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Two Views of Mortality Is Death an Enemy or a Friend?

by J. Todd Billings

Sometimes death strikes down the living abruptly through a heart attack, a suicide, a car accident, a drowning. Loved ones can be left feeling stranded, breathless, and unprepared. In contrast, many forms of cancer operate in slow motion. Dying is protracted. Even if the process takes only weeks, patients and their loved ones observe and anticipate each step along the way. My own cancer hollows the inside of my bones, so that they become “like Swiss cheese,” one doctor quipped with a slight smile. Vital organs become compromised, failing one by one. If this process of deterioration does not stop the heart and breathing, the side effects of the chemotherapy and ongoing treatment will do the job soon enough. Although I could be hit by a car tomorrow, terminal cancer patients like me tend to assume that we can foresee our upcoming demise, like the witches in Hamlet who prophesy his fate. We just don’t know *when* it will come. But when the cancer comes back to carry me down the road of death, the doctors will do what they can to fight this injury, this violation, this offense.

This way of talking about cancer simply intensifies the views I absorbed about death as a young person growing up in a Christian community. Death was a violation, a horror. It was supposed to happen only to a very old person. And even then death was an indignity, a foe. As a Christian, I reminded myself, the apostle Paul was on my side, referring to death as “the last enemy to be destroyed” (1 Cor. 15:26)—although that obviously had not happened yet. As I learned more about the Bible, I found more evidence to bolster my case that death was

fundamentally unnatural: the garden of Eden, framed in Genesis as a place where God dwells, appears to be free from the sting of human death. Indeed, Eden, with the tree of life and guarded by the cherubim, is a type of garden-temple (later reflected in the tree-shaped menorah and cherubim symbols in Israel’s temple). Furthermore, in the Holiness Code of the Old Testament (Lev. 17–26), those who touched a corpse were considered ritually unclean and could not enter the temple until they underwent purification. In the New Testament, the apostle Paul claims that “just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, . . . death spread to all because all have sinned” (Rom. 5:12). Death occurred as a consequence of sin, so it obviously was not a good thing. In most of the Christian books that I read after my cancer diagnosis, death was portrayed as an enemy, a punishment, a departure from God’s intention. And I found this convincing, since I, for one, didn’t want to die.

And yet gradually I discovered a different Christian story about death as well. I discovered it not only as I read Scripture and books of theology, but also as I went to funerals and as I’ve come to know those who have lived many years and feel ready to embrace death. They

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have a sense of completion, like Job, who died “old and full of days” (Job 42:17). Some of these see dying as a challenge, the last lap in a race. Others embrace dying as a welcome release from wearisome burdens. For both groups, it is quite possible to live too long—to insist upon breath at all costs when the body is caving in on itself. Little by little, they have taught me that if our present earthly life were to simply go on forever, it would be a curse. In Genesis, Adam and Eve are banished from the garden after their cardinal disobedience, with a particular consequence: the man “must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever” (Gen. 3:22 NIV).

Over dinner one day, my wife, Rachel (an Old Testament scholar), suggested that this banishment from the tree of life and immortality could be a form of divine mercy. Perhaps such banishment has its own grace built within it. How? Because for sinful humans to live forever would be a terrible burden, not a gift. J. R. R. Tolkien, referring to characters in his book *The Silmarillion*, wrote that “the doom of the Elves is to be immortal.” They are gifted, yet also caught in a cycle: “to love the beauty of the world, to bring it to full flower with their gifts of delicacy and perfection, to last while it lasts, never leaving it even when ‘slain,’ but returning.” In contrast, humans are freed from bondage to the “circles of the world” through mortality. Human mortality is both a source of “grief” and “an envy to the immortal Elves.”¹ In Christian terms, to live as a fallen creature without a terminus could, in fact, be a banishment to Sheol, a place of darkness cut off from the graces of creaturely limits.

In my book *Rejoicing in Lament*, I championed the view of death as an enemy as I reflected on my own experience as someone diagnosed with incurable cancer. But as I discussed the book with a group of men and women in their eighties and nineties at a retirement center, I began to wonder whether I had missed something.

This group of forty had met weekly in smaller groups for a couple of months to read each chapter aloud and share their thoughts with one another. On the evening of our discussion, I addressed questions that the groups had written down. One question arose again and again, in various forms: Why did I speak about death as an enemy, when many of them were *looking forward* to death? In fact, wasn't death a reward? They understood why death was an adversary for their kids or grandkids. Moreover, they didn't want me to die, especially since I have young children. But for them? Their bodies were wearing out, deteriorating, falling apart. Their biggest fear was that they would live too long, debilitated by decay but kept afloat by medical technology. Most of their peers, their friends, had already died. Death would come as a welcome, even overdue, friend.

So which view is correct: death as an enemy, or death as a relief, a mercy? This has been a friendly debate between Rachel and me over the dinner table since the time that we started dating, and it has continued into our married days: Is death portrayed as “natural” in Scripture, or is it fundamentally “unnatural,” deeply contrary to God's intention for creation? Is death always a foe, or is it sometimes a friend? Our discussion gets very complicated very quickly. Usually it ends with rolling eyes and some laughter.

We can't fully assess these views from the outside—as if death didn't apply to us—but only as mortals. Death lies before all of us, out of our immediate reach. We can speculate, but we cannot actually *know* whether it will be feared or welcomed in our final moments. In the meantime, we live expecting our death to be either “friend” or “foe,” and the process of dying to be one of edification or of injury.

Which view is truly authentic for frail human beings? Which view is faithful to the testimony of Scripture? I've come to think that a provisional answer to these questions may be “both.” Jesus, the pioneer of our faith, takes on death as a challenge, an opportunity for service and witness; yet he also enters into the depths of Sheol, wounded and abandoned, as he weeps in Gethsemane and dies on a cross outside the temple and outside Jerusalem's walls. Somehow, both views about death are embodied and culminate in Jesus Christ. And I sense that both views will apply to those who find life in Christ as well.

Death as Pedagogy: Walter and Irenaeus

“What did she die of?” That was my boyhood question to adults when they mentioned they were going to a funeral. The usual response was spoken quietly but firmly to this and any follow-up questions: “She died of old age.” By the time I reached adolescent contrariety, I would protest, “Old age is not a disease! You can't die of old age!” I started to press for specifics. “How did she die? What was her illness?” But after hearing one speculation after another about why a ninety-five-year-old patient's heart stopped beating, I ended up thinking to myself, “She died of old age.” A natural end, not a puzzle to be solved. Death in old age is natural, with blessings of its own. This end seems a bit like that of Abraham, who “breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years” (Gen. 25:8).

Walter, a friend from church, died of old age. Old age was not his disease, of course, but his life arc was ending—an arc of over ninety years, from birth to childhood to adolescence to marriage, parenting, and eventually grandparenting. He had skin in the game in each season of that arc. Even dying was something he did with a certain confidence, as if it were a calling.

