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DUELING WITH DEATH: CHRISTIAN FUNERAL PREACHING AS DIALOGUE

By

JEREMY P. MUNIZ

A PROJECT/DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE
FACULTY OF COVENANT THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the biblical, historical, and current cultural views of death so that the Christian funeral preacher can establish a dialogue between death and Scripture that presents mourners with the unique solution to death that Jesus' resurrection provides all of humanity.

This study examined human responses to death in the ancient world, the biblical context, the modern world, and the postmodern world. The study then focused on the Bible's resurrection message that combats death and comforts mourners. To understand the context of contemporary Christian funeral preaching in a rural, Midwestern setting, this study utilized a qualitative design incorporating semi-structured interviews with four funeral directors and four hospital/hospice chaplains in Jefferson County, Missouri. After examining human responses to death globally as it were (literature review) and locally (eight interviews within Jefferson County, Missouri), the research revealed three primary implications and three practical applications. The implications of this research reveal that a Christian funeral preacher must combat the dreariness of death with the resurrection message of the New Testament. This requires the funeral preacher to view the funeral as worship, an opportunity to exegete the biblical text while honoring the deceased, and to dialogue with death. The research suggests that a Christian funeral preacher can develop a dialectic funeral methodology using an incarnational framework that addresses the pain and suffering of mourners in the past, present, and future tenses.

This study found that Christian funeral preaching must set a worshipful tone that faithfully exegetes the biblical hope humans have in the face of death while acknowledging the uniqueness of every human life. To comfort people who are

influenced by elements of modernity and postmodernity in the context of losing a loved-one, the Christian funeral preacher must be honest about his/her own questions and concerns about death, be willing to challenge people with the absoluteness of death, and faithfully proclaim the biblical message that the resurrection of Jesus Christ defeats the ultimate enemy of humanity, death. The Christian funeral preacher must invest a great deal of thought into the questions that a particular funeral audience may be asking (either verbally or to themselves) and provide biblical answers to those questions using dialogical methodology in the context of a sermon monologue.

The research indicates that the Christian funeral preacher can use the concept of "Immanuel: Past, Present, Future" to frame the questions of mourners. By revealing how Christ has been present in the lives of the deceased, is present with the mourners in their moment of pain, and will be present with the mourners in the future through his resurrection power, the preacher can remain true to scripture, compassionate toward mourners, and honor the deceased.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

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There are far too many people to thank than a few brief paragraphs allow. I want to thank my wife Jenny for her patience with me during this process. Dear, I cherish you. I want to thank my children Averi Grace and Zachary Paul for bringing the smile of God into my life each day (n.b., the only picture in daddy's book is on page twenty). I cannot fail to thank my parents, Jerry and Charlotte Muniz, for the numerous sacrifices they have made for me, and my beloved aunt Pam whose merciless edits on my undergraduate papers taught me how to write with clarity and conviction. I also want to thank my in-laws, David and Jill Meng, for making it possible for me to "get away" and write. Most of all, I want to thank God for showing me the joy of resurrection hope as I grieved the deaths of loved ones over the years.

This project would have been impossible if not for the keen insights of my dear friend Dr. Todd Cathey, and the editorial excellence of Kristen Sagar. I also want to thank my Church family at First Baptist Church De Soto, Missouri who have supported, encouraged, and loved their pastor for nearly eight years. What a joy it is to serve the resurrected Lord Jesus alongside you.

It is my sincere hope that this research will help pastors touch the lives of those who mourn. At the end of this long journey, the Apostle Paul's words to the Christians in Corinth are more meaningful to me than ever before – "But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (I Cor. 15:57).

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

A funeral presents the Christian pastor with an opportunity to challenge the pain and hopelessness of death with the grace and peace of Jesus Christ. It is certain that death will attend each funeral and attempt to "commandeer the pulpit and gain control of the storytelling."[1] What is not certain is whether the pastor will rise to the occasion and challenge death's lies.

According to the research of James Peter Holmes, North American culture perceives that preachers are failing to effectively conduct funerals.[2] One of the researcher's earliest experiences in ministry gave him this same perception. Soon after his ordination, he paid a visit to a local funeral home with his pastor. The pastor and the funeral home director were good friends. As the two men talked, their conversation drifted toward funeral preaching. The funeral home director said to the researcher's

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[1]Thomas G. Long, "Telling the Truth about Death and Life: Preaching at Funerals," *Journal for Preachers* 20.3 (Easter 1997): 5.

[2] James Peter Holmes, "Towards a New Methodology For Preaching at Funerals" (D.Min diss., Acadia Divinity College, 2006: 2-5. Holmes argues that this perception may be "unfair and unfounded" but argues that the perception is "real and it is powerful." He cites two newspaper articles and the writings of a former Baptist minister named Doug Manning that show a trend toward hiring professional "funeral celebrants" as opposed to trained clergy. Manning states: "On the whole, the clergy are doing a very poor job, and people are growing tired of how funerals are done." [In his research, Holmes attempts to prove that due to the "biblically illiterate" nature of most funeral audiences (compared with funeral congregations of the late 19th century), the funeral preacher needs to focus less on detailed biblical exegesis and more on "imagination and metaphor." Holmes compares sermons from 1884 with modern sermons and then interviews both funeral home directors and clergy. Holmes' methodology focuses on an "exegesis of the deceased" that seeks to find stories and happenings from the life of the deceased that "enable the effective proclamation of Christ's resurrection."]

pastor, "I would rather listen to you than Ten Minute Terry." They both chuckled. Not knowing the context of this statement, the researcher inquired, "Who is Ten Minute Terry?"

As it turned out, Ten Minute Terry was a local minister who had become infamous for preaching the same ten minute sermon for every funeral he was asked to officiate. Perhaps the "perception" that Holmes hopes to dismiss is more of a reality than the clergy would care to admit. In fact, Holmes' research suggests that many bereaved persons feel that "clergy fail to make the funeral service personal and that sometimes they simply repeat the same sermon from one funeral to the next."[3] Holmes, and other observers of funerals and funeral preaching, have clearly met a few Ten Minute Terrys of their own.

Statement of Problem

Funeral sermons are one of the most difficult challenges for a pastor. The pastor is faced with a potentially non-Christian audience that is wrestling with the darkness of death. Compounding this dynamic is the pastor's own fear of death and the sobering fact that death brings us squarely into the province of metaphysical mystery. Gene Fowler provides the following warning to pastors: "If you find yourself consistently avoiding scripture passages that either mention death directly or allude to death, you may be avoiding the reality of death out of fear. You may fear that mourners will be upset or angry at hearing it and being confronted with death, or you may be avoiding it yourself, or

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[3] Holmes, 3-4.

both."[4] Pastors must be in constant "training" when it comes to death and grief. In other words, the pastor must learn how to help people with grief by learning to depend on God in his/her own grief.[5] Although Elisabeth Kübler-Ross' well-known book *On Death and Dying* focuses on end of life care from a secular perspective, her observations concerning the clergy's response to death and pain show a fundamental death-denying instinct. She speaks of her "amazement" at how many clergy feel "quite comfortable using a prayer book or a chapter out of the Bible as the sole communication between them and the patients, thus avoiding listening to their needs and being exposed to questions they might be unable or unwilling to answer."[6] The avoidance of the deep issues surrounding death on the part of the clergy has led to countless missed opportunities to present the Gospel as the answer to life's most profound mysteries. A Ten Minute Terry approach to funeral preaching provides little opportunity to challenge death's audacious claims with the Gospel's resurrection hope.

Evidence suggests that mourners can easily spot the unprepared and thoughtless funeral preacher. Holmes' research shows that those who observe funeral preaching believe that much of the clergy lacks any real "personal touch" when dealing with the family and actually do more harm than good in their funeral preaching ministry.[7] The

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[4]Gene Fowler, *Caring through the Funeral: A Pastor's Guide* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004), 138, 147. Fowler also warns the preacher that "accepting grief, facing death, and envisioning hope are spiritual challenges with which you must wrestle over time if you are to grow in your caring ministry to the bereaved through funerals."

[5]Wayne E. Oates, *Grief, Transition and Loss: A Pastor's Practical Guide* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 34.

[6]Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: McMillian, 1969), 254.

[7]Holmes, 2-4.

alternative to clergy-led funerals, according to these observers, is to hire "professional celebrants" who minimize the "bromides and platitudes and 23rd Psalm" and instead "celebrate life."[8]

What can a pastor do to overcome these negative perceptions of funeral preachers? Helpful resources for funeral preaching are rare, and the few that can be found are hardly relevant from a theological and homiletical view point.[9] The literature reveals that many pastors struggle in their decision to either focus more attention on the deceased (eulogy) or spend more time expounding the biblical text.[10] Pastors are surely disappointed when they dust off their homiletic textbooks and discover

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[8]Ibid., 5.

[9]At this point, Fowler is somewhat contradictory. He claims on page 4 that "in most books on funerals the main emphasis is on preaching" but on page 108 he says that many denominational service books "say relatively little about funeral sermons." This tension is, in part, due to Fowler's concern that pastors may pay too much attention to the sermon and not take into consideration "the entire funeral liturgy." Fowler's focus on the pastoral elements of the funeral moment, "i.e., caring through the funeral" possibly leads him to place too little emphasis on the need for powerful preaching at funerals. This pastoral concern not withstanding, Fowler can find "relatively little" about funeral preaching because there is a notable lack of resources that aim to specifically aid a pastor in the process of developing theologically sound and homiletically powerful funeral sermons. Fowler, 4, 108.

[10]For example, James S. Lowery mentions that "in the mid 1960s . . . the prevailing wisdom among Presbyterian clergy in general and teachers of Presbyterian worship in particular was that there be no preaching in funerals." Lowery no longer holds this view and believes that "those who are willing to grapple honestly in sermons with the mystery of death and the pain of grief in the context of affirming the faith should not longer remain silent." James S. Lowery, "To Preach or Not to Preach: That is the (Funeral) Question," *Journal for Preachers* 22.3 (Easter 1999): 39. John Melloh strikes a good balance in his article between the preaching of the word and honoring the deceased. He does place the greater emphasis on the preaching of the word. "Overall the proclamation of the word manifests God's design: that suffering and death will not triumph over God's people." Melloh, John Allyn, "Homily or Eulogy?: The Dilemma of Funeral Preaching," *Worship* 67.6 (November 1993): 506. Robert Kreig's approach encourages the pastor to see the funeral homily as more than just eulogy. He believes the homily should be a "testimony" that is faithful to God's word and pays homage to the deceased. He says, "the homily must approach the texts in such a way as to reveal how the truth declared in the readings is present and in the lives of the congregation." Kreig's suggestions are likely foundational to Holmes' "exegesis of the deceased." Robert A. Kreig, "The Funeral Homily: A Theological View," *Worship* 58.3 (May 1984): 222-239. Holmes, v.

that the subject of funeral preaching is relegated to a brief paragraph or footnote.[11] Why has a subject as crucial as funeral preaching been largely ignored?

Claudia Setzer wrote that "death is a problem that cries out for a solution."[12] The solution to this problem is something that can potentially be found by an honest pastor willing to dig deep into the scriptures and deep into his/her own soul. Funeral preachers must acknowledge that death is a formidable foe. In the introduction to *Life in the Face of Death: The Resurrection Message of the New Testament*, Richard N. Longenecker warns the reader that death is not religion's "trump card" and that "death is religion's greatest challenge."[13] Longenecker suggests that religion must attempt to "offer some explanation for death's universal tyranny, some program for alleviating death's effects, and some hope for death's final eradication, thereby providing people with a way of living out their lives in the presence of this ultimate and most vexing human problem."[14] A Gospel minded funeral preacher should be willing to help people think "about" death and also

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[11]For example, Bryan Chapell's classic text *Christ Centered Preaching* makes a passing statement about the "topical" nature of funeral preaching on page 130 and provides, in outline form, suggestions for the order of a funeral service, principles for the funeral message, and content of funeral messages in Appendix 7 on pages 355-358. This amounts to approximately one percent of this key homiletics text book. Bryan Chapell, *Christ Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005: 130), 355-358. Further proof of the funeral sermon's neglect on the part of homileticians can be seen by the reader in the work of Thomas Long. Though Long speaks eloquently of funeral sermons elsewhere, in his classic homiletics primer *The Witness of Preaching*, he only refers to funerals in passing three times in 259 pages and never provides any specific funeral preaching instruction. Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 2 ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 2005), 66, 126, 134.

[12]Claudia Setzer, *Resurrection of the Body in Early Judaism and Early Christianity: Doctrine, Community, and Self-Definition* (Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2004), 104.

[13]Richard N. Longenecker, ed. *Life in the Face of Death: The Resurrection Message of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 2-3.

[14]Ibid., 3.

"beyond it."[15] One early American pastor eloquently expressed the vexation of death by saying, "O sirs, dying times are trying times."[16] These trying times go beyond the grief of the family and extend to the pastor's study.

The problem of funeral preaching is hardly a new concern. The New Testament provides Christians with the beautiful hope of resurrection. Yet, there is little evidence of how this resurrection message was applied in the context of a funeral. N. T. Wright says, "Unfortunately we have no evidence of how precisely the early Christians conducted funerals; in the fourth century, the first time such evidence occurs, they were considered an occasion of joy, and those attending wore white."[17] This Christian funeral preaching void continued through the medieval period, and even the Reformation contributed little to the development of funeral sermons.[18]

Death visits every human being and thus must be addressed by preachers armed with Gospel truth. Yes, "death is a uniquely dominant historical power," but the New

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[15]Peter C. Moore, *Disarming the Secular Gods: How to Talk So Skeptics Will Listen.* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1989), 162. Moore says, "But despite the fact of death how pragmatic are most people about their own death? It seems likely that people do not want to think about it because they cannot think beyond it."

[16]David E. Stannard, *The Puritan Way of Death: A Study in Religion, Culture, and Social Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 81. This is a line from one of the earliest extant funeral sermons preached in New England and was delivered by Samuel Wakeman for an 18 year old "godly youth" by the name of John Tappin of Boston, MA.

[17]N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God.* Christian Origins and the Question of God Series, Volume 3 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 579.

[18]James F. White, *Introduction to Christian Worship*, 3rd ed., revised and expanded (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), 294. White observes: "Christian burial never received the scholastic attention the seven (sacraments) did and the failure of both Luther and Calvin to devise funeral rites shows that they had more pressing things to do. Thus the funeral has never received as much theological consideration as it deserves, although psychologists, sociologists, and popular writers have leaped in to fill the void." White's view here may be overstated. For example, the English poet John Donne's (15772-1631) funeral sermons are both personal and theologically profound. Charles M. Coffin, ed., *The Complete Poetry and Selected Prose of John Donne* (New York: The Modern Library, 2001), 204-206.

Testament proclaims death's defeat (n.b., 1 Cor. 15).[19] The modern church has "all too often . . . forgotten both hope and fear and refused to think about death as part of the Christian message."[20] Death is an offensive topic that both the ancient and modern church has tried to avoid. James F. White states, "Too often, this has been the fault of the church, which has substituted sentimental funeral services of flowers and poetry for the witness of the gospel. And the church, too often, politely sidesteps mention of death in its weekly life, even during the season of Easter, the period focusing on resurrection. The teaching ministry also has neglected treating something as offensive as death."[21] Complicating this concern is the nihilism and hopelessness of postmodern thought. Politically correct pastors who are pandering to the prevailing relativism of our age will, most likely, avoid the biblical answer to death's most daunting taunts. The absolute claims of resurrection in Christ provide a bold answer to the questions that all people (premodern, modern, and postmodern) are prone to ask when death pays a visit to their lives. The church needs its leaders to gather their courage and lead the charge in a "restless protest against death."[22]

There is no "magic button" that enables human beings to rid themselves of all fears and frees them from the burdens that death brings into their lives.[23] But if the funeral preacher is willing to attend the "seminary of suffering" and wrestle with death while

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[19]Eberhard Jüngel, *Death: The Riddle and the Mystery* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975), 5.

[20]White, 292.

[21]Ibid., 293.

[22]Amy Plantinga Pauw, "Dying Well" in *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, ed. Dorothy C. Bass (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), 169.

[23]Kübler-Ross, 33-34.

leaning on God's word, such fears and burdens can be greatly alleviated.[24] Christian funeral preaching must be more than poetry and platitudes. It must engage the many problems and questions that death delivers to the bereaved soul's door step. The problem of death forces the pastor to transition, homiletically, from a mere monologue about death to an engaging dialogue with death.[25]

Statement of Purpose

Over the course of human history, every culture has developed unique rites and rituals pertaining to death. This project examined views of death from several cultures and various epochs of human history to discover these basic questions. In order to frame these questions in terms that present day mourners in the researcher's cultural context will understand, the researcher has studied Christian funerals in a Mid-Western, Euro-American, rural context where people have been influenced by an amalgam of pre-modern, modern, and folk postmodern ideas. The purpose of this study was to examine the biblical, historical, and current cultural views of death so that the Christian funeral preacher can establish a dialogue between death and Scripture that presents mourners with the unique solution to death that Jesus' resurrection provides all of humanity. This study has sought to provide the Christian funeral preacher with a dialogical methodology that allows the funeral audience to overhear the grace-centered, resurrection-oriented

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[24]John Piper, "Preaching to Suffering People" in Don Kistler, ed. *Feed My Sheep: A Passionate Plea for Preaching* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 2003), 268.

[25]Fred B. Craddock, *As One Without Authority: Revised and With New Sermons* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), 15. Although Craddock is concerned with preaching in general and not funeral preaching in particular, his emphasis on dialogical preaching uncovers the uncomfortable fact that preachers are often talking "at" instead of "with" the congregation. He says: "The Preacher seriously asks whether it is best to continue to serve up a monologue in a dialogical world."

answers to death's taunts that both honor the memory of the deceased and provide meaning and hope for those seeking comfort and consolation at a crucial crossroad of life.

Primary Research Questions

The dialogue with death that a Christian funeral preacher must engage in requires a pastor to have a deep understanding of resurrection theology and a keen awareness of the questions and concerns that a bereaved person might posses. The purpose of this research was to answer the following questions through a detailed review of the literature pertaining to the human understanding of death from the historical, philosophical, biblical, and homiletical points of view and the responses garnered from two focus groups. The two focus groups were funeral home directors and hospital/hospice chaplains from Jefferson County, Missouri.

Question 1: In the current, relativistic cultural context (in the rural Mid-West) how does the death of a loved one challenge a mourner's core beliefs?

Question 2: Is it possible to meld both eulogy and homily in the funeral context?

Question 3: How can the Christian funeral preacher clearly communicate the Bible's answer to the problem of death?

Significance of Study

Homiletically speaking, the Christian funeral sermon has been largely neglected over the past two millennia. Countless opportunities to proclaim the Gospel message of resurrection have been missed as preachers have sought to provide comfort for the bereaved instead of challenging death and unmasking its lies. The preacher is in the

unique position of interacting with death on a personal level and then helping other people overcome the same fears and concerns that he/she has experienced. The purpose of this research was to aid preachers in their journey to the *atria morits* (gates of death). The only way back from this dark place is a firm commitment to the biblical teaching of Christ's resurrection and ours. Funeral preachers must ensure that the funerals they preach "*realistically deal with death*" and do not "*retreat from the face of death.*"[26]

Death forces the bereaved to wrestle with an absolute occurrence in their otherwise relativistic world. The loss of a loved one or the prospect of one's own demise opens the mind to the question of what lies beyond physical life as we know it. David Buttrick calls such moments "limit moments" and describes these moments as times when "our world constructs are blown apart."[27] These moments are opportunities that a Christian pastor cannot miss in a postmodern context where propositional truth and eternal realities are often the objects of scorn.

Death may have some convincing evidence on its side, "the lifeless body, the empty chair at the table, the unraveled narratives of hope and meaning," but the Gospel provides a unique answer to this evidence – the resurrected Christ.[28] Thus, it is the preacher's role to serve as the instrument through which God's word does battle with the hopelessness of death. The preacher must learn to use the preaching moment, which is

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[26]Paul E. Irion, *The Funeral and the Mourners: Pastoral Care for the Bereaved* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), 74.

[27]David G. Buttrick, *Homiletic* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 409.

[28]Long, "Telling the Truth," 5.

inherently monological, and let it serve as a vehicle for a dialogue between death and the Bible's message of resurrection.[29] Death has a propensity to leave us speechless, but biblically-based, Gospel-centered preaching can give us "the voice we need to effectively combat death."[30] Holmes does not overstate the significance of the funeral preaching moment when he states:

> The funeral is one of the most meaningful and profound points of contact that a minister has with members of his or her faith community. The clergy's offering and ministry at the funeral is crucial in both the establishment and the maintenance of the pastoral bond between the minister and the people. And for those in the community beyond the church, the funeral represents one of the last significant points of entry into the church. There are many people who do not enter a church except to attend a funeral. As such, the funeral offers an opportunity for the clergy to convey, to the outside community, the Christian faith and hope in the face of death. And due to the gravity of the occasion, the people are listening.[31]

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[29]The preacher who has pondered death and poured through the scriptures should have no trouble imagining the questions that a bereaved person will be asking aloud or privately. The research of Craddock and others shows how effective it is for preachers to address the potential questions of the audience in his/her monologue. Craddock says, "Without question, preaching increases in power when it is dialogical, when speaker and listener share in the proclamation of the Word. The fact has been understood by really effective preachers for a long time, but we have of late seen a host of new implementations." Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, 18. Zach Eswine seems to confirm Craddock's claim that "really effective preachers" often employ dialogical methods in their preaching in his description of Charles H. Spurgeon's preaching method. Eswine comments: "His style was dialogical. That is to say, Spurgeon did not preach as an observer but as a participant, not as a formal presenter but as a real man who spoke out of his own real experience. Consequently, Spurgeon was not afraid to refer to himself in the pulpit. In fact, he believed that a Scripture manner demanded it." Zach Eswine, *Kindled Fire: How the Methods of C. H. Spurgeon Can Help Your Preaching* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Mentor, 2006), 75. Another great preacher of our present age, Brian Chapell, also stresses the potential of dialogical methodology. "A preacher can also signal progress by asking questions that stimulate further discussion. A preacher who can hear the questions playing on the listeners' minds and then asks those questions *out loud* employs a powerful rhetorical tool. The dialogue a preacher initiates on listeners' behalf not only convinces them that the preacher respects their thoughts and is sensitive to their concerns but also invites listeners to continue progressing through the message to satisfy their concerns." Chapell, 263.

[30]William H. Willimon, *Worship as Pastoral Care* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), 104.

[31]Holmes, 2.

Craddock notes that when the preacher announces "'all men are mortal,' he is greeted with a healthy yawn. But when the preacher says, 'Mr. Brown's son is dying' the church becomes the church."[32] Great Christian funeral preaching can facilitate the transformation of the church from healthy yawn to healthy ministry.

If the Christian funeral preacher will effectively duel/dialogue with death in the funeral moment, the bereaved will have a chance to "awaken" those who are in a spiritual slumber.[33] A keen understanding of humanity's universal struggle with death and the biblical response to this struggle can help a Christian funeral preacher go beyond mere words of comfort to inspiring a radical change of worldview with eternal consequences.

Powerful funeral preaching is a key ingredient to the church's outreach and evangelism. Funeral preaching that is culturally relevant and resurrection-centered must become more of a priority in Christian ministry.

Definition of Terms

– Dialogical Sermon – A sermon that is "dialogical in character while monological in form." In this study, the dialogue is between the lies of death and the truth of scripture.[34]

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[32]Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, 50-51.

[33]Craddock stresses the importance of clear, concrete preaching. He says, "If the imagery of her sermons is to be real, she must see life as life, not as an illustration under point two. This means that the preacher who sees a cloud as a cloud, garbage as garbage, a baby as a baby, and death as death will able to share images that are clear and that awaken meaning." Ibid., 66.

[34]Although not a sermon, Long's article provides several examples of how a Christian funeral preacher might develop such a dialogue. Long, "Telling the Truth about Death and Life", 5-12.

– Folk Postmoderism – I have used Ronald J. Allen's definition, which states, "postmodern outlooks that are voiced and embodied by people who are not familiar with the formal literature and subtle categories of theologians and philosophers."[35]

– Christian Funeral Sermon – A manuscript delivered orally in the context of a Christian funeral worship service that is founded on a biblical text or texts and addresses the specific needs of the mourners present.[36]

– Immortality – The ability of a human being to be "immune from decay and death that results from having or sharing the eternal divine life."[37] Immortality in the non-somatic sense (e.g., Greek philosophy) is foreign to the New Testament. Immortality is only possible because of and through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

– Modernity – A historical period fitting roughly between the French Revolution (1789) and the fall of the Berlin wall and communism (1989) that gave rise to an increased emphasis on humanism, science/reason, and placed little or no emphasis on metaphysical considerations.[38]

– Resurrection – A reversal of the effects of death.[39] The transformation and exaltation of a dead human body made possible by the death and resurrection of Jesus

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[35]Ronald J. Allen, Barbara Blaisdell and Scott Black Johnston, *Theology for Preaching: Authority Truth and Knowledge of God in a Postmodern Ethos* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 21.

[36]The researcher does not see a need to dogmatically differentiate between "homily" and "eulogy." The research of Melloh and others emphasize that Christian funeral preaching must contain elements of both. Melloh, 502-518.

[37]Murray J. Harris, *Raised Immortal: Resurrection and Immortality in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 275.

[38]Thomas C. Oden, *Two Worlds: Notes on the Death of Modernity in America and Russia* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 32.

[39]Wright, 33, 127-128.

Christ.[40] The somatic (as opposed to pneumatic) reanimation of life.[41] Scripture's answer to death's claims and the centerpiece of the Christian hope.[42]

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[40]Murray J. Harris, "Resurrection and Immortality in the Pauline Corpus" in Longenecker, 149.

[41]Harris, *Raised Immortal*, 272.

[42]1 Cor. 15; 2 Cor. 5, et al.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Death Speaks

If there is a subject that spurs poets more than love, it is death. When death speaks, human beings have no recourse but to listen. Anthropologist Margaret Mead observed that though she "knew societies where birth, puberty, or marriage were treated casually," she "knew of no society for whom death is not a critical event."[43] Before the preacher can respond with resurrection power, he/she must let death do its worst. This section examines the literature of the ancient world, the Bible, and the modern world to uncover a sampling of death's taunts.

Death in the Ancient World

The ancients were confronted with death in much the same way as modern and postmodern cultures. One of humanity's most ancient literary works, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, is an illustration of man's duel with death. The general attitude of Mesopotamian cultures toward death is expressed through the main character Gilgamesh. When his friend Enkidu passes away, the confident and fearless Gilgamesh is pushed to the point of utter despair. The pain of his loss sends him on an epic journey to uncover the secret to eternal life. Gilgamesh's hopes are soon thwarted when he learns:

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[43]Herbert Anderson, and Edward Foley, *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals: Weaving Together the Human and the Divine* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 100.

> The life thou pursuest thou shalt not find,
> When the gods created mankind,
> Death for mankind they set aside,
> Life in their own hands remaining.[44]

Hopelessness and frustration lead Gilgamesh to frenzied fear. In a dialogue with Ut-napishtim, a Noah-like figure who has survived a great flood, Gilgamesh laments "What can I do, Ut-napishtim? Where shall I go? The Rapacious One lurks in my bedroom: Death! Where ever I turn my face, there he is: Death!"[45] In the end, Gilgamesh is only as immortal as his earthly accomplishments and the account of his exploits preserved for posterity in writing. The lesson is stark: death is unavoidable.

Egyptian culture's fascination with death is well documented. Death was a fearsome prospect that every Egyptian knew could occur at any time. Proof that the Egyptians viewed death as unpredictable and gruesome can be seen in the pictograph representing the word death (*mwt*) that displays "a man falling on his knees with blood streaming from his head."[46] Egyptian mythology, especially in the story of Osiris and Isis, reveals the afterlife to be non-somatic, mysterious, and shadowy.[47] Death was a fearsome prospect in Egypt, its mythology and accompanying religious rites did little to assuage those fears.

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[44]As quoted in Robert Davidson, *The Courage to Doubt* (London: SCM Press, 1983), 28.

[45]Lloyd R. Bailey, Sr. *Biblical Perspectives on Death*. Overtures to Biblical Theology, eds. Walter Brueggeman and John R. Donahue (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 7.

[46]Edwin Yamauchi, "Life, Death, and the Afterlife in the Ancient Near East," in *Life in the Face of Death: The Resurrection Message of the New Testament*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 21-22.

[47]Yamauchi, 22-29.

The ancient Greeks generated volumes of literature dealing with the questions of death and the afterlife. Beyond the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, few bodies of ancient literature have been more influential in framing the debate about death and what lies beyond our mortal lives. Homer, the most venerable of all Greek poets, had little hope to offer those pondering death. The afterlife could provide "no comforts, no prospects, but only a sense of loss," and the dead were in someway "subhuman and without hope."[48] Wright says, "if Agamemmnon, Achilles, Ajax and the rest were in miserable Hades, what hope was there for anyone else?"[49] Physical life was considered vastly superior to any existence beyond the grave. In a moving scene from *The Odyssey*, the dead Achilles speaks to Odysseus in a dream. The once fearless Achilles laments: "Never try to reconcile me to death, glorious Odysseus. I should choose, so I might live on earth, to serve as the hireling of another, some landless man with hardly enough to live on, rather than to be lord over all the dead that have perished."[50] For many ancient Greeks, "the more beautiful the world, the more terrifying was death."[51] Comfort for the bereaved and comfort for those pondering their own demise was absent in the great Homeric tradition.

Ancient Greeks were hard pressed to find comfort in Homer's writings, but the reader of his epics discovers that Homer did believe in a form of existence beyond physical life. The words used by Homer indicate the sub-human status of the deceased. Those who have perished are variously called "shades" (*skiai*), "ghosts" (*psychai*), or

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[48]Wright, 44.

[49]Ibid., 45.

[50]*Od*, 11.488-91 as quoted in Wright, 43.

[51]Jüngel, 50.

"phantoms" (*eiodola*), and as Wright explains, "they are in no way fully human beings, though they may look like them; the appearance is deceptive, since one cannot grasp them physically."[52] Before he fell in the final siege of Troy, Achilles dreamed that the ghost of his recently deceased friend Patroclus came to him in a form that was both recognizable and disconcerting:

> Presently the sad spirit of Patroclus drew near him, like what he had been in stature, voice, and the light of his beaming eyes, clad, too, as he had been clad in life. The spirit hovered over his head and said - "You sleep, Achilles, and have forgotten me; you loved me living, but now that I am dead you think for me no further. Bury me with all speed that I may pass the gates of Hades; the ghosts, vain shadows of men that can labour no more, drive me away from them; they will not yet suffer me to join those that are beyond the river, and I wander all desolate by the wide gates of the house of Hades . . . He opened his arms towards him as he spoke and would have clasped him in them, but there was nothing, and the spirit vanished as a vapour, gibbering and whining into the earth. Achilles sprang to his feet, smote his two hands, and made lamentation saying, "Of a truth even in the house of Hades there are ghosts and phantoms that have no life in them; all night long the sad spirit of Patroclus has hovered over head making piteous moan, telling me what I am to do for him, and looking wondrously like himself."[53]

The realm of the dead was a sad and shadowy place in the Greek worldview, where a "soul could do little more than engage in a kind of pale reflection of its earthly activities."[54] Everett Ferguson draws attention to what the Greeks referred to as Elysium, a place "where the temperature remains the same year round and the weather is always good, but only a few - the very good - go there; and they are translated directly and do not die. Similarly, very few are punished in the afterlife."[55] The common man did not

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[52]Wright, 43.

