

## 1 TIMOTHY 5:16

### FAMILY RESPONSIBILITY

“If any believing woman has relatives who are widows, let her care for them. Let the church not be burdened, so that it may care for those who are truly widows.”<sup>1</sup>

The Apostle admonished Timothy to instruct the congregation that they must assume responsibility for their own families. When the families of members of the assembly have been cared for, the congregation must then take care to ensure that any members who may have fallen through the cracks are provided for. This was a major advance in the social ministry of the apostolic churches. It freed up the resources of the congregation to serve even more people and encouraged family responsibility to act christianly before the watching world.

As we have seen, the early congregations did not attempt to choose between evangelism and social ministries. For them, it was a case of “both/and”; these first saints understood that they were responsible to care for the vulnerable within the assembly and they were responsible to evangelise the lost. Churches today that list to one extreme or the other are distorting the teaching of the Word. We are to warn the lost of God’s coming judgement, pointing them to the safety of the Cross of Christ. At the same time, we are responsible to serve the needs of those whom God brings to us. This is clearly taught in these Pastoral Letters. The message today concludes our studies of Paul’s instructions concerning care of the vulnerable in the assembly.

**OBSERVATIONS** — In a previous message, I observed that the instructions Paul provides are notable for what is said about women.<sup>2</sup> Speaking of younger widows, Paul said, “I would have younger widows marry, bear children, manage their households, and give the adversary no occasion for slander” [1 TIMOTHY 5:14]. Speaking of a woman managing her household, the Apostle makes a remarkable statement for that ancient day, and perhaps even for this day. In that culture, women were to be quiet and to have no role other than bearing children. However, the Apostle used a powerful term that literally means that a woman is to rule over her house.

The word that the Apostle used (*oikodespoteîn*) is a hapax legomenon—a word found only here and in no other place in the New Testament. This is a compound word comprised of the words “house” (*oikos*) and “rule” (*despotéō*). Paul had earlier used the word “house” to describe an elder who manages his own household well [1 TIMOTHY 3:4] as an indication that he is fit to lead the congregation. The same concept is used to speak of a deacon [1 TIMOTHY 3:12] who is to manage his or her own household well. The same word also refers to “the household of God” [1 TIMOTHY 3:15]. The word “rule” is the word from which our English terms “despot” and “despotism” are derived. The nominal form of the word is used to refer to the master of a slave [1 TIMOTHY 6:1, 2; TITUS 2:9] and of God as “Master” over His servants [2 TIMOTHY 2:21]. After being threatened by the Jewish Council, Peter and John returned to their fellow believers, which became the occasion for a prayer meeting. As they began to pray, they addressed God as “Sovereign Lord.” The word was this same cognate form of the word “*despotéō*” (*despótēs*).

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible: English Standard Version**. Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers, 2001. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Stark, “What About the Younger Widows,” delivered 16 March 2014, <http://newbeginningsbaptist.ca/clientimages/42652/sermonarchive/1%20timothy%205.11-16%20advice%20to%20younger%20women.pdf>

In the Gospels, the ruler of the household is always a male. Consider a few examples that are witnessed in the parables Jesus told. “The servants of the master of the house came and said to him, ‘Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?’” [MATTHEW 13:27]?

Again, Jesus told another parable centred on an individual who was master of a house. “There was a master of a house who planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a winepress in it and built a tower and leased it to tenants, and went into another country” [MATTHEW 21:33].

Permit me to cite one final example in evidence of the contention that one who was “masters of the house” was presented as a male. When Jesus provided instructions to the disciples who were dispatched to secure a place to observe the final Passover Meal, He stated, “Wherever [the man carrying a water pot] enters, say to the master of the house, ‘The Teacher says, Where is my guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples’” [MARK 14:14]? Throughout the ancient world, men functioned in this role. I must wonder whether Paul’s statement was seen as controversial; I can only assume that such was the case.

