

## Towards a Practical Christian Ethic of Dementia

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### **Abstract**

A Christian ethic of dementia is a critical topic, due to the prevalence of dementia, its impact on people and the Bible's teaching regarding how the church should respond. This paper proposes a Christian ethic of dementia and dementia care built on Scripture, arguing that dementia cannot impact, let alone diminish a person's value and that Christians are called to love people living with dementia. As such, it provides an ethic of dementia, and supports the pastoral reflection *Forgotten Ministry* which outlines my experience with dementia and published in this edition of the *Journal of Contemporary Ministry*.

**Key words:** Alzheimer's, biblical ethic, dementia

### **Introduction**

Today there are over 42 million people living with dementia, and by 2050 the number will be 135 million (Alzheimer's Disease International, 2014). Dementia is one of the most terrifying (Williams, 2021; Kevern, 2017) and prevalent diseases today.

Dementia is progressive, largely incurable and terminal. In fact, dementia is Australia's major cause of death (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2025). Dementia impacts the brain, which popular and Christian culture often treat as the basis of our personhood (Ighofose et al. 2023; Kinghorn, 2024; Post, 2006; Swinton & MacKinlay, 2024).

This article takes a three-fold approach toward a Christian ethic of dementia. Firstly, it defines dementia, and the ethical questions dementia raises. Secondly, it explores the ethics of personhood amid dementia. Finally, it proposes an *applied Christian Ethic of Dementia through the lenses of good dementia theology, good life with dementia and good death with dementia*.

## Defining Dementia?

While dementia is commonly perceived as a disease of memory, it is much more complex (Dementia Australia, 2019). For example, there are three overlapping aspects of dementia which must be wrestled with to formulate a Christian ethic of dementia: scientific, social and theological.

Medically, dementia is an umbrella term for several degenerative and terminal neurological diseases which impact the brain, affecting thinking, communication, and the ability to perform everyday tasks (Dementia Australia, 2019).

Socially, dementia is often a condition in which the suffer experiences 'relational abandonment' (Kinghorn, 2024). Ethically, this is critical as it highlights that the experience of dementia is profoundly shaped not only by internal disease but also by the isolation many people impacted by dementia experience (Bute, 2024; Bryden, 2024; Ighofose et al., 2023; Swinton, 2017). The basis of this isolation is three-fold: firstly, suffering makes us feel isolated, second, dementia can lead some people to forget visits from loved ones, increasing the sense of isolation. Critically, while these memories can fade, positive feelings often remain. Finally, and most devastating, Christians, along with others, often neglect people living with dementia, due to stigma, fear of what to say and the pain of visiting (Bolanda, 2025).

Theologically, dementia raises deep questions: What gives a person value, purpose and meaning? What makes someone a person? Does Dementia impact relationship with God? How such questions are answered radically affect how people living with dementia are treated (Boland, 2025b; Boland, 2025c; Carder, 2019; Swinton, 2017; Williams, 2021; Williams, 2022).

## Personhood

An ethic of personhood is critical as it defines people's value and how they should be treated. Exploring all proposals for an ethic of personhood amid dementia is beyond the scope of this article and has already been outlined (Hughes, 2023). Instead, this article summarises three prominent ethics of dementia personhood: the cognition view, the capacity view and the relationship view before contrasting them to a Biblical ethic of personhood.

### The Cognition view of Personhood

Since the Enlightenment's "subjective turn" away from objective truth derived from the divine, to individual truth derived from experience, western society has prioritised the importance of the mind in understanding what makes a person (Crowther, 2017; Kinghorn, 2024). This understanding lies behind the presentation in fiction that "a brain in a bottle" could be a "whole person," capable of thought, speech and action via technology. The bottom line in this argument is that cognition is necessary for personhood and so, to the extent that cognition is lacking, so is personhood. In the scholarly context, ethicists such as Singer, argue that intelligent non-humans (e.g. apes) should be granted the rights of personhood while people living with advanced dementia should be euthanised on the basis of cognitive function (Singer, 2011).

### The Capacity view of Personhood

An example of capacity as the basis of personhood is the Situational Embodied Agent model, which argues that personhood rests on a combination of body, mind and situation (Hughes, 2001; Hughes, 2023). The problem with capacity as the basis of personhood is that dementia typically leads to a decline in capacity. Like the cognition view, this can exclude people living with dementia.

