how we depend on food-suppliers, technicians, trades people, transporters, merchants, information-givers, spiritual counselors, and a thousand others for the supporting infrastructure of our supposed self-sufficiency.

We value independence and strength, for ourselves and for others. Some people prefer not to have children because the little ones are such a full-time job, and we often hear older people, looking ahead to their disability, say that they don't want to be a burden on others. They wanted to have their "own" life when they were young, and they want the same for their children. This is often said out of genuine love. So they try to arrange things so that their children will never have to be inconvenienced by them. But being weak, dependent, and a burden on others is as much a part of life as being strong and independent, and people who go all-out to avoid or deny this side of life are not affirming their full humanity. If we are blind to one side of life, we're likely to be blind-sided, like George. It is as though he lived in terms of only half his reality, with the result that the

other half destroyed the half he lived. But George is perhaps a slightly extreme case of a spiritual problem that we all face.

### **GOD AND WEAKNESS**

The Apostle Paul seems to have struggled against the tendency to love too much his own strength and independence. He says that he besought the Lord three times to take away a “thorn in his flesh,” but the Lord said to him, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in

---

**The Apostle Paul is “strong” when he is “weak” because, in frankly admitting and accepting his dependency on the Lord, he is reconciled to the dependent aspect of his self, and becomes properly dependent on the Source of all that he is and has. He becomes a more “whole” person.**

---

weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9). And Paul seems to have begun, at least, to deal successfully with his power-hunger, for he says that “I am content with weaknesses,...for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong” (12:10). Paul is “strong” when he is “weak” because, in frankly admitting and accepting his dependency on the Lord, Paul is reconciled to the de-

pendent aspect of his self, and becomes properly dependent on the Source of all that he is and has. He becomes a more “whole” person. His weaknesses—that “thorn,” but also “insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities” (12:10)—remind him that he is not self-sufficient and encourage him to turn to Jesus for support. So these adversities have a good side, and can become an occasion for thanksgiving.

Anybody can see, just by considering how things go in a human life, that we are not all strength and independence, but also (and very basically) weakness and dependency. But the Christian has a special reason for emphasizing and personalizing this side of our nature. We believe that God created us and that Jesus has redeemed us. God created us out of the dust of the universe, and Jesus redeemed us from sin and death. (Both pretty impressive kinds of weakness!) All of this is by “grace,” not what we deserve in our strength and merit, but something we need in our weakness and bankruptcy. The daily practice of the Christian life is to remember these things in prayer and meditation. Our aim, in such devotional practices, is to shape our minds and hearts to these facts about ourselves and God. If we remember these dependencies and the God who supplies our every need in both plenty and want, success and failure, health and sickness, and throughout life and in death, we will not feel ambushed when confronted with the brain tumor and a bed in a nursing home. An impor-

tant function of a congregation of Christians is to remind one another regularly of our need for God and each other, and to facilitate our serving one another and graciously accepting that service from one another.

In her work with older people, Elizabeth has observed that people facing the loss of function and seeing death on the near horizon “handle” the change from competency to dependency in very different ways, some with serenity and composure, others with bitterness and disorientation. And she has noticed that two virtues, which especially take dependency and weakness into account, seem to make for better adjustment in such difficult times. People whose earlier lives have been characterized by these traits do best in situations of loss. These virtues are gratitude and generosity.

## GRATITUDE

Gratitude is an eye for the good in life. The intensely grateful person is just a little bit blind to the downside of life—doesn’t tend to dwell on it, doesn’t notice it quite as much as the rest of us do. But gratitude is more than “looking on the bright side” of events. It is a personal—or rather, interpersonal—attitude. To be grateful is to be related to a giver; it is to be grateful *to somebody*. The grateful person is one who is well disposed to *receive* good things *from* somebody.

So the grateful person is not just a “positive thinker.” But she is also not what we might call a “deserver.” A person with the self-sufficiency attitude might be glad to receive a good thing from somebody, on condition that he (the receiver) deserves it. Some people have a strong sense of entitlement to what they have, and some even feel a sort of repugnance for having what they are not entitled to. They may be very glad they have what they have, and even glad to have it from somebody (for instance, when they inherit a fortune from a father they love), but they also have a sense of being entitled to it (“I am the son, after all.”). The truly grateful person, by contrast, has a sense of not deserving the good she receives, and above all she does not insist on deserving all that she has.

The grateful person also differs from one we might call an “exchanger.” People whose minds are oriented by the ideal of self-sufficiency and independency are always a little uncomfortable in the role of a real receiver. That is, they hate to receive something they really need, but are not in a position to “pay back.” They feel that such a receiver is in a one-down position, and is demeaned. Often they don’t mind giving to others, but they don’t much like to be on the receiving end of the relationship, unless they can reciprocate pretty soon in a way that matches or overmatches what they have received. So the test of gratitude, as a character trait, is not whether we enter gladly into “gift-exchanges” and other reciprocal relationships of equal giving and receiving, but whether we are able, with “grace,” to accept the *significant* gift that we *cannot reciprocate*.

The personal side of gratitude also distinguishes the grateful person



from one we might call “the grubber.” The grubber is just glad to get stuff, and doesn’t mind where it comes from. If it comes from somebody, by a generous action, the grubber doesn’t mind, but also doesn’t take this origin much into account. (It’s not that he doesn’t *know* how he got the good thing, but rather that this fact doesn’t *mean* much to him. He doesn’t *care* where the benefit came from, as long as it’s a benefit.) The grateful person, by contrast, is attentive to and glad in the combination: giver-and-gift.

The Christian is in an ideal position to become genuinely grateful, not merely a positive thinker, a deserver, an exchanger, or a grubber. We noted earlier the basic Christian beliefs that we are created by God and redeemed by Christ. These beliefs set the stage for a life of gratitude, because now every good we have, both material and spiritual, is from the hand of a personal God who has given us these things without our deserving them. We are in no position to pay God back, and in no position simply to be heedlessly grubbing up all the goods we can.

This eye for the positive, this willingness to be unentitled before and dependent on a Personal Benefactor, is a wonderful preparation for the losses and dependencies of old age. Jimmy Dorrell, in his November, 2002, newsletter for Mission Waco, writes:

There is a woman on our Board of Directors who is such a thankful child of God. She has no financial pull with foundations or influence with corporations. She has lived in poverty most of her life. As a grandmother, taking care of four others, she lives in a housing project in Waco. She is living with cancer and goes three times a week for grueling kidney dialysis. She has plenty of reasons to hold her fist up to God and say, “Why me, God?” But she doesn’t. She just thanks him each day for another day of life to bless others until he calls her home. Across town there is a man whom I have met with on several occasions. He is a nice man who has amassed a good fortune and “built bigger barns” in this life. But his heart is thankless. He is angry at God and others for the setbacks he has experienced in life. Each time we meet, I notice how his life gradually becomes more “futile” and “the truth is suppressed” because of his selfish hurts and disappointments. He has worked so hard to be happy and now lives a miserable existence.

## **GENEROSITY**

Dorrell’s spiritual diagnosis of these two people—the one functioning well in loss and adversity, the other functioning poorly despite wealth and successes—focuses on gratitude, but also suggests the relevance of generosity. The one lives a life of giving to others, the other a life of acquiring and trying to get happiness for himself. Let’s think for a moment about what generosity is and how it prepares us for the losses of old age.



Generosity is the other side of gratitude. If gratitude is a disposition to *receive* graciously, generosity is a disposition to *give* graciously. Both of these virtues are interpersonal and involve the acknowledgment of dependence. Just as the grateful person receives without a sense of entitlement, the generous person gives freely from the heart, without a sense of the pressure of obligation. Just as the grateful person has a loving attitude to his benefactor, so the generous person has a loving attitude toward his beneficiary. Just as gratitude can be a whole way of life, pervading a person's consciousness of all that he has and is, so generosity can be a fundamental way of thinking and feeling about what one has and is, in relation to others.

The grateful Christian will be generous. It is hard to imagine a deeply generous person who is not grateful, or a deeply grateful person who is not generous. The reason is that these two virtues take the same philosophy of life to heart. This philosophy says that everything ultimately belongs to God, who showers us with his grace; if we are to be like him, we must become little showers in our own right. If you think that you are not entitled to what you have, but that it comes by grace from the hands of another, it is not likely that you will cling to it tightly and use it only for yourself. The practice of giving away, of sitting loose to one's possessions and time, and of seeing regularly beyond oneself to the needs and interests of others, is a kind of practicing-up for the inevitable losses that await us. It is a practice of detachment from ourselves that prepares us to move on, freely and gladly, to whatever God has in store for us.

It seems probable that George was not in the practice of seeing life in this way, and that his focused concern to have a good time in his retirement narrowed his vision so that he couldn't realistically anticipate that something like that brain tumor was a real possibility. The generous person, by contrast, lives to a significant extent outside of himself, taking concern and, very likely, joy in the well-being and interests of others, raining consideration alike on the just and the unjust. In doing so, he partakes, to a small extent, in a perspective of eternity, a God's-eye view in which financial setbacks and cancer and kidney failure are not quite disasters.

---

Seeing regularly beyond oneself to the needs and interests of others is a kind of practicing-up for the inevitable losses that await us. This practice of detachment from ourselves prepares us to move on, freely and gladly, to whatever God has in store for us.

---

These days, we hear a lot about long-term care insurance, insurance that buys us care when we can no longer care for ourselves. To buy or not to buy, that is the question. (Another question is when to buy, if we buy.) People who are actively seeking answers to these questions show some spiritual maturity: at least they seem to be facing their potential for weakness and dependency. Maybe they are less likely to be blind-sided by an unexpected decline than those who are in “denial.” But there is another way to prepare ourselves for the future while we are still strong and young, a more directly spiritual and Christian way. Elizabeth has noticed that older persons who have ingrained in themselves, by long practice, the patterns of gratitude and generosity, handle disability better than the resentful and the grasping. They have better relationships with their caregiving children and other caregivers. While the ungrateful continue grubbing for attention to the end, myopic in their self-concern, the grateful and the generous are happy to have the attention they get and keep deriving pleasure from the good things that are going on in others’ lives. This, it seems, is a kind of long-term care insurance that we can practice every day of our lives, as is natural for those who are daily growing up in every way into him who is the head, our generous Lord Jesus Christ.

---



**ROBERT C. AND ELIZABETH V. ROBERTS**

*Robert is Distinguished Professor of Ethics at Baylor University in Waco, Texas. Elizabeth, LMSW-ACP, works with the Area Agency on Aging of the Heart of Texas Council of Governments as the Managing Local Ombudsman for long-term care residents.*

---

# God's Call in Later Life

BY BETH JACKSON - JORDAN

Many older adults find they are as busy in retirement as they were earlier in life. Though their schedules are full, they may struggle to find a satisfying purpose for this stage of life. How can congregations help us, in our later years, hear a special calling from God?

---

Sue, a slim, athletic-looking woman in her late sixties, came by my office to talk. "I used to play golf every day," she said. "In fact, that's why we retired here from New York. My husband wanted to be in a place where he could play golf year round." She looked out the window and sighed. "But after about three months, I began feeling like there had to be something more. I don't think I'm going to be happy unless I find something more useful to do—something that will make a difference. I want more out of this time in my life than just playing golf."

Many older adults find they are as busy in retirement as they were earlier in life. The activities have changed from their younger years, but the schedule is just as full. Yet, like Sue, many struggle to find a satisfying purpose for this stage of life.

Historians note that retirement is a relatively new concept. Until the twentieth century, few people retired, in the modern sense of the word. Most people worked until they wore out. With an increasing number of people in our society today who can expect twenty to thirty years of life after retirement, and many of those years with relatively good health, we are faced with new questions about the meaning, purpose, and tasks of later life.

The retirement industry aggressively markets retirement as a time of leisure and play, but as people of faith, perhaps we should consider whether these years could be a time of spiritual growth and renewal. In his book, *From Age-ing to Sage-ing*, Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi suggests this is a

time for “harvesting life,” taking time to reflect on the ways God worked in our lives, celebrating the contributions we made and acknowledging the wisdom we gained through life’s difficulties and losses. It is also a time to recognize the unique and often undervalued gifts elders have to offer. Wisdom, compassion and story-telling are just a few examples.<sup>1</sup>

Most ancient cultures had honored roles for their elders. Important

---

**While the retirement industry aggressively markets retirement as a time of leisure and play, people of faith should consider how these years could be a time of spiritual growth and renewal—a time for “harvesting” the spiritual riches of life.**

---

societal roles included “Repositories of Wisdom,” “Celebrators of Rituals,” and “Transmitters of Sacred Knowledge.”<sup>2</sup> Our society deeply needs modern versions of these roles because our elders possess unique potential to address many of the deep spiritual needs within our communities. For example, elders can serve as mentors in

intergenerational activities in schools and congregations or encourage multi-generation members of a family to stay connected through reunions or other events.