As Canon Liddon has observed, “The application of such a word to a Christian wife implies the new and improved position which was secured to women by the Gospel.”<sup>3</sup> Paul’s word choice was either a faux pas, meant to be deliberately provocative or it was indicative that a new freedom, a new reality held sway among the saints. The very fact that this must be discussed in this day reveals how dysfunctional the churches have become. Women were discriminated against; but today they are combative in asserting their right to assume positions of what they construe as power among the faithful. Too often, the churches have become reactionary rather than responsible in the sexual arena.

It is important for us to note the role of a woman within her own household. It is not that women never assumed responsibility over their household; it is only that such roles were so rare as to be exceptional. That the Apostle makes it normative for Christian households is the exceptional aspect arising out of this one verse. To be certain, some examples of women who appear to have exercised rule over their household are found in Scripture.

Among the notable examples of such women is a gracious lady named Lydia. You will recall that she was the first convert in Europe. The account of her conversion is recorded in Doctor Luke’s account of the advance of the Faith in the first decades following Pentecost. “Setting sail from Troas, we made a direct voyage to Samothrace, and the following day to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city some days. And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we supposed there was a place of prayer, and we sat down and spoke to the women who had come together. One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul. And after she was baptized, and her household as well, she urged us, saying, ‘If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay.’ And she prevailed upon us” [ACTS 16:11-15].

Here was a woman who met with other women for prayer. Note that there were no men present; so Lydia appears to have been instrumental in gathering women to pray to the Lord God. She was obviously influential over her household as the entire household followed her in baptism. Perhaps there were children, but assuredly the wording implies there were servants.

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<sup>3</sup> H. P. Liddon, **Explanatory Analysis of St. Paul’s First Epistle to Timothy** (Longmans, Green & Co., London; New York; Bombay 1897) 60

After James was executed by Herod's order, Peter was also arrested. You will recall that God sent an angel to release Peter from prison [see **ACTS 12:1-11**]. When Peter realised he was freed from what appeared to be a certain death, he made his way to "the house of Mary, the mother of John whose name was Mark" where many saints were gathered for a prayer meeting [**ACTS 12:12**]. Mary had sufficient freedom to have a house that was large enough to gather a number of people. It is assumed that her husband had died, leaving her a house and the means to run the house. Mary appears to have revealed a generous heart, opening her house to the saints so that they might have a place to worship and pray.

I am compelled to stress that in the Faith of Christ the Lord there is great freedom for all. However, this freedom is not always recognised by those who profess the Name of the Master. The freedom we enjoy in Christ carries great responsibility for those who are called by His Name. Assuredly, freedom for women is evident in the Faith of Christ Jesus. Historically, women were either excluded or they were used as living accoutrements in the ancient religions, they were not accepted as participants. That view changed with the ministry of the Master.

Women were accepted as full participants in the worship of the Christ. This becomes evident from Paul's statement to the Galatians. "Before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise" [**GALATIANS 3:23-29**].

Again, because of pugnacious positions marked out in this modern age, it is necessary to note what Paul said and what he did not say. Paul did not say that anyone is superior in Christ or that anyone is inferior in Christ—we are alike sinners saved by grace. Paul did say that all who are baptised into Christ have put on Christ; the redeemed are identified as belonging to Christ—in fact, identified *with* Christ. The emphasis in Paul's statement is not on relationship, however, but upon inheritance. That is the reason Paul writes "you are all sons of God, through faith." Yes, ladies, you are "sons of God." The reason this statement must not be rewritten to suit modern sensibilities is that in that ancient day only sons could receive an inheritance; and the emphasis is upon the inheritance we believers receive in Christ the Lord. Therefore, "in Christ" you are all "sons of God"—you have a divine inheritance.

One other matter of importance must be considered at the outset of the message—the instruction is restricted to believing women. Paul makes no statement concerning society; his concern is for the conduct of believers in the congregation of the righteous. It is a principle of the Faith that we do not dictate to the world how it should live. We are, however, responsible to reflect the righteousness of God in our own conduct before the eyes of the watching world. Is this not the impact of his statement to the Corinthian Christians when he writes, "What have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. 'Purge the evil person from among you'" [**1 CORINTHIANS 5:12, 13**].

