



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Defending Life by Embracing Death
(*Death*, pp. 19-25)

Suggested Article:

📖 The Grim Reaper
(*Death*, pp. 46-48)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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Defending Life by Embracing Death

In a Christian equipoise between death-avoidance and death-seeking, we would neither be especially disposed to postpone our deaths, nor disposed to seek them. We would want to continue to give our lives away as we have received them, as sheer gift. But can we be disposed to equipoise in an immortalist culture?

Prayer

Eternal God, neither death nor life can separate us from your love. Grant that we may serve you faithfully here on earth and that we may rejoice with all your saints who proclaim your glory with unending praise.

Through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Romans 8:35-39

Meditation†

If the apostle Paul is correct in his assertion that nothing can separate us from the love of God, then the central theological question that should guide Christian approaches to end-of-life care...is this: How can the faithful who are dying (and those who care for them) be enabled to love God and to hold on to the reality that God is love even in the midst of their suffering?

John Swinton and Richard Payne

Reflection

Should we ever embrace death as a friend? The answer, Paul Griffiths suggests, is both yes and no. No, because death is a result of the Fall, a reward for sin, and a sign that things are not the way they are supposed to be. Indeed, Christ pleaded with the Father that he might avoid his imminent and painful death. "On this understanding, death is a horror and an offence, something we do and should make efforts to postpone in both our own case and that of others, and something we do and should lament when it comes to others." But also yes, since "death marks a transition to a new condition that we hope will be immeasurably better than the agony of this life"; in other words, death is "the gateway to eternal life." Also, accepting death for a righteous cause can be a way to witness to the truth and to imitate Christ.

This ambivalence is a good thing. "To overlook that death is a horror to be lamented easily leads to support for suicide, euthanasia, or the refusal of medical treatment to those who might benefit from it. To overlook the view that death is a friend to be welcomed suggests a blindness to life eternal and a fixation on postponing death at all costs and for as long as possible."

He outlines the "grammar" of a Christian equipoise between death-avoidance and death-seeking. First, "your death's inevitability and apparent imminence are always matters for simultaneous rejoicing and lament." Second, when your death seems imminent, you must discern (with other believers) whether to stave it off, welcome it, or something in between, because "for Christians there is no default response to this gamut." Third, "the length of your life has no great or final significance." What matters is that you live and die faithfully and well: "Your life was received by you as gift, unasked; and the principal purpose of the gift, given you by the Lord, is that you should hand it on and over to others, as Jesus Christ handed his over for us all."



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This Christian stance runs against the grain of our “immortalist” culture in which health care focuses on staving off or delaying death as much as possible and funerary practices isolate us from the dead. To resist these cultural trends and become disposed to Christian equipoise, Griffiths recommends that we:

- ▶ *allow death and the processes of dying to be more visible,*
- ▶ *let “symbols of death, so visible in premodern Christian art and architecture, ... be an ordinary part of every Christian life,”*
- ▶ *use funerary practices that “reflect and encourage not only deep lament but also celebration,”* and
- ▶ *adopt “ascetical moderation with respect to the rhetoric of immortalism, and especially with respect to the language of battle against death-producing illness. Such talk is not Christian, being neither the language of celebration nor that of lament. And because it immediately stereotypes all illness as inimical and labels it as a foe, it prevents proper discernment.”*

These practices, Griffiths observes, must extend over time: “it is much too late to reconfigure your attitude to your own death when you have strong reason to believe that you have only weeks or months to live. Your life needs to be a preparation for death—which is, you may hope, the precursor to eternal life.”

Study Questions

1. What trends in our culture are “immortalist,” disposing us to stave off or delay death in every instance? How can they lead us to undervalue human life and dignity?
2. According to Paul Griffiths, what are the biblical and theological grounds for equipoise toward our impending death?
3. Discuss how each practice that Griffiths recommends resists trends in the immortalist culture and encourages Christian equipoise. How can your congregation implement them?
4. Consider Gustav Klimt’s famous painting *Death and Life*. What stance toward death does it encourage?

Departing Hymn: “The Lord My Shepherd Is” (verses 1, 4, and 6)

The Lord my Shepherd is,
I shall be well supplied;
since he is mine and I am his,
what can I want beside?

While he affords his aid
I cannot yield to fear;
though I should walk through death’s dark shade,
my Shepherd’s with me there.

The bounties of your love
shall crown my following days;
nor from your house will I remove,
nor cease to speak your praise.

Isaac Watts (1719), alt.

Suggested Tunes: ST. THOMAS (Williams) or GOLDEN HILL

† “Introduction” in John Swinton and Richard Payne, eds., *Living Well and Dying Faithfully: Christian Practices for End-of-Life Care* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2009), xviii.