How can we come to see the inherent potential in the role of “elder”? Perhaps we need to begin by facing and moving beyond our own fears about aging. We are created as beings that develop some measure of physical strength, wisdom and experienced judgment, and caring attitude, but only gradually and over a long time. We come to have much to contribute, yet all of these virtues we gain through dependency upon God as well as our parents, families, communities, and eventually, the younger generation. As we consider our own journey of aging, we may find ourselves asking, “What is the meaning inherent in this process?”

### **OLD AGE AS A SYMBOL OF BLESSING**

One strand within the Judeo-Christian tradition sees age as a “blessing” from God. Age is sometimes described as a reward for virtuous living, as indicated in Proverbs 16:31: “Grey hair is a crown of glory; it is gained in a righteous life.” Elders are also presented as people deserving special honor and respect: “You shall rise before the aged, and defer to the old; and you shall fear your God: I am the LORD” (Leviticus 19:32).

While these ideas of old age as a blessing from God and as deserving honor from others may serve to encourage respect and combat the ageism so pervasive in our society, they can also lead to idealizing elders in a way that is not helpful. Setting older people apart to preserve a cherished “saintly grandmother or grandfather” image becomes a stereotype that

can be limiting to older people who may not themselves experience age as a "blessing."

### **OLD AGE AS A SYMBOL OF LOSS**

As a crucial counter-balance to the idea of old age as blessing, there is another, almost opposite theological view also evident in the biblical tradition. Old age as a symbol of loss focuses primarily on the limitations of aging, as expressed in Ecclesiastes 12:1-5, "Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come, and the years draw near when you will say, 'I have no pleasure in them.'" (Or, as my friend Bea, an active, forthright retirement home resident, put it, "Getting old is hell!")

The writings of John Calvin also express a fairly dismal view of aging. Though he teaches that a long and blessed life is proof of God's favor, he also sees the physical decline of old age as a sign of God's punishment: "It is on account of our sins that we grow old and lose our strength."<sup>3</sup>

These grim views of aging impact our thinking and beliefs about the meaning and purpose of later life. It is important to note that these views reflect a time when those who survived into old age almost certainly endured disabling conditions, disease, and pain. Though we live in a time when science has found many ways to effectively treat and delay age-related diseases, old age still reminds us of our mortality and confronts us with the frailty of our physical body.

The theological dualism between age as blessing and age as loss manifests itself in many ways. While many acknowledge the time of retirement as a "reward" for persons who have worked for many years, there is also a growing trend to create retirement communities that segregate older adults from other age groups. Increasingly churches seem to believe that the only way to grow and flourish is to attract younger adults with families. Though we may credit the elders in our congregations and communities for their wisdom and faith, we often also see them as obstacles to progress and change and, at times, may relate to them in patronizing ways.

### **OLD AGE AS A CALLING**

We need a spiritual model of aging that goes beyond "Old Age as a Symbol of Blessing" or "Old Age as a Symbol of Loss." I find "Old Age as a Calling" helpful. Surely God has a special calling for those who in later life have many fruitful years ahead with a wealth of experience, learning, and gifts. What are the emotional and spiritual tasks of later life and how can our preaching and teaching address them? How can God use those whose bodies, though failing, retain a spirit and story that are often a hidden treasure?

The Bible provides us with wonderful examples of older adults who responded to God's call in later life. When Abraham set out with his people for the land of Canaan, we are told he was already seventy-five years old.

At the age of eighty, Moses led his people out of Egypt. And Joshua, at the age of eighty, succeeded Moses to become the leader of Israel. In the New Testament, we find the story of Jesus presented as a child at the temple to receive the blessing of the elders, Simeon and Anna. Anna, who was at least eighty-four years old, was so certain of her calling that “she never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day” (Luke 2:25-38).

### **CREATIVE MODELS OF MINISTRY**

As people of faith, we must begin to imagine the range of possibilities for continuing to respond to God’s call to share our talents, ideas, and dreams in later life. What would happen if older adults, younger adults, and church leaders began thinking together about reclaiming the role of “elder”? The potential for creative models of ministry and outreach is truly exciting. New models must honor the need to spend reflective time “harvesting life” while claiming the vision of “Old Age as a Calling.”

---

**Forty older adults from my church gathered for a retreat to tell stories about the earlier years of the church. Because of the dream of one elder, the stories of friendship, faith, struggle, and hope were preserved as a legacy for future generations of this community.**

---

els must honor the need to spend reflective time “harvesting life” while claiming the vision of “Old Age as a Calling.”

We must develop creative approaches for spiritual growth and contribution in later life. The practice of writing “Ethical Wills” is an ancient practice which many are rediscovering. In contrast to a legal will, by which we bequeath our material possessions to heirs, an Ethical Will is a document written at any point in life in which we record the beliefs and values by which we want to be remembered.<sup>4</sup> Older adults might wish to create versions of Ethical Wills to leave as spiritual legacies for their family and church communities.

In the spring of 1998, a group of approximately forty older adults from my church gathered for a retreat. Hosted by an older member of the church who had moved away to live with family, the purpose of the retreat was to tell stories about the earlier years of the church. Participants were given “prompts” ahead of time to help focus their storytelling. Video and audio recorders were set up and the stories began flowing, frequently accompanied by laughter or tears. Afterwards the tapes were made available to anyone in the church for viewing and the words were transcribed into a text that is kept in the church library. Since that retreat, several of these “living libraries” have passed from this earthly life. But because of the dream of one elder, the stories of friendship, faith, struggle, and hope

were preserved as a legacy for future generations of this community.

As a chaplain to older adults in a variety of settings, I have learned that older adults neither want to be idealized nor discounted. Openness to a new vision of God's purpose for those in later life is vital for the chaplain or pastoral caregiver ministering with older adults. Such a vision will expand the boundaries of our current aging ministries profoundly.

A few months after my conversation with Sue, I was walking down the hall of the skilled nursing facility where I worked. Hearing laughter from a room I was passing, I looked in and saw Sue, now a regular volunteer, in conversation with a frail resident. It seemed Sue had discovered a purpose in later life which could be fulfilled, not only on the golf course, but also in the room of one who needed what she had to give.

May God's call in later life transform and renew the expectations of aging for us all—a time for “harvesting” the spiritual riches of life.<sup>5</sup>

## NOTES

1 Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, *From Age-ing to Sage-ing: A Profound New Vision of Growing Older* (New York, NY: Warner Books, 1995), 57.

2 Robert J. Best, “The Spiritual Role of the Elder in the Twenty-First Century,” in D. Moberg, ed., *Aging and Spirituality: Spiritual Dimensions of Aging Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy* (Binghamton, NY: The Haworth Pastoral Press, 2001), 21-30.

3 K. Brynold Lyon, *Toward A Practical Theology of Aging* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 35.

4 Barry Baines, M.D. *The Ethical Will Resource Kit: Preserving Your Legacy of Values For Your Family* (Minneapolis: Josaba Limited, 1998), 1-3.

5 A few paragraphs of this article are borrowed from my article “God's Call In Later Life: A Theological Reflection on Aging,” *Chaplaincy Today*, volume 17 (2001), 18-21. I thank the editor for permission to use the material.



**BETH JACKSON-JORDAN**

*is Coordinator of Pastoral Care and Education at Huntersville Oaks and Sardis Oaks long-term care facilities in Huntersville, North Carolina.*

This photo is available in  
the print version of Aging.

With a singular charm and colors not typical to portraiture, “Godly Susan” invites us to consider a different type of beauty that can only be revealed as we wait in this grandmother’s quiet presence.



# A Grandmother's Beauty

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

Roger Medearis portrays his grandmother in what first appears to be a scene from Americana. *Godly Susan*, Medearis' final project as a student of Thomas Hart Benton at the Kansas City Art Institute, was painted as a gift for his parents. The young artist combines affection for his grandmother, Susan Mynatt Carns Medearis, and respect for her dignity and the years that she has lived.

"Descendant of two Baptist preachers and mother of three more," notes Elizabeth Prelinger, "she was known as 'Godly Susan.' Medearis would wheel his grandmother, disabled by stroke, up a ramp in his studio, where he made detailed sketches while she sat, often falling asleep. In her left hand she held a lemon because she loved the tangy taste of the fruit."<sup>†</sup>

The contours of the objects in the composition have an unusual curvature to them. Susan Medearis' crippled hands, for instance, are elongated in the style of the Italian Mannerists of the sixteenth century to denote an odd, but elegant loveliness. This stylized "beauty" can be traced in the pink knit sweater, the lines of her dress with its meticulous white lace collar, the foliage and plant life to her right side, and the tree behind her head. She almost seems to be growing out of nature in the lower left corner of the composition.

Godly Susan's personal beauty is not obvious but is revealed through an inner calm. Her face is stern, and focused on something beyond the picture frame. We are in her quiet presence, but we are not the object of her attention.

How many times are older people who resemble Godly Susan avoided by children, or even adults, because of the stern exterior? Medearis offers us a painting with a singular charm and colors not typical to portraiture. He asks us to consider a different type of beauty that can only be revealed as one looks for awhile at Susan Medearis, who has reached a point in life where she finally has the time to just sit and think—about God.

## NOTE

<sup>†</sup> Elizabeth Prelinger, *Scenes of American Life: Treasures from the Smithsonian American Art Museum* (New York and Washington, D.C.: Watson-Guptill Publications, in cooperation with the Smithsonian American Art Museum, 2001), 76.

This photo is available in  
the print version of Aging.

The powerful elderly prophet had learned much from his experience with God over the years, yet Moses would have greater adventures ahead as the leader of the wilderness generation. Michelangelo's "Moses" retains the strength and fortitude necessary for these challenges.

*Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564), MOSES, 1513-16; 1542-45. Marble, Height 7'8 ½". San Pietro in Vincoli, Rome, Italy/Bridgeman Art Library. Commissioned by Pope Julius II for his tomb.*

---

# Strength and Fortitude

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

---

**M**oses is usually depicted as a distinguished and powerful older man. This great lawgiver, who communicated directly with God on Mount Sinai on several occasions, also has horns!

Those horns have an interesting history. “As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand,” Exodus records, “Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God” (34:29). The Hebrew word “*qaran*,” translated “shone” in Exodus 34:29-35, can mean “to send out rays” or “to display or grow horns.” Either way, *qaran* signifies power. When St. Jerome translated the Bible into the Latin vulgate (or common-day language) in 406, he chose “*cornuta*,” the word for horns, as a figurative translation of *qaran*. Most scholars agree that Jerome continued the intention of the original passage. His colorful translation was deeply imbedded in the iconography of Christian art by the time of Michelangelo’s work in the sixteenth century.

Tourists viewing the sculpture today in the Church of S. Pietro in Vincoli, Rome, are sometimes told that it depicts an angry Moses who has just descended from the mountain to confront the people worshipping the golden calf. This is a misunderstanding based on viewing the work out of its original context. Michelangelo’s initial commission was to sculpt thirty larger-than-life-size figures for Pope Julius’ three-story tomb in St. Peter’s basilica. When the tomb was scaled down and relocated after the Pope’s death, Michelangelo finished only three sculptures. *Moses*, intended for the tomb’s second story, was to be seen from below by the viewer. Today, however, the work is viewed on the ground level of the revised monument completed in 1545. *Moses*’ torso is proportionally too long when viewed on eye level, and this makes the figure appear menacing. No wonder overzealous, but misinformed, tour guides interpret *Moses* in the context of the leader fiercely engaging the sinful Israelites, instead of the holder of the tablets of the law looking towards the people with prophetic inspiration.

*Moses* depicts the powerful elderly prophet who had learned much from his experience with God over the years, yet would have greater adventures ahead as the leader of the wilderness generation. Michelangelo’s *Moses* retains the strength and fortitude necessary for these post-Mount Sinai challenges.

This photo is available in  
the print version of Aging.

This tender occasion in Luke's gospel challenges us  
to reevaluate how older adults in our lives might offer  
prophetic words of insight and encouragement.

*Ambrogio Lorenzetti (c. 1290-1348), THE PRESENTATION IN THE TEMPLE, signed and dated 1342. Panel, 8' 5 1/8" x 5' 6 1/8". Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence. Commissioned for the Opera del Duomo for the Cathedral of Siena. With permission from the Ministero dei Beni e le Attività Culturali.*

---

# Sharing Wisdom

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

---

When young parents face the task of raising their children, they may draw from their personal experience, reflect on the words of their own parents, and read the current literature on child-rearing. The Holy Family learned in a similar fashion. Two aged prophets, Anna and Simeon, shared their wisdom and revelation with Mary and Joseph (Luke 2:22-38). These prophets lived long lives that were not, and could not be, finished on earth without the encounter with God's Messiah. Ambrogio Lorenzetti allows us to witness this long-anticipated moment.<sup>†</sup>

On the right side of the painted panel, we see that alongside Anna, Simeon is holding the Christ Child. Mary, blanket in hand, waits to comfort her baby after he is circumcised. Simeon advises Mary through the spoken word while Anna holds a scroll in her hands.

