After a death
Theology and Christian funeral practices

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Christian funeral practices have changed dramatically through the years, and they vary widely throughout the world. Many of these customs would seem strange to Christians in Canada and the U.S. today. We do not place the eucharist in the mouths of corpses to nourish the dead on their way to the heavenly Jerusalem, nor do we tie the feet of the deceased so they will not return home on All Saints' Day. We do not expect spouses to perform public acts of grief for a year. Families do not wash and clothe the bodies of the dead. We do not walk, bearing them, from home to church to cemetery, singing psalms and alleluias. We no longer wear white or black mourning clothes as signs of transition from life to death and back to life.

What funerary practices express the enduring faith of the church? What theological convictions should orient Mennonite pastors who journey with congregations that must mark and move beyond a death?

Noting the sheer variety of Christian funeral customs, we may wonder what practices express most clearly the enduring faith of the Christian church. What theological convictions should orient Mennonite pastors who journey with congregations that must mark and move beyond a death? How should we assess the theology of the hymns sung at funerals, of the prayers prayed, of the words of comfort a pastor offers the bereaved? What theological commitments can guide decisions about the bodies of the dead?

When my father died in our home one Sunday in 1994, I wasn't thinking theologically. I was trying to adjust to the fact that dad's crinkly blue eyes were empty, that mom was moving around in a distracted state, that the children were at once intrigued by and reluctant to touch his body, that my sister was in Belgium, that my brother wanted us to leave dad in the chair until he and his family arrived from eastern Michigan. I was aware that dad did

not fear death, that he received it in faith, that there were no major unresolved relational issues in the background, that his dying had been peaceful. I knew he wanted a simple funeral and that he wanted to be cremated (so as not to take up space in a cemetery), but like many North American families, we had spoken of death only briefly and practically. We never really engaged in theological conversation about death.

There was implicit theology, of course, in our actions following dad's death. Ted and I and our three school-age children gathered with my mother around dad's chair, watching, crying, talking. We did not avoid his body. We placed a flower (he was a gardener) in his hand. We welcomed my brother's family and remembered the details of the death. A memorial service at my parents' church a week later included the hymns "I will raise you up on eagle's wings" and "Gott ist die Liebe" (sung as a lullaby for at least three generations in our family), and a sermon about the gift of a spirit of gratitude to God even in the face of failing health and death.

We held no viewing or burial, and Dad's ashes were not present at the service. The congregation provided a meal over which members of our extended family reconnected and shared stories. Church and family friends sent cards and offered sympathy. And we all went back to school and work.

In addition to emotional and cultural forces, theological convictions—about the power and character of God, about lament and faith, about death and resurrection, about bodies and human being, about bearing one another's burdens in community—shaped our movement beyond dad's death. Whether our practices were appropriate to a Christian theology of death rooted in Scripture is another question, a normative question. What foundational affirmations can help us as pastoral theologians review family and congregational practices surrounding death? Some classic Christian themes provide a helpful starting point.

Ecclesiology

The church is a community of the Holy Spirit. When one person suffers, all suffer, bearing each other's burdens in love. As Douglas John Hall notes, the church "is always receiving from beyond its own possibilities. It is the case of the comforted comforting, the healed healing, the forgiven showing mercy."[1] Death is one form

and moment of suffering in congregational and wider church community life. Therefore, the Christian funeral process is by and for the community, not just for close family and friends of the deceased. Participation in Christ includes solidarity in suffering and healing. Death is not an individual or private family matter but a community event.

North American Christians may need to be countercultural in modeling open funerary patterns, ones that challenge tendencies toward greater privatization in encounter with dead bodies, and in attendance at funeral, memorial, and burial services. Several factors contribute to a reduced role for the Christian community in the process of separation, transition, and reincorporation of the bereaved in social life after the death of a family member or friend. These factors include individualism and autonomy, urban and familial fragmentation, work schedules that make participation in daytime services difficult, and greatly diminished social recognition of a period of mourning after death.

When we are willing to stand in solidarity and hope with those who are grieving, we testify to the constant presence and power of the Holy Spirit with those who may feel abandoned.

Grieving families may also be reluctant to open themselves to their faith communities. For communities and families in which expression of emotion is discouraged, facing funeral services may be stressful. However, when we are vulnerable within the community of the Spirit, we permit God to work in healing ways. And when we stand in solidarity and hope with those who are grieving, we testify to the constant presence and power of the Holy Spirit with those who may be feeling abandoned.

