

Let's Talk about Funerals

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On February 20, 2016, Paul Scalia, a Catholic priest, delivered the homily for his father, Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia. After greeting various dignitaries in the audience and offering the gratitude of his family for their presence and prayers, Scalia began his homily in this way:

We are gathered here because of one man. A man known personally to many of us, known only by reputation to even more. A man loved by many, scorned by others. A man known for great controversy, and for great compassion. That man, of course, is Jesus of Nazareth.

It is He whom we proclaim. Jesus Christ, son of the father, born of the Virgin Mary, crucified, buried, risen, seated at the right hand of the Father. It is because of him, because of his life, death and resurrection that we do not mourn as those who have no hope, but in confidence we commend Antonin Scalia to the mercy of God.¹

In the homily, Paul Scalia refers to “Jesus” thirteen times, while referring to his father twenty times, in every case in connection to Jesus’ gifts of grace and mercy to his father. The homily was built around Hebrews 8, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever,” with each temporal reference serving as a guidepost to reflections upon the elder Scalia’s life in Christ: his past, his present, his forever. In his discussion of “yesterday,” Scalia gave thanks

¹ The entire transcript of Scalia’s eulogy, a wonderful example of Christian reflection during a funeral, may be accessed here: <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2016/02/20/transcript-rev-paul-scalias-eulogy-his-father-justice-antonin-scalia/80667122/>.

first of all for the atoning death and life-giving resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our Lord died and rose not only for all of us, but also for each of us. And at this time we look to that yesterday of his death and resurrection, and we give thanks that he died and rose for Dad.

Further, we give thanks that Jesus brought him to new life in baptism, nourished him with the Eucharist, and healed him in the confessional.

Later, during his reflection on “today,” Scalia reflected on his father’s Christian journey toward holiness. He then offered this:

But don’t take my word for it. Dad himself, not surprisingly, had something to say on the matter. Writing years ago to a Presbyterian minister whose funeral service he admired, he summarized quite nicely the pitfalls of funerals and why he didn’t like eulogies.

He wrote: “Even when the deceased was an admirable person, indeed *especially* when the deceased was an admirable person, praise for his virtues can cause us to forget that we are praying for and giving thanks for God’s inexplicable mercy to a sinner.”

Now he would not have exempted himself from that. We are here then, as he would want, to pray for God’s inexplicable mercy to a sinner. To this sinner, Antonin Scalia. Let us not show him a false love and allow our admiration to deprive him of our prayers. We continue to show affection for him and do good for him by praying for him: That all stain of sin be washed away, that all wounds be healed, that he be purified of all that is not Christ. That he rest in peace.

Finally, Scalia offered reflections on “forever,” suggesting that those in the audience

consider our own place in eternity and whether it will be with the Lord. Even as we pray for Dad to enter swiftly into eternal glory, we should be mindful of ourselves. Every funeral reminds us of just how thin the veil is between this world and the next, between time and eternity, between the opportunity for conversion and the moment of judgment.

Those of us who are not Roman Catholic may disagree with Father Scalia theologically on many points, but if the homily makes us uncomfortable, I suspect it may do so for a different reason.

In 2018, after a lengthy time in the academy, I was blessed to return to local ministry for a small congregation of which I'd been a member for many years. Since that time, I have been blessed with the awesome responsibility of conducting seven funerals, and have attended several more. I have noticed in the past several years the eclipse of the funeral with the "celebration of life"—in fact, of the many services I have attended in the last few years, apart from those I conducted, I cannot think of one that would be what we would call a "funeral." They have all been "celebration(s) of life."

The funeral home industry has noticed this shift, of course, and many funeral homes offer detailed explanations of the differences between the two services. Westchester Funeral Home, in Eastchester New York, for instance, offers this helpful guide:

It's interesting; funerals and celebrations of life have much in common, yet they often appear quite different in execution. Each is a ceremony; a gathering of people who share a common loss. It's just that one is more rooted in tradition, while the other is the result of recent changes in social values.²

Johnson's Funeral Home in Georgetown, Kentucky, explains that

Author Barbara Kingsolver, in her book *The Poisonwood Bible*, wrote "To live is to be marked. To live is to change, to acquire the words of a story, and that is the only celebration we mortals really know." We think this reflection is at the heart of a celebration-of-life. While a funeral, as we've described it above, has more to do with the orderly and often spiritually-defined transition of the deceased from one social status to another; a celebration-of-life is more concerned with telling the story of the deceased. Celebrations-of-life are just that: a time people come together more to celebrate the unique personality and achievements of the deceased than to merely witness or mark the change in their social status.³

² <https://www.westchesterfuneralhome.com/memorial-service-vs-celebration-of-life>.