I could quickly identify Walter in any crowd—whether he was at church, in a coffee shop, or slowly striding down the sidewalk near his retirement home. He walked with a shiny silver cane and a slight hunch, bringing him to just over five feet in height. His eyeglasses were supposedly “transitional”—changing from clear to dark, adjusting to the indoor or the outdoor light—but they always seemed to be as black as night. Yet Walter never hid behind them. He usually sported a light-colored jacket, a white shirt, slacks, and a wide, black tie. His attire lent a dignity to Walter that was reinforced by his dramatic, expressive voice, which sounded like that of an NPR announcer. Wherever I met him, he would greet me by name, give a firm handshake, and introduce himself to anyone else in the vicinity, whether he could see them clearly or not. When asked how he was, he would always speak about some blessing of the day and a grandchild providing cheer, as if his voice were singing a buoyant song. Then, in a low voice, he would report that he was saddened by his wife Edith’s progressing dementia. But he would rarely linger in his melancholy.

Walter would ask me about teaching, about the seminary where I work, about the ministry of young pastors today. Usually these questions were congenial, but sometimes I felt a sting. This man more than twice my age would find his way into any and every Sunday school class I taught, and he seemed to enjoy challenging my theological ideas in stark terms. Yet as I got to know Walter, I sensed that he offered these challenges affectionately. He tutored at-risk middle schoolers until the week before he died, and he mentored any seminary interns who were willing to meet with him. Walter had retired from his pastoral work decades before. He was going to die soon, and he knew it; he spoke of it in casual conversation. He didn’t speak of it with dread, but with an inevitability that he refused to fight. Until death took him, he was going to get out in the sun, care for his wife, love his grandchildren, mentor middle schoolers and seminary students, and occasionally put a burr under the saddle of young professors. He enjoyed all of those things.

By contrast, when I spent time with Edward, an older family friend, I would hear his complaints—anger at how people had treated him and about how foolish and corrupt teachers, leaders, and young people are today. Edward occasionally spoke about how he had “shown” those who thought he was just a parochial pastor’s kid. His own dad was long dead, and those whom he was “showing” were either dead or out of contact with him. Edward’s bitter drama continued only for him; the audience and the other actors had already left the theater. Walter, on the other hand, seemed to radiate a sense of gratitude; he was “full of years,” like Abraham, and blessed by God. He felt the ache and burn of daily pain, he had lost much of his vision, and he was becoming less

and less mobile. He helped feed, bathe, and care for the love of his life, Edith, who no longer recognized him most days. But he didn’t really expect or want to be young anymore. He would die soon, and he seemed to embrace that arc. And his response was gratitude.

Anglican theologian Ephraim Radner points out that it is increasingly difficult for us to embrace each stage of our life as a gift, as a testimony to God’s faithfulness. “One reason that adults [today] cannot stick with things—marriages, their children, their jobs, the generations of their flesh and community, their ecclesial commitments—is because we have failed to learn the patience that comes with recognizing our lives as given, in an order, in time, in their places.”² Perhaps that’s why a friend was both grieving and radiant after Walter’s funeral. “It’s sad, but it is also so encouraging,” she said through her tears. As little clumps of dust given the breath of life, we have the concrete, creaturely task of receiving the joys and griefs that we are given, loving our neighbor in our home and down the street and living in a way that leads not to resentment but to praise. When I embrace earthly mortality throughout life rather than living as if I had no limits, no terminus, I can “engage these realities of my life as a *creature* whose experiences turn me toward my creatureliness in God’s hands.”³

The second-century bishop Irenaeus painted a portrait of Jesus, and secondarily of Adam, that fits in significant ways with this embrace of the creaturely stages of life. For Irenaeus, the embodied arc of growth, adulthood, and dying is a creaturely good. This was a crucial claim for the early church leader, for many in his day followed the teaching of Gnostics who insisted that the vulnerability of flesh being born, maturing, and decaying was an embarrassing scandal. The Gnostics declared that God must be distanced from that whole carnal process. The Gnostic God would never take on mortal flesh in an incarnation. Irenaeus, by contrast, celebrated the bodily, creaturely life as good, in all its stages of growth and decline. Indeed, he even spoke about Jesus as experiencing old age. Jesus “was an old man for old men, that He might be a perfect Master for all, not merely as respects the setting forth of the truth, but also as regards age.”⁴ Although Irenaeus seems to have given Jesus a couple of more decades than the historical record can countenance, his point about the embodied, creaturely life is salient. In childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and even old age, the human person lives a life that the Lord calls “good.” Walter would have agreed. He embraced life with limits—even the sharp-edged limit of dying and death.

As unnerving as it sounds to our culture, so vigilant to stave off death at all costs, Irenaeus claimed that dying itself can be part of a divine pedagogy for coming to know the mercy of the Lord. Irenaeus came to this

conclusion while commenting on the story of creation. Adam and Eve were created as good and yet not fully refined and perfected creatures. They were inexperienced infants, not fully mature adults. This was not a mistake on God's part but an act of mercy. A mother could try to feed an infant a three-course meal prepared for a hungry teenager, but that would not be appropriate for the infant. In the same way, "it was possible for God Himself to have made man perfect from the first, but man could not receive this [perfection], being as yet an infant."⁵ God does not force-feed his children but nurtures them on the path of growth like a good parent. Part of God's intention for creaturely growth is that one comes to love family and community, food and festivity, work and play—and yet, as a mortal, learns to let go of all those things for God's sake.

Thus, for Irenaeus, dying presents us with an opportunity, a choice: either trust in God as the source of life, or try to have life on our own terms (similar to Adam and Eve's sin in the garden). The act of dying becomes an opportunity for growth, a lesson taught by the divine parent. Embracing the mortal course of our lives is a step in our maturation as creatures who trust in the living God. Walter's daily care for Edith, even as she seemed to become less like herself each day, was tender. Walter's mentoring of at-risk children filled him with passion. And yet even these good deeds would need to slip out of his fingers. God was asking Walter to give up his life of service as the arc of his mortality took its course, coming to rest only in the One who is life's source.

As Irenaeus would see it, Walter was not walking a self-congratulatory road. His path of growth displays the depth of human vulnerability—the utter human need for the incarnate Lord Jesus, who shows his loving strength through weakness. As the risen Christ proclaims to the apostle Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9). Christ shows us that true humanity does not lord it over others but takes "the form of a slave," as Paul's letter to the Philippians testifies:

Being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross. (Phil. 2:8)

As Irenaeus expresses it, God's power is displayed through the Word made flesh, who is "capable of being tempted, dishonoured, crucified, and of suffering death."⁶ Jesus reveals the form of the fully matured human by loving when he is hated, choosing obedience when he is tempted, and enduring suffering and death as a creature before the face of God. Jesus is made completely and perfectly mature only through taking on

mortal suffering and death. As Hebrews declares, "He learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him" (Heb. 5:8–9). Christ took on the pedagogy of dying and death, disclosing true humanity to us. And rising from the dead, he brought true humanity into the glory of heaven.

Irenaeus says that once we have come to taste the sweetness of trusting the Lord on the path of suffering and dying pioneered by Christ, we develop the taste buds and stomachs to feed "from the breast of His flesh, and having, by such a course of milk-nourishment, become accustomed to eat and drink the Word of God, may be able also to contain in ourselves the Bread of immortality, which is the Spirit of the Father."⁷ In Irenaeus's vision, although death entered the world through sin, the biological fact of human mortality has been taken up into the mercy of God, giving us a path to trust in God's Word even at our life's end.

