

Clerical Old Age and the Forming of Rites of Passage in Early Modern Scotland

Chris R. Langley* 
The Open University

This article investigates the rites that marked the end of a clerical career in early modern Scotland. It discusses what would take place when a minister had accepted that he was too old for his charge. It explores the ways in which ministers described their aging bodies, the impact of age on their vocation and how parishioners observed them. The article argues that the bureaucratic machinery devised to address the challenges of clerical old age created personal and professional rites of passage.

In 1712, Robert Wodrow, minister of Eastwood, in the Presbytery of Paisley, wrote a note about Patrick Simson, minister of Renfrew, a parish some fifteen kilometres away. Wodrow reported how Simson, ‘the oldest minister in office in this Church’ at ‘near eighty-four’ years old, was ‘in a suddain ... seized with a palsy in the half of his body’. The same day, Simson had attended the meeting of the Paisley Presbytery, and had seemed ‘very hearty’ before travelling home. Simson’s condition lasted several days, until, ‘a little worn off’, he was able to ‘walk throu the room again, with a litle grip’. Wodrow concluded his short record with the note ‘I suspect he will never be able to come abroad’, despite his partial recovery.¹ A cursory glance at the attendance lists for Paisley Presbytery confirms Wodrow’s fears. Simson’s condition resulted in his being absent from all subsequent presbytery meetings; his absence was accepted by his colleagues but (as is typical) the clerk chose not to record the reasons behind it.² Wodrow had an

* School of Arts and Humanities, 18 Custom House St, Cardiff, CF10 1AP. E-mail: christopher.langley@open.ac.uk.

¹ Robert Wodrow, *Analecta: Or, Materials for a Story of Remarkable Providences; Mostly relating to Scottish Ministers and Christians*, 2 vols (Edinburgh, 1842), 2: 80.

² Edinburgh, National Records of Scotland [hereafter: NRS], CH2/294/7, 144–58. Unfortunately, there is a gap in the kirk session minutes of the parish of Renfrew between

Studies in Church History 59 (2023), 244–264 © The Author(s), 2023. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Ecclesiastical History Society. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.
doi: 10.1017/stc.2023.12

acute interest in elderly ministers, conversing with them and recording their recollections in his notebooks. When Simson died in October 1715, Wodrow noted that he and Thomas Warner, minister at Balmaclellan in Kirkcudbright Presbytery, had been the longest-serving ministers in the Church and lamented the loss of Simson's 'clearest judgments' and 'most exact and tenacious memories'.³ Elderly ministers were Wodrow's connections to the past and could offer lessons for the church in which he lived. To Wodrow, elderly ministers like Patrick Simson offered something unique.

Scholars have recently accepted age as a distinct category of historical analysis.⁴ Contrary to the findings of Philippe Ariès, who argued that old age was largely ridiculed, rather than revered, in the medieval and early modern periods, historians now stress that the elderly could elicit sympathy and respect, as well as being the subjects of disdain, jealousy or hatred.⁵ The elderly were recipients of alms, supported by friends and kin and respected as holders of communal memory or knowledge.⁶ Conversely, those who were considered elderly were expected to behave differently and accept the impact of age on their bodies.⁷

Early modern concepts of what constituted old age were remarkably variable and usually related to an individual's bodily condition or mental acuity. Early modern readings of old age were dominated on the one hand by the remnants of Galenic understandings of the body,

1700–31, so we cannot ascertain how Simson's health affected his pastoral responsibilities: see NRS, CH2/1596/1/1.

³ Wodrow, *Analecta*, 2: 305.

⁴ Elizabeth Ewan and Janay Nugent, 'Introduction: Adding Age and Generation as a Category of Historical Analysis', in Janay Nugent and Elizabeth Ewan, eds, *Children and Youth in Premodern Scotland* (Woodbridge, 2015), 1–12.

⁵ Philippe Ariès, *Western Attitudes towards Death: The Middle Ages to the Present* (London, 1976); Allison P. Coudert, 'The Sulzbach Jubilee: Old Age in Early Modern Europe and America', in Albrecht Classen, ed., *Old Age in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (Berlin, 2007), 533–56.

⁶ Margaret Pelling, 'Old Age, Poverty and Disability in Early Modern Norwich: Work, Remarriage and other Expedients', in eadem and Richard M. Smith, eds, *Life, Death and the Elderly: Historical Perspectives* (London, 1991), 74–10, at 78; David Thomson, 'The Welfare of the Elderly in the Past: A Family or Community Responsibility?', in Margaret Pelling and Richard M. Smith, eds, *Life, Death and the Elderly: Historical Perspectives* (London, 1991), 194–221.

⁷ Susannah R. Ottaway, *The Decline of Life: Old Age in Eighteenth Century England* (Cambridge, 2004), 31–5.

according to which the body became colder and drier as it aged as a result of humoral changes, and on the other by the ages of man model, which divided life on earth into four, six or seven distinct periods, each with a different set of characteristics.⁸ Moreover, contemporaries in this period were not entirely comfortable with ‘the language of figures’ or even clear about how one might calculate one’s age with absolute precision.⁹ Chronological age was ‘largely meaningless’ to pre-modern European cultures.¹⁰ In the absence of a chronological understanding, Lynn Botelho has urged scholars to consider the physical manifestations of age that became apparent at certain stages in the life cycle to understand how old age was constructed. These visible changes would affect the perception of others and one’s own perception of self.¹¹ Old age was judged according to the bodies of relatives, friends and neighbours, rather than by arbitrary numbers.

The transitions between different stages of the early modern life cycle were punctuated by rites of passage. Heavily influenced by Arnold van Gennep’s idea that certain ritualized actions would ‘enable the individual to pass from one defined position to another’ in their community, Edward Muir referred to such moments as ‘passages of status’, reflecting on how the performance of ritual acts could cement, sometimes legally, a person’s new position in their community.¹² Victor Turner described such performances as forming distinct ‘life crisis’ rites.¹³ Early modern historians have long focused on the Christian rites and rituals around birth, baptism, churching,

⁸ Anthony Ellis, *Old Age, Masculinity and Early Modern Drama: Comic Elders on the Italian and Shakespearean Stage* (Farnham, 2009), 4–5.

