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# faith in FOCUS

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# Finishing our course with joy

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## Editorial

A few days before writing this, I was listening to R C Sproul, who commented that the age in which we live, is the most hedonistic and sensual in the history of the world. As a society we are absorbed in the pursuit of pleasure and self-indulgence is the highest good and aim of human life.

Maybe that is why, when the topic of retirement comes up, the conversation switches to everything we want to do, now that we have more time. A new car, a camper van, trips to some exotic destination, a new home, fishing, sailing, cruising, sleeping in, new hobbies – the list could go on.

None of these things are wrong in and of themselves, there is a time and place for these pursuits, as long as they do not become the be all and end all of our retired life, or anyone's life for that matter.

Have 20<sup>th</sup>-century Christians adopted the same idea as their worldly counterparts, in that when we attain the age of 65, we are entitled to superannuation and the gold card, and everything else that comes with that?

I don't mean to come across as judgemental or mean spirited, mainly because I also am about 21 months away from the legal age of retirement, if the Lord wills.

However, I believe there is a lot more that the Christian can do in his or her retirement. Becoming the proverbial sport-mad couch potato, hobbyist or what have you, is not what the Lord has redeemed us for. He redeemed us not only for His glory, but also for His service. Our enlistment, was for a lifetime, no less. It brings to mind the triple-S of the Heidelberg Catechism – Sin, Salvation and Service, or gratitude or thankfulness.

There are many good examples around us of those who use their time in a positive and meaningful way in service to the Lord. Service is what we are here for. We are never too old or decrepit to be of service to the King of kings and it pleases Him to use us. Let us take the time to re-evaluate our views on retirement and seek to finish our course with joy.

To Him be the glory.

Our contributors give us very good reasons to reconsider our ideas of retirement.

Mr Ben McDonald considers the positivity and necessity of continuing to bear fruit as we grow old.

Mr Joshua Flinn dispels a worldly myth about retirement.

Mr Walter Walraven looks forward to active service in retirement as other godly retired saints before him.

Mrs Sally Davey takes a look at the good we can do when working.

*Letters from New Zealand, Focus on faith with J C Ryle, Books in focus and Focus on home.*

Mr Terry L Johnson enquires "Is reformed worship Eurocentric?"

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Ben McDonald

# They still bear fruit in old age . . .

I remember my grandmother fondly. She was a faithful Christian, and a jovial, kind-hearted, matriarchal figure in our family. She worked hard constantly and in many different ways: in the church, in the local community, and with her large family. She was even the local mayor at one stage and has a child-care centre named after her!

But what I remember and love about her most is not her achievements or work ethic, as impressive as they were.

When I was 18 or 19, after I had quit university and was struggling to find work, she sat next to me at church one day. When the offering bag came around, she discreetly took \$10 from her lowly means, stuffed it in my hand, and insisted: “Now don’t put that in the bag. That’s for you!”

\$10 doesn’t get you very far of course, not unlike the poor widow’s last two copper coins in Mark 12. But, like the widow’s, her gift is far greater and is reaping far more than things that moth and rust destroy. Far more, I’m sure, than she would have ever thought.

### Psalm 92

Psalm 92 is a wonderful psalm that celebrates the works of God. God is working to turn back evil and destroy his enemies (vv5-9). He is establishing his people as holy and righteous before him (vv10-15). By his covenant love and faithfulness he is making his people thankful, glad and joyful (vv1-4).

Like a towering date palm tree or a cedar of Lebanon, or an old NZ Kauri tree, perhaps, as verse 14 says, “They still bear fruit in old age; they are ever full of sap and green ...”

What’s the secret of their ongoing strength and vitality? Not a new miracle super-food diet or pain-relieving vitamin supplement. Not some celebrity’s yoga,

Pilates or mindfulness routine, or even the latest edition of ‘What’s good for you’ magazine.

Verse 13: “They are planted in the house of the Lord.” And the purpose? “... to declare that the Lord is upright; he is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in him” (v15).

The house of the Lord – the ministry of the temple with all its holy articles, priests, and sacrifices, the Old Testament dwelling place built for God’s name and glory – pictures and anticipates the wonderful sacrificial person and work of Christ on the cross. Being rooted and established in him by God’s grace through faith, we produce fruit that glorifies God and honours his name.

Christians flourish and bear fruit because of the gracious, loving and faithful work of our God through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, empowered by the Holy Spirit – even in old age. For God’s people, producing fruit ceases when life ceases.

Producing fruit sounds a bit like hard work, though, doesn’t it? Maybe it’s even a younger person’s work? How can a believer bear fruit in old age when, instead of feeling like we’re full of sap and green, we increasingly feel like we’re full of aches, pains and, sometimes, complaints?

Our older years often come with significant and under-rated challenges: isolation, loneliness, limitations and impairments. People you’ve known and loved all your life are dying. The world around you has changed rapidly, and not always for the better. When we start feeling our age, we might even be inclined to question our usefulness.

I’m 43. Unless you’re my kids, that’s not that old. Yet I know already that I can’t do some of the things that I was doing 20 or 25 years ago. But then, those

Though we do have life-seasons of intense busyness and activity, don’t mistake these for fruit — that was Martha’s kind of thinking (Luke 10:38-42). Because life *does* slow down, eventually. And *you* will slow down eventually as well. That’s life in a fallen world with bodies that are limited, wear out and don’t last forever.

things aren't necessarily what the Psalmist – and the Lord – meant by 'fruit.'

### What is 'fruit'?

Fruit is not merely exhaustive and exhausting activity: working long hours, endlessly driving children around from place to place, attending meetings and Bible studies, and volunteering for every activity or ministry the church is running. And before I forget it, church cleaning.

Though we do have life-seasons of intense busyness and activity, don't mistake these for fruit – that was Martha's kind of thinking (Luke 10:38-42). Because life *does* slow down, eventually. And *you* will slow down eventually as well. That's life in a fallen world with bodies that are limited, wear out and don't last forever.

But slowing down in old age with the limitations that come with it, doesn't translate to unfruitfulness. It's actually a great opportunity.

Why is that?

Look again at Ps 92:15. Fruit is "... to declare that the Lord is upright; he is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in him."

Producing fruit is to testify to God's

great name and his gracious, loving and holy character especially as we see it in Jesus. Or as Galatians 5:21-22 puts it: "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control ..."

Fruit is Christ-likeness exhibited in word, deed and character. It is spoken, acted and radiated. Your activity changes over time, but your life is always a testimony to who your Lord is and what he has done for you.

After many years of life, especially as a follower of Jesus, you see and experience all manner of trials, adversity, controversies, fears and sorrows. You also see and hear plenty of occasions for thanks, praise and joy. And all of it is for God-dependant character-formation and is, therefore, fruit-inducing.

Having eyes to see God's gracious and providential hand in each trial, and hearts that are willing and desire to be shaped, cultivated and taught by him, gives us ample opportunity for declaring and exhibiting the fruit God has called us for.

Don't underestimate the power of your testimony to God's work in your life, even as you age. It is he who works in us, both to will and to work for his



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good pleasure (Phil 2:13).

Your testimony is not about how wonderful you are and how great things were back in the day, but how great and wonderful God and his grace are – and continue to be.

And don't underestimate the effect that a humble, godly example can have on others – especially the young.

### **Two golden oldies**

Two examples may be helpful: Mr A and Mr B. These are actual men I knew some years ago who were godly, older brothers whose faith is now sight, though I think they were in their 80s at the time. In my mind, these men are up there with the 'heroes' of faith in Hebrews 11.

Mr A's wife of many years gradually succumbed to the effects of Alzheimer's disease. When he could no longer care for her adequately at home and her instability of mind and character was increasingly becoming a danger to herself and others, she moved into specialised care. Mr A sold the family home and moved to within a short distance of his wife's new place of residence.

He visited her daily. As time went on and her condition worsened to the point that she no longer recognised him at all and had little ability to function independently, he continued his daily visits. He would feed her, brush her hair, and read to her – every day. Mr A loved his wife as Christ loved his bride, and gave himself up for her.

But Mr A also loved people. He got to know the staff, other residents and some of their visitors. He used the opportunity to visit the lonely, to testify to God's goodness and declare to them that God was his rock.

Whenever I asked Mr A how he was, his understated yet cheerful answer was always the same: "Oh, alright." I'm thankful to have known him and for his example of bearing fruit in old age.

Mr B was a career farmer, a gentle giant of a man with a gammy leg and missing a finger or two if I recall correctly. As all farmers do, he knew the highs and lows of working on the land, including the devastating effects of bush fires. He also knew the grief and heartache of burying a child.

When his son-in-law was diagnosed with and treated for a brain tumour, he devoted most of his post-retirement hobby-farm to growing fresh produce for his son-in-law's radically specialised diet. He also regularly provided fresh eggs, fruit and vegies for struggling families, includ-

ing RTC student families.

When I had told my elder that our family was thinking of moving to NZ at some stage, Mr B called me the following day. In his beautifully measured yet direct manner, he said to me: "I don't want you to go." There's little that encourages the believer's soul more than knowing you are loved and cared for.

No one had to tell these men to do what they did. Their words, deeds and character were an out-working of God's work in them. And I don't look up to them because they were simply active. Nor do I sense the need to copy precisely what they did – I'm quite certain that I'll never be much of a farmer!

