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## **Recovering the Doctrine of Recapitulation For Contemporary Healing and Death Ministries**

The western experience of death is radically in need of reconnection to it. In the past few centuries, death has been taken from the human experience through life-sustaining medical options and industrialized funerary practices when death does occur. We no longer have to see death. This medicalized and industrialized agency in death is detrimental to our experience as humans. Professor Tim Short, a nursing professor at UVA and Director of the Education Institute at Hospice of the Piedmont in Charlottesville, VA, says, “Our society has lost touch with the last experience of every living thing. In the United States, we have almost come to think of dying as elective.”<sup>1</sup>

Bringing discussions about death to the forefront of societal norms can reverse the detrimental attitudes and fears around death and dying. The Church should be front and center in these discussions. Irenaeus of Lyons, a second century Bishop and arguably the first systematic Christian theologian, saw the death and resurrection of

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<sup>1</sup> Sandy Hausman, “Pandemic Underscores Need for End of Life Training,” Online article published August 6, 2020. <https://www.wvtf.org/post/pandemic-underscores-need-end-life-training#stream/0>. Keeping with this attitude proposes a significant risk, not only for the dying and their loved ones but also for the workers in our healthcare system. A ‘no dying’ mentality harms patients and families; it harms doctors and nurses.

Jesus Christ as the restoration of humanity back to God's image and likeness.

Irenaeus' salvation theology of *recapitulation* uses dynamic metaphorical themes such as Christ as the second Adam and resurrection as restoration.<sup>2</sup> The doctrine of recapitulation, the rebuilding of the human back to the image and likeness of God, should be the primary starting point for building a ministry to meet today's need to speak about death and can be recovered as an essential element in the ministry of healing, especially at death.

This project is a culmination of a dramatic and personal healing experience and the recovery from addiction. I believe this to be a calling. I have always taken a great interest in healing. At the young age of 8 or 9 years old, I recall a fascination with the story of Clara Barton, a pioneering nurse who's bravery founded the Red Cross mission. I am the daughter of a physician, and I wanted to be a nurse when I was young. My life took a different direction because I struggled with addiction. Now, I can see there is a more profound call for my life with administering healing. In the search for personal healing, I have practiced as many healing methods as possible out of complete desperation in finding relief from my afflictions. I have found that death and resurrection is the only healing method that saves.

This essay will briefly share my recovery story to set the stage for a new kind of contemporary healing ministry. There is no better time for renewal than now because our western culture has turned away from death in hopes of finding life. I will share my healing experience through my grandmother's death, setting the stage for a personal death and resurrection of recovery from addiction. Through my experience, I have

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. C.W. McPherson, *Irenaeus of Lyons: Against the Heresies So-called*, Book 5 translation and commentary (Pentecost 2004), 5.

come to believe Irenaeus' model of recapitulation is the foundation of a Christian theology for ministering to the experience of death. This essay will detail Irenaeus' themes of recapitulation. I will also introduce the *Death Positive* movement, a secular philosophical movement aimed at redefining death, as a powerful platform for the proclamation of this message.

### The Gift of Unexpected Healing

In the spring of 2013, my grandmother died. I was able to see her in her last days, and at her age of 97, I caught a glimpse of my future if my life were to continue in the way it was. Like me, my grandmother was controlled by eating disorders. For her, it was a battle that she did not overcome before death. As I watched her die, I was frightened because I had tried every method I could find without finding any relief from a twenty-year struggle of starving my body. At the age of fifteen, when my trial with Anorexia Nervosa began, I searched the scriptures for Bible verses relating to the body. I kept them in a journal, hoping I would come to see how I was “fearfully and wonderfully made.”<sup>3</sup> Twenty years later, at the age of thirty-five, I came to see through my grandmother's death, the powerlessness of the creature to recreate itself into something new.

At the time of my grandmother's death, I was deeply engaged with studying Christian healing methods of charismatic prayer and faith-healing practices. I was avidly clinging to these charismatic healing practices along with the prosperity gospel. I wanted a miraculous release from the bondage of eating disorders and the

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<sup>3</sup> “I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well” (Psalm 139:14). All scripture references are NRSV unless otherwise noted.

compulsive behaviors that went along with the disease. I wanted to be free of suffering. Painfully, I realized these methods were not producing results that they promised. I doubted God, faith, and prayer.

