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Delton J. Glebe

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Life After Death: By What Authority?¹

Delton J. Glebe

*Professor of Pastoral Care,
Waterloo Lutheran Seminary, Waterloo*

Texts: Isaiah 25:6–9, Revelation 7:9–12, John 5:24–29

In a book on *Children's Concerns About Death and Dying*² the author tells us of 5 year old Jill.

Her 75 year old grandmother had just died.

"Jill, I have some very sad news to tell you;

Granny had another stroke and died,"

said her father upon his return from the hospital.

Jill's eyes welled with tears.

As the people left Jill was sitting in the corner.

She seemed more "wondering" than grieving.

Then she came over and placed her head in her father's lap.

She looked up at him and said quietly,

"But Daddy, won't Granny need her socks?"

The father's first impulse was to laugh.

After a bit he asked her what she had in mind.

She replied: "Well Daddy, I've been worried about Granny.

When she was at home she liked to keep her feet warm in those big gray socks.

But when they took her to hospital she just wore that funny dress.

Now that she's gone dead

she didn't have a chance to get those socks before she went away.

Isn't she going to be cold without them?

Daddy, won't Granny need her socks?"

Jill had her imaginings about life after death.

But so do adults.

The search for an image of life after death occupies our minds more than we care to admit.

What is your image of life after death?

Why do you embrace your particular picture of heaven?

By what authority did you select it?

By what authority do you trust it?

By what authority do you claim it?

A parishioner in one of our parishes

had lost a spouse in death.

It was a traumatic time.

But the parishioner found comfort in a certain image of heaven.

Apparently the pastor questioned the image.

Whereupon the parishioner replied:

“If heaven is not the way I picture it,
then I’m not sure I want it.”

Doesn’t the Bible give us an authoritative image?

Not really.

On the one hand the Scriptures use various pictures of life after death.

In today’s text Isaiah pictures “God swallowing up Death forever.”

The text in Revelation pictures “a great multitude surrounding a heavenly throne in worship.”

The text in the Gospel of John pictures “all in the graves rising up in response to the voice of the Son of Man.”

On the other hand the same Scriptures say:

“Eye has not seen nor ear heard
what the Lord has in store for them that love him.”

On the one hand, some Christians are very definite about their one and only picture of heaven.

On the other hand, teachers and preachers search for ever more relevant images.

But whatever image or picture of life after death you use a crucial question in choosing the image is:

By what authority?

Norman Vincent Peale in his most recent book
*The Positive Power of Jesus Christ*³

tells of having lunch with Lord Thompson
the owner of the great newspaper empire.

Thompson said: "Dr. Peale, I am an old man
and one of these days I'm going to die.

I want to know: Is there an afterlife?"

Dr. Peale gave him this picture of the "after-life".

Suppose that someone came to an unborn baby and said:

You cannot stay here long.

In a few months you will be born,

or, as it were, "die out of your present state".

The baby might say,

I don't want to leave here.

I'm comfortable, cared for, warm, loved and happy.

But he is born.

"He dies out of his present life."

And what does he find?

He feels beneath him strong loving arms.

He looks up into his mother's face tender with love.

He is welcomed, cuddled and cared for.

And he says: This is a wonderful place.

Then he goes on to enjoy childhood,

adolescence and adulthood.

Then he becomes an old man.

His step slows, his energy drops.

Someone says:

You are going to die,

or, as it were, "You will be born out of this place into
another".

He objects: But I don't want to die!

I have loved ones.

I love this world.

I don't want to leave it.

I don't want to die.

But he does die!
 What happens then?
 Is God the Creator suddenly going to change his nature?
 Can we not assume that this man
 will feel once again warm arms beneath him,
 will see once again a strong loving face above him?
 Won't he soon exclaim:
 This is a wonderful place!
 I want to remain here forever!

As beautiful as this modern parable is,
 by what authority does Peale make his claim?

Peale replies:

"I believe in the promises in the Bible.

But beyond the biblical is the evidence of intelligence and
 common sense."

By What Authority?

In keeping with his "Power of Positive Thinking"

Peale pictures death as the warm arms beneath him
 the strong loving face above him
 in this wonderful place
 where I want to remain forever.

Peale's Positive Thinking in this picture is not to be denied!

But what about pain, tears, suffering and struggle?

These negatives shake the faith in the walk through death.

These negatives persist in the walk from death to life.

All positives and no negatives do not ring true to life.

All positives and no negatives do not ring true to a biblical
 image of life and death.

For things pictured as all positives and no negatives we have a
 special name.