Walter sensed that mercy. More than once he smiled and quipped to me that he didn't want to live forever. He embraced his dying as part of the arc of human life, each day an opportunity to walk on the path of fellowship with God that Christ pioneered and the Spirit upholds. The path of dying did not make him slip into Sheol but prepared him for the temple of the Lord.

As with Walter, sometimes the season of dying seems fitting for one who has lived a life "full of years." Irenaeus's theological reflection helps us to see how dying can be a gift, an instrument of the Triune God. But one might wonder: Did Irenaeus develop his view of dying because he enjoyed a long, privileged life of security?

When we look at his life, that is clearly not the case. Irenaeus was no stranger to suffering, early dying, and unseemly deaths. In his day, Christians were persecuted by the state. Irenaeus recalls that, as a child, he sat and listened to a bishop named Polycarp. He remembers vividly his experiences with this elder Christian. According to a letter Irenaeus wrote as an adult, "I can speak even of the place in which the blessed Polycarp sat and disputed, how he came in and went out, the character of his life, the appearance of his body, the discourses which he made to the people." Polycarp shared his faith as one who had received the message of Jesus from "the eyewitnesses of the Word of Life." Polycarp's presence and words touched Irenaeus deeply: "I listened eagerly even then to these things through the mercy of God which was given me, and made notes of them, not on paper, but in my heart, and ever by the grace of God do I truly ruminant on them." At some point during Irenaeus's growth from a boy into a man, however, Polycarp was bound, burned, and stabbed for his faith.⁸ Irenaeus later became the bishop of Lyon, an

office made vacant by the martyrdom of the previous bishop. Irenaeus undertook this shepherding role amid the especially violent persecution of Christians by the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius in 177. For Irenaeus, the martyrs died not in defeat but as athletes who were undergoing their final training. These martyrs freely chose to identify with Christ in suffering and death. They chose the path of weakness and lowliness as the true path of the Christian life. They chose courageous witness rather than fearful cowering in the face of death.

Although it first struck me as strange, I've come to embrace the Irenaean view of death as deeply illuminating. I've also come to see how it reflects biblical convictions about creaturehood, finitude, and the incarnation of Christ. The elderly residents of the retirement home I spoke at usually embraced a quite Irenaean perspective on their own mortality: they were content to welcome death as the final season of their mortal lives, dying "full of years" in gratitude to the Creator. But even as they embraced the limits of their mortality, they still knew that dying can be an indignity and death can be a terror. When talking about how death cut down their children or grandchildren by disease or violence, splintering a young family into pieces, they spoke of the raw wound of death. The Irenaean view, on its own, can seem incomplete, even offensive. For death can come as an enemy and can sting as an affliction.

Death as Irrational: Augustine and Melissa

If, in the second century, Irenaeus is the theologian of dying as a creaturely good, Augustine of Hippo, in the fourth century, is the theologian of death as an irrational horror. In his early writings Augustine described death as concordant with the natural order of things. "When things pass away and others succeed them," he wrote, "there is a specific beauty in the temporal order, so that those things which die or cease to be what they were, do not defile the measure, form or order of the created universe."⁹ Human beings die as creatures, fitting into the wondrous order that any biologist or ecologist would recognize. Sometimes this is how children's stories approach death as well. As I snuggle beside my son on a couch with a children's book, we encounter the character "Freddie the Leaf." Freddie loves the sunshine and the wind in summer. But when the decay of autumn comes, Freddie learns that it's his job to fall from the tree, enter the ground, and become fertilizer for new growth after the winter cold. Likewise, the book suggests, human creatures die as part of the ordered cycle of life.

Augustine's theology, however, developed and changed from this "cycle of life" approach as he entered into debates with the British-born theologian and teacher Pelagius. These debates sharpened Augustine's convictions about creation, God's grace, and the staggering

implications of human sin. Eventually, Augustine repudiated his earlier view in the strongest possible terms. Death is not a created good, Augustine says, for "God did not create any death for man in his nature, but it was imposed as a just punishment for sin."¹⁰ For Augustine, death is not a step in the divine pedagogy by which humans grow. Death is not good for anyone. It tears apart soul and body, which are conjoined and interwoven in a living being. This is not the last lap in the training of an athlete. Death, in Augustine's view, is a catastrophe, inherently violent and fundamentally unnatural.

Augustine's view reminds me of the memorial service that was held for my friend Melissa. It was a warm Saturday afternoon as the sanctuary filled to overflowing for this mother of two young children. While the service claimed to be a celebration of her "homecoming," the pastor's opening greeting recognized our grief and confusion and anger. We had gathered for a "victory celebration" for Melissa, we were told. Yet we were right to be angry at her death, the pastor told us, for in our anger we acknowledged that something was wrong. We were angry because death is an enemy, an intruder, in this universe. Death was not part of God's original plan. So be angry with Satan, the pastor told us; be angry with sin.

After a couple of songs, Melissa's brother Ryan approached the front of the sanctuary. He spoke of how Melissa had loved to memorize Scripture and to hear the stories of the missionaries their family hosted. Ryan shared how his sister felt called to attend a Christian college and seminary and then to go overseas as a missionary. She married a classmate who shared her missionary calling to live sacrificially in witness and mercy. Over the course of a few years, they had two daughters. Then, after years of preparation and discernment about where they should serve, they moved to Mexico. But without warning, after just two years on the mission field, Melissa became ill and suddenly died. "I never in my wildest dreams imagined that she would get sick and pass so suddenly," Ryan said. Ryan was not naive; he knew the mission field could be dangerous. There could be opposition, persecution, and even imprisonment, such as the apostle Paul faced. But for Ryan and for many of us in the crowded sanctuary, an underlying question animated our shock: How could Melissa's heart just stop beating so abruptly? How could an unexpected disease cause oceans of hope to dry up so quickly? Persecution is one thing; a quick and senseless illness is another. Melissa's life seemed to be gaining momentum, not slowing down. Five minutes in her presence would bring a smile to my face, generating hope for how God would use her in the future. Couldn't God have found someone else to "take home" that day? Whose side is God on, anyway?

In that sanctuary, I heard how Melissa's death would be for God's glory. That seemed both right and terribly problematic. What could it possibly mean that Melissa's death was for God's glory? Job properly testifies that "in [the Lord's] hand is the life of every living thing / and the breath of every human being" (Job 12:10). Every halting breath is a gift, and the Lord of life is necessarily the Lord of death. And yet Job gives this testimony in the midst of debates about suffering with his friends, teetering between thanksgiving and searing lament. Job also opines that the Lord "destroys both the blameless and the wicked. / When disaster brings sudden death, / he mocks at the calamity of the innocent" (Job 9:22–23). Shouldn't we have hoped for something better than this "disaster" bringing "sudden death"? Why did Melissa's death look more like a slip into the pit of Sheol than an ascent on the road to Zion?