Regardless of this painful experience with popular Christian healing methods, through God's grace and faithfulness, healing eventually arrived, and I am now free from the bondage of addiction. I have also experienced a full restoration of my bone density lost through twenty years of starving myself. In 2016, I spoke on my healing at a Christian conference in NYC and said these words, "It is like a skilled surgeon has removed a dangerous cancer that will quickly return unless I remain under his cure." My healing experience is something I prayed for over twenty years, but still, it came as a surprise. It is my belief we don't find healing; healing finds us.

In looking back, I see how one could never prepare for the grace and mercy of God. The beautiful thing about addiction is that the need for healing is most likely a life or death situation. It is universally evident that the 12-step recovery program is proven essential in the restoration of life for the addict facing death. To admit powerlessness is to surrender the fantasy of helping oneself. It is all that is left when every method has failed. Extinguished are any beliefs in self-help promises or optimistic thinking. To surrender is to give control to the only One who *can* restore life – the same One who once knelt in the garden facing the agony of his death. Recovery for an addict is in essence dying; life must be made new. So it is also for every sinner.

## Irenaeus and the Model of Recapitulation

Irenaeus of Lyons believed, “We never could have learned anything had we not seen him with our own eyes and heard his voice with our own ears.”<sup>4</sup> In Jesus Christ, God fully lives in the experience of our human nature. He prays in such agony over His death that His sweat turns to blood (Luke 22:44). Death is real, even for God. God can do whatever God pleases, and God chose to plunge into the misery of death and demonstrate dying in front of the world, nailed to a cross. When speaking of the addict’s surrender of life to God, the Rev. Sam Shoemaker wrote this: “We felt we had come somewhere within hearing distance of His [Jesus Christ’s] tremendous surrender ‘Let this cup pass...nevertheless, not my will, but Thine be done.’”<sup>5</sup>

The problem with contemporary healing ministries is that they do not work when taken out of the context of God's eschatological plan for creation. I remember the frustration of pouring over the healing scenes in Scripture while trying to understand what is not working in replicating Biblical miracles these days. The Scriptures tell stories of the blind receiving sight, the sick receiving health, the lame rising to their feet with their mat in hand, and the dead raised. I do not believe in adopting the attitude that God has not healed in this way since the days of the early Church. Jesus commissioned his disciples to continue to heal in his Name. Therefore, to make any real sense of a healing ministry from the perspective of ‘dying,’ it is essential to understand the salvific cohesion between creation and the eschaton.

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<sup>4</sup> McPherson, *Irenaeus*, 10.

<sup>5</sup> Sam Shoemaker, *Children of the Second Birth*, (NY: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1927), 182-3. Sam Shoemaker was the Rector of Calvary Church in NYC in 1925-51. This book was published before the founding of Alcoholics Anonymous in 1935, and Bill Wilson credits Shoemaker for giving AA its spiritual shape.

The Very Rev. Dr. John Behr is perhaps the best contemporary source of knowledge for this project. His conversations on death in modern society and his attention to Irenaeus' theme of recapitulation are noteworthy.<sup>6</sup> Behr writes:

In the latter part of the last century, there has been much discussion of our 'denial of death.' But it would seem to me that the problem is deeper and more difficult. If it is true that Christ shows us *what* it is to be God in the *way* that he dies as a human being, then, quite simply, if we no longer 'see' death, we no longer see the face of God.<sup>7</sup>

There is a direct correlation between talking about death and the stability of our faith. If death is a reality we wish to deny, then our faith for healing will be at risk. If the ability to see death is taken away, in the context of today's faith-healing ministries, we might ask, *how were we not able with our faith to raise the dead?*

Irenaeus' salvific recapitulation model, Christ as the second Adam, is coherent and indeed seen in Luke's genealogy (3:23-38). Christ is the recapitulation of all generations, beginning in eternity. The 'first Adam,' who was formed as "a type of the one who was to come" (Rom 5:14), is the "preliminary sketch" of Christ, who existed from eternity, and was still to come.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Behr contends the work of Irenaeus was likely taken for granted. According to H. B. Swete, "No early Christian writer has deserved better of the whole Church than Irenaeus." *Against the Heresies and Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* are his only two surviving works, both translated versions. John Behr, "Irenaeus of Lyons," In *Christian Theologies of Salvation*, ed. Justin Holcomb (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 41.

<sup>7</sup> John Behr, "The Christian Art of Dying," *Sobornost* 35,1-2 (2013): 137.

<sup>8</sup> In John's gospel, the writer refreshingly conceives Christ's presence at Creation: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being" (John 1: 1-3).

So God created humankind in his image,  
in the image of God he created them;  
male and female he created them (Gen 1:27).