[53]*Iliad* 23.62-107.

[54]Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 157.

[55]Ferguson, 157.

necessarily fear a judgment in the afterlife, nor did he have any prospect of a heavenly hope. Death had the upper hand in ancient Greece.

While Homer's writings were foundational for the development of the Greek worldview, it was the teaching of Socrates and his pupil Plato that most profoundly shaped how the West would view death and life after death. The event that spurned this new dialogue was the death of Socrates. Socrates viewed death as the moment when the soul is parted from the body. Jüngel comments: "The last wish of dying Socrates is also that Asclepius should offer up a cockerel – the custom which is followed when one recovers from an illness. Thus for man whose true end is knowledge, death is a release. Death, as the release and separation of the soul from the body means that the soul is set free for itself and to be itself."[56] Socrates introduced to the world a new concept concerning death's meaning. Death was to be embraced because it provided a chance to slough off corruptible flesh and free the soul. This thought dominated the discussion surrounding death in the Greco-Roman world. The great Roman politician Cicero interpreted the Platonic view of death as the motivation for the pursuit of wisdom and knowledge. In the *Tuscalanae Disputationes* I, 74, Cicero quipped: "*Tota enim philosophorum commentation mortis est* – "for the entire life of the philosopher is marked by the thought of death."[57]

The Greeks and Romans dueled with death by using its terrors as a form of philosophical motivation. The Platonic mantra, "Know thyself" was a prompting to "seek

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[56]Jüngel, 45.

[57]Ibid., 46.

self knowledge" and a warning that time is short.[58] This message is expressed with frightening beauty in an ancient Roman mosaic that is housed in the National Museum of Rome (figure 1).

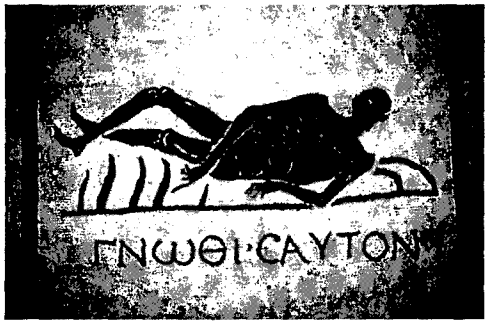

Figure 1

As one can see, the figure is not quite skeletal nor is it fully fleshed. The image confronts the viewer with the fact that with age and wisdom comes self-knowledge, and with self-knowledge comes the realization of death.

In the Greek philosophical tradition, the true lover of wisdom did not focus on that which will inevitably see corruption. He/she had to learn and let be, to die and become. Plato, Cicero, and other Greek thinkers were eager to escape the prison house of the body. This led to a radical distaste of all things physical by philosophers such as Epicurus (341 B.C. - 270 B.C.), who wrote:

> Become accustomed to the belief that death is nothing to us. For all good and evil consists in sensation, but death is deprivation of sensation. And therefore a right understanding that death is nothing to us makes the mortality of life enjoyable, not because it adds to it an infinite span of time, but because it takes away the craving for immortality. For there is nothing terrible in life for the man who has, truly comprehended that there is nothing terrible in not living. So that the man speaks but idly who says that he fears death not because it will be painful when it comes,

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[58]Ibid., 46-47.

> but because it is painful in anticipation. For that which gives no trouble when it comes, is but an empty pain in anticipation. So death, the most terrifying of ills, is nothing to us, so long as we exist, death is not with us; but either the living or the dead, since for the former it is not, and the latter are no more . . .[59]

The writings of the Stoic philosopher Epictetus (A.D. 55 - A.D. 135), far removed from the time of Epicurus, echoed the same sentiment that physical life was something to throw away and that death was simply moving on to another form of existence in the universe. Epicetus wrote, "My wretched body is nothing to me, its parts are nothing to me. Death? Let it come when it will, whether to my whole body or to a part of it. Exile? Can one be sent into exile beyond the Universe? One cannot. Wherever I go, there is the sun, there is the moon, there are the stars, dreams, auguries, conversation with the gods."[60] The Greeks put a brave face on when confronting death, but genuine comfort was lacking. Many centuries removed from the age of Epicurus and Epictetus, a brilliant man wrestling with grief, riled against the human tendency to dismiss death saying, "It is hard to have patience with people who say, 'There is no death' or, 'Death doesn't matter.' There is death. And whatever is matters. And whatever happens has consequences, and it and they are irrevocable and irreversible. You might as well say that birth doesn't matter."[61]

Greek and Roman literature did point to the belief that birth did not matter, or if it did, it was a thing to be lamented. The philosophically minded Greek writer of the 5th

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[59]Epicurus, *Epistle to Menoeceus* 123ff., 127b-132 as translated in C.K. Barrett, *The New Testament Background: Writings from Ancient Greece and the Roman Empire That Illuminate Christian Origins* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1987), 79-80.

[60]Epictetus, *Discourses* III, xxii. 19-26 as translated in C. K. Barett, 82.

[61]C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York: Bantam Books, 1976), 16.

century B.C., Euripides, had one of his characters announce "birth should be lamented, death rejoiced over."[62] Sophocles, a contemporary of Euripides, likewise viewed life as little more than a cosmic accident that only death can rectify. Sophocles states:

> Never to have been born at all:
> None can conceive a loftier thought!
> And the second-best is this: once born,
> Quickly to return to the dust.[63]

Lest one think that only the authors of Greek plays held such views, the first century Roman historian Pliny wrote in his *Historia Naturalis,* "Nature has granted man no better gift than the shortness of life."[64] Such disdain for life was replete in the Greco-Roman world to the point that a favorite inscription upon grave markers was the Latin acronym *NFFNSNC – non fui, fui, no sum, non curo* – "I was not, I was, I am not, I care not."[65] The gods were of little value or comfort to the ancient Greeks and Romans. Ferguson summarizes the Greco-Roman desperation in the face of death saying, "hope was suspect because it could so easily be revealed as false and empty, and therefore vain."[66] Death could spurn the philosopher or be ignored all together, but the concept of being at peace with death was a rare theme in the literature of the Greco-Roman world. Homer's shades, Plato's disdain for the body, and the general disdain of physical life expressed by later Greeks and Romans, portray a sense of desperation and depression in the face of death.

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[62]*Cresphontes*, fragment, 449 in Peter G. Bolt, "Life, Death, and the Afterlife in the Greco-Roman World" in *Life in the Face of Death: The Resurrection Message of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 51-79.

[63]*Oedipus Coloneus* 1218ff. quoted in Bolt, 64.

[64]*Historia Naturalis* 7.50 quoted in Ibid., 64.

[65]Ferguson, 248.

[66]Bolt, 61, 65.

Ancient Greek and Roman funeral orations may have been rhetorically brilliant, but they could provide little comfort. As Melloh says, "Even 'consolation' was expressed through maxims (for example, 'all are mortal,' 'to have lived virtuously, rather than long, is of prime importance,' etc.) or by appealing to widely-held beliefs, such as that death frees from the ravages of disease or the evils of old age."[67] Marcus Aurelius and his subjects could not withstand death's onslaught and could do little more than cower in its presence. Aurelius said, "It is the duty then of a thinking man to be neither superficial, nor impatient, nor yet contemptuous in his attitude toward death, but to await it as one of the operations of Nature which he will have to undergo."[68] A duel with death in the ancient world would have been viewed as a foolish proposition that required the strength and bravado of Hercules.[69] Faced with death's fearsome prospect, an ancient person could do little more than make the most of his/her short, painful life. Death's voice overwhelms all mortal retorts in the literature of the ancient world.

Death in the Bible

The Bible does not shy away from death. According to some scholars, the Bible presents a maturation or development concerning the proper human response to death.[70]

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[67]Melloh, 515.

[68]Marculs Aurelius, *Meditations* as quoted in Robert Fulton, "The Funeral in Contemporary Society" in *Death & Identity*, 3rd ed., eds R. Fulton and R. Bendiksen (Philadelphia: The Charles Press, 1994), 67.

[69]In the play *Alcestis*, Euripides has Hercules "ambush" death so that noble Alcestis can be brought back to her grieving family. Hercules wins the duel with death and brings Alcestis back to Admetus her husband. Death is clearly cheated in this story, but unless one has Hercules as a friend, Admetus' words ring true, "the dead can never come back to life again." Euripides, *Alcestis*, 828-1163.

[70]For example, see Alan J. Avery-Peck, and Jacob Newsner, eds. *Judaism in Late Antiquity, IV: Death, Life-After-Death, Resurrection and the World to Come In the Judaisms of Antiquity* (Boston: Brill 2000), 35-36. This view does not seem to take into account a passages such as Job 14:14. This passage

This process progresses, they presume, from resignation to death in the oldest books of the Hebrew scriptures to outright defiance of death in the Christian writings. The Bible does not ignore death's power, yet it has a disdain for death that develops into an unswerving trust in a physical resurrection secured by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In the context of the Ancient Near East and Greco-Roman world, death was a darkness that no light could dispel. Death's darkness begins to retreat in the face of biblical illumination.[71] Only God could provide humanity with hope against a foe as powerful as death. The scripture's role in defeating death was articulated by the late 19th century English Baptist pastor Charles H. Spurgeon. In his view, " . . . the Holy Spirit has designed to place a lamp in the sepulcher where darkness was wont to hold an undisputed sway."[72] The assault on death begins at the very genesis of human history.

Death in the Old Testament. The sweeping narrative of the Bible explains not only the origins of death but death's ultimate solution. Death's origins are revealed in the early chapters of the Genesis narrative. Adam and Eve were created to be more than mortal and had lost that gift when they chose to disobey God's commands.[73] Harris spells out the classic understanding of this key biblical event by saying, "man was not created unable to die (*nonposse mori*) but able not to die (*passe non mori*), although after the fall he was unable not to die (*non posse mori*)."[74] Genesis 3 teaches that sin unleashed death

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provides a strong hint of resurrection and is found in one of the Hebrew Bible's oldest books.

[71]Ps. 36:9.

[72]Charles H. Spurgeon, "Death, A Sleep," in *Classic Sermons on Death and Dying*, Kregel Classic Sermon Series (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2000), 10.

[73]Gen. 3.

[74]Harris, *Raised Immortal*, 194.

on all of creation. To put it another way, death is an invader of sorts, an "abnormality" that humanity has introduced into the world by sinful choice.[75] The Hebrew people felt overwhelmed by the prospect of death, and the writings of the Old Testament period may seem eerily similar to the writings of other ancient traditions. Authors such as Robert Davidson claim: "For those whom religion is primarily concerned with death and the life hereafter, the Old Testament must be a very disappointing book . . . death seems for most Hebrews to have been neither a preoccupation nor a problem. It was simply a fact to be accepted."[76] While the Old Testament presents less hope for the Hebrew people in the face of death than the New Testament, Davidson overlooks several passages of Hebrew Scripture that point toward a metaphysical hope.

Davidson and others see passages such as Gen. 15:15, 25:8, 35:29; Jud. 8:32; I Chr. 23:1; 2 Chr. 24:15; and Job 42:17 as evidence that God's grace was something that a person experienced only in life. These passages focus more on physical hope by using phrases such as "full of days," "going to your fathers in peace," and "died in good old age." Jüngel summarizes this Hebrew earthbound, hope with the phrase, "grace was life."[77] However, such a view does not account for several passages in the Hebrew Bible

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[75] Christian thinkers from varying theological viewpoints such as Francis Schaeffer and Helmut Thielicke both spoke of death and disease as "abnormal" or "unnatural" elements of this world. The problem of evil, according to Schaeffer's interpretation of scripture, is directly traceable to the "fall" of Adam and Eve. Schaeffer used this biblical concept brilliantly in letters to those suffering with grief, pain and loss. Lane T. Dennis, *Letters of Francis A. Schaeffer: Spiritual reality in the Personal Christian Life* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1985), 158. Thielicke follows this same line of thought and boldly states: "In biblical thought human death is simply unnatural. At no time and in no place is it the expression of any sort of normality of nature, as if it signified the necessary ebb in the rhythm of life." Helmut Thielicke. *Death and Life*, trans. Edward Schroeder (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 105.

[76] Davidson, *The Courage to Doubt*, 27.

[77] Jüngel, 62. Jüngel admits that passages such as Ps. 63:3 " . . . your steadfast love is better than life . . ." point toward a grace that "surpasses life." However, he calls such passages "rare" and thus agrees with the observations of Davidson.

that hint at something beyond physical life on earth.[78] The New Testament writers, no doubt, recognized these hints in the Hebrew Bible and saw their fulfillment in Christ's resurrection.

Hebrew texts that avoid metaphysical speculation abound, and the overall tone concerning death in the Bible is negative. Specifically, it robs humanity of the precious gift of life.[79] In stark contrast to the Greek worldview, the Bible (in either Testament) never views death in friendly terms.[80] Many Old Testament passages hint that humanity cannot overcome death. Human beings are blessed only inasmuch as they can postpone death as long as possible and have a rich, full physical life (cf. Ex. 23:26).[81] Such despair in the face of death led many ancient Hebrews to declare along with the Psalmist, "the dead do not praise the LORD, nor do any who go down into silence."[82] But as stated above, several Psalms appear to reject that death is the end for those who trust in a living God.

Compounding this darkness is the Hebrew concept of sheol. Unlike later concepts of heaven and hell that separate a good afterlife from a bad one, the Hebrews saw a

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[78]e.g., Job 14:14; Ps. 17:15; 31:3-10; 39:4-11; 61; 68:19-20; 73:23-26; 116:15; 118:17-18; Isa. 25:8; 26:19; Dan. 12:2-3.

[79]e.g., "You sweep them away as with a flood; they are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning: in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers" (Ps. 90:5-6). Also see 2 Sam. 14:14; Job 34:12-15; and Jer. 17:11. Ibid., 67. Bailey, in reference to passages like Ps. 13:3-4, comments "Death, then, tends to be used to describe the various conditions which detract from the full potential which Yahweh intended for his creatures; it is used as a value judgment on the quality of life, so that a weak and ineffective person, a 'nobody,' can be called a 'dead dog.' (I Sam. 24:14)." Bailey, 40-41.

[80]Wright says, "Death itself was sad, and tinged with evil. It was not seen, in the canonical Old Testament, as a happy release, an escape of the soul from the prison house of the body." Wright, 91.

[81]Jüngel, 76, cf. Ex. 23:26.

[82]Ps. 115:17.

singular fate for all humanity, the grave. Passages such as Job 10:21-22 and 17:13-16 define sheol as "the negation of everything which makes life meaningful, including the possibility of any real contact with God."[83] Sheol seems to be the triumph of death and the folly of man. After looking death in the face, the prophet Isaiah records for posterity King Hezekiah's musings on mortality in general, and sheol in particular: "For sheol does not thank you; death does not praise you; those who go down to the pit do not hope for your faithfulness. The living, the living, he thanks you, as I do this day; the father makes known to the children your faithfulness."[84] Hezekiah valued physical life and could find no value in death. The concept of sheol provided little comfort for the ancient Hebrew.

When the Psalmists meditated on death and the fallen condition of the world, they could not help but lament.[85] Some of the Psalms appear to view God as mysterious and unknowable, they seem to suggest that human reason alone could not rationalize death or comprehend the life giving potential of God.[86] Such mystery leads Qoheleth to see life as meaningless, and he leans, at times, toward a philosophy that stresses enjoying "each minute while you can, for this is God's gift and will for you."[87] Yet, even the cynical Qoheleth is not completely agnostic (although passages such as Eccl. 3:21 make one wonder) when it comes to life beyond physicality, for he speaks of God putting "eternity

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[83]Davidson, *The Courage to Doubt*, 30.

[84]Isa. 38:18-19.

[85]Pauw comments, "Psalms of lament bring before God the raw intensity of the emotions evoked by death." She also points out that Jesus cried the bitter lament of Psalm 22 on the Cross. These laments are real and raw. They express the pain that death brings into the human sphere. Pauw, 167-168.

[86]Psa. 8:1, 4, 5; cf. Isa. 45:15.

[87]David Wood, "Ecclesiastes: Millennium Gospel" in *Epworth Review* 26.3 (July 1999): 32. Cf. Eccl. 1:2, 14; 9:7-10; 11:9-10.

into man's heart" and God's forthcoming "judgment" of every human deed, "good and evil."[88]

In contrast to the negative views espoused above, there are many Hebrew scriptures that point toward life beyond death. The Psalmist exclaims, "Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints."[89] Passages such as Isa. 40 further open the door to what lies beyond mortal life and proclaim comfort to a persecuted people using images of pardoned iniquity, God's eternal word, the greatness of God, and the promise of super ordinary strength and endurance in the face of overwhelming opposition.[90] The laments of the Psalmist are balanced by a firm trust in the living Lord who "keeps Israel" and "will never sleep nor slumber."[91] The Hebrews understood that a fallen world leaves a human soul feeling lonely and despairing and in constant fear of physical death.[92] There was, however, hope that God's "steadfast love" and "salvation" could be "trusted."[93] The Psalmist could sing to the Lord who "dealt bountifully" with his faithful servants.[94]

What could a Hebrew hope for after encountering the devastation of death? Tangible hope is harder to find in the verses above than in the New Testament scriptures.

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[88]Eccl. 3:10; 12:14.

[89]Wright notes that the word "precious" in Ps. 116:15 can also be rendered "costly." The English term "precious" might lead one to think of some afterlife hope while the term "costly" focuses on the irreplaceable value of a human soul from a physical point of view. Although hardly definitive proof, this passage possibly sheds light on life beyond physical death. Wright, 364.

[90]Isa. 40:2, 8, 9-26, 27-31.

[91]Ps. 121:4.

[92]Ps. 13:1-2, 3-4.

[93]Ps. 13:5.

[94]Ps. 13:6.

Yet, these Old Testament verses do start moving the discussion toward resurrection. As the Hebrew tried to reconcile the scripture's teaching of a living God and the inevitability of human death, a unique light begins to shine in the darkness.

Knowledge of an everlasting God began to give the Hebrew confidence that death could not be the end for God's people. The Psalmist, still wrestling with the darkness of a fallen world, states with boldness: "I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the LORD. The LORD has disciplined me severely, but he has not given me over to death."[95] Although proclaimed in the midst of a great lament, the Psalmist also queries of the LORD, "Do you work wonders for the dead?"[96] Job likewise asks, "If a man dies, shall he live again? All the days of my service I would wait, till my renewal should come."[97] This strange talk of "renewal" begins to make sense as the prophecies of Isaiah are unveiled. Isaiah asserts that "He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken."[98]

This may have sounded good to a Hebrew person, but what does it mean? How can the Lord GOD "swallow up death forever?" How can oceans of tears shed over death suddenly dry up and be no more? Isaiah explains that the answer is resurrection. He says, "Your dead shall live; their bodies shall rise. You who dwell in the dust, awake and sing

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[95]Ps. 118:17-18.

[96]Ps. 88:10.

[97]Job 14:14.

[98]Isa. 25:8.

for joy! For your dew is a dew of light, and the earth will give birth to the dead."[99] The dust of death, the scriptures reveal, is not the end. Daniel says, "And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt."[100] Death had always been the most serious challenge to the biblical claim that the earth was created "good." It is the hope of resurrection, and the possibility of death's defeat, that gives humanity hope that eternal goodness can be experienced in an otherwise fallen and sinful world.[101]

Evidence of life beyond the grave in general, and resurrection life in particular, is not necessarily overwhelming in the Hebrew scriptures. Davidson's previous quote which suggests that the Old Testament is a "disappointing book" for those "whom religion is primarily concerned with death and the life hereafter," is unfounded. Although the hope of the afterlife is not as clear as one might like, it is undeniably present. Resurrection light shines in the Old Testament. Wright explains that the concept of resurrection, though not a primary theme in the Old Testament, is, at the very least, on the periphery of Old Testament doctrine. It is only in the New Testament that resurrection "moves from the circumference to the center."[102]

Death in the New Testament. Resurrection's full rebuttal of death's claims follows below. Yet, one can only understand the full significance of resurrection in light

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[99]Isa. 26:19.

[100]Dan. 12:1-2.

[101]Ibid., 476.

[102]Ibid., 477.

of the overarching narrative of the Bible. The purpose of this section is to show the final stage of development relating to the biblical response to death's powerful lies.

The "fall" of Genesis 3 has no final remedy in the Hebrew scriptures, but certainly hints that a remedy is coming (in the Messiah). It is only in the New Testament that the reader of the Bible discovers that sin and death could be defeated by resurrection power. The New Testament teaches that this resurrection power had to be unleashed by the Son of God. Yes, this world is more a "land of the dying" as opposed to a "land of the living," but Jesus has come to reverse the root cause of death – sin.[103] Death is no mild threat; it is "the last enemy to be destroyed."[104] Sin is inextricably tied to this "last enemy" because death is the final product of sin.[105] As Karl Rahner put it, "Death is guilt made visible."[106] Or as Pauw described it, to live a "fallen life" means that all human beings must expect a "fallen death."[107] But Jesus did not die a "fallen death." The sinless Lamb, according to the Apostle John, took on death's curse for all humanity and "gave himself" as payment for their sin, thereby providing righteousness for the human race that was previously unattainable.[108] The New Testament does not deny death's painful prowess, but it does

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[103]Holmes, 71.

[104]1 Cor. 15:26.

[105]Jms. 1:15; Rom. 6:23.

[106]Karl Rahner, *On The Theology of Death,* Quaestiones Disputatae, eds. Karl Rahner and Henrich Schlier, trans. Charles H. Henkey (New York: Herder and Herder, 1961), 57.

[107]Pauw, 173.

[108]Jn. 1:29; Rev. 5:12; Gal. 3:13; Gal. 2:20-21. A line from one of Martin Luther's prayers beautifully expresses this biblical truth: "Lord, Jesus, you are my righteousness, just as I am your sin. You have taken upon yourself what is mine and have given to me what is yours." Thielicke, 184. Luther understood that the resurrection of Christ gave humanity the opportunity to be righteous in Christ. He understood Christ to be the source of God's power in his life and the only hope of salvation. "And so the devil will be fooled, finding himself threshing empty straw. For what are you fighting devil? Are you trying

not back away from death either. James White, pointing to the centerpiece of the Gospel narratives, reminds his readers that "the reality of death is not denied by a religion with the crucifixion at its heart."[109] Jürgen Moltmann observes that death is a "ruinous power contrary to God and hostile to life."[110] This "ruinous power," according to the New Testament, was soundly trounced by Jesus' resurrection.

The Hebrew people's love of "life" finds its perfect expression in resurrection. Life beyond the grave is not a spirit-like existence, but a flesh and blood hope free from corruption or "perishability."[111] Though the cross took Jesus' physical life, it did not defeat him. Jüngel exclaims, "God confronts death head-on in Jesus! The living God and the dead Jesus. God meets death and doesn't die."[112] The New Testament announces to the world that with Jesus' victory over death, death has lost its ultimate power. True, death remains a factor that humanity must contend with, but death no longer has an eternal "sting."[113] Human kind has been saved from death, and this means that men and

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to find good works, to find fault with my own holiness before God? Serves you right, for I have neither! The power which I have is not my own; the Lord is my strength . . . I have no knowledge of either sin or holiness in me. I know nothing, nothing but God's power in me." Jüngel, 132.

[109]White, 295.

[110]Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 81.

[111]1 Cor. 15:35-58; cf. 2 Cor. 5:1-10.

[112]Jüngel, 108.

[113]1 Cor. 15:55. The New Testament writers distinguished between physical death and eternal death. Harris comments: "Physical death includes the gradual weakening of bodily powers (2 Cor. 4:12, 16), exposure to danger that could prove fatal (1 Cor. 15:31; 2 Cor. 4:10-11), and the cessation of bodily functions (Phil. 1:21; Heb. 9:27). It is therefore a process as well as an event. Spiritual death refers to man's alienation from God and hostility to God that is evident in sin (Rom. 7:9, 24; Eph. 2:1-3; Col. 1:21). The 'second death' denotes the permanent separation from God that befalls those who have already experienced physical death and whose state of spiritual deadness was not reversed during their lifetime through regeneration with the results that their names 'are found written in the book of life' (Rev. 20:14-15)." Harris, *Raised Immortal*, 159-160.

women "are set free both to live and to die."[114] Death is strong, but Christ is stronger. Pauw says, "The Christian answer (to death) is that we belong in life and in death to God, whose love is stronger than death."[115] Eventually, death will "pass away" along with its cohorts "tears, mourning, crying and pain," and all things will become "new" as "God becomes God" to those who have trusted in Him.[116]

The New Testament comforts humanity and promises them that their Lord has walked the dark path of death before them. As Samuel Rutherford reminded a grieving mother by the name of Agnes Macmath: "And that Lord Jesus, who knoweth the turnings and windings that are in that black trance of death, hath numbered all the steps of the stair up to heaven. He knoweth how long the turnpike is, or how many pair of stairs high it is; for he ascended that way Himself: 'I was dead and am alive.' And now He liveth at the right hand of God, and His garments have not so much as a smell of death."[117]

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[114]Rom. 14:8. Ibid., 127.

[115]Pauw, 163.

[116]Rev. 21:1-7. Christian faith demands a radical new approach to death. Harris comments: "While the New Testament writers see death as the end of life on earth, it means the enrichment not the negation of life itself. Death may terminate the pilgrimage of faith but it inaugurates the beatific vision of Christ. For the Christian it suffices to know that the destruction caused by death leaves untouched his incorporation in Christ and that the departure that occurs at death leads immediately to an arrival in the presence of the Lord." Harris, *Raised Immortal*, 162. This may cause tension between a Christian's desire to live life to the fullest in this world and yet yearn for the opportunity to be with Christ. Harris' says, "Since death deprives man of his 'psychical' corporeality and corporateness, removing totally and finally the securities of earthly existence, and since physical death as a biological necessity was one manifestation of God's curse on man for his sin (Rom. 5:12; 6:23; 1 Cor. 15:56), Christians should never eagerly anticipate or embrace the experience. On the other hand, in that death's sting was drawn by Christ's triumph over the grave (1 Cor. 15:55-57) and because death brings enriched communion with Christ (Phil. 1:23) and is but a prelude to the receipt of a spiritual body (2 Cor. 5:1), the arrival of death is not to be dreaded (cf. Hebrews 2:14-15). Physical death is neither welcomed nor feared." Ibid., 165.

[117]Rev. 1:18. Samuel Rutherford, *The Letters*. Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1984), Letter CCC, 607-608. In a letter to a "Christian Gentlewoman" Rutherford writes, "Death is but an awesome step, over time and sin, to sweet Jesus, who knew and felt the worst of death, for death's teeth hurt him. We know that death hath no teeth now, no jaws, for they are broken." Rutherford, CCCXVII, 633.

Jesus is the first and only man to ever silence death. The Messiah, Jesus the Christ, is shown in the New Testament to be the "author of life," the "first to rise from the dead," "the first born from the dead," "the resurrection and the life," and the only way that sinful man can experience eternal life in their "mortal bodies."[118] Resurrection life, according to the New Testament, is the only solution to the fall of humankind and the problem of death.

Death in the Modern World

As Western culture developed in the years beyond the biblical period, death continued to exert an overwhelming influence on humanity. The biblical answers to death were often combined with pagan thought. This synthesis led to a wide variety of human responses to death's taunts. A brief overview of these responses reveals two disturbing trends: a waning of the biblical teaching/hope of resurrection, and an ever increasing emphasis on the soul that opened the door for a humanistic and naturalistic approach to death that was materialistic and non-metaphysical.

Christianity brought the hope of resurrection to the masses in the Western world. Resurrection theology gave amazing hope and vigor to the earliest Christians. Unswerving faith in resurrection life is a hallmark of early Christian literature. Yet, as Catholicism became a more dominate feature of Western culture, darker views of death began to permeate throughout Christian lands. Like the Greeks and Romans before them, Europeans tended to express their frustrations about death in terms of "lamentation about

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[118]Acts 3:15; 26:23; Col. 1:18; Jn. 11:25; Rom. 8:11. Moltmann, 69.

the briefness of all earthly glory, and jubilation over the salvation of the soul."[119] Brief, violent lives led to a more macabre worldview that placed less emphasis on the flesh and more emphasis on the soul. The art of the Medieval period was well known for its darkness and gruesome portrayal of human decomposition. With the exception of a few bright spots (the beautiful resurrection hymns of John of Damascus, the poetry of Bernard of Cluny, and the ministry and writing of Bernard of Clairvaux) death dominated the dialogue and cast its shadow on the heart and mind of the average person during the Middle Ages.

The Renaissance brought Greco-Roman philosophy and art into the mainstream of European life. Art from this period became less gruesome but no less death-denying. Greek and Roman "ideals" became the norm and "poets dwelt upon fame and immortality rather than death."[120] Immortality of the soul became a more common solution to the fearsome prospect of death in art and literature. Though less dark, the Renaissance did not bring about a rebirth of resurrection hope, but of pagan theories about life after death. Optimism abounded, but this optimism was based on the potential of human beings. With the exception of the Reformers in Northern Europe, Western culture turned sharply away from resurrection hope. Outside the Reformation's sphere of influence, death's sting was powerfully present in Western culture.

Scripture's powerful answer to death was increasingly ignored in the years building up to the Enlightenment and the period of history known as "modernity." Death slowly regained its dominance as the Christian church strayed from its message of

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[119]Stannard, 19.

[120]Ibid., 22.

resurrection hope. The stage was set for a cultural paradigm shift and prevailing worldview that offered no hope in the face of death.

Oden traces modernity's beginnings to the French Revolution in 1789.[121] This historical event was pivotal because it was the first major movement in Western culture that disavowed Christian thought (and for that matter, all things meta-physical) and placed a heavy emphasis on human reason.[122] Modernity championed human reason and "was above all a secular movement that sought the demystification and desacralization of knowledge and social organization in order to liberate human beings from their chains."[123] Modernism saw humanity as the measure of all things. It was a movement that disavowed the concept of a sinful, fallen world and replaced this concept with optimistic notions of progress and human achievement.[124]

Modernity does not try to provide answers or responses to the threats and taunts of death. Instead, modernity ignores and despises death, and in the end, can only claim that death is "natural."[125] If death is "natural," then one can assume that there are no outside

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[121]Oden, *Two Worlds*, 32.

[122]In an article entitled "Chopin at the Funeral: Episodes in the History of Modern Death" Lawrence Kramer mentions that the French Revolution took "death out of the province of the church and even from the realm of the human . . . Religious services were abolished, tombs were destroyed, and the dead were unceremoniously carted to mass graves, where their naked bodies were dumped with no family members in attendance . . . The state concerned itself with persons only insofar as they were citizens; the dead, being citizens no longer, were no longer persons. As individuals, they could safely be erased from history." Lawrence Kramer, "Chopin at the Funeral: Episodes in the History of Modern Death" *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 54.1 (Spring 2001): 99.

[123]Brian C. Stiller, *Preaching to Postmoderns* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 3-4.

[124]Stiller, 29. Oden enumerates "four key motifs of modernity." They are, "autonomous individualism, narcissistic hedonism, reductive naturalism, and absolute moral relativism." Oden, 35.

