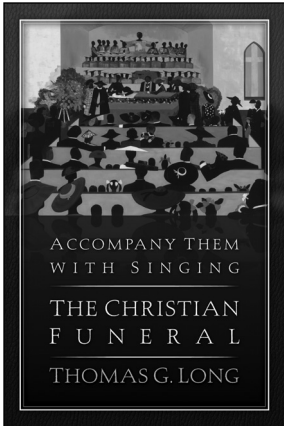


# Preaching, Worship, and Ministry



## Accompany Them with Singing— The Christian Funeral

Thomas G. Long

**LEVEL:** Seminary and professional

**COURSES:** Preaching and Worship; Pastoral Care and Counseling; Death and Dying; Leading Christian Worship

Thomas G. Long, one of America's most trusted and thoughtful pulpit voices, provides a theological and cultural critique of today's Christian funeral.

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Long begins by describing how the Christian funeral developed historically, theologically, and liturgically, and then discusses recent cultural trends in funeral practices, including the rise in both cremations and memorial services. He describes the basic pattern for a funeral service, details options in funeral planning, identifies characteristics of a "good funeral," and provides thoughtful guidance for preaching at a funeral.

But Long also notes a disturbing trend toward funeral services that *seem* theologically right and pastorally caring, but actually depart from the primary aims of the Christian funeral, which are constructed around the metaphor of the deceased as a saint traveling on a baptismal journey toward God, accompanied by the community of faith on "the last mile of the way." He argues that the cultural conditions for maintaining this view are under stress and a new, less-theological and less-satisfying metaphor that focuses on the mourner has begun to erode the Christian view. He contrasts the ancient grand community drama with today's trend toward body-less memorial services that focus primarily on the living and grief management. This is a loss for the church, he argues, and he calls for the church to reclaim the classic metaphor.

## Chapter 1

### Marking Death: Human Rituals, Christian Practices

. . . Human death has never been simply a fact; it has always been a mysterious ocean summoning those left standing on the shore to stammer out convictions about life and to wonder what lies over the horizon. From the beginning, humans have adorned burial places and the bodies of the dead with tokens of

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beauty and love, symbols that push back the brute facts and display the hunger for meaning in the shadow of death.

Some sociologists and anthropologists venture that the origins of religion can be found in these ancient death rituals. . . . Others suggest that it was actually the other way around. . . .

Who can say? . . . Perhaps the knowledge that we cannot finally untangle the knot points to the fact that death and the sacred are inextricably entwined. In both, human beings stand on the edge of mystery and peer into depths beyond our knowing. What we do when the shadow of death falls across our life—the acts we perform and the ritual patterns we follow—etches in the dust of material life a portrait of our sense of the sacred. And, in like manner, what we finally believe and trust about the mystery at the heart of things shapes how our bodies move, what our hands do, where our feet take us, and what our mouths speak in the days of grief and loss. The dance of death moves to the music of the holy.

### **The Changing Landscape of Funerals**

This book is about how one religious tradition, Christianity, with its own sense of the sacred, expresses itself in seasons of death. I want to explore how Christianity's particular understanding of life's holy mystery takes on shape and movement in the customs, practices, and rituals around death. My main interest here is not anthropological, however, but theological and pastoral. I want to explore Christian funerals—what they do, what they mean, how they work. The overarching goal of this book is quite practical. Specifically, it is to help priests and ministers who guide parishioners and congregations at the time of death to preside over funerals that genuinely embody the hope of the gospel. More broadly, this book is aimed at the larger church with the goal that all Christians will move toward ever more faithful practices in the hour of death.

Doing so, however, will involve some hard work. We will need to be more than liturgical interior decorators, trying to figure out how to create tasteful funerals. We will need to step behind the curtain of our current customs to examine what lies hidden in the shadows and to explore the history of how we came to this place in our funeral practices. We will need to rethink basic assumptions about what makes for a "good funeral."