We, in the church, call it *Triumphalism!*

Another authority for an image of death and resurrection
 has emerged in our times.

It has become so fascinating to our people
 that it has more appeal to many

than do the biblical images of resurrection.
It is the phenomenon called Near Death Experiences.

And by what authority?

The authority in Near Death Experiences for images of the afterlife is similar to that of Norman Vincent Peale: intelligence, common sense and clinical evidence. Thousands of cases of “after life” experiences have been documented.

Those with positive “after life” experiences report: having a new body with superior senses, emerging from a tunnel into brilliant light, meeting loved ones who have previously died.

One patient says:

“I saw a figure with long hair in a brilliant white robe.”

I have heard Dr. Elizabeth Kubler Ross say:

Beyond a shadow of doubt there is life after death.

By What Authority?

The researchers reply:

By the evidence gathered in thousands of interviews.

This is not the time and place to debate the evidence.

But a tendency on reporting the evidence in Near Death experiences is pointed out by some researchers themselves. It's the tendency to report only the positive experiences and to forget the negative ones.

We, in the church, call it *Triumphalism*.

Dr. Maurice Rawlings is a 64 year old medical doctor on the staff at the University of Tennessee, a Presbyterian and a deeply committed Christian.

He has documented 300 cases of “after life” experiences. His 1978 best seller *Beyond Death's Door*⁴ shows that not all after-life experiences are good.

Dr. Rawlings reveals a tendency here which we saw in Peale's parable.

The tendency to accentuate the positive and eliminate the negative.

The tendency to claim all positives and no negatives.

For things pictured as all positives and no negatives,
we have this special name:

We, in the church, call it *Triumphalism*.

But Triumphalism appears also *in* the church!

In a town nearby a few years ago
the pastor of a Christian group declared:

If you're a Christian
you're above sadness and sorrow;
you're above tears and grief.
You're in for all joy and gladness.
You're in for all sunshine and roses!

As a result some Lutherans in the area,
honestly began to question
whether it's alright for Christians to weep at a funeral
or to grieve the loss of a loved one.

It's like some televangelists.
In the most bombastic voice
bursting with joy
confidentially they tell you
that all you have to do is accept Jesus.
And the moment you do
all your troubles will vanish like a bubble.
There won't be a cloud in the sky anymore.
Everything will be sunshine and roses.
It's easy, so glorious, to be a Christian!

We, in the church, call it triumphalism.

Because Jesus says:
Whoever would come after me,
let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me!

But are there not times when we need
a totally positive image of death?
When we need a triumphalist image?
When we need to have the resurrection
presented with triumphant sound in triumphant style?

The image which most sustained me this past February

at the death of Pamela our one-year-old and only granddaughter is a New Testament image of life after death. It comes from the parish of the Rev. Peter Marshall. And I used it in my sermon at Pamela's funeral.

The story is about the little boy with an incurable illness who asked his mother,
"Mother, what is it like to die?
Mother, does it hurt?"
She pressed her knuckles white against the kitchen cabinet. She knew it was a question with deep significance. She breathed a hurried prayer for the Lord to tell her how to answer her son. Somehow she immediately knew how to answer him.
"Kenneth," she said,
"do you remember when you were small
how you used to play all day until you were tired?
You were too tired even to undress.
And you would crawl into mother's bed and fall asleep.
But that was not where you belonged.
Much to your surprise,
the next morning you woke up
in your own bed and in your own room.
You were there because
your Daddy had carried you with his big strong loving arms
to your own room where you belong.

"Kenneth, death is like that.
We just wake up some morning
to find ourselves
in our own room
because the Lord Jesus
with his big strong loving arms
has carried us to our own room where we belong."
The point had gone home.
He never questioned again,
during the following weeks,
as he went to meet his Father in heaven
with love and trust in his little heart.

You know as I do
 the mother's authority for that story.
 It's Jesus' warm, personal picture of the Resurrection:
 "In my Father's house are many rooms.
 I go to prepare a place for you.
 If I prepare a place for you
 I will come again to take you to myself
 so that where I am
 you may be also."

But was this only a positive experience?
 Was this only triumphalist?
 I think we miss the point of this parable
 if we think of little Kenneth
 only as triumphantly safe in the arms of Jesus.
 After his mother shared that parable with him,
 he still had weeks of walking through the valley of death.
 His mother and father had months of walking through the
 valley of grief.
 In this parable, triumphalism is avoided,
 because the triumph comes while he is walking through the
 valley of death,
 because the triumph comes while they are walking through
 the valley of grief.

