

The Christian Funeral: A Witness to the Resurrection of Jesus Christ

I begin today by thanking the College and particularly Dr. deVisser for the invitation to be part of your Interim session, where you have an opportunity as faculty and students to engage in some of the day to day realities and challenges of church life. Based on the schedule I have seen for this 2 week session I see you have an appetite to confront some of the difficult issues of the day for the church of Christ. These issues are not new, but the manner in which we engage them is at the heart of what is at stake. It is fitting that the session concludes with a discussion on hermeneutics, because this is what gets down to the basis of most controversy. Will we receive God's Word plainly in its fundamental unity of His purpose and His will or will be content to fragment it and repackage it and redeliver it according to our needs and wants and our collective will? I am thankful that you are not asking me to unravel that for you today, and that we are blessed with men who can help us along the way. I am also very thankful that you have included the topic for this morning in the context of this discussion. These are changing times in Funeral Service as well, and the central question is whether the gospel message has stood the test of time. Is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ sufficient encouragement to bring us to life's precipice? Does the modern mourner want more, or is he actually even content with less? And most pointedly: what is your calling as a shepherd of the flock when it comes to death of the saints? What do you have to offer?

In some ways it is difficult to know where to begin. As students, you have not been faced with the challenge of walking with a family through an end of life journey, whether it be in palliative care facing the imminence of death, or the interjection of death into the life of a family whether suddenly or after a period of anticipation. Each situation brings its own complexities, and certainly a baseline understanding and appreciation of the road of grief and its natural outpouring as our innate God given response to loss is a starting point for pastoral caring and compassion. But eventually, in short order, the saints will look to you for the words that will bring balm and healing, the words that will make sense out of death as part of life's pilgrimage. At the outset it seems clear that God's Word will suffice as it is loaded with good news for the church regarding life and death. However, this Word does not stand alone. It will need to be accompanied with action. The action is the funeral event which often takes shape over a few days. This begs the question: what does a Christian funeral look like? What shape should it take? Does it even matter if Word and action coincide? Does the Word trump any action? What is the role of pastor in sorting this out?

One more side note before I dig in. A student well versed in the Church Order may interject here. Article 65 is clear this is not an ecclesiastical affair but a family one so do I really have a role here in shaping the funeral event? Arranging and conducting funeral events according to their description of being a family affair is a rather nebulous guideline. I have suggested before that the strength of this article may also be its weakness. This article freed the church from the constraints of the church of Rome where death and funerals were sacramentalized and fell under the strict control of the church and the priest, reinforcing his role as intermediary, and imposing the necessity of the recurrent sacrifice of Christ for the atonement of the living and the dead. In this regard we all laud Article 65. The opposite outcome is also potentially true when we work out this article. The funeral event may become distanced from the teaching of the Church regarding life, death and life after death. It may be deduced

that it does not matter whether the funeral event is connected to this teaching, and that it actually intentionally in action makes the same profession as God's Word. The funeral event may become a family affair with a loose connection to the church's teaching. Worse yet, the church's teaching may be forced to accommodate the family's approach to life and death. At this point you may become skeptical, but bear with me and I will illustrate the point.

When I entered Funeral Service over 25 years, times were beginning to change in a profession where things had stayed the same for a long time. The years prior to my involvement had naturally included the deceased body as a key component to the funeral event. Both the practicing religious family and the lapsed religious family still appreciated that fundamentally the question needed to be asked and answered as to what it means that the body, once living, is now dead. By accepting the need to face that question, ceremony was shaped by what was professed. The gospel message of life after death through resurrection based on the work of Jesus Christ still ruled the day. This gave confidence to the bereaved family to ultimately peer into the grave as they lowered the body of their loved one. The burial of the body was what the funeral event was all about, it was the culminating moment conforming to the words of assurance spoken. It was generally accepted in the Christian church that this was the only comfort. With the advent and increase of cremation in North America much has changed.

