

Introduction

I want you to think about something this morning – the very first testimony that you ever gave. I remember mine. When I was 10 years old or so, I stood up in a Sunday evening service and thanked God for saving me from my sins. That illustrates what a testimony is. It's a statement of what we believe about and experience in God.

Now I want you to think about something else – the very last testimony that you will give. There will be one of those you know and I can tell you what it should be, your funeral. That's what I'm going to preach about today – making your funeral and mine a testimony or witness for God. Turn to the verse I read earlier, Colossians 3:17.

Jesus Is Lord of Our Funerals

In verses 12-16, Paul discusses human relationships, how Christians should believe and behave when it comes to others. He then declares in verse 17, ***"Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus."*** The context shows that sums up what Paul is saying in verses 12-16. But as *The Tyndale Commentary on Colossians* points out, it goes far beyond a mere summary of those verses. It expresses the main theme of the entire book itself, which is the pre-eminence of Jesus.

That helps us understand what Paul is commanding here. Jesus is Lord and His lordship extends to literally everything that we say and do – including our funerals. He wants us to plan funerals as people over whom He is Lord. That's one valid application of verse 17. Jesus wants us to plan our funerals as people over whom He is Lord. Doing that requires three things of us.

First, we must establish a chief aim for our funerals. The verse at the top of your bulletins, 1 Corinthians 10:31, reveals what that chief aim should be. It's to glorify God. To glorify Him means to please Him and to esteem Him, that is, cause others to hold Him in higher regard. So, we set that as the chief aim, the primary objective, of our funerals.

Second, we must commit ourselves to achieving that chief aim. We make and carry out the decision to do whatever is necessary to make our funerals glorify God.

And finally third, we must identify what achieving that chief aim requires of us. We prayerfully and carefully figure out what is necessary to make our funerals glorify God.

Those are the three things that planning our funerals as people over whom Jesus is Lord requires of us. Let's do the third today, figure out what is necessary to make our funerals glorify God. It's three things.

Be Good Stewards of Our Bodies in Death

First, be good stewards of our bodies in death! That has to do with how we choose to dispose of them. There are four basic options available to us.

The first is cremation. The funeral director doesn't embalm the body. He burns it instead until all that remains are ashes, from the bones. Those ashes can then be stored, scattered, or buried in a regular grave. The cremation is usually done before the memorial service.

The second option is direct burial. The funeral director doesn't embalm the body. He buries it instead as soon as possible after death in a regular grave. It isn't present therefore at the memorial service.

The third option is embalming. The funeral director embalms and thus preserves the body. Doing that allows it to be present and even shown at calling hours and the memorial service.

The fourth option is donation of the body as a cadaver. We give it to a medical school whose students dissect and study it for the year. After that, the school disposes of it with other cadavers in a mass cremation. A memorial service is then held for family members.

Those are the options and the question is this. Which one or ones glorify God? We should keep two things in mind in answering that.

First, none of the options is inconsistent with our resurrection from the dead. Many Christians don't realize that. One, for instance, told me

that God won't have anything to resurrect at the Second Coming of Jesus if we're cremated or dissected as a cadaver. Nothing could be further from the truth. It's no problem at all for the infinite God to "find" the atoms and molecules that make up our current bodies and transform and incorporate them into our resurrection bodies.

There's a second thing to keep in mind. We should be good stewards of our bodies in death. One of the ways we can do that is through organ donation. Organ donation can improve or even save lives. Eye hospitals, for instance, have a desperate need for corneas. Why should good eyes be buried with the dead when they can be used to give sight to the living? Another way to be good stewards is to donate our bodies as cadavers. Medical schools desperately need cadavers to train their students. They must have them to graduate competent and highly skilled physicians and surgeons. We can help them do that in our deaths.

With those two things in mind, we should choose one of the four options we have in this way. First, learn all we can about the options. Second, discuss them with our family members. And third pray and ask God specifically if He wants us to choose one of the four. I've chosen donation as a cadaver or if that isn't possible, cremation.

Be Good Stewards of Our Money in Death

A second thing is necessary to make our funerals glorify God. Be good stewards of our money in death!

Let's go back to the four options again. The third is the most expensive. The average cost of a funeral in America is \$6,000. That figure can easily go over \$10,000 with extra goods and services. The other options are less expensive. Cremation costs approximately \$1500, direct burial approximately \$2,500, and donation as a cadaver nothing.

That is how much we *can* spend. But how much *should* we spend?

I admit it. Many contest that we should consider that. They think in fact that it's miserly and insensitive to do so. They think even considering cost somehow disrespects our loved ones. Four adult

children, for instance, used the entire \$7,000 of their mother's life insurance policy to bury her. They disregarded the cost up to that amount, thinking it was the best way to honor her.

