

Reclaiming Funerals as Christian Worship
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Introduction: A Brief Travelogue to New Orleans and Old Salem



Presenting Questions

Does there have to be such a discrepancy between the remarkable, gospel-centered, hope-proclaiming, death-defying classic Christian funeral liturgies and the actual practice of so many contemporary Christian funerals?

Leonard J. Vander Zee, *In Life and In Death*. CRC Publications/Faith Alive.

The Funeral: A Service of Witness to the Resurrection. Supplemental Liturgical Resource No. 4. Westminster Press, 1986.

Book of Common Worship. Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993.

Goals for This Session

1. To encourage each of you to set up a council discussion, adult education sessions about this topic (note: to change, even if to deepen, our practices in the context of the volatile emotions surrounding death is not likely, and may be very counter-productive),
2. To encourage each of you to select the very best books for your persona and church libraries (one of the best ways to deepen practice is to make the best resources the most available),
3. To plant the seeds of some constructive questions that can ferment a bit in each of our lives over the next several months.
4. To gently encourage our reclamation of a) funeral in church, b) use of baptismal palls—or other symbolic acts of baptismal identity, including Rom. 6:3-5, c) funeral Lord's Supper, d) public committal services, e) retitling funerals as "A Service of Witness to the Resurrection."

STARTING POINTS AND ASSUMPTIONS

*Funerals “are in no way beneficial to the dead and have proved many ways hurtful to the living”
—Westminster Directory for the Public Worship of God*

1. A funeral is something so very small in the face of the abyss of death. But the love of God is, finally, greater than death. The significance of a funeral lies in the unique opportunity it affords to rest in the love of God.
2. In many circumstances, mourners are not able to participate fully even if they are fully present. A great deal of the value of a funeral is found in participant’s memory of it later. A funeral is, in this way, a little like planting a seed, the fruits of which we may not see immediately (or ever).
3. We all bring our own experiences into this session. In articulating a case for some changes in practice, I do not want to undermine the significance of your own experiences, including very positive experiences with practices that are quite different than I am proposing or promoting.
4. Every funeral service is shaped by local community customs, practices of local morticians and funeral homes, the particular circumstances of the death, family hopes and desires—all in the context of a very short period of preparation between death and a funeral service. For pastors, this means that that default “liturgy” that we have in our hearts and minds (and hard-drives) is even more important. Rather than start from scratch, begin with a template that can be adapted easily.
5. More and more, we must become familiar with funeral and burial customs in various cultures, around the world and right around the corner. . . See, for example, Anne Zaki’s article, “**Funerals in Egypt: Grieving in Community.**” (www.calvin.edu/worship).

CHANGING PRACTICES (1960 to 2008)

1. from dread of death to celebration of hope
2. from suppressed lament to expressed lament
3. from one-size-fits-all to customized services
4. from a funeral-centered observance to a funeral home or visitation-centered communal observance
5. from a cemetery-based sense of place (esp. churchyard cemeteries) to a transient sense of place
6. from a family-based observance to a church-based observance back to a family-based observance
7. from a funeral as an act of worship to funeral as a form of eulogy
8. others?

A generation ago, our weakness may have been in expressing genuine lament and acknowledging grief. Today, our main weakness may be with allowing adequate time and attention on our baptismal identity in Jesus, Jesus’ own resurrection, the resurrection of the body. (Still, realize that this assessment is broad, and does not apply to all communities equally).

PURPOSES OF A FUNERAL

<u>A Typical Cultural View</u>	<u>A Typical Christian Account</u>	<u>A More Robust Christian Account</u>
Facilitate the grief process	Express grief in community	Grief becomes lament directed to the Lord, we direct our grief to God, we practice placing this grief in God’s hands, we rehearse God’s solidarity with the grieving.
Remember/honor the deceased and their family	Remember the deceased in community	What we remember includes not only their good qualities, their foibles, but also their baptismal identity. The funeral is an echo of baptism (Rom. 6:3-4).
	Declare gospel hope in community	On the basis of scripture, we announce the death-defying good news of Jesus’ resurrection, and declare our specific hope in the resurrection of the body.

- This means that funerals will have some “pivot points” in them. Some of those pivot points may emerge as the service unfolds, the context of complex and competing emotions. But they can also helpfully be prepared for.
- Ideally, funerals accomplish all three purposes, with sufficient time in each to allow people to enter that emotion.
- Consider using this chart be used as a kind of or planning or assessment tool. Ask how much time each basic purpose
- Titling the funeral “A Service of Witness to the Resurrection” privileges the third purpose, which—arguably—is the most culturally contested

So what needs to be “reclaimed”?

- The “horizontal”—the role of the church, the body of Christ.
- The “vertical”—the idea that we conduct a funeral before God’s face, that a funeral is grounded in acts of prayer (us to God) and scripture and proclamation (God to us).

In places where these are quite in tact, perhaps they don’t need to be reclaimed, but they still can be celebrated and reinforced.