They are, however, wonderful examples to me of older Christ-like men using what the Lord had given them for the purpose of bearing fruit. They were examples of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control – all rooted in the sure knowledge that Christ was their Lord and Saviour.

### **Unfruitfulness**

Before we finish, it's worth taking a quick look at what makes us unfruitful. Peter tells us in 2 Pet 1:3-9. Unfruitfulness is not caused by aging bodies. Verse 8 says that it is the lack of and the failure to increase in the qualities described in verses 5-7 – faith, virtue, knowledge, self-control, steadfastness, godliness, brotherly affection and love – which leads to ineffectiveness and unfruitfulness in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Nothing is more unfruitful than forgetting our Lord and what he has done for us, and reverting to a self-driven, self-focused way of life.

### **What to remember**

Remember that when Jesus said that his yoke is easy and his burden is light, he wasn't lying. It's still true even in old age. Coming to him in repentance and faith, learning and continuing to learn from him – that he is gentle and lowly in heart – gives rest for the soul and produces fruitful labour, character and testimony in life, for the glory of God.

The call to bear fruit in this life for God's glory doesn't end until you end. Because the wonder of God and his grace in Jesus doesn't end.

Established in him, you will still bear fruit in old age.

*Mr Ben McDonald is the minister of the Reformed Church in Wellington.*

**But slowing down in old age with the limitations that come with it, doesn't translate to unfruitfulness. It's actually a great opportunity.**

# Spiritual gerontology

The world seeks to sell us the idea that retirement and rest are synonymous and comprehensive. They reason that by the time you've hit 65, you'd done your stint and contributed all that society can require of you — you deserve a break.

### **“What use are elderly people in the kingdom of God?”**

*“Stand up in the presence of the aged, show respect for the elderly and revere your God. I am the LORD.” Lev 19:32*

On May 20, 2000, John Piper addressed a college audience of 40,000 students at the fourth Passion Conference in Memphis. In his address, he spoke about two elderly members of his church: Ruby Eliason, 80 years old, single all her life, an ex-nurse — and Laura Edwards, an ex-medical doctor. These two women had partnered together in their later years to minister to the sick and the poor in some of the most difficult places to reach in the world. He told of how just three weeks prior to his address, the brakes failed on the car which Ruby and Laura had been driving, and they went over a cliff. “Is this a tragedy?” he asked. “It’s not! I’ll read you what a tragedy is.”

He pulled out an excerpt from Reader’s Digest:

*‘Bob and Penny ... took early retirement from their jobs in the Northeast five years ago when he was 59 and she was 51. Now they live in Punta Gorda, Florida, where they cruise on their 30-foot trawler, play softball, and collect shells.’*

“That’s a tragedy,” he told the crowd, “and there are people in this country that are spending billions of dollars to get you to buy it. And I get 40 minutes to plead with you — don’t buy it. With all my heart I plead with you — don’t buy that dream... As the last chapter before you stand before the Creator of the universe to give an account with what you did: “Here it is, Lord — my shell collection. And I’ve got a good swing. And look at my boat.”

“Don’t waste your life” he said.

### **No longer useful?**

Dear brother, dear sister, as you approach your so-called ‘twilight years’, I want to impress upon you this truth: You’re no less useful in God’s hand than you were 40 years ago. Yes, you may spend more time each week at the doctor, you take more drugs to manage your pain, your arthritis is playing up, you need more sleep — and yet, God hasn’t finished with you. Why do I say that? Because you haven’t yet passed into glory — you haven’t yet finished the race. The only appropriate conclusion of this? That he still has good works for you left to perform this side of heaven (Eph 2:10)!

The world measures worth by ‘productivity’ or the ability to ‘add value’ in a particular setting. This is why people who lose their job in their late 50s struggle to find another job — the perception is that they won’t be as useful as someone in their 30s. Sadly, Christians have fallen into the trap of measuring their own usefulness in the same manner. I have talked to numerous people either facing retirement or in retirement, not sure what to do with their lives. They think that kingdom work is a ‘young person’s game’ and that their time has passed.

I put it to you, dear reader, that if this is how you view your own ability to contribute to kingdom work, you’ve blatantly misunderstood the nature of God’s kingdom and your place in it.

### **Retirement and rest**

As Piper pointed out, the world seeks to sell us the idea that retirement and rest are synonymous and comprehensive. They reason that by the time you’ve hit 65, you’d done your stint and contributed all that society can require of you — you deserve a break. As a result, retirement becomes the period where you’re able to treat yourself, burning through your savings to cram as much ‘leisure’ into your ‘twilight years’ before you end up arthritically bound to your lazy-boy.

But this attitude is terribly unbiblical.

Scripture teaches that through the entirety of our lives we should have a God-centered attitude towards rest and leisure – not just when you turn 65. This is reflected both in how we must approach the Sabbath day throughout our working lives, as well as the recognition that all good things come from God (Jas 1:17) rather than our own efforts (Luke 12:25).

Scripture also warns explicitly and regularly against inactivity and laziness. Consider David and the sins he committed in his *old* age when he allowed himself to be distracted from his responsibilities (David was 60ish years old when he slept with Bathsheba who was likely 21 at the time).

Too often old age and/or infirmity is used as an excuse to avoid doing what God requires of us. This is especially the case when it comes to personal sanctification: “He’s always been like that, he’s not about to change now!” There is nothing in Scripture which maintains that stubbornness or old-age is a legitimate justification for ignoring sin or weaknesses – instead, you’re still called to bear fruit in your old age (Psa 92:12-15). Therein lies joy and peace – not

in your taking a premature ‘rest’ from your spiritual labors. And just because it’s harder doesn’t mean God wants you to give up – since when has that ever been the case with kingdom work?

The work God made us for doesn’t stop until he calls us home. We’re given a harvest field to work in, a race to run, a battle to fight. Until Christ returns, all of us are responsible to use whatever gifts and talents and blessings he provides in order to serve him and spread his kingdom. You don’t retire from kingdom work this side of heaven. Your role may change drastically but God still has a purpose and a plan for you (and that role isn’t to simply ‘fill up time’ as you ‘wait to go’).

Certainly, when God has called us to serve in one way for a long time, we find it hard to imagine that we could be useful in any other way. This becomes a significant struggle as we approach any major change; it might be becoming an ‘empty nester’, or it could be stopping a nine-to-five job; it could also be that you’ve served in leadership for so long and now that responsibility is in the hands of others, or that you’ve contracted a life-changing disease. But far from

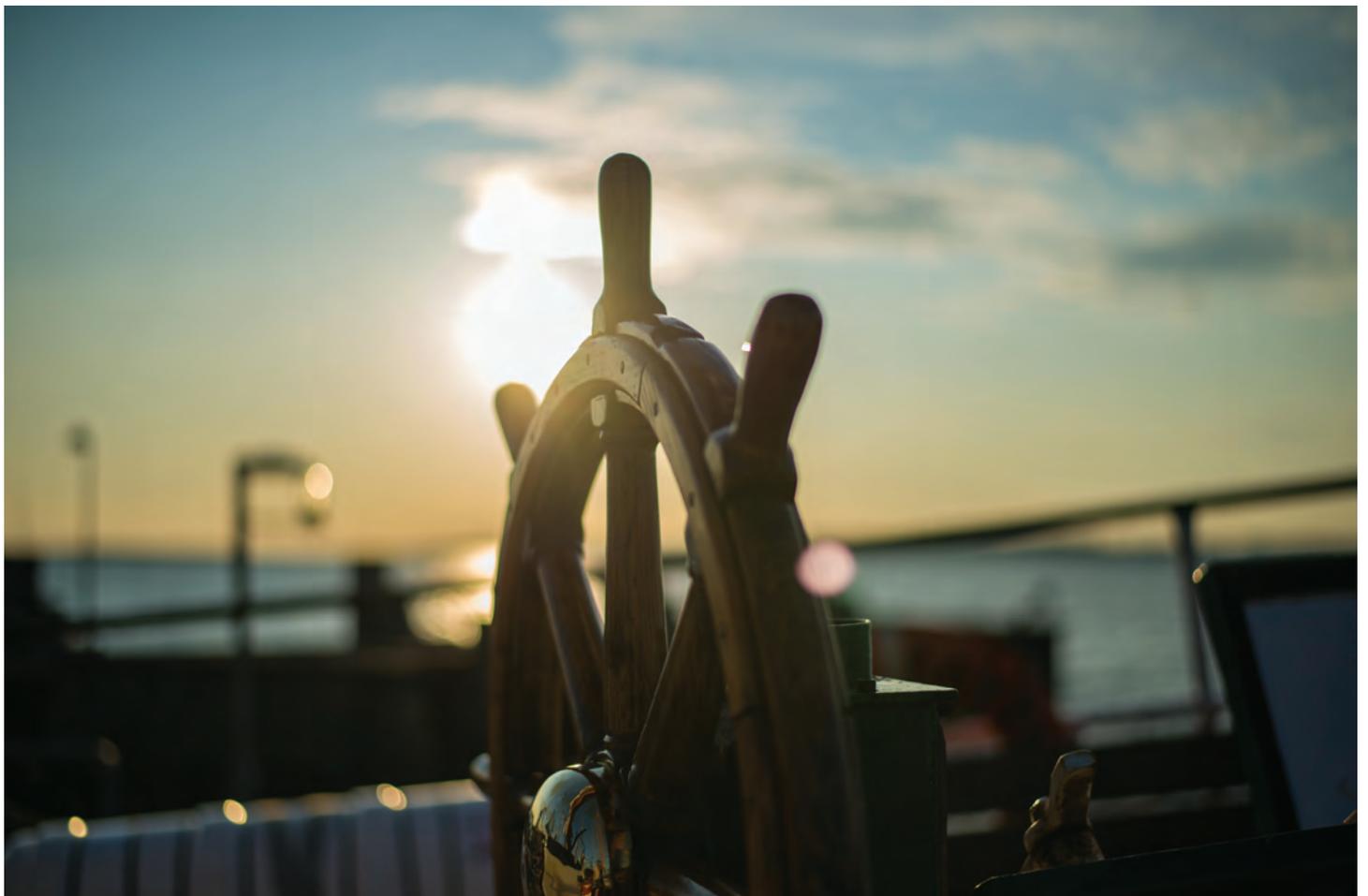


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You don't retire from kingdom work this side of heaven. Your role may change drastically but God still has a purpose and a plan for you (and that role isn't to simply 'fill up time' as you 'wait to go').

making you obsolete, all this means is that God intends to use you in a different capacity. There's no need to fear the unknown; he knows what he's doing.

