

The Christ Church Convergence Lecture Series
Foundations for Christian Dying
The Revd. Ben Sharpe
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The Reality of Death

The Christ Church Convergence Lectures are a series of lectures that address the common concerns, the areas of overlap, in the experiences of those of us who would claim no religious affiliation and those of us who are followers of Jesus. The way we address these issues is to acknowledge our shared experience in ways that hopefully offer some insight and promote the flourishing of both the secular and the committed Christian person. These lectures then seek to highlight and articulate the particular, and yes, sometimes peculiar, way that the Christian faith addresses these issues. It is our hope that this part of the lecture will help secular persons or persons from non-Christian religions accurately understand how followers of Jesus wrestle with the presenting issues of our time.

This evening we are going to address the undisputable common experience that we all will share: death. As of right now, the human mortality rate is hovering right around 100 percent and has been since records have been kept. Yes, it's true: nobody's getting out of here alive.

Denying Death

But you wouldn't know that based on how Westerners in general and Americans in particular process this universal phenomenon. We almost never see death. Yes, we see it relentlessly depicted in films and video games. Yet, sociologist Geoffrey Gorer in his essay, "The Pornography of Death," observes that by

...the middle of the 20th century our culture seemed both obsessed with death and unwilling to mention it. He compared the culture's attitude to death to the Victorian attitude toward sex. Death, he said, had become the new taboo subject, not to be discussed, unmentionable.¹

And while we see it's depiction multiple times a week via media, we almost never personally witness death. Fr. John Behr, dean of St. Vladimir's Seminary says of this:

¹ Allen Verhey, *The Christian Art of Dying: Learning from Jesus*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2011), 15.

...Very few people today (in the West) actually see death. We know that people die, and we see their bodies. But compared to the situation a century ago, there is a marked difference. At the beginning of the twentieth century, most people would have had one or more of their siblings die during their childhood, and one or more parent dying before they reached adulthood. Deceased siblings, parents, friends, and neighbours would have been kept at home, in the parlour, being mourned and waked by friends and neighbours, washed and prepared for burial, until being taken from home to church, where they would be commended to God and interred in the earth. However, today, in a very real sense, we no longer see death: we don't live with it, as an ever-present reality, as has every generation of human beings before us.²

In the United States we have professionalized and monetized death in way that would be unrecognizable to anyone alive before 1900. And it is equally bizarre to most people living on planet earth today.

In the course of this lecture I will address why this is a particularly bad thing for our society in general due to ecological concerns and for Christians in particular for theological concerns. I want us to think about how we can take back death in a way very similar to how we have taken back the other terminus of earthly human existence: birth. If you are my age you were probably born in a hospital with an OB/GYN or at least a General Practitioner presiding. Birth was a medicalized and hospitalized event. Now, however, home birth, natural childbirth, birthing centers, *doulas* and midwives have become mainstream experiences for many families.

Hospice and the Home Funeral movement are just two of several emerging forces that seek to take back death just as we have taken back birth. Many Christians in North America are rediscovering burial in the ancient Christian tradition thanks in large part to Deacon Mark Barna of Holy Ascension Orthodox Church in Mt. Pleasant, SC. I will be depending a great deal on his work in this lecture and in the upcoming teaching series beginning next Thursday evening: Foundations for Christian Dying.

As we approach our practices regarding dying and burial we need to review how we have arrived at how our society generally handles these unavoidable issues. Rob Moll in *The Art of Dying* writes:

² John Behr, "Take Back Death! Christian Witness in the Twenty-First Century," *Koinonia: The Journal of the Anglican & Eastern Churches Association*, New Series No. 64, Advent 2014, accessed October 10, 2017, <https://www.aeca.org.uk/koinonia/64/files/basic-html/>.

