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Near-Death Experience was my reading topic for 2012. The year before, it was books by Walker Percy. Near-death experience is a popular subject right now. On the *New York Times* best-seller list, non-fiction, Dr. Eben Alexander's *Proof of Heaven* only lately dropped to number two.

I've read Dr. Alexander's book, of course, and many other near-death experience reports and studies. The literature is a cacophony of worldviews, as Christian fundamentalists, scientific materialists, and new age spiritualists offer their competing interpretations of near-death phenomena. Materialists believe that reality consists of energy and matter, nothing more, so near-death experience must have a purely neurochemical or psychological explanation. Dr. Ronald Siegel, for example, suggests that the trauma of imminent death calls forth religious fantasies so powerful that "images originating within the rooms of the brain may be perceived as though they came from outside the windows of the senses."¹ Spiritualists tell a different story, based on the belief that souls are disembodied spirits. Dr. Raymond Moody, the founder of modern near-death studies, has hosted events where mediums channel spirits of the dead.²

Christian faith cannot endorse either materialism or spiritualism. Materialism denies God, whose existence we of course affirm and whose character we flesh out in detail. Spiritualism is also at many points inconsistent with the gospel, which is why we do not find a liturgy for channeling in the Book of Common Prayer.

If we are then neither materialists nor spiritualists, what are we?

Ours is a "sacramental" worldview, believing there is more to reality than energy and matter. We understand the universe as a creation, like a play or novel. Life has an author, characters, a plot with twists and turns—an unfolding drama. There is a central figure, and a decisive moment, that T.S. Eliot called the "still point of the turning world." We find liturgies describing all of this throughout the Book of Common Prayer.

Do we believe them?

Walker Percy, who did believe them, also thought that southern Christianity ran skin deep. Most of the men he knew—lawyers, duck hunters, golfers—deep down were materialists and stoics. They live in the shadow of a Christian edifice, as GK Chesterton had described the type, but stand grumbling on the porch, neither leaving nor going in.³ The women in Percy's stories—good looking and good hearted, for the most part—lean spiritualist. In *Love in the Ruins*, Dr. Tom More, thinking about his wife, says there is a "certain type of Episcopal girl" who just past youth will "commence buying antiques and

develop a yearning for esoteric doctrines.⁴ In *The Moviegoer*, Binx Bolling fondly remembers his aunt, who described herself as “an Episcopalian by emotion, a Greek by nature and a Buddhist by choice.”⁵

So who knows what’s really going on out there inside those heads of yours?

Materialists and spiritualists agree that church is not important. Materialists are interested in church only insofar as its influence occasionally impinges on things that count, like science, politics and economics. Spiritualists regret that the church is interested in the wrong things, like rules and dogma.

Within our sacramental worldview, on the other hand, church is important. Among other reasons, church is important as bearer of the torch by whose light science, politics and economics can discover their own origin and meaning. Karl Barth’s book, *Church Dogmatics* (which title my late good looking and good-hearted sister once noticed on my reading table, and disparaged) describes the material world—the arena of science, politics, economics, golf, duck hunting, and antiquing—as the theater for the drama of God’s unfolding involvement with humankind. As the story goes, God became involved to help us, to create a relationship with us, a bond, doing that not by fiat or coercion, but by love, in freedom, appealing to our capacity to recognize what is good and beautiful, and choose it. The name for that choice is “faith;” and its shape is “church.”

“Christ has died,” we say in church. “Christ is Risen. Christ will come again.” Our mantra. It identifies decisive moments in the unfolding story. We gather tonight along the line between the second moment, which has already happened, and the third, which hasn’t yet. How long a time this interval might be, no one knows.

In the *Church Dogmatics*, Barth says we live between two “direct visions” of the truth about the world and God, and the first is enough to tell us all we need to know. Already, he said, we live in the “strength of the resurrection.” Already, he said, we live by the “light of Easter day.” The church “already has behind it the end which it awaits.”⁶ We are secure.

Take heaven, for example. There is a simple proof. If God is powerful enough to create an afterlife in heaven, and if God is good enough to want to, then an afterlife in heaven there will be. Regarding God’s goodness and capacity, prepare to be enlightened Easter morning.

There’s your proof of heaven, and it brings with it assurance of your value as a human being, of your spiritual nature and moral responsibility, of the goodness and pathos of the world around you, of the limits God has placed on evil’s capacity to harm you, and of the grace through which you, in all your faults, have found redemption—you and me both. We know these things already. They are as true as two and two makes four. That is why we are secure.