⁹ Keith Thomas, ‘Age and Authority in Early Modern England’, *PBA* 62 (1976), 205–48, at 205–6.

¹⁰ Shulamith Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages: ‘Winter clothes us in Shadow and Pain’* (London, 1997), 12.

¹¹ A. C. L. Beam, “Should I as yet call you old?” Testing the Boundaries of Old Age in Early Modern England’, in Erin J. Campbell, ed., *Growing Old in Early Modern Europe: Cultural Representations* (Aldershot, 2006), 95–116; Lynn Botelho, ‘Old Age and Menopause in Rural Women of Early Modern Suffolk’, in eadem and Pat Thane, eds, *Women and Ageing in British Society since 1500* (Harlow, 2001), 43–65, at 60–4; Steven R. Smith, ‘Growing Old in Early Stuart England’, *Albion* 8 (1976), 125–41.

¹² Edward Muir, *Ritual in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 1997), 27–31; Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, transl. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (Chicago, IL, 1960), 9–11.

¹³ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago, IL, 1969), 167.

communion, marriage and (especially) death.¹⁴ Scholars have been particularly interested in the ways in which the meanings behind these rites subtly shifted in response to the Protestant and Catholic Reformations. Often, however, the rites of passage that marked a separation into old age have either been collapsed into considerations of dying or have escaped historians' attention altogether.

This article will explore the passage of status experienced by the clergy of early modern Scotland as they entered old age. In the absence of similar studies, such an endeavour may offer a model for historians assessing clerical careers, especially relating to old age, in other national contexts. What follows focuses exclusively on Lowland parishes due to the greater volume and consistency of surviving source material produced by church courts in that area. The article argues that, contrary to the findings of Shulamith Shahar, the bureaucratic machinery of the Reformed Church of Scotland and the emphasis on a minister's ability to perform his role created distinct phases of separation, transition and (finally) incorporation into a new status as an elderly member of the clerical profession.¹⁵ The rites of passage experienced by aging clerics in Reformation Scotland were not solely religious rituals, but fused the religious and the social, were often deeply personal and above all were products of the Reformed church's desire to protect the status of the ministry.¹⁶ Unlike many figures experiencing rites of passage, Scotland's early modern ministry had considerable leeway to negotiate the terms of their new status. Nevertheless, old age, and the activities surrounding it, represented a key transition for Scotland's early modern clergy, one that was acknowledged by the bureaucratic machinery of the church, congregations across the country and ministers themselves.

¹⁴ David Cressy, *Birth, Marriage and Death: Ritual, Religion and the Life-Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford, 1997); Arnold Hunt, 'The Lord's Supper in Crisis in Early Modern England', *P&P* 161 (1998), 39–83; Susan C. Karant-Nunn, *The Reformation of Ritual: An Interpretation of Early Modern Germany* (London, 1997); Christine Peters, 'Gender, Sacrament and Ritual: The Making and Meaning of Marriage in Late Medieval and Early Modern England', *P&P* 169 (2000), 63–96; Elizabeth Tingle and Jonathan Willis, eds, *Dying, Death, Burial and Commemoration in Reformation Europe* (London, 2016).

¹⁵ Shahar, *Growing Old*, 14.

¹⁶ Van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*; Victor Turner, 'Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*', in idem, ed., *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, NY, 1967), 93–111.

The first stage of the Gennepian rite of passage was a moment in which one separated from one's previous state.¹⁷ In their preaching, Reformed theologians appreciated old age as a distinct category or moment in the life cycle. In *The Institutes of Christian Religion*, John Calvin urged his readers to 'respect those in years as the Lord has been pleased to make that age honourable'. Those who had reached their dotage also had the obligation 'by their prudence and their experience (in which they are far superior)' to 'guide the feebleness of youth'.¹⁸ To Calvin, those who failed to respect their elders were guilty of theft, by withholding honour that was owed.¹⁹ The trope of the elderly served a didactic function in Calvin's thought as older people reminded younger parishioners of the limited, imperfect, nature of life on earth and gestured towards the afterlife. For Calvin, humankind was oblivious to the short-term nature of life on earth: 'we flatter ourselves that life is long', when 'the term of seventy years is short', and especially so when compared to the infinite nature of God. Armed with the realization that life is short, people 'see that they are dragged and carried forward to death with rapid haste and that their excellence is every moment vanishing away'.²⁰ Old age should remind believers of their obligations in their mortal lives and of the destiny of their souls after they die.

Following Calvin, Scottish preachers impressed on their listeners the reverence in which they should hold their elders. In 1608, the young preacher William Guild recommended: 'When thou comest to appear before thy betters or elders, in a comely fashion shew the reverence of thy heart towards them, by bowing the knee of thy bodie before them.'²¹ The idea of honouring the wisdom of the aged remained widespread in Reformed preaching in early modern Scotland. In the first half of the seventeenth century, David Lindsay told his parishioners in Belhelvie, Aberdeenshire, that 'honorable age is not that quhich standeth in the lenth of tyme nor is measured of the number of yeirs, bot wisdom is gray haire unto men and

¹⁷ Van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*, 21.

¹⁸ John Calvin, *The Institutes of Christian Religion*, transl. Henry Beveridge (London, 1845), 477 (2.8.46).

¹⁹ Ezra Lincoln Plank, 'Creating Perfect Families: French Reformed Churches and Family Formation, 1559–1685' (PhD thesis, University of Iowa, 2013), 65.

²⁰ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, ed. James Anderson, 5 vols (Edinburgh, 1845–9), 3: 471.