The moment is ripe to explore the Christian funeral. Over the last half century, a number of exemplary funeral liturgies have been developed by the various Christian communions. Many of these have been stimulated by the breathtaking renewal of worship that has occurred among Roman Catholics as a part of the outpouring of reforms from the Second Vatican Council and, in particular, the appearance in 1969 of a new set of funeral rites for the Catholic world: *Ordo Exsequiarum*, the *Rite of Funerals*. . . .

Protestants have been prompted by this to do their own rethinking of the funeral, and in North America alone, revised funeral liturgies have been devel-

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oped by Presbyterians, United Methodists, the United Church of Canada, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the United Church of Christ, Lutherans (twice), and several other denominations, all seeking to join Catholics in creating what Richard Rutherford has described as “truly a human and Christian symbolic language that allows death and the grief of loss their rightful articulation in a living faith community.”<sup>7</sup>

As compelling as these new funeral rites are, what is most impressive is how little impact they have had on actual practice. Ironically, right at the cultural moment that these rich resources for funerals have appeared, American Christians, along with the rest of American culture, have become increasingly confused and conflicted about healthy ways to commemorate death. Funeral practices are in a windstorm of change, and old customs are being abandoned right and left, but the new Christian funeral liturgies don’t seem to factor much into the equation. What one scholar said about Catholics a decade after the new rite appeared could well apply to Protestants also:

After ten years of official use of the new Rite of Funerals . . . American Catholics do not seem to be handling death any better than they did before. In fact, since much of the piety and devotion connected with prayer for the dead has fallen into disuse in that same period, there might be a tendency, at least in some parts of the country, to cope with death more poorly than before the reform.<sup>8</sup>

If we ever needed evidence that writing good liturgy does not automatically generate good worship, the current state of the Christian funeral would be a prime case. While liturgical specialists quietly toiled away, crafting funeral services of great beauty and depth, actual Christian funerals were often migrating toward vague “celebrations of life,” sometimes with such features as open-mike speeches by friends and relatives, multimedia presentations of the life of the deceased, NASCAR logos on caskets, the deceased’s favorite pop music played from CDs, the release of butterflies, cremated remains swirled into plastic sculpture, and cyber-cemeteries.

Even when the changes are less dramatic, it is still true that a general cultural and generational shift toward experimentation, customization, and personalization has impacted the social network of death customs and the Christian funeral along with it. “Leave it to my generation, the baby boomers, to take control,” writes Michelle Cromer.

She continues:

We’re not only organizing our parents’ funerals, but even planning our own in advance, putting our requests in writing and letting everyone know exactly what we want. We’re a demographic so totally accustomed to center stage that we will never give it up without some fanfare. I first noticed this in [the

1. Richard Rutherford, *The Death of a Christian: The Order of Christian Funerals* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1990), 116.

2. Robert J. Hoeffner, “A Pastoral Evaluation of the Rite of Funerals,” *Worship* 55/6 (Nov. 1981), 482.

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movie] homage to my generation, *The Big Chill*. After the priest announces that a college friend will play one of the deceased's favorite songs, Karen [one of the characters], solemnly sits down at the church organ and hits the classic opening chords of the Rolling Stones' "You Can't Always Get What You Want." As that sixties anthem accompanied the funeral procession, I wasn't the only boomer in the audience who thought, *Now that's the way to go out.*<sup>9</sup>

Responding to the demand for funerals with fanfare, one funeral home in Florida has taken to designing elaborate stage sets for theme-based funerals, and a New Jersey funeral director proclaimed that the old-fashioned funeral business is itself on life support. "We can no longer deliver funerals out of a cookie cutter," he said, speaking of funeral professionals. "We must become event planners."<sup>10</sup>

Funeral changes are not just cultural trends and fashion statements. If our theology shapes our funeral practices, and vice versa, then a change in our practice signals a commensurate shift in our theology. Our funerals are indeed changing, and that means something about how we view death theologically is changing as well. At first glance, though, it is hard to assess what is happening. Are we renewing our faith in a different way, or losing our grip? Many funerals today are more upbeat, more filled with laughter, more festive. Is this good or not? Funerals tend to be less formal, less governed by ritual, more relaxed and personal. A gain or a loss? There seems to be less emphasis on the presence of the dead body in funerals, an increase in "memorial services," a measurable rise in the number of people choosing cremation. Worthy, or a cause for concern?

