

ZONDERVAN

Conduct Gospel-Centered Funerals

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CONTENTS

<i>Foreword by Daniel Akin</i>	11
INTRODUCTION	13
Chapter 1	
PLAN (PHIL NEWTON)	17
Chapter 2	
PREPARE (BRIAN CROFT)	39
Chapter 3	
PREACH (PHIL NEWTON)	53
Chapter 4	
PERFORM (BRIAN CROFT)	72
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	81
<i>Appendix 1: Examples of Funeral Sermons</i> <i>(Phil Newton)</i>	85
<i>Appendix 2: Examples of Fitting Eulogies</i> <i>(Brian Croft)</i>	107
<i>Appendix 3: Examples of Appropriate Music</i> <i>(Phil Newton with Jim Carnes)</i>	119
<i>Appendix 4: Examples of Order of Funeral Services</i> <i>(Brian Croft)</i>	123
<i>Notes</i>	125

FOREWORD

SOMETIMES BIG THINGS come in small packages. This book is, without question, one of those occasions. Ministers have two unique opportunities to share the gospel—when there is a wedding, and when there is a funeral. The former is almost always a happy gathering of family and friends. The latter, on the other hand, is one of mixed emotions and feelings. Sorrow, of course, is always present. The gospel has its proper place at both, but it is especially needed when we are confronted with death and our mortality. People need to hear that there is hope in Christ, that death is not the end, that sin does not have the final word. With wisdom and careful preparation, the faithful minister must point those who are before him to the salvation that is found only in Jesus Christ. He must take them to a bloody cross and an empty tomb. He must preach the good news of the gospel.

How this can be done well is the goal of this book, and Brian Croft and Phil Newton have met that challenge. This short work is pastorally rich, theologically faithful, and practically useful. It is a book that should be used in Bible colleges and seminaries, and it should be on the shelf of every minister who, as John Baxter said, preaches as a dying man to dying men. Brian and Phil show us how we can minister to the hurting as we point them to the victory we have in Christ. During times of grief and sorrow people need to hear from God. They need to hear the gospel.

Conduct Gospel-Centered Funerals

Funerals provide a rare opportunity to speak truth into the lives of many who never read the Bible, seldom-if-ever attend church, and avoid spiritual issues when possible. We must not miss the opportunity we have been given as pastors and evangelists. This book is a marvelous gift to the body of Christ that will help us to faithfully honor both callings. I hope it will be widely distributed. I am glad to give it my strongest possible commendation.

*Daniel L. Akin, president of Southeastern Baptist
Theological Seminary, Wake Forest, North Carolina*

INTRODUCTION

WHAT DOES IT MEAN to be gospel-centered? We hear this term almost incessantly today, but we should never presume everyone knows what it means. Here is my attempt at a definition: *Gospel-centeredness is making sure the foundation of our hope is rooted in a holy God's merciful plan to redeem sinners by crushing his own Son on the cross in our place, and proclaiming Christ's triumph over death in his resurrection and the future promise of our own resurrection when Christ returns.*

It is especially important to be gospel-centered in the context of a funeral. Many pastors think they are being faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ, when in actuality they are not. That is why we have written this short volume. There is a pressing need, not just for a book on the practical matters related to leading a funeral service, but also for a guide that offers a clear understanding of what the gospel is and its appropriate application in the context of death. Sadly, it is all too easy to confuse the clear gospel message—even in the midst of a funeral.

The gospel is frequently obscured when a pastor offers comfort about heaven when *how* heaven is received is not made clear. The gospel is distorted when a pastor preaches the deceased into eternal glory with no credible evidence of gospel transformation in that person's life. The gospel is contradicted when the man entrusted to facilitate and conduct the funeral service is unloving, impatient, and uninterested in the souls of

Conduct Gospel-Centered Funerals

the family members who remain. As pastors, both of us share a burden to see the gospel clearly and winsomely proclaimed when funerals are held. We have attended too many funerals at which the gospel was never mentioned or, if it was, was not presented as the focus and source of our hope in Christ. The gospel of Jesus Christ was lamentably overlooked as the primary purpose of the service—where our true hope should rest.

