

The Message of Christian Faith on the Occasion of the Burial of the Dead

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The funeral is a critical moment in the life of any Christian congregation. Death breaks community and threatens faith and life with meaninglessness. It also, or at least frequently, leaves a painful void in the depths of the personal existence of those who have been bereaved. Hence on the occasion of death the church is challenged to confess the faith and to assert the reality of its communal existence.

There is no uniform Reformed practice in regard to the burial of the dead. The ecclesiastical ordinances in Calvin's Geneva simply declare, "The dead are to be buried decently in the place appointed. . . . It will be good that the carriers be warned by us to discourage all superstitions contrary to the Word of God. . . ." The first *Book of Discipline* in the Church of Scotland states, "We desire that burial be so honorably handled that the hope of our resurrection may be nourished; and all kind of superstition, idolatry, and whatsoever thing proceedeth of the false opinions may be avoided" (Cf. *The Westminster Directory*).

These quotations are sufficient to indicate that the burial of the dead must be carried out with decency and soberness. They also reveal an awareness that death is the occasion for much superstition. Hence they all seek to reform the practice of burial by dependence upon the regular preaching and services of the church and by reducing the rites of burial to a bare minimum. It can be argued that the Reformers reacted too violently, but the superstitious practices against which they protested are a warning that funerals are easily perverted by the imaginations of the human heart.

In the course of the years, Reformed communities have sometimes wanted a precise rite of burial. Such a rite would have served very useful purposes in communities in which there were no ordained ministers. However, there are certain advantages in having no established pattern for the burial of the dead. The uniqueness of every death demands more freedom of response and witness than the established rituals provide. There is need for the freedom for the Christian community to confess its faith and to demonstrate the reality of its community in ways appropriate to the situation.

The following reflections are given in response to a request from the editors. They are not intended in any sense to be definitive but are simply presented as conclusions from one minister's experience in the pastorate and in theological reflection.

(1) "Good taste" is always in order in the presence of death. This admonition may appear trite, but it is nonetheless important. Death is an awesome moment, and in its presence soberness is a virtue. The occasion of death

should never be exploited by the minister or by the church for controversial or eccentric purposes. Neither should it be used to teach or to exhort. At burial of the dead the community listens to the Word of God and confesses the faith that is the common experience of the gathered company of believers.

In my own experience, the death and the burial of the dead is a time in which kindness should take precedence over our own ideas or preferences. Calvin resolutely refused to subordinate truth to love. There is, of course, a point beyond which we cannot go in accommodating the desires of the bereaved. Yet I found that I could participate in funerals in which the family wanted practices which I personally found objectionable, so long as I did not have to be responsible for them.

The basic point I want to make is that in the presence of the awesomeness of death, "good taste" in dress, in words, in acts, is eminently in order.

(2) Death and the burial of the dead is an occasion when ministers should be very much aware that they are ministers *of the church*. The minister, on the occasion of the burial of the dead, does not give a personal testimony as to his or her faith, but rather confesses the faith of the church. The eccentricities and novelties of a particular minister's faith or lack of faith are inappropriate for the funeral. The ancient prayers of the church, the theology that has stood the test and challenges of time, the language that is the common vocabulary of the faithful, the hymns that are substantive confessions and supplications of the faith are the proper material of the burial service. The burial of the dead is not an appropriate occasion for either theological or liturgical experimentation.

(3) Death and the burial of the dead is an occasion for the actualization of the Christian community. Church people attend funerals because the death of any member is a concern of the community, not primarily because of personal relationship with the deceased. The gathering for the burial demonstrates community. In addition, the confession of faith testifies to the reality of the church as a community composed of the living and of the dead. The host of heaven also gather with the church on earth for the burial of this believer.

The reality of the church as community is actualized by deeds of kindness for the bereaved, food and useful services, as well as by supporting words. In these practical ways the church reasserts its community in the presence of the challenge of death.

(4) In the burial of the dead, a word of thanksgiving for the deceased is appropriate. When I finished the seminary, I was committed to a service of Scripture and prayer, the same for all people. In these services there was an occasion for the mentioning of the name of the deceased, for a brief word of thanksgiving for the life of the deceased in the prayer and for his or her relationship to the family. I had learned this from ministers who were reacting against the pretentious and inauthentic eulogies that became common for many funerals.