Here we have a resurrection picture
 of triumph in the context of death and grief.
 The sermon that places the resurrection triumph in the
 context of the pain
 is the sermon which speaks most convincingly to
 the bereaved.

Now, I believe, we are ready to appreciate the images in
 today's texts,
 to appreciate the fullness of their authority.
 Isaiah 26 says:
 "The Lord of Hosts will destroy on this mountain
 the covering that is cast over all peoples,
 the veil that is spread over all nations.

He will swallow up death forever
and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces.
It will be said on that day,
This is the Lord;
we have waited for him.
Let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.”

If there is anywhere a temptation to triumphalism it's here.
One commentator calls this “The feast of Triumph”.
Another calls it “The Triumph over God's enemies”.
But again we misinterpret the triumph,
if we fail to see the context.
The covering over the people is suffering.
The veil over the people is death.
The verses preceding this triumph
give this other side of the picture:
“The earth mourns and withers.
The heavens languish with the earth.
The earth is polluted.
The inhabitants of the earth are scorched.
The mirth of the timbrels is stilled.
The noise of the jubilant has ceased.
Desolation is left in the city.
The gates are battered into ruins.”

By What Authority?

The triumph in Isaiah's picture of Resurrection
is so wonderfully powerful
precisely because it rises out of the ashes
of Israel's sorrow and suffering.
It's like the Phoenix as a symbol for Resurrection.
The Phoenix is beautiful and powerful
precisely because it rises out of the ashes.

So, too, in Revelation 7:

“After this I looked and behold,
a great multitude which no man could number
from every nation, peoples and tongues,
standing before the throne and the Lamb,
clothed in white robes

with palm branches in their hands,
 crying with a loud voice,
 Salvation belongs to our God.
 And all the angels stood round the throne
 and round the elders
 and they fell on their faces before the throne
 and worshipped God."

The temptation toward triumphalism at worship is not unfamiliar.

To have a picture of worship
 on a heavenly scale—
 this could be triumphalism at its height!
 If ever there is a temptation
 to present a triumphalistic picture of Resurrection
 it is here
 gathered around the very throne of God.

But again we miss the *real triumph*
 unless we read on.

"Then one of the elders addressed me saying:
 Who are these clothed in white robes?
 I said to him: Sir, you know.
 And he said to me,
 These are they who have come out of great tribulation."
 By what authority, this triumph?
 It is a triumph which has come out of great tribulation.
 There is more.
 "They have washed their robes
 and made them white."
 How?
 In someone's blood.
 Whose blood?
 The Blood of the Lamb!
 The Blood of the Lamb is the Cross of Christ!

Today's Gospel of John pictures the Resurrection:

"Then all who are in the graves
 hear his voice and come forth.
 Those who have done good to the Resurrection of life

Those who have done evil to the Resurrection of judgment.”
 Here again, John’s image of the Resurrection
 holds together the promise of life and the fact of judgment.
 And the judge is both Lamb and Lord!

There we have it!

Authoritative images of death and resurrection
 are images which participate
 in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Our Risen Lord is a Crucified Lord;
 Our Triumphant Christ is a Christ of the Cross.
 Our Easter Sunday is rooted in Good Friday.
 How can some churches and some church people
 celebrate the triumph of Easter Sunday
 without participating in the tragedy of Good Friday!
 How can some clergy turn Good Friday into a quasi Easter
 Sunday,
 thereby escaping the pain and the shame of Good Friday?

Luther says:

Ours is not a Theology of Glory
 Ours is a Theology of the Cross.

Even when with angels and archangels and all the company of
 heaven
 we worship in heaven before God’s throne,
 we will still sing,
 “In the Cross of Christ I glory!”

Why? Because:

Here we find the dawn of heaven,
 While upon the Cross we gaze;
 See our trespasses forgiven,
 And our songs of triumph raise.

Notes

¹ This sermon was preached at the Memorial Service of the
 Eastern Synod’s convention, 1987.

² Donald W. Knowles and Nancy Reeves, *But Won’t Granny Need*

- Her Socks? Dealing Effectively with Children's Concerns about Death and Dying* (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt, 1983) 1.
- ³ Norman Vincent Peale, *The Positive Power of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Tyndale House, 1980) as condensed in *Reader's Digest*, May 1987, 146.
- ⁴ Maurice Rawlings, *Beyond Death's Door* (1978) as reported by John Asling in the *Kitchener-Waterloo Record* 2 May 1987, C5.