Over the last 20 years, as predicted within our profession, cremation as an alternative to burial has increased dramatically. Creeping up from the US west coast north through B.C. and slowly but surely across the the urban centres in Canada and then trickling into the rural communities, cremation is increasing as burial is declining. In British Columbia the cremation rate hovers over 80% and in the GTA it is safe to say it is closing in on 70% and still climbing. Truth be told, part of the challenge with this change is that both the funeral profession and the church in general were slow to confront this change and clearly address it in terms of fundamental traditional Christian beliefs about death and resurrection. As a result, in an effort to find some meaning for funerals embracing the cremation process, the main stream church and the funeral profession began what may be looked back on as the Great Accommodation. How does the Christian church contextualize cremation, originally a pagan practice, and connect it with the gospel message? How do we conduct a funeral without the presence of the dead and even more challenging how do we address death at a funeral when people don't want to talk about it. There has been a great shift from conducting Funerals (a ceremony connected to or involving the dead) to hosting Memorial Services or Celebrations of Life. The shift has been subtle over time and seemingly just an issue of semantics, but the effect has been significant. In the church mourners want to focus now on memories of the dead and celebrating a life lived rather than walking the somber route facing death and its reality in the context of our own mortality. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is macabre in the midst of life affirming ceremony. This type of Service directs discussion which more comfortably lingers on a spiritual plane, leaving the earthly remains out of it. Private burial or cremation prior to any gathering sets a brighter stage and opens opportunity for an uplifting ceremony.

I will share with you a few poignant quotes by people who have observed this transition and how the gospel presentation has been impoverished by it:

Kenneth Bagnell, a United Church Minister, author and guest columnist in many journals recently wrote this in an article confronting this topic: *"...in a word the Celebration of Life has emerged as a companion to a larger issue: the effort of some Christian groups to find a place—to "fit in" – as part of Canada's deepening secular culture."*

And in the same article there is a quote from Dr. Lois Wilson, a former moderator of the United Church expressing her disappointment at funerals she had recently attended because of their superficial, if not trite quality. Among her observations were these: *"It (the service) becomes a "celebration of life" based on private wishes and not a celebration of the Creator, the triune God who gives us life. This makes sense if the person is a non-believer. But for Christians, is not the event of death far more than a biological occurrence? Is it only about memories we will cherish? Is it not also about resurrection and hope...?"*

And one more quote from Thomas Lynch, funeral director, author, and regular columnist providing some reflection on a book by Thomas Long on Christian funerals entitled Accompany Them With Singing:

"... Long documents a troublesome shift in religious practice. In the place of funerals—the full-bodied, full gospel, faith-fit-for-the-long-haul and heavy lifting of grief events our elders were accustomed to—what has evolved, especially among white suburban Protestants, is a downsized, "personalized," user-friendly, Hallmarky soiree: the customized, emotively neutral and religiously ambiguous memorial service to which everyone is invited but the one who has died. The dead have been made more or less to disappear, cremated as a matter of pure function and notably outside the context of faith. The living gather at their convenience to "celebrate the life" in a kind of obsequy lite at which therapy is dispensed, closure proclaimed, biography enshrined and spirits are, it is supposed, uplifted. If not made to disappear entirely, the presence of the dead at such services is minimized, inurned, denatured, virtualized, made manageable and unrecognizable by cremation. The "idea" of the deceased is feted for possessing a great golf swing or good humor, a beautiful garden or well-hosted parties, while the thing itself—the corpse—has been dispensed with in private, dispatched without witness or rubric."

At this point we may shake our heads, mourn the deformation of the mainstream church and take refuge in the security of a Reformed huddle with the type of appreciation we feel for a warm blanket and a cup of tea on a cold winter's day. However, let me share a few personal anecdotes to help bring this closer to home. Funeral customs evolve also in Reformed church circles and are also affected by what is developing in the world around us. Although cremation has not been embraced, yet, its impact on the modern funeral is prevalent.

