COMFORTED BY THE CROSS:
A PRACTICAL THEOLOGY OF FUNERAL PREACHING

by

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ABSTRACT

Comforted by the Cross: A Practical Theology of Funeral Preaching

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Christian ministers increasingly recognize that traditional funeral practices no longer connect with contemporary audiences as they once did. While pastors continue to affirm the importance of funerals and funeral sermons, especially for Christian communities, many struggle with how best to conduct these rituals in a rapidly changing religious landscape. This dissertation seeks to help preachers better understand their audiences by identifying the prevailing beliefs about a funeral's purpose and significance for mourners. By analyzing these beliefs, the study aims to help funeral preachers anticipate potential obstacles to communicating the Christian gospel to mourners, allowing them to adapt their preaching accordingly.

As a work of practical theology, this dissertation seeks to develop funeral preaching as a research-led practice. It employs two qualitative research methods: qualitative content analysis of obituaries and phenomenological interviews with funeral professionals. The dissertation then examines the findings in dialogue with non-theological theories, such as Ernest Becker's theory of the denial of death. It reflects upon both the qualitative evidence and the non-theological interpretations using the theology of the cross. The study then offers recommendations for refining the practice and content of funeral preaching to help the funeral sermon better connect the life of the deceased with

the gospel of grace and so comfort mourners with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

DEDICATION

To my wife Abby, whose compassionate work as a nurse—serving people in their suffering, death, and grief—embodies the heart of a theology of the cross.

And to the memory of Delena Grace Zuniga (2016–2024).

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Completing this dissertation was a long journey, accompanied by many companions. Of the many who helped in big and small ways, I would like to especially acknowledge—

Dr. Douglas John Hall, for giving me special permission as an undergraduate to take his doctoral seminar on the theology of the cross. I was experiencing one of the most painful periods of my life and hoped that studying the *theologia crucis* would help. As reflected in this dissertation, that class became the most impactful theology class I have ever taken.

Drs. Seán McGuire and Dale Sanger for their online friendship, encouragement, and advice. The COVID-19 pandemic severely limited my in-person fellowship with my classmates in the Doctor of Practical Theology program. I am thankful I connected with them in person before everything was locked down.

The ten funeral workers who agreed to be interviewed for this project. They gave me a glimpse into the personal costs and often thankless work of pursuing a funeral vocation, caring for families during their most profound crises.

My supervisor, Dr. Michael Knowles, for his patience during a project that took far too long to complete, his faithfulness in working with me even after his retirement, and his judicious eye for improving this project.

My second reader, Dr. Lee Beach, for introducing me to the life-changing paradigm of practical theology and for his encouragement (Rom 12:8).

Finally, I thank my wife, Abby, for encouraging me in this pursuit and for keeping my speculative theological inclinations grounded in the ordinary faithfulness of our shared life.

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INTRODUCTION

The funeral was not going according to plan. Tim Perry could sense it in the sanctuary. As he preached the funeral homily, instead of comforting the grieving family, it was clear they did not understand what he was saying. "I might as well have been speaking Chaucer's English," Perry wrote. [1] Growing up in rural Canada, Perry had known a time when the church had been the heartbeat of the community. Rites of passage such as baptism, marriage, and funerals were milestones that helped people locate themselves in a larger story. He explained that back then when someone died, "everybody already knew what had to be done without having to be told."[2] There was no need for a guidebook such as Perry's primer on Christian funerals. But that world was gone. Perry began to realize just how much the religious and cultural landscape had changed as he preached to that family. Their grandmother had been steeped in the life of the church, but with successive generations, her family had become unmoored and drifted away. As Perry gave the homily, he paused and looked at their faces. Instead of seeing tears of grief or nods of understanding, they looked confused. "I saw complete bafflement," he wrote. "The dechurching of this family had been devastatingly effective; they had no idea what was

[1] Perry, *Funerals*, 11.

[2] Perry, *Funerals*, 2. The family still knew what had to be done—that their grandmother needed a funeral done within the church—but I wonder if they understand why it had to be done, and what those practices were meant to accomplish.

going on."[3] Perry had prepared words of comfort, drawing on the deep well of Christian tradition, but it was a "language" the family no longer spoke.

Like most pastors, I have had the privilege of conducting funerals for grieving families. Most deaths were anticipated. A few were tragic. One was haunting. As a theologian of the cross, I do not want to minimize or ignore the pain, suffering, and confusion that comes with death. I want to help families interpret those experiences through the lens of the cross and to comfort them with the message of Christ crucified and raised to life. However, that task is made more challenging when the service is attended by mourners who are unchurched or who have diverse beliefs about the meaning of the ritual. Though the Christian funeral is meant to help the grieving process, in many cases, the pain of losing a loved one is made worse by the disorientation that comes from participating in an unfamiliar religious ritual with a strange theological message. There is an increasing need to explain the practice of the Christian funeral to people who are no longer familiar with it. Perhaps more importantly, there is a need for pastor-theologians to rethink the practice in light of the cultural changes around us. "We need to know what a funeral is, and why have one," Lucy Bregman confirms.[4] Hence, funeral preaching can benefit from critical theological reflection on the practice. This dissertation will explore the practical theology of funeral preaching with the aim of producing new knowledge about the practice. The goal is to help pastors preach more effectively to the mourners in the pews.

The remainder of this Introduction will explain the rationale for this study and how it will be approached. It begins by stating the research problem, followed by giving

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[3] Perry, *Funerals*, 10.
[4] Bregman, *Preaching Death*, 17.

the purpose of the study. Next, it lists the research questions and discusses why the study is significant. It then addresses the researcher's perspectives and assumptions, deals with the methodological approach, surveys some relevant literature, and concludes with summaries of the chapters that follow.

Statement of the Problem

All preaching faces the challenge of *contextualization*.[5] Every sermon is given in a specific religious context (e.g., pastoral, liturgical, and theological) and heard by a particular people within their own contexts (e.g., historical, religious, economic, ethnic, political, and linguistic). All these factors can potentially hinder effective communication between the preacher and the audience. Part of the challenge of contextualization is identifying those contextual barriers and reflecting upon how preaching can adapt to them so that the hearers will understand the message about Christ. As Hesselgrave and Rommen claim, "if the gospel is to be understood, contextualization must be true to the complete authority and unadulterated message of the Bible on the one hand, and it must be related to the cultural, linguistic, and religious background of the respondents on the other."[6]

The challenge of adequately contextualizing preaching is amplified by a rapidly changing culture. Though Tim Perry lamented the changes that he had witnessed in his lifetime, already in the 19th century, Nietzsche had Zarathustra say, "Could it be possible! The old saint has not yet heard in his forest that *God is dead*!"[7] Nietzsche saw that

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[5] Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament*, 296.
[6] Hesselgrave and Rommen, *Contextualization*, xi.
[7] Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 41.

changes in what people believed about God were well underway in Europe. Since then, many more people have heard of the death of God. Some have even believed it. The result is that a Christian cultural consensus no longer exists in North America. But neither has an alternative consensus taken its place.[8] Charles Taylor explains that we have moved from "a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is *one human possibility among others*."[9] And there are a bewildering variety of possibilities. "We live in an age of uncertainty," Elaine Graham writes, "an age in which many of the foundations of contemporary Western culture seem to be dissolving."[10] While the problem of secularization has been widely discussed and debated, this study will narrowly focus on whether these changes and uncertainties are reflected in beliefs about the meaning and purpose of funerals and what that means for contextualizing funeral sermons.

In an older work on funeral preaching, Daniels wrote that the funeral audience is one of the most unique a pastor will ever face:

> A further significance of the funeral message lies in the *character of the audience* to which it is addressed. It is the most *cosmopolitan audience* which the average minister is likely to face. There will be people present from the north, the south, the east, and the west…Many a man who has been away from the home town for years, making a name for himself in the world, will be there, ready to give his undivided attention to anyone who really has a message.[11]

Daniels adds that the funeral message is also significant due to "the number of persons present who seldom attend church at any other time."[12] Both observations remain true

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[8] Beach, *The Church in Exile*, 19.

[9] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 3, emphasis added.

[10] Graham, "Practical Theology as Transforming Practice," 105; Graham, "Practical Theology as Transforming Practice," 1.

[11] Daniels, *The Funeral Message*, 17.

[12] Daniels, *The Funeral Message*, 18.

today. If anything, decades of secularization mean funeral services will be attended by people with even more diverse viewpoints. To write a sermon that will be comprehended by mourners, the preacher must first know them. Investigating the "lived experience"[13] of funerals can help funeral preachers do the critical work of contextualizing their sermons.

The Purpose of the Study

What do people believe about funerals? To answer that question, it is important to recognize that cultures are not homogenous. There are always different groups of people within it who believe different things. Instead of assuming that everyone in a culture shares the same convictions, preachers ought to expect that there will be subgroups and subcultures within every society that likely have distinctive beliefs. As Leonore Tisdale writes, preaching always addresses "communities who share the common lifestyles, assumptions, and values that both unite them with one another and that differentiate them from other such subgroups."[14] Those beliefs cannot be known a priori or guessed at but must be discovered by investigating a local culture. What people believe may be counter-intuitive and surprising. It may also be irrational. That applies to the beliefs of members of one's religion or denomination. For example, in my context, I discovered local Baptists who believed that people become angels after death. Although preachers may expect their co-religionists to have a high degree of theological agreement, Meredith McGuire argues that would be a mistake. Her research has found that individuals' "lived

[13] Taylor says that belief and unbelief are more than sets of creedal systems but are better understood as "lived conditions" which are formed (or shaken) by "lived experiences," including a changing lived experience of death. See Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 5, 65–70. Therefore it is likely that the lived experiences of funerals are changing, too.

[14] Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology*, 12.

religion" often differs from—and outrightly contradicts—the beliefs they should have given their religious affiliations.[15] As McGuire also showed, what people believe may not even form a coherent system of thought, with people holding conflicting or irreconcilable beliefs. Not only may the pulpit and pew disagree with each other, but there is every reason to expect that individuals in the pew may not even agree with themselves. If even members of one's congregation may have peculiar local theologies, then preachers should not make the mistake of assuming they already know what a mixed funeral audience believes. Instead of assuming a Christian cultural consensus, they should assume that there are "local theologies" peculiar to their context that may act as barriers to understanding the Christian funeral and the meaning of Christ's death and resurrection. Knowing what these groups and subgroups believe is vital for effective homiletic contextualization.

Homileticians are aware of these changes and the challenges they pose to funeral preaching. Thomas Long reflected, "The swirling social realities of death rituals in the 1990s stand out against the backdrop of the more stable late-nineteenth-century concept of the funeral."[16] A quarter of a century later, Perry is another witness to how those cultural changes continue to impact the practice of funerals.

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[15] McGuire argues that it is a mistake to assume that "ordinary people" accept or reject the package of beliefs and practices that are endorsed by the official spokespersons of an official religion: "like other sociologists, I assumed that individuals' religious worlds would be linked (sometimes firmly, sometimes loosely) with the beliefs, moral norms, and religious practices promoted by the particular religious organizations of which they were members." See McGuire, *Lived Religion*, 3. Instead, she found that individuals have a "lived religion" that may consist of an amalgamation of different beliefs that may not be logically coherent, but which may have a "practical coherence": "It needs to make sense in one's everyday life, and it needs to be effective, to 'work,' in the sense of accomplishing some desired end" (McGuire, *Lived Religion*, 15).

[16] Long, "The Funeral," 5.

However, while most preachers recognize the need to know their audience, they rarely study them systematically. Instead, as Tisdale notes, many pastors "attain their subcultural knowledge of congregations in a tacit and haphazard fashion, and lack appropriate methods of procedures to aid their discernment."[17] Hence, there is a need to more thoroughly research local theologies of funerals to determine what people actually believe. That is the purpose of this dissertation—to discover these local theologies of funerals in an American context and then reflect upon their implications for funeral preaching.

The Research Questions

This research will seek to answer the question: What do people believe about the meaning and purpose of funerals? The goal is to identify those beliefs to better understand how they can act as a barrier or a bridge to hearing the Christian gospel in a funeral sermon. Subsidiary research questions include:

1. Why is it important to have a funeral for a loved one?
2. What does it mean to die?
3. What happens after the death of a loved one?
4. What kinds of rituals have mourners asked to be added to a funeral service, and what do they mean by them?
5. What do mourners find helpful in traditional Christian funerals?
6. What do they find unhelpful or confusing about Christian funerals?

[17] Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology*, 18.

7. What do people think about the relevance of the death and resurrection of Jesus to the death of a loved one?

The Significance of the Study

This study may contribute to the practice of funeral preaching in three ways.

First, it can help funeral preachers better understand the beliefs of *unchurched mourners*. If cultural attitudes toward religion are changing, it is reasonable to suppose that attitudes are also changing toward the meaning of funeral practices. Unchurched mourners have purposes and intentions for funerals. They believe that having a funeral for their dead friends and relatives is good for something. But what? Those popular beliefs, whatever they may be, should be explored and understood. Homileticians know that local beliefs can act as barriers or bridges to someone understanding the homily. That is also true about local beliefs related to funerals. Mourners have a theology. Hence, Jacobsen and Kelly recommend that funeral preachers "listen carefully for the theology that [the mourners] express."[18] Listening to those beliefs can help the preacher better understand their congregations and, therefore, better relate the death of Christ to the situation of the mourners.

Second, this study can help funeral preachers understand the lived religion of their *parishioners*. As noted earlier, McGuire discovered that the lived religion of Christians—i.e., what people in the pew actually believe and practice, irrespective of what is taught in the pulpit—can differ dramatically from prescribed institutional beliefs.[19] Moreover, not only is there a discrepancy between pulpit and pew, Stanley Hauerwas claims that

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[18] Jacobsen and Kelly, *Kairos Preaching*, 49.
[19] McGuire, *Lived Religion*, 12–13.

Christians no longer know how to speak about death and dying: "The essential story—the story of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ—that should form our dying as well as our living as Christians seems to have been lost."[20] In other words, Hauerwas claims that Christians do not have an articulate understanding of how the story of Christ relates to Christian funerals. That means while barriers to understanding the gospel certainly exist *outside* of the church, they can exist *within* it, too. If preachers can better understand what their co-religionists believe, especially where those beliefs may differ from what they are expected to believe, funeral sermons can be improved.

Third, practice-led research into funeral preaching can help it continue to be a reflective, research-led practice. Although Christians have preached funeral homilies for centuries,[21] relatively little has been written about it from an academic perspective and even less from the viewpoint of practical theology. Anecdotal hunches about the effectiveness of funerals can be strengthened, contested, or clarified by qualitative research, which lies at the heart of how practical theology does theological reflection. Preachers can benefit from the research that will be gathered and summarized here and be able to draw their own conclusions from it, even if they might disagree with the practical lessons that will be proposed in the final chapter.

Researcher's Perspective and Assumptions

Thinking is never neutral but always occurs from a perspective, within a context, while making assumptions about the object of thought. This dissertation makes several philosophical and theological assumptions that will influence the research.

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[20] Hauerwas et al., "Speaking of Dying." x.
[21] McGuire et al., "The Christian Funeral Oration."

First, as a work of practice-led research, this study will assume that Christian funerals and funeral preaching are valid practices. The goal is to discover knowledge of operational significance for Christian funerals, not to question whether they should be held at all.

Second, as a work of Christian thought, the epistemological framework undergirding the qualitative research will be Reformed Epistemology. According to Alvin Plantinga's version of Reformed Epistemology, some beliefs are properly basic. That is, they can be rational and justified without being based on reasons or evidence that are more basic than the belief itself. Controversially, Plantinga has argued that belief in God is properly basic.[22] Furthermore, Plantinga has argued that the belief in God is not only basic but warranted. Plantinga develops an externalist account of the reliability of our cognitive faculties, which means if a belief has been formed by cognitive faculties designed to be aimed at truth and functioning in an environment for which those faculties were designed, that belief is both properly basic and has warrant.[23] Plantinga's epistemology undergirds the reliability of our knowledge of the world, making research into the world from a specifically Christian perspective epistemically rational.

Third, as a work of Christian theology, this dissertation will approach the question of funeral preaching from the perspective of the theology of the cross (*theologia crucis*). In particular, the study will draw primarily on the thinking of three self-identified theologians of the cross, namely, Gerhard Forde, Douglas John Hall, and Kosuka Koyama.

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[22] Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," 148–61; Plantinga, *Knowledge*, 35–37.

[23] Plantinga, *Warranted*, 167–98; Plantinga, *Knowledge*, 37–56; Bartholomew and Goheen, *Christian Philosophy*, 221–24.

Andrew Root has acknowledged the unique potential of the theology of the cross for doing practical theology. Root writes, "If practical theology is to be *practical* (attending to concrete experience) but yet *theological*, then it must make central the encounter of divine and human action."[24] The *theologia crucis* unites both concerns with a focus on God's full identification with Christ's death on the cross. Root explains, "it is God's ministry to enter death."[25] Thus, this incarnational divine action takes practical theology even deeper into concrete human experiences while doing so in a theologically rich way. And the *theologia crucis*' unique emphasis on death makes it even more relevant to the investigation of funerals.

Robert G. Hughes has expressly recognized the importance of that theological tradition to funeral preaching: "The theology of the cross provides a resource for clergy in responding pastorally and homiletically to the questions of mourners, because it faces the despair of death even as it proclaims the hope of the gospel."[26] Thus, the theology of the cross seems ideally suited for doing practical theology in general and studying funeral preaching in particular.

Fourth, as a work concerned with preaching, the "normative task" of this dissertation will be related to the homiletical theory of law and gospel preaching, which grows out of the *theologia crucis*. In that school, distinguishing between the different functions of "law" and "gospel" is essential to preaching.[27] The function of the law is to accuse and condemn sin.[28] By contrast, the function of the gospel is to forgive and to

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[24] Root, *Christopraxis*, 8.
[25] Root, *Christopraxis*, 105.
[26] Hughes, *A Trumpet*, 48.
[27] Nestingen, "Distinguishing Law and Gospel: A Functional View," 27.
[28] Nestingen, "Distinguishing Law and Gospel: A Functional View," 30; Wengert, *Reading the Bible*, 31.

comfort the conscience by directing people away from themselves and their merits to God's grace and favor in Christ.[29] The terror and trouble caused by death and dying, and the goal of comforting mourners with the message of Jesus, make a law and gospel homiletic a fruitful conversation partner in the practice of funeral preaching.

The Research Approach

As noted earlier, Tisdale called for a methodical investigation of a subculture's beliefs.[30] Qualitative research into lived experiences can answer that need. Hence, this dissertation will explicitly and methodically investigate local beliefs about the meaning and purpose of having a funeral by approaching the topic from the standpoint of practical theology, using phenomenology to conduct qualitative research. Each of those terms requires some explanation.

First, this will be a work of practical theology. The precise nature of practical theology has been a matter of debate.[31] In some quarters, especially in the UK, it can be synonymous with pastoral theology—the study of Christian worship, preaching, education, pastoral care, and other ecclesiastical activities.[32] Although funeral preaching certainly falls under pastoral theology, this dissertation will be a work of practical theology. In North America, practical theology has expanded beyond pastoral practices to study *any* kind of human practices, whether of the church or the world.[33] Practical

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[29] Nestingen, "Distinguishing Law and Gospel: A Functional View," 30–31.

[30] Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology*, 18.

[31] Edward Farley says, "So varied are the approaches and proffered definitions of practical theology in recent literature that it is not even clear what is under discussion." See Farley, "Interpreting Situations," 1.

[32] Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology*, 71.

[33] For a survey of some different approaches see Root, *Christopraxis*, 53–83; Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology*, 69–90; Swinton and Mowatt, *Practical Theology*, 7–8.

theology is part of the revival of an emphasis on practical wisdom for all of life.[34] Practical theology also engages in *practice-led research*. Whereas academic theology has traditionally prioritized theoretical knowledge over practical knowledge, practice-led research recognizes that practices are already theory-laden.[35] That is to say, theology is not imposed upon practices but already embodied within them, raising theological questions that require critical reflection and research. So, instead of moving from theory to practice, practical theology prioritizes the practical over the purely theoretical, moving in an iterative cycle from practice to theory to practice.[36] In keeping with its focus on practices, practical theology has a "descriptive-empirical task"[37] of undertaking small-scale qualitative research that can help practitioners better understand the context of their practice.[38] Practical theology recognizes that practices occur in specific "situations" that must be described to improve practice.[39] This focus on definite contexts means that practical theology develops "a kind of 'local theology.'"[40] And since theology by itself cannot tell a theologian everything there is to know about a situation; practical theology has developed a critical-correlational aspect[41] that involves entering into dialogue with non-theological disciplines that can help shed light on the complexity of a situation.[42] In sum, practical theology is ideally suited to improve the practice of funeral preaching by

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[34] Practical wisdom in contrast to theoretical reasoning, technical reasoning, and reasoning on the basis of "blind custom and tradition." See Browning, *Practical Theology*, 2.

[35] Swinton and Mowatt, *Practical Theology*, 19.

[36] Root, *Christopraxis*, 55. See also Browning, *Practical Theology*, 1–12. For one illustration of what this iterative cycle looks like see Smith and Dean, "Introduction," 19–25.

[37] Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 31–78.

[38] Pattison and Woodward, "An Introduction," 153–66.

[39] Browning, *Practical Theology*, 15; Farley, "Interpreting Situations," 1.

[40] Pattison and Woodward, "An Introduction," 14.

[41] Root, *Christopraxis*, 57.

