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Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology

End of life

Editorial

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I once heard Old Testament scholar J. Gerald Janzen reflect on growing up in a small Canadian prairie town situated at the end of the rail line. As a child he imagined that the trains waiting at the local grain elevator had their origins in his hometown, and after traversing the wide world, they returned home to his town. As an adult he came to see these trains as an image of our human lives: they begin with God, and after their sojourn on earth, they return to God. A year ago *Vision* focused on the beginning of life, on how our lives originate with God; in this issue we explore our return to God.

May the articles in this issue provide insight and inspiration for those who minister to the dying and bereaved, may they nurture a hope in eternal life that inspires us to faithful living, and may they help prepare each of us for our own return to God.

At the center of Christian thinking about return to God stand the resurrection of Jesus and his teaching about life and death. We offer you three biblical reflections on our Jesus-based hope: one focusing on Paul's understanding of resurrection, one dealing with Jesus's teaching in the synoptic Gospels, and one exploring the Johannine concept of eternal life. "We teach by what we do," a pastoral colleague used to remind me. The four funeral meditations in this issue, each occasioned by a different kind of death, teach us how we can sensitively proclaim our Jesus-based hope in the midst of grief and loss.

Other articles deal with the process of dying or reflect on funerals. The writers address both practical and theological issues, illustrating that the two ought not be separated. The church's real-life practices should be grounded in sound theology, while theology ought to be informed by what we have discerned through experience to be faithful practice (such as praying with those who are dying). In addition, our theology should be concrete enough

to provide a basis for faithful practice. Several pastors describe how they help people prepare to die, how they offer pastoral care to the bereaved, and how they guide the process of funeral planning. More theologically oriented articles discuss convictions that should inform the church's funeral practices or explore what it means to die in Christ.

Not surprisingly, Christian hope in eternal life emerges as a dominant theme in this issue. Such hope can have two different effects. To quote an old adage, "Some Christians become so heavenly minded that they are of little earthly good." Preoccupation with preparing souls for heaven can detract from Christian discipleship and from passionate participation in the coming of God's reign to this broken and hurting world.

But Christian hope in resurrection can have a very different impact. During a visit to the Martin Luther King Center in Atlanta, I was deeply moved to learn how King continued his Christian ministry despite repeated death threats and even the bombing of his home. King carried on courageously, partly because he—and the black church that nurtured his faith—had a profound conviction about the life hereafter. If the current life is all we have to look forward to, then we might do well to live by the philosophy "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die." But as Christians we know that another life awaits us, so we can be free to make sacrifices for a cause greater than our own pleasure. Christians around the world who have faced hardship, persecution, and even martyrdom, have often been empowered to persevere because Jesus promised that "those who lose their life for my sake will find it" (Matt. 10:39).

My hope is that this issue of *Vision* strikes an appropriate balance between this-worldly and other-worldly. May the articles provide insight and inspiration for those who minister to the dying and bereaved, may they nurture a hope in eternal life that inspires us to faithful living, and may they help prepare each of us for our own return to God.

The redemption of our bodies
A Pauline primer on resurrection

Dorothy Jean Weaver

There can be no question about it. From the moment of his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus, Paul is a man transformed by resurrection. First, it is the *risen Jesus* who appears to Saul the Persecutor one day in a blinding flash of light and transforms his identity and mission into that of Paul the Proclaimer (Acts 9:1-20). Then, as Paul carries out this new mission of proclamation on behalf of the risen Jesus, it is *resurrection* that he proclaims. In fact nothing is more crucial to Paul's proclamation than the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Luke tells us that when Paul stands trial before the Jewish Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, he sums up his entire mission in the language of resurrection: "I am on trial concerning the hope of the resurrection of the dead" (Acts 23:6c NRSV; cf. 24:20-21; 26:6-8). Conversely, Paul depicts for the Corinthian church the catastrophe that would result for all who hope in Christ if, as some Corinthian believers maintain, the dead are not raised: "For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied" (1 Cor. 15:16-19).

Paul is passionate to proclaim the Resurrection not because it is some strange new teaching that can tantalize minds but because it is the power of God that can transform lives.

But with this dire depiction Paul has set up a straw horse, only to knock it down. In the next breath he proclaims, firmly and decisively, "But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died" (1 Cor. 15:20). It is this fundamental reality, the resurrection of Christ and the sure promise of future resurrection for the believers, that undergirds the entirety

of Paul's proclamation of the gospel.[1] And it is this unshakeable truth on which Paul builds as he nurtures the fledgling churches of the first-century Mediterranean world into faithful life "in Christ."[2]

What then are the basics of Paul's belief in the resurrection of Christ? And what, in turn, does the Resurrection mean for all who place their faith and hope in Christ? The answers to these questions not only offer us a Pauline primer on resurrection but also point us to the heart of Paul's proclamation of the gospel.

The resurrection of Christ and the sure promise of future resurrection for the believers undergird the entirety of Paul's proclamation of the gospel.

Resurrection is the sovereign act of God. Nothing is more fundamental to Paul's views on resurrection than the role of God in raising the dead to life. Resurrection is God's prerogative, and exclusively so. To the Roman believers Paul depicts God as the one "who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist" (Rom. 4:17). To the Corinthian believers Paul describes God as the one "who raises the dead" (2 Cor. 1:9). And every time Paul uses the specific vocabulary of resurrection,[3] the actor, whether expressed or implied, is God.[4] Paul's thinking has no room for any sort of jack-in-the-box theology. Jesus, for his part, does not spring back to life through his own power or because of his inherently divine character. Rather it is God, and God alone, who raises Jesus—and ultimately those who "belong to him" as well[5]—from the dead. Resurrection is the expression of God's power and of God's intention for the course of human history.

Resurrection is God's cosmic strategy for dealing with the last enemy. As Paul makes clear throughout his letters, the God who raises the dead is a God who wills life over death. Yet as Paul well knows, death is still at large in the world; it is a powerful force ravaging the human community. Paul's language points consistently and undeniably to this reality. In his letters the vocabulary of resurrection is linked regularly and directly to the vocabulary of death,[6] because resurrection by its nature presupposes death. As Paul makes clear to his readers, death is present, powerful, and evil. And death is not simply one evil power among many in the world; it is the ultimate evil power, "the last enemy" of humankind (1 Cor. 15:26). Death is that power whose victory and whose

sting rob human beings irretrievably of the life that God has given them (1 Cor. 15:55). Thus in the end death itself must and will be destroyed (1 Cor. 15:26).

Accordingly, God's sovereign act of raising Jesus from the dead is nothing less than the first stage of God's cosmic, end-time strategy for destroying death, the last enemy of the human race. And God's divine power at work in the coming resurrection of the dead will be, by the same token, God's final and frontal assault on death itself, an assault that will forever rob death of its potency and the grave of its victims. Resurrection is, in short, God's politics of life in a world dominated and ravaged by the power of death.

God has raised Jesus from the dead as the first fruits of God's resurrection power. Paul proclaims this good news to the scattered and struggling churches of the first-century Mediterranean world: death may still be an everyday reality and a powerful force for evil in the world they know, but the power of death is no longer ultimate. In fact, as Paul relates tirelessly to his readers, God has now invaded the realm of death and raised Jesus from the dead.[7] And with this sovereign act of power God has demonstrated, clearly and decisively, that death no longer has the final word in the cosmic scheme of things. In the resurrection of Jesus, life has overtaken the dominion of death (see Rom. 6:9). For Paul this means that the resurrection of Jesus is the crucial event of history, the event that changes everything.

Death may still be an everyday reality and a powerful force for evil in the world, but the power of death is no longer ultimate. In fact, God has now invaded the realm of death and raised Jesus from the dead.

Throughout his letters Paul spells out the implications of this pivotal event for Jesus himself. Because of the Resurrection, Christ "will never die again," since "death no longer has dominion over him" (Rom. 6:9). Instead, Christ who "was crucified in weakness" (2 Cor. 13:4a) and died a death to sin (Rom. 6:10a) now lives "to God" (Rom. 6:10b), a resurrection life characterized by power (Rom. 1:4; Phil. 3:10) and enabled "by the power of God" (2 Cor. 13:4b). Because of the Resurrection, Christ has been "declared Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness" (Rom. 1:4) and is now "Lord of both the living and the

dead" (Rom. 14:9). And the Christ Jesus who died and was raised is now at the right hand of God and intercedes with God for the believers (Rom. 8:34).[8]

Paul also explains to the Corinthian believers that the risen Christ is not simply the present-day demonstration of God's resurrection power but is the pointer to what lies ahead. In Paul's words the risen Christ is nothing less than "the first fruits of those who have died" (1 Cor. 15:20, 23), God's sure promise of resurrection life to come for all those who are in Christ. Because God has raised Christ from the dead, all those who place their faith and hope in Christ will one day share in this same resurrection life.

If Paul fills his letters with assurances that God has raised Jesus from the dead, he likewise reminds his readers that what God has done for Jesus, God will one day also do for them.

God will one day raise the believers just as God has raised Christ. If Paul fills his letters with assurances that God has raised Jesus from the dead, he likewise reminds his readers that what God has done for Jesus, God will one day also do for them. Beyond the metaphorical references to "Christ the first fruits," Paul speaks directly of the linkage between the destiny of Christ and that of the believers. As Paul explains to the Corinthian church, "The one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence" (2 Cor. 4:14; cf. 1 Cor. 6:14). And to the Roman believers Paul says, "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you" (Rom. 8:11). Paul assures his readers with confidence that resurrection is the destiny of all those who belong to Christ.

But this resurrection destiny comes with a cost. Those who hope one day to be raised together with Christ must first follow Christ into baptism, suffering, and death. It is those who "have been buried with [Christ] by baptism into death" who will "walk in newness of life," "just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father" (Rom. 6:4). It is those who suffer with Christ who will "also be glorified with him" (Rom. 8:17; cf. Phil. 3:10). It is those who "have been united with [Christ] in a death like his" who will "certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his"

(Rom. 6:5). And it is those who "have died with Christ" who will "also live with him" (Rom. 6:8). For the believers as for Christ himself, resurrection is God's response to a life of obedience "to the point of death" (Phil. 2:8).

Resurrection is a matter of the body. As difficult as it may be for the Hellenistic believers of Corinth to accept, the resurrection that Paul proclaims is the resurrection of the body. And this truth lies at the heart of Paul's resurrection teaching. Resurrection is not, as Paul's Greek compatriots would understand it, a matter of freeing one's spirit by divesting oneself of the body. Nor is the body itself an evil from which one longs to be freed.[9] Instead, as Paul sees it, the body of the believer is a creation of God (cf. 1 Cor. 15:35-49), a "member of Christ" (1 Cor. 6:15), and a "temple of the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor. 6:19). "The body," in Paul's words, "is for the Lord, and the Lord for the body" (1 Cor. 6:13). The implication is that the body itself is destined for resurrection. Paul assures the Roman believers that God "will give life to your mortal bodies" (Rom. 8:11). And in the very middle of Paul's discourse to the church in Corinth about the use of the body (1 Cor. 6:12-20), he reminds these believers pointedly (v. 14) that "God raised the Lord, and will also raise us by his power."[10] The body of the believer has a destiny in the resurrection, far beyond death and the grave.

Paul seems to have little idea about what that resurrection life will look like (2 Cor. 12:1-4). In any case, he offers no specific details to the Corinthian believers, who appear to be vitally interested in this matter. Instead Paul responds to their urgent question about the resurrection body with a handful of basic affirmations. What is "sown" is not "the body that is to be" (1 Cor. 15:37). It is God who "gives a body" to what is sown (1 Cor. 15:38). What is sown is a body that is "physical," "perishable," and "weak"; what is raised is a body that is "spiritual," "imperishable," and "powerful" (1 Cor. 15:42-44). More than that, Paul seems to suggest, you don't need to know.

In the present moment believers wait, with all creation, for the redemption of their bodies. Paul is clear about two things. The resurrection of Jesus has already happened. And the resurrection of the believers is not yet a reality. And in this present moment, between the "already" and the "not yet," those who

belong to Christ live tenuous lives in a world itself marked by "bondage to decay" (Rom. 8:21), and they "wait for . . . the redemption of [their] bodies" (Rom. 8:23).

This time of waiting is not an easy time, either for the believers or for creation. For the believers the present moment is marked by sufferings (Rom. 8:18), "momentary affliction" (2 Cor. 4:17), physical wasting away (2 Cor. 4:16), inward groaning (Rom 8:23; 2 Cor. 5:2, 4), and a longing for the heavenly dwelling that will replace the "earthly tent" of the body (2 Cor. 5:1-2). And creation fares no better. As Paul puts it, creation itself has been "subjected to futility" and is even now "groaning in labor pains" as it "waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God" and for freedom from its own "bondage to decay."[11] The present moment is indeed a time of great pain.

But there is cause for confidence even in the midst of affliction and groaning. Those who wait for the coming "redemption of [their] bodies" (Rom. 8:23) and long for the "glory about to be revealed" (Rom. 8:18)[12] are even now gifted by God with the Spirit, God's guarantee that one day life will indeed swallow up death (see 2 Cor. 5:4-5; Rom. 8:23). "So," Paul concludes, "we are always confident" (2 Cor. 5:6).

For Paul the powerful hope of the resurrection to come brings all of life into focus and calls forth faithful living in every moment of every day.

Faith in the "already" resurrection of Christ and hope in the "not yet" resurrection of the believers empowers the church for faithful living here and now. Here the sandal leather finally meets the road for Paul. A pastor at heart, he is vitally concerned about the real lives of real believers. And everything that Paul has to say about faith in Christ ultimately issues in the ethical praxis of everyday life. Paul is passionate to proclaim the Resurrection not because it is some strange new teaching that can tantalize minds (cf. Acts 17:16-21) but because it is the power of God that can transform lives. As Paul sees it, God has raised Jesus from the dead so that believers might "walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:4), "bear fruit for God" (Rom. 7:4), and "live no longer for themselves but for him who died and was raised for them" (2 Cor. 5:15). And for Paul the powerful hope of the resurrection to come brings all of life into focus and calls forth faithful living in every moment of every day:

"Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain" (1 Cor. 15:58).

This is Paul's primer on resurrection. And this is a word for living and for dying. Thanks be to God.

Notes

[1] Throughout this essay I will draw my evidence from the "non-disputed" letters of Paul: Romans, 1/2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon.

[2] This is Paul's distinctive terminology for the life of Christian discipleship. See, for example, Rom. 8:1; 16:7; 1 Cor. 1:30; 15:18; 2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 1:22; Phil. 1:1; 1 Thess. 2:14; Philem. 8.

[3] Thus *egeiro*, "to raise"; *anistemi*, "to rise"; *anastasis*/*exanastasis*, "resurrection."

[4] See, for example, explicit references to the action of God in Rom. 1:4; 4:24; 6:4; 8:11; 10:9; 1 Cor. 6:14; 15:15, 38; 2 Cor. 4:14; 13:4; Gal. 1:1; 1 Thess. 1:10. Elsewhere Paul implies the action of God through the use of the passive verb "was raised" without a designated actor. See, for example, Rom. 6:9; 7:4; 8:34; 1 Cor. 15:4, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 20, 22, 29, 32, 35, 42, 43, 44, 52; 2 Cor. 5:15. In the two instances in which Paul uses the language of "rising" (1 Thess. 4:14a, 16b) the surrounding text (1 Thess. 4:14b, 16a) clearly implies that this rising comes about through the action of God. So also Rom. 10:9 provides the implied actor for Rom. 10:7. And within this broader context Paul's references to "his [= Christ's] resurrection" (Rom. 6:5; Phil. 3:10) or "the resurrection of/from the dead" (Rom. 1:4; 1 Cor. 15:12, 13, 21, 42; Phil. 3:11) are clearly to be understood as the action of God.

[5] Cf. 1 Cor. 15:23.

[6] See, for example, Rom. 1:4; 4:17, 24; 6:4, 9; 7:4; 8:11; 10:9; 1 Cor. 15:12, 13, 15, 16, 20, 21, 29, 32, 35, 42, 52; 2 Cor. 1:9; Gal. 1:1; Phil. 3:11; 1 Thess. 1:10; 4:16.

[7] See, for example, Rom. 1:4; 4:24, 25; 6:4, 5, 9; 7:4; 8:11, 34; 10:9; 1 Cor. 6:14; 15:4, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 20, 22-23; 2 Cor. 4:14; 5:15; 13:4; Gal. 1:1; 1 Thess. 1:10; 4:14; Phil. 3:10.

[8] For the believers themselves Jesus's resurrection means, in Paul's terms, "justification" (Rom. 4:25), "life [for] mortal bodies" (Rom. 8:11), "[rescue] . . . from the wrath that is coming" (1 Thess. 1:10), and salvation (cf. Rom. 5:10; 10:9).

[9] But see 2 Cor. 4:16–5:10, where Paul speaks of wishing to be "away from the body and at home with the Lord" (5:8; cf. 5:6, 9). Paul seems to be referring to an intermediate state after the earthly body has died and before the resurrection [see Gary Yamasaki, "Jesus and the End of Life in the Synoptic Gospels, in this issue, 40–47].

[10] See also Phil. 3:20-21, where Paul speaks of the eschatological moment in which the "Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ" whom the believers await "from heaven" will "transform the body of our [humble bodies] that [they] may be conformed to his glorious body."

[11] See Rom. 8:19-22.

[12] Cf. Rom. 8:19, 21; 2 Cor. 4:17.

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After a death
Theology and Christian funeral practices

Gayle Gerber Koontz

Christian funeral practices have changed dramatically through the years, and they vary widely throughout the world. Many of these customs would seem strange to Christians in Canada and the U.S. today. We do not place the eucharist in the mouths of corpses to nourish the dead on their way to the heavenly Jerusalem, nor do we tie the feet of the deceased so they will not return home on All Saints' Day. We do not expect spouses to perform public acts of grief for a year. Families do not wash and clothe the bodies of the dead. We do not walk, bearing them, from home to church to cemetery, singing psalms and alleluias. We no longer wear white or black mourning clothes as signs of transition from life to death and back to life.

