

Appendix J- Funerals “Preparations”

Introduction: Funerals may scare you, but they are actually a glorious time for ministry. Other occasions on which you will see the power of the Gospel and the effectiveness of your ministry so readily apparent may be rare compared to the occasions of ministry in time of grief.

Funerals-Part One

I. Resources that Will Help You Know What to Do

- A. A Book of Common Worship
- B. Your denomination’s Directory for Worship
- C. Lloyd Perry’s *Manual for Biblical Preaching*
- D. Andrew Blackwood’s classic *The Funeral*
- E. *Leadership Handbook of Practical Theology, vol. 1*. James Berkeley, ed. Baker, 1992.

II. What to Do Upon News of a Death

A. Drop everything and go to the family immediately

1. “Nothing” takes precedence over this
2. Family may be at deceased’s home, or
 - * hospital
 - * nursing home
 - * own home
 - * other?
3. If the death a result of an accident the pastor may be called to help notify the family itself of the death. In such an event, go to the family at whatever time of day or night. Ordinarily you should not telephone such news but tell the family directly.
4. If the death is of an elderly or long-ill person in a hospital or nursing home the family will probably already have indicated where the body should be taken in the event of death. If the death is unexpected one of the family’s first decisions may be which funeral home to use. If you are aware of a reputable place and are present you may offer this information if asked. But, be careful not to appear to be steering “business” toward friends.

B. If appropriate, offer to help with arrangements

1. Offer to help make notification call of relatives, friends, etc.
2. Offer to accompany family to funeral home to make arrangements (this is usually done within the first half-day after the death of a loved one.)

arrangements involve

- a. Forms and family histories to be made out
- b. Decisions about time and place of funeral and visitation (most funerals are in funeral homes these days, but it is certainly appropriate and desirable for many that their funeral be in the church and you should be very accommodating about these desires.)
- c. Decisions about manner and place of burial (burial vs. cremation, mausoleum vs. cemetery, local vs. out-of-town, other?)
- d. Decisions about funeral service vs. memorial service vs. graveside service (ordinarily there is a funeral service followed by a graveside service)
- e. Decisions about costs, caskets, and participants (pall bearers, guest ministers, who is considered family for family seating, etc.)

These can all be very sensitive issues. Families and funeral directors may or may not want your help on these issues. Don’t be offended if your presence is not desired during these decisions. Exit gracefully. Offer help where appropriate. Try

to help people not be taken advantage of in a vulnerable time, but do not impose your wishes on a family. Make sure the decisions are theirs.

f. Decisions about service particulars (music, open or closed casket, placement of casket, who will do the sermon, will there be a eulogy or other eulogizers)

- * Decisions about clothing, jewelry, hairstyle, etc. for the deceased.
- * Decisions about flowers vs. memorial fund
- * Decisions about military rites
- * Other?

* Realize it is not the pastor's job to make any of these decisions nor know all the answers. The pastor's task is only to be available to help the family make these arrangements if the family wants his help. Most often all that is really desired is the pastor's silent supportive presence.

III. What to Do at the Visitation (in some communities known as the "laying out," the "viewing," or the "wake.")

- * The visitation usually occurs the evening and/or morning before the funeral when the people of the community come to the funeral home to "pay their respects" and "offer sympathy" to the family.
- * Typically the body of the deceased is "laid out" for "viewing," which is to say if there has not been a disfiguring illness or disease the casket is open and the family gathers near it to receive those who come.
- * In most communities more persons will come to the visitation than to the funeral (unless the funeral is of a young person or a person of some reputation), because the visitation can be attended briefly and during non-working hours.
 - A. Arrive at the funeral home before the family.
 - B. Greet the family as they arrive and pray (if appropriate)
 - C. When all the family has arrived, lead the family into the room where the remains are "laid out." Though there are difficult services and duties ahead for the family this is probably the most difficult moment of the entire death and burial process. If a family comes "unglued" it may be at the moment that the body of the loved one is seen in a casket for the first time (though this is much more frequently the case with unchurched families than with those who know the Gospel well.) In any case, be available for support, prayer and words of encouragement.
 - D. Stay with the family at least through the time that the first sympathizers arrive to express their condolences to the family.
 - E. In awkward or silent moments during the visitations it is often helpful to inquire if there are any special items or thoughts the family wants included in the funeral service, or if out-of-town family have all arrived and are adequately provided for, or if there is any special service the pastor can provide.
 - * It is usually not helpful for the pastor to fall into mouthing cliché's the family will hear many times over the next several hours (e.g., "He's in a better place now," "The Lord must have needed her more than we did," "Didn't they do a good job?" — meaning the mortician has made the body look natural.
 - F. It may also be a good time tactfully to inquire if the family is planning anything special, unusual or inappropriate for the funeral (e.g., military rites, Masonic rites, unusual music requests, multiple eulogies, etc.). Masonic rites are highly problematic and the pastor's request to separate those services from the Christian services is usually honored without argument. With these issues it is important for the pastor to "steer" the family in healthy directions but ultimate decisions should still be theirs unless the church or the pastor are being asked to endorse what is strictly non-biblical.

