

Thomas G. Long

# 4 Myths about CHRISTIAN FUNERALS

*Recently my wife and I were biking down a two-lane back road that winds through the forests and cornfields of rural Maryland. As we went around a bend, we saw on the side of road, nestled in a copse of trees and overgrown with vines, an old family cemetery—a cluster of weathered, hand-carved stones marking about a dozen graves, most of them about a hundred years old and bearing the same family name.*

The sight of this old cemetery reminded me how dramatically our funeral practices have changed over the last few generations. Once there was a homestead near this cemetery, and the family who lived there washed and dressed their own dead and carried them, with tears, prayers, and singing, to this burial spot in the trees. These family funerals, and the customs and convictions that accompanied them, are now mostly artifacts of a dimly remembered past, and all that is left to remind us are places like this with a few forgotten tombstones in a tangle of underbrush.

Advances in technology have prompted some of the changes in the way we ritualize death. The European innovation of chemical embalming became a widespread American practice under the pressure of handling the large numbers of dead lying on Civil War battlefields. Nineteenth century local undertakers, who basically sold coffin hardware and rented horse-drawn hearses, suddenly became embalmers, then reinvented themselves as “funeral directors” and proprietors of “funeral parlors.” The care of the dead was removed from the home to the “funeral home.” Houses built in the twentieth century no longer needed parlors where the family dead would lie awaiting burial, so the space got downsized and renamed the “living room.” Concerns about sanitation moved cemeteries off of farms and away from settled areas to the outskirts of towns. Advances in medicine made it increasingly likely that people would die, not at home, but out-of-sight in hospitals and nursing homes, and the experience of death was displaced from the rhythms of everyday living.

Alongside these technological changes, there have been parallel shifts in social sensibilities that have affected death rituals. Cremation, virtually unknown in America a century ago and the choice of only about 3 percent of Americans as recently as the 1960s, has rapidly gained religious and cultural acceptance and is now practiced in nearly 30 percent of deaths. Also, the rise of psychology and the widespread use of therapeutic language on television and in the popular press have sensitized virtually the whole culture to the process of grief, what is often called “grief work.” Most of all, individualism, distaste for institutional constraints, and deep consumerist tendencies have turned funerals—much like weddings before them—into arenas for the display of personal choices and fashions. Just as brides and grooms once lobbied to write their own vows, we are witnessing now the rise of do-it-yourself funerals that side-step traditional liturgies and

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feature “open mike” opportunities for impromptu remarks by family and friends.

What should we make of all this? In the face of these shifts, pastors are sometimes hard-pressed to know what a “good funeral” might be at this cultural moment. Many clergy, caught in the whirlpool of local customs, funeral home pressures, social shifts, and family preferences, simply fall back to a “whatever would be most meaningful to you” posture when planning funerals, hoping at best to weave a little pastoral therapy into the equation here and there.

But what in our historical moment is a “good funeral”? I am persuaded that pastors, in order to provide care and guidance for people at the time of death, need to take a critical posture toward many of the current cultural changes in funerals and to refresh their thinking about the theological and liturgical aims of death rituals. This may well mean challenging our own assumptions about Christian funerals. As a suggestion of what I mean, here is a brief list of ideas about funerals that seem intuitively wise to many people, including pastors, but which I believe can actually mislead us. I have named them “four myths about Christian funerals.”

## Myth # 1

### Funerals are only “for the living.”

It is commonly assumed that, since the deceased is “dead and gone,” a funeral finds its true focus and value in providing comfort and succor to the living, to those left behind. When we examine the development of the funeral over the first five centuries of Christianity, however, a quite different picture emerges. For our Christian forebears, a funeral was about the deceased; it depicted the

story of a saint traveling to God. They believed that the one who had died was a child of God journeying the last mile of the baptismal way to be with God. When one among them died, they lovingly washed and dressed the body (see Acts 9:36-43), caressing the deceased without fear of defilement, and then, with prayers and songs, they carried the body to the place of burial and farewell. They believed that death changed, but did not destroy, a Christian’s relationship with the community. In the liturgical drama of death, the principal actors were God and the one who had died, and the rest of the community played supporting roles, bearing the saint to the place of departure.

## Myth # 2

### The best witness to the resurrection is a memorial service with no body present.

In her muckraking blockbuster *The American Way of Death* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1963), Jessica Mitford taught us that the American penchant for displaying and viewing embalmed and cosmetically disguised dead bodies is vulgar and uncivilized. On the surface, she was combating the shallow “beautiful memory picture” slogans of the funeral industry, but at a deeper level she was playing on our culture’s distaste for, an almost pornographic antipathy toward, the idea of a dead body. It wasn’t just the rouge and heavy powder that bothered Jessica Mitford; it was dead bodies, period.

Watch a few commercials on television, and it becomes clear that our society despises aging bodies, sagging bodies, and overweight bodies. Actual dead bodies are even worse, a downright unmentionable

offense, and many Christians unintentionally play into this cultural prejudice with high-sounding theological rationales: “A casket present in the funeral draws attention to the dead body instead of God. We can better worship God in a memorial service when the body has been taken care of earlier and is not a distraction in the service.”