What funerary practices express the enduring faith of the church? What theological convictions should orient Mennonite pastors who journey with congregations that must mark and move beyond a death?

Noting the sheer variety of Christian funeral customs, we may wonder what practices express most clearly the enduring faith of the Christian church. What theological convictions should orient Mennonite pastors who journey with congregations that must mark and move beyond a death? How should we assess the theology of the hymns sung at funerals, of the prayers prayed, of the words of comfort a pastor offers the bereaved? What theological commitments can guide decisions about the bodies of the dead?

When my father died in our home one Sunday in 1994, I wasn't thinking theologically. I was trying to adjust to the fact that dad's crinkly blue eyes were empty, that mom was moving around in a distracted state, that the children were at once intrigued by and reluctant to touch his body, that my sister was in Belgium, that my brother wanted us to leave dad in the chair until he and his family arrived from eastern Michigan. I was aware that dad did

not fear death, that he received it in faith, that there were no major unresolved relational issues in the background, that his dying had been peaceful. I knew he wanted a simple funeral and that he wanted to be cremated (so as not to take up space in a cemetery), but like many North American families, we had spoken of death only briefly and practically. We never really engaged in theological conversation about death.

There was implicit theology, of course, in our actions following dad's death. Ted and I and our three school-age children gathered with my mother around dad's chair, watching, crying, talking. We did not avoid his body. We placed a flower (he was a gardener) in his hand. We welcomed my brother's family and remembered the details of the death. A memorial service at my parents' church a week later included the hymns "I will raise you up on eagle's wings" and "Gott ist die Liebe" (sung as a lullaby for at least three generations in our family), and a sermon about the gift of a spirit of gratitude to God even in the face of failing health and death.

We held no viewing or burial, and Dad's ashes were not present at the service. The congregation provided a meal over which members of our extended family reconnected and shared stories. Church and family friends sent cards and offered sympathy. And we all went back to school and work.

In addition to emotional and cultural forces, theological convictions—about the power and character of God, about lament and faith, about death and resurrection, about bodies and human being, about bearing one another's burdens in community—shaped our movement beyond dad's death. Whether our practices were appropriate to a Christian theology of death rooted in Scripture is another question, a normative question. What foundational affirmations can help us as pastoral theologians review family and congregational practices surrounding death? Some classic Christian themes provide a helpful starting point.

Ecclesiology

The church is a community of the Holy Spirit. When one person suffers, all suffer, bearing each other's burdens in love. As Douglas John Hall notes, the church "is always receiving from beyond its own possibilities. It is the case of the comforted comforting, the healed healing, the forgiven showing mercy."[1] Death is one form

and moment of suffering in congregational and wider church community life. Therefore, the Christian funeral process is by and for the community, not just for close family and friends of the deceased. Participation in Christ includes solidarity in suffering and healing. Death is not an individual or private family matter but a community event.

North American Christians may need to be countercultural in modeling open funerary patterns, ones that challenge tendencies toward greater privatization in encounter with dead bodies, and in attendance at funeral, memorial, and burial services. Several factors contribute to a reduced role for the Christian community in the process of separation, transition, and reincorporation of the bereaved in social life after the death of a family member or friend. These factors include individualism and autonomy, urban and familial fragmentation, work schedules that make participation in daytime services difficult, and greatly diminished social recognition of a period of mourning after death.

When we are willing to stand in solidarity and hope with those who are grieving, we testify to the constant presence and power of the Holy Spirit with those who may feel abandoned.

Grieving families may also be reluctant to open themselves to their faith communities. For communities and families in which expression of emotion is discouraged, facing funeral services may be stressful. However, when we are vulnerable within the community of the Spirit, we permit God to work in healing ways. And when we stand in solidarity and hope with those who are grieving, we testify to the constant presence and power of the Holy Spirit with those who may be feeling abandoned.

Because of the short time Canadian and U.S. societies allow for mourning, and because of our Protestant lack of attention to remembering the dead in worship and ritual, Mennonite congregations could also benefit from developing meaningful corporate ways to remember those who have died and to uphold those who may grieve a death for many years.

Eschatology

Biblical hope is in God who is creating a new heaven and a new earth and who at the last day as part of this new creation will raise

the dead, as Jesus was raised, in some mysterious embodied form. This hope is different from hope in an immortal soul that flies from the body at death to exist in another realm. Resurrection hope imagines the faithful dead now hidden with Christ in God (Col. 3:3), awaiting the redemption of their bodies and of all creation (Rom. 8:18-25).

Imagination is a gift of God, and it can help us respond in faith to death. We do well, though, to focus on the foundational conviction that God can be trusted to prepare a good future for us.

Christians through the centuries have used poetry, song, and visual art to imaginatively picture what happens to people when we die. Imagination is a gift of God, and it can help us respond in faith to death. We do well, though, to focus not on the details of our imaginings but on the foundational conviction that God can be trusted to prepare a good future for us.

Though the powers of death often seem to have the upper hand, believers place faith in a God whose creative purpose and power are stronger than sin, suffering, and death. This God, who is preserving creation and drawing it toward a good end, receives the one who has died and sustains those who suffer now. Funeral practices based on this foundation can make room for lament and grief but are not dominated by gloom. They set individual life and death within the context of God's saving purpose and work.

Creation

Christian funeral services are worship services. Death is an occasion to remember our dependence on our creator for life and breath, and to give thanks for the life of the one who died. In these services we rightly remember the dead and seek to comfort the bereaved, but our eulogies should be lifted up in relation to the one who created, sustains, and receives us in life and in death. When our theology of creation informs our funeral practices, they will include not only mourning but also thanksgiving to God for the gift of life. The purpose of a Christian funeral is not primarily to memorialize the one who has died but to release the deceased into the hands of God. If our worship seems to center on the one who has died rather than on God, we need to refocus.

Creation theology also underlines our human calling to steward creation—serve and guard it—as representatives of God.

Simplicity and modesty are consistent with this responsibility: we do well to resist societal tendencies to honor the dead with lavish expenditures and ostentatious memorials.

Christian theologians have noted different attitudes toward death in Scripture. Most prominent is a negative view. Death is understood as a result of sin and a sign of all that stands in opposition to God. It is an evil to be overcome. Jesus—the second Adam, obedient to God even to the point of death, bearing the sins of the world—is not conquered by death, but is raised up. Nothing can suppress the power of God; God rules even death! This faith has sustained many Christians at times of death.

Some theologians, including Karl Barth and Paul Tillich, have noted that creation theology affirms that God made the whole world and pronounced it good. This world, a world shaped by time rather than eternity, includes genesis, change, growth, decay, and death. Therefore, death may be understood as part of God's design for living things. It might even be received as a gift of God. Awareness of our mortality helps give life intensity and meaning, it reminds us that we are not God, and for many it brings a welcome end to suffering.

Our ambivalence about death is appropriate. Both theological streams reflect truth about God and human nature. And both views are compatible with hope for a future with God for the faithful after death. Funeral practices might therefore include a passing positive reference to death along with attention to death as a consequence of human sin, overcome through Jesus Christ.

Anthropology

Creation theology affirms the goodness of the world and of humans as embodied selves. These affirmations have at least two implications for funeral practices. First, humans are whole beings in whom body and spirit are indissolubly linked. The dominant biblical understanding of the self is that humans are unitary beings. Even Paul's language about flesh, body, and spirit, upon close examination, refers to the whole self in opposition to God (flesh/*sarx*/body) and the whole self seeking relation to God (spirit/*soma*/body), not to a separation of spirit and body which devalues the body. In biblical perspective God breathes life into our whole selves; when we breathe our last breath, we die. Chris-

tians need not deny death; we wait in hope for the faithful to be resurrected at the last day.

Second, our embodied selves are good and valued by God. We are living people (with breath) and deceased people (without breath). People who are dead are not simply leftovers of the self to be disrespected or summarily disposed of. Nor are they to be feared. People in death as in life are God's and should be treated with loving respect and dignity.

Christians disagree about whether cremation and burial can equally express respect and dignity. Some feel that belief in resurrection implies burial. Others note that if God can resurrect dry bones and dust, then surely God can resurrect ashes. Early Christians used both cremation and burial, although in time burial became the dominant practice, and Christians began to see cremation as a pagan ritual. By the late eighth century Charlemagne made cremation a capital offense, and only in the mid-1960s did the Vatican begin to permit cremation again for Catholic Christians.

Specific practices regarding disposition of the bodies of deceased people have varied with time and across cultures. But principles of respect for bodies and hope in resurrection have remained constant for Christians and can guide our decision making when we care for those who have died.

Christ and salvation

Jesus is both example and revelation for us in facing death. The biblical witness gives us permission to express our deepest fears and feelings ("My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"). It also shows us Jesus entrusting himself to God in life and in death ("Into your hands I commit my spirit"). Jesus encouraged our hopes for resurrection: he expected God to vindicate the faithful in resurrection at the last day, and after his death, God raised him up, a first fruit of this resurrection.

In raising Jesus up, God demonstrated that this human was indeed an image of God's glory—and a revelation of God's purposes for humans on earth. Jesus taught that God desires a human community marked by trust in and loyalty to God above all, by justice, mercy, love, kindness, peace, joy, forgiveness, sharing, healing, service, and truth telling. He called disciples to build just,

reconciling communities who can face suffering and death together in strength and with hope.

The God Jesus followed and revealed is both just and forgiving. Death comes in some sense as judgment: the life that has been lived cannot now be changed. In our funeral practices we place the deceased into the hands of God for discerning judgment. When relationships with the deceased and among the bereaved are troubled or broken, eulogies may not ring true. But it is always appropriate to express confidence in God's wisdom, justice, and healing power, and in God's compassionate and patient forgiveness of sinners. Some traditional practices might offer new ways for us to pray at the time of death. For example, Greek Christians throw handfuls of dirt into a grave as they say, "May God forgive him [or her]"—echoing themes from the Lord's Prayer as well as Jesus's prayer from the cross. Because salvation is a gracious gift, not earned by human merit, we can entrust all our dead—all our sinful dead—to God's merciful judgment.

Mission of the church

Speaking and embodying the good news of the gospel and inviting deeper participation in the coming reign of God are the heart of the church's vocation. Remembering this mission at the time of death can help orient pastors and congregations in making concrete decisions.

What is good news to the bereaved? Discerning this good news requires listening, not simply telling. Perhaps the gospel of God's forgiveness and mercy will emerge as central because of alienation, guilt, or sin in the life of the deceased or among the mourners. Or perhaps other gospel notes will be elicited: God's gift of an end to physical suffering and hope in new life to come, divine presence and participation in our suffering, gratitude for life. Funeral services and practices should not be tools to try to "save" those at a vulnerable time who have not yet made Christian commitments. Instead, these are times for pastor and people to embody testimony to God's love, mercy, faith, and hope—which is also missionary work.

Most of us prefer not to think about death and those whose work revolves around it. But congregations could be good news at times of death by including in their offerings and ministries poor

Christians in surrounding areas who cannot afford basic funeral services. Pastors and people might also give special attention and support to Christian funeral directors in their community as these service providers help many in crisis who lack the support of a church and an extended family.

Even community peacemaking has links to our death practices. Who may be buried in particular cemeteries: only church members? only Christians or only Muslims? only those who can pay certain fees? How we address such contentious questions witnesses to the God we serve.

A thoughtful, well-grounded theology of death and consideration of its implications for worship and discipleship can help prepare us for times of crisis. Times of death are obviously not times to introduce theological convictions that should have been taught and engaged throughout the life of the congregation.

Jesus's example offers us a further perspective on theology and pastoral care following a death. A pastor's primary responsibility is to recall and express the loving presence and reign of God in funeral ministries, meeting people in their need. A pastor's first responsibility is not to ensure that the bereaved or the congregation have the right theology of death, though there may be room for counsel, as in situations like that of the young man who was lowered into his grave with his Corvette!

Pastors may need to let go of shaping the funeral process according to their own preferences. They may need to soft-pedal some of their theological convictions for the sake of the grieving family and congregation. As Paul's letter to the Philippians reminds us, "Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." Jesus guides and guards us as we minister in life and in death, forming our theology and reminding us that for the sake of our neighbors we must sometimes hold aspects of it lightly.

Note

[1] *God and Human Suffering: An Exercise in the Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986), 145.

About the author

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Walking on holy ground
A pastor's theology of funerals

Klaudia Smucker

One day when my daughter was trying to do something for me on my office computer, she blurted out in exasperation, "All the funerals you have to do and *this* is the computer they give you?" While it's true that I do a lot of funerals at College Mennonite Church, what my sixteen year old and many others don't understand is that accompanying someone who faces death and providing them with a good funeral is a journey on holy ground.

When I sit down with a family to plan a funeral, they let me into their lives at a time when they are vulnerable. It is a gift they give to me. I do not take this privilege lightly. My role is to be present with them, listening, caring, and helping them create a service that honors the deceased, respects the family, worships God, and provides hope.

In a funeral we value the life, mourn the loss, and give hope to the living. That hope is embodied in us through the Holy Spirit.

When I was a chaplain at Greencroft Healthcare several years ago, I received a call from a nurse.[1] Stella had taken a turn for the worse. "Her family is with her," the nurse told me, "but I'm warning you, they are on the edge of hysteria." As I walked into Stella's room, I saw that the ninety-five-year-old woman in her bed against the wall was alone, while members of her family paced back and forth, crying. I went to her daughter and asked her, "Have you had a chance to talk to your mother and tell her some things you'd like her to know before she passes away?"

The motion in the room stopped for a few seconds. The daughter asked me, "Do you think she can hear me?"

"I think she can hear you. It might be nice to be able to say things you'd like her to know, before she dies. Or even to tell her that it's all right to go." I walked over to Stella's bed and sat down, gently laying my hand on her arm. I told her, "Stella, this is

Klaudia. Your daughter and granddaughters are here with you. God loves you, and they love you. It's okay to go."

Stella's daughter walked over to the bedside. "Mom, it's me," she said. "You've been good to me. I'm really going to miss you." Slowly, one by one, each granddaughter came and told their grandma that they loved her. They kissed her cheek.

Then I suggested that we pray. We gathered around her, laid hands on her, and I prayed. "Dear God, thank you so much for Stella. Thank you for her life. We know that you love her. Be near to her in these last hours and fill her with your amazing presence and love. Be with her family. Comfort them and wrap them in your love, and give them the strength to get through these days. We commit her spirit into your loving arms. In Jesus's name we pray. Amen." Then I recited the twenty-third psalm, and we sat down to wait.

The dying process often involves a waiting time. People rarely die quickly in their sleep. Staff brought in coffee, fruit, and rolls, and I asked Stella's family to tell me what she had been like as a younger person. We soon found ourselves laughing as they talked about how stubborn and independent she was, how she always seemed to have a witty response when she needed one. I heard stories of a woman with a courageous and adventuresome spirit.

When Stella took her last breath a few hours later, the room was peaceful, Although there were tears, it was a good moment. We thanked God for her, and we thanked God for taking her to her heavenly home.

Because Stella had moved into the community to be with her daughter, and because the family was not part of a church, I officiated at Stella's funeral. Around the table as we planned the funeral, I asked the family whether they had favorite scriptures or hymns. "I liked the twenty-third psalm that you said at Mom's bedside," her daughter said, and everyone agreed that was a good passage. As I led them through the funeral planning, I talked about how I knew Stella, and about her wonderful sense of humor, her quick wit, even in the midst of her dementia. I encouraged the family to tell me more about her. I told them that I would focus on God's availability to us through all of life, in the dark valleys as well as during the peaceful times. By the time the funeral came, I had a good sense of who Stella was. I was able to

include some of the family stories that I heard from her daughters. And I included the promise of a new resurrected life, because of what Jesus has done for us.

As a pastor at College Mennonite Church, I rarely work with people who do not have a church connection. Many members of our congregation are well-educated and have deep faith. But as I have walked with people through illness, death, and funerals, I have discovered that no matter how much people know about scripture and faith, no matter what their educational background is, illness, aging, and death are great levelers.

However a death occurs, losing someone we love turns our world upside down. Even when we expect it, death can devastate those left behind. It disorients us and invades our lives. It is not convenient. Each time a family member or friend dies, we are faced with the reality that our own life will end. And we realize that the life we knew with our loved one has ended with their death.

No matter how much people know about scripture and faith, no matter what their educational background is, illness, aging, and death are great levelers.

How people will behave in their grief is difficult to predict, and each of us grieves differently. When I sit down to plan a funeral I try to be prepared for anything. Some people who are normally calm become anxious and difficult. Some cope by taking control of the planning, perhaps in order to avoid facing their feelings of loss. Others want to leave everything to the pastor because grief has hit them so hard that thinking and planning are out of the question.

People cannot help how they grieve, but as pastors we can guide them with sensitivity. It is our responsibility to be professional yet caring—to hold things together, leading gently all the way through the planning of the funeral service. Those who are grieving need pastors to create a safe place for them. It is our task to make a haven of comfort and care as we represent Christ's light and hope for them. If we succeed in making space where they can talk and cry while we listen, they are more likely to call on us later when the reality of death sinks in and friends are no longer offering care.

Creating a safe place for people who are grieving takes time, time that can seem in short supply when we're under pressure to

plan a funeral quickly. It's easy for us as pastors to focus on that approaching deadline, but we do well to stop long enough to listen to the family and observe how they are doing. How are they responding to the death? Are there telltale signs of unresolved family relationships with the deceased? How are they relating to each other? As we plan together I tuck my observations away for future reference.

Those who are grieving need pastors to create a safe place for them. It is our task to make a haven of comfort and care as we represent Christ's light and hope for them.

Sometimes siblings and a parent will have different ideas of what the funeral should look like. I start with the presumption—usually sound—that they all want a wonderful service. Then I listen for a common thread in their conceptions, and try to draw it out and help them build a service around it.

Pastors face special challenges when they find themselves grieving the death of a loved one while trying to carry responsibility for funeral planning. When I work with pastors who are grieving, I gently remind them that they need opportunity to mourn their loss with the rest of the family. Like the rest of the family, they need pastoral care. Sometimes their families need to be reminded to release them from a sense of obligation to participate in the service.

