

Restoring the Christian Funeral

BY CHARLES W. CHRISTIAN

Futile attempts to deny death and escape from dying pervade our society. The two books reviewed here seek to restore a distinctively Christian voice to how we understand the dying process and death, and how we articulate their meaning in the funeral service.

The first funeral I officiated was for my beloved grandmother who died at ninety-three years of age. As the pastor in the family and her oldest grandson, I felt a special obligation to make sure not only that she was honored, but also that her faith in Christ, lived out in a small East Texas community for over eighty years, was well represented. An inexperienced pastor, overcome with grief myself, I struggled to bring comfort to others. I felt sorely inadequate.

Fortunately, many elements of the funeral service made the job of officiating this important home-going possible for me: she had died with her family near her, she had prepared for death and said her goodbyes, her Methodist congregation and family members had spoken honestly about the nearness of her death, many congregants gathered for the viewing of her body and the funeral service itself, and two ministers not only shared fond memories but also proclaimed how her story wove into the redemptive gospel of Christ. Somehow, we all grieved and celebrated at the same time.

Twenty years have passed since my grandmother's home-going, but I still struggle to officiate at funerals, primarily because of how we as Americans and Christians have come to approach death. Too often the elements of personal, family, and church community preparation that allowed my grandmother's funeral to fit into the context of her life and the congregation she served are entirely absent. In many cases the deceased's body is absent

from the funeral, or memorial. Their death was often lonely, with family members, friends, and even church family members relegating the dying loved one to a hospital room or nursing home. The funerals focus much on the life and “legacy” of the departed, but the gospel hope of resurrection and the worship of God are mere whispers in the service.

“Christ comes into the world to teach men how to die,” the Christian historian and theologian Jaroslav Pelikan observes, for Christ calls people to “accept their mortality and, by accepting it, to live through him.”¹ This affirmation of a Christian approach to life and death brings into view the dilemma of contemporary approaches to dying. For instance, the cover story of a recent *Time* magazine issue entitled “How to Die” decries Americans for denying the reality of death and focusing their attention on seemingly endless medical attempts at resuscitation. Drawing on the experience of witnessing his parents’ dying, author Joe Klein complains: “Doctors are trained to do whatever they can to save a patient, even an elderly one, and that is an excellent thing. But the Hippocratic impulse [“Do no harm”] has been subtly undermined by the rewards of fee-for-service medicine...” These and other factors “militate in favor of ordering the extra MRI or blood test or dialysis for a patient who probably has only weeks to live.”² Ironically we greatly prolong the dying process while isolating dying persons from view and failing to acknowledge death in funeral services.

In response to this cultural denial of death, the Church’s hope of resurrection and community support for the dying and the grieving can be good news indeed. The two books reviewed here — *Speaking of Dying* and *Accompany Them with Singing* — seek to restore a distinctively Christian voice to how we understand the dying process and death, and how we collectively articulate their meaning in the funeral service.



In the forward to Fred Craddock, Dale Goldsmith, and Joy V. Goldsmith’s *Speaking of Dying: Recovering the Church’s Voice in the Face of Death* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2012, 240 pp. \$19.99), Stanley Hauerwas notes that physicians’ insistent, alluring promise of “another procedure” to stave off death has moved dying and death from the province of community — specifically, the Church, which the authors describe as “the community of believers who have *already died* and are already in a new life and equipped to face physical dying in a radical new way” (pp. xvii-xix) — to the province of medicine. Consequently, Hauerwas laments, “The essential story — the story of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ — that should form our dying as well as our living as Christians seems to have been lost” (p. x).

The authors allow church members to speak for themselves in this book. They begin with the stories of ten pastors who were diagnosed with a terminal illness and died while serving their congregations. One of the

narratives describes the dying of Janet Forts Goldsmith, the daughter of Dale Goldsmith, sister of Joy Goldsmith, and a former seminary student of their co-author Fred Craddock. Although the authors acknowledge the “unique circumstances of a dying pastor,” they argue that these extreme examples highlight “the modern church’s inadequacy in serving the dying and their families” (p. 2).

This book does not decry the positive contributions of modern medicine, but it warns that the realities of dying and death are more easily avoided and individualized in our medically advanced society. The authors explain, “Many Americans today see technology as an escape from the inevitability of death and believe that technological advances will fix any bodily damage suffered throughout their lives.” They identify three causes that contribute to the societal denial of death: lack of awareness about the dying process, high expectations of the medical profession’s ability to heal, and “the change from community-based religion to individualized religion” (p. 3). These factors are abundantly illustrated in the narratives of the ten pastors.