[42] Swinton and Mowatt, *Practical Theology*, 76–78. However, the dialogue is critical, meaning those other theories are not exempt theological critique. As Ballard and Pritchard warn, "It is all too easy to take on board a whole scheme of theory and practice without any real theological critique." See Ballard and Pritchard, *Practical Theology*, 36.

investigating what people popularly believe about the reasons for holding funerals for their dead family members and friends.

Second, the dissertation will undertake qualitative research using phenomenology for its theoretical framework. This topic could be approached using a different methodology, such as through an ethnographic study of different funeral services, a narrative approach to stories of loss, or a congregational study of how different churches practice funerals in their respective communities. Each approach has merits and weaknesses. But the goal of this dissertation is to discover peoples' lived experience of funerals, not to record their stories of grief, or to discover how individual congregations celebrate funerals. A phenomenological approach is better suited to the subject matter because, as Peoples says, "phenomenological research is strictly aimed at understanding experiences as lived."[43]

Third, two types of data will be collected. The dissertation will begin by exploring the question of funeral beliefs through an analysis of obituaries. The obituaries will be analyzed using qualitative content analysis (QCA) to develop an initial understanding of what mourners choose to write and remember about the dead.[44] As Kyngäs explains, "Researchers generally use content analysis to describe human experiences and perspectives."[45] Obituaries reflect a small but significant aspect of the experience of mourners. Moreover, QCA is ideal for analyzing written documents,[46] making it appropriate for this stage of the study.

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[43] Peoples, *Phenomenological Dissertation*, 3.

[44] Schreier, *Qualitative Content Analysis in Practice*. Put simply the steps for doing QCA include preparing the data to be studied, defining the basic unit of text to be analyzed, developing categories and a coding scheme, testing the coding scheme on a sample text, coding all the text, assessing the coding consistency, drawing conclusions from the coded data, and reporting the findings.

[45] Kyngäs, "Inductive Content Analysis," 13.

[46] Kyngäs, "Inductive Content Analysis," 13.

While those initial findings will be valuable in themselves, they will likely also raise further questions, leading to the second phase of the qualitative research. The second phase will involve phenomenological interviews of ten funeral workers. Funeral workers will be interviewed due, in part, to the ethical difficulty of asking mourners to discuss the funerals of departed family members. Asking mourners to describe their experience of the death of a father, mother, or child, may risk being too emotionally volatile. By contrast, professionally trained funeral workers experience those rituals one step removed from the personal experience of grief. And yet, by participating in, and observing, dozens or hundreds of funerals, they are in an ideal position to give quality data about what people popularly believe about funerals. Moreover, funeral workers will have likely attended funerals as part of their personal life, for someone they loved, and can share that experience. The interviews will be analyzed using phenomenology to help process and categorize the answers given. As Peoples explains concerning the usefulness of phenomenological interviews, "If this same question is posed to enough people in a certain situation, a researcher can analyze multiple experiences of the same situation and make certain generalizations of a particular experience."[47]

While there are several different schools and methods of "doing" phenomenology,[48] this dissertation will employ Colaizzi's phenomenological method.[49] It prescribes a seven-step process for making objective generalizations of those experiences.[50] Specifically, these steps involve 1) transcribing the interviewees'

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[47] Peoples, *Phenomenological Dissertation*, 3.

[48] van Manen, *Phenomenology of Practice*, 88–193.

[49] Colaizzi, "Psychological Research"; Edward and Welch, "The Extension of Colaizzi's Method"; Morrow et al., "Colaizzi's Descriptive Phenomenological Method."

[50] I would like to clarify that I will use phenomenology without assuming Husserl's philosophy's thick philosophical commitments. Husserl sought to identify the essential structures of reality. By contrast, qualitative researchers have retained Husserl's methodological procedures without committing themselves

descriptions; 2) extracting significant statements; 3) formulating general meanings; 4) organizing the meanings into clusters; 5) developing a detailed description of the experience; 6) identifying the essence of the phenomenon; and finally, 7) returning the written statement of the essence to participants for validation and correction.[51] Colaizzi's method is ideally suited for analyzing interviews and has a track record of published qualitative research.

Once the data from the funeral artifacts and the phenomenological interviews have been synthesized and the essence of the lived experience established, the interpretive task of doing practical theology will begin. The dissertation will interpret the evidence in critical correlation with sociological theories (i.e., Becker, Smith, Zahl) and then with theological theories (i.e., Forde, Hall, Koyama) before suggesting ways to reform the practice.

Overview of the Literature About Funeral Preaching

Although not extensive, the literature about *funeral preaching* raises several persistent questions about the practice. However, these sources tend to focus on broader historical and theological trends that are not necessarily relevant to the narrow purpose of the research to be undertaken here, which is to discover local beliefs of funerals. But they also show the persistent need for theological reflection about funeral preaching.

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to his ontology. Thus, Colaizzi's phenomenological method is a procedure to help produce accurate, descriptive statements about the data gathered during an interview. The analysis results are objective in the sense of being repeatable and verifiable but do not thereby commit the research to realism about intuitions, essences, and the structures of experience.

[51] Edward and Welch, "The Extension of Colaizzi's Method," 165.

For example, "The Christian Funeral Oration" provides a historical overview of Christian funeral preaching, going back to the ancient Greeks.[52] McGuire shows that the practice of Christian funeral orations is an adaptation of Greek and Roman practices which had already existed for hundreds of years. The authors explain that pagan funeral oration grew out of the literary genre known as the encomium, which is an act of giving tribute or praise to someone. It was also related to the ancient Roman custom of writing letters of consolation to someone who had suffered a death in the family. Finally, there was a native Roman practice of having a kinsman or friend give a funeral speech at the death of a family member, known as the *laudatio funebris*.[53] McGuire notes that Christian funeral orations grew out of these practices but "exhibit modifications and new elements which give them their specific Christian character."[54] In other words, early Christian theologians inherited traditions, reflected upon those funeral practices, and modified them accordingly in light of their theological convictions. This dissertation seeks to continue that cycle of reflecting upon the practice.

Johnson's article, "Resurrecting the Funeral Sermon," helpfully explains some of the significant shifts and changes that have occurred to the nature of the Protestant funeral over the centuries. He recognizes its origins in the Greco-Roman world. But while the structure of the sermon was nearly identical to pagan ones, the Christian funeral theme differed in being "one of resurrection hope, not of despair and remorse as were the pagan rites."[55] He also notes that pagan funeral orations did not occur on a single occasion but over several days, including the day of the interment and on the anniversary

[52] McGuire et al., "The Christian Funeral Oration."
[53] McGuire et al., "The Christian Funeral Oration," xi.
[54] McGuire et al., "The Christian Funeral Oration," vii.
[55] Johnson, "Resurrecting the Funeral Sermon," 37.

of the death. He summarizes the standard rhetorical form of a Christian funeral oration as consisting of "praise of the deceased, a justification of the sadness at the loss of this person, and an attempt to relieve grief with thoughts of consolation."[56] He goes on to explain that by the seventh century, as the doctrine of purgatory was being developed, there was a growing trend to see the funeral mass "as a prayer offered on behalf of the dead."[57] The Reformers disagreed with the theology of purgatory and the related understanding of the purpose of the funeral. For example, in 1526, the Synod of Homberg specifically recommended preaching "the Christian hope without any mention of purgatory."[58] Instead, Johnson explains that Lutheran funeral sermons emphasized how the deceased had the hope of the gospel through their participation in baptism, confirmation, and communion. The Calvinist tradition could be more severe, allowing for disposal of the body but forbidding prayers for the deceased and any sort of funeral oration. However, funeral sermons continued to be preached despite the prohibitions.[59] Later, Elizabethan funeral sermons would omit any mention of the deceased, focusing on doctrine. However, as time went on "the unique life of the departed" became part of funeral preaching. Johnson explains that funeral sermons developed distinct parts: a lengthy doctrinal sermon and a brief acknowledgment of the deceased's faith and personal virtues. But by the late seventeenth century, funeral sermons had become increasingly personal and increasingly evangelistic. Johnson's history assumes that Christian theologians thought about what people popularly believed about funerals, reflected on how those beliefs changed how funerals and funeral preaching were

[56] Johnson, "Resurrecting the Funeral Sermon," 38.
[57] Johnson, "Resurrecting the Funeral Sermon," 38.
[58] Johnson, "Resurrecting the Funeral Sermon," 38.
[59] Johnson, "Resurrecting the Funeral Sermon," 39.

conducted, and then modified both practices in light of their theological convictions to achieve better outcomes. Johnson himself recommends a sermon model that follows a threefold pattern of, first, making public the questions and feelings of the community; second, providing an "honest portrayal of the finality of death and the separation it creates"; third, proclaiming "the saving action of Jesus Christ."[60]

To illustrate Johnson's claims about American Protestant funeral sermons, an older but still useful work is Earl Daniels' *The Funeral Message*. Daniels offers some practical advice about what to do and what errors to avoid in preparing for and conducting a funeral. He summarizes three sermon models, namely, biographical, occasional, and doctrinal funeral sermons.[61] Daniels anticipates the challenge of facing a "cosmopolitan" funeral audience with diverse beliefs about funerals, including religious skepticism.

Scott M. Gibson's *Preaching for Special Services* recognizes that mourners' beliefs about death are changing, and those changes must be accounted for in funeral preaching: "Today preachers face a great challenge as they preach Christ in a culture that does not know much about him and in a culture that avoids thinking about death."[62] This observation emphasizes the need to investigate what mourners believe today to understand the challenges that funeral preachers face. Gibson notes that there is a debate over the role of evangelism in funeral preaching, especially the problem of aggressive evangelism.[63] Nevertheless, there is general agreement among homileticians that the hope of the gospel must be central. Gibson explains the special character of the Christian

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[60] Johnson, "Resurrecting the Funeral Sermon," 46.
[61] Daniels, *The Funeral Message*.
[62] Gibson, *Preaching for Special Services*, 49.
[63] Gibson, *Preaching for Special Services*, 51.

funeral "provided consolation rooted in the doctrines of the Christian faith," especially "the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead."[64] That is the "word" to be preached at the funeral. Thomas Long agrees, writing that the funeral ought to be governed by the gospel: "A funeral governed by the gospel is built upon the eschatological hope that the deceased is not a static corpse or a gaseous and disembodied spirit, but an embodied child of God moving toward the communion of saints."[65] This hope is centered in Christ and His resurrection. And a good Christian funeral, including the sermon, will proclaim that hope: "A good funeral, whatever else it may do, tells the kerygma, the gospel story. The funeral is bold to proclaim that, though it may appear that death has claimed yet another victim, the truth is that the one who has died has been raised to new life in Christ and is now gathered with the saints in communion with God."[66] Gibson argues that an effective funeral must also be personal.[67] In sum, Gibson sees a challenge to preach a funeral sermon that is both personal and connected to the hope of the gospel.

Dan Lloyd's *Leading Today's Funerals* explains several of the aims that funerals and funeral preaching can serve. They can help one grieve, express sympathy, accept loss, remember positive times, make "memory investments," find hope, express respect, and prepare for death.[68] Lloyd emphasizes the importance of knowing the funeral audience, writing, "your first priority is to understand the needs of those you will address. Anticipate the questions and concerns of those who will be seated before you."[69] He notes that "Many who attend funerals rarely or never have gone to church" and suggests

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[64] Gibson, *Preaching for Special Services*, 45.
[65] Long, *Accompany Them with Singing*, 97.
[66] Long, *Accompany Them with Singing*, 137.
[67] Gibson, *Preaching for Special Services*, 51.
[68] Lloyd, *Leading Today's Funerals*, 17–22.
[69] Lloyd, *Leading Today's Funerals*, 44.

it is "unwise to assume they understand spiritual matters the way churchgoers do."[70] Those are precisely the questions and concerns that qualitative research into what people believe can hope to discover.

Lucy Bregman's *Preaching Death: The Transformation of Christian Funeral Sermons* documents the changes in the images and ideas that Protestant clergy use to describe death. She explains that unlike the battles between Christianity and "secular humanism" in the realms of science, sexuality, and family, the "switchover in Christian death language" happened without direct conflict. Christians debated the applied ethics involved in death and dying but did not debate the new beliefs and images about death, while the old images seemed to have been "quietly abandoned and forgotten."[71] She denies that Christians have always been monolithic about their language about death and cautions against naively reappropriating past images as a resource. However, she also advocates learning from the past to provide for the needs of future generations of Christians. Her work demonstrates that funeral preachers have used key Biblical funeral texts to convey very different messages. One interesting point she makes is how belief in the immortality of the soul helped past Christians conceive of death as a "natural" event. Since the soul continues to exist after the demise of the body, the image of "death as transition rather than annihilation would have been the most 'natural' understanding of it."[72] For many Christians, this idea of natural immortality was behind the hope of the gospel. She contrasts hope that is grounded in the immortality of the soul with the hope of eternal life based on the uniqueness of Christ's resurrection. Indeed, her reason for

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[70] Lloyd, *Leading Today's Funerals*, 45.
[71] Bregman, *Preaching Death*, 4-5.
[72] Bergman, *Preaching Death*, 228.

warning against simply adopting past approaches to funeral preaching is due to this "otherworldly" and "Platonic" approach to death and dying that does not hinge entirely on Jesus' death and resurrection.[73] While her study approaches the topic from a ministerial perspective, focusing on what Protestant clergy have believed in the recent past, not on what lay people believe today, it does illustrate how changes in beliefs about funerals have always occurred and will keep occurring.

Thomas G. Long has written or co-written two academic works on the theological meaning of the Christian funeral, namely, *The Good Funeral: Death, Grief, and the Community of Care*,[74] and *Accompany Them with Singing: The Christian Funeral*.[75] In the latter book, Long notes that funeral practices have been changing quickly and that traditional customs have been replaced with new patterns of memorializing the dead that express "a corrupted understanding of the Christian view of death."[76] Though many clergy have approved these changes, Long calls practical theologians to recognize that they have "cooperated with cultural trends around us and done much to weaken the Christian funeral."[77] In contrast to Bergman, Long writes that changes to current practices should occur as "a matter of recovery and reformation" of past practices, not simply by "innovation and improvisation."[78] Long argues that the Christian funeral is best seen as a worshipful drama that narrates the truth about life and death and re-enacts the gospel. He confronts ministers with the question: "does the drama tell the gospel truth, or does it convey some other version of reality?"[79] Good funerals ought to console the grief-

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[73] Bergman, *Preaching Death*, 229.
[74] Long and Lynch, *The Good Funeral*.
[75] Long, *Accompany Them with Singing*.
[76] Long, *Accompany Them with Singing*, 59.
[77] Long, *Accompany Them with Singing*, xv.
[78] Long, *Accompany Them with Singing*, 59.
[79] Long, *Accompany Them with Singing*, 84.

stricken,[80] but that is an expected outcome of the ritual, but not the purpose of it. "The Christian funeral is about meaning, not just therapy."[81] The meaning is that death does not have the final word in the drama but that "the God we know in Jesus Christ, speaks the last word."[82] This overall meaning of the funeral can come into conflict with eulogistic sermons that replace the gospel of Jesus Christ with "the gospel of Al."[83] But the preacher does not face the choice between giving a eulogy and preaching a sermon. A good funeral sermon will address the circumstances of the funeral, including the death of a particular brother or sister in Christ, within the overarching meaning of the gospel. Long summarizes eight purposes of a good funeral sermon, namely, kerygmatic, oblational, ecclesial, therapeutic, eucharistic, missional, commemorative, and educational.[84] These purposes help expand this dissertation's concept of what a funeral sermon can be.

Robert G. Hughes has written or co-written two books that directly address the nature of funeral preaching from the perspective of a theology of the cross, namely, *A Trumpet in Darkness: Preaching to Mourners*[85] and *Preaching God's Compassion*.[86] In *Preaching God's Compassion*, Aden and Hughes describe a two-step process in formulating a funeral sermon. The first step is diagnostic, actively listening to the story of the loss. Each loss raises its own issues, and the funeral sermon will emerge from and be directed to that particular loss. The second step is to offer good news, or hope, to the mourners: "With the specific problems of loss diagnosed, the preacher seeks a clear

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[80] Long, *Accompany Them with Singing*, 78, 94.
[81] Long, *Accompany Them with Singing*, 94.
[82] Long, *Accompany Them with Singing*, 94.
[83] Long, *Accompany Them with Singing*, 185.
[84] Long, *Accompany Them with Singing*, 188-95.
[85] Hughes, *A Trumpet*.
[86] Aden and Hughes, *Preaching God's Compassion*.

understanding of God's good news."[87] Hughes' work helpfully emphasizes that listening to mourners to determine what they believe is part of being able to preach a good funeral sermon that proclaims the gospel in a way fitting for them. Both steps raise the problem of contextualization in funeral preaching.

Aden and Hughes note that while many Christians find comfort in the doctrine of the resurrection, others may find greater comfort in the idea of a suffering God "who shares our suffering but also a God whose very nature is suffering."[88] This is the truth of Christ crucified, who is the image of suffering love. The authors conclude, "It is only a God of suffering who can minister to us in our suffering."[89] That suggests a theology of the cross is needed for there to be consolation given to mourners. While Hughes' *A Trumpet in Darkness* develops a theology of funeral preaching, it is not a work of practical theology driven by qualitative research.

Summaries of Each Chapter

This dissertation will follow Richard Osmer's model of the four tasks of practical theology.[90]

Chapter 1 will begin the *descriptive-empirical task* of gathering information about funeral beliefs. It will explain what that task consists of, namely, doing qualitative research about a practice. The chapter will then use qualitative content analysis to examine obituaries. That will serve as an initial attempt to gather evidence about what

[87] Aden and Hughes, *Preaching God's Compassion*, 71.
[88] Aden and Hughes, *Preaching God's Compassion*, 65.
[89] Aden and Hughes, *Preaching God's Compassion*, 72.
[90] Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 4.

people popularly believe about the meaning and purpose of having a funeral for a family member or friend.

Chapter 2 will continue the *descriptive-empirical task* by presenting the findings from semi-structured interviews of ten funeral workers. MREB approval was acquired for this aspect of the dissertation. The chapter will explain each step in Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenology and then present the findings of the analysis.

Chapter 3 will then engage in the *interpretive task* of practical theology. It will explain how practical theology is interdisciplinary, using non-theological disciplines to interpret the meaning of the evidence. The idea here is that theology does not have an exclusive claim to truth. Other sciences help us recognize different aspects of reality that theologians may not see on their own. This dissertation will consider the qualitative data in light of three theories: Earnest Becker's theory of the denial of death; Christian Smith's theory of moralistic therapeutic deism, and David Zahl's theory of seculosity. Each of these theories will be explained in the chapter and used to interpret the evidence.

Chapter 4 will then undertake the *normative-task* of practical theology. It will explain what that task consists of, namely, that it uses theology in a normative way to interpret both the qualitative evidence and the non-theological interpretation of that evidence, to understand better the situation of the practice that is being investigated. The chapter will summarize a broadly Barthian approach to incorporating non-theological insights into one's theology without compromising the gospel. It will then present the three versions of the theology of the cross to be used in the dissertation, namely, Gerhard Forde's emphasis on justification, Douglas John Hall's critique of the denial of suffering,

and Kōsuke Koyama's concept of the crucified mind. This chapter will seek to determine what insights Forde, Hall, and Koyama's theologies bring to the qualitative evidence.

Given these findings, Chapter 5 will engage in the *pragmatic task* of practical theology. The chapter will summarize what that task consists of, namely, offering practical suggestions to improve the practice of funeral preaching in light of the findings of the qualitative research. The chapter will suggest improvements to the *practice* and to the *content* of funeral preaching in a manner that is sensitive to some of the problems and concerns raised by local theologies of funerals.

As Tim Perry realized his funeral sermon was not connecting with the baffled mourners, he thought, "I have nothing to say to these people."[91] Other funeral preachers may feel the same sense of helplessness. They may sense the difficulty of communicating the Christian hope to a mixed assembly that no longer shares a common theological heritage with its attendant funerary practices. If so, this study hopes to help pastors see that the word of the cross is still relevant to mourners in our culture. However, knowing how to proclaim that hope in the context of a funeral will require investigation and reflection.

[91] Perry, *Funerals*, 11.

CHAPTER 1

REMEMBERING THE DEAD: THE DESCRIPTIVE-EMPIRICAL TASK, PART I

Introduction

What does it mean to remember the dead? And what does that act of remembering reveal about what we value regarding life and death? In a meditation about expectancy, Søren Kierkegaard pointed to the prophetess Anna, whom the Gospel of Luke tells us "was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four" (Luke 2:36b–37a NRSV). Luke thought that it was important to mention that Anna had only been married for a short time when her life was painfully interrupted, was widowed, and went on living as a widow for decades. Kierkegaard thought that was significant, suggesting that Anna "had nothing left that could be the object of her caring while her thoughts were with the one dead" and "nothing she could love with her whole heart without thereby dishonoring or disquieting the one who had passed away."[1] Anna chose not to remarry. That freed her to devote herself to expectancy about the eternal, culminating in her seeing the infant Christ. What sustained her during those long years? Kierkegaard speculated that Anna must have been sustained by the memory of her late husband:

> She remained faithful to the departed one, and she considered herself well taken care of, as she was indeed, since there is nothing that next to God himself so uncompromisingly tests and searches a person's innermost being as does a commemoration of one who is dead preserved in an always present memory; there

[1] Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, 208–9.

