

importantly, in contrast to Smith, I do not believe that human beings are ultimately determined by “our loves,” but rather by the God who loves us, and who lovingly encourages, prods us, and summons us to become what we *already are* by virtue of divine grace.

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## Loving Later Life: An Ethic of Aging

by Frits deLange

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015. 169 pp. \$19.00.  
ISBN 978-0-8028-7216-6.

FINALLY: AN ETHIC FOR THE “fourth stage” of life. As society and the church face an ever-growing population of older people, this book could not be more timely. What makes it unique is its attention to the needs of a much neglected age cohort: the frail elderly, whom Harry R. Moody calls the “illderly” (p. 9). In de Lange’s view, “The older old are scientifically and politically abandoned” (p. 10). Many others have written about the “third age” of life (ages 65–85), called “successful aging,” when retired persons remain healthy, active and productive. De Lange focuses on “fourth age,” those 85 and older, which “creates a new social imagery where choice, autonomy, self-expression and pleasure collapse into a silent negativity” (p. 9).

At age eighty-eight, this book is of special interest to me, since I am now dealing with the issues of the fourth stage due to peripheral neuropathy and other frailties. Every day I deal with issues of dependence on caregivers for daily living—a stage of life well described by the writer of Ecclesiastes: “the days of trouble come, and the years draw nigh when you will say, ‘I have no pleasure in them’” (Eccl 12:1). De Lange discusses various attempts to define an ethic for the oldest elderly, including Kantian, virtue, utilitarian and eudemonistic ethics, but all are too activist to address the needs of people in deep old age, when frailty and dependence

on others is paramount. For de Lange, an ethic of love for the aging (“agapism”) is required—an ethic that stresses care and relationships with others, rooted in Jesus’s commandment to love one’s neighbor as oneself.

Before turning to this ethic of love, the author addresses “Why We Do Not Love the Elderly” (p. 61). “Aversion to aging” is rooted in fear of our own aging and mortality. Ours is still a youth-obsessed culture. Ageism permeates all of society, from discrimination in the work force to elder abuse to warehousing the elderly in nursing homes. “The idea of old age as horrific, disgusting and tainted by mortality has a long history in Western classical traditions as well as in Eastern cultures” (p. 62). De Lange believes that until we accept and love our aging selves, we can never love older people. Loving ourselves means finding the beauty of the soul in the latter years of life. As Elizabeth Roosevelt observed, “Beautiful young people are accidents of nature, but beautiful older people are works of art” (*Huffington Post* 10/1/2017). Loving our aging selves means embracing life and valuing its last season. This is not always easy to affirm when confronted with loss of health and meaning.

DeLange helpfully addresses the crucial issue of parent-child relationships in the later years and reminds us that the fifth commandment focuses on the care of elderly parents by adult children. An ethic of love goes beyond feeling a debt to the parent (pay-back time). It includes both friendship (*philia*) and unconditional respect (*agape*) for aging parents. Unconditional love is needed especially as caregivers attend to the growing population of people with Alzheimer’s or other forms of dementia. Even when minds seem to be empty shells, and speech is garbled or absent, the “soul” is still there and can be reached by a loving person. Jesus rejected reciprocal love, calling his followers to an unconditional love that has no hope of return. As deLange notes, “We have to promote the good of the other, *regardless of whether we can expect any back*” (p. 36, italics original).

The book ends with sad commentary on a society that marginalizes and isolates older

people, and calls for social justice for the elderly: “It is essential that we develop compassion for speechless old people, those who feel cut off from the rest of humankind and are unable to express their complaint any longer. We must sit down with them, and share their cry” (p. 138).

This book will be of real value for persons experiencing the “third age,” as they prepare for the fourth, always lurking on the horizon. It offers guidance for making a smooth transition to the last stage of life’s journey, for caring for our own aging selves, and for response to the myriad needs of the growing population of older people in our churches and communities. It will be of special importance for families caring for elderly loved ones, helping them maintain a friendship across the years.

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### **Christian Practical Wisdom: What It Is, Why It Matters**

by Dorothy C. Bass, Kathleen A. Cahalan, Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, James R. Nieman, and Christian B. Scharen

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016. 352 pp. \$30.00.  
ISBN 978-0-8028-6873-2.

IT IS RARE TO ENCOUNTER a book that offers not only a contribution, but also an innovation. In some ways *Christian Practical Wisdom* is a natural follow-up to *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry* (Eerdmans, 2008); yet this book goes further than the previous work in both argument and method. The authors experiment with a “show and tell” model to avoid writing about Christian practical wisdom in an abstract, theoretical way that would undermine their main argument—that practical wisdom is an essential “kind of knowing that emerges as embodied human beings experience the world, engage in

practices, live imaginatively before texts and traditions, and acknowledge the limits of their knowing” (p. 325). They further argue that within the academy, including seminaries and divinity schools, this kind of practical knowledge has been marginalized, and disembodied, theoretical knowledge privileged. In part one of the book, each author “shows” how Christian practical wisdom operates by sharing real life situations that have enabled them to learn and grow as disciples. In part two, each author then “tells” a part of the theoretical story that advances the book’s argument. The authors also take an innovative approach to the researching and writing of the book—gathering together frequently in a Benedictine community for conversation, meals, prayer, and worship, and going on “field trips” to encounter embodied practical wisdom while learning from its practitioners. The final product reflects this intensely collaborative approach.

I can imagine pastors and professors fruitfully using some of the book’s chapters to facilitate reflection on how the Holy Spirit can use a variety of experiences (of the body, broken families, times of recovery from surgery, love for music, and the conflict between older and newer congregants over received practices) to shape and form us. I recommend that seminary communities wrestle with the book’s opening chapter, which argues that our theological communities need to retrieve Christian practical wisdom, rather than to uncritically prioritize theoretical knowledge. And I suggest that they engage with Dorothy Bass’ chapter exploring how we might engage Scripture in ways that enliven our biblical imagination even in this secular age.

The main limitation of the book has to do with the authors’ own “restricted social and cultural reach” (p. 16). While this is something they name, it is significant given the book’s underlying premise that how embodied humans encounter the world in real life matters. The contributors share the same ethnicity, three of the five are of the same denomination, and there is some overlap in where they received their educations. As a result, the extent of the