- G. Try to avoid saying things that are not true in attempts to comfort. Do not assure a grieving family that a profligate is “in heaven now” if there is not Christian basis for doing so. It is much better to sympathize with a family’s pain than to tell them things that you are not sure are true. For example, you can do much good in good conscience by simply telling a family that you are “sorry for their loss” and that you “grieve for their pain.” Sympathize rather than lie.

IV. What to Do on the Day of the Funeral (many of these instructions assume a casket. Adjustments can easily be made for an urn.)

Do not be at all hesitant or ashamed to ask church members, senior clergy in the community and, most especially, the funeral director what you need to do. Community and regional expectations vary greatly and it is not at all unprofessional to ask for advice when you are new in a church. The funeral director is much more concerned than you are that things go well since his livelihood depends on the appearance of the funerals he directs. No one will be at all concerned if you honestly acknowledge you are new to this community or this task and would like to ask some questions about how things are done.

- A. Arrive at the place of the funeral prior to the family (check to make sure all is as it should be)
 - B. Greet the family as they arrive and pray (if appropriate)
 - C. Lead the family into the room with the coffin or urn.
 - D. Once others begin to arrive you may, if you prefer, seclude yourself to collect your thoughts and make final arrangements with other participants (e.g. other participating pastors or family members) until the service begins.
 - E. Typically, the family will be led out of the main room just before the beginning of the service for the closing of the casket. This is often a good time to pray with the family or offer a word of encouragement for the difficult minutes ahead. (Note: In some Southern and rural communities the casket is closed and taken from the viewing room into the room where the service will be held. In such cases the congregation usually stands as the casket is rolled or borne into the main room.) Occasionally, families will not want the casket closed during the funeral services. Pastors tend to discourage this since it makes the funeral service so maudlin, but the family’s wishes should be observed if they cannot be readily dissuaded.
 - F. When the service is ready to begin the family Funeral Director will be seat the family and will then let the preacher know it is time for him to enter the room.
 - G. The pastor usually enters and seats himself at the front of the room until the conclusion of the prelude.
 - H. At the conclusion of the message the pastor reseats himself. Depending on the community the funeral director may then either
 1. Dismiss the congregation row by row to go out a rear door.
 2. Dismiss the congregation row by row through a front door so that they pass by the casket and the family a final time.
 3. Take the family out first, then remove the casket before any of the congregation is dismissed.
 4. Invite the pall bearers or funeral assistants forward to remove the casket or urn which is then followed by the family and, then, by the congregation.
 5. Other?
 - I. Regardless of the order of the family’s and congregation’s dismissal, if a burial or interment service will immediately follow, the pastor’s task is to precede the casket wherever it moves by four or five paces until it is placed in the hearse.
 - J. The pastor then usually rides in the car that proceeds the hearse to the cemetery or mausoleum.
- V. What to Do at the Graveside (often called a “Gravesite” or “Committal” Service)

