

Dying in Christ: Three Counter Cultural Questions

J. Witvliet, Church of the Servant, May 2009

Opening caution: the multiple circumstances of death in our lives, even among a small group of us gathered here, some of which may be very, very fresh. . . .

1. As we mourn and remember, how can we affirm the gospel of Christ, and the fact that our ultimate identity is baptismal identity in Christ?

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. (Romans 6:4)

- Death notices/obituaries
- Use of the (baptismal) pall at funerals
- Christ-centered scripture readings, hymns, sermons, and prayers at funerals

“A Christian funeral is nothing less than a bold and dramatic worship of the living God done attentive to and in the face of an apparent victory at the hands of the last enemy. Though the liturgy may be gently worded, there is no hiding the fact that, in a funeral, Christians raise a fist at death; recount the story of the Christ who suffered death, battled death, and triumphed over it; offer laments and thanksgivings to the God who raised Jesus from the grave; sing hymns of defiance; and honor the body and life of the saint who has died. Thus, one measure of the veracity of a funeral is its capacity to face, without euphemistic smoke and mirrors, the reality of death. . . .”

—T. Long, *Theology Today*, 1999

2. As we mourn and remember, how can we affirm the role of the church, the body of Christ?

- Services and/or visitation at church
- Church community’s presence in visitation and support
- Church cemeteries, depictions of the whole body of Christ in church art
- The Lord’s Supper at funerals and in future healing (. . . “we join with all the saints and angels in singing ‘Holy, Holy, Holy’”)

Note: in the Reformed tradition, the funeral is a family, not a church, event. However, there may be good grounds for rethinking this...

3. As we mourn and remember, how can we affirm the value of our bodily existence as a gift of God—both in our earthly and resurrected bodies?

Here the Christian tradition resists the Greek idea that bodies are merely “prisons” or “shells” for our souls.

So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. 43 It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. 44 It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body. . . . 51 Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, 52 in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. 53 For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. 54 When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.” 55 “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” (1 Cor 15)

- Focus on not just heaven, but the resurrected body
- Changing the title of the service from “funeral” or “memorial service” to “Service of Witness to the Resurrection”

Note: These are very counter-cultural questions even for many Christians. These are very different criteria for funerals than merely “whether this captured who this person was” or “whether it helped us move along in the grief process” or “whether it successfully placated every family member...” [to be sure, all very significant criteria].

II. Case Study: Cremation and the Church Columbarium

Cremation

- Likely practiced in several ancient cultures.
- Modern cremation chamber invented in the 1870s
- In US, cremation has grown from 5% of all deaths in 1962 to 20% in 1992 to 25% in the early 2000s, and nearly 50% in some Western states
- Cremation is nearly always practiced in Japan
- Hindus and Sikhs practice cremation
- Reasons for cremation include cost [no grave, casket, and possibly no embalming], environmental concerns, aesthetic preference, etc. (all worth discussing, though our time today is limited)
- Church columbariums very common in some traditions (Episcopal) and countries (Czechoslovakia)

Church Responses

1. RESISTENCE. Varieties of resisting responses: “there is no scriptural support for it,” “it could undermine our sense of the resurrection of the body,” “Old Testament prescriptions favor burials,” “in the Bible, burning is a treatment reserved for criminals, idols, or enemies”... Variations on these arguments include by earlier Roman Catholic prohibitions, current Eastern Orthodox prohibitions, (uneven) resistance among evangelical and fundamentalist writers, but also some cautions from mainline Protestants concerned about creeping Gnosticism (devaluing of the body) among Christians. Nearly all of these acknowledge the legitimacy of various practices in extenuating circumstances.

2. ANYTHING GOES. One type of affirming response: “it doesn’t much matter,” “we are proud of the fact that we have no hang-ups about this”

3. THINKING IT THROUGH. Many Reformed and Presbyterian writers suggest that cremation and burial are each legitimate options. The best of them push beyond that to challenge churches and families to ask these questions: *As we mourn and remember, how can affirm the gospel of Christ, our baptismal identity, the significant role of the church, and the gift both our earthly and resurrected bodies?*”

One result of this approach may well be: develop a church columbarium; cultivate awareness of our profound unity the cloud of witnesses who have gone before us; embrace mourning families who choose to choose the church as the place in which they will go to remember and grieve; embrace this living reminder of death and life everlasting in the midst of church life. . .

RESOURCES

Featured Resource: <http://www.calvin.edu/worship/services/occasion/funerals/> (including materials from Anne Zaki, Steve and Joan Huyser-Honig, Len Vander Zee, Tom Long

LITURGIES. *Liturgy: The Funeral: A Service of Witness to the Resurrection* (Westminster) and Leonard Vander Zee, *In Life and In Death* (Faith Alive)

CHRISTIAN THEOLOGICAL AND PASTORAL PERSPECTIVES: Amy Plantinga Pauw, “Dying Well,” in D. Bass, *Practicing Our Faith* (Jossey Bass); John Witvliet, “Dying in Christ,” in *Worship Seeking Understanding* (Baker); Nick Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* (Eerdmans); Thomas Long, “Why Jessica Mitford was Wrong,” *Theology Today* (Jan. 1999), in reference to J. Mitford, *The American Way of Death*. Long has also contributed articles on the topic in *Christian Century*, the *Cresset*, and the Calvin Theological Seminary website.

CREMATION. If you google “creation” and “theology,” you’ll find many not-so-good entries, but also some thoughtful (and opposing) views by Rich Mouw, Timothy George, Russell Moore, and Nelson Kloosterman.

COLUMBARIA. Martha Moore, “Better than a Cemetery: A Presbyterian church offers an alternative” *Reformed Worship* 24; or http://www.mapc.com/html/01_about/01j_about-columbarium.htm for a description of the columbarium at Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church. Talk to John Leegwater.

BROADER CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES. Thomas Lynch, *The Undertaking* (Penguin) and *Bodies at Motion and at Rest* (Norton); Gary Landerman, *Rest in Peace: A Cultural History of Death and the Funeral Home in Twentieth-Century America* (Oxford); David Wendell Moller, *Confronting Death: Values, Institutions, and Human Mortality* (Oxford 1996)