

MATERIALITY AS RESISTANCE

*Five Elements for Moral Action
in the Real World*

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Foreword by Jim Wallis

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JOHN KNOX PRESS
LOUISVILLE • KENTUCKY

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INTRODUCTION

For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic elements of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food; for everyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is unskilled in the word of righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, for those whose faculties have been trained by practice to distinguish good from evil.

—Hebrews 5:12–14

IN THE EARLY CHURCH, CHRISTIAN CONGREGATIONS AND their bishops paid generous and deliberate attention to the plight of the poor and managed to give relief. In the sixth century (long after the much-maligned Constantine) there was a rather abrupt turn away from this attentiveness, as the church became *private* about wealth and *otherworldly* in its hope. The cause of this abrupt turn, Peter Brown has shown, was that the wealthy population became dominant in the church and did not want its wealth subject to the needs of the poor in the church.¹ This turn toward the private and otherworldly is evident, as Brown documents, first of all in the erection of grand mausoleums as hope for another life and as an ostentatious exhibit of wealth.

And second, there was an “othering” of the clergy, so that priests and bishops were distanced from “the real world” and assigned to be representatives of the sacred:

Hence we witness a progressive “othering” of the clergy. They became a sacral class. Their dress, hair style, and sexual behavior were increasingly expected to be sharply different from that of the laity. Religious dress became sharply distinguished from lay dress. The tonsure was taken on as a *sine qua non* of both the clerical and the monastic state. It is notable that the origins of the tonsure did not lie in any clerical regulations. It came from the ground up. The cutting of hair (both of beards and of the top of the head) had long been treated by Romans as a sign of special dedication. The tonsure emerged as a response to lay demand for such a sign. Those who interceded for the laity, as a sacral class, were to be clearly designated by means of a ritual of shaving the crown of the head that had deep roots in the ancient folklore of hair.²

In effect the church gave up its preoccupation with material matters and became busy with spiritual matters of “soul-making” for the next world. That turn away from the material has continued in wealthy churches to this day, as is evidenced by the gentle admonition often made to pastors, “Don’t become political.” This familiar mantra of course is not against being “political,” but only against the type of “political” that disturbs the comfort zone of the parishioner. It is much preferable to have the pastor confined to matters “sacral.” (Shades of the sixth century!) The matter is very different in the churches of the poor that do not hesitate to address matters of materiality.

In the Epistle to the Hebrews, the writer generally appeals to the addressees of the letter with positive encouragement to greater faith and bolder testimony. In 5:12–14, however, the writer chides the addressees because they “refuse to grow up.”³ They continue to rely on “baby food” of the gospel and so wish to remain “infants” who lack skills to address urgent matters of good and evil. It is my thought that in the contemporary wealthy church (most of the Western church!), by happenstance or by intention many members remain “infants” in faith about matters of materiality. They prefer the “milk” and pabulum of a convenient, private, otherworldly gospel about “souls” rather than the solid food of informed critical thought about the materiality of our faith. As a consequence, much of the church is resistant to engagement in real-life material issues of faith and is quite content to settle for “innocent religion.” And in much of this the pastors of the church collude because it often too hard and too risky to do otherwise. The result is a church that is weak or lacking in moral passion about the great issues of the day.

What follows here is a study of some of the dimensions of faith that are front and center when we consider the materiality of our faith. That material aspect of faith is grounded in our conviction about creation: the world is God’s creation that God has called good. It is further grounded in our conviction concerning the incarnation, the confession that God has come bodied (“became flesh,” John 1:14) in Jesus of Nazareth, who “went about doing good” (Acts 10:38) of a vigorously material kind:

The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. (Luke 7:22)

That materiality performed by Jesus is not to be confused with materialism, because the gospel accent on the material is grounded in the conviction that the truth of our life summons us to hope-filled obedience, an obedience that is always referred back in gladness to the goodwill of the creator God. Nobody called Jesus a “materialist” because he healed the sick or brought good Jubilee news to the poor. I judge that, after the manner of his ministry, attention to the material dimensions of our common life and our capacity for critical, honest, faithful thought and action is urgent in our cultural context.

I intend to suggest that the church, and most particularly its leadership, have both an obligation and an opportunity to reengage the materiality of faith after a very long run of avoidance. In what follows I explore aspects of our shared bodily existence wherein all of the gifts and tasks of evangelical faith are deeply operative. I can readily think of five dimensions of this materiality, and readers may think of many others as well. The aim is that we may ingest “solid food” and become more “mature,” with skills and faculties for moral thought and moral action in the real world. I have no wish to deny the personal or the otherworldly aspects of our faith, but I have no doubt that redress about the centrality of the material is urgent among us.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Walter Brueggemann's introduction issues this urgent invitation: "reengage the materiality of faith." His argument throughout the book is grounded in key assumptions he lays out in the introduction. In light of that, consider beginning your group's discussion with the following questions:

Brueggemann observes that by the sixth century, the church became preoccupied with "spiritual matters of 'soul-making' for the next world" (p. 2), as evidenced by buildings (grand mausoleums) and clergy (intentionally distinct from laity by dress and lifestyle).

- What evidence would you cite today that shows the church and its clergy remain primarily attentive to "spiritual" matters? What are the implications, either positive or negative, of that?

Brueggemann's understanding of "materiality" is grounded in theological convictions about creation and the incarnation (p. 3).

- How does the appeal to God's creation as good and Jesus' embodiment of doing good help clarify the meaning of the phrase "materiality of faith"?

Finally, as a way to help your group be clear from the outset about this notion of materiality, invite participants to think of other dimensions of it, in addition to the five discussed in the book (money, food, body, time, and place).