“For most of the last century, death has moved steadily away from view. Over the course of the first half of the twentieth century, the site of death moved from the home to the hospital. In 1908, 14 percent of all deaths occurred in an institutional setting, either a hospital, nursing home or other facility. Just six years later the figure jumped to 25 percent. By the end of the century it was nearly 80 percent.”³

The effect of the medicalization of death has had a profound impact on shifting the role of the person who is dying. Allen Verhey writes:

“When dying was moved to the hospital -- to be accompanied there by technology and those who knew how to use it, accompanied also by great expectations of that technology and of those experts -- there were some profound, if unintended, consequences for the dying role. Most notably, it was simply undercut, replaced by the ‘sick role.’ . . . The dying were no longer treated as if they were dying. They were treated like anyone else recovering from major surgery or a serious disease. You do not go to the hospital, after all, to die. You go there to get better. You are expected to admit that you are sick, but you also expected to share the hospital’s goal, to avoid death. So, suddenly no one was ‘dying’ any more. They were just ‘sick.’ That spelled the end of ‘the dying role’ with its rituals and community. All that was left was ‘the sick role’ and, of course, death itself.”⁴

The role of the sick person is to be the passive and cooperative subject of medical treatment. By contrast, the traditional role of the dying person in the Christian west up until the last 100 years was to insure that they were prepared to stand before God’s judgment by seeking reconciliation with those on earth, while ensuring that they had been reconciled to God through the grace and transformation offered through Jesus Christ.

Moreover, the dying were expected to offer something to the community. The dying would receive guests, would welcome friends and family to their bedside, so that the community could witness their transition from this life to the next. “Christians [in particular] sought to learn from the dying because of their increased spirituality as they neared eternity.... Deaths were recorded by families and friends and retold to those in the community who could not be present. The community drew comfort and encouragement from reports of

³ Rob Moll, *The Art of Dying: Living Fully into the Life to Come*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2010), 15-16.

⁴ Verhey, 14.

those who crossed over in peace and hope.... In...these ways, people learned how to die well, so that when the time came, they were prepared.”⁵

Contrary to these traditional practices and roles, Lauren Winner writes,

...During the last century, Americans have embraced an unprecedented denial of death, an unprecedented evasion of death. In general, we have removed death from our homes. People no longer die there; corpses no longer repose there before burial. We no longer allow people to say that they are dying – rather, they are “battling” an illness. Far from encouraging the perilously ill to recognize the imminence of their death, we encourage the sick (and their doctors) to fight death – but not to prepare for it. Most of us live far from graveyards, which we now locate on the periphery of suburbs, not in our backyards, not in places we routinely encounter. And rather than acknowledge the long unfolding of mourning, we praise bereaved people for the speed with which they get back to normal after their husband or mother or friend dies.⁶

What has catalyzed this historically anomalous denial of death? What is the force that makes us remove the presence of the dying and the dead as far as we can from our actual, everyday experience? Part of this could be laid at the doorstep of concerns about sanitation and communicable disease from the 19th century to the present. We fear contamination. We fear epidemic.

But I think that the obvious motivation, the root cause of our denial of death, is our fear of death, the terror of death.

The Fear of Death

The terror of death is actually a constellation of fears. The first of which is the obvious fear of the pain that often accompanies death. While in the west palliative and end of life care have greatly reduced the suffering and pain associated with dying these have not eliminated this fear from our consciousness. And again, we need to remember that until just the last couple of generations, most people did die in some measure of pain. It is sobering to consider that when my family arrived on these shores in the 1650s there were no readily available remedies for pain at any time of life, let alone when a person was dying.

The dying bring into our awareness another nagging fear: the fear of ultimate loss. When we die, we lose our loved ones. We lose all that we have worked

⁵ Ibid., 40.

⁶ Ibid., 10.

for. We lose, perhaps most troubling of all, control. The dying, and those who care for them, are faced with the fact that the sense that we control our bodies, our dignity, our destinies, is ultimately an illusion. In fact, there is literally no such thing as death with dignity. Death strips us of our ability to maintain our dignity.

The only dignity associated with death is the dignity that the living bestow upon the dying person, and the dignity they bestow upon the body of the dead person. Traditionally that bestowal of dignity, that reverence for the person and the body, were rooted in the belief that, regardless of the appearance and state of the dying and the dead, they still bear the image of God. Dignity is not an internal quality of the dying and the dead. It is an external quality conferred by God and recognized by the community.