### The Relationship view of Personhood

In his ground-breaking work *Dementia Reconsidered*, social psychologist Kitwood argues that personhood is derived from relationships (Kitwood, 2008). The strength of this position is that Scripture, the academic literature and universal human experience emphasise that people are relational beings – we are wired to know and

be known by others. It also aligns well with the understanding of dementia as a condition of social isolation (Kinghorn, 2024). The problem remains however that many people living with dementia experience a loss of relationships.

## The Biblical view of Personhood

Scripture teaches, that the basis of human personhood lies in the fact that we have been made by God, for God, and in the *Imago Dei*. Being image bearers distinguishes us from both God and the rest of creation. Humans can kill fungus, plants and animals, but not humans (Gen.9:1-6) (Calvin, 1636; Grudem, 1994; Packer, 2011), with the arguable exceptions of war (Farley, 2018; Potana, 2014), self-defence (Decker, 2014; Isuwa, 2021) and capital punishment (Charles, 1994; Clark, 2023; Orpwood, 2008).

As a Biblical understanding of personhood pivots on God and is not dependent on any internal property, such as the level of cognition, or external capacity such as the ability to relate to other people, Biblical personhood cannot be earned, lost, diminished or taken – it is immutable and indestructible. Thus, Biblically dementia cannot impact personhood as it does not affect God (Boland, 2025c; Dunlop, 2017; Mast, 2014).

## An applied Christian Ethic of Dementia

Personhood as a consequence of bearing God's image determines how people are called to treat other people and themselves. While this doctrine is easy to articulate, it can be challenging to apply, particularly when it comes to the complexities of dementia. A detailed examination of a Christian Ethic of dementia with regard to ministry is provided in this edition's pastoral reflection – *Forgotten Ministry*. So, this paper will focus on a more general application of a Christian ethic of dementia using three topics: good theology with dementia, good life with dementia and good death with dementia.

## Good theology with dementia

As articulated in the previous section, a Christian ethic of dementia is underpinned by a theology of personhood. Specifically, people living with dementia are **PEOPLE** -

created by God, in God's image and so loved by God He died for them. Therefore, their value is immutable and incredible.

Ethically a Christian view of personhood means living with dementia should not decrease the love a person receives. Yet, people living with dementia often receive less love (Boland, 2024a; Boland, 2025c; Epps et al., 2019; Otwell, 2007; Williams, 2021; Ysseldyk et al., 2013). Overlooking people living with dementia also risks breaking the Bible's teaching about favouritism (Lev.19:15 & Jam.2:1–13) (Boland, 2024a; Boland, 2025c). Specifically, if we treat people living with dementia as less than other people we are playing favourites. Thus, the doctrines of personhood and favouritism mean a Christian ethic of dementia emphasises the importance of loving people impacted by dementia.

A Biblical ethic of personhood also underlies the commandment to love our neighbours: people living with dementia, are our neighbours. A Christian ethic of dementia requires us to love our neighbours with dementia (Boland, 2025c; Goldsmith, 2004; Linthicum & Hicks, 2018; Thibault, & Morgan, 2009).

Personhood and love of neighbour, provide a profound foundation for Christian ethical treatment of people generally and specifically people living with dementia. Scripture, however, places additional emphasis on the importance of care for people living with dementia by prioritising care of the poor, widows and parents.

Dementia can lead to poverty (Wash, 2022) and poverty is a key risk factor in the development of dementia (Daly, 2025; Trani et al., 2024). The majority of people living with dementia today are in the global south (Alzheimer's Disease International, 2014; Alzheimer's Disease International, 2013; Naheed et al., 2023; Resende et al., 2019). Scripture's commands to care for the poor (Cuellar, De la Cruz, & Robinson, 2017; Parcell, 2023; Udom, Olusakin, & Essien, 2025) and the link between poverty and dementia, further highlight the ethical imperative for Christians to care for people living with dementia.

A Christian ethic of dementia is further underpinned by the commandments regarding older people. For example, 'Stand up in the presence of the aged, show respect for the elderly and revere your God. I am the Lord' (Lev.19:32) (Atwell et al., 2020). McCormick argues 'Wherever we turn in the Bible, we consistently see exhortations to honor the aged' (McCormick, 2015). Practically, the Lausanne Movement has identified mission to older people as a global mission priority (Lausanne, 2025). While not all older people experience dementia, being older is the primary risk factor for dementia (Alzheimer's Society, 2025). Therefore the Biblical teaching about older people, buttresses the Christian ethic of importance the important of care of people impacted by dementia.