Gospel-centeredness is making the gospel of Jesus Christ the primary purpose *and* focus of the funeral. We plan, prepare, preach, and perform gospel-centered funerals in the same way we would pursue Christ and our hope of salvation in him as the central focus in our gatherings, our homes, our marriages, and all the other areas of our lives. Funerals pose unique situations and challenges that can leave a pastor unsure how to magnify Christ in the fog of the details and demands.

The aim of this book is to do more than inform you. Yes, we will cover the logistics, challenges, and practical matters of leading a funeral. But we want to also show you how to apply the power of the gospel in the midst of these unique challenges. So, for example, if the funeral you are conducting is for a young man tragically killed—extend the hope of Christ to his friends and family. Even though a baby has died—exhort the parents to look to Christ. Even though the family of the deceased is fighting among themselves and the funeral director has been less than helpful to work with—point them to Christ as you conduct yourself in a way that reflects him. As ministers of the gospel of Jesus Christ, our chief aim (as we argue in the pages of this book) is to bring God glory by making much of Jesus in all circumstances and situations—especially funerals.

Introduction

Consider our experiences. Learn from our mistakes. Renew a deep love for our Savior. Most of all, be encouraged that the clear message of the gospel of Jesus Christ can and should be ministered at every funeral. Be faithful by clearly presenting the hope that Jesus offers us in his death and resurrection.

PLAN

Phil Newton

When he hears of afflictions of any kind coming upon households, he [the minister] should not wait to be sent for, but should hasten to them with the rich consolations he gathers from the gospel.

Thomas Murphy, *Pastoral Theology: The Pastor in the Various Duties of His Office*

FUNERALS TEND TO ARRIVE at a minister's doorstep with little advance notice. Though you can sometimes anticipate a funeral in the case of an extended illness, most come rather suddenly and unexpectedly. An accident, a heart attack, an aggressive illness, a rapidly growing cancer, an undetected disease, a birth defect, a suicide—all of these tend to come without warning. As a minister of the gospel, you must be prepared.

In This Chapter

- Understanding the minister's role during deaths...
- Recognizing dos and don'ts of funeral arrangements...
- Preparing to work with the local funeral home...

Conduct Gospel-Centered Funerals

Your Pastoral Care Responsibility

The responsibility for the pastoral care of the family belongs to you. There are six areas of responsibility you need to consider.

Offering Guidance and Care

The death of a family member is a significant event, one for which your church members will need shepherding and guidance. It is a time to apply the gospel and its promises to help a grieving family through the rough, churning waters they must navigate. One of our church families went through the trial of watching their newborn struggle with an undetected birth defect during his first month. They spent over three months in the local children's hospital, with either the mom or dad constantly by the child's side. I visited with them frequently, always reading Scripture, talking of God's promises, reflecting on the gospel, and praying for them and their little boy. We shed many tears during that time, and my wife and I were there with them when he breathed his last breath. We were comforted by the sufficiency of the gospel at that time. Later, when I conducted the two memorial services for this little boy (one with our church, the other in the dad's hometown several hours away), I was able to *build* on the pastoral conversations I'd had with the family. We all gloried in the gospel of Christ, and despite the intense sadness felt at the loss, we found comfort in the work of Jesus Christ.

Offering Comfort through the Word and Your Presence

Bring comfort both through the Scriptures and by your physical presence. Just being present means much to a grieving family. Sometimes a minister thinks he needs to come up with

Plan

some pithy quote or wise saying to help a grieving family. Better instead is the minister's comforting presence as one who loves and cares for the family. Listen to them, offer a consoling arm around the shoulders, read from God's word, and pray with them. All of this means much more than a clever phrase. They are unlikely to remember much of what you say, but they will remember that you stood with them in their loss. What is most likely to stick with them are the particular biblical texts you select to share, with some members of the grieving family recalling the passages years later. I recently had this experience as one of our older members reminded me of a particular text that I had read to her during a period of grief many years ago. I had completely forgotten about it, but that memory has remained with her over the years.

