Death and the “Divided I”: The Law and Gospel of Dying

“I’m not afraid of death, I just don’t want to be there when it happens.” Woody Allen’s humor has more than a few grains of truth. I’ve learned in my time as a hospice chaplain that death itself is not the primary fear and frustration I encounter. For most people death is a bare idea. A daunting and awe-inspiring idea to be sure, but a reality that most have grappled with and fortified themselves against using their own beliefs and assumptions – in the abstract. The symptoms, the physical limitations, the indignities, and the burned out caregivers are the struggles of terminal illness. They occur in the foreground while the idea of death itself only malingers in the background. I thought I signed up to help people deal with death. Instead I deal with dying. There’s a distinction. Nobody wants to be in there when it happens.

I’ve written elsewhere that in offering chaplain services the most common objection I hear to my visits is not “no” but “not yet.” For most people a religious professional is a symbol of life transitions – christenings, marriages, and funerals. The chaplain is the one who manages your death. Many people who are still walking around or attempting to preoccupy themselves with other things do not feel the need to address death. I’ll die later. They don’t think that they’re dying. Death is something that their future self will do and their present self does not need to be bothered now. People know that they will eventually meet death but don’t want to be bothered with the reality of dying. (I’ve often felt that this is the attitude toward religion too. Most people feel like religion is a good thing to do but they put in in the same mental cabinet as flossing and cleaning the gutters. Something that good and responsible people do but have too much going on right now to tackle.)

Ernest Becker wrote a classic treatment of modern society’s complicated relationship with death entitled, “The Denial of Death.” Death denial is something that animates our whole lives according to Becker. We attempt to stave off death by building enduring monuments as part of our “heroic projects.” As important as his observations are we see into death denial more deeply when we look at it from a theological as well as a psychological perspective.

Helmut Thielicke’s work, “Death and Life” is an in depth treatment of the reality of death in the modern age from a secular as well as a Biblical perspective. Rather than just a battered psyche lashing out against its own weakness Thielicke describes a creature desperately fleeing the judgement imposed on it. The biological reality of death does not contain its full terror in Thielicke’s estimation. Much more horrifying is that death addresses me as a unique and irreplaceable human being in linear time. It’s a limit imposed by my nature as a creature and my broken relationship with my creator. Death is always a threatening accusation happening in real time.

This leads Thielicke to describe the anatomy of death denial as a secular phenomenon. Much deeper than just simply the “repression” that psychologists like Becker indicate, (Denial of Death, 178) the modern individual engages in a self-delusion that is almost surgical:

“It divides man into an intrinsic segment of the I, which is a kind of immortal substance which survives death, and a non-intrinsic segment of the I, which as an insignificant vessel for that intrinsic substance which perishes, in fact ought to perish and can safely do so.” (Death and Life, 18)

In other words our death denial searches for a part of us *in se,*

“intrinsically” and more genuinely ourselves, which cannot die. My body can die but “I” don’t.

The first part of Thielicke’s book catalogues the strategies that people use to employ this divided “I.” With Plato one could imagine the soul clinging to the immortal verities which are untouched by the limits of the world of matter that death inhabits. With Nietzche one could accept the reality of death as a part of life and give it meaning by my efforts. With

With Goethe’s Faust I might find a nobility of value on par with immortality itself by pushing back against death’s limits. All of these are described in detail as a way of clearing some terrain in the reality of death by which death cannot touch me though I must submit to its biological reality. Thielicke in describing Hegel’s view of death puts it this way,

“What is intrinsically proper to man, the spirit, is unscathed by death. Indeed, via death it comes into its own. Death does not contradict man’s destiny. On the contrary it enables him to achieve it. *Death has become a meaningful law*” (*Death and Life,* 36. Italics mine).

Death in this philosophical construction is not the “wages of sin” as Paul puts it. It no longer is my penalty. Instead it becomes a law in my own hands either by giving me something to overcome or putting to death what is not authentically me. Those acquainted with the work of Gerhard Forde will hear this as a faint echo of the “glory story” by which I use the law to demonstrate my own intrinsic righteousness. For Thielicke it goes deeper. In the way I make death a law in my own hands constructs more than my own worthiness, the law becomes the substance of my own identity.

Thielicke offers all this as a penetrating insight into certain social facts of modern society. Facts he perceived clearly in Germany in the midst of the Third Reich. One way to flee the accusation of death is to “retire into the clan” and subsume one’s individual identity into the group or the cause so that “death kills … the individual bearer of the clans powers but does not kill those powers themselves” (31). The person who lives and dies for a tribe or a cause does not stand alone in the midst of death’s accusation but offers their own death as a gateway to participation in something that will endure. Stuck with the problem of our own identity we’ll eventually just burying it in something bigger than ourselves.

