

THE VALUE THAT GOD PLACES ON THE AGED

H. Ronald Vandermey

Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth; and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes: but know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment.

Ecclesiastes 11:9

We live in a society that no longer places value on the aged. That Brave New World where youthfulness is exalted and old age eliminated is no longer found only in a fiction book, it is reported in our newspapers and medical journals; it is debated in our courtrooms and legislative halls; and it is voted in the affirmative by the people in ballot propositions and general referendums. We should not be surprised that the same citizenry that winks at the public sins of our public officials benignly approves the ever-increasing movement toward doctor assisted suicides and euthanasia.

The cry of the most recent presidential election, “It’s the economy, stupid,” provided the rationale for Americans to ignore moral character as an issue. That same desire to preserve the economy is a major argument not only for the liability of unwanted preborns, it is a rationale for the extension of eliminating the unaffordable elderly.

The issues of life and death as discussed in this journal relating to abortion, euthanasia, and cloning, are fundamentally an assault upon the authority of the Word of God. Just as God breathed life into man (Gen. 1 and 2), God also with that same creative force breathed the life-giving Word of God into existence (2 Tim. 3:16). Death, the common denominator of abortion and euthanasia, only came into existence when man revolted against God’s Word (Gen. 3). Devoid of the Word of God today, man views the unborn and the aged with contempt. Even the modern humanistic obsession with the rights of the individual has taken us into a “culture of death.” As Robert H. Bork has surmised in *Slouching Towards Gomorrah*:

Ironically, the freedom of the individual to choose death has made it far easier for others to choose his death. The autonomy is often theirs, not his. (p. 186)

When the Supreme Court endorsed abortion (*Roe v. Wade, 1973*), they admitted that life is not sacred. Thus, if a lethal injection can terminate an unwanted pregnancy to avoid the family financial or personal hardship, why can it not likewise terminate an unwanted senior who has in the family’s opinion become a similar hardship?

God’s Word is for life and God’s Word is for valuing great age. In the matter of life, we have only to look at the restrictions in the Law placed upon the drinking of blood (Leviticus 17:22—*the life of the flesh is in the blood*). When Abel was slain, his blood cried out from the ground (Genesis 4:10), and when Noah was given the command regarding government, emphasis

was placed upon punishing those who shed man's blood (Gen. 9:6).

After isolating Israel from the evil human sacrifices of the Canaanite religions during their 400-year sojourn in Egypt, how grievous it is to read how quickly they and later even their kings fell into the practice that God found so abominable (2 Chron. 28:23). God judged both Israel and Judah with exile for their wickedness.

Indeed, God values life, and God values those advanced in years. Again, we only have to turn to the Law, which states: *Honour thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land in which the Lord thy God giveth thee* (Exod. 20:12). Is it not interesting that God's very next thought in the Law was: *Thou shalt not kill?* Both laws affirm life; euthanasia breaks both commands simultaneously.

Today's attitude toward the elderly expressed in euthanasia has a forerunner in King Rehoboam. When the people complained about the oppressive government taxation, the aged advisors told him to lessen the burden. Instead, he followed the advice of his pleasure-loving contemporaries who with no foresight recommended a drastic increase in government oppression. Despising the counsel of the aged resulted in a severing of the nation (1 Kings 12).

King Rehoboam's father, Solomon, had a different attitude toward the aged. Despite David's many failings, Solomon gloried in the heritage of his father, and in the character qualities that were handed down to him. Throughout Proverbs, the wisdom of the aged is extolled from several aspects. First, as the provider in the home, the aged one is viewed as being a blessing even to the grandchildren (Prov. 13:22).

Second, as the one who establishes the property lines, the aged one is to be respected by subsequent generations, who should honor and defend those boundaries (Prov. 22:28). The landmark was indeed a memorial of exactly what was bequeathed to a family by his ancestors, and its removal was forbidden by the Mosaic Law (Deut. 19:14).

Third, as the teacher in the home, the aged one is to provide the wisdom and instruction of the law. Proverbs 1:8 boldly states: *My son, hear the instruction of thy father, and forsake not the law of thy mother.* Teaching the law from one generation to the next (Prov. 6:20-22) continued the Mosaic injunction (Deut. 6), and at the same time ensured the continuance of the Jewish traditions. An incentive to follow that instruction is the avoidance of the common snares of novices who lack understanding (Prov. 6:23-25). I remember having a skin cancer surgery by an elderly doctor who took much more than the required amount of skin for the biopsy to avoid a second operation if the pathology report was bad (which it was). Years later, a young doctor took just enough tissue for the biopsy, and then had to have me return for the much larger and more painful removal. Wisdom comes with age.

Lastly, Proverbs 20:7 reminds us that a man of years will be able to pass on his integrity to his obedient sons: *A just man walketh in his integrity: his children are blessed after him.* We must remember that in the Old Testament the father was not only the provider of his family, the creator of the boundaries of his estate, and the instructor of his family, but the aged father was also the role model for his family. The greatest outworking of this in the Old Testament is the

story of the House of Rechab in Jeremiah 35:3-10. In that passage Jeremiah compares the obedience of this one family with the disobedience of the nation of Israel in general. Jonadab, their ancestral father, still ruled the family through his teachings given nearly two hundred years earlier. Among other things, he commanded his family to avoid wine, and this was the test. The family passed the exam given by the Lord, because they remembered and honored the integrity of their ancestor, Jonadab.

The Bible, in direct opposition to today's society, is replete with examples of the value of the aged. The tests of Abraham's faith began at age 75, but really did not climax until he was well over 100 (Gen. 22). Although his birth is recorded, most of Moses' life concerns his leadership role after he was eighty years of age. Caleb and Joshua were strong for the Lord in their forties, but they are remembered for their leadership after entering the Promised Land forty years later (Josh. 1; 14:6-13). Daniel stood for God as a young man (1:8), but his greatest exploits and courage took place long after the normal age of retirement (Daniel 5 & 6).

The New Testament repeats the Fifth Commandment (Eph. 6:2-3), and continues the thought that respect for parents is to be a lifelong attitude. Examples in the New Testament verify the value of old age. In Luke 1:6-7, we find that John the Baptist's parents "were well stricken in years." Those in the Temple who were spiritually alert to the entrance of the infant Messiah—Simeon and Anna—were people in their 80's who had faithfully served God with fastings and prayer (Luke 2:26-38). After many years of fidelity to God, they still looked for "the consolation of Israel." The whole nation in a sense benefited from the faithfulness of these two aged saints, whose spiritual sight only burned brighter as their age increased.

In our churches today, pastors need to be the role model for the congregation in both their personal care of aged parents, and in the teaching of God's Word on this important subject. Seniors need to be activated as prayer warriors, visitors, encouragers, and Bible study leaders. One shut-in at our church sends a birthday card to every child and teenager connected with our fellowship.

Thoughts of euthanasia would not have taken root if the Body of Christ had overwhelmed society by following the Word of God on this topic. It is not the economy that is at stake in this issue, it is a Holy God whose justice will fall upon those who profane His Word (Zephaniah 3:5). Solomon's words on the folly of the young began this article, and we close with his warning in the last verses of Ecclesiastes: *Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil.*

Dr. H. Ronald Vandermey is the Dean of the Graduate School, Cohen Theological Seminary, Los Angeles, California, and pastor of the Bethany Bible Presbyterian Church in Glendale, California. He follows his eighty-eight-year-old father's example and calling, the senior Vandermey having been (and continuing to be) a preacher and fervent soul-winner for most of his long and fruitful life.