The Goldsmiths and Craddock interviewed congregants, church leaders, interim pastors, and denominational leaders in ten churches that experienced the dying and death of their minister. From these interviews the authors identify the problems covered in this book and glean insights for how churches can recapture a working theology of death and dying that witnesses to the hope found in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The main problem involves how the ministers’ illnesses were communicated to the congregations. In each case there was a lack of clarity and forthrightness regarding the illness that affected the church’s approach to the minister’s workload (p. 10). In some congregations even talk about reducing the workload was taken as a sign of defeat, regardless of the physical toll of the work on the minister and the psychological toll on the congregation.

The pattern of overall avoidance of their minister’s terminal illness was indicative of deeper problems in church life. “Not only are these dying pastors denied the ministry of the church when they all—including the church—need it most, the larger mission and goal of the church to minister to the needs of the world is delivered a blow from which it is almost

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impossible to recover” (p. 11). Most of the ten churches studied lost significant membership and resources. A chart tracing the impact in the ten churches shows their decline extended up to ten years beyond the death of the minister.

The foundation of the authors’ Christ-centered response to these sometimes disastrous church narratives is found in the second chapter which contrasts the “Christian story” of death with the “secular story.” The Church is not a voluntary organization gathering around a specific cause or set of affirmations, rather it is God’s reborn community where all facets of life, including dying and death, become intertwined with God’s redemptive story. Chapter three traces Jesus’ “dying process” and death, from his first announcements to the disciples all the way to his crucifixion. This Christological outline provides the basis for renewed theological language and practices to face death biblically in a culture of denial.

In the middle chapters there are many helpful suggestions of how congregations can heighten members’ awareness of what dying entails, listen to the dying and the grieving without avoidance or deflection, and minister to them as the body of Christ through worship and care that addresses death in a redemptive fashion.

The final chapter, “A Good Dying,” introduces the acronym TABLE (which brings to mind the open table fellowship of Christ) for the five “useful tools” of communication that inform a congregation’s renewed voice: Talk, Awareness, Body of Christ, Listening deeply, and Eucharist. The first two tools – talk and awareness – can help congregations overcome the deafening silence and denial that often accompanies dying and death in the wider culture. They should not be afraid to speak about death, because their hope is in Christ’s resurrection. Their intentional awareness of the dying process, which stands in contrast to the cultural denial of death through hope in “one more treatment,” motivates specific actions to comfort the dying and grieving, and to prepare the community of faith to turn its eyes upon God, who is guiding them from death to life. The last three tools – the Body of Christ, listening deeply, and the Eucharist – are reminders that all discipleship beginning with baptism is linked to death and the proclamation of death’s defeat. These tools, passed down for generations in the Church, help us provide to and receive from one another the comfort found in Christ. Useful tables in this final chapter suggest specific congregational practices that make full use of these tools. These tables move the book from an academic exercise in the theology of dying to a helpful reference for pastors and congregations in ministering to the dying and the grieving.



If *Speaking of Dying* is a healthy guide for us to regain the Christian theology of death and dying, Thomas G. Long’s *Accompany Them with Singing: The Christian Funeral* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2009, 232 pp., \$12.98)

reminds us that the funeral service is a very practical outworking of this theology. Over the centuries the Church's theology of dying, death, and resurrection has shaped the development of the Christian funeral.

In the five chapters of the first part of the book, entitled "Background," Long explains how the Christian funeral, like the life of a believer, is to be marked by "simplicity, majesty, and the gathering of people" (p. xii). The simplicity of a Christian death and funeral service stand in stark contrast to the secular emphases on pageantry and ostentatious materialism. The majesty of the Christian funeral derives from the fact that the believer is a child of God. This majestic truth, according to Long, is not intended to cause separation from others, but to bear witness to the truth that "to follow Jesus, then, is to walk the royal road intended for all humanity, 'a way in the wilderness' (Isa. 43:19) toward God marked out for all people" (p. xii).

The communal act of Christian baptism begins the believer's journey which is marked by simplicity and majesty; its mirror, Christian funeral, should also be a communal act. Even Christians who die in the solitude of a modern nursing home or hospital bed are "surrounded by the prayers of the church, and they will be carried to God by the faithful, singing songs and hymns as they go" (p. xiii).

