

LIFE UNDER THE UMBRELLA OF PROMISE
ADDRESSING PASTORAL NEEDS OF THE ELDERLY
FROM A REFORMED PERSPECTIVE

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BY
GIJSBERTUS NEDERVEEN, B.D.

DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

McMASTER UNIVERSITY
Hamilton, Ontario

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AUTHOR: Gijsbertus Nederveen

SUPERVISOR: Dr. Malcolm Horsnell

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Gijsbertus Nederveen

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Life

under the Umbrella of Promise:

Addressing Pastoral Needs of the Elderly
from a Reformed Perspective

Things are old longer than new

in memory of my father

those who hope in the Lord
will renew their strength

Isaiah 40:31

I am making everything new

Revelation 21:5

ABSTRACT

LIFE UNDER THE UMBRELLA OF PROMISE: ADDRESSING PASTORAL NEEDS OF THE ELDERLY FROM A REFORMED PERSPECTIVE

The defining question of this thesis is: "What are the spiritual needs of the elderly and how can we best address them pastorally?" The writer has restricted his area of study to addressing the pastoral needs of the elderly from a Reformed perspective. This was done, first of all, because very little resource material is available in that area. In the second place, in his research to date the author came to the preliminary conclusion that pastoral care functions best when it is "religion specific".

His governing hypothesis in writing the thesis is that pastoral care to the elderly needs a clearer focus, greater exposure, and more diligent attention. In a holistic approach to the needs of the elderly there has to be a spiritual care dimension. The author took as his starting point that the Bible provides positive directives for this kind of spiritual care to the elderly.

At the same time he worked with the conviction that, if his assumption is correct that in Reformed circles pastoral care to the elderly needs a clearer focus, the likelihood exists that the same applies to other denominations. This study provides a clear biblical focus from which other Christians can benefit in their ministry to the elderly.

The first part of this study lays a biblical basis for pastoral care of the elderly in the church community. The second part contains a few excursions, one of which deals with the matter of pastoral care to the cognitively impaired

elderly. In the third section the reader finds the results of a Needs Assessment Questionnaire in which both the elderly and the pastoral caregivers indicate what they perceive to be the pastoral needs of the elderly.

The ultimate goal of this work is to stress that pastoral care to the elderly is an essential part of ministry. In order for the elderly to receive holistic care, the church needs to provide the component of spiritual care. Ministry to the elderly is as important as ministering to youth, and it is imperative that especially in the church community the elderly receive the God-given dignity and respect they deserve.

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This thesis would not have been completed if my wife, Annie, and our three children, Michael, Edmund and Andrea, had not been so understanding and forgiving when many hours were spent away from the family.

Above all, my deep gratitude is to the LORD of life who granted me the health and stamina to complete this study in addition to my regular ministerial duties. It is great to live under his umbrella of promise. *Soli Deo Gloria.*

PREFACE

At last the day of the move had arrived. All our belongings were packed into the moving van. On the way to our new residence and my first place of ministry, we stopped at the furniture store to pick up a desk and some chairs. When later that day my brand new desk was placed in the study, I noticed a scratch on it. Upon voicing my disappointment, my father made a comment I have never forgotten. He said: "Toe maar, jongen, dingen zijn langer oud dan nieuw," that is, "Son, things are old longer than new."

These memorable words, "Things are old longer than new," have been placed at the beginning of this study, because it is true that things spend more time being old than being new. In my ministry this truth has been driven home time and again. Obviously, it is most clearly visible in the lives of the most senior members in church. Aging Christians relate in a very real way to the fact that things are old longer than new. Sometimes they wistfully reminisce about youth, but they know all too well that the clock cannot be turned back.

As Christians age and face the end of life's journey here on earth, they may be encouraged in knowing that faith in Jesus Christ prepares them for the next and better life. Therefore this study is written not only from the perspective that things are old longer than new, but especially with the focus of Revelation 21:5 in mind: "I am making everything new." The old order of things (literally, the "first things," Rev 21:4) will pass away. And in between the old and the new lies renewal of strength in God's care whose compassions are new every morning (Lam 3:22-23).

Gijsbert Nederveen
Burlington, Ontario
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ABBREVIATIONS

BIBLE	<p><i>Old Testament</i></p> <p>Gen Genesis</p> <p>Ex Exodus</p> <p>Lev Leviticus</p> <p>Num Numbers</p> <p>Dt Deuteronomy</p> <p>Josh Joshua</p> <p>Jdgs Judges</p> <p>1 Sam 1 Samuel</p> <p>2 Sam 2 Samuel</p> <p>1 Kgs 1 Kings</p> <p>2 Kgs 2 Kings</p> <p>1 Chr 1 Chronicles</p> <p>2 Chr 2 Chronicles</p> <p>Neh Nehemiah</p> <p>Ps Psalms</p> <p>Prov Proverbs</p> <p>Eccl Ecclesiastes</p> <p>Isa Isaiah</p> <p>Jer Jeremiah</p> <p>Ezek Ezekiel</p> <p>Dan Daniel</p> <p>Hab Habakkuk</p> <p>Zech Zechariah</p> <p>Mal Malachi</p>	<p><i>New Testament</i></p> <p>Mt Matthew</p> <p>Mk Mark</p> <p>Lk Luke</p> <p>Jn John</p> <p>Rom Romans</p> <p>1 Cor 1 Corinthians</p> <p>2 Cor 2 Corinthians</p> <p>Gal Galatians</p> <p>Eph Ephesians</p> <p>Phil Philippians</p> <p>Col Colossians</p> <p>1 Thess 1 Thessalonians</p> <p>2 Thess 2 Thessalonians</p> <p>1 Tim 1 Timothy</p> <p>2 Tim 2 Timothy</p> <p>Tit Titus</p> <p>Phlm Philemon</p> <p>Heb Hebrews</p> <p>Jas James</p> <p>1 Pt 1 Peter</p> <p>2 Pt 2 Peter</p> <p>1 Jn 1 John</p> <p>2 Jn 2 John</p> <p>Rev Revelation</p>
BDB	Brown, Driver, Briggs	
COT	Commentaar op het Oude Testament	
ICC	International Critical Commentary	
KJV	King James Version	
LXX	Septuagint	
NEB	New English Bible	
NICNT	New International Commentary of the New Testament	
NICOT	New International Commentary of the Old Testament	
NIV	New International Version	
RSV	Revised Standard Version	
TDNT	Theological Dictionary of the New Testament	
TDOT	Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament	
TWOT	Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament	

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INTRODUCTION

One of the most frequently asked questions a young mother gets to hear is: "how old is your baby?" Whether the infant is one week old or one month, right from the beginning we ask questions in terms of age. This indicates that we view all of life as an aging process. The difference is that at the beginning of life aging is linked to physical, mental and spiritual developing and maturing, while in the closing years of life, aging is linked to the body and mind slowing down, and deterioration sets in to the point where some elderly persons need special care and attention. It is no wonder, then, that old age has received such descriptions as the "evening" of life, or, the "fourth quarter" of life. One person even refers to it as the "winter of human existence."¹

Whatever one calls it, it is an indisputable fact that the aging process in the later years brings with it adjustments, often major ones. These adjustments are not necessarily negative. Most elderly do not mind moving into a one floor unit so that they do not have to climb stairs anymore. By and large, however, most adjustments that have to be made can be regarded as living life "in reverse." If youth is associated with flourishing and picking up momentum, old age is identified with fading and slowing down.

Sometimes, upon reaching the age of fifty, a person will jokingly be told: "It's all downhill from here." That leaves one wondering at what point in the aging process one reaches the bottom of the hill, because for many elderly life becomes climbing uphill. They are slowing down and "gearing down" to get up

¹ Walter J. Burghardt, "Aging, Suffering and Dying: A Christian Perspective." *Concilium* 1991 (3). (Lisa Sowle Cahill and Dietmar Mieth, eds.; London: SCM Press, 1991), 65.

the grade. Aging in the later years of life becomes a matter of physical, mental and emotional decline for nearly everyone.

So the first question becomes: where should one begin in developing a Reformed concept of pastoral care to the elderly? Most of the time discussion about the elderly or aged persons tends to focus on people who are in the last phase of their lives. As a result, caring for the elderly centres on how to make the last years pleasant, comfortable and purposeful. While these endeavours are laudable in themselves, they nonetheless tend to divert our attention from the preceding—and longest—part of the person's life. The life the person has lived up to this point is not validated but more or less relegated to the category of non-existence. But we should not forget that old age is inseparably united to youth. In one of his books, C.S. Lewis inserted the subtle line: "Youth and age touch only the surface of our lives."² However, the substance of this astute comment is both true and clear. Because a young person grows through a process of physical and psychological maturation into an elderly person, the elderly person embodies, in transmuted form, the youth he or she once was.

This study would therefore miss the mark if the starting point were people of old age. Life does not start at old age; it grows towards old age. Ecclesiastes 12:1 has a lasting message for everyone: "Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, 'I find no pleasure in them.'" ³ All of life needs to be lived by going forward in the awareness that each day not only lengthens life, but it also shortens the days we have been allotted on earth (Ps 139:16; Job 14:5). Therefore, life needs to be lived with a forward outlook in preparation for old age. Such preparation is beneficial in coming to terms with the fact that old age invariably brings one to the threshold of death. This is a reality everyone

² C.S. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength* (Scribner, 1974; repr., New York: Quality Paperback Book Club, 1997), 363.

³ All biblical quotations are taken from the New International Version unless indicated otherwise.

needs to bear in mind, but it holds true especially for elderly persons.

The purpose of this dissertation is to look at what life and aging are from a biblical perspective and to consider how the elderly can be assisted pastorally during their last phase of earthly life. Medical advances have added years to life. The task of pastoral care is to add life to years.

CHAPTER TWO

DEFINITIONS

This treatise considers the issue of pastoral care for the elderly from a Reformed perspective. Before we can proceed in a meaningful way, it will be helpful to define certain terms and concepts as they will be used.

2.1 Reformed

By "Reformed" I mean the Christian tradition that has its roots in the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. One of the principal aims of that movement of renewal and revival was to place Scripture at the centre of everyday life as the regulative voice for faith and how faith is lived. The three distinctive elements *sola scriptura*, *sola gratia* and *sola fide*, are fundamental for the Reformed believer. These Reformation principles "by Scripture alone," "by grace alone" and "by faith alone," form the underpinning of this study.

Reformed thinking based on these three "solas" is not limited to one particular denomination, but forms part of a longstanding tradition found in Reformed, Presbyterian, and Reformed Baptist circles. These churches are basically still confessional churches that subscribe to certain standards of faith.⁴ The enduring authority that Reformed Christians ascribe to Scripture is

⁴ Most Presbyterian denominations subscribe to the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, either in its original version of 1647, or in a modified version. To my knowledge, Books I and XI dealing with the "solas" of the Reformation, have not been altered. See Philip Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom* (Harper & Brothers, 1877; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), Vol. 3, 600-673. Many Reformed Baptists still maintain the *Second London Confession* (1688-1689) which, according to James T. Draper, is "the Baptist revision of the famous Westminster Confession." See James T. Draper, *Authority: The Critical Issue for Southern Baptists* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1984), 56. In this book, Dr. Draper, as president

a matter of principle based on the conviction that the Bible is the authoritative Word of God, and that even now the Bible provides normative standards for Christian beliefs and practice.

While I acknowledge that Christians of other persuasion may not share the same conviction about the authority of Scripture for faith and conduct, I simply ask them to acknowledge that this is a position held by many Christians and for many centuries. As Darryl G. Hart and Mark A. Noll sum up: "The word *Reformed* itself has always been shorthand for the phrase that the church must 'always be reforming itself according to the Word of God.'" ⁵ Intimately connected to such Reformed thinking is the place and function of the Bible.

2.2 Bible

The Christian Bible comprises the Old and New Testaments. It is the uniquely inspired Word of God, and we need Scripture for our understanding of who God is and who we are. Evidence of divine inspiration is recorded in the Bible itself. Scripture is the progressive revelation of God's dealings with Israel and surrounding nations. It is especially the unique revelation of God's saving grace towards a fallen race, a kindness that culminated in the coming of the Son of God as Saviour of the world.

A basic premise of this study is that the Bible forms a solid, trustworthy foundation and offers lasting guidance and direction for pastoral and spiritual care to the elderly. The sixty-six canonical books serve "for the regulation,

of the Southern Baptist Convention, argues that Southern Baptists should "reaffirm the great Reformation doctrine of sola scriptura" (22); they should also adhere to "Justification by God's Grace through Faith" (119-20). In many Reformed denominations, including my own, ministers, elders, and deacons are required to subscribe to the Three Forms of Unity, consisting of the *Belgic Confession* (1561), the *Heidelberg Catechism* (1563), and the *Canons of Dort* (1618-19). The three "solas" are described in Articles 3-7 and 22-24 of the Belgic Confession. See Standing Committee for the *Book of Praise* of the Canadian Reformed Churches, *The Three Forms of Unity* (Winnipeg: Premier Printing, 1994).

⁵ Darryl G. Hart and Mark A. Noll in their Introduction, "The Presbyterians: A People, a History & an Identity" in *Dictionary of the Presbyterian & Reformed Tradition in America* (D.G. Hart, gen. ed., and Mark A. Noll, consulting ed.; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999), xxvii.

foundation, and confirmation of the faith."⁶ Since the Bible was written over a long period of time, it shows a progressive unfolding of God's dealings in and for his created world. This history of revelation makes it necessary to look at the Bible in its totality. God's revelation finds its fulfilment in Christ (Lk 22:37, 24:44; Jn 5:39, 46; Heb 1:1-2). Reformed understanding of the Bible requires that one interpret Scripture with Scripture. The Old Testament pre-figures the New; the New Testament interprets the Old.⁷ In conformity to that practice, this study treats the written text of the Bible as the uniquely revealed Word of God.

2.3 Grace

Grace is one of the qualities whereby God shows a special love for fallen humanity. The biblical concept of grace is one of kindness by granting favour, and so it is connected with joy for the recipient. God's graciousness is always a free gift, and often in pardoning sin (Ps 51:1; Ex 34:7).⁸ Therefore, grace is best described as the undeserved favour of God. Grace is God's free gift to us so that we have nothing to boast about in and of ourselves (Eph 2:6-9). As far as the relationship between God's grace and salvation from sin is concerned someone put it succinctly:

Grace means unmerited favor. God is obliged to save no one. It is of His grace that He saves anyone. Sinners have no claim on a Holy God, but God has graciously determined to save

⁶ Belgic Confession, Art. 5, *The Three Forms of Unity*, 10.

⁷ I should like to affirm as my own position the approach of W.S. LaSor, et al., who write about their book: "we are committed to the inspiration and the authority of the Bible, including every part of the Old Testament . . . Though at every point we have sought to approach the Old Testament text from the vantage point of Israel's sons and daughters to whom it was first given, yet we have been constrained not to stop there but to suggest the relationships of the Old Testament themes to the New Testament, the creedal affirmations of the early Church, and the evangelical confessions of the Reformation—all of which govern and express what we believe and teach." William Sanford LaSor, David Allan Hubbard, and Frederic Wm. Busch, *Old Testament Survey: The Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982, reprint 1991), viii.

⁸ Walther Zimmerli, "χάρις" in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Gerhard Friedrich, transl. and Geoffrey W. Bromiley ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), Vol. IX:376-387, 378 and 383. Hereafter: *TDNT*.

those who believe on Jesus Christ.⁹

Grace, because it is unmerited favour, calls for a thankful and joyful response in service to God (Eph 2:10; Col 2:6). Grace is accepted in faith.

2.4 Faith: Knowledge and Confidence

Faith is dynamic. It is the interplay between trust and knowing. While it may start out as trust, it develops into trust based on knowledge. A little child trusts her parents, an older child trusts parents because she knows that she can rely on them. As such, faith has both structure and content.¹⁰ Faith as "structure" is the act or process of believing; faith as "content" is what one believes. In the Reformed tradition this interplay between faith as structure and faith as content has always received much emphasis. The *Heidelberg Catechism* describes true faith as follows:

True faith is a sure knowledge whereby I accept as true all that God has revealed to us in his Word. At the same time it is a firm confidence that not only to others, but also to me, God has granted forgiveness of sins, everlasting righteousness, and salvation, out of mere grace, only for the sake of Christ's merits. This faith the Holy Spirit works in my heart by the gospel.¹¹

This definition indicates that faith needs to be both personal and active. Faith is a living, trusting relationship with God (cf. Heb 11) in which one takes God at his word (cf. Gen 15:6). Faith knowledge is not a neutral knowledge. It is the knowledge of a personal relationship with God through interaction with God's revelation of who we are and who God is. Faith is, therefore, more than belief in the existence of a Higher Being (cf. Jas 2:19); it involves a commitment

⁹ Draper, *Authority*, 119.

¹⁰ Harold G. Koenig, Tracy Lamar and Betty Lamar, *A Gospel for the Mature Years: Finding Fulfillment by Knowing and Using Your Gifts* (Binghamton: Haworth Pastoral Press, 1997), 15.

¹¹ Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 21, in *The Three Forms of Unity*, 47. The German version uses the word "Erkenntnis," i.e., recognition and acceptance. See Philip Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, Vol. 3, 313.

to serving God in the confidence that God's promises of salvation are true and have their fulfilment in Christ Jesus (cf. Rom 15:8; Eph 3:6; Heb 8:6). Faith finds its deepest expression in a personal, trusting relationship with God in Christ.

2.5 Spirituality

Back in 1979, David O. Moberg observed that the word "spiritual" was becoming an "in" word in American society.¹² Its use was not only restricted to a religious context, but it also became well-used in non-religious contexts. The truth of this observation is clearly evident when Harry R. Moody asks: "What is 'spirituality' anyway?" He comments that "In this book there are probably as many definitions as there are authors," and then he mentions "pragmatic spirituality" and "secular spirituality" as some examples.¹³

It is therefore both prudent and necessary to state what we mean by spirituality. While I am aware of the distinction between religion and spirituality, in that spirituality is much broader in scope and may or may not involve belief in God, from a more classical Reformed perspective the two are more or less synonymous. Scriptural use of the word "spiritual" is tied to what is believed and how faith is lived.¹⁴ In this study, then, I retain the "narrow" view that spirituality points to a way of life in which living by God's grace, in the confidence of faith, permeates life in all its facets.

A consequence of using the terms "religion" and "spirituality" as synonyms is that spiritual care and pastoral care become one and the same. For that reason the expressions "spiritual care" and "pastoral care" may occur interchangeably in this discourse.

¹² David O. Moberg, ed., *Spiritual Well-being: Sociological Perspectives* (Washington: University Press of America, 1979), 1.

¹³ Harry R. Moody, foreword to *Aging and the Religious Dimension* (L. Eugene Thomas and Susan A. Eisenhandler, eds.; Westport: Auburn House, 1994), xi-xii.

¹⁴ We can think of such expressions as spiritual warfare (Eph 6:10-11); spiritual truths (1 Cor 2:12-14); spiritual body i.e., Spirit ruled (1 Cor 15:42-44) which give a more rigid and biblically normative meaning to the words "spiritual" and "spirituality."

2.6 Pastoral Care

In its most basic form, pastoral care is showing vigilance and attentiveness to the existing needs in the lives of others. At the same time, pastoral care is multi-faceted because it involves giving leadership and direction to the congregation and to individual members by providing them with spiritual guidance and counselling, and also by comforting, admonishing and encouraging them from the Word of God. Pastoral care, then, is a ministry that seeks to promote the well-being of others, and does so from a biblical basis of sharing in the joys and sorrows we meet in life. Scripture provides clear instruction to give encouragement (cf. Rom 12:4-8), to "carry each other's burdens" (Gal 6:2), and to rejoice with those who rejoice, and mourn with those who mourn (Rom 12:15).

In the Reformed tradition, this task is entrusted specifically to ministers, elders or overseers, and deacons.¹⁵ One particular form for ordination of elders and deacons describes the task of the deacons as the ministry of mercy with the reminder: "Also today the Lord calls on us to show hospitality, generosity, and mercy, so that the weak and needy may share abundantly in the joy of God's people. No one in the congregation of Christ may live un comforted under the pressure of sickness, loneliness, and poverty."¹⁶

While in Reformed churches the task of pastoral care is specifically assigned to office-bearers, it is not their duty exclusively. Generally, the ongoing need at any given time is too great for just a few people to handle (cf. Num 11:11-17). Therefore, the congregation is also enlisted for service (Jas 1:27). In that sense, the task of pastoral care becomes broader in scope, and

¹⁵ In the Reformed tradition there are three special offices. The primary task of the minister is to preach and teach; the elders are the overseers of the church, and, together with the minister they form the ruling body of the church. The deacons are assigned the special ministry of mercy within the congregation and the larger community.

¹⁶ Standing Committee for the Publication of the *Book of Praise* of the Canadian Reformed Churches, *Book of Praise: Anglo-Genevan Psalter*, (Winnipeg: Premier Printing, 1998 rev. ed.), 631.

includes engaging the assistance of all who are able to help in whatever way possible.

2.7 Aging, Aged, Older Adults, or Elderly?

What is the preferred terminology? Since everyone ages from the moment of birth, the term "aging" is not very specific. Aging describes a process, not a specific age group. Hence, the classification of a particular sector of the population as the "aging" sector is not felicitous.

Is it therefore better to speak about a particular age group as "the aged"? There is indeed an age group that can be classified as aged, depending on one's perspective. Many teenagers consider their parents over forty, old. Grandparents are even older, and persons still older than their grandparents are aged. On the other hand, those who are considered aged by teenagers may feel slighted. Some people who are in their upper eighties know that they are well on in years, but, because they are still able to do many things including looking after themselves, they do not feel old and do not classify themselves as such. Feeling aged is relative to what one is able to do. It is more closely tied to being functionally old than chronologically old.¹⁷ Therefore the designation "aged" has its limitations as well.

Of more recent usage is the term "older adults"¹⁸ without specifying what age group is meant. Once again, this does not solve the difficulty. If someone is an adult at thirty, an older adult could be someone who is forty. Obviously, this is not what these writers have in mind, but it only highlights that a standard expression or description to everyone's liking is hard to obtain.

I have opted for the term "elderly," or "elderly person(s)" because, to my understanding, it is mainly used for those who are sixty-five and older.

¹⁷ An example of functional old age would be: "I can't walk fast any more." Chronological old age points to one's actual age, e.g., "I'm 78."

¹⁸ Harold G. Koenig and Andrew J. Weaver, *Pastoral Care of Older Adults* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), ix.

Speaking about the elderly covers therefore a group of people classified as being past a certain age, irrespective whether they are or feel functionally and/or chronologically old. There is no correct term, only a preferred one. My preference is to speak about the elderly.

2.8 Summary

The definitions given in this section give the reader some sense of the "root" from which this study will grow. Although these definitions set limitations that may seem rather restrictive and narrow to those outside the Reformed tradition, nonetheless I am convinced these definitions allow sufficient latitude for the development and discussion of ideas and concepts in advancing a Reformed perspective for pastoral care to the elderly.

PART I

BIBLICAL BASIS

CHAPTER THREE

OVERVIEW

3.1 Defining Questions

1999 was declared "International Year of Older Persons." Yes, the elderly are in the news and they are bound to stay that way because by the year 2025 the population of persons age sixty-five and over is projected to increase by two-hundred percent in Canada.¹⁹ The first wave of the baby boom generation (those born between 1946 and 1964) reaches retirement age between the years 2011 - 2029.

Interest and involvement in the needs of the elderly will only increase as the years go by. Harold G. Koenig has outlined the impact of the escalation of the elderly in a section on "Societal Trends in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries,"²⁰ and asks the probing question: "Who will take care of all these people?" He points out that, in 1994, eighty-five percent of Americans were affiliated with Protestant (61%) or Catholic (24%) denominations, and by the year 2000 over fifty percent of the members of mainline Protestant denominations will be over the age of sixty.²¹

Consequently, the question of pastoral care to the elderly is becoming very important. How are the spiritual needs of the increasing number of elderly

¹⁹ Ibid., 3. From 1991 to 1996, Canada's 65+ population increased by 352,753 people, or 11.1%. For persons over 70 years of age, the number rose by 319,978 people, a 15.2% increase. Figures tabulated from Statistics Canada, *Age, Sex, Marital Status and Common-law Status*, 1991 and 1996 Census Technical Reports, Cat. 92-325E, p. 19 and Cat. 92-353-XPB, p. 27.

²⁰ Harold G. Koenig, *Is Religion Good for your Health?* (Binghamton: Haworth Pastoral Press, 1997), 9-21.

²¹ Ibid., 37-38.

to be addressed? What does the Bible teach about the elderly and their needs? What is the biblical concept of aging? Is there a theology of aging and how can it shape our vision toward the elderly in society? How can a biblical concept of aging help us to be pro-active in dealing with the aging process, both that of others and that of our own?

These question will be investigated in the first part of this study. We begin with some preliminary remarks about aging. Next, we will investigate whether there is a theology of aging in the Bible and what is the merit of developing such a theology. The largest section will be an investigation of biblical data from both the Old and the New Testaments in order to develop a Reformed concept of pastoral care to the elderly.

3.2 Aging: Part of the Cycle of Life

Aging is the process of physical, psychological and spiritual development, maturation and growing older that begins at birth and ends at death. The elderly are the ones who are furthest along in that process. They have graduated from going through many grades of the "school of life," and have learned a practical lesson that needs to be handed down. That lesson is that old age is inseparably united to youth. While life's course brings about many changes, a young person grows through a process of physical and psychological and spiritual maturation into an elderly person so that the elderly person embodies the youth of yesteryear. As Frank Stagg so keenly observed: "In a real sense, the child is the father of the man, the mother of the woman."²² Old age and aging are not isolated happenings, they are part of the cycle of life. Henri J.M. Nouwen and Walter J. Gaffney compare the cycle of life to a wagon wheel where "no one of the spokes is more important than the others, but together they make the circle full and reveal the hub as the core of

²² Frank Stagg, *Biblical Perspectives on Aging*, (National Interfaith Coalition on Aging, Inc., 1978), 6.

its strength."²³ Rolf Knierim's observation is to the point: "Aging and old age are not periods of transition between life and death, and not at all the first phase of death. They belong to life."²⁴

Since old age forms the closing chapter on the cycle of life, it is necessary to discover and understand biblically what is the ideal kind of life the Bible understands aging to close. This requires that before we can develop a biblical motif of aging, we need to have a biblical concept of life. Therefore it will not suffice to discuss a number of texts that contain words like "aged", "old", or "gray".²⁵ We need to do more. We should not start with old age and what happens during the last years of life, but home in on what life is from a biblical perspective. In other words, the spotlight must be on how all of life, both physical and spiritual, prepares one for aging. Knowing what life entails helps us assess the proper attitude and conduct toward the elderly. It will also set the direction for pastoral care to the elderly from a Reformed perspective.

3.3 Towards a Theology of Aging?

3.3.1 Initial attempt

In 1982, Lucien Richard published a study in which he develops a *theology of aging*.²⁶ He formulates the central task of such a theology with the question, "what can be done to transform the oppression of the elderly?" In the discussion he points out that agism is a form of discrimination comparable to racism and to sexism. The author further states that in America: "the possibility of facing old age with dignity is destroyed from the outside, from a culture that considers old age as a period of irretrievable loss and decline and dignity is

²³ Henri J.M. Nouwen and Walter J. Gaffney, *Aging* (New York: Image, Doubleday, 1976; repr., 1990), 13.

²⁴ Rolf Knierim, "Age and Aging in the Old Testament," in *Ministry with the Aging: Designs, Challenges, Foundations* (William M. Clements, ed.; New York: Haworth Press, 1989), 22.

²⁵ Knierim mentions that the Old Testament alone contains some two hundred fifty passages that are concerned with old age. "Age and Aging in the Old Testament," 21.

²⁶ Lucien Richard, "Toward a Theology of Aging," in *Science et Esprit* XXXIV/3 (1982), 269-287.

equivalent to independence. The only acceptable ideal of old age we really possess in America is old age without change, without limits, without losses." Richard then develops his theology of aging based on Christ's kenosis, his self-emptying (cf. Phil 2). "A theology based on kenosis," he writes, "will be a theology 'from below' rooted in the suffering humanity of Jesus and unafraid to affirm the passion of God, his entering into the human reality."²⁷ The key to success in old age becomes for Richard the willingness to accept limitations, conditioned autonomy and freedom. He sums up by saying:

In a kenotic understanding of humanhood, the achievement of integrity, of hope arises out of a long process of disengagement and re-engagement. . . . Creativity is simply another form of kenosis. Creation is not so much an exercise of power but an act of self-limitation.²⁸

From this study it becomes clear that in the end Richard arrives at a theology that leaves life as a relationship with God almost completely out of the picture. In any case, he has left the Old Testament perspective on aging untouched. That makes for a lopsided theology of aging. The main flaw of Richard's theology of aging is that he starts at the wrong end and asks the wrong question. His model puts people in the centre, while the biblical model of life is theocentric. *Life emanates from God, including the life of the elderly, and we should therefore not make aging a process of kenosis "from below"*.

Richard's attempt to model his theology of aging after Christ's kenosis is improbable. He has borrowed a term, but emptied the word of its unique meaning. Scripture speaks about Christ "Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing . . . being made in human likeness" (Phil 2:6-7). Christ's kenosis is not "from below," but "from above." He emptied himself of his divine glory which he had with the Father before the world began (cf. John 17:5) to share in our

²⁷ Ibid., 272, 275, 277 respectively.

²⁸ Ibid., 286.

humanity, so that, as a human being, he could make atonement for the sins of the people (cf. Heb 2:14-17). To use Christ's kenosis as a model of a life of self-limitation—and is aging *self-limitation*?—not only misses the point; it does injustice to Christ's unselfish act of love.

Another flaw in Richard's theology "from below," is that he has cut off *aging from the rest of life*. Aging becomes an emptying of self without filling oneself up with purpose and worth. This can hardly be considered a vision of aging as fulfilling and flourishing. In Richard's model, aging as fulfilment is not in the picture because ultimately he ends up viewing aging more negatively than positively, much like the mind-set he seeks to refute. Aging is presented in the framework of limitation rather than framed positively as meaningful years of life, while Scripture points to a life borne upon the promise of God's care. Biblical aging envisions a life that is sustained *from above* as a life of trust and fulfilment.

Of greater value is J. Gordon Harris' *Biblical Perspectives on Aging*. The author mentions that the Bible lacks a systematic theology of aging.²⁹ He concludes his comprehensive study by observing that "senior adults may recognize that to some degree their future comes out of their own efforts." For Harris, a "biblical theology of personhood points out that an understanding mind develops out of lifelong struggle for knowledge." The elderly should become *lifelong learners like Jethro, Moses, Caleb, Barzillai, Simeon, Anna*.³⁰ Clearly, then, Harris places the emphasis on something far different than Richard. Not self-emptying and limitation, but growth and development till the very end.

However, for Harris as for Richard, the focus has become anthropocentric. By focussing on what people can do or keep on doing in old

²⁹ J. Gordon Harris, *Biblical Perspectives on Aging* (Philadelphia: Fortress Publishing, 1987), 6. This is an important study which also takes the perspective of the Ancient Near East into consideration.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 112-3.

age, one introduces unwarranted limitations for it excludes all those who are not able to perform due to frail physical or mental health. It inadvertently accentuates the difference between the functionally old and the chronologically old. The Bible points us in another direction.

3.3.2 Biblical direction

At this point we should reflect and ask the fundamental question: "Is the fact that the Bible lacks a systematic theology of aging because the canon treats life as one whole and does not compartmentalize the elderly into a separate group?" The Bible speaks about the aged and about youth, but it does so in relation to each other. In other words, the Bible distinguishes age groups where youth and aging stand at opposite ends of the spectrum of life, but Scripture does not divide them into opposite camps, unlike our society which seems to thrive on categorizing and treating life in segments or components.

The Bible views life as a continuum with *several stages*. The Old Testament differentiates between three to five phases which Hans Walter Wolff refers to as "the seasons of life." The simplest division is that of child, young adult, mature adult. Jeremiah 51:22 has four divisions: child, youth, young married adults, elderly. Jeremiah 6:11 has five stages: small child, youth, adult, elderly, aged.³¹ The purpose and importance in mentioning this is not in the first place to highlight the various stages in life, but to remind ourselves that each of these phases forms part of the whole. Additionally, life as a continuum is highlighted in that the biblical family or household often included members from every age group in life (cf. Gen 46:8-26). Extended

³¹ Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), 120. The RSV on Jeremiah 6:11 indicates five age groups by distinguishing between "the old folk and the very aged". The NIV translation of Jeremiah 6:11 allows for four age groups where "those weighted down with years" qualifies the "old". Both renderings are possible. In support of the RSV one can point to Job 15:10 which distinguishes between the old as the "gray-haired and the aged." Cf. four age groups: Joel 2:16, Ezek 9:6; three age groups: Dt 32:25, 2 Chr 31:18 and 36:17, Ps 148:12, Lam 2:21; two age groups: Jer 31:13.

families usually straddled three generations, while Job 42:16 even mentions four generations.

In some Mediterranean societies one can still today see a remnant of such cohesion that binds generations together. In most of our society this has basically disappeared. Life now evolves around the nuclear family consisting of parent(s) and child(ren). This development is heavily influenced by economic conditions. Up to the beginning of the twentieth century, families formed a cohesive unit of productivity. Beginning around the middle of the century, the family has become a unit of consumption.³² One can rightly question if this is an improvement. With this shift to nuclear families, which exclude the elderly, the idea of old age and aging has become a subject all by itself. The study of gerontology and family studies have become separate and independent disciplines, whereas from a biblical perspective they need to be inter-dependent disciplines. If a theology of aging is indeed attainable or even desirable, it should at a minimum embrace aging as the last phase of life as a whole. If anything, a theology of aging should be rooted in a biblical study of life.

In the next section we will study some elements of life by investigating life from an Old Testament perspective.

³² D.J. van den Berg et al., *Ouderdom verplicht: overheid en burgers in een vergrijzende samenleving* (Barneveld: Vuurbaak, 1988), 32.

CHAPTER FOUR

LIFE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

4.1 Life's Origin and Purpose

In the first pages of the Bible we read that life originates from God. After the LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground he breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being (Gen 2:7).

Throughout the Old Testament God is attested as the source of life. In Numbers 27:16 the LORD is called "the God of the spirits of all mankind" (cf. Eccl 12:7).

Job mentions that God's hands shaped and moulded him (10:8-9; cf. Rom 9:19-21) and that the life and breath of every creature is in God's hand (12:10).

Other Scripture passages that indicate life comes directly from God are found in the Psalms. The poet of Psalm 139 says to God: "For you created my inmost being . . . All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be" (vv. 13, 16). In recognizing God as life's source, and as the one who determines his days, the psalmist acknowledged his dependence on God. God as the source of life and one's complete dependence on that source are of necessity intertwined. If God is the source of life, then without the source life is impossible (Ps 104:27-29; 73:11-19).

Concerning the origin of humanity, Claus Westermann highlights that God created the human race by means of two acts. First, the human race receives its existence and its form from God, and the elements of which the human body consists all belong to our world. The fact that the man is made of "dust" already intimates that he will one day return to dust (Gen 3:19). God's second act is breathing into the man the breath of life. The miracle of life is the

breath of life breathed by God. Says Westermann:

It is not that a soul is breathed into the man's body, but rather that he is made a "living soul," a living being. The Bible does not say that a human being is made up of body and soul, or of body, soul, and spirit. God's creation is this man in the totality of his being. Therefore God is concerned not only with the "soul," but equally with the body. A higher regard for the spiritual or ideal than for the corporal or material has no basis in the creation faith of Genesis.³³

These accurate observations, about human life as a psycho-physical unity and whole, already underscore the need to take a holistic approach to life. In practical terms this means that in ministry to the elderly it is important to bear in mind the wholeness of the person, i.e., we should not only focus on health care and social welfare, but also on spiritual care. Of course, the inverse is equally true. Churches should be concerned with the physical needs as well as the spiritual needs. Life from the start has both dimensions and both need to be nurtured simultaneously. In pastoral care we should also treat life as a unified whole in which one's psychological, spiritual and physical developments have moulded the person into the elderly person he or she has become. This is paramount in pastoring to the elderly.

One of the pressing realities of growing older is that as the years go by, the day of one's death also steadily draws closer. In pastoral care to the elderly this should not be ignored. The reason for raising this matter in connection with life's origin is that we must have a clear concept of life in relation to death. Are life and death opposites or are they companions, i.e., is death, like life, part of God's created order? These questions arise in light of Westermann's opinion quoted above that because man was made of the dust this already intimates that he will one day return to dust (Gen 3:19).³⁴ This

³³ Claus Westermann, *Genesis: A Practical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 18-19.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 18. Wolff, *Anthropology*, 115, agrees with Westermann and states: "to die satisfied with life belongs to man's nature as created being."

opinion needs further investigation. It is certainly clear that following the fall into sin God assigned humanity to the "death sentence" because they had eaten from the forbidden tree (Gen 2:17). The people made of dust would return to dust. But the question is: "Did God create humanity from the dust with the intent of returning them to dust?"

B. van 't Veld also acknowledges the close connection between 'ādām ("man", "earthling") and 'ādāmā ("earth") but asks "does death belong to God's creation?" His conclusion based on Genesis 3:22, 24 is that it does not. The fact that there was also a tree of life in Eden left open the possibility that the man did not have to die.³⁵ In my opinion, Van 't Veld does greater justice than Westermann to the context in which the matter is set. God planted in the garden all kinds of trees that were both pleasing to the eye and good for food (2:9). Two of these trees he designated with special names. The one was the tree of life,³⁶ the other the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. With it came the command not to eat of the latter. Right from the outset God let it be known that life in relationship with the Creator depends on the terms God has stipulated. And the stipulation in paradise was that the man could eat of all the trees, including the tree of life, but not of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If he ate of that tree he would surely die (2:17). Embodied in this command was the notion that man *could* die, not that he necessarily *would* die, as being intrinsic to his human nature. Death was a result of disobedience and was an intrusion into the creation order.

³⁵ B. van 't Veld, *'Gelijk het gras...': de menselijke vergankelijkheid in het Oude Testament* (Kampen: Kok, 1989), 24-29. I owe the play on words of "earthling" and "earth" to Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 158.

³⁶ It is significant that the first and last Bible book speak about *the* tree of life indicated with the definite article (Gen 2:9, 3:22, 24; Rev 2:7, 22:2, 14, 19). It was distinguished from all the other good trees for food in that eating from the tree of life would seal life eternally (cf. 3:22). Further, references to a tree of life are found in Proverbs 3:18-19 (wisdom), 11:30 (fruit of the righteous), 13:12-13 (longing fulfilled) and 15:4 (a tongue that brings healing).

Cornelis Gilhuis devotes several pages to this topic as well.³⁷ He comments that the LORD God made certain things dependent upon human obedience. In the Bible, death is the result of sin. He takes issue with Karl Barth and Gerhard von Rad who also maintain that death belongs to our created humanness.³⁸ Gilhuis, too, stresses the importance of the tree of life. But why did the first humans not eat from it? He quotes Barth's opinion: "Er hat es nicht nötig von seinem Früchten zu essen."³⁹ He rightly concludes that this consideration devalues the significance of the tree of life. The fact that the tree of life was important in God's plan is evident from the LORD's act of preventing Adam and Eve from eating of it after the fall (3:24) so that they would not live forever (3:22). The two special trees in the middle of the garden shared not only a geographic connection, but also a representative one. Just as the fruit of the one would bring death, the fruit of the other would bring everlasting life. Eating from the tree of life would change the *posse non mori* into *non posse mori*.⁴⁰

This still leaves us with the question: "Why did the first people not eat from the tree of life?" An interesting thought is the suggestion that eating from the tree of life was prevented until there was an absolute rejection and disowning of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This view finds some support in Revelation 2:7 where eating of the tree of life is also linked to

³⁷ Cornelis Gilhuis, *Pastorale zorg aan bejaarden* (Kampen: Kok, 1956), 100-11. This is a very detailed dissertation, the first part dealing with senescence, the second with biblical data, and the last part lists practical hints for pastoral care to the elderly. Based on the literature I have perused, this study has not been surpassed in detail and scope. Hereafter: *Pastorale zorg*.

³⁸ Ibid., 100-101.

³⁹ Ibid., 106. Quoted from K. Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, III,1 (Zürich, 1945), 292.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 107. This distinction comes from Augustine who opined that before the Fall, created humanity had the capability of not sinning (*posse non peccari*) and therefore it was possible not to die (*posse non mori*); that as a result of the Fall mankind became incapable of not sinning, thus it became impossible not to die (*non posse non mori*); and as the result of Christ's death and resurrection in which believers may share, redeemed humanity will no longer be able to sin in the new creation, and therefore unable to die (*non posse mori*). See Reinhold Seeberg, *Text-book of the History of Doctrines* 2 Vols. (Charles E. Hay, transl.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1952), Vol. 1, 341-2. See also Saint Augustine, *The Augustine Catechism: The Enchiridion on Faith, Hope and Love* (Bruce Harbert, transl.; Hide Park, NY: New City Press, 1999), 120.

conquering.⁴¹ However, let us *stay away from further conjecture*.

One thing that can be said with certainty is that the significance of the trees did not reside in the fruit, but in the name God gave to each of them and in their function. After Adam and Eve had eaten from the forbidden tree, they found out that the tree had lived up to its name. They discovered that their fellowship with God and with one another was marred (3:7-12). As soon as they possessed the knowledge of good and evil, they went into hiding when God came to visit them (3:7-8). Also blame-shifting started (3:12), and the former open trust relationship with God suddenly changed into that of fear (3:10). The damage was done. No further mention of this tree is made anywhere in Scripture. It ceased to exist, but the lasting effects of sinfulness are still with us today.

The tree of life, however, was still around, and is mentioned four times in the last Bible book (Rev 2:7; 22:2, 14, 19). Its significance therefore remains for time to come. But in case the first couple would try to eat from the tree of life after the fall into sin and live forever (Gen 3:22), the LORD God banished them from the garden. Keil and Delitzsch sum up in this way:

Had he [Adam] continued in fellowship with God by obedience to the command of God, he might have eaten of it, for he was created for eternal life. But after he had fallen through sin into the power of death, the fruit which produced immortality could only do him harm. For immortality in a state of sin is not the *ζωη αἰώνιος*, which God designed for man, but endless misery, which the Scriptures call "the second death" (Rev. ii. 11, xx. 6, 14, xxi. 8). The expulsion from paradise, therefore, was a punishment inflicted for man's good, intended while exposing him to temporal death, to preserve him from eternal death.⁴²

I basically agree with this assessment. If, as I have posited, God created the first couple with the possibility of living forever (*posse non mori*), that state

⁴¹ Gilhuis, *Pastorale zorg*, 107

⁴² C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980 reprint), 1:107.

of eternal bliss would only come about by being obedient to God's directive not to eat of the forbidden tree. As soon as that command was breached, sin came into the world and the onset of death began, as God had said it would when he gave the command. The result of sin is not only physical death, but also physical and psychological ailments and sufferings that often come with it. An "immortal" life in that state would be highly undesirable, because it would be a life of continual hurts and hardships. Had Adam and Eve been able to eat from the tree of life after the fall, they would have lived a life of continued rebellion against God and would have lived on in that revolutionary state (Gen 3:22). Whether one could or should equate that state with "second death," as Keil and Delitzsch do, is open to debate. Since God did not let it happen, it would be a fruitless debate. Still, I believe that on the whole they made a valid observation. The expulsion from Eden was both punishment and protection, which shows God's gracious benevolence towards the first couple, and an indication that life continued.

How is all this important for our investigation about the biblical concept of life and the Reformed perspective on pastoral care to the elderly? Several conclusions can be drawn from the above discussion. First of all, life originates from God and, like the Old Testament believers, believers today need to acknowledge that their lives depend completely on the LORD alone. Second, because God also gave access to the tree of life, it is my position that God created people with the intent of giving them eternal life. In the third place, since God gave the first man and woman specific orders to follow, life in relationship with God depended on the terms the Creator God had stipulated. Finally, the expulsion from the garden was an act of God's gracious benevolence which indicated to the first couple that life continued. What we need to investigate next is how life continued.

In the next section we will pursue two questions. First of all we seek an answer to the question: "What sort of relationship existed between God and

fallen humanity?" Secondly, we will look into the matter whether the expulsion from the garden due to the fall into sin removed the hope of living eternally with God.

4.2 Covenant Relationship

Scripture tells us that the relationship God established with the first humans was different from the Creator's relationship with the other creatures. I will argue that this special relationship begun in paradise was a covenant relationship which continued in a renewed form after the fall into sin.

My hypothesis that the special relationship Yahweh had with Adam and Eve in paradise was a covenant relationship needs to be tested. Can we speak about a covenant at this point since the word "covenant" is not mentioned until Genesis 6:18 when God told Noah, "I will establish my covenant with you," i.e., with Noah and his descendants (Gen 9:9)? Also, what is a covenant?

M. Weinfeld explains in his study on *b^crith* ("covenant"), that the original meaning of the Hebrew is not "agreement or settlement between two parties," but that it "implies first and foremost the notion of 'imposition,' 'liability,' or 'obligation.'" ⁴³ This concept of covenant fits admirably with the situation in paradise where God imposed his demand of not eating from the forbidden tree, and the obligation on Adam and Eve's part was to obey.

Gottfried Quell, in his investigation of *διαθήκη*, comments:

Analysis of the covenant concept inevitably leads to the living basis of Old Testament religion because it deals with the problem of man standing before God. It hardly needs to be demonstrated that this question cannot be fully answered within the framework of a limited investigation of the use and meaning of the word *ברית*.⁴⁴

⁴³ M. Weinfeld, "b^crith" in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (C. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, eds.; John T. Willis, transl.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975 rev. ed.), 2:253-278, 255. Hereafter: *TDOT*.

⁴⁴ Gottfried Quell, "διαθήκη" in *TDNT*, 2:106-124, 111.

Quell quotes F. Baumgärtel's observation that: "Even where the term covenant is not present, the intention behind it may be expressed."⁴⁵

It is my view that this intention behind the covenant applies to the relationship between God and humanity in paradise because of their special place in creation. Only of Adam and Eve it is stated that they were created in God's image. One aspect of being in the image of God is that they received the mandate to fill the earth and subdue it by ruling over creation (Gen 1:27-28). This special relationship is sometimes referred to as the covenant of works,⁴⁶ but it would seem better to call it a covenant of God's favour. The latter description is better because, as Andrew Pol indicates: "it focuses our attention on God rather than on man and reminds us that although man had to obey to be blessed, the blessing was still a result of God's favour."⁴⁷ This way of looking at the covenant is also more in keeping with the fact that it originated with God. While any human covenant is an agreement between two or more parties, the uniqueness of God's covenant relationship is that its origin is one-sided. It originates with Yahweh. Linwood Urban correctly observes that God's covenants never take the form of pacts between equals. It is Almighty God who initiates the relationship.⁴⁸ The covenant, then, is one-sided in its institution—and therefore God could impose his demand of obedience; but like any covenant it contains two parts, a promise and an obligation, and therefore the covenant is two-sided in its existence or execution.