²¹ William Guild, *A Yong Mans Inquisition, or Triall* (London, 1608), 196–7.

ane unspoiled lyf.²² In a sermon in 1638, Alexander Henderson, preacher at Leuchars, Fife, told parishioners:

‘Thy youth’. That is, thy young men. Those that are renewed by grace they are called young, albeit they were never so old, because their age is not reckoned by their first, but by their second birth. Ay, moreover, still the older that the children of God grow in years and the weaker in the world, they grow younger and stronger in grace. Secondly, they are caled young, because of the strength that they have to resist temptations.²³

Henderson, himself around fifty-five when delivering this sermon, urged his parishioners to understand that while the body necessarily decayed the elderly held accumulated wisdom as they advanced in years. Those renewed by grace had a youth wholly separate from the age of their bodies.

Beyond this general respect, preachers agreed with Calvin that the physical tokens of age reflected the finite nature of life on earth.²⁴ In aging, humanity is forced to reckon with its mortality and, consequently, its creator. William Wishart lamented how ‘there is no creature on earth, so naked and indigent as man: for naked hee was borne and naked shall hee returne againe: and hee hath no peculiar or proper thing in the world, that hee can justly call his, but sinne and infirmity’. Beyond all of humankind’s achievements lay ‘age and wrinkles and the lineaments of death’.²⁵ Ultimately, even the wisdom of the elderly accumulated over time paled in comparison with God’s infinite knowledge. In 1635, Ninian Campbell told his readers that ‘where there is one come to fiftie years, there are ten not come; but to see a man passe his climacterick and then 80 years, it is a rara avis in terris. Never man yet lived a 1000 years, which are but one day in the sight of God’.²⁶ Preachers used the spectre of aging to remind parishioners of the fallibility of the human body and of its weakness before God, as well as the need to repent effectively before death. Old age

²² NRS, CH2/32/23, 96.

²³ Alexander Henderson, *Sermons, Prayers and Pulpit Addresses*, ed. R. Thomson Martin (Edinburgh, 1867), 26.

²⁴ See Steven R. Smith, ‘Death, Dying and the Elderly in Seventeenth-Century England’, in Stuart F. Spicker, Kathleen M. Woodward and David D. Van Tassel, eds, *Aging and the Elderly: Humanistic Perspectives on Gerontology* (Atlantic Highland, NJ, 1978), 205–20, at 207.

²⁵ William Wishart, *An Exposition of the Lords Prayer* (London, 1633), 373.

²⁶ Ninian Campbell, *A Treatise upon Death* (Edinburgh, 1635), unpaginated.

should spur devotion. In a tract published in 1673, preacher and principal of the University of Edinburgh, William Colvill, stressed how ‘such who are in their decrept old age, stouping toward the earth and the grave, let them not imploy their short time and their affections wholly upon the things of the earth, when by the course of nature, they are near to be removed from it: Let them not be busie in the things of the world and careless of the work of their own salvation’.²⁷ The changes one’s body experienced in old age should serve as the ultimate reminder of the immortality of the soul.

Preachers opining on the subject held a particularly lofty view of clerical old age, separating elderly ministers from their younger associates. An eighteenth-century publication by William Wishart told its readers that elderly ministers ‘should have great Reverence and Respect paid to them by young Ministers’ by ‘rising up before them and giving Place to them in Speech and Discourse’. Wishart recommended that less experienced ministers should ‘shew great modesty and Respect’ to their older colleagues, ‘even when they themselves cannot bring themselves to be of their mind’. There was more to admire in elderly ministers than ‘gray haire’, as Wishart concluded, echoing Calvin by saying that an elderly minister’s ‘Knowledge, Wisdom, Prudence and Experience, demand this Reverence and Respect’.²⁸

This separation between elderly and younger ministers can also be seen in practice. Ecclesiastical courts regularly made alterations to their meetings to accommodate the needs of elderly colleagues, accepting that some older ministers could no longer participate in the same way. In 1623, ministers in the Synod of Fife agreed that ‘such brethren as are aged’ should be ‘disburdened’ of having to preach in front of colleagues and ‘their place supplied by younger brethren’ at future synod meetings.²⁹

In most other cases, ecclesiastical courts would accept that elderly colleagues could not be present at all due to concerns over their mobility. In 1639, William Scott, the elderly minister at Cupar, Fife, wrote to his neighbouring ministers to inform them that ‘the

²⁷ William Colvill, *The Righteous Branch growing out of the Root of Jesse and healing the Nations* (Edinburgh, 1673), 375–6.

²⁸ William Wishart, *Gospel Ministers the Strength of the Nation* (Edinburgh, 1725), 8.

²⁹ *Selections from the Minutes of the Synod of Fife*, ed. George R. Kinloch (Edinburgh, 1837), 98.

daylie decay of my naturall strenth maks me to dowbt if ever I sall sie yow face to face'.³⁰ Scott's acceptance that he would no longer appear at ecclesiastical court meetings was shared by other aging ministers. In 1640, the Synod of Moray heard how William Reid, minister at Gartly, excused his absence from the meeting because of 'his unabilitie to travell pairtlye throughe weacknes and old aige'.³¹ Further south, similar considerations may have led John Kerr, the sixty-four-year-old minister of Prestonpans, to ask colleagues that his absences from presbytery meetings fifteen kilometres away in Haddington should not be marked in the record book.³² Travelling on church business during the winter was particularly difficult for elderly ministers and drastically changed how they performed their roles. William Dickson, minister of Glenholm, struggled to attend presbytery meetings in Biggar, some twelve kilometres away from his manse, throughout the 'very stormie' winter of 1660-1 'in respect of his aige'.³³ Historians have encountered such descriptions of immobility in the petitions of the elderly elsewhere in early modern Europe, reflecting how a minister's experience of old age shared many traits with his lay neighbours.³⁴ However, the physical burden of the administrative machinery of the Reformed Church could weigh profoundly on ministers who were elderly, separating them from the work of their colleagues.

