

Seen as a Living Death

Dementia is a progressive terminal illness which affects thinking, behaviour and the ability to perform everyday tasks. It is caused by a wide range of physical diseases of the brain including Alzheimer's. Most people with dementia are older, but dementia can happen to anybody. At present there is no prevention or cure for most forms of dementia.

Dementia is a threat to the basic values of modern society. Our culture values youth, wit, independence and achievement. Many people fear getting dementia, even more than they fear cancer or death. Society characterises these years as a living death, and exclusion starts immediately. This tells those with dementia that they are only a burden on the taxpayer.

Symptoms can include memory loss, delusions and distressing changes in behaviour. Those who live with dementia can experience problems with understanding, coordination or speech. Sometimes those who are close to them observe aggression, lack of inhibition, hoarding or depression. There may be disturbances in sleep and eating. These symptoms are extremely distressing for the sufferer. It may seem to family and friends that their loved one has ceased to exist even though they are still physically alive. It can seem that all that is left is a body that needs to be fed, washed and cared for.

How can a good and powerful God allow such a massive tragedy?

Dealing with Dementia

At least to some extent, dementia is a consequence of the wonderful life-prolonging technologies and healthier lifestyles we now have. Roughly speaking, 5 percent of Australians have dementia at age sixty-five. By age ninety nearly half will have some form of dementia. Providing care for the growing number of cases has a huge economic impact on society.

According to geriatrician John Dunlop MD the right way to deal with dementia is consistent with Judeo-Christian values. In his book *'Finding Grace in the Face of Dementia'* he says *"there is great value in the fact that people with dementia can still experience feelings and are capable of relationships. Of even greater value is the fact that they, being made in the image of God and loved by Him, possess inherent dignity."*



It is therefore best not to refer to those afflicted with dementia as *"the demented"* but rather as *"people with dementia"*. We must not think of dementia as something that defines who people are. They are first and foremost people.

Honouring God Through Dementia

Caring for a person with dementia is not easy and becomes progressively more difficult. There can be frustration, embarrassment or guilt about how the affected person is behaving. In the vast majority of cases it eventually becomes impossible to care for a person with dementia for twenty-four hours a day, every day.

Christians believe that illness does not take away a person's inherent value as a human being. Everyone is unique, created in the image of God and precious to Him. Every person therefore deserves to be treated with absolute respect and dignity regardless

of their age or state of health. The Bible tells us to **"stand up in the presence of the aged, show respect for the elderly and revere your God. I am the LORD"** (Leviticus 9:32).

In his time of ministry on earth Jesus demonstrated how to love and respect all people. That included the old, the sick, the sinful, and all who were sidelined. Christians are called to follow the example of Jesus by having the same love and service for those in need. That need includes those living with dementia.

Sooner or later the affected person will need to receive specialist care, and that may involve living in a nursing home.

Euthanasia Not an Option

Eventually, euthanasia may be proposed as a solution. How do we as Christians respond?

Like all disease, dementia is ultimately the result of the fall into sin recorded in Genesis 3. It was not part of God's original creation. Like all disease and suffering, dementia will one day be corrected for believers when we receive new glorified bodies in heaven. We rarely see dementia resolved in this life, but we will see such a resolution in eternity.

Once again the Word of God assures us that being made in the image of God is a protection for that life. Euthanasia is not an option for a Christian. The application of life-sustaining technology for one who has dementia is often similar to one with a slowly progressing cancer. Normally at some point it is appropriate to pursue palliative care.

Part of the Christian Community

Our churches should be places where people living with dementia could find a welcome and acceptance. Carers also need support and encouragement. Within the church community, they feel valued: it is essential to who we are as Christ's church. People with dementia belong to the body of Christ, and are

indispensable to the life of the church. Some carers have wonderfully observed that a person who is suffering from dementia is still open to emotional and spiritual experiences. Some with advanced dementia have been seen to suddenly spring to life when saying the Lord's Prayer or singing a hymn.

In his book *'Dementia: Living in the Memories of God'*, UK Professor John Swinton records the words of a Christian woman with pre-senile dementia. She testifies, *"I believe that I am much more than just my brain structure and function, which is declining daily. My creation in the divine image is as a soul capable of love, sacrifice and hope, not as a perfect human being, in mind or body. I want you to relate to me in that way, seeing me as God sees me."*

Dementia is in God's sovereign control. Though it is a result of living in a fallen world, God can still redeem it and accomplish His glory.

Father God, thank You that an illness such as dementia does not take away a person's inherent value and dignity as a human being. Help us to see those afflicted with dementia as people who still bear Your image. Regardless of what stage the dementia has reached help us to treat each person as unique with inherent value and dignity. Be especially close to their carers. Help our society not to be seduced to believe the lie that euthanasia is 'death with dignity' for those with advanced dementia. Thank You that in heaven believers with dementia will receive new glorified bodies and minds. In the Name of Jesus. Amen

About 'Image of God' Leaflets

In the Bible we read that God *"created man in His own image"* (Genesis 1:27). Many maintain that all human history revolves around this truth. The Judeo-Christian belief in the unique dignity of human beings is at the very foundation of Western civilisation.

The 2010 Canberra Declaration therefore states:
"We believe that all human life, being made in the image of God, has intrinsic and equal value from conception to life's natural end."

'Image of God' leaflets relate the doctrine of man as created in the image of God to various issues we face in Australia today.

The 21 leaflets in SERIES ONE are dedicated to Sophie Scholl who was martyred at the age of 21 in World War II for writing and distributing leaflets.

You can download other 'Image of God' leaflets at the Canberra Declaration website.

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**The Canberra Declaration
to Protect**

- ***Religious Freedom***
 - ***Marriage and Family and***
 - ***Human Life***
- in Australia**

Website: www.canberradeclaration.org.au

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Date last modified: 8 September 2017

SERIES ONE
Leaflet 20

Dementia



and the
**Image of
God**