Likewise, until very recently, most people feared death because they feared a judgment after death. There was the ubiquitous and unquestioned understanding that we would all face a reckoning for the life we have lived in this world. And that this reckoning before a holy God would determine whether we would spend eternity in joyful union with God or in everlasting torment for rejecting God.

However, beginning in the 19th century and intensifying until this present moment, fear of judgment has been replaced with fear of annihilation and meaninglessness. We don't fear the judgment. We fear the NOTHING. We fear oblivion. We fear the dissolution of our consciousness and the undoing of our very being and end of our existence.

This fear is the rational result of a secularizing worldview that holds that one's brief life is all there is. However, for some committed materialists the thought of oblivion, of annihilation following death, actually has been embraced as a comforting thought. Polish poet and diplomat Czesław Miłosz wrote regarding this philosophical posture: "A true opium of the people is a belief in nothingness after death - the huge solace of thinking that for our betrayals, greed, cowardice, murders we are not going to be judged."⁷

Fear of the oblivion of death is inseparable from the corollary that death renders human existence meaningless. As Andrew Delbanco quipped, "all our getting and spending amounts to nothing more than fidgeting while we wait

⁷ Czesław Miłosz, "Discreet Charm of Nihilism," *The New York Review of Books*, November 19, 1998, 17.

for death.”⁸ Carrying this further, philosopher Thomas Nagel, himself a professed atheist, courageously presents the meaninglessness of a finite existence.

Even if you produce a great work of literature which continues to be read thousands of years from now, eventually the solar system will cool or the universe will wind down and collapse and all trace of your effort will vanish. . . . The problem is that although there are justifications and explanations for most of the things, big and small, that we do within life, none of these explanations explain the point of your life as a whole—the whole of which all these activities, successes and failures, strivings and disappointments are parts. If you think about the whole thing, there seems to be no point to it at all. Looking at it from the outside, it wouldn’t matter if you had never existed. And after you have gone out of existence, it won’t matter that you did exist.⁹

And thus Timothy Keller writes of the secular materialistic view articulated by Nagel:

If this life is all there is, and there is no God or life beyond this material world, then it will not ultimately matter whether you are a genocidal maniac or an altruist; it won’t matter whether you fight hunger in Africa or are incredibly cruel and greedy and starving the poor. In the end what you do will make no difference whatsoever. It might make some people happier or sadder for a brief time while they are on the planet, but beyond that, your influence— good or bad— will likely be negligible when viewed on any grand scale. Everything you do, and everyone you have done things with and to, will be gone forever. Ultimately, everything we do is radically insignificant. Nothing counts forever.¹⁰

The American Way of Death

The inherent terror of death resulting in our denial and avoidance of it has lead to a particular way of handling these issues in what Jessica Mitford termed, “The American Way of Death.”

⁸ Andrew Delbanco, *The Real American Dream: A Meditation on Hope*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 3.

⁹ Thomas Nagel, *What Does It All Mean?: A Very Short Introduction to Philosophy*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 96.

¹⁰ Keller, Timothy. *Making Sense of God: An Invitation to the Skeptical* (New York, NY: Viking, 2016), 66-67.

In the American way of death, the dead are whisked away as quickly as possible to a funeral home, where the body opened and filled with embalming fluids. The family spends an enormous amount of money for a coffin, to be buried inside a concrete vault, in a cemetery plot costing thousands of dollars. For the viewing, the dead are made up to look as if they are merely sleeping and placed under special lighting to complete the effect. "Don't they look good!" is the desired response in the southern funeral experience. Further, more often than at any other time in the past, Americans are opting for cremation as opposed to placing the body in the earth. Each of these practices need to be examined in turn.

Chemical embalming

Modern chemical embalming was a practice that originated in the American Civil War. A New York coroner's assistant, Thomas Holmes invented a chemical embalming technique, received a commission in the US Army Medical Corps, and began the process of embalming officers killed in battle. In 1867 he turned his experience into a business and went public with the technique. Embalming is now the accepted practice even though the advent of readily available refrigeration made the reasons given for it obsolete years ago. The only remaining reason for embalming is to make the corpse look as cosmetically life-like as possible.

