

Conducting Funerals

By Bill Scheidler

I. Introduction

The subject of death is not one that is handled very well by most people. The word “morbid” speaks of the sensitive nature of death. There is something about death that levels us all. For this reason, the funeral service can be one of the most challenging services for the pastor to perform. One of the reasons it is so challenging is that the pastor is often the officiant for the service and at the same time a mourner.

In spite of this, however, because death is something that will touch every family the funeral experience is one of the greatest opportunities that we have to minister to people at a very deep level.

And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment, so Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many. To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation. Hebrews 9:27-28

Every death that takes place forces us to be reminded of two unchangeable realities.

A. The fact of death

Every man, woman and child who is born into the world will ultimately die. The fact is that only two people in history have not died (Enoch and Elijah). That means that billions have died and more will die, both the godly and the ungodly. No matter how much you care for your body or how much you try to extend your life through natural means you will not escape your appointment with death.

B. The fact of judgment

A second fact is that every man, woman and child will ultimately face judgment after death. Believers who die will face the Judgment Seat of Christ and unbelievers will face the Great White Throne judgment. No amount of rationalization or denial of an afterlife will change this reality. After death it is too late to prepare for death.

II. What is the purpose of the funeral service?

Different cultures have many different practices associated with death. Some of these practices are very ungodly and based on a lack of understanding of spiritual realities. However, many practices surrounding the death of a loved one can be very meaningful and can provide a great benefit to the living. The funeral service has value for six reasons.

A. It is the final act of recognition for a life lived.

People are honored at various points in their life where notable events occur. These are special times that God gives us to reinforce certain truths. These events include

such things as birthdays, graduation days, promotions, wedding days, anniversaries, retirements and even deaths. The funeral service is a final act of recognition for this life lived. The service is not held for the sake of honoring the person who has died, but it is for the purpose of strengthening those who are alive.

- B. It is to help loved ones face the reality of their loss.

It is not uncommon for someone who has experienced the loss of a person who has been very close to them to feel that what is going on around them is not really happening. They believe that it is all a bad dream from which they will awaken. In some cases they imagine that their loved one will walk through the door and everything will be back to the way it was. The funeral service helps to bring a sense of finality and opens the door for quicker recovery.

- C. It is a time for friends and relatives to share love and support.

Having a service at a specific place and time affords loved ones from various geographical locations a focal point where they can grieve together and reminisce together. Without such a service it is very unlikely that such a gathering would take place or that people would make the effort to come together. At times like these people can reconnect with the living for the purpose of comfort, healing and even reconciliation.

- D. It is a time to highlight and affirm the life message of the life lived.

Every person is a living epistle (II Cor. 3:3). That is, every person has certain distinctive things about them that become their life message. The Bible instructs us that we are to learn from the example of others (I Cor. 10:6, 11; Heb. 13:7). The funeral service is a time to highlight the life message of the loved one and to be sure that we have heard what his or her life preached.

- E. It is a time to comfort believers in the hope of the resurrection (Ps. 116:15).

Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of His saints.

Believers need not see death as an enemy. Death is indeed a fact of life, but Christ has overcome both death and hell. The funeral service is a time to remind believers of the saving grace that has come to us in Jesus Christ and the blessed hope that we have of an eternity spent with all believers of all time. The funeral service is sometimes referred to as a “home-going” service because of the heavenly home that has been prepared for all believers.

- F. It is a time to challenge all men with sacredness of life and the necessity of living it for God (Ps. 90:12).

So teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.

The funeral service is a time to remind us once again of the gift of life that has been given to us and the fact that the gift of life is a stewardship from God for which we will give an account. At most funeral services unbelievers will be present. It is

important that at this vulnerable time they have an opportunity to hear the Gospel one more time. It is important that pastors exercise sensitivity to the desires of the immediate family in this context, but the message of the Gospel should be clear. Remember, the service is for the living and not the dead.

III. What is the pastor to do when a death takes place?

A. Visit the home (or place of death) as soon as possible.

This is one of those times where the pastor should drop everything and run. However, when you arrive be calm and be sensitive.

1. Be prepared to share a comforting scripture (Rom. 15:4).

For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.

2. Be prepared to offer words of encouragement and hope (Phil 2:1; II Th. 2:16-17).

Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and our God and Father, who has loved us and given us everlasting consolation and good hope by grace, comfort your hearts and establish you in every good word and work.

3. Be prepared to be still, listen and weep (Rom. 12:15). This is not a time to adjust or correct.

4. Be prepared to handle unexpected and even negative responses. Some typical responses include:

- a. Bewilderment—What should I do?
- b. Hopelessness—What am I going to do now?
- c. Anger—Why did God let this happen to me?
- d. Resentment—Why did my beloved do this to me?

5. Be prepared to pray together with those present.

B. Assist in making immediate decisions (if no prior arrangements have been made).

Most people have never been so close to a death where they are the one who has to make decisions in this context. No one gets good at this process. The pastor, however, can guide them and even accompany them through the process pastoring them every step of the way. Never force your preferences upon them.

1. Selection and notification of funeral home

It is advisable for the pastor to have developed a relationship with one or two funeral homes and their directors so that they can give an informed recommendation to those who have not made any previous arrangements.

2. Notification of relatives and close friends

In order to take stress off of the bereaved, the pastor can assist in organizing callers to notify those who need to know.

C. Be ready to follow-up in the days preceding the funeral.

1. Accompany them to the funeral home and help them to make the decisions that will be required.

These are subjects that no one likes to think about when it comes to close family members. However, they are decisions that have to be made and, unfortunately, they have to be made in a relatively timely manner.