### **Do not cast me off...**

God is so much greater than your flagging energy levels. His plan isn't restricted by your arthritis or your sciatica pain. Neither is your contribution to kingdom work measured by your youthfulness or your ability to keep up with technological progress; it's not improved by a larger bank balance or the size of the inheritance you plan to leave for your kids.

Christ's kingdom does not work like the kingdoms of man. Earthly capabilities and measures of productivity and worth are meaningless to God. He "chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong" (1 Cor 1:27).

It is striking that David cried out to God in Psalm 71: "Do not cast me off in the time of old age; forsake me not when my strength is spent." His flailing physicality had led his opponents to conclude that "God has forsaken him" and "there is none to deliver him." They thought his weakness shows that his time is over, that God won't be interested in him anymore; but they couldn't have been more wrong!

To put it plainly, God has never required your youth or money or qualifications or vocational experience in order to get his work done. Rather, he takes what is broken and uses that instead: "He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak" (Isa 40:29). And he never abandons his people despite their frailty (Heb 13:5).

### **So what can I do?**

David says in Psalm 71: "So even to old age and gray hairs, O God, do not forsake me, until I proclaim your might to another generation, your power to all those to come." Despite his age, he desires to declare the name of his God to the generations which follow. This means the Great Commission *still* applies to you: minister to (and pray for) your neighbors as well as the church. Be eager to present the great works of your God to all men (Rom 1:15).

Titus 2 is also helpful: Specific responsibilities are given to older people in the church. Perhaps most prominent is setting the example of godliness. Paul exhorted the *young* man Titus to teach *older* men "to be sober-minded, dignified, self-controlled, sound in faith, in

love, and in steadfastness. Older women likewise are to be reverent in behavior, not slanderers or slaves to much wine. They are to teach what is good..." (Titus 2:2-3). Make use of the blessing of extra time to mentor a younger man or woman in your church (don't wait for them to come to you but set the example). As your health allows, meet up with young mothers during the day to encourage them, or offer to babysit so younger parents can nurture their marriages. Encourage your minister (and other leaders) and pray *with* him (them) for the flock – speak the truth in love for the building up of the body but don't feel the need to correct (criticize) everything.

Despite the physical and emotional pains God gives, as much as you're able, don't give up meeting with your fellow brothers and sisters in Christ (Heb 10:25). Build them up in love (Eph 4:15), weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice (Rom 12:15). Don't allow yourself to become isolated from the body of Christ! Some of the most encouraging examples I've had in my life are elderly people who love their Lord so deeply that they come to worship him despite great infirmity (even terminal cancer).

Above all, don't neglect the greatest blessings: You're given an amazing opportunity to spend more time meditating on the delights of your God than ever before! For so much of your lives, you've been distracted by the needs of the moment... now you have time to study the Word and deepen your knowledge of God; to taste and see that he is good (Psa 34:8); to draw closer to him (Jas 4:8).

I urge you beloved: don't waste the best years of your life! God says that your grey hairs are a crown of glory not of shame (Prov 16:31). God has been training you your entire life for these final years before heaven – make use of this remarkable honor to serve him! And because you've been granted longer years, you're able to testify all the more powerfully to the great works of grace and mercy that your Redeemer and Friend has done in your life. Lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and trust that God will never forsake the instruments in his hands.

*Mr Joshua Flinn is the minister in New Plymouth, which is a church plant under the supervision of the Reformed Church in Palmerston North.*

## Finishing our course with joy

Walter Walraven

# Service as usual!

By the time this article is published, it will be approximately 21 months until I reach the legal age for retirement, should the Lord will it. And quite frankly, I consider the whole prospect a little daunting and a little exciting at the same time. It will be the full stop at the end of 50 years of working in the same industry. Or, will it?

Quite often when the subject of retirement comes up, the conversation focuses on what the retiree is going to do with all the extra time that he or she has, how much money they have saved, not to mention ideas about moving to a new home or retirement village, trips abroad, hobbies, sports, pastimes, part time work, etc. So very often, it all seems focused on self.

Interestingly enough, some Christian people have these same thoughts. I remember hearing one old retired saint say, "I have done my bit, now it is time for the young to do theirs." When I heard

this, something didn't quite sound right to me. After all, isn't the Christian man or woman a servant of the Lord, and are they not saved to serve? It seems strange that one could think there might be an end of tenure for the Christian, who was purchased at a price and has become a bondservant of the Lord.

My experience since conversion has been that life as a Christian is a life of service – thankful, joyful and loving service to the King of kings. Service may vary, but in essence, all of life is service. Whether you are single or married, your service begins when you enlist in the Lord's kingdom, which for some may be from their childhood, for others upon conversion. Something as menial as church cleaning, or as lofty as the public offices of minister, elder and deacon are service. Being a husband, wife, father, mother or child are service. Your vocation is service. Your retirement is service too!



Photo by Cassandra Ortiz on Unsplash

A few years ago, retirement was not a subject that I was interested in. As I approach that age, I now consider it from the stand point of what can I do, how may I serve my Lord. Quite frankly, I am not interested in sitting in a rocking chair, while I have the ability to do things for the building up of the body of Christ. If it be possible, I would at least like to continue to edit *Faith in Focus*, should that find agreement with the appointments committee at the next synod.

Over the years a few articles on retirement have been published in *Faith in Focus*. I would like to explore what others have done in their retirement to encourage us to use our time well in service to the Lord and His saints and to finish our course with joy.

There are a few people that I believe have been an example to me who ceased their lifetime of paid work and continued to serve the Lord in other meaningful ways. It is their example that I would hope to emulate, should the Lord grant it. I shall only mention their works, and not their names.

Retirement was a lot busier for one man than his former fulltime work. Apart from being engaged in work in his congregation, there was also opportunity to take part in small group Bible studies with students and neighbours interested in the gospel.

Another found further opportunities to serve on a Christian school board and continue to serve the Lord there while also enjoying opportunities to keep fit for the purpose.

One person had a particular gift in teaching and used that to educate others in biblical things, which was a good outlet for his skill set and a benefit for those eager to learn.

A retired couple moved house to another town to make themselves useful in building up the body of Christ. Others made themselves available to work as presbytery clerks and treasurers freeing up ministers from such tasks.

As for those who may be named, Mr Pieter van der Wel (accompanied by his wife Joanna) has had the opportunity to serve as an elder under the oversight of the RCNZ and the PRCA in Vanuatu in order to help out in that small church.

Other avenues of service to the Lord can be found in the community around us. We can volunteer our services in many organisations that need manpower, or we might even consider the idea

of part time work, where we come into contact with people on a regular basis, with a view of letting our light shine, so that Our Father in heaven may be glorified.

I still view retirement with some apprehension, and I do hope that in the

Lord's providence my wife and I will be able to continue to render to the King of kings faithful service in all that we do.

Soli Deo Gloria

*Mr Walter Walraven is a member of the Reformed Church in Silverstream.*

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## Finishing our course with joy

Sally Davey

# J.I. Packer on FINISHING OUR COURSE WITH JOY

There's nothing particularly surprising about suggesting there ought to be a great difference between the way the followers of Christ age and the way those who reject him grow old. The word "hope" has a great deal to do with it, of course. But sadly, even those of us who claim to love the Lord Jesus need reminding that our older selves should be every bit as useful to him as our younger, more energetic versions were. The very fact that an older person working hard into her 80s and 90s amazes us all just proves my point.

One such person, Queen Elizabeth II, born in 1926, still works almost full time. The recent Diamond Jubilee of her accession to the throne was what set British-Canadian writer J.I. Packer thinking about the whole business of aging. Packer, a mere three months younger than Her Majesty, had this to say:

*"The Queen is a very remarkable person. Tirelessly, it seems, she goes on doing what she has been doing for six decades and more: waving in shy friendliness to the crowds past whom she is transported, and greeting with a smile one and another, children par-*

*ticularly, whom she meets in her walkabouts. It is more than sixty years since she publicly committed herself before God to serve Commonwealth citizens all her life. She has done it devotedly up to now, and will undoubtedly continue doing it as long as she physically can ... She is a Christian lady resolved to live out her vow till she drops. She merits unbounded admiration from us all."*

Packer expands the point in the rest of his short book. In exploring the necessity of aging and, without denying the waning of strength and attendant physical troubles associated with aging, he explores the many possibilities Christians have for active service in their older years.

