

The Elderly Christian as a Member of the Family

The world talks a great deal today about old people and its concern for them, and there are several organisations which have been set up to deal with their special needs. But I submit this is an area where the gospel of Christ can shine in a dark sinful world. The teaching of the Bible concerning the position of the elderly within the family is quite different from the views and practices of a great many people today. Never, it seems, has our society been so interested in the plight of the aged. But I submit, never has there been so much real loneliness amongst old people. Why is this? We have witnessed the steady breakdown of family life in our time. There have been many contributory factors. The rehousing programmes in many inner city areas have broken the very strong and effective family ties that once existed and thrived there. The Welfare State itself has proved a hindrance to the maintenance of the effective family unit. By its many schemes to relieve the family of its cares, it has tended to destroy the family. That which was originally intended to support has, in fact, tended to undermine. Above all, of course, the steady (headlong) turning away from the Bible has meant a corresponding turning away from biblical standards in all aspects of life. The family has not escaped. Indeed, it is a spectacular casualty. In this booklet, I wish to draw attention to one aspect of the family; namely, the position of the elderly within it. I aim to give the teaching of the Bible on this matter.

(a) The aged are still part of the family

Today, in many cases, the elderly are no longer part of the family. Oh! in name they are, but in practice they very often

are not. Many old people are relegated, by their young relations, to institutions, homes, *etc.* There they can be, and often are, effectively separated from the rest of the family. I fear it is not too hard to say that many old people are looked upon merely as nuisances to be kept away from real family life.

Let me hasten to add at this point, that I do not write against the necessary institutional care of the aged. It is a good thing, a very good thing that excellent, caring homes exist for the elderly who are in desperate need. It is a fine testimony for the gospel that homes are set up by Christians to cater for such people. It is excellent that spiritual and dignified care can be shown to the aged in this way. I would not write against such commendable effort – no, not in the least. After all, the Bible teaches us that the church must care for its aged when there is no other source of Christian care (1 Timothy 5:9,16). However, many old people in our society are separated from their families, completely unnecessarily, today. The Bible has something to say about it.

Nor is that the only area that needs examination. I submit that many old people today are made to feel different from the other members of society. Very often they are made to feel that they are not quite the same. They are given special (*i.e.* different) treatment in a great variety of ways. Concessionary fares, special tickets, varied prices, special handouts... just to mention a few, all tend to make the elderly feel that they are different. They are treated differently so they must be different. No doubt these things are well-intentioned, and I realise that I leave myself open to strong criticism for even mentioning the matter. But, I submit that this different treatment leads society to look upon old people as different from the rest of the people. I am sure that the Bible is against such a view.

The Bible teaches that the elderly must be considered a part of the family. Very much so. The Bible gives the old a very real part to play within the family.

There is a lovely illustration of this in the life of Naomi. When Ruth married Boaz and had a son, Naomi was not left out in the cold. What is more important, there is no suggestion that this might have happened. Naomi was not forgotten in all the excitement of the marriage. Nor was she ignored later, in the thrill of the birth of a son. Her friends spoke to Naomi about her young grandson in warm and loving terms: ‘And may he be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age. For your daughter-in-law, who loves you... has given him birth’ (Ruth 4:13-15). This is a lovely picture of the place that aged saints should have in the family of Christians. A young grandson has just been born. The elderly grandmother is taken into the celebrations, totally. Look how it is confidently expected that the young child will be a constant and continuing source of comfort to the old lady. She was so much a part of the family that the neighbours could say that the child was as good as hers: ‘Naomi has a son’, they said (Ruth 4:17). We must not disown this as Jewish custom. The aged Naomi was a valued and respected part of the family.

This care of the elderly within the family is a gospel principle. It is not a question of ‘social ethics’. It is a question of obedience to the commands of God: ‘If a widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show piety at home and to repay their parents; for this is good and acceptable before God... if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for his own household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever’ (1 Timothy 5:3-8). Strong words! Strong words, indeed. But they are the words of the Bible. They are in the word of God. This is the biblical doctrine on old people and the family. That is why I stand by my earlier remarks about much of modern day old people’s care. I am convinced that much of the practice of care for the elderly today is contradicting the principles of the Bible, and that is why I said Christians can shine in a dark world. Christians must show real care for the aged. They must treat them as members of the family. Not in name only, but also in practice.

There is another illustration of the same point in the life of Jacob. When Joseph heard that his father was ill, he took his sons to see him. He did not keep the young boys away from the deathbed of their aged grandfather. Joseph brought his young sons to his aged father who was now almost blind: 'Now the eyes of Israel were dim with age, so that he could not see. So Joseph brought his sons close to him and his father kissed them and embraced them' (Genesis 48:10). What an experience for the lads! What a tender scene! This is the kind of family care and love that the Bible speaks of. The aged are not left out. Children are not the be-all and end-all of the family. The aged and the very young are all together. Infants, parents and grandparents are all one together. The children and the nearly blind grandfather in happy loving unity. This happy 'togetherness' of the very old and the very young is so powerful a picture that God uses it to illustrate the blessing that revival will bring to his people: 'Old men and old women shall again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each one with his staff in his hand because of great age. The streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in the streets' (Zechariah 8:4-5). I realise that there is more to that picture than the happy unity of old and young, but that lesson is an integral part of the passage. Old people are still very much part of the godly family. They are not to be left out.