Again, this accounts for Peter's admonition to believers in the Diaspora. "Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation" [**1 PETER 2:12**]. The verses following and the next chapter give specific examples of how believers should live in order to glorify the Lord. It is believing women that are instructed and not women in general.

**RESPONSIBILITIES** — We invest an inordinate amount of time defining rights in our culture. Churches must spell out the “rights” of members of the assembly in their legal documents in order to meet the criteria set by various government agencies. What is less well defined are the responsibilities of members of the assembly. Perhaps this is but a reflection of the general attitude of contemporary society. Beginning with kindergarten, students are drilled to know their rights; they are often less avid in pursuing their responsibilities. Explicitly and implicitly, Paul defines responsibilities of those who name the Name of Christ.

**RESPONSIBILITIES OF FAMILY MEMBERS** — In the text, Paul begins by speaking of the responsibilities of believing women. “If any believing woman has relatives who are widows...” It is important to note that some texts read, “If a believing man or woman...” That reading is likely corrupted, “believing man” being inserted by a copyist in an attempt to bring about parity to the responsibility of men and women and in an attempt to harmonise what was written in verse four: “If a widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show godliness to their own household and to make some return to their parents, for this is pleasing in the sight of God” [1 TIMOTHY 5:4]. However, it appears virtually certain that the shorter reading is preferred.<sup>4</sup> Though a man would indeed be responsible for any widows within his family, the Apostle was apparently focused on believing women as managers of the household.

How close are these relatives to be if they are to receive assistance from believing women? There can be no question but that Paul has in view near relatives such as mothers and mothers-in-law, daughters and daughters-in-law. I will suggest that he would include sisters and sisters-in-law and even aunts. Perhaps even cousins would be in view for this list. The point is that if you become aware of a need in the life of a family member, you have responsibility to relieve that need if you are able.

If you would attend the funeral of a family member, shouldn’t you accept responsibility for that individual if they are in need and you are able to relieve that need? John establishes a standard that should provide some guidance in this instance. The Apostle of Love writes, “If anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth” [1 JOHN 3:17, 18]. If we accept that this injunction holds for fellow believers, and it does, surely we can agree that it would hold equally true for family members.

Paul’s command to the believing woman who has a widow within the family circle is, “Let her care for them.” The verb is used twice in this discussion; the other usage is in verse ten, where those widows who are to be enrolled in the order of widows must have “cared for the afflicted.” I find it fascinating to observe that a widow is to receive the same care that she had been in the habit of providing. If you will, her life is to become proof of Jesus’ promise, “Give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you” [LUKE 6:38]. Paul’s use of the present tense indicative demands repeated or continual action. In other words, the believing woman who has a widow in her family is to take on ongoing support of the dependent members in her family.

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Kurt Aland, Matthew Black, Carlo M. Martini, Bruce M. Metzger, Allen Wikgren, Barbara Aland and Johannes Karavidopoulos, **The Greek New Testament, Fourth Revised Edition (with Apparatus)**, (Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, Stuttgart 2000); Eberhard Nestle, Erwin Nestle, Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland, Universität Münster Institut für Neutestamentliche Textforschung, **Novum Testamentum Graece**, 27, Aufl., rev. (Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, Stuttgart 1993)

Perhaps we imagine that the care of widows and widowers is not a great issue in this day. After all, widows (and widowers) usually have pension moneys available to provide for their needs. Even should there be no retirement moneys, the elderly will receive Canada Pension, Old Age Security, a GIS grant (Guaranteed Income Supplement) and possibly other governmental funding to provide for their care. Health care is available to the elderly, subsidised to ensure that it is available; thus, the cost of providing for healthcare should not be a major issue.