> is nothing that maintains a person's soul in this kind of persevering and faithful endurance as does the thought of one who is dead, which never slumbers.[2]

Kierkegaard suggests that the memory of the dead seems to motivate us differently than other memories. Just as Anna's respect for her husband's memory helped her persist through the long trials of widowhood, perhaps commemorating the dead tests and sustains us as well. Kierkegaard suggested that commemoration can search a person's "innermost being." In other words, remembering the dead—speaking *of* them, and *for* them, and keeping that picture in our memories—can reveal our deepest beliefs about the meaning of death and what makes a life worth living and remembering at all. Remembering the dead can be a mirror that reflects what we believe and value about ourselves.

Every preacher should be concerned with understanding those deeply held beliefs—beliefs that seem to rarely bubble to the surface of conscious deliberation except when we are faced with the memories of a departed loved one. Understanding those beliefs can help funeral preachers better understand mourners and contextualize funeral sermons to more effectively point mourners to the sustaining truth of Christ crucified and risen from the dead. Of course, the challenge of understanding any culture is that culture is always changing, whether the pace of that change is glacier-slow or avalanche-fast. Given that unpredictable situation, it is important to keep researching what people believe, which this dissertation aims to do. Hence, in this chapter, we will present the first part of our qualitative research into contemporary beliefs about the meaning of funerals. It will be divided into five parts. First, it will explain the method used to analyze

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[2] Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, 210.

obituaries: inductive qualitative content analysis. Second, it will summarize what obituaries emphasized about the deceased's life. Third, it will explore what was remembered about the deceased's legacy. Fourth, it will present the evidence of a struggle with loss. Fifth, the chapter will conclude by summarizing the results of this stage of the research.

The Method Used to Gather and Analyze Obituaries

This chapter examines obituaries using inductive qualitative content analysis (hereafter QCA). The goal of this section is to present clearly what QCA is, what makes it inductive, how it yields an objective interpretation of texts, and how it will be used to analyze obituaries in particular.

Basic Features of QCA

When a researcher is dealing with rich data whose meaning is not obvious, and especially when the researcher is interested in less standardized meanings, QCA can be used to systematically describe meaningful descriptions of people's experiences as reflected in the data.[3] QCA is distinguished from other qualitative methods of analysis by allowing the researcher to focus on selected aspects of the data.[4] While there are different varieties of QCA, this research will employ an inductive QCA method. An inductive method is preferred because this research does not seek to test or prove a theory about what people believe but to discover what people believe about funerals, whatever those beliefs may be. Thus, instead of forcing the data into a preconceived coding frame, I will use an

[3] Kyngäs, "Inductive Content Analysis," 13.
[4] Schreier, *Qualitative Content Analysis in Practice*, 4.

inductive method to derive those codes from the data and then construct a frame organically. As Kyngäs summarizes: "A basic inductive content analysis is performed according to the following phases: data reduction, data grouping and the formation of concepts that can be used to answer research questions."[5]

Recognizing the Researcher's Preconceptions

Although the inductive QCA method seeks to be completely open to discovering and seeing whatever the data presents, the researcher's assumptions cannot be completely bracketed out. Hence, as Kyngäs emphasizes, the qualitative researcher should be open about his or her preconceptions concerning the subject of research:

> In qualitative study reports, it is important that the researcher fully describes their preconceptions—in other words, what they knew about the studied phenomena before the research began—because these preconceptions can affect the data collection and/or results. When the preconceptions are described openly, the reader can make their own conclusions about whether or not they affected the results.[6]

As a Christian theologian, I disclosed and described some of my preconceptions in the Introduction. To repeat, this research is a work of practical theology that grows out of my practice of doing funeral ministry. This research hopes to discover new knowledge of operative significance for funeral preaching. I investigate this issue from the perspective of a Christian pastor who has both presided over Christian funerals and who has attended them as a mourner. Based on my experiences, I am engaging in this research, expecting that analyzing the content of obituaries will reveal what people believe about the meaning of funerals.

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[5] Kyngäs, "Inductive Content Analysis," 14.
[6] Kyngäs, "Qualitative Research and Content Analysis," 7–8.

Determining the Sample Size

Since this chapter will analyze obituaries, that raised the question of how many obituaries I would need to study. Kyngäs notes that qualitative studies differ from quantitative ones in determining how to establish an adequate sample size:

> The sample of a qualitative study is very important, but adequate sample size is not defined like in a quantitative study. The sample size is not specified before the research starts the data collection process, and data collection stops once saturation occurs. The term data saturation refers to a point when information from participants becomes repetitive and the researcher will not gain any new information from further data collection.[7]

In qualitative studies such as this one, sheer numbers are not as important as reaching a point of data saturation. Normally, then, a QCA analysis will *not* begin with a specified sample size but will depend, instead, on the researcher's subjective impression that he or she has analyzed enough data to reach a saturation of meaning.

Nevertheless, to have some idea—some outer limit—of the number of obituaries that were needed, I used Cochran's formula to calculate the sample size for a large population such as the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex, which has 7,637,387 people.[8] The equation is:

> Necessary sample size = $(\text{Z-score})^2$ x StdDev x (1-StdDev) / $(\text{margin of error})^2$.[9]

First, there is a Z-score or confidence level wanted for the study. The most common confidence levels are 90 percent, 95 percent, or 99 percent. For this dissertation, I chose a confidence level of 95 percent, which translates into a Z Score of 1.96.

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[7] Kyngäs, "Qualitative Research and Content Analysis," 8.
[8] Butler, *Statistics in Linguistics*, 53.
[9] Mahat and Kandel, *Scientific Research Methodologies and Techniques*, 213.

Second, there is the standard deviation, which estimates how much the responses will vary from each other. A safe choice is considered to be a standard deviation of .5.

Third, there is the acceptable margin of error which we have set at the typical +/- 5%."

Given those numbers, the formula works out to be:

$= ((1.96)^2 \times .5(.5)) / (.05)^2$
$= (3.8416 \times .25) / .0025$
$= .9604 / .0025$
$= 384.16$

In sum, a maximum of 384 obituaries are needed for a representative sampling of obituaries.[10] That was the number of obituaries examined for this chapter. However, as stated earlier, the most important standard for determining an adequate sample size is data saturation.

Data Collection

After determining the sample size, the obituaries had to be collected. The texts were found by looking at local newspaper obituaries and searching funeral home websites. The texts were not selected because they fit a preconceived idea about what obituary writers should say about the departed. Instead, they were selected in an open fashion, without respect to their content, and imported into MAXQDA, a software program designed for computer-assisted qualitative data analysis.

[10] This number was confirmed using Table 2 in Halim, "Determining Sample Size," 29.

Steps in an Inductive QCA Analysis

After gathering the obituary texts, they were analyzed using the approach described by Kyngäs in her article, "Inductive Content Analysis."[11] As she clarifies, this type of analysis can provide a meaningful *description* of someone's experience but cannot *explain* those experiences.[12] That suits this project because explaining the data will come in later chapters in dialogue with theological and non-theological theories. Hence, the goal of this chapter is not yet to explain, but merely to describe and summarize the conclusions derived from the obituaries.

An inductive QCA method takes raw data and then uses a process of data reduction and data grouping to form theoretical concepts that can help answer the research question.[13] Admittedly, the results are somewhat subjective. As Kyngäs notes, "there are no systematic, accurate rules for how to analyze qualitative data. Instead, content analysis can be considered a discussion between the researcher and their data."[14] Even though the results are due to a subjective "discussion" between myself and the evidence, the goal of inductive QCA is to discover theoretical concepts that other researchers would also see if they used the same process of analysis.[15] Here are the steps for doing a QCA analysis.

First, after the obituaries were collected, the texts were read several times to give an overall impression of the evidence.[16] No coding was done at this point. The goal was to become familiar with the documents.

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[11] Supplemented by Erlingsson and Brysiewicz, "A Hands-On Guide to Doing Content Analysis"; Kuckartz, "Qualitative Text Analysis: A Systematic Approach."

[12] Kyngäs, "Inductive Content Analysis," 13.

[13] Kyngäs, "Inductive Content Analysis," 14, 17.

[14] Kyngäs, "Inductive Content Analysis," 14.

[15] Kyngäs, "Inductive Content Analysis," 14–15.

[16] Kyngäs, "Inductive Content Analysis," 14.

Second, the analysis created open codes from the data, looking for any word, phrase, or sentence that might bear upon what people believe about the meaning of death and funerals. Notable sentence fragments could include anything from direct statements about death and the afterlife to noting what obituaries emphasized about the deceased.

Third, the open codes were then arranged into sub-categories. This process involved looking for similarities or differences between them, checking them against the text to confirm they are related to issues discussed by the research question, and then grouping them to form sub-categories. Judging whether codes were similar is an example of the "discussion" with the evidence and the subjective nature of this research.

Fourth, the abstraction process was taken further by grouping the sub-categories into *main categories*. These categories are meant to summarize the most important ideas or concepts that appear in the obituaries.

Having explained how the research was conducted, the remainder of this chapter will present the results of the QCA analysis.

Results of the Analysis

Kyngäs offers a recommendation on how to best present the results of the analysis. "When reporting inductive content analysis findings, researchers should strive to describe the contents of the presented concepts through the identified sub-concepts and open codes," she explains. "The researcher should also provide authentic citations that connect the results and raw data."[17] That is how the findings will be presented here.

[17] Kyngäs, "Inductive Content Analysis," 19–20.

The qualitative research showed that obituary writers emphasized recurring themes when remembering the dead. Four main categories emerged. First, there was a focus on remembering the life of the departed. Second, there were statements about coping with loss. Third, there were hopes expressed in remembering the legacy of the deceased. Fourth, there were comments made about what might broadly be called the afterlife of the deceased. In the next sections, I will define each of the main categories and present some of the subcategories and supporting quotes for each main concept.

Main Category: Remembering the Life

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the main category that grew out of this qualitative analysis is that obituary writers focused on remembering the *life* of the deceased. They presented specific facts about the decedent's life, such as the date and location of their birth, the names of their family, and the day of their death. The obituaries presented that information objectively, anonymously, and in boilerplate style, without the distinctive authorial "voice" or "perspective" that one would hear in a grandson's eulogy about his grandfather. Nevertheless, beyond these biographical facts, it was interesting to note what else obituary writers chose to remember about the decedent's life. Since an obituary is typically brief, each detail is specifically chosen. In what follows, I present some of the most notable sub-categories for remembering the deceased in biographical order.

Sub-Category: Education

Obituaries usually presented the basic facts about the departed's education, especially if he or she had attended college or university. For example, here is a typical passage giving

the name of the high school she attended: “She grew up Oak Cliff, Texas and graduated from David W. Carter High school in 1972.”[18]

Although high schools were not always named, obituaries seemed careful to note where the decedent had gone to college or university: “She received a Bachelor of Science in Industrial Engineering from Texas A&M University. She later completed a Master of Business Administration at the University of Texas at Arlington.”[19]

The higher the education, the more likely it seemed to be mentioned: “Aside from family, Kay was also an accomplished academic, earning her Masters and PhD in Bio Chemistry from Texas Women’s University.”[20] Or, “Steve attended Dallas Theological Seminary and received a BA from the University of Tennessee at Knoxville, a BD from Columbia Theological Seminary and a PD. rom the University of Aberdeen in Aberdeen, Scotland.”[21]

The strong impression was that being educated was considered an accomplishment worth remembering publicly.

Sub-Category: Work and Career

Obituaries would then usually speak about the decedent’s employment. There was a special emphasis on having a *career*. For example: “After receiving her Bachelor’s degree in nursing from Dallas Baptist College, she began her career as a Registered Nurse.”[22]

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[18] Obituary 5.
[19] Obituary 19.
[20] Obitiary 188
[21] Obituary 11.
[22] Obituary 5.

Obituaries usually mentioned if the departed had worked in the same field for an extended period, stating how many years they had been in their field—the longer, the better. For example: “After college, Susan returned to Dallas and spent a decades-long career as a certified travel agent.” Or “Shortly thereafter, he began a 25+ year career in Business and Sales Leadership at IBM in Maine.”[23]

Industry-related awards could be mentioned: “He brought the same detail-oriented nature over to the industry, and throughout his 28-year-long career, he developed 49 office and industrial buildings in excess of 8.5 million square feet and earned a Lifetime Achievement Award at Trammell Crow Company, where he spent the vast majority of his career.”[24]

If someone worked for the same company for several years, their promotions or progress up the corporate ladder were worth noting: “Starting as a lineman for the Texas-New Mexico Power Company, Randy worked his way to Vice President during his 24 years there.”[25] Another obituary recalled how the decedent had loyally stayed with the same company through multiple ownership changes: “Thru the years the company sold several times and he ended his career there as General Manager.”[26]

Remembering how the decedent earned a living and their achievements in their chosen career were prevalent across the obituaries.

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[23] Obituary 9.
[24] Obituary 20.
[25] Obituary 174.
[26] Obituary 190.

Sub-Category: Military Service

Another popular theme was to note if the deceased had any connection to the military. They might have served during wartime: "When the twins were only two months old, Grandad answered the call to serve his country and left for Italy with the US Army in December of 1942."[27] Or, "Tom was a lieutenant in the Army from 1965 to 1967, courageously serving in Korea."[28] Or they could have been a reservist: "During his college years and peacetime, Charles served six years in the Army reserve."[29] And it was certainly mentioned when the decedent had a military career—along with any notable accomplishments during that time. For example:

> Billy's long and dedicated service to his country is exemplified in his numerous awards. He received the National Defense Service Medal, The Vietnam Service Medal, Navy Unit Commendation, Vietnam Campaign Medal with 1960 Combat Action, Legion of Merit (2), Distinguished Flying Cross with one star, the Bronze Star with Combat "V", the Air Medal Strike Flight Award with numeral 50, the Navy Commendation Medal, Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces Meritorious Unit Commendation with Palm and Frame, Vietnam Cross of Gallantry with bronze star, Republic of Vietnam Civil Action 1st Class with Palm, Armed Forced Expeditionary Medal, Sea Service Deployment ribbon, Meritorious unit [sic] Commendation, and the Presidential Unit Commendation.[30]

Being in a military family seemed to be notable: "Born July 15, 1928 in Lexington KY to William McAlister and Margaret Wade, Mae raised four kids on Air Force bases in Germany and the U.S."[31] And growing up in a military family, without necessarily being a soldier, could also be worth mentioning: "He grew up in an Air Force family, from which he gained a love of adventure."[32]

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[27] Obituary 186.
[28] Obituary 228.
[29] Obituary 164.
[30] Obituary 258.
[31] Obituary 106.
[32] Obituary 74.

What came through is how deeply important the military was for the deceased, if not also for the obituary writers. In fact, very few things were considered more important than such service. As one obituary noted: "Aside from his faith and family, Billy's greatest devotion was to the United States Marine Corps."[33]

Throughout this study, so-called "revenge obituaries"—that is, obituaries that focus on critical memories of the deceased, highlighting their wrongdoings or damaged relationships—served as an important counter-point to the evidence from ordinary obituaries. For example, the importance and honorability of military service was emphasized ironically by one revenge obituary that reported: "Leslie enlisted to serve in the Navy, but not so much in a brave & patriotic way but more as part of a plea deal to escape sentencing on criminal charges."[34] Explicitly stating that this man served in the military for the wrong reasons was considered by that obituary writer to be a special way of shaming the decedent's memory.

Sub-Category: Marriage

As one would expect, obituaries always stated whether the decedent was married. But besides mentioning the fact of marriage, obituary writers could also emphasize the *quality* of that relationship. Writers could note the romantic nature of the union, such as how the attraction between partners was immediate: "He had a 62+ year romance with his wife Jan. It was love at first sight when he spotted her on the steps of the SMU [Southern Methodist University] student center and immediately told his friend, 'I'm going to marry

[33] Obituary 258.
[34] Obituary 2.

that girl.'"[35] Marital happiness could be mentioned: "They wed June 19, 1965, and spent the next fifty-seven and a half years happily married, the last forty-six years in Dallas, Texas."[36] Or, "Gay and Shannon had a long and happy marriage of 59 years."[37]
The longer the marriage, the more likely that would be mentioned: "They were married for 20 years until her passing in 1981."[38] Or, "Rosanne married Jack Wensinger in August 1958 and they shared 64 wondrous years together."[39]

Notably, obituary writers did not mention if there had been any marital unhappiness, unfaithfulness, or bitterness. Failed marriages were not directly mentioned except as implied by the use of words such as "stepson," "stepdaughter," or "stepchildren."[40]

Sub-Category: Family

Obituaries listed the names and nature of the relationship of any surviving spouses, children, and grandchildren, but, as with marriages, they could also emphasize the quality of those relationships. It seemed especially important to mention if the family had been loving. On the one hand, obituaries would mention how the decedent loved his or her family: "Most of all, he loved his family, planning their future, and creating memories."[41] "His greatest love and source of pride was his family."[42] "Anyone who knew Kellison knew that her greatest love was her family."[43] And on the other hand, the obituaries

[35] Obituary 54.
[36] Obituary 38
[37] Obituary 57.
[38] Obituary 9.
[39] Obituary 13.
[40] See Obituaries 5, 49, 174, 225, 250, 255, 284, 316.
[41] Obituary 191.
[42] Obituary 190.
[43] Obituary 8.

would say if the family loved the decedent: “Kay received the love and affection of her parents, aunts and uncles whom she cherished until her death.”[44] “Norman will be missed by so many who loved him (and whom he loved).”[45]

The documents generally focused on family happiness, while unpleasant topics such as rifts, feuds, or estrangements, were seldom mentioned. I say *seldom* mentioned because here, again, the revenge obituaries prove the exception. In fact, these seem to have been written specifically to show how the deceased had failed as family members. “With Leslie’s passing he will be missed only for what he never did; being a loving husband, father and good friend.”[46] Obituaries written by angry family members emphasized how the decedent had neither loved nor supported their families but had harmed them instead. One obituary lamented being abandoned by their mother: “She abandoned her children, Gina and Jay who were then raised by her parents in Clements, Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Schunk.”[47] Another disturbing obituary recalled a long history of abusive behavior: “She is survived by her 6 of 8 children whom she spent her lifetime torturing in every way possible. While she neglected and abused her small children, she refused to allow anyone else to care or show compassion towards them. When they became adults she stalked and tortured anyone they dared to love.”[48] Having a loving family was presented as a badge; an unloving one, a wound.

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[44] Obituary 188.
[45] Obituary 221.
[46] Obituary 2.
[47] Obituary 384.
[48] Obituary 3.

Sub-Category: Hobbies

Most obituaries mentioned any hobbies the deceased enjoyed. For example, a love of sports was a popular topic to remember, whether as a player or spectator. For example: "John loved all sports, especially the Dallas Mavericks and Syracuse University basketball."[49] Another obituary connected a love of sports with healthy relationships: "He enjoyed golfing with friends and was an avid sports fan sharing the experience with his grandsons attending Sooner, Cowboy and Ranger games frequently, however Ole Miss football always held a special place in his heart."[50]

Besides sports, obituaries also mentioned outdoor activities such as hunting and fishing: "David was a lifelong, avid fisherman. His first fishing trips with his father and older brother gave him a love for fishing that endured to his very last day."[51] Or, "Jack's favorite hobby (besides pulling practical jokes) was fishing. He fished in Hawaii, Canada, and Costa Rica. His love of fishing led to his move to Lake Fork in Emory, Texas. His personal best was an 11 lbs 9oz, big mouth bass caught when he was 87."[52]

It was popular to note whether the departed had a love of music, especially if they played an instrument. For example: "He developed a love of music at an early age. He played the piano, the cello and was self-taught on the trumpet."[53]

Traveling was another popular hobby worth mentioning, especially if the decedent had visited far-flung countries:

> In their retirement, JoAnn and husband Graydon traveled to many exciting destinations, including Thailand, Greece, and Turkey, among others. Very memorable trips were to Russia, shortly after the fall of the iron curtain and to

[49] Obituary 189
[50] Obituary 164.
[51] Obituary 16.
[52] Obituary 65.
[53] Obituary 199.

> China, where she saw the great wall and the terracotta army of Qin Shi Huang. She also visited Egypt, Bali and South America, trips that left lasting impressions.[54]

Other hobbies that could be mentioned included cooking, baking, walking, or simply enjoying time with pets. These helped to paint the deceased as an individual who enjoyed life and pursued things that made life worthwhile.

By contrast, the importance of hobbies was again emphasized ironically in the revenge obituaries. For example, one revenge obituary sought to emphasize the decedent's low character by noting her *lack* of hobbies: "Dolores had no hobbies, made no contribution to society, and rarely shared a kind word or deed in her life."[55] Another stated that the decedent's "hobby" was to hurt his family: "Lawrence, Sr.'s hobbies included abusing his first wife and children."[56] This perverse use of the notion of a hobby serves to emphasize the perceived importance of having healthy hobbies for a well-formed life.