Defending Life by Embracing Death

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To consider how our culture takes an “immortalist” stance toward death, disposing us to do everything in our power to stave it off or delay it.
2. To outline the “grammar” of a Christian stance toward death—an equipoise between immortalism and self-annihilation.
3. To discuss practices by which your congregation can encourage this Christian equipoise.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Death (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “The Lord my Shepherd Is” locate one of the tunes ST. THOMAS (Williams) or GOLDEN HILL in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Thought Experiment

“Let me ask you to perform a thought-experiment,” Paul Griffiths begins. “Imagine that you have a friend, that this person has been your friend for as long as you can remember—as long as you have had any sense of yourself as a person—and that this friendship has largely defined your character and the sense you have of what it is like to be yourself. Without this friend’s friendship, it seems to you, you would be a different person, and you find that person hard to imagine. But that’s not all. In addition to anticipating this friend’s visits exactly as the visits of a friend, you also dread them. Your anticipation of them causes trembling and sleepless nights, and you know that when they happen, when your friend is with you, you will lament and wail and rend your garments even as you rejoice in the friend’s presence. Lament and delight are inextricably bound together when you are with this friend. This is an unusual friendship. But it is a friendship we all have. It is a friendship with death. ...”

Griffiths continues, “May Christians think about death as a good thing, even as a friend or lover, as my opening thought-experiment suggested? The answer is double, both yes and no.” In this study he explores how his complex attitude toward death leads Christians to an equipoise between death-seeking and death-avoidance.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking members to read aloud the prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Romans 8:35-39 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

In the Christian tradition there is a certain sort of ambivalence between fighting death as a bitter enemy and embracing death as a friend. In this study Paul Griffiths develops the biblical and theological rationale for this Christian equipoise in the face of impending death, and shows how it points us toward more faithful health care and funerary practices. Perhaps it will help to draw a line representing the continuum of responses to death from immortalism (which sees death always as an enemy) on one extreme to self-annihilation (which sees it only as a friend) on the other. Our culture tends to the extreme of immortalism. The Christian position is not at any one point on the continuum, according to Griffiths; rather it requires discernment in each situation in order to determine how best to treat life as a gift from God that is to be given back to God in a way that blesses others.

Study Questions

1. Paul Griffiths identifies several immortalist trends in health care. First, patients request and physicians recommend many diagnostic tests for people, whether they are sick or not, if they promise to lower mortality-rates. "The thought here is that anything which reduces mortality is *ipso facto* good." Second, we often talk about battling illness, but rarely "talk about embracing what we shall succumb to as an ally...." Third, we spend vast amounts of money on products that deny or obscure the signs of aging and death's approach. Fourth, "a startlingly high proportion of what we spend, nationally, on health care is devoted to medical work done on patients in the last six months of their lives. Doctors appear to hew to a default position of administering treatment if it will extend life even for a few weeks." All of these raise the price of health care and redirect resources to the wealthy. Due to the latter practice, he notes, "The wealthy, because they can afford the treatment, are now approaching the unenviable situation of being able to die only if they are killed: once in the grip of a doctor determined not to let you die, it is not easy to escape even if you want to."
2. For the view that death is an enemy, Griffiths alludes to psalms of lament, to biblical teachings that death is a result of sin (e.g., Romans 5:12, 22; 6:10, 23; James 1:15), to Jesus praying in Gethsemane that he might avoid his imminent and painful death, and to Mary lamenting her son's death. For the view that death can be a friend, he mentions that Christians see death as "a gateway to eternal life," that saints are celebrated on their death-day (called *dies natalis*, or "day of birth"), and that Christ and the martyrs accepted death as a way of serving God and giving testimony to the truth. Encourage members to mention other evidence from Scripture and Church history for each of these perspectives on death. Griffiths concludes from this evidence that "For Christians there is no default response to this gamut [of perspectives on death] (as there is, say, to idolatry or lying or adultery); rather, the Christian seeks equipoise between immortalism and self-annihilation."
3. Assign four small groups the task of discussing one of the practices Griffiths recommends. How does the practice help us resist the immortalist trends of the culture? Evaluate how your congregation is implementing the practice, and discuss additional ways it could implement and encourage the practice. Notice that Griffiths believes these practices should involve members from a young age, and should continue over a lifetime.
4. In "The Grim Reaper," Heidi Hornik explains that Gustav Klimt considered *Death and Life* to be his most important figurative work. Even though the painting won first prize in the 1911 International Art Exhibition in Rome, the artist reworked it for some reason four years later "by changing the gold background to grey and adding ornaments and patterning to the figures of death and life," Hornik notes. "Perhaps he wanted to create a more somber overall tone and to increase the contrast between the figures." The image of death as the Grim Reaper holding a club and robed in crosses certainly suggests death is an enemy attacking his sleeping victims. However, Hornik believes Klimt's image "is as much about life as death. He gazes across the canvas toward a vibrant patterning of figure and color which symbolizes, perhaps, not only life but resurrection. At least three generations, from infant to grandmother, are depicted with their limbs intertwining and overlapping. It may be possible for death to take individuals from life, but life as a whole will escape and continue to survive." How do you interpret the living persons' calmness? Are they unaware of death or unafraid of it? Do they see it as a friend, sometimes to be welcomed? Consider whether Klimt represents the immortalist assumption, or the Christian equipoise in regard to death.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.