



**MINISTERING
THE MASTER'S WAY**

Conduct gospel- centered funerals:

Applying the gospel at the unique
challenges of death

Brian Croft and Phil A. Newton

DayOne

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Cover designed by Wayne McMaster and printed in the USA

To our fathers:
Bill Croft and
Joe E. Newton

ENDORSEMENTS

The brevity of this book betrays its value. Conduct Gospel-Centered Funerals is a superb treatment of this crucial aspect of pastoral ministry. It is both theologically faithful and practically useful. I will refer to it often when called upon to point others to the victory we have in Christ during the times of sorrow and grief that always accompany death.

Daniel L. Akin, President, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Wake Forest, NC, USA

Brian Croft and Phil Newton have written a most helpful work for all who have the high responsibility of conducting funerals and ministering to families during times of grief. This theologically grounded guide is commendable in many ways, most importantly for the way it leads readers to understand the central role that the gospel should have in funeral sermons, eulogies, and musical selections. As stated so well in the subtitle, Croft and Newton offer practical and pastoral insights for addressing the ultimate questions regarding life and death during the critical moments of the funeral service. This timely volume is worthy of careful and reflective reading by pastors, church leaders, and ministerial students.

David S. Dockery, President, Union University, Jackson, TN, USA

Phil Newton and Brian Croft have joined hands to provide a marvelously practical and theologically rich book on how to conduct funerals. The book is packed with wise and sane advice, ranging from how to relate to the funeral director to how to counsel a grieving family. Most importantly, the authors remind us that the gospel must be front and center at funerals. But they do not only instruct us to proclaim the

gospel, they also illustrate it by including funeral sermons. This is a must-read for busy pastors, and I suspect most pastors will turn to it quite often.

Thomas R. Schreiner, James Buchanan Harrison
Professor of New Testament Interpretation, The
Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY,
USA

*I needed this book thirty-five years ago! Brian Croft and Phil Newton have done it again—adding to Brian’s immensely useful book, *Visit the Sick*, this one on conducting gospel-centered funerals. In an age when funerals and weddings are likely to be the only occasions when the gospel is heard, the need to view the funeral service as an occasion for the evangel is paramount. Every gospel-centered minister needs to read this book.*

Derek W. H. Thomas, John E. Richards Professor of
Systematic and Practical theology, RTS (Jackson), and
Minister of Teaching, First Presbyterian Church,
Jackson, MS, USA

This book is perfectly titled. Brian Croft and Phil Newton show us how to bring Christ into the center of our funeral services. Filled with practical advice and sound biblical teaching, this book deserves a place in every minister’s library.

Dr. Ray Pritchard, President, Keep Believing
Ministries, Tupelo, MS, USA, and author of *An Anchor*
for the Soul, *Stealth Attack*, and *Why Did This*
Happen to Me?

Conduct Gospel-Centered Funerals is a concise, theologically sound, and practically savvy book on conducting funerals in a manner consistent with the gospel we proclaim. Brian Croft

and Phil Newton are faithful, reliable guides, helping the pastor with everything from pre-funeral planning to post-funeral pastoral care. Particularly helpful is Chapter 3, which guides the pastor in crafting gospel-centered messages for various types of funerals, including those for family members, church members, known unbelievers, infants, tragic early deaths, suicides, and strangers. In short, this is the first book pastors should consult for planning and preaching funerals.

Bruce Ashford, Dean, The College, and Associate Professor of Theology and Culture, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, and Research Fellow for the L. Russ Bush Center for Faith and Culture, Wake Forest, NC, USA

This is an outstanding book that I wish had been available decades ago! Brian Croft and Phil Newton have combined a wealth of pastoral wisdom and funeral-home experience to provide priceless guidance for ministers of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Every pastor, elder, and man preparing for the ministry should read and apply its counsel. Doing so will prevent him the embarrassment of funeral blunders and will open doors for significant ministry to those who grieve.