Representing Christ, the Church, and the Gospel

As a minister of the gospel, you represent Jesus Christ, the church, and the gospel you proclaim. The minister visibly represents Christ's ministry to the family. It's not your job to replace Christ—that could never happen! But you are called to come alongside as one who has been in the presence of Christ through the word and prayer, and to now stand with this grieving family. Pastors are often the first face of the church to be present in grief and the first to apply the gospel to their circumstances to help them move forward in hope and faith. Ministers should also be alert to ways in which other members of the church can aid a family in distress, helping the body to provide care for its members in need.

As one who represents the gospel, a minister should never settle for simply telling the family what he thinks they want to

Conduct Gospel-Centered Funerals

hear. First and foremost, a minister of the gospel must be faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ. I once attended a funeral of a man who had been very active until late-term cancer struck him down. Until just a few months prior to his death, this man appeared quite youthful—even though he was in his seventies. One of the pastors at the funeral, instead of being straightforward about the promises of the gospel, twisted a well-known gospel passage in a way that accommodated what he believed would please the family and the man’s friends. He quoted John 3:3 (“no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again”) and told the story of Nicodemus’s visit with Jesus. Yet rather than talking about the new birth, he said to them, “You see, Nicodemus wanted to remain youthful. He went to Jesus because he wanted to keep on living a full, youthful life.” A sermon about the need to be born again was twisted into an approval of the pursuit of a youthful, athletic lifestyle. This pastor commended the deceased as one who shared the spirit embodied in Nicodemus, approving of his desire for youthful vigor. Needless to say, I was grieved that this man had twisted and demeaned the gospel rather than applying it for the comfort of the family.

Declaring the Sufficiency of the Gospel

A minister should be “all about” the gospel. By this, I do not mean that you should exploit the grieving process for the sole purpose of evangelism. Evangelism *might* present itself during this time of pastoral care, but the minister’s primary goal is to help the family understand that the gospel is about living *and* dying. The same gospel that gives us joy in life also gives us joy when facing death. As the incarnate Son, Jesus Christ tri-

Plan

umphed over death, freeing those who trust him from slavery to the fear of death (Hebrews 2:14–15). The minister’s task is to help the family live in this truth.

But what do you do if the deceased family member was not a believer? How can you, as a minister, offer hope to the family? First, you need to be careful to avoid “preaching a person into heaven.” If the deceased offered no fruit or evidence of conversion, you should be cautious and not assume he or she was a believer. At the same time, you must learn to walk the tightrope of not passing judgment on one’s eternal state. If the deceased had professed to be a Christian but showed little evidence of this, you can refer to the person’s profession but carefully avoid confidently declaring that this person has passed into heaven. I have done numerous funerals where there was scant evidence of genuine faith. Yet we need to realize that ultimately this is not our call to make. So I might say, “Mr. Brown professed Jesus Christ as his Savior as a young man” and then avoid mentioning this again. Or I might choose to share a conversation I had with a spouse or relative about this: “Sally told me of a time, years ago, when Mr. Brown professed faith in Christ; we rejoice in this report.” In other words, *do not say more than what you are assured of by the deceased person’s walk with Christ*. If the deceased scandalized the gospel by his or her life—despite an earlier profession—it may be best to avoid referring to their supposed profession at all, lest those listening become confused about the demands of the gospel.

In a similar way, you will also want to refrain from preaching the deceased into eternal perdition! I remember an occasion when I was working for my dad at a funeral when the

Conduct Gospel-Centered Funerals

minister used very clear language to declare that the deceased was now under eternal judgment.* He lightly cloaked it in judgment terminology, but it was clear enough to all of us what he was saying. And he was probably right, though I question the prudence of making an announcement like this at that time. Most of those in attendance were not under any pretense that this man had been welcomed in the presence of Christ. Rather, he could have more judiciously said, “It is only those who have trusted in Jesus Christ and his redemptive work who will be forever in his presence,” or something along those lines. Place the emphasis not on the deceased but rather on appeals to the living, urging them to trust in Christ.