³ https://johnsonsfuneralhome.com/Funerals_vs._Celebrations_of_Life_1263241.html. It's important to note that these two funeral homes define the celebration of life over against the specifically religious and tradition centered funeral, especially given the geographical and cultural breadth spanned by the two companies. Reading further on the websites of each, one also notices that both funeral homes link the rise of memorial services and celebrations of life specifically to the growing popularity of cremation.

In this essay I will explore the rise of celebration of life services specifically within churches, and consider ways in which that rise and the concomitant decline of the Christian funeral might more accurately reflect the current “secular” cultural milieu rather than the biblically and theologically formed funeral practices of the church in the past. I will also consider ways in which these changes—specifically the shift of *focus* from the gospel to the individual—reinforce, both theologically and sociologically, a fundamentally un-Christian anthropology. These changes also functionally (if not intentionally) sever the deceased, and the deceased’s community, from both salvation history and the communion of saints. Finally, I will attempt to offer some practical suggestions for ways churches may address this trend theologically and pastorally.

The Sociological Function of Funerals

In his book, *Accompany Them with Singing—the Christian Funeral*, Thomas Long relates the discovery of two ancient burial sites separated by thousands of miles as well as thousands of years, each of them with obvious evidence of the care shown to the deceased.⁴ Long explains that, though anthropologists and sociologists disagree on whether these ancient death rituals gave rise to religious development, or the other way around, there is no denying 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.... The dance of death moves to the music of the holy.⁵

There are many events in human life that have been held sacred throughout human history, and thus accompanied by solemn rituals: childbirth, coming of age, conversion, and the coming together of man and woman in marriage, for instance. None, though, holds the significance, historically, of a funeral rite. Here, human beings face the fact of mortality and stand in the presence of the transcendent. Thus, the funeral has served, sociologically, to denote a *sacred* transition. It has served as a recognition of the value and worth of

⁴ Thomas G. Long, *Accompany Them with Singing—the Christian Funeral* (Louisville: WJKP, 2009). Long’s excellent book should be required reading for every person in pastoral care.

⁵ Long, *Accompany Them with Singing*, 3.

human life, but also placed that life within a broader context of both time and the sacred. In doing so, the funeral has functioned as a means of providing hope for the bereaved by providing a *place* for the deceased in the ongoing story of history and humanity.

Funeral practices both shape and are shaped by cultural norms and beliefs. Funerals in the early church reflected the view that Christians held of life as a journey, a “traveling on,” and this has been the primary metaphor of Christian funerals for centuries. The travel to the grave site was considered the “last mile” of the deceased’s earthly journey, and the church’s funeral practices reflected that understanding metaphorically, as they would accompany the deceased to the grave, singing hymns along the way.

Note that the metaphor of the funeral is central to understanding what it is that the culture which practices it believes about the sacred, about human beings, and about the world itself. Christian funeral practices have reflected an understanding of a transcendent order, of a God who is working time toward a conclusion and investing each human life with its own significance within that timeline. When a Christian dies, the church commends his soul to the Lord as he journeys to join the full communion of saints. In this way, Christian funerals have been eschatological affairs—they point toward a *telos* of the created order and they place the deceased within that *telos*.

Long explains that “necessity” is a primary motivator for funerals: a dead body must be moved from the community of the living. However, for Christians, it is also a theological matter:

The necessity of tending to dead bodies belongs, as theologians would remind us, to the order of creation. And that means that whatever rituals Christians develop around death, they are faithful only to the extent that they do not obscure the essential humanity of the experience. A Christian funeral should not be a precious ceremony aimed at covering up the fact that someone is really dead and that the people who are around the dead person have to take care of the body. That is the honest-to-God truth of what is going on. When we care for the bodies of the dead, we are not trying to hide an embarrassment behind a screen of piety; we are trying to do a human thing humanly.⁶

⁶ Long, *Accompany Them with Singing*, 8–9.