For nearly an hour and a half, we both laughed and cried as Melissa's friends and coworkers told stories about her. We stood up between the stories and tried to sing songs of praise. It was hard to sing, but we were right to do so. God is always worthy of praise. Early in the book of Job, after the sudden loss of his children and his wealth, Job declares,

Naked I came from my mother's womb,
and naked I will depart.
The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away;
may the name of the Lord be praised. (Job 1:21 NIV)

But even as I sensed that it was right to praise God, I also wondered if the band could play something other than upbeat, sunny songs. Did these cheery love songs to Jesus recognize our nakedness? Two young girls had just lost their mom. A young husband had lost his wife. All of us had lost a friend; we lost dreams that we didn't know we had for her. But in the service we didn't join the psalmist or Job in lament. We had not, as a community, learned how to sing praise in a minor key.

Years later, Melissa's death still stung. Whether or not I would have used the pastor's words about anger at death, they seemed to disclose something of the genuine horror of the moment at the memorial service. The pastor's comments reflected the German theologian Helmut Thielicke's stark claim that death is "the expression of a catastrophe which runs on a collision course with man's original destination or, in other words, directly *opposite* of his intrinsic nature."¹¹ This is the Augustinian story about death, and it's not surprising that Melissa's funeral evoked this theme as well.

Perhaps, as Irenaeus claims, Melissa's sudden death was part of her—or *our*—education in the glory of God. But Augustine offers us a needed word as well, a crucial reminder that death is both irrational and horrible. We

can't find a reason for a death like this; in fact, according to Augustine, we can't even fully define what the catastrophe of death really is. "But as it is, death is a reality; and so troublesome a reality that it cannot be explained by any verbal formula, nor got rid of by any rational argument."¹² Death broke into Melissa's family, into our friendships, into our unfolding story. It did so as an absence, a sundering, an enigma.

Indeed, for Augustine, death has no rational explanation, and hence it leaves us in silence—in a way that parallels the mystery of sin itself. For instance, in his classic example illustrating the nature of sin in his *Confessions*, Augustine recounts how he stole pears from his neighbors as a boy. Was there a logical justification for his action? No, Augustine says. "We took away an enormous quantity of pears," Augustine recalls, "not to eat them ourselves, but simply to throw them to the pigs." Probing the question a bit more, Augustine says, "Perhaps we ate some of them, but our real pleasure consisted in doing something that was forbidden."¹³ And just as Augustine's theft was fundamentally irrational, so Adam and Eve's sin in the garden was fundamentally irrational and mysterious.

Likewise, Augustine suggests, death stalks creatures simply to tear them apart, not to help fertilize the soil and push the cycle of life into its next beautiful season. "The death of the body was not inflicted on us by the law of our nature, since God did not create any death for man in his nature, but it was imposed as a just punishment for sin."¹⁴ Death is not a created good but a consequence of mistrust, of turning toward the self rather than God, of disobedience to the divine command.

And what good could we make of Melissa's death? A young family torn apart. A mission of mercy and witness upended. A person with a joyful presence, gone from the world. Job's lament seemed to unearth the nonsense of attempting to explain why this should happen. "Your hands fashioned and made me, / and now you turn and destroy me," Job says, both testifying to the Lord's work and questioning the Lord about it from the Pit. "Remember that you fashioned me like clay; / and will you turn me to dust again?" (Job 10:8–9). Melissa may be in a "better place," but that's not where we want her. We want her here. Her girls need her here. Death is a crushing blow to the here and now that we desire. "If he tears down, no one can rebuild; / if he shuts someone in, no one can open up" (Job 12:14). Why this tearing down, O Lord, when her body seemed so strong, with so much life and potential and future? Why would the hands that fashioned Melissa turn her into dust again right now, with a husband and young daughters and a vocation in global mission just underway?

Perhaps these unanswered questions point to our need for a pioneer, a priest who knows our weaknesses, a Savior who has been to Sheol. Precisely because death and many of the sufferings we face are not good in any intrinsic sense, we can have our hearts awakened by the innocent one who “offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission” (Heb. 5:7). Christ offered up prayers, and they were heard; though he died on a cross as one who was apparently cursed, he was actually entering into the holy of holies, the most sacred part of the temple. “He entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption” (Heb. 9:12). Christ did not marry, have children or grandchildren, or enter into old age. He had no earthly inheritance as he faced death. His heart stopped beating and his breath stopped heaving outside of the temple, in Sheol. As he took on this disgraceful, untimely death, he bore the shame of *our own* deaths, which also appear to be outside of the temple, far from the Lord’s promise.

For Augustine, this astonishing mystery is precisely what God takes on in the incarnation and the cross of Christ. Christ does not simply live and then die a natural death. Christ, “the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being” (Heb. 1:3), freely chooses obedience that stoops to the point of death to show God’s love to helpless sinners. “He deigned to be crucified, became obedient even to the death of the cross. He who was about to take away all death, chose the lowest and worst kind of death. ... It was indeed the worst of deaths, but it was chosen by the Lord.”¹⁵ Christ acts as both the priest whose sacrifice is perfect and the pioneer whose journey into Sheol proves the psalmist right in saying,

If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. ...
If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night,”
even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you. (Ps. 139:8, 11–12)

The darkness, of course, is still dark to us. But since Christ embodied the temple in his person—and yet absorbed the black hole of Sheol in his dying and rising—we know the darkness is not all there is.

I wonder, though, whether we sometimes miss this work of Christ by pitching our praise only in major keys rather than in minor ones as well. Christ, the light of the world, died in terrible darkness. In the words of Job, the Lord

has walled up my way so that I cannot pass,
and he has set darkness upon my paths.

He has stripped my glory from me,
and taken the crown from my head. (Job 19:8–9)

I believe the speaker at Melissa’s memorial service was right to say that her death will serve God’s glory, but maybe that glory involves a stripping of earthly glory, a participation in Christ’s dark death. Indeed, Christians are marked by the sign of the cross, a doubly violent horror—both in the crucifixion itself and in the miscarriage of justice that led to it. In Augustine’s view, this leads to a transfiguration of glory as a mark of the Christian. “He was to have that very cross as His sign; that very cross, a trophy, as it were, over the vanquished devil, He was to put on the brow of believers, so that the apostle said, ‘God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ’ [Gal. 6:14].”¹⁶

We mortals do not just need some bodywork to fix the dings and dents caused by sin. We need a love that seeks us out in the Pit, even while we are hostile, while we are enemies of God and his purposes. We need the cross—a sign in the darkness of God’s radiant, friend-making love. In Augustine’s words, “he came into the world as a lover of his enemies,” and “he found absolutely all of us his enemies, he didn’t find anyone a friend. It was for enemies that he shed his blood, but by his blood that he converted his enemies. With his blood he wiped out his enemies’ sins; by wiping out their sins, he made friends out of enemies.”¹⁷

Melissa’s life, and certainly her death, was marked by the sign of the cross. Maybe, just maybe, the darkness of Melissa’s death testifies to the astonishing brightness of Christ’s love, which makes friends with us in our darkness. I can’t figure out how Melissa’s death fits into any human plan for good. I can’t see how it was “for the best,” as we sometimes tell ourselves. But even though I don’t know the reasons why, or how her death could be for God’s glory, I do trust that Melissa belonged to Jesus in life and in death. Because Jesus died in darkness, Melissa’s death in darkness is mysteriously a death in the temple, in Christ as the dwelling place of God, in the one in whom “there is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5). The crucified and risen Lord holds Melissa’s death in his hands; and this same Lord Jesus can use it, if he wishes, as a witness to his own friend-making love.