Building Deeper Relationships

The occasion of death is a wonderful opportunity for developing deep relationships through ministry to the immediate and extended family. Walking with members of my congregation in their grief has put me into closer relationship with them. They rarely put on a front at such times. Their pain comes to the surface in comments that might otherwise never be uttered. As a minister, you will see people as they are, raw and unfiltered. You may hear things that surprise you; you may see attitudes surface that you had never noticed before. Build on these moments. The grieving period itself is not the best time to attack those areas of needed sanctification that surface in a church member’s life. But as time passes, in the forthcoming weeks and months, a watchful minister will find that he is able to apply the teaching of Scripture to issues he recognizes

* My dad worked as a funeral director.

Plan

in a grieving family. You may be able to recommend books to read that steer a person toward further spiritual development. Or you might want to pair the grieving person with someone else in the church who will come alongside as an encourager in the faith.

Being Ready to Offer Long-Term Counsel

The conclusion of a funeral service does not mean the end of your care for the family. A family's grief may be tender for weeks, months, and even years after the death of a family member or loved one. Offering a word in season, a visit, a phone call, an e-mail, or a note will be welcomed and appreciated long after the funeral is over. Offer an acknowledgment on the anniversary marking the loved one's death and your thoughtfulness and care will certainly be appreciated.

Making and Carrying Out Funeral Arrangements

There are many details to stay on top of in planning a funeral. As a minister, you also want to be aware of appropriate actions that will best serve the grieving family. What follows is a list of appropriate dos and don'ts to offer you some direction.

The Dos

1. *DO try to be with the family as soon as you receive word about the family member's death.* Your warm presence and tender words may be just what the family needs. Your first visit need not be long. Many people prefer privacy as they grieve, so be sensitive to this. Plan on maintaining contact with the family by means of phone calls and visits. Take along another elder or deacon who would be sensitive to the grieving, so they

Conduct Gospel-Centered Funerals

can add their comfort and so you can train them in caring for the grieving.

2. *DO offer to help the family gather information in preparation for the funeral arrangements.* Offer to assist in enlisting pallbearers and making calls as needed on behalf of the family. Discuss where the internment will take place and make plans for music for the funeral service.

3. *DO mobilize the church family to join you in caring for the needs of the family.* Offer to arrange for people who can provide food, house out-of-town relatives, or assist in readying the house for guests and provide child care for little ones. Bible study and small group leaders will likely want to join you in caring for the family members. Make appropriate phone calls to ensure that leaders are mobilized.

4. *DO gently offer suggestions that might make the funeral service more honoring to Christ.* A minister might say, “I know you have much on your mind as you make plans for the memorial service. If your family is agreeable, may I suggest that we sing congregationally and read some gospel-centered Scripture during the service? If we can aim to have an abbreviated worship service, I think you will find great comfort in thinking about Jesus Christ and his promises.” Sometimes musical selections can detract from the good news of Jesus Christ. A minister may not be able to persuade the family otherwise, but you should at least attempt to offer good suggestions on music and Scripture. Engaging the congregation in singing helps to promote the gospel — if appropriate hymns are selected.*

* See appendix 3 for a list of suggested hymn selections.

Plan

I once conducted a funeral for an elderly lady who had been a lifelong Catholic. Her daughter and son-in-law had been radically converted to Christ and had become members of our church. We discussed the service, and I suggested we sing a couple of hymns. We knew the attendance at the funeral would be sparse, but we also knew there would be a number of unbelievers present. So we intentionally chose gospel-rich hymns that our church members knew well. (Yes, I realize many unbelievers are unaccustomed to singing in a church, but why not give them the opportunity?) Afterward, having heard the songs and the preaching of the gospel, one of the deceased lady's longtime friends told her daughter (a faithful believer) that she needed to talk with her. She shared, "I think I believe what I heard today."