Sub-Category: Positive Personal Characteristics

Obituaries would mention the departed's positive personal characteristics. Of the seven cardinal virtues, only *kindness* and *humility* were prevalent. For example, people wanted others to know their loved ones were humble: "Granddaddy was a humble man; he never liked to be the center of attention."[57] Or "Yaroslav was humble with a subtle sense of humor. He had so many talents but never bragged about them."[58] Obituaries noted how

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[54] Obituary 196.
[55] Obituary 380.
[56] Obituary 381.
[57] Obituary 186.
[58] Obituary 278.

kind they were: “His kind heart and care for others extended to all persons at the firm, and he was widely admired.”[59] “Billy has left behind an amazing legacy and will be fondly remembered by those who loved him for his huge heart and kindness.”[60] Even though *chastity* was not mentioned by name, faithfulness in marriage could be: “Doug was a scout leader, T-ball coach, fine furniture builder, guitar player, chalice bearer, lay reader, teaser, jokester, big golfer, devoted father and faithful husband.”[61]

Of the theological virtues, only faith and love were mentioned, such as love for family: “Wally will be remembered for his kindness, intelligence and his unwavering dedication and love for his family and community.”[62] As we saw in the discussion about family, the decedent’s loving nature was important to mention. Another recurring positive characteristic to remember was the deceased’s non-judgmentalism: “The kind of love Grandma felt for us was a love without condition. She may not have approved of everything we did, may not have liked some of the decisions we made, but she didn’t lecture, she didn’t judge. She just kept loving us, letting us know that she was there and if we ever needed her, we could count on her to listen, to comfort, to help.”[63] As another eulogist simply put it: “Instead of judging people, she sought to understand them.”[64]

The importance of the decedent’s faith was also noted: “Her strength came from the unwavering faith in her Savior.”[65] Or, “As a boy, Bob’s father and mother instilled in Bob a strong work ethic, a devotion to family, a love of country and a Christian faith

[59] Obituary 45.
[60] Obituary 89.
[61] Obituary 124.
[62] Obituary 105.
[63] Obituary 176.
[64] Obituary 193.
[65] Obituary 8.

which Bob would carry with him throughout his life."[66] Or, "Her Catholic faith was a central part of her life.[67]

Other virtues that were often mentioned included variations on the theme of industriousness: "Most notably, Rosanne valued the importance of perseverance and hard work, she had a never-ending willingness to extend her kindness to others and she relied on her faith."[68] It could be important to say if the decedent had a strong work ethic: "Billy was a United States Army Veteran and served in both Korea and Vietnam. During his time in the service, Billy was praised by many for his dedicated work ethic and proven leadership skills."[69] "She put countless hours and hard work into her business, and every flight attendant knew they could depend on Sharron for her help."[70]

Obituaries writers often praised the decedent's sense of humor. As one obituary writer mentioned: "her boisterous laugh, sense of humor, and charisma were contagious—coined by her dear coworkers as 'The Kellison Effect.'"[71] Or, "She was welcoming, kind, strong and good-humored to the end."[72]

Finally, having a sense of compassion seemed to be very important: "Charles was a caring and compassionate husband, father, and grandfather with an amazing sense of humor."[73] "Beyond his professional accomplishments, Cody was a compassionate and thoughtful soul, always ready to extend a helping hand."[74]

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[66] Obituary 45.
[67] Obituary 177.
[68] Obituary 109.
[69] Obituary 89.
[70] Obituary 108.
[71] Obituary 8.
[72] Obituary 17.
[73] Obituary 164.
[74] Obituary 375.

Generally speaking, while the classical and theological virtues were not emphasized as such, a wide variety of positive personal characteristics were.

Sub-Category: Negative Personal Characteristics

Most obituaries did not mention the decedent's vices. But here again, revenge obituaries provided the major exception, portraying them as unsympathetic moral monsters. As already cited: "While she neglected and abused her small children, she refused to allow anyone else to care or show compassion towards them. When they became adults she stalked and tortured anyone they dared to love. Everyone she met, adult or child was tortured by her cruelty and exposure to violence, criminal activity, vulgarity, and hatred of the gentle or kind human spirit."[75] Or as another obituary bluntly stated: "Lawrence, Sr.'s passing proves that evil does eventually die, and it marks a time of healing, which will allow his children to get the closure they deserve."[76] But once again, it should be clarified that emphasizing the negative was the exception, not the rule.

Main Category: Coping with Loss

The second main category that emerged from the study involved statements about coping with feelings of loss. These were not objective statements about the deceased but subjective statements about how mourners felt about losing their loved one.

[75] Obituary 364.
[76] Obituary 381.

Sub-Category: Feelings of Grief

Obituaries could refer to feelings of grief and loss: "He leaves behind his beloved wife, children, grandchildren, and family, who while deeply grieving his loss, are anchored in the knowledge that he is in the presence of his Savior and Redeemer in heaven."[77] Or, "We who knew and loved him mourn the loss of Morton David Prager."[78] Although there were only a few such expressions mentioned in the obituaries, many obituaries contained links to resources for grief counseling, touching subjects such as "How to Cope with Grief," "The Five Stages of Grief," and "How Do I Handle Holidays While Grieving?" But those were part of the boilerplate formatting of the website and not sentiments directly expressed by the obituaries themselves. Clearly, grief was a known concern but one rarely addressed in the obituaries.

Sub-Category: Missing the Person

Many obituaries mentioned missing the deceased. Typical statements would include: "She will be greatly missed by those who love her and were lucky enough to have been loved by her."[79] Or, "He will be sorely missed but never forgotten. May he rest in peace."[80] Or, "Janet never met a stranger and she will be missed by all that knew and loved her."[81] Another obituary expressed the sense of now having a hole in their life due to the decedent's absence: "He was truly selfless and his passing leaves an unfillable gap

[77] Obituary 45.
[78] Obituary 225.
[79] Obituary 5.
[80] Obituary 54.
[81] Obituary 298.

in the hearts of those who loved him."[82] These were just some of the general statements of feelings of the loss of the personal presence of the deceased.

Sub-Category: Missing the Qualities

Obituaries could also specify that the departed would be missed for his or her personal qualities. For example, someone could be missed for their kindness: "She was so kind and such an inspirational woman that we loved and will miss!"[83] Others were missed for their humor: "We will all miss his warm spirit, dry wit, and loving nature."[84] Indeed, having a sense of humor seemed to be especially remembered fondly: "We all and especially his granddaughters love and terribly miss his goofy side."[85] Or, "His humor, love of people, and commitment to his family will be greatly missed."[86] And again, "He will be sorely missed but with gratitude for his long, rich, and fulfilling life and the love he gave."[87]

Sub-Category: Missing the Activities

Others would miss their shared activities: "No girls have ever been as lucky as Paula and Teresa to have Jerry Woodard for a daddy. They will miss everything about him—especially their group texts acting as armchair play-by-play announcers and color commentators during every Dallas Cowboys game."[88]

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[82] Obituary 53.
[83] Obituary 109.
[84] Obituary 49.
[85] Obituary 202.
[86] Obituary 220.
[87] Obituary 225.
[88] Obituary 302.

Sub-Category: Not Missing the Deceased

As one might expect, the revenge obituaries provide a contrast by emphasizing how the deceased would *not* be missed. "She will not be missed by Gina and Jay, and they understand that this world is a better place without her."[89] Or, "I speak for the majority of her family when I say her presence will not be missed by many, very few tears will be shed and there will be no lamenting over her passing."[90] If the decedent was missed at all, it was due to what he should have been: "With Leslie's passing he will be missed only for what he never did; being a loving husband, father and good friend."[91]

Instead of feeling grief, revenge obituaries could express relief at the deceased's death: "As for the rest of us left behind, I hope this is the beginning of a time of healing and learning to be a family again."[92] Another stated the family could now experience peace: "Her surviving children will now live the rest of their lives with the peace of knowing their nightmare finally has some form of closure."[93]

Main Category: Legacy

The third significant category derived from an analysis of the obituaries was to mention the decedent's legacy. For example, there were statements of what, exactly, the decedent's legacy would be among those who remembered him or her. One obituary remembered the decedent's optimism: "He leaves a legacy of eternal optimism (as well as a large collection of Life is Good t-shirts), an ability to work through any problem, and

[89] Obituary 384.
[90] Obituary 380.
[91] Obituary 2.
[92] Obituary 380.
[93] Obituary 364.

his devotion to and great love for his entire (rather large) family."[94] Another recalled the decedent's professional and personal legacy: "Beyond his legendary status as a trial lawyer, Russ leaves behind a legacy of what it means to 'live out your purpose.' He put his all into everything he did, which is why he did so many things so well, creating a massive void left behind by the unforgettable impact of his well lived life."[95] Or, "Billy has left behind an amazing legacy and will be fondly remembered by those who loved him for his huge heart and kindness."[96] One man was remembered for his philanthropic legacy: "His passion for creativity led him to co-found, with his mother Joan, Site 131 on Payne Street, an artistic space that became a platform for artists to share their visions and inspire the community. Through this venture, Seth's artistic spirit thrived, leaving a lasting legacy that continues to touch lives."[97]

However, beyond these kinds of mentions, hundreds of obituaries included boilerplate links and articles suggesting ways of remembering the decedent's legacy, such as donating to an animal charity or purchasing a brick at the National WWII Museum.[98] The boilerplate language that surrounded the obituaries strongly emphasized the importance of a lasting legacy.

Main Category: Hope for an Afterlife

The fourth main category derived from the obituaries is the one most directly related to the research question. These were explicit or implicit references to religious beliefs.

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[94] Obituary 150.
[95] Obituary 226.
[96] Obituary 89.
[97] Obituary 273.
[98] Obituary 43.

In terms of implicit references, obituaries would state that the funeral service or memorial service would be held at a church or ask that donations be made in the deceased's memory to a church or ministry. While those kinds of statements implied a religious connection or faith tradition, they did not explicitly specify what the decedent or the obituary writers believed.

However, explicit references to the decedent's faith were somewhat more revealing, albeit not to the extent that a researcher would hope. Surprisingly, few, if any, of the obituaries touched on significant issues of theology or revealed much of the content of the decedent's faith. Instead, they would mention the dead's faith or how the church was personally important to them without revealing what about that faith was important. To give an idea of the relative religious minimalism of the documents, out of 384 obituaries, only 8 referred to *Jesus* by name, while 11 referred to the *Savior*. In other words, from a theologian's perspective, even the most explicit religious references in the obituaries were no more than generically religious.

Sub-Category: Strength of Faith

Some obituaries mentioned the strength of the decedent's faith: "Her strength came from the unwavering faith in her Savior. The family is comforted that Kellison is healed and now in the arms of Jesus."[99] Or, "As a boy, Bob's father and mother, instilled in Bob a strong work-ethic, a devotion to family, a love of country and a Christian faith which Bob would carry with him throughout his life."[100] Or, "All his life he was active in the church

[99] Obituary 8.
[100] Obituary 45.

and had a strong faith in God."[101] These did not specify the details of the decedent's faith. And these references were not as common as I had hoped.

Sub-Category: Practice of Faith

Obituaries contained references to the decedent's religious practices, such as their faithfulness in attending church: "A faithful servant of God, she attended Pilgrims Rest Baptist Church for over 50 years."[102] Being a life-long member of a church was notable, such as being "a life-long member of the Church of Christ."[103] Or, "Glenn was a lifelong member of Mount Horeb Baptist Church in Dallas, TX."[104]

If the deceased found significant social fulfillment in church activities, that could be mentioned. For example, "Mary was a member of the Greek Orthodox Church where she was very involved for many years in the Food Festival, baking, selling, volunteering many hours and always making friends."[105] But as important as going to church might be, it could be characterized as being on a par with other kinds of social activities: "She relished time with her grandchildren, enjoyed traveling with friends, visiting the theater, reading, and singing in church and community choirs."[106]

Other obituaries mentioned the decedent's commitment to the ministries within the local church: "Phyllis was a charter member of Christ Church in Plano, where she played an instrumental role in its establishment and growth. Recognizing the power of prayer in the life of a believer, she dedicated herself to interceding for the church, it's

[101] Obituary 164.
[102] Obituary 68.
[103] Obituary 22.
[104] Obituary 232.
[105] Obituary 6.
[106] Obituary 26.

[*sic*] leaders and congregation. Her commitment to a life of prayer was unmatched, and she tirelessly lifted the needs of others, seeking God's guidance and blessings upon the community."[107] Or, "In the 1950's she and her husband, R. J. Smith worked as missionaries in Frankfurt, Germany, sponsored by the Church of Christ at Rockwall and Brin in Terrell and continued working in the Christian ministry upon their return. Sue was a lecturer of Bible studies and traveled to Europe at the age of 26 on an extensive speaking tour, conducting her talks in German and Italian."[108] But these kinds of statements were rare.

Sub-Category: Afterlife

The last sub-category includes statements expressing longings related to the afterlife.

Several obituaries expected a somewhat traditional eschatology of going to heaven when you die. "Judy 'Nana' Henderson Butts of Garland, Texas, went to be with her heavenly Father on April 10, 2023, after a short battle with cancer."[109] Another lady "passed peacefully from this earth to Heaven on April 14, 2023, after a brief illness."[110] Or, "Karen Lynn Holland passed away peacefully, surrounded by her friends and family, and went to Heaven to be with her Lord and Savior at the age of 72 on April 18, 2023, in Mesquite, Texas."[111] Or again, "Martha joined her Savior Jesus Christ on June 2, 2023."[112]

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[107] Obituary 265.
[108] Obituary 255.
[109] Obituary 14.
[110] Obituary 42.
[111] Obituary 22.
[112] Obituary 64.

A few obituaries revealed somewhat unusual views of personal eschatology. For example, one envisioned the decedent riding a horse into heaven: "His family hopes he is riding his dream winged black stallion through the heavenly golden gates and playing on the blissful clouds with his beloved white tiger Sabrina and the other animals who passed before him."[113] Another obituary emphasized reunited with dead pets: "Welcoming him into the kingdom of heaven are his father Dudley, his sister Julie, and his prized Shih Tzu's [*sic*], Hershey and Snickers."[114] Another example is how an obituary reflected the belief that the dead become angels, saying, the decedent "joined the angels in heaven on Saturday, April 15, 2023."[115] This is a belief that I have also encountered in my local context.

Sub-Category: Conversions of Faith

Only one obituary made reference to a conversion experience later in life: "He made a commitment to Jesus Christ in his late twenties, but it was a few decades later that he got serious about his faith, and his children saw his heart soften. His spiritual life became vital: reading the Bible, praying every day with Jane, serving with Prison Fellowship, mentoring men, including prisoners and ex-offenders, and giving generously to those in need."[116]

Interestingly, and surprisingly to me, only one out of 384 obituaries mentioned a change in denominational affiliation. "He was baptized in the Presbyterian Church, Halstead, KS. and later moved his membership to First Mennonite Church, Halstead

[113] Obituary 43.
[114] Obituary 20.
[115] Obituary 12.
[116] Obituary 72.

where he is still a member."[117] Most people seem to remain in whatever faith tradition their families raised them in.

Conclusion

In sum, this chapter presents the first part of our qualitative study into contemporary beliefs about funerals. Although obituaries never explicitly stated why funerals were being held, their content revealed what people think is important to remember about the deceased, which may have a bearing on their beliefs about the purpose of funerals.

The results show that most funeral texts focused on the deceased's life. The manner of their death and how they handled the process of dying were rarely mentioned. Instead, mourners focused on how the deceased lived. As expected, obituaries recounted simple details such as where they went to school, what kind of job(s) they worked, and their role within a family. However, obituary writers often reflected on the personal qualities of the deceased, with much greater emphasis placed on their virtues than their vices. Personal details that helped highlight the uniqueness of the individual were often mentioned, emphasizing their positive qualities over any negative ones.

While obituaries did describe the experience of loss, none indicated serious wrestling with existential questions about death. The results also show that while religious references regularly occurred in the obituaries, specific religious issues were not explored in depth. The specific content of what the deceased believed and how their faith might have guided their life and approach to death were rarely mentioned, except in a general way. We could be told that faith was important to the decedent without being told

[117] Obituary 190.

the content of that faith. Although many of the deceased identified with Christian denominations, few texts articulated anything like a recognizable statement of Christian belief. Based on what was written, it would be hard to know what the obituary writer or the decedent believed about God, death, and salvation. Instead of giving clear and definite theological statements that could be identified with a specific theological tradition, obituaries more often expressed generic hopes about life after death with Jesus. However, while the *explicit* theological data given by the obituaries was slim, it did provide major categories for further discussion. Indeed, as chapters 3 and 4 will argue, these categories reveal *implicit* religious beliefs and commitments that require serious theological reflection. But before getting to that, we will gather more evidence in the next chapter to thicken our analysis.

CHAPTER 2

CARING FOR THE DEAD: THE DESCRIPTIVE-EMPIRICAL TASK, PART II

Introduction

Walk into any funeral home in America, and one will likely come across a plaque or painting inscribed with a quote by William Gladstone who said, "Show me the manner in which a nation cares for its dead, and I will measure with mathematical exactness the tender mercies of its people, their respect for the laws of the land, and their loyalty to high ideals."[1] If Gladstone was right, caring for the dead is no ordinary action but reveals the ideals and values of a culture. Gladstone's insight serves as a presupposition of this dissertation, namely, that funeral practices reflect what people value and believe, and so changes in funeral practices will reflect changes in beliefs and values. What, then, are current burial practices? How have those practices been changing? And what do they reveal about people's current beliefs?

The discipline of practical theology requires gathering and reflecting on empirical evidence related to a practice—what Richard Osmer calls the descriptive-empirical task.[2] In the previous chapter, I presented the first part of my research into funeral beliefs in the form of a qualitative content analysis of obituaries. To enhance the rigor of the research and to explore the situation of funerals from a different perspective, this chapter presents the second part of the qualitative study. Phenomenological interviews were conducted

[1] Quoted in Mitford, *The American Way of Death Revisited*, 153. Mitford explains the inconclusive search for the origin of this famous quote.

[2] Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 31.

with ten funeral workers, who were asked to describe their lived experiences with funerals.[3] This chapter will present the findings of a phenomenological analysis of those interviews. First, the chapter begins by describing the method used in the research. Second, it will describe the procedures for conducting the research. Third, this chapter will present the findings with a brief discussion and representative quotations. Lastly, it will conclude with a summary.

Method

The previous chapter used qualitative content analysis for its research method. This chapter will use phenomenology. Since there are several types of phenomenology, the goal in this section is to clearly present the type used here, showing how it can yield an objective analysis of the interviews.

What Is Phenomenology?

Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) is the acknowledged founder of what became known as the phenomenological movement. I deliberately use the word *movement* instead of, say, *school* or even a *trend* to suggest that it lacks a clearly defined body of teachings. Indeed, after Husserl, phenomenology developed in significantly different directions

Husserl sought to overcome a problem raised by Plato in his allegory of the cave, in which people in a cave mistake shadows on the wall for the reality outside of the cave. This problem of the difference between appearance and reality has haunted Western philosophy ever since, not least in the thought of Descartes and Kant, whom Husserl

[3] Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 52–53.

considered his most important predecessors.[4] As Husserl asked, "How can we be sure that cognition accords with things as they exist in themselves, that it 'gets at them'?"[5]

Briefly, the term *phenomenology* comes from the Greek *phainomenon*, or what is manifested to us. Following Franz Brentano (1838–1917), Husserl believed that consciousness—whether perception, thought, memory, imagination, or emotion—has an "aboutness" to it. That is, consciousness is always directed towards an object, whether real (e.g., seeing a tree), imaginary (e.g., a dream or hallucination), or conceptual (e.g., mathematical truths). Brentano and Husserl referred to that sense of directedness as consciousness's *intentionality*. Husserl took that as the connection between knowing the world and being in it.

Husserl developed a method for studying the phenomena that manifest themselves to consciousness. He believed these phenomena would have features that are commonly perceived and that could be described as universal essences of whatever was experienced (what Husserl called the "eidos"). In that way, phenomenology was meant to do justice to the subjective nature of what is given to consciousness while also discovering the objective structure of that phenomenon. Though his method has been summarized in various ways, broadly speaking, it has four steps. First, the phenomenologist distinguishes between the "natural attitude of mind" of ordinary experience and the properly philosophical attitude necessary for a researcher.[6] Second, the phenomenologist performs what is variously termed the *epoche*, bracketing, or phenomenological reduction, which involves shifting one's point of view about reality, intentionally setting

[4] Solomon, *From Hegel*, 159.
[5] Husserl, *The Idea of Phenomenology*, 1.
[6] Husserl, *The Idea of Phenomenology*, 13.

aside one's presuppositions, assumptions, theoretical commitments, and perceptions of what is naïvely experienced. The goal is to focus on what is really given in experience, apart from any assumptions of what should be there. Such reduction should lead to a presuppositionless "seeing," where preconceived ideas no longer form our experience, and the researcher can narrowly focus on what is given to consciousness.[7] Third, Husserl proposed a second reduction, known as the eidetic reduction or eidetic abstraction. The goal is to get at the essential nature of the object of intentionality to discover "universals, species, essences."[8] In this stage, the phenomenologist looks at what is given from different perspectives—what phenomenologists call *sides*, *aspects,* or *profiles*[9]—to discover its invariant structures. That means looking at which characteristics are necessary to the object of consciousness, distinguishing between those characteristics that could change without affecting the fundamental structure of what is given and those that are necessary to its essential structure, looking for features "that make it what it is, rather than something else."[10] Fourth, the phenomenologist offers a description of the essence of the phenomenon, thereby bridging the gap between what is subjectively perceived (appearance) to what is objectively essential about the datum given to consciousness (reality). Though that was Husserl's approach to phenomenology, qualitative researchers have taken it in a different direction.

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[7] Zahavi, *Husserl's Phenomenology*, 44–46.
[8] Husserl, *The Idea of Phenomenology*, 6.
[9] Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, 17–19.
[10] Morrow et al., "Colaizzi's Descriptive Phenomenological Method," 643–44.

Phenomenology for Qualitative Research

Given that phenomenology seeks to describe lived experience from the perspective of those who have experienced it, researchers have adapted it as a method for doing qualitative research into the human sciences (as opposed to the natural or physical sciences).[11] It has allowed for objective research into areas of experience that are otherwise considered unreliably subjective and unscientific.