Long admits there does not exist today, nor has there ever been, a "perfect model" for a Christian funeral. Nevertheless, he sets out to eliminate some stumbling blocks to providing a healthy funeral, and gives examples of what a Christian funeral should be. Just as orthodoxy finds many modes of expression within the theological boundaries of the Church, so too can the funerals of believers reflect key doctrinal and historical emphases that allow them to be rightly called "Christian." Key chapters critique trends in American funeral practices that eliminate important rituals surrounding death and dying (chapter 1), decrease contact with the body of the deceased (chapter 2), and relegate the funeral service to the status of a personal memorial rather than an act of worship (chapters 4 and 5).

The third chapter, "The Future of the Dead in Christ," is a crucial theological reminder that the funeral of a believer revolves around telling two stories: the sad story of the severing of earthly bonds between the deceased brother or sister and the community, and the hope-filled story of Christ's resurrection that allows the deceased brother or sister to be carried "to the arms of God" (p. 46). Therefore, hiding the painful reality of an individual's death (in the manner of some contemporary memorial services) risks trivializing the second story about the reality of God's intervention through Christ to defeat death.

It is at this point that Long briefly addresses the idea of the "intermediate state," or the situation of the deceased after earthly death and before the resurrection. He concludes that regardless of the details of our theology about this, we must not deny the physicality of the resurrection (for example, by adopting a Platonist view of eternal souls), just as we must not ignore the

reality of the body at death. Such an escape from physicality shuns the God-given journey of the believer that includes birth and baptism and culminates in the community's recognition of the goodness of God's creation despite mortal decay.

Long insists that the Christian funeral should have an eschatological bent. By this he means that the service should closely examine the "goal" of the Christian life which completes the "Christian journey" that begins with baptism. Funeral practices that either distance us from the deceased's body or simply memorialize the deceased's life (and, thereby, fail to acknowledge the final part of the earthly journey and the hope of resurrection) tend to trivialize both life and death.

Four chapters in the second part of the book, "The Church's Ministry in Death," delineate practical steps for congregations to provide a Christian funeral. Like the authors of *Speaking of Dying*, Tom Long believes congregations need to move from denial to a truthful embrace of the dying process and death. Long describes tasks related to the final days of life (Chapter 6), funeral planning which is consistent with Christian theology (chapters 7 and 8), and key elements of funeral sermons (chapter 9).

In the chapter titled "The Marks of a Good Funeral" Long writes, "A good funeral is something that the people of God must do together. It is not a pastoral soliloquy; it is an ensemble performance" (p. 122). The performance includes a holy people, a holy place, and a "holy script": "The funeral is not about some friends of Bob going to the church to be with Bob's memory, but about Bob going to be with God" (p. 136). For the story of the deceased (which plays a legitimate role in the funeral story) to be more than the story of death's victory, it must also be the story of Christ's resurrection that "stakes out a victory over death" (p. 137).

Particularly useful for Christian pastors is the appendix dealing with the topic of "difficult funerals." This section addresses theological and practical approaches to funerals of children, suicide victims, and others whose deaths are particularly devastating for a community.³



As believers in Christ we enter God's family by dying and being born again in baptism. *Speaking of Dying* and *Accompany Them with Singing* remind us of the profound theology of death this entails. They also remind us of the futile attempts to deny death and escape from dying that pervade our society; Christian congregations trapped in this cultural milieu develop a "crown without a cross" mentality that can only end in materialism, emptiness, and a kind of living death that has no means of embracing resurrected life. Without a real death, there can be no true resurrection.⁴ Death remains a real and often mysterious foe, but these works guide us to proclaim that death is now a defeated foe.

NOTES

1 Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Shape of Death: Life, Death and Immortality in the Early Fathers* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1961), 55.

2 Joe Klein, "The Long Goodbye," *Time* (June 11, 2012), www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2116137-1,00.html (accessed May 20, 2013).

3 On the subject of practical resources for planning funerals services, I can recommend two helpful collections of prayers and liturgies: Andy Langford, ed., *Christian Funerals* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2010); and Paul Sheppy, ed., *In Sure and Certain Hope: Liturgies, Prayers, and Readings for Funerals and Memorials* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2003).

4 See Karl Barth's discussion of Christian doctrinal beliefs regarding death in "Was Crucified, Dead, and Buried, He Descended into Hell," *Dogmatics in Outline* (New York: Harper and Row, 1959), 114-120.



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