Here are a few paraphrased discussions I have had with people typically made while planning or preplanning funeral arrangements.

“I don’t know why the body has to be part of the funeral...I think it is morbid” “Don’t you know that out west families usually just deal with that privately and after that is over they have a Memorial Service at night. I think that’s much nicer.” (I remind you cremation rates have been higher and for a longer period of time on the west coast than here !)

“I think we should have the burial first and get it over with. It’s the hardest part. I would like the Memorial Service to be more of a celebration of the life God gave. Someone from the family can share some memories. And besides, more people can attend the reception and we don’t have to waste time in a funeral procession.”

In a recent pre-arrangement with a Reformed couple in their 70’s. “We’ve decided on cremation right after the visitation, no need to take the body to the church. We’ll have a Memorial Service instead What does it matter anyway? In Holland after 50 years they empty the graves into a common grave anyway. I’m not sure what we’ll do with the cremated remains, we might just have the kids scatter them. We told the kids and they are fine with it.”

And from a Reformed pastor, on our way back from the cemetery after a burial before a Memorial Service. “I like the idea of the graveside service for the reality check of it and the closure, but as far as I’m concerned you could remove the body and cremate it after that and bury it in a field. That would save a lot of money because you could rent the casket and not buy a cemetery plot and that money could go to missions.”

I share these not to cast aspersions but to illustrate the reality that we are affected by what we see and experience around us.

Now we need to switch gears, and move from anecdotes and reflections to God’s Word. The Reformed way is to determine what the scripture says authoritatively on the matter. This is the only firm footing for pastor and parishioner alike.

Death is introduced early in the Scriptures as the companion to sin. The questions surrounding the purposes of life, death, and life after death are essentially what the Bible about. The redemptive historical reading of Scriptures is the understanding that death is not our destiny, in spite of our actions, and that God has provided a way out of the consequence of our sin which is ultimately death. All of God’s Word attests to this and points forwards and backwards to Jesus Christ, the second Adam, who paid the penalty for sin and triumphed over death. This was a complete conquest over sin and death for Christ, body and soul. This conquest is prophesied, described and applied in the gospel of grace. It is this reality that should shape how we look at and care for the dead and how we encourage the living in the face of loss of life.

There are some significant connections that can be made from Scripture when we begin to examine death in this context. From the fall into sin forward our impending death is met with a necessary return to the earth or dust from which we were created. It is in fact the ground that testifies the first death on earth as Abel returns to it. (Gen4:8 “What have you done? Listen! Your brother’s blood cries to me from the ground.”) This symbolism is enriched with the declaration of the antithesis between the seed of the

Woman and the serpent and the eventual re-creation when all things are made new in Christ. Man, initially formed from the dust, will return to it and reemerge in Christ as a new creation. A return to the earth is our lot in this life, and the Scriptures do not deny it or cover it up. It is the only route we can go prior to Christ's return. It seems then, that a genuine Christian funeral would not want to cover up or hide this reality. The gospel is rich enough to face up to the open grave.

Another poignant aspect accompanying stories of death and burial in the Old Testament is one of expectation. The shadowy reality of the new heaven and new earth for the patriarchs was the Promised Land. Abraham was not simply a sentimentalist when he was determined to purchase a burial plot for him and his family upon Sarah's death. We wanted a deed to a lot in the Promised Land. He could have saved his money and accepted a free plot from among the choices in the area but he insisted on a purchase showing faith in God's plan for his family. Likewise, Joseph's instructions to have his bones carried in a coffin as part of the procession from Egypt to the Promised Land were made in the same faith. (A funeral director's dream by the way to organize such a procession.) And what about Moses, as punishment for not trusting completely in God, his body was buried outside the Promised Land as a witness to when he broke faith with God. If what happened to his body upon death was of little consequence this would be a redundant act by God. The care of their bodies that followed their deaths bore witness to how they lived in expectation of something greater promised by God. There is a distinct link between the way we live and what we put our trust in and the manner in which our body is cared for in death.