This story of Simeon, a righteous and devout prophet who lived in Jerusalem, is told only in Luke's gospel. The Holy Spirit, who had revealed to him "that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah" (Luke 2:26), guided Simeon to the temple. Lorenzetti paints the moment described so precisely in Luke: "Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, 'Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel'" (2:28-32).

Simeon, adopting the tone used by parents and older friends and family as they "advise" young parents, looked to Mary and explained, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too" (2:34-35). Mary's reaction is not recorded for us in the biblical account, but we must assume that she received it as one more piece of information that would contribute to the understanding of her role as the mother of Christ. As was the case in the Annunciation, Mary would "treasure all these words and ponder them in her heart" (Luke 2:19).

The second prophet, Anna, plays a prominent role at the end of the story, as she offers another insight about Mary's son. (In visual art, on the other hand, the figure of Anna is not always depicted, and seldom occurs

in art of northern Italy.) Like Mary and Joseph, she is pious: “She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day” (2:37). Usually, though not always, Anna is portrayed as an elderly woman, for Luke gives the detail that “She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four” (2:36-37). Lorenzetti employs the symbol characteristic of her prophetic role, the scroll, on which we can read her prophecy of Jesus “to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem” (2:38). The banderole presents the message of redemption that Anna had waited so long to proclaim. With that message of good news held securely in her left hand, she raises her right hand and points to the child who is the fulfillment of that long-anticipated redemption.

*The Presentation in the Temple* captures a tender occasion when Mary listens to the wisdom of experience from older adults. In our culture, advice from parents, older friends, or family members often is not welcome. Luke’s gospel, by featuring this story, also challenges us to reevaluate this attitude toward the older adults in our lives, who might offer prophetic words of insight and encouragement.

## NOTE

† For further discussion of this painting and its relationship to the gospel of Luke, see Heidi J. Hornik and Mikeal C. Parsons, *Illuminating Luke: The Infancy Narrative in Italian Renaissance Painting* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity International Press, November 2003).

---



**HEIDI J. HORNIK**

*is Associate Professor of Art History at Baylor University in Waco, Texas.*

---

# Then Dawns the Light

BY TERRY W. YORK

---

Then dawns the light that what we've seen  
is life bestowing wisdom.  
We also sense that what we've heard  
demands of us we listen.  
Through tears of sorrow, tears of joy,  
each day made its impression.  
So now we live a slower pace  
embracing each day's lesson.

There's joy in learning all that's new,  
yet fear of what might vanish,  
and troubl'ing thoughts that we may live  
beyond our contribution.  
Yet in young eyes, young sparkling eyes,  
amidst their eager glowing,  
we see their need for what we have:  
our love and time for growing.

Then dawns the light, though bodies fail,  
we've minds and hearts of poets.  
We see beyond what life presents,  
we hear each new day's music.  
Our lives enriched, we can enrich;  
now seasoned, we can season.  
Our aging is received as gift,  
our aging has a reason.

We praise God for the gift of years;  
we thank God for the blessings;  
the gift of life, both long and full,  
for guidance and protection.  
When we've left hymns of hope behind,  
along with hymns for praying,  
we'll tune our voices to the song  
of Heav'n's eternal praising.

# Then Dawns the Light

TERRY W. YORK

C. DAVID BOLIN

1. Then dawns the light that what we've seen is  
 2. There's joy in learn - ing all that's new, yet  
 3. Then dawns the light, though bod - ies fail, we've  
 4. We praise God for the gift of years; we

life be - stow - ing wis - dom. We al - so sense that  
 fear of what might van - ish, and trou - bl'ing thoughts that  
 minds and hearts of po - ets. We see be - yond what  
 thank God for the bless - ings; the gift of life, both

what we've heard de - mands of us we lis - ten. Through  
 we may live be - yond our con - tri - bu - tion. Yet  
 life pre - sents, we hear each new day's mu - sic. Our  
 long and full, for gui - dance and pro - tec - tion. When



tears of sor - row, tears of joy, each  
in young eyes, young spark - ling eyes, a -  
lives en - riched, we can en - rich; now  
we've left hymns of hope be - hind, a -

day made its im - pres - sion. So now we live a  
midst their ea - ger glow - ing, we see their need for  
sea - soned, we can sea - son. Our ag - ing is re -  
long with hymns for pray - ing, we'll tune our voi - ces

slow - er pace em - brac - ing each day's les - son.  
what we have: our love and time for grow - ing.  
ceived as gift, our ag - ing has a rea - son.  
to the songs of Heav'n's e - ter - nal prais - ing.

# Worship Service

BY DAVID M. BRIDGES

---

Since aging is a profound part of our common human condition, this service is deliberately very participatory for the congregation. It engages worshipers in symbolically enacting their realization of God's timelessness and trust in God's eternal love.

The service is divided by the six stanzas of Isaac Watts' hymn, *O God, Our Help in Ages Past*, which may be sung, at the appropriate times, by a soloist, ensemble, or choir. Stanzas 2 through 5 have alternate tunes suggested; worship planners may substitute their choice of any Common Meter tune. The first and sixth, however, should be sung to ST. ANNE, the tune commonly associated with this text.

## *Solo:*

"Poor Wayfaring Stranger"

I'm just a poor wayfaring stranger.  
A-travelin' through this world of woe.  
But there's no sickness, no toil or danger,  
in that bright land to which I go.  
I'm going there to see my Father,  
I'm going there no more to roam.  
I'm just a-going over Jordan,  
I'm just a-going over home.

*American Folk Song*

## *The Greeting:<sup>1</sup>*

Grow old along with me!  
The best is yet to be,  
The last of life, for which the first was made:  
Our times are in His Hand  
Who saith "A whole I planned,  
Youth shows but half; trust God, see all, nor be afraid!"

*Call to Worship: Ecclesiastes 3:1-8*

Leader:

For everything there is a season,  
and a time for every matter under heaven:

**People:**

**A time to be born, and a time to die;**  
A time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;  
**A time to kill, and a time to heal;**  
A time to break down, and a time to build up;  
**A time to weep, and a time to laugh;**  
A time to mourn and a time to dance;  
**A time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;**  
A time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;  
**A time to seek, and a time to lose;**  
A time to keep, and a time to throw away;  
**A time to tear, and a time to sew;**  
A time to keep silence, and a time to speak;  
**A time to love, and a time to hate;**

**All:**

**A time to war, and a time for peace.**



*O God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come,  
our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home.*

Tune: ST. ANNE

*Hymn:*

“A Mighty Fortress Is Our God”

*Choral Anthem:*

“Simple Gifts”



*Under the shadow of Thy throne Thy saints have dwelt secure;  
sufficient is Thine arm alone, and our defense is sure.*

Tune: CRIMOND

*Hymn:*

“For the Beauty of the Earth”<sup>2</sup>



***Before the hills in order stood, or earth received her frame,  
from everlasting Thou art God, to endless years the same.***

**Tune:** ARLINGTON

**Hymn:**

“Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise”<sup>3</sup>

**Scripture Readings:** Genesis 18:1-3, 9-15 and Luke 1:5-20

**Sermon:**

“Surprised by Age”

God summons anyone at anytime to service, including people who are “getting on in years” (Luke 1:7).

With both Sarah and Elizabeth, God subtly displays a sense of humor. Though Sarah laughs, then lies to God, God ignores this and has the last laugh. Zechariah’s understandable disbelief at the promise of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, is rewarded with muteness—both a sign of his being in the presence of someone holy and a kind of teasing by God.



***A thousand ages in Thy sight are like an evening gone,  
short as the watch that ends the night before the rising sun.***

**Tune:** NEW BRITAIN

**Reading and Hymn:**

First Reader:

Abide with me, fast falls the eventide;  
the darkness deepens; Lord with me abide:  
when other helpers fail, and comforts flee,  
help of the helpless, O abide with me.<sup>4</sup>

“O Day of God, Draw Nigh” (stanzas 1 and 2)

O Day of God, draw nigh  
in beauty and in power;  
come with thy timeless judgment now  
to match our present hour.

Bring to our troubled minds,  
uncertain and afraid,  
the quiet of a steadfast faith,  
calm of a call obeyed.

Second Reader:

Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day;  
earth's joys grow dim, its glories pass away;  
change and decay in all around I see:  
O Thou who changest not, abide with me.<sup>4</sup>

"O Day of God, Draw Nigh" (stanzas 3 and 4)

Bring justice to our land,  
that all may dwell secure,  
and finely build for days to come  
foundations that endure.

Bring to our world of strife  
Thy sovereign Word of peace,  
that war may haunt the earth no more,  
and desolation cease.

*R. B. Y. Scott (1937)*

*Tune:* ST. MICHAEL



*Time, like an ever rolling stream, bears all who breathe away;  
they fly, forgotten, as a dream dies at the opening day.*

*Tune:* MORNING SONG

## *Prayers of the People*

### *Prayer Response:*

Leader/**People:**

When the storms of life are raging, **stand by me, stand by me.**  
When the storms of life are raging, **stand by me, stand by me.**  
When the world is tossing me, like a ship upon the sea,  
Thou who rulest wind and water, **stand by me, stand by me.**

In the midst of faults and failures, **stand by me, stand by me.**  
In the midst of faults and failures, **stand by me, stand by me.**  
When I've done the best I can, and my friends misunderstand,  
Thou who knowest all about me, **stand by me, stand by me.**

When I'm growing old and feeble, **stand by me, stand by me.**  
When I'm growing old and feeble, **stand by me, stand by me.**  
When my life becomes a burden, and I'm nearing chilly Jordan,  
O thou Lily of the Valley, **stand by me, stand by me.**

*Charles Albert Tindley (1851-1933)*

### *Prayer Response Hymn:*

“Jesus, Still Lead On” (verses 1, 3, and 4)

Jesus, still lead on, till our rest be won,  
And, although the way be cheerless,  
We will follow calm and fearless,  
Guide us by Thy hand to our fatherland.

When we seek relief from a long felt grief;  
When temptations come alluring,  
Make us patient and enduring;  
Show us that bright shore where we weep no more.

Jesus, still lead on, till our rest be won;  
Heavenly Leader, still direct us,  
Still support, control, protect us,  
Till we safely stand in our fatherland.

*Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf (1700-1760)*

*Tune: SEELENBRAUTIGAM*

### *Choral Offertory:*

“Saints Bound for Heaven”<sup>5</sup>

Our bondage it shall end, by and by;  
from Egypt's yoke set free;  
hail the glorious jubilee,  
and to Canaan we'll return, by and by.

Our deliverer He shall come, by and by;  
and our sorrows have an end,  
with our three score years and ten,  
and vast glory crown the day, by and by.

Though our enemies are strong, we'll go on;  
though our hearts dissolve with fear,  
lo, Sinai's God is near,  
while the fiery pillar moves, we'll go on.

And when to Jordan's floods, we are come,  
Jehovah rules the tide,  
and the waters he'll divide,  
and the ransom'd host shall shout, we are come.

Then friends shall meet again, who have loved,  
our embraces shall be sweet,  
at the dear Redeemer's feet,  
when we meet to part no more, who have loved.

Then with all the happy throng, we'll rejoice  
shouting glory to our King,  
till the vaults of heaven ring,  
and through all eternity we'll rejoice.

*American Folk Hymn*

### *Doxology*

### *Closing Exhortation (2 Peter 3:8-9):*

But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.



***O God our help in ages past, our hope for years to come,  
be Thou our guard while troubles last, and our eternal home.***

***Tune: ST. ANNE***

*Spoken Benediction (from Luke 2:29-32):*

Gracious God, now let us depart in peace according to your word; for we have seen your salvation which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for the revelation to the Gentiles and glory to your people Israel.

*Hymn of Benediction:*

"I'll Praise My Maker While I've Breath"

I'll praise my Maker while I've breath,  
And when my voice is lost in death,  
Praise shall employ my nobler powers;  
My days of praise shall ne'er be past,  
While life, and thought, and being last,  
Or immortality endures.

The Lord has eyes to give the blind;  
The Lord supports the sinking mind;  
He sends the lab'ring conscience peace;  
He helps the stranger in distress,  
The widow, and the fatherless,  
And grants the pris'ner sweet release.

I'll praise Him while He lends me breath,  
And when my voice is lost in death,  
Praise shall employ my nobler powers;  
My days of praise shall ne'er be past,  
While life, and thought, and being last,  
Or immortality endures.

*Isaac Watts (1674-1748)*

*Tune: OLD 113<sup>th</sup>*

**NOTES**

- 1 Opening stanza of Robert Browning, "Rabbi Ben Ezra."
- 2 Have all sing the first and last stanzas and all refrains, but assign various groups to sing the other stanzas (e.g. women only, men only, senior adults, choir, etc.).
- 3 A soloist sings stanza 1; an ensemble, stanza 2; choir, stanza 3; everyone, stanza 4.
- 4 From "Abide With Me," by Henry F. Lyte (1793-1847).
- 5 This text, in a choral arrangement by Robert Shaw and Alice Parker, is available from Lawson-Gould Music Publishers by calling 1-800-327-7643 (catalog #911).