Now the problem: unlike two and two makes four, it takes faith to know the resurrection. Compared to certain other kinds of knowledge, the assurances of faith seem relatively weak. Thomas Aquinas knew this, and he knew why: our inbuilt knowing apparatus is built primarily with earth in mind. As “proof,” we’ll take sight, sound, taste, touch, or smell over logic any day.

That is why Dr. Alexander’s *Proof of Heaven* outsells the *Church Dogmatics*. The author, who had been one of Walker Percy’s southern stoics, woke up from a coma one day saying quite sincerely that he had been there and seen the place with his own two eyes. That is also why a convincing medium might be reassuring to a grieving parent in a way that reasonable believing isn’t.

Comparing the certainty of science with that of faith, Aquinas said that faith gives both less certainty and more: more, in that faith’s knowledge of God is anchored in God’s own certainty about himself, which is firmer ground than the reasoning processes that make science and logic possible; yet also less, in that where science and logic claim truth we can see the reasons for it, while faith is left to scratch its head sometimes. That is why my doctorate in theology doesn’t command your attention in matters concerning, for example, grace, in the way that a doctorate in medicine does concerning heart disease or cancer.

But even so, grace is our more deeply needed medicine.

“What is grace?” asks the Book of Common Prayer, and then it tells us: “Grace is God’s favor towards us, unearned and undeserved; by grace God forgives our sins, enlightens our minds, stirs our hearts, and strengthens our wills.”⁷

Grace is what happens in the bond between ourselves and God, as we recognize the good and beautiful and choose it. It is where the spiritual takes material effect. In the intelligence, grace surfaces as faith; in the memory, as hope; in the will, as love.⁸ When we pray for grace, faith, hope and love are what we’re praying for.

That prayer is answered with a morsel of bread and sip of wine. “Sacraments,” we call them.

In our sacramental worldview, these little tastes of bread and wine are signs of grace as sure as two and two makes four. The symbols were carefully chosen. What does wine suggest? Happiness, of course, as it is written: “Wine maketh glad the heart of man” (Psalm 104:15). What is bread then? Sustenance, of course, the food we live by.

The analogy is clear: what bread and wine are materially in us, Christ is spiritually in us. Logic gets us that far, and Jesus spells it out. In Luke, he says his kingdom is “new wine.” In John, he says I am “living bread,” come down from heaven.

Now, tonight, near death, Jesus adds his own impending death to the meaning in these symbols. This bread is my body. This cup is my blood. The Passover overtones are clear: “Tomorrow is a sacrifice, and I am the lamb.”

Holy Communion puts us in that room that night with Jesus. There, he moves us by his faith. Betrayed, facing execution, he knows the plot, understands his part and resolves to play it through. “Now my soul is troubled. Should I say ‘Father save me from this hour? No, it is for this reason I have come to this hour.’” Here at the origin of Christian faith, in Christ himself, faith finds its best possible example.

Holy Communion puts him in this room, tonight, with us. “This is my body. This is my blood.” This is your pardon, your happiness, your life—right here, right now.

We suffer sometimes, yes, as he did: and our sufferings are not as worth comparing with the glory yet to be revealed.

We are disappointed sometimes, yes, with ourselves, by others: and yet, as it was true for him, it true for us, that to play a part in human history is our privilege and responsibility.

We are weak, yes, as he was too: in the grace that lets his weakness be our strength, and his death our resurrection.

¹ Fox, *Valley of the Shadow*, 171, citing Siegel 1993:254-5.

² Sabom, 2186.

³ Walker Percy, “Stoicism in the South,” in *Signposts*. “The greatness of the South, like the greatness of the English Squierarchy, had always a stronger Greek flavor than it ever had a Christian. . . . The Southern gentleman did live in a Christian edifice, but he live there in the strange fashion Chesterton spoke of, that of a man who will neither go inside nor put it entirely behind him, but stands forever grumbling on the porch.”

⁴ Percy, *Love in the Ruins*, 1071. “A certain type of Episcopal girl has a weakness that comes on them just past youth, just as sure as Italian girls get fat.

They fall prey to Gnostic pride, commence buying antiques, and develop a yearning for esoteric doctrines.”

⁵ Percy, *The Moviegoer*, 284.

⁶ Barth, CD IV.1, 725-28.

⁷ BCP, 858.

⁸ I draw here from John of Cross, as interpreted by Denys Turner.