One more Scriptural teaching that weighs heavily in this discussion is the connection between body and soul. Scripture is replete with emphasis on the connection between our body and soul. We boldly confess as Scriptural truth that we belong, body and soul, in life and death to Jesus Christ. Not only do we belong to Christ, we house the Holy Spirit as a temple, which has dramatic implications for how we treat and use our body in this life. These confessions affirm the powerful continuity between life, death and life after death for the believer. We do not physically or spiritually ever skip a beat in belonging to Christ and sharing in all his benefits. And yet, it is often suggested immediately upon the death of a believer that what remains is a shell. This suggests something that is much less than what the body was just a moment before death occurred. It is almost as if we give the body back, as something unclaimed by Christ, something emblematic of sin and not salvation. As we psychologically break the emotional tie with the body we also begin to lose some confidence in God's claim on it. This does not follow biblical example or norms.

The apostles were clear that we should not look at the body in this way. In fact on numerous occasions they use the term "fallen asleep" to describe the death of the saints. Just like we would not carelessly abandon the body of a sleeping loved one, in the same way we should not disassociate ourselves from the care of one who has died. The apostle Paul does not call the body a shell, but rather something like a seed which is very valuable. Comparing it to a seed, illustrates that our dead bodies are set apart for re-creation when claimed by Christ. They are loaded with promise because they are washed in his blood. There is a rich harvest expected here: transforming the corruptible to the incorruptible, the mortal to the immortal, the dishonourable to the honourable, the weak to something powerful, the

natural to the spiritual. Our bodies are not abandoned to the grave, instead they wait there for rich reward.

The apostle Paul clearly warns where the erosion in confidence in the resurrection of the dead leads. Let's read a few verses from 1 Corinthians 15:12-19 to follow this argument:

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There we have it. If there is no real resurrection there is no point. We are left in a pitiable mess. At the heart of the gospel both in life and death is a belief in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And now we begin to come full circle on our topic and focus in on the suggested theme. At the core of the Christian Funeral is a necessary witness to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is the pattern set for us in Christ as the second Adam and this is our only hope for this fleeting life. It is an anomaly for the followers of Jesus Christ to regularly celebrate his suffering and death at the Lord's Supper during our lives, and then at the death of our loved ones to turn around and focus on celebrating their life. It is consistent and powerfully transforming to, on that day, summon what has carried us in this life, the fuel of our faith, the preaching of Christ's death and resurrection. It is this gospel witness that makes all the difference and makes the only difference. Everything else on its own is vanity.

And how does this connect with current trends? The current trend is to remove the body and set it aside and re-focus the funeral to that of Memorial or Celebration. More and more people choose to not walk the road that faces death squarely, but rather to remove the corpse as something that is obscuring the main event. The modern funeral has purposefully created a missing link by removing the dead body as the purpose of a funeral. The missing link obscures the necessity of a witness of the death and resurrection of Christ, it mutes the declaration that death is a result of sin, and ultimately questions the necessity of a Saviour. This is dramatic talk but it is being borne out in this culture. In Reformed circles this sentiment is often spiritualized. I want the Word to be the focus so let's remove the body as it should not be the focus. Do not glorify the body. Amen we say to that; but do not minimize the body as it is Christ's own possession! He will see it through to the grave where he has claimed a victory and preserve it for the great Day of his return. We should accompany our loved one's body on that journey to the grave with confidence in Christ our Saviour.

When I say we, who am I talking about? Another trend of the day is increasing isolation and defining what is private and personal and what is public also in the church. Ironically as we expand our network on social media we feel an opposite pull for privacy in the face of hurt, sin and its consequences and death of a loved one. Certainly our idea of community in general is obscured in the face of living in sprawling suburbia; we just don't have neighbor relations like people used to. Also, in the church, the desire to privatize the difficult parts of the funeral event is influenced by what happens around us. Jesus challenged his disciples to recognize the family of faith as our true and lasting family. It is the family of faith that shares the deepest and lasting bond. These are the people who share in the festal shout when Christ returns. These are people who are worthy to travel the distance with to life's end.