Since life is a gift of God, the biblical notion of life and living intimates

⁴⁵ Ibid., 111n26.

⁴⁶ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 272.

⁴⁷ Andrew J. Pol, *Confess your faith!* (London, ON: Inter-League Publication Board, 1999), 15. Clarence Stam also considers it not wise to speak about covenant of works. At the same time he considers the expression covenant of favour to be problematic because favour is so hard to distinguish from grace. He prefers to "characterize the covenant made with mankind in paradise, and maintained throughout time, as the covenant of love." See, *The Covenant of Love: Exploring our Relationship with God* (Winnipeg: Premier Publishing, 1999), 52-53.

⁴⁸ Linwood Urban, *A Short History of Christian Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995 rev. ed.), 13.

that the person should have a close relationship with God (cf. Gen 3:8-9). Heinrich M. Ohmann points out that the uniqueness of the Old Testament is that "it approaches things from the angle of what is visible, audible and perceptible. . . . Life bears the indelible mark of its Originator."⁴⁹ This indelible mark is accentuated by the covenant relationship that continues even after the fall into sin, albeit in a revised form. To differentiate between the pre-Fall and the post-Fall covenant relationship, I think it helpful to make a distinction in that life in the covenant has been transformed from living by God's favour into living by God's grace.⁵⁰ While grace and favour basically mean the same thing, namely, an act of kindness that is freely granted from one to another, yet, after the fall into sin, grace not only points to God's undeserved favour, but especially to forfeited favour.⁵¹ While before the fall God's favour rested upon humanity unimpeded, after the fall the LORD's favour rests upon believers in the covenant of grace.

⁴⁹ Heinrich M. Ohmann, "Life and the hereafter in the Old Testament (Death, Grave, Sheol)," in *Κοινωνία* Vol. 3, (1980) No. 1-2, 4. This essay has been published in an expanded and revised version in *Een levende voorstelling* (Kampen: Van den Berg, 1993), 29-61.

⁵⁰ In the NIV the word "favor" and its derivatives occur 145 times; 118 in the OT, 27 in the NT. In most instances it refers to favour in human relationships. The word "grace" and its derivatives occur 159 times; 51 in the OT, 108 in the NT. In most instances it refers to the relationship between God and his people. In the OT, the reference is often to God's gracious act (Ex 34:6; Num 6:25; 2 Kgs 13:23; 2 Chr 30:9; Ezra 8:22, or used in conjunction with compassion (Neh 9:19; Ps 86:15, 103:8, 111:4, 116:5, 145:8; Isa 30:18; Jonah 4:2). In the NT, God's grace is through Christ (John 1:14, 17; 1 Cor 1:4; Rom 3:24, chaps 5 and 6), freely given in Christ (Eph 1:6-7; Heb 2:9, 4:16). The last book of the Bible ends with the blessing of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ (Rev 22:21). All these references give greater impetus to the Reformation maxim "sola gratia."

⁵¹ S.G. de Graaf, *Promise and Deliverance* (St. Catharines: Paideia Press, 1977), Vol. 1, 37. He writes: "Grace, in general, also means favor, but in the Scriptures grace always has the special meaning of favor that forgives guilt." Of interest here is Norman H. Snaith's discussion on the distinction between *héséd* and *'ah'bhāh*. He writes: "It is necessary to distinguish between these two words, since both mean 'love.' The difference lies in the fact that *chesed*, in all its varied shades of meaning, is conditional upon there being a covenant. Without the prior existence of a covenant, there could never be any *chesed* at all. . . . On the other hand *'ahabah* is unconditioned love. It is not limited by the condition of any covenant, but only by the will or the nature of the lover. Actually God's *'ahabah* (love) for Israel is the very basis and the only cause of the existence of the Covenant between God and Israel. *'Ahabah* is the cause of the covenant; *chesed* is the means of its continuance. Thus *'ahabah* is God's Election-Love, whilst *chesed* is His Covenant-Love." See *The Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964) 94-95. I see a similar distinction between favour and grace where favour approximates *'ah'bhāh* and grace approximates *héséd*.

Such an understanding of God's special relationship of grace can be developed with Genesis 3:15 as starting point. There God said to the serpent, after having put his curse on it, "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike at his heel."

Victor Hamilton makes the point that this NIV rendition is not the best when it translates the same Hebrew word in two ways within the same context. He maintains that one should either translate by using twice the word "crush," or twice "strike."⁵² He is right, not only linguistically, but also exegetically and biblically. For if we project Genesis 3:15 for a moment to Christ as the seed of the woman, then we know from the New Testament that the Christ suffered a "crushing" defeat at the hands of his opponents and died on a cross. But in suffering that "defeat," Christ did his Father's will and died for our transgressions (Isa 53; cf. 2 Cor 5:21; 2 Tim 2:5). And by his death and subsequent resurrection, Christ became victorious over sin and "crushed" the one who holds the power of death, that is, the devil (Heb 2:14).

But may we project Genesis 3:15 as a messianic prophecy? Is that what is meant by "offspring"? I concur once more with Hamilton who, after discussing whether the use of *zera'* ("seed") here refers to an individual and an immediate offspring, or to a collective and distant offspring,⁵³ concludes:

We may want to be cautious about calling this verse a messianic prophecy. At the same time we should be hesitant to surrender the time-honored expression for this verse—the *protevangelium*, "the first good news." The verse is good news whether we understand *zera'* singularly or collectively.⁵⁴

⁵² Hamilton, *Genesis*, 198.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 198-9. Hamilton first of all observes that in the vast majority of cases where offspring refers to an individual child, it refers to an immediate offspring rather than a distant descendant. This makes him sound the caution not to be too hasty in seeing in Genesis 3:15 a clear-cut reference to some remote individual. At the same time he also cites examples where offspring is a collective referring to a large group of distant descendants (Gen 9:9, 17:7-10, 22:17-18).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 199-200.

Genesis 3:15 can rightly be viewed as the first gospel message, the first good news and glad tiding after the fall into sin, because God came to the first man and woman with a promise of hope. They were promised descendants. That meant: hope for a future, and death deferred. Access to the tree of life was taken away, but hope for life was kept alive. God provided hope for the future. It is significant that after this incident Adam called his wife Eve, “mother of all living” (Gen 3:20), pointing to life.

This brings me to the second question: “Did the expulsion from the garden due to the fall into sin remove the hope of living eternally with God?” I think not, but the way to that “eternity” did change. While eating of the tree of life would have made eternal life with God possible without dying—and so eternal life, both temporally and qualitatively, would be part of life as it was created—after the fall into sin eternal life, in the temporal sense at least, is possible only after death while, at the same time, it is already a reality through faith in the promise.⁵⁵ Perhaps I can say it best this way: in the pre-Fall state, eternal life would be life with God uninterrupted; in the post-Fall state, eternal life with God, in the fullest sense, has to wait to the life after this life. However, the hope of living eternally with God remained after the fall into sin because, before he expelled the people from paradise, God placed them under the umbrella of promise and hope within a covenant relationship. The big question is, of course, what the promise entailed. From my understanding of Genesis 3:15—that God’s promise of descendants meant hope for a future and death deferred—the promise was the promise of life in the midst of death.

Throughout the Old Testament it becomes clear that the position and place of the believer in the covenant is one of safety. God is merciful. The LORD

⁵⁵ In the temporal sense, eternal life occurs after this earthly existence. But for Christians, eternal life is also something of the present. John’s Gospel relates that “this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (Jn 17:3; cf. Jn 3:36). Believers may feel in their hearts already the beginning of eternal joy. See Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 58, *The Three Forms of Unity*, 63.

does not delight in the death of anyone (Ezek 18:23, 32). It is not the LORD's desire to inflict death. Death is not pleasing or gratifying to God because death is caused by sin, the very thing God abhors. The covenant LORD finds pleasure in giving life. His favour is for a lifetime (Ps 30:4-5). While Adam and Eve and their descendants could only anticipate death (Gen 2:17), God gave the *protevangelium*, the promise of the seed who would be victorious over sin and death. This promise of victory slowly weaves its way throughout Scripture and culminates in the coming of Christ.⁵⁶

Although one can hardly assume that the fulness of the promise recorded in Genesis 3:15 was immediately evident to Adam and Eve, it seems to me that they must have had some notion of ongoing life when God did not at once implement the death sentence. However, reprieve is not the same as abolition as became clear in the first human death when Cain killed Abel. Still, in light of the nature of the promise it would not stretch the imagination in saying that by the time of Enoch (Gen 5:24), and certainly by the time of Noah and the covenant renewal (Gen 6-9), the people did have an inkling of life after this life.⁵⁷ We do not know to what extent they had a notion of life after this life, but the writer to the Hebrews affirms that Old Testament believers lived with a view to the life to come (11:13-17). If living under the umbrella of promise and hope in the covenant would end at death without hope of further existence, then that would provide cold comfort and empty consolation. What good is the vision of the serpent's defeat (Gen 3:14-15; cf. Rev 12 and 21) if there is no prospect of ever reaping the benefit of the deceiver's destruction? In light of

⁵⁶ One only has to compare such classic texts as Isa 7:14 and Mt 1:23; Mic 5:2 and Mt 2:6; Hos 11:1 and Mt 2:15; Isa 61:1-2 and Lk 4:18-19, to mention just a few references. Further see the Messianic Psalms 22, 110, 118. For a complete list of all the OT passages quoted and referred to in the NT see Kurt Aland *et al.*, *The Greek New Testament* (Münster: United Bible Societies, 1975), 897-903.

⁵⁷ If the Egyptians before the time of Moses already believed in an afterlife—they provided their dead with supplies for the next life—it would not be inconceivable to think that there may also have been an inkling of a next life among the OT believers. See Warner A. Hutchinson, *Ancient Egypt: Three Thousand Years of Splendor* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1978), 109-113.

Scripture as a whole, Genesis 3 and related passages speak of a great expectation.

Genesis also relates that because of the fall into sin God laid his first curse upon creation so that life became more difficult and became terminal (Gen 3:17-19). God blocked the way to the tree of life (3:22, 24). This implies that the prospect of living forever (3:22) was curtailed. But how long would the people live? What would be their life span?

4.3 Life Span

In the catalogue of longevity (Gen 5) we encounter ages ranging from a low of 365 years to a high of 969 years. These phenomenal ages have been interpreted in various ways, and views on this subject range anywhere from being literal to mythical.⁵⁸ After the Flood there is a steady decrease in life span leading to the boundary of 120 years mentioned in Genesis 6:3. W.H. Gispen regards this decrease in life span as a normalization which curtails the flourishing of sin to gigantic proportions.⁵⁹ Likewise, J. Barton Payne writes that "the decreasing life span of man in the primeval period may have been due to the progressive effects of sin (cf. Prov 10:27)."⁶⁰

Of interest for our purpose is that a 120 year life span seems to have become the limit by the time of Abraham. The ages recorded for his early descendants range between 120 -140 years,⁶¹ while nearly all his ancestors still

⁵⁸ Rachel Zohar Dulin, *A Crown of Glory: a biblical view of aging* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 10-13, suggests that the phenomenal ages were a denial of aging (11), a throwback on heroic times, a nostalgic view of the distant past, and wishful thoughts of not aging with time (13).

⁵⁹ W.H. Gispen, *Genesis* (COT; Kampen: Kok, 1974), Vol. 1, 224-5.

⁶⁰ J. Barton Payne, *The Theology of the Older Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962), 212. He also comments "that its greatest percentage of drop, almost in half, occurred in the days of Peleg (Gen. 11:17-19). But if this man's name *peleg*, "division" (10:25), refers to the contemporaneous confusion of tongues at Babel (and there appears to be no other contextually valid interpretation), then the drop in age is seen to coincide with this climax to human sinfulness."

⁶¹ Gen 25:17; 35:28; 47:28; 50:22; Ex 6:16, 18, 20

have a recorded age of over 200 years.⁶² It is significant that modern medicine and science have also determined that the limit of biological life, one's life span, is around 120 years,⁶³ whereas currently the average life expectancy is between 75 and 80 years of age.

The repetitious pattern in Genesis 5 of the person's name, age, and death, is suddenly interrupted when we come to Enoch. We do not read that he died. We are simply informed that Enoch lived a total of 365 years. He walked with God⁶⁴ and was no more because God took him away (5:23-24). While Payne wonders if this rapture provides the first glimmer of hope for eternal life during the primeval period, Claus Westermann feels that the emphasis is on the inexplicability of this removal, and says: "there is no notion of any mythical heavenly realm here."⁶⁵ An unique and insightful angle is presented by Victor Hamilton who views the fact that God took Enoch as: "one indication in this chapter that long life per se is not the most sacred and honourable blessing that can come from God. To be lifted aloft into God's immediate presence is perhaps more of an honor."⁶⁶ From a pastoral perspective this insight can be a great help and a comforting thought for elderly parents who are grieving the fact that they were pre-deceased by a child. Fulness of life and purposeful life depends on quality of years, not quantity of years.

In the final analysis, however, the ages recorded in Genesis 5 no longer

⁶² Gen 11. Even if this was calculated on a lunar calendar year of 354 days, the eleven days difference per year would only decrease the ages by about six to ten years.

⁶³ Claudia Wallis, "How to Live to Be 120," *TIME Magazine*, March 6, 1995, 46; Jeffrey Kluger, "Can We Stay Young?," *TIME Magazine*, November 25, 1996, 57. Jonathan Weiner, "Can I live to be 125?," *TIME Magazine*, November 8, 1999, 42-43. See also Mark Novak, *Aging & Society: A Canadian Perspective*, (Scarborough: Nelson, 1992 Second Edition), 124.

⁶⁴ F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 287 and 289n53, writes in connection with Heb 11:5 about Enoch: "In the Septuagint the repeated clause 'Enoch walked with God' is rendered 'Enoch was well-pleasing to God,'" and is used of Noah (Gen 6:9), of Abraham (Gen 17:1; 24:40), of Abraham and Isaac (Gen 48:15), and of the pious Israelite (Ps 56:13; 116:9).

⁶⁵ Payne, *Theology*, 445. Westermann, *Genesis*, 42.

⁶⁶ Hamilton, *Genesis*, 257. He further observes: "We have here the intriguing situation of the father who does not die and the son who lives the longest of any human being. And we have the person in Gen. 5 living on earth the shortest and fathering the person who in Gen. 5 lives the longest on earth" (257).

provide a realistic life span or life expectancy since these long life spans of the primeval period have ceased to exist. Even the life span of 120 years during the patriarchal period is something of the distant past. Still, there are two lessons to be gleaned from these recorded data. First, the lives of Enoch and Noah stand out because of their special relationship with God. Their way of life was a constant walking with God (5:24; 6:9). For Enoch this blessing did not translate into a long life in terms of quantity of years, but a full life in terms of quality of years. Second, the familiar pattern of birth and death continues till this very day, making us aware of the cycle of life, while "we never know when we have made the full round."⁶⁷ In between birth and death, life, for everyone, is a journey.

4.4 Life is a Journey

Growing old is part of life, the end of a process of an existence that can be regarded as a journey. A biblical reference that comes to mind is Jacob's reply to Pharaoh. When the Egyptian king inquired about his age, Jacob responded with: "The years of my pilgrimage are a hundred and thirty. My years have been few and difficult, and they do not equal the years of the pilgrimage of my fathers" (Gen 47:9; cf. Gen 23:4, Dt 26:5).

E.A. Speiser believes that "journey" or "pilgrimage" is a poor translation of *m^ogûrîm*. He gives several reasons, the most important being that "an allusion to wandering through life has rightly been suspect as unduly sophisticated." He suggests that "the attested range of the stem *g-r* includes 'to live on sufferance' (see 19:9), and this suits the present context admirably: any time that man is allowed to stay on earth is but borrowed time."⁶⁸

There is not much support for Speiser's suggestion. Not one of the modern translations I consulted, whether English, Dutch (*vreemdelingschap*),

⁶⁷ Nouwen and Gaffney, *Aging*, 156.

⁶⁸ E.A. Speiser, *Genesis* (Anchor Bible Commentary; Garden City: Doubleday, 1964), 351.

Afrikaans (*vreemdelingskap*), or French (*nomade*), nor the Septuagint which has *παροικῶ*, supports his proposal. In a word study on *gûr*,⁶⁹ Kellerman suggests that the usual meaning of *m^egûrîm* is sojourning. The word occurs eleven times, six in connection with 'erets ("land"). Yahweh is called *gê* (Jer 14:8). Palestine is his dwelling place, which he gave to Israel as an 'erets *m^egûrîm*, and in it he is like a foreigner.⁷⁰ Even David, who dwelt in the established promised land, had nonetheless this sense of being a *gê* when he declared, "we are aliens and strangers in your sight, as were all our forefathers" (1 Chr 29:15). Joseph had this same sense of being a stranger (Gen 50:24-25) even though he lived in Egypt longer than anywhere else.

We can infer from this that the concept of *gê* and *m^egûrîm* is one of not having reached one's ultimate or permanent destination. Jacob's reply to Pharaoh may simply mean that he, in spite of his long life, has not settled in the promised land. But throughout life's long journey he and his forefathers had peace (*šālôm*) in God's promise of better things to come. Therefore *šālôm* involves much more than enjoying health and prosperity. It is the keen awareness of contentment and fulfilment that permeates all of life. It has to do with positive relationships with others, especially with God. This peace from God is a quiet repose that rules the senses in knowing that the LORD is near, and knowing oneself surrounded by his goodness and love. This *šālôm* is possible because it is based on the trust that one reaches the goal God has set before her/him in the present stage of life. From this we can conclude that the image of being a sojourner was not a negative description of life, but an acute awareness that life in the covenant depended on God's leading. As such it reflected a peaceful quiet and trusting acceptance of dependence on God. Under the umbrella of promise the Old Testament patriarchs knew themselves

⁶⁹ D. Kellermann, "gûr" in *TDOT*, 2:439-449.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 448-9. From a NT perspective this ties in with Rev 21 which declares the coming of a new world where God will dwell with his people again.

in God's loving care.

Also significant is Westermann's remark that Jacob's unique expression "years of sojourning" and the phrase "land of sojourning" are idioms that associate his life with that of his fathers.⁷¹ In other words, Jacob views his life as closely linked to that of others. Life is seen as a relationship, not only with those who are living, but also with those who have already gone before. That is why they could also die in peace (Gen 15:15; cf. 25:8).

Keil and Delitzsch consider Jacob's answer about life as a journey a "figurative representation of the inconsistency and weariness of earthly life in which we do not reach the true peace with God and the blessedness of his fellowship."⁷² Other exegetes see in Genesis 47, about Jacob's account of his 130 year pilgrimage and his observation that his journey had not been nearly as long as that of his forefathers, a longing for eternal life. H.C. Leupold, for example, explains Jacob's unsettled state of life as "an excellent type of the spiritual truth that all of man's life is but a pilgrimage to the eternal home where we no longer stay for the time being as strangers."⁷³ Whether this can be said on the basis of Genesis 47:9 alone can be questioned. However, in light of the New Testament it is certainly true. Hebrews 11 clearly impresses the point that already among the patriarchs there was an expectation of life after this life (vv. 8-10, 13-16). This expectation is reflected especially in the Psalms. The poet of Psalm 49 states confidently, "But God will redeem my life from the grave; he will surely take me to himself."⁷⁴ This is not a trivial matter, but one that has a bearing on how Old Testament believers viewed aging and coped with aging. And, as an aside for the moment, I suggest that the expectation of life after death also had a bearing on how Old Testament believers took care

⁷¹ Westermann, *Genesis*, 310. Cf. Gen 28:4, 36:7, 37:1; Ex 6:4.

⁷² Keil and Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 1:376.

⁷³ H.C. Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980 [1942]), Vol. 2, 1129-1130.

⁷⁴ Cf. Ps 16:8-10, 71:19-20, 116:3-9, 69:15; see also Job 19:25-26.

of their dead as reflected in the practice of bodily interment.⁷⁵

Jacob spoke about the difficulties of life. Similar sentiments are expressed in Psalm 90:10 where life is described as "trouble and sorrow." Centuries later Qoheleth also touched on this subject.⁷⁶ Indeed, there is nothing new under the sun. The Preacher finds the end result of a life of toil disappointing, to say the least, because the human being is a perishable creature who only lives toward death. Life's toil and trouble are like meaningless rounds. From Qoheleth's perspective the trouble of our existence serves like a constant *memento mori*.⁷⁷ But, surprisingly enough, he uses the memento to focus on the Creator. Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come (12:1). The Preacher wants to underscore the reality that one must prepare for old age by keeping God in the picture in order to shoulder the burdens of old age. Qoheleth is not so much a pessimist⁷⁸ as he is a realist who says that if we analyse life carefully then we see that during our short life (2:3; 6:11) the things we strive for will slip away from us in the end. He stresses that we should live from the perspective and understanding that the journey of life is one that ends in death. "Death is the destiny of every man; the living should take this to heart" (7:2; cf. 3:18-22; 9:2-3, 10). But lest we misunderstand his intentions by thinking that, because of the meaninglessness in life he has uncovered, nothing matters, he concludes his search by stating that everything matters. In his search for the meaning of life he came to the

⁷⁵ This matter will receive detailed attention in the excursion on "Inhumation or Cremation: does it matter?"

⁷⁶ Eccl 1:3; 3:13; 5:15, 17-18; 9:9

⁷⁷ Van 't Veld, *Gelijk het gras*, 49-60.

⁷⁸ Derek Kidner argues convincingly that Qoheleth takes on the role of an explorer who relentlessly probes the boundaries of life. But he does so to show that in the end all comes down to one thing: the need to acknowledge God. Kidner quotes with approval G.S. Henry's view that "Qoheleth is addressing the general public whose view is bounded by the horizon of this world; he meets them on their own ground, and proceeds to convict them of its inherent vanity. . . . His book is in fact a critique of secularism and of secularized religion." See *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 93; and *The Message of Ecclesiastes* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1976), 13-20.

conclusion that in whatever way one tries to maximize life's possibilities, it should be done in the awareness that whatever we do is done before the face of God who will bring every deed into judgment, whether good or evil (12:14; cf. 3:15; 11:9). Therefore, remember your Creator in your youth. In the vigorous years prepare for old age which brings on the evil days of the body breaking down. And in old age, live from the perspective of understanding that life's journey is one that ends in weakness. Life is short. Enjoy the short life by keeping God in the picture because old age and its effects will be upon you before you know it.⁷⁹

4.5 Life's Brevity Embraced by Eternal God

Even though the patriarchs lived to be over a hundred years old, they considered life brief. Jacob indicated that his life had not been as long as that of his forefathers. He referred to the number of his years as "few" (Gen 47:9). Similar thoughts about the brevity of life are found throughout the Old Testament. Job defined his days as "swifter than a runner," like speedy boats that skim past, and like eagles swooping down (9:25-26). Life is compared to a breath (Ps 144:4, Isa 2:22), a fleeting shadow (Job 14:2; 8:9; Ps 144:4; cf. 89:47), few (Job 10:20, 14:1; Eccl 5:18, 6:12), a handbreadth (Ps 39:5), and grass (Ps 103:15; cf. Is 40:6). Our days are numbered (Job 14:5) and the duration of life is determined from before birth (Ps 139:16; cf. 31:15; Job 14:5).

What was the gauge used to determine the brevity of life? If, for instance, most people were to reach a certain age, let us say 100, what made them consider their life span as a "fleeting shadow," and "a handbreadth?" Was it in comparison to their predecessors who had attained a greater age? In

⁷⁹ A solid study on Ecclesiastes 12 was written by Michael V. Fox, "Aging and Death in Qoheleth 12," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 42 (1988), 55-77. He is of the opinion that Ecclesiastes 12 should not be read exclusively as an allegory. In his study he deals with three types of meaning, and tries to combine the literal, symbolical, and figurative in explaining the meaning of this chapter. His insights are helpful, but when all is said and done I believe that the symbolical is still to be preferred over the literal.

my opinion they considered life brief because they viewed life against the backdrop of God's eternity. They lived under the protective wings of eternal God. When Moses blessed the people before his death, he reminded them of their unique position before the God who has no equals. He said: "There is no one like the God of Jeshurun . . . The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms" (Dt 33:26-27).

Not only did Old Testament believers view their brief existence against the backdrop of God's eternity, they also linked God's eternity to the covenant relationship. Psalm 103:14-18 clearly reveals the link between God's eternity and life in the covenant. The poet says: "From everlasting to everlasting the LORD's love is with those who fear him . . . with those who keep his covenant" (vv. 17-18). Van 't Veld writes in connection with these verses from Psalm 103: "Here the comfort/consolation for perishable man is found in the notion that God's *hèsèd* ("covenant love") and righteousness reach beyond the brief human life."⁸⁰

Yahweh's covenant relationship throughout the generations is possible because of God's eternity. Because God spans the ages, the covenant made with the forefathers remained valid. God's promises continued from generation to generation, as did the covenant obligations. It is the same God who entered the relationship with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who is God of the covenant with the Old Testament believer of every age and generation. Israel's God of the covenant is the same God throughout time. Abraham already knew Yahweh as the Eternal God (Gen 21:33); Jeremiah called God the eternal king (10:10); Isaiah spoke about the everlasting God (40:28).⁸¹

⁸⁰ Van 't Veld, *Gelijk het gras*, 72. My translation of "De troost voor de vergankelijkheid is hier gelegen in the gedachte, dat Gods *hèsèd* en gerechtigheid verder reiken dan de korte menselijke levensstijd." The word "troost" has a range of nuances which includes "comfort, consolation and encouragement."

⁸¹ Allan A. Macrae states that '*olām* can point to something in the future, perpetuity, or the remote past, or both. See R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, *The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), Vol. 2, 672-3, #1631. Hereafter: *TWOT*. Other references to God's eternity are found in Ps 90:2, 102:12, 103:17, 146:10, as well as Is 40:8, 51:6, 8.

The thought was encouraging, therefore, that even though life was like a breath, it was embraced by the God who endures. Life was lived under the umbrella of promise of the God who spans the ages. God's eternity provided safety and security throughout the generations. Therefore, life, on the whole, was not looked upon negatively. Life's brevity did not make it meaningless. Rather, it made God's people look at the LORD God in a special way. They looked to God as the source of light and life,⁸² and discovered that life without God is darkness (Isa 5:20, 30). Life with God, whether long or short, depended on a meaningful relationship with God as stipulated in the covenant expectations. Because the eternal God made the covenant, the covenant obligations continued from generation to generation. This ongoing obligation through the generations was reflected in the duties assigned to life within the covenant.

4.6 Life's Duties

Life's duties within the covenant relationship receive detailed treatment in Deuteronomy. It serves as a handbook on life as God intended it for his covenant people. Central in that relationship is God's demand for obedience as reflected in the extensive legislation beginning with the ten words of the covenant (Dt 5; cf. Ex 20) and how these laws are to be kept. For young and old alike, one's life, one's relationship with God, is not static; it is a dynamic way of life. God's blessings come through covenant faithfulness (cf. 4:26, 40).⁸³

In Deuteronomy the stress is on one's duties toward God. These duties are both collective and personal. The personal responsibilities are caught up

Daniel 7:9 mentions someone Ancient of Days. In the much loved Psalm 23, David expressed his confidence that he would dwell in the house of the LORD forever (lit. "for length of days"). David's "forever" and the description of God's eternity (*'olām*) are not the same.

⁸² Ps 27:1, 36:9, 56:13, 97:11; cf. 37:5-6

⁸³ Disobedience would invoke God's anger (11:16-17; cf. Lev 26:16 "I will drain away your life.") The NT counterpart is found in 2 Tim 2:11-13.

into, and are part of, the collective responsibilities. Collective and personal duties involved commitment and devotion to God and service to others. This commitment and devotion to God is captured in the command to love God with heart, soul, and strength (Dt 6:5), and the service to others can be summed up as love for the neighbour (Lev 19:18). Jesus later on quoted these Old Testament texts and called them the greatest commandments (Mt 22:37-40).

Since collective and personal duties are so intertwined, we find great emphasis placed on the community and on the individual for keeping each other in the ways of the Lord. Deuteronomy 29:18 gives the express command: "Make sure there is no man or woman, clan or tribe among you today whose heart turns away from the Lord our God to go and worship the gods of other nations; make sure there is no root among you that produces such bitter poison." And Deuteronomy 4:9 warns: "Be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them slip from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them."

The emphatic command that the people keep God's deeds in their hearts *for as long as they live* indicates that they should remain faithful even in old age. Also, the instruction to teach God's deeds to grandchildren highlights teaching the youth as a task of the elderly. I believe Ian Cairns is right when he states that this command in Deuteronomy 4:9 "presupposes a bridging process of family instruction and catechesis between annual feasts (cf. 6:7, 11:19, 31:13, 32:46)."⁸⁴ Youth is encouraged to learn from the older generation (32:7; cf. Jer 6:16; Joel 1:3; Ps 78). In fact, the role of instruction is so intimate and familiar that the relationship between instructor and instructee is sometimes described as that of father and son (Prov 3:12).

As it is the duty of the older generation to teach the young people, so it is

⁸⁴ Ian Cairns, *Word and Presence: a commentary on Deuteronomy* (International Theological Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 58.

the duty of youth to receive the instruction of the elderly. When both fulfill their duties, then God's blessing rests upon them all. One of those blessings is long life. Within the covenant community everything is interconnected. Collective and personal duties are linked. Duties and blessings are linked. Duties and long life are linked. An obedient life in the covenant engenders the blessing of long life.

4.7 Long Life

Long life is associated with walking in the ways of the LORD in obedience to his commands. It is promised in the fifth commandment: "Honor your father and your mother as the LORD your God has commanded you, so that you may live long and that it may go well with you in the land the LORD your God is giving you" (Dt 5:16; cf. Ex 20:12).⁸⁵ This command, and the many others God dictated, indicates that life in communion with God requires covenant obedience. Yahweh's directives must be taken to heart and obeyed by young and old alike. God's words and expectations are synonymous with life. "They are not just idle words for you," Moses said, "they are your life. By them you will live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess" (Dt 32:47).

R.Z. Dulin points out that in Deuteronomy the phrase "length of days" appears twelve times followed by a phrase which connects it to the land or nation. Long life in the land was linked to national obedience (Dt 5:16, 27-30; 6:3; 8:1; 11:21; 30:17, 19; 32:47). This means, according to Dulin, that length of days was therefore "not an individual hope to live long and age, but rather it connoted the national aspiration for long survival in the promised land."⁸⁶ I concur, although I would think that there was also a personal hope to live long and grow old. In any case, the corporate view of life and prosperity Dulin

⁸⁵ Cf. Dt 16:20, 30:19-20

⁸⁶ Dulin, *Crown*, 14.

emphasises fits perfectly with the collective duty within the framework of God's covenant alliance. However, I do not share Dulin's closing remark of her chapter on The Israelite Idea of the "Fountain of Youth" when she says: "Be it national or personal, the dream of 'length of days' was an expression of the denial of death and postponement of aging. It was only a dream, a fantasy."⁸⁷

I wonder whether divine revelation is not more than "only a dream." Length of days is a divine promise repeated in Ephesians 6:3 where the fifth commandment is quoted in a New Testament perspective and is called the first commandment with a promise. One could also ask whether Dulin is not reading into the Old Testament a "fountain of youth" idea based on a twentieth century American view of life that is infatuated with the cult of youth. In my view she misses the mark here because she severs aging from the totality of life. It is very much the habit of our time to compartmentalize life in sectors of which old age is the last sector, the winter of human existence, the undesirable end.

From a biblical perspective, old age and aging remain purposeful. Long life was everyone's wish, whether as a nation in the land of promise, or as an individual by reaching fulness of years (Gen 25:8). Long life was coveted because life meant being in relationship with God and with others. When life was lived in relationship with God under the umbrella of promise, then it could simply never be long enough! Death was undesirable because it interrupted a relationship with family and friends, and especially with God. Death silenced

⁸⁷ Ibid., 17. Denial of death seems to me to be a more recent phenomenon. Philippe Ariès has written an extensive survey about attitudes on death and dying from the fifth century to the nineteenth century. In that survey he discovered an attitude of indifference to death, but no death denial until the 20th century. See *The Hour of Our Death*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 312-3, 322 and chap 12 "Death Denied," 559-601. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross mentions in her study on death and dying that some of her medical peers denied they had terminally ill patients in their care. She revealed that this denial was in some way linked to her peers' own fears and denials of death. *On Death and Dying* (Macmillan Publishing, New York, 1969; Toronto: First Collier Books Trade Edition, 1993), 20 and 220. Ernst Becker has looked at death denial from a psychoanalytical angle, and is of the opinion that: "the idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is the mainspring of human activity . . . to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny for man." *The Denial of Death* (New York: Free Press, 1973), ix.

all praise of God and was therefore the exact opposite of life which was meant to produce praise to God.⁸⁸ Later on the Psalms reflect praise as being the highest aim of human existence. When death comes then all praise for God is silenced (Ps 88:5, 30:16; Isa 38:18-19). Old Testament believers coveted long life because the living experienced God's presence. And living in God's presence touches upon the spiritual dimension of life.

4.8 Life's Spiritual Dimension

All of life is lived in the presence of God. He sees; he watches; he cares. In Deuteronomy 30:11-20, Moses placed God's offer between life and death before the people. Ohmann points out that "in the revelation of YAHWEH, life and death are from the very outset connected respectively with God's promise, symbolized in the tree of life, and with God's threat in case man does not heed God's command."⁸⁹ Some of Cairns' insights on this passage are worth repeating as they are relevant to our topic. He writes:

"Life" is normally equated with "length of days" (v. 18), hence the primary reference is to natural life in the physical world. But because it is life in the presence of Yahweh, the physical is shot through with a spiritual dimension. . . . In Dt, with one exception the verb "choose" always has Yahweh as its subject: It is Yahweh who chooses the ancestors, Israel, their descendants, and the place of worship. The covenant is grounded in Yahweh's initiative. Here the stress is on the necessity for human response. "Life" is virtually a title for Yahweh: to choose life is . . . to choose Yahweh.⁹⁰

These observations provide a solid point of departure for the role of churches and pastoral ministry toward the elderly and all other members. The primary task of churches is to point people to a life with God, a life of service and worship. Churches should give careful consideration to Moberg's

⁸⁸ Gen 24:27; 29:35; Ex 15:2; 18:10; Lev 19:24; Dt 8:10; 10:21; 32:3

⁸⁹ Ohmann, "Life and the hereafter in the Old Testament," 3-4.

⁹⁰ Cairns, *Word and Presence*, 265-266.

observation:

Far too many religious groups serving the aging pay so much attention to empirically observable needs related to health, transportation, food, home services, and social relationships that they fail to minister to spiritual needs in any but the most perfunctory modes. No other agency is expected to make spiritual concerns a primary focus, so when churches and synagogues fail to accentuate spiritual ministry, they betray the people they serve.⁹¹

The most important spiritual dimension in life, and one that will support believers till the end of life, is a lifelong walk with God. In the Old Testament, life is often portrayed as a path established by God to which one should keep. Psalm 25 contains this prayer: "Show me yours ways, O Lord, teach me your paths" (v.4). God's Word is deemed to be a light on our path (Ps 119:105).⁹² From this vantage point the famous exhortation in Ecclesiastes 12:1 to "remember your Creator in the days of your youth" receives added dimension. A life without God in one's youth is difficult to transform into a life with God in old age. Frank Stagg has put it succinctly: "One must prepare for old age, and usually it is too late in old age to prepare. Further, to prepare in youth for age, one must know God."⁹³

Life with God is not a haphazard try-your-luck kind of existence; it is learned conduct through learned obedience (cf. Dt 4:6, 30:20; Lev 18:5). God's demand of obedience forms the "backbone" of what the authors of wisdom literature⁹⁴ call the "fear of the LORD" as the beginning of knowledge and wisdom (Prov 1:7; 9:10; cf. Ps 111:10).

Biblical wisdom is practical in nature. It is more than a collection of facts

⁹¹ David O. Moberg, "Spiritual Maturity and Wholeness in the Later Years," in *Spiritual Maturity in the Later Years* (James J. Seeber, ed.; Binghamton: Haworth Press, 1990), 18.

⁹² Cf. Ps 17:5, 50:23; Prov 2:7-8, 10:17, 15:9-10; Jer 6:16, 23:12. Perhaps we can regard this as an early precursor of Christians as followers of the Way (Acts 9:2, 24:14).

⁹³ Stagg, *Biblical Perspectives on Aging*, 6.

⁹⁴ Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes are classified as wisdom literature in the Old Testament.

of who God is. Wisdom is a combination of knowledge,⁹⁵ insight, discernment and discretion on how to apply this knowledge and insight in relation to one's life with God. As such we can say that in its basic reality, biblical wisdom is knowing God's goal for us in each stage in life. This wisdom and discernment come from God. Godly wisdom brings life and prolongs life (Prov 3:2, 16; 4:10). The elderly have a distinct advantage over youth because they are the one's who have had the opportunity to reflect upon God's wonderful deeds the longest. No wonder we read in Job 12:12, "Is not wisdom found among the aged? Does not long life bring understanding?" (cf. Job 8:8-10). This is immediately followed by the recognition that: "To God belong wisdom and power; counsel and understanding are his" (12:13).⁹⁶

Biblical wisdom begins with the fear of the LORD, i.e., reverence and awe for God, obedience to God, and trust in God. Fear of God is akin to submitting to God's revealed will. It combines worship and adoration whereby God's people stand in awe of Yahweh's covenant initiatives and grace. All these elements are present in Psalm 25:12-14. God instructs those who fear him, and makes them prosper, i.e., they will know themselves surrounded by

⁹⁵ Malcolm J.A. Horsnell observes about the Hebrew understanding of knowledge (*yd'*) is not simply abstract knowledge of objective facts, but that it can refer "to the process of learning by instruction or by observation; to instinctive, intuitive knowledge; to experience of a situation; to being acquainted with; or to being skilled or having ability. Knowing involved the entire personality, not just the mind." "Biblical Concepts of Aging" in *McMaster Journal of Theology* (Spring 1993) Vol. 3, No. 2, 34-35. The German makes a distinction between "kennen" (e.g., to know the facts, be acquainted with the issue), and "wissen" (e.g., who knows?, as far as I know). The same distinction is found in the Dutch between "kennen" and "weten". The German word "Begriff," i.e., "idea, notion, comprehension, conception" (Dutch "begrip") contain the nuances of the Hebrew *yd'*.

⁹⁶ There appears to be some difficulty in translating Job 12:12 in context. Does it go with v.11 or v.13? NIV and RSV both connect it to v.11, but NIV translates in the form of a question: "Is not wisdom found among the aged?," while RSV translates as statement: "Wisdom is with the aged." J.E. Hartley connects v.12 to v.13 and translates: "With the Aged One is wisdom and with the Long-lived One is understanding." He provides this explanation: "Building on the accepted idea that wisdom resides with the elders in the community, Job takes two of their epithets and uses them as titles for God, *the Aged One* and *the Long-lived One*. The longer one lives, the wiser one becomes. Since God is the oldest by far, he certainly is the wisest. The hymn will recount God's great wisdom in his sovereign rulership over the world." John E. Hartley, *The Book of Job* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 210, 213. I find that last reasoning weak. God is not wisest because he is oldest; God is wisest because he is God (cf. Isa 55:8; 1 Cor 2:11-16).

their LORD's goodness and love. The LORD confides in them by inviting them into the inner circle for a most intimate relationship. Therefore, wise people are those who, in response to that intimate relationship, serve God with reverent awe and dedication. Even the Preacher who, from many angles, expressed his view about the meaninglessness of life, concluded all his searching with this observation: "Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man" (Eccl 12:13; cf. Lev 18:5; Dt 30:15).

The elderly were to be living examples of this wisdom based on a life-long experience of God's dealings with them. They had to pass on to successive generations that the fear of the LORD adds life (Prov 10:27), leads to life (Prov 19:23), is the fountain of life (Prov 14:27).

We can sum up that the spiritual dimension of life involved a life-long walk with God in submission to his revealed will. Wisdom is with the elderly because they have an advantage over youth in that they have experienced God's presence in their lives much longer. This wisdom, like all God's gifts, was to be utilized for the benefit of the whole community.

4.9 Summary

In this section I have sketched a picture of life from the Old Testament. We began by looking at life as it originated with God and by considering how life completely depended on God. Already in paradise God pointed the first couple to the possibility of living forever by giving them access to the tree of life with the intent of giving them eternal life. Expulsion from the garden was both punishment and protection.

From the outset life was set in a covenantal relationship. The covenant originated with God who imposed the terms of the covenant. The covenant was one-sided in its institution and two-sided in its execution. This special relationship was one of safety for the people because God placed them under the umbrella of promise. I have argued that after the fall the covenant should

be regarded as a covenant of grace, and that because of the *protevangelium*, the covenant of grace kept alive the awareness of a better life to come (cf. Heb 11). The Old Testament believer had an inkling or expectation of life after this life.

After the Flood the human life span was limited to 120 years. The Old Testament believer considered his/her life brief in duration. This brevity was measured against the backdrop of God's eternity. Also the covenant relationship was viewed in relation to God's eternity, which provided the assurance that God's promises remained in force throughout the generations because the Lord of the covenant spanned and outlasted the generation with whom the covenant was made. In the covenant, all of life is embraced by God who endures. God's eternity provides safety and security throughout the generations.

Life can be viewed as a journey. Jacob viewed his life as a pilgrimage, as not being truly at home wherever he dwelt on earth. This was not a negative description of life, but an acute awareness that life in the covenant depended on God's leading and peace (*šālôm*). Life on earth was coveted, and long life was a special gift from God. Life was seen as a relationship with God within the community, but there was also a link with those who had already died.

Long life for the community and for the individual was associated with walking in the ways of the Lord, i.e., in covenant obedience. Life within the covenant was not static; it was a way of life. The most important spiritual dimension was a life-long walk with God. Long life was purposeful because life meant being in relationship with God. Still, fulness of life did not depend on quantity of years, but on quality of years. The main focus in the Old Testament was on life in a vibrant relationship with God, and Ecclesiastes underscores the need that from our youth we must prepare for old age by keeping God in the picture in order to shoulder the burdens of old age (Eccl 12:1).

Duties within the covenant were personal and collective. People lived

within the covenant community in which all had a task to perform. One task of the elderly was to teach the young members in society, and youth had the duty to be receptive to the teaching of the elderly. If both fulfilled their duty, then God's blessing would rest upon them. For the covenant believer, God's word is synonymous with life (Dt 32:17).

The elderly were also to be wise and discerning people. In regards to wisdom, the elderly have the advantage over youth. By reaching advanced age, the elderly were to praise God for their long life and to become living examples of Godly wisdom based on their life-long experience of God's dealings with them. Wisdom is practical in nature. Wise people were those who, in response to the intimate relationship with God, served God with reverent awe and dedication.

With these biblical data as our basis, we can now review some specific passages in the canon concerning the elderly and aging. Two main elements stand out and will have our attention. First, in God's covenant community the elderly belong and have an honoured place. Second, under God's covenant care, people can confidently face life with its hardships and joys.

CHAPTER FIVE
PLACE AND FUNCTION OF THE ELDERLY
IN THE OLD TESTAMENT COMMUNITY

5.1 Elderly in their "Prime"

5.1.1 Old people belong

Our starting point here can be the exodus from Egypt. When Moses was about to lead the Israelites to freedom from a life of slavery, he insisted that the elderly come too. "We will go with our young and old" (Ex 10:9). There was no talk of leaving them behind. The elderly were not regarded as people past their prime who had little or nothing more to offer to the community. There was a strong sense of community. The old people came along because they belonged.

Collective responsibility ran deep, and a general sense of communal commitment is found throughout the Old Testament. Individualism, i.e., the selfish leading of one's life in one's own way without regard for others, is not a biblical image as it runs counter to the requirement to "love your neighbour as yourself" (Lev 19:18). People who acted individualistically, acted against the collective good of the community, and to their own detriment. Achan's selfish act of taking from the spoil devoted to the Lord (Josh 6:17) caused defeat at Ai (Josh 7; 22:20; cf. Dt 29:18), and David's selfish act in taking a census of his warriors led to hardship for the nation (1 Chr 21; cf. 2 Sam 24). The basic reason why individualism as the "cult of self"⁹⁷ was detrimental for the

⁹⁷ Georgina Bray, *Ageing—A Sort of Ghetto-Land* (Grove Books: Bramcote, 1991), 9.

community was because God did not make his covenant with only one person; he made it with Abraham and his descendants. God made his covenant with a people, a community. In that communal life the elderly not merely belonged; they played a prominent role.

Rolf Knierim highlights that the elderly remained an integral part of societal life. They did so diachronically and synchronically. Diachronically, by being the link between the generations; synchronically, by being involved with all the other groups in the corporate entity of their society. The ongoing societal importance of the elderly was institutionally guaranteed by the fact that they always remained a part of their families and clans.⁹⁸

Regarding the ongoing involvement of the elderly, Thomas B. Robb makes the interesting distinction between *chronos*-time and *kairos*-time.⁹⁹ Kairos time is within chronos time. The latter is clock time which runs out whether one uses the time wisely or not. Kairos time is equivalent to quality time, making the best of chronos time. The elderly may run out of chronos time, but they have a calling to make the most of kairos time. It is mainly in this framework of kairos time that they continued to function for society.

5.1.2 Old age

We have already noted that the life span in the patriarchal time was reduced to 120 years. Some attained a higher age, but that was becoming the exception rather than the norm. When Joshua was about to die at the age of a hundred and ten (Josh 24:29), the LORD called him "very old" (Josh 13:1). Here we have an indication that 110 had become the upper limit. Later on Eli was considered very old at ninety-eight (1 Sam 2:22, 4:15). This was further reduced to a maximum life span of seventy or eighty by the poet of Psalm 90. That

⁹⁸ Knierim, "Age and Aging in the Old Testament", 27-28.

⁹⁹ Thomas B. Robb, *Growing Up: pastoral nurture for the later years* (Binghamton: Haworth Press, 1991), 19-23.

raises the question: If the uppermost life span was "four score" years, what was the life span and life expectancy of the average Israelite?

Nearly every study on the subject has accepted Wolff's conclusion that the average life expectancy was less than fifty.¹⁰⁰ This is based on a tabulation of the average age of Israelite kings. The thesis connected with this is that kings outlived the general population by some ten years because royalty had better food and protection. Also, some tombs were found which contained skeletons of which the average age is calculated at between 35 to 40 years.¹⁰¹ The only source I found which estimated old age in the high range between fifty and seventy is J.-P. Prevost,¹⁰² which is interesting in light of Isaiah 23:15 where the span of a king's life is listed as seventy years.