One thing Packer notes, in particular, is that elderly Christians are "veterans of the war between the forces of Christ and those of Satan." That is, they have learned a great deal about the long, drawn-out fight we all face with the world, the flesh and the Devil. They have much to teach younger Christians who may be more naïve about we're up against in our walk with Christ.

Furthermore, older Christians have learned much about fellowship with the Lord in prayer and Bible-reading; about journaling with self-examination; about corporate worship and fellowship; and about the value of extended periods of silence and solitude. These lessons are a precious resource for God's people in the church. If only older members were willing to share them, and younger members would ask to hear about them, we would all benefit.

However, Packer is also realistic and has some other wise words about this sharing. He knows that younger people can feel pushed around by the unwanted "advice" of their elders. Here's how he put this when talking about family interactions:

*"For seniors to invade family circles unasked – dictatorial in-laws, for instance, who have not grasped that in life, as in Scripture, loyalty to one's spouse should trump the claims of parents – is undoubtedly unhealthy. But it is also bad for families to ignore mature wisdom that is available to them in the persons of older relatives and friends. Christian seniors should make a point of*

*being available to give as much help of this kind as families are willing to receive, and of showing themselves affectionate, equable, and (if I may coin a word) unsnubbable as they do so. And they should remember that, in any case, the larger need and the wider sphere of ministry to which they should be attending is in the church."* (pp. 97-8)

In fact, Packer makes the good of the church the strongest focus of his plea for older Christians to make the remainder of their lives useful to Christ. Addressing them directly, he suggests they ask God, and the leaders in our churches, as to how "you might do the best you can with what you have got and model in your own person the mobilizing of over-sixty-fives to continue giving all they can for as long as they can to contribute to the mutual ministry that goes on within God's flock." (p. 98)

He is aware of the temptations in our culture to spend our older years winding down, caring for ourselves and generally enjoying ourselves. He notes that "taking their cue from the world around, modern Western churches organize occupations, trips, parties, and so

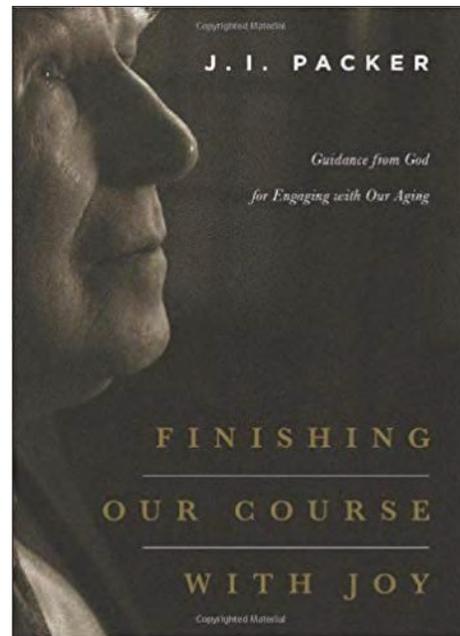


Photo by Hanson Lu on Unsplash

forth for their seniors and make pastoral provision for the shut-ins, but they no longer look to these folks as they do to the rest of the congregation to find, feed and use their spiritual gifts. In this they behave as though spiritual gifts and ministry skills wither with age. But they don't; what happens, rather, is that they atrophy with disuse." (pp. 64-5) I found this observation very telling. How often do we expect – or even ask – a person in his or her seventies to lead a Bible study group, disciple a young person in need of help or speak at a youth camp? It is obvious that people in their seventies are often in quite good health and have sufficient energy and clarity of mind for such activities. Why are they not doing such things?

This is a most stimulating and interesting little book. It would make for useful discussion around the whole church. I'm persuaded we could all benefit from Packer's wisdom. He's thought about the subject a great deal, and has insights well worth considering. As an older man himself – he is 90 now – and one who has recently lost his eyesight through macular degeneration, he has had to adjust his own service to Christ accordingly. I'm reminded of Milton's famous line in the "Sonnet on His Blindness" which reads, "They also serve who only stand and wait." I do pray that Packer finds joy as he runs the rest of his course in the Saviour's service.

I thought I would end this brief summary of Packer's book by noting a few real-life examples of the kinds of contributions that God's people have made in older age. One could start with Moses, who led the people of Israel until they reached the border of the Promised Land when he was 120 years old. Joshua was leading Israel in battle well beyond our contemporary retirement age. The apostle John was leading the church at Ephesus with sufficient vigour to earn himself imprisonment on the island of Patmos around the age of 90. Polycarp the early church martyr and leader of the church at Smyrna met his death at the age of 86. If God gives the strength, why not use it with zeal for his honour and glory?

One last example, from nearer our own time. I have just begun reading a biography of Dwight L. Moody, the famous late-nineteenth-century evangelist. Moody's father died when he had only just started school His mother was left with seven young children and she was about to give birth to twins. Credi-

tors took many of the household possessions. It was a dire situation, and she only survived with the help of a kind brother. But encouragement also came from another quarter. Moody's biographer, Kevin Belmonte, tells the story well:

*"Betsy Moody might have despaired, but an unlooked-for mercy arrived in the person of the Reverend Oliver Everett, the aging minister of the First Congregational Church.*

His kindness was a sunshine of hope. Materially, he brought the Moody family food and other staples from his own home. He offered to help with the children's schooling and urged Betsy to keep the family together. Aging though he was, he wasn't daunted by the prospect of spending hours in a home filled with active, energetic children. Some clergymen, as they grow older, become more quiet and retiring. Everett had a rare gift for expressing genuine, if modestly expressed, affection. Betsy Moody's children warmed to him. Young Dwight never forgot Everett's habit of placing an affectionate hand on his head, or saying a kind word."<sup>2</sup>

*The righteous flourish like the palm tree  
And grow like a cedar in Lebanon.  
They are planted in the house of the  
Lord;  
They flourish in the courts of our God.  
They still bear fruit in old age;  
They are ever full of sap and green.  
(Psalm 92:12-14)*

#### Endnotes

- 1 J.I. Packer, *Finishing Our Course With Joy* (Crossway, Wheaton, 2014), p. 12
- 2 Kevin Belmonte, *D. L. Moody: A Life* (Moody Publishers, Chicago, 2014), p. 23

*Mrs Sally Davey is a member of the Reformed Church in Dovedale, Christchurch.*



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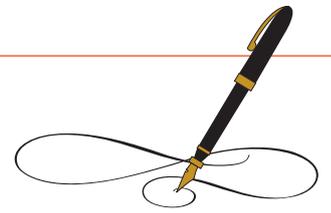
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# Work – an Opportunity for *GOOD*

What's important in your life? Sure, you'll mention church, family, and friends. But looking at life by another measure, what consumes a great deal of your time and energy – daily, weekly, and year by year? Surely it's our work. Many of us have mixed feelings about work. Yes, it enables us to support ourselves and our dependents – and to be generous to those who need our help. But it also takes us away from our families, it can add significant stress to our lives and even get us downright frustrated or discouraged at times.

For many people, work is their primary form of social interaction. Through work they make friends, plan activities, and get suggestions for good hairdressers, doctors, places to shop, etc. For new immigrants, workmates are invaluable for learning about the culture, social conventions, how to speak or not to speak. We make friends at work. Just think: for many people who happen to lose their job for whatever reason, it is a traumatic loss of social contact. Spare a kind thought for anyone you know who has no job at the moment. See if you can think of ways you could encourage them. They may be glad of the reassurance that there are people who care about them.

For many more than you might think, work is the primary gauge of their social status. Why else would the second question you ask a new acquaintance be "What do you do?" Meaning, what's your job? Learning the answer, your mind subconsciously ranks their value. Storeman? School cleaner? Checkout operator? Not so high. IT systems architect, financial analyst, medical consultant, barrister....? Wow! We all know whom we are more impressed by. My heart goes out to those who say apologetically, "I'm just a worker. Oh, I'm just a

part-time volunteer; a teacher's aide; a homemaker; a kitchen assistant." I know by the look on that person's face that they consider themselves of low social status because their pay or their importance in the workplace might not rate in the world's eyes. I sympathise – I've given that sort of answer myself. Because my work is at home and includes tasks that don't fit typical work definitions, I find myself tempted to try and make it sound more "professional". Silly, isn't it?

I often think of Mary's words (echoing Hannah's): "He has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate." (Luke 1:52). This is precisely what her son's ministry did. The world was turned upside down by a poor, homeless carpenter who was born in a stable and grew up in a despised region of the land of Judea. Those who consider themselves important in the world's eyes turn out to have no status in Jesus' kingdom, while the



Photo by Denisse Leon on Unsplash

humble poor enjoy spiritual privilege as his fellow-heirs. Likewise, the work we might do, in *God's* eyes, at least, has little to do with its value in the world's eyes, or the ways he might intend to use us for his purposes.