[125]Thielicke comments that "in secular man we see death variously glorified, ignored, or held in contempt." Thielicke, 67.

forces (such as sin) that cause the phenomenon.[126] Death becomes a pragmatic consideration with no more meaning than the death of a tree or a cat. Modern philosophy attempts to assuage human fears by claiming that death really is not all that bad.[127] This leaves humanity with nothing more to do than to put on a brave face and contend with the inevitable. Kübler-Ross spoke with great admiration of a fifty-three year old terminally ill man who said, "I don't think about dying. I think about living."[128] In order to "think about living," Modern folk must make sure that the ugliness of death is out of sight. Kramer says:

> But one of the fundamental aims of the modern era was precisely to immunize every day life from death. As mortality rates from illness declined and life expectancy increased, as sanitation improved and sickness and death came to seem unsanitary, as care of the dying passed from the hands of families to those of doctors, death was increasingly asked to occupy a place apart – though of course it did not always comply. The modern cemetery, which initially provoked resistance because of its distance from people's homes, literally put the separate sphere of death on the map. According to Aries, the final phase in constructing what he calls the invisible death was the transfer of the deathbed from the home to the hospital, a process that began in earnest around 1930.[129]

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[126]Sigmund Freud's reflections on death illustrate modernity's struggle with death and its attempt to make it a natural phenomena. Freud says that "the idea of a 'natural death' is alien to primitive races; they ascribe every death occurring among themselves to the influence of an enemy or an evil spirit." Freud then suggests that one must "not neglect to turn to biological science to test the belief." What follows is a lengthy and incoherent diatribe that does little more than illustrate that scientists can arrive at no consensus concerning what death is and thus opens the door that the "primitives" may have it right after all. John Rickman and Charles Brenner, *A General Selection from the Works of Sigmund Freud* (New York: Dobleday, 1989), 64.

[127]An example of such denial can be found in the writings of Patricia Anderson. She says: "Dying is okay. It is not a flaw. It is not a failure. Natural death is not an external visitor that comes from a distance and happens *to* us. Death is inside us. It grows within us and will come to fruition when it is ripe and ready to flower. To deny it is to deny ourselves, and saddest of all, it is to turn our back on the freedom that lies within the fact of impermanence." Patricia Anderson, *All of Us: Americans Talk About the Meaning of Death* (New York: Delacorte, 1996), 352.

[128]Kübler-Ross, 148.

[129]Kramer, 121.

Peter Moore goes as far to say that we put our dying in hospitals "not only to reduce their suffering, but also to reduce ours" because "in a materialistic age, death is the ultimate indecency."[130] Modernity acknowledges the ugly nature of death (at best) but provides no meaningful answers for those who mourn or await their own demise.

For modern man, death is an "unhappy accident" that science will one day conquer.[131] In her book *All of Us: Americans Talk About the Meaning of Death*, Patricia Anderson interviews a fifty-three year old medical doctor by the name of Andrew Weil who articulates the frustration that death causes modern man. Dr. Weil comments, "From the doctor's point of view, to see death as the ultimate failure is very, very common. Every time a patient dies, that is a stark reminder that you are not in control of the process."[132] Such frustration leads scientists such as Aubrey de Grey to propose that death can be defeated with "biological engineering."[133] On the other hand, Jüngel argues, "The more death is regarded as something to be 'treated' the less one can cope with it. Death becomes dressed up and painted over."[134]

An example of "painting up" death can be seen in hyper-modern Nazi Germany. Hitler and his henchmen tried to develop a thoroughly modern state that focused on

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[130]Moore, 161.

[131]Jüngel, 34.

[132]Anderson, *All of Us*, 290. In a sermon entitled "I Do" by Walter J. Burghardt, the same sentiment is expressed by a "respected medical doctor who wrote in a medical journal – 'In my opinion death is an insult; the stupidest ugliest thing that can happen to a human being.'" Alton M. Motter, *Preaching About Death: Sermons Dealing with Death and Hope* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1997), 13.

[133]Paul Boutin, "Battling Time's Ravages: A Maverick Biotech Researcher's Goal: Perpetual Youth" *Wall Street Journal Online*, accessed on 11 September 2008; available from http://online.wsj.com/article/SB118919946556720937.html?mod=googlenews_wsj; Internet.

[134]Jüngel, 35.

health and vitality. Thielicke points out that the Nazi's were very fond of the sculptures of Kolbe because they represented the Greek ideal of "beauty" and focused on youth and strength.[135] Such an emphasis is necessary if one has no hope of life beyond the grave.

If modernity has a religion, that religion is science. Patricia Anderson observes that "with the advent of scientific materialism comes a tendency to see death as something hidden, something shameful."[136] Death has no fear of science, renders it helpless, and kills all the hopes of the Enlightenment project.[137] Those with modern worldviews believe that "when the Christian views of death, dying and the afterlife were removed, there could be a new, free, pragmatic, almost casual approach to death, one releasing man from the fear of non being."[138] Os Guiness, however, argues that "men cannot escape the fear of non-being. Secular man now has an even greater fear of death and non-being. The gross commercialization of grief and dying is only the flip side of the fear of death . . ."[139] Albert R. Mohler says, "The problem with the Enlightenment was the

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[135]Thielicke, 58.

[136]Anderson, *All of Us*, 289.

[137]In an essay by Charles W. Wahl entitled "The Fear of Death" one can see that Modernity's bravado is no match for death's finality. "Today, more than ever in his history, man is the undisputed master of his physical world. Indeed, his successes in the physical and biological sciences have been so many and so remarkable that we have come in consequence to accept as an almost certain and established thing that man, through science, is equal to the solution of any problem that may confront him. Success has become a habit of the species. But there is a glaring exception to this paean of man's conquests, one problem where all his assurance, ingenuity, and wit avail him nothing; an area which stands in bold contrast to the rest of nature which is so malleable to his will. I refer, of course, to the phenomenon of death. Here man, with all his cleverness, is powerless. He may postpone death, he may assuage its physical pains, he may rationalize it away or deny its very existence, but escape it he cannot." Fulton, 57. Job came to the very same conclusion as a result of his trials (cf., Job 28).

[138]Os Guinness, *The Dust of Death: A Critique of the Establishment and the Counter Culture – and a Proposal for a Third Way* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 32.

[139]Guiness, 33. In Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, this fear of non being is beautifully expressed through the terminally ill Ivan: "When I'm not, what will there be? There'll be nothing. Then where will I be when I am no more? Can this be dying? No, I don't want to!" Olson, Tillie and Leo Tolstoy, *The Riddle*

totalitarian imposition of the scientific model of rationality upon all truth, the claim that only scientific data can be objectively understood, objectively defined, and objectively defended."[140] Death renders objective rationality helpless. Modernity cannot win the duel with death. When death speaks, a thoroughly modern man (such as Tolstoy's famous character Ivan Ilych) can do nothing more than look at death and shudder.[141]

Postmodernity and Death

Modernity's inability to deal with human suffering and death led to a philosophical phenomenon known as postmodernity.[142] Postmodernity has had an impact on popular culture, and its views (relativity, cynicism, banality) are well entrenched in American society.[143] This is what the researcher has defined as folk postmodernism.[144] Death's voice and demeanor have changed in a postmodern context, but the lies are the

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of Life and Death: Tell Me a Riddle & The Death of Ivan Ilych (New York: The Feminist Press, 2007), 64.

[140]Albert R. Mohler, "What is Truth? Truth and Contemporary Culture" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48/1 (March 2005): 64-65.

[141]Olson and Tolstoy, 70.

[142]An excellent summary of postmodern characteristics is provided by Brian C. Stiller in his book *Preaching Parables to Postmoderns*. Stiller mentions six areas of general agreement among postmoderns. "(1) Reason, the fundamental building block of modern thought is rejected as the only prime means to discover truth. This has led to seeing truth as not that which is true *out there*, but that which is *interior*, so that self both defines and articulates what the self believes to be true. (2) Postmodernity also rejects the modern assertion that truth is objective . . . meaning is but a human phenomenon, etc. (3) Postmoderns dismiss authorities who, by their positions of power, use 'truth' to oppress and advance their personal agenda. (4) As objective truth is rejected so is the metanarrative – a grand and sweeping story that gives meaning to life and serves to answer the larger questions of human existence. (5) As truth is relative, all ideas are considered to be of equal value. (6) In populist terms, postmodernity is driven by a concern for the therapeutic." Brian C. Stiller, *Preaching Parables to Postmoderns* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 6-8.

[143]Gene Edward Veith, Jr. claims, for example, that relativism is not just the philosophy of the "lunatic fringe" but is the common way of thinking for two-thirds of the American people. Gene Edward Veith, Jr. *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), 16-17.

[144]In this research, the phrase "postmodern(ism)" will specifically represent "folk" aspects of this philosophy as opposed to the more technical, academic aspects.

same. Christian funeral preaching must answer the unique questions being asked by the folk postmodern mourner.

The Jagged Edge

Generally speaking, postmodernity is a reaction to modernity's absolute faith in science, progress and human rationality. Ronald J. Allen says, "Postmodernists recognize limitations in modernism's reliance upon science and rationalism. Furthermore, philosophers and social scientists notice that all perception involves interpretation. Human beings cannot gather pure, uninterpreted data."[145] Perhaps the most appropriate definition was provided by the bartender Moe, in the television series *The Simpsons*. He defines postmodernism as "weird for the sake of weird."[146] The Enlightenment promised a new world based on logic and objectivity. Postmodernity questioned how a human mind can be perfectly logical or objective. Radical postmodern thought espouses that there is no order to the cosmos, only chaos. Such radical views are rare, nonetheless, the Christian funeral preacher must anticipate an audience that is influenced by radical elements of both modern and postmodern thought. Allen says, "The preacher speaks in a mixed community of moderns, postmoderns, and people who are aware (sometimes inchoately) of a shift in the cultural breeze but are uncertain of its direction."[147] As James K. A. Smith notes: "Postmodernity does not make a clean break from modernism. There are both

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[145]Allen et. al, 17. David J. Lose observes that postmodernity represents a basic shift from "epistemology to hermeneutics." David J. Lose, *Confessing Jesus Christ: Preaching to a Postmodern World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 20.

[146]Myron B. Penner, "Christianity and the Postmodern Turn: Some Preliminary Considerations," in *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn: Six Views* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), 13.

[147]Ibid., 10.

continuities and discontinuities between modernity and postmodernity."[148] Postmodernity leaves the Christian funeral preacher with a precipitous jagged edge that he/she must carefully consider in the funeral moment.

The Bible points to Christ as the only way to heaven and the only hope of death's defeat. This exclusivity offends those with postmodern leanings that are instinctively pluralistic and committed to diversity and inclusivity.[149] As Moore points out, "The one value that dominates others is openness."[150] Gene Edward Veith, Jr. defines postmodern sins as "being judgmental, narrow-minded, thinking that you can have the only truth or trying to enforce your values on anyone else . . . The only wrong idea is to believe in truth; the only sin is to believe in sin."[151] Folk postmoderns have implicitly accepted these ideas, and common expressions such as "different strokes for different folks," "it is all relative," or "you may see it your way, but I see it my way" reflect a proclivity toward

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[148]James K. A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 26.

[149]Allen, 17.

[150]Moore, 39. Long before the term postmodern was invented, C. S. Lewis saw that the secular virtue of an open mind was becoming common place. Lewis understood the danger of this position and vigorously stated: "An open mind, in questions that are not ultimate is useful. But an open mind about the ultimate foundations either of Theoretical or Practical reason is idiocy. If a man's mind is open on these matters, let his mouth at least be shut." C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1974), 48. Douglas Groothuis, quoting from Dorothy Sayer's 1965 work *Christian Letters to a Post-Christian World*, illustrates the dangers of open mindedness and tolerance. "In the world it calls itself Tolerance; but in hell it is called Despair. It is the accomplice of the other sins and their worst punishment. It is the sin which believes nothing, cares for nothing, seeks to know nothing, interferes with nothing, enjoys nothing, loves nothing, hates nothing, finds purpose in nothing, lives for nothing, and only remains alive because there is nothing it would die for." Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity Against the Challenges of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 170.

[151]Veith, 197.

relativism.[152] To a certain extent, folk postmoderns are not "interested in doctrine, but in practical solutions to personal problems."[153] Doctrine is distasteful because it makes certain truth claims.[154] Postmodern minds are looking for what works for them, not for what is true for everyone.[155] Those influenced by postmodern thought focus exclusively on the good life here and have less concern for the hereafter.[156]

Christian talk of the need for all humans to find salvation in Christ is offensive to the relativistic mindset of a postmodern person. People must acknowledge sin if they are going to submit to a Savior. Postmodern relativity, ironically, has gravitated back to a pagan worldview. In the introduction to Francis Schaeffer's *Death in the City*, Udo W.

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[152]Eduard R. Riegert quotes Alyce McKenzie as saying that "different strokes for different folks" is the "quintessential postmodern proverb." Riegert comments that "it acknowledges the diverse experiences of human beings and human communities, and accepts the appropriateness of moral relativism: choices are equally valid, because they boil down to individual preference. Riegert also quotes Robin Meyers saying that "there exists a body of research to back up the claim that when it comes to authority, the holiest of trinities is Me, Myself, and I." Eduard R. Riegert, "What is Authoritative for the 'Post-Modern' Listener? *Currents in Theology and Mission* 25.1 (February 1998): 10. Also see Allen, et al., 22.

[153]Chris Altrock. *Preaching to Pluralists: How to Proclaim Christ in a Postmodern Age* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004), 26.

[154]Postmoderns, according to Altrock, place a higher value on feeling than on fact. He tells of a conversation he overheard between a church member and a visitor. This person likes Jesus, but hates the church and the Bible. Ibid., 21.

[155]Veith says: "With no absolute canons of objective truth, the rational is replaced by the aesthetic. We believe in what we *like*. Those unused to thinking in terms of absolute, objective truth still have opinions and strongly held beliefs. In fact, their beliefs may even be more difficult to dislodge, since they admit no external criteria by which these can be judged and shown to be wrong. Since their beliefs are a function of the will, they cling to them willfully. Since their beliefs will tend to have no foundation other than their preferences and personality, they will interpret any criticism of their beliefs as a personal attack. Since 'everyone has the right to their own opinion,' they do not mind if you do not agree with them, but they will become defensive and sometimes angry if you try to change their opinions." Veith, 176.

[156]Altrock quotes Brian McLaren to show the difference between a modern and postmodern approach to an audience. McLaren argues that the question a modern preacher would ask is "If you were to die tonight, do you know for certain that you would spend eternity with God in heaven?" The "new and postmodern" question is "If you live for another thirty years, what kind of person will you become." Altrock, 30. Curiously, this sounds akin to the social gospel of late nineteenth and early twentith century liberalism.

Middleman says, "Our society at large has returned to one more form of pagan embrace of all things natural as good, at the expense of thought, rational considerations, and moral reflections."[157] Modernism, on the one hand, sought to "rid the world of religion," but postmodernity "spawns new ones (religions)" that are "tied to moral rebellion" and embrace many of the themes of ancient pagan worship.[158] The preacher's task in the Christian funeral context is difficult because the congregation will most likely contain a toxic mixture of modern and postmodern ideals that have a sprinkling of old fashioned, pre-modern paganism.

The Christian funeral preacher will not be able to find a "clean break" in an audience that allows him/her to focus on purely modern or postmodern concerns.[159] Yet, Smith points out that "the most significant continuity" is that both modernity and postmodernity "deny grace."[160] Smith claims that both worldviews "are characterized by an idolatrous notion of self-sufficiency and a deep naturalism."[161] Postmoderns, however, are often more spiritual than their modern counterparts and have adopted what Darrell Guder calls a "secular spiritualism" that "at the same time holds deep transcendent values and shallow worldly values. They will pray to God in the morning and commit adultery in

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[157]Francis Schaeffer, *Death in the City* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002), 19.

[158]Veith, 198, 200. What the researcher means by "themes of ancient pagan worship" include the postmodern emphasis on sexuality that reflects ancient fertility rites that glorified sex and utilized temple prostitutes. Albert Mohler says that "both modernism and postmodernism can be understood as lengthy and elaborate rationalizations for sexual misbehavior." Mohler, *What is Truth?*, 69. Another example is secular society's embrace of "abortion rights," a rebirth of the Canaanite (specifically Ammonite) cult that worshiped the god Molech who required child sacrifice for appeasement (cf. Lev. 18:21, 20:1-5; 1 Kgs. 11:7; 2 Kgs 23:10; Jer. 32:35).

[159]See comment by Smith above. Smith, 26.

[160]Ibid., 26.

[161]Ibid., 26.

the evening."[162] Postmoderns have little use for the greater good, or a humanism that seeks to make a better world for humans. Instead, postmoderns view humanism in terms of what makes their world better.[163] In other words, without grace, the postmodern person becomes wholly committed to his/her feelings and opinions and has trouble locating any "common ground" with other human beings.[164]

A postmodern person is a lonely soul trying to find a community that interprets reality just as he/she does. Finding such a community is impossible if there can be no valid knowledge and everything is up to interpretation.[165] Postmoderns have strayed from a theistic-centered epistemology, which sets boundaries and seeks truth to a humanistic, ego-centered hermeneutic that has no boundaries and can discover no real truth.[166] It is for this reason that when it comes to the questions of life and death, postmodernity has an outlook that is "passive, cynical, and insecure."[167] The prospect of death brings many postmoderns to the point of hopeless nihilism.

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[162]Altrock, 19.

[163]Lose, 27.

[164]Ibid., 20.

[165]Ibid., 23. In his reflections on his own terminal illness, Anatole Broyard writes "Once we had a narrative of heaven and hell, but now we make our own narratives. I'm making my own narrative here and now. Yet the real narrative of dying now is that you die in a machine." Anatole Broyard *Intoxicated By My Illness* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1992), 42.

[166]Harry Lee Poe simply says, "postmodern people focus on themselves." Harry Lee Poe, "The Gospel in a Postmodern Culture." *Review and Expositor* 101(Summer 2004): 501.

[167]Veith, 83.

Hopeless Nihilism

Veith comments that if modernism "took as its project the death of God . . . postmodernism has as its project the death of the self."[168] Another way of expressing this claim is to say that modernity made "homeless minds" whereas postmodernity appears to create "homeless hearts."[169] With no sense of self, and hearts that are homeless, postmoderns have a tendency to be anti-human.

An example of such anti-human sentiment can be found in organizations such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. Ingrid Newkirk, president of P.E.T.A., once quipped, "A rat is a pig is a dog is a boy."[170] With such hopeless views of human life, and an oblivious attitude toward any purpose in life, postmodern people become more like tourists in life as opposed to residents. David F. Wells says, "Tourists are not rooted in the place they visit. They are just passing through, just looking. They are there for their pleasure and entertainment. They are unrelated to any of their fellow travelers - Tourists never stay; they are always on the move."[171] The death of self has caused the postmodern person to be less like a pilgrim on a quest and more like a tourist on vacation.[172] Just as the tourist dreads the end of the vacation, the postmodern person has nothing but dread for his final destination in life - death.

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[168]Ibid., 73.

[169]David Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 50.

[170]Veith, 75.

[171]David F. Wells, *Above All Earthly Pow'rs: Christ in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 132-133.

[172]Wells, 134.

The death of self leads to a lack of any concrete meaning in life for a postmodern person. It is for this reason that the postmodern mind easily gravitates toward virtual reality. Veith comments that for postmoderns, "all reality is virtual reality."[173] Ignoring death by immersing oneself in entertainment is a way of life for postmodern people. They have their television (with hundreds of channels), an internet connection, video games, movie theaters, and a phone that can let them watch the shows they missed, check their email, play video games, and find out what time the movie starts tonight. Veith mentions that "it has been said that television *is* the real world of postmodernist culture. Nothing counts unless it gets on TV."[174] How can real life count for anything if the only joy is virtual? Postmodern people may just be "entertaining themselves to death."[175]

The emphasis on relative truth and addiction to virtual reality has caused a death of the postmodern self. Wells comments, "The new spiritual quest, then, seems to be rooted in a sense of homelessness in the modern world, of having been abandoned in a place where we no longer fit, and in consequence it is reaching out for something more certain, more real, more substantial."[176] If it is true that "postmodernism may represent the dead-end . . . the implosion of, the deconstruction – of human attempts to do without God," it may be that they are ready for something substantive and meaningful in life that

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[173]Veith, 61.

[174]Ibid., 121.

[175]Although written more than twenty years ago, Neil Postman's candid look at American culture's addiction to entertainment remains relevant in our current cultural context. His observations are only magnified when one adds more recent cultural/technological phenomena such as the internet and smart phones. Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves To Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin Group, 1985).

[176]Wells, 148.

provides hope in the face of death.[177] The alternative for the postmodern person is unbridled chaos.

Allen says "to be postmodern is to be post-certain."[178] Postmodern man "can live with contradictions," and unlike their modern counterparts who strived to impose order on chaos, postmodernists "live with and affirm chaos, considering any order to be only provisional and varying from person to person."[179] The postmodern mind fancies that it can "see through" all things, but as C. S. Lewis once warned, "to see through all things is the same as not to see."[180] Without a standard for truth, there is no basis for rationality and/or reality and nothing left but chaos.[181] In his essay "Unspeakable Ethics, Unnatural Law," A. A. Leff summarizes the confusion that postmodern philosophy imposes on society:

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[177]Veith, 68.

[178]Allen, 28.

[179]Veith, 42, 211. David Wells says: "That there is no longer any center to reality is the central principle, if one may be permitted to use such a word, in the postmodern mind. There is no center which is the norm for all of the human centers, centers of private interest, of ethnicity, of gender, of sexuality, and of perspective. This, of course, correlates with the widespread belief that there are no absolutes in life and it also is a further explication of the meaninglessness of the world." Wells, 233

[180]Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 81.

[181]Moreland and De Weese in an essay entitled "The Premature Report of Foundationalism's Demise state: "Finally, postmodernists reject the idea that there are universal, transcultural standards, such as the laws of logic or principles of inductive inference, for determining whether a belief is true or false, rational or irrational, good or bad. Consequently, there is no predefined rationality. Postmodernists also reject the notion that rationality is objective on the grounds that no one approaches life in a totally objective way, without bias. Thus, objectivity is impossible and observations, beliefs, and entire narrative are theory-laden. There is no neutral standpoint from which to approach the world, and thus observations, beliefs, and so forth are perspectival constructions that reflect the viewpoint implicit in one's own web of beliefs. Regarding knowledge, postmodernists believe that there is no point of view from which one can define knowledge itself without begging the question in favor of one's own view." J. P. Moreland and Garrett De Weese, "The Premature Report of Foundationalism's Demise" in *Reclaiming the Cente: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation In Postmodern Times*, eds., Millard J. Erikson, Paul Kjoss Helseth, and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), 98.

> Napalming babies is bad.
> Starving the poor is wicked.
> Buying and selling each other is wicked.
> Those who stood up to and died resisting Hitler, Stalin, Amin, and Pol Pot –
> And General Custer too – have earned salvation.
> Those who acquiesced deserve to be damned.
> There is in the world such thing as evil.
> [All together now:] Sez who?
> God help us.[182]

Groothius comments on Leff's poem: "The living and speaking God can split open the doors of the postmodernist prison of socially constructed ethics and articulate the resounding words of moral truth. God may indeed help us. But we must listen to God speak. We must have ears to hear if truth decay is to be reversed in our Postmodern world."[183] Post certain contradictions lead to a worldview that is unsustainable.

C. S. Lewis anticpated postmodern thinkers like Richard Rorty years in advance. Rorty famously quipped that "truth is made rather than found" and "philosophy can no longer exist as a discipline in its own right, since it has no access to universally valid principles of reason or objective truth."[184] Utilizing his concept of the *Tao*, a word that represents universal, moral law, Lewis said: "The rebellion of new ideologies against the *Tao* is a rebellion of the branches against the tree: if the rebels could succeed they would find that they had destroyed themselves. The human mind has no power of inventing a new value than of imagining a new primary colour, or, indeed, of creating a new sun and a new sky for it to move in."[185] Men such as Rorty have embraced chaos. Lewis

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[182]Groothius, 210.

[183]Ibid., 210.

[184]Mohler, "What is Truth?", 66. Groothius, 198.

[185]Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 44.

commented that such people are not necessarily "bad men," they are "not men at all" because they have stepped into a "void" that can only lead to self destruction.[186]

Postmodern chaos can only collapse "all reality into the self," which can open up the door for the destruction of not just the self, but others as well.[187] Lewis spoke of such persons seeing "existence as mere chance," thus " he is free to do as he pleases, hurt who he may, recklessly pursue pleasure . . ."[188] It is for this reason that so many postmodern voices express the nothingness of reality and an utter ambivalence toward life and death.

In his book, *Death in the City*, Francis Schaeffer writes, "Our generation has nobody at home in the universe, nobody at all."[189] This is certainly true of postmodernism, a view that "denies all worldviews."[190] By ridding the world of objective truth and denying the possibility of an overarching meta-narrative, postmodernity has left popular culture with no hope in life or in death. The consequences of a purely subjective world are incredible and dangerous for human beings, both physically and spiritually. Groothius, commenting on these dangers, observes that if "there is no objective meaning anchored in a reality beyond ourselves; everything is unhinged; everything can mean anything, so everything means nothing. Style is all that remains, substance disappears . . . When all that is available is surface, when the ocean is all wave and no bottom,

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[186]Ibid., 64.

[187]Wells, *Above All Earthly Pow'rs,* 194.

[188]Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 67.

[189]Schaeffer, 43.

[190]Veith, 49.

anchorage is out of the question."[191] Popular culture has been revealing the anchor-less reality of postmodern thinking for decades in the so-called art of Andy Warhol and Jackson Pollock, as well as the mind-numbing incoherency of television shows such as *Seinfeld.*

Postmodern culture seems playful and mostly harmless, but when relativity is applied in society, a door is opened for endless evil. In his book *Mapping Postmodernism: A Survey of Christian Options*, Robert C. Greer refers to an article in the *Washington Times* written by the columnist John Leo. In this article, Greer says that Leo "speaks of students who do not deny that the Holocaust happened but refuse to say that the holocaust was morally wrong – they prefer to say instead – 'Of course I dislike the Nazis, but who is to say they are morally wrong.'"[192] These university students have placed right and wrong on the same level as feelings. Evil men such as Hitler were very adept at manipulating these feelings toward evil ends. With no trust in logic and little concern for others, postmodern people worship a god of self that pays no heed to universal morality and the well-being of humanity.[193]

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[191]Groothius, 57.

[192]Robert C. Greer, *Mapping Postmodernism: A Survey of Christian Options* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 139.

[193]In his book *Algen: A New Word – A New World*, Jeremy Rifkin expresses how relativity leads to self worship. He says: "We no longer feel ourselves to be guests in someone else's home and therefore obliged to make our behavior conform with a set of preexisting cosmic rules. It is our creation now. We make the rules. We establish the parameters of reality. We create the world, and because we do, we no longer feel beholden to outside forces. We no longer have to justify our behavior, for we are not the architects of the universe. We are responsible to nothing outside ourselves, for we are the kingdom, the power, the glory for ever and ever." Jeremy Rifkin, *Algen: A New Word – A New World* (New York: Viking Press, 1983), 244. For a good discussion of the ramifications of Rifkin's philosophy, see D.A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 89.

A negative and nihilistic worldview leads postmodern people to a place of utter hopelessness in the face of death. Life has no purpose, and death is little more than non-existence. Patricia Anderson interviewed Judith Campisi, a forty year-old molecular biologist, who said of death:

> I think death is the end. I don't believe there's anything afterwards. I think once your dead, you're dead and at that point nothing matters. Dying is the hard part . . . Now, if you believe in God, then you can say God cut us the best deal he could. As an atheist I just think that that's the way it is. You enjoy what you've got while you've got it. Recently I bought this house which is sitting right on the Hayward fault here in California. It's absolutely inevitable that this fault is going to blow sometime in the next thirty years, but I love this house and I want to live here. What can I do? Just enjoy what I've got while I've got it.[194]

The postmodern person is no better off than the modern person and can only look toward a coffin and the grave.

Dying is not dealt with as much as it is laughed at and denied by the postmodern person. Anatole Broyard chronicled his struggle with terminal illness in the book *Intoxicated By My Illness*. In this book, Broyard states that he wants an "untamed, beautiful death. So I think that we should have a competition in dying, sort of like Halloween costumes. If you have to die, and I hope you don't, I think you should try to die the most beautiful death you can. Let's give a prize for the most beautiful death. We can call it heaven . . . At the end you're posing for eternity. It's your last picture. Don't be carried into death. Leap into it."[195] The leap that Broyard faces provides no hope of safety and no surety of heaven. Postmodern people often live for nothing and expect nothing beyond their physical life.

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[194]Anderson, *All of Us*, 316, 322.

[195]Anatole, Broyard, *Intoxicated By My Illness* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1992), 65,67.

The postmodern mind is lost in a cloud of diverse "religious and philosophical perspectives" that make "the notion of one absolutely true religion or philosophy unacceptable."[196] Ironically, this diversity of religions and philosophies push a postmodern person in the same direction as modernism – radical secularism and humanism with a proclivity toward pure nihilism.[197] Francis Schaeffer believed that the only way for a lost secular and humanistic culture to find hope and meaning was to have it turn to the scripture's teachings about man's fall and redemption. He said, "We must resist humanism, but to make man a zero is not the right way to resist it. You can emphasize that man is totally lost and still have the biblical answer that man is really great. In fact, only the biblical position produces a real and proper 'humanism.' – From the biblical viewpoint, man is lost, but great."[198] The preacher cannot be overwhelmed by the nihilism of secular postmodernity and must confront this worldview with the narrative of God that provides meaning to questions of life and death.

Death cannot be explained away with a sound bite, nor can it be dispassionately dismissed. The Bible addresses death as a serious problem and readily admits the pain and suffering it brings. The Apostle Paul viewed life as pointless apart from Christ. In 1 Cor. 15:32, he confesses that his own work as an apostle would be meaningless if

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[196]Groothius, 210.

[197]Thielicke anticipated postmodern secularization and nihilism that would spawn from what he calls *post Christum*. "Nihilism is the most extreme consequence of secularization, and precisely because of its tie with secularization it is nihilism *post Christum*. By virtue of his contact with Christianity the autonomous man of the Western world has in his hand a most ultimate standard by means of which he can measure the interior truth about himself to a terrifying degree. Perhaps it is a curse imposed by Christ on those who desert him, that they have come to knowledge because of him without yet having the comfort that sustains them in this knowledge." Thielicke, 57-58.

[198]Schaeffer, 95.

Christ has not risen from the dead.[199] Christianity does not deny the feelings of hopelessness that all human beings encounter in the world. It does, however, provide meaning and hope that secularism and humanism cannot provide those who suffer.

Postmodern people are lost, but God's word asserts that they have the potential to be great. The emptiness of postmodernity may propel people out of the void and give them a willingness to hear truth. When people lost in the confusion and pain of the world ask "Where is God in all this?" Christians can respond "[He is] . . . grieving with us, weeping for us, but more than that – drying tears, creating life out of death, hope out of despair, forgiving sin, restoring wholeness."[200] The cross of Christ tells the world that God has confronted death and meaninglessness head on; the resurrection announces their defeat. Perhaps the postmodern phenomenon has opened up a spiritual door that can restore hope to lost and wandering hearts.

A Spiritual Door

The prospect of death has led many people of postmodern persuasions to a dark place. Yet, postmodernism opens a few spiritual doors that modernism attempted to close. Schaeffer saw opportunity for Christians in the failures of modernism and the frustrations of a developing postmodern worldview. He said, "our generation is hungry – hungry for love, for beauty, for meaning, for stable morals and law. The 'dust of death' covers all."[201] Postmodernity has tried to make truth relative and reject objective morality. This

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[199]Wells, *Above All Earthly Pow'rs*, 197.

[200]Joanna Adams, "The Only Question" in *Journal for Preachers* 12.2 (Lent 1989): 28.