I do not want to minimise the necessity of the cost of providing care for elderly family members; however, there is seldom anything left over after the immediate bills are paid. The design of governmental assistance is to provide what is necessary and nothing more. Thus, families should accept responsibility to supplement what is lacking for their own ageing family members. If there is no one to assist, the churches should assume a measure of responsibility in this instance.

There is another aspect, however, that beyond the issue of finances in which families bear responsibility; I am speaking of the need to visit elderly family members. This is simply one of the dreadfully neglected areas of life for the elderly, whether in a care facility or living in their own home. We imagine that our lives are so hurried and hectic that we are stressed beyond limit. Many people wonder whether they can find time to squeeze in one more thing in their busy schedules.

This is truly an issue of priorities, however; we reveal what we value through our use of time. If we value personal time above all else, we will invest considerable time in personal pursuits that fuel self-interests. If we value family, we will find time to spend with family. If we value worship of the True and Living God, we will find time to be in His presence. For many of our fellow citizens, it is difficult to draw any conclusion other than that they are focused on gratifying their self-interests.

Visiting in retirement homes or extended care facilities, I note that many of the elderly receive few visits. Long days extend into dreary weeks; and regardless of how stimulating the staff may be, they are not family. I am aware that in too many instances, widowed individuals will receive no visits from family other than at Christmas or perhaps on a birthday. Of course, this shouldn't be.

I suspect that those who are so consumed with their own self-interests that they haven't time to visit an elderly family member are also negligent about spending time in the presence of God. They likely are unfamiliar with His Word and unwilling to "waste" a couple of hours in a service of worship. They are just too busy.

Listen again to the earlier admonition of the Apostle. "If a widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show godliness to their own household and to make some return to their parents, for this is pleasing in the sight of God" [1 TIMOTHY 5:4]. It is pleasing in the sight of God because it fulfils the Fifth Commandment. "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you" [EXODUS 20:12].

If the new standard for modern society is described by people so self-absorbed that they have no time for their parents, it may be indicative that the dark days of which we were warned have come upon us. "Understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power" [2 TIMOTHY 3:1-5].

## 1 TIMOTHY 5:16

### FAMILY RESPONSIBILITY

In this dark catalogue of sins marking the last days are several characteristics that are germane to this discussion. “People will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power.” Ouch! That could easily describe too many of us today.

**RESPONSIBILITIES OF CHURCH MEMBERS** — There is a second command that the Apostle has given; that command could be overlooked. The command is, “Let the church not be burdened, so that it may care for those who are truly widows.” Personal charity cannot effectively be replaced by organisational charity. The Apostle was concerned lest the congregation should become financially strapped. Therefore, he taught that we must assume responsibility for our own families. What we must not lose sight of is that the church is to be invested in the support of its own members. This is evident from Paul’s insistence that the congregation must be free to “care for those who are truly widows.”

Two truths must be stated, though it shouldn’t be necessary. The first truth is that the church assumes responsibility for those who are truly needy; the church has no responsibility for those who are lazy or unwilling to be responsible for themselves. This is evident from Paul’s repeated use of the term “truly widows. “Honor widows who are truly widows” [1 TIMOTHY 5:3]. “She who is truly a widow, left all alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day” [1 TIMOTHY 5:5]. This lends weight to his presentation that the church will then provide for those who are “truly widows” in our text.

Those who are slothful, who refuse to care for themselves, are not to receive assistance. “Even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living” [2 THESSALONIANS 3:10-12]. It is significant that the Apostle immediately appended the following statement after he had issued the foregoing command: “As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good” [2 THESSALONIANS 3:13].

Caring for the truly vulnerable is good, if we accept what the Apostle says. However, refusing to encourage sloth through underwriting the negligent is equally good. I am going to quit preaching and begin meddling at this point. I am adamantly opposed to the church assisting those who have funds to spend on alcohol, moneys to spend on cigarettes, means to permit them to holiday in Jasper or assets that permit the purchase of lottery tickets each week. The congregation is not responsible to assist anyone to pursue their vice or their luxuries.