Which takes me to a book I have just read. Entitled *Work: Its Purpose, Dignity and Transformation*, it is written by theology professor Dan Doriani. (In case you think a theology professor would know little about the world of everyday work, Dan has worked in numerous menial jobs as a young person and to fund his many years of study. He knows what it's like to wash dishes in grotty restaurant kitchens, sell hardware, work with machines, paint buildings and much more). This book helps us see how our work has worth in *God's* sight; and illustrates the many ways we can truly make a difference in whatever capacity we work. By sharing a few of Doriani's insights, and adding some thoughts of my own, I'd like to give you a taste of what a *God*-focused view of work would look like, in contrast to the misconceptions that influence us today.

First of all, work is a *God*-given task that is good. *God* himself works. In John 5:17 *Jesus* said: "My Father is working until now, and I am working." *God* gave Adam work when he first created him; tending the plants and naming the animals. After he and Eve sinned they still worked, but their work became difficult, requiring effort and involving frustration. Weeds and disease meant more work, harder work, and constant repetition of it.

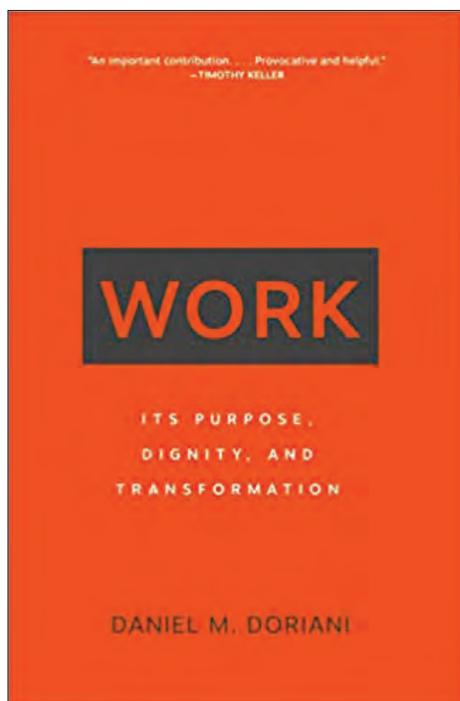
Dan Doriani has quite a lot to say about the nature of work, its purpose, and what makes it both wonderful and awful. He calls it the glory and misery of work. Made in *God's* image, we have creative capacity and a desire to produce things, because they delight us and bring pleasure to others; and also because it assures us of our usefulness. On the other hand, one of the great miseries of work is being required to do meaningless or repetitive tasks. While this sort of work may fill our need to earn income, and is better than being unemployed, it can be somewhat dehumanizing, since it is barely creative. It always helps if employers remember that their staff are people, not machines, and don't treat them as production units.

In Doriani's estimation, love is the most important factor to consider if we want to work in a way that pleases *God*. With love as our motive, serving our neighbor in doing our work makes it worthwhile, satisfying and purposeful all

at once. It can change many things about the way we work. Imagine, for instance, the rubbish truck worker. To you, it may seem soul-destroying to ride a rubbish truck day after day, collecting up other people's trash and taking it to a refuse station. Does it stimulate your mind? Is it well-paid? Does doing it change the world in any meaningful way? No, it has to be repeated next week, and the next, and the next. But imagine a world where rubbish is not collected. Piles of stuff at people's back doors. Heaps of bags overflowing on the streets attracting rats, mice, cats and neighbourhood dogs. Rubbish collectors, bread delivery truck drivers, those who milk cows on dairy farms, hospital cleaners, rest home carers, all these people who do what are considered to be low-skilled or low-status jobs are doing work that we all need and are loving us by doing it. Especially if they do it with care and excellence; and with a cheerful, gracious attitude to their fellow-workers and those who receive their service. Doriani says: "By working with his hands, *Jesus* showed that all honest labour is noble. By performing manual labor, *Jesus* honored shepherds, farmers, carpenters, servants, and everyone else who uses muscle power." (p. 18)

This is not to say that we shouldn't aspire to a position of greater responsibility, or to a different kind of work. Through further education or gaining the necessary experience we can open up new opportunities to make a difference in our world. Doriani is clear that some work has more importance than other kinds – *ie* is work which gives the person doing it greater influence in the workplace. However, the principle of serving others still applies – we just have more opportunities to do good to a wider group of people. But all of us have opportunity to love fellow workers and customers simply by doing our work cheerfully and well, with an attitude of "how can I help you?"

We may, however, find that our work is in difficult places where it is not easy to serve *God* or others. Doriani discusses this at length in Chapter 7 of his book. He includes some useful examples from the biblical record of faithful men and women who served autocrats: Joseph, Daniel and Esther among them. He shows how they exercised wisdom and courageously acted in faith. There are some useful principles for our own work which we can apply from these examples. He also tells the stories of contemporary Christians who have tried to be faithful to their calling in difficult work situations.



One of them I thought particularly interesting. This was “Mike’s” story (a true one, with secondary details changed). He was the chief financial officer for a media corporation that produced news content for magazines, radio and television. One year his corporation bought a lurid television program, followed by a small video company that produced pornography. Mike’s Christian friends told him he’d have to resign – this situation was too compromising for him. But Mike thought he’d take it further. He raised his concern at the next board meeting and told the directors these acquisitions violated the company’s principles and charter. They had to divest the company of them. The board said no, they were following good business practice by diversifying. Mike replied that when the regulatory agencies found out, they would be in trouble. One director countered, there’s nothing in the transaction that reveals the nature of their work – how would the agencies find out? Mike just said, they’ll find out because I am going to tell them. I loved that! Mike’s reply took courage and obviously put his job on the line. It was a high-risk action and he didn’t know how God would shape the outcome. He was walking by faith in saying what he did. In the event, it ended well – the corporation sold both enterprises and returned to their core business. If Mike had simply resigned, as his Christian friends told him he should, the good result might not have been achieved. Mike’s action certainly gave him opportunity to explain what he thought was right, and why. It was part of a Christian’s service of love for our neighbours. How else will they hear the truth if someone like Mike stays silent? Ultimately, giving answers like this reveals who we *really* work for. Yes, we might suffer some harsh consequences – but if our answers are truthful, gentle and respectful it may be surprising what kinds of outcomes God may produce for his own good purposes. (See pp. 117-8)

It seems to me that work – an integral and necessary part of all of our lives, is an opportunity for us to do a great deal of good. Whatever our work may be, we can do it creatively, with a cheerful attitude, and a desire to love our neighbor in the doing of it. By working well we honor God. And who knows how he may use it for our good, and for the good of numerous others?

### Endnote

1 Dan Doriani, *Work: Its Purpose, Dignity, and Transformation* (P&R Books, Phillipsburg, 2019)

## Letters from New Zealand

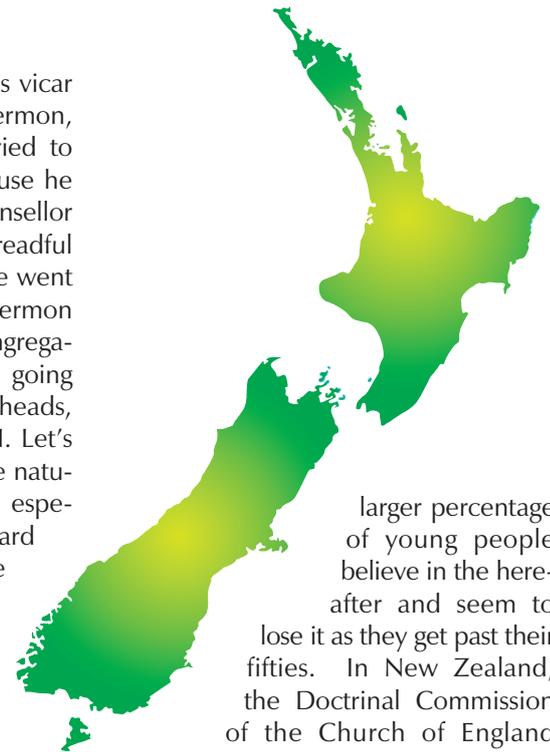
D. G. Vanderpyl

### July 1983

Once upon a time there was this vicar who had to preach his first sermon, and it really scared him. He tried to postpone that day with any excuse he could possibly find, but his counsellor was unrelenting. And so that dreadful day finally arrived. Trembling, he went into the pulpit and started his sermon with the question, “Beloved congregation, do you know what I am going to say?” They all shook their heads, and he continued, “Neither do I. Let’s stand for the benediction.” Quite naturally, everybody got most upset, especially the counsellor when he heard about it from the session. So, he again ordered him to the pulpit the following Sunday. “Well, beloved congregation,” he commenced, “do you know what I am going to say?” The congregation did not want to get caught out again, so they all nodded their heads in the affirmative. “In that case, since you know what I am going to tell you, there is no point for me to tell you. Let us stand for the benediction.” Of course, by now they were absolutely livid with the performance of their vicar. The session and the counsellor made it clear in no uncertain terms to get on with the preaching. And there he stood once again in the pulpit. Again he asked, “Brothers and sisters, do you know what I am going to say?” Some shook their heads in the negative and others nodded their heads in the affirmative. And this poor vicar instructed his congregation, “Let those who know tell those who don’t. Let’s stand for the benediction.” If you don’t believe this tale, then accept it as a 20th century parable of the abbreviated form of the Great Commission: “Let those who know, tell those who don’t.”