[201]Schaeffer, 42.

postmodern experiment quickly proved "unlivable" and did little more than provide opportunities for evil persons to exploit the weak and helpless.[202]

The postmodern turn has tried (and is trying) to make man something less than what God intended him to be, but as Schaeffer points out, humanity's ancient ancestors painted beautiful scenes in caves that cry out "I know within myself that I am more than the dust that surrounds me."[203] Postmodern chaos has not done away with man's drive for order and the realization that "there's something there" as opposed to nothing, that there is marvel in the "form" of the universe, and that our minds cannot accept that life is "produced by chance."[204] Only Christian faith explains why there is both chaos and order in the universe. The chaos is due to sin, order is brought about by the reconciling power of God in Christ that was poured out through his resurrection. Thought it may be true that postmodern people are increasingly secular and hostile to faith, it also seems that they are open to the mystery and deep spirituality of what Veith terms "Classic Christianity."[205]

Though postmodern people are suspicious of meta-narratives, it is also true that they are enamored with the power of story. As Riegert points out, the Christian story is a "true story – that is, it corresponds with reality yet transforms it."[206] The fickle and

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[202]Schaeffer says that "men may have different mores, but one never finds people without moral motions." He goes on to illustrate how a life with no absolutes in unlivable by quoting the Maruqis de Sade who, as a result of his belief that "everything is chemically determined" and "whatever is, is right," abused women in a horrible fashion. Curiously, later in life he would complain about being mistreated by others. Ibid., 110-112.

[203]Ibid., 114.

[204]These quotes come from Sartre, Einstein, and Darwin respectively. Ibid., 116-117.

[205]Veith, xii-xiii.

[206]Riegert, 14.

corrupt nature of language that postmodernism espouses is acknowledged in the biblical narrative. Satan himself has twisted language from the beginning, and the corruption of language at Babel helps humanity understand why hermeneutics is always a daunting challenge.[207] Veith remarks: "Although our language presumes to erect structures that reach the heavens, in reality we are using our words to rebel against God's Word."[208] Humanity's ability to communicate and connect through language, although often in a "clumsy" fashion, is "a sign, a trace of divine language."[209] The Bible admits that human language and human story is far from perfect, but it also reminds us that "God's language can break in from the outside and give us freedom."[210] This "outside" source of help is, in the words of the Apostle John, "the Word."[211] The Word comes from God unaffected by the fall and able to tell the world God's story.[212] Thus, Christians "have by God's grace, a true story to tell."[213]

Christianity has a story to tell that provides meaning for an anchor-less, postmodern generation. The Christian story not only helps humanity understand why chaos and death are ever present, it also provides them a unique solution in the resurrection of Christ. Instead of refuting postmodern ideals in a debate forum (a modern

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[207]Gen. 3:1; 11:1-9.

[208]Veith, 66-67.

[209]Ibid., 67.

[210]Ibid., 68.

[211]Jn. 1:1-18.

[212]Ibid., 67.

[213]Groothuis, 155.

format for uncovering truth), the Christian preacher must present the biblical story as the best explanation of the world as it has become. The challenge a pastor can present to the postmodern person is to find a better story, a story more real and true. Christian preachers can connect with the hearts and minds of the postmodern audience by the incorporation of elements of the biblical narrative and the use of parables.[214] Death's questions, in particular, can only be answered by the faithful telling of the Gospel story.

Allen argues that postmoderns value conversation, and death certainly invites dialogue.[215] Postmodern-minded folk value conversation because of its ambiguous nature.[216] In other words, postmodernity allows for interpretation even when it disavows absolute truth. David Tracy defines conversation as "an exploration of possibilities in the search for truth."[217] The Bible does not shy away from the tough questions and provides cogent answers to those who have the courage to ask, seek, and knock.[218] Though Tracy believes that conversation can deliver, at best, "relative adequacy," he also admits that

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[214]Ben C. Stiller provides a preaching methodology that focuses attention on the use of parables in postmodern contexts. Stiller provides "seven ways in which parables can serve to speak the gospel into [the] contemporary mind." Stiller, 26-30.

[215]"Communities with a postmodern orientation value conversation. They recognize that give-and-take often amplifies a community's understanding of a subject. Persons with different angels of perception share them with one another (and challenge one another). In the process, people often see things that they have not seen before . . . Dialogue is especially valuable when people are unclear, even confused, about what to think about an issue or how to work through it. Good interaction allows the community to name the subject (and its constituent parts), to identify points at which the people are certain and uncertain, to recognize strengths and weaknesses in various ways of perceiving the subject and acting on it. The fact of the conversation itself often adds authority to the conclusion, especially if the participants are aware that the conversation has been fair to all points of view. At its best, conversation is an act of critical reflection. Adults in the postmodern world particularly value serious critical reflection that helps them discern alternative interpretations of the data and the positive and negative qualities of each." Allen, et al., 41.

[216]Ibid., 42.

[217]David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 20.

[218]Matt. 7:7.

"truth manifests itself, and we recognize its rightness."[219] The truth of God's word, therefore, in a dialogue with death may have the potential to sound like an earnest conversation that invites the mourners to enter and determine for themselves where truth resides.[220]

Modernity's emphasis on individualism is mostly rejected by postmodern people. Some postmodern individuals tend to "see identity within the collective community."[221] Pluralism and diversity in the context of unity is a postmodern ideal that has strong roots in the Christian faith.[222] The Christian story is not for a particular culture or continent. The New Testament stresses that any person from any culture can find a common bond of hope in Christ. Thus, "Christianity is able to make a real affirmation, because we affirm that it is possible to be in personal relationship to the personal God who is there and who is the final environment of all He created."[223] All human beings are in the community of death, and the only hope that this community can experience life is to enter into a relationship with the resurrected Christ. The Christian community is nothing less than a

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[219]Ibid., 25, 28.

[220]Craddock says, "If a situation is created in which the speaker and listeners are sparring, there are no winners, only losers, as hostility fills the room. The preaching experience should have as its aim the reflection of one's own life in a new way, a way that is provided by the gospel. If the sermon evokes this reflection, all the while brining it into the presence of God, judgment and promise become actual doors open to the listener. The person who attends to such a sermon concludes for herself that the present condition is not inevitable nor irrecoverable. Nothing has been decided for her, but now with an alternative, she must decide. Now conditions are such as to make faith, which by its nature involves choice, a possibility." Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, 61, cf. 31.

[221]Stiller, 28.

[222]Veith comments: "The unity of the church, after all, as the Apostle [Paul] clearly states, encompasses diversity, one body consisting of diverse organs (1 Cor. 12). This synthesis of unity and pluralism sounds almost postmodern." Veith, 220.

[223]Schaeffer, 42.

group of people bound together to Christ and his life. The prospect of a community of life may be an open door to faith in Christ for postmoderns.

Postmodernity is little more than a surrender to the chaos of life. The postmodern person doesn't try to overcome the chaos with truth, but instead embraces the chaos with a dark and brooding cynicism. Perhaps the prospect of death can pull postmodern people out of this dark cynicism and challenge them to embrace hope and life. As Milton McC. Gatch once said, "To contemplate the fact of death is to understand the importance of living."[224] Death forces people to think more deeply about life than any other event.[225] The scriptures make plain that "truth is deathless, but the 'second death' awaits those who reject God's saving truth (Rev. 21:8)."[226] Postmodernity's penchant for relativistic truth has played into the hands of death and caused chaos and despair in the hearts of human beings. Yet, postmodernity's love for story, spirituality, and community may open a door to the one truth that can set all people free. The only answer to death's taunts that provides man with true hope is the biblical message of resurrection life.

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[224]Milton McC. Gatch, *Death: Meaning and Mortality in Christian Though and Contemporary Culture* (New York: Seabury Press, 1969), 160.

[225]Anatole Broyard, though thoroughly non-Christian and definitively postmodern, realized that death had given him the courage to dig deep into the mystery of life for the first time. He tragically queries, "Why did all this wisdom and beauty come so late?" Broyard, 68. Os Guiness warns those covered in the "Dust of Death" about putting off the contemplation of death and eternal life in Christ by saying, "Hell is nothing less than the truth known too late." Guiness, 358.

[226]Groothuis, 75. D. A. Carson suggests that a possible way to introduce people who are both modern and postmodern to the truth of Jesus Christ is to employ a "chastened modernism" and a "soft postmodernism." He writes: "A chastened modernism and a 'soft' postmoderism might actually discover that they are saying rather similar things. A chastened or modest modernism pursues the truth but recognizes how much we humans do not know, how often we change our minds, and some of the factors that go into our claims to knowledge. A chastened postmoderism heartily recognizes that we cannot avoid seeing things from a certain perspective (we are all perspectivalists, even if perspectivalists can be divided into those who admit it and those who don't) but acknowledges that there is a reality out there that human beings can know, even if we cannot know it exhaustively or perfectly, but only from our own perspective." Carson, 90.

Resurrection's Rebuttal

God's plan to defeat death is a central theme of the Bible. This plan reaches its apex in the death and resurrection of Christ. The Bible does not seek to console humanity concerning death; instead it seeks to announce death's crushing defeat. Stuart Townend and Keith Getty express this truth in the fourth verse of "The Power of the Cross" – "Death is crushed to death, life is mine to live."[227] The Christian hope is undeniably resurrection-centered, but how does the Bible define resurrection? In answering this question, the researcher has first determined whether the concept of a resurrection like Christ's is a common phenomenon in ancient, pagan history and literature. Second, the researcher has investigated the distinction between immortality and resurrection. Finally, the researcher has examined the radical nature of resurrection in the New Testament that offers a unique hope to humans as they ponder death. Death had no equal until God intervened in the world through the resurrection of Christ.

Resurrection Beyond the Bible

If one defines resurrection as "the reversal of the effects of death" in terms of a physical reanimation of human life, then one is safe to assume that resurrection was not a common thought or belief in the ancient world.[228] Resurrection is not a part of Homer's understanding of any human existence beyond the grave, and as Wright puts it, if Homer's writings have anything at all to say about resurrection, it is that "it doesn't

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[227]Stuart Townend and Keith Getty, "O, to see the dawn," (Thank You/Adm. by worshiptogether.com songs): 2005.

[228]See definition of resurrection above. Also see Wright, 33, 127.

happen."[229] It was not that the Greeks were unaware of the concept of resurrection. After all, they did have a word for it (ἀναστασις), but their literature reveals that they did not see it as a viable option or source of hope in the face of death. Wright shows that resurrection "was not one way of describing what death consisted of. It was a way of describing something that everyone knew didn't happen: the idea that death could be reversed, undone, could (as it were) work backwards."[230] Apart from the resurrection theology that was present in Christianity's Jewish roots, it was "born into a world where its central claim was known to be false."[231] Generally speaking, resurrection in the pagan world was an absurdity that did not merit serious inquiry for lovers of truth.[232]

Hints at possible resurrections surface in the pagan literature on rare occasion. For example, some of Nero's soldiers circulated a rumor that Nero had not really died (the circumstances surrounding Nero's burial were very secretive), and this gave rise to a myth of "Nero redux" or "Nero revivus."[233] This claim of resurrection, however, was not widely accepted, and "no one seems to have thought that resurrection was what

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[229]Ibid., 32.

[230]Wright, 33. Wright provides several examples from the Greek and Roman world that show not only distaste for the concept of resurrection, but a total refutation of such an offensive idea. He quotes Aeschyus' *Eumenides* where Apollo announces, "Once a man has died, and the dust has soaked up his blood, there is no resurrection." Ibid., 32. Cicero saw the body as a prison house of the soul and generally believed that "nobody in their right mind, having got rid of it, would want it or something like it back again." Ibid., 60.

[231]Ibid., 35.

[232]Claudia Setzer includes a quote from Celsus, writing in Greek around A.D. 177-180 from Alexandria. As a staunch Platonist, he had no patience for the Jewish and Christian doctrine of resurrection. He says, "The doctrine of resurrection, in particular, he categorizes as 'too absurd to qualify as a child's bedtime story from an old woman (*Cels.* 6.34).' Setzer, 100.

[233]Wright, 68.

happened."[234] Stories of resurrection surfaced in ancient pagan literature from time to time, but the consensus seems to have been that this was all perfect fiction and that death was a "one way street" where "would-be traffic-violators (Sisyphus, Eurdice and the like) were turned back or punished."[235] Resurrection was little more than a literary device in the ancient pagan world.

The only culture outside of Judaism or Christianity that had a religious or philosophical hope in resurrection was the Zoroastrians of Persia. Zoroastrianism taught that there was a "good or evil consciousness after death, the passing over a bridge, and the ultimate resurrection of the flesh and the kingdom of righteousness."[236] It is possible that Zoroastrian belief did influence Jewish thought concerning resurrection. However, it is just as likely that the presence of Hebrew people in Persia during the diaspora served to influence Zoroastrianism. Other possible connections between the Bible's doctrine of resurrection and resurrection in the ancient world are the agrarian myths of the ancient world. Wright comments that these were not presented as facts of life after death, but were "metaphors" that helped describe the rejuvenation of plant and animal life as the warmer months replaced the coldness of winter.[237] Overall, the evidence suggest that the

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[234]Ibid., 68.

[235]Ibid., 82. Sisyphus managed to get a reprieve from Hades and then refused to go back. Sisyphus was punished with the task of pushing a rock up a hill for eternity that would always fall back to the bottom again. Eurydice tragically died as a result of a snake bite. Her husband Orpheus was allowed to retrieve her from Hades but lost her forever when he did not obey the conditions of her release and looked back at her before they had left the underworld. Both stories are clearly mythological in character and serve to show the perils of trying to re-enter the human world.

[236]Ferguson, 250.

[237]Wright, 80. Ferguson agrees with Wright and elaborates on the difference between biblical resurrection and the agrarian myths. "Parallels to the resurrection have been suggested in the 'dying and rising savior-gods.' But the 'resurrection' of these gods is very different from what is meant by that word in Christian belief. There is nothing in the myth of Osiris that could be called a resurrection: the god became

authors of the Bible did not borrow the concept of resurrection from their neighbors. The development of resurrection hope (in particular, resurrection hope for all who would believe in a resurrected Savior) as the answer to death's pain is a uniquely Judeao-Christian doctrine.

Immortality, Resurrection, or Both?

In the face of death, humanity's most clever solution to death has been the development of the doctrine of the immortality of the soul. The immortality of the soul is man's best guess as to how he might survive his inevitable meeting with death. According to Eccl. 3:11, God has put "eternity in man's heart," but the verse also states that "he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end." Holmes calls the idea of the "immortality of the soul" a "compromise solution . . . whereby death would be allowed to keep the body in the grave and the mourner would be comforted in the hope that the soul of their beloved is eternally alive and free from the effects of death."[238] Whatever the term "immortal" actually means, it does not provide the hope of continued physical life as we know it. Moltmann describes the immortality of the soul as "an opinion" and the resurrection of the dead as a "hope."[239] Immortality is man's shrug

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ruler over the dead, not the living. The myth of Attis contains no specific mention of a resurrection, though it has been thought that the gladness following mourning in his cult presupposed some such notion. The Adonis myth perhaps most clearly indicates the resuscitation of a god, but even here it is not strictly a resurrection. These beliefs are more closely allied to the cycle of nature, and the mysteries seem to have had their origin in the agricultural cycle." Ferguson, 298.

[238]Holmes, 26-27.

[239]Moltmann, 65.

of the shoulders, a best guess, an implicit admission that he cannot "find out what God has done from beginning to end."[240]

From ancient times to the present, the immortality of the soul has been a palatable rationalization of death's menacing presence. Holmes says: "This hope reflects a notion of death as a friend rather than death as the final enemy. Further this hope is completely independent of God. This immortality of the soul then seems incompatible with the hope of the resurrection of the body."[241] Holmes has clearly borrowed from Moltmann, who argues that "immortality of the soul places an emphasis and trust in the self-transcendence of the human being – resurrection relies on God's transcendence over death."[242] Christian preachers, however, are often tempted to employ the non-biblical language of the "immortality of the soul" because of their desire to bring comfort to grieving souls.[243] Harris comments that the "notion of immortality can sometimes soften the blow of death for mourners and the dying person," especially in situations where "the deceased has suffered a long battle with illness, old age, dementia or even cancer, the immortality of the soul offers them the hope that their loved one has simply shed the ravaged body and the disease that caused them to suffer."[244] Christian funeral preachers must tread carefully

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[240]Eccl. 3:11.

[241]Holmes, 27. Moltmann, speaking of the erroneous concept of "death as a friend" says "the immortal soul may welcome death as a friend, because death releases it from the earthly body; but for the resurrection hope, death is 'the last enemy' (1 Cor. 15:26) of the living God and the creations of his love." Moltmann, 66.

[242]Moltmann, 58.

[243]Immortality of the soul is an entirely pagan concept with no foundation in the New Testament. Harris, in his book *Raised Immortal*, states, "Even in the New Testament, where the three Greek words that are sometimes rendered 'immortality' or 'immortal' are used a total of seventeen times, these words never occur in connection with 'soul' or 'spirit.'" Harris, *Raised Immortal*, 189.

[244]Holmes, 28.

when refuting pagan notions of immortality, and Harris states that it is a "curious fact that few theological issues are as potentially explosive as the doctrines of resurrection and immortality."[245] The reason for such explosiveness is that Christian preachers and theologians have consistently failed to differentiate between the concepts of immortality and resurrection.

As stated above, the phrase "immortality of the soul" or "immortal soul" is not found in the New Testament. The concept's origins are thoroughly Greek. Holmes, again borrowing from the thought of Moltmann, writes that "Plato's thesis that cognitive learning is recollection and that therefore what the soul perceived after birth must already have been known by the pre-existent soul. Thus, if the soul transcends birth it is only natural to assume that it also transcends death."[246] Notions of immortality led to a denigration of physical life and a celebration of spiritual life. If the soul is truly immortal, then death brings humans the eternity that they crave, or to put it another way, death is the "feast day of the soul."[247] The flesh was seen by some Greeks as a prison house, the ultimate limiting factor for human beings.[248] Thus, flesh was mortal, spirit was immortal. Man was mortal, the gods were immortal. The closest a man could get to being a god was to shed mortal flesh and embrace the immortal soul.[249]

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[245]Harris, *Raised Immortal*, 1.

[246]Homes, 30. Also see Moltmann, 59.

[247]Moltmann, 60.

[248]Wright, 79.

[249]Harris, *Raised Immortal*, 190.

The Bible's approach to death is wholly different from the Greek notion of the immortality of the soul. The Bible teaches that man was created with a "possibility of immunity from death" that was irrevocably lost when humanity fell prey to sin.[250] There is, therefore, a direct connection between man's sinfulness and death. Sin causes death, and so for man to have eternal life, sin must be addressed by a holy God.[251] In the Jewish culture of Jesus' day, resurrection life was a widely held hope and belief. The Sadducees not withstanding, most of Jesus' audience would have believed in the resurrection of the body. This could be why the Gospels record very little of Jesus' teaching on resurrection. When Jesus does speak of resurrection, he views it as fact and dismisses all challenges to the concept in smart fashion.[252] Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life," and in the context of death (Lazarus' death in this instance), Jesus reveals that man's one true hope is the resurrection of the body.[253]

Resurrection is a key element in the Gospel narrative. However, the Gospels do not develop a resurrection theology. This task was taken up by the rest of the New

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[250]Rahner, 41.

[251]Rom. 3:23. Thielicke expounds on the connection between sin/death and resurrection life by saying: "This is why death is a problem in the Bible. For here man is not simply a piece of life or of spirit or of the nation, but behind all of these and apart from all of them he still also has a self which bears an indelible character for which he must give account. Because of this self death is a problem. For seen in this light death is no longer an event of transition, the self going over into something else; it is rather destruction, the self going under like a sinking ship. For the same reason redemption from the bondage of death is not to be found in the dream of some alleged immortality, which is after all nothing else than a transition; redemption is to be had only in the resurrection of the dead, that is, in that reality whereby I am caught up and carried through the very destruction by that one whom death was unable to smother in its vortex. Resurrection is the shattered grave (but nevertheless a previously occupied grave); immortality is the denial of the grave." Thielicke, 99.

[252]Matt. 22:23-33.

[253]Jn. 11:25.

Testament writers.[254] As the Christian faith spread into cultures heavily influenced by Greek philosophy, the defense of this core doctrine became more of a priority. As stated above, the Jewish culture of the first century would have been the only culture where resurrection was a commonly held belief. Paul, in particular, was often writing to people who were "well versed in Greco-Roman ideas of immortality apart from the body" and to those who would have viewed resurrection hope as "strange."[255] Such people would need to hear arguments espousing the superiority of resurrection to immortality. An easy way to make the story of Christ more palatable and accessible to the Greek worldview would have been to speak of Jesus' resurrection as a purely spiritual resurrection.[256] Yet, examples of early Christian preaching and teaching found in the book of Acts and the Epistles of Paul show that a "spiritual" or non-somatic resurrection was never assumed – the apostles clearly taught and believed in the "bodily" resurrection of Jesus.[257]

A physical hope of resurrection is the only hope in the face of death that the Bible presents humanity. Wright says:

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[254]The exception is the Gospel of John. The story of Lazarus in John 11 provides a measure of insight for the reader into commonly held views of resurrection in first century Judaism.

[255]Setzer, 54.

[256]Wright argues that "the early Christian belief that Jesus was in some sense divine cannot have been the cause of the belief in his resurrection" because "divinization did not require resurrection; it regularly happened without it. It involved the soul, not the body." Wright, 83.

[257]Harris, *Raised Immortal*, 60. Harris also says: "To elevate spiritual resurrection and deny somatic resurrection, as (apparently) did Hymenaeus and Philetus (2 Tim. 2:17-18) and a Corinthian minority (1 Cor. 15:12), is to deviate from the truth (2 Tim. 2:18). On a subjective level, the greater the awareness of spiritual resurrection with Christ, the more intense the longing for the complementary somatic resurrection." Ibid., 106. Cf., Acts 1:3; 2:31,32; 3:15; 4:2, 9-12.

> Paul simply does not rate a prospect of future disembodied bliss anywhere on the scale of worthwhile goals; he would not classify non-bodily survival of death as "salvation," presumably since it would mean that one was not rescued "saved," from death itself, the irreversible corruption and destruction of the good, god-given human body. To remain dead, even "asleep in the Messiah," without the prospect of resurrection, would therefore mean that one had "perished." For there to be no resurrection would mean that Christian faith and life, including suffering, would be "for this life only."[258]

Christianity teaches that Jesus is a "first fruit"of resurrection that provides hope for believers to likewise experience resurrection.[259] If Jesus had simply "gone to heaven," and the Christian hope was to just "join him there in the future," the present world would be of no concern.[260] The world, however, is a concern of the New Testament writings, and Christians are exhorted in scripture to bring the changing force of the Gospel to bear in the world. The Bible's message of resurrection hope announces to the world that physical life has a direct correlation with resurrection life. Immortality literally releases a human being from accountability in this world. Resurrection life, on the other hand, connects present with future in a way that is uncomfortable for those mired in sin.

The connection between physical life and eternal, resurrection life is hard to understand regardless of the vocabulary one employs. Harris points out that the term "resurrection" is a translation of the word "*anastasis* where the prefix *ana*, which may mean 'up' or 'again,' signifies either a rising *up* (i.e., standing erect) of someone who has

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[258]Wright, 333.

[259]1 Cor. 15:42. "In Paul's view, then, Christ now is what redeemed humanity will be. The glorified Christ is the first fruits of perfected humanity." Harris, *Raised Immortal*, 125.

[260]Wright, 583.

been in a reclining position or a coming to life *again* of someone who has died."[261] Other New Testament words that describe resurrection life, such as *egēgertai*, are in the perfect passive verb tense (i.e., "he has been raised"), which points to "an event that leads to a state."[262] Christ's resurrection, and that of those who are in Christ, is an event that happens in the physical world and has ongoing implications for their eternal state in heaven.

Resurrection, according to Paul, takes a "natural body" and transforms it into a "spiritual body."[263] This body is not "spiritual" in the Greek sense (i.e., bodiless) but is a body "dependent on and controlled by the spirit of God."[264] To overcome the linguistic challenges that this presents, Wright has coined the term "transphysical" to describe resurrection life. Wright defends his etymological invention by saying:

> The word 'transphysical' seems not to exist, surprisingly enough (one might have thought some enterprising ontologist would have employed it long since) . . . 'Transphysical' is not meant to describe in detail what sort of a body it was that the early Christians supposed Jesus already had, and believed that they themselves would eventually have. Nor indeed does it claim to explain how such a thing can come to be. It merely, but I hope usefully, puts a label on the demonstrable fact that the early Christians envisaged a body which was still robustly physical but also significantly different from the present one. If anything – since the main difference they seem to have envisaged is that the new body will not be corruptible – we might say not that it will be *less* physical, as though it were some kind of ghost or apparition, but more. 'Not unclothed, but more fully clothed.' As

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[261]Murray J. Harris, "Resurrection and Immortality in the Pauline Corpus," in *Life in the Face of Death: The Resurrection Message of the New Testament*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 148.

[262]To illustrate the point, Harris provides the following paraphrase of 1 Cor. 15:52 – "The dead will experience resurrection (i.e., an event), and so they will become permanently immortal (i.e., live in a state of 'risen-ness')." Harris, "Resurrection and Immortality in the Pauline Corpus," 148.

[263]1 Cor. 15:42-49.

[264]Ibid., 147.

> historians we may have difficulty imagining such a thing. But, equally as historians, we should not hold back from affirming that that is what the early Christians were talking about. They were not talking about a non-bodily, 'spiritual' survival. Had they wanted to do so, they had plenty of other language available to them, as indeed we do today. We should not project on to others the limitations of our own imagination.[265]

Wright's definition fits well with Paul's description of a resurrection body as being "further clothed" in 2 Cor. 5:1-10. Immortality would be a taking off of flesh whereas resurrection would be putting something on the flesh (or more accurately "over" as in "*further* clothed") that is glorious and eternal.[266] Once again, Paul connects physical life with resurrection life. The analogy of a seed and plant that Paul uses in 1 Cor. 15:36-38 further expresses "identity with difference" and shows that "outwardly the full-grown plant may appear unconnected with the seed buried in the ground but inwardly the plant is continuous with the seed."[267] Exactly what this resurrected body will look like is not expressed by the New Testament authors, but Harris provides a summary of five "features" of the resurrection body that he finds in the New Testament: "(1) of divine origin, (2) spiritual, (3) imperishable, glorious, powerful, (4) angel-like, (5) heavenly."[268] Resurrection is a continuation of who we are physically in the spiritual realm - a

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[265]Wright, 477-478.

[266]Paul uses the word "naked" to describe the taking off of flesh in 2 Cor. 5:2.

[267]Harris, *Raised Immortal*, 126.

[268]Ibid., 125.

continuation of more than just our spiritual essence, as it were.[269] In Christ, a person dies physically to live bodily for eternity.

Nothing could be further removed and antithetical to the concept of immortality than the New Testament's doctrine of resurrection. The one and only hope that the Bible provides humanity in the face of death is resurrection. The Old Testament sets the stage for resurrection theology, and the New Testament presents resurrection as man's great hope of overcoming sin and death. Yet, the Greek concept of immortality was a constant threat to orthodox resurrection teaching. The first major threat came in the form of gnosticism. Wright shows how the gnostic documents uncovered at Nag Hammadi "denied or radically reinterpreted" resurrection.[270] Over time, the concept of the immortal soul and resurrection life have been used in a synonymous and confusing fashion. Even the Westminster Confession is unclear at one point concerning resurrection and immortality. In Chapter XXXII.1, the Westminster Confession says that the soul has

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[269]Harris uses a biochemical illustration that shows the complexity of the connection between the physical and the spiritual even in the context of this world. "Biochemist inform us that during a seven-year cycle the molecular composition of our bodies is completely changed. Even during our present life, then, the continuity between the body now possessed and the body possessed seven years ago resides in personality, not materiality. In spite of the permanent mutation of the material particles comprising our physical bodies, our personal identity is retained." Ibid., 126.

[270]"If resurrection is seen in any sense a return, at some point after death, to a full bodily life, it is denied. If (as in the *Epistle to Rheginos* the language of resurrection is retained, it is reinterpreted so that it no longer refers in any sense to the bodily events of either ultimate resurrection or moral obedience in this life, but rather to non-bodily religious experience during the present life and/or non-bodily post-mortem survival and exaltation . . . There is no emphasis at all on the Jewish and early Christian doctrine of creation, on the goodness of the present created order and on the one true god as having made it and as intending to remake it . . . There is no emphasis on future judgment, a judgment which requires a resurrection if it is to be truly just . . . There is little or no sense that resurrection goes with a stance against the ruling authorities." Wright also mentions that these gnostic writers, unlike the early Christian tradition from the time of Paul to Tertullian, use little if any Old Testament scriptures that refer to resurrection. Wright's summary of gnostic teachings is that "this is a form of spirituality which, while still claiming the name of Jesus, has left behind the very things that made Jesus who he was, and that made the early Christians what they were." Wright, 538-551.

"an immortal subsistence."[271] This is not entirely wrong, but the language is anything but clear. The only solution is to speak of immortality in the direct context of resurrection life.

In the truest since, God alone is immortal.[272] God has, however, made is possible for "this mortal body" to "put on" immortality.[273] Harris states, "It is not by birth, but by grace and through resurrection that immortality is gained."[274] Immortality, then, is a "future gift" that stresses that "the highest good (*summum bonum*) is not equated with freedom from embodiment but with the receipt of a spiritual body as a perfect instrument for the knowledge, worship, and service of God.[275] What Christians eagerly await is their 'heavenly dwelling,' not incorporeal bliss."[276] This future gift of immortality, however, does begin at the moment of faith in Christ. Moltmann explains that it is the Spirit of God who makes it possible for the "community of Christ" to experience "the power of resurrection" that is "stronger than death and must therefore be called immortal."[277] Harris

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[271]Harris stresses the need to avoid connecting the terms "immortal" or "immortality" with the word soul and uses this excerpt from the Westminster Confession as an example of the confusion that comes as a result of these terms being too closely paired. Harris says, "according to Paul and the New Testament, what is immortal when one uses that term with regard to humanity is the resurrected believer." In the researcher's view, the Westminster Confession, particularly in XXXII.2-3, clearly connects immortality with resurrection. Harris, "Resurrection in the Pauline Corpus," 165. In his earlier work, *Raised Immortal*, Harris suggests that the phrase "immortality of the soul" has "no place in Christian terminology" but adds "the term immortality is no less a biblical concept than resurrection and thus should be retained in the vocabulary of biblical and systematic theology." Harris, *Raised Immortal*, 237-238.

[272]1 Tim. 6:16. Harris, *Raised Immortal*, 189.

[273]1 Cor. 15:53-54.

[274]Harris, "Resurrection and Immortality in the Pauline Corpus," 165.

[275]1 Cor. 15:53-53; Rom. 8:23; 1 Cor. 15:43-52; Phil. 3:20-21.

[276]The Greek phrase Paul uses in 2 Cor. 5:2 is "*to oikētērion hēmōn to ex ouranou.*" Cf. 2 Cor. 5:2-4. Ibid., 165.

[277]Moltmann, 71.

agrees with this point and suggests that "a preferable solution is to affirm that the immortality gained *potentially* at the moment a person comes to be in Christ becomes an *actual* possession in the resurrection of the dead."[278] Immortality makes perfect sense in light of resurrection because then "immortality signifies not the survival of the soul or the person through and after death but the acquisition of deathlessness as a result of participation in the divine life."[279] The Bible teaches that the "two doctrines (resurrection and immortality) stand or fall together."[280] A human being can only experience immortal life as a result of the resurrection of Christ.[281]

Resurrection does not give a Christian the right to be careless with his/her physical body. The New Testament shows a direct connection between physical life and spiritual, resurrection life. The implications of a properly understood doctrine of resurrection are profound for the Christian life in general and funeral preaching in particular. Wright states:

> History matters because human beings matter; human beings matter because creation matters; creation matters because the creator matters. And the creator, according to some of the most ancient Jewish beliefs, grieved so much over creation gone wrong, over humankind in rebellion, over thorns and thistles and dust and death, that he planned from the beginning the way by which he would rescue his world, his creation, his history, from its tragic corruption and decay; the way, therefore, by which he would rescue his image-bearing creatures, the

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[278] 1 Cor. 15:22b; 2 Cor. 5:17. Harris, *Raised Immortal*, 196.