---

**DAVID M. BRIDGES**

*is Minister of Music at McKendree Methodist Church in Nashville, and teaches at Belmont University and Middle Tennessee State University.*



# Aging with Hope and Wonder

BY TERRY THOMAS PRIMER

Longfellow wrote that “age is opportunity, no less than youth.” While television, radio, and print media champion the young as models of vision, vigor, and imagination, Scripture portrays quite another story. Many men and women, chosen by God to help move forward the divine-human story, were senior citizens.

---

Barry, born in 1910, came from a struggling immigrant family.<sup>1</sup> Fortunately, his keen mind earned him a scholarship from a fine state university in the midst of the Great Depression. Following college, he completed a law degree from New York University. Returning to his home town, he developed a reputation as an honest, impartial arbitrator of the law and, over time, was appointed to increasingly more prestigious state and federal court positions. In retirement, Barry began a career in philanthropy, endowing his alma mater with scholarships and contributing to his favorite community charities and causes. Now in his nineties, although physically diminished, he is known for his excellent memory, sharp mind, and generous nature. Each fall he eagerly waits to meet the young men and women who are recipients of the scholarship established in his name.

Frank, who is seventy-five, was by every report a successful businessman in New York City. For many years he managed a thriving fish trade for local restaurants and markets, but he always yearned for something more, to make a difference in this world. After twenty-five years in business, he retired, earned a master's degree in psychotherapy from Yeshiva University and became a family counselor for a social service agency spe-

cializing in services to troubled youth. Frank grew up in a tough neighborhood, and identified with the scrappy young men who had lost their way. Although old enough to be a grandfather to his clients, he loved his work and his clients appreciated his no-nonsense but loving guidance. The onset of Parkinson's disease convinced Frank and his wife to move into a full-service retirement community. Although no longer in private practice, Frank is an unofficial member of the Resident Services team, seeking out troubled senior adults who need a listening ear, and offering his expertise gratis.

I am convinced that Lillian may never retire. In 1945, she was one of only a handful of African-American women to earn a Ph.D. from a distinguished university. A fervent believer in the value of education, she advocated its free and open access for all citizens. Over her long career she served as an educational advisor to several presidents. In her retirement, she serves on many national, state, and local boards. At eighty-four she is still highly sought after and rarely turns down a speaking engagement. In the 1980s, she was ordained to the gospel ministry and the words of Jesus will be on her lips long after she is unable to travel.

#### **"AGE IS OPPORTUNITY"**

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote that "age is opportunity, no less than youth," and each of these three and many others have taken advantage of the "seventy years or perhaps eighty, if we are strong," as allotted by the Psalmist, to make a contribution to this world (Psalm 90:10). Though today television, radio, and print media champion the young as models of vision, vigor, and imagination, as if these were the only people worthy of notice, the Bible portrays quite another story. Many key characters, chosen by God to move forward the divine-human story, were senior citizens many years past their prime even according to our standards. Noah was 600 years old when told to build the ark before the flooding of the world; Joseph was 110 when he died; Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, was described as "getting on in years" (Matthew 1:18); and Anna, the prophetess, was eighty-four when she encountered the baby Jesus. Age is revered in Scripture as a sign of favor; the ancient patriarchs and matriarchs named in the genealogies are esteemed for their long life and wisdom. We admire the enthusiasm and freshness of youth, which bubbles over like champagne; but from the elderly we can gain deep wisdom, which has been aged in the casks of experience, distilled by optimism and death, and now embodies the fullness of life. Perhaps only those accustomed to watching the mysterious ways of God can recognize the Almighty's fingerprints on the pages of time and on a life.

#### **OLD-FASHIONED HOSPITALITY**

In Genesis 18, two senior adults receive God's revelation regarding Issac, the promised child and the future of Israel. Chapter 17 describes

Abraham as 100 years old and his wife, Sarah, is ten years his junior at age ninety. Stumbling their way toward righteous, these two imperfect but faithful people are well along in years. The biblical writer tips off the reader that it is God who is coming to visit on this hot, dry, dusty day, but apparently Abraham doesn't know this. Three travelers arrive suddenly, perhaps awakening Abraham as he rests in the shade of his tent. He responds with magnificent hospitality, bowing low and addressing one as "my Lord." (The word "Lord" is not the usual one for God but a title to address a person of superior rank.) Abraham bids the three not to pass him by, but to let their servant Abraham offer the shade of his tree, a little water for their hot, tired feet and a small morsel of bread to refresh them. The graciousness of their host persuades the three strangers to tarry awhile in his company.

With modest understatement, Abraham begs his travelers to accept his humble hospitality and then begins working on a feast fit for royalty. He asks Sarah to prepare bread using the choicest flour—and not just a loaf or two. Today, two loaves of bread require approximately 5-6 cups of flour. In contrast, Abraham asks his wife to prepare the equivalent of 28 cups of flour, and then he moves on to supervise the selection of the calf to be slaughtered and prepared. In this culture, serving meat was considered a rare delicacy, a costly sacrifice, and a sign of deep respect. With the meal in preparation, Abraham offers his visitors an appetizer of curds and milk, also an indication of his high esteem for his guests, since milk products were regarded as sources of vitality, possessing curative powers. When the meal is ready, Abraham personally serves his guests in the shade of the tree, waits while they eat, and attends them as a servant.

#### **LAUGHING AT GOD**

Up to this point, the biblical narrative has described the generous hospitality of Abraham to three traveling strangers, but in Genesis 18:9 the story shifts direction and reveals God's presence. One of the three heavenly visitors asks, "Where is your wife Sarah?" "There, in the tent," answers Abraham. Although hidden from view, Sarah moves to center stage. One of the three divine visitors, now identified as God, speaks, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son" (18:10). And Sarah, who is listening, laughs.

---

**We admire the enthusiasm and freshness of youth, which bubbles over like champagne; but from the elderly we can gain deep wisdom, which has been aged in the casks of experience, distilled by optimism and death, and now embodies the fullness of life.**

---

Was it a giggle of nervousness, a guffaw of incredulity, a chuckle of delight or perhaps a snort of impossibility? I wonder. Some months ago, I told this story to a group of residents gathered for chapel in a nursing home in which the average age is ninety. When I finished reading the Bible story, I asked the women there, "Would you like to be pregnant?" You should have heard the giggles. The women all looked at themselves and then at one another. In their faces you could see memories of pregnancy,

---

**Scripture reminds us that no one is ever too old to receive fresh promises from God.**

**Trust, therefore, in the Almighty, the Faithful One, and continue to hope. For hope ignites life, laughter, and generosity, even in the twilight of one's life.**

---

childbirth, and two-year-olds running wild. Then, as they looked at themselves in wheelchairs and with walkers, they laughed deep throaty chuckles of relief. Not a single one of them volunteered to become a mother again.

We are not given a description of Sarah's laugh, but the text reminds us that Abraham and Sarah were

candidates for gracious retirement, many years past childbearing and toddler-chasing age. "After I have grown old, and my husband is old," Sarah wonders to herself, "shall I have pleasure?" (18:12). There is a word play in the text and one could translate the passage this way: "Even though I am withered, shall I become ripe again?" In the prediction and in the overhearing of Sarah's thoughts and words, the power of God is revealed. God asks Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh? Is there anything too difficult for me?" Many years later the angel Gabriel will reassure Mary, another woman who is contemplating the impossible, with a strikingly similar phrase: "Is anything too difficult for God?" (Matthew 1:27).

God's question and Sarah's response reveal the Lord's faithfulness and Sarah's doubt. Why did she laugh? Because she is old and children are born to the young. Her incredulity is matched by the raucous laughter of Abraham earlier, in chapter 17, in which the covenant between God and Abraham is renewed and symbolized with a change in name. Abram becomes Abraham and Sarai becomes Sarah, which includes a special blessing for her: "I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her and she shall give rise to nations" (17:16). And in the very next verse, Genesis records, "Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, 'Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?'" Frankly, Sarah's laughter is modest in comparison, but it does offer God an opportunity to repeat that this time next year, she will be the mother of a son. However they

laughed, with guffaws, deep chuckles, giggles, or snorts of delight, God is patient and faithful.

### RESPONDING IN HOPE

This story of heavenly visitation is the basis for the name Isaac, meaning laughter, and I wonder what Abraham and Sarah said to one another after the three strangers went on their way. A gloriously impossible promise was reaffirmed to them, a son will be born, but on this occasion it will not be by the Holy Spirit. Isaac's birth requires these two to act in faith. In my mind's eye I can see them, old beyond their years, getting undressed for the night as the stars begin to twinkle. Slipping into bed, they kiss, holding each other tightly—and I bet they laughed, hoping against hope that the heavenly visitors are right, that there is nothing too difficult for God.

What about us? We are not the matriarchs and patriarchs of nations who have entertained angels. But perhaps this is an invitation for us is to continue to live, love, and hope, watching for God in unexpected places. Abraham's spontaneous hospitality provides the setting for a revelation from God who is patient with our laughter, doubt, and disbelief. Scripture reminds us that no one is ever too old to receive fresh promises from God. Trust, therefore, in the Almighty, the Faithful One, and continue to hope. For hope ignites life, laughter, and generosity, even in the twilight of one's life.<sup>2</sup>

### NOTES

1 "Barry," "Frank," and "Lillian" are not their real names, but their stories are true.

2 Nahum M. Sarna, ed., *Genesis, The JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 130.



**TERRY THOMAS PRIMER**

*is chaplain for Presbyterian Homes and Services at Monroe Village in Monroe, New Jersey.*

## ❖ Other Voices ❖

[Much] ambiguity permeates our thinking about aging. Is it a decline or an ascent? [Is life] a journey that moves upward until it peaks about middle age and then slopes downward to death? Shall we work to prevent aging or learn to revere it? We cannot learn to understand aging if we undervalue or overvalue its realities, or...simply try to make it appear as much like midlife or youth as possible. The fact is that aging is both descent and ascent, ...loss and gain. This is true of growth at every stage of the life cycle.

**KATHLEEN FISCHER**, *Winter Grace: Spirituality and Aging*

We are not alone in our worry about both the physical aspects of aging and the prejudice that exists toward the elderly, which is similar to racism or sexism. What makes it different is that the prejudice also exists among those of us who are either within this group or rapidly approaching it.

**JIMMY CARTER**, *The Virtues of Aging*

I am reviewing carefully the places in Scripture where I might find old age mentioned for the first time. Adam lived for 930 years, yet he is not called an old man. Methuselah's life was 969 years, and he is not called an old man. I am coming all the way down to the flood, and after the flood for almost three thousand years, and I find no one who has been called old. Abraham is the first one, and certainly he was much younger than Methuselah, but he is called an old man because his old age had been anointed with rich oil.... [I]t was full of days.

**ST. JEROME**, *Homilies on the Psalms 21*

So then, when are we old? The correct answer is...when we think we are—when we accept an attitude of dormancy, dependence on others, a substantial limitation on our physical and mental activity, and restrictions on the number of other people with whom we interact. As I know from experience, this is not tied very closely to how many years we've lived.

**JIMMY CARTER**, *The Virtues of Aging*

The...situation of many people, old and young alike, is a disease of the imagination. We have accepted the negative images of old age. The task... is to convert the imaginations of both old and young to a new vision of the human. And this can only happen if the old themselves refuse to let society define them, and instead internalize new images of the later years. Large numbers of older people who refuse to be seduced by our current value system could be an unprecedented prophetic force in the world.

**KATHLEEN FISCHER**, *Winter Grace: Spirituality and Aging*

Paul declares [in 2 Corinthians 4:16-18] that whereas aging and its changes are inevitable, they need not be calamitous. They can instead be opportunities for deeper spiritual awareness, greater understanding, and livelier fulfillment. The Bible makes plain that vision and bold faith are not limited to those under thirty. In fact God often summoned those who were near or beyond their “threescore and ten” to be agents of divine truth and purpose: Abraham and Sarah, Noah, Hannah, Naomi, Zechariah and Elizabeth, Simeon and Anna, Nicodemus.

**DONALD J. SHELBY**, *“It Takes a Long Time to Become Young”*

[The early Christian fathers and mothers have taught me] that whatever our culture tells us about life being an inevitably demoralizing business of falling apart, it is not what human life is about. Bodies do wear out and our minds do get slower, but human beings are made in the image of God who is love; and God’s intention for us, if we choose to pursue it, is continual growth—growth in love both of God and neighbor.

**ROBERTA C. BONDI**, *“Smoke, Tears, and Fire: Spirituality and Aging”*

We must expect and demand more of our opportunities to share fellowship with our elders. The church can become an extended family; utilize the experience, skills, gifts and graces of its elders; demand a stewardship on the part of its members which lasts a lifetime; be an advocate for its older members who have been dehumanized by secular systems; celebrate “redirection” rather than “retirement”; and be thankful for the servanthood, so frequently shown...by the loving action of older members. But most importantly, the church can learn more about what it means to be part of the Kingdom by more fully incorporating aging persons in the midst of its ministry.