For centuries, this understanding of the funeral as a sacred moment and reminder of the order of creation was central to funeral practices in the West in general, and in the church specifically. The past few decades, though, have witnessed a shift from the traditional Christian funeral practice to something altogether different. Whereas the traditional Christian funeral was largely an act of worship in which the church focused on the work of God, the new practices—especially the celebration of life services—are often devoid of worship altogether and focus almost exclusively on the life lived by the deceased. There are often reflections on the character of the dead—her kindness, his charity, and other “good” character traits. This is not always the case, as some services reflect on what the deceased has done—travel, athletic prowess, and other “adventures.”

Additionally, while in the traditional service the body of the deceased has been present for this final step in its journey, more often in modern practice the body is absent—this is true even in memorial services. What does this suggest about what contemporary culture believes about a *telos* of human life, about the human body, about resurrection, about the sacred? And how did we get to this point?

The answers to these questions would require additional articles, if not books, as the matter is of course very complicated. But I want to suggest here that the contemporary funeral practices of the memorial service and especially the celebration of life are closely tied to developments in the secular culture, and that they actually serve—when practiced without reflection on the sacred—to undermine Christian faith and support the dominant narrative of the culture around us. In practice, like weddings, they are becoming more and more an event in human life to which the church and her gospel are irrelevant.

These modern funeral practices appear to arise from at least two prominent developments in Western thinking since, especially, the Enlightenment: the de-sacralization of the world, and the psychologizing of human life. These developments have been central to the ethos first of modernity and now the frayed community of postmodernity. The developments in funeral practices discussed above, I suggest, are derived from and also reinforce these two developments.

De-sacralization. The Enlightenment project, built as it is around Cartesian skepticism and a deep commitment to a particular definition of knowledge as

“that which can be empirically verified,” has had an immeasurable effect on every aspect of human life, from technology to philosophy, from anthropology to theology and physics and metaphysics.⁷ The most mature expression of the Enlightenment project is found in what is most often called “modernity.”⁸ Modernity saw itself as throwing off the superstition of the past, and pictured humanity as finally being liberated from the bindings of creation, tradition, and history. Modernity’s commitment to the Enlightenment definition of knowledge as the empirically verifiable effectively relegated investigation of everything outside the bounds of the empirical sciences to the realm of opinion or preference.⁹ While this was understood to liberate humanity from the vagaries of premodern speculation and offer a way beyond the oppressive bonds of tradition, time has shown that the metanarrative of scientific “progress” has been used for greater oppression (even world domination) than any earlier metanarrative.¹⁰

In setting itself up against religion, then, science (through positivism) assumed the truth-making capacity of modernity, and the centuries of colonial expansion as well as the bloodiest century in history (the twentieth) testify to its effective control over the story of Western exceptionalism. This dedicated *faith* in the achievements of science is well evidenced in an address by the British-educated Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s first prime minister:

⁷ For an extensive introduction to the way that the Enlightenment has impacted especially knowledge in the West, see Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012), 298–364. Gregory argues that the seeds for the Enlightenment revolution were sown in the Reformation. While in the specifics one may object to some of Gregory’s analysis in other areas, his chapter on “Secularizing Knowledge” offers invaluable insight to the transformation of knowledge since the Enlightenment.

⁸ The moniker is unhelpful except insofar as it illustrates the hubris and presentism of “modern” philosophy. Modernism enjoyed its peak influence—as largely unquestioned truth—in the eighteenth to early twentieth centuries in the West.

⁹ For a most helpful discussion of this relegation of spiritual and moral thinking to opinion, see Dallas Willard, *Knowing Christ Today: Why We Can Trust Spiritual Knowledge* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), and much more exhaustively Dallas Willard, *The Disappearance of Moral Knowledge*, ed. Steven L. Porter, Aaron Preston, and Gregg A. Ten Elshof (New York: Routledge, 2018), published posthumously.

¹⁰ See Middleton and Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger than It Used to Be*, 20ff. The case is overstated, of course: there is no doubt that, given the technology of modern society, the Assyrians, Persians, or Romans would have been globally dominant as well. However, given modernity’s claims to “equality” and “progress,” the outcome is ironic.

[I]t is science *alone* that can solve the problems of hunger and poverty, of insanitation and literacy, of superstition and tradition, of vast resources running to waste, of a rich country inhabited by starving people.... The future belongs to science and to those who make friends with science.¹¹

While one is not surprised to find such thinking in Britain's crowning colonial achievement, it is shocking to witness the rejection—and even dismissal—of the thousands of years of India's cultural and religious history from the mouth of its elected leader. Ultimately, modernism's breathtakingly hegemonic rejection of non-European "superstition," as well as Europe's own religious and cultural history, would provide some of the seeds for the coming revolt against epistemological imperialism found in postmodernism.