5. *DO be personal without forgetting that your primary responsibility is to set forth the gospel of Jesus Christ.* Anecdotes about the deceased are certainly appropriate, although they should be shared wisely. For the funeral of a believer, the goal is that attendees will leave thinking, "What a great Savior this person had!" rather than what a clever fellow or gifted woman they were. Anecdotes may be drawn from your own relationship with the deceased or uncovered through conversations you have with their family or friends. Use caution here and try to avoid discussing private issues or matters that might lead to embarrassment or a breach of confidentiality. Also, be careful not to tell a story in order to manipulate people into a particular emotional response. Your task is to bring comfort, not to manipulate. A light or humorous story or illustration may be appropriate, but act wisely. I once attended a funeral where it

Conduct Gospel-Centered Funerals

was just one story after another about the deceased. None of them related to Christ. Not even the minister spoke of Christ, other than a token nod to him in his prayer. Most of the service focused on sharing humorous incidents or idiosyncrasies of the deceased. I left thinking that while the stories were interesting, no comfort had been offered and an opportunity for speaking of the hope in the gospel of Christ had been squandered.

In contrast to this experience, I recall attending the funeral of an older woman who had been an educator and coach in her community. One of the family members told of how the woman had come to faith in Christ after her teenage daughter suggested she read Chuck Colson's *Born Again*. While numerous delightful anecdotes were told about this lively person, the centerpiece of the funeral was a clear gospel message given by her son-in-law. The church was packed with people from the community, and they left without a doubt that Jesus Christ and the gospel were the focus of this beloved woman's life.

6. *DO expound the Scriptures.* Many pastors have a habit of stringing together a series of Scripture passages for a funeral service. But any sense of context is missing in this approach. Scripture should always be understood in context, not pulled and mashed into something new. I knew of an older minister who had committed much of Scripture to memory, and his funeral messages consisted of quoting dozens and dozens of verses. While I believe strongly in the primacy of the God's word, try to be sensitive to the way in which you use a biblical passage. Some preachers, with the best intentions, lead hearers to misconstrue the meaning of a passage. As a college student attending a funeral, I heard a minister use 1 Corinthians 2:9

Plan

from the NASB as his text: “But just as it is written, ‘Things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard, and which have not entered the heart of man, all that God has prepared for those who love Him.’” He went on to speak of how wonderful a place heaven would be for the deceased. If he had read the next verse, though, he would have seen that this text has nothing to do with heaven—it speaks of the believer’s present provisions through Christ in the gospel!

Instead of choosing an assortment of texts, select a single text or two and open it up by explaining it to the congregation and making application in light of the gospel. There are several “standard” funeral texts such as Psalm 23; Psalm 27; Psalm 46; Ecclesiastes 3:1–11; John 11:1–44; John 14:1–7; 1 Corinthians 15; 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18; and Revelation 21–22. In truth, almost any passage from the Gospels or a passage that explains the gospel of Christ will work well. I once preached on justification by faith from Romans 3 at one family’s request. It ended up being a clear gospel explanation and gave further opportunity for gospel discussions after the service. At another funeral, I focused on the person and work of Christ from Colossians 1:15–20 to an audience that, for the most part, had a law-based, works-righteousness understanding of salvation. It was a priceless opportunity to make the gospel of Christ clear to them. At my dad’s funeral, I expounded Revelation 5, making appropriate gospel exhortations throughout. I personally profited from a meditation on resting in Jesus from Matthew 11:28–30 at the funeral service for my granddaughter.

7. *DO dress appropriately.* Though a black suit is not necessary, a dark suit with a white or blue shirt and a conservative tie

Conduct Gospel-Centered Funerals

is often appropriate. Customs in your region may dictate otherwise, but normally this will keep you appropriately dressed. If you are new to an area, you might want to ask the local funeral director what to wear. He or she will be in a good position to advise you. Don't forget to take an overcoat with you for winter graveside services, especially in cold-weather parts of the country. The coldest I have ever been in my life was while conducting a winter graveside service. The burial was on the crest of a hill in the cemetery, and I shivered throughout, making speaking quite difficult! Shortly after the service, I found myself a better overcoat!