### September 1983

They held a survey in Australia about God. Over eighty per cent believe in Him but half of them don’t believe there is a devil. According to the poll, a



larger percentage of young people believe in the hereafter and seem to lose it as they get past their fifties. In New Zealand, the Doctrinal Commission of the Church of England created a new concept of God.

This is how they now describe our Heavenly Father: “God is the Creator, but He gives more freedom than the orthodox tradition has contemplated, both to natural forces in the world and to human beings. People are free to act as their consciences suggest, without being stopped or judged by God. God works to influence the world, or lure it to fit into his purposes, by love, a struggling and suffering love; this love continues the work of creation. God is not almighty in the normal sense.” Well, if the Aussies and the Kiwis believe in a God as just described above, then we might as well throw away all those surveys and polls, from God’s point of view anyway. I would say, we had better listen to and accept what Paul has to say in Romans that “God is true, but every man is a liar.”

A move to support overseas students at the College has found some ready response. I read in the Mangere bulletin that they have committed themselves to fully supporting such a student and the North Shore church has also made a commitment to sponsor one student over a four-year period. These churches have an opportunity to get to know their student via correspondence with them. There sure is some evidence that

our churches do take the promise made at Synod seriously, "To make home and overseas missions priority number one."

In New Zealand, doctors are protected by law against medical misadventure, should a patient or his/her relatives sue for negligence. It is now being suggested that ministers of religion should also obtain some professional advice about their legal position should a member of his church sue him as a result of having acted on counsel which ended in some serious financial or domestic reversal. In this day and age, anything can happen, and the day may come that the pastor will have to insure himself against a claim of professional negligence.

### October 1983

When a minister has finished a period of work in a congregation, either by accepting a call elsewhere or through retirement, much ado is made of his departure, with a special farewell evening and presentation. But when an elder or deacon has served his church faithfully for a number of years, the only mention made is often a little notice in the church bulletin, asking the congregation to submit names for a duo to replace elder or deacon so and so. Within the four walls of the session room, some words of appreciation will be spoken to the outgoing office bearer and the incoming replacement is welcomed to the court of the church. And that is the end of matter. The vast majority of office bearers will probably say that is quite okay with them. But at the same time, we can't escape this unequal recognition of faithful service to God's people. Therefore, it was so nice when I read in one of the church bulletins under Pastoral Notes that the brethren X and Y were thanked for their work of four years in the session and congregation. And it really moved me when I read, in the same bulletin, a little note from one of the retiring office bearers in which he took the opportunity of asking forgiveness for mistakes he had made as an elder in the church and to thank the congregation for the trust and understanding he found while in office. It is not often that one comes across a little piece like that.

In another bulletin of the same church, I came across a little note from their session, which also applies to all our other churches as it has been noticed here, there and elsewhere too.

This is what the session communicated to the congregation: "THE OFFERING AS WORSHIP: We thought it good to say a word about the evening offering since visitors to our evening services have commented on the surprising number of people who don't put anything in the offering bag. Now as you know, there is a simple reason for this, most of us make our contribution in the morning service. As we noted elsewhere, we are not suggesting that there is anything wrong with the amount we are giving. On the contrary, this is most encouraging. What we would like to suggest is that we remember that the offering is a part of worship. We collect money during the worship service not because that is a convenient time for doing so, but because it symbolises the giving of our lives to God. It is a part of worship just as song and prayers are. So, we are encouraging everyone to contribute to the evening offering. Even if it is a symbolic gift, you are saying something to the Lord and to others." Signed, Avondale Session.

May I also add something. With our system of church offerings by way of the envelope system, it has become customary for the father or mother to place the envelope in the offering bag and consequently the rest of the family has been excluded from taking part in this section of the liturgy. As a result, the children have never learned to "give" and when the time arrives that they become an "earning" member of the church, they have difficulty in developing the habit of faithful, regular giving. As one of them said to me once, "They (the parents), should have taught me when I was small because I don't even feel guilty when I let the plate go by during the morning and the evening service."

And finally, I read in the Silverstream bulletin that "session urges all members to see that their cars are properly locked during the worship services." Recently, a man was seen trying to get into the cars during the service. Well, that creature should have tried the church door instead of the cars, he might have been more successful and gained some long-term benefits.

### Abridged



*"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge."  
Prov 1:7*

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J C Ryle

# Self Inquiry

### Part 3

Let me ask, WHETHER WE KNOW ANYTHING OF PRACTICAL CHRISTIAN HOLINESS?

It is as certain as anything in the Bible that “without holiness no one will see the Lord” (Hebrews 12:14). It is equally certain that it is the invariable fruit of saving faith, the real test of regeneration, the only sound evidence of indwelling grace, the certain consequence of vital union with Christ.

Holiness is not absolute perfection and freedom from all faults. Nothing of the kind! The wild words of some who talk of enjoying “unbroken communion” with God for many months, are greatly to be deprecated, because they raise unscriptural expectations in the minds of young believers, and so do harm. Absolute perfection is for heaven, and not for earth, where we have a weak body, a wicked

world, and a busy devil continually near our souls. Nor is real Christian holiness ever attained, or maintained, without a constant fight and struggle.

The great Apostle, who said “I fight, I labour, I keep under my body and bring it into subjection” (1 Corinthians 9:27), would have been amazed to hear of sanctification without personal exertion, and to be told that believers only need to sit still, and everything will be done for them!

Yet, weak and imperfect as the holiness of the best saints may be, it is a real true thing, and has a character about it as unmistakable as light and salt. It is not a thing which begins and ends with noisy profession: it will be seen much more than heard. Genuine Scriptural holiness will make a man do his duty at home and by the fireside, and adorn his doctrine in the little trials of daily life. It will exhibit itself in passive graces as well as in active. It will make a man humble, kind, gentle, unselfish, good-tempered, considerate of others, loving, meek, and forgiving. It will not constrain him to go

out of the world, and shut himself up in a cave, like a hermit.

But it will make him do his duty in that state to which God has called him, on Christian principles, and after the pattern of Christ. Such holiness, I know well, is not common. It is a style of practical Christianity which is painfully rare in these days. But I can find no other standard of holiness in the Word of God, no other which comes up to the pictures drawn by our Lord and His Apostles. In an age like this no reader can wonder if I press this subject also on men’s attention. Once more let us ask – In the matter of holiness, how is it with our souls? “How do we do?”

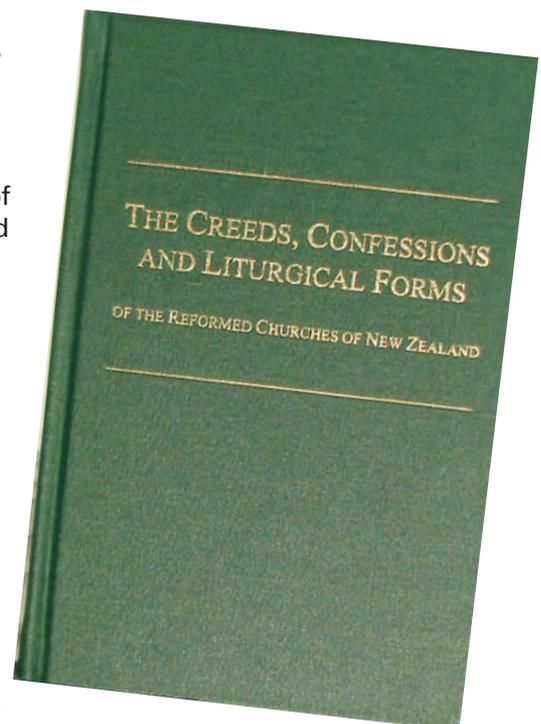
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# Is Reformed worship Eurocentric?

Terry L. Johnson

The immediate roots of Reformed worship clearly are anchored in Europe, even Northern Europe. Does this mean that Reformed worship is “Eurocentric” in some kind of limiting way?

Some critics argue that Reformed worship is what it is because of culturally relative distinctions that can be discarded in favor of other culturally relative distinctions of non-European cultures. They seem to have in mind a more emotionally expressive preaching and praying, a more physically and vocally active participation, and a more musically dominated approach. They tend to describe Reformed worship as overly intellectual, word-dominant, and rationalistic. These characteristics are attributed to the culture of Europe rather than to biblical or theological conviction.