Because of the short time Canadian and U.S. societies allow for mourning, and because of our Protestant lack of attention to remembering the dead in worship and ritual, Mennonite congregations could also benefit from developing meaningful corporate ways to remember those who have died and to uphold those who may grieve a death for many years.

Eschatology

Biblical hope is in God who is creating a new heaven and a new earth and who at the last day as part of this new creation will raise

the dead, as Jesus was raised, in some mysterious embodied form. This hope is different from hope in an immortal soul that flies from the body at death to exist in another realm. Resurrection hope imagines the faithful dead now hidden with Christ in God (Col. 3:3), awaiting the redemption of their bodies and of all creation (Rom. 8:18-25).

Imagination is a gift of God, and it can help us respond in faith to death. We do well, though, to focus on the foundational conviction that God can be trusted to prepare a good future for us.

Christians through the centuries have used poetry, song, and visual art to imaginatively picture what happens to people when we die. Imagination is a gift of God, and it can help us respond in faith to death. We do well, though, to focus not on the details of our imaginings but on the foundational conviction that God can be trusted to prepare a good future for us.

Though the powers of death often seem to have the upper hand, believers place faith in a God whose creative purpose and power are stronger than sin, suffering, and death. This God, who is preserving creation and drawing it toward a good end, receives the one who has died and sustains those who suffer now. Funeral practices based on this foundation can make room for lament and grief but are not dominated by gloom. They set individual life and death within the context of God's saving purpose and work.

Creation

Christian funeral services are worship services. Death is an occasion to remember our dependence on our creator for life and breath, and to give thanks for the life of the one who died. In these services we rightly remember the dead and seek to comfort the bereaved, but our eulogies should be lifted up in relation to the one who created, sustains, and receives us in life and in death. When our theology of creation informs our funeral practices, they will include not only mourning but also thanksgiving to God for the gift of life. The purpose of a Christian funeral is not primarily to memorialize the one who has died but to release the deceased into the hands of God. If our worship seems to center on the one who has died rather than on God, we need to refocus.

Creation theology also underlines our human calling to steward creation—serve and guard it—as representatives of God.

Simplicity and modesty are consistent with this responsibility: we do well to resist societal tendencies to honor the dead with lavish expenditures and ostentatious memorials.

Christian theologians have noted different attitudes toward death in Scripture. Most prominent is a negative view. Death is understood as a result of sin and a sign of all that stands in opposition to God. It is an evil to be overcome. Jesus—the second Adam, obedient to God even to the point of death, bearing the sins of the world—is not conquered by death, but is raised up. Nothing can suppress the power of God; God rules even death! This faith has sustained many Christians at times of death.

Some theologians, including Karl Barth and Paul Tillich, have noted that creation theology affirms that God made the whole world and pronounced it good. This world, a world shaped by time rather than eternity, includes genesis, change, growth, decay, and death. Therefore, death may be understood as part of God's design for living things. It might even be received as a gift of God. Awareness of our mortality helps give life intensity and meaning, it reminds us that we are not God, and for many it brings a welcome end to suffering.

Our ambivalence about death is appropriate. Both theological streams reflect truth about God and human nature. And both views are compatible with hope for a future with God for the faithful after death. Funeral practices might therefore include a passing positive reference to death along with attention to death as a consequence of human sin, overcome through Jesus Christ.

Anthropology

Creation theology affirms the goodness of the world and of humans as embodied selves. These affirmations have at least two implications for funeral practices. First, humans are whole beings in whom body and spirit are indissolubly linked. The dominant biblical understanding of the self is that humans are unitary beings. Even Paul's language about flesh, body, and spirit, upon close examination, refers to the whole self in opposition to God (flesh/*sarx*/body) and the whole self seeking relation to God (spirit/*soma*/body), not to a separation of spirit and body which devalues the body. In biblical perspective God breathes life into our whole selves; when we breathe our last breath, we die. Chris-

tians need not deny death; we wait in hope for the faithful to be resurrected at the last day.

Second, our embodied selves are good and valued by God. We are living people (with breath) and deceased people (without breath). People who are dead are not simply leftovers of the self to be disrespected or summarily disposed of. Nor are they to be feared. People in death as in life are God's and should be treated with loving respect and dignity.

