

M. Laubscher

Dr. M. Laubscher, Department
Practical and Missional
Theology, University of the
Free State
E-mail: laubscher@ufs.ac.za
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4240-1991>

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BOOK REVIEW

THE END OF CHRISTIAN LIFE. HOW EMBRACING OUR MORTALITY FREES US TO TRULY LIVE

Billings, J.T., (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans),
240pp. ISBN: 978-1-58743-420-4 (R298)

If you have read Todd Billings' previous work, you might perhaps already have noted (and read!) his most recent book. Let me phrase this slightly differently and more precisely: Most of the readers, who have probably heard and shared the recommendations of Billings' previous works such as *Calvin, participation, and the gift: The activity of believers in union with Christ* (2008); *The Word of God for the people of God* (2010); *Union with Christ: Reframing theology and ministry for the church* (2011); *Calvin's theology and its reception: Disputes, developments, and new possibilities* (co-edited with John Hesselink, 2012); *Rejoicing in lament: Wrestling with incurable cancer and life in Christ* (2015), and/or *Remembrance, communion, and hope: Rediscovering the Gospel at the Lord's table* (2018), would thus also be very interested in his most recent book on facing one of the most profound existential questions in life, namely how to deal with our mortality – engaging death – and start living anew.



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As with previous work, Billings engages the subject in a deeply existential and theologically sound manner. His reflexivity on his own pilgrimage of the past couple of years is not only very personal and moving, but also quite revealing about the bigger traditions and cultures within which we could find ourselves. With this book, he helps us discover some of the ways in which we are called to travel along on this pilgrimage that starts with the embrace of death, in order to liberate us for life.

The book “as an act of pilgrimage” (p. 17) is also visible in the well-thought through structure of the various chapters. Chapter one starts with the realisation that we are all living in *sheol* (a place of darkness), whether we know it or not. Drinking again from the wells of the Psalms, Billings shows how the Israelites “repeatedly suggested that the biological dead are not the sole inhabitants of Sheol” (p. 23). The profound insight is the following: “[T]he most fundamental polarity is not between biological death but between the Lord’s presence and the Lord’s apparent absence” (p. 25). In other words, before we can deal with biological death, we first need to engage with death-in-all-its-forms-of-darkness itself and, in the process, we shall discover what it means to be alive and truly live. Mere compartmentalisation of death, as merely the last thing to happen to us (or only to others!), is for numerous reasons very superficial and misleading. In fact, in light of life, we start to see (face and unmask) more forms of death itself. In short, the first chapter sets off by radicalising this particular pilgrimage of embracing both the profound reality of life and death in our midst.

Chapter two explores this line of thought further, as our mortality can be viewed as both our enemy and friend. Drawing on the insights of Augustine and Irenaeus, respectively, death could be both irrational and pedagogy. In essence, I believe that Billings helps us have a more nuanced and constructive engagement with our limitedness as such. He wants us to appreciate anew the insight that “to live as a fallen creature without a terminus could, in fact, be a banishment to Sheol” (p. 51). Behind this idea are some profound insights such as, for instance, the mere awareness that life itself consists of various facets and stages, and that each carries, within itself, the potential of being a sincere gift to us. Within this context, we are introduced to Irenaeus’ thoughts for whom “the embodied arc of growth, adulthood, and dying is a creaturely good” (p. 55). In dealing with death upfront, we discover what it truly means to live as we learn to trust in God throughout all of life’s stages and phases. As we grow into trusting God, so we mature being rooted in Christ, in whom we know death is defeated, and life is abundant and everlasting. But, as Billings admits in the end, this view of Irenaeus is perhaps not all there is to death (and in certain contexts even offensive), because, as we hear from Augustine,

death is also irrational, an enemy, and it surely continues to sting with severe affliction.

There is, in other words, a sure element of truth to Irenaeus' thought on trusting and maturing in God throughout life, but we also know all too well that often

death stalks creatures simply to tear them apart, not to help fertilize the soil and push the cycle of life into its next beautiful season (p. 63).

It is against this backdrop, arguably knowing we need the perspectives of both Irenaeus and Augustine (death as a pedagogy into maturity and real trust, and an irrational enemy), that Billings insightfully states that any claim of an untimely death that serves God's glory is perhaps more a case of "that glory involves a stripping of earthly glory", and (this is the profound part) "a participation in Christ's dark death" (p. 65). As we know, Jesus entered darkness, and died in that darkness. We can also know that all other deaths belong to Christ in life and death, meaning that any

death in darkness is mysteriously a death in the temple, in Christ as the dwelling place of God, in the one in whom 'there is no darkness at all' (p. 66).