Cremation

In response to the expense of a typical American funeral, and in the misinformed notion that it is somehow environmentally friendly, many people have resorted to cremation. Cremation, however, actually tends to create a larger profit margin for the funeral home.¹¹

And far from being a "green" practice "...a cremator uses about 285 kiloWatt hours of gas and 15kWh of electricity on average per cremation - roughly the same domestic energy demands as a single person for an entire month."¹²

Cremation requires temperatures between 1400-1800 degrees Fahrenheit. Since bones do not burn up at these temperatures the remaining ash and bones are literally placed in a grinder to create "cremains". Enormous violence is done to the body in this procedure.

¹¹ J. Mark Barna and Elizabeth J. Barna, *A Christian Ending: A Handbook for Burial in the Ancient Christian Tradition*, (Manton, CA: Divine Ascent Press, 2011), 28.

¹² Leo Hickman, "Should I ... be buried or cremated?," *The Guardian*, accessed October 13, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2005/oct/18/ethicalmoney.climatechange>.

Taken as a whole, the current American way of burial is environmentally harmful. “OSHA lists 263 hazardous chemicals”¹³ in the embalming process. Scientific American magazine reports the ecological impact of the typical funeral:

...American funerals are responsible each year for the felling of 30 million board feet of casket wood (some of which comes from tropical hardwoods), 90,000 tons of steel, 1.6 million tons of concrete for burial vaults, and 800,000 gallons of embalming fluid. Even cremation is an environmental horror story, with the incineration process emitting many a noxious substance, including dioxin, hydrochloric acid, sulfur dioxide, and climate-changing carbon dioxide.¹⁴

The Business Side of Death

The funeral industry is big business. Some time ago, “...the Federal Trade Commission established a General Rule regarding funeral service and pricing.... The General Rule allows...a non-declinable Basic Charge of Service fee; also known as ‘Professional Services.’ This is the absolute minimum you will pay for the services of a funeral director.”¹⁵ This fee used to be around \$400. It “is now \$1000 to \$3000.”¹⁶ Funeral costs are 8 to 10 times what they were 30 years ago. Right now there are three major funeral corporations who have bought up funeral homes and cemeteries around the country. These corporate funeral homes average prices for services 60% higher than independent funeral homes. Corporate funeral homes consistently reap a 34% profit and their cemeteries a 20% profit. “The casket is around 40% of the profit in a funeral. The mid-priced casket has the highest markup.”¹⁷

In 1961 one could expect to pay \$750 for the typical casket and services. Today the range in our area is from \$4,510 to \$34,005 including casket, plus \$3000-\$4000 for a cemetery plot and basic marker.¹⁸

¹³ Barna, 36.

¹⁴ “Eco-Afterlife: Green Burial Options,” *Scientific American*, accessed October 12, 2017, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/eco-afterlife-green-burial/>.

¹⁵ Barna, 30.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 31.

¹⁸ Ibid., 28.

While many funeral homes and funeral directors are genuinely concerned with serving the best interests of their clients, some less scrupulous funeral salespersons either intentionally or unintentionally mislead people on what is required for a funeral. For instance:

- Did you know that there is no NC law requiring you to use a funeral director or a funeral home?
- There is no NC law requiring the embalming of a corpse.
- There is no NC law requiring the burial of an unenbalmed body within 24 hours.
- There is no law requiring a licensed funeral director in order to transport a body across state lines.
- There is no NC law requiring a casket or a vault.
- There is no NC law prohibiting burial on your private property.
- There is no Winston-Salem ordinance regulating private cemeteries. To the contrary: “Family-owned private cemeteries and church cemeteries within the city are regulated by their own appointed boards.”¹⁹

A Different Way to Die

Historically followers of Jesus have had a different way of processing death that replaces fear with hope. Likewise, Christians have a theology of the body and ancient burial practices that provide an alternative to the expensive, death denying, and environmentally harmful practices associated with the typical American funeral.