I have obviously expanded the apostolic instruction to speak of any who are vulnerable. I do no violence to the instructions in doing so. Clearly, the Apostle was teaching that believers are expected to assume responsibility for their own family members. The principle stands: if a member of our family is vulnerable, whatever the reason for their vulnerability may be, we who are followers of the Master must accept responsibility to assume responsibility for them. It matters not whether we speak of widows, widowers, orphans or the incapacitated; believers are to care for those who are vulnerable.

This concern extends to the congregation. When a member of the assembly is vulnerable and has no family to provide for them, we accept responsibility as a congregation for their care. Obviously, as we have explored this concept, we are reaching beyond the mere provision of daily necessities such as food, shelter and medical care. We are equally concerned for the mental and emotional well-being of those who are members.

When Jesus spoke to His disciples of the Judgement of the nations at His return, He pointed to the areas that reveal that an individual has been in tune with God's heart. Listen again to that rather extended teaching. "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'

"Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?' Then he will answer them, saying, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life" [MATTHEW 25:31-46].

To be certain, Jesus focused on provision of those aspects that we know to be necessary for life—food, water, shelter and clothing. What is easy to overlook is that Jesus anticipated that those who were twice-born would accept responsibility for providing mental, emotional and spiritual stimulation—visiting and defending the vulnerable. The natural outworking of the indwelling Spirit of God is expressed through concern and compassion for the vulnerable.

It is true that those who are following the Master should not be criminal, but I have met more than a few believers who were in prison. My first ministry was in a prison farm. Though most were there deservedly, it remains that some were believers who for one reason or another had run afoul of the law. Such violations of written law may become more commonplace in the future as the tide of acceptance turns against those who are following the Master. Not all the homeless are slothful; some are fellow believers who have fallen on hard times.

As a congregation, we have vulnerable individuals that are part of the assembly now. Those who are homebound, those who are lonely, those who may be susceptible to discouragement—these are in need of our love and our ministrations now. Don't begin to say that we hire elders to do this, because the elders are not hired; the church provides support to free them for the work of the ministry, which is prayer and instruction in the Word. The assembly is responsible to ensure that those who are vulnerable among us are cared for.

Though the numbers of those who are truly vulnerable are not great at this time, I fear that these numbers will swell in the near future. I am not a prophet, but I do see the growth of overt hostility toward the Faith of Christ the Lord. The day may not be far off when we will have ample opportunity to visit those in prison and to visit those who are sick. In such a situation we will discover that followers of the Christ will struggle to provide for necessities. The tender mercies of government will not always be available to all the citizens; and the faithful have always been vulnerable when they relied on the state.

**RESPONSIBILITIES OF WIDOWS** — I have spoken of the responsibilities of family toward vulnerable members of their own family. I have also spoken of the responsibility of the congregation for the vulnerable among them. It needs to be said that the widows (or the vulnerable who receive the ministrations of the congregation) also bear some responsibility. Widows are responsible to seek God and to trust Him. This means they must resist their disposition to rely on the fleeting security of this dying world, seeing that their provisions are a demonstration of divine grace. Widows are responsible to pray for the ministries of the congregation and for the elders of the church.

If the foregoing discussions are indicative, and they obviously are, widows are responsible to continue to honour the memory of their husbands. As occasion provides opportunity, widows are to continue to do good works. Listen again to the requirements for those enrolled in an order of widows. “Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband, and having a reputation for good works: if she has brought up children, has shown hospitality, has washed the feet of the saints, has cared for the afflicted, and has devoted herself to every good work” [1 TIMOTHY 5:9, 10]. She who is truly a widow must train herself to “set her hope on God and continue[] in supplications and prayers night and day” [1 TIMOTHY 5:5].