- A. When the funeral procession arrives at its destination the pastor goes to the rear of the hearse and when the casket or urn is removed, again precedes the deceased's remains to the grave or crypt. In many regions the congregation that has followed will not advance beyond the hearse until the pall bearers have placed the casket over the grave and the family has advanced to the grave site.
- B. The pastor stands at the head of the casket (usually the west side although it is always advisable to ask the funeral director which is the head if you are unsure) until the family is seated and the people gather around — usually under an awning or tent of some sort if the service is outside.
- C. Wait for the funeral director to indicate it is time for you to begin. He will not signal you to start until all have walked up to the graveside even if this takes some time and most are waiting.
- D. The committal service is outlined in most Books of Common Worship and is usually quite brief. It involves words of committal — “Here we commit the body of our loved one and friend to the grave; the spirit has already gone to the Lord who gave it...” perhaps a short Scripture, a prayer and a benediction. If there is only a graveside service (i.e., no funeral) then a brief message may be given after the words of committal.
- E. After the benediction the service is not over and the funeral director will not usually dismiss the people until the pastor shakes hands with the seated family members and expresses a word of comfort to them.
- F. If there are military rites they will usually occur during the committal service. These usually involve taps, folding and giving of the flag, a gun salute, perhaps a short address by active or retired military personnel, or even a “missing-man-formation” fly-by. Taps and gun salutes are often quite shattering to a family. If the pastor has concluded the Christian service, he may want to be very close to family members to offer support during these moments. If the pastor does not know the military personnel involved, or what their words and actions will be, he will usually choose to conclude the Christian service with a benediction before the military rites.

VII. What to Do After the Funeral

- A. In many communities there will be a meal prepared at the church or the family home for relatives and friends. The pastor is usually expected to attend and pray for the family at the beginning of the meal.
- B. In future days and weeks the attention showered on the family at the time of death will quickly fade. The pastor will need to take special care to continue support.

Funerals-Part Two

“The Service”

- I. The Order of the Funeral Service (note: Books of Common Worship and Denominational Directories of Worship offer very dependable orders and forms for the readings and prayers below)

*Prelude

Words of Institution (Often called “Opening Lines” or “Processional Verses” in the Books of Common Worship, these are the verses that open the service. Traditionally these verses were read as the casket was borne to the front of the church. Now they function much the same as a brief Call to Worship to begin the funeral service.)

*Prayer of Consolation (Discern appropriate content from the forms even if you extemporize your own prayer here; the pastor's prayer often leads into a congregational recitation of the Lord's Prayer.)

Old Testament Readings (Typically a short selection or two from the forms)

*New Testament Readings (Typically a short selection or two from the forms; often concluding with the selection which will be used as the text for the message.)

Personal Biography (Often called the "Obituary" but not like a newspaper obit. An optional minute or two recounting the person's life endeavors and family, often woven into the funeral message introduction. This makes the funeral personal without over eulogizing. If a eulogy is to be given this is typically the place for it.)

*Funeral Message (Typically brief — 7-10 minutes — unless otherwise requested by the family)

*Closing Prayer (Discern appropriate content from the forms and your message)

Benediction (Although the pastor may choose for there not to be a benediction if a Committal Service will follow the Funeral Service.)

* Special Music or Hymns (if the service is in a church) often occur after this component.

II. Basic Principles for Funeral Messages

A. Comfort and reach with Gospel hope; do not berate or lecture.

B. Be brief; this is a very difficult time for people. Messages typically are thematic, logical development not expository — no one will have their Bibles with them to "follow along."

C. Praise God, more than the person. Acknowledge God's grace more than lauding human goodness, although it is certainly appropriate to give thanks for the goodness God has worked through this individual's life. Care simply must be taken not to imply that persons' acceptance is based on their goodness — the message the world almost inevitably hears.

D. Hold the cross high. This is not an evangelistic sermon. But most pastors will address more non-believers at funerals and weddings than at any other time. The truths of the Gospel need to be plainly stated as they bear upon man's ultimate condition.

E. Do not damn to Hell nor preach into Heaven. If persons "Be not known as believers" be careful that you neither judge their hearts nor give false hope. It is best merely to state the truth of the Gospel hope that those who profess Jesus Christ share without saying whether such a hope applies to this person. Preachers in older times said that when preaching a funeral for one who was not known as a believer they would "Read the man's facts, then preach the Lord's Gospel;" i.e., let people know whose funeral it is by some personal reference but then move on to preach the Gospel without judging whether the one applied to the other. Often this is still good advice.

F. Simple truths sincerely spoken are required. This is not the time for theological treatises or exegetical insights. The simple truths of our resurrection and reunion based upon God's grace alone are the most compelling, meaningful and comforting things you can say. The Gospel has real power in these moments. Don't be afraid to let it work.