When my grandmother died, my family looked to my brother-in-law and me, both pastors, and asked how much we wanted to do in the funeral. I was glad for the opportunity to provide a remembrance about some of the things my grandmother taught me, as a last gift to her, but I was grateful that her pastor could care for me. I welcomed being able to sit back during most of the service, hearing the ancient words of comfort and strength and letting them sink deep into my soul.

As pastors, we may have ideas about what direction we want to take in planning a funeral, but we must be prepared to let go of our own agenda as we discern with the family what their needs are. We desire salvation for all God's people, and funerals provide us with a wonderful opportunity to demonstrate God's love and to proclaim good news. Funerals are not a time for shoving the threat of fire and brimstone down the throats of a captive audience. If we run roughshod over people who are grieving, espe-

cially those who have already been hurt or excluded by the church, we are adding insult to injury.

I attended a funeral once where the pastor hit the casket so hard and so often as he talked about how sinful we were and how much we needed Jesus, that I thought he might wake the dead. We didn't hear good news that day. I once read a newspaper article about a priest who was being sued because he declared that a person who had died was going to hell. He apparently couldn't think of anything positive to say about the deceased.

It is certainly easier to preach a funeral meditation for some people than for others. The reality is that those who die in our congregations are good, bad, ugly, and beautiful, inside and out. As Paul writes in Romans, we are all sinners, and we all fall short of the glory of God. One of my professors once suggested that when we get to heaven we will be surprised to see who is there and who is not. Others might even be surprised to see us.

The community of believers meets every Sunday, declaring that we are a redeemed people of God—not perfect, yet seen as perfect. I hold this concept in mind as I conduct a funeral. The incarnation of Jesus is a clear statement that God values, cares about, and understands humanity. The conviction that God wanted to be in the middle of the messiness of life, wanted to experience the joys and sorrows that accompany life, is central to our faith.

We go to funerals because we believe that God loves and values each person, even those who have not lived exemplary lives. We go because we want to walk with the people who loved the one who has died. We go because we are sad, and we find comfort as we grieve together. We have hope that even in the inconsistencies, failures, and hypocrisies of our own lives, we will experience God's grace and mercy once again.

At these times when we are most vulnerable, we are reminded that Jesus cares not only about our present life, but about what happens beyond it. It warms my heart to hear the story of Lazarus's death and to ponder the significance of Jesus's weeping with Mary and the other mourners. To know that Jesus understands what it is like to lose someone, that he experienced a loss so painful that he "was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved" (John 11:33), should comfort all of us as we contemplate Jesus's love for the ones we also loved.

When we remember people of faith, we can draw inspiration from the ways they followed Jesus. At the same time, I try to notice their peculiarities. How did they, as unique individuals, with particular quirks and foibles, make a difference in the world? One Saturday when I went to visit a woman in the hospital, I noticed that she had brought in a radio. Because our church services are on the radio, I said, "Oh, you brought in a radio to listen to the church service." Without skipping a beat she replied, "No, for Cubs games." Then she hastily added, "and for church services too!" When I gave the meditation at her funeral several months later, I recounted that story. People laughed because anyone who knew Wilma knew that she loved the church, but the Chicago Cubs could give it competition!

Recounting how a person lived as a disciple of Christ is important. We consider what this life meant and what purpose it served. But unless we also point to the hope of the resurrection, death can mean despair and emptiness. Jesus's incarnation gives our earthly life meaning, and Jesus's resurrection gives us hope that the sadness, evil, and brokenness in the world will someday come to an end. Death does not have the final word. In the midst of deep grief, we can believe that God has something better in store for us. The radical belief in resurrection not only gives us hope, but it shapes our lives as we live out our faith.

Many people nearing death have asked me, "Will God be pleased with the life I've lived?" They are concerned with their primary relationships. Have they lived their lives with integrity?

As I walk with people through the joys and the tragedies of their lives, I know that at the end it doesn't matter how much money they made, or how well-known they are, or what Mennonite or worldly pedigree they have. Many people nearing death have asked me, "Do you think I've done enough? Will God be pleased with the life I've lived?" They are concerned with their primary relationships. Have they lived their lives with integrity?

Helen was a woman I admired. At ninety-one she always had a quick smile and positive things to say, although she was often in pain and her mobility was limited because of arthritis. She knew her Bible and could quote scripture like no one else I knew. I always thought that if I could choose how I would age, it would

be like Helen. One day she called me to come visit. It was clear that she was troubled. She told me that she had been diagnosed with a respiratory disorder and that she would probably be gone within the year. But that wasn't what bothered her. She wasn't afraid to die, but she wanted to get some things clear in her thinking before she died. She said, "I've tried to live a life worthy of God. But I haven't always done everything right." She was quiet for a while and then tears streamed down her face. "I was divorced in 1932."

We talked about God's love and forgiveness, but I could see that she wasn't convinced that God's forgiveness was for her. Finally I asked her what she would say to me if I were in her place. "I would never wish a marriage like that on anybody. He was very mean," she told me.

I asked her, "What would God say to me?"

"I forgive you and I love you."

"Can you believe that God would say that very same thing to you?" I asked.

"I want to believe it. I want to," she said.

Most of us want to live a good, decent life, ending in a good death while we sleep. We want to hear Jesus say, "Well done, good and faithful servant." Yet we tend to be hard on ourselves, and we worry. We know how often we falter and fail. All the sins present in the world are present in the church. We are not immune to them. Sometimes we do better at being good and faithful servants than other times. We need forgiveness, and without a doubt, we need the magnificent grace of God.

In the movie *Back to the Future*, the main character, Marty McFly (played by Michael J. Fox) was able to go back in time and see how the choices people made affected their futures. Walking with people at the end of their lives and planning their funerals has helped me think about the bigger picture of life. If only people could remember to look ahead and say, "Will this be worth it to me down the road?"—before they have an affair, before they break relationships, before they focus on work at the expense of family and friends—they would have fewer regrets at the end.

We pay a lot of attention to Christian education for our children, but often as adults we seem to stop attending to growth in our spiritual lives. Many people who would be considered

important and successful by the world's standards are bereft and in despair toward the end of their lives because they never developed a sense of who they were in Christ, apart from what they did.

People who have worked hard at incorporating God into all aspects of their lives seem to have deep reserves when times get tough. When I listen to the stories of such people, I discover that they have seen their share of the good and the bad, but throughout the years they have continually sought God's transformation. I believe more than ever that caring for our relationship with God at every stage of life will provide us with a strong foundation, a deep well of spiritual treasure to tap into when we need it.

Funerals remind us that we can't control everything in life. Some people die too young, some suffer too long, and some have too much pain. I have seen some people long for heaven and have rejoiced with them when they take their last breath. With their families, I have asked God why, and I have prayed, "This is too hard. Help us cope."

Funerals remind us that we need each other and that we need God in this imperfect world. Funerals remind us to call on God for comfort and strength. When we remember to rely on God in those moments, we can come together at someone's death, in spite of all our differences and disagreements, and have hope for each other, for the church, and for the world. Jesus has been here, Jesus cares, and Jesus has conquered death.

I believe more than ever that caring for our relationship with God at every stage of life will provide us with a strong foundation, a deep well of spiritual treasure to tap into when we need it.

The Mennonite *Minister's Manual* order for a funeral opens with the words "The peace of God which passes all understanding in Christ Jesus. Amen." It continues with a confident and comforting statement of what we want to accomplish in a funeral: "We have gathered here to thank God for the life of our brother/sister, _____, to find comfort in time of need, and to place ourselves in the presence of God whose love knows no end, in time or eternity."[2] In a funeral we value the life, mourn the loss, and give hope to the living. That hope is embodied in us through the Holy Spirit and continues in us as we follow Jesus in this kingdom of heaven partially realized on earth. Things will happen to us that we can't control, yet as Christians we have the radical

notion that whatever happens, we can be assured of God's consistent availability and love, through life and through death into eternal life. As we worship together at a funeral, we gather as a community around those who are bereaved, and we live as those prepared to die.

Notes

[1] Names and some circumstances have been changed to protect confidentiality.
[2] John Rempel, ed., *Minister's Manual* (Newton, Kans., and Winnipeg, Man.: Faith & Life Press; Scottdale, Pa., and Waterloo, Ont.: Herald Press, 1998), 192.

About the author

Klaudia Brady Smucker is a pastor at College Mennonite Church in Goshen, Indiana. The congregation has about a thousand members and observes more than twenty funerals in the course of a year.

"I will tell you a mystery"
A funeral sermon

Paul Dyck

Five years ago, in the spring of 1989, Kerry Lepp decided he wanted to be baptized. He wrote out his statement of faith, and on testimony night he told us, "I was born and raised in a Christian home. I went to church all my life and always took for granted that being a Christian just meant going to church once a week. As I grew older, I really didn't care about church or God. I guess you could say I was a falling Christian. Until my Mom died. Then I was really upset. I thought for sure that God hated me and wanted my life to be miserable. Then about two or three months after my Dad remarried I realized that God wanted my life to change. Very slowly, my Christian walk went uphill, and now I am learning incredible new things about God. I hope this learning will never stop. I am very glad God changed me. I have been able to live a clean, healthy life, and I love it."

We see a compelling face of death today, a face of death that changes us because we can't push it away. We've been confronted with the frailty and preciousness of life, with the nearness of death, even our own death.

I remember how touched I was by that testimony five years ago, by its clarity and simple honesty. It's take-me-as-I-am Kerry, revealing what's going on in the depths of his heart, admitting his failures, and acknowledging his struggle with God over his mother's death. And announcing, with characteristic flair, his faith and his joy about God changing his life, his gratitude for the life God gave him. Kerry's words convey his warmth. No wonder he had so many friends. No wonder so many people, especially kids, liked to be with him. No wonder so many people are here today. No wonder our grief is so intense.

How have you grieved these past five days? How many tears have you cried? How many times have you thought, "It can't be true. Could Kerry really have died?" Or has the shock and numb-

ness worn off for you? What comes after it, and how are you coping? How are you dealing with Kerry's death? Most of all, I wonder what effect it will have on you, how Kerry's death will change you in the days, weeks, months, and years to come.

I want to talk about that change, about God changing us, the way God changed Kerry. We see a particularly compelling face of death today, a face of death that changes us because we can't push it away. Usually we tell ourselves that death happens to someone else. It's for old people, not for young folks like us. It's for people in other countries, not for us. And accidents happen to people we don't know; we read about them in the newspaper. But now, because of who Kerry was to us, death struck so close that we can't push it away. It struck so unexpectedly, so drastically, and with such force that we are changed by it.

We are different people than we were a week ago. We've been confronted with the frailty of life, with the preciousness of life, with the nearness of death, even our own death. We understand what James meant when he wrote, "Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money.' Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes" (James 4:13-14).

Today we know the truth of James's words, and that truth changes us. We—you and I and Kerry—are each but a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Because of Kerry's death you and I won't be taking our tomorrows for granted for a while. We realize we don't know for sure what will happen tomorrow, at some intersection of life. We know that behind the mist that is our life stands death.

But when we draw close to death, we draw close to God, and the mysteries of God. We draw close to eternity. And to draw close to God is to change. To feel death and eternity close at hand is life changing. The apostle Paul tries to explain as well as he can, as well as words allow him, part of this mystery, part of our entry into eternity, part of the changing of our perishable mist of life into an imperishable body that is alive with God. He writes, "Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last

trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality" (1 Cor. 15:51-53).

We cannot fathom God's mystery. We cannot make sense of all of life, and we cannot answer all our questions about death. But listen to this mystery, this miracle of change: In a moment, at the intersection of two roads last Wednesday morning, things changed drastically and tragically. Something happened to Kerry's frail mist of life on earth that it would be unable to survive. A few hours later, in the ambulance on the way to Winnipeg, in another moment, things changed again, mysteriously and miraculously. That perishable mist was clothed imperishably. Kerry's death was swallowed up in the victory of Christ's life after death. And the sting of death, for him, was gone. Whatever trumpets there are in heaven were heard by a Kerry who had again been changed by God.

When we draw close to death, we draw close to God, and the mysteries of God. We draw close to eternity. And to draw close to God is to change.

Listen again to what Kerry wrote in his testimony about how his life was changed, turned around, and moving up toward God. It's as if already then he was describing this greater change. "My Christian walk went uphill, and now I am learning incredible new things about God. I hope this learning will never stop. . . . I am very glad God changed me. . . . I love it." Today Kerry's words ring with new depth and truth. Oh yes, Kerry, I believe your faith took you toward God, and I can't imagine what incredible new things you are learning about God. And no, this learning won't stop. In fact, it just began anew the day you died. How you must love it, dear Kerry. How glad you must be that God changed you.

Yet we cry, and with good reason. We feel the pain of separation. We feel the sorrow of loss. We feel the disorientation and shock of a vigorous life suddenly cut far too short. And we feel the sting of death, even as it brings us close to God. This moment is full of mystery and paradox for us. The sting of death that's been swallowed up in victory for Kerry brings great grief to us, yet in that grief we find ourselves on holy ground, in the presence of God. That's where we sit today: trembling, on holy ground, close

to God, with tears trickling down our cheeks, stinging with confusion and hurt, unable to see well.

It's as if we are stuck living on the Saturday between Good Friday and Easter. In this life we sometimes get caught between that terrible dark day on which Jesus died and was laid in the tomb, and the mysterious, miraculous day when the earth quaked, the stone rolled away, angels came, and Jesus rose from the dead. We're stuck in the shock, despair, and grief of Kerry's tragic death. We can't see the incredible glory of resurrection. The Good Friday part of the story is with us today, but not the Easter part.

We are stuck, and we may even think the story is over because the pain is so great. But it isn't over. God has something more in mind. We'll see it better some day. We may not realize that God is here with us. But the curtain in the temple's holy of holies is already torn in two. And even now God's presence is released, is already round about us. And we stand on holy ground, with God, even if it's dark and we're feeling lost.

Are you there with me today? Is this unfamiliar territory for you? Then hang on. Hang on until Easter morning. Hang on until an angel comes to tell you the rest of the story, about how Jesus Christ who was laid in the tomb has been raised from the dead, so that all who belong to him will be made alive.

If Kerry's death has brought you close to God, and especially if that's new territory for you, let Kerry's testimony make you decide to stay there, close to God, always. Let God change you as God changed Kerry, and let the risen Christ greet you and call you by name and roll the stone of your tomb away. And hear the promise that one day—in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at your intersection with eternity—God will change your frail life into imperishable life with God.

About the author

Paul Dyck, currently pastor at Poole Mennonite Church near Milverton, Ontario, is delighted to be sharing life with Kathy, his wife, and their three daughters, Jessica, Rebecca, and Sonya. He was pastor at Steinbach (Manitoba) Mennonite Church from 1985–2000, and was involved in four funerals and one wedding in the Lepp family circle. Kerry Lepp was twenty-two years old when he died. More than a thousand people attended his funeral.

Praise and lament in the face of death

Dan Epp-Tiessen

A friend of mine once remarked, "You know, Dan, we Christians do some crazy things." I have come to believe that his observation holds true in many areas of Christian life. I certainly see it at funerals. At funeral after funeral, in the face of life's deepest pain and loss, we sing hymns and read scripture texts praising God for divine grace, goodness, and even protection.

The apparent craziness of our actions impressed me at the funeral of my wife's aunt, Irma Epp. Aunt Irma was an energetic, gifted woman, struck down far too early in life by cancer. At her funeral, a table at the back of the church held pictures and other significant objects that members of the family had lovingly placed there. Prominently displayed was her Bible, open to a favourite text: "But those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint" (Isa. 40:31). I felt acutely the contradiction between what this text claims and the event that had brought us together. Aunt Irma had indeed waited for the Lord, but despite many a prayer for healing, her physical strength had not been renewed; she was no longer walking or running among us.

Our worship must hold together praise that affirms the sovereignty and goodness of God, and lament that acknowledges the pain and brokenness in God's world.

How dare we feature a passage such as this at a funeral? On such an occasion, how dare we claim that "goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life" (Ps. 23:6)? How dare we bless the Lord "who heals all your diseases, . . . who satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's" (Ps. 103:3-5)? How dare we sing hymns of praise as we surround sisters and brothers in the faith who are too choked by grief to sing with us? Wouldn't it be more appropriate, less crazy,

to highlight a text such as "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Ps. 22:1).

A cynical psychologist would likely have a ready explanation for our Christian craziness: When faith in the goodness and power of God meets up with the brutal reality of human suffering, Christians sense a threat to some of their basic convictions. In reaction, they hold funerals permeated with pronouncements that God is still powerful and in charge, that believers can count on God to be faithful. Praise of God at funerals functions as a form of denial, creating a spiritual bubble in which Christians can continue to perpetuate their illusions.

I confess to having had similar thoughts, until I had opportunity to teach a course on the Psalms and reflect more deeply on the significance and function of praise in the Christian life. Laments are the most common type of psalm, numbering about sixty of the 150 psalms. These psalms are prayers in which the worshipper cries out to God for deliverance from calamity, usually from illness or enemies.

One feature of these lament psalms that puzzles many biblical scholars is the fact that most end on a note of praise, or at least include a significant element of praise. Psalm 22 is a striking example. After its opening cry of godforsakenness, the first two-thirds of the psalm consists largely of bitter descriptions of the psalmist's plight, which alternate with pleas for deliverance. Psalm 22 contains one of the bleakest descriptions of distress of any of the laments, yet the middle of verse 21 marks a sudden shift, and the last section of the psalm contains some of the most glorious praise of God and God's deliverance found in the Psalter.

The stark contrast between the two parts of the psalm has led more than one scholar to surmise that Psalm 22 represents the combination of two formerly independent psalms. I am less interested in theories that seek to account for the striking juxtaposition of praise and lament in such psalms than in asking what might be the theological and practical significance of combining these contrasting impulses. I believe that the juxtaposition in these lament psalms can be helpful as we face the tragedies and painful experiences of life and as we plan for Christian funerals.

