

LUTHER'S HANDBOOK ON DYING

by Christopher Raffa



Death is no child's play. But sadly, the children of God play with death, and they get burned every time. There is a carelessness and a recklessness to how we prepare for death. There is also a difference between assistance in death and preparing for death. Hospice can assist you in the dying process, but it cannot prepare you for death. The Gospel, however, prepares you to die well. In his *Warning to His Beloved Germans* of 1531, Martin Luther reminds us why the Reformation was worth dying for: "It has, praise God, come to this, that men and women, young and old, know the catechism and how to believe, live, pray, suffer, and die."

Luther was adamant that we learn how to prepare for death long before its shadow looms over us. How does one prepare? By going to church. We prepare for death by listening to the narrative of salvation wrapped in sermon and hymn, font and Supper. For Luther, the chief subject of all theological meditation, of the Church's speech to dying men, is the interaction between the sinning human being and the justifying God. In God's justifying work, we are the object of His love long before we reach our deathbeds. We prepare for death long before the clock strikes midnight, before the curtain falls, before the casket is closed. We prepare for death by going to the very place where

death is defeated, where time stops, where we receive the medicine of immortality. God prepares us for death by the manifold gifts that He bestows upon us in the temple of His body, the Church.

Defense against the devil

Because Luther sees death as the greatest of all terrors, and because its arrival is always unexpected, we must daily approach death with a repentant heart and the confession of our sin. The devil is a crafty beast of terror, especially when we lie dying. The conscience is a vast playground for the devil. He will use a single sin to throw into doubt all that God has said and done for us. The only defense against such attacks is to run to the Sacrament of the Altar, plead to be given this bread of life always and say to the arch deceiver, “If you can terrorize, so can my Christ strengthen; if you can kill, so can Christ give life. If you have poison in your fangs, Christ has far greater medicine.”

Healthy or sick, those who did not seek care from their pastor greatly pained Luther. We recoil and are jolted when Luther says, “A private pulpit and altar cannot be set up just because they have despised the public pulpit and altar to which God has summoned and called them.” Preparing for death requires one’s pastor, a *seelsorger*, a curate of the soul. It’s a travesty for Luther that a person having a faithful pastor would not call upon him prior to an unresponsive state, to receive the gifts that give a blessed death. Luther bemoans that people “at the last minute want the Gospel taught and the sacrament administered as when they lived under the papacy, when nobody asked whether they believed or understood the Gospel but just stuffed the sacrament down their throats as if into a bread bag.”

No child’s play

Luther’s words show us why the Reformation was worth dying for. Luther’s words show us why catechesis is imperative in preparation for death. Nothing can replace faithful catechesis in midst of death’s ever-widening jaws. There is no weekend Christian training, some haphazard slapstick instructional member class. Why? Because those who believe this are enlisting in a fierce battle with their sinful nature, the world, the devil and their final enemy — death. Catechesis is from the cradle in order that we may properly prepare for the grave.

Death is no child’s play. It strips you of everything until you have nothing. And yet, there is a child who plays with death in a manger and upon a cross. Astonishingly, He strips death of its power and renders it a mere shadow. Luther would have you prepare for death long before death comes knocking. He would have you look far beyond the securing of your earthly affairs. He would have you immerse yourself in Scripture and hymn and Sacrament and ponder the life and death of God for the eternal life of man. **LW**

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