III. The Content of the Funeral Message (Begin personally, move higher)

- A. Begin with something personal related to the deceased or their family. Let the family know you are speaking directly to them. Address the family directly and let others “listen in” by projecting so all can hear.
- B. Tie the personal reference to a Gospel truth evident in the text(s) you read prior to the message.
- C. Logically develop the hope Christians have in the face of death based on the theme you have introduced and the passage(s) you have read. Every funeral message should at least contain references to Christ’s victory over sin and death, believers’ resurrection hope, the basis of our hope being faith alone, the joys of heaven, our ultimate reunion with all loved ones who die in Jesus, and the need of all the living to claim this Gospel.
- D. Make sure all know that this person’s hope is in Christ’s work not the person’s work.
- E. Genuinely rejoice in the joy deceased believers now know, but at the same time affirm the right for loved ones to grieve for the separation they now experience.
- F. End with hope, the assurance of Christ’s victory.

IV. Cautions for Funeral Messages

- A. Be careful about references to “We are gathering here to celebrate the passing of Joan Smith into glory.” Yes, there are truths in which believers can rejoice, but there is much pain present, too. Jesus wept in the face of death. We should not treat the horror of a fallen world’s ultimate consequence without hope nor without regard for the real pain it causes. Do not forbid grief.
- B. Provide the comfort of your sympathy to the families of those that were not known as believers, but do not “preach them into heaven” nor condemn them to hell. Ultimately you do not know others’ hearts. Preach Gospel truths without saying if they apply to one whose salvation you question.
- C. Avoid exaggeration of anyone’s good life. But at believers’ funerals certainly let the glory of their life and hope in Jesus fill your message. It is not at all inappropriate to cite the goodness that God has accomplished through a believer’s life and to rejoice in the service and testimony such a person has provided the Kingdom.
- D. Do not condemn a deceased person’s relatives or friends nor use the funeral as a time to guilt-trip them into heaven. Though it is certainly legitimate to invite others to share in the hope this believer had, and even to express the concern the deceased may have had for their salvation, these appeals should be made with compassion not condemnation.
- E. Avoid excess length of service as well as sermon. This is a very difficult time for some people and it is not kind to make them sit for long periods of time at such emotional extremities. An average funeral service (not counting the music) is only about 15-20 minutes in length. Unless the family requests otherwise, a funeral service that runs 45 minutes to a hour including the music is generally much too long (except for some special cases in which extra ceremony is being required).
- F. If you must object to the participation of other clergy do so with great care. If you are new to a church it is not uncommon for a family to want a previous minister with whom they have a special relationship to do a funeral. If the previous minister is courteous he will try to dissuade the family from inviting him back, but if they insist it is hard for him to refuse. If you then object you will only appear jealous and petty. Try not to get your feelings hurt and realize that the same thing will happen to the minister who follows you if you have devoted yourself to the care of this flock.

Objecting to the participation of liberal clergy in services you perform is also very problematic. My own practice has been a great willingness to “take light to darkness” but a great reticence to “bring darkness to light.” That is to say, I am willing to go preach the Gospel in a liberal church setting if I am invited because I have had some ministry to that family. However, I will not allow a liberal minister to preach a false Gospel in a service over which I have control. If a

family insists on inviting a man with a liberal stance to participate in a funeral I officiate, then I will ask him to do the Scripture readings (since I figure he cannot mess that up). Realize, however, whatever one chooses to do in these circumstances is debatable. You must balance your ability to have a continuing ministry to a family that may need to mature in its faith, with the need not to endorse evil. Difficult choices are best made with the advice of your session, but understand you sometimes must decide on the spur of the moment. You may not always know if you have made the right choices, but if you have the trust of your people and are striving for faithfulness most will understand whatever choice you make even if they disagree.

G. Remember your primary task is to comfort, not to evangelize. Even though evangelistic truths are presented, this is a funeral sermon. The main purpose is to bring the hope of the Gospel to loved ones facing the pain of death.

H. Other?

V. Common Funeral Texts

see Lloyd Perry's list but be sure to add

Gen. 50

I Thessalonians 4: 13-18

Rev. 20 and 21

Other appropriate Psalms