The importance of lament at funerals is obvious. The pain of those who are left behind must be named, and their grief, loss,

anger, and disorientation thereby validated. When the pastor publicly names such pain at a funeral, she speaks for the community of faith, assuring family and friends that the community recognises their anguish and is surrounding them with love, prayers, and other forms of support. Naming people's pain also brings that pain into the healing presence of God. Words of lament spoken in public worship have a sacramental power to release streams of divine grace, bringing strength, comfort, healing, and renewal. For similar reasons personal sharing has become important in many Mennonite worship services. Speaking openly before God and God's people about health concerns and other serious matters can be a sacramental act through which worshippers experience God's grace and healing power.

Naming people's pain brings it into the healing presence of God. Words of lament spoken in public worship have a sacramental power to release streams of divine grace, bringing strength, comfort, healing and renewal.

As necessary as lament is at funerals and in the face of life's tragedies, it is not sufficient, *especially* at funerals and in the face of life's tragedies. By itself lament can be too negative, too self-absorbed, too focused on our human condition. If lament is all we do in our hour of need, we are left gazing into the abyss of our pain and brokenness, and we will find little hope and potential for healing there. Our eyes also need to be drawn heavenward: "I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come? My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth" (Ps. 121:1-2). Praise has the power to draw us out of ourselves and focus our attention on God, the source of our strength and salvation. When is attention to God more necessary than when we face life's deepest hardships, when we recognise that we do not have within ourselves the resources needed to face the challenges that lie ahead?

Praise and lament need each other, both in times of crisis and in the Christian life as a whole. Without praise, lament is too negative and self-absorbed, and it leaves us without much hope. In turn, praise needs lament to keep it honest. If all we do in worship is praise God, our theology is reduced to "God is great and good, and isn't life wonderful!" But for many people, life is anything but wonderful. Our worship must hold together praise that affirms the sovereignty and goodness of God, and lament that

acknowledges the pain and brokenness in God's world. Without lament, our praise becomes shallow; it lacks integrity and power, and it becomes a denial of the painful realities of life.

At the funeral of a man I will call Paul, the pastor kept a smile on his face as he repeatedly assured Paul's wife, children, and grandchildren that they had no reason to be sad: Paul was a good Christian man, and he had gone home to be with his maker. I wanted to shout, "Of course Paul has gone home to be with his maker, but that means he won't be going home with Helen anymore. The home they shared for fifty-two years will now be big and lonely, the bed cold and empty. We must acknowledge the pain of this loss!"

This funeral had an abundance of praise, but because there was a dearth of lament, the praise was shallow, lacked integrity, and functioned as denial. The pastor meant well. His goal was to help the family experience God's healing and comforting touch, but I suspect that he stood in the way of what he was seeking to accomplish. By choosing to avoid lament, he deprived Paul's family of an opportunity to express their pain, and an opportunity to experience the community of faith surrounding them in their time of pain. The pastor also missed the opportunity to bring the anguish of a grieving family into the gracious and healing presence of God.

After our eight-year-old son, Tim, died of cancer some nine years ago, we received a touching note from an Old Order Mennonite woman whose son had sometimes ridden the school bus with Tim. After commenting that little ones who die are better off with God (a theology that makes me squirm just as bit), she concluded, "but it is the parting that is so hard." In her own unsophisticated way this woman understood intuitively a thing or two about grief, about the importance of juxtaposing praise and lament, and about what it is helpful to say in the face of death.

During the funeral of thirty-eight-year-old Robin Jutzi, mourners gathered around the open grave to bid final farewell to his body. His family had requested that during the committal service we sing "Praise God from whom all blessings flow"—not the modest version often sung as table grace, but the jubilant version many Mennonites refer to affectionately as 606. Some of us might choose a different hymn for such an occasion, but in this case the

praise of God was anything but shallow. It was a vigorous declaration that, despite the enormous pain of the moment, Robin's family and friends continued to cling to their faith and hope in a sovereign and gracious God "from whom all blessings flow."

This praise derived much of its power from the family's lament. The Jutzi family was not in denial. Three of the family's four sons were born with cystic fibrosis. Now for the third time in eight years, the sting of death had touched this family. When Christians who face losses of this magnitude are still able to sing their praises to God, such praise has power beyond description. Yes, we Christians do some crazy things.

How does praise function at a funeral like that of Robin Jutzi or Aunt Irma? If our praise is balanced by lament, it can become a potent act of defiance in the midst of suffering. Praise can be a declaration that despite the pain and loss we are experiencing, we will continue to believe that "the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting" (Ps. 103:17). Despite the evil, injustice, and suffering that plague our world, we will continue to trust that "the LORD has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all" (Ps. 103:19).

Combining praise with lament can help us steer a course between two dangers—the danger of promising people too much in our preaching and pastoral care, and the danger of promising them too little.

Such praise is anything but denial. It looks the pain and evil of this world straight in the eye and says, "You are all too real, and you hurt deeply." But in the same breath our praise declares that because of what God has done through Jesus Christ, we know that suffering, evil, and death are not the ultimate realities of life. God's love is the ultimate reality. Praise reminds us that God's love and grace are strong enough to carry us through life's difficult experiences. Praise reminds us that evil and suffering will not have the last word here on earth, because some day God's reign will bring a new heaven and a new earth. Bold praise nurtures faith in trying times. Christian martyrs through the ages have died with such defiant praise on their lips.

Combining praise with lament can help us steer a course between two dangers—the danger of promising people too much in our preaching and pastoral care, and the danger of promising

them too little. By focusing exclusively on praise, the pastor at Paul's funeral promised the grieving family too much. No smiling assurances about eternal life and God's presence can erase the pain of those who have lost a loved one to death. Promising people too much pulls the rug of integrity out from under our faith, theology, and pastoral care. A healthy dose of lament ensures that we do not feed people simplistic answers that do not hold up in the face of life's tough questions.

But if we spend too much energy lamenting the sad state of the world, we may lose sight of the sovereignty and saving works of God, and then we may promise people too little. We need praise that reminds us that God is still Lord of this universe, no matter what we or others may be suffering. We need praise that celebrates the signs of God's reign among us, even while we live in a broken world. We need praise that illumines the ways our lives and the lives of others can be and have been transformed by the grace of Jesus Christ. Promising God's people too much is a temptation some evangelicals are prone to, but equally dangerous is a liberal tendency to promise people too little of God's transforming power.

Our praise does far more than just remind us of the grace and power of God. Praise actually helps us experience that grace and power and become rooted in it. To put it simply: praise puts us in touch with God. Claus Westermann writes that "the secret of praise is its ability to make contact with God; through praise one remains with God."[1] Intuitively we recognise the way praise connects us with God, and this experience is a reason why praise is so central to our worship and Christian life. As we praise God we come to experience some of what we sing and speak of in our praise.

After stumbling upon Westermann's observation I began to understand something that happened to me when our son Tim was dying. For the last month of his life, Tim was unconscious, and Esther and I took turns keeping watch by his bed, waiting for the inevitable. To comfort myself and to pass the time, I started with the first hymn in *Hymnal: A Worship Book* and worked my way through, singing all the hymns I knew. To my surprise, it was the hymns of praise that spoke most meaningfully to me. I still remember singing the words of that grand old hymn, "Now thank

we all our God with heart and hands and voices, who wondrous things has done, in whom this world rejoices," as the tears streamed down my cheeks. I remember feeling both crazy and guilty for singing such songs while Tim was dying before my eyes.

Now I understand. Praise puts us in touch with God, and connection with God was exactly what I needed during that painful time. I needed to draw close to God and feel God's love and grace and strength surrounding me. When we praise we open ourselves to experiencing the power, mercy, and love of God that we extol in our praise. Through praise we abide with God. Because my praise was more than balanced by lament, it functioned as both a powerful act of defiance and as a way of opening myself to the healing power of God. Not everyone is able to sing hymns of praise in time of crisis or at the funeral of a loved one. When sisters and brothers are too choked by grief or anxiety to sing the praises of God, then it is the church's task to uphold such people by proclaiming God's praises on their behalf.

It is essential that we acknowledge pain and bring it into the healing presence of God. But in the midst of grief we are also invited to praise, because praise can be an act of defiance that nurtures and strengthens our faith.

As Christians we must lament, because all too often life brings hardship, loss, and struggle, and it is essential that we acknowledge such pain and bring it into the healing presence of God. But even in the midst of grief and suffering we are invited to praise, because our praise opens us to the grace and power of God, and because our praise can be an act of defiance that nurtures and strengthens our faith. Our praise declares that ultimately God's love and grace are more powerful than the sorrow and pain that prompt our lament. May we Christians continue to do crazy things.

Note

[1] *The Psalms: Structure, Content and Message* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1980), 6.

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Jesus and the end of life in the synoptic Gospels

Gary Yamasaki

One of the helpful findings of recent research on Jesus is the realization that he should be viewed as a Jew, steeped in his Jewish heritage, and functioning out of a Jewish worldview. So if we want to understand Jesus's comments on death in the synoptic Gospels, we must read them against the backdrop of how Jews of his day viewed death. We must consider the Jewishness of Jesus.

Death in Jewish thought

B. A. Mastin summarizes the Hebrew view of death reflected in all but a few isolated passages of the Old Testament: "For the Israelite, man consisted of spirit and body joined in a firm unity, so that without the body man could not be properly said to exist. The dead inhabited Sheol, which is quite different from the later hell; it is the 'land which is not a land,' the place of gloom and despair and nothingness which has been emptied of everything that can in any way make life desirable; and above all else it is usually represented as distant from God."[1]

If we want to understand Jesus's comments on death, we must read them against the backdrop of how Jews of his day viewed death. We must consider the Jewishness of Jesus.

In Hebrew thought body and spirit are seen as a unity. The belief that the spirit leaves the body at death is not Hebraic; it came into Christianity through Greek thought, which is characterised by a dualism of body and soul. The Greeks saw the body as a prison of the soul, and death as effecting a release of the soul from that prison.[2]

Mastin's assertion that the dead "inhabit" Sheol implies that the dead are actually still alive in some sense. However, Lou Silberman describes the dead in Sheol as "shadows, shades, ghosts in this far land . . . echoes of the living; perhaps they are even fading echoes."[3] So it is probably better to say that the dead

"exist" in Sheol—exist, but "have no experience either of God or of anything else."[4]

Further, the traditional understanding of Sheol does not include any cognizance of a point at which this state of existence would end. However, two passages in the Old Testament reflect a significant evolution from this position:

> *Your dead shall live, their corpses shall rise.*
> *O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy!*
> *For your dew is a radiant dew,*
> *and the earth will give birth to those long dead. (Isa. 26:19)*

> *Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. (Dan. 12:2)*

These two passages indicate a belief in life after death—life resulting from a resurrection of the dead at a final judgment.

A belief in resurrection, although rare in the books of the Old Testament, emerges clearly in the Jewish writings of the intertestamental period. In these writings, existence in Sheol becomes an intermediate state—existence during the time between one's death and the resurrection of the dead at the end of time. This intermediate state is often referred to as sleep; at death one falls asleep, to be awakened at the resurrection.

A belief in resurrection, although rare in the books of the Old Testament, emerges clearly in the Jewish writings of the intertestamental period. Existence in Sheol becomes an intermediate state—between one's death and the resurrection.

In addition to the shift in portrayal of Sheol as an intermediate rather than a permanent state, the understanding of the nature of existence in Sheol undergoes change. In contrast to the older view—existence without experience—the intertestamental literature begins to suggest that already in Sheol the righteous experience reward and the wicked experience punishment.

At first glance, the view of Sheol in these intertestamental writings appears to parallel the traditional Christian conception of reward in heaven and suffering in hell. However, the experiences of reward and suffering in Sheol are seen as temporary; it is only at

the resurrection that eternal reward and eternal suffering commence. Therefore, experiences in Sheol can be thought of as foretastes of the ultimate destinies of the dead.

Death in the synoptic Gospels

In the synoptic Gospels, death is not a prominent topic; Jesus's focus is clearly on the here and now. In the instances when death is mentioned, the texts reflect the view of death contained in the intertestamental literature. For example, a belief in Sheol and the coming resurrection underlie this exchange: "Another of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.' But Jesus said to him, 'Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead'" (Matt. 8:21-22; par. Luke 9:59-60). Jesus is not denying his would-be follower the few days' time we need to bury our dead. Rather, he is addressing a delay of up to a year. The Jewish burial practices of his day were developed to prepare the deceased for resurrection at the end of their stay in Sheol. When people died, their corpses were placed on a shelf in a tomb. At the end of a year, when the flesh had decomposed, the bones were gathered and placed in an ossuary, a limestone container, and put in a niche in the tomb.[5] There they remained, ready to be restored to life at the resurrection.

The intertestamental view of death is even more apparent in Matthew's description of events surrounding the death of Jesus: "The tombs . . . were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised" (27:52). Here Matthew's reference to people who had fallen asleep is to those who were in Sheol.

A passage in which Jesus appears to reflect a belief in Sheol is the account of Sadducees confronting him on the question of the resurrection (Matt. 22:23-33; Mark 12:18-27; Luke 20:27-40). Because the Sadducees held that only the Torah was authoritative, they rejected the concept of the resurrection of the dead, which they claimed was not found in the books of Moses. In the Gospel story they pose a dilemma designed to force Jesus to admit that there is no resurrection. In response, Jesus says, "Have you not read in the book of Moses, in the story about the bush, how God said to him, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is God not of the dead, but of the living" (Mark 12:26-27). Jesus's response indicates that he sees the

long-dead Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as being alive. His comment is consistent with the belief in Sheol prevalent at the time.

In two passages from the Gospel of Luke, Jesus's words indicate not only that he believes in Sheol, but also that he conceives of it as consisting of a part for the righteous and a part for the wicked. The first passage is the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31). This story chronicles the fate after death of a poor man named Lazarus, who lived his life in misery, and a rich man who lived his life in luxury. In Jesus's story the poor man is taken to be with Abraham, and the rich man is taken to a place of torment (vv. 22-23a). The rich man is said to be experiencing torment "in Hades" (v. 23).

The Greek term *Hades* is often understood simply as a designation for hell. However, its use in both the Jewish literature of the intertestmental period and in the New Testament suggests that *Hades* is simply a Greek designation for the temporary holding place of the dead designated *Sheol* in Hebrew. So the rich man's torment is not eternal punishment resulting from final judgment against him, but rather temporary punishment in Sheol as he awaits the final judgment at the resurrection of the dead. And what of the poor man? The parable does not specifically say that he is also in Hades, but the fact that the rich man can see him (v. 23b) suggests they are both in the same place, but separated by a great chasm (v. 26). If that is the case, the poor man would be in what A. J. Mattill calls "the happy side" of Hades.[6]

Another passage in Luke's Gospel indicating Jesus's view of Sheol is his interaction with a thief who is being crucified with him (Luke 23:39-43). In response to the thief's repentant words, Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (v. 43). The traditional interpretation of this verse holds that the thief went directly to heaven upon his death to be with Jesus there. However, Mattill points out that according to Luke himself, Jesus did not enter heaven immediately upon his death, but rather entered Hades. Peter's address in Acts 2 cites David as prophesying the resurrection of Jesus:

> *"For David says concerning him,*
> *'I saw the Lord always before me,*
> *for he is at my right hand so that I will not be shaken;*

therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced;
moreover my flesh will live in hope.
For you will not abandon my soul to Hades,
or let your Holy One experience corruption.'"
(Acts 2:25-27)

David spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, saying,
"He was not abandoned to Hades,
nor did his flesh experience corruption." (Acts 2:31)

According to Luke, then, when Jesus died he entered Hades to await his resurrection and ascension. His words to the thief, "Today you will be with me in Paradise," do not refer to heaven but to the happy side of Hades.[7]

In these passages Jesus seems to understand death much as many of his contemporaries did, but one Gospel passage shows Jesus challenging some established views on death. Luke 13:1-5 reports an incident in which Jesus is informed about some Galileans who were massacred at the behest of Pilate. Jesus responds, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you . . ." (v. 2-3a). And he continues with another incident: "Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you . . ." (vv. 4-5a). Jesus's responses refute the view common in his day that tragedies should be understood as acts of God in response to sin.[8] Here, Jesus asserts that the deaths of these people were not the result of God's judgment on their sins; in Jesus's mind, physical death is not linked with divine judgment.

For Jesus, the most important issue is response to his offer of the kingdom of God, and he brings up the specter of death only to emphasize the urgency of making that response.

On this occasion, Jesus seizes the opportunity to explain a significance he attaches to death. In refuting the belief that these Galileans and Jerusalemites met their deaths by the hand of God because of their sins, Jesus issues a warning to his hearers to repent while there is still time (vv. 3b, 5b). So death is significant in that it marks the end of one's opportunity to repent. For Jesus, the

most important issue is response to his offer of the kingdom of God, and he brings up the specter of death only to emphasize the urgency of making that response.

While Jesus may use the possibility of imminent death to urge a decision for the kingdom, he also makes it clear to those who do make such a decision that following him may actually bring about their death. But he is quick to add that death suffered under such circumstances is not to be feared. As he sends his disciples out to proclaim the kingdom, he says, "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matt. 10:28).

Here again Jesus reflects the Jewish view of death common during his time. He exhorts his disciples not to fear physical death—which would merely consign them to Sheol for a time—but rather to fear the possibility of eternal consignment to hell at the last judgment. In Jesus's mind, physical death is a relatively minor matter, for it can be overcome by the resurrection of the dead at the last judgment. Of paramount importance is receiving a favourable judgment at the resurrection, and that requires covenant loyalty to God while one remains among the living. For Jesus, a life of discipleship takes precedence over preserving one's physical life.

Jesus makes it clear that following him in proclaiming the kingdom may actually bring about the disciple's death. But he is quick to add that death suffered under such circumstances is not to be feared.

What is the significance of Jesus's own resurrection for belief in the general resurrection of the dead at the time of final judgment? At one level, God's raising Jesus from the dead acts as a divine stamp of approval for Jesus, a vindication of all that Jesus did and said, including his belief in the future resurrection of the dead. So Jesus's resurrection serves as God's assurance of a future general resurrection. The events recounted in Matthew 27, noted above, function as further support for this assurance. The report that at Jesus's death "the tombs also were opened and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised" (v. 52) marks a departure from the schema that expected resurrection only at the final judgment. This raising of the dead anticipates the coming general resurrection, and so provides hope to the saints of Jesus's day.