Paul Tautges, Pastor-Teacher of Immanuel Bible Church, Sheboygan, WI, USA, and author of Comfort Those Who Grieve

Far too many funerals present nothing but a eulogy—that is, good words about the deceased—and nothing about Jesus Christ, who came to be the solution to the final problem of sin and death. The seasoned pastors who authored this book have given us a practical resource that shows how to make the gospel central on an occasion when people are desperately in need of the good news of what God has done for sinners through Jesus

Christ. Everyone who provides leadership for funeral, memorial, or graveside services could profit from reading this helpful guide.

Don Whitney, Associate Professor of Biblical Spirituality, and Senior Associate Dean of the School of Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY, USA

As this book demonstrates, Brian Croft always writes about practical matters spiritually, and spiritual matters practically. Not everything in this book will fit every pastoral situation or cultural context, but all pastors will find much-needed guidance on what to say and do as they tread carefully and prayerfully through the minefield of bereavement, mourning, and funeral arrangements.

David Murray, Professor of Old Testament and Practical Theology, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, MI, USA

How I wish that I had this book ten years ago! Filled with biblical and wise pastoral wisdom, this book will help the person just starting to take funerals as well as give fresh thoughts to those who have taken many. Brian Croft and Phil Newton have written a pastoral gem.

Paul Rees, Senior Pastor, Charlotte Chapel, Edinburgh, Scotland

Death is an inescapable reality, and any minister of the gospel who is committed to speaking for God must prepare to speak to those who are dealing with the trauma of losing a friend or a loved one. Funerals are one of the greatest opportunities for the gospel of Jesus Christ to be proclaimed because they are reminders to everyone that death is indeed “the end of all men.”

When biblical understanding of how the gospel applies to death and grieving is joined with careful preparation to help others to see it, eternal good can also be done by ministers at funerals. Brian Croft and Phil Newton know the gospel well and share their seasoned, pastoral wisdom in how to minister its comfort and power to those who gather in a worship service that has been called by death. If the biblical, pastoral, and practical counsel that is provided in this book is followed by those whose task it is to conduct funeral services, much glory will come to God and much good will come to mourners.

**Tom Ascol, Pastor, Grace Baptist Church, and
Executive Director, Founders Ministries, Cape Coral,
FL, USA**

This book is wonderfully practical and helpful. The authors have performed hundreds of God-honoring funerals and here share lessons learned in the trenches. If you are called upon to perform funerals, you will find this resource invaluable. I know that I will consult it often.

**Mike McKinley, Senior Pastor, Guilford Baptist
Church, Sterling, VA, USA, and author of Church
Planting Is for Wimps**

In Conduct Gospel-Centered Funerals Brian Croft and Phil Newton have done a grace-filled service to every minister of the gospel. How I wish this volume was available when I began my pastoral ministry four decades ago! It is filled with practical counsel and Christ-exalting truth.

**Al Jackson, Pastor, Lakeview Baptist Church, Auburn,
AL, USA**

I am very pleased to join with others in recommending this little gem of a book. Every pastor—young or old—knows just how

daunting (especially if this happens to be his first time) and demanding it is to conduct funeral services. Above everything else he desires with all his heart to honor God and be of help to those who are grieving. In Conduct Gospel-Centered Funerals Brian Croft and Phil Newton have placed before us a series of pastorally sensitive reflections which cannot help but be of immense value to us in this vital area of our ministries.

***Daniel Webber, Mission Director, European
Missionary Fellowship, and Principal of the EMF
School of Biblical Studies, Welwyn, UK***

Brian Croft and Phil Newton's book is saturated with biblical wisdom, pastoral experience, and the gospel. Most importantly, the gospel permeates every aspect of their encouragement for pastors in this accessible volume. I wish I had read it when I was asked to do my first funeral. We will all benefit from pondering what these seasoned pastors have to teach us here.