What should we make of this difference of opinion? Here we see the importance of, and need for, careful differentiation between life span and life expectancy. While those who propose the low average age probably think in terms of average life expectancy, Prevost may be thinking in terms of a possible biological life span. This distinction may also offer the "solution" to the seventy or even eighty years listed in Psalm 90. If this is taken to be the upper life span rather than the average life expectancy, then the high figure is not really unrealistic.

The general consensus is that someone was probably considered old around the age of fifty. For the priests it was even the compulsory retirement age (Num 8:25).¹⁰³ This is unique in light of the fact that a person's peak value

¹⁰⁰ Wolff, *Anthropology*, 119f. Harris, *Biblical Perspectives*, 12. Dulin, *Crown*, 21. Horsnell, "Biblical Concepts of Aging", 24-28. The latter comes to a higher average of 52 years, which seems more probable.

¹⁰¹ John J. Pilch, "Sickness and Long Life" in *The Bible Today* 33 (1995), 97. Dulin, *Crown*, 23.

¹⁰² Quoted by Robert Martin-Achard, "Biblical Perspectives on Aging" in *Concilium* 1991 (3), 32. Martin-Achard, who also follows Wolff's hypothesis, writes: "Prevost concludes that 'in all probability we can put old age between fifty and seventy,'" and then comments, "an interesting remark, though a hypothetical one."

¹⁰³ This text undermines the statement by Koenig, Lamar and Lamar, about retiring from God's service. They write: "We recently did a computer word-search for retirement in two versions of the Bible

and productivity lay between the ages of twenty and sixty (Lev 27:3). Gilhuis has an enlightening opinion on this age cap for priests. He opines that since around the age of fifty many people begin to experience health related problems, priests had to stop regular duty in the temple service at that age because they had to be without physical defect in the LORD's service.¹⁰⁴ This view also allows for the possibility that those who are physically fit can function as assistants after the age of fifty (Num 8:26). What the age cap for the Levitical priests indicates is that the years between twenty and fifty can be counted as the best years physically.

As for the others, old age did not automatically sideline the person. It appears that everyone kept on working as long as he or she was able.¹⁰⁵ The family, as a community of productivity, depended on the input of all. This meant that everyone in the household was useful in some way to the very end. Old age was not seen as an end in itself, but growing old made it possible for the elderly person to gain "a heart of wisdom" (Ps 90:12). Besides growing old the elderly were also expected to grow in wisdom so that they would become sages. Someone summarized this growth process with the catchy phrase: "From age-ing to sage-ing."¹⁰⁶ Maturity of age and wisdom qualified the elderly persons with their life experience for the role of leaders, counsellors, and teachers (cf. Ps 71:18; 78:4). They attained a stage in life where they deserved special recognition and respect.

(the International Standard and the American Standard). Nothing came up." They then give examples of those listed in the Bible who continued to serve and comment: "Thus, we conclude from the lives of the great leaders in the Bible that God does not retire people from service." *A Gospel for the Mature Years*, 33.

¹⁰⁴ Gilhuis, *Pastorale zorg*, 124-5.

¹⁰⁵ Samuel continued as judge over Israel all the days of his life (1 Sam 7:15-16); Eli was on duty as priest till age 98 (1 Sam 1:9); Caleb was still full of vigour and eager to start a new life at 85 (Josh 14:10).

¹⁰⁶ This play on words is borrowed from Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, *From Age-ing to Sage-ing* (New York: Warner Books, 1995). The title is great, but the overall direction of the book I cannot make my own.

5.1.3 Respect for the elderly

Respect is when a person is treated with special distinction and honour. God demanded such respect for the elderly when he commanded, "Rise in the presence of the aged, show respect for the elderly and revere your God. I am the LORD" (Lev 19:32). The rule is: treat the elderly with special distinction and consideration for this is God-pleasing. With this requirement God laid down a normative rule with regard to the elderly. G. Warmuth comments on the use of *hād̄hār* ("respect", "honour") in Leviticus 19:32 and says it means: "to act in a way that is keeping with *hād̄hār*, i.e., to distinguish by respect, to show respect: 'honor old age.'"¹⁰⁷

Is this respect something that comes to the elderly automatically? Instructive is Elihu's approach to his elders in Job 32-37. While he questioned the wisdom of his seniors, he did respect them by not speaking out of turn. He waited until they had nothing more to say to Job. And while it can be said that in Job and Ecclesiastes we find critiques of the accepted traditions of their time,¹⁰⁸ Elihu demonstrated the required respect. His reproof of Job and Job's three elderly friends, who were all older than he, should not be considered a matter of disrespect. Elsewhere in the wisdom literature we find in Proverbs 9:8, "rebuke a wise man and he will love you" and also: "rebuke a discerning man, and he will gain knowledge" (Prov 19:25; cf. 1 Tim 5:1; Tit 2:15).

The example of Elihu is instructive because it confirms J.R. Porter's observation that: "reverence for *the aged* is not primarily on humanitarian grounds. It is rooted in the divine ordering of society and hence coupled with the injunction *fear your God*."¹⁰⁹ This comment has far reaching implications. If respect for the elderly was linked to reverence for God, then aged people

¹⁰⁷ G. Warmuth, "hād̄hār" in *TDOT*, 3:335-40, 340 .

¹⁰⁸ Horsnell, "Biblical Concepts of Aging", 36-38.

¹⁰⁹ J.R. Porter, *Leviticus* (Cambridge Bible Commentary; Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 159.

occupied a special place in God's plan within the covenant community. And indeed they did. One of their main tasks in life was to be guardians of tradition. They also fulfilled a judicial role to keep the community functioning properly.¹¹⁰

Respect for the elderly is further stipulated in the command to honour father and mother.¹¹¹ Usually this command is applied to children who live at home and who need to abide by the rules of the house and show respect. In light of Ephesians 6:1-4, this is clearly the primary focus. But Lloyd R. Bailey is undoubtedly correct to give it a wider scope by saying:

What is meant by the term "honor" is not stated, but it is surely more than the simple obedience of childhood. The term carries the nuance of affection (Ps. 91:15), of respect and prizing highly (Prov. 4:8), and of reverence (Lev. 19:3). The "ultimate significance" of the commandment may be the protection of parents when they are no longer able to care for themselves, when they are, from a utilitarian point of view, useless. It is thus not aimed at small children, in contrast to the way that we almost always seek to use it now.¹¹²

Except for the last sentence, in which Bailey is overstating his case—had he said that it is not exclusive aimed at small children I would fully agree—I believe his contribution is significant. His insight gives more weight to Isaiah's prediction that a society which fails to honor the elderly is on the brink of destruction (3:5). Lack of respect is a sign of break down of the social structure. When insolence is on the rise and respect disappears, atrocities happen. During time of war, respect is often completely wanting. Conquest knows little regard for age or sex (Dt 28:50, 32:25; 2 Chr 36:17; Isa 47:6). News clips on television regularly expose such atrocities in vivid colour and detail by airing footage of total disregard for anyone, young or old. Lack of respect for the

¹¹⁰ Dt 19:11-13; 21:1-9, 19; 22:15

¹¹¹ Ex 20:12; Dt 5:16; Prov 23:22

¹¹² Lloyd R. Bailey, "Biblical Perspectives on Aging," in *Quarterly Review* (Winter 1989), 57.

elderly, especially those who are frail, gives rise to legitimate fear that their lives could be terminated by way of euthanasia.

Respect for the elderly, even if they became frail,¹¹³ is etched in the covenant law. From the Old Testament perspective the elderly are the V.I.Ps of society. At the same time, the elderly were expected to act with circumspection and reflect understanding. As the link between past and future (Dt 32:7), they were the ones to whom the people looked for wisdom, guidance, and integrity. As wise counsellors they would carry their silvery gray hair as a crown of splendour (Prov 16:31). Their wisdom is not in the first place an accumulation of facts and data; it is above all a practical knowledge of God's dealings with his people in that special relationship under the umbrella of promise. To quote Frank Stagg once more, "Where there is openness to life and to God, to truth and to right, advantage belongs to the length of years and not to the novice."¹¹⁴ If the elderly use their insights wisely for the good of the community then old age will be a true blessing for everyone.

Of course, this is the norm to which there are exceptions. Solomon was wise in his youth by asking for wisdom (1 Chr 29:20), but he acted foolishly in his old age (1 Kgs 11:4). He could have learned a lot from Qoheleth who observed: "Better a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king who no longer knows how to take warning" (Eccl 4:13). In the book of Job we find that "young" Elihu could no longer restrain himself when he was disappointed with the "wisdom" of his elders (32:9-10), and the prophet Hosea compares Ephraim to an old man whose hair is sprinkled with gray but who has no discernment of God's ways (7:8-10). Nonetheless, the prevailing thought in Scripture is that

¹¹³ In a society of productivity that depended on everyone's output for making a living, old age became a burden to society as far as productivity goes. Old age did not contribute positively to producing wealth. That also appears to be the message of Proverbs 23:22 with the instruction for people not to despise their mother when she is old. She may no longer be useful from a utilitarian point of view, but in her old age she needs the ongoing respect of her children.

¹¹⁴ Stagg, *Biblical Perspectives on Aging*, 6.

wisdom is found with the elderly (Job 12:12, 32:6-7), and that wisdom is contained in old sayings (1 Sam 24:13; cf. Ps 78:2). It is the folly of youth to reject the council of the elders (1 Kgs 12:7-11). Every new generation should learn about its roots and know its history from the elderly (Job 8:8-10; Joel 1:3; Ps 78:4). As guardians of tradition and as teachers of one's roots, the elderly are to be a blessing to the community.

5.1.4 Blessings of old age

5.1.4.1 *Personal blessing*

Blessings of old age take on a twofold character: personal blessings and communal blessings. On the personal level we can think of God's promise to Abram: "You, however, will go to your fathers in peace and be buried at a good old age" (Gen 15:15). Concerning this personal blessing we read that when the moment of death came, "Abraham breathed his last and died at a good old age, an old man and full of years" (Gen 25:8). The expression "old and full of years" is also used of Isaac (Gen 35:29), David (1 Chr 23:1; cf. 1 Chr 29:28), Jehoiada (2 Chr 24:15) and Job (42:17). Advanced age was qualified as a good or ripe age, and to die full of years was a special blessing. To die at a ripe old age meant that the person came to the end of his/her life with a sense of contentment and fulfilment.¹¹⁵

5.1.4.2 *Communal blessing*

The attention given to the personal blessing pales in comparison with the blessing of the elderly for the community. It was a disastrous situation for

¹¹⁵ We are not told about Moses and Aaron that they were old and full of years. The reason for this may be that Aaron's death and age are mentioned in passing in Israel's travel log from Egypt to Canaan (Num 33:39); Moses' age and death are recorded in connection with his "picture of health." We are informed that "his eyes were not weak nor his strength gone" (Dt 34:7). We might say that he was taken out of life while he was still vigorous. In a sense he was not "old" yet, nor "full of days." Of Joshua we read: "Joshua, the servant of the Lord, died at the age of a hundred and ten" (Jos 24:29). Ishmael's life is not classified as full of days, even though he lived to 137 years of the age (Gen 25:17).

Israel if there were no elderly. When God sent a prophet to Eli telling him that because of the sins of his sons there would not be an old man in his family line (1 Sam 2:31; Isa 3:4-5), it was a clear message that the LORD was withholding his blessing. At the same time the inference was that an old man in the family line was a blessing. Centuries later Zechariah painted a picture of tranquillity when he prophesied the promise of God's restoring grace: "This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'Once again men and women of ripe old age will sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with cane in hand because of his age'" (8:4). Noteworthy is that "because of age" the cane will be necessary. This reference to the cane is not something negative, but enlivens the picture of a peaceful old age under God's blessing.

One of the last acts the aged person performed was to dispense a blessing upon his descendants. When Jacob was nearing the end of his life, Joseph brought his sons to be blessed by their grandfather (Gen 48:10). This may have been a fixed ritual similar to that in Genesis 27.¹¹⁶ Jacob kissed and embraced Joseph's sons. Bodily contact was part of the blessing ceremony. Leupold thinks along similar lines as Westermann when he writes that Jacob kissed and embraced Joseph's sons "in a manner that made these young men understand better what their grandfather had meant to their father."¹¹⁷ The blessing formula (Gen 48:15-16) called upon the God of the forefathers, and so the link with previous generations was maintained. Not only was gray hair a crown of splendour for the elderly (Prov 16:31), but grandchildren were the crown of the aged as well, and (elderly) parents were considered to be the pride of children (Prov 17:6).

From the blessing ceremony we can deduce the valuable lesson that we should not prevent grandchildren from visiting or from being present when a grandparent is dying. Here again we see the important function of the aging

¹¹⁶ Westermann, *Genesis*, 315.

¹¹⁷ Leupold, *Genesis*, Vol. 2, 1150.

toward the younger generation. The old carry forward the tradition of the past. A personal blessing from the aging (grand)parent was coveted and this shows the link between generations. In our modern way of thinking that link is often lost. We know of ancestors, but the important link with them has vanished. That, too, has a bearing upon how the elderly are perceived. A youth oriented society tends to view the elderly as people who live with declining health and loss of vigour and vitality. With that impression becoming prevalent, the elderly person is easily "written off" as a "has been." From the Old Testament perspective, however, an elderly person is someone who has almost arrived.¹¹⁸ The elderly person is someone who has reached the age of maturity and can serve the community with much practical wisdom and insight for the good of all. Bailey stated it poignantly: "what characterizes the elderly is not to be their declining strength, but rather the pre-eminence which they enjoy because of their status. They are not 'over the hill', but are at the summit of fulfilment and influence."¹¹⁹

The Old Testament presents long life as a blessing to the individual and to the community. The elderly have had a lifetime of practical experience. From them, as wise leaders, emanated a blessing to the community. And that practical experience and blessing is, as Wolff rightly observed, what makes the departing words, the voice of the dying, so important for the living.¹²⁰

5.1.5 Generation Gap

A major difference between youth and elderly is that the former are often carefree, maybe even careless, while the elderly are often concerned and even anxious for their children's actions. A biblical illustration is found in Job 1:5. After his children had feasted, Job was in the habit of sacrificing a burnt

¹¹⁸ Cf. Van den Berg, *Ouderdom verplicht*, 21.

¹¹⁹ Bailey, "Biblical Perspectives on Aging", 61.

¹²⁰ Wolff, *Anthropology*, 99.

offering for each of them, thinking, "Perhaps my children have sinned and cursed God in their hearts."

In light of this parental concern we can point to the place of prayer in the life of the elderly believer. The elderly have the time to circle the globe with their prayers for the church. They should be encouraged to continue to pray for the youth of the church. Instructive is Samuel's comment that he considers it as sinning against the LORD if he would fail to pray for others (1 Sam 12:23). Paul mentions regularly in his letters that he constantly prays for the church (Col 1:3, 9; 2 Thess 1:11).

Another difference is that the younger generation is often more progressive, i.e., looking to the future, while the elderly are more reflective, looking back. Elderly persons love to reminisce. They can recall more of the past and the splendour of the former times, while the younger generation does not. But a word of warning is found in Ecclesiastes on reminiscing about "the good old days." The Preacher comments:

Do not say, "Why were the old days better than these?" For it is not wise to ask such questions. Wisdom, like an inheritance, is a good thing and benefits those who see the sun. Wisdom is a shelter as money is a shelter, but the advantage of knowledge is this: that wisdom preserves the life of its possessor (Eccl 7:10-12).

These words of wisdom should strike home because wise elderly persons only have to reminisce on their own youth and they will quickly conclude that all was not well then either. And, it is good to remember that nowhere in Scripture are youth considered "bad," and the elderly, "good," or vice versa.¹²¹ It is good to be reflective; it is not good to stand in the way of all change.

¹²¹ Gilhuis, *Pastorale zorg*, 164.

5.2 Physical Signs of Age

5.2.1 Gray-headedness

Going gray is something nearly all elderly persons experience. How one reacts to it makes all the difference in one's view of the elderly. The reaction in our days and in biblical times appear to be complete opposites. In the Bible, gray-headedness is portrayed as a badge of honour; for many people today, going gray is a downside of aging.

Connected with this present-day adverse thinking is that the discussion about our aging population is often far from flattering. The elderly are referred to as a graying population but not necessarily in a respectful manner.¹²² Gray reminds us of something pale or colourless. Gray is a colour which hardly excites anyone. Yet, regardless how drab gray may seem, the general picture about the elderly is very much coloured. Whenever we hear or read something about the graying population it is invariably done from the perspective of facing up to a "problem" that will only increase as time goes on. Aging is for many people synonymous with frail health, forgetfulness, senility, feeling or being declared useless, drab, old fashioned and out of touch,¹²³ as well as losing independence. In one word: threatening. Such negative stereotyping is reflected in the term *gerontophobia*.¹²⁴

This vision is hopelessly one-sided and out of touch with the biblical

¹²² As an aside I should like to mention a matter that bothers me during my visits to nursing homes. Time and again one hears (young) nurses call the residents by their first name or in some supposedly endearing way, something the elderly (especially males?) were probably never used to from strangers. One should be on guard for condescension. A sense of this frustration is ably reflected by Emma Elliott in "My name is Mrs. Simon," *The McMaster Reader on Gerontology*, Tamara L. Horton, Diana Watson, and Karl Kinanen, eds. (Ginn Press: Needham Heights, 1993), 161-163.

¹²³ Van den Berg, *Ouderdom verplicht*, 9. Mark Novak mentions that sometimes mass media fosters prejudice against older people by pointing to them as the cause of rising health cost in Canada. Also, a study done on humour birthday cards found that the emphasis fell on age concealment, and most took a negative view of aging. *Aging & Society*, 7.

¹²⁴ Van den Berg, *Ouderdom verplicht*, 16, illustrates it in a negative sense as being afraid of the old. Another usage of the term is given by Gary Collins when he writes, "It has been estimated that one-fifth of the American population suffers from 'gerontophobia' (the fear of growing old)." Gary R. Collins, *Christian Counseling: A Comprehensive Guide* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1988 rev. ed.), 224.

view of aging which reveals the dignity of old age. The overwhelming force of argument goes in the direction of old age as a blessing from God. Becoming old is something in which not only the person who reaches advanced years, but also those around them, can and should rejoice.

The Bible speaks about gray-headedness in positive terms. Gray hair is the outward symptom of agedness. In the book of Proverbs gray hair is called "a crown of splendour" (16:31), something that adorns the aged. Just as young people can take pride in their physical prowess, so old men and women whose physical strength is declining can glory in the colour of their hair. "The glory of young men is their strength, gray hair the splendour of the old" (Prov 20:29). The elderly can keep their heads up. From a biblical perspective, gray is not colourless, but glorious.

5.2.2 Senescence

5.2.2.1 *Loss of eyesight*

One of the most common age related ailments recorded in the Bible has to do with sight. Isaac's eyes were so weak that he could no longer see (Gen 27:1). This indicates that he had gone completely blind, a burden he had to live with for more than twenty years.¹²⁵ With Jacob it was slightly different. His eyes were failing him so that he could hardly see (Gen 48:10). Some sight was left to him and it is tempting to think here that he suffered from cataracts or glaucoma. Eli, at age 98, was as good as blind. His eyes were becoming so weak that he could barely see (1 Sam 3:2; 4:15). The prophet Ahijah could not see either because his sight was gone because of age (1 Kgs 14:4).

But there are exceptions to every rule. Moses still had excellent vision even at the age of 120 (Dt 34:7), while Leah had weak eyes even before she

¹²⁵ After deceiving his blind father Isaac, Jacob fled and served Laban for at least 20 years (Gen 31:38, 41) before returning. We are not told how many years passed before Isaac died at age 180 (Gen 35:28).

was married (Gen 29:17). Her poor eyesight was not associated with age.

One can agree with the remark by John J. Pilch that blind persons did not feel cursed, but his reason for saying it appears to be strange exegesis. He writes:

According to Genesis 1:3-5, God existed in darkness before creating light. Darkness therefore symbolizes the presence of God. To live in darkness, that is being unable to see, means one lives in the presence of God. Such intimacy with God compensates the blind person who can interact with but not see other human beings.¹²⁶

Unintentional, no doubt, but Pilch makes it sound as if blindness were a special blessing. What more could a true Israelite hope for than intimacy with God and being in his presence? Aside from the question whether it is theologically correct to say that God existed in darkness—which is doubtful (cf. Ps 36:9; 1 John 1:5)—one can also produce texts that shows how God used darkness to create distance between himself and his people (cf. Dt 5:22-23; 2 Sam 22:12). Therefore blindness did not function or serve as a special form of intimacy with God. What we can say is that blind people were more dependent on God because blindness meant that the person was sidelined. He/she was unproductive and therefore a burden on society. Blindness hindered the person in his/her relationship with others. He/she became totally dependent on others. In old age this was bad enough; in youth it was tragedy. Blindness brought isolation and loneliness. That is why God had given certain directives for care of the blind (Lev 19:14) as they were in need of help (cf. Job 29:15). It is also telling that many of the healings Jesus performed were restoration of sight. As soon as sight was restored the person belonged and functioned fully in the community again.

¹²⁶ Pilch, "Sickness and Long Life," 96.

5.2.2.2 *Loss of hearing and taste*

The senses of hearing and taste also tended to diminish with age. Barzillai, at eighty years of age, admitted that life's enjoyments were slipping away from him (2 Sam 19:32-37). By way of a rhetorical question he reveals his true state of health: "Can I tell the difference between what is good and what is not? Can your servant taste what he eats and drinks? Can I still hear the voices of men and women singers?" (v. 35). This evaluation of his present situation shows his physical limitations due to old age. Old Barzillai declined the invitation to go with the king. Perhaps he did not want to become an unnecessary burden for others. But his primary reason was that he wanted to die in the familiar surroundings of his own home and family (v. 37).

5.2.2.3 *Loss of independence*

As age creeps up, the pleasantries of life ebb away. So does mobility. The loss of mobility made it so that the aged person had to resort to a cane (Gen 47:31; cf. Zech 8:4). Taken as a whole, then, the most noticeable negative sign of aging was that the elderly person became dependent. We can think of Isaac relying for help on Rebekah and sons (Gen 27); Eli needed the assistance of Samuel (1 Sam 3); David needed help to stay warm (1 Kgs 1); and perhaps we can also think of Naaman helping his master who "would be leaning on his arm" (2 Kgs 5:18) even though we are not told that Naaman's master was old.

Stephen Sapp comments that the greatest burden for Americans—and we can include Canadians—is the loss of dependence.¹²⁷ In a culture where self-sufficiency and self-reliance rules supreme, the prospect of becoming dependent is indeed a burdensome one. Yet that is precisely what happens to most elderly. But here we touch at the same time the heart of the connection

¹²⁷ Sapp, Stephen. "An Alternative Christian View of Aging," *Journal of Religion and Aging* 4 (1), (1987), 7-8.

between life, living, and pastoral care. Dependency, i.e., the fact that we need the help, encouragement and insightful advice of others, is part of normal life. Dependency is not something that arises in the latter years of one's life.

"Christianity is all about 'being dependent' at any point in one's life, not just when one grows old."¹²⁸

For the person who has lived his/her life in dependence on the Lord, aging does not negatively affect the relationship with God. The essence of the relationship remains unchanged: God keeps on looking after his people. And yet, growing old adds the new dimension of being able to reflect upon the discovery each day again that God's compassions are new every morning (Lam 3:22-23). God even stated the exclusive promise of ongoing involvement in the life of the elderly: "Even to your old age and gray hairs I am he, I am the one who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and will rescue you" (Isa 46:4). We find a similar thought in Psalm 71:9 and 18. The aging psalmist acknowledges his dependence on God and prays: "Do not cast me away when I am old; do not forsake me when my strength is gone." He phrased in the form of a prayer what Isaiah 46:4 proclaimed as promise.

Another reassuring factor relating to dependence is that God declares that both health and sickness come from his hand. Sometimes it comes as a consequence of disobedience (cf. Lev 26:16; Dt 28:59), at other times it occurs without a specific reason for anyone to know (cf. Ex 4:11; Lev 21:20). This study is not the place to discuss why God does these things.¹²⁹ However, the fact that

¹²⁸ Ibid., 8.

¹²⁹ This matter has received and still receives plenty of discussion. An ancient source that touches on the subject of Theodicy is Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy* (Penguin Books, 1968; repr., London: The Folio Society, 1998), 116, 139. One fairly popular book that discussed the matter of God allowing evil to happen is by Harold S. Kushner, *When bad things happen to good people* (New York: Schocken Books, 1981). A modern theologian who discusses Theodicy in nearly all his works is Jürgen Moltmann. See *The Crucified God* (New York: SCM Press, 1974), 69-84; *The Experiment Hope* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 51-52; *Experiences of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 50-54; *The Way of Jesus Christ* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1990), 170-8. A vindication of divine justice in allowing evil to exist is given by Gijsbert van den Brink, *Almighty God: A Study of the Doctrine of Divine Omnipotence* (Kampen: Pharos, 1993), 240-73. In this dissertation Van den Brink defends the classic position of God's omnipotence, but he prefers to speak about God's almightiness, 5.

God tells us that both health and sickness come from him can work for the positive in providing spiritual care. These happenings in life remind us of our total dependence on God. We may remind each other that when illness strikes, even a terminal illness, it is not a sign that matters have run out of control or that God has abandoned the sick. God gives us the opportunity to set our house in order (2 Kgs 20:1; Isa 38:9), and wants us to include him in the search of healing (2 Chr 16:12). The Lord gave express and clear instructions that the weak need the care of the strong (Ps. 41:1; 72:13; 82:3-4) and rebukes those who ignore the needs of the weak (Ezek 34:4).

God tells us that he is in control by making the sovereign claim: "There is no god besides me. I put to death and I bring to life, I have wounded and I will heal, and no one can deliver out of my hand" (Dt 32:39).¹³⁰ The main import of this claim is that all of life is in God's hand. Yahweh's people are safe in the hand of the LORD whose power overarches even death. Peter Craigie sums it up beautifully:

Everything that happened to the people of God happened only under his power. Life, health, and victory were a result of God's blessing. But death, disease, and defeat were equally a part of God's dealings with his people; they did not indicate any diminution of God's power. . . . An important principle emerges from this passage: when the blessing of God appears to be withdrawn, man should not question the ability of God, but should examine the state of his relationship to God.¹³¹

¹³⁰ A.D.H. Mayes and B. van 't Veld may be correct in saying that bringing to life in Dt 32:31 is not a reviving from physical death but from the threat of death which sickness brings. However, their reference to 1 Sam 2:6 appears to undermine their point. In that verse, death and making alive are parallel to bringing down to the grave and raising up. H.W. Wolff, *Anthropology*, 108, calls Hannah's words in 1 Sam 2 a "hymn of praise." He first deals with Ps 139:8 and comments that "Yahweh's hand also reaches into the world of the dead." Then he says, "If Yahweh alone is God ... [then] from Yahweh there is simply no escape; it then also becomes the assurance of salvation that we find celebrated in hymns of praise, e.g. 1 Sam.2:6." It is therefore quite probable that God's sovereign claim of putting to death and bringing to life can also be taken literally, that it is not merely a reference to restoration from illness. A.D.H. Mayes, *Deuteronomy* (New Century Commentary; London: Oliphants, 1979), 392. So S.R. Driver, *Deuteronomy* (ICC; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1909), 378. Van 't Veld, *Gelijk het gras*, 74.

¹³¹ Peter Craigie, *Deuteronomy* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 388-389.

This observation is important in connection with aging and the frailty of life that often comes with it. Growing old is not an accident; it is part of life. When difficulties come with age then one need not give up hope. Pastoral care is helping elderly persons hold on. Even though contextually Deuteronomy 32:29 is placed in the setting of God's judgment upon covenant disobedience, the principle remains the same. Life is in the hand of Yahweh. Even death is not beyond God's reach. The New Testament triumphant shout is: "Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:39).

5.2.2.4 *Loss of cognitive function*

One issue the Old Testament does not treat is what we would consider mental deterioration. Even Ecclesiastes 12, the biblical metaphor about the infirmities of old age,¹³² does not mention mental decline. It only touches upon physical deterioration. However, mental deterioration is a real factor in the lives of some elderly. Koenig and Weaver cite statistics that 5% to 10% of persons over sixty-five have Alzheimer's disease, and for those eighty-five years and older, the percentage rises to forty-seven percent. Also, about 15% to 20% of other types of dementias are caused by strokes.¹³³ Therefore the matter of cognitive dysfunction deserves our attention. I will discuss the matter in a separate section by looking at pastoral care to cognitively impaired elderly.

5.2.2.5 *Insecurity and doubt*

A symbolic but vivid description of the effects of old age to which many elderly can relate is the sense of insecurity described in Ecclesiastes 12. Old age brings days of trouble "when men are afraid of heights and of dangers in the streets" (v.5). This is the only place in Scripture where such a picture of

¹³² Maybe the Preacher spoke from experience. Horsnell suggests that the writer of Ecclesiastes might have been an old man who could look back with hindsight on the joys of youth and the hardships of an infirmed old age. "Biblical Concepts of Aging", 30.

¹³³ Koenig and Weaver, *Pastoral Care of Older Adults*, 25-26.

insecurity is painted, but it is very real. Many elderly do become afraid of heights and traffic which often means that they tend to become more housebound, and possibly find themselves in a more isolated position.

There is also another kind of insecurity, better known as doubt. Of course, doubting is not restricted to the elderly. It can happen to anyone. However, if doubts crop up, they are a great burden because one cannot hide from them by staying at home, nor can one outrun doubt by going somewhere else. Doubt is haunting and easily leads to suspicion. It is not uncommon that elderly persons can become very suspicious, not trusting anyone—least of all their children whom they suspect of being after their money. As a result some elderly have few friends and become loners. The solution to that situation requires more than putting them with a group of their peers. What they need above all is reassurance of God's care for them.

The Psalms provide examples of doubts and insecurity. There is the plea: "Do not cast me away when I am old and my strength is gone. When I am old and gray, do not forsake me, O God" (Ps 71: 9, 18). Further, we hear pleas for God not to remember the sins of youth (Ps 25:7; cf. Job 13:26), for if the LORD would keep a record of sin, no one could stand (Ps 130:3). Elderly persons can be haunted by the past and they are sometimes apprehensive whether God really forgives sins. In pastoral care we can point them to the same sources where we find cries for help because the truly amazing element is that these cries for help are almost always followed by words of reassurance. This reassurance surfaces when believers draw upon their knowledge of God. When at first the poet lamented: "Even when I am old and gray, do not forsake me, O God" (Ps 71:18), he recalls in the following verses: "Your righteousness reaches to the skies, O God . . . Who, O God, is like you? You will restore my life again . . . and comfort me once again" (71:19-21). And after the writer of Psalm 25 implored God not to remember the sins of his youth, he prayed: "according to your love remember me" (25:7-8). Life under the umbrella of

promise gives a confidence that overrides insecurity and doubt.

Here we find another tool in pastoral care to the elderly: when doubts creep up and assail, the promises of the covenant need to be presented as real solutions. The believers of old, and believers today, may count on the steadfast love and faithfulness of God that spans the generations even till today.

5.2.3 Age and procreation

One of the limitations that comes with age is the lack of ability to procreate. Although the matter of impotence is not really mentioned in the Bible—and is not necessarily old age related—there is no reason to assume that it did not exist. Perhaps impotence is implied in 2 Kings 4:14-17, which speaks about the Shunamite woman “who has no son and whose husband is old” (v.14). The Bible does not pretend to be a medical manual. Therefore, we usually read about the woman’s inability to conceive. That was, of course, the problem with Sarah. Abraham had fathered a son by Hagar. The Bible also mentions that he had children by Keturah (Gen 25:1-4). This is an interesting subject in itself. Was Keturah his concubine while he was married to Sarah, or did he take her to wife after Sarah’s death? If so, then he was able to still inseminate even at a highly advanced age.

Abram did not think it strange to father a son at the age of eighty-six (Gen 16:16). But when he was told that his aging wife would bear him a son he laughed and thought, “Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?” (Gen 17:17). What brought about his change in reaction? Did Abraham consider impossible at the age of one-hundred what he considered still possible at age eighty-six? Or was it because he knew that Sarah could no longer conceive since with the onset of menopause the hope of bearing a child was gone forever. It must be the latter, as this also seems to have been Sarah’s reaction. The fact is stated that she was past the age of childbearing (Gen 18:11). She laughed at the news of

becoming a mother and asked, "After I am worn out and my master is old, will I now have this pleasure?" (Gen 18:12).

A point of discussion has been what she meant by "having this pleasure". J.G. Harris clarifies that Sarah was wondering if she would enjoy sex enough to get pregnant. R.Z. Dulin comes to the same conclusion, as does M.J.A. Horsnell.¹³⁴ The latter contrasts 'edna "(sexual) pleasure," with hepes "joy, pleasure" in Ecclesiastes 12:1. The same meanings are found in BDB and William Holladay.¹³⁵ Because of this difference between 'edna and hepes, the conclusion is drawn that aging brings with it the loss of sexual pleasure. Still, it remains the question whether Sarah was thinking of sexual pleasure per se, or of having the pleasure of conceiving and having her barrenness overturned by becoming a mother. I would think the latter in light of verse 13, "Will I really have a child, now that I am old?" (cf. Gen 21:7).

It is clear that a male was capable of impregnating a female even though he was well advanced in years. Lot's daughters were able to get pregnant by their father when he was old (cf. Gen 19:30-34), although we are not told how old he was. Joseph is called the son of Jacob's old age (Gen 37:3). He was born when Jacob was between ninety and ninety-five years of age, and the patriarch must have been a few years older still when Benjamin came along. It is rather interesting that while Jacob called his 130 years "few" (Gen 47:9), Joseph is considered the son of his old age when he was "only" ninety. This suggests two things. In the first place the concept "old" is relative to the situation. Second, the concept "old" with a view to bearing and begetting children seems to be defined by the woman's physical condition of being beyond child bearing years. That seems another reason to view the concept of

¹³⁴ Harris, *Biblical Perspectives*, 46. Dulin, *Crown*, 30. Horsnell, "Biblical Concepts of Aging", 20.

¹³⁵ Francis Brown, S.R. Driver and C.A. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975 second printing), 726 and 342 respectively. William Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 266 and 112 respectively.

“pleasure” in Genesis 18:12 in the sense of the pleasure of conceiving and bearing children.

However interesting all this may be, the main lesson of Genesis 18 is not the aspect of procreation at old age, but that God fulfilled his covenant promise. The main issue is not that the elderly can still enjoy sexual relations, but it is a lesson about dependence and trust. God made Abraham wait so long to teach him, and us, that everyone depends on God’s timing. So, everyone in old age must entrust himself or herself to God’s care and direction.

Further, this passage shows the biblical importance of progeny for the elderly, as can be learned from Naomi whose life was “renewed” in old age with the birth of a grandchild (Ruth 4:15). Similarly, Psalm 128:6 expresses the wish of living long enough to see one’s children’s children. Experiencing the joy of grandchildren was a reminder of God’s faithfulness through the generations.

5.3 Facing Death

5.3.1 Death: the way of all the earth

One aspect of life that the elderly face more than anyone else is their impending death even if it may still be a while off. Death is the shadow side to life. Isaac expressed the close link between old age and dying when he said, “I am now an old man and don’t know the day of my death” (Gen 27:2). Even though he acknowledged his ignorance concerning the day of his death (cf. also Eccl 9:12), as an old man Isaac faced up to the reality of its coming.

Scripture also relates how God at times told the person outright, or indicated in some way, that he was about to die. He told Moses (Dt 31:14), Aaron (Num 20:23-29) and Joshua (Josh 23:14). It is hard to determine whether this was something positive or not. The indicators are that their “going the way of all the earth” (Josh 23:14; 1 Kgs 2:2) was something they accepted in spite of the negative sentiments found, e.g., in Ecclesiastes. But even the Preacher’s

view towards life did not necessarily make him bitter about death. I suggest that his comment, "The living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing" (9:5), is only a statement about present knowledge and not an exposition of what happens after this life. He is not contrasting life with afterlife, but life with death. Taken within the context of the passage he is saying that the living are still part of what is going on in the world (9:4); the dead are not. Their earthly things are done. Finished. They have no further part in anything that is done under the sun (9:6). Qoheleth sees death as the end of the meaningless round of life. From his point of view, life is touched by meaninglessness because upon death all that we strove for is lost to us.¹³⁶

Scripture contains many negative descriptions about death, and the ugliness of death is expressed in different ways in the Old Testament. Death brings desolation (Hos 13:14), and makes unclean (Num 19:16; Dt 21:22-23). Death cuts life short and the deceased goes down to Sheol. Death and grave are darkness (Job 10:20-22; 38:17), insatiable (Hab 2:5; Prov 30:15), and inescapable (Eccl 3:19-20; 5:18). The grave is considered the place of no return (2 Sam 12:23; Job 7:9; 10:21; 16:22; cf. 14:7-12). Premature death "in the prime of life" is considered a punishment (1 Sam 2:33), while long life of the wicked is an anomaly (Eccl 8:12-13; cf. Ps 73).¹³⁷

How did these perceptions of death affect the lives of the people in the covenant? Clearly, death was, and is, something negative. It breaks every relationship with God and people on earth. And yet, for the Israelites, death was something they accepted as part of life. Which raises the question: Was their acceptance of death only a matter of resignation to the inevitable, or was

¹³⁶ I am appreciative of Gilhuis' observation that the Preacher's lament about meaninglessness is connected to physical decline. *Pastorale zorg*, 137.

¹³⁷ Lloyd R. Bailey has reviewed the instances of what the Israelites would consider a "bad" death, or a "good" death. A "bad" death would include premature death (2 Sam 18:32-33); a violent death (1 Kgs 2:28-33); or when there is no surviving heir (Gen 15:2-3). A "good" death would be when it occurred in a good old age (Gen 15:15), and when death was non violent (Jer 34:4-5). See *Biblical Perspectives on Death* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 48-52.

it also a matter of confidence? It is both. The Old Testament believer knew that life was in God's hands (Ps 31:15). Still I would venture to say that they faced death in the confidence that even in death they would be in God's care. I make this observation in light of such clear pronouncements as: "Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand" (Ps 73:23) and, "God will redeem my life from the grave; he will surely take me to himself" (Ps 49:15).¹³⁸

From the beginning, death has been associated with sin (Gen 3; 6:3), and as punishment for sin (Gen 2:7; cf. Rom 5:12, 17). But God's promise in the covenant is redemption from sin and the pit (Ps 103:4). If, under the umbrella of promise, the LORD God guided his people to their death, then it becomes inexplicable to think that he would not be with them in death and beyond.

In the writings of Isaiah and Daniel we discern the progression of God's revelation. More than anyone before them they expressed an eschatological view of life. Isaiah expressed the certainty that God will swallow up death forever (25:8),¹³⁹ and God's dead will live, their bodies will rise (26:19). Also Daniel spoke about continuing life when he wrote: "Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake; some to everlasting life, others to everlasting shame and contempt" (12:2; cf. Jn 5:28-29).

How did this eschatological view of life develop with Isaiah and Daniel? I posit the view that through divine revelation they were able to formulate more clearly the hope and expectation that was expressed by predecessors who knew God as their refuge in life and death (2 Sam 22:3-6; Ps 16; Ps 73:23-28; cf. Col 3:3). Apocalyptic eschatology in the Bible is not a human invention, but it is God's progressive revelation. Isaiah and Daniel built upon previous revelation but went beyond the previous revelation to give deeper insight, perspective and a broader horizon. They could say more about the resurrection life than the Old

¹³⁸ Cf. Ps 16:8-10; 71:19-20; Job 19:25-26; Isa 25:8; 26:19; Dan 12:2.

¹³⁹ Bailey asks in connection with Isa 25:8, "are we dealing with *affirmation* or with *aspiration*?" and says "the vision concerns those then living; it does not concern itself with the fate of those already dead, that is, with resurrection." See *Biblical Perspectives on Death*, 73.

Testament believers before them, but not independent from the faith perspective of these believers. Even though resurrection to a new life after death was still a vague concept for the Old Testament believer—the deeper reality of it was only made clear after Jesus rose from the dead—the dying person could face death with confidence in the faithfulness of the eternal God who “puts to death and brings to life” (Dt 32:39). The umbrella of promise extended beyond the youthful years to old age and beyond.

5.3.2 Dying: care and respect for the dead through burial

Death was the closing chapter of a sometimes long and harsh life. But death was softened by the presence of kin. Dying was not a solitary event in which the dying person had to face the last moments alone.¹⁴⁰ God had assured and consoled Jacob that Joseph’s own hand would close his eyes (Gen 46:4), and when Jacob had seen Joseph he exclaimed: “Now I am ready to die” (46:30). But there was another important issue. When the time drew near for Jacob to die, he called Joseph and made him swear not to bury him in Egypt. Jacob did not want to be buried in a foreign land. He wanted to be buried with his fathers (Gen 47:29-30) in the promised land.

Great care was given to the dead. After all, it was a parent, a spouse, a child, or a friend who had died. It was always someone they had known and whose memory would linger. H.M. Ohmann describes it in this way:

By the *nishmat hayyim* that YAHWEH breathed into man’s nostrils, he became a living being, a *nephesh hayyah*. When the *neshamah* departs from man and he dies, he is still recognizable by his relatives as father, mother, brother, sister, etc. Seeing his dead body in the casket, they mention his name. Although the *ruah* was taken away by God or the *nephesh* went out, to them he or she is still a *nephesh* (person) whom they have known intimately and that is how they speak

¹⁴⁰ Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, 561-575, has traced the development of solitary death to the 19th century. Prior to that time death was always a “public” happening where the dying person was surrounded by relatives and/or friends. Death has been made “invisible,” i.e., it has been kept from public view.

of him. Although dead, in a way he still is with them and they will go and pay last tribute of respect to this *nephesh* (body) as is befitting in a proper funeral.¹⁴¹

Burial of the body is connected with respect for the person. The Israelites did not normally cremate their dead.¹⁴² Proper burial meant that the person was laid to rest. Jacob spoke of "resting" with his fathers, which suggests a sense of continuity, if not a sense of eternity.¹⁴³ The idea of continuity is clear from the way God introduced himself to Moses as the "God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob" (Ex 3:6, 16). Linking these three names implies more than remembering the covenant bond. The names of the three patriarchs are not presented to Moses as ancestors of a distant past, but as people whose legacy and life continues in some way. God refers to the patriarchs as still "existing" beings. Jesus applied these words in this sense in his rebuttal to the Sadducees when he said: "even Moses showed that the dead rise, for he calls the LORD 'the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' He is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive" (Lk 20:27-38). He implied that even though the patriarchs had died long ago, they were still "alive" in God. In the parallel passage in Matthew 22:29-32 the words "you do not know the Scriptures," and the question "have you not read" are found. They show that Jesus intimated that the Sadducees could have known about the resurrection from the

¹⁴¹ Ohmann, "Life and the hereafter in the Old Testament", 13.

¹⁴² The few Old Testament texts that speak about burning refer to burning as punishment (Gen 38:24; Josh 7:15, 25; Amos 2:1; 6:10; Lev 20:14; 21:9), or fires lit at the death of a king who died in peace with God (Jer 34:5; 2 Chr 16:14; 21:19). I posit the view that the practice of cremation cannot be defended on the basis of Scripture. Since this is too big of a topic on its own, but significant for Reformed pastoral care to the elderly, it will receive due attention in the chapter on "Inhumation or Cremation: does it matter?"

¹⁴³ Job spoke of death as lying down in peace and being asleep with kings and counsellors (Job 3:11-26; cf. 14:12). Daniel spoke of those who sleep in the dust. Other OT references of death as sleep are found in the Psalms (7:5; 13:3; 76:5) and Jeremiah (51:39, 57). The concept of death as "sleep" is used several times by Jesus (Mt 9:24; cf. Mk 5:39, Lk 8:52; Jn 11:11-13) and in other places in the NT (Acts 7:60, 13:36; 1 Cor 11:30; 15:6, 18, 20; 1 Thes 4:13-15; 5:16, 10). Just as death as "resting" suggests a sense of continuity, so does the idea of being asleep. One expects to wake up from sleeping.

Pentateuch, as indicated in the expression "even Moses showed that the dead rise" (Lk 20:27).

5.3.3 Death as gathering

The phrase "gathered to his people" is used several times in the Pentateuch.¹⁴⁴ Does this phrase have any special meaning for life under the umbrella of promise? Charles Feinberg cautiously comments about 'asap ("gather", "remove", "gather in harvest"): "some scholars suggest that this phrase intimates, albeit indistinctly and vaguely, an early belief in life after death. It may, however, be a euphemism for death without clear theological import."¹⁴⁵ Aart de Bondt, in his dissertation on death and life after this life, opines that this expression indicates more than "dying," but it obtained that simple meaning over time. This expression does not say that in the hereafter they will also be together.¹⁴⁶

Leupold is far more outspoken. He says that the phrase "gathered to his people" in Genesis 25:8

cannot mean: buried with his relatives or ancestors, for we know that none of his kin except his wife lay buried at Machpelah. Apparently, the expression is then equivalent to the one used in 15:15, 'to go to one's fathers.' Those who have gone on before in death are regarded as a people still existing.¹⁴⁷

Basically the same deduction is produced by W.R. Bowie in the *Interpreter's Bible Commentary* who concludes: "This cannot mean that he was buried with his ancestors, since their graves must have been in far away Chaldea. Does it reflect perhaps a hope, desirous though dim, of life beyond

¹⁴⁴ Gen 25:8, 17; 35:29, cf. 47:30; 49:29, 33; Num 20:24, 26; Dt 32:50

¹⁴⁵ Charles F. Feinberg, "'asap" in *TWOT*, 60, #140. *TDOT* does not discuss 'asap.

¹⁴⁶ Aart de Bondt, *Wat leert het Oude Testament aangaande het leven na dit leven?* (Kampen: Kok, 1938), 95-116. Specific reference on 110.

¹⁴⁷ Leupold, *Genesis*, Vol. 2, 694.

this life?"¹⁴⁸ And Gispén comments on Numbers 20:24: "Aaron will come to his fellow Israelites who have already died, also those who have died in the wilderness." He will be gathered to his people in the realm of death.¹⁴⁹

Being "gathered" alludes to continuity. It implies that the person is not cut off from his ancestors. This was as true for Ishmael (Gen 25:17), Aaron (Dt 32:50), Joseph (Gen 50:24) and Josiah (2 Kgs 22:20), as it was for Abraham (Gen 25:8), Isaac (Gen 35:29) and Jacob (Gen 47:30). The concept of gathering preceded burial. But even in burial the patriarchs sought to be together. Abraham was buried in the same cave as Sarah, as were Isaac, Rebekah, Leah and Jacob (Gen 23:3; 25:10; 49:29, 31; 50:13).