Parishioners' perceptions of their minister would change as his body struggled with the intensity of his vocation. Parishioners in Skene, Aberdeenshire, complained in 1599 that their minister, John White, 'delyvers nocht the doctrine of salvatioun'.³⁵ Such petitions show lay appreciation and understanding of what was expected from a Reformed minister, but also offer an assessment of his body's changing condition. Commissioners from Burntisland petitioned Kirkcaldy Presbytery in August 1638 requesting a minister to give the communion in their parish 'in respect of thair minister's age

³⁰ NRS, CH2/154/2/2, 8–9.

³¹ NRS, CH2/271/1, 136.

³² NRS, CH2/185/5, 60.

³³ NRS, CH2/35/2, 19.

³⁴ Louise Marsha Gray, 'The Self-Perception of Chronic Physical Incapacity among the Labouring Poor: Pauper Narratives and Territorial Hospitals in Early Modern Germany' (PhD thesis, University College London, 2001), 181–3.

³⁵ NRS, CH2/1/1, 35. My thanks to Dr Catherine E. McMillan for drawing my attention to this example.

and weaknesses'.³⁶ Age prevented ministers from fulfilling other functions of their office, gradually removing them from certain aspects of their role. By 1646, William Scott, the elderly minister of Cupar, was unable to sign testimonials describing the behaviour of parishioners leaving his parish, forcing him to employ two notaries to sign documents on his behalf.³⁷

Perhaps unsurprisingly, previously powerful preachers were separated from their former selves by the effects of age. In August 1640, the elders of Innerleithen told Peebles Presbytery that their minister, Patrick Sanderson, did 'not edifie them as he wes want' in his preaching and was 'not able for the function' due to 'his age and infirmitie'.³⁸ While the need for mental acuity may have driven Sanderson's parishioners' comments, it was far more common for neighbours to notice how age affected the strength of their minister's voice, shifting their experience of his sermons and risking his reputation among his congregation. In 1643, ministers in Ayr Presbytery visited the parish of Straiton because of reports of the 'age and great infirmitie of ... voice and body' of the local minister, John McCorne.³⁹ This was no isolated example. In 1646, the clerk of Biggar Presbytery described Thomas Campbell, the octogenarian minister of Biggar, as 'not aibill (this long tyme by past and now als) to preache or exercise [his] ministeriall functione' due to his 'great aige and weaknes'.⁴⁰ The elders of Balfron, Dunbartonshire, complained to the local presbytery during a routine visitation of the parish in 1650 that their minister, John Norwell, was 'very much weakened' through 'infirmitie of age'. The elders reported that Norwell was not able to preach effectively, as 'these that sits nearest to him can hardly somtymes discern what he sayes'.⁴¹ For ministers like Norwell, their old age was framed by showing how the effects of bodily decay had affected their performance as preachers, that yardstick of the Protestant Reformation.⁴² This marked a clear

³⁶ NRS, CH2/224/1, 439.

³⁷ NRS, CH2/532/1, 35.

³⁸ NRS, CH2/295/2, 103–4.

³⁹ NRS, CH2/532/1, 104.

⁴⁰ NRS, CH2/35/1, 55 (parenthesis original).

⁴¹ NRS, CH2/546/1, 169–70.

⁴² Michelle D. Brock, 'Exhortations and Expectations: Preaching about the Ideal Minister in Reformation Scotland', in Chris R. Langley, Catherine E. McMillan and Russell Newton, eds, *The Clergy in Early Modern Scotland* (Woodbridge, 2021), 15–31;

separation from the zealous preaching of their earlier lives and started a process by which parishioners' assessments of their performance would change.

The separation from fully active minister to elderly incumbent was also a deeply personal one, as ministers had to confront the very real change in how they devoted themselves to God with a failing body. While the pains incurred in worshipping with an aging body may have been 'meat and drink' to those 'seeking to emulate Christ's bloody sweat in Gethsemane', as Alec Ryrie has stated, such bodily aches and pains underlined a shift in a minister's devotional life.⁴³ Towards the end of his life, John Welsh, minister of Ayr, was unable to kneel comfortably to pray.⁴⁴ Ministers recorded that their aging bodies began to struggle to fulfil tasks that they had found relatively straightforward in their younger years. Lucas Sonsie, the minister of Carrington, told colleagues at a meeting of Haddington Presbytery in May 1618 that the 'weightie burden of the ministrie' was becoming increasingly difficult for him to fulfil considering his 'old age now drawne on'.⁴⁵ In January 1629, Adam Colt told the archbishop of St Andrews, John Spottiswoode, that he struggled to fulfil his duties as minister of Musselburgh in Dalkeith Presbytery, 'in respect of his grit burden and aige'.⁴⁶ Elderly ministers expressed such problems in remarkably similar terms throughout the period and across the country. In August 1650, Patrick Stewart, minister of Rothesay in Dunoon Presbytery, told his colleagues that he was 'unable to stand under the burthen' of the ministry 'by reason of his age and daylie infirmitie growing upon him'.⁴⁷ And to the north, John Brodie, minister of Auldearn in Forres Presbytery, informed his colleagues in 1652 of his 'old age and bodilie infirmitie, hardlie able to beare the whole burden of such a weightie charge'.⁴⁸ Descriptions of the duties of the ministry emphasized their metaphorical weight but also the very real strain this could have on the aging

Neal Enssle, 'Patterns of Godly Life: The Ideal Parish Minister in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century English Thought', *Sixteenth Century Journal* 28 (1997), 3–28.

⁴³ Alec Ryrie, *Being Protestant in Reformation Britain* (Oxford, 2013), 175.

⁴⁴ *The History of the Life and Death of Mr John Welch* (London, 1735), 32.

⁴⁵ NRS, CH2/424/1, 449.

⁴⁶ NRS, CH2/424/1, 557.

⁴⁷ NRS, CH2/111/1, fols 16^r–16^v.