One of the differences that has developed after Husserl, and which has a direct bearing on the question of using the method for qualitative research, is the growing divide between transcendental phenomenology and hermeneutic phenomenology. Whereas transcendental phenomenology is more descriptive, placing a strong emphasis on the need for the researcher to bracket out his or her interpretations of the phenomena to get an objective analysis of the data, hermeneutic phenomenology is more skeptical about the researcher's ability to bracket out his or her lifeworld and acknowledges, even celebrates, the researcher's preconceptions as part of the process of gathering and analyzing the data.[12] Either approach could have been used for this study. However, since the explicitly interpretive aspects of the evidence will occur in later chapters of this dissertation, I chose to use a transcendental and descriptive phenomenological method at this stage to produce the most objective data about funeral beliefs possible.

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[11] Van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience*, 3.

[12] Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 79–80; Neubauer et al., "How Phenomenology Can Help Us Learn from the Experiences of Others," 92–95.

Procedure

This dissertation collected data through semi-structured phenomenological interviews.[13] Ordinary interviews and phenomenological interviews differ significantly in their objectives, structure, and approaches. Ordinary interviews can be used in contexts such as job recruitment, research, and journalism to gather specific information, opinions, or insights that are relevant to the goal at hand without delving into the experiences of the person being interviewed. By contrast, phenomenological interviews aim to explore and understand individuals' lived experiences concerning a particular phenomenon, with the primary focus being capturing the essence of those experiences.

After choosing to use phenomenological interviews, the next step was to establish a proper sample size for the study. Theoretically, a sample size of one would suffice for a phenomenological analysis because one experience of an object of consciousness is generally accepted as sufficient for uncovering its invariant structure or essence. Nevertheless, a rigorous phenomenological analysis requires repeatedly looking at the object of consciousness and imaginatively exploring it from different angles. Qualitative researchers achieve this by exploring a phenomenon with a group of individuals.[14] Dukes recommends a sample size of "three, five, or perhaps even ten subjects."[15] Hence, this study opted to interview ten funeral workers.[16] Funeral workers were chosen because they have the most practical experience with funerals and because their professional training gives them an emotional distance from the trauma of a funeral that might otherwise be triggered by talking about it.

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[13] Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 78–79.
[14] Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 78.
[15] Dukes, "Phenomenological Methodology in the Human Sciences," 200.
[16] Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry,* 157.

Data Collection

After receiving approval from the McMaster University Research Ethics Board, potential interview subjects who met the criteria were approached and asked to participate. After obtaining informed consent, all interviews were recorded over Zoom and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

There are several different transcendental phenomenological research methods. In this case, Colaizzi's phenomenological method was used to analyze participants' transcripts.[17] Colaizzi presents a step-by-step process for rigorously analyzing qualitative data. Each step is meant to keep the researcher close to the data under investigation and to methodically yield a concise yet comprehensive and objective description of the phenomenon being investigated. However, researchers who have used Colaizzi's method have adapted his steps for their own purposes, offering different descriptions of each step.

Table 1: The Six Steps in Colaizzi's Method[18]

Step	**Description**
1. Transcribe.	The qualitative interviews are transcribed for analysis. According to Colaizzi, these do not need to be transcribed verbatim, as long as the essence of what was said by

[17] Colaizzi, "Psychological Research."

[18] This is my schematization of Colaizzi's method, inspired by Morrow et al., "Colaizzi's Descriptive Phenomenological Method," 643.

	the participant is preserved and validated by the participants.
2. Familiarize.	The researcher reads over the interview transcripts several times in order to familiarize himself or herself with what was said.
3. Identify significant statements.	The researcher identifies statements that are directly related to the phenomenon being researched.
3. Create formulated meanings.	The researcher takes the significant statements and reformulates them in more general terms.
4. Create theme clusters and emergent themes.	The formulated meanings are then grouped together with other statements of a similar type across all the interviews to form theme clusters. Similar theme clusters are then grouped into emergent themes.
5. Develop an exhaustive description.	The researcher synthesizes all the statements in a cluster to write an exhaustive description of the phenomena.
6. Seek validation.	The researcher sends the exhaustive description to the participants to ask

	whether it captures their experience. The description may be verified or clarified, leading the researcher to back and modify earlier steps in light of the participant's feedback.

Colaizzi's workmanlike method gives a clear and systematic approach to analyzing qualitative data using descriptive phenomenology. Moreover, this study was guided by several published examples of qualitative studies undertaken using Colaizzi's method.[19] The manner in which I present the different steps of the method follows a Master's thesis written by Rachel Ann Kornhaber.[20]

Extracting Significant Statements

The interviews resulted in 10 verbatim transcripts. From those, 179 significant statements and phrases pertaining to the main research question were coded and extracted. Table 2 illustrates how significant statements were extracted from the interviews. All the significant statements were checked against the interview transcripts to make sure they related to the research questions and were being understood in context. Predictably, many of the participants's significant statements were repetitious, describing similar insights

[19] Baird and Pierce, "Adherence to Cardiac Therapy"; Sanders, "Application of Colaizzi's Method"; Person et al., "The Meaning of Work for South African Women"; Yambo et al., "Experiences of Military Spouses"; Kim, "Nurses' Experiences of Care"; Park et al., "Physicians' Experience of Communication with Nurses"; Wirihana et al., "Using Colaizzi's Method of Data Analysis"; Sun et al., "A Qualitative Study on the Psychological Experience of Caregivers"; Andales et al., "Navigating Learning through Catastrophic Calamities"; Allman et al., "Using the Colaizzi Method."

[20] Kornhaber, "The Lived Experience of Nursing Severe Burns Injury Patients: A Phenomenological Inquiry."

and experiences with funerals. Of those, the richest and most descriptive statements were coded, leaving 140 significant statements.

Table 2: Example of How Significant Statements Were Identified in the Interview Transcript

I think it kind of gives them closure. You know, **people just kind of need that closure**. I know I've read some studies to where **people that don't have any type of ceremony never really, truly accept the death.** For me, I've been on both sides of the table. **To me, that's like the last thing that you can do for that person.** You know, we're kind of arranging a wedding-type event in just a matter of days and things. But we try to make it as smoothly as possible to give that last send-off, final farewell to that person… if it's a traditional funeral or even what we call a traditional cremation where the actual body is there, **it allows them to see that the person is really dead and that that's the finality of it**. I mean, with the cremation, it's a little different because, obviously, you're just looking at a box or sometimes maybe a pitcher…

Turning Significant Statements into Formulated Meanings

The next step is to reformulate the 140 statements in more general terms. Colaizzi explained that this step involves "creative insight" and a leap from what participants have said "to what they mean." Because this necessarily involves the researcher's subjective judgments, it is a "precarious leap" involving the risk of misrepresentation, but it is

phenomenologically necessary in order to "discover and illuminate those meanings hidden in the various contexts and horizons of the investigated phenomenon."[21]

Each of the 140 significant statements from the participants and each of the formulated meanings were coded with the same numeral. For example, the code 22_FD2 means it was the 22nd significant statement, and that it came from Funeral Director 2. The code 22_FD2F indicates that was the corresponding formulated meaning. Table 3 below illustrates examples of how significant statements were reformulated.

Table 3: Development of Formulated Meanings from Significant Statements

Significant Statements	Formulated Meanings
"Sometimes people think of funerals as morbid, but lately I've been using the term…The nomenclature from funeral service to celebration of life. We're here to celebrate a life and that looks different than grieving at a funeral" (22_FD2).	People do not want a morbid funeral characterized by grieving. More and more they prefer a celebration of life (22_FD2F).
"But I also know we're in a culture where there's a shift away from funeral services or memorial services" (24_FD2).	There is a cultural shift away from the traditional funeral (24_FD2F).
"I think they want to eliminate all of it together because one, I think they're uncomfortable talking about death or experiencing death" (25_FD2).	Some people want to eliminate the funeral because they are uncomfortable talking about death or experiencing the death of a loved one (25_FD2F).

[21] Colaizzi, "Psychological Research as a Phenomenologist Sees It," 59.

Development of Theme Clusters and Emergent Themes

After identifying the significant statements and taking the "precarious leap" of turning them into formulated meetings, similar statements were grouped together into *theme clusters*. There were 21 clusters in all. These were compared to one another and grouped into eight *emergent themes*. Table 4 illustrates examples of how formulated meanings were grouped into theme clusters and then associated with emergent themes.

Table 4: Illustration of the Grouping of Formulated Meanings

Formulated Meanings	Theme Cluster	Emergent Theme
A funeral is the last good thing you can do for the deceased (41_FD3F). Funeral services are a way of expressing the love mourners still have for the deceased (78_FD6F). Funeral sermons can help the healing journey, especially by seeing their loved one honored (117_FD7F). Funerals are seen as a way of honoring the deceased (106_FD7F).	Showing Love	Reasons for Funerals
People have funerals due to family traditions (1_FD1F). Mourners choose to do funerals out of tradition without always understanding why they should have a funeral (120_FD8F). People	Following Tradition	Reasons for Funerals

have funerals to uphold community traditions or standards (167_FD10F).		
Religion declined when COVID showed people they did not have to go to church (113_FD7F). Religion may be declining over all, but it is experienced regionally, with some areas holding steady (128_FD8F). Mourners who are not connected to a church often still want a spiritual component in the funeral to give them comfort (28_FD2F).	The Decline in Religion	Changes in Funerals

Writing the Exhaustive Description

Next, all of the emergent themes were considered together, and a full and inclusive description was written about the phenomenon experienced by the funeral directors. The description aimed to capture the common characteristics of each emergent theme so that, taken together, it captures the essence of the lived experience of the funeral.

Seeking Verification of the Exhaustive Description

Following Colaizzi's method, the exhaustive description was returned to all participants to ask whether or not it captured their experience. This is a controversial aspect of the method, with Giorgi giving three reasons why this step should be avoided. Firstly, the

researcher and participant have fundamentally different perspectives on the situation being investigated, with the researcher adopting a phenomenological attitude while the participant has a native or natural attitude. Secondly, participants describe their lived experience, whereas the researcher describes the phenomenological meaning of that experience, and the experiencer is not the best judge of meaning. Thirdly, if the participants are given the last word on the description of the phenomena, Giorgi asks why one would bother doing a lengthy analysis if the researcher can simply consult with the experiencer and accept whatever he or she says.[22]

In response to Giorgi, the aim of descriptive phenomenology is to accurately describe a lived experience; therefore, it is reasonable to expect a participant to recognize his or her experience in the description of the phenomenon.[23] If they do not, that should give the researcher cause to reconsider the relevant parts of the research.

In this case, the exhaustive description was sent to all participants for validation. Nine out of ten participants responded. And nine out of ten agreed that the exhaustive description reflected their experience. One participant made a suggestion about the phrasing of a sentence related to the definition of closure, but it did not affect the findings or require a reexamination of the transcripts.

Findings

As described earlier, the extracted meanings were categorized into eight emergent themes which were summarized by the exhaustive description. Those themes were: reasons for funerals, resistance to death, changes in funerals, criticisms of funerals, expectations for

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[22] Giorgi, "Concerning Variations in the Application of the Phenomenological Method," 311.
[23] Morrow et al., "Colaizzi's Descriptive Phenomenological Method," 643–44.

funerals, expectations for ministers, expectations for eulogies and sermons, and expectations for personal eschatology. Each theme will be discussed here, with select quotations from participants used to support the validity of the exhaustive description, illustrate its ideas, and illuminate the participants' lived experience of funerals.

Emergent Theme 1: Reasons for Funerals

The emergent theme of *reasons for funerals* summarizes why funeral workers think the funeral ritual is still needed today. The exhaustive description stated:

> Funeral workers agree there are several important reasons to have a funeral. These reasons are not often understood by mourners who continue to have funerals due to family traditions or to uphold community standards.
>
> The most prominent reason to have a funeral is for closure. The funeral ritual grows from an innate desire to recognize that the decedent was once alive. People feel grief because they can no longer express the love they have for the deceased. So, funerals allow mourners to express their love by honoring and celebrating the decedent's life and to see that life celebrated by others. That provides a cathartic emotional release of grief.
>
> Another reason to have a funeral is to see the body. Viewing the body is an integral part of the grieving process because it helps mourners face the fact of death and to understand it better. Refusing to see the body can be detrimental to the process of healing because people can then doubt or deny that the death has occurred.

Funerals also help the process of closure by letting a community gather around the grieving family, support them, and collectively say goodbye, allowing mourners to see they are not grieving alone.

When participants spoke about the reasons why people have funerals today, they noted that mourners were often ignorant of the reasons they should have a funeral.

> "I don't know if your average everyday consumer could even articulate or conceptualize why they need it, but they need it, and they know." (167_FD10)

Some families choose to have funerals because doing so is traditional, because it was requested by the deceased, or both:

> "I think many people do it just because it's tradition. I don't think that they fully understand how important it is. I think it's tradition. Mom's 86, mom died, and that's what she wants. I think that there's a small handful of people who understand the value of a funeral." (120_FD8)

Even if mourners do not always understand the reasons for funerals, all the interviewees agreed there are important reasons to have funerals, most of which concern the well-being of the mourners. The first and primary benefit that came to most minds was that of *closure*. As one director said:

> "But if I were to sum all of this up, I would say for families that have a memorial service or a funeral service, it's more for closure, a final understanding of what is happening." (63_FW5)

Being able to express your love for the deceased is how one director defined closure:

> "Closure to me would mean the opportunity to feel and express your love for that person that you've lost by honoring them and showing others what they meant to you." (109_FD7)

Participants explained that closure is part of the healing process. An important step in that process was to see the body of the deceased:

> "I think there's so much healing in being able to view a person who has died to get the brain to understand that final connection. Because once you see someone who is dead, you cannot convince yourself that they're not dead." (2_FD1)

Facing that evidence helps the mourner come to terms with the fact of death and to accept its finality:

> "Well, if it's a traditional funeral or even what we call a traditional cremation where the actual body is there, it allows them to see that the person is really dead and that that's the finality of it." (42_FD3)

Indeed, when mourners do not see the corpse, whether that is an intentional choice or one made necessary by the circumstances of the death, funeral directors report that a mourner can struggle to believe that their loved one has really died. One funeral director told the story of a woman who chose not to have a funeral and then later returned to the funeral home to ask if her mother was really dead:

> "Years and years ago, we had a lady come in. Her mom had passed away. And she chose direct cremation. She didn't want to come to the funeral home. We picked up the body. She came in. She signed the papers. You know, we have your mom. Do you want to view her? 'Nope, y'all can just take her to the crematory.' Okay? Fast forward a month down the road. I'm sitting at the funeral home. She walks in the door, weeping, crying. It's like, What's wrong? She's like, "I just need to know something…Was that really my mother whose ashes I got back? Was that really my mother?' Yes, ma'am. That was really your mom. Why do you ask? 'Because I just didn't have that I didn't see her, so I didn't get that closure that I needed. And I just wanted to make sure that was her." (38_FD2)

A funeral can help mourners accept the fact of death by giving people an opportunity to remember and celebrate the deceased's life:

> "I think for the most part, what mourners want the most in the funeral is to see their loved one's life on display and portrayed in the way that they knew their loved one to be, right?" (4_FD1).

Mourners grieve because they still love the deceased but can no longer show them that love, which deepens their sense of loss and creates frustration at not being able to show their love to their beloved. A funeral provides the opportunity for mourners to express their love for the decedent one last time, which allows for a healthy release of emotions:

> "You can view your loved one and you can have that cathartic cry and that emotional release that is so important. It is important to me to let that emotion out. You are being strong for no one. That is silly because it's just going to prolong the inevitable and make you have a breakdown four years later in the middle of H-E-B [grocery store]. Not that I would know." (10_FD1)

Emergent Theme 2: Resistance to Death

If some mourners appear ignorant about the emotional and psychological benefits of having a funeral, funeral directors report that others are reluctant to have a funeral because of an active denial of the reality of death. The next emergent theme was that of *resistance to death*:

Funeral workers report that Americans can be in denial about the reality of death and are generally death-phobic. Some people refuse to have a funeral because they are uncomfortable talking about death, let alone experiencing the death of a loved one. People can be so deeply in denial about the inevitability of death that they express shock when even the very elderly and chronically ill die. Many people do not expect to

die and do not plan financially for the inevitable, leaving families with the unexpected costs of the funeral.

Americans also insist on sanitizing death. For example, whereas in other countries, corpses are left to look like corpses, Americans want them to be cosmeticized to look as life-like as possible. Poor embalming may be contributing to a decline in funerals with an open casket and the rise in cremations.

This denial of death is also shown in discouraging children from attending funerals in an attempt to protect them from facing the reality that a friend or family member has died.

Funeral directors report that funeral services are in decline, in part, due to an American reluctance to face death. For example, one participant shared that the desire to avoid death is shown by how some people refuse to have funerals because they do not want their families to see their corpses:

> "The avoidance of death. People don't want to see that. And honestly, I think a lot of people will say, 'Oh, I don't want a service. I don't want people looking at me.' And then their kids listen to them. I don't think their kids need to listen to them. I think they need to do what will actually help them…And that person, I don't mean to be ugly, but that person is dead. And as mourners, we have to be able to complete those death rituals to be able to move forward." (90_FD6)

Funeral workers shared how Americans can be death-phobic. Another interviewee gave a poignant example of how deeply in denial we can be about death. She found that some families could be genuinely shocked at death, even if the decedent was very old and chronically ill:

> "We are so death phobic. Superstitious. Not wanting to face the fact that you're going to die, or your father's going to die, or that anybody's going to die. And

> you know it's the way we live our lives. People come in and have to make arrangements. And I'm looking at it like your mother was 94. She had this condition. I'm looking at what the doctor signed off on. And they're *surprised*…Not just you know *mourning*, but they are *shocked* that this happened. I'm sorry. Nobody lives forever, but I can't say that to them." (124_FD8)

People are not only in denial about the death of other members of the family. They do not seriously expect that they will die. One funeral director explained how people seemed to think they would live forever, impacting their financial preparations for the inevitable:

> "Americans think that they're going to live forever, and so that they are not prepared for death. And when I say prepared for death, I'm not just talking about spiritually, I'm also talking about financially. And also, in my context, people are not prepared." (161_FD9)

While not everyone is in denial about the fact of death, funeral directors report that even those mourners who are ready to face it prefer for death to be sanitized:

> "And I feel like Americans, especially death, is so sanitized now…So in England, funeral homes do not cosmetize their dead. They have coffins, not caskets, which really that's not a point here. But they don't do a lot of the traditional preparation of the bodies that we do here in America, which I have always thought that's very interesting. But that's the first thing is that you know we cosmetize the dead. We you know get them dressed up. But in the UK, these people look dead. They look like corpses. But our practice is different. Our practice is different. And you know we want them to look as lifelike as possible down to when I was in mortuary school, I learned how to do you know the shading on your chin because we normally have that when we're alive, and you don't think about that when somebody's laying down. And so you want to recreate the shading." (82_FD6)

Sanitizing death is another way in which people avoid facing the reality of it.

Emergent Theme 3: Changes to Funerals

As American culture changes, so have its death rituals. Hence, the third emergent theme that arose from the interviews was that of *changes to funerals*:

Funeral directors say that funeral practices are changing in several respects. For example, they report an overall decline in the religious influence on funerals. Fewer people attend church, and many mourners do not have a home church. They say the religious influence declined after the COVID-19 lockdowns showed people did not have to attend church. However, that decline differs regionally, with large, progressive cities showing less religious influence on funerals. In contrast, the majority of funerals in the South, the Bible Belt, and in rural areas are still conducted according to a faith tradition.

Another change is a decline in viewings. The practice used to be that mourners would come for two or three days before a funeral to pay their respects. Viewings have sometimes been renamed as “gatherings” to help instill the need for that part of the grieving process. But it has still declined.

The demand for cremations has sharply increased. Financial considerations have led to an increase in cremations, with traditional funerals being too expensive for many families. Demand also rose after the Roman Catholic Church began allowing for cremations.

Another significant change is that mourners are increasingly choosing to have celebration of life services over traditional funerals. A celebration of life differs from a funeral by having little or no religious aspect. Friends and family come to share stories about the deceased, watch videos, and visit with each other in a party atmosphere.

Funeral directors report that it is becoming increasingly common to replace traditional clergy with non-religious licensed funeral celebrants. Funeral directors are

recommending funeral celebrants to non-religious families. Instead of giving a religious message, funeral celebrants focus more on the life of the deceased.

Another trend among corporate funeral homes is the push toward personalization. The details of the service, including colors, decorations, and music, are dictated by the tastes and hobbies of the deceased. The self-focus of baby boomers had fed the demand for personalization.