[279] Ibid, 198.

[280] Ibid., 233.

[281] "To deny resurrection is to deny immortality, since the embodiment involved in the event of resurrection-transformation is, from a Christian outlook, necessary for the enjoyment of the meaningful existence implied by immortality. On the other hand, to deny immortality is to deny resurrection, since the permanent supply of the divine life pledged by immortality is necessary to sustain the resurrection life of transformed persons." Harris, "Resurrection and Immortality in the Pauline Corpus," 167.

> muddled and rebellious human beings, from their doubly tragic fate; the way, therefore, by which he would be most truly himself, would *become* most truly himself. The story of Jesus of Nazareth which we find in the New Testament offers itself, as Jesus himself had offered his public work and words, his body and blood, as the answer to this multiple problem: the arrival of God's kingdom precisely in the world of space, time and matter, the world of injustice and tyranny, of empire and crucifixions. This world is where the kingdom must come, on earth as it is in heaven. What view of creation, what view of justice, would be served by the offer merely of a new spirituality and a one-way ticket out of trouble, an escape from the real world?
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> No wonder the Herods, the Caesars and the Sadducees of this world, ancient and modern, were and are eager to rule out all possibility of actual resurrection. They are, after all, staking a counter-claim on the real world. It is the real world that the tyrants and bullies (including intellectual and cultural tyrants and bullies) try to rule by force, only to discover that in order to do so they have to quash all rumors of resurrection, rumors that would imply that their greatest weapons, death and deconstruction, are not after all omnipotent. But it is the real world, in Jewish thinking, that the real God made, and still grieves over. It is the real world that, in the earliest stories of Jesus' resurrection, was decisively and for ever reclaimed by that event, an event which demanded to be understood, not as a bizarre miracle, but as the beginning of the new creation. It is the real world that, however dangerous this may turn out to be, is the real world in and for which Christians are committed to living and, where necessary, dying. Nothing less is demanded by the God of creation, the God of justice, the God revealed in and as the crucified and risen Jesus of Nazareth.[282]

Resurrection rings of radicalism. True Christian preaching sounds different than any other voice that a grieving person will hear in the world. Christian funeral preaching that emphasizes the radical message of resurrection has the potential to break through all cultural barriers and presuppositions. Christianity has no ability to rebut death, much less defeat it, without resurrection hope.

Radical Resurrection

Underlying the New Testament's radical message of resurrection is the equally radical message of incarnation. The wonder of God becoming human is expressed by the

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[282]Wright, 737.

Apostle John in the prologue to his Gospel, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth."[283] Resurrection hope is, at its core, a very physical hope that would have no merit apart from incarnation. Furthermore, what could God do for human beings if he himself had never tasted death? Jeffry R. Zurheide, in his book *When Faith is Tested* writes:

> In the incarnational light God can no longer be viewed as the High and Mighty One, insulated from the woes of the human plight, in which the traditional theology of the centuries would have us believe . . . Suddenly we catch a glimpse of a God who loves us so much that God chooses to identify totally with humanity . . . Those seeking to minister, then, can bring to the victims of tragic suffering the consoling news that God can help "when bad things happen to good people," because God has truly been in their place. God can help because God understands at a profound level what it means to sense alienation, suffer pain, and even face death itself. How powerful the presence of a God who has walked "through the valley of death" can be for one whose personal valley is dark and deep indeed! . . . The Almighty exists and acts speaks here in the form of one who is weak and impotent. [284]

The Gospels testify that Jesus was a man who had emotions, experienced pain, and faced death. He was a historical person with the same kind of physicality that every other human experiences. These same Gospels also testify that when Jesus appeared to his followers three days after his crucifixion, he was, once again, a physical man, but now

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[283]Jn. 1:14.

[284]Jeffry R. Zurheide, *When Faith is Tested: Pastoral Responses to Suffering and Tragic Death* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 38. Robert E. Webber sees the incarnation in a similar light as Zurheide and connects Christ's incarnation with his resurrection. He says, "In the incarnation God becomes one of us that we might be united to him. In union with us God enters our suffering, overcomes sin and death and in his resurrection begins the new creation." Robert E. Webber "Narrating the World Once Again: A Case For Future-Ancient Faith" in *Criswell Theological Review* 3/2 (Spring 2006): 25.

endowed with an incorruptible resurrection element.[285] Human flesh had been transformed into something marvelous as a result of death's defeat.

The Bible teaches that since the fall of man in Genesis 3, God has been at war with the powers of death. Death, in the Bible, is an enemy, never a friend.[286] As discussed above, this is a radical departure from the prevailing Greek and Roman worldviews that held death as a friend that released one's true essence from the confinement of flesh.[287] Jesus' incarnation, his life and ministry, and even his death, according to the New Testament, is God's secret weapon in his war against death. Jüngel says, "The struggle in which God deals with death, and in which death also has to deal with God is the history which faith tells about Jesus Christ."[288] Holmes asserts, "In order to fully appreciate the hope of the resurrection, we must first acknowledge that death is the enemy and seek to

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[285]N.T. Wright references Luke 24:36-43 and comments, "Every line, almost every word, in this scene demonstrates the point. For Luke, the risen Jesus is firmly and solidly embodied, able to be touched, able to eat." Wright goes on to say that, "Even when Luke overlaps with Mark and Matthew, the story has been substantially rewritten. But the picture of Jesus is the same, and it is a picture which, though deeply puzzling in itself, fits with the more developed theological analysis of resurrection which we find in the theological traditions of which Paul is the earliest exponent. It is the picture of the risen Jesus as a firmly embodied human being whose body possesses new, unexpected and unexplained characteristics: a picture of what we have called 'transphysicality,' or transformed physicality." Wright, 657, 660-661.

[286]1 Cor. 15:26.

[287]Jüngel articulates the difference between Christian and Greco-Roman thought by comparing the death of Christ with the death of Socrates. He writes, "The death of Socrates suggests that the deadly poison is a health-giving medicine. Socrates greeted death with a swan-song. When Jesus died he uttered a cry. The swan-song announced the return to God. Jesus cried: My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me? This is to look the negative in the face. And yet it is precisely the death of Jesus which is proclaimed as salvation." Jüngel, 53. G. Walter Hansen shows the difference between the two worldviews by comparing how each system viewed man's origin and terminus. He writes, "The culture of the Greco-Roman world that surrounded Paul and his churches called on everyone to make merry because death was the end of creation. Paul, however, exhorted his churches to rejoice – because the resurrection of Jesus was the beginning of the new creation." G. Walter Hansen, "Resurrection and the Christian Life in Paul's Letters," in *Life in the Face of Death: The Resurrection Message of the New Testament*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 203-224.

[288]Jüngel, 81.

comprehend the full effect of death."[289] Resurrection hope does not allow death any "credit," as it were, and reminds us that "there is a friend beyond the falls of death who waits for us in the ocean of eternity, where he raises us up out of the water to eternal life."[290] Only the resurrected Christ can say to those facing death, "Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades."[291]

Death's defeat through Christ's resurrection is the reason for Paul's joyous claim that "neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."[292] Paul also preaches that "if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his."[293] Sin, the predicating factor of death, had to be paid for by the Messiah. Jesus undercuts the source of death's strength by dying for human sin.[294] Christ's death pays sin's penalty and defeats death for all humanity.[295] Christ's resurrection then provides resurrection life for all who believe. Unlike the Greeks and Romans whose philosophy engendered a hatred for the body, Christianity's radical

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[289]Holmes, 13.

[290]Ibid., 33.

[291]Rev. 1:17b-18.

[292]Rom. 8:38-39.

[293]Rom. 6:5. For more discussion on Paul's view of resurrection in Romans 6-8 see Carol M. Norén, *In Times of Crisis and Sorrow: A Minister's Manual Resource Guide* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), 13.

[294]1 Cor. 15:3b-4; cf. Mt. 1:21; Jn. 1:29.

[295]Rom. 5:8.

message of resurrection restored the concept of the *imago Dei* and lifts up the infinite value of a human being.[296] Death is no friend because death robs humanity of precious life created in God's image.

Immortality of the soul, and other creations of the human mind that attempt to deal with death, provide little comfort because they do not remove death's "sting."[297] The resurrection of Christ is a "head-on" challenge of death, showing that God can "meet death" and "doesn't die."[298] Apart from resurrection, death robs man of his totality. With resurrection, man may still lose the battle with death in a physical sense, but he wins the war with a restoration of physical life that is "incorruptible."[299]

The great English Congregationalist pastor Joseph Parker (1830-1902) captured the beauty and power of resurrection hope in the opening words of a funeral invocation when he said, "Almighty God, we bless thee that, though we are always dying, yet we cannot die . . ."[300] This statement acknowledges that death still plays a role in the Christian life, but not a primary one. The implication is that death is neither sought nor

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[296]In a "Letter to a Soldier" Thielicke answered a former student's question concerning the "nothing to lose" attitudes of atheistic communist in battle. Why were communist so willing to give up their lives? Thielicke answered, "Death becomes a much more serious matter the more we have to lose, that is, the more we are aware of the true destiny to which we have been called, the more we know of the dignity and uniqueness of our person, which death strikes down . . . The only reason we speak of 'the infinite value of the human soul,' is that we are so infinitely loved; we were bought at so great a price. God does not love us because we are so worthy; on the contrary, we are so worthy because God loves us." Thielicke, xxiv-xxv.

[297]1 Cor. 15:55.

[298]Jüngel, 108.

[299]1 Cor. 15:42-58. Harris, quoting from the book of Revelation, says, "For the righteous, immortality results from resurrection. Those who share in the 'first resurrection' are immune from the 'second death' (Rev. 20:6), having received 'the crown of eternal life.'" Harris, *Raised Immortal*, 229.

[300]Joseph Parker, "The Days of Our Years" in *Classic Sermons on Death and Dying*, ed. Warren W. Wiersbe. Kregel Classic Sermon Series (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2000), 49.

feared by those in Christ. Apart from Christ, death is purely negative in that it "takes away" the only life a person knows. In Christ, death actually leads to a "putting on" of something more, something better, something eternal. As Paul puts it, we are not "found naked" in death, but "further clothed" when "what is mortal" is "swallowed up by life."[301]

The hope of physical resurrection is the ultimate Christian hope in the New Testament.[302] Yet, this does not make it any less outrageous to those who prefer the more rational notions of the immortality of the soul. Gatch states:

> The radical individualism and experimentalism is more compatible, as one reflects upon the problem of death, with the mode of immortality than with the mode of resurrection. Resurrection is not simply an outrage in the face of reason and experience; it also does not do justice to modern man's sense of aloneness and his general belief that mind or perception is somehow at the core of being . . . Characteristically, then, modern theology has spoken of man's immortality rather than his resurrection.[303]

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[301]2 Cor. 5:1-5.

[302]Though resurrection hope is the ultimate hope, those who die in Christ are certainly "present" with Christ (2 Cor. 5:6-10, cf. Luke 23:43; Phil. 1:23). The exact nature of the intermediate state (the time between a person's death and the *Parousia*) was, according to Harris, a "penultimate" concern as opposed to the "ultimate"concern of resurrection. However, the scriptures teach that the dead in Christ "live to God" (Lk. 20:38b) and are in the presence of Christ (Phil.1:23) in an "enriched fellowship with Christ." Harris, *Raised Immortal*, 142.

[303]Gatch, 165. Gatch condemns this view and sees it as a product of Enlightment thinking not biblical theology. As stated above, the Bible writers were often writing to audiences that would have rejected their basic premise (resurrection) outright. Wright points out the Bible writers would have been keenly aware that their audiences would see the claim of Jesus being "raised from the dead" as outrageous in the sense that "a great many things supposedly happened to the dead, but resurrection did not." Early Christians understood that they were making a claim that "something happened to Jesus which had happened to no one else." Wright, 83. Throughout the New Testament, resurrection is viewed as a "reversal" of death not just a "reconstrual of life after death." Wright continues by saying, "It is not about discovering that Sheol is not such a bad place after all. It is not a way of saying that dust will learn to be happy dust." Ibid., 127-128. Gatch's point expresses the intellectual problem that resurrection hope has always presented. But this does not lessen the fact that "early Christianity was a 'resurrection' movement through and through." Ibid., 210. In his concluding statements, Wright speaks to the problem Gatch has identified and writes: "It appears to be a triumphalist doctrine, clinging for security to the idea of an omnipotent god who can intervene in the natural world at any point and sort things out, but who apparently chooses not to in most cases. How very undemocratic of god, people think (without realizing that this idea itself is a local, almost tribal, western-Enlightenment view). Surely he, or it, should treat all people just the same. The idea of Jesus as a *representative,* such a key notion all early Christian expositions of his resurrection, has been screened out both from the 'meaning' which is here under attack and from the

It is true that the resurrection of Jesus is a surprising way (for those who espouse radical individualism) for God to deal with death. The surprise of resurrection, Wright points out, is a dominate feature of Luke's Gospel and one can see this same surprise in the other three Gospels as well.[304] Yet, the New Testament shows that the disciples quickly interpreted the resurrection as the proof of Jesus' Messiahship and Lordship.[305] Such high praise is unusual when one considers that the recipient of this praise had just been crucified by the Roman empire.[306] Furthermore, what explains the fact that a gathering of orthodox Jews changed their day of worship to Sunday? Wright answers by saying, "the early Christians believed something happened on that first Sunday morning."[307] Historically speaking, it requires an outrageous event to lead to a new and radical faith like Christianity.

Christianity has a unique answer to death that is both a physical and spiritual hope. Harris states, "The resurrection was not simply an occurrence in the spiritual world, for the empty tomb stands at the intersection of the spiritual and the material and shows that these two categories are reconcilable."[308] In other words, resurrection immortality

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critiques which, in demolishing this meaning, have felt obliged to demolish the resurrection along with it." Ibid., 723.

[304]Lk. 24; n.b. Mk. 16:8; Mt. 28:10; Jn. 20:11-18. Ibid., 657.

[305]Jn. 20:28.

[306]Ibid., 553.

[307]Ibid., 580.

[308]Harris, *Raised Immortal*, 43. Schaeffer too sees the resurrection as the perfect connection between the human body and soul. He writes: "The great teaching of the resurrection of the body is not just abstract doctrine; it stands as a pledge and reminder of a very important and a very hopeful fact. It says God made the whole man. God made man spirit and body, and He is interested in both. He made man with an intellect, and He is interested in the intellect. He made man with an artistic and creative sense of beauty, and He is interested in that. Body, mind, artistic sense: these things are not low; they are high. Of course, they

provides a unique spiritual hope in the context of a physical world. Resurrection bridges the gap between life and death. Thus, resurrection hope has implications for Christians in life and in death.

Resurrection immortality is a radical approach to death that demands a radically different approach to how one lives his/her life. The context of a funeral provides a platform for the Christian pastor to speak of the power of resurrection hope in the context of this life and the next. Resurrection theology allows the Christian pastor to be both realistic about death's pain and hopeful concerning the future state of those who trust in Christ. Irion writes, "The Christian doctrine of the resurrection witnesses to the belief that death is real, but that it is not the end of existence. It is a transition to a new quality of life. Death breaks the pattern of human relationships; resurrection holds out the possibility that new quality of relationships can be established in a later life."[309] Resurrection holds out hope that the precious relationships we have nurtured here on earth can be continued in eternity in a very real, and human sense.

Death establishes what appears to be, form a mortal point of view, a literal dead end. The Bible, however, helps a grieving person look beyond death's dead end to see that there is more beyond. Richard Baxter exhorts Christians to "look not on the dead bones and dust and difficulty, but at the promise" and to "never look at the grave, but see the resurrection beyond it."[310] Paul, speaking of our future glory, says "For those whom

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can become wrong if they are ut in the wrong perspective, but they are not wrong, nor unimportant, in themselves. Therefore, since God made the whole man and is interested in the whole man, the salvation which Paul preaches is a salvation which touches the whole man." Schaeffer, 100-101.

[309]Irion, 74.

[310]Richard Baxter, *The Saints Everlasting Rest* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 45, 47.

he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers."[311] Wright observes that Paul is claiming here that the human body is "not a prison from which to escape; what it needs is a transformation."[312] The body needs transforming because of the ravishes of sin upon the human body. Again, Paul says in his letter to the Romans "So that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." In other words, "the resurrection is thus the Creator's answer not only to sin but to its consequences."[313] Resurrection transforms scarred and sinful flesh into glorious eternal flesh.[314] Not once in the New Testament is resurrection used as a metaphor, instead it is viewed as a personal hope that comes as the result of a personal relationship with the risen Christ.[315]

The radical message of resurrection should be the centerpiece of Christian preaching in general, and funeral preaching in particular. Harris states, "Without the resurrection the New Testament loses its soul and the Christian faith its central pillar.

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[311]Rom. 8:29.

[312]Wright, 231.

[313]Ibid., 250.

[314]Baxter expresses the transforming power of resurrection by saying, "If grace makes a Christian differ so much from what he was, as to say, I am not the man I was, how much more will glory make us differ. As much as a body spiritual, above the sun in glory, exceeds these frail, noisome, diseased bodies of flesh, so far shall our senses exceed those we now posses." Baxter, 28-29. Though more technical and less poetic than Baxter's description of resurrection, Karl Rahner's commentary on 1 Cor. 15 likewise shows the glory of resurrection's transformation of human life. "The description (of a resurrected body, cf. I Cor. 15) seems to indicate that, in its glorified state, the body not only obtains a perfect suppleness and pliability in its relationship to the spirit of man as perfected and divinized by the supernatural action of grace, but also that bodily structure does not necessarily coincide with man's present restrictions to definite spatio-temporal determinations." Rahner, 34.

[315]Ezek. 37; Acts 3:19-22. Wright, 454, 457.

Without a risen Christ, the Christian message becomes meaningless and the Christian's faith futile.[316] A person cannot give himself to a dead man, nor can he expect anything or receive anything from a dead man."[317] The testimony of the early church and the persecutions that they endured prove that the first Christians were teaching, preaching, and dying for their hope of resurrection life.[318] Resurrection promises a transformed body in the next world and a transformed life in this world. Harris says, "Resurrection is not simply a somatic reanimation and transformation *after* physical death. It is also, according

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[316]1 Cor. 15:14, 17.

[317]Harris, *Raised Immortal*, 5.

[318]For example, Augustine devotes time in his writing to assuage the fears of his fellow Christians concerning the desecration of their bodies. He writes, "For this thing, which with savage rage was done to the bodies of Martys, if it could any whit hurt them, to impair the blessed resting of their most victorious spirits, would assuredly not have been suffered to be done. In very deed therefore it was declared, that the Lord in saying, 'Fear not them which kill the body, and afterward have no more that they can do,' did not mean that he would not permit them to do any thing to the bodies of His followers when dead; but that whatever they might be permitted to do, nothing should be done that could lessen the Christian felicity of the departed, nothing thereof reach to their consciousness while yet living after death; nothing avail to the detriment, no, not even of the bodies themselves, to diminish aught of their integrity when they should rise again." Augustin, *On Care To Be Had For the Dead [De Cura Pro Mortuis*], Philip Schaff, ed. Vol. 3, *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, trans by Rev. H. Browne in *Nicene an d Post-Nicene Fathers* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999), 539-551. Another powerful illustration of both the Christian hope of resurrection and the pagan hatred toward the doctrine comes to us from the great historian of the early church, Euesbius. He writes of the Gallic saints in the city of Lyons during the reign of Verus who after being tortured, killed, and then thrown to the dogs, their corpses were "watched carefully night and day to see than no one received the last offices at our hands. Then they threw out the remains left by the beasts and the fire, some torn to ribbons, some burnt to cinders, and set a military guard to watch for days on end the trunks and severed heads of the rest, denying burial to them also. Some raged and ground their teeth at them, longing to take some further revenge on them, others laughed and jeered, magnifying their idols and giving them credit for the punishment of their enemies; while those who were more reasonable, and seemed to have a little human feeling, exclaimed with the utmost scorn:'Where is their god? And what did they get for their religion, which they preferred to their own lives?' Such were their varied reactions, while we were greatly distressed by our inability to give the bodies burial. Darkness did not make it possible, and they refused all offers of payment and were deaf to entreaty; but they guarded the remains with the greatest care, regarding it as a triumph if they could prevent burial . . . thus the martyrs' bodies, after six days' exposure to every kind of insult and to the open sky, were finally burnt to ashes and swept by these wicked men into the Rhone which flows near by, that not even a trace of them might be seen on the earth again. And this they did as if they could defeat God and rob the dead of their rebirth, 'in order', they said, 'that they may have no hope of resurrection – the belief that has led them to bring into this country a new foreign cult and treat torture with contempt, going willingly and cheerfully to their death. Now let's see if they'll rise again, and if their god can help them and save them from our hands.'" Eusebius, *The History of the Early Church from Christ to Contantine,* trans. by G. A. Williamson (New York: Penguine Books, 1989), 147-148.

to Paul, a moral or spiritual renewal *before* physical death."[319] In 2 Cor. 5:15 Paul writes, "and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised." That is to say that "only those raised with Christ can live for Christ."[320] Every Christian life has the potential to be "the trophy of a visible resurrection."[321] This thought fits well with the teachings of the New Testament. If a Christian's body in life is "God's Temple," then there is something sacred about that body which can only be fully realized by resurrection.[322] Resurrection makes eternal the body that held the eternal One.

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[319]Harris, *Raised Immortal*, 101.

[320]Ibid., 103.

[321]Eusebius recounts a story told by Clement in his work *The Rich Man Who Finds Salvation* concerning a rebellious young lad that the Apostle John helped find grace and restoration. The transformation of his life was so complete that Clement describes him as "the trophy of a visible resurrection." Eusebius, 83-85.

[322]1 Cor. 3:16-17; 6:19-20; 2 Cor. 6:14-18.

CHAPTER 3

PROJECT METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to examine the biblical, historical, and current cultural views of death so that the Christian funeral preacher can establish a dialogue between death and scripture that presents mourners with the unique solution to death that Jesus' resurrection provides all of humanity. To glean information useful for Christian funerals concerning death in the current cultural clime, the researcher has sought out professional funeral directors and chaplains in hospital and hospice contexts. The researcher has interviewed four funeral home directors and four chaplains for the purpose of retrieving what Sharon Merriam describes as an "insider's perspective" otherwise known as the *emic*.[323] All of the interviews were conducted in person by the researcher at each interviewee's office or place of business. Each participant lives and works in Jefferson County, Missouri which is mostly Caucasian (Euro-American), rural, and consists of people who have been influenced by an amalgam of pre-modern, modern, and folk postmodern ideas.

Design of the Study

Due to the phenomenological nature of the funeral context, and the sundry attitudes, inconsistent variables, and differing opinions that surround human suffering,

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[323]Sharon B. Merriam, *Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2001), 6-7.

death, and the grieving process, the researcher has employed a qualitative research design for this study.[324] Quantifying responses to death and the acceptance of a resurrection-focused Christian funeral sermon on the part of those who are mourning, in the view of the researcher, is problematic. Quantitative research demands objectivity, and this demand seems unreasonable in light of the difficulty of quantifying feelings and experiences that are inherently subjective. In other words, qualitative methodology allows for the bias of the researcher and seeks to provide suggestions for other Christian funeral preachers who are "grounded" in contexts similar to that of the researcher.[325] The observations of funeral home directors and chaplains has provided a more subjective, but descriptively "rich" set of data that could only come from individuals who continually dwell in the emotional "intensity" that death brings to mourners.[326]

In his book, *Educational Research: Planning, Conducting, and Evaluating Quantitative and Qualitative Research*, Creswell defines qualitative research as a "type of educational research in which the researcher relies on the views of participants, asks broad, general questions, collects data consisting largely of words (or text) from

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[324]John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2003), 15, 131. By "phenomenological," the researcher is incorporating Creswell's definition of "the essence of human experiences concerning a phenomenon" that an observer can record and then seek to understand. Creswell mentions that qualitative research employs "theory as a broad explanation" and helps provide an "explanation for behavior and attitudes, and it may be complete with variables, constructs, and hypotheses."

[325]John W. Creswell, *Educational Research: Planning, Conducting, and Evaluating Quantitative and Qualitative Research*, 3rd ed. (Upper Saddle, NJ: Pearson, 2008), 432.

[326]Merriam mentions that qualitative methodology produces observations that are "richly descriptive." Merriam, 8. Lawrence T. Orcher mentions that a qualitative researcher can use what he terms "intensity sampling" which incorporates "individuals whom they believe are likely to have intense experiences or feelings related to the topic of the research." The researcher believes that funeral home directors and chaplains qualify for such "intensity sampling." Lawrence T. Orcher, *Conducting Research: Social and Behavioral Science Methods* (Glendale, CA: Pyrczak Publishing, 2005), 101.

participants, describes and analyzes words for themes, and conducts the inquiry in a subjective, biased manner."[327] Creswell's research points out eight aspects of qualitative research methodology that fit well with this particular study: "takes place in a natural setting, uses multiple methods that are interactive and humanistic, is emergent rather than tightly prefigured, is fundamentally interpretive, views social phenomena holistically, reflects systematically on who he or she is in the inquiry and is sensitive to his or her personal biography and how it shapes the study, uses complex reasoning that is multi-faceted, iterative, and simultaneous, and finally, adopts and uses one or more strategies of inquiry as a guide for the procedures."[328] The data gleaned from the literature review has provided Christian funeral preachers with a more universal view of human suffering and death while the qualitative research done through the interviews has connected these generalizations with the researcher's cultural context.

Interview Design

The interview design sought to discover general facts concerning Christian funeral preaching and funeral audiences from funeral home directors and hospital and hospice chaplains. The need to glean each interviewee's unique take on this subject led the researcher to utilize open-ended questions that allowed themes to "emerge."[329] To accomplish this, the researcher has employed what Merriam describes as a "semi-structured format" for interviews.

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[327]Creswell, *Educational Research*, 46.

[328]Creswell, *Research Design*, 181-183.

[329]This approach allows for the research to go "where the information takes you." Creswell, *Educational Research*, 438.

> In this type of interview either all of the questions are more flexibly worded, or the interview is a mix of more and less structured questions. Usually, specific information is desired from all the respondents, in which case there is a highly structured section to the interview. But the largest part of the interview is guided by a list of questions or issues to be explored, and neither the exact wording nor the order of the questions is determined ahead of time. This format allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic.[330]

Each interviewee's unique take on death, grief, and Christian funeral preaching led to the emergence of unexpected themes and suggestions for funeral preaching that were informative and practical.

Over the past seven years, the researcher has had conversations with every funeral home director in this study. However, the researcher had only previously conversed with two of the four chaplains. Nonetheless, none of the interviewees were given the questions beforehand. This allowed for more natural and spontaneous responses and allowed the researcher to ask follow-up questions that varied from the prepared research questions. The researcher contacted each participant and explained to them the topic of this research. He then informed them that the interview would last approximately one hour. To keep the interviews to one hour, the researcher determined to ask two "central questions" followed by five "sub-questions."[331] This allowed enough latitude for the researcher to potentially ask as many as five follow-up questions. Overall, the researcher felt that a limit of twelve total questions (depending on the interview) was a maximum number for a one hour interview.[332] All of the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

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[330]Merriam, 74.

[331]Creswell, *Research Design,* 106.

[332]Creswell, *Research Design*, 106.

The subjects of the qualitative research had more than one hundred and fifty years of experience with families contending with death and grief in Jefferson County, Missouri. Of the four funeral home directors, two were from De Soto (population 6,504) in the south western corner of the county, one was from the county's town seat in Hillsboro, (population 1,989) which is centrally located in the county, and one was from the Festus/Crystal City (populations 11,223 and 4,549 respectively), which is located on the eastern side of the county.[333] Two of the chaplains serve at Jefferson Memorial Hospital in Crystal City (one as the hospital's main chaplain, the other as a chaplain in the hospital's hospice), and two served as chaplains in hospice organizations that serve the Jefferson County area. The funeral home directors were all from the central and south part of the county, which is not as suburban as the northern part of the county. Thus, their viewpoints and experiences were in keeping with the sociological limitations of this study, mostly Caucasian and rural. The chaplains had slightly more experience with the more suburban and culturally diverse sections of the county but were very familiar with the rural and culturally homogeneous aspects of the central and southern parts of the county. Four funeral home directors and four chaplains generated enough information for what Orcher terms a "saturation effect."[334] The eight interviews provided a healthy level of redundancy that appears to indicate that a proper level of saturation was achieved by the researcher.

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[333]These figures represent population numbers from the year 2007. http://www.city-data.com/county/Jefferson_County-MO.html

[334]Orcher, 69, 106.

Limitations of the Study

Though this project has examined the history of human dealings with death, the main focus of this research was on Christian funeral preaching in the Mid-western United States in a Missouri county that is more than ninety-seven percent Caucasian and mostly rural.[335] The researcher has also limited the discussion of philosophical leanings (e.g., modern, postmodern) to general descriptions that represent an influence that is more on the folk level and less on an academic level.

An obvious limitation of this research has been its focus on Christian funeral preaching where the mourners have been open to Christian teachings of resurrection life. The methodologies suggested in this research have obvious limits in funeral contexts where the deceased was not a professing Christian and/or the mourners were not open to a Christian sermon in the context of the funeral. As stated in the literature review, the possibility of non-Christians in the context of a Christian funeral service is likely. Thus, the research has taken into account the need for Christian funeral preaching to provide a conversational tone that invites all of the mourners into a dialogue with Christian resurrection hope. Overall, the qualitative research was conducted in a county where the Christian population (Evangelical Protestant, Mainline Protestant, and Catholic) in the year 2000 was slightly above forty percent of the overall population.[336]

Another limitation of this research has been the selection of funeral home directors and hospital/hospice chaplains for the interview process. These two groups were selected because of their regular association with issues pertaining to death and dying. In

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[335]http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/29/29099.html

[336]http://www.thearda.com/mapsReports/reports/counties/29099_2000.asp

particular, these two groups have had many opportunities to hear Christian funeral preaching in a wide variety of situations, and in some cases, they have preached funeral sermons of their own. The researcher felt that for this particular study, those interviewed needed to have as much experience hearing funeral sermons as they had delivering funeral sermons (e.g., pastors).

Biases of the Study

Qualitative research, according to Creswell, allows for the experiences and observations of the researcher to be expressed.[337] This research has been conducted with an obvious bias toward biblical Christianity that has been influenced by Baptist and Reformed theologies. The persons the researcher interviewed for this project each have a Christian background and generally agree on the need for biblical preaching in the context of a funeral that focuses on resurrection hope and honors the life of the deceased. Though death itself is an objective reality in human experience, the interpretation of death on the part of mourners is a subjective endeavor. This study has attempted to examine death, mourning, and Christian funeral preaching in a limited cultural context that incorporated nothing less than the biblical teaching of resurrection.