Death Is NOT Natural

It is common for people to offer platitudes like, “Death is a natural part of life,” or even, if we are overtaken by sentimentality, to view death as a friend. But traditional Christian teaching does not accept either of these premises.

The ancient teaching of the scriptures and the church is that death was not God’s original intention for his human creation. We instinctively recognize that death is an unnatural, a deeply wrong, part of our experience. Poet Dylan Thomas summed up this inner awareness well:

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;

¹⁹ <http://www.cityofws.org/Departments/Property-Facilities-Management/Cemeteries>.

Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

In spite of the materialistic, secularist view, the writer of Ecclesiastes spoke well when he declared that God has “set eternity in the hearts of men (Ecclesiastes 3:11b)” so that the human spirit recoils at the thought of death as the complete obliteration of the self.

The ontological WRONGNESS of death was experienced by our Lord Jesus Christ. He wept beside the tomb of his friend Lazarus (John 11:35) even though in just a few moments he would raise him from the dead. That term “wept” is a weak translation of the reaction of Jesus to death. B.B. Warfield says of this passage:

The spectacle of the distress of Mary and her companions enraged Jesus because it brought poignantly home to his consciousness the evil of death, its unnaturalness, its “violent tyranny” as Calvin...phrases it. In Mary’s grief, he “contemplates...the general misery of the whole human race” and burns with rage against the oppressor of men. Inextinguishable fury seizes upon him; his whole being is discomposed and perturbed...

It is death that is the object of his wrath, and behind death him who has the power of death, and whom he has come into the world to destroy... His soul is held by rage: and he advances to the tomb, in Calvin’s words again, “as a champion who prepares for conflict.” The raising of Lazarus thus becomes, not an isolated marvel, but — as indeed it is presented throughout the whole narrative...a decisive instance and open symbol of Jesus’ conquest of death and hell.²⁰

Death is no friend. Instead the bible teaches that death is an enemy to be vanquished:

[20] But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. [21] For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. [22] For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. [23] But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. [24] Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. [25] For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. [26] The last enemy to be destroyed

²⁰ B.B. Warfield, “The Emotional Life of our Lord”, accessed October 12, 2017, <https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/articles/onsite/emotionallife.html>.

is death. [27] For “God has put all things in subjection under his feet.” But when it says, “all things are put in subjection,” it is plain that he is excepted who put all things in subjection under him. (1 Corinthians 15:20-27 ESV)

Christ Has Conquered Death

Thus, while human rebellion and sin made death the unavoidable experience of every human being, through his crucifixion and resurrection Jesus has defeated the power of death and the one who controls the fear of death. God himself is most fully revealed on the Cross of Jesus in his willingness to suffer death in his great love for his human creation. This is the God we know in Christ! He is willing to fully identify with us in our weakest moment and most broken condition. What unimaginable love!

The service for the burial of the dead in our Book of Common Prayer contains this ancient hymn of the church: “Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death and on those in the tombs bestowing life.” Similarly, the great Easter Sermon of St John Chrysostom says: “Death swallowed a body and met God face to face.” These assertions are directly drawn from the Bible where it is declared Jesus’ own death was the means of vanquishing death:

[14] Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, [Jesus] himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, [15] and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. (Hebrews 2:14-15 ESV)

Christ has defeated death and he has done so through the very means that death entered human experience at the beginning. Mark Barna writes:

Saint John Chrysostom teaches us that the symbols of our defeat in Paradise were the virgin, the tree, and death. Eve was the virgin, for she had not yet known Adam. The tree was the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Death was the result of Adam’s disobedience. Now again we have a virgin, a tree and death; the symbols of defeat now become the symbols of victory! For instead of Eve, we now have the Virgin Mary. Instead of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, we have the tree of the Cross. Instead of the death of Adam (separation from God), we have the death of Christ, the God-Man. Death was defeated using the same means by which it had prevailed: the virgin, the tree and death!²¹

²¹ Barna, 47.

