

Dying to live: Romans 6:1b-11; Matthew 10:24-39

by [William R. O'Brien](#) in the [June 14, 2005](#) issue

"The walking dead." These are the words of African-American soldier Leon Bass as he described the horror he saw when Americans liberated prisoners in the Buchenwald prison camp in April 1945. Today some call confirmed drug addicts "the walking dead." Then there's the book/film *Dead Man Walking*—which describes many of us spiritually.

There was a man who thought he was dead. When his wife asked him to carry out the garbage, he would answer, "I can't, I'm dead." Finally in exasperation she asked him if he thought dead men could feel pain. When he responded negatively, she pinched him as hard as she could, to which he blurted out, "What do you know, dead men can feel pain." That may be a humorous way of reflecting on an imagined psychological status. But what is more tragic than to be dead spiritually, yet be acting as if we were alive?

The tsunami in Southeast Asia brought instant death to thousands of people. The first order of the day was to bury the dead as quickly as possible so as not to produce more deaths. In reality, death has been producing death since the sin principle entered the human equation. Every generation has probably felt that it was living in the worst of times. But the contagion of death is pandemic in our world.

While death due to natural disasters is not a new phenomenon, death as a consequence of decisions made or paths chosen is being compounded exponentially in our day. Ethnic cleansings, racial genocides, human rights abuses, terrorism, random crimes, HIV/AIDS—all reflect a foundational death-producing principle at work. Wretched people that we are! Who can rescue us from this body of death?

The first step in the rescue is the burial. Paul's question to the Roman believers was also a powerful statement: "Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" He continued by affirming that the burial is not the end of it all. "We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life."

Baptism was not a new ritual in the time of Paul. Jews practiced it on many different occasions—for weddings, for purification after the birth of a baby, for conversions to Judaism. The location was in running water—a stream or a lake. In the cities, rainwater would be caught and stored for baptismal use. But no loyal Jew would submit to baptism for repentance—that was for sinners.

John the Baptizer bridged the divide between Judaism and the meaning of baptism as embraced by the church. His preaching raised the consciousness of the Jews, convincing them that they too needed to repent. In the midst of John's preaching and baptizing in the wilderness, Jesus walked into the picture. Despite John's protests that John should be baptized by Jesus, not the other way around, he submitted to Jesus' request. The voice Jesus heard as he came up from the water was one of assurance that he was the chosen one of God, and that his method of fulfilling his chosenness would be suffering love and death. Through the resurrection, the living Lord has the power to administer life to all the walking dead and offer citizenship in a living kingdom.

Lesslie Newbigin once said that if you do not see the kingdom it's because you are facing the wrong direction. One must do a U-turn—the literal meaning of the Greek word for repent. For any of us “walking dead,” baptism is the moment in time when we get our new ID, the card that says we are “the alive in Christ.”

A painting in the Tretyakov Museum in Moscow stopped me in my tracks. Not just its size, although it covers a whole wall. Ivan Ivanov depicts Jesus standing on a bold, stony outcropping. The people stand at some distance from the Christ. They are in varied postures—some are looking at him, others are looking back over their shoulders, and still others have their eyes downcast. In the foreground are several nude figures. These people are emerging from the baptismal stream, and their clothes lie behind them on the banks. Answering the Nicodemus question of how a grown man can be born again, the painter captures the image of dead men walking. These are men and women who were buried and resurrected to new life through the one who stands at a distance. Their eyes are fixed on him, the one who has become the center of their lives.

In the early days of church history it was a common baptismal practice for those entering the water to lay aside their old clothes, depicting their surrender of the former life of sin and death. They emerged from the water like newborn babes—innocent nudes. According to Eugene Peterson's rendition of Colossians, the

alive ones could then be “clad in the wardrobe God picked out for them: compassion, kindness, humility, quiet strength, discipline . . . and the all-purpose garment of love.”

What a contrast—the living choosing to dwell among the walking dead! Baptism becomes the sword that divides. Their wardrobe sets them apart from those clad in garments of self-centeredness, lust, greed and death. The rhythm determined by their priorities is counter to that of the walking dead. That difference does not produce a condescending arrogance. It produces the attitudes depicted by their garments. By God’s indwelling Spirit, they know their walking dead neighbors can be transformed, and that it’s worth dying to live.