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[337]Creswell, *Research Design*, 75.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to examine the biblical, historical, and current cultural views of death so that the Christian funeral preacher can establish a dialogue between death and Scripture that presents mourners with the unique solution to death that Jesus' resurrection provides all of humanity. The findings of this research provide a Christian funeral pastor with four areas of concern that can aide him/her in the development of funeral sermons. These categories are: ignorance concerning death, avoidance of overt evangelism, making a personal connection, and incarnational ministry. With these concerns in mind, a Christian funeral preacher can begin the process of selecting the appropriate questions that he/she wants the funeral sermon to address. The ensuing dialogical sermon can then provide the funeral audience with a meaningful dialogue between death and the scriptures that the audience overhears and internalizes.

Research Participants

The researcher interviewed four funeral home directors and four hospital/hospice chaplains in Jefferson County, Missouri. Each interview was conducted in a semi-structured format that incorporated seven questions covering three categories: general information, theological considerations, and social considerations. These seven questions led to various follow-up questions that allowed each person interviewed an opportunity

for their unique insights to emerge. General information questions revealed to the researcher the years of professional experience that each funeral director and chaplain had with death and Christian funeral preaching. This category also provided each research participant an opportunity to share with the researcher their perceptions of the unique culture of rural Jefferson County, Missouri. The theological questions revealed to the researcher the funeral home directors' and chaplains' views concerning the biblical teachings of life, death, and resurrection, the types of theological concerns a bereaved person may have in a funeral context, and finally, how scripture's absolute statements about life and death might conflict with the relativistic inclinations of the average mourner. Social consideration questions provided the researcher with insight into the expectations of mourners as they pertain to funeral preaching and how the Christian funeral preacher can help mourners through the denial phase of grief.

Each funeral home director and chaplain selected by the researcher had ample experience with death and dying concerns in the context of Jefferson County, Missouri. Funeral Director No. 1 is a life-long resident of Jefferson County and has served as a funeral home director in that county for more than twenty years. His family has been involved in the funeral industry for three generations, and he is affiliated with the Lutheran denomination. Funeral Director No. 2 has also lived in Jefferson County for the majority of his life and harkens from a family with a long tradition in the funeral industry. He has served as a funeral director for twenty years and is Roman Catholic. Funeral Director No. 3 has been a full-time funeral director for seven years and has worked for a funeral home in Jefferson County for more than fifteen years. In addition to his experience in the funeral home industry, he has also worked for the county fire

department and the county medical examiner. He is Roman Catholic. Funeral Director No. 4 represents the fourth generation of his family to serve in the funeral industry. In four generations, his family has served Jefferson County for more than one-hundred and two years. Although he has only been the primary owner and director of the funeral home since 2001, Funeral Director No. 4 has been involved in the funeral industry since his early childhood. He is affiliated with the Methodist denomination.

Chaplain No. 1 has served as a pastor in the northwestern part of Jefferson County for seventeen years in the Church of Christ denomination. In addition, he has served as a hospice chaplain for a number of Jefferson County hospice organizations since 1997. Chaplain No. 2 has served as a Southern Baptist pastor in St. Francois County, Missouri for twenty-six years and as a hospice chaplain in Jefferson County for the past four years. Chaplain No. 3 is the head chaplain at Jefferson County's only hospital. He has served in this position for twenty-three years and is affiliated with the Methodist denomination. Chaplain No. 4 is an assistant hospital chaplain in Jefferson County and a deacon of a Roman Catholic parish in said county. He has been in ordained ministry and served as a hospital chaplain for fifteen years.

Research Findings

Careful examination of the transcripts of each interview revealed to the researcher four consistent themes. These themes can guide a Christian funeral preacher in the selection of scriptures and the formation of germane questions that will facilitate his/her duel with death.

Ignorance Concerning Death

A primary finding of this research is that many mourners are intellectually and emotionally unprepared for the death of a loved one. Funeral Director No. 1 spoke of his amazement that "people do not expect death."[338] He went on to comment that "we do not know the day or time, but we do know that it is going to come to us and the people we know." In his view, the only explanation is "denial" and a refusal to "deal with" death, or for that matter, to even "talk about it." The consequences of this denial are stark, and Funeral Director No. 1 commented that "when it does happen, you have not prepared your body emotionally for what is going to come." In other words, death can overwhelm the heart that has not prepared for its arrival.

One might imagine that death denial happens when life is good and death is far from a family's thoughts. The research, however, shows that this denial continues right through the time of the funeral. Funeral Director No. 2 noted that families are requesting that no clergy be involved in the funeral service more often in recent years. They replace the religious element of a funeral service with family members or friends who "get up and say a few words, play a couple of the deceased's favorite songs, and off we go." Funeral Director No. 4 lamented that people are "getting away from the importance of a funeral service." He fondly recalled the lessons of life and death he learned from "the older generation" and lamented the "fast moving" younger generation's unwillingness to deal with a matter as important as death. Funeral Director No. 2 believed that his Catholic upbringing forced him to deal with death in a positive way. He said that Catholics "talk

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[338]Necessary grammatical corrections were made by the researcher, however, the meaning or intent of the research participant's observations have not been altered.

more about death than other denominations." All of the funeral directors and chaplains agreed that death presents the living with an opportunity to learn and that avoiding it or denying its reality did more harm than good. Chaplain No. 1 summarized this consensus best when he said that in the context of the funeral "you learn things here that you do not learn anywhere else."

Funeral Director No. 2 noted that those who do not have "a pastor" or a religious "background" are "lost." In his view, the reason why these souls are so "lost" is because they have no hope in "eternal life," and they think that "this is the last time they are ever going to be with their loved one." Chaplain No. 1 commented that this feeling of hopelessness is prevalent among people apart from God who are "under the sun."[339] In other words, they can only see death from a worldly perspective. Chaplain No. 1 said, "what we need is an above the sun view of this." Even people with church backgrounds have " a very ignorant faith" according to Chaplain No. 1. He elaborated by saying,

> It might be due to a lack of knowledge. They do not know that much about God, to tell you the truth. But I would think that is plain ignorance. Faith comes by hearing the word, and well that is a simple little verse there, but it says everything. You have to know something before faith can be there. You have to know about Jesus before you can put your trust in him. So I think that is the biggest problem.

One might summarize Chaplain No. 1's views by saying that death disrupts a life that is comfortable, and comfortable people seem to be deaf to the warnings of God's word.

For those who are ignorant of death or trying to deny death's sting, Chaplain No. 1 suggests that a funeral preacher point them to the scriptures and say "here is what the Bible says about it." He stressed the need to view the body as a "temporary house" that

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[339]Eccl. 1:14.

"goes back to the same elements that everything else is made of."[340] Christian faith acknowledges that "everything is wearing out" and that by all outward appearances it is a "hopeless situation." Yet, the Bible promises those of faith "a body that is suited for the glory of heaven." Chaplain No. 1 commented that when he tells people that "to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord" people say to him "I have never heard that – no one ever explained that to me."[341] Such statements reveal that the average person has not been exposed to basic biblical doctrines concerning life and death. Chaplain No. 3 postulates that this ignorance stems from a "disenfranchised experience" with a "pastor or priest" or possibly a family's lack of emphasis on the realm of church participation that led to a "lifestyle" that did not provide any exposure to genuine Christian teaching. This ignorance does not become a problem until people go through "hard times in life," and then they begin to query, "Why is God punishing me?"[342] Chaplain No. 3 observed that instead of learning to lean on a God of "love," these people feel even more "separated from the church and from God" and feel that God is "out to get them." Chaplain No. 3 lamented the lack of "depth" among church-goers and said, "We know that you can be sitting in church every Sunday and not have this deep, ongoing daily walk with God." This lack of depth leads to ignorance and fear when death visits a family.

The research revealed three consequences of an incomplete view of the Bible's teaching concerning death. The first consequence is to see death as natural and good. In

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[340]2 Cor. 5:1-5.

[341]2 Cor. 5:6.

[342]Chaplain No. 3 told of a family who had "a view of God that was flawed" that caused them to continually ask, "Why is God punishing us?" This chaplain said that the only way to help people through such a crisis is to emphasize "the incredible compassion and love" of God.

the interviews with the funeral directors, this became a consistent theme. Funeral Director No. 1 had a solid understanding of sin and the hope of resurrection, however, he also argued that death was not always bad and that "it is better than what we imagine often times." He followed this statement up by stating, "there are some situations when death is a blessing." Funeral Director No. 2 spoke of death as part of the "cycle of life" and saw death as a good thing because it ushered a soul into "eternity." In his view, "the Bible looks at death as a part of life . . . it is in the cycle of life that you are born and then in life you die." For him, life on earth serves to prepare you "for the afterlife." He added that death was not a bad thing unless "you are going to hell." Funeral Director No. 3 saw death in terms of "coming home" and argued that death only looks bad from our perspective. From God's perspective, death is a "transition" that brings about a "new way of life." Funeral Director No. 4 viewed death as neither "a good thing or a bad thing" it is a "cyclic thing." All the chaplains viewed death as a negative, although, Chaplain No. 2 did comment that "for the Christian death is not a bad thing."

The second consequence of ignorance as it relates to death is an improper understanding of grace. Chaplain No. 2 described a situation where a recently bereaved couple had been told by clergy that their tragedy was a result of sin. Specifically, a "pastor or counselor" told a young couple that their baby had died because they "were not in church." Chaplain No. 3 spoke of his own struggles with a father who made him feel that he "never measured up." He said that for years he assumed that "if you do not get it right, you are failing, you are going to hell." According to Chaplain No. 2, those facing death, and the family members of the deceased, often say things like, "'I hope I have done

enough' or 'I hope that the good Lord will allow me to come in because I have not been a good person.'" He said,

> I guess one of the worst things in the world is to talk to people that have been taught over and over again that you can never know . . . if you have failed to repent of the least little sin or if you have made an error or had a bad thought, that you are not going to go to heaven . . . that only perfect people go to heaven.

Most people know well their imperfections. Works-based theology provides little hope for those facing death. Without a proper understanding of man's fallen condition and God's infinite grace, death is a fearsome prospect.

A final consequence of not understanding the Bible's teaching on death is a faulty understanding of resurrection life. For the most part, the funeral directors and chaplains had an understanding that the Christian hope was focused on resurrection. Yet, when it came to articulating this hope, all those interviewed struggled with the implications of this centerpiece of Christian doctrine. Funeral Director No. 1 described resurrection simply as "life beyond" our current lives. Funeral Director No. 3 imagined that after Lazarus was raised from the dead in John 11, he was never afraid of death again. His theory was that since Lazarus had already died once, he had "already experienced God's resurrection" and knew that when he died again he was "going to heaven . . . to be there with Christ and God forever." Chaplain No. 4 said, "we as Catholic ministers, as preachers, are asked on the day of Christian burial to preach about the resurrection." He added,

> And I often talk about, especially if it has been a long dying process, our loved ones being resurrected and that they are going to enjoy a place where there is no more pain and no more suffering, no more medication, no more chemo treatments. Because that is what the resurrection is, that we are restored . . . restored to a full life.

The physicality of resurrection life was little discussed, and for the most part, much of what was said about the resurrection of the body sounded much like the Greek concept of the immortality of the soul.

Avoidance of Overt Evangelism

The role of evangelism in the funeral context was a subject that all the research participants discussed during the interview process. Curiously, the researcher did not ask any direct questions about evangelism. All four funeral home directors were negative about the use of overt evangelism in the context of a funeral. On the other hand, all four chaplains felt that the Gospel needed to be proclaimed in the context of a Christian funeral in a way that was sensitive to the needs of the family.

Funeral Director No. 3 believed that a Christian funeral preacher needs to "give the funeral audience something to think about." However, he warned that pastors need to "focus less on trying to save the soul and focus more on trying to help the soul." In his view, mourners are in an "emotional state" that makes it hard for them to be "saved." He suggested that a funeral preacher lay the ground work of faith that "starts them on the journey forward." Unfortunately, Funeral Director No. 3 did not elaborate on how a minister can "help a soul" as opposed to "saving a soul."

Funeral Director No. 2 considered overt, evangelistic funeral preaching a "bother." He said that many times he has seen "a minister who will try to save people that are there for the service and have them raise their hand . . . I think there is a time and a place for that, but I think the funeral home is not the time or the place." Funeral Director

No. 2 also felt that preachers take advantage of "people's emotions" during funeral times and suggested that the funeral home is not the context where a pastor should "drum up parishioners for their church." In his view, this makes people "uneasy." Later in the interview, he revisited this subject and said that his observations about evangelism were for funerals that were mostly in a non-Christian context.

Funeral Director No. 4 believed that many people who requested that no minister officiate at their loved one's funeral did so because of a fear that the minister would demand "sad music" and preach "hellfire and brimstone" sermons. He said, "these are people who just do not understand what ministers are for" and mentioned that they have in mind a "revival" preacher instead of a funeral preacher. Funeral Director No. 4 suggested that a Christian funeral preacher should give the audience "the facts" but not necessarily "denounce their sins." He said, "the whole reason for having the funeral is to help people . . . not to make them feel bad or guilty but to help them carry on." Funeral Director No. 4 hinted that a good funeral preacher can give a few "points" that may help the bereaved "down the road."

Funeral Director No. 1 was very clear that his role was to serve a family's grieving needs but that he had no desire to "impose personal beliefs or theology on people." He spoke of several instances where families did desire a minster to officiate the funeral, but demanded that he/she not "talk about the Bible" or "Jesus." Funeral Director No. 1 said that in such instances, he knows of certain church leaders who will honor these wishes. Echoing the sentiments of the other funeral home directors, he said, "Oftentimes, the opportunity is not there to completely change someone's mind, and I think that it is important that we be sensitive to the people that have lost someone." He did, however,

mention that "ministers" have to "stand by some principles too." Funeral Director No. 1, as well as the other three directors, saw very little merit in revivalistic, evangelism methodology in the funeral context.

Each chaplain was also sensitive to the use of overt evangelism in the funeral context. However, all four chaplains made it clear that if a family desired no scripture and no talk about God or the Gospel, they were not comfortable officiating the funeral. Chaplain No. 2 said that he could not officiate a funeral under such restrictions because "if you preach nothing and say nothing and touch no areas of life that are spiritual . . . you bring no hope." He realized that there were "boundaries" but distinguished between being "churchy" and being "biblical." Later in the interview he spoke of how he felt that the place for messages concerning "heaven and hell" was "Sunday morning." Chaplain No. 2 felt that the emphasis of the Christian funeral sermon needed to be "God's presence and love." He said that the "Gospel" was a "preeminent part" of his funeral preaching and then mentioned that he focuses on the twenty-third Psalm and the book of Ephesians.

Chaplain No. 4 likewise refuses to officiate a service where the family desires no "talk about God." He felt that a service could include talk about God and still not "over do it." Chaplain No. 4 was adamant that "sacred scripture" had to be a part of every funeral sermon. Chaplain No. 1 said that he will "always try to get around to the Gospel." He said, "I look at every funeral as an opportunity, and I really do feel that I am speaking to the living." Chaplain No. 1 believed that his role as a Christian funeral preacher is to "comfort people, give strength and encouragement," and tell of the Christian "hope of glory." He said that he believed the funeral service was a time to "educate people" and that he personally liked to incorporate the book of Ecclesiastes. Chaplain No. 1 was one

of the few research participants that fully understood that the researcher was seeking information about Christian funeral preaching. He said, "I take funerals as a golden opportunity, especially Christian funerals, because there are nonbelievers out there." Chaplain No. 1 spoke of his disappointment with funeral services he had listened to that did not mention the Gospel and said "this was not time well spent." He said that Christian pastors "have the best story in the world to share," and if people do not want to hear "the most important part (i.e., the Gospel)" then they need to "get somebody else" to do the funeral service.

Making a Personal Connection

During the eight interviews, the concern that was discussed most was the need for ministers to make a personal connection. Both funeral directors and chaplains discussed the need for the Christian funeral preacher to be a minister first and a preacher second.

The first step toward making a personal connection, according to interviews, is to get to know the bereaved family. Chaplain No. 1 said that bereaved families "want to hear someone honor their loved one." Chaplain No. 3 said that "even though we have the hope of resurrection, we are still bound to this earth right now and we are still human, and we still have egos and flesh, we still have minds, hearts, and feelings." Chaplain No. 4 said, "I think it is important to be personal" and suggested getting to know as much about the deceased so that when the time to preach comes, "something will click" and connect the audience with the "core of the message." He continued by saying that a Christian funeral preacher had to be "blunt" and "compassionate" at the same time. However, he warned

that "compassion needs to come first" so that you have the necessary "rapport" that allows you to speak in blunt terms.

Funeral Director No. 3 asserted that "compassion" is a key element in the formation of a "game plan" for a funeral sermon. A compassionate, caring pastor can get to know the situation well if he/she allows ample time to learn about the bereaved family. Funeral Director No. 1 said, "the pastor has to take some time with the family," and this allows the family to be more "free about sharing stories and information." He said that a personal meeting is much more beneficial for a family and lamented the fact that many pastors just telephone the family. This approach does not allow the pastor any opportunity, in his view, to get to know the deceased. Thus, the family may see the pastor as a mere "stranger" who "wants to know about dad." Funeral Director No. 4 noted that ideally, the pastor already knows the family and the deceased. However, he warned that "every funeral is different" and "every family is different" and the pastor must work hard to "put it all together" if the funeral sermon is going to be effective. Funeral Director No. 1 mentioned that the pastor's knowledge of the family can help him/her "present the message to the funeral audience in a manner that will be well received."

Funeral Director No. 4 and Chaplain No. 2 warned against "canned" or "cookbook" sermons. Yet, Funeral Director No. 4 spoke well of a minister who delivered a derivation of one of three sermons at every funeral. This minister had three sermons that were approximately seven minutes in length, and Funeral Director No. 4 recalled that when this pastor would walk into the funeral home to visit with the bereaved family, his father (the funeral director at the time) would hold up one, two, or three fingers to let the

pastor know which sermon would be appropriate for this particular funeral. The researcher can think of no better illustration of a "canned" funeral sermon.

Other problems can occur when a pastor does not take time to understand a family's needs and wishes. Funeral Director No. 2 spoke of a situation where a family had lost a daughter in a car accident. The daughter had been drinking, and though the family wanted the pastor to be aware of the situation, they did not want him to mention this in the funeral sermon. The pastor ignored this request, brought up the circumstances of the young woman's demise, and made a "bad situation worse." Funeral Director No. 3 mentioned that something as simple as pronouncing the deceased's name correctly can reveal how well the pastor knows the family.

Another way that a Christian funeral preacher can connect with the audience is to know the deceased person's life well enough to highlight what made this person wholly unique. Funeral Director No. 2 mentioned that not every funeral is for a "pillar of the community" but that every person deserves to be acknowledged for their unique contributions to society on the day of their funeral. Chaplain No. 1 spoke of the "value of a person's life" and that "people feel good hearing about their loved one, that their life was valuable." The Christian funeral preacher has the responsibility of revealing to the congregation what made this person unique and provide evidence concerning how this person is, in a sense, irreplaceable. Caution must be used, however, and Chaplain No. 1 suggested that a pastor might "prepare the family for a flood of memories about the deceased." Chaplain No. 4 said simply, "I just think it is important to be personal." The only negative aspect of being personal, according to Funeral Director No. 2, is to "tell inappropriate personal details" concerning the deceased.

When a pastor knows a family well and has taken the time to understand the unique personality of the deceased, it is more likely that he/she will then be able to incorporate the appropriate scriptures and say the appropriate words of comfort. Chaplain No. 2 said, "What I am finding is that people are hardened against church." He said that this hardening can often be traced back to a tragedy and that a funeral sermon can provide an opportunity to proclaim to such persons that, "God never did leave them, he was always there with them." Chaplain No. 2 said that the more a pastor knows the family and the deceased, the more apt he/she is to know the "questions" that the bereaved will be asking and to be able to answer those questions with a word from the scriptures. He said, "They ask many questions like, 'What does the Bible have to say about this?' . . . That is why I think we have to be prepared to answer those questions and be willing to say, 'I am not sure, but I will get back with you.'" Befriending the bereaved, according to Chaplain No. 2, provides people the opportunity to "open up" and ask the questions that provide an opportunity for the Christian funeral preacher to share the Gospel.

Funeral Director No. 2 recalled instances where pastors powerfully connected the deceased with a particular scripture or scripture passage. In his view, this showed that the pastor "knew the person who had passed away." Funeral Director No. 3 believed that scripture is an essential element of the Christian funeral sermon, but argued that the audience needs the pastor to expound upon the passage instead of just reading it. He said, "they need to have these passages brought to life." Chaplain No. 2 illustrated this point well with a personal story. He said,

> There were seven to eight hundred people at my wife's funeral. Preachers would come up to me and quote scripture. At that point in my life, I could have cared less about the scriptures they quoted. You are broken hearted. Yes, you have to

> use the scriptures, but you have to say something that is relevant to the people that are setting there. Some of them (mourners at a funeral) may have never even heard the scriptures read before, it has no meaning to them. I always try to understand the deceased. I talk about their life, the funny stories, the sad stories, what the Bible says about death, what the Bible says about eternal life.

The point Chaplain No. 2 makes here is that scriptures that do not connect with the deceased and the bereaved have little impact. Preachers must choose texts that connect with the mourners and then he/she must explain and expound those texts.

The interviews reveal a need for Christian funeral preachers to make a personal connection with a family that can then be expressed through the funeral sermon and/or eulogy. Chaplain No. 3 and Chaplain No. 4 both agree that an appropriate sense of humor can help put a grieving family at ease. Chaplain No. 4 suggests that a Christian funeral preacher must "be personal, be real, be human." The only way for a Christian funeral preacher to be personal is to communicate that he/she is a "person" who can laugh and cry with those who grieve.

Incarnational Ministry

Funeral preaching is one of the most difficult homiletical challenges a minister faces. Words are never enough. What people need is the presence of God. The interviews revealed that being the representation of God is more important than what a pastor says. Chaplain No. 3 spoke of a CPE supervisor who explained Christian ministry in terms of "incarnation." Chaplain No. 3 recalled his supervisor saying, "There is one incarnation with a capital 'I,' and that is Jesus Christ. You as chaplains are the incarnation with a small 'i.' The large 'I' is God being present with us in Jesus. The small 'i' shows how you are now representatives of God, the embodiment of Christ, in your ministries."

Chaplain No. 3 said,

> That was a most profound truth. So I am always aware that whenever I am visiting people in the hospital, and when I am ministering to them in a time of grief, I realize that I am the embodiment of God for those people in that moment. And for some of these people, it may be the only experience they have with the church or with Christianity.

Though no other research participant used incarnational terminology, several of them did make comments that allude to the incarnational nature of Christian ministry.

Funeral Director No. 3 spoke of the need for a minister to be present during times of grief. Although the minister's presence may be more acutely felt when the family is familiar with him/her, Funeral Director No. 3 said that he has seen "relief on the faces" of family members the moment the pastor arrived, even when the family had never met the pastor. He said that the families appreciate the "sacrifice of time," and above all, there is a sense that the preacher represents for the hurting family "God's presence." Later in the interview, Funeral Director No. 3 said that it was important for the pastor to reflect the "compassion of Jesus" and the "truth" of Jesus to the bereaved.

Chaplain No. 1 stressed the need for a Christian funeral preacher to explain the significance of Christ's incarnation. He spoke at length about how in many situations, he comforts grieving families with the story of the Bible from "Genesis to the Gospel." In his view, people can be comforted in the knowledge that God understands the pain of loss because of Christ's death on the cross. Grieving families often ask, "Why did this happen?" Chaplain No. 1 believes that this is the opportunity to admit that "things are bad here on earth since the fall" and that the pain we experience "should not be." The worst thing imaginable had to take place because of all the pain and suffering in the world; God had to give up his Son to "death." Chaplain No. 4 said that he often comforts families by

saying, "God knows our pain. He gave up his Son, his only begotten Son." According to Chaplain No. 2, the Bible teaches us that "God still loves us in spite of our sins" and as Chaplain No. 3 put it, a minister must have "Christ's compassion for human beings, for hurting souls."

Chaplain No. 4 told a story about a family who believed that their deceased loved one was going to come back to life. When asked by the family what the chaplain thought of their hope for their loved one coming back to life again, he spoke briefly about God's "power" and offered to continue praying. Beyond that, Chaplain No. 4 determined not to say anything more. When it was clear that the man was not going to come back to life, Chaplain No. 4 was able to minister to the family effectively. Ministry effectiveness was "accomplished by silence and time" on the part of the chaplain. Chaplain No. 4 believed in a "silent but present" approach that allowed God to work. According to him, silence enabled him to listen well and allowed him to minister more effectively to the family when they began to ask questions later. Chaplain No. 4 mentioned that he likes to challenge mourners to "allow Jesus to fill those voids, to fill that hurt, to fill that pain with his presence. Don't block Jesus out." As stated above, Chaplain No. 4 believes that ministers are most effective when they are "personal, real, human." Chaplain No. 3 said, "you do not have to be a stoic soul as a Christian." He said, "you have to honor the deep emotions God gives us" and be "aware of them." Chaplain No. 3 spoke of people who did not return to church for many years because they were ashamed of their "emotions" and thought that the church expected "better of them." When the researcher asked him how he communicated the validity of emotions he said, "I cite 'Jesus wept' and the Psalms."[343]

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[343]Jn. 11:35.

Chaplain No. 3 spoke of the emotional range of the Psalms from celebratory to lamentation and said, "I also cite my own experience and tell people about the grief I have experienced." Chaplain No. 3 sees incarnational ministry as a way to emphasize "God's love" and the "importance of recognizing and dealing with feelings" in moments of grief.

Being the incarnation of Christ is not always a positive experience, according to Chaplain No. 3. "I do get some negative responses" he said, "if the mourners do not have a very good relationship with Jesus or the church . . . they project their anger on me." But he also commented that in other situations, "some people throw their arms around me the moment I mention that I am a chaplain . . . even though they do not know me at all." Chaplain No. 3 observed that the people who receive him warmly have "a good relationship with their church and a good relationship with God" and see him as a "man of God." Chaplain No. 3 lamented those who express "hostility" toward him as a chaplain. He said, "there is a part of my heart that says that these are the very people I need to be with," but "if people close the door, then that is not going to happen." A minister can offer to be the presence of God in the midst of sorrow, but the mourners are responsible for receiving that presence into their lives.

Summary

The findings of this research reveal that for a Christian funeral preacher to positively impact a grieving family, he/she must incarnate God's love by dealing honestly with the facts of death in a non-threatening manner (i.e., overtly evangelistic) that spiritually connects with people on a personal level.

CHAPTER 5

IMPLICATIONS AND APPLICATIONS

The literature, coupled with the qualitative research, uncovered three implications concerning Christian funeral preaching: the funeral as worship, exegeting the text and honoring the deceased, and honest dialogue with death. From these implications, the researcher has suggested three practical applications that can assist Christian funeral preachers in the preparation of funeral sermons.

Implications of the Preacher's Duel with Death

Death always invites a dialogue. For those apart from faith in Christ, death dominates the discussion, and the mourner can only express words of remembrance concerning the good times that have come and gone. In a funeral sermon given for his father, Robert S. Rayburn contrasted the secular perspective of a dialogue with death with a scriptural perspective. The contrast is beautifully framed by one of Shakespeare's most well-known quotes (the "To be or not to be" soliloquy from *Hamlet*) and Paul's words of Christian hope in the face of death found in Phil. 1:18-26. Hamlet, says:

> To be, or not to be – that is the question:
> Whether 'tis nobler in the mind, to suffer
> The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune
> Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
> And, by opposing, end them? To die, – to sleep, –
> No more; – and by a sleep to say we end
> The heart-ache, and the thousand natural shocks
> That flesh is heir to, – 'tis a consummation

> Devoutly to be wished. To die,– to sleep; –
> To sleep! – perchance to dream; ay, there's the rub,
> For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
> When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
> Must give us pause . . .[344]

Rayburn comments,

> William Shakespeare has given a nearly perfect expression of the worldly mind in the face of death. Hamlet, torn by loneliness, sadness, and guilt, contemplates suicide. He wishes for release from the miseries of this life. But he cannot bring himself to take the fateful step because he does not know what death will bring. Will it be, as he would fondly wish, 'a sleep which ends the heartache, and the thousand natural shocks which flesh is heir to?' If so, he would welcome it. But perhaps death is not extinction after all. Or, as he puts it: 'For in that sleep of death what dreams may come . . . must give us pause.'[345]

Shakespeare's Hamlet both covets death and fears death. He has no definitive answer as to what lies beyond.

Now compare Hamlet's uncertainty with the Apostle Paul's words in his letter to the Philippians:

> What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice. Yes, and I will rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance, as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again.[346]

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[344]*Hamlet*, Act 3, Scene 1.

[345]Robert S. Rayburn, "The Christian's Greatest Means of Grace" *Presbyterion* 16.1 (Spring 1990): 1.

[346]Phil. 1:18-26.

Rayburn says, "Paul has nothing of Hamlet's melancholy distaste for life, for he does not carry about with him the heavy weight of sins which must still be answered for."[347] Paul's hope is fueled by the resurrection. The Christian funeral preacher must follow Paul's lead and announce this great resurrection hope.

The Funeral as Worship

It is likely that not all mourners at a funeral will be Christian mourners. This fact alone does not detract from the reality that a Christian funeral is a time to worship. Without a celebration of God's grace, the service can be nothing more than a memorial that looks back and provides no dialogue with death. Fowler says,

> A Christian funeral is open to all who want to attend, which does not compromise its integrity as worship . . . Christian worship always should convey openness to strangers, especially in funerals . . . Sensitivity to a diverse group of mourners is consistent with a Christian funeral. Yet, it does not require hiding who you really are and what you really are doing. A mourner who is not religious may know quite well that the deceased was a Christian, as well as a member of a particular congregation, and fully expects the funeral to be in the religious tradition of the deceased.[348]

Holmes argues that "the funeral represents one of the last significant points of entry into the church" and sees this moment as an opportunity for pastors to "convey the Christian faith and hope in the face of death" to a people who are, "due to the gravity of the occasion . . . listening."[349] The presence of non-believing mourners can serve as a

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[347]Rayburn, 3.

[348]Fowler, 92.

[349]Holmes, 2. Paul Scott Wilson agrees with Holmes' position and states, "Funerals, along with weddings, provide an excellent opportunity to evangelize, to share the joy and wonder of our faith with others. Funerals are opportunities to express our best theologies – for example of life, death, human suffering, God's purpose in creation, and eternal life. Paul Scott Wilson, *The Practice of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 288. Willimon also agrees saying: "The primary reason for our congregation to worship is not to focus upon ourselves and our desires but to focus upon God and God's relationship

motivation, as opposed to a deterrent, for a pastor to approach the funeral moment within the context of Christian worship.

James White says that "the Christian funeral is worship above all else, not primarily grief therapy." This may be true, but Linda J. Vogel suggests a balance between worship and concern for the mourner. Vogel says, "There is a time to cry and a time to be comforted. There is a time to grieve and a time to celebrate. Somehow our services of death and resurrection need to provide the community opportunities to acknowledge and express both ends of the emotional spectrum."[350] As the researcher has discussed above, when the funeral preacher faithfully answers death's taunts with the biblical message of resurrection, the reality of death's pain is acknowledged along with the joy and hope of resurrection immortality.[351]

Wayne Oates asserts that "the primary goal of the funeral is to worship God in the valley of the shadow of death and to care for the mourners."[352] The Gospel alone can bring peace to a troubled, grieving soul. Mark E. Chapman writes, "To speak so as to call forth Christ, is then to speak so as to call forth Christ against death."[353] A worshipful

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toward us. The centrality of the funeral within the grief process, at least for the church, is not that a funeral is a good therapeutic aid to psychological well-being (which it often is) but that a funeral is an excellent time to focus upon God and our life and death in the light of God's love for us in Jesus Christ." Willimon, 115.