So through Jesus, death is no longer the king of terrors, but has become the gateway into an existence filled with love and joy. Timothy Keller writes regarding the Christian hope made available by the victory of Jesus over the grave:

Camus argued that what we most want in life is to not lose our love relationships. The knowledge of our impending death, he concluded, takes love away and so makes life meaningless. Many people find Camus to be too gloomy, but the older one gets, the more one feels the force of his words. If you believe death really is the end of love, then you will not want to think about it too much as you get older. However, if you believe, as Christians do, that death is actually the entrance into greater and endless love relationships, then thoughtful reflection will only make it easier to face whatever is coming.²²

And this new existence is not some ethereal, disembodied life. Rather we await the resurrection of the dead in which we will be granted a new, incorruptible, glorified body in which we will united to God in love in the new heavens and the new earth forever.

Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. (1 John 3:2 ESV)

N.T. Wright says of the Christian hope:

Jesus came to us from God's future, from the new world which God has begun to make... God's future is, quite simply, his new heavens and new earth. The Bible doesn't speak, as so many Christians imagine, of a disembodied heaven, but rather of new heavens and new earth. And the point about God's future world is that it will be more real, more solid, more tangible and visible and tasteable than the present world. And that for a good reason: the present world is full of corruption and decay, of violence and sorrow and sin and death.

But the whole point is that what God has decided to do about all this, precisely because he's the creator who loves the world he made, is to do away with all that corruption and sorrow and death and so leave the way clear for the world to be renewed from top to bottom, so that everything that's pure and lovely and beautiful and noble and wise will shine out all the more brightly.

²² Keller, 74.

That is the future world which we are promised – which the ancient Jewish people were already promised in their scriptures; all because God is the good creator who has promised to set his world right in the end.²³

The Body is Sacred

The fact that God himself took on a human body in Jesus Christ, and that we hope in the resurrection means that Christians hold the body to be sacred. This belief that the body is sacred leads to several important points in the traditional Christian view of death and burial.

Along with the intrinsic sacredness of any human body, Christians consider the body of believers to be holy because it has also been the temple, the abiding place, of God's Holy Spirit. It has been nourished with the medicine of immortality, the Holy Eucharist, and thus has been integrated with Christ's own body through this holy mystery. And ultimately the body does not belong to the believer but to God who has purchased it at great price through the death of his own Son, Jesus. Saint Paul says that the Christian's body has a purpose, a *telos*. It is meant, he writes,

...for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. [14] And God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by his power. [15] Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?... [19] Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, [20] for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body. (1 Cor. 6:13b-15a, 19-20 ESV)

Since the body is sacred, traditional Christian burial practices have reflected that belief. One critical to this discussion is that cremation is not, and never has been, a Christian option. It has been seen as a desecration of the body and an overt, if futile, denial of the resurrection. Russell Moore writes:

I am surprised by how often Christians are stunned to hear me say that cremation is not a Christian act. Previous generations of Christians would have understood exactly, but today an anti-cremation stance seems at best Luddite and at worst carnal. People will ask, "Can't God

²³ NT Wright, "God's Future in Person," accessed October 12, 2017, <http://ntwrightpage.com/2016/03/30/gods-future-in-person/>.

raise a cremated Christian just as he can raise a decomposed buried Christian?"²⁴

The question is not simply whether cremation is always a personal sin. The question is not whether God can reassemble "cremains." The question is whether burial is a Christian act and, if so, then what does it communicate?

Of course God can resurrect a cremated Christian. He can also resurrect a Christian burned at the stake, or a Christian torn to pieces by lions in a Roman coliseum, or a Christian digested by a great white shark off the coast of Florida.

But are funerals simply the way in which we dispose of remains? If so, graveyards are unnecessary, too. Why not simply toss the corpses of our loved ones into the local waste landfill?

For Christians, burial is not the disposal of a thing. It is caring for a person. In burial, we're reminded that the body is not a shell, a husk tossed aside by the "real" person, the soul within. To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:6-8; Phil. 1:23), but the body that remains still belongs to *someone*, someone we love, someone who will reclaim it one day.²⁵

The sacredness of the body also precludes Christians donating their bodies to science, or having the body violated by an autopsy not legally required to determine the possibility of foul play.