Again, our Christian ancestors would have been mystified by such talk. The bodies of Christians were not distractions or offenses; they were “temples of the Holy Spirit.” Christians did not think of the body as a mere shell or a prison house. They did not think of themselves as “having” bodies; they were *embodied*, and even in the resurrection they would be embodied (1 Corinthians 15:35-41). For early Christians, a funeral without the body of the deceased would simply not make sense. Carrying the body to the place of burial was not what was done before or after the funeral; it *was* the funeral. A funeral was not sitting in a church building thinking quiet and inward thoughts about mortality and life. A funeral was putting on sandals and lovingly carrying the body of the deceased to the place of farewell, singing praises to God along the way.

A worthy goal for us, I think, is to get Christians to show up for their own funerals. Now, obviously, it is not always possible or desirable to have the actual body present at a funeral. Bodies are lost at sea or donated to science; people choose to be cremated or they die halfway around the world. But even when the body cannot be present, it can be invoked and remembered as an act of the imagination. The main point is that, over time, people know the difference in a community that affirms the resurrection of the body and one that prefers, as did the Gnostics, to worship in the spirit free from the embarrassments of the flesh.

We can hardly imagine a firm called “Sullivan and Sons, Baptism Directors,” so why do we so easily accept “funeral directors”? A funeral is a worship service. It is the church that preserves the wisdom and treasures of this liturgical tradition, and it is the church, attentive to the Spirit, that “directs” its own worship.

### Myth # 3

#### The purpose of a funeral is to help manage grief.

Given the triumph of the therapeutic in our culture, it should come as no surprise, I suppose, to see how many pastoral care books assume that funerals have one and only one job: helping people with their grief. But saying that a funeral is about grief management is akin to saying that the purpose of a Sunday morning worship service is to take up the offering. Sure, it happens, and it is important, but the receiving of the offering is but one small aspect of Sunday worship. People do receive comfort and help with grief at a funeral, but funerals have the much larger and deeper task of enacting the gospel at the time of death.

In fact, here is an irony: the more a funeral focuses and dwells on the grief of the mourners, the less helpful to them it will probably be. In the face of death, the strong emotions of grief may well be the most prominent reaction, but people do not really hunger to be psychoanalyzed in a funeral or to have their sorrow dissected or even spotlighted. Instead, people hunger for meaning, to have this loss, this seeming defeat, placed in some context where it finds value. A Christian funeral takes this one death and, in the context of worship, weaves it into the fabric of the story of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. Seeing the story of the deceased in the light of God’s story provokes praise, and as a part of this praise of God, we find meaning and comfort.

In a way that we would find strange, perhaps even emotionally unhealthy, early

Christians were uneasy about excessive grief at funerals. They wept over their loved ones, of course, and they experienced deep sorrow in their losses, but they constantly sought to temper their tears with alleluias. They encouraged each other not to be so overwhelmed with grief that they lost sight of hope. Some therapists might call this repression but it was not. It was, rather, a wise theological insight that Christians had gleaned from Judaism, namely that what finally heals the human heart is not inward self-absorption but outward praise.

### Myth # 4

#### Funeral directors should direct funerals.

Only faith communities that have lost their way theologically and liturgically about death require commercial vendors to direct their funerals. We can hardly imagine a firm called “Sullivan and Sons, Baptism Directors,” so why do we so easily accept “funeral directors”? A funeral is a worship service. It is the church that preserves the wisdom and treasures of this liturgical tradition, and it is the church, attentive to the Spirit, that “directs” its own worship.

This is not to say that clergy are obliged to have an adversarial relationship with the local funeral home. We are not the enemies of the funeral director (and, to be frank, clergy attempts to be “consumer advocates” against the allegedly mercenary funeral directors are often clumsy, ill-informed, and misguided). Indeed, funeral service professionals are often helpful partners in caring for families. They per-

form tasks in the preparation and transportation of bodies that most of us are not equipped to do in contemporary society. Moreover, many funeral professionals are skilled interpreters of local customs and perform valuable services in helping families navigate the difficult passages of death. But the point remains; even though many of them might resist this old and worthy term, funeral professionals are best understood as “undertakers.” The necessities of death and the ritual of the funeral entail many logistical and practical tasks. The Christian community has the burden of naming those tasks and, at its behest and with its permission, the funeral professional agrees to “undertake” some of them.

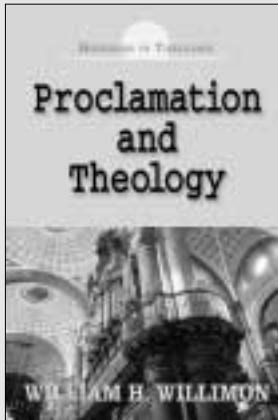
This list of funeral “myths” could be much longer, of course, but it is a start. Our culture is in a season of confusion about funerals, as well as all the rest of its sacred rituals. But times of cultural disorientation are also teachable moments, periods when Christian ways of believing, seeing, and living can be perceived as the daring alternatives to cultural patterns and the bold expressions of good news they have always been. □

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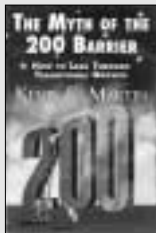
**volume *New Interpreter's Bible* (Abingdon Press.) and is author of several books, including *The Witness of Preaching* (Westminster Press) and *Beyond the Worship Wars* (Alban Institute.) See p. 19 to order.**

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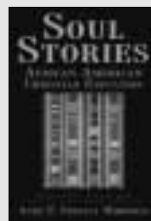
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