Earlier I spoke about the Church of Rome and its sacramentalizing of death and funerals. The church itself has set the rules for Last Rites, the Funeral Mass and the Burial of the Dead in prescribed services for its baptized members. As erroneous as this is, as we find much of this is not rooted in Scripture, there are elements of it that were initially on the right track or at least well intentioned to foster faith grounded in fundamental teachings. The Church of Rome makes a clear connection at the beginning of the Funeral Mass with the baptism of the believer; that this event falls within the extent of the covenant promises of God. The focus of the Funeral Mass itself addresses the reality of the individual's death and the significant connection with Christ's death and resurrection. At this point we diverge quickly as we understand the Mass itself to be critically flawed and that doing something to benefit the dead is a fruitless task. Funerals are for the living in the sense that they are the only ones impacted by them. The gospel of life remains audible and beneficial only to those who walk this earth, not those who rest beneath it. The Roman church decidedly does not allow eulogies as part of the Funeral Mass lest they cloud or construe the elemental teaching. Eulogy is segregated to the time of the reception. In addition, even though the church relented to allow for cremation of the deceased a number of years ago (as part of the Great Accommodation as many of their members were choosing to do it and forego the traditional Mass), they still insist on maintaining the link with the body by having the cremated remains present for the Mass and push hard for burial following the Service itself. This too, however, is a practice that they will have difficulty maintaining as it is challenged by parishioners regularly.

I'll now push on to some type of conclusion while resisting the possible temptation to try to provide the pattern for a Christian funeral. When entering a calling or profession we may be tempted to get the Cole's notes or the fool proof liturgy, or the list of dos and don'ts and rest on that. Patterns are flawed, in the sense that even if they are well thought out and grounded in solid theory, they are of little value long term if the fundamental design is not understood or appreciated. The question of "Why do we do what we do?" is part of the ever reforming church's lexicon and it is well applied regularly to maintain what is godly and root out what can become dangerously ungodly. I do not want to add anything to your arsenal in regards to Christian funerals. I just want to convince you that you already have everything you need. But you need to have the confidence to speak it in the face of hurt, loss and despair, and in the face of possible increasing resistance.

I want to end with 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. I have been struck recently again with my own Pastor's preaching on the direct simplicity of these words. Let's read them for a moment:

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

In the past I have written and spoken about grief with hope with the emphasis on the fact that our hope does not eclipse our grief but it does shape it. This is an important acknowledgement in order to have the patience and understanding to walk the long road of grief with someone. In connection with our topic today I am struck with the plain teaching of what does provide hope in the face of death. This is not complicated theology, but a plain statement of belief from Paul, Silas and Timothy. They believe what happened to Jesus in his death and resurrection will happen to those who believe in him when

they die. That's it. It is that simple. The hope for the dead in Christ is that they will rise again. The resurrection of the dead is real. It is the only thing we rest our hope on. There is no need to embellish this, to add to it, to complicate it, or to shine it up. If you die before Jesus' returns and you believe in him you can have full confidence that you will rise like him and so will your loved ones. And once they have stated that plainly, they end with this instruction: "encourage each other with these words".

There you have it. If you are called into the ministry you will be asked to bring comfort in the face of death. You will be challenged to see if you have confidence to go all the way to the grave in the face of many different situations. People will look to you to see if you have the words to make sense of it all, to frame their grief in hope. You will need to bear witness to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. I challenge you today to not shrink back from this. It is truly the only thing you have to offer. The future for everyone is not bound up in what he has said or done or accomplished or failed. Life before death, at death and after death is completely dependent on the reality of Jesus' death and resurrection. Your task is to proclaim this without trepidation, "Listen, I tell you a mystery: we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed!"