⁴⁸ NRS, CH2/162/1, 53.

clerical body.⁴⁹ Acknowledging that the form of one's devotion was changing marked an important shift in a minister's career.⁵⁰

Ministers and parishioners might mark this separation in a cleric's identity by entering a supplication to the local presbytery or synod. This small act marked a distinct moment in the cycle of a minister's career. The nobility from the parish of Dirlerton approached Haddington Presbytery in 1637 with a petition lamenting that the impact of old age had made their minister unable 'to defray the care as befor tymes'.⁵¹ The Dirlerton petitioners' comparison with their minister's previous performance was common, even in petitions from ministers themselves. In 1640, Duncan Omev, minister at Southend in Kintyre Presbytery, resigned his office 'out of tenderness of conscience least the people should want service'.⁵² Similarly, the octogenarian John Wemyss, minister of Kinnaird, told members of the Presbytery of Brechin in 1658 that 'be reason of his weaknes of body and great age he is unhable to discharge all the dueties of his ministrie ... as he was wont'.⁵³ Such language was common. William Jaffray, minister of Kinedward in Turriff Presbytery, had expressed himself in similar terms in 1650.⁵⁴ These moments represented official recognition and acknowledgement from both parish and minister of a cleric's old age.

A key part of an elderly minister's separation from his former role was having to accept the need for a younger minister to help him fulfil his responsibilities. Most elderly ministers would continue to serve in the parish in some capacity until their death, delegating most of their responsibilities to a younger incumbent. In 1653, John Brodie, minister of Forres, told colleagues at his presbytery how he was 'privie to his owne bodilie weaknesse' and wished 'to sie god honoured' with the appointment of a young minister to help him fulfil his responsibilities.⁵⁵ Such statements acknowledged the challenges of the clerical

⁴⁹ This accords with Susannah Ottaway's findings that early modern men were likely to 'mourn the general loss of strength' in their bodies: Ottaway, *Decline of Life*, 33–5.

⁵⁰ Robert W. Daniel, 'Godly Preaching, in Sickness and Ill-Health, in Seventeenth-Century England', in Charlotte Methuen and Andrew Spicer, eds, *The Church in Sickness and in Health*, SCH 58 (Cambridge, 2022), 134–49.

⁵¹ NRS, CH2/185/4, fol. 109^v.

⁵² *Minutes of the Synod of Argyll 1639–1651*, ed. Duncan C. MacTavish (Edinburgh, 1943), 19.

⁵³ NRS, CH2/40/1, 411 (emphasis mine).

⁵⁴ NRS, CH2/1120/1, 203.

⁵⁵ NRS, CH2/162/1, 54.

vocation, but also made clear how ministers felt duty bound to step aside partially when they could no longer perform the task. The connection between bodily infirmity and clerical vocation was made clear in 1658, when John Fife, minister at Navar in Brechin Presbytery, acknowledged ‘be reason of weaknes of bodie his willingnes to tak a young man to be a fellow labourer to assist him in the work of the ministrie’.⁵⁶ These public utterances formally marked the threshold of old age and a diminution of a minister’s role as the person solely responsible for his cure of souls. It also marked the entrance into a liminal state, in which the terms of the cleric’s new settlement could be openly discussed.⁵⁷

The second stage of van Gennepe’s rites of passage is transition: a liminal state in which the individual sits between their new status and their former position. In practical terms, a minister who had accepted that he was too old to fulfil his charge existed in such a liminal space. Before formally appointing a younger assistant minister, local presbyteries frequently diverted other preachers to deputize for the elderly minister, thereby acknowledging his clerical status while also underlining that he was physically no longer fully fit to fulfil the office. In 1628, Archibald Oswald, minister of Pencaitland, ‘crave[d] the help’ of colleagues in Haddington Presbytery every Sunday until his health had recovered or a helper was appointed.⁵⁸ Ministers living in Edinburgh supplied the place of William Arthur in 1649 ‘out of their brotherlie care’ due to his ‘great age’ and declining health.⁵⁹ Neighbouring clerics expended considerable effort on behalf of their aging colleagues. In 1673, ministers from across Dalkeith Presbytery preached every fortnight at the conjoined parish of Fala and Soutra as John Logan, minister of the parish, was no longer able to fulfil his preaching duties. They did so until Logan died the following year.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ NRS, CH2/40/1, 402.

⁵⁷ There are parallels with pre-Reformation practice, in which the terms of an elderly monastic superior’s retirement would only be discussed following formal acknowledgement that he could no longer perform the role: see Martin Heale, “For the solace of their advanced years”: The Retirement of Monastic Superiors in Late Medieval England’, *Journal of Medieval Monastic Studies* 8 (2019), 143–67, at 143–50.

⁵⁸ NRS, CH2/185/4, 23.

⁵⁹ NRS, CH2/718/6, 23.

⁶⁰ NRS, CH2/424/5, 7.

Such efforts reflect a widespread belief that a minister's orderly transition into old age protected the dignity of the church. The *Second Book of Discipline* was explicit in recommending that elderly ministers 'ought not to be deposed' and that 'honour should remain to them, their kirk should maintain them; and others ought to be provided to do their office'.⁶¹ Such arrangements may not have been feasible in the immediate aftermath of the Reformation, but a proliferation of trained ministers and improvements to parish finances made outsourcing some of an elderly minister's duties to a younger assistant viable by the early years of the seventeenth century.⁶² In 1642, Alexander Henderson, then minister in Edinburgh, reiterated that ministers who 'through old age, sicknesses, or other infirmities' could not fulfil their pastoral responsibilities should 'still retain the honour of their office and comfort of maintenance during their lifetime. And they performing what they are able in teaching, government, visitation and catechising, others are joined with them by the Presbytery and with the consent of the people to be their fellow labourers and to undergo the main charge'.⁶³

While reflecting deferential attitudes towards age, Henderson's comments were also driven by a desire to protect the functioning of the church during a minister's transition into old age. An act of the General Assembly the previous year made similar claims, stating that elderly ministers 'shall not by their cessation from their charge ... be put from enjoying their old maintenance and dignity'.⁶⁴ Elderly ministers sat in a liminal space, continuing to serve as important role models for the local community and the ministry at large, without being able to participate fully in their original responsibilities.⁶⁵

⁶¹ *The First Book of Discipline*, ed. James K. Cameron (Edinburgh, 1972), 32–9.