Conclusion

What implications for how the church understands the end of life might follow from this survey of the subject in the synoptic Gospels? For one thing, this review should prompt us to exercise some care about what we say when people die. Often Christians simply say that the dead have "gone to heaven." Does such an understanding of death really accord with the way death is understood in the synoptic Gospels? Or is our belief that the souls of the dead leave their bodies and go off to heaven more the product of Greek influence on the development of Christian thought than the product of Jesus's understanding of death?

This survey should inform our view not only of death but also of life. Christians today often emphasize the sanctity of life. For Jesus in the synoptics, life is indeed precious because it is given by God, and because it affords us opportunity to respond to the call to participate in God's kingdom. But in a culture that seeks to prolong youth and avert death at all costs, the church's emphasis on the sanctity of life may sometimes be seen as attaching an absolute value to preserving our biological life. In contrast, for Jesus something else is of much higher value than preserving our physical existence: living a life of covenant loyalty to God. A life of discipleship, a life lived in allegiance to the kingdom of God, is so important that it is even worth risking our lives to pursue it.

A pastoral theology rooted in the synoptic tradition will remember that the nearness of death makes response to Jesus's call an urgent matter. But Jesus reminds us that death is not to be viewed as divine judgment on the individual, nor is it something to be feared. The disciples' security rests not in their power to stave off death but in the God whose power over death is already evident in Jesus's resurrection, which is an anticipation of their own.

Notes

[1] B. A. Mastin, "Death in God's Design," *Theology* 64 (1961): 374.

[2] A. J. Mattill Jr., *Luke and the Last Things: A Perspective for the Understanding of Lukan Thought* (Dillsboro, N.C.: Western North Carolina Press, 1979), 26.

[3] Lou H. Silberman, "Death in the Hebrew Bible and Apocalyptic Literature," in *Perspectives on Death*, ed. Liston O. Mills (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1969), 21.

[4] Ibid., 25.

[5] This disposition of the bones was known as the second burial, and it is the subject of the Matthew 8 passage. See Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science*

Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 56, 347–48.

[6] Mattill, *Luke and the Last Things*, 31.

[7] Ibid., 33–34; Mattill finds support for this position in passages from 1 Enoch and the Noachic fragments of 1 Enoch in which the term *Paradise* is used for the abode of the departed righteous, and in a rabbinic comment on 1 Samuel 28:19 dated to the third century C.E.

[8] See I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 553, for a list of examples of this type of thinking.

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The winding road of grief
A funeral sermon

Norm Dyck

For several weeks now, those of you who knew Henry best saw his decline into despair. Those of you closest to Henry knew of his struggle with depression and mental illness—the years of highs and lows, of medication, of days shadowed by hopelessness. A few years ago in Henry's openness to discuss his illness we thought we saw a candle of hope being lit. He seemed to be putting to rest a difficult chapter of his life. But recently church members and friends noticed Henry's distance. Depression had gripped his life in such utter despair that in his final decision to end his life the world seems dark as night. We are left with so many questions. Especially we wonder why.

Henry's death leaves a void in our lives. Here at Graysville Mennonite we feel it keenly. I will miss his handshakes, his words of encouragement, his passion for God's word. His seat is empty; his voice in the choir will be missed. As Frank told me, "We've lost our encourager, and we're not sure how we can replace him." We will miss his involvement in Sunday worship. The children will feel the absence of the friend who always noticed them.

We were all stunned by Henry's death. It has left many of us, family and friends, frozen and numb. Some of you may be feeling guilty. Henry helped so many people. You may wonder, "How could I have helped him?" "What could I have done?"

Some of you may be feeling anger. Your anger may be directed at the doctors who years ago were not able to do as much for Henry as you had hoped they would. Some of you may be angry at Henry for leaving you behind. And your anger may be directed at God. "Why would God allow this to happen to a faithful Christian brother, a wonderful father and husband?" Some of you may be asking, "Why did God abandon Henry?"

Those of you who are Henry's family have watched your husband and your dad go through the agony of his struggle. Your

family circle has been broken, and you may be feeling abandoned too. Feeling alone is frightening. Someone has said that losing a loved one is like waking up in a strange country beside a deserted road. You stumble to your feet, uncertain about how you got there, not sure which way to go. The world is empty and silent.

I'm sure the disciples felt that way after Good Friday. They accompanied their master into Jerusalem with palm branches waving, but within a few days he was arrested. They risked everything on this promising leader, and he was executed as a criminal. They had left their families and occupations to follow Jesus, and now all their hopes were dashed. After the crucifixion, some of the disciples went into hiding, while others left Jerusalem and headed for home. All must have felt abandoned.

In Luke 24 we read about two disciples on the road to Emmaus, leaving Jerusalem. We can hear their despair, as they tell the stranger walking with them, "We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel" (v. 21). Their grief kept them from recognising that their companion was Jesus. These mourners felt forsaken by God, but all the while their risen Lord was at their side.

There is a clue here for us. Two mourners long ago expected their Lord to be available in hard times. They had been led to believe that he would stand by them. Now they felt completely alone. The tears in their eyes prevented them from recognising that it was Jesus who came to walk that lonely road with them.

When we think of Henry's death we will continue to have questions. We don't have answers for the decision he made. But we do know that nothing is beyond the scope of our Saviour's love.

That same Jesus, risen from the dead, conquering death, conquering the grave, is here to walk that lonesome road with you and me. Keep the cross of Christ before you. The road ahead is not an easy one. It may be full of bumps and unexpected turns. Occasionally you'll feel lost, unable to back up, afraid to take a step forward. You'll be angry. Sometimes you will be convinced that everyone has abandoned you, even God.

But God will be there. He may be barely visible to you right now, but sometime in the encouraging words of a friend, God will speak. In the passing remark of a stranger, God will be present. And when you worship him, at home, at church, at work, Jesus

Christ who died and rose again for all of us will make himself known to you. Your family circle will never be the same, but with the help of Christ it will be mended again.

When we think of Henry's death we will continue to have questions. We don't have answers for the decision he made. But we do know that nothing is beyond the scope of our Saviour's love. Henry was a believer in Jesus Christ. He knew that his Saviour had died on the cross and had risen again to save him from his sins. Henry had faith in Jesus, and because of that faith we claim the tremendous promise in Paul's letter to the Romans: "I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:38-39).

Because we do not have answers we cannot judge. We have a risen Saviour and God who judges for us. The final decision that Henry made throws us onto the tender mercy of our God. We don't know how God judges suicide, but we do know that our God is a God of love and grace. We know that your family is in the tender care of God right now.

Your grief is something each of you will have to work through individually. No one can walk this path for you. But this path does not have to be walked alone. The members of our church family are ready to listen and care for you. The church doors are open for all of you; my office will always be open to you. The homes and the lives of the members of Graysville Mennonite will be open to you as well, as together we sort out our feelings of loss, of pain and grief, and as together we look to the cross of Christ for strength.

Grief can be like a winding road in a dense dark forest. From a distance the road seems to disappear. The way looks impassable. Yet with God's help, when obstacles suddenly appear in front of us, paths do become visible. As you come closer, you see the road winding beneath the trees. It's safe. God is there. Trust in God. Follow his path. God will lead you on to life, life in this world and in the world to come.

About the author

Norm Dyck is pastor of Graysville (Manitoba) Mennonite Church. He and his wife, Rose, and their son, Malachi, live in Carman, Manitoba.

Pastoral reflections on dying well

Dorothy Nickel Friesen

I thought I could not pastor people who were dying. After all, I had little experience with death, and my childhood was remarkably free of personal trauma with death. Death had not touched me in a dramatic way. I had not seen anyone linger in death. I had not heard the death rattle as last breaths were drawn. I had not spent hours in vigil near the bedside of someone I loved.

Then I became pastor of First Mennonite Church in Bluffton, Ohio. I have now officiated at more than eighty funerals—some for people whose lives were measured prenatally, in weeks or months; others for people who had lived more than a hundred years on this earth. I have prayed with those who yearned to die and with those who feared death. I have held the hands of those who could not respond to a human voice, and I have cradled a lifeless infant as she seemed to sleep in my hands. I have led worship services where hundreds overflowed the sanctuary, and I have stood beside an open grave with a few bystanders shivering in the wintry air. I have presided professionally at funerals for total strangers, and I have wept hot tears for parishioners whom I loved deeply.

When potentially fatal illness strikes, thoughts of death creep into a person's psyche. At such times the pastor can ignore these intimations of mortality. Or she can embrace this holy moment of awareness.

When potentially fatal illness strikes young or old, rich or poor, man or woman, thoughts of death creep into the psyche of the one afflicted. At such times a pastor can ignore that person's intimations of mortality, dismissing as inappropriate both fear of death and welcoming of death: she can minimize the situation or change the subject. Or she can embrace this holy moment of awareness.

When people in our congregation were dying, I tried to engage them and their family at their particular levels of understanding

and awareness. Then I tried to move them, sometimes ever so gently and sometimes quite boldly, toward facing the prospect of their death. "Does anyone else know that you are ill?" "Have you ever thought about dying?" "Are you afraid of suffering?" "What happened in your family when someone died?" "Tell me about your favorite Bible story or hymn."

These more private efforts were often coupled with more public work to alert family members, circles of friends, and the faith community about this impending death. We prayed for people by name. We organized volunteers to assist in daily living or by providing support for a grief-stricken spouse. We took turns with around-the-clock vigils. We prepared funeral services in which God's name was honored and the individual was remembered with a mixture of congregational traditions and unique family requests. We provided a lunch for the grieving family and friends with a simple menu and genuine hospitality.

The congregation modeled its willingness to embrace death by building its own caskets. Constructing and lining caskets proved to be a service both for the dead and for the living.

But I am convinced that it is not enough for a pastor to provide good and thoughtful pastoral care, to lead a worship service full of grace, and to meet the next death as a matter of routine. I have concluded that a congregation must see dying, as living, as a matter of stewardship. Just as the extravagance of some weddings leaves modesty behind, so the temptation to show love for the dead by sparing no expense violates our commitment to simplicity. The idea that "my wife never had much in life, but I'm going to see to it that she has the top-of-the-line casket" detracts from the community's celebration of life.

The deacons and nurture commission members at First Mennonite Church in Bluffton put together a booklet, *Preparing for Death: A Resource Guide*, for each household in the congregation. This booklet was routinely used in classes for those exploring membership in the congregation, and it was the subject of a session in a summer series on stewardship. Patterned after several other Mennonite congregational resources, this forty-page booklet was full of resources and suggestions about the issues, questions, and decisions that surround death. We urged each adult to fill out

a form indicating their wishes for disposition of their body, funeral plans, and legacy gifts. In short, we offered a practical guide for talking about a topic we tend to avoid and for making plans for a difficult time.

More than that, the congregation modeled its willingness to embrace death by building its own caskets. Following the strong leadership of my predecessor as pastor, the congregation had begun a ministry of building simple but beautiful caskets as an act of compassion and stewardship. Construction was done by a crew—mostly men—who loved to work with wood, had tender hearts, and saw this project as their Christian service to others in the congregation. After the construction, a second crew—mostly women—lined the caskets, carefully pleating the ivory-colored cloth. Not long after I became pastor at First Mennonite Church, I walked into an upstairs classroom to find the two crews completing a casket. Every now and then workers would stop long enough to recount stories about people who had died, recalling them in fond remembrance. A man recently widowed wept silently as he carefully pinned folds into the lining fabric. Constructing and lining caskets proved to be a service both for the dead and for the living.

All my fears—that I could not attend to the dying, that I would not find the right words, that I would weep in public, that I would say the wrong things, that I would get sick in emergency room—disappeared as I lived into my pastoral vocation.

Once, we received the tragic news that a baby would be stillborn. Her grandfather called the casket-building committee and requested their help to make a coffin for his first grandchild. That tiny wooden box became a treasured gift to an already beloved child. As we moved to the burial site, the young father carried the casket under one arm, his other arm holding his weeping wife. We all knew that their anguish was eased by the congregation's tender love made tangible by the little casket. In the congregation the birth of a child is usually announced on Sunday morning with a red rose in a vase on the pulpit. The Sunday after this baby's death, the red rose lay on the pulpit instead of standing in a vase: "Death has come to our congregation. We grieve the loss of this child, and we mark her death symbolically. We cry together; let us pray together."

Preparing a congregation for death is an ongoing pastoral task. Preaching about death, teaching about death, and finding rituals for death are pastoral responsibilities. But pastors can take up the task of caring for the dying only as they face their own mortality and their own fears. All my fears—that I could not attend to the dying, that I would not find the right words, that I would weep in public, that I would say the wrong things, that I would get sick in emergency rooms—disappeared as I lived into my pastoral vocation. I found fitting words and actions, and I never experienced nausea as I witnessed horrible injuries, awful trauma, and cold death. Yet I often left such scenes so exhausted that I could barely talk, and more than once, as I stepped in the door of my home, tears flowed uncontrollably. Death had taken its toll—again. Resting, reading comforting scriptures, talking, and writing all became ways for me to cope and heal and thrive in ministry to the dying.

My experiences have taught me something about dying. The truth is that living well contributes to dying well. Those who have a strong faith, family, and fruitful vocation will often understand death as both a human reality and as a process in which God is at work. In my experience, in many instances those who lived well—had strengthened their faith, had communicated with their families about dying, and were quick to acknowledge their fears and their affirmations—died well and peacefully.

Most people fear the pain of dying, but I have witnessed only one death in which pain seemed to wrack the dying person's body. In my estimation, that pain was the result of denial that death was imminent, and family discord about palliative measures. The power of modern medicine, prayer, and support can make dying a release from suffering and a sweet passage to another life. Pastors can help people deal with the fears, explain the dying process, prepare family members for death, and then gently guide them through after-death decisions. Signing papers for organ donation can become an opportunity for pastoral care. Talking about the loss of a parent can become an entrée into a teenager's topsy-turvy world. Planning a funeral with an estranged family member can become a time to heal wounds and offer reconciliation.

Pastors can help most effectively when they are aware of community resources offered by hospice programs, hospital

chaplains, and other health professionals. Drawing on such resources strengthens families, because they know they are not alone. Pastors can develop congregational care teams that offer ongoing support in a crisis: Identify legal, financial, mental health, nursing, pastoral, and social work resources in your congregation or community. Who likes to cook? Who can provide transportation? Who will care for children? Who can pray? Who will visit? While confidentiality and respect for family wishes are paramount, pastors and congregations can offer support in many, many ways when a loved one is dying and after death occurs.

Pastors are afforded the rare privilege of access to the dying and to their families. We are allowed in emergency rooms, delivery rooms, nursing homes, funeral homes, and people's houses at almost any hour of the day or night. We see people at their worst and in their greatest distress. Our presence brings hope simply because we represent both the community of faith and the resources of our Christian faith. Just by showing up, we communicate the availability of God's love and compassion and the support of the church community. Death is the occasion of important pastoral ministry.

Some remembering is appropriate in worship because our faith is also about God's work in our lives, but it is a pastoral act to steer the planning for the funeral service toward worship and to encourage reserving most of the reminiscing for later.

Finally, the celebration of life and of Christ's victory over death is most appropriately celebrated in the worship sanctuary with a service of Christian witness. Community traditions are strong ("We use the funeral home—not the church—because so few people will be there"), and families sometimes try to pack in cute anecdotes ("Can we tell the one about when Dad fell into the lake?"). Some of this remembering is appropriate in worship because our faith is also about God's work in our lives, but it is a pastoral act to steer the planning for the funeral service toward worship and to encourage reserving most of the reminiscing for the meal and social gathering times.

One of my greatest joys was in listening as family and friends told stories about the person who had died. Weaving parts of the story of that one life together with the big story of salvation became a pastoral discipline that took enormous energy. The

reward was often a biblical meditation that was personal, hopeful, and pertinent. But in Christian funerals we do well to keep the focus on the acts of God through Christ Jesus and not on the recital of human accomplishments, however dramatic and noteworthy the latter seem.

I have become a better pastor because I have had many opportunities to care for those who are dying and their families. My faith is stronger because of my familiarity with death in its many faces. I want to live a long and fruitful life, but these experiences have taken away my fear of dying. This statement of faith—I am not afraid to die—I can now make because as a pastor I have had the privilege of accompanying others in their living and in their dying. Thanks be to God.

About the author

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Final benedictions

Rudy Baergen

Death, for the ill and elderly, comes as the mysterious acquiescence of complex physical, spiritual, and emotional impulses one to the other. A significant moment for pastoral care arises when these impulses battle one another in the stages of dying.

Many of us know people who no longer find sustaining joy or meaning in the routines of living, whose loving relationships have ended, and whose spirits have made peace with death, yet their physical organs defiantly maintain the pulse of life. For years my monthly visits to a gentleman paralysed from his neck down always ended with his plea that I pray for his death. My prayers voiced gratitude for his life and for fond memories of his deceased wife. I acknowledged his readiness to die and committed him into God's hands. But his heart kept beating. He had a good heart, we agreed. When I left that pastorate, he said a tearful goodbye. Since I was leaving for an assignment overseas I told him that I hoped I *wouldn't* see him again, and he chuckled. Several months later his prayer for death was finally answered. I was sorry I could not be at his funeral to celebrate his release.

Just as rituals and prayers can enable us throughout our lives to embrace life, so prayers of release can enable us to receive death in peace.

Perhaps more common within our congregations and communities are the many who in the face of death are not yet ready spiritually and emotionally to let go. They continue to love life, they want to see children or grandchildren grow up, for them the promise of a glorious acceptance in the heaven beyond does not yet hold an allure equal to life on earth, difficult as it may be.

Often our emotional and spiritual yearnings can do little to change our body's genetic time clock. Yet as a pastor I have had experiences with rituals and prayers of release that give me pause to reflect on the holistic nature of death.