[350]Linda J. Vogel, *Rituals for Resurrection: Celebrating Life and Death* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1996), 83.

[351]How Christian pastors deal with death has "much to tell us about Christian life itself." White, 288.

[352]Oates, 27. Holmes makes the same point when he says, "Ultimately, the purpose of the Christian funeral sermon is to proclaim the Christian hope in the face of death." Holmes, 12.

[353]Mark E. Chapman, "The Authentic Word in the Face of Death: Reflections on Preaching at Funerals" *Currents in Theology and Mission* 22.1 (February 1995): 41.

funeral sermon has the ability to remind believers of their resurrection hope and introduce nonbelievers to the hope of resurrection. Wilson says,

> The sermon remains, however, first and foremost a proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Nearly the entire time is appropriately spent developing the heart of the Christian faith from suitable Scripture texts: through what God has worked in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, death no longer has the final say. Since the reality of death is confronting the listeners, our message is largely one of grace and love.[354]

If the Christian funeral remains true to the scripture's teachings of resurrection and offers praise to the resurrected Christ, healing can take place. Christian funerals, however, often stray from this message and place too much emphasis on the deceased.

Exegeting the Text and Honoring the Deceased

If a Christian funeral is viewed as worship, then Christian funeral preaching must be more than the dry recital of a deceased person's resume. Melloh agrees that the preached word, in the context of a funeral, "must refer to the death of this person."[355] The inherent danger for Christian funeral preachers, however, is to pay too much attention to the "biographical details" of the deceased and to revert to the pagan Greek style of funeral oration that, at its best, could stand out for its "rhetorical flourishes" but would always be marked by a "philosophical chilliness."[356] Yet, Pauw emphasizes that Christian funerals are a time to "remember the accomplishments and good efforts of the dead and to thank God for who they were and what they meant to those around them . . . Funerals provide a

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[354]Wilson, 287. Chaplain No. 1 mentioned that the Christian funeral is a time when the pastor should challenge the congregation and say, "we can learn from this."

[355]Melloh, 502-503.

[356]Ibid., 514-518.

time to celebrate the gifts and the legacy of those who have died."[357] Vogel, speaking of Christian funeral sermons that focus solely on the biblical message of resurrection, states that she could not "get past" her own "anger and pain and loss to participate fully."[358] Krieg comments that "funeral homilies are problematic" because "on the one hand, they are not eulogies of an individual life . . . they are proclamations of the mystery of God's compassion . . . on the other hand, the funeral homily in which the dead person is not mentioned would be insensitive."[359] Finding a balance between these two extremes is a colossal challenge for the Christian funeral preacher.

The research of Holmes tries to find this balance between eulogy and homily by exegeting the deceased. Holmes says,

> Today's funeral congregation is usually unfamiliar with the scriptures and the traditions of the church. It is therefore difficult to hold their attention by exegeting certain biblical texts . . . the preacher must seek to base the funeral sermon on an exegesis of the deceased. It is the clergy's task to seek out metaphors or stories from the life of the deceased which will enable the effective proclamation of Christ's resurrection.[360]

John H. Leith comments, "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

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[357]Pauw, 169. Funeral Director No. 2 stressed that even those who are not a "pillar in the community" deserve acknowledgment for their uniqueness. He also said that when a family leaves a funeral, they need to "feel that their loved one was important." Chaplain No. 1 said that the "Christian funeral" can show the "value of a person's life."

[358]Vogel, 82-83.

[359]Krieg, 222.

[360]Holmes, v.

community in ways appropriate to the situation."[361] If Leith considers the preaching of specific biblical texts as an "established ritual," then his comment melds well with Holmes' exegesis of the dead. Such an emphasis on the dead is extreme when one considers that Folwer does not assume that a eulogy has to be included in the Christian funeral sermon at all.[362] Holmes is aware of a tradition in Christian preaching to avoid eulogizing and states that E. J. Wheeler's famous collection of funeral sermons from the late nineteenth century, *Pulpit and Grave*, contains many sermons that omit the "name of the deceased" much less any "merits of their life, or the circumstances of the bereaved."[363] Late nineteenth century funeral audiences were more biblically literate, according to Holmes, than their modern counterparts, and this fact leads him to develop a funeral preaching methodology that is less "transcendent" and more "incarnational."[364] Yet, Holmes' concept of exegeting the deceased may be less incarnational and more anthropocentric.

Holmes desires to remain "faithful to the Gospel" and utilize the concept of grace and resurrection in every funeral.[365] Thus, it is curious that his methodology places

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[361]John H. Leith, "The Message of Christian Faith on the Occasion of the Burial of the Dead" *Journal for Preachers* 6.2 (Lent 1983): 20.

[362]"Assembling for a Christian funeral and participating in it *may* (emphasis mine) include remembering the deceased, which is part of relating to the burial." In case his reader has never heard of such a practice, he goes on to define a eulogy in terms of a "memorializing part of the funeral in which family or friends may speak about the deceased, sharing some memory of the person, or reading a poem or a letter." Fowler, 91.

[363]Holmes notes that "getting to God was all that mattered. Neither did preachers in the 19th century seem to search out the depths of human suffering, though they did make assumptions about it. Their task was to proclaim the word of God." Holmes, 39.

[364]Ibid., 57-62.

[365]Ibid., 1, cf. 185-186.

emphasis on the exegeting of deceased people as opposed to the scripture. Perhaps Holmes' conclusions are an over-reaction to the dry and impersonal funeral preaching of the late nineteenth century. Nonetheless, Holmes hints at a potential flaw in his own theory when he admits that when the deceased is the focus of a sermon instead of God's word, "Where does that leave the hearers?"[366] The context of this statement is in a section where Holmes warns the reader concerning the connecting of a deceased person with a particular biblical character. Holmes fails to see that the same fundamental problems can occur when a pastor tries to tie a deceased person to a biblical metaphor (a key element of Holmes' exegesis of the deceased methodology).[367]

For the majority of his work, Holmes acknowledges the distinctive edge the Christian funeral preacher has when he/she combats death with the biblical hope of resurrection. Yet, in the name of relevancy, Holmes seems willing to sacrifice the forthright proclamation of the biblical message. He says:

> On some occasions the preacher may need to set the Bible itself aside during the funeral sermon, in order to effectively communicate the biblical truths of hope and new life through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. The scriptures must still be read as part of the funeral liturgy and, furthermore, the preacher must

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[366]Ibid., 63.

[367]Ibid., 186.

> be grounded in the good news of Jesus Christ in order to be sure that he or she arrives at the good news."[368]

Holmes has potentially compromised the authority and efficacy of the scriptures for the purpose of sounding relevant to a biblically illiterate, postmodern audience.

The life of the deceased is an important part of any funeral sermon, but according to Kreig, it should not become the driving force of the funeral sermon. He says, "the funeral homily is not a eulogy. It does not narrow its focus to one individual. It is a testimony about God's invitations and the responses of one member of the human community."[369] Willimon offers similar warning when he states, "It is pastorally unwise and theologically questionable to let the dead person's life, no matter how saintly that life may have been, become the center of attention at a funeral because, finally, the most relevant thing at the time of death is the never-ending grace and love of God."[370]

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[368]Holmes asks "Can the preacher arrive at Gospel without referring to scripture?" and then starts by saying "ultimately the answer to this question is that apart from the Word of God the preacher has no authority." Holmes then begins to retreat from this very strong assertion and says, "the problem however is that the Word of God has little authority in the lives of many people who are in attendance at a funeral service." This statement seems to take for granted the power of the proclaimed word and perhaps puts too much emphasis on catering to the perceived needs of the audience. Holmes argues that "on the day of the funeral there is one thing that holds authority for them and that is life, and in particular the life of the person who has died, because they have come to honor and show respect for that person." It would appear that the locus of authority, in Holmes view, is the deceased person's life as opposed to the living word of God. Ibid., 80.

[369]Kreig, 239. Wilson agrees with Kreig and adds, "The sermon is not primarily a eulogy in praise of the dead, although it is appropriately both personal and specific about the life of the deceased. A few vivid details or brief stories of someone's life, including one or two direct quotations (or perhaps a favorite saying or significant idea expressed during the life of the deceased; the other perhaps a sentiment expressed by surviving family member), are usually sufficient. If there is to be a repeated non-biblical image used in the sermon, one is enough, and generally let these stories be the source. The image may be placed within the setting of the Christian hope by the end of the sermon." Wilson, 287.

[370]Willimon, 115-116. A *Chicago Tribune* article that referenced an interview with Lyle Schaller, a key figure from the church growth movement, reveals how commonplace man-centered preaching is in contemporary culture. Schaller states, "For the church what matters is not the message, what matters today is the man." John Armstrong argues that preachers need to put this equation in reverse and emphasizes that preaching is about the Gospel message, not primarily about the man. In a Christian funeral context, the spiritually dead in the audience need to hear more than a flattering narrative about the person who has physically died, they need to hear the voice of the living God speaking in the midst of death. John

Ironically, Holmes also agrees with this sentiment in his dissertation. Take for example the following warning from Holmes: "Today's preacher must recognize that there is an inherent danger with starting outside of the scriptures. The danger is that by changing the starting line we may lose touch with the finish line, but as we have seen from the preachers of an earlier era, neither does beginning with the scriptures guarantee that the preacher will arrive at the good news."[371] The qualitative section of this research and that of Holmes' reveal the need for preachers to do more than offer "canned funerals."[372] Instead, they must offer a funeral sermon that addresses "the person's life and faith."[373] Holmes' research also reveals a strong need for the funeral sermon to be about "Jesus and the deceased . . . You ought to know them both better by the end of the sermon."[374] Knowing both Jesus and the deceased may be key goals of a Christian funeral sermon, but the greater emphasis must be on the eternal hope that scripture provides as opposed to the loss of a mortal soul.

A Christian funeral sermon offered in a contemporary context cannot completely ignore the life of the deceased. Holmes' research, at the very least, reveals to pastors that contemporary funeral audiences will not respond to a sermon that is void of references to the deceased. The problem with Holmes' methodology is that it seems to move the locus of authority from the Bible to the deceased. Christian preaching must have God's word at

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Armstrong, "Preaching to the Mind" in *Feed My Sheep: A Passionate Plea for Preaching*, ed. Don Kistler (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 2002), 174.

[371]Holmes, 82.

[372]See above, 104.

[373]Ibid., 90-91.

[374]Ibid., 155.

its center, or it is not Christian preaching. Death brings about the greatest spiritual challenges and the greatest spiritual opportunities for a Christian pastor. It is in this moment that he/she needs a power that is beyond clever rhetoric or the perceived needs of mourners. What is needed is exegetical funeral preaching. Chapell states:

> Biblical exposition binds the preacher and the people to the only source of true spiritual change. Because hearts are transformed when people are confronted with the Word of God, expository preachers are committed to saying what God says. The expository preacher opens the Bible before God's people and dares to say, 'I will explain to you what this passage means.' The words are not meant to convey one's own authority but rather humbly to confess that the preacher has no better word than God's Word. Thus, the preacher's mission and calling is to explain to God's people what the Bible means.[375]

Derek Thomas warns that a sermon without a firm connection with the scripture, a sermon that fails to "look at the intention of God in the passage," is hermenutically "inadequate," and "what emerges is often full of passion but devoid of precision, earnest but effervescent, relevant but un-related."[376] So how does the preacher stay true to the biblical text and avoid sounding irrelevant or dry?

The answer may be to invite the funeral mourner into a conversation with the scripture. In other words, the funeral preacher anticipates the questions and pain that the mourner brings to the funeral service and attempts to answer those questions and soothe the pain with the biblical message of resurrection hope. Lose suggests a confessional

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[375]Chapel, 30.

[376]Derek Thomas, "Expository Preaching: Keeping Your Eye on the Text" in *Feed My Sheep: A Passionate Plea for Preaching*, ed. Don Kistler (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 2002), 81. Another essay in this same tome by R. C. Sproul quotes Martin Luther as saying, "Your task, O preacher, is to make sure that you are faithful to the text, that you are faithful to the proclamation of that gospel, that you are faithful to set forth the whole counsel of God, and then step back and let it happen. I don't have to try to cajole and persuade people with my techniques to get them to respond. I preach the law; I preach the gospel, and it is the Holy Ghost who attends the ministry of that word to bring forth the fruit." R. C. Sproul, "The Teaching Preacher" in *Feed My Sheep: A Passionate Plea for Preaching*, ed. Don Kistler, (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 2002), 160.

model that a preacher can follow, which puts dialogue at the center of his or her monologue. Lose says,

> First, they (preachers) are involved in a conversation with the text by which they hope to hear the text's confession and thereby be prompted to their own confessing of faith through the sermon. Second, they are then involved with the corresponding conversation with the congregation through their sermon whereby they hope their confession draws hearers more deeply into the Christian conversation.[377]

The conversation is dominated by the biblical text, not the deceased person. The opening words of the sermon can serve as a eulogy that, as Eugene L. Lowry might put it, introduces the problem (the death of this particular person) and the plot (a family in grief). It is then that the pastor can acknowledge the mystery (the physical and metaphysical quandary that death brings to the human heart) and provide the resolution with the biblical message of resurrection.[378] The resolution can be an unsavory thought if the deceased was not a good person.[379] In such situations, the pastor must focus more on the grieving needs and future hope of the audience as opposed to the eternal destiny of the deceased. The audience will, most likely, be keenly aware of the deceased person's life-

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[377]Lose, 142-143. Funeral Director No. 2 spoke of similar, internal "conversations" he has had with a priest during mass. He said, "You will ask yourself questions like 'What if there is not an eternity?' or 'What if you will not see your parents again?'"

[378]The actual model that Lowry uses is a five step process that he breaks down in the following way: "1) upsetting the equilibrium, 2) analyzing the discrepancy, 3) disclosing the clue to resolution, 4) experiencing the gospel, and 5) anticipating the consequences." Lowry points out that a funeral sermon may not need step one "upsetting the equilibrium" because death has already done this. However, a meaningful eulogy will, in varying measures, remind the congregation what has been lost. This may be "upsetting," but it shows the crowd that the preacher views the deceased as a person of value. Furthermore, the preacher sets up the need for the people to "experience the Gospel" and makes them aware of the consequences of faith (or lack of faith) in Christ and his resurrection. Eugene L. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form* (Louisville: John Knox, 2001), 26, 92.

[379]Paul Scott Wilson comments, "If the deceased was not a good person, it is appropriate nonetheless to extend compassion to the deceased, entrusting that person to God, while realistically and in general ways acknowledging the difficulties survivors may still be experiencing." Wilson, 87.

style, and questions concerning life after death will, potentially, weigh more on their minds than if the deceased was a model Christian.

The research of Craddock has brought to the attention of Christian pastors the need for sermons to be "for" listeners rather than "to" them.[380] The Christian funeral preaching of prior centuries that Holmes references in his research are mostly void of any concern "for" the audience. The most meaningful funeral preaching will "be honest with one's own and another's situation."[381] In other words, Christian funeral preaching must come from a heart that openly admits the pain and mystery that death brings into the human sphere. This honest approach to death's claims can then lead to a sermon that "grows out of a dialogue between a particular passage (not a general and meaningless reference to what 'the Bible says') and a particular congregation (not 'the human situation')."[382] Such an approach allows the audience to over-hear biblical answers to their deepest concerns. What the audience hears is the voice of God, which always points people to the cross of Christ and his resurrection.[383]

A Christian funeral preacher comes as a fallen man/woman to an audience full of fallen people, all of whom need to hear a word from the Lord during a dark time. The funeral preacher then becomes a "priest" in the sense that he/she,

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[380]Craddock, 51. Funeral Director No. 1 made a similar case. He said, "I believe that the family benefits from the speaker's knowledge of the family and that speaker's ability to present the message to them in a manner that the speaker believes will be well received."

[381]Ibid., 51.

[382]Ibid., 104.

[383]"The purpose of preaching, therefore, is not to provide a forum for the preacher to give moral advice, to express opinions on important topics, or to lay out religious 'principles for living,' but rather to be the occasion for the hearing of a voice beyond the preacher's voice: the very word of the living God. Preaching is not about the preacher; it is about the voice of God." Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 19-20.

> Goes to the biblical text . . . carrying the questions, needs and concerns of congregation and world, not as an agenda to be met but as an offering to be made. And then the preacher listens to the text. The word heard there may be one of comfort, but it may also be one that judges. It may answer our questions, but it may call our questions into question. It may be a word that brings joyfully home, or it may call us deeper into the wilderness. Whatever that word may be, the preacher must tell the truth about it. The priest must become the witness.[384]

In order to honor the witness of scripture and the deceased, the Christian funeral preacher has no option but to enter into a duel with death using scripture as his/her sword. This duel is, in essence, a dialogue that the audience overhears. The dialogue is not delivered to them, but for them.

A Dialogue With Death

The Christian funeral preacher should have at least three considerations in mind before entering into a dialogical duel with death. These considerations are honest dialogue, a determination to discuss the absolute nature of death, and the proclamation of resurrection's routing of death from the scriptures.

Honest Dialogue. Willimon warns that "The crisis of death must be overcome, but it must not be overcome prematurely. Talk of resurrection and Christian hope must not come before honest admission of the reality of death and grief."[385] A Christian funeral sermon cannot focus on what man can do in the face of death because he/she can, in fact, do nothing. Christian funeral preaching is about the actions of God, and beyond this, the

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[384]Ibid., 66.

[385]Willimon, 108. According to Funeral Director No. 4, contemporary talk of death uses euphemisms such as "passed away." He said that people do not like to use the word "death" and that the term "passed away" was developed so that people could imagine their loved one just "floating away."

preacher can only discuss man's futile reactions to death.[386] Preachers can compromise the funeral sermon by speaking of death as natural and turn the entire funeral service into something sentimental and full of "flowers and poetry."[387] Such preaching mocks God and disregards the teaching of scripture. John Updike, in his "Seven Stanzas from Easter," pleads:

> Let us not mock God with metaphor, analogy, sidestepping, transcendence;
> making of the event a parable, a sign painted in the
> faded credulity of earlier ages;
> let us walk through the door.
>
> Let us not seek to make it less monstrous, for our own convenience, or own sake
> of beauty, lest, awakened in one unthinkable hour, we are
> embarrassed by the miracle,
> and crushed by remonstrance.[388]

The event of death requires a hard, honest look at Gospel truth. Death makes its case at every funeral, and the Christian pastor must humbly challenge death's lies with resurrection hope.[389]

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[386]Paul Scott Wilson, "Beyond Narrative: Imagination in the Sermon" in *Listening to the Word: Studies in Honor of Fred B. Craddock* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1993): 143.

[387]White, 293. Unfortunately, the funeral directors in this study all expressed their view of death as "natural" or a part of life's "cycle." See above, 97-98.

[388]As quoted in Wright, 684.

[389]Long says, "Death is the preacher of evil's most convincing lie. Death claims persuasively that the God who promised to be present turned out to be absent, that the God who vowed to give and preserve life would not – or could not – keep that promise, and that all talk of steadfast loving relationships and enduring community is so much empty wind. What death is trying to do is to commandeer the pulpit and gain control of the storytelling. When a person dies, Death plants a victory banner in the dust and summons everyone to gather around and listen up, and the narrative sermon Death speaks goes like this: 'I, Death, am the Lord of all time, and no matter who giveth, Death taketh away. All time is contained between the ticking of the clock and the beating of the heart, and when the clock winds down and the heart stops, there is no more. Human life is fragmented and aimless, and its sad and confused wanderings all end up here – in loneliness, defeat, and sorrow. Relationships are destined to fail, community is an illusion, and human life is fragmented and aimless.' Death preaches on the text 'A mortal, born of woman, few of days and full of trouble, comes up like a flower and withers, flees like a shadow and does not last' (Job 14:1-2)." Long, *Telling the Truth*, 5. Chaplain No. 1 suggested that the Christian funeral preacher needs to acknowledge death "up front" and admit that in this world we have a "limited view." In his view, a preacher needs to

Long describes death as "taking up a collection," asking for "hopes, memories, and loved ones," whereas the pastor must lead the church to "receive an offering" of "hopes, memories, and loved ones to a gracious God."[390] This offering is based on the "centerpiece of the Christian confession . . . the cross-resurrection kerygma."[391] Craddock states, "Whoever has looked upon the crucified Jesus and said, 'Son of God,' has believed not just because of but also in spite of. The believer has chosen, has taken risk, has said yes in a world of nos. The believer has leaned forward, heard the whisper, and trusted in the voice of God."[392] If Christian funeral preachers lead the crowd to receive an offering of God (as opposed to allowing death to take up a collection), they will potentially allow the audience to hear the whisper of God in the midst of suffering. Force of logic and lofty rhetoric cannot convince minds or change eternal destinies. Yet, the voice of God, spoken through the word of God, that comes through the preacher's mouth will not return void.[393]

A preacher must work hard to preach expository sermons, but expository funeral preaching adds to his/her challenge the raw emotional state of the audience. The Christian funeral preacher, when he/she attempts to declare the hope of scripture, often feels that

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admit when he "does not know" the answer, and he went on to discuss how the passion of Christ reveals God's empathy with human suffering. Chaplain No. 3 commented,"We still live in a fallen world that is filled with darkness. But when we accept Jesus in our life, receive the Spirit, and walk in his word, we have power and hope that allows us to "face the hardships of life that come to all human beings."

[390]Ibid., 11.

[391]Lose, 73. Later, Lose elaborates by saying, "We confess Christ crucified and resurrected. We are weak, we preach foolishness, but we confess that Christ's atoning work has for each human being the answer to life's deepest concerns." Lose, 206.

[392]Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986), 57.

[393]Isa. 55:10-11.

the "legacy of Babel . . . appears to overcome the promise of Pentecost."[394] The legacy of Babel has led many pastors to focus sermons (Sunday sermons as well as funeral sermons) on purely human concerns while minimizing the actual biblical message.

Critics of preaching accuse pastors of creating sermons that are "programmed from below."[395] In other words, pastors take a marketing approach to sermon preparation that places an over-emphasis on the perceived, needs of the congregation at the expense of the proclaimed Word. Webber argues that this leads to preaching that is shaped too much by culture and not enough by biblical theology. Preachers can easily become pragmatic and "minister out of whatever works," and this leads to sermons that are therapeutic as opposed to theological.[396] Webber says, "Preaching, which historically opened up the Word of God and called God's people into holy living, is now influenced by the triumph of the therapeutic."[397] Christian preaching must emphasize God's story so that people hear what God says instead of what they want to hear. Without the proclamation of God's story, people become "storyless," and everything is reduced to "my story," which leads to what Webber calls "the empty wasteland of the narcissistic self."[398] If a person has only his/her own story, that story ends at the grave. Only God's story can provide meaning for people that is metaphysical and eternally meaningful.

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[394]Allen, et al., 123.

[395]Groothius, 271-272.

[396]Webber, 18.

[397]Ibid., 18.

[398]Ibid., 19-20.

Though God's story should take center stage in a Christian funeral sermon, the preacher cannot ignore the fact that death has taken a unique person away from the land of the living. There must be a willingness on the part of the Christian funeral preacher to listen to the needs of the mourners and express God's story in a way that is eternally meaningful and also relative to the suffering they are experiencing in the temporal world. Bad theology is a pitfall of Christian funeral preaching, but so is "deafness" on the part of the preacher when it comes to listening and responding to the hurts and pains of those who mourn.[399] Lowry explains that preachers often fail to analyze or diagnose the needs of listeners and lack "the concrete perceptive insight into the multifaceted ambiguities of the human situation which, when revealed, make one reflect, 'Of course, why didn't I think of that?' or 'Yes, I have always known that without knowing how to say it.'"[400] If a Christian funeral sermon is little more than a "bulletin board that posts information about God, world, and church," then the congregation can easily reject or ignore what is being said by the preacher.[401]

The research of Fred Craddock and others has helped correct the tendency of preachers to merely give out information and has renewed focus on what the listeners will be most likely to receive.[402] The preacher must learn to properly balance a Word from the

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[399]Robin Meyers, speaking in the context of sermons in general, states "Next to bad theology, the leading cause of bad preaching is deafness." Robin R. Meyers, *With Ears to Hear: Preaching as Self-Persuasion* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1993), 51.

[400]Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot*, 41.

[401]Allen, et al., 169.

[402]Craddock's influence in the revolution of the listener-centered approach to homiletics is well attested and described in great detail in Gail R. O'Day and Thomas G. Long, eds. *Listening to the Word: Studies in Honor of Fred B. Craddock* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993).

Lord with the word that a congregation needs in specific situs. Such a balance is made possible by preaching that is dialogical in nature. Holmes' research shows that "Any preaching is dialogue. On the one side, the preacher spends time listening to people talk and tell stories. Then the preacher goes off, brings these stories up against the biblical text as the other side of the dialogue, and answers back with a sermon."[403] Funeral preaching in the dialectic allows for a pastor to admit that death has ruptured the narrative of life and also presents the Gospel as a viable and victorious alternative to this otherwise bleak circumstance.

The homiletical challenge of this approach is to make the choices available to the audience in such a way that they do not feel coerced or manipulated.[404] It is key that the Christian funeral preacher communicates that he/she stands "with" the people in the face of death's pain and mystery as opposed to standing "against" the people.[405] Honest dialogue about death cannot come from a preacher whom the audience perceives as a person who thinks of himself as above or beyond their suffering. Instead, the preacher must communicate a kindred spirit by admitting his/ her own grappling with the suffering and pain that death brings to every human heart. Meyers suggests that preachers must "participate in their own sermons, not just deliver them."[406] This can only happen when a Christian funeral preacher has first learned to accept grief and face death in his/her own

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[403]Holmes, 166.

[404]Meyers, 110.

[405]Paul Scott Wilson, *The Imagination of the Heart: New Understanding in Preaching* (Nashville: Abindgon, 1988), 29.

[406]Meyers, 15.

life.[407] Long suggests that "a pulpit is not a lectern or a podium; it is a witness stand, and the preacher's task is to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth about what has been seen."[408] This approach (funeral preaching in the dialectic), therefore, has the potential to reveal that the pastor is signaling "vulnerability" and is allowing "room for questioning and even rejection."[409] Furthermore, the approach shows the appropriate nature of lamenting the loss of loved ones in a world that is broken while still proclaiming the hope of such brokenness being fixed by the ministry of Christ and the continual presence of His Holy Spirit.[410] Finally, this approach communicates that Christianity is not "romantic" or "soft" and is instead "tough-fibered and realistic."[411] In

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[407]Folwer, 147.

[408]Thomas Long, *The Senses of Preaching* (Atalanta: John Knox, 1988), 4.

[409]Lose, 229. Vulnerability can be expressed by a pastor if he/she admits his/her own struggles with death. The problem of death needs to be well expressed before the biblical solution is presented. This is in keeping with Schaeffer's suggestion that if he had one hour to witness to a "thoroughly modern man" he would spend forty-five minutes on the negative and fifteen minutes telling him the Gospel. This keeps the majority of the funeral sermon in the real world of pain and grief instead of in the metaphysical, or heavenly, sphere that is beyond the knowledge or experience of any mortal, human being. Schaeffer, 85-86.

[410]Pauw, 68. Also see Zurheide, 75-76 and Vogel, 83-85. Piper comments, "In the face of toil and trouble and suffering and death, the wise preacher cries out with the psalmist, 'Satisfy us in the morning with Your steadfast love.' He prays this both for himself and for his people: 'O God, grant that we would be satisfied with Your steadfast love always, and need nothing else' – and then he preaches to that end." Piper, 246.

[411]Schaeffer, 54. Groothius argues, "No human (or angel for that matter) has a perfect or comprehensive grasp of what Jesus' lordship entails, but this does not mean that we cannot utter 'final' or 'universal' truths about Jesus, his gospel and his kingdom. Divine mysteries remain, but they are placed within a framework of intelligible claims that make possible knowledge of God and his ways." In other words, true Christianity embraces mystery and yet stands firm on its truth claims. Christianity does not shy away from the pain of a fallen world, nor does it leave humanity without hope. The implications for preaching, according to Groothius, are that "Women and men called to the high office of teaching and preaching (Jas. 3:1) must not shy away from the hard truths of Scripture but embrace them and declare them with fire and light, borne of prayer and trembling before a holy God (cf. Titus 2:7) . . . A God-centered and truth-intensive ministry of the Word is indispensable in a postmodern time when many would dispense with or marginalize both (cf. 1 Thess. 2:2-6)." Groothius, 117, 270-271.

other words, the preacher stands with the people as a witness to a fallen world, and all its pain, while offering the hope that he/she has found in Christ.

Honest contention with death in the funeral context runs the risk of forcing people out of an "avoidance phase," where the mourners are, emotionally, still denying death outright.[412] The funeral preacher must attempt to guide mourners from this denial to the acceptance of death's reality.[413] By expressing the appropriateness of sorrow, the Christian funeral preacher can then remove the barrier of guilt (e.g., the mourner may say "I must be strong for my family, etc.") and help them find God's grace.[414] God's grace alone can provide comfort for those who have been dealt a mortal blow by death. The Gospel proffers resurrection hope for those struggling with the pain of a fallen world. Preachers must present this hope at the dark hour of death so that eternal joy can begin, even in a moment of great physical loss.[415] Talk of heaven may have a place in a funeral for a deceased Christian, but the mourners also need to hear of the grace God offers them in the midst of their suffering and pain.

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[412]Fowler, 115-116. This has led, according to Funeral Director No. 1, to an increase of funerals where "the body is not present." In his view, "it is not for financial reasons, but a continuation of the family's denial" of death.

[413]Ibid., 116.

[414]Spurgeon wrote, "We are not forbidden to sorrow . . . God's grace does not take away our sensibilities, it only refines them, and in some degree restrains the violence of the expression." Spurgeon, 22.

[415]Piper says, "If we would see God honored in the lives of our people as the supreme value, highest treasure, and deepest satisfaction of their lives, then we must strive with all our might to show the meaning of suffering, and help them see the wisdom and power and goodness of God behind it ordaining; above it governing; beneath it sustaining; and before it preparing. This is the hardest work in the world – to change the minds and hearts of fallen human beings, and make God so precious to them that they count it all joy when trials come, and exult in their afflictions, and rejoice in the plundering of their property, and say in the end, 'To die is gain.'" Piper, 242-243.

When Christian funeral preaching is offered as honest dialogue, the audience is exposed to "diametrically opposed visions of life."[416] The conversation that the funeral audience over-hears provides an opportunity for them to hear answers to life's greatest mysteries that are unique and that they will not hear "anywhere else."[417] Wilson argues that "imagination exists because of the juxtaposition of opposites."[418] If this basic premise, which serves as a key thesis in his book *Imagination of the Heart*, is true, then Christian funeral sermons provide the potential for the most powerfully imaginative sermons, as a pastor puts resurrection hope next to death for everyone to see (or, more aptly, hear). This causes the listeners to be more "entangled" than "taught" as the preacher brings them into a conversation that they cannot completely ignore.[419] One cannot argue with or ignore the absolute certainty that all people die. If the preacher's goal is honest dialogue with the funeral audience, then the absolute nature of death must be discussed by him/her.

