



CANADIAN CONFERENCE
of Mennonite Brethren Churches

ARTICLE 18 [MB Confession of Faith]

Christ's Final Triumph

PASTORAL APPLICATION

The article on "Christ's Final Triumph" raises practical pastoral issues in two basic areas: the first involving death and the afterlife and the second involving eschatology and the "last days." The Bible calls Christians to live their lives with the end in view. With such a perspective, the Master is given free reign to align our life priorities and nurture us to maturity. Such a life will receive, without reservation, the acclaim of heaven as the words "well done" are sounded.

The teaching of this article is a comfort to the believer and a warning to the nonbeliever. It speaks words of assurance to all believers, especially those struggling, weary, or grieving death. It is a call of repentance and faith to the careless and indifferent.

Watchfulness is a distinguishing characteristic of the Christian living with the end in view. This watchfulness pertains not only to the timing, but to the resultant lifestyle as well. Only unprepared Christians live as though they will almost certainly have upwards of 70 years before their work is presented before the Judge. The completion date may be hastened dramatically on two fronts: by death or Christ's second coming.

Perspectives on Death

The common denominator of life is death. People are confronted with this reality as they witness the death of someone else or face the prospect personally. These experiences provide an excellent opportunity for ministry and pastoral care.

Christians are prepared to face death at any time. They live confidently in the knowledge that death is a summons home to the place where their real citizenship resides. They feel their mortality, but it's not an altogether unsettling thought. Though keenly aware of life's uncertainty, they are not morbidly preoccupied with death and dying.

When faced with imminent death because of disease or old age, it's normal to face the prospect with anxiety. The passage from life to death is a trip with few road maps, except that of our Lord Jesus. Certainly some apprehension is to be expected.

To prepare for the passage, rehearsal of the promises of Scripture concerning God's children can be particularly helpful to bring assurance. It is the strength of the relationship with God more than the extravagant beauty of heaven that is likely to encourage the believer.

End-time judgment for believers should not be dreaded, but seen as report card day. Graduation is not in question, but different awards will be received on the basis of faithfulness. If one's name is in the "Book of Life" there is no reason to fear. In Jesus Christ, the believer stands firm.

Medical science has sometimes made decisions regarding extension of life difficult. While Christians enjoy life, they have less need to prolong it by extraordinary means. They know that life on earth is not the final reality. However, neither assisted suicide nor active euthanasia should be pursued since it is God's exclusive right to give and take life (see Article 14: The Sanctity of Human Life).

The Christian Funeral

A Christian funeral is permeated with an undertone of hope. That is not to say that grief should be suppressed. Death still brings distress and sadness as with any prolonged separation from a loved one. Full



victory will be gained when the cycle of life and death is broken, when life alone will prevail for eternity. Grieving is a reality, but so is hope.

The funeral or memorial service is an act of worship. Planning for the service gives an opportunity for healthy remembering of the life and for grieving the loss of the deceased. The goals of the service are to honor the life of the loved one, as well as to encourage the family, friends, and community to continue living with meaning, hope, and purpose. The funeral meditation is an opportunity to reflect on the purpose of life with reference to God as Creator, Christ as Redeemer, and the Spirit as Comforter. Finding a central metaphor suggested by the life of the person being memorialized can give focus to the meditation and encouragement to the grieving family. If a family does not confess faith in Christ, they may be open to brief but challenging words of comfort and hope based on the message of God's grace in Christ. The pastor must take care not to violate trust by using someone's sorrow as a pulpit for hard-edged judgment or opportunistic evangelism. At the same time, the pastor must not project a notion of "cheap grace." Many have found that clearly articulating the message of God's grace opens the way for evangelistic opportunities in later conversations with grieving family and friends.

Different areas may have different funeral customs. It is important for a pastor to be aware of cultural and regional sensitivities. Some prefer to practice a more intimate burial service followed by a public memorial service. Others insist on an open casket at the funeral followed by burial. (For help in planning the funeral, see the Kindred Productions publication *Following the Call*, 138–140.)