Is this argument correct? Americans at this particular point in our history are obsessed with ethnicity and race. Nearly everything – religion, employment, politics, music, language – is reduced to race. Yet as Christians, our concern ultimately is not with race, but with truth. (This is not to say that there are not important racial issues past and present and future that must be dealt with, but rather that everything should not be viewed through the lens of race.) Although its immediate roots are in Europe, what are the distant roots of Reformed worship? Does it have foundational roots in the patristic church that are non-European? The answer is yes. To be Reformed is to be profoundly catholic.<sup>1</sup>

## **Christianity: Not a European Import**

Consider first that Christianity itself is not Eurocentric. Jesus and his disciples were Middle-Easterners. They were Semitic. The earliest churches were in Palestine, Syria, Asia Minor, Ethiopia, and North Africa. Not until Acts 16 does the gospel cross over into Macedonia and Europe. Thomas Oden, who is general editor of the landmark multi-volume *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, argues that the flow of ideas and influence that have given shape to historic Christianity was not north to south, as has been often assumed, from Europe to

Africa, but south to north, from Africa to Europe.<sup>2</sup> The intellectual centers of early Christianity in the earliest days were in the Middle East, in Alexandria, Egypt, and especially in North Africa. Classic ecumenical Christianity “was largely defined in Africa,” Oden writes. It is not a European import. “The Christian leaders in Africa figured out how best to read the law and prophets meaningfully, to think philosophically, and to teach the ecumenical rule of triune faith cohesively, long before these patterns became normative elsewhere.”<sup>3</sup>

For example, Tertullian (c. 160–220), reared in Carthage in North Africa (present day Tunisia) created much of Latin Christianity’s orthodox theological terminology (e.g., *substantia* as in “one substance,” *personae* as in “three persons,” and *trinitas*, “Trinity”) and developed the early Christological formulations. Origen (c. 185–c. 254), born in Alexandria, Egypt, was one of the first Christians to develop a systematic statement of faith. He was an energetic Bible commentator and an effective apologist. Cyprian (d. 258), also of Carthage, has been called “one of the greatest theologians in the history of the Christian church.” Athanasius of Alexandria, Egypt (c. 296–373), nicknamed the “Black dwarf,” by the way, was the great champion of orthodoxy against Arianism and famously stood for the doctrine of the Trinity *contra mundum*, against the world. His treatise, *On the Incarnation of the Word of God*, is a theological classic. Augustine of Hippo, born in present day Algeria (354–430), North Africa, is, of course, the single most important theologian in the history of the Christian church, writing with decisive insight on the subjects of the Trinity, the dual nature of Christ, original sin, free will, grace, predestination, and the church and sacraments. The Cappadocian fathers, natives of Asia Minor (present-day Turkey), were the decisive

influence leading to the final defeat of Arianism at the Council of Constantinople in 381.

Anyone who wishes to identify Christianity as “Western” or “European” or “white” must not only ignore the Middle Eastern origins of the Hebrew patriarchs and prophets, of Jesus and the apostles, but also the development of the defining doctrines of the Christian religion in the first four centuries. Historic orthodoxy and catholic doctrines of the creeds and counsels primarily are products of African and Middle Eastern church fathers.

When Christianity invaded Northern Europe, the missionary preachers did not encounter the Dutch Masters hanging in townhomes or Bach fugues being played in assembly halls. They encountered crude barbarism. The European culture that developed was the fruit of the interaction between Christianity and the native genius of the various people groups. Christianity is not European, but European culture owes much to Christianity.

### **Distant Roots of Reformed Worship**

Doxology is but the expression of theology. Given that the theological roots of Reformed orthodoxy primarily are non-European (and especially Augustinian), we may expect that the liturgical elements of Reformed worship will have these same non-European, patristic roots. An examination of those core elements – lectio-continua reading and preaching, psalm-singing, covenantal sacraments, and prayer – will confirm our hunch.

### **Lectio-continua reading and preaching**

Verse-by-verse preaching has been a hallmark of Reformed Protestantism from the very beginning. Why? Because of what can be known from the Bible and church history. The apostle Paul exhorts his successor, Timothy, and all subsequent successors, “Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching” (1 Tim. 4:13). The text literally reads, “the reading.” It could be called the reading because it was a known entity, inherited from the synagogues, of reading sequentially through books of the Bible (see Luke 4:16–17; Acts 13:15; 15:21). The lectio continua was characteristic of the Bible readings and preaching in the early church. Of this, liturgical scholars agree.

We also see this clearly in the work of the church fathers. Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–205) provides one of

the earliest extant Christian sermons, a verse-by-verse exposition of Mark 10:17–31, preached with historical-grammatical awareness in which he allows Scripture to interpret Scripture.<sup>4</sup> Origen may be considered the father of biblical exposition. He wrote commentaries on almost all the books of the Bible, and his homilies are among the oldest examples of biblical preaching. While ministering in Caesarea (northern Palestine) he preached through the whole Bible. John Chrysostom (c. 344/354–407), Syrian by birth, preached through most of the books of the New Testament. His sermons on Matthew influenced Reformer Ulrich Zwingli, leading to his decision to preach verse by verse through Matthew beginning the first Sunday in January, 1519, at Zurich’s Great Minster church. This has been called “the first liturgical reform of Protestantism.” Augustine of Hippo (354–430) is regarded by Hughes Old as not only “a master of classical oratory,” but also “a great expository preacher.” As a former professor of rhetoric, Augustine could have used a more artistic, more embellished, more rhetorically sophisticated and popularly esteemed form of preaching. But he clearly chose not to do so, “sticking instead with the form of the expository sermon as it was developed in the synagogue in the early Christian church.”<sup>5</sup>

These early non-European Christians gave to us the formative examples of straight-forward, text-driven expository preaching. The decision to preach text-driven, lectio continua, verse-by-verse sermons is not a decision to preach like Europeans, but a decision to preach after the model of the best of the Christian tradition.

### **Psalm-singing**

The Reformation revived congregational singing of psalms and biblical hymns. The psalter itself, a book of songs in the center of the Bible, was argument enough for the church to undertake psalm-singing as a regular part of its worship. The apostles commend it (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16; James 5:13), and so the Reformers embraced it. They also learned of the importance of congregational psalm-singing from the church fathers.

For example, Tertullian, in the second century, testified that psalm-singing was not only an essential feature of the worship of his day, but also had become an important part of the daily life of the people. Athanasius says it was the

Reformed worship is simple. Reformed Protestants merely urge that Christian assemblies do that which Scripture directs. The resulting services are simple and plain: the Word is read, preached, sung, prayed, and seen.

custom of his day to sing psalms, which he calls “a mirror of the soul.” Eusebius (c. 260–c. 340), Bishop of Caesarea, left this vivid picture of the psalm-singing of his day: “The command to sing Psalms in the name of the Lord was obeyed by everyone in every place: for the command to sing is in force in all churches which exist among nations, not only the Greeks but also throughout the whole world, and in towns, villages and in the fields.”<sup>6</sup>

### Covenantal sacraments

Jesus said of the Lord’s Supper, “This ... is the new covenant in my blood” (Luke 22:20; Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24; 1 Cor. 11:25). By invoking the covenant on an occasion of participation in a covenantal meal, Passover, Jesus was signaling the fundamental meaning of the eucharist. It is a covenant meal which is both a sign and seal of that covenant. Likewise, circumcision is identified by the apostle Paul as “sign” and “seal” of justification in Romans 4:11. Circumcision is identified with baptism in Colossians 2:11–12, Paul even calling it “the circumcision of Christ.” Baptism is the covenant rite of admission.

The Reformers spoke of the sacraments as “visible words” and as “outward signs of inward graces.” Where did they get this language? From the Bible. The apostle Paul says that by administering the Lord’s Supper we “proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Cor. 11:26). The Lord’s Supper is a form of words. He also speaks of “spiritual food” and “spiritual drink” (1 Cor. 10:3, 4), as well as “the washing of regeneration” (Titus 3:6; compare with Rom. 6:3–11), that is, of external signs of inward graces.

Yet the Reformers also learned this language from the African and Middle Eastern church fathers. The Africans Tertullian, Cyprian, and Augustine all gave prominence to a covenantal understanding of sacraments as oaths by which covenants are ratified or confirmed. Augustine defined the sacrament as “visible words” and as external signs of inward graces, both classic definitions. This covenantal understanding had a profound influence on the church’s understanding of the meaning and manner of administration of the sacraments, and especially influenced the Reformers and subsequent Protestantism. The eucharistic reforms of the sixteenth century are rooted in Scripture and largely non-European patristic testimony.

### Prayer

Reformed Protestants have insisted on biblical prayer – and by “biblical,” they meant prayer in the language of the Bible. The Bible gives us terminology to use in prayer, as each generation must ask, “Lord, teach us to pray” (Luke 11:1). It also gives us the categories: “I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions” (1 Tim. 2:1–2). The Reformers identified six basic prayer genres in Scripture: praise, confession of sin, thanksgiving, intercession, illumination, benediction. Further, they identified five categories into which intercessions might be divided: sanctification of saints; church and its ministry; sick and suffering; civil authorities; Christian mission. They found support for this also in the writings of the fathers: Syrian and Egyptian liturgies, Augustine, Tertullian, Ambrose, etc.<sup>7</sup> By restoring the prayers of praise, intercessions, illumination, and benediction, the Reformers launched a veritable “revolution in prayer.”<sup>8</sup>

### Simplicity

Reformed worship is simple. Reformed Protestants merely urge that Christian assemblies do that which Scripture directs. The resulting services are simple and plain: the Word is read, preached, sung, prayed, and seen. Unauthorized ceremonies, rituals, gestures, symbols, and postures are eliminated so as not to distract attention from the ordinary means of grace, the Word, sacraments, and prayer. Worship must be “according to Scripture,” regulated by Scripture, and therefore limited to what God has authorized. This means that worship will be simple. It will be focused. This too was emphasized by the early Christians, especially the Africans. They took seriously the prophetic tradition which warned of external ostentation at the expense of internal or heart service (e.g., Amos 5:21–24; Isa. 1:10–15; Jer. 7:1–11). Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–c. 215), Tertullian, and Lactantius (c. 250–325), another North African theologian, came to their understanding of Christian worship before it had been influenced by what Hughes Old calls, “the trappings of the imperial court.”<sup>9</sup>

We recognize that many questions are left unresolved by our review of the roots of Reformed worship. Yet those of us wishing to see the growth of Reformed and Presbyterian Protestantism can’t but rejoice to discover so many of our “patristic roots” in Africa and non-European

sources. Calvin was reviving the ministry and worship of the ancient church when he published his “Form of Church Prayers according to the custom of the Ancient Church.” Not only did the Reformers look to Scripture for the patterns, but also to the best of the early churches. When we bring Reformed Protestantism to Asia, Latin America, Africa, and the African diaspora around the world, we bring not a European import, but that which is scriptural and indigenous to the African, the Middle Eastern, and non-European peoples.