Adam was created “in the image” of Christ, who is “the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation” (Col 1:15).<sup>9</sup> Christ, the firstborn from eternity, is the Savior, and so Adam, only an animated human, was created to be saved:

Because the Word, the Fashioner of all things, prefigured in him the future economy relating to the Son of God on behalf of the human race, God having predetermined the first, the animated human that is, so that he should be saved by the spiritual [one]; for, since the Saviour pre-exists, it was necessary that the one to be saved should also exist, so that the Saviour should not be without purpose.<sup>10</sup>

As only a “type,” the original formation of Adam is brought to completion in Christ, which is the life he is to grow into “by learning through experience”:

The unfolding of the economy cannot therefore be told by beginning with Adam, considered in himself, proceeding to the “Fall,” then the “history of salvation” and finally to Christ, but must be told such that the end and the beginning mutually inform each other in one arc, both synchronously, so that the arrangement of the

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Behr, “Irenaeus,” 43.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 41-42.

whole is revealed together in its recapitulation, and diachronous, as it is unfolded throughout [our] time.<sup>11</sup>

Irenaeus sees Christ as the first principle rather than a response to Adam's transgression.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, the Gospel cannot be expressed solely as God's resolution for the error of Adam. Behr clearly explains: "For Irenaeus, the Gospel is not simply a narration of the next stage or a new step in God's dealings with the human race, but rather the recapitulation of Scripture through the Cross, in a concise word."<sup>13</sup>

Christ's resurrection opened Scripture to reveal recapitulation expressed throughout history. The notion of recapitulation is particularly evident in the story of Joseph, who was sold into slavery by his brothers to be their deliverer later. Joseph tells his brothers, "Do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life... So it was not you who sent me here, but God" (Gen 45:5,8).<sup>14</sup> The theme of recapitulation culminates in the crucifixion. By the hands of the human race, Christ was delivered up to death, although he was

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<sup>11</sup> Behr, "Irenaeus," 44. Behr succinctly expresses Irenaeus' logic: "Christ is no plan B!" Ibid., 42.

<sup>12</sup> Early church theology focused on the Christ event as a ransom paid to the Devil, who held sinful humanity bound under his authority. God must pay the price equal to or greater than the value of all the captive souls. This price, of course, was God's Son. There are significant Scripture references to support the theory that the Son of Man came "to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mk 10:45, Matt 20:28, 1 Tim 2:6). Beginning in the Middle Ages with Anselm of Canterbury (b. 1033), the tide was turned on the ransom theory of the Christ event. Instead of Christ fulfilling the debt to the devil, Christ's death fulfilled the indebtedness of creation to God. Jesus' death atoned for sinful humanity, and creation was reconciled to God. These are two very different notions on salvation, and thus, Irenaeus' theology of recapitulation is reflective of the ransom tone. Cf. David Hogg, "Theologies of Salvation in the Middle Ages," In *Christian Theologies of Salvation*, ed. Justin Holcomb (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 115-118.

<sup>13</sup> Behr, "Irenaeus," 42.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Ibid., 44.

“handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God” (Acts 2:23).<sup>15</sup>

At work in these illustrations is God’s redeeming strength through human weakness. The transforming power of God is made perfect in weakness (cf. 2 Cor 12:9). It is paradoxical: God’s creation put the Son of God on a cross, yet God works it for salvation. Human apostasy is turned “inside out” to reveal God’s foreordained plan for creation. Through Adam’s apostasy, by which death entered the world, Christ enters into death so that Adam is saved from it.<sup>16</sup> In reaching to “be like God,” Adam lost his likeness to God (Gen 3:5). In dying, Christ demonstrates what it is to be like God. His death delivers humankind from the ‘fear of death’ (Heb 2:15) because only death grants the return to life.

### The Role of Disobedience in Salvation

From creation, Adam was always a creature, a type, through whom the Creator works; never was he meant to stand alone with an active capacity to good works.

Adam’s turn to evil through temptation opened the way for death.<sup>17</sup> In examining

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>17</sup> By way of Satan’s twisting scheme, Adam’s apostasy is that Adam believed he had the potency to be like God in a self-governing manner, knowing good from evil. Of particular interest to me in healing and recovery is the bound will. In this case, the postlapsarian problem is the understanding of the good. In his Heidelberg Disputation, Luther claims that we do not even know what is good; we do not know good from evil. What appears to us to be good is, in all actuality, evil if it has been attained outside of grace by the self-governance of the will. Cf. Gerhard Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 81. For Augustine, Adam did not will evil as if it was something of itself; to will at all is to will the good. Evil cannot be willed, it is *privatio boni*. The finite creature participating in God’s infinite being, who is the source of good, is where freedom occurs, but Adam’s choice is a slipping from this freedom. Therefore, the self-governance of the will is only an illusion or fantasy. Cf. John Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (London: Routledge, 2003), 7-9.