Absolutes Examined. Death is coming. The first hints of its arrival come when a person is told that they, or a loved one, have a potentially life threatening illness. Broyard, when told that his prostate cancer had spread, describes the moment when the absolute

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[416]Wells, in the tradition of apologists such as Lewis and Schaeffer, believes that Christianity provides the best explanation of why pain and suffering are present in the world. All worldviews, when compared side-by-side with Christianity, are shown to be lacking in his view. He states, "Thus it is that we have two diametrically opposed visions of life. In the one, there is no center; in the other, there is and it is Christ. In the one, life is but a succession of random events; in the other, life is lived out under the sovereign rule of Christ. In the one, we are alone in the cosmos; in the other, we are not. In the one, salvation is humanly managed; in the other, it is divinely given. Christianity best flourishes when the sharpness of these opposing visions is preserved, and it becomes sickened when it is not." Wells, 262.

[417]Albert R. Mohler, "The Primacy of Preaching" in *Feed My Sheep: A Passionate Plea for Preaching*, ed. Don Kistler (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 2002), 19.

[418]Wilson, *The Imagination of the Heart*, 46.

[419]Meyers, 104.

truth of death struck him. He said, "What struck me was the startled awareness that one day something, whatever it might be, was going to interrupt my leisurely progress. It sounds trite, yet I can only say that I realized for the first time that I don't have forever."[420] In his classic short story, *The Death of Ivan Illyich*, Leo Tolstoy records Ivan's response to his own terminal diagnosis. Ivan says to himself,

> It's not a question of my appendix or my kidney, but of life and . . . death. Yes, life was there and now it is going, going and I cannot stop it. Yes. Why deceive myself? Isn't it obvious to everyone but me that I'm dying, and that it's only a question of weeks, days – it may happen at any moment. There was light and now there's darkness. I was here and now I'm going and I cannot stop it.[421]

Disease, and other elements of human suffering, can only be ignored or suppressed for a season. David Tracy says, "Suffering, however repressed, eventually erupts to subvert our most basic modern belief: the belief that somehow we can think our way through once more."[422] The presence of a deceased friend or loved one in a casket is a stark reminder that all people eventually succumb to death.

This absolute fact of death must serve as the motivation for the Christian funeral preacher and the funeral sermon. Chapman grimly states, "To look into the open casket is to look into the mirror of the future for all of us."[423] If life is "lived on a time line," then a funeral service clearly points toward that fact that we are "always moving closer to the

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[420]Broyard, 3-4.

[421]Tolstoy and Olson, 64.

[422]Tracy, 77.

[423]Chapman, 42. Chaplain No. 2 said that in his experience, terminally ill patients facing eternity ask, "Am I ready?"

end of that line."[424] Funerals make death uncomfortably personal, and as Anderson and Foley put it, "Death is personally critical because it is the ultimate expression of human finitude."[425] Funerals force people to come and see death's work and hear death's taunts. No matter how healthy they are at the present, no matter how vital they feel, the death of a friend or loved one reminds all that "death lays claim to the body and destroys it."[426] Craddock comments, "Apparently the gospel speaks of the faint recollection of Eden in all of us and to that remembrance, sin distorted to be sure, of who we really are."[427] This "faint recollection of Eden" is highlighted in the context of a funeral, and the results of the fall are on display for all to witness.

Apart from resurrection hope, the funeral service and the funeral sermon can only be positive in the past tense (e.g., "Joe was a wonderful person") and will be wholly negative in the present and future tense (e.g., "Joe is not here with us now" or "We will never again enjoy Joe's wonderful personality"). This is why the absolute dreariness of the funeral moment demands that a Christian funeral preacher be armed with the Gospel and resurrection hope. Long states, "It is the privilege of the funeral preacher to interrupt death's monologue and proclaim the good news that Jesus was indeed there and is present even now."[428] Christian funeral preaching must be realistic and resurrection-focused.

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[424]Holmes, 16. Holmes adds: "Thielicke points out that death reminds us that we cannot start over again. Death renders life's time line irreversible and unequivocal. Time therefore leads on a collision course with death. Death also reminds us that time in never on our side. We don't have time, but time has us. Time bears all its sons away. We do not control the flow of the river. The river sets our pace." Ibid., 17.

[425]Anderson and Foley, 101.

[426]Holmes, 17.

[427]Craddock, *Preaching*, 161.

[428]Long, "Telling the Truth," 7.

Piper says,

> The first thing you will learn to say to your people is that they must suffer. You will make it a theme running through all your messages: they will get sick; they will be persecuted; and they will die. They must be reminded of these things again and again, because almost all forces in the culture are pushing them away from those realities and trying to get them not to think about it and therefore not to be ready for it, and certainly not to value it when it comes.[429]

The past and present pain that death has brought is powerful and absolute, but if the truth of Christ's resurrection is introduced by the Christian funeral preacher, the possibility of a future hope beyond the grave enters into the equation.

Christian funeral preachers, however, have the challenge of addressing a funeral audience that potentially has little use for truth of any sort. Not all funeral mourners will be moral relativists. Nonetheless, many may be suspicious of all external sources of authority ("tradition, empirical observation, or logical deduction") and wary of all truth.[430] Death is a truth that cannot be ignored and a reality that shatters materialistic hopes. The advent of death forces open a door to metaphysical inquiry. A proclivity toward relativity collides with a need for metaphysical relevance. This is where an honest dialogue about the facts of death and the hopes of scripture meet. Modernity and postmodernity alike, according to Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "are ultimately digressions from the main subject, namely, the way of wisdom and life summed up in Jesus Christ."[431] The Christian funeral sermon should introduce the audience to the main subject by contrasting the biblical hope

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[429]Piper, 264.

[430]Allen, et al., 37, 72.

[431]Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Pilgrim's Digress: Christian Thinking On and About the Postmodern Way" in *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn: Six Views*, ed. Myron B. Penner (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), 97.

of resurrection with the pagan, philosophic, and materialistic teachings of humanity. Open-minded people, whether influenced by modernity or postmodernity, come to realize that science cannot solve every problem and that the reality of death demands some sort of interpretation.[432] Christian funeral preachers present the Gospel of Christ and the power of resurrection as both an interpretation of death and the only solution to its finality. Chrisitian funeral preaching in the dialectic presents the audience with a choice between hopelessness and hope, resurrection and the grave; it does not force a value system or a tradition. Instead, Christian funeral preaching in the dialectic presents the crowd with the cold hard facts of death alongside the Christian hope and then leaves the hermenutics up to the mourners.[433]

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[432]David Tracy says, "Science cannot answer everything. The best scientists realize this. A sense of wonder" was once "considered a skeleton in the family closet of the humanities. But now that wonder has surfaced in the natural sciences themselves . . . Former claims for the value-free technology and a history-free science have collapsed. The hermeneutical character of science has now been strongly affirmed. Even in science, we must interpret to understand." Tracy later comments, "Reality is what we name our best interpretation. Truth is the reality we know through our best interpretation." Tracy, 33, 48. Funeral Director No. 2 observed that "some people are in the middle of the road on everything . . . but when you lose a loved one, it is a whole different story."

[433]This may be what Carson refers to as a sort of "soft" postmodernism. In other words, the preacher admits that "we see through a glass darkly, but we do see." Funeral preaching in the dialectic allows for the mystery and pain of death to be acknowledged while presenting a viable solution, a possible interpretation of death that provides hope and peace. Carson, 94. Long, in *The Witness of Preaching* says, "The purpose of preaching, therefore, is not to provide a forum for the preacher to give moral advice, to express opinions on important topics, or to lay out religious 'principles for living' but rather to be the occasion for the hearing of a voice beyond the preacher's voice: the very word of the living God. Preaching is not about the preacher, it is about the voice of God." Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 19-20. Wilson states, "the Christian service is appropriately understood as a celebration of resurrection and is designed less for the deceased than for the living. In any funeral, whatever the age or the manner of death of the one who has died, listeners have questions in at least six subject areas: God and Scripture, God and tradition, the deceased, the family, the congregation, and the preacher. Questions in each of these areas can and often need to be answered in the course of the funeral sermon." Wilson then provides an extended list of general questions in these six areas. Wilson, *The Practice of Preaching*, 285-286.

Holmes says, "We are powerless against death, but God is not."[434] This simple statement, in many ways, could serve as a theme of the entire biblical narrative. As this research has shown, humans are mostly silenced by death's taunts. Humanity wants to be the master of destiny, but death always ends up as the master. This is why death destroys any hope proffered by modernism and postmodernism. For example, doctors study in the hope that their practice can help stave off disease and death. Modernity hopes that one day, science will conquer death. Yet, science has not come close to this dream. Patricia Anderson interviewed a forty-eight year-old psychotherapist named Fleur Green who mentions that the idea that a person is powerful or that she can achieve whatever she wants to achieve is absurd. Green says,

> On a certain level that idea is ego-strengthening and it's important. But of course, at a much deeper level, it's just not true. You can't control everything and you can't do whatever you want to do. Life and death are huge, much bigger than we are. If you ask me, humans have about as much chance of grasping the totality of life as blue jays have of grasping long division. You can exercise a lot of choice about your experience, but to imagine you are choosing the totality of your life is silly. More than that, it makes death a big problem, like if you die you didn't get it right. That's awful.[435]

Life can make men proud; death only humbles.[436]

The humbling power of death may provide an opening for the truth of the Gospel. If a person realizes that he/she is powerless in the face of death, can this lead to a search for God? Holmes says that "the belief in the resurrection body acknowledges that God

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[434]Holmes, 23.

[435]Ibid., 9.

[436]George Campbell Morgan, in a funeral sermon entitled "The Vanquished Enemy," said, "Death to humanity is always hostile and hateful. Of all the forces natural and spiritual, death is the least under human control. Life is far more under human control than is death." George Campbell Morgan, "The Vanquished Enemy" in *Classic Sermons on Death and Dying*, ed. Warren W. Wiersbe. Kregel Classic Sermon Series (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2000), 151.

gathers up all of our temporal moments into the eternal present, reunites us with our broken and fragmented self, and socially weaves us into a new community."[437] White says:

> Death makes humans realize how completely dependent they are on God when all else fails. Whatever lies beyond death is also created by God and experienced before us by Jesus Christ. Christians are not bereft of hope even in the face of death; they are comforted by the only real source of hope in the world, God's gracious love.[438]

Christian funeral preaching must present a radical message that sin is the root cause of death and that sinners can only find redemption and hope in the grace provided through Christ's resurrection.[439] Such truth sounds absurd to some in the land of the living. Yet, it may be a truth more readily heeded in the valley of the shadow of death. The Christian funeral preacher can only answer death's absoluteness with the biblical message of resurrection.

Resurrection's Routing of Death. The Bible approaches death in realistic fashion.[440] It stresses that death is absolute and unnatural.[441] Jesus did not provide glib

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[437]Holmes, 23.

[438]White, 295. A finding of the qualitative research was that Roman Catholic Christians feel that their faith prepares them for death. Funeral Director No. 2 claimed that Roman Catholics "talk more about death than other denominations." He believed that this emphasis on death helped him work through his personal grief when his father died prematurely.

[439]Rom. 3:23; 1 Cor. 15:12-34. "You can have as radical a doctrine of sin as you wish as long as your doctrine of grace is equally radical." Tracy, 75.

[440]Pauw writes that "Christian hope for life beyond death is a hope that has passed through the furnace of suffering and death." Pauw, 169.

[441]Francis Schaeffer's writing provides Christians with an example of how to incorporate the truth of death's absolute and unnatural character into a very practical, Christ-centered worldview. He writes, "Of course our perishableness is a trouble to each one of us. We see the beautiful girl or the athletic boy, and if we have some wisdom in life we already realize that soon the beauty and strength will pass. Yet it is just this point where Christianity does speak with power . . . Proust, the French writer, had this thought as the center of his thinking. To him, death brought the end of all things, and thus 'the dust of death' covers everything in this present life . . . But as Christians we are in a different position. Life does not end at death. And if we are

comments about death, and as Long states, when Jesus contends with death in the Gospels, he acknowledges that "human beings really do get hurt," and he "is not there with a Band-Aid and a lollipop."[442] Yet, the biblical narrative stresses that "suffering and death will not triumph over God's people."[443] The grave is not the end for those in Christ. Christian faith proclaims that there is a Sabbath of resurrection life.[444] This story, the story of resurrection's routing of death, must be told by the Christian funeral preacher. He/she must "tell the story to refute death's claims – a story that is deeper than our mind, our emotions, and the empirical evidence at hand."[445] Armed with resurrection hope, the

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Christians it not only does not end at death, but goes on to a thing of beauty. Of course, this does not remove all the stink of the *present* perishableness, but it does mean we are not caught. It is for this reason that the resurrection of Christ is so critical." Schaeffer continues this same line of argument in another letter when he writes, "Death is an enemy, and God never meant it to exist for human beings. Thus, every death is abnormal. While it is wonderfully true that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord, the Bible makes plain that our real hope is that glad day, in the midst of the restoration of all things, when Jesus returns and the total person will be again complete with the body and the spiritual portion. We await that day, for until then all is not complete." Dennis, 101, 165.

[442]Long, "Telling the Truth," 6.

[443]Melloh, 506. Leith, in an excerpt from one of his funeral sermons, illustrates this point. He says, "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 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 world. The final word is God's grace." Leith, 24.

[444]"Time, which appears captured between tick and tock, in reality flows from creation to eternity. The fragmented story of human life, even this human life, so frayed and broken, is woven into God's seamless tapestry, and the apparently lonely and restless human pilgrimage does not end up in a cemetery but in a place of Sabbath rest." Long, "Telling the Truth," 7.

[445]Ibid., 5. Chaplain No. 1 said that he liked to take people "all the way back to Genesis" to help them understand the cause of human suffering.

Christian funeral preacher must not let death have the upper hand and, therefore, must preach with an air of defiance.[446]

A Christian funeral preacher will often be asked to preach the funeral of a non-Christian. The Christian funeral preacher, however, cannot retreat from a resurrection focus in the funeral sermon. The eulogy provides the preacher with an opportunity to speak well of the deceased and to speak clearly to the congregation that this particular death is a tragic loss to all gathered at the funeral service. The Christian funeral preacher must also remain true to his/her resurrection hope and not try to "make people feel good," rather he or she needs to "make people feel the cross - and then the resurrection."[447] Without the Easter hope, Christian preaching (especially in the context of a funeral) is impotent. Great preachers, like Charles Spurgeon, have always understood that death must first be named as the enemy and only then can the preacher proclaim Christ's victory over death.[448] Thus, the Christian funeral sermon should always begin with the "bad news" of death and then finish with the "good news" of Christ's resurrection.[449] George Campbell Morgan's attitude toward death was one of "hostility and hatefulness"

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[446]Ibid., 8. Chapman says, "Authentic Christian language in the face of death should not concede the claim of death, but challenge it. Authentic Christian language in the face of death should not blend in with the language of grief and mourning, but speak a word of triumphant hope above it. Authentic Christian language in the face of death should not leave those who face death where they are, but should be language powerful enough and alien enough to call forth the grieving into hope, to call forth Christ in the midst of pain and sorrow as the one whose cross is victory, to call forth a future beyond death that is so filled with the triumph of resurrection life as to make the present moment of grief a tolerable and passing moment." Chapman, 42. Chaplain No. 2 expressed this sentiment well when he said, "Resurrection is our great hope and our promise."

[447]Chapman, 42.

[448]Holmes, 46.

[449]Ibid., 186.

and he argued that "the Christian must ever be in conflict with death by every method."[450] Death rules the living apart from Christ, and "man is delivered up to its power."[451] The Christian funeral preacher must not miss the opportunity of the funeral service to announce Christ's resurrection hope to those in the audience dead in sin.

According to Paul, humanity's biggest enemy, death, has been defeated, "not redefined; not understood in a different light; defeated."[452] Christ's resurrection has made it possible for humanity to experience a future resurrection that can lead all people out of "the abyss of fear and make us free."[453] Resurrection "interlocks" all other Christian doctrines and gives hope to humans who are destined to struggle and suffer in a fallen world.[454] With resurrection as the main theme of every Christian funeral sermon, the Christian pastor can answer the following four questions posed by Wright and provide the

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[450]Morgan, 153, 156. Morgan speaks boldly and directly to death saying, "Oh death, I hate you. But you are not the master of the situation! You are the enemy, putting out the light of the eyes and sealing the ear, cruel enemy. But you are not king Oh death. Jesus is King. The risen Lord and Master reigns." Ibid., 158.

[451]Rom. 5:14, 17. Jüngel, 88.

[452]Romans 8:38-39. Wright, 259. Wright also says, "The creator's answer to death cannot be to reach some kind of agreement or compromise. Death must be, and in the Messiah has been and will be, defeated (1 Cor. 15:26). Anything other than some kind of bodily resurrection, therefore, is simply unthinkable, not only at the level of the meaning of individual verses and phrases but at the level of the chapter's (1 Cor. 15) argument as a whole. 'Resurrection' does not refer to some part or aspect of the human being *not* dying but instead going on into a continuing life in a new mode; it refers to something that *does* die and is then given a *new* life." Wright, 314.

[453]Moltmann, 125. Wright, referencing Phil. 3:10-11, comments that "the resurrection is primarily a future event, corresponding to the resurrection of Jesus himself, but that its power is already made known in the present life, even in the midst of suffering and death." Wright sums up this point by saying, "we believe between resurrection and resurrection." Wright, 234, 275. Harris says, "The resurrection of the dead began with the resurrection of Christ. Resurrection is not simply a future possibility but a present reality." Harris, *Raised Immortal*, 111.

[454]Wright, summarizing the view of Irenaeus, states, "The bodily resurrection was one part of the Christian armour, interlocking with all the others, designed to withstand the worst that (the) pagan empire could do." Wright, 517.

hearer with a Christian worldview that can help them navigate through their grief to Christian hope.

> Who are we? Resurrection people: a people, that is, formed within the new world which began at Easter and which has embraced us, in the power of the Spirit, in baptism and faith. Where are we? In God's good creation, which is to be restored; in bodies that will be redeemed, though at present they are prone to suffering and decay and will one day die. What's wrong? The work is incomplete: the project which began at Easter (the defeat of sin and death) has not yet been finished. What's the solution? The full and final redemption of the creation and ourselves with it; this will be accomplished through a fresh act of creative grace when Jesus reappears, and this in turn is anticipated in the present by the work of the Spirit. What time is it? In the overlap of the ages: the 'age to come', longed for by Israel, has already begun, but the 'present age' still continues.[455]

The Bible announces deliverance from sin and death by the power of Christ's resurrection, which unlocks the gates of death and connects those who believe in Christ with the privilege of a relationship with the Lord of creation.[456] Christian funeral preaching needs to be nothing more than a witness of these eternal truths.[457]

Resurrection hope is not the "automatic entitlement of every human being" but is a "privilege God graciously grants to those who are related to Jesus Christ by faith."[458] The resurrection of Christ and the future resurrection of believers in Christ are, however, the universal hope for humans in the face of death according to the scriptures. Christian funeral preaching should constantly employ the adversative conjunction "but" in order to be honest about the pain death brings and also point mourners to the cross and

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[455]Ibid., 581.

[456]Rom. 6:9-10; 8:2; 2 Tim. 1:10; Rev. 1:8; Col. 1:18. Cf. Harris, 163-164.

[457]Long sees resurrection preaching as the "test par excellence of theological preaching" and claims that "the resurrection validates the earthly ministry of Jesus as the way of God, and far from condescending to attempt by Christian people to live like Jesus lived, the resurrection lifts such energies to the highest power." Long, *The Senses of Preaching*, 38, 47.

[458]Ibid., 184.

resurrection.[459] Only resurrection preaching can "blast apart the finality of death" and "open the way to new life."[460] Apart from resurrection hope, life has no ultimate meaning and pastors (or people in general) have no need to care for others because they only have this life and they know death is coming. Long says, "But if the tomb could not remain sealed, if suffering and death do not have the last word, if God's future for us is more than an infinite extension of yesterday, then we can hope for more than a reshuffling of the same old cards. A radically new game has been promised."[461] When a Christian funeral sermon focuses on resurrection's routing of death, the Christian funeral preacher uncovers a path for the mourners whereby all things can become new, and the laughter of the redeemed can replace the tears and sorrow of death.[462]

Application: Immanuel (Past, Present, Future)

Christ's bodily resurrection "stands at the beginning of Christianity, and belief in the resurrection of our bodies stands at the 'end.'"[463] Without resurrection, there is no rebuttal of death. Anyone of any faith can eulogize the deceased and celebrate the past, but only a Christian funeral preacher armed with the biblical message of resurrection can provide hope in the present and future tenses. To be Christian, the funeral preacher's sermon must have at its core the message of resurrection. With resurrection as a

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[459]Buttrick, 72.

[460]Guinness, 392.

[461]Long, *The Senses of Preaching*, 48-49.

[462]Rev. 21:1-7. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 8-9.

[463]Anthony J. Godzieba, Lieven Boeve and Michele Saracino, "Resurrection - Interruption - Transformation: Incarnation as Hermenutical Strategy: A Symposium" *Theological Studies* 67 (2006): 784.

resonating undercurrent of the sermon, the pastor can then demonstrate (using dialogical methodology) to the funeral audience how the advent of Christ provides hope in the past, present, and future tenses.

Immanuel Past Tense – Acknowledging the Cost of Loss

Every human life is a precious gift from God. The Christian funeral preacher must communicate this truth to the funeral audience. Holmes, and others in this study, have made a strong case for the inclusion of a meaningful eulogy in the context of a Christian funeral. Funeral mourners faced with the sobering fact that they will never have another opportunity to laugh with, cry with, or pray with their loved one, need to hear that their deep grief is appropriate, and even godly. When Jesus was faced with death's devastation he cried out in pain. If "Jesus wept" in the face of death, so can the rest of humanity.[464] Mourners need to understand that Jesus is with them as they remember the person they loved and that God understands the cost of loss.

Many funeral services in the Midwest begin with a reading of the obituary or a short eulogy delivered by the pastor, family member, or friend. It is at this point in the funeral service that the Christian funeral pastor can facilitate grieving that is in the "past tense." All funeral services, Christian and non-Christian alike, will have this past tense element. As stated above, without the hope of resurrection, a funeral service can only look back and talk about what was and is no more. With Jesus by their side, however, a grieving person can remember the unique nature of the deceased's life and give thanks to God for that life. The pastor must be willing to discover what made this particular

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[464]Jn. 11:35.

deceased person's life special and then formulate the kinds of questions that the grieving family will be asking either verbally or nonverbally.

During the opening moments of a Christian funeral service, the pastor's acknowledgment of the devastating power of death may invite the audience to listen more intently. Mourners need to see transparency and honesty on the part of the pastor. Those present at the funeral who were familiar with the deceased person should be able to detect that the preacher knew the deceased person and views this person as a special gift from God. Verbalizing what has been lost may prepare the mourners for the possibility of a future hope.

The scriptures show that God loves people on an individual basis.[465] Such passages can establish a connection between God, the deceased, and the mourners. The Christian funeral preacher, using the biblical text, must acknowledge God's love in the life of the deceased. This could possibly nudge the mourner into contemplating how God loves them individually. This process celebrates the uniqueness of the deceased and remains true to the biblical text. Instead of trying to make a scripture fit a person, the preacher reveals to the audience how God's universal love has individual application. The biblical message of grace can connect the mourners with the Christian hope. All people are loved by God in spite of their actions or contributions. God's love is not dependent upon who we are, instead, it is the result of God's very nature. God is love.[466] When the Christian funeral preacher is honest about what death has removed from the mourner's

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[465]e.g., Gal. 2:20.

[466]1 Jn. 4:8.

life and connects Christ's presence in the past tense, there is an opportunity for him/her to show Christ's presence in the present moment of grief and suffering.

Immanuel Present Tense – Admission of Suffering

The Christian funeral preacher, after he/she has established that Christ was present in the life of the deceased, should suggest to the mourners that Christ is also present with them in their current moment of pain. Death is an irrevocable truth in life that robs us of those we love and reminds us that we will one day die as well. Postmodern relativity provides no comfort amidst the pain of grief. The biblical teaching that Christ is "Immanuel," or "God with us," is a message that reminds people that Christ can help them at this particular moment of pain.[467] Christian funeral preaching can easily leave this element out of the funeral service. Between the eulogy that looks back at a life lived and lost, and the sermon that talks about heaven and a future hope, pastors often forget that there are people in the pews who are in tremendous pain. Mourners need to hear the pastor admit that death brings questions into their lives that may not be perfectly answered in this world. An honest dialogue with death facilitated by the pastor may provide an opportunity for those present at the funeral to see their emotions as valid and their grief as appropriate.

In the researcher's view, when the family has a strong, Christian background they will most likely need to hear that it is appropriate to grieve. Too often, poor theology has compounded grief with unholy guilt. In other words, the mourners have come to believe that people of faith should be happy when their loved ones have died in Christ. They have

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[467]Matt. 1:23.

been taught that their loved ones are in a "better place" and that they are now in a place where death, tears, mourning, and crying are no more.[468] Yet, their hearts are aching with a loss that seems to shatter their souls. The Christian funeral preacher both honors the deceased and comforts the living when he/she acknowledges that the loss of this particular person was "costly"and that there is a time to "weep" and "mourn."[469]

If the family does not have a strong faith background, they may be more inclined to grieve, but also more inclined to view death as natural or a part of the cycle of life. The Christian funeral preacher must portray death as an enemy that Jesus has ultimately defeated through resurrection. He/she must exhibit an air of defiance toward death at this point and communicate how the Christian hope is greater than death. Non-Christian mourners may bring elements of hopelessness and nihilism to the funeral that the Christian funeral preacher can challenge by honoring the intrinsic value of the deceased's life and the hope of resurrection life beyond this physical world. The pastor must acknowledge the pain death has caused the bereaved.

The book of Hebrews teaches that Christ has a continuing ministry to those who live and suffer in this world. Jesus came (past tense) to save humanity through his atoning work on the cross. This ministry continues (present tense) as he stands beside humanity in their suffering and is "not ashamed to call them brothers."[470] The salvation that Christ provided the world came as a result of personal suffering. Hebrews 2:9 explains to us that Jesus was "crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the

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[468]Rev. 21:1-7.

[469]Ps. 116:15; Eccl. 3:4.

[470]Heb. 2:11.

grace of God he might taste death for everyone."[471] Due to his incarnation, Christ understands human suffering first hand. His knowledge of human pain gives him empathy with humanity. Jesus was made "perfect through suffering," thus he is the "founder of . . . salvation."[472] Death seeks to enslave humanity by robbing them of hope. The fear of death can quickly lead a person from doubt to utter despair. However, Jesus can "deliver all those who through the fear of death were subject to life long slavery."[473]

The good news of the Bible is that God comes to a human being burdened in a moment of suffering and does not scold him/her. On the contrary, Jesus enters into that grief with every bereaved human being and comes alongside them as a brother. A person can express their deepest pains and their greatest griefs and know that Jesus will lovingly guide them to a place of healing. Jesus died to defeat death. Hebrews 2:14 says, "He himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil."[474] The Bible teaches all people that grieving is appropriate, that Jesus is with them in their grief, and above all, that Jesus has defeated "the last enemy," death itself.[475]

Immanuel Future Tense – The Last Enemy Defeated

Every culture in every epoch of human history has had to wrestle with the overwhelming power of death. Solutions to the problem of death, as discussed earlier,

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[471]Heb. 2:9.

[472]Heb. 2:10.

[473]Heb. 2:15.

[474]Heb. 2:14.

[475]1 Cor. 15:26.

provided little hope or comfort for those who faced death. The unique answer to the questions that death raises in human hearts is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Christian hope is resurrection. Apart from resurrection, Christianity is earth-bound and provides little comfort for those combating the pain of death. If the Christian funeral pastor has established that Christ can be "Immanuel" in the past and present tenses, he/she must conclude with the bold assertion that Christ is present with all people in the future tense through the miracle of resurrection.

Death disturbs life's tranquil journey and brings to bear questions about human pain and suffering. Resurrection preaching does not ignore death's power, but instead acknowledges it in the most profound way. God had to send his Son to defeat death's power. Death required the ultimate sacrifice that the Heavenly Father could give – Jesus. For many, the ultimate expression of injustice and corruption in this world is death. Good people, young people, and church people will all face death. Invariably, mourners ask "Why?" The narrative of the Bible explains that sin is the culprit and that the resurrection of the Son of God is the answer. Christian funeral preachers must answer the negativism and nihilism of a fallen world with the glorious hope of Christ's resurrection. Mourners need to hear that there is hope of physical life beyond our earthly existence. Those who grieve need to be comforted with words of hope that reveal the limitless nature of God's love as expressed by Jesus Christ on the cross.

The resurrected Lord promised, "I am with you always, to the end of the age."[476] A living Savior is humanity's hope in the trying times of death. Without reservation, and

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[476]Matthew 28:20.

with the unction of the Holy Spirit, the Christian funeral must joyfully announce to those who mourn that "'Death is swallowed up in victory.' 'O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?' The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."[477]

Suggestions for Future Research and Practice

In the view of this researcher, literature pertaining specifically to Christian funeral preaching methodology is sorely lacking. A future research project could possibly investigate why the authors of preaching and pastoral theology textbooks do not invest more energy into this important topic. The researcher has found that there are many books on the subject of grief, and many books on the subject of preaching, but very few books that attempt to combine the two in the context of a funeral.

A second subject that merits further research is the prevalence of resurrection preaching in evangelical Christian life. What impact does consistent resurrection preaching have on the worship, evangelism, discipleship, teaching, and fellowship ministries of the local church?

A third subject for further research would be to conduct a qualitative study of Christian funeral preaching in a more urban, less traditional cultural context. Perhaps a more comprehensive picture of the needs of funeral mourners could be discerned from a detailed quantitative study of funeral directors and chaplains in a state or region.

A fourth possible research design could focus attention on a well-known Christian pastor's funeral sermons. These sermons could be compiled, compared, and dissected to

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[477] 1 Cor. 15:54b-57.

discern specific methodologies employed. To determine how these sermons had been received, the researcher could interview family members or friends who heard these sermons delivered in person.

A final area of research would be to investigate the role of evangelism in funeral contexts. As discussed above, the qualitative portion of this research revealed a high level of angst among funeral home directors concerning the use of evangelism techniques in funerals. Christian funeral preaching will always have an evangelical undertone, but what exactly do funeral home directors consider inappropriate in a funeral context?

This research could not fully develop any of these suggestions for further research. However, it is the hope of the researcher that some of the issues brought up as a result of this body of research will led to further inquiry concerning funeral preaching methodology. Hurting souls need Christian funeral preaching. Those who grieve need to know that Jesus is present with them in their suffering in the past, present, and future tenses. This research suggests that if a Christian funeral preacher will approach each funeral sermon using dialogical methodology that approaches the questions of mourners in terms of incarnation, the deceased will be honored, the living will be challenged, and God will be glorified.

APPENDIX

INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR FUNERAL HOME DIRECTORS AND CHAPLAINS

The following interview guide was used as a framework when conducting personal interviews with funeral home directors and chaplains. This guide follows a semi-structured interview format that allowed for appropriate follow up questions.

General Information

1. How many years have you served as a funeral director/chaplain and how has this experience shaped or changed your views pertaining to the importance of a Christian funeral and Christian funeral preaching?

2. What is your faith background and how would you characterize the faith backgrounds of the families you serve?

Theological Considerations

1. How does the Bible view death and what hope does it provide those who mourn?

2. What questions might a bereaved person be asking (verbally or to themselves) that Christian funeral preaching must address with a biblical answer?

3. How does the absolute statements of scripture conflict with the relativistic inclinations (e.g., you believe your way, I believe mine) of the average funeral mourner?

Social Considerations

1. What do you feel people expect from a funeral sermon (e.g., scripture, poetry, stories from the life of the deceased, etc.)?

2. Assuming that most mourners are in a denial stage of grief, how can the Christian funeral preacher speak frankly about the definitive loss of a loved one and not alienate his or her audience?

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