5.4 Summary

The preceding pages touched upon the life of the elderly with God under the umbrella of promise. It is clear that the Bible is a realistic book. It paints a picture of aging that is both pleasing and disheartening. Pleasing, because agedness is a blessing from God. By God's decree the elderly are accorded an esteemed place and function in society and they have the promise that God will sustain them (Isa 46:4). Aging is also disheartening because it often comes with many losses. Mentioned by name are the loss of eyesight, taste, and hearing. There is also the loss of independence. Mental decline is not mentioned in the Old Testament, but it deserves further attention from a biblical perspective. Elderly persons can also be plagued by insecurity and doubt, which means that the promises of the covenant need to be presented as real solutions when doubt assails the elderly person. Pastoral care is helping the elderly hold on to God's promises.

Taken as a whole, however, the Old Testament views aging and the

¹⁴⁸ Walter Russel Bowie, "Genesis" in *Interpreter's Bible Commentary* (12 vols) (Nolan B. Harmon, ed.; New York: Abingdon Press, 1952), Vol. 1, 663.

¹⁴⁹ W.H. Gispén, *Het Boek Numeri* (COT; Kampen: Kok, 1964), Vol. 2, 15-16.

elderly in a positive way. Old age did not sideline the person, but the elderly belonged and played a prominent role in the community. By God's directive they deserved special recognition, honour, and respect if they lived up to the requirements of being wise teachers and examples. From a biblical viewpoint old age is a blessing for the individual, and for the community. The aged Samuel considered it his duty to pray for others. The elderly were an asset, not a liability.

Signs of agedness, such as gray hair, were a sign of honour. Respect for the elderly was etched in covenant law (Ex 20:12). Of course, old age also brings with it senescence, and the physical impairment reported most is loss of sight. This meant that the person became dependent on others. God made provisions for the well-being of the weak. Based on the requirement of the fifth commandment that children honour their parents, aging parents may expect ongoing respect and protection also when they become frail. From a biblical perspective, dependence does not have to be negative because God keeps on looking after his people. They can always rely on their Lord as health and sickness come to us from God. Especially through terminal illness God gives the opportunity to examine one's relationship to him.

Life expectancy in Israel seems to have been around fifty years, and the peak years were between twenty and sixty. The elderly were sometimes taught a lesson about trust and patience, e.g., when God made Abraham wait a long time before he became the father of Isaac. Such lessons teach us to depend on God's timing. Procreation at high age was God's way of fulfilling promises made, and to see one's grandchildren was a real blessing. Grandparents formed the closest living link between generations past and present, and they had the important function of teaching the youth about God's faithfulness to previous generations.

In facing death the Old Testament believer knew that his/her times were in the Lord's hands. I have argued that death was more than facing the

inevitable. Even though death received many negative descriptions, they are negative because death breaks all relationships with God, family and friends here on earth. Still, even in death the Old Testament believer knew himself or herself in God's care. A dead person was treated with respect because the family did not just bury a corpse, they laid their loved one to rest. Finally, I have tried to show that the idea of life after death is more than human apocalyptic eschatology. Israel's hope and expectation was rooted in progressive revelation. Jesus intimated that the Sadducees could have known about the resurrection from the Pentateuch. Isaiah and Daniel crystalized the concept of life after death so that it became more fully part of Israel's faith perspective.

One further task remains in surveying biblical data, namely, to see what the New Testament has to say on the subject of life and aging.

CHAPTER SIX

NEW TESTAMENT VIEW ON LIFE AND AGING

Reviewing the New Testament on life and aging shows some significant parallels to the Old Testament. This need not surprise anyone, because the book of the new dispensation builds upon, and relies upon, knowledge of God's dealings with believers in the old dispensation. For obvious reasons, then, the New Testament does not elaborately restate God's requirements; it simply picks up where the Old Testament left off. For the New Testament believer life under the umbrella of promise continues,¹⁵⁰ and one discovers quickly that there are no substantive new details that can be adduced from a New Testament perspective. However, what we do find is a major emphasis on the concept of life.

6.1 Elderly

Compared to the Old Testament, the mention of elderly in the New Testament is scarce. Only three persons are mentioned by name, all in Luke's account, and all in connection with the birth of Jesus. They are Zechariah, his wife Elizabeth,¹⁵¹ and Anna, who receives special mention as being "very old."

¹⁵⁰ A discussion on how God's covenant continues in the NT goes beyond the scope of this study. I am merely stating the accepted Reformed position that God's covenant with its promises and obligations did not disappear with the coming of Christ, but that it received new depth through him. For a recent, straightforward, and yet fairly detailed discussion on the old and new covenant, see Douglas Wilson, *To a Thousand Generations—Infant Baptism: Covenant Mercy for the People of God* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 1996), 21-38.

¹⁵¹ Lk 1:18, 36. The mention of this couple is in connection with Elizabeth being barren (Lk 1:7). God worked the miracle of birth beyond her childbearing years. Of course, we see in the act of God a repeat of what he did for Abraham and Sarah.

She was a widow until she was eighty-four.¹⁵² A possible fourth elderly person is Simeon (Lk 2:25-26), but there is no actual reference to him being old.

However, the fact that it had been revealed to him that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ is generally taken to mean that Simeon was advanced in years.

One conclusion we can draw from this scant information is that in the New Testament the emphasis is no longer on the quantity of years, but on life with the Lord that continues on. With the coming of Christ the End Times have been ushered in. The focus of Jesus' preaching was: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (Mt 3:2; 4:17). But his message was also that the kingdom of God has come (Lk 10:20), and is even within us (Lk 17:21). The uniqueness of the new dispensation is that in Christ the eschaton has come and is still coming. If the Old Testament focal point was the coming Christ (Micah 5:2; cf. Mt 2:4-6; Gal 4:4), in the New Testament the focal point has shifted to the moment when God will make all things new (Rev 21:5). The focus has been re-directed from life as an earthly existence, to life on earth with a view to the life to come (Col 3:1-4). Christians are en route. Therefore, also for New Testament believers life is a journey, and the promised destination is the new earth.

6.2 Life is a Journey

The New Testament speaks about Christians as aliens and strangers. The apostle Peter addressed his first epistle to "God's elect, strangers in the world" (1 Pt 1:1; cf. 1:17; 2:11). He wrote his letter to the Christians in the dispersion who were scattered throughout the region we now know as Turkey. The reference to Christians as aliens and strangers in the world focuses on

¹⁵² Lk 2:36-37. Besides Anna, the only ages mentioned are those of a twelve year old girl (Mk 5:42); Jesus as a twelve year old (Lk 2:42), and the start of his ministry at thirty years of age (Lk 3:23). Further, the Jews took issue with Jesus when he told them that Abraham was glad to see his day. Their retort was: you are not even fifty (Jn 8:57). One more age is mentioned, that of a man over forty (Acts 4:22). All other occurrences about the age of persons are references to people from the OT dispensation.

their special place in the world. Christians have the special calling in life to be in the world, not of the world (1 Jn 2:15-16). The main requirement is to live as strangers in reverent fear of God (1 Pt 1:17) and, as aliens and strangers in the world to abstain from sinful desires that war against the soul (1Pt 2:11). Like the Old Testament believers, Christians need to walk in the ways of the Lord. And Paul mentions that Christians, being strangers to the world, are enjoined to a new family, the household of God (Eph 2:19). Christians are people who are looking, beyond the present world, to a new heaven and new earth (2 Pt 3:13-14).

Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, in his excellent commentary on Hebrews, makes some fine observations relevant to our discussion. In connection with his exegesis on Hebrews 11:9-10, which deals with the fact that Abraham was a stranger and sojourner in the promised land, Hughes places an extensive note which deserves to be quoted in its entirety. He writes:

This temporal or this-worldly insecurity is clearly indicated in the Greek by the verb *παρώκησεν*, since *παροικεῖν* (Lk. 24:18 as well as here), together with the cognate nouns *παροικία* (Acts 13:17; 1 Pet. 1:17) and *πάροικος* (Acts 7:6, 29; Eph. 2:19; 1 Pet. 2:11), implies the transitory residence of strangers or outsiders, whether in an actual or a spiritual sense. The concept of the Christian as an impermanent sojourner on earth who is on his way to his true home that lies beyond the present scene is derived from the experience of Abraham and the terminology by which it is described. Thus in the LXX of Genesis 23:4 Abraham speaks of himself as *πάροικος και παρεπίδημος* among the inhabitants of the land (cf. Ps. 39:12). In verse 13 of the present chapter it is said that Abraham and his fellow patriarchs acknowledged that they were *ξένοι και παρεπίδημοι* on the earth, *ξένοι* being here a synonym for *πάροικοι*. And Christians are called *πάροικοι και παρεπίδημοι* by Peter (1 Pet. 2:11; cf. 1:1, 17). For them, this earth is not their homeland, but rather, as Abraham found the land of promise, foreign territory: *παρώκησεν εἰς γῆν τῆς ἐπαγγελίας ὡς ἀλλοτριαν*. Cf. the similar terminology of the Jewish composition known as the Psalms of Solomon, which is generally assigned to the first century B.C.: *πάροικος και*

ἀλλογενῆς οὐ παροικήσει αὐτοῖς ἔτι. The spiritual sense has from the apostolic period on been part of the idiom of Christianity. It might benefit the modern church to be reminded of the spiritual significance of the familiar term 'parish' ('parochial'), which is directly derived from the Greek term παροικία.¹⁵³

For Christians, then, life still is a journey, and the destination is once more a "promised land." Only, this time it is not a specific country on this globe, but the new earth and new heaven where God will dwell with redeemed humanity. And so we can say that, for Christians, this life is a prelude to eternal life.

6.3 Life, a Prelude to Eternal Life

What is the core concept of life from a New Testament perspective? As in the Old Testament, so the New traces life as coming from God. But there is a shift in emphasis. While the old dispensation focussed predominantly on the covenant relationship between the Creator-God and the creature with regards to life on this earth, the new dispensation deals primarily with re-created life through the Son of God. Life's relationship with God is now through his Son (Rom 8:2). The promises of life for the present and the future are in Christ Jesus (2 Tim 1:1; 1 Jn 5:11). Simply stated, the Son is our life (1 Jn 1:1-3; 11:25) and access to God is through Christ (Jn 14:6).

Still, this life through the Son emanates from the Father who has life in and of himself (Jn 5:26). He alone is immortal (1 Tim 6:16), and gives life to the spiritually dead through the renewing Spirit (Rom 4:17; cf. Ezek 37). Even though God can exact life at any moment (Lk 12:20), only James makes mention of life's brevity by commenting that life is like a mist (4:14). On the whole, the overriding message is that Christ Jesus has brought life and

¹⁵³ Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 468n30.

immortality to light through the gospel (2 Tim 1:10), and that God grants eternal life¹⁵⁴ to those who believe in the Son (Jn 3:16). The New Testament focus is that life should be lived with a view to being with Christ forever in completely restored fellowship where *non posse non mori* will have changed into *non posse mori* (Rom 6:8-10; 1 Pt 1:9).

The way to that never ending life with God in Christ is by faith (Rom 1:17). Christianity is so intertwined with the Saviour that living without him would be no life (Jn 15:15). But life with Christ is living under the umbrella of promise. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus talked about living without worrying because the Father will take care of our needs (Mt 6:25-34). Christians can unburden themselves with Christ and find rest for their souls (Mt 11:25-30). These are wonderful messages of hope that can be related to the elderly in pastoral care to them as they journey from this life to everlasting life. The exciting news is that, compared to the Old Testament believers, Christians are a major step closer to the destination of sharing life with God in unending bliss because Christ has come. While believers in the old dispensation lived in anticipation of his coming (Gen 3:15; Micah 5:2), Christians can look back on Christ's saving work.

By way of analogy we can consider what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 13:12. He mentions that for the moment we see a poor reflection as in a mirror and that we live with partial knowledge. The day is coming when we will see face to face, i.e., perfectly. All will be clear because the poor reflection will be gone. Similarly, what the Old Testament believers saw was a poor reflection of God's ultimate plan for fallen humanity. Everything was seen in the promise, or, as the writer to the Hebrews explains: "They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance" (11:13). Old Testament believers lived by faith in God's promises without seeing the full

¹⁵⁴ Acts 13:48; 1 Tim 1:16; 6:12.

fruition of the promises (1 Pt 1:10-12). Christ's coming ushered in a new phase in the fulfilment of promise so that Christians have a clearer vision of God's saving grace than their Old Testament counterparts did. But ultimate clarity for everyone awaits the day of Christ's return. In that respect Christians today are no further ahead than Old Testament believers (Heb 11:39-40). Christians today also need to live by faith under the umbrella of promise (2 Cor 4:13f).

The message of the New Testament is that life is both present and future. Just as God declared in Deuteronomy 32:47 that his words are life, so believers in the new dispensation are told that the Spirit gives life and that the words of Jesus are spirit and life (Jn 6:63). And, like the Old Testament,¹⁵⁵ the New portrays life with God as staying in the ways of the Lord (2 Pt 2:15). Walking in the ways of the Lord provides stability and assurance that nothing can separate us from God's love for us in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom 8:39), not even death, because death has been overpowered by the resurrection of Christ (Rom 1:4; 1 Cor 15). Christians have the glorious future of sharing in Christ's resurrection (Rom 6:1-10; 1 Pt 1:3).

6.4 Eternal Life Through Resurrection Faith

In Isaiah 26:9-10 and Daniel 12:2 we find some of the most explicit statements in the Old Testament about life after death. This, of course, receives full attention in the New Testament where Christ's resurrection and our resurrection is amply attested. Text are numerous.¹⁵⁶ What stands out among them is that some of these texts refer to Old Testament saints who looked forward to their never ending life with God (Heb 11:14-16). Most telling are the comments Jesus made. In a confrontation with the Sadducees he mentioned that they could have known from their Hebrew Bible that the dead rise (Lk 20:27-38; Mk 12:18-27). And in another encounter Jesus spoke about Abraham

¹⁵⁵ Ps 50:23; Prov 2:7-9; cf. 15:9-10; Jer 23:12.

¹⁵⁶ Acts 3:15; 26:8; 1 Cor 15; 2 Cor 5:15; Col 1:18; John 11:25; Luke 24:5-6, etc.

rejoicing at the thought of seeing the day of Christ (Jn 8:56-57). Especially that last statement of Christ indicates that the expectation of experiencing full salvation is more than a New Testament expectation; it is a longing that goes back a long way.

Because the notion of ongoing life with God is not only a New Testament phenomenon but was already believed by the covenant people in the Old Testament, we can understand why a man like Simeon could calmly await death and ask to be dismissed in peace (Lk 2:29). Similarly, Peter received an indication that he would not live much longer (2 Pt 1:14) and accepted it peacefully. In these things Simeon and Peter were no different from Moses and Aaron who also appear to have faced death with a calm acceptance. And yet there is progress and a new perspective. While in the old dispensation believers spoke about going to the grave, Peter spoke of an imperishable inheritance (1 Pt 1:4). The importance of calling it an inheritance is that an inheritance is not earned; it is a gift. Eternal life is God's gift to people who put their trust in Christ as Lord.

Also Paul voiced several times that he was more than willing and ready to depart from this life because he anticipated a new and better life.¹⁵⁷ In fact, Paul often wrote about the resurrection because he did not want the church of Christ to be ignorant or uninformed about the life to come (1 Thess 4:13; 2 Cor 5:1-6). But he wrote these matters with an additional purpose in mind. He penned them so that Christians would fight the good fight of faith (1 Tim 1:19-20) and not give way to doubts and insecurity about God's salvation. In some Reformed circles, doubts persist about the "worthiness" of being saved.¹⁵⁸ This happens when Christians look at themselves and their sins, rather than look on Christ the Saviour. If there was one man who had reason to doubt God's

¹⁵⁷ Acts 21:13; Phil 1:21-24; 3:12-14; 2 Cor 5:8-9.

¹⁵⁸ Steve Schlissel, "Christian funerals, the gospel message, and assurance" in *Christian Renewal: a Magazine of Reformed Faith and Vision*, Feb 7, 2000, 17-18.

saving grace, it would be Paul. He could not forget his "sins of youth" either. As an old man¹⁵⁹ he could not forget that in his youth he persecuted the church of God. Time and again he mentioned it, even calling himself the worst of sinners.¹⁶⁰ Still, he did not dwell on his past so as to cast doubt on his salvation; he put his past in the spotlight of God's grace, and rejoiced in the renewal of his life in this way: "But by the grace of God I am what I am" (1 Cor 15:10). Like the Old Testament believers before him (cf. Ps 103; Isa 1:18), Paul knew of God's forgiving grace. In pastoral care to the elderly, this glorious message may and must be proclaimed for their benefit and encouragement. Life with God is sustained by God's grace. By grace we are saved through faith (Rom 1:17; cf. Hab 2:4; Eph 2:8). Saved from sin, and saved for eternal life.

While this hope and expectation of eternal life with God is great news, the fact is that, before we reach that state of perfection, life needs to be lived on earth. Since life is a journey and a prelude to eternal life, we also need to look at some of life's duties within the church community. For here, too, there are similarities with the Old Testament.

6.5 Duties Within the Church Community

6.5.1 General pastoral duties

To the young pastor Timothy, Paul wrote: "Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives' tales; rather, train yourself to be godly" (1 Tim 4:7). These instructions were written to Timothy to tell him not to get embroiled in useless talk. At the same time, he should not let anyone look down on him because of his youth (v.12). This word of advice applies to all those labouring in pastoral care. One of the difficulties that can arise is that the elderly person

¹⁵⁹ Horsnell observes that some modern translators accept the conjecture that in Philemon 9 *presbutēs* means "ambassador" of Christ. RSV and NEB translate that way. KJV and NIV have maintained the more basic meaning of *presbutēs* as "old man." See "Biblical Concepts of Aging", 31n14. The author's own opinion is that: "The basic meaning of *presbutēs* as 'old man' implies that Paul is appealing to his agedness for respect and authority," 31.

¹⁶⁰ 1 Cor 15:9; Acts 7:58 ff; 22:3-8; 26:9-15; Gal 1:13, 26; Phil 3:6; 1 Tim 3:13; 1 Tim 1:15-16.

does not want to accept a much younger pastor. But if the pastor stays above the fray, he/she can be the one that gives guidance and direction when and where required. In that way he/she will provide leadership as a shepherd of God's flock and as an example for the congregation to follow (1 Pt 5:1-4).

Paul reminded Timothy that as a pastor he would have to deal with people of all ages. The sound pastoral advice he received was: "Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father. Treat younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, with absolute purity" (5:1-2). The message is: do not let anyone in your charge get away with sinful behaviour, but in correcting them, an attitude of love, humility, sensitivity, and respect must prevail.

What are some of the items that need attention in pastoral care to the elderly? If we take Paul's instructions to Titus and Timothy as our standard—and there is no reason to assume that human nature has changed—then we need to pay attention to such areas as: teaching the elderly to be temperate, worthy of respect, self-controlled, and sound in faith, in love and in endurance. After all, they are to be pillars who teach the next generation about the ways of the Lord. Likewise the elderly need instruction and correction where necessary. They need to be reverent in the way they live. We can say: they need to act their age. Since gossip receives special mention, the elderly need to be reminded not to say things that slander (Tit 2:2-3).

6.5.2 Specific duties

6.5.2.1 Addressing real need

In his instructions to Timothy, Paul draws specific attention to the place of widows in the church (1 Tim 5:3-16). It is a section highlighting the services of women to women. In it, Paul focusses especially on the task of the older widows and gives this explicit instruction: "If any woman who is a believer has widows in her family, she should help them and not let the church be burdened

with them, so that the church can help those widows who are really in need" (5:16). No one should be placed on the widow list too quickly. The minimum age was sixty (5:9)¹⁶¹ because at the age of sixty a widow's chances for re-marriage were considerably reduced, and her need for assistance increased. Timothy should give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need, i.e., those who had no other means of support and who therefore depended on the church for help (5:4). Paul wanted to make sure that those who really need the help and attention are the one's who receive it (5:16).

We can learn a practical lesson from this with regard to pastoral care to the elderly. Everyone loves attention but concern should be channelled first to those who really need it. Age alone does not determine the level of attention a person should receive; the specific need of the person should help determine how much time and attention he/she should receive in pastoral care. An elderly person in her eighties who is still healthy and mobile, may have less need for pastoral care than a sixty-five year old person who is housebound. The church must give attention where the need is greatest.

But in addressing the needs of the elderly, Paul is quite adamant in stressing the role of children towards parents.

6.5.2.2 Duties toward family

Children and grandchildren should learn first of all to put their religion into practice by caring for their own family and so repaying their parents and grandparents, for this is pleasing to God (5:4). Paul's words seem harsh when he says that anyone who does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

¹⁶¹ J.N.D. Kelly comments: "Sixty was the recognized age in antiquity when one became an 'old' man or woman. . . The fourth-century *Apostolic Constitutions* (III. i. 1 f.) accepted the same age-limit for widows, although it is interesting to observe that some texts of the late third century *Didascalia* (III. i) reduce it to fifty." See *A Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles* (A&C Black, London, 1963; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 115.

Martin Dibelius and Hans Conzelmann write concerning 1 Timothy 5:8:

Here the religious motif is stressed. 'To deny the faith' means not apostasy, but practical disavowal. The unity of belief and action is presupposed. . . . The passage shows how community duties are increasingly felt to be specifically Christian. In this way a Christian family ethic is formed, which goes essentially beyond the traditional 'rules of the household.'¹⁶²

This evaluation of Dibelius and Conzelmann reveals several valuable points. They speak of a religious motif, about a unity of belief and action, and about community duties—and I agree with those sentiments. The guidelines Paul presents are religiously charged; they unite belief and action as belonging together, and they are necessary for the proper functioning of the community. But what do these authors mean by a "family ethic which goes essentially beyond the traditional 'rules of the household?'" Concerning this "family ethic" they write:

The clearest sign of a Christianization of the world is seen in a developing family ethic, which goes substantially beyond traditional injunctions of rules for the household. Already, a kind of religious family tradition appears (2 Tim 1:3, 5; 3:14f). From the example of Onesiphorus one learns that the piety of the father benefits the members of the family (2 Tim 1:16). Likewise, caring for the aged members of the family is now emphasized as a specifically Christian duty (1 Tim 5:4, 8, 16). . . .

All this does not simply appear as a reproduction of popular ethics, but has been given new motivation by Christian ideas. Further, the fulfilment of these demands is urged for the church's sake. In no small degree the significance of the Pastoral Epistles rests on the fact that they are the only documents in the canon which enjoin such a structuring of life under the ideal of good Christian citizenship.¹⁶³

¹⁶² Martin Dibelius and Hans Conzelmann, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Hermeneia Commentary; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 74-75.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 40-41. For the sake of completeness I quote the remainder of their argument: "For an historical understanding it is not enough simply to confront this ethical ideal with the ethics of Jesus or Paul. It is necessary to consider the changed situation of the church and to interpret the Pastorals, together with contemporary writings (Luke and the *Apostolic Fathers*), in the context of a changing conceptual structure—change had to follow the re-orientations toward a longer duration of life in the world."

Here I cannot go along with Dibelius and Conzelmann. Where I differ, and which I think is essential for a Reformed view of pastoral care to the elderly, is their view of a "family ethic which goes substantially beyond traditional injunctions." The authors do not accept the Pastoral Letters as being of Pauline origin.¹⁶⁴ That is why they speak of a Christian family ethic and of a "religious family tradition" which began in the first century, and that is why they mention that the Pastoral Epistles are the only documents in the canon which enjoin such a structuring of life under the ideal of good Christian citizenship. Dibelius and Conzelmann come to this conclusion because they hardly interact with the Old Testament. It is as if New Testament faith is detached and has no roots. However, if one does accept Paul as the author of the letter to Timothy, as I do,¹⁶⁵ then one can say that Paul's "family ethic" is no new development, but an expansion on the Old Testament value system which required respect for elderly, and care for orphans and widows. More to the point, therefore, is J.N.D. Kelly's comment on 1 Timothy 5:3-16:

This surprisingly long section throws a precious light on conditions in, and problems facing, the apostolic Church. In Judaism widows were regarded as the object of special solicitude (e.g. Deut. x. 18; xxiv. 17; Ps. lxxviii. 5; Is. i. 17; Lk. ii. 37), the obligations of the good Jew towards them being deduced from the Fifth Commandment, and Christianity naturally inherited this attitude.¹⁶⁶

That this view is more natural is also supported by Acts 6 where the first Christian church in Jerusalem took action to look after the widows. Also James

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 1-5.

¹⁶⁵ The difficulties that exist around the question of authorship should be acknowledged because they are not insignificant. E. Earle Ellis has given a fair overview of the various positions on either side, but offers no new synthesis because, he writes: "I do not have one." However, he does indicate his inclination toward Pauline authorship. See *Paul and his Recent Interpreters* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 7 and 49-57. Thomas C. Oden, who first accepted the view of his teacher Fred D. Gealy that "if a date must be suggested, A.D. 130-150 would seem to be a reasonable conjecture," has changed his mind and now accepts the Pastorals as Pauline. See *First and Second Timothy and Titus* (Interpretation Bible Commentary; Louisville: John Knox Press, 1989), 10-15.

¹⁶⁶ Kelly, *A Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, 112.

made the plight of the widows a matter of concern for the church (1:27). Therefore, I suggest that in 1 Timothy 5 we are not dealing with a first century Christian family ethic, but Paul is expanding upon the obligation within the Christian church in conformity to the Old Testament requirements. The New Testament church community is not a completely new institution; rather, it builds upon the principles of communal life as stipulated in the Old Testament covenant community.¹⁶⁷ From that perspective the instructions from both the Old and New Testament for looking after the needy (cf. Isa 58:7) take on a normative character for the Christian church.

Paul's instructions to Timothy remain of great practical value. Here we can point to the role of pastoral care not only to, but especially for, the elderly. Aging parents sometimes need help, and the first responsibility in helping out lies with the children. Interestingly enough, Paul writes that the children and grandchildren need to learn this responsibility. It does not come automatically and, therefore, the children need to be reminded of their duties at times. It is so easy to get totally absorbed in one's own nuclear family and one's own world, but a God-given responsibility to assist the parents when necessary, remains. Life is a two-way street. While on the one hand we read in Scripture that parents ought to save up for the children (2 Cor 12:14)—and from the context it is clear that Paul uses the term "to save up" not only for possessions (v.14) but also in the sense of spending one's time and energy (v.15), in other words, to stand ready for the children—in his instruction to Timothy (1 Tim 5:8) he shows the other side of responsibility within the family. When parents are in need of help the roles may become reversed where the children ought to help out their parents with their time, energy, and financial support. In pastoral care for the

¹⁶⁷ K.L. Schmidt, "ἐκκλησία" in *TDNT*, 3:501-536, has written an in-depth article on the church in which he has carefully argued that the NT church is similar to the *qahal Yahweh*, the assembly or community of Israel. He writes: "On the basis of the OT use of ἐκκλησία for the total community of Israel, it speaks of the 'saved community of the NT' which finds expression first as the total community and then as the same community in local circumscription." 503.

elderly, this responsibility needs to be impressed upon the immediate family of the needy elderly.

This biblical principle is, I believe, still practised within the vast majority of Reformed church communities. When elderly persons are in need, they can rely on the church deacons and the church community for help, but the children are expected to be involved and do as much as they can for their parents. The point is, the children should take the responsive and leading role towards elderly parents who have specific needs, and assist them wherever and whenever possible.¹⁶⁸ If they do not, they deny the faith, i.e., they fail in their Christian duties as faith demands of them.

Sometimes the relationship between parents and children is strained. In that case the role of pastoral care is to try to bring them together and restore the relationship.¹⁶⁹ From a New Testament understanding, anyone who does not to the best of his/her ability look after the needs and affairs of his/her immediate family acts worse than an unbeliever. This comment by Paul is very much religiously charged, and I believe he wrote it to shame Christians into action. If Christians look around them they will find that unbelievers sometimes display great dedication in helping family. They put Christians who ignore their family to shame. Christians who do not acknowledge their responsibility towards family act worse than unbelievers.

In all this we are not merely dealing with a cultural matter, but with a biblical issue which, from a Reformed perspective, sets a high standard for us to follow. Paul is intimating that Christians ought to be shining examples in this respect also. Unbelievers should not be examples of a loving attitude for

¹⁶⁸ This assistance can be from their own means or by helping parents connect to the various social support systems that are in place. My point is simply that the children should expend the time and energy to help their parents in these matters and not leave these responsibilities up to others. In light of the fifth commandment (Eph 6:2) one can say that it is the children's duty to see to it that their parents are looked after well when there is a need or when the parents are no longer capable of looking after their own affairs.

¹⁶⁹ Elderly parents can be stubborn in accepting help from their children. If so, they prevent their children from carrying out a Christian obligation and that needs to be addressed pastorally as well.

Christians; it should be the other way around (Gal 6:2) especially when it pertains to (elderly) parents.

This duty needs to be taken seriously. There is always the danger of falling into casuistry, i.e., the use of subtle but evasive reasoning to avoid duty. Jesus fought that attitude at one point when tradition was used as a ploy to avoid responsibility towards parents by supposedly devoting to God a gift meant to help out the needy (elderly?) parents (Mk 7:9-13). It was a clever attempt to circumvent the requirement of the fifth commandment to honour father and mother (Ex 20:12; Dt 5:16; cf. Prov 28:24). Jesus reproved this gimmick for setting God's law aside, and thereby upheld the norm of the Old Testament for his followers.

In the New Testament, God's requirement to honour parents is not set aside (Eph 6:2). Rather, it is amplified by giving concrete direction as to how this honouring needs to be done so that parents are indeed seen as the pride of their children (Prov 17:6).

6.6 Summary

Since the New Testament builds upon the Old Testament, it does not reveal much new with regards to the position of the elderly within the church community. Only a few elderly are mentioned by name and a preliminary conclusion seems warranted that in the new Testament the emphasis is no longer on the quantity of years, but on life with the Lord that continues on eternally. Christians are reminded that life is a journey in a world in which they are basically aliens and strangers. But this life forms the prelude to life with God forever which is promised through faith in the risen Lord. Christians are en route to the new earth.

While there is the focus on the new life, the New Testament, like the Old, portrays life with God as staying in the ways of the Lord. Life under the umbrella of promise is now a life of trust in Christ's saving work. In the Sermon

on the Mount, Jesus encouraged his followers not to worry about tomorrow (Mt 6:25-34), and urges Christians to place themselves into his care and to unburden themselves with him and so find rest for their souls (Mt 11:28-30). Elderly persons who doubt their salvation need to be assured that life with God is sustained by God's grace. Sins of youth need to be placed in the spotlight of God's grace. In pastoral care to the elderly the glorious promises of God in Christ must be proclaimed for their benefit and encouragement.

Also in the New Testament we read of people who learned of their impending death and who faced death with a calm acceptance. But unlike the Old Testament believer who spoke about going to the grave, the Christian can speak about an imperishable inheritance. Even though the New Testament believer has greater clarity about life after this life than the Old Testament believer had, the ultimate clarity for everyone awaits the day of Christ's return.

Those who labour in pastoral care should be aware that some elderly persons might not accept immediately a much younger pastor. However, this should not stand in the way of carrying out one's ministry with an attitude of love, humility, sensitivity, and respect. Also, in providing pastoral care to the elderly the church must give attention where the need is greatest.

Life within the church community takes on certain duties in which the needs of the community are met. Special attention is given to the task of children to parents in keeping with the Old Testament requirement of honouring father and mother. The New Testament is not detached from the Old, but has its roots there, and is an expansion on the Old Testament value system. In pastoral care for the elderly this responsibility of children to parents may need to be stressed from time to time. God's requirement to honour one's elderly parents is not set aside.

6.7 Conclusion

The excursion through the Old and New Testaments has revealed how

God's covenant grew from being a covenant with individuals (Adam, Noah) into a covenant with Abraham and descendants, and so to Israel as a nation. In Reformed circles the view is that the covenant continues in the New Testament dispensation as God's covenant with the believers and their children (Acts 2:39). This new covenant mediated by Christ is superior to the old one because it is founded on better promises (Heb. 8:7; cf. Jer 31:31-34). I maintain, therefore, that God's special relationship continues to run via the covenant line. Life is still lived under the umbrella of promise, some of which has been fulfilled in Christ, with the ultimate fulfilment at Christ's return.

Within that covenant, young and old live, move and have their being. So, living in the covenant is not only a living with God but also a living, caring and sharing with others. Life, from a biblical perspective, is a relationship with God and each other. Within that relationship youth may not be—and would not want to be—individualistic with progressive strides which leaves the old wondering where they are. Neither may the old be exclusively retrospective and hinder change. Life needs to be lived looking forward because God is leading his people to the tree of life¹⁷⁰ guided by Christ's finest promise for young and old: "I am making all things new."

¹⁷⁰ Besides the tree of life the Bible also mentions the book of life. It is God's book (Ex 32:32-33). In God's covenant all of life is "life" orientated. Other OT references are: Ps 69:28; Isa 4:3; Dan 12:1; Mal 3:16. In the NT the book of life surfaces anew. Not surprising, just as all the NT references to the tree of life are found in Revelation, so all but one (Phil 4:3) referrals to the book of life are in Revelation 3:5; 20:12, 15. Revelation 21:27 calls it the Lamb's book of life.

PART II

EXCURSIONS

In Part Two we will check out the comments made in the section on senescence about pastoral care to the cognitively impaired elderly, and put to the test my position expressed that care for the dead was influenced by the faith perspective of the Israelites who lived under the umbrella of God's promise.¹⁷¹

The first excursion will deal with elderly persons who suffer from senile dementia or from Alzheimer's disease. We need to determine, in so far as that is possible, if and how they are spiritually challenged. Connected to that is the important question how they can be helped pastorally.

The second excursion deals with the subject of caring for the dead and looks at the practice of inhumation versus cremation. Death brings an end to life here on earth for all of us unless the Lord returns in the meantime. Does death leave no more than a body, an empty shell that we can dispose of as we see fit? Is there a biblical precedent for Christians to follow? We will investigate this subject under the heading "Inhumation or Cremation: does it matter?"

Closely linked to the excursion on funerary practices is the matter of the funeral itself. My concluding excursion briefly highlights the main areas of pastoral involvement in times of bereavement.

¹⁷¹ See sections 5.2.2.4; 4.4n75; 5.3.2n142.

CHAPTER SEVEN

PASTORAL CARE TO COGNITIVELY IMPAIRED ELDERLY

7.1 A Pressing Question

In the section on senescence (5.2.2.4), I mentioned that the metaphor of old age in Ecclesiastes 12 highlights physical deterioration but not psychological decline. The Old Testament is silent about loss of cognitive function, and the New Testament does not deal with this subject either. And yet, mental decline is a real part of life among the elderly. When 5% to 10% of persons over sixty-five suffer from Alzheimer's disease, and almost 50% of those over eighty-five have the disease, and another 15% to 20% of dementias are caused by strokes,¹⁷² then the loss of cognitive function is something that cannot be ignored as far as pastoral care to the elderly is concerned. What sort of pastoral care needs to be given to them? Is there a biblical direction from which we can take our starting point in pastoral care to the cognitively impaired elderly? Are they spiritually challenged? How does life under the umbrella of promise function for them? These questions are important, not only for helping the person suffering from the dementia, but especially for his/her spouse and family. If pastoral care is to be a holistic care to the needs of the elderly, then this issue needs our attention.

7.2 What has been Done and What Needs to be Done

With the steady increase in the number of elderly during the twentieth century, increased attention has been given to their needs, particularly on the

¹⁷² See page 67 of this study, note 133.

healthcare front. Over the last two decades, researchers have been studying the correlation between religion, spirituality and health, and have gathered mounting evidence that religion is a health benefit.¹⁷³ Research has shown that highly proscriptive religious groups which do not allow smoking and alcohol consumption, have a healthier membership than do other religious groups.¹⁷⁴ Subsequent research has confirmed previous findings that "the greater the intensity or degree of religiousness, the better the health and the less of whatever illness is being investigated."¹⁷⁵

One specific area that has hardly been explored is whether elderly persons with cognitive impairments such as Alzheimer's disease and senile dementia¹⁷⁶ are spiritually challenged. Most articles in journals and books on the topic of dementia written prior to the early 1990s do not deal with the spiritual aspect at all.¹⁷⁷ There has been a positive shift in direction in the 1990s.¹⁷⁸ Nevertheless, virtually all research on the relationship between

¹⁷³ Jeffrey S. Levin, "Religious Factors in Aging, Adjustment, and Health: A Theoretical Overview." *Journal of Religion and Aging* Vol. 4 (3/4), 1988, 141.

¹⁷⁴ Christopher G. Ellison, "Religion, the Life Stress Paradigm, and the Study of Depression." *Religion in Aging and Health: Theoretical Foundations and Methodological Frontiers* (Jeffrey S. Levin, ed.; London: Sage, 1994), 81, 86-88. See also Ellen L. Idler and Stanislav V. Kasl, "Religion, Disability, Depression, and the Timing of Death." *American Journal of Sociology* Vol. 94 (4), January 1992, 1054.

¹⁷⁵ Levin, *Religion in Aging and Health*, 5.

¹⁷⁶ Frans M.J. Brandt, *Victory over Depression: A Complete Guide to Recovering the Joy of Living*. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988) describes various forms of dementia and their characteristics. It will be helpful to be familiar with some of the differences. He gives the following definitions: "Senile dementia refers to the serious mental impairment found in older people—usually after age sixty five. This dementia is caused by physical atrophy and degeneration of the brain. In senile dementia there are no signs of cerebrovascular disease. Senile dementia is characterized by memory loss of recent events, agitation, lack of interest, and major personality changes (coupled with temporary returns of more normal behavior). "In Alzheimer's disease we are always dealing with an organic brain disorder. . . . [It] is primarily a genetic disorder leading to destruction of brain tissue (196 - 197). Alzheimer's is a "presenile dementia" (284). "How do we know if a person is suffering primarily from depression or Alzheimer's disease? . . . depressed persons admit, while Alzheimer's patients deny a decrease in intellectual areas and memory." (cf. 284, 292, 333 and 83-94).

¹⁷⁷ Berton H. Kaplan et al. quoted the results of research in four psychiatric journals between 1978 and 1982. The findings were that "of the 2,348 psychiatric articles reviewed, 59 included a quantified religious variable." Berton H. Kaplan, Heather Munroe-Blum, and Dan G. Blazer, "Religion, Health, and Forgiveness" *Religion in Aging and Health* (Jeffrey S. Levin, ed.; London: Sage, 1994), 62.

¹⁷⁸ Excellent material is found in the works of Levin and especially Koenig. His *Aging and God: Spiritual Pathways to Mental Health in Midlife and Later Years* (New York: Haworth Press, 1994), xxi,

religion and health has focussed on how religion affects health, not on how deteriorating health affects religion, and how cognitive impairment impacts on the spiritual well being of the elderly. This is virgin territory for research that needs to be pursued because trying to understand how mental disability affects faith is really the issue in the quest whether the cognitive impaired elderly are spiritually challenged.

A study of the impact of cognitive impairment on faith needs to address questions such as: "Does the spiritual well-being of the elderly person suffer when he/she is cognitively impaired, and how?", and "How is his/her spiritual well-being challenged?" This excursion is a modest contribution to that study. Our evaluation will be limited to elderly persons who have lived an active life of faith prior to the onset of psychological decline.¹⁷⁹ Since most elderly persons of Reformed persuasion have lived active faith lives and have been involved in weekly worship and other church activities, my assumption is that when such Christians are affected by senile dementia due to old age, or suffer from Alzheimer's disease, a continuing faith stimulus remains essential for them. This premise is supported by the findings of a study which concluded that spirituality continues to play a role till the end. Hooyman and Kiyak write:

Although religion appears to be very important to many older people, they probably also valued it when they were young. That is, contrary to popular stereotypes, we do not become more religious as we age. . . . Religious *beliefs*, as contrasted with church attendance, appear to be relatively stable from the late teens until age 60, and to *increase* thereafter.¹⁸⁰

claims to be "the first publication to comprehensively address the issue of religion and *mental health* in later life." The book is intended specifically for persons affiliated with the Judeo-Christian religious tradition (105).

¹⁷⁹ In this investigation there is no pretense whatever of expertise in medical or psychology training. Therefore, any evaluation of medical surveys is cursory, and only used in so far as these studies are helpful in gaining understanding in providing pastoral care to spiritual needs of the cognitive dysfunctional person.

¹⁸⁰ Nancy R. Hooyman and H. Asuman Kiyak. *Social Gerontology: A Multidisciplinary Perspective* (Massachusetts: Allyn & Bacon, University of Washington, 1988), 423. See also Harold G. Koenig, *Research on Religion and Aging: An Annotated Bibliography* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1995), 10 #13, "There is no evidence from the hundreds of scientific studies presented in *Research on Religion and Aging*

One could ask whether it is as strictly age related as the number sixty seems to suggest, but one can agree that the perseverance of saints and the process of maturing in faith takes time. This process needs pastoral care and attention. My reason for quoting this observation by Hooyman and Kiyak is that if religious beliefs increase for the mentally healthy elderly person, those who suffer from intellectual functioning need to have their faith stimulated as well. Of course, this is best done by their own faith community in the tradition familiar to them. It is my hypothesis that the positive correlation between spirituality and cognitive dysfunction lies on the "religion specific" plain.

7.3 A "Religion-Specific" Approach

By "religion specific" I mean that the elderly persons who suffer from cognitive dysfunction are best served pastorally when they are approached and aided with familiar helps of their religious past. We can think here of "religious memory," to borrow a term from Wade Clark Roof.¹⁸¹ Even though he uses it in an entirely different context, it fits the purpose remarkably with regard to pastoral care to the cognitively impaired. The religious symbols with which the elderly grew up usually unlock the religious memory and are some of the best aids to reach them in the end. This suggests that their pastoral needs are essentially religion specific. Research seems to support this hypothesis. In a study on "Measuring Religiosity in Later Life," Neal Krause has shown just how difficult it is to set up a religious survey model and concluded: "there may not be any one 'best' way to specify a measuring model."¹⁸² This finding seems

that people "outgrow" their traditional religious beliefs as they become older; if anything, these beliefs become stronger and more useful for coping."

¹⁸¹ Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The spiritual journeys of the baby boom generation* (San Francisco: Harper, 1994), 251. He uses the term for baby boomers seeking a return to the faith. They usually remember that as youngsters they attended church at one time, and seek out that church environment based on religious memory.

¹⁸² Neal Krause, "Measuring Religiosity in Later Life." *RESEARCH ON AGING: A Quarterly of Social Gerontology and Adult Development*, Vol. 15 (2), June 1993, 170-197. Krause tried to devise and test a multidimensional measurement model of late life religiosity. His aim was to find out the relationship

to confirm that perhaps the most workable way of dealing with spiritual aspects is a religion specific approach.

In focussing on the spiritual needs of the cognitively impaired elderly persons, pastoral care workers need to realize that they are dealing with individuals who have their own specific needs, and whose needs require special attention and care. It so easily happens that pastoral care stops because meaningful contact and responsiveness is often lacking in people suffering from dementia. But, as research has shown, religious involvement among older people is an important part of their lives.¹⁸³ Philip Brown remarks: "older persons need the comfort that religious faith can produce. . . . Old age is a natural part of the life-cycle and has its own distinct religious needs."¹⁸⁴ The distinct religious needs of the cognitively impaired elderly is that, through pastoral care, faith is kept alive at his/her level of "mature" faith.

7.4 Mature Faith

Harold G. Koenig, a geriatric psychiatrist affiliated with Duke University, has made an excellent and comprehensive contribution concerning the relationship between faith and the cognitive dysfunctional person. His insights are most helpful in reaching some preliminary conclusions regarding the question as to whether the cognitively impaired elderly are spiritually challenged. Of great value is his definition of mature faith as "maximizing whatever level of faith is possible given one's emotional and intellectual

between religious involvement and life satisfaction (170). A persistent problem in measuring religiosity was the fact that religiosity is a multidimensional phenomenon. Standard test areas such as organizational religiosity all fell short because the belief factor is overlooked. Faith in Jesus and the miracles he performed are not valid in measuring the beliefs of Jews. Krause concluded that "there may not be any one "best" way to specify a measuring model." (195).

¹⁸³ Empirical findings show that "religious involvement does not generally decline as people age except with respect to religious attendance and only among those individuals with serious disability." See Levin, "Religious Factors in Aging, Adjustment, and Health: A Theoretical Overview," 139.

¹⁸⁴ Philip S. Brown, "Religious Needs of Older Persons." *Spiritual well-Being of the Elderly*, (James A. Thorson and Thomas C. Cook Jr., eds.; Springfield: Charles C. Thomas, 1980), 81.

abilities."¹⁸⁵ This is an extremely useful concept in the discussion since Scripture reveals that even a small child is capable of a certain maturity level of faith. More than once Jesus held up the faith of a child as the example for faith in adulthood (Mk 10:15; Lk 18:17; Mt 18:3-4). The idea that even little children are capable of possessing the most important and basic element of faith is comforting and reassuring. Writes Koenig:

Freeing religious faith of age and cognitive restraints makes it available to everyone. . . . Indeed, the ability to trust and enter into relationship is one of the first psychological developments in the human infant. . . . In cases where cognitive function and other intellectual capacities diminish in later life, simple religious truths—such as God’s care and promise to never leave one’s side—remain within the elder’s grasp long after other functions have left."¹⁸⁶

These considerations are significant in assessing the effects of cognitive impairment on spirituality. Their implication is that since the most basic faith requirement is belief in Jesus Christ (Jn 3:16), those who are affected by senile dementia or Alzheimer’s disease can still be fully “mature” in the faith, albeit at their diminished level of cognition. Richards and Seicol point out that:

Memory limitations are often perceived as barriers in spiritual connectedness for cognitively-impaired person, but it must be emphasized that the very long term memory exists into the latter stages of illness. . . . Such memories are deeply-rooted.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁵ Harold G. Koenig, *Aging and God*, 113. Koenig is critical of James W. Fowler’s Stages of Faith Development because, in Fowler’s paradigm, individuals with impaired cognitive development would be prevented from advancing beyond a certain stage. Fowler’s paradigm does not allow for reaching a mature faith in the cognitively impaired person. Koenig argues that faith development does not depend primarily on intellectual assent. Overemphasis on intellectual understanding of faith does not correspond with biblical evidence which warns the believer “not to rely on one’s own wisdom” (Isa 29:14; 1 Cor 1:18-31; 2:5, 14). Most of the time faith requires no more than simple acceptance, without proof or understanding. Indeed, faith involves belief *without seeing* (Heb 11:1) Even this belief is a gift of grace and not due to our own doing (Rom 11:6; 12:3; Eph 2:8), 87-104. For further discussions on Fowler’s Stages see various discussion papers in *Christian Perspectives on Faith Development* (Jeff Astley and Leslie Francis, eds.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), esp. 62-76; 122-134 and 135-150.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 115.

¹⁸⁷ Marty Richards and Rabbi Sam Seicol. “The Challenge of Maintaining Spiritual Connectedness for Persons Institutionalized with Dementia.” *Journal of Religious Gerontology* Vol 7 (3), 1991, 30.