(b) The aged are an honoured part of the family

The aged are not to be given a mere place in the family of the godly. They are to be given an honoured place.

The respect that God demands for the old in general, must be shown within the family in particular. The sin of despising aged parents is directly forbidden (Proverbs 23:22). By the same text, the positive command to honour an aged parent is also set out. Christians must not have a neutral attitude. The aged should hold an honoured place in godly homes: 'Parents are the pride of their children' (Proverbs 17:6). How often today children are the pride of their parents! When Joseph presented his father and his brothers to Pharaoh, he placed especial honour upon his aged father. He took him before

Pharaoh, alone. He did not hide his old father away. He was pleased (proud?) to bring him before the king. Jacob, when he lay dying, called his sons to his bedside. He said: 'Gather together and hear, you sons of Jacob; listen to your father Israel' (Genesis 49:2). It was a coveted thing in those days to receive the blessing of an aged father. So far from being neglected, the elderly were highly regarded. Isaac, when he was very old, weak and blind drew very near to death. But his sons still obeyed his commands and did all they could to obtain his blessing (Genesis 27). The aged are not to be ignored. They are to be honoured. The godly family will hold its older members in great esteem.

(c) The aged are a useful part of the family

The aged are not merely part of the family, nor are they just to be respected. The elderly have a useful part to play within the godly family. Their valuable experience and maturity have to be put to work. The use that old people can be in general, must be worked out in the family in particular. Naomi received comfort from the birth of her grandson. But she not only received; she gave, also. She took a real and practical interest in the child's care and up-bringing. She 'took the child, laid him on her bosom and became a nurse to him' (Ruth 4:16).

Jacob made himself useful in the lives of his grandsons. When Joseph came to see him when he was in bed with illness, Jacob took the opportunity to speak of God, his word, works and ways. This was such a blessing to his son and his grandsons who listened to him. What instruction for young minds! Picture the scene. Listen to the old man: 'God Almighty appeared to me... there he blessed me and said to me...'. He went on: 'Rachel died' (Genesis 48:1-7). Then he proceeded to bless the boys. With his hands upon their heads he said: 'May the God before whom my fathers... walked, the God who has been my shepherd... may he bless the boys. May they be called by my name' (Genesis 48:8-20). Then he spoke of his death, in their hearing. What a lesson for godly families. What a privilege for the young and the old. To hear

and to give such wonderful spiritual instruction! What an enforcement of the gospel! God gives spiritual experiences to men with this in mind. He has ordained that this is one of the ways in which he will spread his truth. God blessed Moses with the demonstration of his power so that he might ‘tell his children and grandchildren’ (Exodus 10:2). God made it a principle for his people to follow (Deuteronomy 4:9).

Timothy greatly benefited by such a godly upbringing. His mother and grandmother were godly women (2 Timothy 1:5; Acts 16:1). Timothy was brought to saving faith in Christ early in his life. How was this? He had been graciously taught by God’s Spirit who used the women. He had learned the gospel from them: ‘Continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them and that from childhood you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus’ (2 Timothy 3:14-15).

Of all these it might well be said: ‘Children’s children are a crown to the aged’ (Proverbs 17:6).

Of course, there is a difference between being useful and interfering. The elderly person has a vital role to play, but that role must not be exceeded. The father and the mother still have the parental responsibility. That has not been given to the grandparent. Aged people must not interfere in the marriages of their children. Much harm has been done in that way. Not for nothing did God say: ‘A man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife’ (Genesis 2:24). Nevertheless the principle still stands: the aged Christian must take an honoured and useful place in the family.

Application to an elderly Christian

Do you still regard yourself as part of your family? Do you take an active part in it? Do you pray for your children and grandchildren? Do you tell them of the ways of God, both from his word and from your own personal experience? Do

you speak to them of the great matters of life and death? Do you take pleasure in the children? Does it show? Do they know that you are delighted and thankful to God for them? Or do they get the impression that you regard them as little more than nuisances? Do you interfere and cause trouble between man and wife? Between parents and children? Or do you wait to give advice and counsel when asked?

Application to a Christian of younger years

Do you forget, despise, ignore or mistreat in any other way your parents and grandparents? Do you respect them? Do you want to hear of their experiences with God? Do you listen to them? Do you ask their advice? Do you want to learn all you can from them before they die? Or are they nuisances to you? Have you effectively shut them away? If you have children yourself, do you take them to see their aged relations? Do you want your aged relatives to tell your children about God? Do you bring your aged relations right into the centre of your family life?

We have to acknowledge that there comes a time when the elderly may become like children again. Due to their physical and mental deterioration they need real care. They may need to be waited upon for everything, which can be both trying and embarrassing. They might even become a problem in a way in which they have never been difficult before. It may be necessary to help them by kindly, and even sometimes firmly telling them what they need to do. Tremendous patience and Christian grace may be called for at this stage. However demanding the situation becomes, the elderly Christian must know that he or she is loved for Christ's sake. Your unsung ministry in this service will be known and in due time rewarded by Christ, although few here may know of your labour of love.