8. *DO get the details about the graveside service.* If there is an interment service or graveside service, the minister will usually need to wait by the rear door of the funeral coach and arrive with the procession. He will lead the pallbearers with the casket to the grave site. This might seem like a strange warning, but exercise caution as you are walking near the grave site. I've found that grave digging does not always go as planned, and the width of the grave can present a slight danger for a fall. Those who prepare the grave usually place boards along the edge of the grave to prevent accidents, and these boards are covered with "funeral grass" (an Astroturf-type material), so you may not see them. Either walk around the boards or directly on them if you are instructed to do so by the director or cemetery attendant. Believe it or not, I have seen pallbearers unwittingly step into a grave!

You will need to stand at the head of the casket to offer your remarks at the graveside. Begin your remarks only after the director gives you a nod to proceed. I always keep my eye

Plan

on the director, as he watches to make sure that all those in the procession have arrived. Once he catches your eye and signals, you can begin your remarks. Do not count on having a lectern or stand to assist with your Bible and notes. Normally, these are *not* provided in the cemetery. I recommend clipping your notes to the pages of your Bible or placing them in a small notebook or three-ring binder that you can use at the funeral.

After you finish your remarks and end with prayer, you may need to quietly speak to family members seated by the graveside. A brief but warm comment, a handshake, or a hug is appropriate. After you speak with family members, the funeral director will close the graveside service, giving instructions to the guests.

9. DO offer your services to the funeral home when they do not have a minister to serve a grieving family. Gospel opportunities await those who minister on these occasions. You will be frequently introduced to people who need to see Christianity at work and hear of God's good news for sinners. You may want to invite members from your congregation to assist in serving these families in need.

The Don'ts

1. DON'T try to do the funeral directors' job. Remember that they are professionals. Instead, consult with them to find out the logistics of where you need to be prior to the service, where you need to sit, and how you will close the service and turn the reins back to the director. Avoid telling a funeral director how to do his or her job.

2. DON'T squander an opportunity to counsel with the gospel of Christ. Funerals are a chance to apply what you preach and

Conduct Gospel-Centered Funerals

teach your congregation. Often, you will find that passages you've recently preached will be useful in your ministry as you point the attendees' attention back to some particular application of the Scripture you made earlier.

3. *DON'T be late for the funeral.* Arrive early to spend time with the family and guests. Let the parking lot attendant (if one is available) know that you are the minister for the funeral. He may ask you to park in a special place at the head of the funeral procession. The funeral director will normally be awaiting your arrival with a "minister's card" (or "obituary card," as it may be called) that gives you basic information on the deceased's birth, hometown, family, etc. You may want to use some of this information in the service, even if only as a guide to praying for the family members by name. Once you arrive, introduce yourself to the director, ask about logistics with the family and any plans for the procession, and give him or her an order for the funeral service—particularly specifying how you will close the service and return leadership to the director. Find out the details for the graveside or internment service. He may invite you to ride in the director's car. I always prefer doing so. You will get to know the director, plus you are guaranteed to arrive at the appropriate place for the burial! To be honest, whenever I am asked to be the lead car I have a fear I will end up leading the procession to the wrong spot in the cemetery, so it may be best to stick with the director, if they offer.

4. *DON'T neglect communicating with those involved in the memorial service.* If other members of your congregation are participating in some aspect of the service, make sure you are

Plan

all on the same page. I had an unfortunate experience in a church I previously served when a woman with a wonderful singing voice had been asked to sing at the funeral for a relative of another church member. The service was held in a rural location some thirty to forty minutes from our church, and it was not easy to find! This woman was notorious for being late, and sure enough, when it came time for us to process into the church to begin the service, the singer was nowhere to be found. Charitably, the director delayed the start in hope that the woman would soon arrive. After an uncomfortable delay in the afternoon sun, she remained a no-show. We began the service, and ten minutes later the singer sheepishly made her way to a seat close to the front. In what goes down as one of my most awkward funeral moments, I closed the service, walked in front of the casket, and began to exit toward the adjacent cemetery. Having gone no more than twenty feet, the deceased's widow blurted out, "Let the girl sing!" The director glanced at me, motioned with his eyes to return, and moved the casket once again to the front of the little church so that "the girl" could sing. A little margin in timing and better communication on my part might have alleviated that tense moment.