I gradually moved away from this practice, because in actual experience I found that the burial of certain persons irresistibly demanded some public affirmation of their service in the life of the Christian community as well as in society. The Second Helvetic Confession, 1566, disapproves of the cynics who never say a good word about the deceased. No one ought to want to go back to

the old eulogy or to saying words on the occasion of a funeral that are not authentic and that are not self-authenticating among the hearers when pronounced. Appropriate references to distinguished service in the community or to a powerful Christian witness can be made in a discreet and sober way. When done soberly, the speaking of a good word does not create a precedent requiring a eulogy when it would not be appropriate. In the case of several very distinguished public figures, I found it fitting to interweave the Christian message with a more elaborate thanksgiving for the life of the deceased.

(5) The service on the occasion for the burial of the dead is an appropriate time to affirm in a fundamental way the faith of the church. As I have indicated, my first funeral sermons were compilations of great Scripture passages, with a few introductory remarks. Every funeral service should contain a reading of the very great passages of Scripture which have meant much to Christian believers in every age. No burial should be without readings from the Psalms, John 14, Romans 8, 1 Corinthians 15.

The hymns which are sung on the occasion of a funeral are also opportunities to bear witness to the faith. My own preference is for the great hymns that confess the faith and that center attention upon God. The hymns that I particularly like for funerals are the following: "All People That on Earth Do Dwell," "How Firm a Foundation," "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," "Thine Is the Glory," "Now Thank We All Our God."

I have increasingly come to the conviction that the burial of the dead is the proper occasion for the church to confess its faith using the Apostles' Creed. The Lord's Prayer also gives the people an opportunity to affirm their faith and claim God's grace.

In recent years, I have given the message on the occasion of burial a more theological structure. These burial sermons have tried to assert in the presence of death the reality of the Christian community, the meaningfulness of life, and the grace of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ upon which the first two affirmations depend.

The theology that is appropriate for a funeral message should be the tried and tested theology of the church. It should be a theology that the minister has mastered and can conceptualize in his or her own words. It should be expressed in plain, simple English sentences that are distinguished by their coherence and clarity. The funeral is not the occasion for amateur theology. If the choice is between amateur theology and a service simply of prayer and Scripture reading, then the latter is clearly the proper choice.

I have also found that the burial message is a proper place to assert the Christian faith over against the absurdity of many deaths. In a fundamental sense every death is absurd and a challenge to faith. Yet some deaths are an acute challenge to faith and are blatantly absurd. On the occasion of such a death, we can only honestly face the absurdity, trust God, and seek in our own actions to give some meaning to a death that otherwise is irrational and absurd. In the church the absurdity of death should be accepted, understood, and overcome.

Long ago, Augustine did not try to explain away the brutality that Christians experienced at the hands of the Goths in the sacking of Rome. The dif-

ference, Augustine said, between Christians, and non-Christians, was not in what happened to them in the world, but in their responses to what happened to them. Christians were distinguished by the faith, hope, and love with which they responded to the tragic events of their own lives.

On the occasion of a death that was especially poignant for me—the sudden death of a beautiful, brilliant, committed twenty-nine year-old woman, an honor graduate of a great university, a wife and a mother, I said the following words:

A Funeral Sermon

We have gathered here this morning as those who knew and loved _____. We have also gathered here in awe before the mystery of life and in fear before a death that appears so absurd, that threatens our community and our faith. But we have gathered as the church to reaffirm the reality of the church itself in the face of death, to give thanks *for* and to pay tribute *to* the life she lived in our midst, to declare again our faith.

I. It is very fitting that we gather as the church and that in the presence of the death of _____ we reaffirm its reality.

She was born into the church, and even those closest to her by ties of flesh and blood knew her in the church as soon as they knew her in the human community. And so we have come together not only as human beings who know human sorrow, but as the church of the living God to confess our faith, to share together in the common life that has sustained us thus far, and to affirm the reality of the church in the face of death.

In this life together, we knew _____ in the keenness of her mind, in the graciousness and humaneness and gentleness of her person, in the quiet dignity and stability of her life, in her commitment to and love for the church.