⁶² W. R. Foster, "A constant platt achieved": Provision for the Ministry, 1600–38', in Duncan Shaw, ed., *Reformation and Revolution: Essays Presented to the Very Reverend Principal Emeritus Hugh Watt* (Edinburgh, 1967), 124–40; Robert M. Healey, 'The Preaching Ministry in Scotland's "First Book of Discipline"', *ChH* 58 (1989), 339–53, at 353; Margaret H. B. Sanderson, 'Service and Survival: The Clergy in Late Sixteenth-Century Scotland', *Records of the Scottish Church History Society* 36 (2006), 74.

⁶³ Alexander Henderson, *The Government and Order of the Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1642), 13.

⁶⁴ Alexander Peterkin, ed., *Records of the Kirk of Scotland, containing the Acts and Proceedings of the General Assemblies* (Edinburgh, 1838), 293.

⁶⁵ Janay Nugent, 'Reformed Masculinity: Ministers, Fathers and Male Heads of Households, 1560–1660', in Lynn Abrams and Elizabeth L. Ewan, eds, *Nine Centuries of Man: Manhood and Masculinity in Scottish History* (Edinburgh, 2017), 39–52, at 40–2.

While most figures undergoing some form of cultural or social transformation tend to have little agency, ministers themselves played a vital role in negotiating their transition into old age, especially in details relating to financial questions.⁶⁶ At the root of this agency was the expectation that the minister would give up some of his stipend voluntarily and redirect it to his prospective helper. One of the most detailed examples of this desire can be seen in the case of Patrick Simpson, minister of Stirling in 1611. Simpson lamented that ‘his manifauld infirmities’ threatened ‘ane heftie dissolutione of his earthlie tabirnacjail’.⁶⁷ Despite accepting his aging body, Simpson needed to be persuaded to agree to the financial aspects of accepting an assistant minister. Unsurprisingly, aging ministers like Simpson were particularly anxious about their income and their family’s financial security into their old age.⁶⁸ In East Lothian, James Carmichael, minister of Haddington, excused the lack of preaching in his parish in 1621 because of his ‘infirmitie and age’, but warned that while committed to ‘doe all the gude everie way he culd’, he was ‘not bund by anie law to give supplie’ to sustain another minister and that forcing him to do so would financially ruin him.⁶⁹ Similarly, John Logan, the minister of Fala and Soutra mentioned above, told colleagues in Dalkeith Presbytery in 1673 that he would struggle to fund an assistant, ‘his stipend being very small and his familie great’.⁷⁰ Elderly ministers who had accepted the need for a younger minister to help them continued to consider the security of their own family into their dotage.

Younger ministers from neighbouring parishes were often deputed to broker a deal with their elderly colleagues, asking them to relinquish more of their stipend. Upon hearing about the difficulties experienced by Andrew Playfair, the seventy-one-year-old minister of Aberdalgie, Perth Presbytery sent a neighbouring minister to ‘signifie’ its concerns (and presumably devise a settlement) in 1650.⁷¹ William

⁶⁶ Turner, ‘Betwixt and Between’, 93.

⁶⁷ For similar phrasing, see William Morray, *A Short Treatise of Death in Sixe Chapters* (Edinburgh, 1620), 20.

⁶⁸ One sees similar problems in the pre-Reformation diocese of Exeter in England: see Nicholas Orme, ‘Sufferings of the Clergy: Illness and Old Age in Exeter Diocese, 1300–1540’, in Pelling and Smith, eds, *Life, Death and the Elderly*, 62–73, at 65–8.

⁶⁹ NRS, CH2/185/3, 151.

⁷⁰ NRS, CH2/424/5, 7.

⁷¹ NRS, CH2/299/3, 134.

Petty, the minister of Petty in Inverness Presbytery, was in his mid-seventies when the bishop informed him in 1682 that his 'great infirmity through old age' made him unable to discharge the duties of a minister. The bishop implored ministers living nearby to 'concurr' with Petty to persuade him to accept some outside help and the reduction in his stipend it would entail. Elderly ministers in these parishes wanted assurances that they would receive sufficient maintenance and care once the assistant minister was in place. In the case of John Norwell in Balfroun, noted above, the elderly minister was ordered to accept an assistant minister to help him serve his charge but could maintain possession and use of the manse and glebe land for the rest of his life. Such negotiations were quite common for ministers entering their old age in relatively humble rural parishes and represented a key moment in their transition to their new role.

Authorities were aware of such difficulties and worked hard to negotiate with local patrons temporarily to augment the parish stipend in order to cover both the costs of the new, younger, minister and the ongoing expenses of the aging incumbent until the latter's death. In 1611, ministers in neighbouring parishes in Dunfermline Presbytery visited the parish of Orwell and discovered that the most significant landowners of the village were happy to augment the stipend to obtain an assistant minister to the seventy-nine-year-old incumbent Patrick Geddes.⁷² While the end result looked harmonious, the process of persuading the landowners of Orwell took five months to complete.⁷³ Such intricate negotiations underline how aging ministers continued to hold considerable influence in a parish despite their liminal status.

In some rural parishes, landowners closed ranks to prevent any augmentation of the stipend, usually allowing their aging minister to continue to hold the full value of the stipend, but also forcing him to work into his dotage. The patrons and parishioners of Inverkeithny in Strathbogie Presbytery insisted in 1647 that 'they had satisfaction of their minister', Robert Irvine and under no circumstances would desire an assistant minister. Irvine continued, alone, in post for over a decade despite a routine visitation in 1650 reporting that his lack of teeth made it difficult for his congregation to

⁷² NRS, CH2/105/1/1, 81.