*Time* magazine correspondent Lisa Takeuchi Cullen, who spent several years studying changing death rituals in America in order to write a book on the topic, concluded that the "new American way of death is personal, spiritual, and emotional. It is altruistic, futuristic, and individualistic." When she began her exploration, she was, by her own description, "an unabashed advocate of the new American way of death, a way I believed involved celebration in place of mourning."<sup>11</sup> But near the end of her research, two beloved members of her family—her grandfather and a cousin—died, and her mother's cancer, once in remission, returned "with blinding speed and terrible fury." These sudden and sobering encounters with mortality prompted Cullen to question her "blithe convictions" about mourning being displaced by celebration. "If [my mother] died," she wrote, "if I lost this woman who raised me, would I have it in me to throw a party?"<sup>12</sup>

The stakes are high here. I am persuaded that in this, our moment in history, we are going through one of those periodic upheavals in the ways we care (or

3. Michelle Cromer, *Exit Strategy: Thinking Outside the Box* (New York: Jeremy Tarcher/Penguin, 2006), xiv.

4. Funeral director Lou Stellato, as quoted in Lisa Takeuchi Cullen, *Remember Me: A Lively Tour of the New American Way of Death* (New York: Collins, 2006), 27.

5. *Ibid.*, 208-209.

6. *Ibid.*, 208.

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don't) for the dead that are inevitable signs of an upheaval in the ways we care (or don't) for the living. To put it bluntly, a society that has forgotten how to honor the bodies of those who have departed is more inclined to neglect, even torture, the bodies of those still living. A society that has no firm hope for where the dead are going is also unsure how to take the hands of its children and lead them toward a hopeful future.

I also am convinced that there is a broad but identifiable Christianly way to honor the dead, to walk with them in hope, and to mark well the meaning of death and life. Christianity is not simply a set of ideas and doctrines; it is a way of life, and it finally expresses itself, or denies itself, in the patterns of everyday living, in the ways that Christians do such things as raise children, care for the earth, gather at table, show hospitality to the stranger, manage money, and face death. There are Christianly patterns of living, and there are Christianly patterns of dying and caring for the dead. In sum, I believe, amid the swirling changes and uncertainties of American death patterns, it not only makes sense but is in fact an urgent task to describe, nurture, and practice what can be called “the Christian funeral.”

Photo by Kay Hinton/Emory University Photo/Video



**Thomas G. Long is Bandy Professor of Preaching at Candler School of Theology, Emory University, and is one of the most popular preachers in the United States today. He is the author of *The Witness of Preaching*; *The Senses of Preaching*; *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible*; *Whispering the Lyrics: Sermons for Lent and Easter*; *Matthew (Westminster Bible Commentary)*; *Hebrews (Interpretation)*; *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian*; and *Preaching from Memory to Hope*.**

“Dr. Long prescribes a full-bodied liturgical and community theater—funerals equipped for the heavy lifting of Christianity—acting out our faith and humanity, bearing our dead to the brink of real and eternal life. *Accompany Them with Singing* is an indispensable and luminous guide for clergy, families, funeral directors—all home-going pilgrims—on how we ought to deal with death by dealing with our dead. I think it will be the text of record on this subject for the next fifty years.”

—Thomas Lynch, author of *The Undertaking*

“*Accompany Them with Singing—The Christian Funeral* is pastorally practical in its application, in touch with the treasury of funerary ritual across the interfaith spectrum, and sensitive to the personal needs of real life. Long has devoted more than two decades to exploring this topic while engaged in active ministry. He has given us a book that pastoral caregivers and both college and seminary professors will welcome enthusiastically.”

—H. Richard Rutherford, CSC, University of Portland