

The good funeral: Recovering Christian practices

by [Thomas G. Long](#) in the [October 6, 2009](#) issue

When Elizabeth Janzen died in a Minneapolis nursing home, the staff immediately notified the closest relative, her daughter Sarah in St. Louis. Sarah, who had faithfully visited her mother once a month, arranged for Elizabeth to be cremated, for the ashes to be sent to St. Louis and for an obituary to be placed in the Minneapolis newspaper. A month later, Sarah took the ashes to a lake in rural Minnesota, where Elizabeth and her family had often vacationed, and scattered them on the water.

A week later, a memorial service was held in the chapel of the Minneapolis church where Elizabeth had kept her membership, though her health had prevented her from attending for a number of years. On a table at the entrance to the chapel were placed several photographs of Elizabeth at various stages in her life, her Bible, a ceramic vase she had made, and a few other personal mementos.

At the service, Sarah read one of her mother's favorite poems, Elizabeth's younger sister told an amusing story about their childhood, the chaplain from the nursing home read Psalm 23 and prayed a brief prayer giving thanks for Elizabeth's life, and two of Elizabeth's former students (she had taught high school for more than 30 years) read fond reminiscences of her as a teacher. After a time of quiet reflection, during which they listened to a recording of Judy Collins's rendition of "Amazing Grace" (one of Elizabeth's favorite hymns), the small group in the chapel silently dispersed.

Elizabeth Janzen is fictitious, but the rituals marking her death represent a rapidly emerging trend in Christian funeral practices. With surprising swiftness and dramatic results, a significant segment of American Christians has over the past 50 years abandoned previously established funeral customs in favor of an entirely new pattern of memorializing the dead. This new pattern is not firmly fixed (indeed, variations, improvisations and personal customizations are marks of the new rituals)

but it generally includes the following characteristics:

- a memorial service instead of a funeral (i.e., a service focused on remembering the deceased, often held many days after the death, with the body or the cremated remains of the deceased not present)
- a brief, simple, highly personalized and customized service, often involving several speakers (as opposed to the standard church funeral liturgies presided over primarily by clergy)
- a focus on the life of the deceased (often aided by a physical display of photos and other mementos)
- an emphasis on joy rather than sadness, a celebration of life rather than an observance of the somber reality of death
- a private disposition of the body, often done before the memorial service, with an increasing preference for cremation

The shift toward this new pattern has not happened everywhere, of course. It is most pronounced among white, suburban Protestants, and the older customs often still prevail in rural areas, among nonwhites and in many Catholic parishes. But these differences seem more a matter of lag time than anything else. The trend lines are clear, and it is apparent that funeral practices for all Christians, as a part of the larger culture, are moving at various rates of speed toward this new pattern.

A significant number of Christian clergy, especially those who are more progressive and better educated, applaud many of these changes. While they may be troubled somewhat by the open-mike atmosphere of these new services or by the inevitable banalities of some of the poems, songs, readings and other elements imported into them, they nevertheless find them preferable to the older, often depersonalized and more somber rituals of the past—primarily for two reasons.

First, the preference for memorial services, the emphasis on joy or even on laughter, the deemphasis on the body of the deceased, and the celebration of the personal aspects of the life of the one who has died all seem more commensurate with the Christian witness to the resurrection. Second, the valuing of simpler, less formal services provides leverage for people to break loose from the stranglehold of showy, expensive and burdensome funeral practices so prized by the funeral industry.

These clergy are unquestionably well intentioned, and they are right to find some encouraging signs here, but I want to raise some basic theological questions about this emerging pattern of death practices. I would like to suggest that these newer rituals, for all of their virtues of freedom, simplicity and seeming festivity, are finally expressions of a corrupted understanding of the Christian view of death. These newer practices are attractive mainly because they seem to offer relief from the cosmeticized, sentimental, impersonal and often costly funerals that developed in the 1950s, which were themselves parodies of authentic Christian rituals. Contemporary Christian funeral practices certainly need to be changed, but change should be more a matter of recovery and reformation than innovation and improvisation.

In the early years of the Christian movement, Christians developed distinct funeral practices that, while woven from local customs, still reflected Christian theology. At the beginning of the third century, Tertullian could already speak of an “appointed office” for Christian burial in North Africa, and certainly by the late fourth century the contours of a distinct Christian funeral rite began to appear. This rite was composed of three movements: preparation, processional and burial.

In the preparation movement, the body was washed, anointed and clothed in garments representing baptism. In the processional phase, the body was carried to the grave, and sometimes the procession entered the church on the way for prayer and the reading of scripture. The burial phase took place at graveside and included the commendation of the deceased to God and the actual burial of the body. During each movement, the church prayed, chanted psalms and sang hymns of joy. Often a Eucharist was held, either in the church or at the grave.