Which Death? Which Story?

You may be wondering, Which will be the story of my own death? Will it be more like the story of Walter or of Melissa? Will I die “full of years” at the end of a long life? Will my dying be the final stretch in the race of discipleship? Or will my death be a sudden and inscrutable horror to my friends and family?

Mortals can be certain of one thing on this point: we don’t know. Even patients with a terminal diagnosis like

me don't know. Death is always out before us, beyond our reach. As soon as we *could* know which story is ours, it will be too late. "You won't be there when you're dead," in the words of my daughter. Our earthly life will be over. We can talk about what medical interventions we want if we end up in the hospital or hospice, but our heart could unexpectedly stop beating, and it all would come to nothing. When I asked my father about the death of his grandpa at the age of sixty, he said, "Probably a heart attack, but we don't really know. He was just working on the farm, and he died one day." The improved technologies utilized in postmortems today may give us more probable answers about why a sudden death occurs. But they can't prevent the accident or the unforeseen malady that takes away our breath and stills our heart.

Given this uncertainty, it makes sense to pursue growth throughout each stage of life with Irenaeus, but also to recognize with Augustine that death itself is an enigma, a reality always beyond our grasp, a foe that cannot be fully domesticated or befriended. The Lord's work is expansive enough to encompass both the Irenaean and the Augustinian sides of death. In Christ, God has taken on our mortal, creaturely life and pioneered a true humanity that displays mature power through humble obedience. And we also see that in Christ's cross and resurrection, God plunges the darkness of the Pit into his vast universe of light, forgiving the enemy and giving new life to those whose feet are stuck in the miry bog. In all likelihood, our own deaths will not fit exclusively into one theological view of death or the other. They will have a bit of both. Indeed, even in the stories of Walter and Melissa we see fragments of both views held together. Walter lived a long life, "full of years," and his dying was an opportunity for service and witness. Yet he also experienced the irrational horror of death as dementia pulled his wife, Edith, more and more away from him, away from their shared past, away from the present moment. "Old age can be very frightening," a character in a P. D. James novel confesses, revealing that he is losing his memory. "My son died young, and at the time, it seemed to be the most terrible thing that could happen to anyone in the world—to him, as well as to me. But perhaps he was one of the fortunate ones."¹⁸ This may be part of Walter's story with Edith as well.

Melissa's death was a horror, and many at her funeral spoke of her unlived years and what could or should have been for her and her young family. Yet we also heard about how, weeks before her unexpected death, she had completed a writing project to share her faith with her daughters. Perhaps even as a young mother she had started to embrace her mortal limits and come to terms with her eventual death. Whether we face death at fifteen or fifty or ninety, we are likely to have both

Irenaean and Augustinian elements woven into our dying.

In what ways can these two types and theologies of death be reconciled? As in the cases of Walter and Melissa, living and dying involve both joy and sorrow. And both Irenaeus and Augustine testify to the God of creation, who takes on death and its consequences in the dying and rising of Jesus Christ. Yet, held together, the two types of dying can seem like oil and water—like a strange recipe in which the two main ingredients just won't mix. Yes, our living and dying will probably reflect aspects from both Walter's and Melissa's stories, both Irenaeus's and Augustine's visions. But the combination won't make for a bland soup. No, the contrasts will remain: sweet and sour together, soft and sharp. For us and our loved ones, our own dying will likely be both an offense and a gift, an affliction and a consolation, a catastrophe and a strange work of providence.

Thus, to be attentive to the tastes and smells of God's gifts in living and dying, we need to embrace two apparently contrary realities. On the one hand, dying is a dimension of the gift of life, an opportunity for growth, for witness, for service. The dying should receive not just our sympathy and our prayers for healing but also our prayers for courage as they witness and serve, even as they depend on others. The dying are still athletes running the race. God works in his dying creatures, often showing his strength in and through creaturely weakness. Whether we are young or old, the reality of our mortality can goad us to cultivate faith, hope, and love; reminders of our mortality can lead us to seize the day for kindness, for faithfulness to family and friends, for courage in the face of adversity. If we deny and push away our mortality, we miss the gifts that our small and fragile creaturely status gives us, the opportunities that knowledge of our dying opens up for us in daily life.

On the other hand, we also need to embrace the icy truth that death itself is an enigma and a wound. We become slaves to fear when we refuse to speak the word "death" and give only euphemisms in its place: "passing on," "promoted to heaven," moved to "a better place." Yes, these euphemisms testify to something true, but they also treat an open wound like a trophy. The dead are now corpses, deceased, taken from us—for no reason that we can understand. Without acknowledging this Augustinian view of death's inherent violence, we ignore the ways in which the death of a loved one leaves us with branches withered on the vine.

When we honestly name the wounds, the withered branches, the ways in which we are undone, we vaccinate ourselves against the overpowering fear of death. We give death its space, let its wounds breathe without fabricating explanations about how it makes

sense or works for the best. Otherwise, the fear of death actually enters our bloodstream. With the Preacher in Ecclesiastes, we admit that “a living dog is better than a dead lion,” that the dead will “never again . . . have any share in all that happens under the sun.” Accepting this can help us to experience the creaturely joy and wonder of the next verse: “Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart” (Eccles. 9:4, 6–7).

Admit it: we cannot master death or understand its ways. But this Augustinian surrender can be a liberating victory. And this Augustinian insight can point, like the death of Melissa, to the most courageous and liberating death in the cosmos: the death of the one through whom all things were made, the death of Jesus in darkness, the one who is “crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone” (Heb. 2:9).

This Augustinian perspective on the fundamentally irrational character of death in darkness can point us to the absolute necessity of a mediator, a redeemer who tasted death on our behalf. If we don’t embrace this deeply, we can spend a great deal of anxious energy blaming one person or institution or another, as if they themselves thought up the idea of death. We may perform acrobatic feats of logic to get God off the hook for horrific deaths, to answer those “why” questions for Melissa and so many others. Ironically, such preoccupations tend to inject the fear of death into our lives, distracting us from the larger reality that we are mortal and that God’s promise does not nullify our mortality. We don’t have answers to all of our “why” questions, but the world is still full of wonder and beauty, and God’s promise testifies that death will not have the final word.

Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding.
Who determined its measurements—surely you know!
Or who stretched the line upon it?
On what were its bases sunk,

or who laid its cornerstone
when the morning stars sang together
and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?
(Job 38:4–7)

As strange as it seems to say this, the Lord’s reply to Job out of the whirlwind is a liberating one: it does not answer Job’s questions or cure his fears, but nevertheless enables him to live again—to raise children, to run a farm, to live for many more years and eventually see “his children, and his children’s children” (Job 42:16). He does so as one who knew the Pit and the riddle of death, and knew that the riddle could not be solved. He does so as a creature with wounds and scars, but he also, as chapters 38 and 39 go on to emphasize, continues on as a mortal who knows the joy and wonder of the world of bears and lions and ravens and mountain goats and ostriches and eagles that the Lord governs in ways Job did not previously understand. Job trusts in the Lord, the Creator, whose ways he cannot fathom. And, like Abraham, like Walter, he dies not controlled by fear but, as the concluding verse of the book testifies, “old and full of days” (42:17).

Whether our own deaths look more like Walter’s or Melissa’s, we can trust that even in our dying and our death we’ve not slipped out of the hands of the Creator and Redeemer, the crucified and risen Lord, who entered into the darkness on our behalf. The darkness is still dark, but it’s not given the final word. For in the words of Paul, this Lord, Jesus Christ who was crucified, is “the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords. It is he alone who has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light” (1 Tim. 6:15–16).

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¹ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012), xiv–xv.

² Ephraim Radner, *A Time to Keep: Theology, Mortality, and the Shape of a Human Life* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2017), 128.

³ Radner, *Time to Keep*, 128.

⁴ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 2.22.4, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. and trans. A. Roberts J. Donaldson and A.C. Coxe (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956) 1:391.

⁵ John C. Cavadini, “Two Ancient Christian Views on Suffering and Death,” in *Christian Dying: Witnesses from the Tradition*, ed. George Kalantzis and Matthew Levering (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018), 99. I am indebted to Cavadini for this metaphor, as well as for his illuminating comparison of Irenaeus and Augustine on death, which informs my own account.

⁶ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.19.3, quoted in Kalantzis and Levering, *Christian Dying*, 102.

⁷ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.38.1, quoted in Kalantzis and Levering, *Christian Dying*, 100.

⁸ According to *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Buffalo, 1887, 1:39–44).

⁹ Augustine, *Augustine: Early Writings*, ed. and trans. J.H.S. Burleigh (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1953), 58.

¹⁰ Augustine, *City of God* 13.15, trans. Henry Bettenson (New York: Penguin, 2004), 524.

¹¹ Helmut Thielicke, *Death and Life* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970), 105, emphasis added.

¹² Augustine, *City of God* 13.11 (trans. Bettenson, 520).

¹³ Augustine, *Confessions* 2.4, trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1961), 47.

¹⁴ Augustine, *City of God* 13:15 (trans. Bettenson), 524.

¹⁵ Augustine, *Homilies on the Gospel of St. John* 36.4, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. John Gibb and James Innex (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 7:209.

¹⁶ Augustine, *Homilies on the Gospel of St. John* 36.4, in *The Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, 7:209.

¹⁷ Augustine, Sermon 317, quoted in Arthur A. Just, Jr., *Luke*, in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament 3* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 361.

¹⁸ P.D. James, *A Certain Justice* (New York: Knopf, 1997), 247–48.

Is Authentic Christian Community Even Possible?

By Merwyn Johnson

Western Christianity faces a dire situation today. The modern, secular World, created largely by the Christian West, has “come of age,”¹ *i.e.*, grown up enough to take responsibility for itself. Many people confidently believe they can meet their own emotional, physical, and spiritual needs very well without divine assistance. For such a World, the Church is unnecessary at best, useless at worst, and generally disposable as a matter of consumer choice. From where, then, does authentic Christian community come, what holds it together, and what keeps it going?

In truth, God creates the Christian community. So, the answer to these questions must lie with God. This essay makes three points: 1. Authentic Christian community starts with Jesus Christ; 2. The usual quick-fixes will not reverse an increasing separation of American culture from Christianity; 3. Christ in fact brings otherwise self-isolated, unique individuals together.

1. Authentic Christian Community Starts with Jesus Christ

Faced with a “world come of age” in the extreme turbulence of Nazi Germany, 1933–1945, Dietrich Bonhoeffer came to a simple insight: Jesus Christ is the reality of *God with us* (Matthew 1:23). Living together within this reality, Bonhoeffer says, all Christians take their cues *from Christ, through Christ, and in Christ*.²

a. From Christ

Life with God comes *from Jesus Christ*, the Word of God incarnate. The Word of God pronounces us guilty and righteous before God even when we do not feel guilty or righteous. God puts this Word of life—truth and salvation—into the mouths of others. “Therefore,” says Bonhoeffer,

Christians need other Christians who speak God’s Word to them. ... They need them solely for the sake of Jesus Christ. The Christ in their own hearts is weaker

than the Christ in the word of other Christians. Their own hearts are uncertain; those of their brothers and sisters are sure.³

“The Christ in [our] own hearts” cannot and does not stand alone. The Christ in us is rooted in the reality of Jesus Christ as his own person. “The Christ in the word of other Christians” is part of the priesthood of all believers that conveys Christ to us tangibly. Bonhoeffer is here blending *Christ in us* with the larger term, *us in Christ*.

b. Through Christ

Christians come to one another only *through Jesus Christ*. Reconciling us with God, Christ also reconciles us to one another. That binds us to forgiving those whom he has forgiven, loving those whom he loves, serving those whom he serves, and living with those who live with him. Christ thus mediates our relationships with others.

Bonhoeffer calls the ideal of unmediated relationships a dream wish. Unmediated relationships present an ideal or goal for us to pursue person-to-person and with all the love, intimacy, and trust we can muster. Such direct relationships, however, are demanding without relief; finding and keeping them at all costs often becomes all-consuming, a hothouse that takes on a life of its own. If we can attain these relationships on our own, God is unnecessary. For this reason, says Bonhoeffer, “God’s grace quickly frustrates all such dreams.”⁴ Authentic Christian community is grounded in God’s forgiving love, defined and mediated by Jesus Christ, and energized by the Spirit (1 John 4).

c. In Christ

Our life together takes place *in Christ*. Jesus Christ defines the Church by his life, death, and resurrection. The Church and Christians do not thus embody Christ, as if we could incarnate either Christ’s divinity or his perfect humanity. Christ lives in us as part of what it means for us to live more fully in Christ. Fellowship *in*

Christ is the aim of salvation. *In Christ* we fellowship with GOD up to and including eternal life. *In Christ* we fellowship with all others who are in Christ, past, present, and future. *In Christ* we participate in a mystical community that is greater than the sum of its parts.

In worship, the life blood of Christian community, Christ stands at the center of the Church. Christ forms, transforms, and re-forms Christians together, wherever the Word is preached and the Sacraments are celebrated—based on Scripture and empowered by the Spirit. Jesus Christ himself stands there before us and speaks his life-giving Word.

Christ also stands at the center of the World. No matter how undeveloped, disfigured, or depraved humans may be, each person brings us face-to-face with the image of God made by God and re-created in Jesus Christ. God thus makes a claim upon our lives with every person we meet, and the way we deal with them one-by-one is the way we deal with Jesus Christ. We cannot know that everyone we meet is saved, but we do know that *God* stands before us and around us at every moment of every day.