One of the most important changes to funeral practice has been a decrease in the number of traditional funerals as compared to other options:

> "But I also know we're in a culture where there's a shift away from funeral services or memorial services." (24_FD2)

The decline in funerals was understood to be due, in part, to a general decline in the influence of religion on society. As one participant noted:

> "What I'm hearing is decline. I think nationally. I'm still in an area where it's holding pretty steady. But yeah, I think religion is declining, and that's why we're seeing fewer traditional funerals." (128_FD8)

However, despite the sense of there being an overall decline in religion, in some areas, the influence of religion was "holding pretty steady." Indeed, especially in the American South, the religious influence remains dominant:

> "In my context, which is South Georgia, I think you have 90% where this will be a religious service. You have about 10%, where the person may not have been Christian, but people still want that component. And so I think it's about a 90/10 split, at least where I am. It might be different in the north. But in the Bible belt, rural South Georgia, they're going to want those rites of faith tradition involved in their worship or involved in their service." (29_FD2)

However, funeral directors outside of the American South report a decline in the influence of religion, though again, it differs by region:

> "I think it can vary a bit regionally. In the areas where I've had a good deal of experience—if you look at places like Colorado and Arizona that are more progressive—I would say it has really declined there. If you go somewhere like South Louisiana, it's still very much part of the culture. And in Texas and many places in the South, I think it's probably in the middle. I think you see people more involved in religion in rural areas than in the city. I think it ties back to the more stable populace a community has, where if you have people that were born and raised there or multi-generational families in the same place, those older traditions tend to remain intact." (174_FD10)

Funeral professionals also reported that religious influence has changed since the COVID-19 pandemic. Directors will usually recommend pastors to grieving families based on their denominational affiliation, but interviewees noted there has been a rise in unchurched families:

> "I know just in general, people were already leaving the church before COVID, regardless of whatever religion you're in. And with COVID, they had been maybe thinking it and not really saying it. But COVID showed you don't have to go to church. You can watch it online… And so I believe it's decreasing and going to continue to decrease just like volunteerism." (113_FD7)

However, while participants thought that more mourners are finding spiritual connections online, they also reported that mourners are discovering that an online church cannot provide a tangible pastoral presence during the funeral:

> "I think it has changed because people are not affiliated with churches as much. They either find their connection to spirituality through online presence, or through television presence, especially since COVID. I think it's driven people more inside their homes and they don't go to churches as much. But still, when a funeral happens, they want that pastoral presence." (27_FD2)

They want the pastoral presence, but do not have any personal connections to fulfill the need.

Funeral directors also reported changes in the desires of different age groups. Generally speaking, while older people want faith-based traditional funerals, younger people increasingly prefer non-religious cremation ceremonies that have a party atmosphere:

> "When I first got into the business, it was mostly older, traditional service, faith-based, church-going people. They wanted to have a funeral. They wanted the burial. They wanted the Word, the Gospel, spread just to have closure, to express their faith, and to know where their loved one is. They wanted to share their beliefs that their loved one is in heaven and then reach out and minister to anybody else… As more of that has changed, I don't think we're seeing a lot of that. We're seeing more cremations. We're seeing memorial services that are still faith-based, but more and more people just want to have a party. They don't want any of this religious stuff. They want to have a big keg there, and a band, and just really have more of a celebration of life, and it be more about them." (62_FW5)

With a decline in burials and increased demand for cremations has come a decline in viewings. One interviewee suggested that viewings have become less common due to people being repulsed by the idea of having their corpses seen by others:

> "Today, probably the one that is shrinking or disappearing the most is what, 25 years ago, we would have called a viewing. A viewing was something that happened for two or three days before the service…People would come, they'd pay their respects. I think the aversion to that is, number one, if you ask most people about themselves they'll say, 'I don't want people looking at me when I'm dead,' or they'll say, 'I don't want people remembering me that way.'" (169_FD10)

Emergent Theme 4: Criticisms of Funerals

The next emergent theme concerned *criticisms of funerals*. These were areas where funeral directors explained what they believed mourners did not want in a funeral:

Funeral directors agree that mourners do not want an "altar call" during the funeral. Altar calls can be experienced as condemning and unloving. The exception is if the decedent was very religious and evangelism was essential to

his or her identity. Otherwise, people do not want overt evangelism during the funeral. They especially do not want to hear preaching about sin or hell (i.e., "hellfire and brimstone preaching"). People want guidance during the mourning process, to be comforted, and to celebrate the life of the deceased, but they do not want to be warned against hell.

The funeral professionals had very strong opinions on this issue. They reported that what mourners did not want often concerned the content of the funeral sermon. The most common criticism concerned overtly evangelistic messages with an emphasis on hell:

> "I've seen a lot of ministers talk about personal agendas or personal beliefs. And that comes back to saving souls at funerals and talking about hellfire and damnation and that kind of stuff. You can see the people physically recoil from stuff like that a lot. The older crowd will like it, but the younger crowd does not." (97_FD6)

Related to that criticism, interviewees report a strong aversion to altar calls, a popular term for when a preacher makes a high-pressured evangelistic invitation. Though altar calls may be intended to be loving, one funeral director explained how they were perceived as condemning:

> "Another bad practice, I believe, is the altar call. It's got to stop. It's pretty condemning. I've seen very few pastors do it effectively in a loving way—where it gave the impression that God is love and salvation. I've seen very few pastors communicate that. It's been more so because of condemnation, sin, and all of these things." (115_FD7)

Directors also criticized as inappropriate those funeral sermons that discussed sensitive issues such as the sinfulness of suicide or homosexuality:

> "I think the sermon tends to help, but you get some of these ministers that go off on tirades, especially with somebody that's committed suicide and different things. We had one minister when I worked in Illinois where the deceased lady was our coffee lady's sister-in-law. Her son was gay. And he was there. The priest

> went on a tirade during the funeral service about how being gay was a sin, and gay people were going to hell and this and that. And you know I talked with him on the car ride to the cemetery. I told him, 'Father, I really like you. You're not monotone. You keep my attention. But that's not the time nor the place.'" (49_FD3)

5. Expectations for Funerals

The next emergent theme concerned *expectations for funerals*. Here, funeral directors explained what they believe mourners wanted out of a funeral service.

Mourners do not want a morbid funeral. Even though being sad is an integral part of the grieving process, people increasingly prefer an upbeat celebration service with a party atmosphere that is happy and hopeful.

Mourners also expect the deceased to be remembered in the best possible light so they will remember the good things in the future. It is rare for people to say the deceased was not a good person, and pastors and funeral directors will usually stop anyone who begins to say bad things about the deceased during the funeral. If the deceased was an abusive or hateful person, they are typically cremated without being given a funeral at all.

Mourners want to focus on the good aspects of the decedent's life, such as being remembered as a loving family member, a generous neighbor, or someone with fulfilling hobbies. However, the goodness of the deceased can be overemphasized to the point where they can be portrayed as a saint or nearly perfect.

In open-casket funerals, people expect to see the deceased look as good as possible, as the person they remember, and not as the person who suffered through a prolonged illness.

Funeral directors reported that mourners want a service to present the best aspects of the decedent's life, displaying those aspects for everyone to see:

> "I think what mourners want the most in the funeral is to see their loved one's life on display and portrayed in the way that they knew their loved one to be, right?" (4_FD1)

Interviewees report that people expect that displaying the life of the deceased means focusing on good memories or the decedent's best qualities. However, funeral directors noted that the goodness of the deceased could be overemphasized and remembered in such a positive light that they are nearly canonized:

> "It's a personal pet peeve of mine that once somebody dies, they are basically canonized, that they were just this amazing person, and we don't think how maybe they weren't always great. And that doesn't need to be publicized. A funeral is not a time for being negative. You know what I mean? But I feel that people are so scared to speak ill of the dead." (101_FD6)

Bad experiences with the decedent are deemphasized in favor of the positive memories:

> "Even if they had bad experiences growing up, or if they had bad experiences with their loved one, I think people prefer putting them in a positive light so that they don't remember the negative going forward. Yeah, the negative was there. It was something that happened. But I want to remember all the positive aspects." (37_FD2)

Despite the trend of presenting the decedents in an overwhelmingly positive light, funeral directors admit that people are not as good as they are depicted:

> "I guess that being who I am, we are flawed, right? There was not one perfect person that walked this earth since Jesus was here, right? At least, that's what my beliefs teach me and what I believe. And to get up there and only speak of how this person was such a loving person, that they were like Mother Teresa, and they just gave everything, and were so patient and so kind and somebody that you

> would want to be around all the time. That's not me. I'm a jerk. I'm outspoken sometimes. I am impatient at times. I have my flaws. Would I give the shirt off of my back to anyone who needed it? Absolutely, yes. But do I have a mouth on me? Also, yes." (6_FD1).

Emergent Theme 6: Expectations for Ministers

Funeral professionals report that mourners not only have expectations for the funeral, but also for the presiding ministers. Hence, the next emergent theme involves *expectations for ministers*.

Religious mourners expect to have a pastor or minister officiate at the funeral. Even mourners not connected to a church often want a spiritual component and a pastoral presence to comfort them. Funeral directors will connect unchurched families with appropriate pastors and ministers.

Mourners want pastors to care for them and to provide guidance for the day of the service. Funeral directors agree that a good pastor will connect with the family soon after getting the call. They will visit with the grieving family before the day of the funeral service. A bad practice is when the pastor only sees the family on the day of the funeral.

Mourners expect acceptance from the pastor, both for themselves and for their loved ones, regardless of how they lived or are living. They expect the pastor to listen to them and let them express their emotions.

A good funeral sermon will be based on asking the right questions and listening to the answers given by the family so the minister can put into words what they cannot. Funeral preachers who have not visited with the family before

the funeral inadvertently make it evident in the sermon that they did not know the deceased.

Ministers are expected to provide comfort and hope amid grief. Christian ministers explain how to have that hope from the Bible, reminding mourners of verses, passages, and lessons that will bring comfort in light of death.

While mourners expect pastors to care for the family in the days leading up to and during the day of the funeral, funeral directors report that mourners are typically not given enough aftercare, with little follow-up with grieving families.

Funeral workers said that mourners want a funeral minister to give them hope and guidance in the face of death and tragedy but only expect that for the day of the funeral. Participants confirm that many ministers are all too willing to limit their help to that day, and not do any follow up:

> "Hope, a little bit of guidance. But really, unless they have a relationship with the minister, it's almost like they just want guidance for the day. Or for the service. And I see ministers a lot of the time being okay with that. They get their check, they meet the family, and you don't hear the ministers tell the family, 'Here's my number. Here's my card. This is my home church,' or, 'I would love to touch base with you in a couple of weeks and just see how you're doing.'" (14_FD1)

Christian ministers are expected to be knowledgeable about what the Bible has to say about death and dying. Their role is to help mourners remember what they cannot remember amid their grief:

> "It's a minister's job to provide comfort and hope to families through sharing God's Word and what the Bible has as it relates to hope. Because that is a big part of it, right? Fear comes from not knowing. And when we educate ourselves, we are less afraid. People look to ministers to be the expert on the Bible. And you know that is our guiding light as believers. And yeah, I may have gone to 13 years of Catholic school growing up, but when I'm grieving or mourning, do you think that I'm going to remember the verses in the Bible? I know that they're there. I know that there are words from God to offer me comfort. But I'm not in the state

> of mind to draw on that memory to look for them. Nor am I in the mental state to be Googling words of comfort from the Bible. I want somebody to give it to me—to read it to me over the phone, sit with me over a cup of coffee, and share that comfort with me. I don't have time or the brain capacity to research it at that time." (15_FD1)

Funeral directors report that mourners have the expectation that, after getting word of the death, ministers will meet with the family as early as possible:

> "Good practices are, once you get notified, connect with the family. Once you get notified…I need to cancel whatever plans I have, and I need to get in the car and drive to that family… I'll be on the phone with them for a good 30 minutes just getting information, talking, and trying to plan the service. If you get there in plenty of time to greet the family at the funeral home, or you know if there's a visitation, make sure you're at the visitation. Speak to the family. If the funeral is at 11 o'clock, get there by 10:30" (32_FD2).

Ministers who do not meet families until the day of the funeral, and perhaps even arrive late, do not fulfill the expectations that funeral directors have about the role of the minister in the funeral:

> "Bad practices. Be there late. Oh, we've had many times when we've been waiting on a preacher." (33_FD2).

Funeral professionals explain that mourners expect ministers to comfort them. The kind of comfort that mourners perceive themselves as needing is to be told that things will be okay:

> "I think it's predominantly, you know, the fact that they try to let other people know that things will be okay, you know, whatever their religious background is, however that goes with them. It wasn't at a funeral, but I had one of the fire department chaplains when I worked in Binghamton. He came to a suicide call. And he said to the family members, he said, "It's not going to be the same." He says, "It's not supposed to be the same. It'll get better, but it's not going to be the same." And I've carried that with me. I heard that probably 15-plus years ago. And it's helped when I have a friend who's, you know, had somebody pass away. And you know it's nice to know that it's not going to be the same, but it'll get better." (61_DF4)

Instead of feeling bad about the death, they want ministers to help them feel good about it:

> "They want somebody to kind of get up there and try to make everybody feel good about the situation. They want preachers to guarantee them that their loved one is in heaven, that they're in a better place, and that we'll all be together again someday." (69_FW5)

Mourners also want pastors to care:

> "But I will sum this up by saying that what mourners really want is they want you to care, and they don't care how much you know until you first care" (155_FD9).

Emergent Theme 7: Expectations for Eulogies and Sermons

The next emergent theme was *expectations for eulogies and sermons*.

Mourners still expect pastors to give a eulogy or a sermon.

A good eulogy helps bring the dead back to life by using humor and interesting anecdotes that reveal who they were. Eulogies help mourners know the deceased better, especially their relationships with others. Mourners want eulogies to emphasize that the deceased loved their families and were involved in their lives. Eulogies also show how the deceased was loved despite their flaws.

Good funeral preachers know their audience. Canned sermons are acceptable if the message is both new to the hearers and beneficial to them. A good funeral sermon evokes a gamut of emotions—from laughter to tears. They also give mourners comfort from Scripture. The preacher should show sympathy to the mourners for what they are experiencing. Funeral preachers are there to let people know that things will be okay, even though the death of their

loved ones has changed their lives forever. Good funeral sermons offer hope in the face of sorrow.

A good funeral preacher is aware of the time and factors such as the weather or room temperature, and will not preach longer than necessary. Mourners expect a comforting but concise message.

Interviewees said that mourners wanted to be comforted not only by the funeral ritual but also by eulogies and funeral sermons. One participant summarized the essence of funeral preaching as giving words of comfort:

> "I think that whole premise of giving people words of comfort and the exact verses that they can go back to and can write down…People say, 'You know what? I've read the Bible before, but I've never thought of that verse in that way.' Sometimes, people can interpret Bible verses in ways that we hadn't thought, and it just changes our entire outlook on them. So, I think that can be one of the positive outcomes of a message. But also, some people just don't have the words to put together to honor their loved one" (16_FD1).

Interviewees said that a good eulogy captures the essence of the decedent's life and evokes a range of emotions in the mourners:

> "That is really the time that the minister or whoever is delivering that eulogy to get across who that person was, however many years of life they lived on the earth, in a very compact amount of time. It needs to pack a punch. It's got to be clear, concise, and full of who they were as a person. A very well-delivered eulogy will cover the gamut of emotions. You're going to get the crying. You're going to have the laughter. You're going to have the pauses. You will be able to tell that the people there are touched or be able to say, 'Yeah. That was who they were.' Or, 'You know, I never really thought of the impact that they made on me. But you know that is true.'" (18_FD1)

Eulogies help everyone in the congregation learn different aspects of the deceased's life, and therefore help everyone to know their loved one better:

> "I believe that eulogies are very important. It helps all of us, especially if we didn't know that person. It helps all of us get to know them and have an

> understanding of maybe the relationship that they had with their friends and family. I love eulogies that start with tears and end with laughter, or that start with laughter and end with tears, or maybe a little bit of both." (118_FD7)

The funeral directors explained that mourners feel that eulogies can help to bring the departed love one back to life:

> "It is important because usually people, when they present a eulogy, can infuse a little bit of humor and tell some interesting anecdotes. It brings that person—I don't want to say back to life—but that is what it does. And what it should do is pay tribute to the person, both the good and bad, and some things in between. It reminds us that we're saying goodbye to a human being that we all cared about." (139_FD8)

Emergent Theme 8: Expectations for Personal Eschatology

The final emergent theme relates to what theologians call personal eschatology, i.e., the question of what happens to a person after physical death:

> Christians of all denominations want to feel good about death, which means they want assurance that their loved one has either gone to heaven or is in a better place. Christian ministers assure people that the Christian dead are in heaven with the Lord. Mourners do not want to hear about hell, still less to be told that is where the deceased has gone. They want to be told their loved one is in heaven.
>
> Non-religious mourners also want to know that things will be fine for the deceased. They expect celebrants to say the dead are no longer in pain and suffering but are in a better place without defining what that place is.

First and foremost, funeral directs say that mourners want to know that the decedent is no longer suffering:

> "I think we all want to be reassured that our loved one is…not suffering anymore and is probably going to be in the arms of our Lord you know to use those phrases and that everything's going to be and that they also, the living, are going to be okay. We don't say it very much in our arrangements, but that this whole thing is a process that does not have a pattern. It's always different" (134_FD8).

They want to know there is hope for the decedent and themselves. No matter the religious tradition, it seems people want to know that the decedent has gone to a better place.

> "Again, I think it's that sense, whether they be Catholic or Protestant, Baptist, Christian, or Muslim, or some type of island-based folks that they have a sense that, yes, our loved one has passed away, and we understand that, but here's why that's okay. Here's why they've gone on to a better place, or you know they have a chance to have that closure, but with you know the background from whatever religion that they have. So they want maybe assurance of what's happened to their loved one. And maybe they also want assurance for themselves" (59_FD4).

Conclusion

This chapter explored perceptions of the meaning and purpose of funerals through phenomenological interviews with funeral professionals. These conversations provided insights into how funeral workers perceive mourners' preferences and expectations, shedding light on the evolving nature of funeral rituals, and the values and beliefs driving these changes. The findings, supported by participant-verified descriptions and illustrated with direct quotes, may not achieve the "mathematical exactness" envisioned by William Gladstone; still, their phenomenological rigor offers robust evidence that will form the basis of interdisciplinary reflection in the next chapters.

CHAPTER 3

UNCOVERING HIDDEN BELIEFS: THE INTERPRETIVE TASK

Introduction

Now that we have gathered some empirical evidence about how people choose to remember the dead, we can begin to ask what the evidence *means*. This is where the unique *interpretive task* of practical theology comes in. Put simply, the practical theologian wants to do justice to the complexity of whatever practice he or she is investigating. The challenge is to do that in a self-conscious, self-critical, and disciplined way, one that is open to whatever the evidence indicates[1] and that is humble enough to recognize that theology alone cannot give a comprehensive explanation of a situation. Recognizing that limitation, practical theology seeks to be interdisciplinary, interpreting the empirical evidence in dialogue with non-theological disciplines, expecting that their theories can help us better understand the situation or practice.[2] Non-theological disciplines such as the social sciences, philosophy, literature, and other fields[3] can help theologians notice things in the evidence that one might otherwise miss—or even refuse to see. This chapter will engage in that interdisciplinary task. It will be divided into five parts. First, it will explain the interpretive task of practical theology, showing why and how it engages in dialogue with non-theological disciplines. Second, it will begin the

[1] Farley, "Interpreting Situations," 10.
[2] Packiam, *Worship and the World to Come*, 15.
[3] Ballard and Pritchard, *Practical Theology*, 113.

interdisciplinary analysis by exploring the evidence from the obituaries and interviews in light of Ernest Becker's theory about the denial of death. Third, the analysis will continue by rethinking the findings in light of David Zahl's theory of seculosity. Fourth, Christian Smith's category of moralistic therapeutic deism will be used to place the evidence in a broader religious context. And fifth, the chapter will summarize the non-theological interactions.

Explaining the Interpretive Task

What is the *interpretive task* of practical theology? Put simply, instead of moving straight to theologizing about the qualitative evidence, practical theology uses *non-theological disciplines* to interact with the data.[4] As previously noted, every Christian practice occurs within a situation that must be interpreted.[5] The challenge is to interpret the situation well, moving beyond a naïve analysis and adopting the standpoint of the researcher who is open to whatever is given in the data, irrespective of one's assumptions or expectations. The practical theologian wants to place the evidence within an explanatory framework that is broader than one solely based on theology. Put differently, practical theologians seek a "thick description" of the data.[6] Doing so requires humbly admitting with Pattison and Woodward that "theological tradition does not in itself provide all the information about the modern world that is needed to have a good understanding of many issues."[7] Since theology alone cannot provide that description, the practical theologian looks for conversation partners—compatible theories—in other disciplines such as the

[4] Packiam, *Worship and the World to Come*, 15.
[5] Farley, "Interpreting Situations," 11.
[6] Jones, *The Church Is Flat*, 24.
[7] Pattison and Woodward, "An Introduction," 9.

arts and sciences.[8] Non-theological theories can help the practical theologian better understand and explain "particular episodes, situations, and contexts."[9]

This appeal to non-theological theories is not due to a crisis of confidence but due to recognizing that creation is complex and that other scientific disciplines can discover true things about the world. However, when practical theology appeals to other disciplines, it does not give them the last word on interpreting the situation. Nor does the interdisciplinary nature of practical theology supplant the need for theological reflection. On the contrary, the purpose is to enlarge the evidence that will be reflected upon theologically. Put differently, Swinton and Mowatt explain that practical theology is *correlational* in that it "necessarily tries to hold together and correlate at least three different perspectives—the situation, the Christian tradition and another source of knowledge that is intended to enable deeper insight and understanding."[10]

The Epistemic Status of Non-Theological Theories

Before interacting with the non-theological theories, one should account for their epistemic status. For example, should we take those theories as dogmas? Should they be taken as unquestioned presuppositions on par with one's confessional commitments? Do the human sciences take priority over theological sciences? Not quite. Instead, Osmer recommends a *fallibilist* and *perspectival* understanding of theoretical knowledge.

