



Changes at the House of Mourning

As our society has been moving away from a biblical view of life and death, the way people view funerals and conduct themselves at them has been changing along with it. In the interest of keeping or increasing their share of the market, funeral homes have adjusted to these changes and in turn have been a force to change people's habits on the occasions of funerals.

The most marked change has been the introduction of the notion and attitude of "*celebration of life*" into what was known as "*the house of mourning*" (Eccl. 7:2). The idea is that at the funeral we need to focus on the person's life and contributions and we should have a celebratory atmosphere. These changes should send us back to the Bible to see how God would have us think of funerals.

Rituals

The Bible says little about funeral ceremonies. The word funeral does not even occur in the Bible. However, there are biblical allusions to ceremonies of various sorts that indicate that these were not lacking. Since burial took place frequently in haste, as in Christ's case on the very day of His death (John 19:31-33; 41-42), there were no elaborate ceremonies prior to interment. Emphasis seems to be on the period of grief and mourning following burial, during which there was extended, and often "showy" lamentation, by way of the presence of professional mourners (e.g., Luke 8:52).

During the days when the Roman Catholic Church was departing from Scripture, ceremonies were introduced including the celebration of the mass and expressing the belief in communion that still exists between the living and the dead. The kiss of peace was also given to the body. After the mass, the badges of honour of the deceased were laid on the altar and a eulogy was given by a family member in honour of the deceased person – listing his or her qualities and merits. This was followed by various prayers and chants directed at the body. The body was then taken out for burial, again accompanied by prayers and chants.

Reformation

It is against this background of Roman superstition that the churches of the Reformation insisted on a very simple burial. One of the first synods (Dort 1574) ruled that funeral sermons should be discontinued as soon as possible in order to avoid the danger of superstition. Localities that had not yet introduced them should not do so. The Synod of Dort (1578) judged likewise and added that in places where these funeral sermons could not yet be discontinued, these should not be regular sermons but merely extemporaneous words of admonition.

This synod did not even favour prayer at funeral 'services,' doubtless because many people would attach superstitious value to such prayers on behalf of the dead person. The Synod of Middelburg (1581) decided that funeral sermons should not be introduced in places where such had not been done and they should be discontinued in the most suitable way in places where they had already been introduced.

Simplicity

The Dutch Refugee churches in London, England, had a slightly different practice, as is evident from "The Christian Ordinances of the Dutch Refugee Churches in London," written by Marten Micron. There we read:

Funerals among us take place in all simplicity without any pomp of pagan or popish character. Everything that is done with the dead body is for the instruction and comfort of the living and not of the dead. After all, Jesus Christ in His church has not appointed us as

ministers of the dead but of the living. After the dead body has been brought into church, in the midst of the brethren who have assembled, the minister speaks a brief exhortation to the congregation, in which he usually expounds how by Adam death has entered and how by Christ death has been overcome and taken away, and then he speaks about the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. He also points to the uncertainty of life and shows how the day of the Lord will come as a thief. Thereunto he admonishes every one to watch and pray. If there have been any and excellent virtues in the deceased, then these should be ascribed to the honour of God, and the congregation is exhorted to follow after these virtues. Particularly, the congregation is stirred up unto conversion of life. After this exhortation has been made, the deceased is buried.

The simplicity and God-ward focus of this directive is obvious and most worthy of imitating.

Lessons

In light of the changes that we see happening around us, what should our response be, based on God's Word.

1. We ought to maintain a solemn and God-centred approach

Death remains a solemn event. Even when the person was a true Christian, the Bible still speaks of death as an enemy (1 Cor. 15:26). Jesus wept at the grave of Lazarus (John 11:35). Indeed, when a child of God dies, we do not mourn without hope. But we do mourn (1 Thess. 4:13). God is speaking in every death. We need to be people who listen to what God is saying.

2. We ought to reject eulogizing that glorifies the departed

As a student for the ministry we were taught: *"When conducting a funeral service, do not talk about the dead but speak to the living."* This is sound advice! Many half-truths and outright lies are spoken at separations and funerals. Those who keep silent about the dead but address the living with the gospel will avoid many temptations.

That is not to say that a *"funeral should not be an occasion to speak about death and the Christian hope in general terms."* Some appropriate words may be said with reference to the person who has died and whose body is about to be buried. But to do so appropriately is very difficult. It must be done fittingly with much restraint. We need to watch the line between thankful affection and sentimental superficiality. It may be difficult to define, but we should know the difference and not cross the line. Someone put it like this: Why focus on a flower that has bloomed only for a season, when you can fix attention on the rainbow of God's mercy that reaches from everlasting to everlasting?

3. We ought to focus on the gospel in life and in death

We are surrounded by death. But for those who fear the Lord it is also true that, as they are going to the grave to bury their dead, the Word of God is going along, and it speaks of life. Indeed, the birth of a child and the death of a loved one is "a family affair." Yet the Christian family is a member of the congregation of the Lord. A funeral gathering, in which a minister of the Gospel preaches the Word, is not contrary to Article 65 of the Church Order, if in that service the Gospel is made known and the deceased person is not eulogized.

The seriousness of life becomes nowhere clearer than where one confronts the living with death. But nowhere does the ministry of the Gospel stand out more clearly than where it is proclaimed with all seriousness that *"the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord"* (Rom. 6:23).¹

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¹ W. van 't Spijker, *"Rouwdiensten," Ambtelijk Contact*, 1983, 245-248.