**DANIEL B. OLIVER**, *“A Holistic Approach to Ministry”*

Because all the commandments have [a] social dimension, we must do the will of God as a “light of the world,” showing a way to the nation in which we live, indeed to the whole wide world. Care of the elderly should not be simply a family matter among us, for, in a way, Christian community replaces the conventional family unit; Christian community is a new-order family. Therefore, congregations must begin to wrestle with the problem of aging members. We are called to do God’s love and justice with the world’s elderly people.

**DAVID G. BUTTRICK**, *“Threescore, Ten, and Trouble: A Biblical View of Aging”*

What will the kingdom be like according to Zechariah [8:4-5]? It will be like a public park. There will be benches where the old folks can bask in the sunshine in enjoyment. No disease will have brought them premature death, no feebleness of body or mind will have impaired their ability to



stroll out to the park to chat with their friends. They will be able to enjoy their lives, in their fullness of years.

**ELIZABETH ACHEMEIER**, *Preaching from the Minor Prophets*

A guaranteed long life of well-being is not to be equated with “medical advances” that extend life expectancy in order to keep people “alive” in various states of misery and dysfunction. Such a vision of the future as conjured by our technological capacity would be completely incongruous with the coming shalom of Jeru-shalom. Thus the vision is not only of an extended quality of life but a quality of life congruent with the gifts of a generous creator. There will be a reordering of resources so that all may luxuriate in life as the creator intends.

**WALTER BRUEGGEMANN**, *Isaiah 40-66, commenting on Isaiah 65:20*

[W]e should recognize that the commandment [to honor parents] is addressed to adult children. We are not to shout the command at little children or threaten them with stoning if they don’t conform. “Honor your father and mother” is a social injunction designed for mature children and their even more mature parents. Moreover, [it] addresses corporate Israel. We Americans tend to read our Bibles as if every “you” were second-person singular. But the Fifth Commandment is addressed to Israel and is intended to define social policy. ...[T]he commandment has more to do with social security issues than with psychological attitudes within the family.

**DAVID G. BUTTRICK**, *“Threescore, Ten, and Trouble: A Biblical View of Aging”*

Association with the older generation gives the younger generation practice in the art of living and dying. Life should not be a disjointed affair with each generation living isolated from the next, like sausage links. Life is a flowing stream.... My conclusion is that growing older Christian is not much different than growing up Christian. It’s a matter of models and support. Mother and Dad were my models growing up. Older adults are my models now. I can be a model to younger men and women.

**KATIE FUNK WIEBE**, *Border Crossing: A Spiritual Journey*

My own relationship with Christ has changed across the years. The Christ to whom I committed my life as a child still reigns over the central altar of my life, but the rugged realities of time, the harsh hurts of broken hearts, and the windy gusts of change have brought me to a more weathered, more mature image of him. There is a deepening awareness of the absolute stability of God’s unchanging presence in the changing realities of my life experience as my childhood images of Jesus age with me. My experience is that Christ ages very well!

**JAMES A. HARNISH**, *“Do You Know What Time It Is?”*



---

# What's Retirement For?

BY WILLIAM L. TURNER

Retirement may be our best chance to know ourselves and how we are shaped by our relationship to God, to use ministry gifts in new ways, and to discover new gifts and fresh energy. Even though later years can burden us with serious illness of self or spouse, retirement may be a wonderful season of grace to grow toward both the “being” and the “doing” of mature faith.

---

Winding up a three-Saturday New Testament workshop for a Lay Institute, I asked the retirees in the crowd to stick around after the final session and share their thoughts. “I’m new at this,” I admitted, “so I’d like to know what you think. What’s retirement for?” Among the eager and enthusiastic responses were these:

“It’s for more ‘quality time’ with your spouse and family.”

“Retirement is a time to let go of some responsibilities (and pick up some more).”

“It’s release from the tyranny of the schedule, so you can slow down and ‘smell the roses.’”

“It’s for being unprogrammed—choosing your own interests and deadlines, doing what *you* like for a change.”

“It’s an opportunity to learn new things and make different contributions” (one seventy-plus-year-old smiled broadly as she spoke about learning to play the piano).

“Retirement means that I have more time to devote to the inner journey—exploring myself and my relationship with God.”

When I posed the question to my widowed, seventy-nine-year-old mother-in-law, she laughed and said, “Retirement is for doing all the jobs

nobody else will do!" The agenda for this retired school teacher includes serving as fund-raiser and treasurer for the volunteer fire department, and active participation in her local church, two senior adult clubs, one senior adult choir, Baptist Women, a "knitters' club," a retired teachers organization, and the local garden club. She also serves as a museum docent and tutors a young Hispanic student in English. When we try to phone her from our home two states away, it's a challenge to catch her at home!

## THE CHANGING FACE OF RETIREMENT

I retired at sixty-three, after nearly forty-five years of active pastoral ministry. Since becoming a "rookie retiree" a year ago, I have learned a lot from those who've traveled further down that road. For one thing, there is a decided shift away from the myth of retirement as loafing: the retirees I know are busy people.

Also, in the current economic climate, many people are choosing to leave their jobs much later; recent stock market losses, shrinking nest eggs, and the rising costs of health care keep many people on the job longer than they had planned. In fact, there are eighteen million men and women age fifty-five and older still in the labor force, and the number is growing. Workers over sixty-five, the traditional retirement age, are projected to number 5.4 million by 2010. Despite the limitations on earnings imposed by current tax laws, between 75 and 80 percent of today's workers plan to keep working at least part-time in their retirement. Many will need the money; it's that simple.

At least half, however, say that they will continue working for "enjoyment and a sense of purpose."<sup>1</sup> They are like the seventy-five-year-old woman I met recently in a nearby fast-food restaurant. She's been greeting customers, replenishing napkins, straws, and condiments, and clearing tables for the past seven years. She retired from a local company at sixty-five, but later returned to work because she hungered for interpersonal contact. "I'm here because I like people," she told me. Her part-time job provides some spending money, and she enjoys that. She's careful, however, not to let it interfere with her house and garden chores—or her time with children and grandchildren.

She is typical of the new activism that is changing the face of retirement. Even the terminology has gotten fuzzy; ask people if they are retired, and you may hear, "Yes, no, sort of, not really, I don't know."

The lengthening of life, along with the advancing vitality of older people, may turn out to be the most significant scientific/medical achievement of the twentieth century, with about twenty-five years added to life expectancy since 1900.

A few years ago, Florida Senator Bob Graham reported on a picnic planned for forty-five centenarians in Tallahassee. It had to be postponed because half of them could not attend; they were out of town on vacation.<sup>2</sup>

A Harris Poll conducted for the National Council on Aging discovered that nearly half of those polled between sixty-five and sixty-nine considered themselves “middle-aged,” as did a third of those in their seventies.<sup>3</sup>

Though we are all terminal, and though serious illness of self or spouse can be a burden in later life, these additional years may turn out to be a wonderful “grace period.” So what shall we do with such a gift?

Despite my very limited experience, I venture to suggest four significant tasks for these days of grace.

## RETIREMENT CALLS FOR REFLECTION

First, there is the need for some *reflection*. I don't think that “retirement” is a biblical word. There are many references to “rest” in Scripture, especially the sabbath rest that can give balance and pacing to our lives at any age. The early days of retirement may well serve as a kind of sabbath pause where we rest, reflect, and prepare for a very different lifestyle.

There is also a good bit of biblical encouragement about aging well and in health—surely one of the most obvious tasks of retirement years. We learn that Abraham, who was already seventy-five when he left Haran to follow God's leading, died a century later “in a good old age...and full of years” (Genesis 25:8). We discover that in the final years of Moses' life, “his sight was unimpaired and his vigor had not abated” (Deuteronomy 34:7). The psalmist celebrates those who “flourish in the courts of our God. In old age they still produce fruit” (Psalm 92:13-14). Such examples call on us to take care of ourselves physically, emotionally, and spiritually so that retirement years may be as useful and productive as possible.

The story of Caleb's later life is particularly heartening and instructive (Joshua 14:6-15). He and Joshua had spied out the land of promise forty-five years earlier. Now, at

eighty-five, he asks for his part of the new territory. Though it is the least fertile and most difficult terrain, Caleb wants the hill country. He has waited forty-five years; now he is ready for a fresh challenge.

Retirement, at whatever age, confronts us with

the need to seriously reflect on the challenges ahead. It's wise to start such reflection as early as mid-life, or before, rather than being blind-sided by retirement reality itself. A friend of mine retired from a long-time business career. He and his wife had grown children, a beautiful home, and a comfortable retirement income. Still, he was deeply despondent. He had based his identity on his job; now that was gone. He eventually pulled out of his

---

**The Bible speaks of sabbath rest for balance and pacing in our lives at any age. The early days of retirement may serve as a sabbath pause where we rest, reflect, and prepare for a very different lifestyle.**

---

despair, but he lost nearly three years of what could have been a much more meaningful life.

Reflection is a necessary first step in retirement preparation. What expectations do we have? How realistic are they? What difficult changes lie ahead? What physical, mental, and financial resources will we need to support this new and challenging part of life? As my neighbor, who recently retired at age seventy-seven, told me, “For retirement, you need a plan.”

## REFRAMING OUR LIVES

A second retirement task is the *reframing* of our lives. I awakened on the mornings immediately following my retirement with the same number of daylight hours I’d enjoyed for more than six decades. The difference now was huge, however, in that the decisions about the use of those hours were largely *mine*! For several weeks, every day felt like Saturday as I eased into the long-delayed chores of residential relocation (from Texas to Kentucky), home repairs, various do-it-yourself projects, shopping, reading, and fishing. My grandson’s gift of a special “retirement watch,” with all the numbers and hands unattached and loose inside the casing, seemed wonderfully appropriate.

After about six weeks, however, I knew that I had to reframe my life. After all those busy days in active pastorates, how could I use my time in fresh and creative ways? In the process of answering that question, there were losses to be faced, grieved, and released. They included a twenty-four/seven schedule of work-related activities, a steady paycheck, and daily interaction with church members and staff colleagues. Bereft of these, was I now useless, discarded, and relegated to “coasting” with my memories? Though I had worked hard not to define myself exclusively by my profession, I felt such losses deeply. I prayed hard for the ability to let go and to remain open to new possibilities.

## RECONNECTING WITH ULTIMATE VALUES

During this reframing process, I found myself faced with a third retirement task: *reconnecting* with my life’s ultimate values. What are the core convictions of my life? How have they sustained me? Can they continue to shape me at this stage of my life? Retirement offers an opportunity to reconnect with our values by rethinking such questions.

Among the most important reconnections are the ones to self and to God. “It’s a time to find out who you really are.” I’ve heard that often among friends and colleagues in retirement, and I’m discovering it to be true. This means that, at long last, we may concentrate on *being* at least as much as *doing*. In our early and middle years of active employment, we may honestly affirm our *being*, may gladly welcome our identity as disciples of Jesus. It’s just that *doing* uses up so much of our time—finishing school, getting a job, earning a living, buying a house, funding family expenses, trying to secure a sound financial future, and so on. We cherish

relationships with God, family, and friends at all stages of the life cycle, but we do live long in the grip of economic necessity and consumerism. With retirement comes our best chance to know ourselves and how we are shaped by our relationship to God.

I find myself free to create more space for prayer, focused reading, solitude, worship and introspection. Nobody pays me to be a “religious professional” any longer; I am simply a believer and a pilgrim. My inner journey with God is now uniquely my own, and my life is richer for that.

Despite the physical limitations and death which will inevitably accompany these later years, my present focus coincides with the apostle Paul's: “Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day” (2 Corinthians 4:16). Self-discovery and spiritual growth are worthy goals for Christians in retirement in ways that simply “staying busy” can never be.

### **REDIRECTING OUR LIVES**

An abiding goal in the Christian life is to align our inner and outer journeys so that they form in us an authentic wholeness, a true spiritual integrity. We allow our relationship with God to transform all our relationships and all we do. The *redirecting* of our lives, energies, and gifts for ministry can grow best out of such an alignment. Retirement not only provides time for such spiritual formation; it also extends us great freedom to make sound choices. As Kathleen Fischer points out, if our physical stamina is reduced during life's later years, we will be “less willing to spend our energy on things that do not matter.”<sup>4</sup>

Sometimes new directions emerge out of painful necessity. I have several friends who retired early in order to be caregivers for chronically-ill spouses. Having done that during several pre-retirement years myself, I can report that it taxes one's resources of patience, stamina, and tenacity. The

sobering realities of disability, divorce, or the death of a spouse can shift directions and priorities in unique and difficult ways. At these moments we draw heavily upon our trust in God's sustaining grace.