2. Unworkable Quick Fixes for Culture vs. Christianity

American culture is *de facto* separating itself from Christianity today. What are we to do as Christians? We seemingly have no ground on which to stand. The easy way out is to take matters into our own hands. Three quick-fixes lie close at hand. None of them is workable in the end.

Quick Fix One

Seeking authenticity without culture supports, one quick-fix might be to dispense with the trappings of organized religion altogether. Why not start with a blank sheet of paper and cultivate a pure, individual, inner spirituality? Then we could dispense with formal worship, organization, rules, doctrine, maybe even one-sided sources of revelation like the Bible. Without the formalities of religion, we could also get rid of the church politics, doctrinal disputes, denominations, and sectarian traditions that divide us from one another. Would it not be great to mingle only with pure, unvarnished truth and authentically spiritual individuals?

The trouble is, we cannot start from scratch. We are dealing with real people, including ourselves, as 21st century American Christians. Starting elsewhere invites false hopes, mistakes, and abuses in the name of what is new and free. “New” and “free,” however, do not guarantee authenticity.

Further, do we really want to separate ourselves from our forebears in the faith? Surely they were not totally

ignorant, misled, corrupt, or unfaithful. Even in their ambiguities and mistakes, they bear witness to Jesus Christ, and for that we can be thankful (Phil. 1:15–18). In the name of authentic Christian community it makes no sense to isolate ourselves from the “great cloud of witnesses” (Hebrews 12:1), try to be Christian alone, or otherwise separate ourselves from God.

Quick Fix Two

Another quick-fix might be to re-establish ourselves as useful instruments to the world around us, restoring our relevance and mission. Western culture already adapts the Gospel for its own purposes of meeting human needs as in modern psychology, medicine, technology, and the marketplace. So, why not redouble our efforts to be useful, like a wrench whose instrumental purpose lies in turning nuts and bolts? Then we can go on making “useful” contributions to people’s lives and infusing culture with our religious vision.

The trouble is, as the World also knows, making the Gospel or the Church “useful” merely turns the Gospel into a commodity and secularizes the Church. Is that not already a problem for the Church?

Furthermore, instruments used to fix things make no real claims upon us and may be self-justifying. On their face they appear clean, pure, and self-contained. A wrench is simple and clear in its purpose, to turn nuts and bolts. We may argue over how the wrench is designed and used, but not over its inherent usefulness. To be a wrench in the hands of God seems to give us a free pass, a justification of ourselves as we are, a declaration of some kind of innate goodness.

The wrench, of course, is not immune to either defects or misuse. More importantly, the Christian Church cannot justify itself in terms of its inherent usefulness to God any more than through good works. Authenticity for the Christian Church comes from connecting to its source, to God alone. *In Christ* God sets the Church in motion, makes it unique and precious, and sustains it beyond all usefulness.

Quick Fix Three

A third quick-fix could come from casting our nets more widely to include an endless diversity of different people in the Christian community. With maximum inclusiveness, maybe we can grow the Church to the far reaches of creation itself. Isn’t everything and everyone good just as God made them? Would not such openness re-establish our place in the World?

The trouble is, radical diversity—different individuals utterly unique in their person, story, and present circumstances—in fact presses the very questions of authentic Christian community with which we are

wrestling. What makes our differences an asset instead of a liability? How can we communicate and collaborate across our differences? What draws us together? What holds us together?

The Church cannot be concerned only for itself, its own kind, the “saved.” Nor can we limit the “saved” to our view of who is in and who is out, nor confine the people of God to those whom we think God loves or serves. Diversity for its own sake, however, does not guarantee authenticity. The novelty of major differences wears off quickly unless our relationships are mediated through Christ and we are centered in something other than ourselves.

Furthermore, a community cannot long survive merely on a loving disposition, unspecified openness, or tolerance secured by the lowest common denominator. Real diversity entails an equal concern for what unites us. The only solid basis for an authentic Christian community lies with the God Who—in Christ—brings and holds together very different, unique individuals.

3. Christ Brings Self-isolated, Unique Individuals Together

The alternative to these quick-fixes for Bonhoeffer is Jesus Christ “existing as community.”⁵ The words of the Gospel remind us constantly that we are *from Christ, through Christ, and in Christ*. We belong to God by God’s own action, *from Christ*. Our relationships to God, the World, and all others are mediated *through Christ*. Being *in Christ* together encompasses all our relationships with others and the World around us. *From Christ, through Christ, and in Christ* we become something we could never be, left to our own devices. The Church, on the other hand, participates fully *in Christ*, and *through his uniqueness* overcomes the inherent isolation of diverse individuals.

Above all, focusing on Christ gives us an openness to fellow Christians that doesn’t rely on either self-limiting sameness or unlimited diversity. Only *in Christ* can we recognize the authenticity of one another’s Christian experience of God. Only *in and through Christ* can we bridge unique, individual differences rendered infinitely diverse.

The following list is only a beginning for what goes into our individual, unique life experiences with God:

¹ Bonhoeffer’s phrase, from his time in prison, 1943ff. See his letters of 8 June and 16 July 1944, plus his “Outline for a Book,” in *Letters and Papers from Prison: Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, Vol. 8, ed. John W. de Gruchy, trans. Isabel Best, Lisa Dahill, Reinhard Krauss, and Nancy Lukens (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009), 424–432, 473–482, 499–504.

² Bonhoeffer, *Together/Prayerbook of the Bible: Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, Volume 5, ed. Geffrey B. Kelly, trans. Daniel

- age, • gender, • background,
- life situation, • time in history, • ethnicity,
- culture, • socio-economic standing,
- education, • expectations, • politics,
- self-understanding, and more.

On our own, we struggle to communicate across such differences. With authenticity on the line, how, indeed, can we be a Christian community?

Tolerance and mutual acceptance have their breaking points, so merely striving for these ideas in our common life is not enough. Christian community operates at another whole level when we value, celebrate, carefully listen to, and learn from another person’s life experiences *in Christ*. Notice the ascending engagement in that sentence. We venture there only when each person we meet presents us with God’s claim upon us, as the image of God restored—*from Christ, through Christ, and in Christ*. Authentic Christian community comes from sharing the depth and range of one another’s unique life experiences with God, *in Christ*.

The face of Christ is not limited to members of the Christian community. We will look for Christ beyond the Church as well. By grace alone God leads us, sinners that we are, to take seriously the image of God on the face of every human we meet. We do not thus baptize people outside the Church as anonymous Christians. We do, however, seek their well-being, peace, and justice as fellow humans for whom Christ died and rose again. Christ mediates these relationships as well, and the Gospel itself leads us to them. *In Christ*, then, we also share authentic community with those outside the Church.

Is authentic Christian community even possible today? I believe it is. The Christian community—including my own church and others—has indeed found authenticity in the past. I also believe such authenticity will be found going forward, because *in Christ* God’s grace to us is *new every morning* (Lam. 3:23).

This essay is from *Bedrock for a Church on the Move* (2019). Used with permission from In Christ Supporting Ministries.

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Bloesch and James Burtness (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1996), Chapter 1, “Community,” 27–47.

³ *Life Together*, 32.

⁴ *Life Together*, 35.