All of this has led directly to the de-sacralizing of contemporary culture. In a world in which "life" may be reduced to the material and the "spiritual" (metaphysical) rejected as superstition, then anything held sacred must necessarily be completely subjective rather than universal and true. Artifacts, places, beliefs, worship, and even human life have lost any sacred significance for much of our culture, and this has seeped into the church (of course). It can be seen in our waning reverence, in the casual way in which we approach worship and other sacred moments—including the fact that those moments have now largely become reflections on ourselves—our feelings, our thoughts, and the like—rather than the direct worship of God.

The reader may be forgiven for thinking that all of this seems like quite the detour in an article about funeral practices. In truth, though, there is a direct connection between these Enlightenment developments and the de-sacralization of the world in the rise of a sharp division between the "sacred" and the "secular." This division has led to (and been reinforced *by*) the recent developments in funeral practices discussed above. In a world in which the sacred is removed from the category of knowledge and relegated to the realm of "opinion," a form of ritual that serves the function of the necessity of burial (see Long above) must be developed to meet the needs of those who reject the sacred altogether. What would such a ritual look like? The funeral reflects a worldview which includes the sacred. The celebration of life does not.

¹¹ Quoted in Vinoth Ramachandra, *Subverting Global Myths: Theology and the Public Issues Shaping Our World* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008), 172.

The Psychologized Life. In his book *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, a synthesis of the work of Charles Taylor, Philip Rieff, and Alasdair MacIntyre, Carl Trueman has argued extensively (and, I believe, conclusively) that a defining feature of contemporary culture is the triumph of psychology throughout the modern West.¹² While Trueman is exploring this phenomenon in order to understand the sexual revolution in the West, the analysis is also helpful in reflecting on ritual practice as well.

Rituals are extremely important to culture and community, insofar as they serve as vehicles for the transmission of the culture's central stories through what James K. A. Smith has called "thick practices."¹³ Traditional Christian funeral practices—highly liturgical and largely devoid of eulogy—served to place the deceased in the broader story of the gospel and reinforced the centrality of the church to the life of the believer. They were eschatological, as well, in that they pointed to a *telos* for the deceased and constantly reminded the congregation of the drama of Scripture, and it was *this* that provided consolation and hope to the grieving.¹⁴

A funeral in the psychologized world, though, is focused far more on the comfort and "well-being" of the grief-stricken than on recounting or reinforcing any particular sacred belief. The purpose or aim of a funeral in this world is to "provide closure" for those who grieve rather than enact the last journey of the deceased as she awaits the resurrection. It is important to note a tacit assumption in this development, namely that the traditional Christian funeral did not provide psychological well-being to the grieving.

Additionally, in combination with the de-sacralization of human life and the nihilism of secular eschatology, the psychologizing of the human person has led to the rehearsal of the experience of the deceased becoming the most important aspect of the ritual of the dead. The celebration of life service consists of a recounting of the good deeds and joyous spirit and fun times of the deceased, reinforcing the worldview of the secular age, while ensuring that the

¹² Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020).

¹³ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009). On rituals, see Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1947).

¹⁴ For a detailed depiction of the beautiful early Christian practice of funerals, see Long, *Accompany Them with Singing*, 57–75.

body of the deceased isn't present so as not to dampen the celebration. A contemporary non-Christian celebration of life eulogy might well be summed up as, "Bob's not here anymore, but Bob was a good guy and had a great time."

Ironically, the celebration of life functions in our society (and our churches) as what Philip Rieff called a "deathwork"—something that undermines the "established order" in our own culture and something that undermines the traditional Christian order, including its core beliefs and practices. The funeral places the life of the deceased within the story of God's redemptive work. The celebration of life, insofar as it *replaces* the funeral, further reinforces the desecralization of the world, the psychologizing of the self, and the deprecation of the relevance of the church to human life.

Going Forward: Recovering a Sacred Ritual

In June of 2000 my wife Jennifer died of a sudden septic infection, a week and three days shy of our second anniversary, and eight weeks to the day following the birth of our daughter Madison. As I write this article, my family and I are preparing for the transition of my father—my best friend—from this life into the arms of Christ. I am acquainted with grief. In this article I may have come out too hard against celebrations of life. I may have overstated the danger. Given this possibility, I want to affirm, here in my conclusion, the *good* of the celebration of life, in its proper context. The celebration of life—indeed, the eulogy itself—is, in some ways, a corrective to the traditional funeral service. For it is not a generic life that we commend to God, but *this* life, this *particular* life, this individual and unique soul. In that way, the celebration of life may be a truly *incarnational* theology in the life of the church. The unique life lived by this follower of Jesus truly has meaning, and it is right and good that it be remembered and celebrated.