### Notes

- 1 Hughes O. *Old’s Patristic Roots of Reformed Worship* (Theologischer, 1970) evaluates and in the end substantiates Calvin’s claim that his “Form of Church Prayers” expressed more the convictions of the church Fathers than the culture of the Reformers.
- 2 Thomas C. Oden, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, volumes 1–30 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998).
- 3 Thomas C. Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 29–30.
- 4 See Hughes O. Old, *The Reading & Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church*, vol. 1–7 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998–2010); 1:294–305.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 2:381. See also 4:46 and 2:324
- 6 J. G. Davies, *The New Westminster Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 451.
- 7 See Old, *Patristic Roots*, 219–250; *Worship*, 91–107.
- 8 Old, Class Lectures, Erskine Theological Seminary, May 11, 2004.
- 9 Hughes O. Old, *Themes and Variations for a Christian Doxology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 98.

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## Books in focus

### **Romans**

by J. V. Fesko. Reformation Heritage, 2018. Hardcover, 464 pages, \$24.00.

**Reviewed by Reformed Theological Seminary professor Ben C. Dunson**

J. V. Fesko's new Romans commentary is in *The Lectio Continua Expository Commentary on the New Testament* series, a series comprised of non-technical, expository sermons written from an unabashedly Reformed perspective. (The series uses either the King James or New King James translations of the Bible.)

As Fesko notes, Paul does not explicitly state why he wrote Romans, although Fesko sees Romans 1:16–17 as a kind of theme statement for the whole letter, arguing that Paul's chief purpose is to unpack the "power, scope, and nature of the gospel" (23). And the gospel is this: "the righteous shall live by faith," a faith that

*is both the exclusive means by which we receive the imputed satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, and the lens through which we must live our entire lives. (30)*

For those whose own theological perspective is Reformed there are few surprises in Fesko's reading of Romans. What perhaps distinguishes this commentary most is its welcome concern to apply the text to the heart as well as the mind, seen, for example, in Fesko's treatment of hypocrisy and pride in Romans 2:17–29 and his discussion of hardship and suffering in the life of the believer in Romans 8:18–25.

It may be most helpful to interested readers to note a few areas where Fesko takes a view that is contested by modern interpreters.

Fesko straightforwardly expounds Paul's prohibition against homosexual desire and activity in Romans 1:26–27. With regard to Paul's teaching that God "will render to each one according to his deeds" (Rom. 2:6) and that "the doers of the law will be justified" (Rom. 2:13), Fesko takes the position that such statements hypothetically lay

out the law of God to send lawbreakers to Christ (47–52).

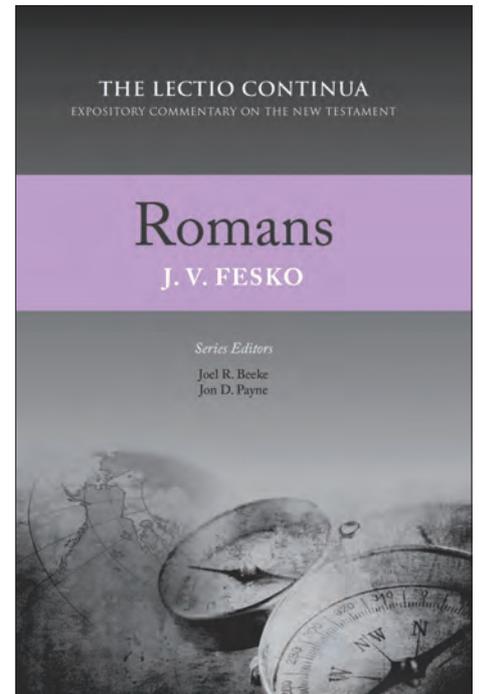
In chapters 9 and 10 (on Rom. 3:21–31 and 4:1–8), and throughout the commentary, Fesko clearly articulates Paul's teaching that Christ's death accomplishes a penal (judicial) substitutionary atonement for his people that turns God's righteous wrath away from them. Justification is thus a forensic (legal) declaration that one is in the right with God, a verdict grounded solely in the imputed righteousness of Christ.

In chapter 10 (on Rom. 5:12–14), Fesko provides a classic Reformed defense of "federal theology." On the long-simmering debate among modern Reformed theologians about the relationship among union with Christ, justification, and sanctification, Fesko maintains that because justification is a judicial verdict that "breaks the legal claim and power of sin" (162), it is "a life-giving verdict" (160). While explaining union with Christ in Romans 6, Fesko emphasizes that Paul lays out the legal, rather than transformative, dimension of this union (see, for example, 169; Fesko has elsewhere argued against the notion of "definitive sanctification" in Paul's theology). How, then, does sanctification take place? The believer

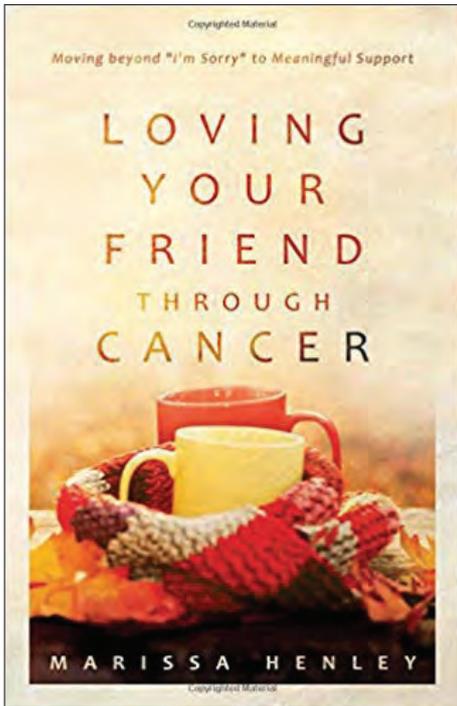
*die[s] more and more to sin and live[s] more and more unto Christ by seeking the power of His life-giving resurrection and laying hold of the life-giving verdict of our justification. (166)*

Fesko elsewhere emphasizes that the strength to pursue progressive sanctification lies in the fact that the believer is a participant in the new creation, and that the Holy Spirit is actively at work subduing the sinful flesh of the believer. On the identity of the "I" in Romans 7:13–25, Fesko, in agreement with an increasing number of Reformed scholars, contends that Paul is not writing about himself (before or after conversion), but about "Israel's collective experience under the law" (182).

In sum, Fesko has written a straightforwardly Reformed commentary that is focused on the meaning of the text as



well as its application to the hearts and lives of believers. Pastors and laypeople will benefit from his exposition.  
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***Loving Your Friend Through Cancer: Moving Beyond "I'm Sorry" to Meaningful Support***  
 by Marissa Henley. P&R, 2018.  
 Paperback, 264 pages, \$12.00.  
**Reviewed by OP member Linda Jones**

A quick glance at the front of this book previews the author's style and tone for this practical guide to helping one's friends through cancer: the cover art features warm, tastefully vibrant colors, with even the warm orange typography evoking a crackling fire in the fireplace. The reader is guided by Henley's warmth and compassion as she walks through all the practical and emotional dimensions of a cancer diagnosis, treatment, and survivorship, and how God weaves the "threads of support," that is, the community of friends, family, and church, "into a beautiful tapestry to provide for all our needs."

First experiencing cancer with a close family member, and then as a patient herself, Henley shares what she has learned in first-person sketches of Christian women compassionately supporting their friends through cancer and its aftermath. There are thirteen chapters

covering the full scope of cancer, from "When Cancer Strikes a Friend," to "Your Friend as a Sick Person" and the final two chapters, the sobering "When There Is No Cure," and "When It's Not Really Over." Henley is direct and sympathetic, as she gives the reader practical ideas to help the cancer patient navigate the logistics of managing her day-to-day life during treatment. She also offers

recommendations on how to use words of love and hope to encourage and comfort spiritually the one who is suffering. Each chapter ends with questions for reflection and action steps to consider.

A section of articles and resources close out the book, including several worksheets for managing the logistics of helping, such as a meal delivery plan. There are also two articles in the back matter that the author references as the theological framework of the preceding chapters of the book, "A Biblical View of Suffering" and "A Biblical View of Community." One may wish that these two articles were more deeply developed and integrated throughout the book. Marissa Henley provides concrete examples of what it looks like for Christians to love one another and their neighbor. It might not look the same for everyone, but Henley's suggestions will spur creative thinking for helping our own friends in their various circumstances.

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# Una Sancta

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