***Shawn Wright, Pastor of Leadership Development,
Clifton Baptist Church, Louisville, KY, and Associate
Professor of Church History, The Southern Baptist
Theological Seminary, USA***

Ministers and potential ministers owe a debt of gratitude to Phil Newton and Brian Croft for their labors in Conduct Gospel-Centered Funerals. It is clear that both men are seasoned pastors with a passionate heart for the gospel in the midst of one of the most trying circumstances the pastor faces. Having served with Phil for twelve years, I am glad to see the principles I gleaned from him put into written form along with Brian's complementary insights. You will not find a more practical approach to leading the funeral than Conduct Gospel-

Centered Funerals. *I look forward to using it in mentoring others who are now in my charge.*

Todd Wilson, Senior Pastor, Grace Covenant Baptist Church, Birmingham, AL, USA

Brian Croft and Phil Newton have given pastors a tremendous blessing in their timely, succinct, scriptural, and practical work, Conduct Gospel-Centered Funerals. They write out of a passion for Christ and a yearning to see the lost saved and believers edified in the conduct of Word-based funerals. New pastors will especially benefit from their practical insights in planning, preparing, preaching, and performing funerals. And veteran pastors will also be challenged to make sure that mourners are comforted with the pure Word of God, and with a clear vision of Christ in the words and the actions of the pastor. I heartily commend this godly writing!

Andrew Davis, Senior Pastor, First Baptist Church, Durham, NC, USA

ABOUT THIS BOOK

The call comes. “Pastor, will you conduct my mother’s funeral?” Or, “Please help us—our baby just died.” Two to three days’ notice offers little time to prepare for the challenges surrounding a funeral. What will you say to the family? How will you conduct the service? Which texts will you read? How will you relate to the funeral director? Most importantly, how will you keep the gospel of Jesus Christ central throughout your ministry to the grieving family and those attending the funeral? Experienced pastors Brian Croft and Phil A. Newton offer readers a concise guide to conducting gospel-centered funerals. With examples from their own ministries, the authors help pastors apply the gospel’s power while serving those grieved by a loved one’s death.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Brian Croft is Senior Pastor of Auburndale Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky, USA. He is the author of several books about pastoral ministry, including *Visit the Sick: Ministering God’s Grace in Times of Illness* (Day One, 2008). Through his blog, Practical Shepherding (www.practicalshepherding.com), he seeks to equip pastors and leaders to faithfully shepherd God’s people. He and his wife, Cara, have four children.

Phil Newton is Senior Pastor of South Woods Baptist Church in Memphis, TN, USA, a church he planted in 1987. He is the author of *Elders in Congregational Life: Rediscovering the Biblical Model for Church Leadership* (Kregel, 2005) and a contributor to other books and journals. His expositional work is posted at www.southwoodsbc.org. Phil and his wife, Karen, have five children and five grandchildren.



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BRIAN'S PREFACE

Phil should solely have written this book. Phil grew up around a funeral home and was raised by a faithful father who was a funeral director and taught him to care for people in this everyday context. Phil conducted his first funeral before I was born and was in the trenches of pastoral ministry before I was potty-trained. Needless to say, Phil has graciously allowed me to ride on his coattails to be included with him in this book. So then, allow me this moment to say “thank you” to Phil for his kind, humble, and inclusive spirit in approaching this project.

I must confess, I think I found myself more excited to work with Phil, learn from a seasoned pastor, and create an excuse for us to fellowship together, than I was to write another book. Nevertheless, I am grateful that in the Lord's kindness all those expectations were met in addition to this book being completed, and we trust that the Lord will use it as a helpful, practical tool to assist pastors in ministering the gospel at some of the most opportune times of people's lives. If you benefit from Phil's wisdom and experience in reading this book half as much as I did in working on this project with him, you will find combing through these pages well worth your time.