5. *DON'T preach too long at the funeral service.* On Sunday mornings, I regularly preach forty-five to fifty minute sermons. At funerals, I only speak for ten to twenty minutes. There have been a few rare exceptions, but only at the family's request. Why do I keep my messages short? It is very difficult for people to maintain a long attention span during a funeral. Brevity also shows consideration for those who have taken time off from work to attend the service and who need to return

Conduct Gospel-Centered Funerals

after it is over. A typical funeral service should normally last no more than thirty to forty minutes. Even a brief service can accomplish much good for the kingdom of God in that time frame. There are exceptions, of course. I've attended services that lasted well over an hour and were done appropriately. I've also attended services that lasted that long and were done inappropriately, straining everyone in attendance. Family members may be emotionally exhausted, so your aim is to offer them comfort, *not* add to their exhaustion.

6. *DON'T do more than you are asked to do.* Sometimes multiple ministers will be invited to fill various roles in a service. One might be asked to read Scripture, another to offer the eulogy, and another to give the sermon. Do only what you've been asked to do. Assuming that you have liberty to go beyond the family's wishes betrays the confidence they have placed in you. I was asked to read a biblical text at a funeral without offering any commentary on the text. I feared that the minister would fail to preach the gospel, so I really wanted to say more! Even though my fears were realized, I restrained my impulse to speak. Trusting in the power of God's word, I prayed that the Spirit would powerfully attend the reading of Holy Scripture. Out of respect for the family, I dared not take advantage of my time on the platform by misusing my opportunity.

Gathering Information

Sitting with a family just after their loved one has died provides a precious opportunity to understand their affection (or, in some cases, lack of affection) for the deceased. You can invite them to tell stories and to remember the little things that the deceased had done for them or with them. Sharing these

Plan

types of stories will give a unique perspective of the deceased, as you begin to see them more like the family does. I've found it appropriate, especially after the initial shock of the loved one's death, to ask questions that allow the family to open up and talk. It is certainly appropriate to jot down notes in the family's presence as you prepare for the service. You do not want to misrepresent a story they share, so pay close attention to details, asking questions to clarify anything you don't understand.

Working with the Funeral Home

You are not alone in caring for families when a death occurs. The local funeral home will also be involved, albeit from a different perspective. My father was a funeral director during my childhood and adolescence, and I had the opportunity to watch him as he cared for people. I noticed his concern as families made their way through the shock of death and the subsequent grieving process. Though he rarely talked about it, his care was evident in his actions and his tenderness that often went far beyond normal funeral "service" to help people through their grief.

My father was certainly not the only one who cared like this. Through the years, I've met many funeral directors and personnel who compassionately serve those who experienced the loss of a family member. For some it is just a job, but honestly, it is difficult to work in an environment in which you regularly face death and grief unless there is at least some small measure of concern for the grieving. As a gospel minister, I encourage you to seek out funeral home personnel who will partner with you in offering genuine care for people.