It is an encouraging and comforting thought for family and friends that even those who become cognitively impaired can have a mature or functional faith, although the only way the person can give expression to his/her faith will be in very rudimentary ways such as singing a hymn, reciting a prayer, or, towards the end, simply by giving a sign of recognition to a religious stimulus.

The truth of this observation is valid for anyone who has been involved in pastoral care to cognitively impaired elderly persons who in their earlier years lived an active life of faith. Many pastoral care givers can affirm Gilhuis' analysis: "loss of memory reminds us that we must let go of this life a little at a time. . . . On deathbeds often only one name is mentioned and one face seen: Jesus. But then that is sufficient."¹⁸⁸ When dealing with elderly who suffer from senile dementia or Alzheimer's disease, there is indeed a noticeable "letting go of life a little at a time." But for elderly persons who have been active in the faith, the name of Jesus usually triggers some kind of response.¹⁸⁹ One can consider that response to represent the person's "mature" faith in which he/she maximized the level of his/her emotional and intellectual abilities at that time.

An important implication of this modest faith requirement is that ongoing pastoral care and spiritual nourishment of elderly persons with senile dementia and Alzheimer's is imperative. It belongs to the religion specific routine in their lives. Ongoing pastoral care is simply a continuation of what they have known all their lives and, therefore, invaluable for their spiritual well-being.

Another valuable observation by Koenig with a view to the cognitive dysfunctional elderly person is that once mature religious faith is established,

¹⁸⁸ Cornelis Gilhuis, *Conversations On Growing Older* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1977), 80-81.

¹⁸⁹ Susan H. McFadden in her article "Religion, Spirituality, and Aging," comments: "There is considerable anecdotal evidence from chaplains in long-term-care facilities that persons with dementing illnesses respond positively to religious services and spiritual care." *Handbook of the Psychology of Aging* (J.E. Birren, and K.W. Schaie, eds.; San Diego: Academic Press, 1996), 171. See also Herman Knoop, *Pastoraal depositio* (Groningen: Vuurbaak, n.d.), 33-36.

it tends to resist permanent reversals although the process of faith maturation may be affected by mental impairments.¹⁹⁰ In other words, the process for further growth and development in faith may be affected due to cognitive impairment, but the assurance of the person's faith is not. One's trust in God, and belief in Christ as Saviour, remains unaffected! For the Christian it is precisely this assurance of one's faith that gives the stability in life, combats anxiety and depression, and gives inner peace. That is why Koenig can speak about mature faith as faith that carries a person through tough times and does not fluctuate in either triumph or tragedy. Dementia, and especially Alzheimer's disease, is one of life's tragedies. The person lives with locked up memories that need to be unlocked through familiar aids.

7.5 Unlocking Locked-up Memories

It is sad to see the vitality of a once keen mind transformed into a vacant stare. How can we reach the locked up mind? The locked up mind is often opened through things that are familiar to them. Singing hymns, Bible reading, prayer, and exposure to other religious symbols or rituals¹⁹¹ arouses spiritual feelings that are not accessible by other routes. Here we touch upon the matter of being religion specific once again. Elements that were part of their religious upbringing, life, worship, and practice of faith can penetrate blank minds and stares that are otherwise inaccessible. Richards and Seicol stress the same point when they write:

¹⁹⁰ Koenig, *Aging and God*, 129-130.

¹⁹¹ The reference to religious symbols or rituals should possibly be qualified based on the findings of Idler and Kasl that "primarily Catholics and, to a certain extent, Jews benefit from their religious observance... Protestants ... [are] more open to a spirit of free inquiry ... [and] less ritualistic practices." See "Religion, Disability, Depression, and the Timing of Death," 1077. This interesting study evaluates Durkheim's view on the complex and multidimensional relevance of religious involvement to health (1055) and analyses in particular the "death-dip" phenomenon before ceremonial occasions of religious significance. "Death-dip" refers to the finding that people are considerably less likely to die in the six months before their birthday than in the five months after. This appears to hold true especially for famous people for whom the ceremonial event is important.

[Memories can be unlocked by] sparking memories through pictures, music, games, familiar prayers, and Bible verses, etc. As mental functioning steadily decreases, spiritual wholeness must be addressed on an increasingly non-verbal level.¹⁹²

Memories involving religious experiences and religious symbols—perhaps because they are affectively charged—are among the last memories lost in dementing illnesses.¹⁹³ Kathleen R. Fisher says it somewhat forcefully: “memory enables us to hold fast to our identity. . . . We do not merely have these memories; we are these memories.”¹⁹⁴

But what happens when memory is lost and identity is lost, is faith possible? The Christian faith claims that the most essential aspect in life, one’s spiritual connection to God, remains until the end. Even when memory loss seems to be complete, then God holds us in his right hand (Ps 73:23) and nothing can separate us from his love (Rom 8:39). That is what life is like under the umbrella of promise.¹⁹⁵

7.6 Cognitive Impairment: A Spiritual Challenge?

Old age has been described in various ways. Whether one refers to it as the “fourth quarter of life”¹⁹⁶ or as the “winter of human existence,”¹⁹⁷ both

¹⁹² Richards and Seicol, “The Challenge of Maintaining Spiritual Connectedness,” 34.

¹⁹³ Koenig, *Religion in Aging and Health*, 34. Cf. Harold G. Koenig and Andrew J. Weaver, *Counseling Troubled Older Adults: a handbook for pastors and religious caregivers* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 131 where they write: “Alzheimer’s disease is a cortical dementia and usually does not involve the emotion centers of the brain. Thus, Alzheimer’s patients even in advanced stages retain the capacity for emotions.” They also comment: “patients in the later stages of Alzheimer’s disease still retain the capacity to experience emotions and communicate at some rudimentary level. Even though they have difficulty expressing emotion, these patients can tell when someone is kind to them, is concerned about their feelings, and cares about them. Like wise, many such patients become more peaceful and less agitated following spiritual activities in their presence such as prayer, Scripture reading, the singing of well-known hymns, and various religious rituals.” 132.

¹⁹⁴ Kathleen R. Fisher, *Winter Grace* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 34. Quoted by Richards and Seicol, “The Challenge of Maintaining Spiritual Connectedness,” 31.

¹⁹⁵ Cf. Heb 13:5-6 which applies to the NT believer God’s promise to Joshua in Dt 31:6-8; Josh 1:5.

¹⁹⁶ William M. Clements, “Spiritual Development in the Fourth Quarter of Life.” *Spiritual Maturity in the later Years* (James J. Seeber, ed.; Binghamton: Haworth Press, 1990), 55.

¹⁹⁷ Burghardt, *Concilium* 1991 (3), 65.

expressions highlight the truth that this last phase forms part of a whole. Just as one cannot separate the last quarter from the preceding ones, nor separate winter from the other seasons, so we cannot sever the last phase from life as it was lived. If old age is the "winter of human existence" then those who suffer from senile dementia can be viewed as people who are "frozen" in time. The "frozen" mind is hard to penetrate. The more you chisel away at it, the more pieces break off. Still, if religion played an important part in one's life in the early years, it continues to remain important in old age. What was learned from youth bears fruit in old age, even when cognitive dysfunction sets in.

Based on the preceding observations, it is my hypothesis that the cognitively impaired elderly are not necessarily more spiritually challenged than others; they are differently challenged. Cognitive dysfunction affects spirituality to the extent the person resists and struggles with the changes that are occurring in his/her life. During the early stages of dementia the person may struggle coming to terms with his/her gradually shrinking world. Edward T. Welch, in his chapter on Alzheimer's Disease and Dementia, comments that many older people would rather admit to physical problems than to emotional problems.¹⁹⁸ Especially the onset of the disease lays a burden upon the person,¹⁹⁹ often linked with depression. Perhaps as many as fifty percent experience anxiety or depression at this time. As the disease progresses, they become less aware of their dysfunctions. As a result, depression and other affective symptoms tend to diminish.²⁰⁰ Once the resistance has ceased the challenges change into acceptance and peaceful repose. The person suffering from the dementia is no longer burdened by the effects of the disease. The

¹⁹⁸ Edward T. Welch, *Blame It on the Brain?: Distinguishing Chemical Imbalances, Brain Disorders, and Disobedience* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1998), 72

¹⁹⁹ See Koenig and Weaver, *Counseling Troubled Older Adults*, 115-135. Cases 14-16 on Early-Stage, Middle-Stage and Late-Stage Alzheimer's Dementia detail some of the burdens associated with the illness.

²⁰⁰ Koenig, *Aging and God*, 369.

burden has now been shifted completely to caregiver.²⁰¹

Life brings its challenges in one way or another to everyone, but in cognitive dysfunctional persons the coping and response mechanism shuts down. Does that make them spiritually challenged? In their ability to respond, most definitely. Alterations in consciousness often disrupt the concentration necessary for prayer or Scripture reading. In matters of assurance of faith, however, I believe they are not spiritually challenged. This is not empirically verifiable either way,²⁰² but I base my view on the biblical promise that childlike faith and trust in God is all that is needed to have a purposeful and direct relationship with God (cf. Mk 10:15; Lk 18:17). Cognitively impaired persons become unnecessarily burdened if their spiritual needs are ignored or not taken seriously. Then they suffer from spiritual undernourishment, and impoverishment is the result if they are not spiritually stimulated. But then the spiritual challenge they face is more the result of lack of care tantamount to abandonment.

The actual effect of cognitive impairment on spirituality appears to be one of degree rather than in kind. A curious phenomenon is recorded in a study which had established that there was a genuine link between religion and mental health. The researchers discovered that "older patients . . . with mild to moderate dementia consistently reported higher levels of religious activity and intrinsic religiosity." They commented on this phenomenon:

Why religiosity should be higher among patients in early stages of dementia is unclear. . . . Religiosity somehow may be causally related to dementia, or symptoms of dementia may contribute to greater religiosity. Recognition of failing

²⁰¹ The stress factor on caregivers and the cross they bear is a topic all by itself. For a helpful chapter on the subject see Koenig and Weaver, *Counseling Troubled Older Adults*, 137-43.

²⁰² Koenig correctly states that the Christian faith makes a claim that good scientists do not and cannot make. He writes: "As science looks in on itself, it finds *relativism* (truth dependent on point of observation). As Judeo-Christianity looks in on itself, it finds *the absolute* (truth not dependent on point of observation). The latter type of truth is one that must be based on faith. That faith . . . is based on an experience which God initiates and man receives." *Aging and God*, 37.

cognitive capacity by persons in the early stages of disease often results in significant psychological stress and represents a major adaptive challenge. One might speculate that religion is utilized to help cope with their distress.²⁰³

As much as cognitive impairment is a challenge to the elderly person, we can ease the challenge by taking his/her spiritual needs seriously. Besides medical care they need also pastoral care. Perhaps even more the pastoral care which provides the familiar songs and prayers that can still "thaw" the frozen mind at times. To those who were raised in a Christian setting, religious symbols and songs continue to provide comfort and encouragement.

7.7 Conclusion

Our inquiry as to what kind of pastoral care needs to be provided to cognitively impaired elderly was occasioned by the fact that the Bible does not treat the matter of psychological decline. However, since mental degeneration is a reality for some elderly, the pressing question is where and how the cognitively impaired elderly fit in under the umbrella of promise.

Many studies have been done on how religion affects health, not on how deteriorating health affects religion. I have tried to demonstrate that while spirituality is affected by cognitive impairment, it appears to be a loss in degree, not in kind. Even the cognitive dysfunctional person retains a "mature" faith. This conviction that there is a permanence of mature faith provides hope and encouragement to family members who see a loved one regress to the point where the person is no longer what he/she used to be. A religion-specific approach to providing pastoral care is essential to unlock the vacant stares and awaken recognition. Family members need to be encouraged to "continue as normal" as far as the faith of their loved one is concerned by reading from

²⁰³ Harold G. Koenig, David O. Moberg, and James N. Kvale. "Religious Activities and Attitudes of Older Adults in a Geriatric Assessment Clinic." *Journal of the American Geriatric Society*, Vol. 36 (4), 370, 372.

the Bible, singing the familiar songs the person used to sing, and prayer. Even though there may not be a measurable “recognition factor” from the person, nevertheless, it may stir him/her emotionally and spiritually.

From a Reformed faith perspective there is good reason to believe that the spirituality of the person, though diminished in active participation, remains intact to the last moment.²⁰⁴ These are things that cannot be empirically verified, but from personal dealings with Alzheimer’s patients near death, the name of Jesus still brought a reaction and at times even a sign of life in an otherwise vacant look.

In their “winter” years the cognitively impaired elderly should not be abandoned to a religion-less vacuum. Rather, they should be stimulated in life’s journey through what is familiar to them, whether songs, symbols, rituals, verbal or non-verbal means. These things will diminish any challenge to one’s faith and stimulate the spirituality of the person till the end.

²⁰⁴ Christians have the promise that nothing can separate them from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Rom 8:39). That is also the reason why the Heidelberg Catechism begins with the question about the only comfort in life and death. The answer is that both in life and death we belong to the faithful Saviour Jesus Christ (Q&A 1). *Three Forms of Unity*, 40.

CHAPTER EIGHT

INHUMATION OR CREMATION: DOES IT MATTER?

8.1 Is it Really an Issue?

In the main section I have defended the position that death is an intruder into the *created order*. God created humankind with the intent to live on indefinitely in fellowship with the Creator, and the Old Testament believers lived with the expectation of life after death. I have further suggested that this expectation of eternal life had a bearing on how they took care of the dead. The Israelite funerary practice of burying their dead was influenced by their faith perspective. At this stage, my hypothesis needs to be investigated more closely and requires biblical support.

But is it really an issue? In my pastoral visits to the elderly the question on how one should care for a deceased spouse has come up for discussion. They are asking for a biblical directive in caring for their loved one. In the Reformed community, Scriptural directives have a fundamental bearing on how matters in life are governed, including funerary practices and this needs attention because one cannot assume any longer that Christians automatically choose inhumation²⁰⁵ as the last act of caring for the dead, especially since cremation is actively promoted as an alternative. So, is this really an issue? Or is this no more than a personal preference and therefore something that should not occupy any of our time?

²⁰⁵ With the steady increase of cremation the word “burial” has become an open concept. Most people still associate burial with burying a body. However, since cremated remains (sometimes referred to as cremains) are at times also buried, it is becoming more common to speak of body burial as inhumation. I will use both “burial” and “inhumation” for the interment of a body.

Basic to our discussion is the question: "Does the Bible have something to convey on this matter?" The answer depends on whether one considers the biblical practice of caring for the dead as something that sets an example for us to follow, or whether one considers burial as no more than a culturally conditioned custom. It is my position that the Bible relates more than a cultural practice. We know that inhumation was practised throughout the ancient Near East and, therefore, it was not restricted to Israelite culture alone. But just because inhumation happened in other cultures that does not make it primarily a culturally conditioned practice. It was very much a religious rite. The Egyptians buried the dead and provided supplies for the afterlife. We do not read of such a practice in the Bible. So, while there may have been a cultural sameness among nations, their cultural practice was influenced by religious values. In my opinion, the way one disposes²⁰⁶ of the dead is a reflection of one's religious conviction. Both cremation and inhumation are conditioned by one's religious views and these religious views shape one's cultural value system.²⁰⁷

I will argue that inhumation is the biblical model that Christians of Reformed persuasion should be encouraged to follow. It would be in keeping with the practice of Christians for the last two millennia and with the practice of Old Testament believers before that. A shift towards cremation did not occur until the end of the nineteenth century and is becoming increasingly more

²⁰⁶ For lack of a better word I will use the common term "disposing" or "disposal" of the body even though it leaves an unsavoury taste. It gives the impression that the body is little more than a waste product.

²⁰⁷ Among Hindus and Buddhists, burning of the body is the prescribed method of disposal. Hindus believe in the cycle of life, death and rebirth. With emphasis on the constant reincarnation of the soul, the body is of lesser importance. Cremation is understood to facilitate the quick separation of body and soul, and burning the body takes place soon after death. E.S. Hartland lists three reasons for cremation which carry religious overtones: 1) Nomadic tribes could take the ashes with them for carrying out witchcraft by means of the dead; 2) to be quit of the ghost; 3) as a means of protection of survivors against haunting and injury by the dead. See "Death and Disposal of the Dead (Introductory)" in *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, 12 vols, (James Hastings, ed.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1910), 4:423-4.

popular.²⁰⁸ What occasioned this change? We will first take a quick historical survey, then highlight the main reasons for the shift towards cremation, and, finally, present biblical evidence favouring inhumation.

8.2 Selective Historical Survey

Burning the dead can be considered to be both an ancient and a recent practice. Archeological digs have found cremated remains in Palestine dating to a time long before the coming of the Israelites.²⁰⁹ In spite of the claim by Constance Jones that: "Cremation is mentioned in the Bible and in some areas it was regarded as a regular community activity,"²¹⁰ I hope to show later from biblical evidence that the Israelites themselves did not practice it except in aberrant situations. Still today cremation is against Jewish law, but, as Earl A. Grollman highlights, the requirement of the law and the application of the law differ. He writes:

Since the natural decomposition of the body is required, cremation is contrary to Jewish law. However, the practice is permitted in Reform and Reconstructionist Judaism, as long as a funeral is held with the body present.²¹¹

Right from the start Christians followed the Israelite custom of burial,

²⁰⁸ In Ontario the cremation rate for 1976 was just over 11 percent of those who died, although in British Columbia it was already nearing 45 percent. By 1991-1992 the percentage for Ontario had increased to 34 percent, and for British Columbia it reached 70 percent. The Canadian average for 1990-1991 stood at 34.25 percent. One reason for the increase is the influx of immigrants whose religious requirement is cremation. For the statistical information see Consumers Union of the United States, *Funerals: Consumer's Last Rights* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1977), 157, hereafter: *Funerals*; and Eric C. Tappenden, "Ethical Questions in Changing Funeral and Burial Practices," *Ethical Issues in the Care of the Dying and Bereaved Aged* (John D. Morgan, ed.; Amityville: Baywood Publishing, 1996), 36-37, hereafter: "Ethical Questions."

²⁰⁹ Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961), Vol. 1, 57.

²¹⁰ Constance Jones, *R.I.P.: The Complete Book of Death and Dying* (New York: Stonesong Press, 1997), 96. Hereafter: *R.I.P.*

²¹¹ Earl A. Grollman, "Explaining Death to Children from Jewish Perspectives." *Bereaved Children and Teens: a support guide for parents and professionals*, (Earl A. Grollman, ed.; Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 145. Some Jewish groups permit cremated remains to be buried in a Jewish cemetery provided that the urn has an opening so that the ashes come in contact with the earth. See *Funerals*, 167. See also Harry Rabinowicz, "Cremation" in *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 16 vols, (New York: MacMillan, 1971), 5:1072-73.

and wherever Christianity gained prominence the practice of cremation disappeared. Writes Jones:

The Scandinavians practised cremation until the 11th century, when they converted to Christianity. Pre-Christian Russia also used cremation, switching to burial after converting. Today, Jews, Greek Orthodox Christians, Southern Baptists and Moslems largely disapprove of cremation, but in 1963 the Roman Catholic Church removed its ban.²¹²

For the early Christian church inhumation became the only proper way of caring for the dead. At one time the practice of cremation was a fashionable way of disposal among the aristocratic classes throughout the Roman Empire.²¹³ This was gradually abolished in most of Christianized Europe. In A.D. 785, Charlemagne even prohibited cremation in his realm as a pagan rite. He proclaimed this edict: "If anyone follows pagan rites and causes the body of a dead man to be consumed by fire, and reduces his bones to ashes, let him pay with his life."²¹⁴ This "universal law" lasted for about eleven centuries. It was not until late in the nineteenth century that cremation became a prevalent alternative to burial.

From this quick sketch we may conclude that even though the practice of burning the dead can be traced back several millennia, cremation as a mode of disposing of the dead is a relatively new phenomenon and a recent practice among Christians. Significant is the fact that up to the middle of the nineteenth century Christians considered only inhumation in accord with their religious

²¹² Jones, *R.I.P.*, 101. According to the recent *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), "The Church permits cremation, provided that it does not demonstrate a denial of faith in the resurrection of the body" [#2301], 553.

²¹³ P.H. Jones, "Cremation" in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, VI (1971), 722. J. Douma points out that the reason why it was used primarily by aristocracy is because the cost of wood for the funeral pyre. Jochem Douma, *Rondom de Dood* (Kampen: Van den Berg, 1984), 141.

²¹⁴ From the Paderborn Capitularies, in H.R. Loyn and John Percival, *The Reign of Charlemagne: Documents on Carolingian Government and Administration* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976), 52 #7. One could escape the death penalty as long as the "crime" went undetected, and the person who went of his own accord to a priest and was willing to make his confession and undergo penance, would be excused the death penalty on the priest's testimony, 52 #14.

convictions. This indicates that for nearly 2000 years Christians treated the biblical example of burial as the standard to follow, and as being the God-honouring way of looking after their dead. This Christian practice replaced the religious and cultural practices of the peoples who turned from paganism to Christianity.

What brought about the shift in thinking and practice we experience today? In his excellent book, *The Hour of Our Death*, Philippe Ariès has traced the transitional phases in the burial customs from the fifth to the nineteenth century. He discovered a gradual shift in the direction of a contempt for life. By the eighteenth century, death had become a medical issue. It was the time for scientific knowledge. Looting of graves for the purpose of medical science and the study of anatomy became common. With it came a disrespect for the bodies of the dead.²¹⁵

These insights may also help us understand the development in nineteenth century England. In 1874, Sir Henry Thompson tried to introduce cremation in England.²¹⁶ He did so after visiting Italy, where cremation was practised, and after he had seen a model of one of the experimental furnaces at the Great Exhibition in Vienna (1873). With memories of the appalling conditions of cemeteries in Britain²¹⁷ he was attracted by this method of disposal of human remains. He organized the Cremation Society of England which found supporters among prominent writers, artists and scientists. However, because of fierce opposition from the Church of England and the Home Secretary, his plans were temporarily frustrated. A test-case arose in 1883 when Dr. William Price tried to have the body of his child cremated. Legal action was initiated against him which, in 1884, produced the judgment that cremation was a legal process provided it did not cause a nuisance.

²¹⁵ Ariès, *The Hour of our Death*, 327, 353, 363, 368.

²¹⁶ Jones, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, VI (1971), 722.

²¹⁷ Most likely a reference to grave robberies. Theft of cadavers seems to have been a common practice. See Ariès, *Hour of Our Death*, 369.

In 1902 the first Cremation Act was passed and updated in 1952. The general principle of the Act was to ensure that cremation would not be a means of concealing crime and that proper safe-guards would be established in the public interest.²¹⁸ Since that time, cremation has become the accepted norm in Britain where in 1975 no less than 59 percent of those who died chose to be cremated. By 1990-1991 this number had risen to nearly 70 percent.²¹⁹

Sources I consulted could not give me any indication how long cremation has been legal in Ontario, or if it ever was illegal here. The Hamilton Mausoleum & Crematory has been in operation since 1958. The crematorium in Toronto has been operational a little longer. Prior to that the only place in this area where cremations were done was Buffalo.²²⁰

8.3 Reasons for the Shift Toward Cremation

The rapid increase of cremation warrants a brief investigation of the reasons for this means of disposal. Constance Jones provides three reasons. She writes:

Cremation has a purity and simplicity that appeals to the American taste for cleanliness and economy. It also costs much less than full interment. Burial space is becoming harder to find, thus boosting costs even more and making Americans wonder how permanent any burial site really is.²²¹

²¹⁸ Regulations for crematories reduce the possibility of concealing crime. The two main requirements to which the Hamilton Mausoleum & Crematory currently is subject are: 1) a written application signed by a family member and the coroner; 2) a certificate that the death has been registered at city hall. Around 1994, the requirement that no cremation could take place within 48 hours after death, was lifted.

²¹⁹ *Funerals*, 158; Tappenden, "Ethical Questions", 36.

²²⁰ I was somewhat surprised to discover that none of the funeral directors I consulted, nor the manager of the Hamilton Mausoleum & Crematory, knew that at one time cremation was illegal in most of Europe. In the Netherlands, the Burial Act of 1869 made allowances only for inhumation. A society favouring cremation tried to get this Act amended. Two attempts (1919 and 1940) proved unsuccessful, but a third try in 1950 resulted in a change of the Act in 1955. Under this new Act grave burial still had preference. Not until 1968 were inhumation and cremation placed on a par. By 1974, 25 percent chose to be cremated. See G. van der Leeuw and H. de Vos, *Godsdienst en Crematie* (Den Haag: Vereniging voor Facultatieve Lijkverbranding, 1950), 1, who write in favour of cremation, and Jochem Douma, "Crematie" in *Christelijke Ethiek CAPITA SELECTA I* (Kampen: van den Berg, 1978), 69-70, who writes against the practice. See also Douma's *Rondom de Dood*, 139-68.

²²¹ Jones, *R.I.P.*, 102-3.

The common thread that runs through these three reasons is the aspect of cost. While Jones lists economy as the most prominent reasons, the Consumers Union of the United States lists yet another motive: tolerance. "There is more religious tolerance—even encouragement—of cremation than in the past."²²²

While economics play a role in every area of life, the point I wish to pursue is the matter of religious tolerance. As noted earlier, until 1963 the Roman Catholic Church was strongly opposed to cremation. On June 19, 1926, Rome had taken a stand against cremation in order to warn against the dangers of de-emphasising the resurrection of the body,²²³ a concern Reformed Christians share. What has changed? One might well ask whether this danger of de-emphasising the resurrection of the body is less real today than in 1926. Evidence points in the direction that the number of those who reject this key Christian belief is increasing. *TIME Magazine* published a survey that revealed a strange mix of thought. While 81 percent of those who were polled believed in a life in heaven with God, 66 percent said this would be an existence of the soul only; 22 percent said body and soul.²²⁴ These results indicate that the resurrection of the body is denied or, at best, not understood by most of the respondents.

While Rome, with its 1963 decision to permit cremation as long as it does not demonstrate a denial of faith in the resurrection of the body, removed cremation somewhat from the religious sphere, William E. Phipps, who advocates cremation, put it squarely within the realm of a broader religious tolerance most Christians now have on the subject of cremation. He mentions that this tolerance "is anchored in a reinterpretation of their basic sources of

²²² *Funerals*, 158.

²²³ M.B. Walsh, "Cremation (Moral Aspect)." *New Catholic Encyclopaedia*, IV (1967), 441. See note 202 above.

²²⁴ David Van Biema, "Does Heaven Exist?" *TIME Magazine*, March 31, 1997, 50-58.

authority." ²²⁵ In the first part of his book, Phipps clearly makes his argument for cremation a religious issue, and cites the bodily resurrection as one of the main objections by those opposing cremation. He is not very sympathetic to religious objections. For example, he mentions the discovery of a fresco in a synagogue which:

displays severed human heads, hands, and legs reconnecting. Fairy-like souls of the dead flutter down to return to their former fleshly habitations. People who take such fantasy seriously are bound to think of cremation as a sacrilege. ²²⁶

In support of his own position he derides a sermon by James Fraser which "surpasses all others in fundamentalist bigotry." Why? Because Fraser claims that God established the pattern for humans when he personally chose to bury rather than cremate the body of Moses. Says Phipps: "Fundamentalists continue to be the most formidable religious adversary of cremation in America." ²²⁷

Phipps' comments are not only insensitive to those who hold the Bible as God's divine revelation and who seek to do justice to biblical teaching, they are offensive to many believers who hold to the resurrection of the flesh. Not only is his tone offensive, his exegesis of biblical texts, if one can call it exegesis, is deplorable. One would expect deeper insights from a professor of religion ²²⁸ as examples will show. The one thing Phipps is right about is that he puts the discussion about cremation in the religious sphere.

That brings me back to his comment on tolerance which is based upon reinterpretation of the basic sources of authority. It would be tedious to tackle all his assumptions and exegetical creativity, so a few examples must suffice.

Concerning the strange disappearance of the prophet Elijah by "α

²²⁵ William E. Phipps, *Cremation Concerns* (Springfield: Charles C. Thomas, 1989), 53.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 26.

²²⁸ Phipps' credentials are listed as Professor of Religion and Philosophy at Davis and Elkins College, Elkins, West Virginia.

chariot of fire" (2 Kgs 2:11-12) he judges that this description "is more akin to a poetic description of cremation than of burial."²²⁹ This is an explanation of a fertile imagination, but not a grappling with the text. Unfortunately for Phipps, the text does not speak about burial at all—not to mention cremation—but about Elijah being taken up to heaven in a whirlwind.

Concerning the Lord Jesus Christ he writes:

Jesus gave little attention to the disposal of the dead. "Let the dead bury their dead," he is reported to have said [Lk 9:60]. In a negative reference to earth burial, he compared hypocrites to "whitewashed tombs which outwardly appear beautiful but within are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness [Mt 23:27]. A parable of Jesus listing six compassionate acts which distinguishes the righteous, disregards burying the dead [Mt 25:35-36]. It was added in the medieval era to complete 'Seven Works of Mercy' expected of Christians."²³⁰

Where would one begin in tackling the shallowness of quoting these Scripture passages out of context? Suffice it to say that it is symptomatic of Phipps to quote Scripture out of context or without providing any trace of exegesis, either that of his own, or that of others. Also, he dismisses the burial of Lazarus by saying that it may not be historical. That is a quick way of getting things off the table and preventing meaningful discussion.

Another example of great imagination to prove his point has to do with the apostle Paul. He opines that Paul venerated the living body as "a temple of the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor 6:19), but that Paul did not find the dead body of sacred value. Paul viewed his worn out body as a transient "earthly tent," soon to be demolished. Asks Phipps: "As a tentmaker, how might Paul have disposed of dilapidated tents? Is it not likely that he would salvage any reusable parts and then destroy by fire the remaining organic stuff?"²³¹ The implication is, of

²²⁹ Ibid., 53.

²³⁰ Ibid., 54.

²³¹ Ibid., 54-55.

course, that if Paul would burn parts of dilapidated tents, he would also approve, and probably practice, the burning of dilapidated bodies.

This questionable sort of eisegesis continues for a while longer. Concerning the resurrection chapter, 1 Corinthians 15, Phipps looks at some verses, conveniently skips others, and comes to the conclusion: "Paul's theology is fully compatible with body disposal by cremation. Contrarywise, those who adamantly advocate earth burial because it enhances bodily resurrection have a weak New Testament foundation on which to stand."²³²

Let me leave my interaction with Phipps at this. He certainly has not convinced me with any of his attempts to prove cremation as a sanctioned biblical practice. Equally weak is any attempt to argue against cremation on the basis that it may reflect a denial of faith in the resurrection. Such denial can equally be present with inhumation. We need to build our case by investigating the funerary practice of the Israelites, and that of Christians for the past 2000 years, within the framework of the whole Bible.

8.4 Summary

The purpose of the preceding section is to illustrate a decisive shift in attitude towards cremation after a period of nearly 2000 years in which Christians looked after their dead by inhumation. This funerary practice was based on the conviction that the biblical example set the standard for Christians to follow. Wherever Christianity replaced paganism, inhumation became the biblically sanctioned way of looking after their dead. One of the Old Testament beliefs was that the body is an important part of our being and that even in death the body should be cared for with respect and dignity.²³³ Christians of Reformed persuasion, together with not a few Christians of other

²³² Ibid., 55.

²³³ See note 141. This is not meant to imply that people who cremate their dead do so necessarily out of disrespect.

denominations, belong to the minority who resist cremation because biblical examples point almost exclusively to the practice of inhumation. It is a religious matter that finds sanction in Scripture. Proof for cremation on biblical grounds and as a regular community practice, as claimed by Constance Jones, is lacking.

8.5 Biblical Evidence

8.5.1 Against cremation

Contrary to Phipps' misguided effort in proving cremation from Scripture through imaginative interpretation, biblical evidence favouring the practice of burning the dead is lacking. What about texts that refer to funeral fires (Jer 34:5; 2 Chr 16:14, 21:19)? As Roland de Vaux pointed out years ago, and as modern Bible translations reflect, these texts do not refer to cremation. Mention is made of a fire being lit at the death of a king who died at peace with God. The dead were not burned, but incense and perfumes were burned near the body in honour of the deceased.²³⁴

Closer scrutiny of biblical data reveals that in Scripture fire is most of the time a symbol of destruction.²³⁵ That is the meaning of Joshua 7:15, 25-26. The burning of Achan is a deviation from the normal burial custom because it is God's judgment on Achan's sin. Burning is also a prescribed punishment for certain cases of sexual immorality (Lev 20:14, 21:9; cf. Gen 38:24).

Two biblical references, 1 Samuel 31 and Amos 6, are sometimes advanced as evidence for cremation. 1 Samuel 31:11-13 relates the following:

²³⁴ de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, I, 57.

²³⁵ Friedrich Lang, "πῦρ" in *TDNT*, 6:928-48, writes: "Cremation is practised only in case of transgressors," 935. In support of cremation, Van der Leeuw and De Vos introduce NT texts like 1 Cor 3:13, 15; 1 Pt 1:7; Rev 3:18 where fire is mentioned as a symbol of purification. See *Godsdienst and Crematie*, 11. However, the context must decide its use. Fire is used to test the genuineness of something such as gold (Rev 3:18) or one's faith (1 Pt 1:7) or the foundations of one's faith (1 Cor 3:13,15). The question is: can we from an overall biblical perspective consider the burning of the dead as a purification rite? I believe that is not sustainable.

When the people of Jabesh Gilead heard of what the Philistines had done to Saul, all their valiant men journeyed through the night to Beth Shan. They took down the bodies of Saul and his sons from the wall of Beth Shan and went to Jabesh, where they burned them. Then they took their bones and buried them under a tamarisk tree at Jabesh, and they fasted seven days.

Without going into detailed exegesis, I follow the most commonly held Reformed view that these biblical passages form exceptions due to the circumstances. In regards to 1 Samuel 31:10-13, a crisis situation called for drastic measures. Loraine Boettner writes:

The narrative shows that the procedure followed in regard to Saul was an abnormal and desperate measure. . . . It was probably resorted to on this occasion to prevent insult (of Saul and his sons at the hands of the Philistines).²³⁶

In connection with Amos 6:9-10 we note that it also reflects a serious situation of a nation at war. It depicts a horrible scene of siege so that people were in hiding. It reads:

If ten men are left in one house, they too will die. And if a relative who is to burn the bodies comes to carry them out of the house and asks anyone still hiding there, "Is anyone with you?" and he says, "No," then he will say, "Hush! We must not mention the name of the LORD."

Here, again, is a crisis situation where "even survivors will not survive"²³⁷ and which called for drastic measures normally not condoned. Therefore, these two Bible passages cannot be used as biblical support for cremation.

Amos 2:1-3 appears to be a more difficult passage. There we read:

This is what the LORD says: "For three sins of Moab, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath. Because he burned, as if to

²³⁶ Loraine Boettner, *Immortality* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co, 1975), 52. For similar view see P. Lok, *Graf of oven?* (Groningen: Vuurbaak, 1975), 39. Friedrich Lang, "πῦρ" in *TDNT*, 6:935n43 writes: "In the case of Saul and his sons in 1 S. 31:12 we do not have ordinary cremation but a special form of burial."

²³⁷ Peter C. Craigie, *Twelve Prophets* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), vol. 1, 171.

lime, the bones of Edom's king, I will send fire upon Moab that will consume the fortresses of Kerioth. Moab will go down in great tumult amid war cries and the blast of the trumpet. I will destroy her ruler and kill all her officials with him," says the LORD.

God pronounced Moab's doom for burning, as if to lime, the bones of the king of Edom.²³⁸ It is interesting that Francis I. Andersen and David Noel Freedman, in dealing with Amos 2:1-3, spend a lot of time explaining literary structure, but do not give much exegesis on the passage. For them it appears to be no more than God's displeasure for violating the sanctity of a tomb.²³⁹ In my opinion, they overlook the gravity of God's judgment on burning the bones to lime. I take the specific reference to the burning of the bones to lime to highlight the repugnant nature of the act (cf. Isa 33:12). If we compare Amos' denunciation of the Moabite act with Josiah's reform, we find a striking contrast. Josiah also desecrated graves and had human bones dug up and burned upon the altar to defile the altar which the kings had used in their worship of foreign gods (2 Kgs 23:16-20). God did not condemn Josiah for his actions.

Why would the one kind of desecration of tombs receive such a harsh judgment and not the other? Surely we must conclude from this that God's judgment against Moab was more than a flare up for desecrating a tomb. Josiah's act did not incur God's judgment because what he did was in keeping with God's verdict upon Israel's kings and priests who set up their own shrine in Bethel (1 Kgs 13:1-2). In other words, this desecration was God's vengeance.

²³⁸ Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah* (Word Biblical Commentary; Waco: Word Books, 1987), 314-5, probably says more than warranted when he comments: "This sixth oracle cites as the paradigmatic atrocity a particularly furious sort of vengeance: burning skeletal remains so as to prevent resurrection. . . . To burn someone's bones, i.e., desiccated bodily remains, was an attempt to prevent—at least symbolically—the opportunity for that person to participate in the resurrection, thus to wish for him or her eternal death." However, if this burning was an act of vengeance so as to prevent resurrection, it would affirm that a resurrection awareness existed in pre-exilic times c. 750 BC.

²³⁹ Francis I. Andersen and David Noel Freedman, *Amos* (The Anchor Bible, vol. 24; New York: Doubleday, 1964), 288.

Amos, however, pronounced God's judgment upon Moab for an ungodly human act of revenge on the dead perpetrated against the king of Edom. God revealed his anger because the bones of the dead were not respected. God's judgment upon Moab suggests that burning the dead is a violation of human dignity.

Clearly, then, the biblical evidence does not support cremation as a common practice in biblical times. With the exception of 1 Samuel 31:11-13 and Amos 6:9-10, the passages cited place the burning of the dead in the realm of judgment. Destruction of the body by way of burning was not practised except as a form of punishment commanded by God for serious offenses (Lev 20; Josh 7:15, 25), or in exceptional circumstances. That is one reason why many Christians have resisted the trend and have not felt free to choose cremation as an alternative to inhumation. The other reason is that the Bible supplies overwhelming evidence for inhumation as the normative practice in ancient Israel.

8.5.2 Favouring inhumation

In contrast to the lack of scriptural support for cremation, numerous texts from both the Old Testament and the New Testament can be cited in support of burial. Biblical passages that come to mind are Genesis 23:19-20; 25:7-10; 35:19; 50:3, 7-9 and 24-26; Judges 8:32; Luke 7:12-15; John 11:43-44, to mention just a few. Of special interest are Deuteronomy 34:5-6 and John 19:38-42.

Deuteronomy 34:5-6 relates the death of Moses and his being buried by God himself. This detail already indicates that it must be more than a passing interest that God's method was burial and not some other means of disposal. Added to that we find in John 19:38-42 (and parallel texts) details of Christ's burial. John 19:40 provides the specific information that they took care of his body "in accordance with Jewish burial customs."

Why did the Israelites have the burial custom of inhumation? I believe it

is because of their conception of humanity. Man was formed by God of dust (Gen 2:7) but did not become a *nefesh hayyah*, a living being, until God breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. When the breath of life is taken away and the person dies, he still remains a human being, albeit a *nefesh mē*, a dead one. The explanation given by Heinrich M. Ohmann and already quoted in the Old Testament section of this study is instructive:

When the *neshamah* departs from man and he dies, he is still recognizable by his relatives as father, mother, brother, sister, etc. Seeing his dead body in the casket, they mention his name. . . . To them he or she is still the *nephesh* (person) whom they have known intimately and that is how they speak of him. Although dead, in a way he still is with them and they will go and pay the last tribute of respect to his *nephesh* (body) as is befitting in a proper funeral.²⁴⁰

In other words, we are dealing with a custom that shows the same respect for the dead as for the living. From the biblical standpoint the body as created by God does not lose its importance at death. This is clear from the care given to the dead. The Israelites treated the body with respect and dignity. It was not a matter of disposing of a corpse. Great care was taken to lay the body to rest. We only have to think of the care given to Jesus for his burial which happened according to the burial custom of the Jews (Jn 19:40).²⁴¹ Also Lazarus' body was wound in grave clothes. From the details given about strips of linen, and the face cloth (John 11:44), we get an indication how carefully the dead were attended to. As one would not destroy a living person, so one should not destroy a dead person for he is and remains a created being. In death God claims what he created "from the dust of the earth" as someone who belongs to him and lets the body return to dust.²⁴²

²⁴⁰ Ohmann, "Life and the Hereafter in the Old Testament," 13.

²⁴¹ Cf. Mk 6:29, 16:1; Acts 8:2; Mt 27:59.

²⁴² P. Lok raises the interesting question whether the slow procedure of the body decaying in the grave is an integral part of the punishment which the Lord laid upon the sin of fallen humanity when God declared: "you are dust and to dust you will return" (Gen 3:19). Lok observes that the notion of "dust"

Under normal circumstances,²⁴³ burial is the God-honouring way of caring for the dead. For Christians the best example and proof is the burial of the Lord Jesus Christ. Associated with his burial is his resurrection. The connection between burial and resurrection is portrayed by Paul in the symbolism of sowing and reaping (1 Cor 15:36ff; cf. Jn 12:24-25 where Jesus speaks about his death in terms of sowing a seed). The body is sown perishable; it is raised imperishable. This symbolism can be properly understood only if it refers to inhumation, the sowing of the body in the earth to await the great awakening of those who have fallen asleep (cf. 1 Thes 4:13-18).

Based on the overwhelming biblical evidence in favour of inhumation, Christians have for nearly two millennia avoided cremation as an option. From the start they followed the Jewish custom of burial. This method of caring for the dead led to the virtual abolition of cremation in Europe. Now the tide is changing and Christians are being persuaded that cremation is an acceptable alternative to inhumation. However, in light of Scripture I am convinced that inhumation should be promoted and practised as the God-honouring way of

occurs repeatedly in Scripture (Job 7:21, 19:19, 17:13-16, 19:25, 34:14-15; Ps 7:5-6, 22:16, 30:10, 103:14; Eccl 3:20, 12:7; Dan 12:2). His conclusion is that the idea of returning to dust belongs to God's judgment and then sums up: "Dying and decay of the body is certainly not a natural thing: death does not belong to life. In Genesis 3, dying and decay of the body is in one line with the punishment, which an angry God pronounces upon the serpent, the man and the woman. What the development would have been without the fall into sin is difficult to describe in a concrete way. In any case, man would have obtained immortality. In no way would mankind have returned to the dust. Death has entered life as an intrusive enemy. An this last enemy must be unseated (1 Cor 15:26). That grim, hostile character of death we may not camouflage in any way." Lok, *Graf of oven?* 52-54 [my translation]. This thought is worthy of careful reflection.

In light of this observation we should perhaps also consider the practice of embalming. Embalming is required by Ontario law if the body will be prepared for public viewing. This is done for health reasons. However, the current practice of preparing the body to look like someone who is asleep as if no death has occurred is, I believe, an impact of our death denying culture. It borders on a denial of the grim, hostile character of death. This should be avoided, and I suggest that the make up should be kept to a minimum.

²⁴³ Crisis situations such as a war or a plague form exceptions to the rule. Even in such extraordinary circumstances mass burial is to be preferred over cremation. Ruth Mulvey Harmer relates how the bubonic plague from China was brought to Italy in January 1348 via merchant vessels. Six months later it had spread to England and by the end of the century it had claimed as victims 25 percent of the entire population of Europe. *The High Cost of Dying* (New York: Crowell Collier Press, 1963), 64-65. She further mentions Johannes Nohl who, in *The Black Death*, writes that customary funeral practices were abandoned to cope with the problem. Mass burial and cremation of bodies was resorted to in order to stop the spreading of the plague.

caring for the dead and for that reason alone, a shift to cremation is not a positive development.

Another argument often put forth in favour of cremation, but clearly secondary in the discussion, is the scarcity of cemetery space. The practice of clearing the graves after a period of time has been practised for centuries and solves the problem of cemetery space.²⁴⁴ The point is not that our bodies lie in a fixed spot until resurrection day; the significance of bodily interment is that Christians give testimony to their faith that the body is sown in the ground as symbolism of a seed that will be raised imperishable to a new life.²⁴⁵

I recognize that there are Christians who in good conscience have opted for cremation on the basis that Scripture does not explicitly forbid it. This excursion is not a judgment on their actions. The intent of this section is to cause us to reflect upon a fairly recent trend—which Phipps highlighted as a reinterpretation of the basic sources of authority²⁴⁶—and to present the case that burial is the biblical model Christians should be encouraged to follow because inhumation is a way of showing respect to the body God has created, and body interment is a statement of faith about the sowing of the body as a seed for resurrection day. In pastoral care to the elderly that is the message I convey to them in the belief that body interment reflects most closely the burial practice of the Old and New Testament believers for many millennia.

It is clear that my reservation about cremation does not stem from a fear that a cremated body cannot be raised. That is an irrelevant point and not an issue at all. If that were the case then many men and women who were burned

²⁴⁴ Aries, *The Hour of our Death*, 52-59, details how for centuries the practice has been in place to clear cemeteries when space was needed and the bones stored in charnel houses. In The Netherlands, where space is at a premium in the larger cities, cemeteries are cleared after about fifteen years.

²⁴⁵ In light of Jn 12:24-25 and 1 Cor 15:36 such symbolism is not present in cremated ashes. Ashes are a waste product and cannot be “sown” like a kernel that dies. The symbolism is that the body is sown perishable—it will decay—it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonour—a corpse—it is raised in glory (1 Cor 15:42-43).

²⁴⁶ Phipps, *Cremation Concerns*, 53.

to death for the faith, or anyone who is killed in a fiery crash, would have no hope. My reservations concerning cremation stems from the fact that what rightly is a religious issue, i.e., a matter in which one's religion plays a prominent role, is being reduced to a marketing item in which religion is minimized, and economics are placed central.²⁴⁷ I agree with Douma's evaluation that "Cremation is a symptom of our secularized world."²⁴⁸

8.6 Ethical Questions

Besides the historical and biblical perspective there are other areas of concern. Eric Tappenden asks whether cremation is an ethical option. He recognizes that this question must be answered in the context of belief and value systems. But ethics is broader than just a particular religious or cultural viewpoint. Then he lists a number of pointed questions in this regard, such as:

- Do our practices help the grieving process and grieving person or hinder them? Is what we're doing helping survivors resolve their grief, or does it make it more difficult?
- Is what we're doing reinforcing or changing our death-denying culture?
- Is what we're doing dignified?
- Are we considering what family or other survivors need and want?
- Is it ethical to "do nothing" with cremated remains?

Tappenden did not answer these questions fully. The fact that he phrased these issues in the form of a question indicates that the discussion on these matters is either just beginning or far from over.²⁴⁹ In any case, these are certainly issues that, together with the biblical and historical perspective, need to be carefully weighed by anyone who leans toward cremating the dead.