But redirection may take other forms. Alongside my adjustment to retirement stands the deepening joy of a new marriage. Earlene and I were married in June, 2001; we continue to learn and grow in a wonderful new

---

**New directions may emerge out of painful necessity. The sobering realities of disability, divorce, or the death of a spouse can shift directions and priorities in unique and difficult ways. At these moments we draw heavily upon our trust in God's sustaining grace.**

---

relationship. A retired neighbor (and devout Christian) now spends his days working to build affordable housing for low-income families. A retired surgeon now finds himself heavily involved in lay ministry, including preaching, in his church. Another woman, having completed a career in music education, now serves her church as minister of music. In my last pastorate, I watched scores of retirees help to operate a clothing center, a food pantry, a hospital and apartment ministry, and a ministry to internationals—in addition to myriad other church assignments. My own desires to preach and to mentor younger pastors are currently being satisfied with pulpit supply invitations and a part-time teaching job at a nearby seminary.

We may continue to use ministry gifts already discovered in different places and new ways. Or, we may discover different or delayed interests, new gifts, and fresh energy. Travel, continuing education, and renewed interpersonal contact, such as I now enjoy with my children and grandchildren, may well lead to exciting avocations or even second careers.

All in all, retirement seems to be a time for Christians to go on being pilgrims, learners, and risk-takers. I resonate with the conclusion of Malcolm Boyd who, at age seventy-eight, wrote:

I remain an eternal student, incomplete and unfulfilled, gazing at a full range of Mount Everests of the mind that remain unclimbed.... Faith is the ground I stand on, the air I breathe, the thread of life that connects me to continuing life with God in eternity.<sup>5</sup>

This is truly a season of grace during which we may explore what one person calls “the rest of ourselves,” and thus grow toward both the *being* and the *doing* of mature faith.

## NOTES

1 Walt Duka and Trish Nicholson, “Retirees Rocking Old Roles,” *AARP Bulletin* (December, 2002), 3-4.

2 Dudley Clendinen, “What to Call People Who Used to Be Old,” *The New York Times* (July 2, 2000), 10.

3 Ibid.

4 *Winter Grace: Spirituality and Aging* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1998), 55.

5 *Simple Grace* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 132-133.



**WILLIAM L. TURNER**

*lives in Lancaster, Kentucky. He is now retired after forty-five years in pastoral ministry, most recently as Pastor of South Main Baptist Church in Houston, Texas.*

---

# Come, Let Us Worship

BY TERRY W. YORK

“Old and young together!” exclaims the psalmist, “Let them praise the name of the Lord.” Congregations are realizing this vision in creative ways, through cross-generational worship in which all ages help plan, lead, and participate in their coming together to adore God, encourage faithful discipleship, and nurture community.

---

**D**espite much good that is done in generation-focused congregations and their worship, there is a growing awareness that we need to reunite the generations for worship. Congregations are beginning to experiment with cross-generational approaches in which members of all ages help plan, lead, and participate in worship. Here are helpful resources for establishing cross-generational worship.<sup>†</sup>

## FINDING A COMMON STORY

Those who “grew up” in church or who have been members for many decades are a “membership generation” quite apart from those who joined recently, no matter what their age. Gil Rendle, in *The Multigenerational Congregation: Meeting the Leadership Challenge* (The Alban Institute, 2002; 150 pp., \$18.00), focuses on differences between long-term and short-term membership generations, but he also makes helpful observations about cross-generational worship.

Rendle finds that stories are fertile ground on which the generations can meet. He invites members to “find the [biblical] story they are living, and...to explain why they believe they are living that story. [He] will often expand the possibilities, allowing the group to use a denominational hymnal if they prefer to find the hymn they are living” (p. 52). As they weave together the biblical story, Christianity’s story, the congregation’s story, and their personal stories, members realize that they are living together in



a colorful tapestry of overlapping and intersecting narratives.

Multi-generational congregations are indeed “countercultural institutions in an increasingly market-driven culture,” Rendle admits (p. 23). They may face tension and conflict when they move toward cross-generational worship. If this struggle is identified and explained early in the process, it can be approached as a challenge, a goal for the community to accomplish together. Congregations can meet the challenge when they enjoy strong, yet flexible, leadership, foster careful communication on the part of clergy and laity, and keep in mind the value of cross-generational worship. The generations do, in fact, need each other.

### THE NEED TO LINK THREE GENERATIONS

Certainly, worship is closely linked to a congregation’s whole life: worship energizes a church’s entire ministry, even as other dimensions of congregational life energize worship. That is why participating in the whole, working together and worshiping together, lies at the heart of cross-generational congregations. Their worship fits with, and expresses, the joy they share in a sweep of cross-generational ministries.

Still, it takes arduous spiritual and emotional work to understand what other generations’ “music and dancing are all about.” Henri Nouwen explores this implication of the generations coming together in *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming* (Doubleday, 1992; 151 pp., \$16.00). “Not only does [the father] run out to welcome the younger wayward son, but he comes out also to meet the elder, dutiful son as he returns from the fields wondering what the music and dancing are all about and urges him to come in” (p. 102).

Younger and older generations in a congregation need to learn the significance of each other’s music and worship practices. Knowing what is important to others and how that importance is expressed is essential for communicating, working, and living together.

Commenting on the parable of the vineyard, in which the landowner pays the same wage to those who worked all day as to those who worked only a short time, Nouwen says, “God looks at his people as children of a family who are happy that those who have done only a little bit are as much loved as those who accomplish much” (p. 104). What youth offer to worship is important to the congregation, but so, too, is what older generations offer. This is not just a matter of playing fair; rather, it is the full community of God functioning at its best. Nouwen’s commentary prods us toward cross-generational worship. “God is so naïve,” he continues, “as to think that there would be great rejoicing when all those who spent time in his vineyard, whether a short time or a long time, were given the same attention. Indeed, he was so naïve as to expect that they would all be so happy to be in his presence that comparing themselves with each other wouldn’t even occur to them” (p. 104). Our worshiping together reflects



mutual love and respect of this magnitude by nurturing generational connections from childhood all the way through the senior adult years.

Encouraging all generations to participate in worship planning and leadership does not call for one-sided accommodation from elder toward younger. In *Will Our Children Have Faith?* (Morehouse Publishing, 2000; 176 pp., \$14.95), John Westerhoff points out we are called to maintain the continuum of ages within the community. "True community necessitates the presence and interaction of three generations," he writes. "Too often the church either lacks the third generation or sets the generations apart" (p. 52). The third (oldest) generation is the generation of memory. Without it, he contends, the other two—the generation of vision and the generation of the present—are locked myopically into the present moment. Together, the three generations preserve a fuller view of life. So, too, authentic worship calls for all three generations to be active; when this happens, the spiritual vitality and well-being of the entire congregation is enriched.

### **MAKING CROSS-GENERATIONAL WORSHIP HAPPEN**

How can we bring the desire for cross-generational worship to fruition? *Celebrating Passages in the Church: Reflections and Resources* (Chalice Press, 1999; 224 pp., \$19.99), reminds us of the opportunities that our life-milestones present. Editor Hugh W. Sanborn gathers essays and worship materials that address two distinct sets of milestones: developmental passages, including transition from infancy to childhood, childhood to adulthood, midlife for women and men, and later maturity; and major transitional events such as birth, believer's baptism, graduation, marriage, divorce, vocational change, serious illness or accident, retirement, and death. The typical congregation does not recognize or celebrate many of these important passages. "We Protestants," Sanborn gathers from this, "often [give] lip service rather than embodiment to our understanding that Christianity is a way of life" flowing through these significant transitional periods and events (p. 2).

The contributors help us celebrate more of these life-milestones in corporate worship. Each author addresses a particular life passage or transitional event biblically and theologically, and then offers guidance to incorporate this life-milestone perspective into worship. Many include creative orders of worship with scripture readings, prayers, hymns and songs, worship rites, and congregational responsive readings.

*Celebrating Passages* offers a rich resource for bringing the generations together in worship to commemorate the experiences we hold in common. This approach to worship celebrates life's grand moments of joy—birth, baptism, or marriage—and mourns, but with hope, in those occasions of desperate grief—death, divorce, or life's many losses. It reawakens in us the knowledge that all of our years spill over with sacred time and grace-filled events. When, as a community of faith, we celebrate this fullness of

human life, sharing together in the sorrows and the joys that are particular to the young and the old, we strengthen generational connections and nurture the community's worship, faith formation, and discipleship.

### LED BY THE HEART

Congregations need not erupt in conflict as they move toward authentic cross-generational worship. There is no reason to rush through careful listening and planning, actions which are themselves ministry that lead to cross-generational worship.

Thomas Long's *Beyond the Worship Wars: Building Vital and Faithful Worship* (The Alban Institute, 2001; 119 pp., \$16.00) encourages us to work within the bounds of what "the congregation knows by heart." He shares the following personal story which suggests cross-generational worship may be closer at hand than we might suspect. One Sunday when the usual call came for the congregation to confess their faith by reciting the Apostles' Creed, Long became aware that, for the first time ever, his eleven-year-old son joined him in reciting the creed. "Where did my son get this Trinitarian formula?" he wondered. "We never explicitly taught David the creed, never sat at the kitchen table with flash cards reading 'I believe in God, the Father almighty.'" David learned the Creed, of course, "by being in worship, by hearing it recited week after week, until that day when memory and maturity and motivation converged and he stood up and joined in the chorus of conviction" (pp. 86-87). This beautifully illustrates operating within the bounds of what a congregation knows by heart.

Long offers four insights to facilitate reforming congregational worship: pastoral leadership is key; some congregational conflict is inevitable; changing worship requires significant lay involvement; and education and publicity, for children and adults, paves the way for renewal. Before launching into reforming congregational worship, consider the "state of your communion." A great deal of practical help in assessing a congregation and determining a path toward cross-generational worship that minimizes conflict can be found in *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook* (Abingdon, 1998; 256 pp., \$43.95), edited by Nancy T. Ammerman, Jackson W. Carroll, Charles S. Dudley, and William McKinney. This book addresses not only worship, but also a congregation's whole life and work.

Establishing cross-generational worship is not an end in itself. When achieved, it cultivates a congregation where the good news of Christ is lived and shared, vibrantly, by young and old alike.

### NOTE

† Much of this article is borrowed, in somewhat altered form, from my article, "Cross-Generational Worship," *Family Ministry: Empowering Through Faith* 16:4 (2002), 33-46.

---

# Caring for Aging Parents

BY DENNIS R. MYERS

Eldercare is becoming increasingly distorted by the rationing of health resources, institutions paternalistically controlling the care recipient's treatment, the fragmenting of relationships between generations, and the desire to preserve life at all costs. The books reviewed here go "against the stream" by drawing upon biblical instruction and personal faith to guide caregivers who make hard choices in the crucible of parent care.

---

**M**arie is fifty-six and recovering from triple bypass surgery. She calls with urgency in her voice, deeply concerned about her eighty-three-year-old mother, who lives alone in the same city. "Mother is going downhill fast. She's not eating right, and getting around is more and more difficult for her. I want her to move to a place where she can get the care she needs, or even move in with me. It would be so much better for her. Every time I try to bring all this up, she gets so upset with me and says she is doing just fine. She is so stubborn and hard-headed! I love her so much and I am afraid for her. I am just at my wits end. What am I to do?"

Marie is one of twenty-four million caregivers searching for answers to caregiving dilemmas. Though parent care is normative for mid-life, and a rite of passage for every family, the care-giving role often comes suddenly, catching us in a web of uncertainty, shaking strongholds of identity, and scattering delusions of immortality. For the Christian caregiver, motivated by the commandment to "honor your father and mother," the words of Paul in Colossians 3:12 are instructive: "clothe yourselves with compassion,

kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.” How do we “clothe ourselves in compassion” when the recipient of our caring rails against loss of autonomy and personhood? How can personal autonomy be preserved in the context of increasing dependency and loss? On what moral basis can decisions be made that threaten a parent’s sense of independence and personhood? How can we assist family caregivers with everyday decisions, and

---

**The recovery of authentic autonomy serves as a guiding ethic for compassionate caregiving. To the extent possible, older receivers of care should be offered meaningful choices that go beyond mastery of tasks and permit expression of personhood.**

---

enable them to cope with the personal consequences of parent care?

The four books in this review furnish substantive guidance to caregivers who must make hard choices in the crucible of parent care. The authors draw upon their caring experiences, personal faith, and understanding of Scripture to speak empathically and ef-

fectively to the dilemmas associated with caring for an older parent whose capacities for autonomous living are compromised. Peter Jeffery, in *Going Against the Stream: Ethical Aspects of Ageing and Care*, (The Liturgical Press, 2001; 282 pp., \$24.95), constructs a sturdy ethical framework for caregiver choice-making within an environment of increasing dependency. Harold Koenig and Andrew Weaver, in *Pastoral Care of Older Adults* (Fortress Press, 1998; 98 pp., \$16.00), prepare pastors and other professional caregivers for the counseling and care management issues associated with family caregiving, while Grace Ketterman and Kathy King, in *Real Solutions for Caring for Your Elderly Parent* (Servant Publications, 2001; 140 pp., \$9.99), offer caregivers an inventory of practical information, including prescriptions for their own self-care. Houston Hudson’s *Circle of Years: A Caregiver’s Journal* (Morehouse Publishing, 1998; 118 pp., \$10.95) contributes an honest, real world perspective on parent care through the lens of his five-year caregiving journey with his mother.