BASIC PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

1. A default pattern

Gathering: Scriptural Words, Greeting/Welcome, Hymn(s), Prayers of Grief,
(Confession/Assurance)

Word: Scripture, Sermon, Creed

Prayer: (Remembrances) and Prayers of Thanksgiving, Petition
(Table)

Committal and Parting:

2. Preaching practices

“When all is said and done, we do not preach at funerals primarily to provide comfort... And we are not there to explain why all of this happened... we are not there to supply spiritual solemnity to an already somber situation. What we are there to do is to unmask a lie. . . . Funeral sermons, then, are not merely messages of comfort; they are words of combat.”

--Thomas G. Long, “Telling the Truth about Death and Life: Preaching at Funerals,” Journal for Preachers 20.3 (Easter 1997), 4-5.

- Room for both “favorite passages of the family”/deceased, but also “texts to unmask the lie of death” fitting for gospel proclamation on that day.
- Scripture texts that not only depict faith/personality of the person, but also confront death with a witness to the resurrection.

3. Prayer Practices

Room for familiar words.

- Use of some set prayers that reflect great care in expressing (not always possible in the moment), and also that mourners can return to after the service.
- Room for multiple elements/modes of prayer, adequately distinguished so that participants can dwell with them.

4. Music and Artistic Expression

- Balanced diet of songs of lament, songs of comfort, songs of resurrection hope
- Balance of the familiar (most) and the occasional (perhaps 1)

5. Other practices

- Creeds, statement of faith
- What about eulogies, testimonials, remembrances? (Consider them as prefaces to prayer, a kind of extended “prayer request time” ?)
- Placing of the pall
- Prayers of confession (re our unwillingness to confront death, our own issues with the deceased, etc.)

6. Pre-planning Questions

- Toward a new set of questions. Not merely “what songs would you like sung,” but instead “could you identify one song of lament, one song of comfort, and one song of resurrection hope that could be appropriate for your family’s funeral? (perhaps to be selected from a list)”

Other, Broader Issues

1. new forms of cultural Gnosticism

“When I remember the vague, bodiless, drifting, mapless, storyless quality of the Central Park ceremony in memory of the cremated John Lennon—when 100,000 people observed 10 minutes of silence during which a cluster of white balloons floated toward the sky as a sign of John’s departing essence, and Yoko Ono celebrated the triumph of spirituality over materiality by testifying that she ‘saw John smiling in the sky’—then I know that I will gladly pick up the corner of a heavy coffin bearing the body of someone I love and trudge, grunting under the load, across the muddy churchyard where I can stand before an open grave to hear once again, “Behold, I tell you a mystery. We shall all be changed.”

—Thomas G. Long, in “Why Cremation?” *Christian Century* (Jan. 30-Feb 6, 2002), p. 33.

2. the diminishing significance of the funeral for community life

Given that so many people attend visitations at funeral home and not the funeral, might we think about new forms of corporate prayer at the visitation (e.g., a brief vigil prayer service at the close of visitation that includes a Psalm, a brief scripture reading on our baptismal identity, and a prayer).

3. What does this mean for weekly worship practices? Do our weekly worship practices adequately form Christian communities for our inevitable encounters with death?

Resources

<http://www.calvin.edu/worship/services/occasion/funerals/>

Featured Resources

[Accompany Them with Singing: The Recovery of Authentic Christian Funeral Practices](#)

Thomas G. Long

[Christian Funerals: Going to be with God](#)

Vital Worship feature story

[Funerals in Egypt: Grieving in Community](#)

Anne Zaki

[“In Times of Death”: Resources for Funeral/Memorial Services](#)

Howard Vanderwell and Norma de Waal Malefyt

[How Common Worship Forms Us for Our Encounter with Death](#)

John D. Witvliet

[In Life and in Death: A Pastoral Guide for Funerals](#) (www.faithaliveresources.org)

Leonard Vander Zee

[When Someone Dies: Questions about Funeral Practices and Traditions](#) (www.reformedworship.org)

Leonard Vander Zee

Funerals (see also resources listed on p. 1)

Several articles in *Reformed Worship*

Thomas G. Long, “The Funeral Changing Patterns and Teachable Moments,” *Journal for Preachers* 19.3 (Easter 1996): 3-8.

Paul Waitman Hoon, “Theology, Death, and the Funeral Liturgy,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, XXXI/3 (Spring 1976): 169-181.

John Allyn Melloh, “Homily or Eulogy? The Dilemma of Funeral Preaching,” *Worship* 67 (1993): 502-518.

Virginia Sloyan, *A Sourcebook About Christian Death* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1990).

Christian Perspectives on Death and Dying

http://www.practicingourfaith.org/prct_dying_ways_books.html

Amy Plantinga Pauw, “Dying Well” in *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for Searching People*, ed. Dorothy C. Bass (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1997).

Helmut Thielicke. *Living with Death*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983.

John D. Witvliet, in *Worship Seeking Understanding: Windows Into Christian Practice* (Baker Academic, 2004).

Broad reflections on death and dying in contemporary culture and/or historical perspective

Stephen Prothero, *Purified by Fire: A History of Cremation in America*. U. of California Press.

Thomas Lynch. *The Undertaking: Life Studies from the Dismal Trade*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1997.

Jessica Mitford. *The American Way of Death (1963), and The American Way of Death Revisited (New York: Knopf, 1998)*.

David Wendell Moller, *Confronting Death: Values, Institutions, and Human Mortality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).