²⁴⁷ On purpose I have stayed away from taking cost factors into the discussion. In a way they are irrelevant. Cremation with all the "trimmings," such as a bronze urn in a columbarium, does not save much on cost. On the same token, a sober funeral does not need to be overly expensive. There is such a thing as a happy medium.

²⁴⁸ Douma, *Rondom de Dood*, 159.

²⁴⁹ Tappenden, "Ethical Questions", 39-40.

8.7 Conclusion

In this excursion I have briefly sketched the biblical model of caring for the dead. Scriptural evidence points to respect and dignity for the deceased. Contempt for the body is not a biblical concept, and therefore even in death the person received similar respect and dignity as when alive. Burning of the body was a means of punishment and therefore not practised as a normal way of disposing of the dead.

It is a fact that cremation is gaining ground as the funerary practice of choice and the momentum is too great to stem the tide. The fact that among Christians the practice is also on the rise I deem as an unfortunate development. Besides biblical factors, there are also ethical issues to consider. In my view, the increase in cremations among Christians is not only a matter of economics; it is a symptom of our secularized world.

When in my pastoral visits the question comes up what scriptural directives there are concerning burial practices, I will continue to encourage my parishioners to maintain inhumation as the clear biblical example under normal circumstances. Burial is more than the sanitary disposal of the body. It is a powerful statement of faith. It is the best witness Christians can give that they are sowing of the body for the glorious resurrection. Christians should be encouraged to maintain that clear witness as long as possible.

CHAPTER NINE

PASTORAL INVOLVEMENT IN TIMES OF BEREAVEMENT

In times of bereavement the family requires special attention and assistance. When a person is dying and death is imminent, pastoral care needs to steer the family to the moment of the final farewell. Understandably, this process of separation is usually hardest on those who stay behind. The dying person is busy setting his or her house in order and preparing to depart and be with Christ, while the others remain behind with their grief. So then, the main question becomes: "How can we best assist grieving family members after a death has taken place?" Each pastor will have his or her own approach, and it will be impossible to prescribe one standard procedure. The main objective is that the special needs of the grieving are addressed in an empathetic way. Let me conclude this section on excursions by briefly relating my personal approach in assisting the grieving in their time of bereavement which can be summed up as ministry of presence.

9.1 Ministry of Presence

When a member of the congregation is dying and the end is imminent, daily visits to encourage the person and the family from the word of God become the routine. If possible, I try to be with the family during the last moments of the dying person's life. If that can not happen, my aim is to meet with the family as soon as feasible to deal with their grief and to make preliminary arrangements for my part in the funeral ceremony. Since meeting with the whole family on the day the death occurred is highly unlikely, I always

arrange to meet with as many of the family members as are present in the funeral home during their private viewing. In this way the possibility presents itself to speak with the children and grandchildren of the deceased as well. Since death is the closing of a life cycle, the family members of the deceased are encouraged to let their children and grandchildren be part of the funeral so that they do not become the "forgotten mourners." Also, some of the most precious "teachable moments"²⁵⁰ are to be had around the open casket. It helps the younger ones deal with the finality of death, and authenticates the final farewell as a real and personal experience.

Every pastoral care giver should realize his or her own limitations and inadequacies in helping people deal with their grief. The grieving do not expect us to have all the answers. Therefore it is sometimes better not to say anything rather than to try and break the silence and perhaps say something that may come across as insensitive. Irrational thinking on the part of the bereaved in their time of grief can make the most logical and true comment seem trivial. We can learn a valuable lesson from the wise insight of a Lutheran pastor who calls pastoring to the bereaved "ministry as presence." This ministry is "about listening, waiting, respecting silences."²⁵¹ Often the most effective help, and the pastoral care the family usually remembers best, is simply to be there for the family in their time of need.

Being available for the bereaved holds true especially at difficult moments. The closing of the casket is usually such a moment. For that reason I make myself available to the family if they wish me to be present when the casket is closed after the last viewing the night before the burial. That is often a traumatic experience for the family because it signals the last farewell. If the

²⁵⁰ Richard J. Paul, "Funerals and Funeral Directors: Rituals and Resources for Grief Management." *Readings in Thanatology*, (John D. Morgan, ed.; Amityville: Baywood Publishing, 1997), 269-70. Hereafter: "Grief Management."

²⁵¹ Richard B. Gilbert, "Protestant Perspectives on Grief and Children" in *Bereaved Children and Teens*, 126-7.

family so desires, I will return to the funeral home to read from the Bible and pray with them, and to remind the family of God's promises regarding the life everlasting. They need this encouragement for the next day, the day of the funeral.

9.2 Function of Funerals

9.2.1 Family involvement

In most Reformed churches a funeral is not a ritual in the sense of a burial rite that the church practices on behalf of or for the dead. To my knowledge, Reformed churches do not have a set liturgical format or an adopted funeral liturgy. In fact, the Church Order of the churches I serve stipulates: "Funerals are not ecclesiastical but family affairs, and should be conducted accordingly."²⁵² There is a positive and practical side to this stipulation. Because there is no set burial rite, the pastoral approach allows for greater involvement of the bereaved family.

The family always receives the option to select a Bible passage and songs for the funeral, and most of them make use of the opportunity to be involved in this way. A selection of their choice speaks more to them because it has special significance. Often it is a part of Scripture that was dear to the deceased. In fact, it is not uncommon that a dying person has prepared his or her own "order of service" by selecting the Scripture reading, text for the funeral address, and songs to be sung. Not everyone takes such a pro-active and leading role, but all families are encouraged to be active participants rather than passive observers. The day of the funeral is very much *their* day. Every family receives the opportunity to state their preferences to make the ceremony more meaningful for grieving and meeting the emotional needs of

²⁵² Article 65, Church Order. *Book of Praise*, 671. Because of this stipulation I use the term funeral ceremony rather than funeral service or funeral ritual. This may seem to be an insignificant detail, but it is meant as a careful distinction because: 1) Rituals include both rites and ceremony; 2) Reformed ecclesiology does not know of private church services.

the bereaved.

The quotation from Prof. Ohmann in section 8.5.2 about respect for the body of the deceased loved one is also what sets the mood for the funeral. This respectful care for a spouse, parent, or child, makes family involvement so special. We are not "disposing" of some corpse; we are performing our last duty and privilege to a loved one by bringing the person to his or her last resting place on this earth. Not a lasting, but a last, resting place. Burial is the symbolic act of sowing the seed for the day of the glorious resurrection. A life lived under the umbrella of promise is a life of hope in the glorious future. As such, the whole outlook of the funeral ceremony is based on the perspective of a glorious future that awaits the believer.

9.2.2 Funeral ceremony

What is involved in a funeral? What is its primary function? Constance Jones summarises well when she writes: "Protestant funerals are celebrations of life. Music and hymns, prayer, Bible readings, a eulogy and a brief sermon characterize most funerals."²⁵³

The funeral is indeed a reflection of life under the umbrella of promise. Even though the person has passed from this life, his or her existence continues. We bury the person in the belief and confidence that while the body is deposited in the ground, the believing person has gone to be with Christ.²⁵⁴ The perishable body is sown as a seed to be raised imperishable (cf. Jn 12:24; 1 Cor 15:42-44). Family members, friends, and the church community as a whole are reminded of this great prospect in the funeral address prior to the interment. In that way the focus remains on God's promises and faithfulness, rather than on the deceased. This focus on God's promises gives consolation and encouragement to the bereaved family and it brings closure to a difficult

²⁵³ Jones, *R.I.P.*, 19.

²⁵⁴ Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 22, Q&A 57. *Three Forms of Unity*, 62.

moment in life.

One of the main functions of a funeral is that it brings closure to the responsibilities the family has towards the deceased. Once the funeral is over, the family can move on to deal with other areas of grief. For that reason I personally discourage memorial services held (several days) after interment as it delays closure. I fully concur with Richard J. Paul's comment:

In earlier years time was taken to deal with a death when the event occurred. . . . By contrast there has recently been a steady increase in grieving people choosing to immediately dispose of the body and plan a memorial service for some later date. On the surface this seems like a normal choice to accommodate the hectic and highly mobile life styles we lead. However, a death is not like a wedding that can be planned a year in advance. Death, even anticipated death, severs a physical relationship and so necessarily interrupts the lives of the survivors. If a death is the emotional equivalent of a physical amputation then the time to treat the wound is immediately. Any delay in appropriate treatment may result in emotional scar tissue.²⁵⁵

It is significant that the Bible speaks about periods of mourning.²⁵⁶ A thirty day period seems to have been common (Num 20:29; Dt 34:8), although in Egypt they took as long as seventy days (Gen 50:3). There also seems to have been what amounts to excessive mourning (1 Sam 5:10 - 6:1). The main point, however, is that setting aside time for grieving helps one get on with life. The grieving persons should be encouraged to give vent to their grief as it provides therapeutic relief.

The sooner grief recovery begins, the better it is. A whole year of firsts lies ahead that need to be confronted and overcome one by one. That holds true especially when life returns to normal for friends and family, while the bereaved spouse, parent, or child continues to cope and adjust to a void in the

²⁵⁵ Paul, "Grief Management," 268.

²⁵⁶ Gen 50:4; Dt. 21:13, 26:14; 2 Sam 11:27.

household. A profound feeling of loneliness and, at times, even a sense of abandonment sets in. That is why the months following the death and funeral demand ongoing and involved pastoral care. Participation in the funeral begins the healing process. But that is precisely what it is: a beginning. A sustained follow-up support is crucial in bearing and overcoming one's grief. That is something pastoral caregivers need to see as their God-given task. As James reminds us: "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress" (1:27).

The aim of funerals is to help people deal with grief, not as people without hope (1 Thess 4:13), but as people who seek their solace with God and with each other. It stands to reason that this approach also expects community involvement.

9.2.3 Community involvement

The family needs more than pastoral care; it also needs community caring. Howard Raether described a funeral as "An event to which no-one is invited, and everyone is welcome."²⁵⁷ That certainly holds true among the church community I serve. As soon as the family has made all the funeral arrangements and the visiting hours are known, a chain-link call is put into place notifying all the church members. The section elder of the deceased member is put in charge who notifies all the other elders in the church. Each elder, in turn, is responsible for informing every family in his section about the passing on of the particular member. At the same time the elder relates the visiting hours, and the time and date of the funeral. As a result many from our church community come out during visiting hours to express their sympathies to the bereaved. A turnout in the hundreds is not uncommon. At such occasions one truly experiences the truth of the enigmatic words of Qoheleth:

²⁵⁷ Quoted by Richard J. Paul in "Grief Management," 265.

It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, for death is the destiny of every man; the living should take this to heart. Sorrow is better than laughter, because a sad face is good for the heart. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of pleasure (Eccl 7:2-4).

Needless to say, such show of support is tremendously uplifting for the family. It goes a long way in "satisfying social, spiritual, psychological, and emotional needs of the bereaved."²⁵⁸ Many of the suggestions found in literature on death and dying for helping the bereaved in their time of grief are things Christians have done for generations. Only, they never gave these actions specific names or labels. For example, when Howard C. Raether calls funerals therapeutic because they prevent withdrawal from reality,²⁵⁹ he expresses exactly what is practised and experienced within Reformed communities. Also, his comment that for the bereaved there are no silent funerals, strikes a familiar chord. Funerals are definitely opportunities for family and friends to enhance or restore communication.²⁶⁰

On the day of the funeral itself, some church members also come to the funeral to show their support. For obvious reasons the attendance is less on a week day than on a Saturday. Nonetheless there is usually a fairly good participation. If the weather is agreeable, the majority will also go to the cemetery. During the funeral address the deceased is remembered, but not made the focal point. The message is for the living, to keep them focussed on the God of life, and on the hope that we have (1 Thess. 4:13-18; 1 Pt. 3:18). As Richard Paul reminds us: "The funeral is about the person who died, but it is for the living."²⁶¹

²⁵⁸ Ibid., 256.

²⁵⁹ Howard C. Raether, "Rituals, Beliefs, and Grief." *Death and Spirituality*, (Kenneth J. Doka and John D. Morgan, eds.; Amityville: Baywood Publishing, 1993), 209.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 209.

²⁶¹ Paul, "Grief Management," 262.

Also at the cemetery the focus is on the return of Christ and the bodily resurrection. When everyone is gathered around the grave a few verses from Scripture are read. This is usually followed by a hymn in which we express our hope in the promised resurrection. Finally, the Apostles' Creed is recited, often followed by the Lord's Prayer.

For most family members of the deceased, the trip to the cemetery is the hardest part. There the reality sets in: this is the end, the final farewell. Maybe that is the reason why most families do not wish the casket completely lowered. This is unfortunate. If the symbolism of inhumation is the sowing of the body for the new life, then this symbol is incomplete without lowering the casket and spreading earth upon it. I do not know when it became the practice to walk away from the grave with the casket suspended in mid air, but it would be wonderful if that were changed.

After the interment everyone is invited back to the church facilities for refreshments and socializing. This is a wonderful way of closing off a tense and often intense few days. Such socializing with family and friends works as a relief valve, and lets the bereaved family members know that they are not alone. Again the wisdom of the Preacher comes to mind:

A man may have a hundred children and live many years; yet no matter how long he lives, if he cannot enjoy his prosperity and does not receive a proper burial, I say that a stillborn child is better off than he. (Eccl 6:3).

9.4 Conclusion

While there is not one specific way to provide pastoral care to the bereaved, it is unquestionable that such care is needed. Pastoral involvement is imperative. Even though pastors may often feel inadequate in their task of consoling the grieving, what is most important is a ministry of presence in the hour of need. In many instances just being there is the biggest help the bereaved need at that time. Care should be taken that the younger family

members of the deceased do not become forgotten mourners.

The grieving family should be given the opportunity to express their preferences for the funeral address to make it more meaningful for them. They should be encouraged to be active participants rather than passive observers. Pastoral involvement in the funeral address is to focus on God's faithful care and keeping for those who live under the umbrella of promise. The funeral ceremony should "round off" the first stage of mourning by bringing closure to the family responsibility for the deceased so that grief recovery can take over. Also community involvement is imperative for the support of the bereaved.

The final act of the family, relatives and friends at the cemetery is the burial of someone special to them. I would plead for the lowering of the casket and spreading earth on it to highlight the symbolism of sowing the seed for the glorious resurrection.

PART III

NEEDS ASSESSMENT ANALYSIS

CHAPTER TEN

NEEDS ASSESSMENT ANALYSIS BY THE ELDERLY

10.1 Purpose of the Questionnaire

Pastoral care to the elderly has always been considered a significant part of ministry within the Reformed church communities. In Part I and Part II, which form the theoretical portion of this thesis, a biblical foundation has been laid which makes it clear that such care is scripturally mandated. In Reformed churches this care has been assigned specifically to the elders and deacons. In practice, the way this care is provided, and what is provided, is mostly left up to the individual's judgment. Because of this "unstructured" approach it was necessary to develop a basic questionnaire in which the views of the elderly would be polled about the pastoral care they are receiving, and compare these responses to the views of the elders and deacons as to how they perceive their task and how they carry out their pastoral duties. The main aim of these questionnaires is to determine how "in tune" the spiritual leaders are with the pastoral needs of the elderly, and to gauge how realistic the expectations of the elderly are towards ministers, elders, and deacons. Based on the outcome of these questionnaires we may be able to pinpoint strengths and weaknesses within the system, and make some recommendations

10.2 Procedure

As part of this study, two questionnaires were developed. The first was a Needs Assessment Questionnaire in which the elderly reflected what they felt were their pastoral needs and how those needs had been addressed. This

questionnaire contained fifty-four questions of which a special section (questions 40-51) applied to widows and widowers only.

Three hundred copies of each questionnaire were sent out across Canada to sixty churches within two Reformed church federations. In order to provide complete anonymity to the respondents, the questionnaires were mailed to the local pastors with the request to distribute them to people of their choice. My only stipulation was that the participants had to be seventy years old or older, and that, if possible, the questionnaires be handed to men and women in the three categories of married, widow/widower, and never married. Participation was entirely voluntary, and the respondent would return the questionnaire in a sealed envelop to the person who gave it to him/her. This person returned these sealed envelops in one package to me. Upon receipt of several packages the envelops would be mixed together, were then opened, and assigned a number. In this way there is no way of tracing any of the respondents.

10.3 Statistical Accuracy

Of the three hundred questionnaires sent out, 132 responses were received from people who fit the required criteria. One hundred responses came in from those in the 70-79 year range, thirty-two from the 80+ elderly. This is a respectable forty-four percent response rate.

Several points of clarification need to be made at the outset. Since I provided only one questionnaire per household, it means that in the case of married couples only one person could answer the questions. This was done unintentionally, and I did not realize this shortcoming until the results came in. In the vast majority of cases the questions were answered by the male party. This is no surprise as in the Reformed tradition the male generally takes the leading role. Obviously, this explains the reason why there appears to be a greater number of males than females in the 70-79 age range. I think that four

respondents probably tried to overcome this "handicap" by circling both sexes, implying that the answer provided held true for both of them. In that case I have simply assumed that the male answered the questionnaire.

On some of the questionnaires the respondents answered a question with both yes and no, thereby indicating perhaps that both instances applied to that person. For example, one person marked both options to the question whether she enjoyed good health. I have taken that reply to mean that she has good days and bad, and depending on the circumstances, she is either in good health or not. Also, not all questions were answered. This means that the numbers, when added up, do not always come to 132. Because not everyone answered each question, or skipped parts of a multi-layered question, the accuracy of the needs assessment will be minimal for exact statistical information. However, that was never the intent of the questionnaire. It was developed to serve as a guide to determine what the elderly considered their pastoral needs to be, and how these needs have been met in the past. A sizeable sample base of forty-four percent of respondents provides us with a fair reflection of the general thinking among these elderly about their pastoral needs.

10.4 Evaluation

Most of the information supplied by the elderly is very straightforward and can simply be read from the chart.²⁶² For this reason my evaluation and commentary will touch mainly on the highlights, and my interaction will focus primarily on some unexpected findings and on the additional information supplied by the respondents. Where percentages are listed, they are rounded off to the nearest whole number.

²⁶² A complete schematic overview of the questionnaires is found in Appendices A and B.

10.4.1 Aged?

One of the first questions the elderly were asked to answer was whether they considered themselves aged. Sixty-one (46%) replied they did, while seventy-one (54%) did not consider themselves to be aged. Of interest is that in the 70+ age range a greater percentage of males considered themselves aged compared to the females, but this switched around in the 80+ range. Nonetheless, a slight majority of elderly did not look at themselves as aged people. This may be due to the fact that most of the respondents indicated they were in good health. Eleven males in their seventies indicated ill health compared to three females in the same age group. Nine out of the sixteen who experienced ill health also indicated they felt aged. This seems to point us in the direction that most elderly connect the term "aged" to failing health.

10.4.2 Greatest adjustment

As one would expect, the loss of a spouse ranked at the top as the greatest adjustment in the lives of the elderly. Of the forty-nine widows and widowers, forty-three (88%) indicated this to be the case. The next biggest adjustment was retirement. Among the never married, all three ladies listed retirement as their biggest adjustment. From among the seventy-nine married couples, slightly more than half (56%) listed retirement as a major adjustment. All this is not so startling considering that the routine of a lifetime of work and daily involvement has come to an end. It is important to recognize that during the working years at least one-third of the day—or about half of one's waking hours—is invested in work. That is more time spent on one specific activity than on all other activities combined. When retirement approaches some major adjustments need to be faced. Something needs to fill the void that is created when work demands are no longer part of the daily routine. This implies that retirement needs careful preparation. Perhaps a pre-planned system of "phasing out" from work and a "phasing in" to new activities would be of help.

In some European countries people who reach the age of sixty are entitled to scale back to a four day work week if they so desire. This is further reduced to three days in preparation for total work stoppage at age sixty-five.

Among the other major adjustments mentioned were reduction of health and loss of income. From the additional comments received the health problems affected either their own person, e.g. arthritis or loss of vision, or that of the spouse who had suffered a stroke or has Alzheimer's disease. Several elderly also listed loss of mobility as an adjustment, something most probably related to reduction in health. One widower mentioned as one of the greatest shifts for him the fact that he was unable to think and remember as before.

Loss of income was mentioned by ten people. This signals that in pastoral care attention should be given to possible financial support from (immediate) family and the church community if government assistance does not fully meet their needs. Here the task of the deacons comes into play and, as is clear from responses given by widows and widowers, the deacons did indeed offer this assistance to them. For a few, relocating to another town and church community required some adjustment. This may or may not be connected to loss of income, e.g. downscaling to live on a pension income, but it was an adjustment worth noting as it affected their way of life.

One additional comment worth noting is the lament of several widows who felt excluded because they have not been invited out since their husbands died. As one of them put it: "It is a couples' world."

10.4.3 Greatest fears

Changes feared most were mental and physical decline. Here, too, an interesting phenomenon surfaced. Women tended to fear physical decline more so than mental decline, while the men indicated the opposite. Perhaps the reason for this difference lies in the fact that these elderly have grown up with the more traditional role of the woman as the homemaker and caregiver,

and the man as the leader and breadwinner. Physical decline among the women would result in loss of homemaking and caregiving capability, and therefore loss of their greatest identity; mental decline among the men would result in loss of their leadership role and, hence, loss of their identity.

Another change some anticipated or dreaded is the fear of being or becoming lonely. Out of the thirty-two respondents who voiced a fear of becoming lonely, fifteen were couples. The reason for this fear may be that they are scared that if the partner dies, loneliness will be part of life. It appears that their fears can be calmed somewhat, for in response to the question as to whether the elderly are lonely, seventy-eight out of 117 (67%) indicated they are seldom lonely; thirty-eight (32%) answered they are lonely at times, while only one widow in her eighties said she is always lonely.

In case one should suspect that these figures were submitted by elderly persons who live in a senior's residence and who enjoy the company of peers to ease loneliness, this is not the case. Even among the 74% of respondents who do not live in a senior's residence, the majority stated they are seldom lonely. This holds true also for widows and widowers.

These figures confirm the findings reported in a research paper stating that most older people are seldom lonely. Payne and McFadden comment:

Research shows that persons under fifty-five hold the view that most older people are lonely, while in actuality, most older people report that they are seldom lonely. . . . the majority of older people have regular contact with their families, and many live within ten to fifteen minutes from some family member. Living alone does not limit outside activity or the development of meaningful social networks.²⁶³

My questionnaire results support this observation. Ninety percent indicated that they had family nearby, and there is a social network that the

²⁶³ Barbara Pittard Payne and Susan H. McFadden, "From Loneliness to Solitude: Religious and Spiritual Journeys in Late Life" in *Aging and the Religious Dimension* (L. Eugene Thomas and Susan A. Eisenhandler, eds; Westport, Conn.: Auburn House, 1994), 16.

elderly use. A fair number are involved in church related activities such as Bible study groups and choir. Others volunteer in the wider community, travel, or keep busy with hobbies. Making visits to family and friends also ranks high on the list. No doubt, receiving visits also cuts down on lonely moments. About sixty percent mentioned that they receive visits from members in the congregation.

So then, the issue of loneliness seems to be a minor one. But Payne and McFadden also state:

Although the research indicates that older persons do not suffer from such loneliness as the general public might imagine, nevertheless the . . . trauma of widowhood produces a profound sense of loneliness in most older persons.²⁶⁴

If the authors mean that the trauma of becoming a widow or widower produces a profound sense of loneliness, my findings agree. The first year is hard and produces loneliness. Overall, however, my findings are somewhat different. Twelve widows and widowers age 70-79 and five widows in the 80+ years, 34% of all the widows and widowers, indicated that they are seldom lonely. Thirty-three (66%) of the total number said they are lonely at times. That is not an indication of "a profound sense of loneliness." Maybe we need to inquire how the elderly define loneliness. Do they differentiate between being lonely and feeling lonely? Perhaps those who experience a profound sense of loneliness are the ones who are no longer able to be involved, or who are no longer physically active. Or maybe they do not receive many visitors from church members or the pastoral care team. This last comment is important in connection with another observation by Payne and McFadden that:

The failure of the church to retain contact intensifies feelings of loneliness. This is true for homebound elders as well. . . .

Sometimes, clergy and laity fail to recognize that even those elders able to attend religious services can still feel

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 17.

lonely because so many of their cohort have died.²⁶⁵

Which raises the question: How many pastoral visits do the elderly need?

10.4.4 Pastoral visits

Questions 14 through 20 of the Needs Assessment Questionnaire dealt with pastoral visits by elders, deacons, and ministers. Some interesting results surfaced. Of the 117 replies received regarding elder visits, eighty-four mentioned they receive only one visit per year; twenty-four receive two visits; five receive four visits, and three receive six visits. One person mentioned eight elder visits per year.

Of the ninety-five responses regarding the realistic number of elder visits, twenty-seven feel that one visit per year is sufficient; fifty-one think two visits are the minimum requirement; twelve look forward to four visits per year; four believe six visits from their elder to be optimum. One person indicated that no regular visits are necessary, but that the elder should visit when there is illness or death in the family.

ACTUAL YEARLY VISITS made by the church elder			YEARLY VISITS EXPECTED from the church elder		
Number of respondent	%	Number of yearly visits	Number of respondents	%	Optimum number of visits
84	71.8	1	27	28.4	1
24	20.5	2	51	53.7	2
5	4.3	4	12	12.6	4
3	2.6	6	4	4.2	6
<u>1</u>	<u>.8</u>	8	<u>1</u>	<u>1.1</u>	if necessary
117	100		95	100	

Comparing these two sets of figures we can conclude that the expectation of the majority of elderly persons is for at least two visits per year from their elder, but that these expectations are currently not met. Between actual visits made and expected visits a significant gap of 33% needs to be bridged.

²⁶⁵ Ibid., 23

Concerning visits by the deacons, thirty-eight responses were received. Twenty-six respondents mentioned they receive one deacon visit per year; eleven checked off two visits, and one marked down six visits. As to the number of visits deemed realistic, fifty-nine people responded of which thirty-eight said one visit per year is sufficient; seventeen felt two visits would be nice; three checked off four visits as realistic, and one believed six deacon visits per year is best.

ACTUAL YEARLY VISITS made by the deacon			YEARLY VISITS EXPECTED from the deacon		
Number of respondent	%	Number of yearly visits	Number of respondents	%	Optimum number of visits
26	68.5	1	38	64.4	1
11	28.9	2	17	28.8	2
0	0	4	3	5.1	4
<u>1</u>	<u>2.6</u>	6	<u>1</u>	<u>1.7</u>	6
38	100		59	100	

From this chart we can conclude that the number of visits brought by the deacons and the number of visits expected of them is pretty well right on target.

This leaves the pastoral visits by the minister. Ninety-nine responses were received for both the actual visits received and for the realistic number of visits as perceived by the respondents.

ACTUAL YEARLY VISITS made by the minister			YEARLY VISITS EXPECTED from the minister		
Number of respondent	%	Number of yearly visits	Number of respondents	%	Optimum number of visits
27	27.3	1	14	14.1	1
33	33.3	2	45	45.5	2
22	22.2	4	19	19.2	4
16	16.2	6	20	20.2	6
<u>1</u>	<u>1</u>	8	<u>1</u>	<u>1</u>	8
99	100		99	100	

The numbers speak for themselves. Here, too, the preference is for at least two visits per year. The difference between actual visits and expectations is a twelve percent spread.

These statistics reveal that fifty-four percent of the elderly members expect to see their district elder as least twice a year. This appears to be a realistic expectation since in most instances an elder has a section of, on average, thirteen to fifteen families or addresses. Taken over the whole year, visiting fifteen families twice a year works out to two visits every three weeks. A schedule of one visit per week would enable an elder to visit the fifteen families three times in the year. This does not seem to be unreasonable, and the expectations by the elderly of two pastoral visits from their district elder seems realistic.

How realistic is the expectation of nearly forty-six percent of the elderly to receive two visits from their pastor each year? That depends entirely on the size of the congregation and the number of addresses he or she has. In a congregation of sixty addresses, two visits per year to each family translates into making four visits per week. That is manageable. When the number of families approaches the one hundred mark, it will be a real juggling act to visit every family twice. Anything above one hundred addresses makes two visits per year unrealistic. This means that if the pastor visits the elderly twice per year he or she would do so at the "expense" of other families. Since Reformed churches of more than one hundred families are not uncommon, a solution needs to be found in order to address the pastoral expectations of the elderly. These expectations highlight the need for closer cooperation and coordination of visits between elders and minister so that each takes a responsible share in making visits to the elderly.

Concerning other matters relating to pastoral visits, most elderly would rather have short visits more often than few long visits. Visits of half an hour to forty-five minutes seem to be optimum for all. Seventy-four percent distinguish between pastoral and social visits, and 68% consider visits from their elder or deacon to be pastoral visits. The fact that one-third does not consider a visit by the elder or deacon as a pastoral visit may be an indication that the elderly

elevate the minister to an unwarranted higher pastoral position. If so, this needs to be overcome by elders and deacons becoming more pro-active in their work (see 11.2.4).

Very few (12%) consider the age difference between themselves and a young(er) elder, deacon, or minister to be a barrier for meaningful communication. Two-thirds expect a pastoral visit to be concluded with Scripture reading and prayer; the other third did not have this expectation. Forty-three percent answered the question whether they deem it necessary that each pastoral visit ends with Scripture reading and prayer in the affirmative, 57% did not think that was necessary.

10.4.5 Greatest pastoral need

Responses to the question as to what the elderly consider to be their greatest pastoral need can be summed up under three main headings: assessment; communication; and preaching and the communion of saints.

10.4.5.1 Assessment

Under this heading we find a variety of issues that need assessment on how to best help the elderly person. Most of these are relational issues and gravitate to purely personal needs. For example, one couple mentioned that they were under stress because of some of their children. What exactly caused this stress they did not say, but from personal contact with elderly who have raised similar concerns, it usually has to do with children not wanting to serve the Lord any longer. This strains the relationship between parents and children who no longer share the same vision. While for the parents the relationship with the Lord under the umbrella of promise comes first, including the sanctity of keeping the Lord's day, the children have set other priorities for themselves. This causes strain, and such stress is not imaginary, nor is it of recent time. We only have to think here of Job and the concern he had for his children.

Another person pointed to the need to analyse the way one gets older. Here, again, no specifics were mentioned, and we are left to fill in the blanks. Two obvious possibilities stand out. The first would be how the elderly person himself or herself adapts and prepares for old age; the second possibility could be how the younger generation looks upon the aging population and their needs. Both of these are valid areas relating to getting older that need assessment on an ongoing basis.

One couple in the 70-79 age group was very vocal about the role the minister and elders should fill within the congregation. According to this couple, the pastoral caregivers should take their office of shepherding more seriously by taking care of the flock. They felt this was a problem that needed to be addressed. They lamented that the minister and elders do not understand the aging of the flock. No further specifics were given, but we get the drift. Ministers and elders should be more involved in looking after the congregation and learning about the needs of the elderly. Perhaps their comments were a cry for help from the spiritual leadership to focus more on where the need is greatest. Maybe that is why this couple was among the 26% who felt that ministers should visit the elderly at least six times per year.

One gentleman who himself served as elder for many years, mentioned that he longed to pass on his experience to the younger generation, especially the younger elders and ministers. He expressed the desire to instill a love for the confessional standards of the church and the importance of the Church Order to these office-bearers. However, he had difficulty communicating with his minister and elders. He demurred: "They listen, but do not answer or act upon it, and often go a different direction."

Two things come to mind here, the first being that this former elder considers it his duty, in keeping with the communal responsibility laid out in Deuteronomy, to share his experience and to instruct the younger elders and ministers. In the second place, the fact that, in his opinion, the younger elders

and ministers often go in a different direction may be an indication of a growing generation gap where elderly cling to old, and maybe ineffective methods, while younger leaders travel newer paths. As we will discover in section 11.2.8.3, there is a perception among some elders that the elderly are stubborn and headstrong, and one of the difficulties lies in making the elderly see that they are not always right. In any case, in these comments by the elderly we have an indication that change is not desirable.

A similar concern came from a widow who expressed the need to assess what is happening in church today and the direction the Reformed churches are going. It is obvious that this senior member looks beyond her own personal world. The broader church community plays a significant part in her life. In this she is not alone for another elderly person commented: "We need to discuss the change of views." These comments are solid indicators that church life and one's place within the church community rank high among the elderly. At the same time, these comments reveal a sense of unease in what the elderly perceive not merely as a change of direction, but what is for them a worrisome change from true and trusted paths. In these sentiments shine through a sense of collective responsibility to keep each other in the ways of the Lord (Dt 29:18; 4:9), and they enforce the point that the elderly wish to stay involved, tuned in, and heard. Their belonging to the church is an essential part of their lives, and one they wish to guard and preserve where necessary.

Several other comments can be lumped together as they deal with pleas for better understanding of the elderly. A widow mentioned that "being alone needs encouragement." By this she may mean that being a widow is not easy and she needs encouragement to face life alone. Another expressed the need for ministers and elders to try and understand that physical and spiritual needs continue to exist when people grow older, while at the same time they should have understanding for the limitations agedness brings. As an eighty year old widower remarked so pointedly: "My life is not over yet but do not

expect me to be sixty-five.”

Some of these comments tie in with the next set of pastoral needs which can be categorized as the need for communication.

10.4.5.2 Communication

Another area of pastoral need is meaningful communication. Many of the elderly responded that they have a need for frank and open talks where truth and openness are communicated. One person stated: “I need to talk about my place in the church.” The elderly want to talk about their personal faith and share their struggles with others. It is interesting that the need to have these talks were voiced especially by the widows who miss regular communication because they are now alone. Although one lady stated she was shy to speak about her personal faith, on the whole, however, the need to talk about the faith in search for spiritual guidance and encouragement ranks very high. They are asking for a listening ear and meaningful dialogue.

When it comes to matters of faith the elderly wish to address issues of substance. They wish to talk about the Bible and about church matters; they want to talk about the Saviour and their final rest. They seek assurance of God's plan in their lives in order to be strengthened in the faith. From these responses, which came from quite a few elderly, it is clear that religion lives among them and has a prominent place in their lives.

Several elderly mentioned specifically that they wanted personal contact with their pastor and elder. There is a definite expectation that ministers and elders take interest in the elderly's well-being and faith life. They felt it was important to know their minister well so that they would feel comfortable to discuss issues, talk about their worries and concerns, and receive direction and encouragement in return. A few also expressed the wish to discuss the sermon with their minister.

One married elderly woman mentioned that she had a need to talk with

her minister in private. No reason was given, but perhaps it is a flag that communication between spouses is not always what it should be. It is not unusual that the woman has a greater desire to speak about faith than her partner. Perhaps one reason for her need to talk in private might be that the male dominates the discussion all the time so that she cannot get her needs addressed.

10.4.5.3 Preaching and the communion of saints

Eleven respondents mentioned preaching as their greatest pastoral need. They are looking for spiritual food that helps them in daily life. Some of the areas emphasized were: good covenantal sermons; simple and food giving sermons which are not just theoretical, but that give spiritual comfort. They want faithful scriptural preaching that proclaims the promises of God's grace. They want to hear God's word of salvation for the strengthening of their faith.

The worship services play a primary role in fulfilling that need. However, many stressed that going to church twice on Sunday is important to them for more than hearing a sermon. The worship service is important also for sharing and participating in the communion of saints.

Within the communion of saints the elderly look for support, especially during times of coping with personal infirmities, ill-health of a spouse, and in times of bereavement. Nearly all who mentioned the need for communion of saints also mentioned they felt their burdens were shared through the prayers of the individual church members, and when their needs were remembered in prayer during the public worship service.

10.4.6 Talking about faith

We have already touched upon communication as one of the most important needs of some elderly. A subsequent question revealed that almost twice as many elderly are inclined to speak about their faith with the minister

than with the elder or deacon. The next person to talk with about faith is the spouse, followed by friends and family. Two-thirds consider talking about faith very important, and the highest response rate to this question came from widows.

It seems strange that a larger number mentioned that they were more likely to speak about faith with the minister than with their spouse. There may be several reasons for this. One may be difficulty communicating openly about faith. Perhaps we do not have to dig so deep for reasons. I simply interpret this to mean that if the minister visits they wish to address matters of faith.

10.4.7 Participation in the worship services

In response to the question whether the elderly were still able to regularly attend the worship services nearly all indicated they could. There seems to have been a misunderstanding of this multi-layered question. It asked that if they could not regularly attend the worship services, whether they missed it, and what they missed most. Since only one person replied that she could not regularly attend the worship services, the next portion of the question should have been left unanswered by the rest. Yet four respondents mentioned they miss coming together for worship, another four mentioned they miss the congregational singing, and nineteen said they miss the whole worship service. The only way I can "explain" these replies is to take them as indicators that if these respondents have to miss the worship services, they feel the absence of participating in all of the worship service, and in sharing in the communion of saints.

If my interpretation is correct, then these comments are strong indicators that participation in the worship service rates high on the wish-list of the elderly. It is an intrinsic part of their life. They participate because they belong, and they participate because attending the worship services is something they have always done. This is confirmed by the fact that basically everyone of

them attends the weekly worship services whether they can fully participate or not. Helpful on this point are the findings of Payne and McFadden who write:

Payne found that membership and participation in a congregation is the single most pervasive community institution to which older adults belong. . . Even when other organizational memberships are dropped, the membership in a church or synagogue is retained. Clearly, older adults are attached to their religious institutions, and this attachment represents a significant source of meaning in their lives.²⁶⁶

Since belonging and participating rate so high on the priority list of the elderly, it is important to note some of the things that prevent them from full participation in the worship services, and determine where and how this can be prevented. Basically, the things that hinder them most are their own limitations which are mainly health related.

Forty-two people responded to the question about some of the things that excluded them from full participation in the worship services. Twenty six (62%) mentioned hearing loss and twelve (29%) said the minister was speaking too fast for them. Three felt the services lasted too long for them as they loose train of thought and no longer have the ability to concentrate for long periods. Two persons mentioned that loss of eyesight was an impediment for participation in singing along if the words of the song are not known.

Another person mentioned that the music was too loud. While we may be ready to dismiss this as a petty complaint, from personal contact with members who have suffered a stroke, or those who have hearing aids—which amplifies everything and which they have difficulty adjusting—I have learned that for some of them the volume factor is a real frustration and obstacle. Maybe a combination of these hindrances explains why forty percent make use of taped sermons even though nearly all attend the worship services.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 22-23.

10.4.8 Involvement

Very few respondents (15%) feel they are forgotten by the church community. As to the question as to whether the elderly persons are involved in congregational life, 70% stated they were, and only 23% indicated they would like to be more involved. About 39% said they would become more involved if asked, while nearly 70% felt they had something to offer to their church community.

As to the manner of involvement, ninety-nine respondents indicated they pray for others, ninety-one visit fellow elderly. The numbers drop considerably when it comes to other activities. Only sixteen elderly mentioned they visited younger members, fifteen serve on committees, eleven take part in improving church property, and ten teach Bible classes. One elderly male is involved in helping a member who is mentally challenged. A widow busies herself with visiting a seniors' home. Several elderly keep busy with Bible study, and one lists keeping up with current issues as a way of being involved.

Sixty-eight percent listed life experience as a blessing of old age; the other 32% treasured their new found freedom to do things they like. Those who selected life experience as their first choice also indicated that they consider it their duty to teach the youth of the church about the faith, give advice, and be examples to them. Those who selected freedom to do things they like were most likely to be of help through volunteering their time and services, visiting the elderly and the sick, spending time on hobbies, and enjoying God's creation. In these two slightly different approaches on how blessings of old age are viewed and appreciated we see the diversity of gifts that are utilized, each in their own way, for the benefit of others. Perhaps for each one it is not so much a matter of doing what they like, but liking what they do and are best at doing. A retired minister looked forward to being involved in activities other than church.

A very small number of respondents (10%) head south for the winter,

and only one couple does so on doctor's recommendation. The majority go for one month. Those who stay for three months to half a year do not feel isolated from the church community during their absence, but have some feeling of "isolation" from family and friends.

10.4.9 Responses by widows and widowers

Questions 40 through 51 were addressed to widows and widowers. Forty-nine women and men participated in answering these questions, and the overall ratio between widows and widowers was five to one.

One question asked which period of bereavement was the most difficult for them. Both sexes replied that the first year was the hardest. This hardly comes as a surprise. Besides facing daily aloneness, a whole year of "firsts" had to be worked through in which birthdays, anniversaries, social outings and family gatherings had to be attended without a spouse.

More startling is the disparity between those who have been widowed for more than five years and still find it difficult. While twenty of the twenty-eight widows responded that after all those years they still find being alone difficult, none of the four widowers expressed that sentiment. It is difficult to assess this surprising discovery. If almost three quarters of the widows still find being alone difficult after five or more years, one would expect a similar ratio of three out of the four, or at least two out of four, to apply to the widowers. If anything, one would expect more widowers to be lonely because many men are lost without their wives since they were used to being looked after and now have to look after themselves.

One reason why widows may find the loss of the spouse still difficult after five years may be linked to the fact that nurturing and caregiving has been a major part of their lives. This stops when the husband dies and this vacuum perhaps translates into a form of loneliness. Also, women are generally more communicative than men who are more solitary by nature.

Perhaps the widows miss the communication more than the men. Another possibility is that the women have always been dependent on the men so that the loss of a spouse creates a greater and more lasting vacuum in their lives. Whatever the reason for the difference may be, the questionnaire results seem to suggest that males have a different coping mechanism that lets them block things out and get on with their lives.

One area in which there was no divergence was in the need for pastoral care during the time of bereavement. During that time all the widows and widowers looked forward to pastoral visits. Most of them replied that they benefited from the visits they received. Two widows indicated the visits were of no benefit, while another two mentioned that no pastoral visits were made. One expressed her dismay that no one of the pastoral team even inquired of her how she was doing. If so, the pastoral caregivers were highly insensitive to her needs.

Among some other comments received, a widower acknowledged the great support he received from family and friends. A widow moved closer to her children after the husband died, which helped her cope. One elderly person mentioned that since he is still able to go to church he did not expect a visit.

As to the pastoral visit by the minister, forty-one persons replied that the minister visited them in their time of bereavement, while three never received a visit. Thirty-seven mentioned that the minister was sensitive to their needs; three answered in the negative. Thirty-one replied the minister addressed their needs; one said he did not, and lamented: "the minister never even read and prayed with me."

Most, however, were positive about the way they were helped in their time of grief. The pastor seemed to be understanding of their need and provided comfort and encouragement from the Bible and with prayer. A widow was encouraged with the assurance that God will not forsake us. Another received help from the pastor with raising the children who had lost a father

figure. A widower mentioned that he was consoled by the fact that the minister reminded him that his wife is with the Lord. Some of these comments may seem mundane but they are the precious moments pastoral care brings, moments that stand out and are engraved in their memory. These are perfect examples that pastoral care is helping elderly person hold on in the faith in moments of doubt, and how life under the umbrella of promise is one of safety (see 5.2.2.5).

Most widows and widowers were also visited by their elders who were both sensitive to their needs and addressed these needs. Six widows said they were not visited, and five of them indicated that they expected their district elder to come. As one tersely commented: "mostly forgotten."

Those who did receive a pastoral visit from their elder at the time of bereavement spoke favourably of the elder's actions. They received spiritual support and were comforted with the word of God. The elder reinforced the message of the gospel and was sensitive about the loss.

Visits from the deacons were an even fifty-fifty split. Here the expectation appears to be somewhat different. Twelve people said they did not expect a visit from their deacon; four expressed they did. Those who were visited said the deacons addressed their needs and were sensitive to them. They carried out their ministry of mercy by inquiring if any financial support was needed, offered this support, and also spoke words of encouragement. One widower was happy with the deacon visits which gave him company.

For many widows and widowers, the loss of a spouse brought about changes in how faith is expressed and experienced. Seventy percent of those who lost a spouse began to read their Bibles more regularly and differently, while almost 79% began to pray more regularly and meaningfully, and 74% learned to appreciate church more. Nearly two-thirds of the respondents mentioned that since the death of their spouses it has become more important for them to talk about their faith with others. Sources that provided the greatest support in time of loss were listed in the following order: faith, family, Bible

reading, friends, minister, elder or deacon, and prayer.

None of the respondents felt that the pastoral care workers were afraid of talking about their late spouse for fear of hurting them. They all stated that talking about the spouse should not be avoided. Seventy-one percent would even encourage pastoral visitors to talk about their late spouse.

10.4.10 Fear of dying

The last three questions dealt with fear of dying. Sixteen people expressed such a fear,²⁶⁷ five widows and two widowers, and nine who were married. The overriding concern among the married couples seemed to be what would happen to the surviving spouse. In other words, it was not so much a fear for oneself—no one stated so—or being afraid to face God, but uncertainty how the surviving spouse would cope. In fact, five people cited Lord's Day 1 of the Heidelberg Catechism as an indicator there is no need to be afraid.²⁶⁸ This confidence is rooted in the New Testament conviction that beyond the grave there is the imperishable inheritance.

Nonetheless, death is still an "unknown" to be faced. That may be the reason why 61% of all the respondents expressed the need to talk about dying. Seventy-four percent of all the widows mentioned the need to talk about dying compared to 29% of the widowers. As to the question whether this issue is discussed with them, 56% said that their minister or elder never discussed dying with them.

²⁶⁷ One respondent remarked: "In my view the question should have read: 'If you are afraid of dying what, in your view, would be the reason for this fear?'" He gave the following options: a) physical pain; b) separation of your loved ones; c) loss of all your possessions; d) doubt about your salvation; e) lack of preparation. His comment is to the point that in simply answering Yes or No to the question on the questionnaire the respondent may have had any of the above thought going through his mind.

²⁶⁸ Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 1, "What is your only comfort in life and death?" The first part of the answer is: "That I am not my own, but belong with body and soul, both in life and death, to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ." *Three Forms of Unity*, 40.

10.5 Summary

Many comments have passed our review and some preliminary evaluations have been made as we went along. A fairly broad perspective has unfolded as to the pastoral care the elderly expect. In many ways the review was positive, and some surprises surfaced. To quickly recap the highlights, it became clear that the elderly do not like the term "aged" as they link it to failing health. The greatest adjustment in their lives is the death of a spouse, followed by adjustment retirement brings. The greatest fear among the women is physical decline, among the men it is mental deterioration. Loneliness is not their greatest burden. As to pastoral visits, the visits of the deacons are what is expected; those of the elders are 33% below expectation, and those of ministers somewhere in between. On a scale of 1-10 the deacons would score 10, the elders 4, and the ministers 7. Most respondents consider visits by their elder or deacon to be pastoral visits.

The greatest pastoral needs relate to personal issues that need to be assessed on an individual basis. The place of preaching and communion of saints are the other two great needs expressed. Participation in the worship services is of great importance to the elderly. The majority stays involved in church life in their own way.

Responses from widows and widowers indicate that they did expect pastoral visits from the minister and elder during the time of bereavement. The expectation for visits from the deacons was an even split. Several elderly expressed fear of dying, but among the married couples this was more as a concern how the remaining spouse would fare when she/he is alone. Almost two-thirds expressed the need to speak about death and dying but that the issue is seldom discussed.