Few people are as attuned to their dying as Kevin was. I came to know him when he was in his midthirties and battling the debilitation of cystic fibrosis. He had a zest for life and a fighting spirit that had enabled him to hold death at bay much longer than expected. But the disease took its toll, and his lungs continued to deteriorate until his survival depended on getting a double lung transplant. Waiting his turn for a matching set of lungs became an endurance struggle against death. Could he hang on long enough? His spirit was strong, he had much to live for, and in my weekly visits my prayer was for his health and life. That prayer was answered. He received a transplant, and his recovery went well. I was privileged to officiate at his wedding. He was intensely aware that someone else's death had allowed him to live.

Shortly after his wedding, his body began to reject the transplanted organs, and his deterioration went quickly. Eventually in one of my visits he told me he thought he was dying, that he didn't expect to live long enough to keep his appointment a month later with his specialist. A few weeks later he confided that he knew his time was short—a week at most, he thought. My prayer for him, while still a request for health and healing, now began to ask for strength for "the facing of this hour."

Some days later I was called to his home. He had said goodbye to the members of his family, one by one, and now he wanted me to have a final prayer with him before the advanced stages of his dying took control. His breath was short, interrupted by difficult coughing spells; he did not anticipate living through the night. We chatted and exchanged farewell words that I will never forget. He sensed when it was time for me to leave. I prayed, thanking God for Kevin, for his person and his gifts, for the good that he had known in his life, for all whom he had touched with his passionate love for life, and we commended the things that had not been so good into God's hands. I left the room knowing that I would not see him again. He died within hours.

Aden at age eighty-eight had lived a long, full life. He had accomplished much and continued to take a keen interest in things around him. He loved to tell stories and was a veritable encyclopaedia of Mennonite history. He seemed to want to stay around forever to see how that history would yet unfold! He

persisted in attending many public functions, including church services, in his wheelchair—long after others thought he should submit to his reality.

Eventually he was hospitalised with a terminal illness, but his spirit vigorously resisted death, and he returned home, declaring that he would recover more quickly there. He continued to request prayer for healing and renewed health while I gently tried to prepare him and his daughter for the death that waited at his door.

Then one afternoon his daughter telephoned. "Daddy says that he is ready. Can you come?" When I arrived at his bedside, he was conscious and whispered haltingly that his time had come and that he was ready to die. I prayed that he could let go of his caregiving daughter and that she could release him into God's care. It was a tearful moment, but the miracle of release had happened. By the next morning Aden had passed on into God's eternal keeping.

Perhaps more than any other, Ruby's death taught me the importance of prayers of release. Ruby was a woman of great dignity, a quiet woman who shunned attention as she accepted the reality of her terminal cancer. On my return from Mennonite World Assembly in India, I learned that Ruby was lingering in a coma. I found her family at her bedside. They had been with her all night, hoping that she would not need to suffer much longer. But she held on.

As I said the amen, Ruby became calm and breathed one last time. Was the timing coincidental? Or had her spirit been waiting in some inexplicable way for a final benediction?

As I talked with her husband at her bedside about the struggles and joys of their more than fifty years together, I noticed that Ruby was becoming restless. I suggested that we have a word of prayer with her. My simple prayer committed Ruby into God's care and asked that she would know the fullness of God's everlasting peace and that her family would be able to accept her death. We gave thanks for her life, her love, her family, and for God's care for her over the years. As I said the amen, she became calm, breathed one last time, and then no more. In that mysterious, holy moment, she had passed on to the next life. It

was a moment of grief but also a moment of relief, of praise and awe. Was the timing coincidental? Or had Ruby's spirit been waiting in some inexplicable way for a final benediction?

Vernice's release was not as dramatic. I visited her, a woman in her eighties, soon after she had been told she had terminal cancer. We talked about her impending death, and she hesitantly confessed that although she felt ready to die, she was afraid of the dying itself. She was afraid that the pain and the medication would overwhelm her and she would no longer be able to pray. I reminded her of the Gospel story in which the friends of the paralytic man lowered him into the presence of Jesus. I assured her that like those friends her church community would carry her in prayer until the moment of her release.

Vernice was afraid that she would no longer be able to pray. I assured her that like the friends of the paralytic man who lowered him into the presence of Jesus, her church community would carry her in prayer until the moment of her release.

There was no quick and easy release from the pain and deterioration for her, but her family and congregation supported her as she journeyed that lonely road. One of the last things she told me before she slipped into unconsciousness was "Thank you for that story. It has helped me through." Although her struggle was long and difficult, Vernice had experienced her own victory over the fear of death through the prayers of release offered by her community.

We confess that God is the source of life. God breathes the breath of life into our nostrils, and when we die our breath returns to God. Perhaps we are not mere bystanders in this great mystery of life and death. Just as rituals and prayers can enable us throughout our lives to embrace life, so prayers of release can enable us to receive death in peace, as a friend who guides us into God's eternal care.

About the author

Rudy Baergen is presently serving as academic dean and professor of Bible at the Seminario Bíblico Menonita in Bogotá, Colombia. Previously he served as pastor of First Mennonite Church, Kitchener, Ontario. He received his doctorate in New Testament from Union Theological Seminary, Richmond, Virginia.

A sure thing
Death and eternal life in the Gospel of John

Jo-Ann A. Brant

Ours is an impatient society. We demand ever-faster service from our computers and our internet providers. We purchase the objects of our desire on credit. Why wait, when we can have it now? Perhaps this impatience is the reason the Gospel of John has overtaken the Gospel of Matthew in our society as the most quoted of the four Gospels. The Gospel of John seems to guarantee eternal life, beginning right now, with easy terms and no unpleasantness. Jesus promises that "anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed over from death to life" (5:24). By believing, we cease to be children born of flesh and blood and become children of God.

The statement "For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (3:16) paradoxically links life and love with an act of lethal, selfless giving.

Throughout the Gospel, Jesus repeats this claim many times in various ways. But the clarity of the claim gives way to paradox when we read it in its narrative context.[1] Yes, eternal life begins with belief (1:12), and yes, it is desirable: it is a life lived in the fullness of Christ's joy and love (15:10-11). But there is a catch. Jesus's glory is revealed in his death, and we manifest our share in divine love when we are willing to forsake the security this world offers, when we too are willing to die. The statement "For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (3:16) paradoxically links life and love with an act of lethal, selfless giving.

Jesus affirms that those who have already died will be resurrected and will face judgment (5:29).[2] But to his followers he says that eternal life begins now, this side of the grave, with a spiritual rebirth made possible by his incarnation. Physical birth and death

define the borders of biological life, but Jesus's coming into the world mediates divine life now to those who receive him. In contrast, those who reject him can be physically alive but spiritually dead.

As Jesus's coming changes the meaning of eternal life, so his dying changes the role that death plays in the human condition. Death was not part of God's intention for creation and had been seen as a consequence of sin. Now John's Gospel describes Jesus's crucifixion not as humiliation but as his exaltation and glorification.[3] Through his death our relationship with him is not severed but strengthened, because his dying reveals his love for us.

Likewise, the Resurrection is not a remedy for Jesus's death but is its complement; it allows life and love to abide. As his followers, we do not mourn his death. We feel sorrow for his suffering on our behalf, but our joy is made complete by his abiding presence (16:22-24). For those who abide in Christ, death is not Sheol, a shadowy existence in which we wait for resurrection and judgment; it is a door through which we enter our Father's house (14:2-3) or a sleep from which we will awaken at our resurrection (11:11). Just as God became incarnate and dwelt with us in the person of Jesus (1:14), Jesus's resurrection prepares a place for us to dwell with God (14:2).

In one of the many wordplays in the Gospel, Jesus talks about the role of death in the eternal life that begins here and now. In his discourse on the light of the world, Jesus says, "Whoever keeps my word will never see death" (8:51). His antagonists parrot his words, but in slightly altered form: "You say, 'Whoever keeps my world will never *taste* death'" (8:52; my italics). They get it wrong: those who believe in Jesus *will* taste death. In fact, Jesus makes tasting death a condition of life when he says, in his discourse on the bread of life, "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you" (6:53).

In his last public discourse, Jesus issues a general invitation to die, using a botanical analogy: we are like grains of wheat that must fall to the earth and die in order to bear fruit (12:24). Jesus does not mean the obvious—that we must die in order to be resurrected. He continues, "Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also" (12:25-26).

I suspect that when Jesus says we will not see death, he is drawing on the Old Testament tradition in which *seeing* signifies *valuing*. People tend to be influenced by appearance. Eve "saw that the tree was good for food" (Gen. 3:6). When Samuel proclaimed Saul king, he said to the people, "Do you see the one whom the Lord has chosen? There is no one like him among all the people" (1 Sam. 10:24); the narrator has told the reader that the people see a man "taller than any of them" (1 Sam. 10:23). Jesus's comment that "whoever keeps my word will never see death" may then mean that although we face physical death, we do not attribute to it power over our lives.

For those who abide in Christ, death is a door through which we enter our Father's house. Just as God became incarnate and dwelt with us in the person of Jesus (1:14), Jesus's resurrection prepares a place for us to dwell with God.

If we pay attention to the plot that unfolds in the Gospel of John, we notice that Jesus's death on the cross is not just an expression of love for all humanity but is the result of his love for a particular person, Lazarus. The story of Lazarus fulfills the claims Jesus made in his discourse on the good shepherd (John 10:1-18). There Jesus states that the good shepherd gives his life for his sheep. Then he makes it clear that his own death is such a death: "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (10:11). "And I lay down my life for the sheep" (10:15b). "For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again" (10:17). "No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again" (10:18). The virtue of laying down one's life in behalf of another is also extolled in the farewell discourse, when Peter claims that he will lay down his life for Jesus (13:37-38), and when Jesus says, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (15:13; see also 6:51; 17:19).

When he cries, "Lazarus, Come out!" (11:43), Jesus is the shepherd who is calling his sheep by name. Lazarus's resurrection excites messianic expectations, and the crowd in Jerusalem testifies that Jesus is "the King of Israel" (12:13), a claim that makes the people likely targets for violent suppression by Roman authorities. This dynamic is the reason for the high priest Caiaphas's observation that "it is better for you to have one man

die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed" (11:50). Jesus's opponents see his life-giving act as life-threatening, so they conspire to kill him.

Resurrection threatens the political order by disabling its most powerful weapon. If order is maintained through the fear of death, and if the line between life and death is eliminated, rulers lose their ability to control. Moved by his conviction that he can save the nation from death at the hands of the Romans, Caiaphas purchases political life by handing Jesus over to Rome. But by acknowledging Roman power and relying on Roman security, he betrays another conviction. He and his followers are made to shout, "We have no king but the emperor" (19:15). An appeal to political necessity is exposed as a denial of God's sovereignty.

We should not ignore Caiaphas's logic. It is the logic that informed U.S. military aggression against Iraq: it is better for us to have a few Iraqis die than to have many Americans face the threat of weapons of mass destruction. And we should affirm the truth in Caiaphas's words that he does not understand. Jesus does indeed die for the people, but not so that we can go on living in fear of the power of death. We must deny Caiaphas's logic. As children of God, we are invited to live without fear of death, for the death of our bodies has no ultimate significance.

Resurrection threatens the political order by disabling its most powerful weapon. If order is maintained through the fear of death, and if the line between life and death is eliminated, rulers lose their ability to control.

Throughout the Gospel narrative, characters move from the security of conventional or traditional truths to receive Jesus and the truth that he offers. They move away from the security of social allegiances and roles toward a path that entails rejection, conflict, alienation, and death. Nicodemus, the Pharisee, struggles to understand how one can be reborn (3:4). Hearing his story, we realize that the underlying question is not how but why. Why give up one's position of authority and respect by starting again? Many of us romanticize our early years, but few of us wish to relive the struggle to find one's place in society.

In challenging the injustice of the Pharisees' condemnation of Jesus, Nicodemus risks losing his place among them. They respond, "Surely you are not also from Galilee, are you?" (7:52).

Because Nicodemus remains silent through the remainder of the Gospel, commentators seem compelled to put words of confession or denial in his mouth. We cannot see into Nicodemus's heart, but his participation in Jesus's burial, an act that allies him with the family of an executed criminal, seems an implicit acknowledgement that making political alliances to secure one's social status is deadly. Perhaps his gift of an excessive quantity of myrrh (19:39) can be seen as an attempt to mask the stench of decay surrounding the life the state offers.

The life to which Jesus invites his followers is not social or political security of the kind offered by Caiaphas or the Pharisees. If we want to abide in him, we will take risks. Like Nicodemus, we will risk alienating ourselves from those with status and authority. In fulfilling Christ's command to love one another, we risk denial and betrayal. Eternal life requires that we relinquish our attempts to control our fate. It means making ourselves vulnerable to the inconstancy and the judgment of this world, armed with its threat of death. In doing so, we recognize the one true constant, the one sure thing, God's love.

Notes

[1] 1:18; 3:16; 4:14; 5:21, 24, 39-40; 6:40, 47-48; 8:12, 51; 10:10, 28; 11:26; 13:31-32; 17:6, 26; 18:37; 20:30-31.

[2] The provision for resurrection and judgment makes room for discussion about salvation for those who do not believe in Christ.

[3] References to Jesus's death as the hour of glory: 2:4; 7:6, 8; 12:23, 27; 13:1, 31-32, 17:1. References to the crucifixion as exaltation: 3:14; 8:28; 12:32-34.

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Love stories

A funeral meditation on 1 John 3:11, 16-24

Wanda Roth Amstutz

In recent weeks I have witnessed the intertwining of two love stories.

I have witnessed a chapter in a beautiful love story embracing John Janzen's family. It is a story of a devoted husband and wife, a father and his daughters, a grandfather and his grandchildren. I consider it a great privilege of my role as pastor to be invited to walk with families as they say goodbye to one they dearly love. So I was honoured to be there while Irma sat at John's side, loving her husband as she has so faithfully for fifty-six years. I was privileged to read a granddaughter's tender, humorous tribute to her grandfather. I was blessed to sit in the hospital room while John's four daughters sang in sweet harmony the old familiar hymns he loved. Holding his hands and stroking his hair, they gently kissed him and whispered, "I love you, Dad." I was moved to sit with his family after he died, hearing them reminisce about him as a young man, a husband, a father, a father-in-law, a grandfather.

In reading and reflecting on the words of 1 John 3, I also witness an unfolding love story. In fact the entire story the scriptures relate is about a God who is unfailingly and wholeheartedly in love with the wonderful creation she has birthed. Over and over God reaches out to humanity in love, seeking a relationship with creation, even as humanity repeatedly turns its back on its creator. In the stories of the Bible we witness God's quest for new ways to draw his children back, to remind them of the love he has for them. Finally, when all other options seem to have been exhausted, God chooses to come to humanity in Jesus, the ultimate example of love. As the author of 1 John writes, "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us" (3:16a).

This love story continues as the great gift of divine love offered to us in Jesus elicits an answering love in us: "For this is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love

one another. . . . Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action." Because we have been given the model of sacrificial love, because so much love has been offered to us, we are to respond by offering the same kind of love to those around us.

The love story of John Janzen's family and the story of God's love for humanity intertwine. John must have known the love Christ had for him, because he seemed to have so much love to give others. Whether John was giving his time and expertise and money to his family, or helping unfortunate children through a fund for international children, or serving as a conscientious objector during World War 2, or joking and playing with his grandchildren, or oohing and aahing over his beautiful wife, or praying to be ever mindful of those less fortunate, he lived love well.

And the love story of the Janzen family does not end here. The love that John offered to you, his friends and family, does not die here but lives on in your hearts. You will pass it on to your own families and friends. You will offer to the world the same love that John did. Social worker Leah de Roulet, who works with people who have terminal cancer, writes that our purpose in life "is to somehow enhance each other's humanity—to love, to touch each other's lives. . . . By and large, the meaning of a person's life gets distilled to 'How well have I loved?' A person can then find hope in believing: somebody loved me and I loved him or her and those memories that my loved one carries forward will shimmer on inside my children and grandchildren and beyond."[1]

The love story we find in the scriptures goes on. Because of this story we are not overcome today, although our hearts are full of grief and sadness: we know that the love story between John and his God continues.

The love story we find in the scriptures also goes on. Because of this story we are not overcome today, although our hearts are full of grief and sadness: we know that the love story between John and his God continues. Our God loved us so much that he sent his Son to live among us, to show us love by his example, and to die for our sins so that we do not have to die. John, a man who knew how to love well, is being well loved by his creator. That same love is awaiting each of us.

May these two intertwined love stories inspire us. As we recognise our creator's never-ending love for us, may we be inspired to love our families more deeply, to love our neighbours more tangibly, and to love more generously those who have little of this world's goods. May we be comforted to know that John is safe, at peace, and celebrating with the one who loves him and each of us far more than we can imagine or comprehend. Amen.

Note

[1] David Friend, *The Meaning of Life: Reflections in Words and Pictures on Why We Are Here* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1991); quoted in John R. Bodo, *Sourcebook for Funerals* (Canton, Ohio: Communication Resources, Inc., 1998), 163.

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When my father died

Rachel Miller Jacobs

When my father died
I was washing potatoes in my kitchen,
the graveyard smell of wet dirt thick in my nostrils.
I've read about people who saw a distant
though much-loved soul leap from its body,
but not me—
not until the doctor came in,
and my stomach heaved,
and my bones turned to water,
and I heard the rush of blood in my ear,
did I know, with the certainty of a contraction,
my father's death.

My mother and sister and I
leaned on the gurney in the ER,
like the women at the tomb
too amazed to speak.
Mothers that we are,
we patted Dad's cool fingers,
smoothed his cheek,
made the low sounds that soothe a baby,
laboring to let go of him,
to allow him to be born into a life far away from us,
unimaginable.
And we, dismayed
with the weight of the body he had left behind
(an abandoned shoe by the side of the road),
wept.

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On being stuck with our parents
Learning to die in Christ

Harry Huebner

The title's suggestion that we are stuck with our parents may offend some readers. We do not like to think of ourselves as being stuck with each other. Why? Perhaps because our culture teaches us that the only things worth having are those we freely choose; we are taught to believe that our will and our freedom are basic to our being. But our parents and our children are precisely the people we do not first of all choose.