I want to express my deep appreciation to Joe and Joey Ratterman, Charley, and the entire Ratterman Funeral Home, for allowing me the opportunity to conduct so many funerals for them when a pastor was unavailable or unknown to a hurting family. The difficult, unique, and often unpredictable situations in which we have found ourselves over the years are what have allowed me the experiences to write such a book. By God's grace, I look forward to many years of partnership in the future. Thank you for your investment, confidence, and friendship.

As always, my wife and children remained steadfast in love, patience, and support throughout this project. I wish to dedicate my portion of the book to my father, Bill Croft, who as

a physician exemplified care of both the dying and the families of those enduring the death of a loved one.

Brian Croft
Senior Pastor
Auburndale Baptist Church
Louisville, KY

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PHIL'S PREFACE

Brian should solely have written this book. Through his other books he has already demonstrated a unique ability to help pastors serve their congregations and communities. Brian's blog, "Practical Shepherding" (at www.practicalshepherding.com), is filled with the kind of down-to-earth, practical, biblical, and insightful material that I wish I had known in the early years of pastoral ministry. It would have saved me a multitude of mistakes! In a word, Brian *connects*. He does not approach pastoral work as an "armchair pastor," telling others what to do but hardly lifting a finger to the task himself. He speaks as one who lives in the trenches of pastoral work. Anyone reading Brian's writings finds his own pastoral understanding enriched.

Joining with a fellow pastor of kindred spirit to write a book that offers help to those who minister to grieving families is a long-time dream come true. I have wanted to write on this subject for years but lacked someone who would gladly compensate for my obvious weaknesses. Brian is just that pastor. He sees details that I have long overlooked. Having spent plenty of time counseling fellow pastors, Brian understands how to focus on what pastors most need. I am confident that you will find his writing to be spot on, just as I have, so that we might all serve Christ and His church more faithfully.

I want to express my appreciation for my fellow elder Jim Carnes, who provided a list of recommended hymns to use at funeral services. Special thanks go to Mike Nowlin, Matt Slinger, and Rich Shadden, for their editing assistance. Also, I express my deep affection and appreciation for Randy and Stacey McLendon, Chuck and Suzanne Buchanan, and Chris and Jessica Wilbanks, whose loss of Jackson McLendon, Peyton Buchanan, and Jordan Wilbanks taught me much about resting in the sufficiency of Christ in the face of death. As always, my wife Karen has been an encouragement to me as I worked on

this manuscript. I want to dedicate my portion of this book to the memory of my father, Joe E. Newton (1925–1998), who exemplified care for those enduring the death of a loved one.

Phil A. Newton
Senior Pastor
South Woods Baptist Church
Memphis, TN

INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to be “gospel-centered”? We hear this term almost incessantly today, but we should never presume that everyone knows what it means. This is especially true in the context of funerals, as many think they are being faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ as they conduct them, when in actuality they are not. As a result, there exists a pressing need not just to have a book on the practicalities of funerals, but to have one that would guide us to a clear understanding of what the gospel is and its appropriate application in those practicalities. Thus, before clarifying what it means to be gospel-centered, we must first acknowledge what it looks like to confuse the clear gospel message in the context of funerals.

Faithfulness to the gospel in funerals is obscured in the pastor’s words of comfort about heaven when *how* heaven is received is not made clear. The gospel is distorted when the pastor preaches the deceased into eternal glory when there has been no credible evidence of gospel transformation in that person’s life. The gospel is likewise contradicted when the man entrusted to facilitate and conduct the funeral service is unloving, impatient, and uninterested in the souls of the family that remain. This book reflects the authors’ mutual burden from attending numerous funerals at which each of these scenarios became the defining focus. On those occasions the gospel of Jesus Christ was lamentably overlooked as the primary purpose of the service and the focus upon which all true hope depends.

Therefore, gospel-centeredness is when the gospel of Jesus Christ is the primary purpose *and* the focus of the funeral. It is making sure that the foundation of any hope experienced is rooted in a holy God’s merciful plan to redeem sinners through crushing His own Son on the cross in our place. We plan, prepare, preach, and perform gospel-centered funerals in the same way we pursue Christ as our central focus in our churches, homes,

marriages, and all other areas of our lives. The challenges in the logistics of funerals, however, are almost always unique, leaving a pastor unsure how Christ is to be magnified in the fog of their details and demands.