Organ Donation

Similarly, there are grave ethical concerns for Christians in regard to organ donation. Particularly the fact that the harvesting of organs happens when you are still alive. You can't get a viable live organ from a dead body. Anita Kuhn writes:

In a remarkably candid article about organ donation in the *New England Journal of Medicine (NEJM)*... published...August 14, 2008, Dr. Robert D. Truog of Harvard Medical Center and Children's Hospital Boston, and Dr. Franklin G. Miller, a bioethicist at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland, ...make the unnerving observation that, in cases

²⁴ Russell D. Moore, "It Is Better to Bury than to Burn," *Touchstone Magazine*, April 21, 2006, accessed October 11, 2017, http://touchstonemag.com/merecomments/2006/04/it_is_better_to/.

²⁵ Russell D. Moore, "Grave Signs," *Touchstone Magazine*, January/February, 2007, accessed October 10, 2017, <http://www.touchstonemag.com/archives/article.php?id=20-01-024-v>.

involving vital organs, many “donors” may not actually be dead at the time their organs are taken from them. While this statement corroborates the view of many pro-life groups, scientists, and physicians, it is likely to be news to the general public.²⁶

Not to put too fine a point on it, harvesting organs usually involves the intentional taking of a human life.

Convergence

While Christians and secular persons may not agree upon the ultimate purpose of the human body or the hope of the resurrection, we share a common concern regarding the impact of the typical American burial on the environment. Thus the natural death, home funeral, and green burial movements all point to a way of caring for the body after death that coincides with Christian concerns. Secular people can gain a great deal of comfort and sense of completion and closure by washing the body, building the coffin, and carrying out the burial of a loved one. They similarly benefit from the economic advantage of a home funeral over the typical funeral home burial.

Ancient Christian Burial Practices

There is a beautiful option for Christians who want to reclaim our biblical heritage and traditional practices around death and dying. Instead of resorting a funeral home burial with its attending expense and environmental problems, the local church can take care of every step of the process.

At the time of death members of the church who a part of a death care team can wash the body, trim the nails, and do the hair. The body is then anointed with fragrant oil just as the women who went to the tomb on Easter morning were prepared to do for Jesus. The body can be clothed in a baptismal garment such as an alb,] or simply wrapped in a white burial shroud. A member of the church can build a simple, soft wood (pine) casket for the body to be placed in and carried by church members to the home or to the church to wait for burial.

If the body reposes in the home or the church, dry ice can be placed under it in the coffin to keep it cool.

Following the funeral the body is then transported by members of the church to the graveyard to be place in a grave dug by the family and/or church

²⁶ Anita Kuhn, “Down on the Transplantations”, *Touchstone Magazine*, October 2008, accessed October 10, 2017, <http://www.touchstonemag.com/archives/article.php?id=21-08-046-c>.

members. No vault is required. Within a 3 to 5 years most of the body will decay into the natural elements of which it is made, returning to and nourishing the earth. By about 15 years all that will remain will be the skeleton of the deceased.

My challenge for Christ Church is to develop just such a team of individuals including our deacons who have been traditionally charged with the care of the dead, to adopt these practices. It will require training and time but I think that it will be immensely rewarding for the community and for those who are facing their own death for us to restore these practices.

Likewise I want to call on someone in Christ Church who has the means to provide acreage here in Forsyth County for a church graveyard in which members of Christ Church Winston-Salem, Christ Church Lewisville Parish, and Church of the Good Shepherd can be laid to rest in a tradition fashion.

Reclaiming death

If, as we have stated, God is most clearly revealed in the death of Christ, to remove death from our experience is to reject how God most intimately entered into our experience and defeated our greatest foe.

There has been much discussion, in the latter part of the last century, of our 'denial of death'. But it would seem to me that the problem is deeper and more difficult. If it is true that Christ shows us what it is to be God in the way that he dies as a human being, then, quite simply, if we no longer 'see' death, we no longer see the face of God.²⁷

For followers of Jesus, it is time for us to reclaim death.

²⁷ John Behr, "The Christian Art of Dying," *Sobornost*, 35:1-2, 2013, 137.