Luther famously stated in his “Invocavit” sermons that “The summons of death comes to us all and no one can die for another.” Thielicke makes all the conclusions of the first part of his work as a means of contrast to the biblical view of death that Luther employs. Death is not a concept. Death is *my* death. It comes for me as an individual, with a unique personality, and an irreplaceable being. Death in this way confronts us not in the realm of nature with its repeatable laws, but in the concrete realm of history in which I am defined by my relationships. Further, death greets me not in cyclical time which grants new beginnings with each ending, but in linear time. Worse, death greeting us in linear time comes at us constantly with the knowledge that we have an end.

Death comes with the cry of God which calls us out for the brokenness of our relationship with God because we won’t accept the fact that we are sinners or confess that we are just creatures. This is precisely why so many of my patients decline talking to me. Death is something that I “do.” But at the current time I just don’t have time for it. Right now I am a subsisting subject which is busy. “Don’t talk to me,” they tell me, “Talk to future me. That guy is dying, I’m not.”

Like Adam in the garden, to the accusation of God’s direct address in our deaths we seek a substitute. Adam referred God to Eve, and Eve referred God to the serpent. We do the same things with our possessions, our causes, and all the righteousness we pile up to stand for and with us in the midst of death. “The Biblical message teaches everywhere that I am separable from all the powers that surround me and support me, that in this ultimate dimension of my personhood I have to become singularly alone.”

And it is right there in that terrifying solitude, in that naked aloneness of Adam in the garden that we receive new life. Denying that immortality is some substance that is infused into us Thielicke describes God dealing with us in our death as a new address to us:

“I dare not regard my death … as something that no longer strikes the real me, since I am immortal, but moves on bypassing my soul. No, all of me goes down into death. Nothing gives me the right to reject the totality of man, which the Scriptures proclaim in connection with the disaster of death, and suddenly split him into body and soul, into a perishable and imperishable “I” segment. But as a Christian I go down into this death with the complete confidence that I cannot remain therein, since I am one who God has called by name and therefore I shall be called anew on God’s day. I am under the protection of the Resurrected One. I am not immortal, but I await my own resurrection. I am one with whom God has begun to speak. God will not break faith with me in the fellowship he has established, nor will he let it be annulled by death. This is the certainty of my conquering death, founded not in me, but in God. ‘Where and with whomever God speaks whether in anger or in grace that person is surely immortal. The Person of God, who speaks, and the Word point out that we are the kind of creatures with whom God would want to speak eternally and in an immortal manner.’ (Quoting Luther, LW 5, 76)

… Just as I stand with empty hands before God and remain standing, just as I can only beseech God nevertheless to accept me, in just this fashion do I move into my death with empty hands and without any ‘death proof’ substance in my soul, but only with my gaze focused on God’s hand and with the petition on my lips, ‘Hand that will last, hold thou me fast!”

In dying I come before God, who holds not only judgment but also life in his hands, and I come with the confidence that I have no need to trust my good works nor my immortal soul. In fact I dare not even trust them (since the one is really not good and the other is not immortal) and yet I am confident that I am righteous and share in the resurrection by grace alone … I remain in fellowship with him who is Alpha and Omega, and with this knowledge I walk into the night of death, truly the darkest night; yet I know who awaits me in the morning.” (199)

Dying is not just the “end of the ride” to a Christian. Her confession of Christ is not just an assent to salvation as if it were a metaphysical certainty that allows the ride to continue after a brief interruption. (This is what I find behind the drive to get me to pray the “sinner’s prayer” with patients that I get from family members as if it were a kind of medicine that bestows immortality). Nor is her life in Christ about some broader participation in the eternal forms of “love”, “justice”, or any other idols of the tribe” which will stand with me and give my life meaning and value. Dying, as we learn in the catechism, is something that we experience every day in our baptism as we experience the frailties and limitations of our lives as creatures in our bodies and our relationships. And dying is also something that Christ enters into with us just as the divine word gets plunged into that water while we drown. Death and resurrection are present realities. Always in pursuit. Always running at us, one in the darkest night, the other awaiting us in the morning.

Resurrection is not something I dig for inside myself or pull up from some analogical or substitutionary element in creation. Resurrection is instead a new word, that speaks to me after death confronts me and freezes me in my tracks. We can’t escape our dying. We should not want to. It is precisely there that we here this new address, this new word by which we live according not to some self-created law but by the promise of new life which comes not from some co-operative segment in our own “I” but from another person altogether. It’s the very word that Christ speaks to the thief on the cross next to him who knows that Jesus does not belong there but he most certainly does. All he can say in resignation to his fate is “remember me.” But Jesus gives a promise in return. “You might be dying with me, but today you will live with me in paradise.” By this promise he’s more than a memory to Jesus, he’s a companion. And right there is what it means to face the reality of deaths as Christians. Not in dividing or tending to who we are and what we’re doing, but listening to the one who is there with us.

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Sources:

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