⁷³ NRS, CH2/105/1/1, 99.

comprehend his preaching.⁷⁴ In April 1651, ministers in the Synod of Aberdeen complained that nothing had been done to find a helper for Robert Forbes, the seventy-seven-year-old minister of the rural parish of Echt, because of some unspecified ‘difficulties’, presumably in finding enough lay support from parish landowners to enable Forbes to change status.⁷⁵ Such lay input (or the lack of it) could have a considerable influence over the minister’s changing status. One clergyman’s experience of entering old age could be fundamentally different from another due to the context of the parish in which he found himself. The size of a cleric’s stipend could affect how he experienced the transition into old age.

Occasionally, elderly ministers nominated their sons to act as assistant ministers in the parish, which served both to underline the former’s influence over this process of negotiation and to emphasize how his role was changing. In 1630, Harry Wilkie petitioned Kirkcaldy Presbytery asking for ‘libertie to supplie his father’s place in preaching’ in the parish of Portmoak during his father’s old age.⁷⁶ Wilkie’s choice to petition the presbytery directly was unusual, as it was customary for the father or someone of standing in the parish to initiate such petitions. When Gideon Penman was preaching in his elderly father’s stead in the late 1630s in the Midlothian parish of Crichton, the senior Penman, William, asked the presbytery if Gideon might be ‘admitted helper’ to him in May 1639.⁷⁷ William told his colleagues that ‘his age and infirmitie’ prevented him from fulfilling some aspects of his ministry.⁷⁸ These agreements offered the younger minister an opportunity to learn from his father, while securing the elderly minister’s right to live out his life in the parish manse. Such arrangements would have also offered some additional security to the aging minister’s wife.⁷⁹ By accepting his son as assistant, however, the aging minister’s role shifted.

This complex set of financial negotiations was an important component in the liminal state in which elderly ministers found

⁷⁴ *Extracts from the Presbytery Book of Strathbogie*, ed. John Stuart (Aberdeen, 1843), 74.

⁷⁵ NRS, CH2/840/1, 37.

⁷⁶ NRS, CH2/224/1, 33.

⁷⁷ NRS, CH2/1120/1, 204.

⁷⁸ NRS, CH2/424/2, fol. 135^v.

⁷⁹ For more on the financial concerns of clerical wives, see Chris R. Langley, ‘Clergy Widows in Early Modern Scotland’, *Scottish Church History* 51 (2022), 111–32, at 123–6.

themselves. Once a minister had been recognized as no longer able to fulfil the rigours of his vocation, an almost ritualized set of actions were set in motion to negotiate the terms of his transition. Both the elderly cleric and influential lay people in his parish held considerable influence over this process, meaning the experience of becoming an elderly minister could vary widely between different parishes. In most cases, an aging minister had to accept some reduction in his financial status in order to move out of this liminal phase.⁸⁰ Authorities in general were eager to ensure that this transition was as smooth as possible to protect the dignity of the clerical estate and to keep local tensions to a minimum. This process of negotiation had quickly become standardized by the end of the sixteenth century and became a permanent fixture in the clerical life cycle. This was an administrative, as well as a personal, rite of passage.

Like other examples of rites of passage, the aging minister's incorporation into his new role brought with it a new set of obligations.⁸¹ The change in his status was clearly marked and would have been visible to his congregation. Nevertheless, the minister's new role was not static, but should be viewed as a starting point of a longer process in which the incumbent slowly ceded more control over parish affairs to his new colleague. While this accords with the idea that reintegration rites could be lengthy, it is here that aging ministers diverge most obviously from van Gennep's model, in holding considerable influence to negotiate the terms of their incorporation into their new status.⁸²

The admission of the elderly minister's assistant represented the first act through which the minister's new status was confirmed. During the service, the elderly minister vacated his pulpit and watched with the rest of the congregation as another minister preached the admission sermon for his helper.⁸³ The sermons that opened the admission ceremony for an assistant minister were

⁸⁰ There was no guarantee that this complex process would conclude before the elderly minister died. John Fife in Navar, discussed above, died in May or June 1658, before the appointment of his would-be assistant, Hercules Skinner, who was appointed as sole minister of the parish on 22 July 1658: NRS, CH2/40/1, 408.

⁸¹ Jean Holm, 'Introduction: Raising the Issues', in eadem and John Bowker, eds, *Rites of Passage* (London, 1994), 1–9, at 8–9.

⁸² Van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*, 41–2.

⁸³ See also the admission of Robert Semple as assistant to John Hume at Lesmahagow in May 1648: NRS, CH2/234/1, 365.

based around scriptural texts which emphasized the assistant minister's clerical authority, placing him on an equal footing with his older colleague. In 1638, at the admission of Robert Kerr as assistant to his father in Prestonpans, Adam Blackhall, minister of nearby Aberlady, instructed those present on 'the dewties of pastors and people', encouraging the congregation to be obedient to its new minister.⁸⁴ At the admission of Archibald Turner as assistant to James Porteous at Borthwick in 1648, the minister who commenced the service preached on Hebrews 5: 4, expounding the duties of the clergy.⁸⁵ Such sermons underscored the new minister's authority and subtly changed the older minister's role.