But I disagree. Remember what our chief aim in funerals is - to glorify God. Well, how much we spend on them is a crucial factor in achieving or not achieving that aim. Quakers have understood that from the beginning of our movement 350 years ago. Listen to what paragraph 278 of our church's discipline says about that: ***"Knowing that our bodies have been made of dust (Genesis 3:19) and shall return to dust, Friends (Quakers) ought to avoid extravagant and expensive funerals and memorial stones."*** That statement contains a critical guiding principle. We need to be good stewards of our money in our deaths and the deaths of others. Being that requires two things.

First, don't plan funerals for the dead that work hardship on the living. A client of mine died when I was practicing law back in the mid-80's. Her son and daughter-in-law wanted to give her a very nice funeral, which they did, spending \$5000 in fact. They had to borrow the money though to do that, which worked a financial hardship on their children and them for several years until they paid it back. Don't do that. Don't plan funerals for the dead that work hardship on the living.

Being good stewards of our money in death requires a second thing. Don't spend money unnecessarily on the dead that can be used to benefit the living. Some people I know had \$5000 to spend on their mother's funeral after she died. One of them wanted to directly bury her and give the money that wasn't used to World Relief. His siblings were aghast though and disagreed. They then spent the entire \$5000 on the funeral. What that son suggested was a reasonable thing to do. Don't spend money unnecessarily on the dead that can be used to benefit the living.

Whether or not you agree with those applications, the principle behind them is right. We should be good stewards of our money in death. That principle should guide how much money we spend on our funerals and the funerals of others.

Plan a Jesus-Centered Memorial Service

There's a third thing that's necessary to make our funerals glorify God. Plan Jesus-centered memorial services. Memorial services are rights of passage and absent special circumstances should be held. And when they are held, they should be planned in a way that achieves several essential objectives. They should honor the dead person, assist the survivors in handling their grief, ritualistically unite the dead person's family, and most of all glorify God.

I draw your attention to the words "most of all." The primary objective of our memorial services should be to please and esteem God. And we achieve that objective in a specific way. We make them Jesus-centered. We focus on and plan them around Him.

My wife and I went to great lengths to make our wedding ceremony Jesus-centered. We had our mothers come in on songs that told about Jesus, wrote and memorized our own vows that told about Jesus, chose and sang congregational hymns that told about Jesus, and had Scriptures read that told about Jesus. Guests commented afterwards that it was the most God-glorifying wedding they had ever been to.

All of us should do that same thing with our memorial services. Plan them now and make them Jesus-centered. Make sure that they clearly communicate three things: the person of Jesus, the works of Jesus, and the right response to those. We can do that through Scripture readings, anecdotes and readings, testimonies, hymns and choruses, special music, and the preacher's homily. In my service, for instance, I have a part titled *Celebrate Jesus*. It reads and explains verses about Him. Two are Colossians 1:17 and 2:3. Jesus is the glue of the universe and the smartest person who ever lived. I also have a chorus and hymn to be explained and sung. The hymn is *I Have Decided to Follow Jesus*. Explanation – decide to be His disciple. The chorus is *Knowing You*. Explanation – His disciples eventually become His friends. However you do it, do it. Plan a Jesus-centered memorial service.

The best way of course to make our memorial services Jesus-

centered is to make our lives that. The centerpieces of memorial services are the eulogies or what we Quakers call memorials. Eulogies are spoken or written tributes of the living to the dead.

They're quite revealing. They reflect what the living perceive to have been the defining qualities of the dead. I've heard over a thousand eulogies in my time and can honestly say this. Only a handful defined the dead primarily in terms of Jesus. I've conducted over 200 hundred memorial services, well over half of those for professed followers of Jesus. In their eulogies, the family and friends of those professed followers defined them as many things: outstanding husbands, wonderful fathers, brave war heroes, Indians fans, workers in the church, pray-ers, golfers, incredible cooks, and so on. But interestingly enough, they defined only a handful primarily as followers and friends of Jesus.

That's so revealing! One of two things explains it. The defining characteristic of the dead was their relationship with Jesus but the living weren't spiritually perceptive enough to grasp it. Or the defining characteristic of the dead was not their relationship with Jesus. It was something else like parent, spouse, patriot, sports fan, and so on.

May that second explanation not be true of you and me. I'll tell you what I aspire to. It's to so know, love, and live for Jesus that it's unmistakable to those around me. The one overriding truth about me is that I'm a familiar friend of His– and they'll remember me as primarily that after I die. That's the best way I know of to make our memorial services Jesus-centered and thus glorify God.

Conclusion

American poet T. S. Eliot wrote a poem titled *The Hollow Men*, which contains this a thought-provoking line, ***“And this is the way the world ends – Not with a bang but with a whimper.”*** I'd personalize that line by asking this in closing. How will you and I end our lives? How will we go out? Will it be with a whimper, a bang, or a testimony? Do what I've preached about today and make it a testimony – your very last one.