Before we can evaluate the comments of the elderly further we need to investigate the responses to the second Needs Assessment Questionnaire. In it the views of the pastoral caregivers were polled as to how they see their task within the church community and how they perceive the needs of the elderly.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

NEEDS ASSESSMENT ANALYSIS BY ELDERS AND DEACONS

11.1 Preliminary comments

The purpose of the Needs Assessment Questionnaire by the Elders and Deacons was to determine how these office-bearers view their work among the elderly. Three hundred questionnaires were sent out following the same procedure as described in section 10.2, and mailed to the same churches.

A few additional comments are necessary. In the questionnaire to the elders and deacons the 25-35 age bracket was inadvertently omitted. Some of them picked up on this shortfall and they created a new category so that the new age group has become 30-44 years. This is a realistic reflection of the age structure in most churches since an elder or deacon under the age of thirty is a rarity. In total there were 137 participants in this questionnaire which is the equivalent of a forty-six percent response rate. Replies came in from 103 elders and thirty-one deacons. Only three ministers chose to participate whom I have included with the elders. The 30-44 age bracket formed the largest group by far, consisting of fifty elders and twenty-two deacons. Next was the 55-64 age bracket with thirty-one elders and five deacons, and the other two groups 45-54 and 65+ making up the other twenty-five elders and four deacons. Overall, this 46% response rate makes for a substantial sample base from which to make some assessments.

11.2 Evaluation

For the purpose of evaluating the responses the results were sorted by

elder or deacon. These two groups were sub-divided according to age brackets in the hope that something unique would surface among them. This did not really happen as many quite similar responses were received from across all age brackets. Replies to each question have been grouped together and condensed. Some comments that merit separate mention also receive due attention. Where appropriate, I will interact with comments received from the elderly as highlighted in the previous chapter. The headings in the sections that follow reflect the question on the questionnaire.

11.2.1 Where is the greater need in pastoral work?

The majority of elders and deacons envisaged the greater pastoral need to be among families (37%), next among youth (27%), followed by the elderly (22%) and singles (12%). These percentages, no doubt, depend somewhat on the number of elderly each deacon and elder may have in his district. From the replies received, the average works out to be four elderly persons per district. Therefore, the fact that pastoral care to the elderly rates third is hardly startling. Still, there is a surprising element in these figures. Among those who mentioned pastoral care among the elderly as the greater need, the highest response rate came from twelve deacons and nine elders in the 30-44 year range, and from eleven elders in the 55-64 age bracket. In the 65+ category, four elders listed the pastoral needs of the elderly at the same level as that for families and youth. Only two persons in the 45-54 age range listed pastoral care to the elderly as the greater need.

What do we make of the fact that the youngest age bracket lists the elderly as needing the most pastoral care? As we learned from Payne and McFadden's study, persons under fifty-five hold the view that most older people are lonely. This may also be the perception of these elders and deacons and therefore they concentrate on the elderly. Indeed, in answer to the question what the elders and deacons perceived to be the greatest need or burden of

the elderly, sixty-one percent of all respondents put loneliness at the top, and again, the highest numbers came from the 30-44 age bracket.

11.2.2 Distinguishing between "elderly", "aged", "aging"

Sixty-four percent stated they do not distinguish between the three terms for reasons such as: "all need the same care," and "all these names refer to those who need special attention." One mentioned: "it does not matter what name we use because all of them are in final phase of life." A deacon found that all three names contain a negative sound, but did not suggest another word that might ring more positive.

Thirty-six percent did make a distinction, with health usually being the determining factor. However, there was no unanimity here as to who the "healthy" ones were. For some, the term "elderly" connoted poor health and implied they needed extra help; for most, however, the term "aged" referred to the ones who needed help due to declining health. Often the word "aged" was associated with mental or physical disabilities including loss of mobility and loss of independence.

Several respondents viewed the distinction in terms of marital status. In their opinion, "elderly" refers to couples who can still communicate well with each other; "aged" refers to widows and widowers and therefore the lonely ones; "aging" refers to those who are sick. A few considered those over seventy-five to be aged, regardless of health. One person observed that up to age seventy-five the people are usually still very involved.

In general, then, the term "aged" has a less favourable flavour. The term "elderly" is more positive and leaves the impression that the person is still healthy and mobile, while the aged need care and lose their independence. This basically confirms my preliminary conclusion under 10.4.1 where it was shown that the elderly have a distaste for the word "aged" because they seem to associate it with poor health as well. If this exercise tells us anything of

worth, it is that we cannot assume that everyone is thinking along the same lines when we use specific names, or labels, to identify needs. In fact, here we have a clear indicator that certain words receive a positive meaning from the one while evoking an opposite reaction in others.

Similar opposite views were also prominent in answer to the question whether it is best to speak about pastoral care to the aging, or to the elderly, or to the aged. The oddity here is that while 64% did not distinguish between the terms "elderly", "aged" or "aging", 75% voiced a strong preference for the description "pastoral care to the elderly."

11.2.3 Which is the better term?

The seventy-five percent of the elders and deacons who preferred the expression "pastoral care to the elderly" gave as primary reasons that it sounded more respectful, gentler, and less offensive than "pastoral care to the aged." In keeping with the idiom of our time, one called it more "user friendly". Several mentioned that "aged" is an old fashioned and unpleasant word, and one stated bluntly: "aged sounds like a write off."

Some other reasons were that "pastoral care to the elderly" is more descriptive and more representative of those who are retired. One person mentioned that it was the more scriptural expression of the three but did not give evidence for his claim. For others, the word "elderly" was more indicative of a certain age group of people over sixty-five, or over seventy. Still others felt that we should accentuate the wisdom and experience of the elderly as the fruit of old age (Ps 92:14), rather than focus on their agedness.

Seventeen percent opted for the expression "pastoral care to the aging" as the better term because, they felt, pastoral care is for those who need special care. Since aging is accompanied by symptoms of decline, pastoral care to the aging therefore better identifies the needs of all who are in advancing years. In these comments the underlying notion surfaces that aging

is equivalent to having special needs. Such views perpetuate the idea that aging is something adverse and fosters a negative sentiment to growing older, in spite of the fact that some feel that the term "aging" shows more respect and honour, and consider the other expressions too blunt.

Eight percent preferred "pastoral care to the aged" as being a softer term and therefore better. For them, the word "elderly" implies feebleness, and describes someone in need of pastoral care and extra attention.

Here, again, a difference of opinion is based on the meaning one associates with a word. While all of these views carry within them some valid points, the overriding preference is to speak of "pastoral care to the elderly." This was not my expectation at the time of developing the questionnaires which I called Needs Assessment Questionnaire to the Aging, and in the questionnaire itself the word "aged" was often used. My own reason for adopting the term "elderly" throughout this thesis is explained in section 2.7.

11.2.4 Why not visit more than once per year?

Some replies here were interesting. One person said he does not visit more than once per year because he feels that the minister should visit the elderly, while another mentioned that the minister should be at least partially involved in visiting. One can fully agree that the minister should also visit the elderly in the congregation, but the comment that the minister should be the one to visit is out of tune with the expectations of the elderly. Elders and deacons do well when they take note of the expectation of the majority of elderly to have at least two visits per year unless they state they do not wish special visits. Does this mean that the majority of elders and deacons fail in their mission? Hardly. Only one-third of them visit their section once per year. The other two-thirds visit twice a year (31%), quarterly (27%), or even monthly (9%).

Several office-bearers responded that visiting the elderly is enjoyable

but that the greater need for pastoral care is among young families and among widows and widowers. Basically, if the elderly are still able to attend church every Sunday, the elder or deacon visits when the need arises, such as when there is sickness, death in the family, or other crisis. This approach seems to be in keeping with Paul's instruction to Timothy to look after those who are really widows, i.e., those who need it most (1 Tim 5:4; cf. section 6.5.2.2). However, if elders and deacons only visit when there is a need, then their work will always tend to be reactive rather than pro-active. The purpose of visiting is to build a relationship of trust so that people can and will confide in the pastoral caregiver (pro-active), rather than to show one's face when there is a need (reactive). Pro-active visiting takes more than one or two visits in a year.

One person listed inexperience for his not visiting more than once per year while another stated his young family needed time and attention as well. One's own family, of course, is an important responsibility. Careful time management in pastoral work should eliminate most of the problem. If, as I pointed out in section 10.4.4, a district of fifteen addresses can be visited three times in one year by making just one visit per week, it would appear that with proper planning the problem of not spending ample time with one's family can be minimized, if not solved. Regular visits would also overcome the matter of inexperience rather quickly.

11.2.5 Role of the elderly

As to the question as to what the office-bearers consider the role of the elderly to be within the church community, a wide range of worthwhile comments and suggestions were made. Highest on the list is the expectation that the elderly give leadership and direction by teaching and motivating youth. This is the opinion of no fewer than forty-seven respondents who regard this as an ongoing task for the elderly in keeping with Deuteronomy 29:18 and Deuteronomy 4:9 as discussed in the section on life's duties. Another thirty-six

stated that they expected elderly persons to be role models by being examples of a trusting faith which radiates a happiness and contentment with life as a whole. The elderly are expected to be owners of life experiences and who, with those life experiences, bear witness to God's goodness and faithfulness. The general consensus is that the elderly are looked upon as sources of wisdom and knowledge who share their experience with younger generations, inspire youth, and offer to be listening ears. A further task for the elderly is to encourage families in raising their children in the Lord's ways. The elderly are also expected to give spiritual support and direction to their grandchildren.

Several pleas were made for the elderly to keep up with current issues and to continue to be involved in the congregation, also as elders or deacons. Their role is to add spiritual balance and stability to the church. The majority of office-bearers recognize that with regards to wisdom and life experience the elderly person has the advantage over youth. With their life experience they are better equipped to see trends developing and sound a warning. Elderly persons can provide a historical perspective, share their insights, and be living resources who pass information to the next generation.

All these views recognize the fact that the elderly serve as a bridge between the past and the present. In essence, the expectation is for the elderly to play a similar role the elderly fulfilled in Old Testament times as sages and leaders in their communities. From these expectations by the office-bearers we get a true sense that says: the elderly belong. They have a task to fulfil for the good of the church community. This general opinion conforms to the biblical model that the older and the younger generations belong together. Even though they stand at opposite ends of the spectrum of life, they form one church community.

There was also the suggestion by several deacons and elders that the church should "challenge their compassion," i.e., call upon the elderly to use their talents in supporting older friends, share their needs, and offer

companionship. Elderly persons should practice communion of saints by visiting with their peers, but also with youth. The task of praying for church members and church leadership was also mentioned, and we can think here of how seriously Samuel took that responsibility when he spoke of sinning against the Lord if he would fail to pray for others (1 Sam 12:23; cf. 5.1.5).

11.2.6 Role toward the elderly

Concerning the task of the pastoral caregivers towards the elderly, two words were used repeatedly: comfort and encouragement. These words sum up the main area where the elders and deacons see the bulk of their work, and this ties in with the expectations they have from the elderly. The office-bearers not only expect the elderly to remain involved within the congregation, but they also see it as part of their task to motivate and encourage the elderly to remain involved and use their gifts in the congregation for the benefit of all, and not become isolated.

On the spiritual level, both elders and deacons seek to address the emotional and spiritual needs of the elderly by encouraging them from the Bible about God's compassion and faithfulness, by praying with them, and by thanking God for the daily blessings that are new every morning (Lam 3:22-23).

Quite a few deacons and elders mentioned that they consider it their primary task to give support and encouragement to the elderly as they weaken during the natural process of growing old, help them with fears of dying, and prepare them to meet the Lord. To do so, the personal faith relationship of the elderly persons with their Lord needs ongoing attention to help them live as God's children in faith, hope, and love, and to keep them focussed on God's promises. Throughout old age the bonds between them and the Lord need to be confirmed and the elderly need ongoing encouragement to build upon the assurances of God's word. In their work among the elderly, the office-bearers are prepared to give advice when necessary, ease concerns, assist with

everyday challenges so as to help them hold on to God's promises.

Especially the deacons confirmed my discussion on duties toward the family (6.5.2.2) that they see it as part of their task to provide pastoral care not only to the elderly but also for them. Deacons are prepared to be motivators by reminding the children of their need to be involved with their aging parents in light of the ongoing requirement of the fifth commandment to honour and respect one's father and mother. Also, in keeping with the directives given in 1 Timothy 5, the deacons see it as part of their task to remind the children that when parents are in need of help, they ought to help out their parents with their time, energy, and financial support, if needed. The deacons are also prepared to supply monetary help where necessary, and to just be there for the elderly especially if family is not.

To be effective in this work, most office-bearers do see the need to visit the elderly on a regular basis. They realize that the elderly persons need a listening ear, deserve to be treated with Christian dignity and respect for their years of experience, and need visits to alleviate loneliness. They try to stimulate members of the congregation to visit as well.

Of special interest is the comment made by several pastoral caregivers that visiting has a twofold effect. In visiting the elderly they not only give, but also receive by learning from them. This is an important assessment because it allows for greater communication opportunities. It may make one even look forward to the visits which serve the purpose of mutual upbuilding. When such dialogue is present the elderly persons unintentionally become sages to the younger generation.

11.2.7 Greatest pastoral need

As already mentioned (see 11.2.1), 61% of all the elders and deacons considered loneliness the greatest area of need among the elderly. Next in line was stimulation to get involved. Twenty-two percent of the elders and deacons

listed non-involvement by the elderly as a concern. In their opinion it is not uncommon for elderly persons to take a hands-off approach to life because they feel they have done enough and do not want to commit themselves to being involved on an ongoing basis. Now it is their time to relax. These elderly distance themselves from most activities except the worship services, and show little interest in sharing life's experiences for the benefit of others. Of course, there are elderly who love to be involved but can no longer do so because they are getting frail and weak.

Closely connected to non-involvement is loss of purpose in life, which was mentioned by 21% of the office-bearers. Some of the comments received were that the elderly feel left out, isolated and misunderstood. Others see as the greatest pastoral need that the elderly need help in dealing with dying. As one formulated it: "The elderly need to see life's vanity through the eyes of Qoheleth and confirm their faith."

11.2.8 Difficulties in visiting the elderly

The last three sections contain the main comments of the elders and deacons with their views on the role of the elderly, their responsibility towards the elderly, and what they perceive to be the greatest needs of the elderly. These comments were purposely recorded without commentary because many of them resurface in connection with the question as to what difficulties elders and deacons experience in visiting the elderly. *Difficulties in visiting the elderly* can be grouped under three headings: communication, age barrier, and miscellaneous.

11.2.8.1 Communication

In the area of communication, language was mentioned as the main barrier by twenty-two respondents in the 30-44 age bracket. Most older people revert to their mother tongue of Dutch or German, while the younger generation

is no longer conversant in these languages. This can be a real problem in churches that were established by immigrants. A "solution" to the problem is to assign to elderly persons someone who still understands their mother tongue. Since in most cases elderly persons retain the ability to comprehend English, the pastoral caregiver does not need to speak Dutch or German, but only needs to be able to understand it and can respond in English. In that way all parties are helped.

Another obstacle is that many elderly experience a loss of hearing which makes communication difficult. Obviously, this also makes it more difficult to keep the conversation going and the topic focussed. Also the loss of mental capabilities by some of the elderly makes meaningful contact difficult. However, here we must qualify the word meaningful. What may not be so momentous or profound for the pastoral caregiver may be very meaningful for the elderly person. As was shown in the chapter on pastoral care to the cognitively impaired, meaningful contact for them lies at the level of their spiritual maturity at that time. Therefore, a very meaningful visit can simply be to read some familiar Bible verses and pray with the person.

11.2.8.2 *Age barrier*

Visiting the elderly can be somewhat daunting if there is quite an age gap. This is the perception of a number of deacons and elders who are the same age or younger than the children of the elderly they visit. On a casual basis this age difference is no problem, but in a pastoral function it makes the visitors feel insecure. Two main areas were highlighted. The first age barrier deals with gaining the trust or openness of the elderly; the second has to do with the young elder or deacon feeling intimidated by the elderly. This is clearly evident from responses such as: "it is difficult to give advice to people who have gone through more than I have," and, "when something is wrong and you cannot say it."

Of course, these are areas in which younger office-bearers need to gain confidence. Scripture is definitely on their side since it states that if an older person needs to be rebuked, this should be done. The trick lies in how it is done. Paul's instruction to Timothy is helpful and significant on this point. It is of timeless quality when he writes: "Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father" (1 Tim 5:1), but also, "Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young" (1 Tim 4:12).

How real is this perceived age barrier? As we noted in section 10.4.4, only a small percentage of elderly feel there is an age gap that stands in the way of meaningful communication. In practice, then, age difference should not be an insurmountable problem, but one that young office-bearers should deal with on the basis of biblical directives found in Timothy. Regular visits to the elderly should go a long way in gaining their trust and openness. If elderly persons do not right away accept a much younger pastor this should not stand in the way of carrying out one's ministry with an attitude of love, humility, sensitivity, and respect.

11.2.8.3 Miscellaneous

The miscellaneous group contains by far the most wide-ranging evaluation of difficulties the office-bearers experience in their pastoral work, and one that requires the most interaction.

It came as quite a surprise that some of the harshest comments about the elderly were voiced by elders over the age of sixty-five. But a general sense of frustration emerges when words as stubbornness, headstrong, self-centred, bored, complaining, and cantankerous are being used. There is a perception that among the elderly there is an uncompromising spirit, an unwillingness to change or to listen. Some have petty complaints and others are always critical of younger people. A number of deacons and elders observed among elderly persons a deep-rooted bitterness from dwelling on past incidents. They just are

not able to let matters rest but keep on stewing on them and this makes the pastoral care needlessly difficult.

On a more gentle tone, many office-bearers also sensed that there are changes happening that move too rapidly for the elderly. As one said, "There must be understanding for the pace of life and the different life experiences." Therefore we do well at this point to compare notes and interact with some of the findings recorded in sections 10.4.5-8 which reflect the views of the elderly and which may help shed some light on, or even undo, some of the harsh criticism by the pastoral caregivers.

When elderly people are viewed as complainers it is important to screen genuine concerns from complaints. For example, if there are elderly who are constantly down on youth, or harp on the olden days as better times, it can very well be that they do not see things in the proper perspective and are indeed complaining. In that case they should be reminded of the insights of the Preacher: "Do not say, 'Why were the old days better than these?' For it is not wise to ask such questions" (Eccl 7:10). Also, in light of what was mentioned in the discussion on the generation gap, the elderly should be made aware that Scripture nowhere considers youth to be "bad" and elderly "good". Such complaining cannot be condoned. However, it may be that the elderly are trying to point out areas where they see things "going off the rails", so to speak. Their "complaints" may be voices of genuine concern that should be heeded because the elderly do worry about deviations from the tried and trusted paths and consider it their duty to sound the warning bells. This is in keeping with what is expected of them. One of the expectations the office-bearers have of the elderly is that they are wise and discerning people. As biblical wisdom is practical in nature, so the concerns of the elderly are usually practical in nature. Based on their long life experience they know that new things are not necessarily improvements. That is why they voice their concerns. Of course, if a deacon or elder does not share these concerns, it can be construed as

complaining, especially if the matter is raised more than once.

From the side of the elderly came the comment that we need to analyse the way one gets older. This can be construed as simply being a word of advice that the elderly should evaluate their own aging process, but it is much more likely meant as a plea to the younger generation for understanding of the elderly and their needs. One can interpret this comment as a complaint that younger people do not understand the elderly, but that does not take away the fact that it contains a valid truth. Just as we need to understand and objectively evaluate the needs and aspirations of our youth, so we need to understand and evaluate the needs and convictions of our elderly. Especially when one's own age range falls somewhere in between, being no longer a youth and not yet an elderly person, any objective evaluation will be a challenge.

Regarding to charge of petty complaints, I am reminded of the person who mentioned that the music in church was too loud. To some that may seem like a non-issue but for the person it is a real bother. Pastoral caregivers need to be sensitive to these things, show discernment, and not be too hasty in judgment.

The idea that the elderly are self-centred emerges easily enough because they often talk about their own situation. Indeed, there are elderly persons who live in a very small world and who have little interest in the larger community. These are the men and women who become prime candidates for feeling bored, lonely and isolated. Perhaps this is what some deacons and elders faced who indicated they were bothered by the shallow interests some elderly show towards church life. These elderly have little perception of their role in the church community and are hardly involved.

But what constitutes involvement? Do the elderly and pastoral caregivers give similar content to the word? According to the survey done by the elderly, seventy percent believed they are involved and said they have something to offer to their church community. Nearly 40% indicated they would

become more involved if asked. So, first, then, four in ten elderly need a nudge to become more active. And it is positive to note that elders and deacons see it as their task and follow through on giving such encouragement. However, most elderly persons indicated that their involvement is limited in scope. Not everyone is fit to serve on committees, teach Bible classes, or maintain church property. For the vast majority, involvement centres mainly around praying for others and visiting fellow elderly. Therefore, more creative ways need to be found to get them more deeply involved as advisers and to tap into their creativity. For example, some churches have set up a program in which elderly persons are asked to be mentors for college and university students living on campus. Their task is not only to keep a particular student in his/her prayers, but also to encourage the student through regular contact. In that way they can be teachers of youth. The important thing is that ways be developed in which elderly persons can use their gifts in the best way so that they will like what they are doing and are best at doing.

By far the most troublesome difficulty encountered by elders and deacons is when the elderly do not open up about their faith. Not a few elders voiced disappointment that the elderly sometimes lack evidence of faith or have a reluctance to talk about their faith. Unfortunately, the short, cryptic replies by the office-bearers did not always paint a complete picture. Nor do their comments appear to be representative of the views by the elderly. Two-thirds of the elderly, and among them especially the widows, stated that they have a need for frank and open discussions about faith. In these discussions they want to talk about their place in the church and wish to address matters of substance for them. They seek assurance of God's plan in their lives and they seek encouragement in growing older.

At the same time, many of the elderly responded that they prefer to discuss matters of faith with their minister (see 10.4.6). Maybe they wait for the minister to come and hold back on discussing pertinent matters of faith with

their district elder or deacon. One reason for this may have to do with the fact that, in general, the older generation is fairly guarded about what they say and to whom. They do not so easily talk about family problems, or discuss the difficulties they experience with their children. Nor do they readily admit that they are perhaps struggling with past sins. Sins of youth can weigh heavily on the conscience and these are not freely divulged to others. But in order for healing to take place the Bible tells us to confess our sins to one another (Jas 5:16) and the elderly may feel most comfortable doing so with their minister.

It is entirely possible that the deacons and elders who lament that elderly persons do not want to speak about their faith are faced with this sentiment that the elderly prefer to speak with their minister. If so, this needs to be addressed because the office-bearers, too, are pastoral caregivers who minister to the elderly. Here we have further evidence of the need for more than one visit per year in order to win the confidence of the elderly before they share their faith and struggles with the office-bearers.

While some elderly are reluctant to open up about sensitive issues, others have a hard time believing they are saved. This observation by a few office-bearers confirms what I have highlighted in sections 5.2.2.5 and 6.4 concerning the doubts some have about worthiness of being saved. This happens when Christians look at themselves and their sins rather than look on Christ the Saviour. At times they have difficulty putting their trust in God's promises. Pastoral caregivers need to remind elderly persons of God's promise recorded in Isaiah 46:4, "Even to your old age and gray hairs I am he, I am he who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and will carry you." Elderly persons who doubt their salvation need to be assured that life under the umbrella of promise is sustained by God's grace. And for those who cannot seem to let matters rest but dwell on past incidents, the office-bearers can remind them of Paul's urging in Philippians 3:13-16 about forgetting what is behind and focussing on the goal to win the prize for

which God calls his people heavenward in Christ Jesus (cf. Isa 43:18-19).

Regarding the charge that some elderly are stubborn and headstrong, one elder mentioned the difficulty of making the elderly see that they are not always right. No doubt such elderly persons exist and they make things difficult for themselves and others. But a similar sentiment of obduracy was also levelled towards pastoral caregivers by the elderly person who tried to pass on his experiences but felt that his insights and suggestion were ignored. When suggestions or concerns are not taken seriously it sends signals that the elderly do not belong. And it is precisely the longing for belonging that is strong among the elderly. They want to belong to a church community where they feel fully a part of the congregation. In an interesting article on old people in the church, Martina Blasberg-Kunke writes that we should recognize that the elderly with their unique needs have a special expectation of the churches. That expectation is to be wanted and accepted.²⁶⁹ As pointed out by Payne and McFadden, membership and participation in a congregation is the single most pervasive community institution to which the elderly belong. They are attached to their religious roots. Koenig also highlights this sense of belonging and affiliation when he writes:

One of the reasons why older adults are more likely to be church members is that this generation is known for its pro-institutional stance, whereas more recent generations born since World War II have tended to be anti-institutional.²⁷⁰

This desire to belong and the pro-institutional stance of the elderly may play a role in the perception that the elderly are unwilling or unable to accept change. Elderly people crave stability and consistency rather than change. They have outgrown the desire of renewed challenges and rather stay in the tried and trusted paths they know well. This is an aspect of pastoral care that

²⁶⁹ Martina Blasberg-Kuhnke, "Old People in the Church: The Subject Option in Old Age." *Concilium* 1991 (3). (Lisa Sowle Cahill and Dietmar Mieth, eds.; London: SCM Press, 1991), 73-74.

²⁷⁰ Koenig, *Is Religion Good for your Health?*, 38.

needs to be kept in mind. Pastoral care to elderly persons is care to individuals who belong to the community.

Let me sum up this section by stating that it is quite evident from the comments supplied by the elders and deacons that they have identified real day to day issues they are facing in ministering to the elderly. My interaction with some of these comments was not meant to minimize the concerns that were raised. If anything, my aim was to heighten our awareness of the issues raised by both the pastoral caregiver and the elderly, and by comparing both sides to get a better perspective on the issues at hand before proposing possible solutions.

11.2.9 Difficulty keeping conversation going

Responses to this question came from the elders only and sixty percent of them indicated that they have some difficulty communicating or keeping the conversation going. A main reason for the difficulty cited by three younger elders was the language barrier. One mentioned his personality as being in conflict with the elderly. For several others the constant repetition was an irritant and one even had trouble controlling his temper. Elders in the other age brackets mentioned communication on spiritual issues as difficult because some elderly do not respond much or they live in the past.

As to the comment by those who have difficulty when the elderly start reflecting on the past and becoming repetitious, it is necessary to point out that all pastoral caregivers, especially the younger ones, need to realize that by reminiscing the elderly are validating their life's journey. They are not just people who are old, but people who have grown old through times of rapid change and often through personal struggles. Many who are now in their seventies have experienced the terror of war in which they lost close family and friends. Many have experienced economic hardship, and for most there is also the experience of rapid technological change that has transformed their world

from village life into the world as a global village. Therefore, when the elderly are reminiscing it is more than a living in the past; it is validating the past in and for the present. In talking with elderly persons of Reformed persuasion one often discovers that the underlying reason for reflecting on the past is not so much recalling how good or bad the past used to be, but how good the Lord has been. Hindsight is 20/20 vision; validating life is like hindsight. Reflecting on life with the Lord is reflecting on covenant faithfulness.

11.2.10 Why not speak about the late spouse?

Sixty percent of the pastoral caregivers indicated that they usually speak with the widows or widowers about their late spouse; thirty-seven percent seldom do. The reason most often given is: "I do not bring it up unless they lead me to it." Some will not start such a discussion "for fear it will turn into a conversation on regret," or because they have not known the spouse. Yet another is uncomfortable dealing with fresh grief, while still another uses as his bench mark whether the death was recent or not so recent. However, none of the elders or deacons would avoid the topic if broached by the elderly widow or widower.

Fifty-six percent of the elderly mentioned that the minister or elder never discussed dying with them, and the reason for this may well be along the same lines, namely, that the elder and minister do not bring it up unless they are led to it. But, as I indicated in the section on life's origin and purpose (4.1), this is a matter that should not be ignored, especially since 61% of the elderly expressed a need to talk about dying. While, generally speaking, there may be a calm acceptance of death, the elderly want to talk about the promised new life where God's people have access again to the tree of life (Rev 2:7, 22:14).

11.2.11 Summary

Evaluation of Needs Assessments by the Elderly and the office-bearers

shows that there is much in common. In many ways the elderly are satisfied with the pastoral care they receive, and the pastoral care givers are diligent in their task. The greatest area of discrepancy is the perception of the needs. To make pastoral care to the elderly more effective, each elder or deacon will have to weigh whether he sufficiently understands, appreciates, and interacts with the needs and concerns of the elderly. How the different perception of needs will be harmonized is mostly a matter of individual maturing by the visitors and growing in understanding of the needs of the elderly. This growing and maturing needs to take place on the biblical basis that old people belong. Their place within the church community is very important to them. It is one of the last vestiges in which they feel at home and where they feel secure and they seek to preserve it the best they can.

It seems to me that we must have clarity of purpose as to where and how the elderly fit in. Living in the covenant community is more than experiencing a personal relationship with God; it also involves the caring for and sharing of each other. The clearest vision of where and how the elderly fit in is found in the biblical example of the church as a community where every one has a place and a role. We do well to take Georgina Bray's comment to heart: "Elderly people are not 'yesterday's church', just as young people are not 'tomorrow's church'. They are integral to the community of faith," and, "As we age we are not incorporated by the charity of younger members, but by our own standing in Christ are inextricably part of the whole."²⁷¹ In pastoral care to the elderly there needs to be a perspective on a community in which the elderly have a place and where they fully belong.

To round off the evaluation of the questionnaire results, some strengths and weaknesses need to be mentioned. Under strengths we can list the fact that the pastoral caregivers are essentially "in tune" with the needs of the

²⁷¹ Bray, *Ageing*, 14, 16.

elderly. Their expectations of the elderly are biblically based. The majority sees the main task of the elderly as giving leadership and direction by teaching and motivating youth. They view the elderly as a bridge between the past and the present, and as people who have a task to fulfill for the good of the church community. In their role toward the elderly the elders and deacons consider it part of their task to stimulate the elderly to remain involved. Respect for the elderly also plays a major part in their ministry to them.

From the side of the elderly we can note that most of them feel part of the congregation where they are members, and church life is very important to them. Most elderly stay involved at their own level, and take seriously the expectation to be guardians of tradition as the living link between the past and the present. In spite of some criticism, the majority of elderly are satisfied with the pastoral care they receive, and nearly all widows and widowers indicated that the pastoral caregivers visited them at the time when they lost their spouse and were sensitive to their needs at the time of bereavement.

Under weaknesses I would list the following areas that need serious consideration for improvement. First of all, the expectations of the elderly for at least two visits per year from their elder needs attention as this expectation appears to be a realistic and manageable one. Second, pro-active visiting is a must if elders ever hope to win the confidence of the people in their pastoral care. If visits are made based on need only, there will never grow a bond where the elderly person will confide in the pastoral caregiver. Third, since 61% of the elderly expressed a need to talk about death and dying, ministers, elders, and deacons should also be pro-active in addressing that need. Fourth, in their ministry to the elderly, the pastoral workers should be sensitive to the fact that things which may not bother younger members can be a real obstacle to the elderly. Therefore the need to screen complaints from genuine concerns is imperative.

As for recommendations, my main recommendation is that all pastoral

workers take the needs of the elderly seriously. During the visits they should allow the elderly to validate their lives. After all, the visit is first and foremost for the benefit of the elderly person. By lending a listening ear, we go a long way in showing them that they belong. Since many elderly seek meaningful communication in the visits they receive from their minister, elder, or deacon, this needs to be maximized for the mutual benefit of the elderly person and the visitor. Then the visits will not only become more meaningful for both, but also interesting and pleasant.

After these evaluative comments on the questionnaires we can now turn to the overall evaluation of the goals set out at the beginning of this thesis.

CHAPTER TWELVE

EVALUATION OF GOALS

12.1 Goals

After analysing the biblical perspective on aging and the elderly, the all important question becomes: "Did this thesis attain the goals set out at the beginning? At the outset four defining questions were asked that reflect the objective of this study. These questions were: How are the spiritual needs of the elderly to be addressed? What does the Bible say about the elderly and their needs? How can a biblical concept of aging help us to be pro-active in dealing with the aging process, both that of others and our own? What kind of Reformed concept of pastoral care can we develop with respect to the elderly? In this chapter these four questions will be revisited by touching upon the most salient points that were raised in this treatise. We begin with what the Bible relates about the elderly and their needs.

12.2 Biblical Concept of the Elderly and Their Needs

In tracing what the Bible has to say about the elderly we discovered that Scripture does not have a systematic theology of aging, but it does distinguish between age groups as stages in life which form parts of the whole. Aging is part of a life cycle that begins at birth and ends at death. Old age forms the closing phase of life's journey. But it is not a meaningless journey. Believers may travel life's course under the blessing and protection of their Creator. As life's origin is from God, so life's purpose is to serve God within the covenant relationship Yahweh established. Whether one becomes old or not, in life's

journey the emphasis is on the quality of life. Life is God's gift to us which we may live under the umbrella of promise.

This umbrella of promise also shelters the elderly in the covenant community. They belong. Their place is not at the fringes but it is elevated to a status in which they deserve special recognition and respect. This respect is stipulated in the command to honour father and mother which, no doubt, includes respect for elderly parents. Respect for the elderly is therefore not primarily on humanitarian grounds; it is rooted in the divine ordering of society (Lev 19:32). Lack of respect is a sign of breakdown of the social structure. A society which fails to honour the elderly is on the brink of destruction (Isa 3:5).

From a biblical point of view, growing old is something positive. Old age is considered a personal blessing and a communal blessing. Old age is not seen as an end in itself, but growing old makes it possible for the elderly to gain wisdom from which the community can benefit. Within the covenant community everyone has a task to fulfil for the good of all. For the elderly this task is to be wise and spiritual leaders to the community. Wisdom is practical in nature. It is a combination of knowledge, insight and discernment in relation to one's life with God, and is sometimes conveyed in old sayings (1 Sam 24:13). Therefore the elderly have something to pass on for the benefit of the church community. Every new generation should learn about its roots and know its history from the elderly who are to be the guardians of tradition and teachers of the youth.

As all of life has a physical and spiritual dimension, so the needs of the elderly can be broken down into physical and spiritual needs. Even though physical and spiritual needs are distinguishable, they are often inseparable. Under the physical needs would fall anything related to senescence, while spiritual needs would focus primarily on such issues that affect the faith, such as insecurity, doubts, loneliness, and the need to keep on trusting in God's promises. Insecurity can lead to isolation and loneliness. Doubts arise from

fear of being cast away and forsaken by God. Also sins of youth can haunt the elderly person. As pastoral antidote we may remind the insecure or doubting person of God's love, compassion, mercy and promises to them. The aim of pastoral care is to help the elderly hold on to God's promises.

Certain physical conditions can also affect one's spiritual well-being. For example, blindness can also lead to isolation and loneliness, and this fact points to how someone's physical condition can cry out for spiritual care. Careful reflection on the needs of the elderly tells us that pastoral care has to take on a holistic approach in order to meet the needs of the elderly. But their greatest need, and the ultimate concern in pastoral care, is to keep the focus of faith on God through life's trials and joys.

Among the trials we can list the frailty of the body. Especially when people grow older they experience many losses such as loss of hearing, loss of eyesight, and loss of independence. Adapting to, and living with, these physical limitations calls for encouragement. The elderly may be assured that their dependence on others in the later stages of life is not something negative. Christianity is about being dependent on God. Growing old need not negatively affect the relationship with God. The essence of the relationship remains the same: God keeps on looking after his people. Life within the covenant community is one of safety. Yahweh makes the sovereign claim that all things are under his control and all life is in his hand. This claim provides assurance to the elderly that with God they are safe. Growing old, and the frailty of life that often accompanies it, is not an accident. It is part of life that is in the hands of Yahweh. Everything depends on God's timing, and therefore we need to entrust ourselves to God's care and direction.

Health and sickness come from God. Therefore, when ill health strikes or the frailty of old age creeps up, it is not a sign that things have run out of control or that God has abandoned the sick person. Rather, one can look upon illness and frailty as providing opportunities for reflection and to examine

one's relationship with God. Sometimes illness opens up new dimensions in which one learns to discern anew that God's faithfulness and compassion are new every morning. Therefore the losses that old age brings do not point to a meaningless old age. In fact, these losses often serve us in making our faith become more focussed on God. I believe the observation of Koenig, Lamar, and Lamar is to the point when they stress:

Our meaning and purpose in life does not come from our circumstances. The focus of our faith—our ultimate concern—has nothing to do with our living arrangements, health status, material possessions, job, or social position. We live in order to serve God, and we can do this no matter what situation we are in—because God will make a way.²⁷²

I agree. In pastoral care the primary focus is on the faith relationship of the elderly person with his/her God so that the trials in life will not undermine the joy of one's faith (cf. Phil 4:4-7). Life's most urgent need is to encourage everyone to walk with the Lord. The need for such a stimulus does not diminish with old age.

Among the joys in life we can list, of course, God's gifts of health and prosperity which are embodied in the biblical notion of peace (*šālôm*). But God's peace is above all a quiet repose that rules the senses in knowing that the Lord is near, and knowing oneself surrounded by God's goodness and love under all circumstances. Such peace affects one's whole existence. It provides encouragement for daily living and adds to the quality of life.

But the most important joy in life is the gift of faith which assures us that, thanks to God's grace for us in Jesus Christ, life with God is transformed to a living hope which does not end at death but continues on to everlasting life. While in the Old Testament the notion of life after this life was still vague, the resurrection of Christ has become the triumphant message of the New Testament. From a New Testament perspective, all of life is a prelude to eternal

²⁷² Koenig, Lamar and Lamar, *A Gospel for the Mature Years*, 105.

life through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, one of the greatest needs of the elderly, and one that is also expressed by several elderly persons themselves, is to keep them focussed upon Christ's glorious promise: "I am making everything new" (Rev 21:5). The biblical concept of the elderly is a positive one. They belong, and God has promised them his ongoing care throughout the journey of life (Isa 46:4). Christians are en route, and the promised destination is the new earth.

12.3 How to be Pro-active in Dealing With the Aging Process

Elderly persons, whether functionally old or chronologically old, serve as reminders for younger people that one day they will need to travel the same road. As such, the elderly can be beacons in a society in which many people are postponing preparation for old age far too long. It is as if old age can be shut out until one is unable to do anything any more. At worst, aging is *discounted as unreal; at best growing old is considered to be unpleasant*. Such a negative outlook of old age does not take into account the positive contribution the elderly can bring and which receives impetus in Scripture. One does not have to be physically active to enjoy life. The Bible points us in the direction of quality of life which is rooted in a meaningful relationship with God and fellow human beings. This quality of life may be experienced under the umbrella of promise because God's covenant promises of his care and protection still hold true today.

This does not take away from the fact that aging is part of life that leads to death, and death is the shadow side of life. But also the less pleasant things in life help build character, and through recognition of our dependency to God lead to spiritual maturation. Here we can learn a valuable lesson from the Old Testament in being pro-active with one's aging process. Children were not kept away from their roots, nor from the dying. All of life is the training ground for the end that awaits everyone. From an early age Christians must learn to

remember their Creator in the days of their youth (Eccl 12:1). The Preacher wants to impress upon us that life is short and its effects will be upon us before we know it. Since life without God in one's youth is difficult to transform into life with God in old age, Scripture encourages us to prepare for old age by keeping God in the picture in order to shoulder the burden of old age. We need to prepare for old age so that in old age we can hold on to God's promises in a trust relationship. That is the best way for youth to be pro-active in anticipating their own aging process. Elderly persons can be pro-active in their old age by acting their age. They should live from the perspective that life's journey is one that ends in weakness. But for everyone, a lifelong walk with the Lord constitutes the most important spiritual dimension in preparation for old age. That walk with God needs ongoing stimulus in old age by addressing the spiritual needs of the elderly.

12.4 Addressing the Spiritual Needs of the Elderly

From the Needs Analysis Questionnaire results it is clear that, on the whole, the spiritual needs of the elderly are addressed in the pastoral care they receive. Underlying this care is the conviction that the elderly belong. Reformed church-life is regarded as a covenant community in which the elderly may expect to enjoy and experience a sense of purpose. Based on the biblical principle that the elderly belong, an awareness must be cultivated in the church community that the elderly are part of the congregation. For this reason I concur with the comment by Henry Nouwen and Walter Gaffney:

As soon as we start thinking about care for the aging as a subject of specialization, we are falling into the trap of societal segregation, which care is precisely trying to overcome. When we allow our world to be divided into young, middle-aged, and old people, each calling for a specialized approach, then we are taking the real care out of caring, since the development and growth of men and women take place, first of all, by creative interaction among the generations. Grandparents,

parents, children and grandchildren—they all make the whole of the life cycle visible and tangible to us at every moment of our lives.²⁷³

While elderly persons tend to become increasingly dependent on the help of others, they also need to retain their independence and we should not make them disabled members of the church community. Once again Nouwen and Gaffney offer some valuable insights when they mention that “since in human life pain always seems easier to understand than happiness . . . we spend more time and energy discussing the pains of aging than its possible joys.” Discussing the pains of aging appears to be a natural reaction in which we display our empathy to the physical and emotional hurts in life. But the same authors also point out that “we will never be able to give what we cannot receive . . . Only when we are able to receive the elderly as our teachers will it be possible to offer the help they are looking for.”²⁷⁴ The elderly are our teachers in that they show that some day we must travel the same road. We can learn from them about their needs rather than what we perceive their needs to be.

What sort of help are they looking for? For one, the help that allows them to be themselves. They ask us to be considerate of their limitations. As the eighty year old widower reminds us: “Don’t expect me to be sixty-five.” This a plea to the younger generation for understanding of the elderly and their

²⁷³ Nouwen and Gaffney, *Aging*, 117. In his book, *The Vital Congregation* (Abingdon Press: Nashville, 1990), 103, Herb Miller spends about ten lines on the elderly. If anything, this creates the impression that the elderly are not really vital to the congregation nor are they considered a necessary part for the vitality of the congregation. This lack of recognizing the ongoing needs of the elderly, and the contributions they can make in congregational life, is sad commentary on the place of the elderly in their church community. The market is flooded with books that help churches seek a new direction. An important question is: Are the elderly included in that search? Churches fail in their mission if the aging population is ignored or taken for granted. Churches must recognize that specialized ministries connect with one segment of church life, but disconnect with another. While there is no immediate fear that the elderly will become Generation F (forgotten) because there are too many of them around, there is the danger of the elderly becoming Generation S (sidelined). They fit in the tolerance zone, not in the comfort zone.

²⁷⁴ Nouwen and Gaffney, *Aging*, 62, 153.

needs. Another way of helping is that we have an eye for the fact that a person who has lost a spouse sometimes becomes isolated. As one widow remarked: "It is a couples' world." These are just two examples that illustrate that the needs of the elderly must be assessed on an individual basis. The elderly, especially widows, expressed the need for meaningful communication and they want to address issues of substance. They wish to talk about faith in search for spiritual guidance and encouragement. Quite a number of widows and widowers indicated that after the death of their spouse it became more important for them to talk about faith with others. Also, 61% of the elderly who responded to my questionnaire indicated that they felt a need to discuss dying with their pastoral caregiver. This spiritual need, therefore, should not be avoided but needs to be discussed with them.

Elderly persons often have a need for a sympathetic and listening ear. They are helped when we let them talk about happenings in their lives, whether joyous or sad, as a way of validating their lives. In pastoral care we should keep foremost in mind that a meaningful visit, i.e., meaningful for the elderly person must address the issues that are important to them.

Since participating in the worship services rates high among elderly because going to church has been a part of their lives, their needs in the worship services need to be taken into consideration. Things that prevent them from full participation are mainly health related, especially hearing difficulties and lack of concentration power. Such things, however, can be minimized through special church hearing aids and the minister not speaking too fast.

These are some of the main issues mentioned by the elderly about the pastoral care they received and which needs to be incorporated in a Reformed concept of pastoral care.

12.5 Reformed Concept of Pastoral Care

In the section on definitions, pastoral care was defined as "showing

vigilance and attentiveness to the existing needs in the lives of others." It is a ministry that seeks to promote the well-being of others, and does so based on the biblical requirement of sharing in one another's joys and sorrows. The Christian church receives its mandate for pastoral care from God. The aim of this care is to help Christians live from, and hold onto, God's promises as they grow older and weaker. The Bible gives direction about caring for the weak (Ps 41:1; 72:13; Jas 1:27). If these injunctions have any meaning for us today, then pastoral care must focus on living up to these biblical directives with respect to the elderly who become weak and vulnerable. With this in mind, a Reformed concept of pastoral care to the elderly needs to reflect a holistic approach to life in which we give attention to the person's physical and spiritual needs. This perspective on pastoral care fits well with the theme of this thesis that life for the believer exists under the umbrella of promise. So, then, the primary and ongoing task of pastoral care is to point the elderly to a life with God and to keep them in a trusting relationship with their Lord. Life is from God, depends on him, and needs to be lived for God.

On which areas should pastoral care home in? Foremost is the need to remind the elderly that, from a biblical perspective, growing old under the umbrella of promise is something positive despite the difficulties that old age brings. Pastoral care to the elderly is to help them "face" aging and help them to live from the reality that life's journey is one that ends in weakness. Life in the covenant depends on God's leading and dependence on him. Old age is part of life under the protective umbrella of promise of the faithful God who declared that he will sustain the elderly in their old age (cf. Isa 46:4). Pastoral care needs to help them find peace in God's promise of better things to come. God's peace is a calm that rules the heart in knowing that the Lord is near, and knowing oneself surrounded by his goodness and love.

In pastoral care to the elderly it is important to recognize the close link between physical need and spiritual care. Health and sickness come from

God. Therefore, when ill health strikes it is not a sign that things have run out of control or that God has abandoned the sick person. It might be helpful for pastoral caregivers to keep in mind that the greatest fear among women is physical decline, while among men it is mental deterioration. Illness and frailty gives the pastoral worker a special opportunity to help the elderly person take stock and review his/her relationship with God. We should encourage the elderly not to dwell needlessly on the past (Isa 34:18-19, Phil 3:13-16), but focus on the new things the Lord is doing by embracing God's forgiving grace. In this way any doubts about one's faith and salvation, or any doubts about forgiveness of sins of youth, can be dealt with. As pastoral antidote we may remind the insecure or doubting person of God's love and compassion, and that Christ encouraged us to unburden ourselves in order to find rest for our souls. Life with God is sustained by grace.

Keeping the elderly in a trusting relationship with God involves giving leadership and direction by providing them with spiritual guidance and counsel from the Word of God. Elders and deacons should bear in mind that elderly persons may at times have to be corrected and admonished to be temperate, worthy of respect, self-controlled, sound in faith, in love and in endurance (Tit 2:2).