Adam's transgression from the vantage point of Christ's incarnation, only through death can Adam, or any human being, receive true life intended in and by the one who was still to come. Adam, who is only an animated human being at first, given the breath of life, must expel this breath through dying to be vivified with the spiritual breath only bestowed in Christ.<sup>18</sup> Thus, death is the gateway to resurrection as restoration into the likeness of God. As the Apostle Paul says, "What you sow does not come to life unless it dies" (1 Cor 15:36).

The story of Jonah produces a revelatory meaning for the role of disobedience and death in receiving true life. Just as death is the way to life, disobedience is the way to obedience. The prophet Jonah is at first disobedient to God's call at Nineveh, and his experience of being swallowed up by the great whale is a picture of the human's experience of being swallowed by death. Jonah learns obedience (he is to be a servant of the Lord) through his experience, and in the end, is expelled from the belly of the whale, and to the glory of God, Nineveh repents upon Jonah's preaching. In essence, Jonah's call is not different from the call to Adam and Eve as servants to the Lord in the caretaking of creation.<sup>19</sup> In the end, we learn obedience by imitating Christ, who is life, and this is most starkly evident in following after Christ in taking up our cross and dying to the self. Humility is the proper position of the creature before the Creator. Even from the beginning, we must have grace. God consigned God's creation to sin in order to have mercy (Cf. Rom 11:32). In looking at the beginning from the end, death and disobedience lead the way to true life, salvation unhoped-for and secure.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. Behr, "Irenaeus," 46, 49.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 49-50.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 49

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul tells his fellow believers: “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death” (Phil. 3:10). Life’s last experience cannot be ignored or outsourced as if death does not happen, or at least that it does not occur in the capacity that it does, the transformation to real life. It is more important than any other experience since and including birth:

We don’t find purpose at the beginning, we find it at the end, looking backward. Purpose comes from what is final looking backward, not from potential long in wait at the beginning. In fact, the Greek work for end, telos, means “end” both as a final state and as a purpose or goal. God has a telos for nature, even if we can’t see it within nature. It is the future act of redemption that determines what the previous will have meant, and this can be discerned only eschatologically.<sup>21</sup>

### Death Positive

*Death Positive* is a philosophical and social movement gaining momentum through community efforts of bringing death back into our conversations. It is a culture shift ushering in a positive mindset around death as part of living well. The goal of the movement is to redefine death. A few examples of these efforts are Death over Dinner, Death Cafes, and End of Life Doulas. The former settings are organized gatherings where people come together to eat and share creative conversations regarding mortality. These functions are springing up all over the country. An End of Life Doula is a non-medical professional trained to help patients and families facing death. The

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<sup>21</sup> Ted Peters, *Can you believe in God and Evolution?* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008 ),120.

concept is modeled off of a birthing doula, who serves a family in the pregnancy and birth of a baby. There is an increasing need for change in end of life care as the Baby Boomer generation ages, and trained death doulas are trending as an essential role in the future of death care.<sup>22</sup> A death doula's role is also important outside of the immediate patient and family care. She is a forerunner of the Death Positive movement, tasked with engaging communities in the importance of seeing death once again.

As this death movement gains momentum, the death industry is making changes, which I will discuss briefly for the purposes of this project. In our era, death has been an experience outsourced to hospitals and funeral homes. As families take a greater interest in making choices around death and engaging in the dying process of loved ones, the industry's demand is changing. Interestingly, creative new methods of body disposition are becoming popular. Traditional burial and cremation options are expanding to environmentally sustainable options such as green or natural burials, mushroom suits, and water cremation. Beneath these methods is the desire for a virtuous death. It is a giving back to nature to "be of use" as a personal act of salvation.<sup>23</sup>

Theologically speaking, death cannot ultimately be redefined outside of what is written in the Scriptures. Death Positive is a secular movement leaving the door open

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<sup>22</sup> The American population is facing an eldercare crisis because of the large number of aging individuals. A changing trend in elderly patients asking to die at home is thrusting families into caregivers' role to the dying. A doula helps teach the family to care for the dying. With a trained doula's assistance, the end-of-life process can be proficiently less muddled, after-death planning can be made lighter, and the family can focus on being a family. See <https://www.lmdoulacare.com/>.