Some may have questions about cremation versus burial. Both the Old and New Testaments assume burial as a customary means of laying the body to rest. However, there is no theological issue which would prevent choosing cremation. Sometimes, however, fire is associated with judgment and family sensitivities become the more crucial consideration.

Priorities in Light of the Second Coming

For the watchful Christian, the second advent is a blessed hope. No matter what joys are experienced on earth, they will certainly be eclipsed by the joy of meeting our loving Lord and Savior in the air. Therefore, the watchful and prepared Christian "packs light." We hold lightly to material possessions because we realize that the world and everything in it will wear out and disappear. We exchange the temporal things of this world for eternal gain, thus planting our hearts firmly on heaven's soil. We realize that the Judge will consider how wealth and time were used for God's kingdom, and that hoarding and indulgence will be viewed negatively.

One should be aware that in times of prosperity and wealth, interest in prophecy and Christ's return tends to be diminished. Where hardship and persecution or their prospect become the norm, the longing for Jesus' coming usually intensifies. Those living in times of greater ease and prosperity are more likely to be caught off guard at Christ's appearing.

Just as death can be unexpected, the watchful believer understands that Christ's coming will surprise many. No one knows or can know when God will give the final signal. From time to time, especially during times of millennial fervor, self-proclaimed prophets set dates as specific as a certain day or as general as a certain year. No attention should be paid to such speculations regardless of the means employed to predict the time of Jesus' return. Such predictions are not only presumptuous, but thoroughly unbiblical. Only the Father knows the time.

However, we do well to study the nature of the events which will signal the coming of the end. Biblical prophecy should be studied in balance with the rest of Scripture. Ignorance of it may result in lack of readiness. Making it the prime focus over an extended time often leads to excesses, skewed perspectives, and even division. It can result in a people who are "so heavenly minded they are of no earthly good."

Watchful believers are aware that the battle for the minds and souls of people will intensify. Deceptive signs and wonders will be the catalyst for some to turn away (Matt. 24:24). Alert Christians will avoid being mesmerized by flash and sizzle, but will rather seek after the will of God for their lives. The message God has given us in His Son is more than sufficient to live a Spirit-filled life.



If we are watchful and living in right relationship with God and others, our priorities will not need dramatic last-minute realignment. Prepared lives are characterized by alertness and self-discipline. These attitudes find their expression in lives of prayer, purity, and sacrificial service (Matt. 25:31-46).

A Perspective of Peace

Another characteristic of a believer who has an end-time perspective is peace. Christ's triumphal return at the end of this age is a quiet assurance in a world of political turmoil and economic uncertainty. The fast pace of changing world events, wars and bombs, genetic manipulation, crime, or large-scale atrocities may lead one to conclude that the world is out of control. To know that God hasn't abandoned this world to fate or to the whims of humans but to a triumphant, climactic victory over the destructive forces of evil is a source of great comfort. As Christians we are assured through our faith that God's plan remains secure. God tolerates human disobedience for the time being, but overall control is never in question. Every pastor has occasions in public teaching or private counseling to reassure believers that the final reign of God is sure.

A similar sense of calm prevails when faced with questions of personal injustice. Revenge and retaliation are not ours to carry out. These are God's domain. We know that God sees every abuse that occurs and will bring about a greater justice than we could ever accomplish. With this knowledge we find it possible to forgive, releasing individuals to God's care.

This does not mean that we take a passive stance toward all matters of injustice. Where people are oppressed, we seek to intervene on their behalf. We do not believe we can create the millennial kingdom through human effort, but we work for justice because we belong to such a kingdom.

With the end in view, we also face hardship of various kinds with considerable perseverance and hope. We know that suffering is a given for this world only and that in the next there will be no tears. Our pain is a tool which God may use to shape us into the masterpiece He desires.

Our society is focused on success. Every person is encouraged to set goals and plans for the future. These plans may include economic freedom or personal fulfillment. Often the greatest void in these pursuits is spiritual commitment. In this climate, the hope of heaven and the assurance of heavenly rewards can be an incentive for focused living. "Therefore encourage each other with these words" (1 Thess. 4:18).