Thus, the aim of this book is not just to inform you of all the different kinds of important logistics, challenges, and practicalities that often accompany a funeral, but to assist you to know how to apply the power of the gospel in the midst of those unique challenges. In other words, even though the funeral you are conducting is for a young man tragically killed—extend the hope of Christ. Even though a baby has died—exhort the parents to look to Christ. Even though the family of the deceased are fighting among themselves and the funeral director has been less than helpful to work with—point them all to Christ as you conduct yourself in a way that reflects Him. As ministers of the gospel of Jesus Christ, our chief aim is, as we argue in the pages of this book, to bring God glory by making much of Jesus in all circumstances and situations—especially funerals.

Speaking of logistics, this book is to be a helpful companion to Paul Tautges' excellent book, *Comfort Those Who Grieve*, also published by Day One in the *Ministering the Master's Way* series. Paul has served us well with this helpful, biblical, theological, and pastoral treatment to aid those grieving to find hope in the context of death. We desire to address the practicalities within this same context and, by God's grace, achieve the same result. 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 be ministered in the context of every funeral. We would argue that the message must be clear if it is to be faithful.

Plan

—PHIL NEWTON



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 →

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*

Funerals tend to arrive at the minister's doorstep with little notice. Though extended illnesses allow one to anticipate a funeral, most funerals come rather suddenly. An accident, a heart attack, an aggressive illness, a rapidly growing cancer, an undetected disease, a birth defect, a suicide—all tend to come without warning. As gospel ministers, we must be prepared for such occasions since the responsibility for pastoral care of the family belongs to us.

But the minister is not alone in family care. The local funeral home is also involved in care, albeit from a different perspective. My father was a funeral director during my childhood and adolescence. I had the opportunity to observe his concern and care for people going through the shock of death and the subsequent grieving process. He occasionally mentioned his concern for the people he served, but mostly I could see it in his actions and tenderness, as he often went far beyond normal funeral “service” to help people through their grief.

My father was far from alone in such care. Through the years, I've met many funeral directors and personnel compassionately serving those experiencing the loss of a family member. Certainly, 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 a measure of concern for the grieving. Consequently, as gospel ministers, we must seek to partner with funeral-home personnel in offering broad care for those encountering the trauma of death.

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As partners, it is important to remember each other's role. As a gospel minister you should focus on six specific areas.

1. Providing pastoral care

By this, we mean that you recognize the death of a family member as a significant occasion when your members need shepherding. It is time to apply the gospel and its promises to help them through the rough, churning waters they must navigate. One of my church families went through the trial of watching their newborn struggle with an undetected birth defect during his first month. Subsequently, they spent over three months in the local children's hospital, with either the mom or dad constantly by the little fellow's side. I visited with them often, always reading Scripture, talking of God's promises, reflecting on the gospel, and praying for them and their little boy. We all shed many tears through that period. My wife and I were present when he breathed his last breath. We found the sufficiency of the gospel to be so comforting at that time. When I conducted the two memorial services for this little boy (one in our church, the other in the dad's hometown several hours away), I was able to *build* on the pastoral conversations that I had had with the family. We all gloried in the gospel of Christ, so that, in spite of the intense sadness at the loss, we found comfort in the work of Jesus Christ.

2. Giving comfort through the Scriptures and your presence

Just being present means much to a grieving family. Often, the minister thinks he must come up with some pithy quote to help the grieving family. Better, however, is the minister's comforting presence as one who loves and cares for the family. Listening to them, offering a consoling arm around the shoulders, reading from the Word of God, and praying in the midst of weakness mean much more than clever phrases. They

likely will not remember many of our quotes, but they will remember that we stood with them in their loss. It is surprising how our selection of particular biblical texts stays with them, with some recalling a particular passage years later. I had this experience recently, as one of the older members at my church reminded me of a particular text that I had read to her as she worked through a time of grief many years earlier, though I had forgotten about it.