We knew in her the wonder of human existence and the joy of human fellowship. By this fellowship we were all enriched. We find words inadequate to say precisely how we understood the wonder of her life and the wonder of our fellowship together. Yet we know that in knowing one another and in sharing in the common life of the church, we were deeply enriched and strengthened in the faith. And now we can best think of _____'s life as a means of God's grace to us. We give thanks for the special human being she was—intelligent, kind, understanding, interested, committed to something more than herself.

When she was married in this church in December, 1973, she asked—somewhat unusual for a wedding service—that these words from the Sermon on the Mount should be read. And I think she would want them read now.

“Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. . . .” (Matt. 6:25-34)

We take assurance now in the truth of our faith that the church is a body composed of the living and the dead (some of whom are very dear to _____) and that in Christ, the head of the church, we still have communion one with another. We are glad that we knew _____; and it is our hope that we shall know her

again in the fullness, beauty, and wonder of that life into which by God's grace — has passed and into which we shall soon go.

II. Now as the church, we confess our faith in the presence of death that the meaning of life, its significance and purpose, is revealed not in this death, which appears so irrational to us, but in the love of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. We understand death in the light of God's love, not God and life in the light of death.

Over against —'s death we make at least three basic confessions of faith.

1. First of all, we confess our faith that —'s life was established in the purposes of God. At the beginning of her life this faith was confessed in baptism. Her parents and the church claimed the promises of God for her. Her name was called, indicative of our faith that God thought of — before she was, called her into being, and gave to her her identity, her individuality, her name, her dignity. And now at death we confess again this faith that was affirmed at baptism. We establish our hope in the fact that the eternal God knows us by name, that he searches us out and sets us behind and before (Ps. 139), that he numbers the hairs upon our head, and allows not a sparrow to fall without his notice. (Matt. 10:29-30).

2. We also as the church confess our faith that the eternal God who called us into being will *complete* and *fulfill* the work that he has begun in us.

"Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me. . . . (John 14:1-6).

3. We come together as the church finally to confess that the last word today and every day is the grace of God. The evil in the situation, even the absurdity of this death, is not the last word. The last word is the grace of God, that enables us to take whatever comes and to use it in the building of a life of beauty and wonder and authenticity, that enables us even in the presence of this death to praise God and to enhance the meaning of human existence. God has made the world in such a way that deaths such as this do occur, but he has also made the world so that this death is not the final word. The final word is God's grace. In the faith that — liked to confess, we confess now that God works with those who love him for good in all things (Rom. 8:28).

God made the world so that human life is precarious. In this world our hopes are frequently frustrated. We have to live in this dangerous world, where from the perspective of our hopes many events are irrational and absurd for those who believe in the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. If God intended to make us comfortable, then clearly this is an incredible world. But God does not treat those whom he loves as his favorites. He causes his sun to shine and his rain to fall upon the just and unjust alike. Biochemical systems and the structures of the world impinge upon the good and evil with impersonal impartiality. The important differences between people are not so much in what happens to us as in our responses to what happens to us. If God's purpose was to bring many sons to glory (Heb. 2:10) or to bring us to human maturity, as Paul said (Eph. 4:13), then this is the kind of world that challenges us to grow into the maturity of faith, of trust, of human sympathy. God could not and cannot by definition create mature human beings. He could and did create persons with the possibility of human maturity. And this maturity

comes only as we respond to the crises and challenges of our lives. In the words of Unamuno's great prayer, may God deny us peace but give us glory.

It is good to push back the boundary of death and to fight against death, but more important than postponing death for a few years is the receiving of a wisdom, an insight, and a grace that enables us to face death and all the challenges of life with the dignity, poise, and serenity that comes from a great faith in God. So our final word is to claim the grace of God that works with those who love him for the good in all things, and to pledge ourselves to find in the irrationality and absurdity of this death an occasion to praise God and to enhance the meaning of human life.

We cannot and we ought not to deceive ourselves. This death is an absurdity in God's world. It will remain an absurd, irrational fact unless it becomes a means of God's grace by which God's purposes for his people are fulfilled. To this end we commit ourselves to work to make some sense out of ___'s death as a final tribute to her life.