⁵ *Act and Being: Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, Vol. 2, ed. Wayne Whitson Floyd, Jr., trans. H. Martin Rumscheidt (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1996), 112.

The Feast of Many Memories

On the Thirtieth Year Anniversary of John Leith's *From Generation to Generation*

By Richard A. Ray

If you keep an eye on the market for home improvement supplies, you are seeing some healthy indications. Even the sales of tools are up. A do-it-yourself, fix-it-up mood has caught the attention of many homeowners.

A similar optimism has energized church leaders. Webinars, Zoom share times, and continuing education conferences provide an endless supply of over-the-counter remedies for whatever you need for pepping up your church. New member slow down, drooping mid-summer outings, and slides on the stewardship graph—there is a promising remedy for all of these. Sub-specialists are ready, and the amazing thing is how little time they need to get you up and running.

If business corporations can hold training sessions, explore potential mergers, restructure locations, and dissolve nonproductive units, well, why not churches? It might sound like common sense. Unfortunately, when it comes to churches, history offers some different lessons. Even the empirical evidence, and, after all, what could be more important to us than that, does not provide encouraging results. And the question of the lasting effects could be another matter altogether.

More than thirty years ago John Leith observed these changes in the management of churches, and it began to appear to him that many of us had begun to lose our way. He brought these observations to the broader public at lectures given at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1989 and in a book entitled *From Generation to Generation: The Renewal of the Church According to Its own Theology and Practice* the following year. His view could be captured in a few words. While sociological studies, new organizational remedies etc. have their use, the more basic issue, the termites in the floorboards, is more fundamental. Our problem, as he had uncovered it, was theological and spiritual. Could the very thing that we had always taken for granted and in which had confidence have become our Achilles heel?

There could be more than we might imagine involved in this. Years ago, when my wife and I were standing outside of the ruins of the cathedral in St. Andrews, a long black car pulled up. A couple hopped out. They introduced themselves and asked why we were there. I offered the explanation that I was studying theology at the University. The man responded with the kindly question that I must have prepared for doing this at

Georgia Tech. After all the two different fields must have sounded reasonably alike to him.

Years later, in what seems now to have been another life, I was meeting with book dealers in New York. We were discussing the prospective title for a soon to be published volume. I suggested a title that included the word “theology,” after all that was what the book was about. The response from the publishing authorities was quite direct. “Not a title like that. After all, you want someone to buy it, don’t you?”

Leith’s diagnosis goes to the heart of the matter. And our basic issue is that we hardly know what the theological heart is any longer. How can we recover vital and compelling ways to move the basic doctrines of the Christian faith down from one generation to another if they seem to be overly abstract and without power to us? A rediscovery and recovery process, starting with the church itself, might be needed.

One of the distinctive things in his book is the apparent simplicity in his remedy. “Apparent,” however, could be a misleading word for us. As Leith develops his argument, he declares that the remedy lies in preaching, teaching, and pastoral care. However, the yellow caution light is blinking for us. It is these time-honored practices but with a difference. And we had better not mistake what could be a shark for the sea bass that we had loved to catch. While the remedy consists in a recovery of that which we had thought we had been engaged in doing all along, there is a good deal more. Leith says that the most productive and most compelling models for these three responsibilities can be found in the history of the church itself. And this could spell trouble. We simply may not know how to go about finding them.

These models could be deeply imbedded in what we had thought that we had known about the past, and the chances are that they are hidden in the very matters that we had skipped over lightly. Even our approaches to knowledge itself could have disguised them. There is a difference in how we go about learning things. And this is where you and I, it seems to me, can learn to lift up the stones, look into the briar patches, and recover the vastly significant treasures from the traditions that could make theology the most enriching thing we have ever encountered. What we discover in these old histories might astonish us and lead us to change the ways in

which we go about preaching, teaching, and pastoral care. And, surprisingly, they might offer new possibilities for our lay leaders as well.

Here is a little narrative that, while it has little to do with theology in the overt sense, might hold some promise for us. A man named Elias Kulukundis was born in London and soon moved with his parents to the United States. All four of his grandparents, as well as others in his family, had lived on the very small island of Kasos in the Aegean Sea. His family having settled in Rye, New York, he graduated from Philips Exeter and Harvard. So, he was all set to become a modern secular man. However, at the

age of 27 he decided to visit, having never been there, his ancestral home on Kasos. His discovery of the inner meanings of the traditions in his past led him to write the book that was published in 1967, *The Feast of Memory* (New York: Holt, Reinhart, and Winston). And perhaps that journey toward which John Leith would encourage us would become a feast of many theological memories for you and me.

The Reverend Richard A. Ray, Ph.D. (St. Andrews University), is chairman of the Board of the Presbyterian Heritage Center, Montreat, North Carolina.

Conference Speakers

John Azumah is a Presbyterian pastor, preacher, evangelist, professor of theology at the University of Ghana, and author of many books and articles. After serving from 2011 to 2019 as Professor of World Christianity & Islam at Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia, he is now the executive director of The Sanneh Institute, Ghana, and serves as visiting professor at Yale Divinity School and presidential visiting fellow at Yale University.

Richard Gibbons is senior pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Greenville, South Carolina. A native of Scotland and graduate of the University of Glasgow, he is a much sought after preacher and teacher of the Bible and Reformed theology, has led missions in Glasgow, Edinburgh, and Aberdeen with the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, and currently serves as co-moderator on the ECO denomination's Theological Task Force.

Jennifer McNutt is an associate professor in Biblical and Theological Studies at Wheaton College. She is author of the award-winning book, *Calvin Meets Voltaire: The Clergy of Geneva in the Age of Enlightenment, 1685–1798*, a specialist in the post-Reformation period, co-president of McNuttshell Ministries, Inc. with her husband, David McNutt, with whom she also serves as a parish associate at First Presbyterian Church of Glen Ellyn, Illinois.

Earl Palmer has served as pastor of University Presbyterian Church in Seattle, Washington, Union Church, Manila, Philippines, First Presbyterian Church of Berkeley, California, and The National Presbyterian Church, Washington, D.C. He has authored many books and commentaries, leads Earl Palmer Ministries, a vibrant writing, teaching, preaching, and mentoring ministry, and has been called “the best expository preacher in America of our times.”

Richard Ray is chairman of the board of the Presbyterian Heritage Center, Montreat, North Carolina. He has served as a pastor in Arkansas, Virginia, and Tennessee, managing director of John Knox Press, professor at Stephens College and Pittsburgh Seminary, and most recently as president of King University, Bristol, Tennessee. He has also served on the board of the Grandfather Home for Children, Calvin Studies Society, King University, and is on the board of advisors of *Theology Matters*.

Lorenzo Small is pastor of First United Presbyterian Church, Charlotte, North Carolina. After several years in the corporate world, working for companies such as 3M Corporation and Eli Lilly & Company, he was called to preach, served as a Baptist minister, and later was ordained and installed as pastor of Pleasant Ridge Presbyterian Church, Lancaster, South Carolina. He is a graduate of Union Presbytery Seminary (Charlotte) and a member of the Foundation for Reformed Theology.

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