The theme of the service was the completion of baptism, and the church accompanied a brother or sister to the place of union with God through the resurrection of Christ. Taken as a whole, the early Christian funeral was based on the conviction that the deceased was a saint, a child of God and a sister or brother of Christ, worthy to be honored and embraced with tender affection. The funeral itself was deemed to be the last phase of a lifelong journey toward God, and the faithful carried the deceased along the way to the place of final departure with singing and a mixture of grief and joyful hope.

In subsequent centuries, this basic funeral pattern sometimes struggled for visibility against cultural and theological changes. For example, the joyful Easter motif of the

early Christian funeral was nearly submerged by a gloomy “Day of Wrath” theology of the late Middle Ages, and the Puritans, offended by what they saw as excesses in Anglican funerals, tried, unsuccessfully as it turns out, to get rid of funeral ceremony altogether. Nevertheless, the basic pattern and practices of Christian burial managed to weather the storms and continued to exert a strong force on Christian funerals until the late 19th century.

This review of the development of classic Christian funeral practices should make it evident that the pattern for funerals now appearing is not simply a modernization and adaptation of traditional customs but a radical, and finally diminished, replacement of Christian ritual.

For example, the current shift to a memorial service with the body absent means that Christian death practices are no longer metaphorical expressions of the journey of a saint to be with God. The saint is not even present, except as a spiritualized memory, a backdrop for the real action, which happens in the psyches of the mourners. The mourners are the only actors left, and the ritual now is really about them. Funerals are “for the living,” as we are prone to say. Instead of the grand cosmic drama of the church marching to the edge of eternity with a fellow saint, singing songs of resurrection victory and sneering in the face of the final enemy, we now have a much smaller, more privatized psychodrama, albeit often couched in Christian language. If we take the plot of the typical memorial service at face value, the dead are not migrating to God; the living are moving from sorrow to stability.

How did the church shift from the understanding of a funeral as the joyful accompanying of a saint on “the last mile of the way” to a reflective, disembodied, quasi-Gnostic cluster of customs and ceremonies? What happened in the latter part of the 19th century?

Because this is precisely the time that embalming became widespread and the modern funeral parlor developed, it is almost irresistible to blame the newly minted funeral professionals for all the mischief. As the argument goes, undertakers reinvented themselves as funeral directors and rode the technological advances in embalming all the way to the bank. They first took the dead away from us in order to embalm them, and then they took the funeral itself away and turned it from a worship service into a vulgar display of conspicuous consumption.

The truth, however, is that a guild of embalming technicians could never have become directors of any sacred Christian ritual, could never have taken the funeral away, had not church and culture been more than ready to hand it over. Almost every developed society, even ancient Rome, has had “undertakers” who assist with the preparation of the dead, but even if 19th-century undertakers had hatched a plot to hijack the Christian funeral, it would have failed if our death rituals had been healthy and full of meaning.

If Christian funerals today are impoverished, we must look primarily to the church’s own history and not look with scorn at the funeral director. The fact is that many educated Christians in the late 19th century, the forebears of today’s white suburban Protestants, lost their eschatological nerve and their vibrant faith in the afterlife, and we are their theological and liturgical heirs. It was not, of course, as if the whole of 19th-century Christian society woke up one morning and suddenly found that they no longer believed in eternal life. The loss of conviction about the otherworld came slowly and gradually.

In the decades after the Civil War, the quite literal views of many American Christians regarding heaven, hell, the end of the world, the resurrection of the body and the second coming of Jesus began to ebb away. A recent study by Drew Gilpin Faust points out that the sheer devastation of the Civil War itself, the staggering number of dead, the violence and loss of life out of all proportion to the ability of most people to make meaning from it, accelerated the 19th century’s already growing crisis of faith. She writes:

Civil War carnage transformed the mid-nineteenth century’s growing sense of religious doubt into a crisis of belief that propelled many Americans to redefine or even reject their faith in a benevolent and responsive deity. But Civil War death and devastation also planted seeds of a more profound doubt about human ability to know and understand. . . . The Civil War compelled Americans to ask with intensified urgency, “What is Death?” and in answering to find themselves wondering why is death, what is life, and can we ever hope to know? We have continued to wonder ever since.