Conduct Gospel-Centered Funerals

Knowing the Funeral Director

In the small town of my early years, there were two funeral homes and two funeral directors, with a few employees between them. Local ministers had little trouble knowing the name of the directors and having some congenial relationship with them. That is still true in smaller communities. But since most people now live in urban areas, it is difficult to personally know the funeral director. In some cases, large conglomerates own funeral homes rather than a local family. Multiple funeral homes will conduct several funerals each day instead of the four or five per week typical in a small community. Naturally, the director has less leisure time to spend chatting with local ministers, so a minister may have to take the initiative and introduce himself to the funeral directors at the local funeral homes. Here are a few suggestions for your visit:

1. Make an appointment to visit for five to ten minutes with the funeral directors in your area.
2. Leave him or her a business card and a little information about yourself and your church.
3. Ask about the funeral home's policies for meeting with families, funeral services, and funerals for those who don't have burial insurance.
4. Ask for a quick tour of the facilities so you will be familiar with what services are available for members of your congregation.
5. Keep a record of the director's name, phone number, and any details that might help you to be an informed counselor to those involved in loss.

Plan

Understanding Logistics

What is the funeral director's role? We've spent some time considering the role of the minister when someone dies, but we haven't talked much about the other member of the team who cares for the grieving family—the funeral director. They have an important job to do as well, and as I mentioned earlier, it's vital that the minister not attempt to take over the funeral director's domain. I remember my dad commenting, with much displeasure, about two pastors in our county who always tried to take over his job. My dad was an experienced professional at his work and well respected by his peers. The pastors in question were not experienced at funerals, but they liked to be in charge—even pastors are not immune to pride. I still recall my father expressing his dread whenever he had to team up with these two pastors to do funerals. They were a poor witness to my father and to his other employees. These pastors should have understood what the funeral director was charged with doing in behalf of the family. To help you avoid repeating their mistakes, we'll consider some of the key components of the funeral home director's job description.

Provide respectful care of the deceased family member. The funeral director is the last one to give physical care to the remains of the deceased. I remember, as I worked with my dad, the tenderness and respect he showed to the lifeless body. Although no one was around to see how he handled his work, grieving family members had confidence that “Mr. Joe” would treat their loved one with the greatest respect.

Provide short-term service for the family. Though the pastor

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is engaged long-term, the funeral home is involved for only a few days in the lives of grieving family members. Most funeral directors want to provide the best possible care in that brief span. What services does the funeral home typically provide?

- transport of the deceased's body for embalming and preparation
- assisting the family in making arrangements for the service
- providing a range of caskets, vaults, and clothing for the deceased
- seeking to make the lifeless face as natural as possible
- gathering and arrange floral tributes
- notifying the local newspaper of the death
- transporting the deceased and floral tributes to the place of service and internment
- arranging for details at the graveside
- making sure the grave is ready for the family's visit
- filing a death certificate

My dad often reminded me that he could not afford to make mistakes since he dealt with people for such a brief period of time. Any mistakes would be remembered and would reflect negatively on him and his work.

Accommodate the wishes of the family. The funeral director normally meets with the family within twenty-four hours of their loved one's death. He gathers needed information for legal purposes, for the minister, and for ensuring that every desire of the family is met. Occasionally, the pastor may need to accompany the family at such time, although for the most

Plan

part, that visit should be left to the funeral director. The director will ask for the deceased's full name, place and date of birth, place of residence, place of death, names of family members, place of employment, church membership, other significant organizations or involvement, names of pallbearers, location of the funeral service, name of the person who will conduct the service, name of the person responsible for music, and location of the cemetery for burial. I have found, especially with younger families experiencing a death, that it is helpful to clue them in on what will happen at the visit with the director. At that time, he will also offer various selections of caskets, vaults, and burial clothing. On numerous occasions, I have been seated with a family around a table, helping them gather the information they need for their meeting with the director.

Comply with the laws of the state. Every legal jurisdiction has laws regulating burial and cremation of the deceased. The funeral director will be familiar with the current laws and responsible to fulfill them.



Attention to detail helps the minister to serve grieving families as well as to provide a good witness in the community. Since most deceased are buried three to five days after death, the minister will need to be well organized and prepared for what seems a rushed period. Thinking ahead for what the family will encounter in the brief time frame between death and burial will enable a minister to focus on ways to apply the gospel to families struggling with their loss.

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I suggest periodically reviewing this chapter (and the ones that follow) until your understanding of how to prepare for a funeral service becomes a natural part of your ministry to the church.