<sup>23</sup> According to Dr. Hannah Rumble, "Natural burial presents an opportunity for gift-giving and salvation in the context of death." See <https://drhannahrumble.com/academic-research/>.

for spiritual teachings and worship of death apart from God.<sup>24</sup> I believe this budding movement is the platform for reviving Irenaeus' Recapitulation model in ministering to the dying and in a contemporary charismatic healing ministry for the Church and the world. Spiritual healing ministries abound in this age, but there is a need for a ministry that brings together the Sovereignty of God, the Passion of Jesus Christ, and the renewing work of the Holy Spirit. Here faith is deepened in the Kingdom message proclaimed by Christ: God has come to make you new.

### Recovery as Recapitulation in the Experience of the Cross

Before concluding, I would like to bring recapitulation in the personal experience of healing to a close. Recovery is to recover the likeness of God. Jesus told His disciples, "If anyone wants to come after Me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it" (Matt. 16:24-25). Contrary to any prosperity gospel message, the cross is not a means to the end — it is the end. At times the cross will seem to be a horror and God the devil. Sickness, loss, moral despair, or any thwarting of the will produces real suffering. From an eschatological standpoint, suffering is

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<sup>24</sup> In my Doula training, I was introduced to a New Age type of physical versus spiritual energy at the time of death. As death grows near, the physical body decreases, and the spiritual body increases. As this change in energy occurs, the dying 'understand' things differently; they see and feel connected with others without any judgment. This idea of 'gnosis' is undoubtedly contradictory to Irenaeus' claim that the gospel is the true gnosis — intimate familiarity with God because God has provided the resurrection life. McPherson, *Irenaeus*, 9. All other gnososes are "foreign to the divine Word of the Bible and the Gospel." Louis Boyer speaks to past and modern gnososes as "a 'salvation' which every human 'spirit' can grasp in the awakened consciousness of its eternal bond with the divinity, so setting itself free from its false bond with the world of bodies." This erroneous view holds no importance for Christ, who is the Logos made flesh, or human history. Louis Boyer, *The Spirituality of the New Testament and the Fathers*, (London: Burns & Oates, 1960), 236.

holistic. This outlook may not diminish the pain of loss or despair, but it considers their importance in the story's more excellent whole.

In his book, *The Red Badge of Courage*, Stephen Crane tells the story of Henry Fleming, a young Civil War soldier who enlists in the Union army in hopes of fulfilling his dream for glory. But, a long time goes by before his regiment is called forward to the battle, and the fear of dying begins to set in his mind. Henry wonders if he is courageous enough for battle. Then, upon seeing the enemy for the first time, Henry's courage fails, and he flees the battlefield. This is an unforgettable picture of the reality of human nature. To die is inconceivable. It is something humans constantly work against and pray to avoid. The hardest part of dying is not knowing what new life will bring. How could one know? New life is something that has never been before.

A new creation, as promised in Scripture and revealed in Christ, is coming. Irenaeus saw creation and salvation as one movement. The beginning to the end, disobedience to obedience, and death to life follow the arc of God's economy of salvation. Behr summarizes Irenaeus by saying, "God's continuously creative work throughout the economy, resulting in the end in the one who is in the image and likeness of God, *is* salvation."<sup>25</sup> Recapitulation theology begins with the perfect and completed work of God in Christ, and then moves to Adam, who is yet to be made complete: "For never at any time did Adam escape the hands of God, to whom the Father, speaking, said, 'Let us make the human being in our image, after our likeness.'"<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Cf. Behr, "Irenaeus," 44-5. *ital. mine*

<sup>26</sup> Irenaeus of Lyon, *Against Heresies*, 5.1.3. See [https://ccel.org/ccel/irenaeus/against\\_heresies\\_v/anf01.ix.vii.html](https://ccel.org/ccel/irenaeus/against_heresies_v/anf01.ix.vii.html)

Irenaeus' model of recapitulation is a theology ready for the secular movement, *Death Positive*. Emphasizing the cross as the transformational experience of death and resurrection in the Christian life must be the future work of the Church and her theologians as the shared experience of every creature, death, comes back into focus and conversation. It is also the theological foundation for a contemporary yet right-practicing Christian healing ministry where the personal encounter with the Spirit of God through the action of the cross causes life-altering effects. This resurrected new life in Christ is witnessed moment upon moment in the rooms of recovery. After all, it is the great commission given to all believers. Jesus said, "As you go, proclaim this message: 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give" (Matt 10:7-8).

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