First, *fallibilism* is the assumption that no theory, model, or claim can ever be proven true in a conclusive way. While the theory can be considered provisionally true

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[8] Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 83.
[9] Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 113.
[10] Swinton and Mowatt, *Practical Theology*, 73.

given the current state of the evidence, the fallibilist admits it could be disproved given contrary evidence that may come to light. Fallibilism intends to avoid the twin dangers of skepticism and foundationalism.[11]

Second, *perspectivism* means the theories in question are not expected to give us a comprehensive "God's eye view" of a situation where they impartially capture the whole truth of the matter. Perspectivism recognizes that "theories construct knowledge from a particular perspective or position."[12] What any theory can tell us will always be inherently limited in that it looks at the evidence from a certain angle or perspective. For Osmer, taking a fallibilist and perspectivist approach to the claims of non-theological theories allows them to have a "voice" in dialogue with theology while being respectfully reserved about the certainty of their findings:

> There is a deep-seated human need for certainty, for the one, true, right answer. Yet, a fallibilist, perspectival understanding of theoretical interpretation confronts us with the limited nature of human knowledge and reason. We must learn to live with uncertainty: the more we know, the more we realize how little we know. We must also learn to live with the tension between different perspectives, including those of theology.[13]

A third issue concerns whether to give non-theological disciplines the same "weight" within the research process. This is the question of *epistemological priority*. Theologians may be concerned that if non-theological disciplines are treated as equal partners in a theological dialogue, their conclusions may override theology. Swinton and

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[11] But philosophers point out that fallibilism is not without its own problems—problems Osmer does not raise. For example, there is a question as to whether fallibilism rules out the possibility of knowledge altogether. After all, if every belief is fallible, and therefore, no belief can be considered absolutely true, does that eliminate the possibility of knowing anything? Do all of our beliefs amount to mere opinion and never to knowledge? There is also the question of self-referential coherence, namely, whether the theory of fallibilism is fallible. This chapter will pragmatically follow Osmer in taking a fallibilist approach to the theories used here without committing to a specific epistemological stance.

[12] Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 83.

[13] Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 84.

Mowatt warn that the approach runs the risk of committing intellectual idolatry. "If mutuality truly means that both parties have an equal voice in the research process and that the social sciences can actually override theology on central issues, then the danger of idolatry becomes a real possibility."[14] To avoid that danger, Swinton and Mowatt recommend a "Chalcedonian pattern" to understand how theology and non-theological theories can relate in a critical correlation.

The Chalcedonian approach can be summarized in four factors: first, as "indissoluble differentiation," whereby each perspective has its proper role to play; second, as "inseparable unity," where the two kinds of perspectives coincide to describe the same situation in reality; third, as "indestructible order," whereby each discipline addresses a different level of reality; and fourth, in terms of the "logical priority of theology."[15] As Swinton and Mowatt explain further:

> Mutual critical correlation provides a way of holding together in critical tension the four components of the practical-theological task that we highlighted above. Mutual critical correlation sees the practical-theological task as bringing situations into dialectical conversation with insights from the Christian tradition and perspectives drawn from other sources of knowledge (primarily the social sciences). It is a model of integration that seeks to bring these dimensions together in a way that respects and gives an equal voice to each dialogue partner.[16]

Given these factors, no wonder Osmer says that choosing the right non-theological theories, knowing whether they help to explain the situation, and productively interacting with them depends on what he calls *sagely wisdom*:

> Drawing on theories of the arts and sciences to interpret the relevant particulars of episodes, situations, and contexts takes wise judgment and moral sense, as well as a solid grasp of the theories being used. This is a complex intellectual activity,

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[14] Swinton and Mowatt, *Practical Theology*, 79.
[15] Swinton and Mowatt, *Practical Theology*, 80.
[16] Swinton and Mowatt, *Practical Theology*, 73.

> requiring judgments about the theories most relevant to the case and their contribution to the realization of the moral ends defined theologically.[17]

The practical theologian should not randomly choose non-theological theories to use in his or her research but should seek to wisely evaluate which ones are best suited to the project.

Three Ways to Evaluate Non-Theological Theories

Practical theologians must choose from thousands of non-theological theories. However, since not all are equally relevant to the practice being studied, it is crucial to choose the right theories that will shed light on the situation. Osmer recommends three ways of evaluating a theory: "(1) the model, or root metaphor, a theory uses and the conceptual field built on this model; (2) the disciplinary perspective a theory uses and the level of reality this discipline addresses; (3) the soundness and strength of a theory's argument(s)."[18]

First, practical theologians can identify the root metaphor(s) a theory uses. A metaphor proposes an analogy between two areas of life, comparing a familiar area with one that is less familiar to illuminate similarities and differences between the two.[19] After identifying the root metaphor (which Osmer also calls a model), we can then map the concepts based on it, allowing the practical theologian to draw on the non-theological theory with greater integrity.[20]

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[17] Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 85.
[18] Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 114.
[19] Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 114–15.
[20] Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 117.

Second, practical theologians can identify the disciplinary perspective or specialist field that the theory assumes. One must pinpoint which aspect of reality the theory applies to. "Disciplines typically address one system located at one level of life. They do not explain all systems at all levels."[21] So, for example, psychological theories will focus on the mental, while anthropological theories may focus on the level of groups and societies. A practical theologian can choose different theories to address the multiple levels of reality reflected in the situation.

Third, practical theologians should identify a theory's primary arguments— its "claims, grounds, qualifiers, warrants, backing, and rhetorical strategies."[22] Once the arguments are identified, the practical theologian can identify their relative strengths or weaknesses and the challenges raised against them.

Summary

In the rest of this chapter, I will summarize the three theories that were chosen to clarify the evidence of contemporary funeral practices identified thus far, namely, Ernest Becker's theory of the denial of death, David Zahl's theory of seculosity, and Christian Smith's theory of moralistic therapeutic deism. I will then apply those theories to the evidence, hoping they will shed light on the main research question: to understand what funeral practices reveal about the beliefs and values of the people who participate in them.

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[21] Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 118.

Ernest Becker and the Denial of Death

Ernest Becker (1924–1974) was a cultural anthropologist who taught in the United States and Canada. In 1974, he was posthumously awarded the Pulitzer Prize for his book *The Denial of Death*, in which he claimed that our sense of mortality shapes human behavior in pervasive ways that are not consciously acknowledged. For the purposes of this research, the root analogy in Becker's theory is the one drawn between the denial of death and what is commonly thought of as religion. Becker argues that actions and attitudes motivated by the denial of death are fundamentally religious. The disciplinary perspective in *The Denial of Death* combines psychology and philosophy. Becker's theory will help us to understand a possible motivation for mourners to choose the funeral practices they do.

The Denial of Death

Becker argues that death is an unpleasant fact of life, and almost everyone who has considered the reality of death has experienced some level of fear about it. Against those who maintain that such fear of death is not natural but learned (and can therefore be unlearned), Becker theorizes that it is both natural and drives much of human behavior: "the idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is a mainspring of human activity—activity designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny for man."[22] To give an elementary example, consider how the fear of death underlies the instinct for self-

[22] Becker, *The Denial of Death*, xvii.

preservation and how much positive activity self-preservation inspires. People go to great lengths to protect themselves from dying.

However, Becker claims if the fear of death were always at the forefront of our consciousnesses, people would go insane, so we repress it, leading to the paradox of having an "ever-present fear of death in the normal biological functioning of our instinct of self-preservation" while simultaneously experiencing "utter obliviousness to this fear in our conscious life."[23] But Becker claims that the need to repress our fear creates a dynamic source of positive activity whereby the fear of death becomes a surprising source of life energies where an organism will work "against its own fragility by seeking to expand and perpetuate itself in living experience; instead of shrinking, it moves toward more life."[24] In other words, the fear of dying motivates people to act in ways that expand their lives to avoid dying.

Humanity's Paradoxical Nature

According to Becker, humanity suffers from a second paradox: the existential paradox of being "half animal and half symbolic."[25] Our animal identity refers to our physical or biological nature, while our symbolic identity reflects the fact that individuals have a specific life history, with minds that can contemplate eternity and achingly wonder about our place in the cosmos. However, the ability for abstract conceptualization leads us to the painful realization that, despite the "towering majesty" of our symbolic half, since we are half animal, one day we will die and be buried in the dirt "to rot and disappear

[23] Becker, *The Denial of Death*, 17.
[24] Becker, *The Denial of Death*, 21.
[25] Becker, *The Denial of Death*, 26.

forever."[26] That "existential dualism" creates "an excruciating dilemma" that leads us to repress and deny death in creative ways.

Immortality Projects

Becker claims that one way people cope with this existential dread is by constructing what he calls *immortality projects*. While nothing can guarantee our ongoing animal existence, individuals can extend their symbolic selves beyond physical death. To do that, people create cultural systems and symbols that provide a sense of significance that can extend beyond the grave, creating the illusion of being part of something that will outlast one's physical death. These projects allow individuals to transcend mortality by focusing on their symbolic selves. This includes their cultural identities, achievements, and beliefs. Becker characterizes these projects as being heroic: "we like to be reminded that our central calling, our main task on this planet, is the heroic."[27]

However, Becker claims this heroic impulse is deeply narcissistic, which is inseparable from self-esteem, which is inseparable from a sense of self-worth, which is constituted symbolically. Hence, narcissism "feeds on symbols."[28] This narcissistic need for symbolism manifests itself through the constant comparisons we make between ourselves and others. For example, in children, comparative narcissism is evident in sibling rivalry. Becker argues such rivalry is not due to a child being vicious or selfish, so much as trying to desperately "justify himself as an object of primary value in the universe."[29] The child "must stand out, be a hero, make the biggest possible contribution

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[26] Becker, *The Denial of Death*, 26.
[27] Becker, *The Denial of Death*, 1.
[28] Becker, *The Denial of Death*, 3.
[29] Becker, *The Denial of Death*, 4.

to the world life, show that he *counts* more than anything or anyone else."[30] In adults, the need for self-justification is expressed in having or wanting a somewhat better home in the neighborhood, a bigger car, or brighter children.[31] But it is also evident in how people engage in larger, more ambitious immortality projects, such as building temples, cathedrals, and skyscrapers, or in leaving a family dynasty that spans generations. "The hope and belief is that the things that man creates in society are of lasting worth and meaning, that they outlive or outshine death and decay, that man and his products count."[32]

Undergoing an immortality project requires heroism such that Becker believed that all cultures have "hero-systems" that are meant to give us a sense of immortality. In the West, religion provided the structure for these systems, but Becker saw the apparent decline in religion was changing that. "Religion is no longer valid as a hero system, and so the youth scorn it."[33] Nevertheless, the hero systems and the quest for immortality remain despite the apparent decline in religion. Hence, Becker considers that every society—even if it is overtly secular or atheistic—is still religious "whether it thinks so or not."[34] They, too, repress the fear of death by seeking symbolic immortality, even if they try to "disguise themselves by omitting religious and spiritual ideas from their lives."[35]

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[30] Becker, *The Denial of Death*, 4 (emphasis original).
[31] Becker, *The Denial of Death*, 4.
[32] Becker, *The Denial of Death*, 5.
[33] Becker, *The Denial of Death*, 7.
[34] Becker, *The Denial of Death*, 7.
[35] Becker, *The Denial of Death*, 7.

Transference

One last example of how Becker claims people suppress the fear of death is through *transference*. He explains that people try to tame their fear of the universe by becoming fascinated by someone who holds power and imputing the power of the universe to that person (e.g., an influential leader). As Becker writes, "We can't really do much about this unbelievable power, except for one thing: we can endow certain persons with it."[36] Believing that someone has power over life and death helps tame the terror one feels about the universe. Parents are often the objects of transference.[37] Consequently, when the person to whom one has transferred that authority dies, their death is experienced as particularly traumatic because it implies that "our own immortality is in doubt."[38]

Becker's theory can help us reconsider what the qualitative evidence means. Indeed, the evidence both helps to confirm Becker's theory, and Becker's theory helps us see how much the fear of death and the desire for symbolic immortality influences funeral practices.

Evidence of the Denial of Death in the Evidence

First, in support of Becker's general thesis, the evidence collected from obituaries and from the funeral workers showed an *explicit* denial of death. As one funeral director said, "We are so death phobic. Superstitious. Not wanting to face the fact that you're going to die, or your father's going to die, or that anybody's going to die." (124_FD8).

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[36] Becker, *The Denial of Death*, 145.
[37] Becker, *The Denial of Death*, 146.
[38] Becker, *The Denial of Death*, 149.

Second, the evidence also suggested an *implicit* denial of death. For example, funeral directors reported that while funerals and viewings are in decline, cremations are on the rise. One of the effects of having more cremations is that mourners do not see the bodies of their departed family and friends, which can prevent them from facing the reality of death and achieving closure. One funeral director told the story of a woman who, after having her mother cremated, returned to the funeral home to ask if it was really her mother who had passed. "'Yes, ma'am. That was really your mom. Why do you ask?' 'Because I didn't see her, so I didn't get that closure that I needed. And I just wanted to make sure that was her.'" (38_FD2). Cremations may be considered a way to avoid the reality of death or implicitly deny that it has happened.

How the Denial of Death Helps to Interpret the Evidence

First, Becker's theory of death denial may help to explain why there has been a rise in cremations and a decline in viewings and burials. Funeral directors agreed that seeing a body helps the mourners face the fact of death. It could be that the decline in demand for viewing the corpse of the decedent is due to mourners preferring not to face the fact of their death. They are in partial denial about the death of their loved ones.

Second, the implicit denial of death may also explain why obituaries and celebration services typically focus on the *life* of the deceased rather than dwelling on the finality of their death. Our analysis of the obituaries showed they contained little to no detail, let alone emphasis, on the fact or manner of the death but were wholly concerned with summarizing the decedent's life. Likewise, funeral directors report an increased preference for celebration of life services, which have the same emphasis. Becker's

theory suggests these are not accidental but may be examples of activity motivated by the desire to avoid the reality of death. Obituaries and celebrations that focus on life to the exclusion of death may be a psychological defense mechanism raised against the anxiety provoked by contemplating one's own mortality. Instead of being insignificant, obituaries and celebration of life services may be acts of repression that are meant to mitigate the existential dread associated with death.

Third, if Becker is correct in stating that people attempt to transcend their physical death by emphasizing their symbolic selves, then obituaries may epitomize that symbolic self-focus. An obituary is a symbolic cultural artifact. It distills a person's life into a narrative (i.e., symbolic self), emphasizing their achievements, relationships, and contributions (i.e., immortality projects). By "immortalizing" these aspects in the printed or digital word, obituaries can provide a sense of continuity beyond physical existence. Likewise, most funeral practices can be understood as attempts at transcending death physical death by extending the symbolic self. Purchasing a burial plot, placing the ashes in an imperishable urn, embalming a body, placing it in a metal casket, marking a grave with an engraved headstone, or storing the body in a stone mausoleum may all be examples of trying to extend the decedent's symbolic self beyond physical death.

Fourth, obituaries, eulogies, and celebration of life services focus on the kind of achievements that Becker considers to be hero projects. What may be considered a hero project is a culturally conditioned interpretation that grants personal significance beyond mere biological existence. So, for example, obituaries and funerals will celebrate decedents for their roles as parents, professionals, artists, or community leaders. Instead of being simple statements of biographical facts about the decedent's life, they may be

emphasized because those roles have become vessels for symbolic immortality, allowing individuals to envision their legacy as transcending death to some degree. Indeed, the decedent's "legacy" was one of the categories often mentioned in the obituaries. One's legacy is what transcends physical death. The dark flipside of this insight is that the choice to forgo having an obituary or funeral when a family member dies may not merely be neglectful but an attempt to negate the decedent's quest for symbolic immortality, guaranteeing that their symbolic self will end at physical death. Worse, Becker's theory suggests that writing a revenge obituary that will exist on the internet for years to come may be an attempt to ensure the decedent will symbolically live on in shame and contempt.

Fifth, funeral directors noted the shock expressed by some people at the death of their beloved despite their old age and poor health. That irrational disbelief may be an example of "transference." When the death of a patriarch or matriarch of a family is experienced as particularly life-altering, it may be partly due to having imputed their life with the power to protect the rest of the family from mortality. So long as the grandfather or grandmother lived, it seemed as though the rest of the family would live, especially the younger members. But once they died, the rest of the family faced their own morality, which can be shattering.[39]

Sixth, although funeral directors reported a decline in religion, if Becker is correct that all cultures are fundamentally religious, perhaps the waning more specifically concerns adherence to traditional religions and denominations (e.g., Methodist, Catholic, Baptist, etc.), not the expression of the quest for immortality itself. A secularizing culture

[39] That is surely not the only reason why the death of a patriarch or matriarch can come as such as such a shock. Their death may also be seen as the death of a family's history, the withering of the roots.

remains focused on achieving symbolic immortality, even though that fundamentally religious pursuit is expressed differently in the present than it was in the past.

Summary

Even though the evidence gathered from the obituaries and interviews contained little by way of explicit theology, if Becker's theory about the fundamentally religious nature of death denial is true, seemingly mundane practices such as obituaries, funerals, and celebration of life services express quasi-religious beliefs and attitudes. Despite the apparent decline in traditional religion, mourners suffer from a repressed fear of death and a desire for symbolic immortality, which they strive to achieve via immortality projects that are thought to extend the meaning of their lives beyond the grave. Contemporary obituaries and funerals may represent a projection of the mourners' own aspirations, attributing to the decedent the same transcendence of mortality that they desire for themselves.

David Zahl's Theory of Seculosity

Funeral directors are not the only ones to note an overall decline in religion. Social commentators have long noted the decline of religion's influence on society and the rise of secularism. At least, that is the story that has often been told. However, in *Seculosity: How Career, Parenting, Technology, Food, Politics, and Romance Became Our New Religion and What to Do About It*, David Zahl argues that people are not becoming less religious but rather that the nature of their religion has changed.[40] Zahl's main metaphor

[40] Zahl, *Seculosity*, xiii.

revolves around the notion of justification. He draws an analogy between the goal of secular pursuits and the goal of traditional religious pursuits, claiming they both aim at justification. The disciplinary approach taken in this theory is that of sociology and psychology. Zahl's theory helps one understand the values that lead obituaries and eulogies to emphasize specific aspects of the decedent's life, while downplaying others.

Seculosity and Replacement Religion

Zahl contends that contemporary society has developed a set of beliefs and practices that function in a manner similar to that of traditional religious systems. He claims those beliefs and practices can be understood as secular replacement religions. Zahl distinguishes between capital-R "Religion," which involves traditional and overtly religious practices and concepts,[41] and "religion" with a small-r, which he characterizes as the "controlling story" of our lives.[42] Zahl claims that religion seeks "enoughness," his term for what is known in theological circles as "justification." Zahl means that people are searching for the sense that their lives have value, which they measure according to specific benchmarks tied to their performance in different areas of life. Zahl refers to that approach as "performancism." As he explains:

> You'll hear about people scrambling to be successful enough, happy enough, thin enough, wealthy enough, influential enough, desired enough, charitable enough, work enough, good enough. We believe instinctively that, were we to reach some benchmark in our minds, then value, vindication, and love would be ours—that if we got enough, we would be enough.[43]

[41] Zahl, *Seculosity*, xii.
[42] Zahl, *Seculosity*, xiii.
[43] Zahl, *Seculosity*, xiv.

Zahl argues that performancism is a scorekeeping scheme—one without mercy.[44] The other important term that needs to be defined is the "secular." Zahl defines the secular as an environment "without the divine as its default" or "any setting in which belief in God is not axiomatic."[45] However, secular people are pursuing enoughness, and Zahl argues that those pursuits should be understood in terms of replacement religions. He claims that "any scheme where salvation is reserved for those with the most impeccable track records is a *religious* scheme."[46] Thus, he uses the portmanteau "seculosity" to refer to this marriage of religion and secularism. While secular people may not be religious in a traditional sense, their lives are still shaped by seculosity through the pursuit of enoughness. Indeed, that same quest for enoughness is also evident in the lives of overtly religious people, such as Christians.

Drawing on the work of psychologist Jonathan Haidt, Zahl argues that the search for enoughness is due to a concern for righteousness and self-justification:

> We want to feel good about ourselves, and so we edit our personalities to maximize the approval of others. Or we exaggerate hardships to make ourselves seem more heroic or others more villainous. The theological and psychological term for the energy we expend for the sake of feeling righteous is *self-justification*, and it cannot be overstated as motivation in human affairs.[47]

Zahl explains that the attempt at self-justification is "the drive to validate your existence" and "to assert your lovability" by meeting the benchmarks of enoughness.[48] But one must perform well enough in different areas of achievement to be considered "enough." While

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[44] Zahl, *Seculosity*, 8.
[45] Zahl, *Seculosity*, xxi.
[46] Zahl, *Seculosity*, 10.
[47] Zahl, *Seculosity*, xv.
[48] Zahl, *Seculosity*, xvi.

these are not the standards of traditional religion, Zahl argues that they serve a similar function, telling us that "we're okay, that our lives matter," and so they function as our "preferred guilt management system."[49]

However, the flip side of pursuing self-justification is the propensity to compare oneself with others, to judge them for failing to meet our standards, and to treat the shortcomings of other people with less mercy and grace than one's own. The quest for self-justification becomes a cause of alienation. Thus, the quest for self-justification in secular replacement religions can become just as self-righteous and oppressive as traditional religious "Pharisaism," leading individuals to feel pressured to meet ever-increasing benchmarks of success that they can never finally attain, leading to a culture of overwork, stress, and burnout.

Examples of Seculosity

Zahl points to several examples of seculosity, but this study will focus on only four: busyness, romance, parenting, and work. Those categories are especially relevant to the qualitative data that was collected.