One group of elderly who need considerable attention in pastoral care are the widows and widowers. The loss of a spouse brings major changes in the life of the widow or widower. In general, this change is recognized by everyone, but the elderly need the support of the church community in their grief journey. Widows and widowers expect visits from their minister and elders. Regular visits to them are a necessity because the elderly have their own unique needs, and they expect pastoral care. Just over half the elderly expect a visit from their section elder at least twice a year. This should be taken seriously. Visits of about half an hour appear to be optimum, and pastoral visits should be coordinated between pastoral care givers so that the

visits are not bunched up in one week and then for months no one comes around. Sharing a visiting schedule may be helpful in this respect.

During pastoral visits the elderly want to have their personal issues discussed. They are in need of meaningful dialogue and want their needs addressed in a biblical way. Their personal faith relationship needs ongoing attention and stimulation. Especially the widows indicated a need to talk about faith as they seek spiritual guidance and encouragement. For many it becomes more important to talk about faith with others after the death of their spouse. Also, many elderly feel the need to discuss dying to help them prepare for death and to help them find reassurance in God's promises. The bond with God needs to be confirmed and strengthened. During pastoral visits made by the minister the elderly wish to talk about faith. In visits to people whose mental sharpness is disappearing, elders and deacons should strive for meaningful contact, i.e., meaningful for the elderly person at his/her own level of spiritual maturity. Lending a listening ear goes a long way in helping the elderly.

Next to the loss of a spouse, retirement was listed as the second major adjustment in life. The impact of this change in life is generally not so readily acknowledged. In pastoral care we should encourage those who are nearing retirement age to prepare for this new phase in life in order not to be bored or feel bereft of a sense of purpose. Jay Adams makes the recommendation that, in preparation for retirement, the elderly should not retire from work but retread,²⁷⁵ i.e., prepare for a new productive phase in life. This is certainly an area that should not be overlooked or minimized in pastoral care.

An adjustment that comes packaged with retirement is loss of income. While for most elderly that may not be a big concern since they have planned ahead, for other elderly it may have an impact on the quality of life. Loss of

²⁷⁵ Jay E. Adams, *Shepherding God's Flock* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 268-9.

income does not only mean downscaling, but for some it may necessitate relocating. That brings with it not only the likelihood of being uprooted from one's neighbourhood, but also the real possibility of being uprooted from one's church community as well. Uprooting means starting over in acquiring friends, and that can contribute to the feeling of loneliness.

While loneliness is often associated with widowhood, it is something that needs to be carefully assessed. Contrary to the general perception, the great majority of elderly say they are seldom lonely. What needs to be evaluated is whether they make a distinction between being alone and feeling lonely. Is aloneness equated with loneliness? As to those who fear that the loss of a spouse will turn life into a lonely road ahead, their fears may be eased somewhat through the statistical evidence that most elderly are not lonely all the time. This should not be minimized to the point where one thinks loneliness does not exist. It does, and it is often felt at moments when married friends slowly let go of the ties that existed when the spouse was still alive. A sense of loneliness becomes very pronounced in a couples' world.

The ideal kind of life in the biblical sense is a life with the Lord. In practical terms this means that pastoral care must consider the importance of the worship services for the elderly. *Participation in the worship services rates high among them.* Going to church is something that most have done from childhood and is part of their way of life. This explains their pro-institutional stand regarding the church community. They attend the worship services not only for worship, but also for fellowship. *It gives them a sense of belonging to the communion of saints.* They have a strong sense of belonging, and wish to stay involved with congregational life.

Things that prevent the elderly from full participation in the worship services are often health related, such as hearing impairment or the inability to concentrate for the duration of the sermon. These are things to which they can adapt by listening to the sermon again on tape. What they cannot adjust to is

when they are being sidelined in the community. That is a sign they no longer belong. Thankfully very few elderly even hinted in that direction.

One way in which we can emphasise that the elderly belong is by encouraging them to stay involved. The elderly may be running out of *chronos* time, but they have a calling to make the most out of *kairos* time. While perhaps physically "side-lined," the elderly can nonetheless be stimulated to be spiritual leaders and examples by living wise, pious lives for the younger generations to follow. Old age is the time for quiet reflection. The years in which the pressures of life competed with quiet time are behind them. Now they have ample time for unhurried reflection and contemplation on life's joys and sorrows within the covenant relationship with God.

I wholeheartedly echo the comment that "because aged persons can become paradigms of the good, godly and wise life they should not retire into oblivion."²⁷⁶ It is sad enough when our youth oriented society sidelines the elderly; it is even worse when elderly sideline themselves. This means that in their senior years they are busy setting aside the longest—and probably also the most productive—part of the life they have lived. The elderly should be encouraged to validate their life's experiences for the benefit of others, and transform age-ing into sage-ing. The younger generations can learn much from their wisdom, piety and experience. The elderly can pray for the needs of the church and for their children and grandchildren. They should be motivated to encourage parents to raise children in the Lord's ways; to be role models to their grandchildren and other youth, especially when they are young and impressionable. Further, those who are capable of teaching youth should be asked to do so.

But their involvement can also be on the level where pastoral care givers tap into the life experience of the elderly for advice and leadership. We need to

²⁷⁶ Horsnell, "Biblical Concepts of Aging", 44. Section XII of this essay contains a fresh approach and gives much food for thought.

give them the opportunity to talk about their faith and discuss church related matters. We need to stimulate them to participate in study groups where they can provide a historical perspective and play the role of guardians of tradition. Their input is needed to keep the church community functioning properly.

Another area of pastoral care is care for the dying. This needs to be a *ministry of presence*. One must be aware that the dying person and the family members that remain are moving on two different plains. There comes a point in life when the dying person is ready to let go (cf. Gen 46:30). Therefore it is not for the benefit of the dying person when family members urge him/her to hold out for another day. Christians are en route. The promised destination is the new earth. From a New Testament perspective the dying person is someone who has nearly completed the journey, and who needs to be supported to reach the finish line. Therefore, we should not isolate the elderly in their dying days and moments. If elderly persons die alone in the hospital then for them the description of agedness as the "winter of human existence" is more than a description. It is stark reality. Then they not only receive a cold shoulder, but are left out in the cold altogether.

All of life is a gift from God. To live is to exist under the umbrella of promise. From a Reformed perspective this gives a positive direction to pastoral care to the elderly at any stage of their journey. We may encourage each other with the assurance that old age is not some cruel joke or sad mistake. I share the view of Bray that old age is a time of honour, not a ludicrous mistake. Aging is part of the life cycle as a natural progression from birth to death, and not as a graph which peaks in early middle-age and thereafter declines. At every stage in life we form and maintain identity in relation to others as body, mind and soul, and this must be interpreted sensitively and appropriately in old age.²⁷⁷

²⁷⁷ Bray, *Ageing*, 11-12.

The elderly deserve our full respect, appreciation, and care. They should not be marginalised. Respect for the elderly is rooted in the divine ordering of society. Lack of respect is a sign of breakdown of the social structure. And if there is one social structure where the elderly should feel safe, secure, wanted, and respected, it is the church of Christ. If we take the Bible as our source and example, then we find that the elderly belong not in the margins, but in a place of prominence. In God's plan they have a place of honour. In all of life, but especially in pastoral care, we should strive to retain that place of honour for the elderly in accordance with God's directive (Lev. 19:32).

12.6 Conclusion

From this review of the four defining questions I conclude that this thesis has in large measure attained the goal it set out to achieve. One thing that became clear is that what I referred to as an "unstructured" approach to pastoral care (10.1) nonetheless covered the full spectrum of the needs of the elderly. I submit that the pastoral care in the Reformed tradition is on the right track, both biblically and according to the expectations of the elderly it currently serves. While the Reformed approach to pastoral care does not need *major restructuring*, it needs constant fine tuning. It needs to become more focussed on the needs as they really exist, rather than how they at times are perceived. The main difference that the questionnaires brought to light was the discrepancy in the perceived needs of the elderly. Therefore, the greatest need is for the elders, deacons and ministers to grow in understanding of the needs of the elderly as they present them.

This study is presented as a modest contribution to the ongoing task of analysing, reviewing, and improving on pastoral care within the covenant community as a whole, and to the elderly in particular.

CONCLUSION

Pastoral care to the elderly from a Reformed perspective is a necessity in the Reformed church community. When the world around the elderly begins to shrink, pastoral care may not be among the things that fall away. When their world gets smaller the constancy of pastoral care with a familiar, religion-specific, approach to their care is of enduring value and of great benefit to them. Till their dying days every elderly person needs the assurance and the stimulus that old age is a blessing from God and something positive. Life and death under the umbrella of promise and hope in God's covenant faithfulness gives encouragement to face each new day. It reminds us that God's compassions are new every morning (cf. Lam 3).

No two elderly persons are exactly alike. Each individual is a unique being with his/her unique needs and aspirations. Yet everyone needs to be reminded and encouraged to prepare for old age and the ultimate end. Each person needs to be comforted when the end draws near. And in that need everyone is the same.

No one is too young to prepare for growing old. When we are talking about aging and the elderly we are, in a sense, talking about ourselves. The experience of old age is there before one knows it. That is why Qoheleth's urging is to the point and should be taken to heart: "Remember your Creator in your youth." *Memento mori!* But in the meantime, *memento vivere* in the fear of the LORD under the umbrella of promise.

APPENDICES

Appendix "A"

Cover letter re: Needs Assessment Questionnaire to the Elderly

Date:

Dear brother and/or sister,

I am working on a Thesis Project for the completion of my Doctor of Ministry (D.Min.) studies at McMaster Divinity College, Hamilton, Ontario. My area of interest relates to pastoral care to the aged, and my paper will focus on:
Addressing the Pastoral Needs of the Aged from a Reformed Perspective.

In order to know what needs to address I have developed a needs assessment questionnaire pertaining to pastoral and spiritual needs of the aging. If you are 70 or older, I request your help in assessing what you perceive to be your own pastoral needs, and how these needs are met.

Participation in this questionnaire is entirely voluntary. It does not contain any questions whereby you can be identified or traced. I have requested the help of your minister (or clerk in case of a vacancy) to recruit up to six volunteers in the congregation to which you belong. In this way I have no idea who you, or the other five participants, are. If you are willing to participate, please complete the questionnaire by August 14, 1999, place it in the enclosed envelope, and hand it sealed to your minister (or clerk). He will forward all the responses to me in one mailing. Do not put your name on the questionnaire or envelope.

Your input is used solely for sampling what you and others in your age bracket consider to be your pastoral needs; how they are met, and where ministers, elders and deacons can or should improve. Note: this is not intended as an evaluation of the pastoral care provided by your minister, elder or deacon. All the responses will be compared, analyzed and incorporated in the Thesis. Once the project has been completed and accepted by McMaster, all questionnaires will be destroyed.

Thank you for your cooperation,

NEEDS ASSESSMENT BY THE AGING ABOUT PASTORAL CARE

- | | | |
|---|-------|-----|
| 1. Please indicate your age group: | 70-79 | 80+ |
| 2. Please indicate your sex (M=Male; F=Female) | M | F |
| 3. What is your marital status | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Married | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Widow/Widower | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Never married | | |
| 4. Do you consider yourself an 'aged' person (Y=Yes; N=No) | Y | N |
| 5. Are you in good health | Y | N |
| 6. What has been the greatest adjustment for you in your aging process (please mark as many as apply) | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> retirement | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> coping with change due to | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> loss of spouse | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> loss of mobility | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> loss of income | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> loss of independence | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> sickness | | |
| other _____ | | |
| 7. What changes do you fear most in your aging process | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> physical decline | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> mental decline | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> emotional upheaval | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> loneliness | | |
| other _____ | | |
| 8. Are you a 'shut-in' | Y | N |
| 9. Do you feel lonely | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> all the time | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> some times | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> seldom | | |
| 10. What do you do to ease loneliness | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> hobbies | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> clubs | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> church | | |
| other _____ | | |

11. Do you have family nearby Y N
12. Do you live in a senior's residence Y N
13. Do you receive frequent visits from members in the congregation Y N
14. How often do you receive a pastoral visit per year (please circle)
 from your elder: 6x 4x 2x 1x other ____
 deacon: 6x 4x 2x 1x other ____
 minister: 6x 4x 2x 1x other ____
15. What would you consider a realistic number of pastoral visits per year
 from your elder: 6x 4x 2x 1x other ____
 deacon: 6x 4x 2x 1x other ____
 minister: 6x 4x 2x 1x other ____
16. What would you consider a good time limit for a pastoral visit
 ____ 15-20 minutes
 ____ 30 minutes
 ____ 30-45 minutes
17. Would you prefer ____ short visits, but more often
 ____ longer visits, less often
 other _____
18. Do you expect each pastoral visit to end with scripture
 reading and/or prayer Y N
19. Is it necessary that each pastoral visit ends with scripture
 reading and/or prayer Y N
20. Do you make a distinction between a social visit and a pastoral visit Y N
21. Do you regard visits from your elder or deacon as ____ pastoral visits
 or as ____ social visits
22. Do you find the age gap an obstacle in confiding to a young
 minister, elder or deacon Y N
23. What do you feel is your greatest pastoral need? Please explain

24. Who is the person you are most likely to talk with about your faith
- spouse
 - family member
 - friend
 - minister
 - elder/deacon
 - other _____
25. How important is it for you to talk about your faith with others
- very important
 - somewhat important
26. Are you still able to do personal Bible reading Y N
- If you answered No, what is the main stumbling block:
 - eye sight
 - concentration
 - other _____
27. Can you still attend the worship services Y N
- If your answer is No, do you miss attending the worship services Y N
 - If you answered Yes to the last part, what do you miss most
 - being together with fellow believers
 - singing
 - not participating in the Lord's Supper
 - the whole worship service
 - If you answered No, what are the reasons

28. Is your church building easily accessible Y N
29. What are some of the things that exclude you from full participation in the worship service:
- hearing loss
 - minister speaks too fast
 - language barrier
 - service too long
 - other _____
30. Do you make use of taped services on video or audio cassettes Y N

31. Does your church library also have books for you to read Y N
32. Do you feel that you are being forgotten in your church community Y N
33. Do you consider yourself fairly involved in your church community Y N
34. Would you like to be more involved Y N
35. Would you become more involved if asked Y N
36. Do you feel that at your age you have things to offer
to your church community Y N
37. What do you consider a blessing or gain in your old age
(mark as many as apply)
- ___ life experience which I can pass on to children and grandchildren
- ___ freedom from a work-schedule which allows me to get more actively
involved in church life
- other _____
38. How are you involved in the church community
- ___ pray for one another
- ___ teach Bible study
- ___ visit fellow elderly
- ___ visit younger members
- ___ improve and maintain church property
- ___ serve on committees
- other _____
39. Do you spend part of the winter in the warmer regions of the USA Y N
- If Yes, is it at doctor's recommendation Y N
- How long do you stay away: ___ 1 month
___ 2 months
___ 3 months
___ 4-6 months
- Do you feel your stay "down south" isolates you from your
- a. church community Y N
- b. family Y N
- c. friends Y N

46. Were you visited by your deacon Y N
- If you answered No, would you have expected your deacon to come right after or shortly after losing your spouse Y N
 - Was your deacon sensitive to your specific needs at that moment Y N
 - If you answered No, please indicate main lack of sensitivity _____

- Did he address your needs during this visit Y N
- Please indicate in what way _____

47. What provides you the greatest support in your loss:
- _____ family
 - _____ friends
 - _____ minister
 - _____ elder/deacon
 - _____ faith
 - _____ Bible reading
 - other _____
48. Has your loss made you
- a) read the Bible more regularly and differently Y N
 - b) pray more regularly and differently Y N
 - c) appreciate church more Y N
49. Since the loss of your spouse has it become more important for you to talk about your faith with others Y N
50. Do you sense that your minister, elder, or deacon is afraid to talk about your late husband/wife for fear of hurting you Y N
51. Do you feel that talking about your late spouse should be
- a. avoided Y N
 - b. encouraged Y N
52. Are you afraid of dying Y N
53. Do you ever feel the need to talk about it Y N
54. Does your elder, deacon, or minister ever discuss this with you Y N

THANK YOU for participating in this project!

QUESTION	CATEGORY	ALL						70+						80+									
		ALL	M	F	MAR	W	Wf	Ws	ALL	M	F	MAR	W	Wf	Ws	ALL	M	F	MAR	W	Wf	Ws	
1. What is your age?	70-79	96	64	32	66	30	4	26	96	64	32	66	30	4	26	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	80+	32	14	18	13	19	4	15	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	32	14	18	13	19	4	15	
	never married 70-79	4	1	3	-	-	-	-	4	1	3	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
2. Sex	M	79	79	-	70	8	8	-	63	65	-	60	4	4	-	14	14	-	10	4	4	-	
	F	53	-	53	9	41	-	41	35	-	35	6	26	-	26	18	-	18	3	15	-	15	
3. What is your marital status?	Mar	79	70	9	79	-	-	-	69	60	9	66	-	-	-	10	10	-	13	-	-	-	
	Wid	49	8	41	-	49	8	41	27	4	23	-	30	4	26	22	4	18	-	19	4	15	
	Never Mar	4	1	3	-	-	-	-	4	1	3	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
4. Do you consider yourself "aged"?	Y	61	33	28	34	27	4	23	40	24	16	27	13	1	12	21	9	12	7	14	3	11	
	N	67	45	22	45	22	4	18	56	40	16	39	17	3	14	11	5	6	6	5	1	4	
	never married	4	1	3	-	-	-	-	4	1	3	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
5. Are you healthy?	Y	117	69	48	67	42	5	33	86	56	30	54	25	2	23	31	13	18	13	17	3	14	
	N	16	12	4	9	9	5	4	14	11	3	9	7	4	3	2	1	1	2	2	1	1	
6. What was your greatest adjustment?	retirement	47	44	3	41	5	4	1	40	37	3	35	4	3	1	7	7	-	6	1	1	-	
	loss of spouse	43	6	37	-	43	6	37	27	3	24	-	26	3	23	16	3	13	-	17	3	14	
	mobility	5	2	3	4	3	-	3	2	1	1	4	1	-	1	3	1	2	-	2	-	2	
	income	10	6	4	4	4	2	2	7	5	2	1	1	1	-	3	1	2	3	3	1	2	
	independence	3	2	1	2	1	-	1	1	1	-	1	-	-	-	2	1	1	1	1	-	1	
	sickness	14	9	5	10	4	1	3	13	9	4	9	3	1	2	1	-	-	1	1	-	1	
	Other	*	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
7. What changes do you fear most?	physical decline	48	30	18	27	23	5	18	43	27	16	22	18	5	13	5	3	2	5	5	-	5	
	mental decline	51	37	14	37	13	2	11	41	29	12	31	8	1	7	10	8	2	6	5	1	4	
	emotional upheaval	5	3	2	3	2	-	2	5	3	2	3	2	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
	loneliness	32	17	15	15	21	5	16	20	10	10	9	11	2	9	12	7	5	6	10	3	7	
	Other	*	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
8. Are you shut-in?	Y	3	2	1	1	4	1	3	1	1	-	1	-	-	2	1	1	-	4	1	3		
	N	107	66	41	63	42	7	33	86	55	31	54	28	5	23	21	11	8	9	12	2	10	
9. Are you lonely?	always	1	-	1	-	1	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	1	-	1	-	1		
	s.times	38	11	27	11	33	4	29	30	8	22	8	22	2	20	8	3	5	3	11	2	9	
	seldom	78	62	16	58	18	4	14	64	52	12	48	12	3	9	14	10	4	10	5	-	5	
10. How do you ease loneliness?	hobbies	79	49	30	47	35	6	29	64	42	22	40	22	4	18	15	7	8	7	12	1	11	
	clubs	16	6	10	7	8	-	8	16	6	10	7	8	-	8	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
	church	66	40	26	36	32	8	24	53	33	22	32	21	4	17	11	7	4	4	10	3	7	
	Other	*	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
11. Is family nearby?	Y	107	71	36	66	46	9	37	88	58	30	55	28	5	23	19	13	6	11	16	3	13	
	N	12	7	5	8	4	-	4	11	7	4	7	4	-	4	1	-	1	1	-	-	-	

* For comments given under "Other" see relevant sections in Chapter Ten

QUESTION	CATEGORY	ALL							70+							80+						
		ALL	M	F	MAR	W	Wf	Ws	ALL	M	F	MAR	W	Wf	Ws	ALL	M	F	MAR	W	Wf	Ws
12. Do you live in a senior residence?	Y	33	16	17	13	22	4	18	23	10	13	9	14	1	13	10	6	4	4	8	3	5
	N	92	62	30	61	28	3	25	77	55	22	53	19	3	16	15	7	8	8	9	-	9
13. Visits fr congr	Y	62	37	25	35	27	4	23	50	31	19	29	18	3	15	12	6	6	6	9	1	8
	N	55	38	17	35	21	4	17	45	31	14	30	14	2	12	10	7	3	5	7	2	5
14. How many time per year do you receive a visit from your elder?	6x	3	2	1	2	1	-	1	1	1	-	1	-	-	2	1	1	1	1	-	1	
	4x	5	3	2	2	5	1	4	5	3	2	2	3	1	2	-	-	-	2	-	2	
	2x	24	13	11	15	13	1	12	20	12	8	12	8	1	7	4	1	3	3	5	5	
	1x	34	55	29	53	29	5	24	68	45	23	44	22	4	18	16	10	6	9	7	1	
	Other	8x	-	-	-	8x	8x	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	8x	-	-	-	8x	6
14. How many time per year do you receive a visit from your deacon?	6x	1	-	-	-	1	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	1	-	1	
	4x	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
	2x	11	3	8	3	8	-	8	9	3	6	3	6	-	6	2	-	2	-	2	2	
	1x	26	13	13	12	16	2	14	22	11	11	9	13	2	11	4	2	2	3	3	-	
	Other	-	-	N	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	N	N	N	-	-	3
14. How many time per year do you receive a visit from your minister?	6x	16	8	8	7	11	2	9	9	5	4	4	5	1	4	7	3	4	3	6	1	
	4x	22	13	9	12	12	2	10	20	12	8	12	8	1	7	2	1	1	-	4	1	
	2x	33	23	10	23	7	1	6	28	19	9	18	6	1	5	5	4	1	5	1	-	
	1x	27	16	11	14	13	2	11	21	12	9	10	11	2	9	6	4	2	4	2	-	
	Other	8x	-	-	-	-	10x	-	-	**	-	-	-	-	-	-	10x	N	-	-	10x	
15. What do you feel is a realistic number of visits from your elder per year?	6x	4	2	2	3	3	-	3	2	2	-	2	-	-	2	-	2	1	3	-	3	
	4x	12	7	6	4	8	2	6	11	6	5	4	6	2	4	1	-	1	-	2	-	
	2x	51	36	15	36	16	1	15	41	29	12	30	10	-	10	10	7	3	6	6	1	
	1x	27	20	7	20	9	4	5	23	17	6	17	6	3	3	4	3	1	3	3	1	
	Other	if nec	-	-	-	-	10x	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	10x	-	-	-	10x	
15. What do you feel is a realistic number of visits from your deacon per year?	6x	1	-	1	-	1	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	1	-	1	-	1	
	4x	3	1	1	1	2	-	2	2	1	1	1	1	-	1	1	-	-	-	1	-	
	2x	17	8	8	8	8	-	8	15	8	7	8	6	-	6	2	4	5	5	2	-	
	1x	38	25	13	25	14	1	13	29	21	8	20	9	1	8	9	4	5	5	3	5	
	Other	-	-	-	-	-	10x	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	10x	-	-	-	10x	
15. What do you feel is a realistic number of visits from your minister per year?	6x	20	10	8	10	10	1	9	12	7	5	8	4	-	4	8	3	3	2	6	1	
	4x	19	12	6	7	10	4	6	15	9	6	5	8	3	5	4	3	-	2	2	1	
	2x	45	30	15	32	13	1	12	37	25	12	26	10	1	9	8	5	3	6	3	-	
	1x	14	10	4	9	5	1	4	13	9	4	8	5	1	4	1	1	-	1	-	-	
	Other	8x	-	-	-	-	10x	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	10x	-	-	-	10x	
16. What is optimum length of a visit?	15-20	21	14	7	15	6	2	4	15	10	5	12	2	-	2	6	4	2	3	4	2	
	30	49	31	18	28	22	4	18	39	24	15	22	16	3	13	10	7	3	6	6	1	
	30-45	51	30	18	29	21	2	19	41	27	14	25	15	2	13	10	3	4	4	6	-	
17. Your preference? Short, more often longer, less often	Short	54	35	19	36	20	4	16	39	24	15	26	12	1	11	15	11	4	10	8	3	
	more often longer	22	16	6	17	7	1	6	20	14	6	15	5	1	4	2	2	-	2	2	-	
	Other	*	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	5	

CATEGORY		ALL							70+							80+						
		ALL	M	F	MAR	W	Wt	Ws	ALL	M	F	MAR	W	Wt	Ws	ALL	M	F	MAR	W	Wt	Ws
18. End visit with reading & prayer?	Y	82	52	30	51	35	6	29	63	41	22	41	21	3	18	19	11	8	10	14	3	11
	N	36	25	11	23	13	2	11	31	22	9	20	9	2	7	5	3	2	2	4	-	4
19. Necess to end w reading & prayer?	Y	51	31	20	29	27	5	22	41	26	15	24	17	3	14	10	5	5	5	10	2	8
	N	69	44	25	43	24	3	21	57	36	21	36	18	2	16	12	8	4	7	6	1	5
20. Distinguish btw pastoral / social visit?	Y	83	54	29	52	34	6	28	69	46	23	45	22	4	18	14	8	6	7	12	2	10
	N	29	20	9	18	10	2	8	22	15	7	14	7	1	6	7	5	2	4	3	1	2
21. Consider visit from elder/deacon	pastoral	83	55	28	53	31	4	27	67	46	21	44	21	3	18	16	9	7	9	10	1	9
	social	40	16	24	17	26	2	24	33	15	18	14	17	2	15	7	1	6	3	9	-	9
22. Is age a barrier?	Y	14	9	5	9	5	-	5	11	8	3	8	3	-	3	3	1	2	1	2	-	2
	N	104	68	36	64	44	7	35	84	55	29	52	27	4	23	20	13	7	12	15	3	12
23. What is your greatest pastoral need?		For comments see section 10.4.5																				
24. Talk about faith with	spouse	62	56	6	57	3	1	2	52	47	5	47	1	-	1	10	9	1	10	2	1	1
	fam member	37	22	15	20	20	3	17	29	17	12	16	13	2	11	8	5	3	4	7	1	6
	friend	48	27	21	22	28	5	23	41	21	20	19	20	3	17	7	6	1	3	8	2	6
	minister	71	43	28	38	35	7	29	54	32	22	31	22	3	19	17	11	6	7	13	3	10
	elder/deacon	44	27	17	26	21	3	18	33	21	12	20	13	2	11	11	6	5	6	8	1	7
25. Talk about faith is very imp s.what imp	Y	76	52	24	44	36	7	29	62	42	20	38	24	4	20	14	10	4	6	12	3	9
	N	37	22	15	26	11	2	9	29	18	11	20	7	2	5	8	4	4	6	4	-	4
26. Personal Bible reading if No, reason: concentration	Y	119	76	43	72	49	8	41	97	63	34	60	33	5	28	22	13	9	12	16	3	13
	N	1	1		1	1	-	1	1	1	-	1	-	-	-		-	-	-	1	-	1
27. Do you still attend worship services? If No, do you miss it? Miss most: being together Singing LS Whole worship	Y	118	77	41	72	49	8	41	96	63	33	60	32	5	27	22	14	8	12	17	3	14
	N	1	-	1	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	1	1	-	-	-
	Y	2	-	2	1	1	1	1	1	-	1	-	1	1	1	1	-	1	1	-	-	-
	N	0	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	being together	4	1	3	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	1	1	2	2	-	-
	Singing	4	1	3	2	2	2	2	3	1	2	1	2	2	2	1	-	1	1	-	-	-
	LS	1	-	1	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	1	1	-	-	-
Whole worship	19	15	4	16	3	-	3	6	4	2	4	2	2	2	13	11	2	12	1	-	-	
28. Bldg access	Y	108	72	36	68	43	8	35	86	58	28	55	27	5	22	22	14	8	13	16	3	13
	N	3	1	2	1	2	-	2	3	1	2	1	2	-	2		-	-	-	-	-	-
29. What excludes you from worship? hearing loss min too fast language barrier service too long Other:	hearing loss	26	19	7	14	10	1	9	14	11	3	11	2	-	2	12	8	4	3	8	1	7
	min too fast	12	7	5	5	8	2	6	8	6	2	5	3	1	2	4	1	3	-	5	1	4
	language barrier	1	1	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	1	-	1	-	-	-
	service too long	3	3	-	2	1	1	-	-	2	2	-	1	1	1	1	1	-	1	-	-	-
	Other:	*																				

QUESTION	CATEGORY	ALL							70+							80+						
		ALL	M	F	MAR	W	Wt	Ws	ALL	M	F	MAR	W	Wt	Ws	ALL	M	F	MAR	W	Wt	Ws
30. Do you make use of tapes/cassettes?	Y N	47 70	28 49	19 21	32 42	20 25	2 5	18 20	38 56	22 41	16 15	24 37	14 14	1 3	13 11	9 14	6 8	3 6	8 5	6 13	1 2	5 9
31. Does the library have books for you?	Y N	82 29	54 18	28 11	51 17	31 15	6 2	25 13	64 25	44 15	20 10	43 14	19 10	4 1	15 9	18 4	10 3	8 1	8 3	1 23	2 1	10 4
32. Do you feel forgotten by church comm?	Y N	18 101	96 7	93 3	11 62	9 40	- 8	9 32	12 84	5 59	7 25	6 55	6 25	- 5	6 20	6 17	49	2 8	5 7	3 15	- 3	3 12
33. Are you involved in the church comm?	Y N	80 35	53 23	27 12	52 19	27 18	3 5	24 13	68 26	47 16	21 10	47 13	18 13	2 3	16 10	12 9	67	6 2	5 6	9 5	1 2	8 3
34. Would you like to be more involved?	Y N	23 76	17 47	62 9	16 46	73 2	2 5	5 27	21 61	15 38	6 23	15 38	62 1	1 3	5 18	2 15	29	- 6	1 8	1 11	1 2	- 9
35. Would you become more involved if asked?	Y N	37 58	28 33	92 5	27 32	12 28	1 6	11 22	35 42	27 23	8 19	26 24	91 6	1 3	8 13	2 16	11 0	1 6	1 8	3 12	- 3	3 9
36. Do you have things to offer?	Y N	67 29	45 18	22 11	44 13	22 17	2 6	20 12	58 20	40 12	18 8	40 9	15 10	1 3	14 7	9 9	56	4 3	4 4	7 7	1 2	6 5
37. What are blessings of old age?	life experience freedom Other	91 42 *	64 32	27 10	63 32	31 8	5 2	26 6	75 38	54 30	21 8	54 30	18 6	3 2	15 4	16 4	10 2	6 2	9 2	13 2	2 -	11 2
38. How are you involved?	pray for each other teach Bible study visit fellow elderly visit younger members improve church property serve on committees Other	99 10 91 16 11 45 *	62 85 61 21 01 1	37 2 35 4 1 4	60 7 52 12 8 11	43 4 37 4 3 5	7 1 5 1 2 -	36 3 32 3 1 5	79 9 74 13 9 15	51 7 47 10 9 11	28 2 27 3 - 4	50 6 44 10 7 11	27 3 26 3 2 4	4 1 4 1 2 -	23 2 22 3 - 4	20 1 17 3 2 -	11 1 9 2 1 -	9 - 8 1 1 -	10 1 8 2 1 -	16 1 11 1 1 -	3 - 1 - - -	13 1 10 1 1 1
39. Do you go down south during winter?	Y N	13 114	12 64	1 50	12 60	1 51	1 8	- 43	12 85	11 52	1 33	11 49	1 31	1 4	- 27	1 29	1 12	- 17	1 11	- -	- -	- -
Doctor's recommendation	Y N	1 13	1 11	- -	1 10	1 1	- 1	- -	1 10	1 10	- -	1 9	1 1	1 1	- -	1 1	1 1	- -	1 1	1 1	- -	- -
how long:	1 month 2 months 3 months 4-6 months	10 1 2 1	9 1 2 1	1 1 2 1	9 1 2 1	1 1 2 1	1 1 2 1	- -	8 1 2 1	7 1 2 1	1 1 2 1	7 1 2 1	1 1 2 1	1 1 2 1	2 2 2 1	2 2 2 1	2 2 2 1	2 2 2 1	2 2 2 1	- -	- -	- -
During your stay do you feel isolated from:	church community family friends	Y N Y N Y N	4 8 6 7 5 7	3 8 5 7 4 7	1 - 1 6 5 7	- 7 - 1 - 1	- 1 - - - 1	- - - - - 1	4 7 5 7 4 7	3 7 4 7 3 7	1 - 1 - 1 -	4 6 5 6 4 6	- 1 - 1 - 1	- 1 1 - - -	- 1 1 - - -	- 1 1 - - -	- 1 1 - - -	1 1 1 - 1 -	- 1 1 - - -	- 1 1 - - -	- 2 1 - - -	- 9 1 - - -

QUESTION	CATEGORY	ALL						70+						80+								
		ALL	M	F	MAR	W	W _r	W _s	ALL	M	F	MAR	W	W _r	W _s	ALL	M	F	MAR	W	W _r	W _s
52. Are you afraid of dying?	Y	16	10	63	948	73	17	631	146	94	52	839	62	14	520	216	11	16	19	11	-3	111
	N	83	52	1		8			7	2	5		4				0			4		
53. Do you ever feel the need to talk about it?	Y	55	34	21	3418	27	25	259	472	30	17	2915	17	22	157	88	45	43	53	10	-3	102
	N	35	22	13		14			7	17	10		9							5		
54. Does your elder, deacon, or minister ever discuss this with you?	Y	41	26	15	2234	22	53	171	334	21	12	1927	12	22	101	8	56	34	37	10	31	75
	N	52	34	18		19		6	2	28	14		13		10					6		
40. How long widowed?					N/A							N/A							N/A			
1-12 months		5	36	45		55	365	457	336	1	23		33	1	236	2221	-1	-2		22	-1	221
1-2 years		5	53	72		83	38	28	17	-	61		61	-	14	5	1	11		21	1	14
3-5 years		8	8	8	1@	2				-	4	1@	7	-				4		5		
5+ years		32								3				3								
41. Most difficult period:																						
1-12 months		12	2	10		12	2	106	854	-	84		35	-	843	4214	2	22		42	2	221
1-2 years		7	1	64		75	1	420	16	1	31		41	1	16		-	14		14	-	4
3-5 years		5	1	20		20	1			1	6		6	1			-			-	-	-
still very difficult		20	-			-	-			-	-		-	-			-			-	-	-
42. Did you look forward to pastoral visits during that time?	Y	39	5	34	1	39	5	34	25	4	21	1	25	4	21	14	1	13		14	1	13
	N	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-		-	-	-
43. Did you benefit from these visits?	Y	35	5	30	1	35	5	302	222	4	18	1	22	4	182	13	1	12		13	1	12
	N	2	-	2	-	2	-			-	2	-	2	-			-	-		-	-	-
	Comment	*																				
44. Visited by minister?	Y	41	5	36	1	41	5	363	253	4	21	1	25	4	213	16	1	15		16	1	15
	N	3	-	33	-	33	-	323	223	-	31	-	32	-	183		-	-		-	-	-
Sensitive to your needs?	Y	37	5	23		37	5	261	191	4	83		23	4	151	15	1	14		15	1	14
	N	3	-	26		31	-			-	15		19	-			-	-		-	-	-
If No, please indicate		*		1		1					1		1									
Did he address your needs?	Y	31	5				5			4				4		12	1	11		12	1	11
	N	1	-				-			-				-			-	-		-	-	-
	Please indicate	*																				
45. Visited by your elder	Y	33	6	27	3652	33	6	27	21	4	17	3652	21	4	17	12	2	10		12	2	10
	N	6	-	6	5	6	-	6	4	-	4	5	4	-	4	2	-	2		2	-	2
If No, did you expect him	Y	5	-	5		5	-	5	5	-	5		5	-	5		-	-			-	-
	N	1	-	1		1	-	1	1	-	1		1	-	1		-	-			-	-
Sensitive to your needs?	Y	24	4	20		24	4	20	16	3	13		16	3	13	8	1	7		8	1	7
	N	1	-	1		1	-	1	1	-	1		1	-	1		-	-		-	-	-
If No, please indicate		*																				
Did he address your needs?	Y	25	4	21		25	4	21	15	3	12		15	3	12	10	1	9		10	1	9
	N	-	-	-		-	-	-	-	-	-		-	-	-	-	-	-		-	-	-
	Please indicate	*																				

@ - questions answered by a widower 70+ who remarried

CATEGORY QUESTION	ALL							70+							80+						
	ALL	M	F	MAR	W	Wr	Ws	ALL	M	F	MAR	W	Wr	Ws	ALL	M	F	MAR	W	Wr	Ws
46. Visited by deacon?	Y 26	3	17	N/A	20	3	171	14	2	12	N/A	14	2	12	6	1	5	N/A	6	1	5
	N 20	3	13		20	3	739	12	2	10		12	2	10	8	1	7		8	1	7
If No, did you expect him	Y 4	1	91		41	1	121	3	1	2		3	1	2	1	-	1		1	-	1
	N 12	3	21		21	3	111	8	2	6		8	2	6	4	1	3		4	1	3
Sensitive to your needs?	Y 13	1	11		31	1		11	1	10		11	1	10	2	-	2		2	-	2
	N 1	-	1		13	-		-	-	-		-	-	-	1	-	1		1	-	1
If No, please indicate	* 1				1																
Did he address	Y 13	2				2		11	1	10		11	1	10	2	1	1		2	1	1
your needs?	N 1	-				-		1	-	1		1	-	1	-	-	-		-	-	-
Please indicate	* 1																				
47. What provides you the greatest support in your loss?																					
family	39	54	34		39	543	342	252	43	21		25	433	211	1410	1	13		14	1	139
friends	32	31	28		32	155	820	215	31	19		29	133	912	8715	1	98		10	1	871
minister	23	55	20		23		103	425	33	12		13		322	13	-	71		87	-	311
elder/deacon	11		10		11		530	22		32		42		19		-	31		15	-	
faith	40		35		40					21		52				2	1		13	2	
Bible reading	35		30		35					9		2				2				2	
Other	pray																				
48. Has your loss made you read the Bible more regularly and differently	Y 2611	43	22	1	26	432	228	176	22	15	1	17	221	154	9584	2	74		95	2	747
	N 2672	22	82	-	11	241	245	183	11	41	-	61	121	172	93	1	73		84	1	373
pray more regularly	Y 38	41	45	1	26		197	145	21	72	1	83		124		1	73		93	1	
and differently	Y 38		19	-	72					12	-	14				1				1	
appreciate church more	Y 38		7	1	38					4	1	5				2				2	
	N 38			-							-					-				-	
49. Since the loss of your spouse has it become more important for you to talk about your faith with others?	Y 2112	33	18	1	21	33	189	118	12	10	1	11	12	106	104	21	83		10	21	83
	N 2112		9	-	12					6	-	8							4		
50. Do you sense that your minister, elder, or deacon is afraid to talk about your late husband/wife for fear of hurting you?	Y -37	-7	-3		-3	-7	-30	-24	-4	-2		-2	-4	-20	-13	-3	-1		-1	-3	-10
	N -37		0		7					0		4				0			3		
51. Do you feel that talking about your late spouse should be																					
avoided	Y -2323	-3	-2	-	-2	-314	-202	-161	-1	-1	-	-1	-112	-151	-793	-	-5		-7	-	-59
	N 10	14	04	1	32	46	46	67	12	51	1	61	55	55		2	91		93	2	1
encouraged	Y 10		6	-	51					55	-	67				-				-	
	N 10			1	0						1					2				2	

Appendix "B"

**Cover letter re: Needs Assessment by Elders and Deacons about
Pastoral Care to the Aging**

Date:

Esteemed brothers,

I am working on a Thesis Project for the completion of my Doctor of Ministry (D.Min.) studies at McMaster Divinity College, Hamilton, Ontario. My area of interest relates to pastoral care to the aged, and my paper will focus on: Addressing the Pastoral Needs of the Aged from a Reformed Perspective.

In order to know what needs to address I have developed a needs assessment questionnaire pertaining to pastoral needs of the aging. Via your minister (or clerk in case of a vacancy), I have requested up to six members of your congregation who are 70 or older, to do a self-assessment as to what they consider to be their pastoral needs, and how these needs are met.

Another part of my study requires an assessment by ministers, elders and deacons of what they perceive the pastoral needs of the elderly to be. I have solicited the help of your minister (or clerk) to recruit four elders and two deacons as volunteers in the assessment study. In this way I have no idea who you, or the other five office bearers, are. If you are willing to participate, please complete the questionnaire by August 14, 1999, place it in the enclosed envelope, and hand it sealed to your minister (clerk). He will forward all the responses to me in one mailing. Do not put your name on the questionnaire or envelope. Participation is entirely voluntary. The questionnaire does not contain any questions whereby you can be identified or traced.

Your input is used solely for sampling what you and 250 other office bearers perceive to be the pastoral needs of the aged and how you strive to meet these needs. Note: this is not an evaluation of how you perform compared to elders and deacons elsewhere. All the responses will be compared, analysed and incorporated in the Project Thesis. Once the project has been completed and accepted by McMaster, all questionnaires will be destroyed.

Thank you for your cooperation,

**NEEDS ASSESSMENT BY ELDERS AND DEACONS
ABOUT PASTORAL CARE TO THE AGING**

1. Please indicate whether you are an Elder Deacon

2. What is your age group (please circle one) 35-45 55-65 65+

3. Where do you see the greater need for your pastoral work
 - Singles
 - Families
 - Youth
 - Middle-Aged
 - Elderly

4. Who would you classify as elderly persons 65-70 71-75 76+

5. Do you make a distinction between the elderly, the aged, and the aging Y N
 Please explain _____

6. This questionnaire is about pastoral care to the aging. What would you consider to be the better term/classification:
 - pastoral care to the aging
 - pastoral care to the elderly
 - pastoral care to the aged
 Please indicate the reason for your selection _____

7. How many persons (70+) do you have in your district/section _____

8. How often do you visit each person/family:
 - monthly
 - quarterly
 - bi-annually
 - yearly

9. If yearly, why not more often:
 - time restraint
 - uncomfortable visiting elderly
 - feel more than once a year is not necessary
 - other _____
 • If "other", would you care to comment _____

10. Are you aware of the difference between "chronologically old" and "functionally old" Y N

QUESTIONS	CATEGORY	ALL ELDERS & DEACONS	ELDERS ONLY					DEACONS ONLY			
			ALL	30-44	45-54	55-64	65+	ALL	30-44	45-54	55-64
1 What are you?	Elder	103	103	50	14	29	10	-	-	-	-
	Minister	3	3	-	1	2	-	-	-	-	-
	Deacon	31	-	-	-	-	-	31	22	4	5
2 What is your age group?	30-44	72	50	50	-	-	-	22	22	-	-
	45-54	16	15	-	15	-	-	1	-	1	-
	55-64	36	31	-	-	31	-	5	-	-	5
	65+	13	10	-	-	-	10	3	-	3	-
3 Where do you see the greater need for your pastoral work?	Singles	21	14	6	2	6	-	6	5	-	1
	Families	64	53	28	8	13	4	11	6	3	2
	Youth	47	39	19	8	8	4	8	6	-	2
	Middle-Aged	4	2	1	-	1	-	2	1	-	1
	Elderly	38	25	9	1	11	4	13	12	1	-
4 Who would you classify as elderly persons?	65-70	46	35	22	2	7	4	11	10	1	-
	71-75	72	58	27	8	18	5	14	9	2	3
	76+	31	24	6	3	11	4	7	4	1	2
5 Do you make a distinction between elderly, aged, aging?	Y	45	36	16	1	14	5	9	6	1	2
	N	79	58	29	12	14	3	21	15	3	3
6 What is better term? Pastoral care to the	aging	22	18	6	3	8	1	4	2	1	1
	elderly	99	74	35	11	22	6	25	18	3	4
	aged	10	9	5	1	2	1	1	1	-	-
7 How many persons (70+) do you have in your district/section?					Range is from 0 - 50 (50 was listed by a minister). Average per respondent is about 4 elderly persons.						
8 How often do you visit each person/family?	monthly	14	9	3	1	5	-	5	3	1	1
	quarterly	39	34	14	3	13	4	5	3	2	-
	bi-annually	45	36	21	6	7	2	9	5	2	2
	yearly	48	32	16	7	8	1	16	11	3	2
9 If yearly, why not more often?	time restraint	29	24	16	3	5	-	5	5	-	-
	uncomfortable visiting	3	3	2	1	-	-	-	-	-	-
	more than 1/yr is not necessary	15	10	5	3	-	2	5	3	2	-
	other										
10 Do you know the difference between "chronologically old" and "functionally old"?	Y	109	91	41	14	28	8	18	11	2	5
	N	25	13	9	1	2	1	12	10	2	-

QUESTIONS	CATEGORY	ALL ELDERS & DEACONS	ELDERS ONLY					DEACONS ONLY				
			ALL	30-44	45-54	55-64	65+	ALL	30-44	45-54	55-64	
11	What do you perceive to be the role of the elderly within the congregation?		For comments see section 11.2.5									
12	What do you perceive to be your role toward the elderly in the congregation?		For comments see section 11.2.6									
13	Do you consider yourself sensitive to the needs of the aged?	Y N	121 10	91 9	44 5	12 2	28 -	7 2	30 1	22 -	4 -	4 1
14	Do you familiarize yourself with the needs of the aged?	Y N	116 14	87 12	41 6	10 4	27 2	9 -	29 2	21 1	4 -	4 1
15	What do you perceive to be the greatest pastoral need of the aged?											
	loneliness		84	64	28	8	21	7	20	14	3	3
	loss of purpose in life		37	34	18	5	7	4	3	2	-	1
	boredom		14	10	3	2	4	1	4	4	-	-
	stimulation to get involved		38	25	12	3	7	3	13	10	3	-
	other											
16	Do you consider visiting the aged different from visiting widows and widowers?	Y N	78 54	64 39	35 14	9 6	15 15	5 4	14 15	9 11	2 2	3 2
17	Difficulties in visiting the elderly?		For comments see section 11.2.8									
18	Do you have difficulty communicating or keep a conversation going?	never with some with most	47 86 11	36 66 11	15 34 7	5 8 3	12 19 -	4 5 1	11 20 -	8 14 -	2 2 -	1 4 -
19	Is your age an obstacle to visiting the elderly?	Y N	18 115	15 87	13 36	2 13	- 30	- 8	3 28	3 19	- 4	- 5
20	In your visits to do you speak about their late spouse?	usually seldom never why not	75 46 4	60 34 3	26 15 3	7 8 -	21 8 -	6 3 -	15 12 1	10 8 1	2 2 -	3 2 -

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