3. Representing Jesus Christ, the church, and the gospel

The minister visibly represents Christ's ministry to the family. It's not that the minister replaces Christ—that could never happen! But he does stand as one who has been in the presence of Christ, through the Word and prayer, and now stands with the grieving family. He is also the first face to meet the family and to apply the gospel to help them move forward. He is in a position to recognize how other members of the church can aid the family in distress, and so can direct the body toward offering member care.

As one representing the gospel, the minister must never see his role as simply saying what he thinks the family want to hear. He is to be faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ. I once attended the funeral of a man who had been very active until late-term cancer struck him down. Athletic until just a few months before his death, this man looked youthful even though he was in his seventies. One of the ministers at the funeral, rather than being straightforward about the promises of the gospel, twisted a well-known gospel passage to accommodate what he perceived would please the family and friends. He quoted John 3:3 (“Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God”) and told the story of Nicodemus's visit with Jesus, but rather than talking about the new birth he said, “You see, Nicodemus wanted to remain youthful. He went to Jesus because he wanted to keep on living a full, youthful life.”

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He continued by commending the deceased as one who had this same spirit, desiring youthful vigor. I was grieved that this man demeaned the gospel instead of applying it to the comfort of the family.

4. Setting forth the sufficiency of the gospel

The minister must be all about the gospel. By this, I do not mean that he looks at the grieving process and funeral as a prime evangelistic opportunity. A time for evangelism *might* present itself through the pastoral care but, more pointedly, the minister's 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 triumphed over death, freeing those who trust Him from slavery to fear of death (Heb. 2:14-15). The minister's task is to help the family to live in this truth.

But what if the deceased family member was not a believer? How can the minister offer hope? First, a minister must be careful about "preaching a person into heaven." For the sake of the gospel, if the deceased offered no fruit of conversion, the minister must be cautious about assuming him or her to have been a believer and thus a recipient of gospel promises.

Second, however, the minister must also walk the tightrope of not passing judgment on a person's eternal state. If the deceased had professed to be a Christian but showed little evidence, the minister might refer to the person's profession but carefully not present it as though this person had passed into heaven. I have led numerous funerals when scant evidence of genuine faith accompanied the deceased. Yet I realize that, ultimately, that is not my call. I might say, "Mr. Brown professed Jesus Christ as his Savior as a young man," and then mention this no more. Or I might relate a conversation with a spouse or relative: "Sally told me of a time, years ago, when Mr. Brown professed faith in Christ; we rejoice in this report." Do not say more than that

which you are assured of by the deceased person's walk with Christ. However, if the deceased scandalized the gospel by his or her life—in spite of an earlier profession—it may serve all by not referring to the supposed profession, lest the hearers become confused about the demands of the gospel.

Third, the minister, out of desire to comfort the family, will also not preach the deceased into eternal perdition! I remember an occasion, when working for my dad on a funeral, when the minister used very clear language to declare the deceased to be under eternal judgment. He lightly cloaked it in judgment terminology but it was clear enough for me, as a teenager, to understand exactly what he intended. He was probably right about the deceased, but I question the prudence of making such an announcement 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, the minister might more judiciously say, “It is only those who have trusted in Jesus Christ and His redemptive work who will be forever in His presence,” or something along that line. In this respect, the minister does not place the emphasis on the deceased, but rather appeals to the living who have yet to trust in Christ.

5. Building relationships for ministry with 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. The minister sees them as they are. He may hear things that surprise him; he may see attitudes that he had never before noticed. Build on such times. The grieving period is not the best time to “attack” those areas of sanctification that surface in a church member's life. But in the forthcoming weeks and months, the watchful minister is able to apply the teaching of Scripture to issues he recognizes