Stuckness is an apt label not only for our family ties; it also characterises much about our other relationships. We are stuck with our co-workers, our neighbours, our fellow citizens, the other inhabitants of the planet. We are also stuck with ourselves—our bodies, our minds, our aptitudes and deficiencies. We can alter our attributes in minor ways but not substantially. Above all, we are stuck with our finitude, our creatureliness.

For Christians, this is to state the obvious: we are created beings. We are beholden to another; we are stuck with God. Our free will is not basic to our being. If it were, we would will to live forever. What is basic is the givenness, the gift, of our existence. We did not give ourselves life, and even our parents did not will us into being. We were given life by God and are asked to receive it in praise.

Death is not the ultimate enemy; being forgotten is. Hence to help others die in Christ is to remember them as God remembers them and us. It is to remember together whose we are.

As Christians, we are called to imagine both life and death under God. Only then can we learn how to live our lives as given and taken by one who wills to save us. And as we look to Jesus Christ, we see a life that can be made visible in our own bodies (2 Cor. 4:10). As we listen to our messiah, we hear an invitation to become like him in his death (Phil. 3:10). To discover the meaning of these words is the challenge before us.

Memory, identity, and dying

> *Listen to me . . .*
> *[you] who have been borne by me from your birth,*
> *carried from the womb;*
> *even to your old age I am he,*
> *even when you turn grey I will carry you.*
> *I have made, and I will bear;*
> *I will carry and will save. (Isa. 46:3-4)*

My ninety-one-year-old mother-in-law is physically very much alive, but she has lost all her powers of memory. Her body, although frail, is still with us; for years her death has been gradually approaching. Reflecting on the slow process of her dying can teach us something about how to live with our own imperfect bodies. It can even teach us something about the Christian faith.

Mother was a saintly person, a conscientious Christian. She had an active prayer life, read the Bible faithfully, attended church with almost fanatic regularity, chided her children when they needed it, and rarely got angry. She was habitually hospitable, kind, gentle, loving, forgiving, gracious, and dignified. She had these characteristics, this character, because she knew whose she was. She lived under the lordship of Jesus Christ.

With the onset of her dementia her character began to change. When she was in the earliest stage of the disease, one day in the course of our Sunday dinner conversation she discovered (she had forgotten) that Father had stayed home from church. She exclaimed, "You were not in church this morning? I will never forgive you for that as long as I live!" We were shocked at her uncharacteristic words and tone. I said, "But Mom, you're a Christian, and Christians always forgive." "Oh yes," she said, "I forgot."

With the loss of her memory, Mother has lost her old identity. Does she have a new one? It is hard for us to know who she really is. Her identity confusion results in behaviour that makes no sense to us or to her. She lacks a stable frame of reference that could give consistent shape to her words and actions. Perhaps more accurately, her worlds keep shifting, without meaningful continuity. What remained longest in her memory were the poems and

songs she had learned by heart. During the five years she lived with Agnes and me, in the evenings we often sang and recited poetry. In our singing and reciting we still shared an intact world, for songs and poems are givens to be performed only one way.

Now Mother is not able to communicate at all—not to others and, one suspects, not even to herself. Until recently she was able to think. I doubt that she thinks in any meaningful way now. But she still has strong feelings and fears. With memory loss one doesn't immediately stop thinking and feeling; one just doesn't have a consistent place to think and feel from.

Memory names an important ability to make one's desires one's own. When one forgets who one is, strange things happen. Mother's children became her siblings, her husband became an uncle, her parents strangers. Once she went to our large dining room mirror and pled with the person she met there, "Please, please, take these pills and throw them away. These people are making me take them, and they are killing me. They want to poison me to get rid of me. Please take them and run!"

Why is it so hard to live with a mother whom we love, with whom we shared so many wonderful life experiences, and whom we all know to be behaving as she does because of a biological dysfunction that leaves her confused and disoriented? We see our granddaughter's confusion as normal when she cries because something has disoriented her. Like Mother, she lacks the capacity to place such events into proper context. Both are dependent upon others, yet these others often understand their roles quite differently.

Why does the disorientation of elderly people with dementia bother us while that of a baby does not? I suspect it has something to do with the relationship between dependency and future. The future of a child is wide open, while the future of an elderly mother is death. Both dependencies beg for a coherent imagination in which actions and thoughts have places that are shared by a community of friends.

Whose speech? Which metaphor?

> *Precious in the sight of the* LORD
> *is the death of his faithful ones. (Ps. 116:15)*

The story of Mother's dementia is not pretty, but I truly believe that she can still teach us much about the love of God, perhaps only in spite of herself, but that is not so different from how the love of God gets expressed through the rest of us. Her story can help us see the place of Christian memory in our living and dying in Christ. While memory is central to our understanding of human existence, you and I are not simply what we as individuals remember. We are also remembered by others.

Mother's memory and her identity are no longer principally in her own hands—not that they ever were lodged only there—but in the hands of those who control the discourse about her. Because Mother no longer knows herself, we must now be her memory. We have the power to shape her identity because we provide the speech and the metaphors. But which speech and which metaphors will do?

Michael Ignatieff[1] and David Keck[2] have written moving accounts of their mothers' struggles with Alzheimer's disease. The two accounts differ markedly because the imaginations in which these men hold their dying mothers differ; their speech and metaphors are different. They literally remember their mothers differently.

Alzheimer's may help us become aware that faithfulness in exile is after all possible. It may help us see that our salvation lies not in our control over life but in our life in Christ when we have realised that we are not in control.

Ignatieff struggles to understand the disease itself. He writes, "Diseases whose cures have been found become mere diseases; those we do not yet understand become metaphorical carriers of everything we fear and loathe."[3] He cites Susan Sontag's proposal that cancer should be regarded "as if it were just a disease, a very serious one, but just a disease. Not a curse, not a punishment, not an embarrassment. Without 'meaning.' And not necessarily a death sentence."[4]

Ignatieff labels this a "non-metaphorical" understanding of disease. To live an illness as Sontag proposes is to live it on the basis of a radical individualism, which, Ignatieff asserts, one can do only if one has an irrational trust in a medical profession that tacitly promises to win the biological wars using sophisticated scientific counterattacks. "Only medicine approaches disease nonmetaphorically." He wants to go further: "What is needed is a

shared stoicism, in which patient and doctor reach an understanding of what medicine can and cannot do."[5] In other words, Ignatieff argues that submitting to our biological destiny is not something we have a choice about. All we can do is struggle to accept what we have received. And here the task is to struggle well. We are not in control of everything, but we are in control of some things. The challenge is to accept what we cannot change and to change what we can.

Yet this difficulty remains: in the struggle of life, everyone loses. A people who from childhood have been fed the myth of self-mastery find that loss hard to accept. Death is frightening and painful because it is defeat.

While David Keck is troubled no less than Ignatieff by Alzheimer's degenerative effects, he calls it "the theological disease." Why? Because it forces us to re-examine our notions of Christian faith—faith reduced to self-fulfilment, personal experience, or social justice, for example. How can the church offer salvation to one who can no longer pray or sing or read the Bible or attend church or accept communion? What is salvation for a helpless victim succumbing to the ravages of a disease that robs one of mobility, memory, thought, and even identity? These questions are related to the question of how the church can offer salvation to a violent and unjust world when our non-violent efforts fail to make it better. In other words, how can we come to an understanding of the Christian life that is not grounded in what we can do but in how our efforts fit into the fabric of what God is doing?

Alzheimer's may help us become more intimately aware that faithfulness in exile, in a place of homelessness, strangeness, speechlessness, is after all possible. It may help us see that our salvation lies not in our control over life but in our life in Christ when we have realised that we are not in control. The story of salvation is not principally about Jesus Christ equipping his followers with new insights or tools or strategies or power to fix things. Rather salvation lies in the drama of God's grace and mercy into which we are invited as participants.

Keck suggests that (like an Alzheimer's patient) contemporary theology displays a kind of forgetfulness: it forgets that Christian faith has at its centre the symbol of suffering—Christ's suffering.

The church is often tempted to separate salvation from suffering, to see salvation as synonymous with overcoming suffering, with liberation. Memory loss teaches us otherwise! "When one beholds an Alzheimer's patient as she loses control of her body, one may see more clearly the obvious fact that when you are nailed to the cross, you can no longer control your body's motions."[6] Our ability to imagine salvation for such a person requires understanding that our well-being rests in the hands of another who can change what we cannot.

Like Ignatieff, Keck believes that we are not in charge, but Keck refuses to submit stoically to the inevitable, to surrender to biological determinism. The fact that we are not in charge doesn't mean that no one is. The story of the suffering Christ does not serve to reinforce the irony that even our Saviour lost the battle with death. Rather this story tells us that despite our experiences of suffering, death, and loss of control, God is in charge. The Bible's exile-exodus and cross-resurrection stories are not about hopeless resignation to the madness of a broken world. They are stories of hope in the saving acts of God who as creator recreates. In the face of human powerlessness, Christian hope trusts the God of resurrection who is actively restoring what is broken. The metaphor that stands as an alternative to biological destiny is that of the transforming power of God. Our speech about death's coming must therefore focus on God and on how God remembers.

Remembering as God remembers

> *Can a woman forget her nursing child,*
> *or show no compassion for the child of her womb?*
> *Even these may forget,*
> *yet I will not forget you.*
> *See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands.*
> *(Isa. 49:14-16)*

Some will say that Mother is remembered best, that we remember her "true self," when we remember her as she was before the disease took hold. Although continuity with the past is important to our understanding of identity, to remember Mother as she was carries no distinct Christian meaning. Moreover, it seems alto-

gether arbitrary that we should be able to choose the time-frame by which we define our lives.

In biblical and theological terms, we all—the living, the dying, the dead—are best remembered as God remembers us. For to die in Christ is to die being remembered by God. The repentant thief on the cross knew this when he cried out, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom" (Luke 23:42). It is not important to die remembering. Most of us do not die that way. But to die being remembered by others makes dying bearable, and to die being remembered by God is what saves us from the sting of death.

To ask how God remembers requires a theological account of memory. M. Therese Lysaught, who is indebted to Keck's work, reminds us that a theological account of memory must begin with the simple affirmation that God remembers! Humans forget, but God remembers.

What does it mean to say that God remembers? Lysaught writes, "To be remembered by God is to be held in existence, to live. To be forgotten, on the other hand, means death."[7] To be remembered by God is to have one's deepest fears allayed, to have what threatens us with non-existence taken away.

It is not important to die remembering. Most of us do not die that way. But to die being remembered by others makes dying bearable, and to die being remembered by God is what saves us from the sting of death.

Lysaught and Keck both point out that while we may come to know who God is through God remembering us, in the biblical account God's acts of remembering do not have the primary function of disclosing God's identity. Rather, God's acts of remembering issue from God's loving-kindness and mercy. That is, how God remembers flows from God's character. Hence such acts are tied intimately to God's relationship with the other: fidelity rather than identity is the issue.

God's remembering is not principally mental recall. When God remembers, God acts in character: God redeems, creates, forgives, judges. And when God sets people free, as in the case of the exodus, God expects Israel to respond with similar redemptive activity—remembering the poor, the widows, the strangers in the land. God's remembering is an invitation that seeks a response.

While God faithfully remembers us, history is marked with human forgetfulness of both God and neighbour. Yet despite human forgetting, God's remembering knows no end. As Lysaught puts it, "God remembers us to the point of assuming human flesh and living among us, suffering our forgetfulness in his very body, and in rising, forgiving—or remembering our sins no more. Through God's act of remembering in Jesus we are given life anew; our enslavement to the tyranny of existential forgottenness—death—is vanquished. Our task is then very simple: 'Do this in remembrance of me.'"[8]

When we live in remembrance of Jesus Christ, that is, live as his disciples, we open ourselves to the transforming power of God, and we become able to mediate God's remembering to others.

If we are called to remember as God remembers, we will need to reorient our own understanding of the relationship between remembering and identity.[9] When we live in remembrance of Jesus Christ, that is, live as his disciples, we open ourselves to the transforming power of God, and we become able to mediate God's remembering to others. In this way we participate in God's healing ministry, living in relation to others out of our God-given identity. When we remember as God remembers, we become the kind of people who are empowered to help others die in Christ, placing them in God's memory where death loses its power.

Lysaught points out that this learning occurs in the body of Christian friends, the church, in the interplay of remembering both the living and the dead. "We learn how to remember the living . . . where we learn to remember the dead—through that remarkable Christian practice of remembering, the practice of funerals."[10]

To remember as God remembers is to live with the dying as we live with the living, that is, to hold before each other the reminder of who we are in Christ. We are loved, we are accepted, we are gifted with grace, we are being healed, we are not forgotten. And in our sometimes exilic existence God is still present with us and is redeeming us, no matter what befalls us. The concerns of the dying matter, yet only living friends can attend to them, because the dying eventually become powerless. Death is not the ultimate enemy; being forgotten is. Hence to help others

die in Christ is to remember them as God remembers them and us. It is to remember together whose we are.

The promise of presence

> *Even though I walk through the darkest valley,*
> *I fear no evil;*
> *for you are with me. (Ps. 23:4)*

God promises to be with us always, even "through the valley of the shadow of death" (Ps. 23:4 KJV). Remembering as God remembers means being present, participating in the other's joys and open to the other's needs. Helping others die in Christ is not merely, or even primarily, a family matter. We only learn to befriend those with whom we are stuck by learning from the Christian community what it means to give our lives for another. It is the church—the body of Christ—that teaches the model of divine friendship by forming a people capable of incarnating love in a hostile world. Families cannot be Christian unless they learn from the Christian family, the church, how to live in remembrance of Christ. Helping people die in Christ is therefore not the task of the biological family alone but particularly of the family called church, the family that trains its members in what it means to be Christian friends.

The most basic promise we can make to one another is the promise of presence. In the consoling presence of another our fears of abandonment, alienation, and death are lessened. And what do we fear more than abandonment?

If we want to befriend others as God befriends, the most basic of all promises we can make to one another is the promise of presence, of fidelity. In this promise lies our hope, for in the consoling presence of another our fears of abandonment, alienation, and death are lessened. And what do the elderly, the dying, fear more than abandonment? For that matter, what do friends fear more?

Christian friendship expresses openness to the other and to God. We do not have all the answers, for God alone is wise. We certainly do not have all the powers, for God alone resurrects. However, Christian friendship promises presence, a promise that

commits us to sharing each other's fears and joys. We promise a presence that teaches mutual practice of Christian virtues, that seeks to build up the Christian community and fosters friendship with God.[11] Christian friendship begins and ends with the faith that we are God's.

Insofar as friendship is the promise of presence, it takes time. But those who are not elderly tend to see time in terms of getting things done, and see non-productive pursuits as a waste of time. As Richard (played by Leonardo DiCaprio) says in the movie *The Beach*, "In the endless pursuit of pleasure there is no time for death." Our culture teaches us to see time as a commodity that may be exchanged for other goods—it has cash value—rather than as a gift, an opportunity to be present to another in Christ.

Presence often produces nothing we can measure. Instead it flows out of an identity given to us in Christ, and we remain present because we are driven by passion, the passion God expresses in the incarnation. We are present and give care to the elderly because we want to—we are driven to! Without time to be present, there is no possibility of friendship, and without the possibility of friendship, dying is tragic.

In ancient times a good death was one where the gift of time provided opportunity to make things right with friends and to say good-bye to loved ones. These preparations were seen as essential to a good death. Today we fear time spent in dying—in part because we do not wish to be a burden, in part because we fear suffering. But perhaps our biggest fear is of being forsaken (even Jesus expressed this fear), and we cannot imagine our friends wanting to be present if our death comes slowly. In other words, what we fear most is loss of friendship. We find it hard to imagine that to be stuck with anyone can be a good thing. The only good end we can imagine is a quick one.

How utterly sad and impoverished such an imagination is! To remember as God remembers, to be present as God is present, is precisely to promise that we will not forsake our friends even when they become burdens to us. Stuckness, it turns out, has other names, *Christian* names: promise and commitment. We can offer each other no greater promise than to remain present to one another, redemptively reflecting the face of God's healing love! To help another die—or live—in Christ is to help that person remain

who she is in Christ, in spite of her loss of mobility, thinking capacity, and even identity, for in Christ our identity can only be found, not lost.

Notes

[1] Michael Ignatieff, *Scar Tissue* (Toronto: Viking Press, 1993).
[2] David Keck, *Forgetting Whose We Are: Alzheimer's Disease and the Love of God* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).
[3] Ignatieff, *Scar Tissue*, 67.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Keck, *Forgetting Whose We Are*, 17.
[7] M. Therese Lysaught, "Memory, Funerals, and the Communion of Saints: Growing Old and Practices of Remembering," in *Growing Old in Christ*, edited by Stanley Hauerwas, Carole Bailey Stoneking, Keith G. Meador, and David Cloutier (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 279.
[8] Ibid., 281.
[9] See ibid., 280.
[10] Ibid., 282.
[11] See Stanley Hauerwas and Laura Yordy, "Captured in Time: Friendship and Aging," in *Growing Old in Christ*, 177.

About the author

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Lost and found together
A funeral sermon

Brent Kipfer

And if we're lost
Then we are lost together[*]

The love song "Lost together" takes on new meaning in light of our gathering here today. We are here together. And many of us may be feeling lost. It's terribly disorienting to lose someone you love. It can get so that you hardly know which end is up anymore. Grief can take you all kinds of places you don't want to go: anger, fear, pain, depression, loneliness, guilt. All of these feelings are normal. You may be feeling lost today.

And if we're lost
Then we are lost together

I know that Cindy wasn't a very religious person. It might surprise you to hear that many people thought Jesus wasn't either. When you get to know Jesus, you find out that playing religion is not exactly one of his priorities. Jesus breaks down a lot of our stereotypes about God.

Today some of you are asking, "Where is God in all of this?" I believe that God is like the lover in the song who would rather be lost with us than be anywhere else without us. That is the message of Christmas. One name for Jesus is Immanuel—God with us.