Among the explosion of materials, media, and Internet resources currently available to assist the family caregiver, these books are exceptional in that they address family caregiving within the perspective of biblical instruction and Christian faith practices, and contribute, in a powerful way, to enhancing the efficacy of caregivers.

#### **CHRISTIAN COMPASSION AND AUTHENTIC AUTONOMY**

Eldercare in our culture is increasingly distorted by the rationing of health resources, institutions paternalistically controlling the care recipient’s treatment, the fragmenting of relationships between generations,

and the desire to preserve life at all costs. Since these provide a defective foundation for caring, Peter Jeffery proposes that we substitute a wide range of “upstream” cultural innovations grounded in Judeo-Christian values, a new “moral platform upon which the care of the elderly in the twenty-first century could be based” (p. xvii).

Jeffery’s philosophy of eldercare recognizes that Christian compassion infuses a spiritual quality into caregiving and leads the professional carer to a deeper empathic understanding of the care receiver. For example, the caregiver may assume that the older parent desires cure or rehabilitation when the care receiver really wants their caregiver to “believe in their potential, to value their life experience and to recognize that they have something to contribute to treatment” (pp. 46-47). The compassion Jeffery has in mind draws heavily on the person-centered approach of Carl Rogers, in that the caregiver takes on the pain of the care receiver. It is a gift of self, and a “sacrificial exchange of the best years of one’s life for the worst years of another” (p. 65) that transforms both caregiver and receiver.

Since loss of autonomy is at the heart of care with older persons, the recovery of authentic autonomy serves as a guiding ethic for compassionate caregiving. To the extent possible, older receivers of care should be offered meaningful choices. Decision-making opportunities should go beyond mastery of tasks and permit expression of personhood. Even in the face of declining competence or impaired autonomy, Jeffery asserts that moral caregiving discovers the realm wherein authentic autonomy can still be enacted. Paternalistic control by caregivers, though based on beneficence or good intentions, constrains authentic autonomy and provokes passivity and resistance to care initiatives.

Jeffery’s contribution of an ethical framework for eldercare cannot be overvalued. He accurately diagnoses the most problematic barriers to humane care for older persons and carefully engages the central ethical dilemmas of eldercare. However, the role of faith communities is not well-developed, and Jeffery does not explain how professional and family caregivers can “take on the pain” of the care receiver, while maintaining a “detached” yet personal relationship with the receiver. Though the idea of authentic autonomy holds some promise for indicating when constraint is proper, Jeffery would do well to provide more illustrations of how this theory works in actual cases.

## **COUNSEL FOR CAREGIVERS**

Harold Koenig and Andrew Weaver surveyed congregational leaders to determine the fifteen most common eldercare concerns to include in their guidebook for pastoral counselors and professional caregivers. Koenig, a specialist in psychiatry and renowned for his seminal research on religion and aging, and Weaver, a clinical psychologist and ordained minis-

ter, highlight the fact that the pastoral role includes helping “both caregivers and elders recognize the mutuality of meaning, purpose, and joy in the reciprocity of caring and being cared for” (pp. 62-63). Pastors link caregivers to opportunities for rest and renewal, and to agencies that promote companionship and provide assistance with the activities of daily living. They provide counsel and spiritual support crucial for carers who experience emotional upheavals, family distress, or lack awareness of community care resources. Their primer on biological aging, depression and grief, and Alzheimer’s disease is particularly helpful, as are the authors’ recommendations for congregational involvement in caregiver education and support. This quick reference for professional caregivers also enlightens the family caregiver on enabling older persons to deal with dependency, selecting a nursing home, and effecting reconciliation between caregiver and parent after a difficult nursing home placement.

Grace Ketterman, a psychiatrist and pediatrician, and Kathy King, a counseling psychologist in private practice, are a mother-daughter team committed to encouraging and informing family caregivers. They complement the pragmatic theme of Koenig and Weaver by offering practical advice on preventing and ameliorating a parent’s excess dependency, as well as safeguarding grown children from the effects of caregiver burnout. The chapter on encouraging independence while setting limits addresses how to balance autonomy with the realities of physical and mental challenges. In response to the question, “How can you monitor and be involved in the details of their lives without being intrusive, patronizing, or controlling?” (p. 14), Ketterman and King recommend caregivers become familiar with parents’ lifestyle and daily patterns before challenges to their independence emerge. Furthermore, they recommend blending parental independence with care provision according to the principle of minimal assistance. Illustrations of how to mix independence and assistance are provided in the context of everyday challenges like transportation, social involvement, sustainability of the home environment, and maintaining physical wellness.

## **THE REWARDS OF PARENTAL CAREGIVING**

Houston Hodges shifts the focus from advice-giving to endowing parental caregiving with heart and voice. *Circle of Years* invites us into his own parental care story. As this pastor cares for his mother over a period of five and one-half years, he discovers the “reversal of the care transition” becomes an “opportunity to enjoy harvest time, the closing of the circle of obligation that started life, when you were totally dependent on those who gave you birth and cared for you” (p. ix). His journal narrative illustrates how the ethic of authentic autonomy can be applied. Betty Hodges enjoys sitting at the table and enjoying a cup of coffee after her meal in the care facility, even though staff and her impatient son are ready for her to return

to her apartment. Her “talisman against the loss of her independence” is that she can say “Two more sips!” (p. 59). The accounts of caregiver distress actually can engender in readers the kind of intellectual empathy suggested by Peter Jeffery. Hodges confesses in a journal entry, “I have the collie-wobbles again, the hurting stomach that means I am not in charge and don’t know what’s next and am afraid. I think I’ll play more ocean music” (p. 41).

*Circle of Years* is a rare and invaluable contribution to the literature of parent caregiving. It is a source of encouragement for those who care and a useful, illustrative resource for lay and professional caregivers. It also provides a model of how ethical issues are actually expressed in everyday caregiving.

What, then, are the rewards for Marie and other caregivers who compassionately embrace the independence of an older parent and simultaneously minimize the risks associated with declining capacity? Is it the joy of expressing gratitude for a lifetime of a parent’s unconditional love, a “well done” for faithfulness to the call to honor father and mother, or the deepening of compassion? Whatever the benefits, the most precious of all may be the memorable moments of parental affirmation and blessing that occur during the journey. Hodges sums it up well: “There are other intrusions of wonder and grace in this life to decorate its gray-tinged walls with bursts of beauty. There will be a conversation, unexpected and at random, where memories of childhood long past come fresh as tomorrow morning.... There will be a delightful morning...when truth and compassion are running high...(when) through the fog of forgetting will come a crystal-clear word of love” (pp. 52-53).



**DENNIS R. MYERS**

*is Professor of Social Work and Gerontology, and Director of the Master of Social Work program at Baylor University in Waco, Texas.*



# Spirituality of Aging

BY MARK A. PETERS

As we grow in Christian faithfulness through our later years, we continue to be linked with others in community—aware of others, helping them, and learning from them. We draw not only upon our own wisdom, but also the wisdom of the faithful community that forms us. This sort of spirituality for aging has importance not just for the old, and may be even more necessary for the young.

---

Since spirituality and aging usually have been examined separately, books that bring them together must cover substantial ground in two specialties. Christian spirituality involves the way we are formed inwardly by the gospel to have new concerns, ways of seeing ourselves and the world, and attendant emotions and reactions. Studies of aging focus on the changes in persons and their relationships in the later years of life. Books on spirituality of aging must bridge theology and these social studies of the lives of older persons.

These works often look very different depending on their writers' primary discipline, and we see some of this variety in the three books under consideration. Such variety can be positive in that it provides many different approaches to an important subject, or potentially negative because readers may feel a bit overwhelmed as they attempt to choose a book that will be a helpful resource for them.

## **PRACTICAL GUIDANCE**

The selections in *Affirmative Aging: A Creative Approach to a Longer Life* (Harrisburg: Morehouse Publishing, 1994; 141 pp., \$14.95), edited by Joan E. Lukens, approach the spirituality of aging from very practical angles. Topics include intergenerational relationships, providing ministry opportu-



nities for older persons, the church's response to aging, and the church as family. Nancy Roth's "Meditation and Prayer" (pp. 41-57) is an especially helpful essay. Many people assume that elders who have been in the church all of their lives have mastered these disciplines. It is often the case, however, that elders find traditional ways of praying less helpful in later years. Roth covers a variety of types of prayer and meditation and offers model prayer exercises. Like all of the essays in this book, a study guide that facilitates individual and group reflection follows the essay.

Charles J. Fahey's "Ethics and the Third Age" (pp. 12-22) particularly struck me. He argues ethics and spirituality (or, as he prefers, "holiness") are inseparable. Because of this unity, Fahey suggests that an ethic of aging must have a social as well as a personal element. This is an important point to remember because those who seek to help "third agers" often concentrate on the individual dimension, seeing elders only in social terms when they receive care from the community. Emma Lou Benignus nicely picks up the importance of this theme in "Challenge to Ministry: Opportunities for Older Persons" (pp. 23-40) when she observes, "when asked what they wish, rather than what they need, many older persons say, 'To make a contribution,' 'To let the remaining years count'" (p. 23). Personal spirituality too often withers if it is not in touch with its social counterpart.

## **BIBLICAL REFLECTIONS**

*Reflections on Aging and Spiritual Growth* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998; 108 pp., \$11.00), edited by Andrew J. Weaver, Harold G. Koenig, and Phyllis C. Roe, is a different book altogether. As the title suggests, these essays are mainly individual reflections growing out of the writers' personal experiences.

Several writers interweave their personal reflections with themes that emerge from passages of Scripture. "For Everything There is a Season" (pp. 79-87), by well-known biblical scholar Gene M. Tucker, is a brief and highly readable survey of Old Testament attitudes towards aging. The Bible does not always present its views for easy discernment on topics of interest to us. Tucker garners from the Old Testament passages their sometimes positive, but other times negative, points of view on aging. William Williamson takes a text from Ecclesiastes, a book often seen as having one of the gloomiest views on old age, and one from Revelation to craft a sermon reminding us that retirement "is a whole new life" ("Retirement: A Whole New Life," pp. 89-95). Other contributors draw from passages in Genesis and Romans.

Monica Furlong's "A Spirituality of Aging" (pp. 43-49) haunts us with her opening statement, she "is not too sure that there is such a thing as a 'spirituality of aging.' There is simply the sort of spirituality that may, or may not, have helped us during the rest of our lives, and in old age we must do the best we can with the wisdom and knowledge we have cobbled

together..." (p. 43). I do not personally agree with her claim that one advantage of aging is that our lives become simplified because we have fewer choices. Yet, her opening statement is a warning to us all. Gerontologists, those who study aging and the elderly, like to say that the older we get the more we become our true selves. If this is the case, then we cannot start too soon to work on developing a spirituality that encompasses aging

---

**We cannot start too soon to work on developing a spirituality that encompasses aging.**

**The problem is that older adults, with their wisdom, are often segregated, sometimes physically, from the rest of the community of faith, and few people will venture to cross these barriers to learn from them.**

---

so we will not have to rely on what we have merely "cobbled together." Indeed, this is another good argument for the social aspect of spirituality that Fahey recommends. Being in community calls us to be aware of others, to help them, and to learn from them. Thus, it is not only our own wisdom we draw upon, but also the wisdom of the faithful community that forms us. This notion

is central to Kathleen Norris's "It's a Sweet Life" (pp. 103–8), drawing as it does on her communal experiences within the cloistered, or monastic, life.

## **THE SOCIAL DIMENSION OF CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY**

Kathleen Fischer's *Winter Grace: Spirituality and Aging* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1998; 210 pp., \$12.00) delves more deeply into the spirituality of aging. Where the essays in *Affirmative Aging* and *Reflections on Aging and Spiritual Growth* can be read in any order, picked up for momentary meditation and set down to come back to later, Fischer's book demands more sustained time and attention. *Winter Grace* deals with many of the same themes that we have seen in the other books, moving from the general topic of "Spirituality and Aging" through issues of "Memories" and "Dependence and Independence" to "Loss," "Dying," and "Resurrection." Fischer, a theologian and counselor of older adults, loves to tell what she has learned through stories, often poignant stories of people she has encountered in her years of counseling, sometimes interweaving these stories with her thoughts on biblical texts.

The theme of Christian spirituality possessing both a personal and social dimension is embedded in nearly every chapter of Fischer's book. We find it in the obvious places, such as her chapter "Dependence and Independence," but also in less obvious places like "Humor and Hope," where she observes that "laughter at its best is always social. A good joke cries out to be shared" (p. 127). Even the startling chapter "Resurrection" de-

velops this theme. In the section on resurrection and community, after briefly discussing the Bible's concept of the body, Fischer proclaims "since resurrection faith means that what happened to Jesus will also happen to us...this includes a communion with all persons which is deeper and more extensive than we have known.... The New Testament makes clear that resurrection is a community experience" (p. 192).

Fischer is also aware that a spirituality for aging is a lifelong process. "As we grow older we become more like ourselves," she notes, and later observes that a "spirituality of aging has importance not just for the old. It may, in fact, be even more necessary for the young" (pp. 14, 17). Why?