But the celebration of life must be performed in context within the story that gives meaning to this particular life. The gospel is the story that gives meaning to this life that we celebrate, and as we celebrate this life we must remind the gathered community of the reason for which this life may be celebrated: the birth, life, death, burial, and resurrection of our Lord. In truth, the ritual that we call the celebration of life is now so interwoven into our culture and our churches that it is here to stay. And I don't think that's a bad thing, so

long as we bear in mind the sacredness of human life and especially the *story* that makes life sacred.

Given this assessment, I would like to offer some suggestions for ministers regarding funeral practices. First, begin thinking now about how to combine the best elements of the celebration of life with the traditional funeral, and prepare your congregation (beginning especially with congregational leadership) for this. Make it very clear to the congregation that any celebration of life of a member will take place in the context of a Christian funeral—a moment of worship in which the church celebrates what God has done in defeating death and bringing life.

Second, I want to suggest that we regain the formality of the traditional funeral. Formality matters. For many years we have seen the rise of “casual” culture in our churches—suits and ties have been replaced by boots and jeans. I don't want to suggest that this is necessarily a *bad* thing—I mostly see it as neutral—but when it comes to sacred moments in human life, a formal practice, a *ritual*, is extremely important for maintaining a sense of the sacred. I have, over the last few years, seen some pictures of outdoor weddings in which the minister wore shorts and a t-shirt. There is of course nothing *sinful* about this, but it does reflect a lack of seriousness, or at least a lack of the *recognition* of the seriousness of this moment in the lives of those joining together as one flesh. In that moment, the minister administers *sacred* oaths, before God and his people, to live together for the rest of their lives as one. They aren't less married because of the shorts and t-shirts. But do the shorts and t-shirts not inherently—if inadvertently—denigrate the seriousness and the sacredness of the moment?

It is the same for Christian funerals. It is time for the church to remember and reclaim the purpose of the funeral: it is *not* merely a subjective, psychological exercise. The funeral serves as the final journey of the deceased, it is an *objective* moment in time, a transition from this life in the church to the eternal communion of saints. The funeral is a moment in which the church commends a faithful servant to his Lord. Formality, ritual, and ceremony are vital to all of these.

Some years ago, I attended Aggie Muster at Texas A&M University's Reed Arena. Muster is a unique and beautiful tradition. Each year, on April 21st, Texas A&M alumni gather together with at least one other Aggie to

remember the Aggies who have died in the last year. The largest gathering is at Reed Arena (Texas A&M's basketball arena), where thousands gather for a ceremony honoring those Aggies celebrating their 50-year reunion, and this is followed by the Roll Call of the Absent—a time in which the lights are dimmed and the names of those Aggies who have died since the last Muster are called out. For each name, a family member or friend answers “here” and lights a candle for the deceased.

Having grown up a Longhorn fan, I was completely unfamiliar with the event. I was invited to attend by my (at the time, future) wife and decided to go. Attending this event at this location—on campus—is an absolutely incredible thing to experience. We arrived quite a while before the ceremony began, and the arena filled up completely. It was packed with college students—over 12,000 19- to 25-year-olds mostly—and it was *loud*. At the commencement of the ceremony, the whole arena immediately stood and fell silent. It was quiet enough that I could hear the air conditioner running. These young people stayed in that state for three hours as the formal ceremony proceeded.

Muster is inundated with ritual: the Sul Ross volunteers marching in slowly in their dress white uniforms, the same poems read at every Muster, finally culminating in the Roll Call. No eulogies are offered beyond those of the community. No psychologized speech, no customization or individualization, only ritual and repetition. Yet I found it to be perhaps the most moving ceremony I have ever witnessed. And I know that I am not alone in that—simply say the phrase “softly call the muster” to any Aggie and ponder their reaction.

A secular university takes the death of a member of its community seriously enough to engage in this formal, annual ritual. Lives are impacted and community built and maintained through it. It is a place in which death, and life, and community, and a story, are all taken extremely seriously. How much more should a Christian funeral reflect the grandeur or God's great story and incorporate deceased members of the church into that story in their last journey, their journey through the last enemy?