Christians disagree about whether cremation and burial can equally express respect and dignity. Some feel that belief in resurrection implies burial. Others note that if God can resurrect dry bones and dust, then surely God can resurrect ashes. Early Christians used both cremation and burial, although in time burial became the dominant practice, and Christians began to see cremation as a pagan ritual. By the late eighth century Charlemagne made cremation a capital offense, and only in the mid-1960s did the Vatican begin to permit cremation again for Catholic Christians.

Specific practices regarding disposition of the bodies of deceased people have varied with time and across cultures. But principles of respect for bodies and hope in resurrection have remained constant for Christians and can guide our decision making when we care for those who have died.

Christ and salvation

Jesus is both example and revelation for us in facing death. The biblical witness gives us permission to express our deepest fears and feelings ("My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"). It also shows us Jesus entrusting himself to God in life and in death ("Into your hands I commit my spirit"). Jesus encouraged our hopes for resurrection: he expected God to vindicate the faithful in resurrection at the last day, and after his death, God raised him up, a first fruit of this resurrection.

In raising Jesus up, God demonstrated that this human was indeed an image of God's glory—and a revelation of God's purposes for humans on earth. Jesus taught that God desires a human community marked by trust in and loyalty to God above all, by justice, mercy, love, kindness, peace, joy, forgiveness, sharing, healing, service, and truth telling. He called disciples to build just,

reconciling communities who can face suffering and death together in strength and with hope.

The God Jesus followed and revealed is both just and forgiving. Death comes in some sense as judgment: the life that has been lived cannot now be changed. In our funeral practices we place the deceased into the hands of God for discerning judgment. When relationships with the deceased and among the bereaved are troubled or broken, eulogies may not ring true. But it is always appropriate to express confidence in God's wisdom, justice, and healing power, and in God's compassionate and patient forgiveness of sinners. Some traditional practices might offer new ways for us to pray at the time of death. For example, Greek Christians throw handfuls of dirt into a grave as they say, "May God forgive him [or her]"—echoing themes from the Lord's Prayer as well as Jesus's prayer from the cross. Because salvation is a gracious gift, not earned by human merit, we can entrust all our dead—all our sinful dead—to God's merciful judgment.

Mission of the church

Speaking and embodying the good news of the gospel and inviting deeper participation in the coming reign of God are the heart of the church's vocation. Remembering this mission at the time of death can help orient pastors and congregations in making concrete decisions.

What is good news to the bereaved? Discerning this good news requires listening, not simply telling. Perhaps the gospel of God's forgiveness and mercy will emerge as central because of alienation, guilt, or sin in the life of the deceased or among the mourners. Or perhaps other gospel notes will be elicited: God's gift of an end to physical suffering and hope in new life to come, divine presence and participation in our suffering, gratitude for life. Funeral services and practices should not be tools to try to "save" those at a vulnerable time who have not yet made Christian commitments. Instead, these are times for pastor and people to embody testimony to God's love, mercy, faith, and hope—which is also missionary work.

Most of us prefer not to think about death and those whose work revolves around it. But congregations could be good news at times of death by including in their offerings and ministries poor

Christians in surrounding areas who cannot afford basic funeral services. Pastors and people might also give special attention and support to Christian funeral directors in their community as these service providers help many in crisis who lack the support of a church and an extended family.

Even community peacemaking has links to our death practices. Who may be buried in particular cemeteries: only church members? only Christians or only Muslims? only those who can pay certain fees? How we address such contentious questions witnesses to the God we serve.

A thoughtful, well-grounded theology of death and consideration of its implications for worship and discipleship can help prepare us for times of crisis. Times of death are obviously not times to introduce theological convictions that should have been taught and engaged throughout the life of the congregation.

Jesus's example offers us a further perspective on theology and pastoral care following a death. A pastor's primary responsibility is to recall and express the loving presence and reign of God in funeral ministries, meeting people in their need. A pastor's first responsibility is not to ensure that the bereaved or the congregation have the right theology of death, though there may be room for counsel, as in situations like that of the young man who was lowered into his grave with his Corvette!

Pastors may need to let go of shaping the funeral process according to their own preferences. They may need to soft-pedal some of their theological convictions for the sake of the grieving family and congregation. As Paul's letter to the Philippians reminds us, "Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." Jesus guides and guards us as we minister in life and in death, forming our theology and reminding us that for the sake of our neighbors we must sometimes hold aspects of it lightly.

Note

[1] *God and Human Suffering: An Exercise in the Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986), 145.

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