A Christian ethic of prioritising people living with dementia is also supported by the commands about parents (Exo.20:12; Mar.7:9-13 & Eph.6:2-3). Challies argues the commandment to honour parents applies beyond childhood has often been neglected. Specifically, he notes we are all always children, so the command never ceases to apply (Challies, 2017). None of the other commandments are time limited although adultery, coveting one's neighbour's wife and murder primarily apply to adults (Boland, 2025c). Not limiting the honouring of parents to the period of childhood is also supported by Jesus' teaching on Corban (Mar.7:9-13). Finally, the command to honour parents is linked to a promise (Eph.6:2-3) and its placement as the fifth commandment gives it additional weighting (Challies, 2017). While many parents do not live with dementia, parents are more likely to live with dementia due to increasing age (Alzheimer's Society, 2025). Thus, the commandment to honour our parents, further supports a Christian ethic of prioritising people living with dementia.

The basic theological principles of respect for personhood, avoiding favouritism and loving one's neighbours and the specific Scriptural statements regarding the prioritising of care for the poor, widows and parents highlight the importance of caring for people living with dementia from a Christian ethical perspective.

## Good life with Dementia

Having highlighted the Biblical ethic of dementia, it is appropriate to examine the application of this ethic with reference to helping people living with dementia live life to the full (John10:10).

For many people, the hope of a good life with dementia seems like an impossibility (Kitwood, 2008). Yet there is strong evidence that it is possible to live well with dementia (Barr, et al. 2016; Bute, 2024; Bryden, 2024; Morse, 2015). This is not to suggest life with dementia is without challenges, but that “we need to learn to see dementia properly, both its prickly vines and its beautiful fruit” (Swinton & MacKinlay, 2024). Therefore, a key application of a Christian ethic of dementia is to share a positive vision of dementia.

Sadly, Christians have been guilty of unethical engagement with people living with dementia; for example, telling people their dementia has a spiritual origin (Alemayehu et al., 2025; Brooke & Ojo, 2020; Bryden, 2024; Ighofose et al., 2023; Jacobs et al., 2024; Kantawala et al., 2023; Mfaene & Pillary, 2023). More commonly, churches have neglected ministry to people affected by dementia (Boland, 2024; Boland, 2025c; Bryden, 2024). This topic is explored, and practical suggestions made in this edition’s pastoral reflection – *Forgotten Ministry*. A Christian ethic of dementia however requires not simply ‘ministry’ but an engagement with the “prickly vines” of dementia.

What are the ethical “prickly vines” of life with dementia? Living with dementia requires engaging with the “prickly vines” of grief, dependency and mortality. As dementia is degenerative, it is typically marked by significant ongoing loss of memory, capacity and relationships (Martin, 2023). From a Christian perspective, key responses to these challenges are grief, lament and trust in God (Crowther, 2017). Too often Christians who are experiencing these losses are exhorted to ‘leap lament’ and joyously ‘trust God’. Yet this is a caricature of what Scripture teaches!

The Psalms are full of lament and Lamentations is a whole book of grief. Jesus was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, and consequently no stranger to tears (Luke19:41, John11:35 & Isaiah 53:3). When it comes to the pastoral care of those with dementia, it’s all too easy to focus on the gentle and joyous parts of specific

psalms – “Green pastures and still waters” and “as the deer pants for the water” – while neglecting the “Valley of the shadow of death” and “my bones suffer mortal agony.” Or we can skip over the “dark” psalms (e.g. Psa.22, 88 & 137), when these are precisely what is needed. A Biblical ethic of dementia, therefore, includes prioritising the “dark” parts of grief, as one of the challenges of dementia is learning to grieve before the throne of grace.

Another challenge is facing our dependency (Boland, 2025; Bute, 2024) particularly as Western culture idolises independence. A great resource that provides a Christian perspective on the importance of facing and embracing dependency is *The Final Lap* (Wyatt, 2023). Wyatt notes that while our culture places emphasis on autonomy and control, Scripture teaches we are created as limited beings who are designed to be dependent on the creation, each other and God. Learning to recognise and accept increasing dependence is a lifelong process but one that dementia brings to the fore. Thus it is both a thorn and fruit of dementia.