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[*] In December 2002, I was invited to officiate at the funeral of a forty-one-year-old woman named Cindy, who had died of cancer. I had met her twice, and had provided pastoral support on the day she died. Although she had not been involved in the church, her husband wanted a Christian pastor to lead the memorial service at a local funeral home. Before the sermon, a friend sang one of Cindy's favourite songs, "Lost together," by Jim Cuddy and Greg Keelor, © 1992 Blue Rodeo Productions. Although the music would not normally be used in Christian worship, I took a line from the refrain as a central motif for my sermon. I prepared the sermon with the assumption that a significant proportion of the congregation would be non-religious.

Christians believe that Jesus is God in the flesh—that Jesus comes near to show us the face of God.

For many of you, last week when Cindy died was not a time for lighthearted Christmas celebrations. Christmas lights, parties, and presents did not fit. Maybe you can identify with the writer of Psalm 22. In a gut-wrenching prayer, he cries out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest" (Ps. 22:1-2).

Where is God in our confusion and grief? Where is God when we are lost? How does God respond to this kind of prayer? God doesn't give a pat answer. God doesn't give a lecture on the purpose of suffering. God doesn't explain in five easy steps. Instead, God comes in person. God stands with us and says,

And if you're lost
Then we are lost together

God comes in person to be with us. That is the surprise of Jesus Christ. Who would have imagined it?

When Jesus was dying on the cross, he cried out, using the words of Psalm 22. Mark 15 describes the day of his crucifixion: "When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?' which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'" (Mk. 15:33-34).

Consider what these words mean. If Jesus is God in the flesh, then God himself went to the most godforsaken place. Out of love for us, Jesus became lost and forsaken—separated from the presence and security of his Father in heaven. He said,

And if you're lost
Then we are lost together

Jesus entered a broken, messy, and sinful world to stand with us, to be our friend, to carry our sin and to suffer our pain. Jesus reveals the heart of his Father to us. He comes with a love that will not let us go. He comes to be in relationship with us. He comes to share our lostness.

And if we are lost with God, then we are really not lost at all. If Jesus is standing with us, if we are standing together, that is good news indeed, because with Jesus, suffering and death do not get the last word. After the cross comes his resurrection. And if we are united with him in his death, then "just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:4). This is a promise that God makes to us. Jesus experienced death for us, so that we could live with him. He offers to stand with us in our grief, in our sin, in our lostness—and by doing that, Jesus changes this awful place. And he changes us. It is a gift, unexpected and free. The apostle John was amazed by that gift. He was a close friend of Jesus, and he wrote, "God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 John 4:9-10).

Jesus does not shrink from even the darkest place. And if we welcome him there, his presence transforms it. The cross is a place of torture and death—but Jesus turns it into a place of freedom and grace.

Our hope and strength are not based on what we do, but come through Jesus. He does not shrink from even the darkest place, the ugliest place. And if we welcome him there, his presence transforms it. The cross is a place of torture and death—but Jesus turns it into a place of freedom and grace.

When Jesus comes, a whole new future opens up for us. The writer of Psalm 16 describes this gift, the result of God's presence with us. He gives thanks to God, saying, "You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore" (Ps. 16:11). It sounds jarring to hear about joy or pleasure when we are so full of sadness. It seems unreal, scarcely possible. Still, Jesus steps into the darkness and whispers,

And if you're lost
Then we are lost together

Psalm 22 begins with the cry, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Maybe you are asking the same question today.

The person who first called out those words turned his pain into a prayer. His question still hangs in the air and pierces us. But that is not the end of the matter for the psalm writer. After expressing his pain and confusion and lostness, he finally comes to the conclusion that the Lord did not despise or abhor the suffering of the needy; "he did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him" (Ps. 22:24).

God also hears us and, by his Holy Spirit, he stands with us today. God assures us that because Jesus has been raised from the dead we too can experience newness of life, both in this life and the next.

And if we're lost
Then we are lost together

About the author

Brent Kipfer is pastor of Brussels (Ontario) Mennonite Fellowship. He and his wife, Sarah, have three young children, Joel, Micah, and Joanna.

Children's books that deal with the end of life
An annotated bibliography

Kathryn Meyer Reimer

Many picture and chapter books for children include the death of a parent, grandparent, sibling, or friend. For *Vision* readers looking for a few choice children's books on end-of-life issues I have selected ones that speak to a broad variety of situations, ones with which anyone who has experienced the terminal illness or death of a family member or friend might be able to identify. These books are easy to share, easy to read, and appropriate for children as well as for adults.

I have organized the list in three sections: books that speak to feelings about and images of death, books that deal with end-of-life illness, and books that address the subject of death by using the death of an animal. All are books that would be appropriate for a church library or the personal library of a pastor, lay minister, or pastoral care commission member. The list does not include novels or resource books.

Books dealing with feelings about and images of death

In narrowing my selection of books on the subject of death, I found myself returning to older books that continue to be classics. What follows is my short list of books that speak to all ages in a clear, eloquent way about the feelings of loss at the time of death. All are currently in print.

Nana Upstairs & Nana Downstairs, by Tomie dePaola (New York: Puffin Books, 1998). This book is a family story about a four-year-old boy who looks forward to his weekly visits with his great-grandmother, Nana Upstairs. (She lives in the home of his grandmother, Nana Downstairs.) He is especially close to his great-grandmother, and they spend many hours together. She dies, and when his family goes to visit, her bed is empty. "'Won't she ever come back?' he asked. 'No, dear,' Mother said softly. 'Except

in your memory. She will come back in your memory whenever you think about her.'" A few nights later he sees a falling star and decides that it is a kiss from his great-grandmother.

This book avoids sentimentality while approaching the relationships and concerns of a child in a gentle, sympathetic way. It speaks directly about one of the things we fear most: the empty bed. The 1998 edition is a full-color reissue of a 1973 three-color book.

Everett Anderson's Goodbye, by Lucille Clifton (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1983). Everett Anderson has lost his father. With sparse text, this short book directly addresses five stages of grief—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance—using a brief scene or interchange between Everett and his mother. Tenderly illustrated by Ann Grifalconi, this book can help children talk about all the different feelings they go through as they deal with the death of someone they love.

How It Feels When a Parent Dies, by Jill Krementz (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981). Jill Krementz is a photographer whose work has included taking portraits of children. She found that the children had so much to say as she was photographing them that she started to write down their words. *How It Feels When a Parent Dies* records the words of children ages seven to sixteen who have lost a parent to death. In two to four pages each child shares his or her own story about living with and through the death of a parent.

The book can be read bits at a time or as a whole. Each story is poignant in the honesty of children talking about their own lives and losses.

Lifetimes: The Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children, by Bryan Mellonie and Robert Ingpen (New York: Bantam Books, 1983). With realistic, nature-oriented illustrations, this book centers on the idea that everything has a lifetime—animals, plants, and people: "There is a beginning and an ending for everything that is alive. In between is living." "Nothing that is alive goes on living for ever. How long it lives depends upon what it is and what happens while it is living." Some lifetimes are short, some are long, some are cut short by illness or accidents, but all

living things die. The text and illustrations are factual, descriptive, and clear as they talk about death that inevitably comes to all living things, including people.

What on Earth Do You Do When Someone Dies? by Trevor Romain (Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing Inc., 1999). This pocket-sized book answers children's questions about death, from "Why am I hurting so much?" and "What can I do if I'm angry?" to "What happens to a person's body?" and "What is a funeral or memorial service?" Several pages are devoted to each question. Brief, straightforward text is accompanied by black-and-white illustrations. The author lost his own father and has done extensive work with children who have cancer and are facing death. He writes with an authenticity, empathy, and clarity that is compelling.

Sad Isn't Bad: A Good Grief Guidebook for Kids Dealing with Loss, by Michaelene Mundy (St. Meinrad, Ind.: Abbey Press, 1998). Each page of this book deals with an emotion or response children might have after a significant loss. Responses range from worrying that the death might somehow be their fault to worrying that they shouldn't be having a good time when good things happen after someone has died.

The writing is fairly directive in tone and touches on issues that many other books do not address. The book frequently suggests that the child talk with trusted adults. While I appreciate the book's discussion of issues surrounding loss, I regret the editor's choice to illustrate it with elves rather than children (the book is part of a series called Elf-help Books); somehow the illustrations seem to make light of an otherwise thoughtful text.

Books that deal with end-of-life illnesses

The books listed below deal ably with illnesses that precede death. All are written from a child's perspective and are appropriate for use with all ages. Two are out of print but readily available from libraries and used book sources.

Always Gramma, by Vaunda Micheaux Nelson; illustrations by Kimanne Uhler (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1988). A young girl and her grandma have warm interactions around all sorts of

activities, from taking walks to baking, and then Gramma begins to say and do strange things. First she starts to forget things, and then she gets lost when she is going places they have gone many times before. She behaves in uncharacteristic ways—yelling at her husband (when he changes the locks on the house so she won't walk away and get lost), and throwing things. Finally her condition deteriorates so much that the family decides they can't take care of her at home. She moves to a nursing home where her husband, daughter, and granddaughter visit her and feed her every day. Although Gramma is unable to communicate verbally, the young girl pushes her wheelchair out into the sunshine and talks with her. Gramma can still squeeze her granddaughter's hand.

"Some people wonder why we visit her so often. They say Gramma doesn't know we are there and that she doesn't remember us anymore. But I remember everything. I remember our swims in the creek. . . . And I remember every song she ever taught me. I believe that somewhere deep inside Gramma remembers, too." An honest and compassionate handling of the painful process of dealing with dementia.

Now One Foot, Now the Other, by Tomie dePaola (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1981). Bobby and his grandfather, Bob, love to do all sorts of activites together, from playing blocks to going to fireworks. Bob is the one who teaches Bobby to walk, "first one foot, then the other."

When Bobby is five years old, Bob has a stroke, and after his hospitalization he returns home, unable to talk. When Bob grunts, Bobby is initially fearful but soon learns that his grandpa still has ways to respond to him and interact with him. Slowly Bob learns to talk again. The story ends with Bob leaning on Bobby's shoulders, moving "first one foot, then the other," as he learns to walk again. This warm story addresses both the physical and the emotional realities of living with a stroke victim.

My Book for Kids with Cansur: A Child's Autobiography of Hope, by Jason Gaes (Aberdeen, S.Dak.: Melius & Peterson Publishing, Inc., 1987). As an eight year old, Jason Gaes wrote this book about having cancer since he was six. He documents what it feels like to have surgery, radiation, and chemotherapy.

He also writes about the side effects: "Sometimes keymotharupy makes you sick and you throw up. Sometimes you looz your hair from it but you can wear hats if it bothers you. Mostly kids don't care when your bald." Jason is surrounded by family and helpful medical staff; when he grows up he wants to become a doctor who helps children with cancer. At the end of the book his cancer is in remission. This book authentically follows the interests and thought patterns of a child, yet resonates with adults. It is dedicated to Sister Margaret "'cause we're both waiting to see if our cansur comes back."

Books that deal with death by describing the death of an animal

These two books offer unique insights about the rituals surrounding death. For some younger people, a pet's death may be their most direct encounter with grief, sorrow, death, and dying.

The Dead Bird, by Margaret Wise Brown (New York: William Morrow, 2004). A group of children find a dead bird and decide to bury it. They follow the rituals of a funeral—burying, singing, and placing a marker to remember the bird. This quiet and tender book provides a good way to start to talk with young children about the rituals following a death and the feelings we have when someone dies. It is a reissue of a book published more than twenty years ago.

The Tenth Good Thing about Barney, by Judith Viorst; illustrated by Erik Blegvad (New York: Atheneum, 1971). When his pet cat, Barney, dies, a child lists ten good things about him. This book offers a way to talk about how, even though we are sad, we remember those who have died through memories and stories, and by thinking about the things we liked about them. Simply told with three-color illustrations.

About the reviewer

Kathryn Meyer Reimer is professor of education at Goshen College, Goshen, Indiana, where she teaches children's literature and literacy. She is also involved with children's education in her congregation, Assembly Mennonite Church.

Book review

Jacob W. Elias

Revelation, by John R. Yeatts. Believers Church Bible Commentary. Scottdale, Pa., and Waterloo, Ont.: Herald Press, 2003.

John R. Yeatts's commentary on the Revelation to John follows the format now familiar to pastors and other church leaders who rely on the Believers Church Bible Commentary series: an introductory section, the commentary itself, and essays (twenty-six, in this case). Yeatts adds a glossary of recurring symbols and motifs in Revelation.

The amount of detail included in this commentary goes beyond the BCBC norm. Anyone picking up this book for even a cursory examination will notice how extensive are the bibliography and the index of ancient sources. Lists of biblical passages cited in support of interpretive claims sometimes take up four lines of the commentary's text. Frequently Yeatts also refers to other ancient sources, including pseudepigrapha, early church writings, Jewish writings, and various types of classical literature. At times I felt that Yeatts was too exhaustive in his effort to document his conclusions. Scholars may want to explore how Josephus or Eusebius shed light on a text in Revelation, but will the "Sunday School teachers, members of Bible study groups, students, pastors, and others" identified in the series foreword as intended readers also be interested?

Clearly Yeatts is committed to casting new light on Revelation. Some Christian readers, including some within the believers church community, ignore this apocalyptic treatise. Others give Revelation inordinate attention in an eager effort to decipher its code and predict the future. My impression is that potential readers whose instinct is to ignore biblical apocalyptic literature will need to be highly motivated to engage in the level of exegetical digging required for profitable reading of this commentary.

Similarly, readers intrigued by popular "eschatological fiction" (Yeatts's term, 179–80) such as the Left Behind series, or those moved by the vivid prophetic scenarios of some radio and TV preachers, may find it easier to continue along their accustomed interpretive track. Yeatts tends to give even-handed coverage to different types of interpretation. While affirming the need for balance, I wished that Yeatts would argue more persuasively for his preferred interpretation.

I found myself looking for more dialogue with liberationist perspectives, such as those of Pablo Richard (Latin America), Allan Boesak (apartheid era South Africa), and Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (feminist). More interaction with these interpreters of Revelation would stimulate awareness of how the message of the apocalypse intersects with its social and political context. Detailed reflections about the history of interpretation and the possible meanings of Revelation's many symbols may appeal to some futurists but are unlikely to win over those who declare that prophecy is not their thing.

I wonder whether in the end Revelation needs to be experienced through the right brain, rather than analyzed with the left.

When Yeatts talks about the writer of Revelation as "an artist at work" (211), and when he reflects on how the symbols appeal to the feelings (153), he may encourage more readers to give Revelation a hearing. When he discusses the imperial cult of the emperor (246–47), he may catch the ear of readers who long to know how the gospel informs the church as an alternative community relating to its social and political milieu.

After reading this major interpretive work I wonder whether in the end Revelation needs to be experienced through the right brain, rather than analyzed with the left. Yeatts has done an admirable job of the latter. I hope the result will be that more of us will join him in also doing the former.

About the reviewer

Jacob W. Elias is professor of New Testament at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary. He and Lillian, his wife, serve as co-pastors of Parkview Mennonite Church, Kokomo, Indiana.

Book review

Helmut Harder

Homosexuality: Biblical Interpretation and Moral Discernment, by Willard M. Swartley. Scottdale, Pa., and Waterloo, Ont.: Herald Press, 2003.

Willard Swartley is known for tackling difficult ethical and moral issues that the church has needed to face. His earlier book, *Slavery, Sabbath, War, and Women: Case Studies in Biblical Interpretation* (1983), was widely read and highly acclaimed. Now he broaches a fifth issue that has preoccupied the church recently, homosexuality. Swartley had originally considered treating homosexuality in the earlier book, but chose not to at the time because that issue did not parallel the other four. That is, while the biblical texts on slavery, sabbath, war, and women give evidence of a progression of thought within positive and negative parameters, homosexuality is consistently surrounded by a negative aura in the scriptures. Having waited until 2003 to publish on this latter topic, the writer now benefits from an additional twenty years of discussion on the issue.

Swartley concludes that three matters are of primary importance in our day: to uphold the authority of scripture; to listen to voices from outside western culture; and to be proactive in pastoral care.

After the introductory chapter, the book moves through three parts. First, Swartley enters into dialogue with numerous *biblical studies* published on homosexuality over the past twenty years (chapters 2–4). Second, the author discusses twentieth-century *western cultural forces* that have contributed to the moral predicament we are in, and offers his analysis of their influence (chapters 5–6). Third, he offers *practical guidance* for the church (chapters 7–9).

What are Swartley's conclusions? The eight chapters (excluding chapter one) can be summarised as follows: (1) In the Old

Testament sexuality is based on a theology of creation that differentiates male and female, and hence regards sexually intimate same-sex relations negatively, as sinful. (2) Jesus extends compassion and mercy to all, including those mired in sexual sin, and calls people to holiness. (3) For Paul, the theology of Genesis 1–2 lies at the heart of his negative view of same-sex relations. (4) Biblical sexual ethics has suffered hard times in a culture that insists on writing its own moral script. (5) The biblical teachings on homosexuality are morally transcultural, applicable to all cultures throughout time. (6) With respect to gays and lesbians, the church is called to respond with both compassion and judgment. For example, homosexual people can be members of the Christian church, but participation in same-sex erotic activity is sinful. (7) What matters most is our identity in Christ. Sexual identity is important, albeit of secondary concern. (8) Three matters are of primary importance in our day: to uphold the authority of scripture; to listen to voices from outside western culture; and to be proactive in the pastoral care of people across the entire range of sexual morality.

In the opinion of this reviewer, the importance of Swartley's book is twofold: First, his hermeneutical approach to biblical texts on homosexuality has integrity, and is thus a compelling model for the church today. Those who may want to challenge Swartley's conclusions will have to debate his hermeneutical approach and will have to appeal to some other authority than the scriptures. Second, his presentation of trends in modern western culture signals a necessary and vital aspect of the background considerations in the church's current struggle with the issue of homosexuality.

Swartley has made a significant contribution to the church's discussion of homosexuality. Here is a study that can provide positive steps toward a resolution to the debate. Yet this reviewer would echo the author's challenge: "Let us not neglect the church's call to mission by haggling endlessly over this intractable issue of homosexuality"(47). Might this book serve to put some arguments to rest?

About the reviewer

Helmut Harder is emeritus professor of theology at Canadian Mennonite University, Winnipeg, Manitoba.