Because we are all aging together, the challenges and blessings of the later years are ones we all share. We all struggle with questions of self-esteem, longing to find our ultimate worth in who we are rather than in what we do. We all know grief, loss and failure, face limitations and the final limit, death. We puzzle over our purpose in life and the lasting value of our products. And at every age we also stand in wonder and gratitude at the beauties of creation and discover new dimensions of love and friendship (p. 19).

If Fischer's observations are correct, and they most assuredly are, then a spirituality of aging should begin at the earliest age possible. The problem is that older adults, with their wisdom, are often segregated, sometimes physically, from the rest of the community of faith, and few people will venture to cross these barriers to learn from them.

These books face a common difficulty. Their biggest problem is their cataloging—primarily as books on "Aging," and secondarily under the category of "Spirituality." Perhaps we will know that we have made progress in including the whole life cycle in the journey of faith when books such as these start appearing under the category of "Personal Growth and Development," for they truly speak to all of us.



**MARK A. PETERS**

*is pastor of McKendree United Methodist Church in Manquin, Virginia, and teaches at J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College in Richmond.*

  
**Christian Reflection**  
A Series in Faith and Ethics

**Focus Article:**  
 The Sign of Jonah  
(*Prophetic Ethics*, pp. 54-59)

**What do you think?**  
Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to:  
[Christian\\_Reflection@baylor.edu](mailto:Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu)

**Christian Reflection**  
Center for Christian Ethics  
Baylor University  
PO Box 97361  
Waco, TX 76798-7361  
Phone 1-866-798-2325  
[www.ChristianEthics.org](http://www.ChristianEthics.org)

© 2003 The Center for Christian Ethics

## The Sign of Jonah

Jesus' mysterious invocation of "the sign of Jonah" became, for Christians facing persecution and death in the early third century, a promise of God's ultimate act of grace and deliverance: resurrection from the dead.

**Prayer**  
*Scripture Reading: Matthew 12:38-41*


**Background Reading:**  
The Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and three nights. Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish:  
"I called to the Lord out of my distress, and you heard my voice. You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows passed over me."  
Then he said, "I am driven away from your sight; how shall I look again upon your holy temple?" The waters closed in around his head at the roots of the mountains.  
I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever; yet you raised me up from the Pit, O Lord. As my life was ebbing away, I remembered the Lord, and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple, I with the voice of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Deliverance belongs to the Lord!  
Then the Lord spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land.

**Reflection**  
"In their speaking, art, and writing, in their music, hear God's voice. Why composer, painter, poet, why the note and color choice?" begins Terry York's new hymn (*Prophetic Ethics*, p. 51). The Jonah marbles, which are a rare artistic creation dating to the third century A.D., and the many appearances of Jonah scenes on early Christian sarcophagi and catacomb paintings, indicate this story was one of the first narratives depicted in Christian art. These artistic expressions reveal important clues about the early church's theological imagination.  
"Early Christians interpreted Old Testament prophecies and church's Christians, interpreting the ministry of Jesus or the events as announcing Jesus' mysterious rebuke of some religious leaders demanding a prophetic sign."  
Jonah was inspired by Jesus' healing of a man's withered hand (Matthew 12:9-14), curing crowds of sick people (12:15). Leaders demanding followed Jesus' crowds of sick people (12:22-23). By asking for a sign, the religious leaders were not seeking additional miraculous healings; even Beelzebul can perform miracles and wonders, they charged (12:24). Instead, they demanded an

14



**Focus Article:**

 The Sign of Jonah  
(Prophetic Ethics, pp 54-59)

What do you think?

What do you think?  
Was this study guide useful  
for your personal or group  
study? Please send your  
suggestions to:  
[Christian\\_Reflection@baylor.edu](mailto:Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu)

**Christian Reflection**  
Center for Christian Ethics  
Baylor University  
PO Box 97361  
Waco, TX 76798-7361  
Phone 1-866-298-2325  
[www.ChristianEthics.us](http://www.ChristianEthics.us)

© 2003 The Center for Christian Ethics

## The Sign of Jonah

## The Sign of Jonah

Gravimetric

Prayer  
Scripture Reading: Matthew 12:38-41

Scripture Reading: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Devotional Reading: \_\_\_\_\_

**Responsive Reading!**  
The LORD provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and  
Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three  
nights. When Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the  
belly of the fish, he said:  
"O LORD, my distress and he answered me,  
and you heard my cry for help."  
Jonah 1:17-2:1

The LORD provided a large fish to swallow Jonah. Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish:

I called to the LORD out of my distress and he answered me; I called to the LORD out of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice.  
You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas,  
and your waves broke over me; all your waves and your billows rolled over me.

Then he said, "I am driven away from your sight; how shall I  
beak again upon your holy temple? The waters closed in  
the deep surrounded him; weeds were wrapped  
about his roots of the mountains.  
The deep surrounded me; all your waves and  
billows passed over me.  
You cast me into the deep, into the belly of the LORD our  
voice. You cast me into the deep, into the belly of the LORD our  
and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and  
billows passed over me.

billows passed over him. Then he said, "I am driven away from the deep, the roots of the mountains. My bars closed upon me forever; my prayer came not before thee, O LORD. As my life was consumed in the fire of thine anger, as thy wrath was kindled against me, so thou hast broken down the tower of my defence, and hast brought down my strong hold. Thou hast said, I will not call, for thou art angry with me; therefore hast thou said, I will not answer, for thou hast despised my prayer. Thou hast said, I will not hear, for thou hast despised my voice; therefore hast thou said, I will not answer, for thou hast despised my prayer. Thou hast said, I will not hear, for thou hast despised my voice; therefore hast thou said, I will not answer, for thou hast despised my prayer."

[illegible]

Then the LORD spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out  
on the dry land.

### Reflection

**Reflections** In their speaking, art, and writing, in their music, hear God's voice. Why composer, painter, poet, why the note and color and choice? Why begins Terry York's new hymn (*Prophetic Ethics*, p. 51). The Jonah marbles, which are the many appearances of Jonah scenes on the third century A.D., and the various paintings, indicate this early Christian church's biblical and catechism paintings in Christian art. This story was one of the earliest narratives depicted in Christian art. These artistic expressions reveal important clues about the early church's Christians interpreting the ministry of Jesus or the Old Testament prophecies and their interpretation of the book of Revelation. These artists expressed their rebuke of some religious leaders who were Christians and their interpretation of the book of Revelation.

"Early Christians interpreted Old Testament prophecies and events as announcing and prefiguring the ministry of Jesus or the church," writes Hornik. "Their interpretation of the book of Isaiah inspired by Jesus' mysterious rebuke of some religious leaders who were healing of sick people (12:15, 16-27:23). By

Early Christians interpreted these verses as announcing and prefiguring the church," writes Horstik. "The church was inspired by a prophetic sign." The leaders demanding Jesus' healing of a sick man's withered hand (Matthew 12:9-14), curing crowds of demoniac (12:22-23). By asking for a "sign," the religious leaders were not seeking additional miraculous healings; even Beelzebul can perform miracles and wonders, they charged (12:24). Instead, they demanded an

18

Download and print these free resources from each issue's webpage or at [www.christianethics.ws/cestudyguides.htm](http://www.christianethics.ws/cestudyguides.htm), and reproduce them for your Bible study group.

# Christian Reflection

Thoughtful Christian reflection  
and reliable guidance  
in engaging the ethical dimensions  
of today's world.

FORGIVENESS

**2002**

MORAL LANDSCAPE OF CREATION

HEAVEN AND HELL

SABBATH

THE PORNOGRAPHIC CULTURE

**2003**

PROPHETIC ETHICS

AGING

CHILDREN

CONSUMERISM

Order the 2002 or 2003 Series: \$16.

*Christian Reflection* is an ideal resource for discipleship training in the church. Multiple copies are available for group study at \$2.50 per copy. Study guides and lesson plans are available free on the website.

[www.ChristianEthics.ws](http://www.ChristianEthics.ws)

phone (toll-free): 1-866-298-2325

# Editors

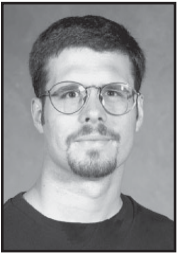


**ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ**

General Editor

Bob Kruschwitz is Director of The Center for Christian Ethics and Professor of Philosophy at Baylor University. He convenes the editorial team to plan the themes for the issues of *Christian Reflection*, then he commissions the lead articles and supervises the formation of each issue. Bob

holds the PhD in philosophy from the University of Texas at Austin and the BA from Georgetown College. You may contact him at 254-710-3774 or at [Robert\\_Kruschwitz@baylor.edu](mailto:Robert_Kruschwitz@baylor.edu).



**F. MATTHEW SCHOBERT, JR.**

Associate Editor

Matthew Schobert is Associate Director of The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. He assists from the initial planning stages to the final editing of each issue of *Christian Reflection*. Matthew earned the MDiv from George W. Truett Theological Seminary and the MSW

from Baylor University's School of Social Work. You may contact him at 254-710-7438 or at [Matthew\\_Schobert@baylor.edu](mailto:Matthew_Schobert@baylor.edu).



**HEIDI J. HORNIK**

Art Editor

Heidi Hornik is Associate Professor of Art History and Director of the Martin Museum at Baylor University. She selects and writes analysis of the artwork for *Christian Reflection*. With the MA and PhD in Art History from The Pennsylvania State University and the BA from

Cornell University, her special interest is art of the Italian Renaissance. With Mikeal C. Parsons, she co-edited *Interpreting Christian Art* and co-authored *Illuminating Luke: The Infancy Narrative in Italian Renaissance Painting*. Contact her at 254-710-4548 or at [Heidi\\_Hornik@baylor.edu](mailto:Heidi_Hornik@baylor.edu).



### **JOY JORDAN-LAKE**

Proclamation Editor

Joy Jordan-Lake is Adjunct Professor of American Literature at Baylor University. She commissions inspirational pieces for *Christian Reflection*. After her BA from Furman University she earned the MDiv from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and the MA and PhD in English from Tufts University. She has contributed to *Christian Century* and *Christianity Today*, among other publications, and is the author of *Grit and Grace: Portraits of a Woman's Life*, a collection of stories and reflections. You may contact her at 254-710-6981 or at Joy\_Jordan-Lake@baylor.edu.



### **NORMAN WIRZBA**

Review Editor

Norman Wirzba is Associate Professor and Chair of the Philosophy Department at Georgetown College. He designs and edits the book review articles in *Christian Reflection*. Norman holds the MA and PhD in philosophy from Loyola University of Chicago, the MA in religion from Yale University, and the BA from the University of Lethbridge, Alberta. His research interests include the intersection of Christian theology and environmental ethics. You may contact him at 502-863-8204 or at Norman\_Wirzba@georgetowncollege.edu.



### **TERRY W. YORK**

Worship Editor

Terry York is Associate Professor of Christian Ministry and Church Music at Baylor University. He writes hymns and commissions music and worship materials for *Christian Reflection*. Terry earned the MCM and DMA from New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary and the BA in music from California Baptist University. He has served as Minister of Music and Associate Pastor in churches in California, Arizona, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas. He was Project Coordinator for *The Baptist Hymnal* (1991), which has five of his hymns, including "Worthy of Worship." You may contact him at 254-710-6992 or at Terry\_York@baylor.edu.



# Contributors

**C. DAVID BOLIN**

Minister of Music, First Baptist Church, Waco, TX

**DAVID M. BRIDGES**

Minister of Music, McKendree Methodist Church, Nashville, TN

**HEIDI J. HORNIK**

Associate Professor of Art History, Baylor University

**BETH JACKSON-JORDAN**

Coordinator of Pastoral Care and Education, Huntersville Oaks and Sardis Oaks long-term care facilities, Huntersville, NC

**ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ**

Director, Center for Christian Ethics, Baylor University

**DENNIS R. MYERS**

Professor of Social Work and Gerontology, Baylor University

**MARK A. PETERS**

Pastor, McKendree United Methodist Church, Manquin, VA

**TERRY THOMAS PRIMER**

Chaplain, Presbyterian Homes and Services, Monroe Village, Monroe, NJ

**ROBERT V. RAKESTRAW**

Professor of Theology, Bethel Theological Seminary, St. Paul, MN

**ROBERT C. ROBERTS**

Distinguished Professor of Ethics, Baylor University

**ELIZABETH V. ROBERTS**

Managing Local Ombudsman, Area Agency on Aging, Heart of Texas Council of Governments, Waco, TX

**STEPHEN SAPP**

Professor and Chair of the Department of Religious Studies, University of Miami, Coral Gables, FL

**WILLIAM L. TURNER**

Retired Pastor, Lancaster, KY

**ANNE E. STREATY WIMBERLY**

Professor of Christian Education and Church Music, Interdenominational Theological Center, Atlanta, GA

**TERRY W. YORK**

Associate Professor of Christian Ministry and Church Music, Baylor University