A particular ethical challenge relating to dependency in the midst of dementia is decision making. In moderate to advanced dementia, a common problem is loss of self-awareness and therefore diminished ability to make good decisions. Classic challenges include driving and living alone. A good resource for thinking ethically about these challenges is *Dementia and Ethics Reconsidered* (Hughes, 2023), which covers topics such as ‘Consent and capacity’, ‘Best interest’ and ‘Truth-telling’. (An explicitly Christian position regarding truth telling is outlined here: Boland, 2018a).

A key theological question asked by many people affected by dementia is: What happens if I forget God? As a chaplain, I have found it helpful to ask: Is your faith dependent on you or God? My aim is to help the person realise we all forget God and that Christianity instead relies on God’s love, power and memory (Boland, 2025c; Carder, 2019; Swinton, 2017).

An examination of conversion in the midst of dementia is provided by Wormell, who shows dementia does not prevent people becoming Christians (Wormell, 2015), While Williams provides a deep exploration of the Christian’s experience of mild to moderate dementia, highlighting the opportunities and challenges of this experience

(Williams, 2021). Finally, Bute and Bryden provide powerful voices of Christians living with dementia (Bute, 2018; Bryden, 2005; Bryden, 2015). An exceptional resource for sharing the Gospel with people living with dementia is *Hymns We Love* (Cramer & Cramer, 2023).

A Christian ethic of dementia requires Christians to love amid the grief and the dependency which dementia often brings. It also requires consideration of mortality, as one of the blessed fruits of dementia is the chance to prepare for death.

### Good Death with Dementia

A biblical ethic of a good death with dementia is critical as dementia is usually terminal and death is a key theme throughout Scripture from the fall to the second coming (Gen.2 and Rev.21). Indeed, Christianity is almost death centric, as it pivots on Jesus' death. There are many Christian resources on a good death (Best, 2024; Dunlop, n.d.; McDonald, 2013) as well as Christian resources which engage with death and dementia (Boland, 2025c; Bachand-Wood, 2016; Dunlop, 2017; MacKinlay, 2012) As such, I will simply summarise five key scriptural teachings about a good death.

1. While death is a consequence of the fall (Gen.3:1-24 & Rom.5:12-14), it has been conquered by Jesus' resurrection (1Cor.15:1-58 & 2Tim.1:8-12). So, for those who believe in him, death is not to be feared; it is now the gateway to life eternal (Joh.11:23-27, 14: 1-7 & 1The.4:13-18) (Calvin, 1636; Grudem, 1994; Web, 1990).
2. Pain is not innately good (Gen.3: 16-19). So, treatment focused on pain relief is ethically acceptable (Best, (2025); Lambaerts, 2025; Tyndall, 2025).
3. Christian hope is eternal (e.g. John11:23-27, 14: 1-7 & 1The.4:13-18); but life in our current bodies will end (Gen.5:3-32; Ecc.9:1-12 & Heb.9:27) (Brammall, 2008). Therefore, Biblically, it is ethical to choose not to undergo treatment to extend life (Best, 2025; Meilaender, 2020).

4. Unlike animals, people bear the *Imago Dei* (Gen.1:26, 5:1, 9:6 & Jam.3:9) so deliberately causing the death of a human being (Gen.9:6), even for reasons of compassion, is not ethical (1Sam31:4) (Erickson, 1998; Grudem, 1994; Packer, 2011). The question of killing in war (Farley, 2018; Potana, 2014), self-defence (Decker, 2014; Isuwa, 2021) and capital punishment (Charles, 1994; Clark, 2023; Orpwood, 2008) are arguably exceptions.
  
5. Christians are called to love people and care for them, even though we may disagree with their decisions (Mat.22:39; Mar.12:31 & Luk.6:27-36). As such, it is ethical for a Christian to offer support to a person who has chosen to undergo Voluntary Assisted Dying (Best, 2025; UnitingCare, 2022).

## Conclusion

This paper has proposed a Christian ethic of dementia care founded on Scripture. It defined dementia and the ethical questions dementia raises before exploring the topic of personhood amid dementia and highlighting that a Biblical ethic of dementia is underpinned by the *Imago Dei*. Therefore dementia does not diminish a person. This foundation was then built on to propose an applied Christian Ethic of Dementia using the lens of good dementia theology, good life with dementia and good death with dementia.

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