Although Billings leaves it there, I find it quite illuminating that, even in (most of) these irrational, hostile, and murky situations, we are not mere passive victims or spectators of death, but can willingly and actively participate in His death (and resurrection) – the One who embraced the cross, and died (rejoicing in lament) as no victim or spectator of death itself. In short, we are no longer victims of this enemy and, although it might be irrational, it is placed within the sphere of an intriguing, consoling, and promising mystery.

In the next three chapters, Billings shows how his theological GPS also engages some of the most pressing contextual developments and questions Westerners inevitably need to face nowadays on this pilgrimage. Chapter three deals with our generation's apparent denial (in suppression, fear, and even a strange partialisation [or, even as my spellchecker suggests, "patriotization"]) of death in many contemporary Western cultures. The quest for a more nuanced position comes to the fore, as "the goal for the Christian life is not eliminating the fear of death but removing death from its throne" (pp. 75-76). Such unmasking of the fear of death has some very pertinent sociopolitical implications, as the lure for authoritarianism looms largely again in so many societies at present. In an important paragraph, Billings formulates the following:

Perceiving and living in small ways, taking in just a tiny bit of the fathomless reality in our midst, can be a wonderful thing. When a sudden brush with death turns us inward, we tend to protect our in-group and demonize outsiders – leading to horrific ends. But properly embracing our moral limits can result in daily practice of wonder when we surrender to life's enormity as creatures who know we are small (pp. 86-87).

The truth, which knows and accepts that we are not in control and that the small little details in our lives are indeed beautiful, also confronts the notorious “big lie” (since the release of his book) that actually “believes” in these authoritarian leaders’ promises that we apparently can overcome death through enduring power of nation, race, wealth, and military might. In this context, the so-called “big lie” means much more than simply the fantasy of a rigged election, but the projection of our own messianic capabilities, and its “eternal politics”. In short, the “denial” of death (read: the fear of losing, and especially losing control and power) – and thus actually believing in your own “big lie” – manifests not only in mere fabrication of our own narrative and “facts”, or merely in being factually ill-informed by our media and news feeds, or even wishful thinking, but is also on a more profound level blatantly blasphemous. Denial of death thus often manifests in “having faith” in a blasphemous big lie, and thus is (as we have noted) extremely dangerous – yes, even extremely deadly itself.

Our denial of death (and life) is, of course, not only visible within much of the current (and extremely politicised) cultural wars people project and fight, but strangely enough perhaps also fuelled by our fervent “belief” in modern-day medicine. Chapter four’s key question is: “How should we live and die on this planet of modern medicine?” (p. 97). Billings’ answer is again carefully phrased, yet clear:

Make no mistake: medicine is gift. But it's only a small flashlight, when what we need is a shining sun to see what's going on, to see what it means to be a dying creature before the One whose days have no end” (p. 98).

A few pages on, he puts the matter even further into perspective with a beautifully written paragraph:

[I]n our rapidly changing society, in which dying has been institutionalized and the ordinary process of dying has been removed from our daily experience, medicine is often not received as a gift. Instead, we cling to it as a cloak to shield us from the daily reality that we are all dying. We fail to acknowledge that even the best medical treatment has no solution for the diagnosis of death. Instead of receiving medical care as

gracious gift from the Lord, we look to it as a golden calf, a self-made god that can become our tyrannical master (p. 105).

This presumptuous treatment of modern-day medicine is, of course, not only visible within the medical sphere and discourses (meaning, of course, among Christians as well), but it also shows its true face in our Christian funerals and liturgies in the mere way in which we treat the body/coffin/and-life-story of the deceased. Our so-called “Godfather problem”, to which Jamie Smith refers in his work, is again apparent, as many funerals’ liturgies do not confront and expose the death-denying culture, but with all due respect, rather give it a (Christian!) baptism by sugar-coating death.

Without the liturgy of a monthly funeral, without the regular practice of sitting with the dying, we leave it to the tailored dramas of television or the highly charged outrage of the news cycle to portray the concrete process of dying (p. 110).