Younger widows will need to consider entering or re-entering the workplace. Many will remarry; they need to be encouraged to seek out a godly companion if this is the course they choose. While it is true that all singles must guard their sexual desires, younger widows must refrain from improper relationships. With the multiplication of “Christian” dating services, the vulnerable widow must be wary of the intentions of those she may meet on such sites. She must bear in mind that not everyone who says he is a Christian, is a Christian.

**BALANCING THE DEMANDS** — I want to attempt to be practical to those who listen to my voice. What I have to say is directed to Christians, in an attempt to provide practical instruction concerning elderly parents. Frequently, these elderly parents are widows—men have a way of passing off the scene at a younger age than women.

Financial independence is not always a consideration for widows or widowers today. Many widows today have a measure of wealth through investments, retirement programs and inherited funds. Unfortunately, when a woman is bereaved, family members often assume that she is unable to make financial decisions on her own. Consequently, they may be insensitive to her personal considerations and make decisions for her in isolation. It is not uncommon that well-meaning children will insist that she leave her home, depriving her of familiar surroundings and friends. The decision is too often made hastily and without consideration for the individual. Families, and especially Christian families, must be sensitive to the widows needs.

I suggest that it is wise for the church to provide a voice of reason for those who are suddenly bereaved. As a congregation, we can provide encouragement in what has historically been sensitive areas that are off limits. Perhaps we need to assign deacons to provide financial guidance for those who are widowed, or even for other vulnerable individuals. Deacons who are appointed to the specific task of familiarising themselves with the various governmental programs that are available to the widowed can provide an essential service. If there is need to make a budget and the widowed have no experience in that area, one who is aware of what needs to be done could prove to be a great blessing. It would mean assessing the actual financial needs and recommending appropriate steps to address those needs. Such ministries are highly practical; and they would no doubt be a blessing to the vulnerable.



The congregation can be trained in dealing with those who grieve. Members can learn to be a source of great support. Early in the process of dying, as a congregation we should and could provide hospice care, so that the surviving spouse will have support during the dark, final days of her or his loved one. We can provide respite care for those who are called upon to provide for their loved one. We can assist families to recognise their responsibilities, educating them in how to prepare for the inevitable.

In years past, I have set in place programs to train the membership of the congregation for those necessary things that come to each life. I suspect that more needs to be done in this area. We could, and should, have a day in which a lawyer speaks to the membership to address such mundane matters as a will and the other legal documents that make transitions easier in our increasingly complex world. We could, and should, make the director of a funeral home available to speak of options after death so our members are not compelled to act precipitously and without knowledge of what is happening. The provision of a qualified insurance broker to speak of options available at various stages of life would be a decided blessing to some.

I am well aware that these suggestions are social in nature, and some will dissent by questioning whether the elder has any right to speak of such things. The appropriate response is that an elder need not attend more than a few funerals until he realises that few people are prepared for what is inevitable. We minister to the living, and not to the dead. Therefore, we can smooth the inevitable transition for those who are part of the assembly by anticipating the inevitable. If we assist members before they are thrown into the maelstrom, we will assist them in the transition that must come into each life.

I don't wish to leave the impression that the choice is "either/or," it is actually "both/and." We are always preparing people to die. Should the Lord tarry, each of us must one day face the inexorable march of time. Each of us shall grapple with the last enemy, and we shall succumb to his cold embrace. For those who shall die—all of us if Christ should delay His return—the question that must be asked is whether they are twice born. Those who are twice born may die but once; those who are born but once, shall surely die twice. Long years ago, the warning was issued, "Poor soul, how shall you live if the Sun of Righteousness be not risen within you? For if the second birth be not accomplished in you, then surely the second death shall prevail." Therefore, I am not your friend if I fail to warn you of the coming judgement.

John paints a dismal, dark scene as he nears the end of the Apocalypse. "I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire" [**REVELATION 20:11-15**].

Your name can be written in the Book of Life. This is the promise of God. "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved" [**ROMANS 10:9, 10**]. God now invites you, promising, "Everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord will be saved" [**ROMANS 10:13**]. Amen.