Most funeral directors and their staff are very good with people at this point. However, it must be remembered that they are not the person's pastor and ultimately funeral service is a business for them. In some cases they will try to oversell product and service that is really unnecessary. The pastor needs to constantly remind the grieving that we cannot do anything more for the person that has died. At this point we need to think about the living.

The following are many of the decisions that will be made with the funeral director:

- a. Where the service will be held (church, home, funeral hall)?
- b. When it will be held (day, hour)? Is the venue available at that time?
- c. Who is to participate in service (preach, play, sing, etc.)?
- d. Who will be the pallbearers?
- e. Will there be a burial or cremation?
- f. Will there be a grave side service and procession?
- g. Assisting with casket selection.
- h. Assisting with gravesite arrangements.

2. Call daily prior to the service for help and support.

3. Send or give a card with a personal note. Give some serious thought to your comments. This card will be something that they will cherish; that they will read many times and that will be a constant reminder to them of where they can go for help.

4. Reserve necessary rooms and notify participants (especially if held in church).

5. Provide assistance in regard to housing and meals for out-of-town guests.

6. Make sure flowers are sent from the church.

7. Look for opportunities to minister to other family members and friends.

It should be noted that the pastor does not have to do all of these things personally, but the church should be mobilized to minister in these ways.

IV. How does the pastor prepare for the funeral service?

- A. Ask for the Bible of the deceased a few days in advance.

The Bible of the deceased will often give you insight into the person and their relationship with the Lord. Look for underlined passages, notes written in the margin and other items that are found in its pages. During the service you can highlight these things and it can be as if the message is coming from the deceased themselves.

An example of this was the Bible of a man by the name of Jack Talbott. In the front of his Bible in his own handwriting were these words, "I, Jack Talbott, being of sound mind do hereby vow to live by the words of this book all of the days of my life."

- B. Ask the relatives for comments about the deceased to get a personal perspective.
1. Obvious strengths/character qualities
 2. Favorite songs
 3. What they remember the most
 4. Last words
- C. Ask immediate family for desires concerning the actual service (length, message, etc.).
- D. Ask God to give you the appropriate word of comfort to share.
- E. Arrange the order of service. The service *may* include some or all of the following:
1. Congregational singing
 2. Prayers
 3. Special music
 4. Testimony of close friend or family member (Eulogy).
 5. An open microphone for selected persons to share.
 6. Exhortation and comfort
 7. Scripture reading
 8. Obituary
 9. Dismissal
- F. Call the funeral home to inform them of the approximate length of the service. You should be careful about the time. You can be too short to do the person justice, but you can also be too long.

V. How should the order of service be arranged?

Many variations are acceptable in the service depending on the preferences of the family, but a general order would be as follows:

- A. Opening prayer and scripture reading
- B. Special musical number and/or congregational singing.

Congregational singing should only be used where a good segment of the attendees are believers. Song selection should include well-known songs.
- C. Brief testimonial and obituary concerning the deceased
- D. Exhortation and words of comfort
- E. Special musical number
- F. Closing prayer and benediction
- G. Announcement regarding procession or grave side committal (This information may also be in the funeral bulletin).
- H. Dismissal

It is good to print up several copies of the order of service for the funeral directors and other participants in the service to use as a reference as the service progresses.

VI. What is the pastor's role at the graveside service?

Not all funerals end with a graveside service. This is especially true when the remains are cremated. However, when there is such a service the following guidelines would apply.

- A. Be a strength to the family—ready to comfort.
- B. Read an appropriate scripture (e.g. I Cor. 15:20-28; I Th. 4:13-18; Rev. 21:1-7; Psalm 23).
- C. Read an appropriate committal.

Then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it. Ecclesiastes 12:7

1. Committal for the Unsaved

Inasmuch as it has pleased God in His infinite wisdom and providence to remove from this world the soul of _____, we commit his (her) body to the ground, earth to earth, dust to dust, ashes to ashes, there to await the Day of Resurrection, when the earth and the sea will give up their dead, to appear before the Lord Jesus Christ, the Righteous Judge of the living and the dead.

2. Committal for the Saved:

Inasmuch as it has pleased God in His infinite wisdom and providence to remove from this world the soul of _____, we commit his (her) body to the ground, earth to earth, dust to dust, ashes to ashes, there to await the glorious appearing of Our Lord Jesus Christ, when at His coming the earth and the sea will give up the righteous dead, and the bodies of those who sleep in Jesus shall be raised and made like His glorious body.

3. Committal for a Crematory Service

. . . we commit his (her) body to the elements, awaiting the day of the resurrection, when the dead shall appear before the Lord Jesus Christ

2. Committal for a Vault or Tomb Burial

. . . we commit his (her) body to the tomb, awaiting the day of the resurrection, when the dead shall appear before the Lord Jesus Christ

D. Close with prayer.

E. Allow the family to take their time.

VII. What should be done when the service is over?

A. Be open and sensitive to the needs of relatives.

B. Call several times in the weeks ahead.

C. Volunteer services in helping sort out affairs and disposing of personal possessions of deceased (be sensitive here).

D. Be ready to suggest ways in which that person can fill the obvious vacuum.

VIII. What about honorariums for participants?

Do not refuse honorariums that are given. Usually these areas are covered in the overall funeral package for which they have made arrangements. Most people value your involvement and help a great deal, but they do not know how else to say it but to give a monetary gift. On the other hand, if they do not offer an honorarium, please do not mention it.