In fact, not merely pleading for a more attuned and sensitive awareness for Christian funerals and its peculiar liturgies, but actually for the church’s liturgy itself – starting with the way in which we administer baptism as fundamental to orientate, prepare, and set us off on the road and pilgrimage of living deeper into our baptisms, and thus living towards facing a “holy death” (cf. p. 116).

The above cultural (and very much political) critique, and eventually liturgical self-critique, sets us up for the fifth chapter’s focus on unmasking the prosperity gospel’s false vision of the Christian way of life. Being a cancer patient, and a father of young children, Billings suspects that “God may be up to something different than providing me with middle-class American ‘prosperity’” (p. 124). To be blunt and state the ultimate, our hope is in essence not about life extension, but about having the eternal life we have in Christ to its fullness (p. 131). The focus (of the Gospel) is not about health-and-wealth, but rather being-and-maturing into who we are in Jesus Christ. We can flourish even (more) as we approach and accept death, knowing that our hope is ultimately not in some of these extreme (and often very desperate) treatments, but in the Resurrected One (p. 145).

The two remaining concerns of the vast majority of people on this pilgrimage towards facing the “empty tomb” is: What do we actually “know” in terms of life after death (Chapter six), and what do we actually mean by hope in the end (Chapter seven). In terms of the intermediate state, Billings affirms that “the New Testament provides very few details ... except that it is in union with Christ” (p. 156). There seems to be “a mysteriously two-dimensional, black-and-white vision rather than the full-colour, three-dimensional vision of the final consummation”. One of the significant reasons in grappling with this aspect is that it unmasks and resists many of the functional (flat and simplistic)

one-stage eschatologies floating around in the name of Christianity. Or, more positively phrased, it speaks about “a two-stage hope about the end”, whereby we die in fellowship with Christ, awaiting the great drama to come (p. 157).

What about the many “near death experiences” (NDE) out there and among Christians? Billings obviously wants to take this seriously, but not without bracketing the matter with qualifications such as – in the words of Scott McKnight – that it is not really reliable guides to use, as they are in essence “pre-” or “near-” death experiences, and not “post-” death experiences (p. 169). However, this does not mean that Billings is dismissing the potential of the matter at issue in this instance, as he concludes with the following telling remarks (and it is worth the while to quote him at length):

Perhaps they are neither purely illusory nor reliable anticipations of the life to come. Perhaps they reflect who we are as humans – soaked in the grandeur of God’s glory, testifying to our transcendent purpose of knowing and glorifying God, even in the face of death. ... [T]hese people – squeezed and broken – are telling stories that point beyond themselves. They pray prayers that ache for more than merely seeing their losses as random events in a world of chance. They may not be given us direct ‘information’ about the life to come, from a Christian standpoint, but they are expressing their God-given longing for the temple, the loving presence and reign of God (pp. 174-175).

Thus, these fringe issues are taken seriously, without becoming the actual focus. They come into perspective as they point and reference beyond themselves. Whether we go to bed, or engage death, we are called to grow and mature into surrendering our bodies to God. Or, as Billings himself recalls and references another symbolic act and ritual of significance:

We handed over our children to the minister’s hands in baptism, a sign of God’s covenant promise; we handed our children over to the promise of death and of new life in Christ alone (p. 189).

Hope in the end is not coloured by some kind of speculative vision of the future, but with rest in God and his promises (p. 181). The significance of this is in terms not only of the end (our telos), but also of our beginning and origins. Our lives are not framed by ourselves, but by Christ born of a virgin and raised from the dead.

Unless we frankly recognize that Christ’s birth and resurrection come forth from places of hopelessness and helplessness, we’ve not understood their meaning (p. 187).

In conclusion: I have read and reviewed this work in a time when a close friend of mine is also learning (and teaching us) how to embrace our mortality

anew. Months ago, he received the fatal prognosis of his cancer, and the end (in more than one sense) of the pilgrimage is near. These friendships, with Billings' book on the one side, and my visits and prayers to my dying friend helped me anew remember my own mortality, and what it means to trust and rely on God's promises. The joy is indeed

not found in living as if we are immortal, [but] in giving ourselves away, in all of our temporal and crumbling weakness (p. 217).

The book deals with one of the big and most profound questions in life with much refreshing insight and light. Many thanks and much appreciation for sharing this gift with us. Highly recommended.