The elderly minister's incorporation into his new role was a gradual process, as the responsibilities he continued to perform would reduce as his body aged. This flexibility is exemplified by the petition of John Bell, the elderly minister of Glasgow, to the General Assembly in 1638. The moderator of the assembly told those present:

There is heir a reverend and aged brother, whom we should all honour – for gray haire, for a crowne of glorie – that hath approuen himselfe to God in his Church and to the people of this cittie in a speciall manner; and now, finding his natural weaknes increasing, though he hath vigour of mynd as yet and fearing his dissolution drawes near, he hes represented to yow heir a supplication for a helper in the ministerie.⁸⁶

Bell acknowledged the effects of age on his ministry, but felt he still had something to offer his parish due to his 'vigour of mynd'. The specific duties to be undertaken by Bell's prospective assistant were not explicitly described but remained flexible. The minister's relationship with his younger helper would also change according to his need. In December 1647, John Durie, appointed as the helper to the aging minister of Dalmeny, John Gibson, complained that his senior colleague found preaching 'such a burthen unto him that he could scarce lie any longer heare him'. Gibson was told to preach 'onleie when he finds himselfe any wayes disposed for it' and to request Durie's help more often.⁸⁷ Many ministers saw continuing their ministerial duties as a key part of living out their vocation. While the sixty-

⁸⁴ NRS, CH2/185/4, 111.

⁸⁵ NRS, CH2/424/3, 237.

⁸⁶ *Records of the Kirk of Scotland*, 184.

⁸⁷ NRS, CH2/242/3, 281.

nine-year-old minister of Dunbar, Andrew Stevenson, promised to serve with a helper 'in all the points of his ministerial calling' for as long as he possibly could, his responsibilities had been severely reduced before his death in 1664.⁸⁸ The minister's incorporation into his new role would continue to evolve until his death.

Ecclesiastical courts enforced the change in the elderly minister's status. Church authorities moved quickly to protect the interests of elderly ministers who were perceived to be vulnerable to exploitation. In 1651, the Synod of Fife received a petition from Patrick Geddes, the elderly minister of Orwell. After having an assistant appointed to help him the previous year, Geddes told his colleagues 'that some elders of his parochie have of late violentlie and unjustlie stoppit some of his mentinance dew to him and that they ar going about to depyryve him of much of that mantinance quhich is his just right'.⁸⁹ The ministers of the synod immediately intervened to ensure 'the aged and reverend brother may live and close the remanent of his days in quyetnes', and to prevent a potentially embarrassing scandal between Geddes, his successor and his neighbours.⁹⁰ Maintaining the integrity and reputation of the ministry in general meant protecting elderly ministers' incorporation into their new role.

One can observe this desire to protect the dignity of elderly clerics in the unusually detailed case of Colin Rynd, a minister who had served in Perthshire from 1588 before moving to Ireland in the 1610s. With Ireland gripped by rebellion from the end of 1641, Rynd returned to the place of his birth in search of safety. Unfortunately, his brother Patrick died in early 1641, leaving only a modest estate, meaning that Colin needed to find other forms of support.⁹¹ Upon his petitioning for assistance in 1644, Perth Presbytery appointed ministers across the region to collect money to support Rynd, but added the proviso that ministers should 'distribut the same by pairts as he sall stand in neid'. Rynd settled in the area but his difficulties in obtaining money to support himself increased. In 1648, the region's ministers again tried to collect financial support for him, the clerk describing Rynd as 'aged and distressed'. Rynd's case was so desperate that the Synod of Perth and

⁸⁸ NRS, CH2/99/1, 132.

⁸⁹ NRS, CH2/154/2/1, 236.

⁹⁰ NRS, CH2/154/2/1, 237.

⁹¹ NRS, CC20/4/9, 1056.

Stirling intervened and ordered that every parish pay twenty shillings each year to support him. Rynd based himself in Perth and tapped into the networks of patronage and friendship established by his father William Rynd, former schoolmaster of the burgh.⁹² Rynd was not, however, surviving alone. In 1651 and again in 1655, Thomas Irvine, a merchant in Perth, petitioned the synod, revealing that he had ‘manteind’ Rynd ‘in bed and burd diverse yeires before the said act wes maid and sensyne’ but was yet to receive any payment from the synod for having done so. The matter was still ongoing the following year when some in the synod complained that Irvine was aggressively soliciting them for payment. In April 1657, the synod’s moderator implored ministers to pay Irvine after he had told the ministers that Rynd was ‘not weill payed therof and that he is now become verie old and is in great necessitie’.⁹³ Rynd, who was almost ninety by the time of Irvine’s last petition, gained access to these support networks through his status as a former minister and through the intervention of ecclesiastical courts who were eager to maintain the public reputation of elderly ministers and to ensure their well-being.

The process by which an elderly minister was incorporated into his new role was not always smooth. Indeed, on occasion, an elderly minister could dissent from his new status and continue to intervene in parish affairs. In 1642, John Cockburn, elderly minister of Humbleton, was asked to ‘abstaine from any such speaches or cariage as might justlie procure a dislyk’ of any minister who agreed to be his helper. Similarly, in 1649, ministers in Peebles Presbytery found that Richard Powrie, the elderly minister at Dawyck, ‘did not walke answerable’ or in accordance with his new role.⁹⁴ Such warnings policed the margins of the minister’s incorporation into his new status, while reflecting his continuing influence in parish business.

Old age was accepted as a distinct stage in the life cycle of ministers in early modern Scotland. Accepting their duty as preachers, teachers and parish leaders, ministers understood the challenges of their calling, but the weight of these burdens invariably increased as ministers grew older. While there was no single point that defined old age in this period – these definitions were based purely on ability to fulfil

⁹² John Row, *The Historie of the Kirk of Scotland*, ed. William Fleming (Edinburgh, 1842), 211–12.

⁹³ NRS, CH2/449/2, 267.

⁹⁴ NRS, CH2/295/4, 2.

the role, rather than a predetermined age – clerics had to acknowledge the impact of age and decrepitude on their ministry. This involved a series of personal, bureaucratic and communal actions that allowed a minister to move from one role to another. This process maps quite neatly onto van Gennep's three stages of separation, transition and incorporation, but with the minister holding considerable power along the way. This process of transition represents a distinct bureaucratic and personal passage of status that every long-serving minister in early modern Scotland would experience.