Part of the crisis of faith was about eschatology. In the 1840s, some Christians confidently calculated the exact date of Jesus’ return, only to have their hopes, and

for many of them their naive faith, crushed when Jesus did not come—a time that came to be called the Great Disappointment. Even less advent-minded Christians of the time had to reckon with the impact of the rising sciences, of Darwinism, and of the new skeptical philosophies imported from Europe. Consequently, the literalisms of the past came under severe stress. Pictures of Jesus coming in the clouds, of the dead rising bodily from the graves, of the saints arrayed in glory, became less and less imaginable, less and less plausible.

The notion of heaven was not altogether abandoned. Instead, it was revised and domesticated. Heaven was reimagined as a place very much like the best of earth, sometimes not a place at all but simply an intensification of earthly delights, and the idea of the resurrection of the body yielded to the more gentle and continuous notion of the immortality of the soul. One late-19th-century member of the clergy characteristically said, “To me, heaven means only myself with larger opportunity. It means this earth-life grown into perfection.” Lucy Larcom, in a devotional essay characteristic of the period, wrote:

Surprises doubtless await us all, across the boundaries of this earthly existence. But none, perhaps, will be more surprised than those humble, faithful, self-sacrificing souls who have often almost dreaded the strange splendors that might open upon them beyond the gates of pearl, when they find that it is the same familiar sunshine in which they have been walking all their days, only clearer and serener. They will wonder that they have no new language to learn, no new habits to form, almost no new acquaintances to make. They will at last discover what their humility hid from them here, that while on earth, without knowing it, they had already been living in heaven.

No wonder the metaphor of journeying to be with God began to break apart at the seams. If people had “already been living in heaven,” then there was, after all, nowhere for the dead to travel, and without letting go of the vocabulary of the otherworld, mainline Protestants in the late 19th century, long before John Lennon, could well “imagine there’s no heaven.”

A second significant development was the creation of rural cemeteries located some distance away from towns and villages. At first, cemeteries were separated from the living because of the notion that putrefying bodies produced miasmas, noxious

gases that caused disease, but by the end of the 19th century, rural cemeteries were less about avoiding pollution and more about aesthetics. They were landscaped, gardenlike environments designed to encourage quiet and restful contemplation of nature, immortality and the meaning of life.

The more practical effect of these remote cemeteries, as Susan J. White has pointed out, was the division of the previously unified funeral ritual into two discrete parts: the funeral in the church and the burial in the distant cemetery. It was not long before this separation in distance became a separation in liturgical fact and in theological symbolism. The funeral was no longer a journey to the place of burial; it became a stationary event completely contained within the church building. The graveside ritual became a mere optional afterword. As White observes, "The removal of the gravesite to a location far away from the precincts of the church depletes a fund of theological and communal images and severely reduces the sense . . . that the living and the dead are part of one 'holy communion.'" So, with heaven gone and with the cemetery miles away, neither the dead nor the living had anywhere to go, and the metaphor of the journey to God collapsed.

Surely the task before the church now is to retrace our steps and to recover the grand liturgical theater in which Christians embrace their dead with tender affection, lift up their voices in hymns of resurrection and accompany the saints to the edge of mystery. This will not involve a mere repristinating of funeral practices or a rejection of cremation, but a recovery in our time and in contemporary forms of the governing symbols of the communion of saints, the resurrection of the body, and the journey of Christian dead toward the life everlasting.

In the meantime, the seeds planted in the 19th century continue to bear weeds. Since literalistic views of heaven and the saintly journey are no longer plausible to us, and since we lack the theological imagination to grasp the poetic truth and power of these metaphors, dead Christians have nowhere to go but to evaporate into the spiritual ether and into our frail memory banks. With heaven domesticated, the soul morphed into an immortal gas, the corpse become a shell and the cemetery moved out of sight, it was almost inevitable that the dead with their embarrassing bodies would be banned from their own funerals and the living would be condemned to sit motionless, contemplating the meaning of it all and pretending to celebrate life as the nephew of the deceased sings "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling."

Surely our culture will eventually weary of such liturgical and spiritual thinness and be ready for more depth, for more truth—for our sake and for the sake of those we love. When we are, the great drama of the journey to God will be there, beckoning us to join the procession of the saints. We will travel toward eternity with those we have loved, singing as we go and calling out to the distant shore in words of confident hope, like these from an ancient Coptic funeral prayer:

Let the shadows of darkness be full of light. Let the angels of light walk before him.

Let the gate of righteousness be opened to him. Let him join the heavenly choir.

Bring him into the paradise of delight. Feed him from the tree of life.

Let him rest in the bosom of our ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, in your kingdom.

This article is excerpted from Thomas G. Long's book Accompany Them with Singing: The Christian Funeral, just published by Westminster John Knox.