First, Zahl examines the seculosity of busyness. If one were to ask a typical American how they were doing, he or she would likely answer, "Keeping busy!" That peculiar culturally-conditioned answer reflects the seculosity of busyness, whereby people invest their self-worth in always being occupied with work, hobbies, and by over-scheduling activities. People develop the sense that if they are not "over-occupied" then they are "inferior to those who are."[50] Zahl argues that at the heart of such performancism

[49] Zahl, *Seculosity*, xiii.
[50] Zahl, *Seculosity*, 4.

is the sense that what one does makes us "lovable" and our life "worth living."[51] If the value of one's life depends, in part, on keeping busy, that invests an enormous amount of importance in seemingly trivial or routine activities.

Second, Zahl argues that performancism is pervasive in parenting. For example, it may be that parents invest excessive time, energy, and resources into raising their children because they view parenting as a means of validating themselves and demonstrating their worth to others. In that approach, a child's success reflects the parent's success. Hence, enormous energy is put into getting the child into the right school, selecting sports teams, and other validating activities. The child becomes a proxy for the parent's failed ambitions. As Zahl says, "They cease to be a person in their own right and become our second chance to get into the school that rejected us, follow the dream we didn't have the guts to stick with, enjoy the childhood or adolescence we were denied, or leverage the physical prowess or beauty we squandered (or never had)."[52] However, when a child does not get into the right school, shows no athletic ability, or if their marriage falls apart, it's as though the parent has failed. The pressure to be a perfect parent can lead to feelings of inadequacy, guilt, and anxiety as individuals strive to meet unrealistic standards of success and achievement.

Third, Zahl argues that the seculosity of romance can be affected by relational performancism. Instead of loving someone for who they are, people can use each other "to prop up their enoughness."[53] For evidence, Zahl appeals to "the soulmate myth." This is where romance takes on a decisively salvific tone as people look for someone "who

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[51] Zahl, *Seculosity*, 6.
[52] Zahl, *Seculosity*, 58–59.
[53] Zahl, *Seculosity*, 20.

holds the key to both our personal happiness and ultimate fulfillment."[54] In other words, there is a tendency "to look to another person to provide for us what we cannot provide ourselves: not just validation but redemption."[55] Given the high expectations placed on romance, if someone does not find his or her soulmate, the perceived results are devastating: "You have not just failed at dating, but life."[56] Again, failing to perform well according to the metrics of romance becomes another reason for guilt and shame.

Fourth, Zahl discusses the seculosity of work. Many Americans are unapologetic workaholics, logging in hundreds of more work hours per year than their European counterparts: "work has always served as the great American barometer of worth and identity. Our occupation is the number one socially approved means of justifying our existence, and not just the type of occupation but our performance there."[57] When people do not work, or if they procrastinate, it induces feelings of guilt, a telltale sign of being engaged in a replacement religion.[58] "When work becomes the primary arbiter of identity, purpose, worth, and community in our lives, it has ceased to function as employment and begun to function as a religion. Or at least we have made it responsible for providing the very things to which we used to look to God."[59]

Zahl explores several more examples of seculosity in his book, each with similar expectations and pressures. However, the previous four examples suffice to give the contours of the theory. In summary, seculosity provides a compelling critique of contemporary secular culture, showing that otherwise non-religious pursuits tend to

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[54] Zahl, *Seculosity*, 27.
[55] Zahl, *Seculosity*, 28.
[56] Zahl, *Seculosity*, 34.
[57] Zahl, *Seculosity*, 91.
[58] Zahl, *Seculosity*, 94.
[59] Zahl, *Seculosity*, 94.

mimic religious patterns of belief and behavior and highlighting how secular activities and ideologies can function as quasi-religious systems. Zahl's theory can help us better understand what the qualitative evidence of funeral practices means for discerning what people believe about the meaning and purpose of funerals.

Seculosity in Obituaries and Funerals

Obituaries may *seem* like simple, boilerplate artifacts that record the factual details of an individual's life and would be easy to overlook as significant evidence about what people believe and value. But that mundane evidence takes on a new depth when seen through the lens of seculosity. The same is true for the evidence gathered from the phenomenological interviews.

First, obituaries usually highlight the decedent's personal benchmarks, such as their educational attainments, successful marriage and family life, professional achievements, hobbies, and other contributions to society. Zahl's theory suggests that mentioning those kinds of details is not only out of a desire to be *factual* but to show that the decedent lived *a worthwhile life* as measured by meeting particular cultural benchmarks of success. Obituaries contain an implicit value judgment in what is reported and how one's life is remembered because they aim to show the decedent's life was worthwhile. An obituary records how the decedent met specific social benchmarks of enoughness.

Second, obituaries and eulogies may demonstrate a commitment to self-justification through performancism. Zahl claims that one assumption of performancism is that people are defined by what they do, i.e., by their works. That may explain why

obituaries prioritize external markers of success and identity, whether in school, the workplace, on the sports field, or in the military. By focusing on how the decedent acted, obituaries reinforce the cultural tendency to define one's life according to material accomplishments and achievements.

Third, according to Zahl, performancism creates the pressure that one must meet or exceed the benchmarks of success. Even if the requirements are unmet, people feel pressured to portray themselves as having met them, creating a hypocritical or false image. That type of pressure may be reflected in how mourners portray decedents in obituaries and eulogies. The dead are usually portrayed in the most positive light, akin to being a saint. Any sins, flaws, or failures they had is downplayed or ignored. That overwhelmingly positive portrayal can be interpreted as a projection of the expectations that mourners place upon themselves and how they value their own lives. Contrastingly, revenge obituaries might be considered scandalous due to how they show the decedent failed the performancist test.

Fourth, obituaries and eulogies may complement the seculosity of parenting. Zahl described how parents could feel pressured to have a successful child because it reflects upon their value as parents. Mourners want other people to know that they had a good father or mother who was professionally, personally, and romantically successful and enjoyed expensive and fulfilling hobbies such as vacations abroad. The children want others to know that, because it shows they came from a worthwhile lineage. Raising the profile of the parent who has died may have the effect of raising the mourner's own value.

Fifth, obituaries may satisfy a psychological need to compare oneself with others. Zahl claimed that seculosity leads to religious-type Pharisaism in its merciless scorekeeping and condemnation of others for their failures. The desire to publicly shame neglectful family members through revenge obituaries may be motivated by that lack of mercy. The way the public enjoyes reading revenge obituaries may reflect how looking at the extreme failures of others in their roles as fathers or mothers or as brothers or sisters helps reassure us about our performances. Their symbolic "damnation" helps assure us of our "salvation."

Summary

David Zahl's theory of seculosity suggests that the ordinary details mentioned in obituaries, and remembered in eulogies, may have been chosen by mourners to emphasize a decedent's achievements, successes, and positive legacy because it is a projection of how the mourners are on a quest for self-justification ("enoughness") based on performancism.

Christian Smith and Therapeutic Deism

The third and final non-theological theory comes from the work of Christian Smith, along with his co-researchers Melinda Lundquist Denton and Patricia Snell. They set out to survey the religious beliefs of teenagers in the USA. To their surprise, Smith and his colleagues discovered that most teens were conventionally religious. They nominally identified with the religion of their parents. The researchers found little or no evidence of teenage rebellion against religion. However, the content of the teenagers' faith was less than orthodox. The main image in Smith's theory is that of therapy, comparing what

teenagers believe about God to therapy. Smith's theory approaches the evidence from the perspective of sociology. It will help us identify the unstated theological convictions that may motivate mourners in choosing how to remember the dead.

Describing Moralistic Therapeutic Deism

After interviewing 267 teens in 45 states about their religious convictions, Smith describes the belief system of American teenagers as what he calls Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (hereafter MTD). Here are seven elements of that belief system.

First, MTD promotes a moralistic approach to life. Being moral is understood as "being the kind of person that other people will like, fulfilling one's personal potential, and not being socially disruptive or interpersonally obnoxious."[60] Smith notes that this vision of morality lacks depth. It is not the morality of Christian asceticism, Kantian deontology, or even utilitarian calculation. Instead, it is a superficial concern with being "nice" and "kind" to others. This moralism also includes principles of fairness, tolerance, and personal happiness. It is religiously inclusive and does not seem to depend upon any specific theological account of God, humanity, or nature.

Second, MTD holds to a deistic conception of God. For the purposes of Smith's study, deism is the view that God exists, created the world, and established a moral order but is otherwise not personally involved in the world, with the important exception of a "therapeutic qualifier."[61] Teenagers conceive of God as largely uninvolved in creation but expect the Deity to intervene when their personal well-being is involved.

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[60] Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 163.
[61] Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 164–65.

Third, MTD promotes a therapeutic view of God. Smith found that for these teens, religion is not about traditional concerns such as repentance from sin, rigorous ascetic practices, or "basking in God's love and grace."[62] Instead, it is about "feeling good, happy, secure, at peace."[63] God exists to help people attain subjective well-being and happiness, which is also the goal of life. In MTD, God is like a combination of "a Divine Butler and Cosmic Therapist."[64] While God is generally not very active in the world, the Deity is active when it comes to helping individuals feel fulfilled. God is understood to be "always on call, takes care of any problems that arise, professionally helps his people to feel better about themselves, and does not become too personally involved in the process."[65]

Fourth, Smith argued this therapeutic view of God reflects a more basic therapeutic individualism. The self is considered the source of moral knowledge and authority, and subjective experience measures what is authentic, right, and true. Instead of having a morality based on external standards that are derived from religion, natural law, or culture, in MTD, ethical decisions are decided self-reflexively, emphasizing sentiment and emotions. The authority of priests, pastors, and parents is displaced by the authority of therapeutic advice-givers such as psychologists, psychiatrists, and social workers.[66] MTD emphasizes the pursuit of personal fulfillment and emotional well-being and views religion as a means of achieving individual happiness. Smith understands this

[62] Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 164.
[63] Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 164.
[64] Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 165.
[65] Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 165.
[66] Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 173.

kind of individualism as an attempt to rescue personal uniqueness from impersonal utilitarian institutions.

Fifth, MTD's focus on therapeutic individualism changes the nature of religion and spirituality. For example, it undermines religion as an external authority. Instead, therapeutic individualists seek out practices that satisfy their subjective needs and wants. Additionally, rather than being centered on God's claims on human lives, one's spirituality centers on self-realization and personal happiness.[67] Religious beliefs and practices are instrumentalized to promote psychological comfort, self-esteem, and a sense of purpose or meaning in life.

Sixth, all these MTD trends occur within the context of mass-consumer capitalism. Smith considers capitalism to be more than a system of production and exchange. It also promotes a specific moral order and institutionalizes a worldview that remakes both religion and the self. For example, under capitalism, religion becomes just another product marketed as satisfying or fulfilling the individual.[68] The purpose of life comes to be regarded as "satiating one's self-defined felt needs and desires," as opposed to "attaining salvation, learning obedience to God, following the Ten Commandments, achieving enlightenment, dying to oneself and serving others, or any other traditional religious purpose."[69]

Seventh, although Smith focuses on the beliefs of teenagers, he suggests that MTD is not limited to that age group but is instead "colonizing many established religious traditions" and seems to be a widespread faith among many U.S. adults.[70]

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[67] Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 175.
[68] Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 176.
[69] Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 176.
[70] Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 166.

In a follow-up study written with Patricia Snell about the religious lives of 18-to-23-year-olds, Smith found that the same convictions he describes as MTD were held five years later. However, having lived longer and confronted more challenges in life, their faith in MTD had been tested, and some had backed away from simplistic versions of it. "In short, there seem to be certain tests in life through which some youth find that MTD proves an unrealistic account or an unhelpful way to respond."[71] Going through those tests either led to greater or lesser assurance about faith in general and for others, "into either looser or tighter connections to more traditional religious faith specifically."[72] But overall, Smith concluded that while MTD-like beliefs had become "somewhat diluted" with age, they had not disintegrated.[73]

This summary of MTD sheds important light on contemporary funeral practices by showing that mourners have an implicit theology that explains what they choose to do at funerals.

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism in Obituaries and Funerals

Many of the funeral directors interviewed for this study, as well as their clients, would have been teenagers when Smith conducted his research. Those teenagers have since grown up and are experiencing the death of their parents and grandparents. If Smith is right, MTD should be apparent in this study's obituaries and phenomenological interviews. Indeed, the evidence from the phenomenological interviews supports the

[71] Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 155.
[72] Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 156.
[73] Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 155.

prevalence of MTD, and MTD helps us better understand the meaning of the available evidence.

First, a moralistic approach is reflected in the manner in which both obituaries and eulogies often emphasize the deceased's moral virtues and character traits. Rather than focusing on the decedent's religious convictions, what is remembered is their kindness, generosity, and compassion, especially to family and friends. That narrow range of moral concerns reflects MTD's prioritizing of agreeable behavior over other moral norms. The reverse of this emphasis may be reflected in how revenge obituaries identified instances in which decedents were unkind to their families and friends. The abuse and neglect may not be seen as a betrayal of deep moral commitments (e.g., Kantian duties, Aristotelian virtues, or Jesus' love ethic), but as a betrayal of MTD's expectations of kindness and agreeableness.

Second, MTD's emphasis on personal fulfillment, self-realization, and happiness is reflected in the kinds of details routinely recorded in obituaries, such as those about the decedent's education, career, family, and hobbies. Eulogies and celebration of life services often focus on how the deceased was friendly and kind to family and friends and rarely mention their personal or professional failures, let alone their sins. Smith's research suggests that the focus on those values is due to an underlying commitment to therapeutic individualism, which provides the framework for mourners to evaluate the impact of the decedent's life. Obituaries, eulogies, and celebrations of life are meant to show the decedent was individually fulfilled, because that is a projection of what mourners value. Furthermore, MTD may be the framework for survivors to evaluate the harm that a decedent has caused. Revenge obituaries—even more so, not having a funeral

at all—may reflect anger at how the mother or father violated MTD-like moral expectations. Instead of being friendly and fair, parents are remembered for being mean and unfair. Instead of helping their families achieve fulfillment, self-realization, and happiness, mourners resent how a cruel parent caused them hardships, depression, and low self-esteem. Their anger is framed in terms of how the deceased frustrated their personal happiness.

Third, the therapeutic component of MTD was also evident in how interviewees reported that mourners expect eulogies and a pastoral presence to bring comfort to mourners. Initially, this might have been taken as the expression that mourners still need a traditional pastoral presence. However, the desire for comfort might reflect MTD's therapeutic emphasis. Just as God is conceived of as a Cosmic Therapist who is generally uninvolved but who is expected to intervene to guarantee our happiness, perhaps the role of ministers is perceived similarly. Mourners may think of ministers as largely uninvolved in life but needed in moments of crisis, the way a butler or therapist is needed.

Fourth, MTD is associated with an inability to articulate fundamental doctrine. Smith found that teenagers claimed to believe what their parents believed but could not state what those beliefs were or what they believed personally. When they could express a belief clearly, the doctrines were often unorthodox. This inability to articulate one's faith may be reflected in how obituaries often state where someone went to church without mentioning any particular doctrines or personal beliefs. Likewise, funeral directors reported that one of the pastors' jobs is to remind mourners of Biblical truths they may be unable to remember at the moment. If Smith is correct, many mourners will

only have fragmented beliefs barely related to the doctrinal standards of their respective faith traditions. In other words, it is likely that funeral ministers will not be reminding mourners of what they should remember but sharing new truths about death, dying, and the afterlife.

Fifth, MTD involves a deistic view of God as being typically distant, somewhat vague, and generally non-interventionist, except when the Deity is expected to intervene to fix one's problems. That vague view may be reflected in how obituaries and eulogies reference a higher power, spiritual presence, or generic view of God, without specifying which god is meant. It may also explain why funeral directors reported that even unchurched mourners still desire a spiritual presence at a funeral to provide comfort and guidance without necessarily invoking specific religious doctrines or rituals. Failure to mention theological specifics thus highlights an important tension in MTD: a vague God (whom we do not identify in detail for fear of offending those with different convictions) is nonetheless expected to make us feel better.

Sixth, the influence of mass-consumer capitalism on funerals is evident in the reported trend toward greater personalization in funeral ceremonies. Funerals are increasingly tailored to fit the consumer desires of the deceased and the mourners—if they can afford it. The question of affordability is also reflected in the decline in costly burials and the steep rise of less expensive cremations, leading some funeral directors to feel like they have been reduced to order takers.[74]

[74] As one funeral professional put it: "Another trend that I don't necessarily agree with is cremation. It's made funeral directors order takers. The paperwork is just, 'Let's get the vital statistics, sign here, sign here, boom, you're done.' There's no opportunity to really bond with these families the way you are able to with a funeral or a memorial service." (FD6).

Cost-effectiveness takes priority over religious tradition. The capitalist mentality may also be evident in how unchurched mourners who look for a "spiritual" presence at the funeral will collaborate with funeral directors and shop around for the right type of clergy to officiate.[75]

Seventh, MTD's personal eschatology envisages that good people go to heaven. There is little or no emphasis on the alternative. That conviction may be evident in how mourners want to be told that the deceased was a good person and is now in a better place (whatever that place may be). It may also explain the strong reaction against a funeral sermon mentioning hell or damnation since that possibility does not fit into MTD's personal eschatology.

Summary

Christian Smith's theory that teenage religion can be understood in terms of moralistic therapeutic deism (MTD) seems to be confirmed by the qualitative evidence. While that evidence initially seemed disappointing because it revealed very little about mourners' explicit religious beliefs, that is only true if one assumes a robust Christian context, according to which one expects to hear familiar Christian words, phrases, and concepts. However, when that evidence is examined in light of Smith's theory, one sees evidence of how mourners adhere to MTD, where the dead are remembered in a way that reflects values consistent with therapeutic individualism. And the vague religious references are

[75] "Because a lot of times…we would have to recommend ministers. And so we had celebrants that we just recommended that came in. We didn't make any money off of it. We just said, 'These people are very good.' But we would tailor our recommendations based on what [the family] wanted. If somebody wanted a very hellfire and brimstone minister, we would say, 'Okay, you want this Baptist minister.' But maybe if you want someone a little soft-hearted, we'll talk about this Episcopalian minister." (FD6).

also consistent with MTD. In short, while the evidence could have been read as giving us very little information about mourners' beliefs in a Christian context, it reveals much more about what mourners believe, given the context of MTD.

Conclusion

In keeping with the interdisciplinary nature of practical theology, three non-theological theories were used to interpret the evidence gathered about funerals. Each theory helped to bring a different perspective concerning the meaning of the qualitative evidence. When that evidence was first collected, it looked as though it did not reveal very much about what people believed about funerals because it did not contain explicit theological language. However, the non-theological theories helped to interpret the evidence and uncover hidden beliefs. The three theories used here provided insights that complement each other. If Smith's MTD leads us to expect that good people will go to heaven, Zahl's seculosity helps to deepen the account of what people count as good, and how they are operating within a framework of self-justification based upon works. If Becker's denial of death leads us to expect that, out of a fear of death, people will engage in heroic immortality projects to help extend their symbolic selves beyond the grave, Zahl's categories of seculosity shed light on what form those immortality projects may take, whether it be through parenting, romance, work, or sheer busyness. Becker's claim that people are deeply motivated by attempts to repress their fear of death is complemented by Zahl's claim that people also feel anxious for not meeting the benchmarks of seculosity and of having a life worth living. If Smith's claim that people are interested in personal

self-realization and happiness is true, then seculosity helps to define the different areas of self-realization that someone may pursue.

Although the three theories complemented each other, they did not equally apply to the evidence. Smith's theory focuses on teenagers who identify as religious, particularly as Christians. Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is his interpretation of teenage religion and does not try to explain what atheists believe. Presumably, a mourner who is an atheist does not believe in a Cosmic Butler. However, their operative moral system may consist of being "nice" and "kind." Discernment is therefore needed in using Smith's theory. By contrast, Becker and Zahl's theories address both secular and Christian people's motivations and beliefs.

As enlightening as these perspectives are for understanding what people believe about the meaning and purpose of funerals, the practical theologian must reflect theologically upon the evidence. The next chapter will use the perspective of the theology of the cross to reflect upon the qualitative evidence and the conclusions drawn from the non-theological theories.

CHAPTER 4

IN LIGHT OF THE CROSS: THE NORMATIVE TASK

Introduction

What should a practical theologian make of the foregoing evidence about funerals and funeral preaching? While practical theology is concerned with understanding how practices exist in empirical experience, it does this by bringing the insights and resources of Christian theology to bear upon understanding them.[1] In other words, practical theology is theological. After gathering and analyzing the evidence about funeral practices from the perspective of non-theological disciplines, it is time for what Richard Osmer calls the *normative task* of practical theology. This next step involves the work of theological reflection. To that end, this chapter will draw upon the theology of the cross. Though that tradition is most closely associated with Martin Luther, it has since grown and developed in different directions.[2] This chapter will use the insights of three theologians of the cross, namely Gerhard Forde, Douglas John Hall, and Kōsuke Koyama.

The chapter will be divided into five parts. First, it will summarize the normative task of practical theology, explaining the "Chalcedonian" model of cross-disciplinary dialogue. Second, it will evaluate the three non-theological disciplines for their suitability

[1] Pattison and Woodward, "Introduction," 8.

[2] For a history of Luther's development of the *theologia crucis*, see McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*.

to aid theological reflection. Third, it will summarize the three theologies of the cross that will be used, namely, Gerhard Forde's focus on justification by faith, Douglas John Hall's analysis of triumphalism, and Kōsuke Koyama's notion of having a crucified mind. Fourth, it will give a theological interpretation of the qualitative evidence and the interdisciplinary insights for each of the three theologies. Fifth, it will synthesize the insights gained into the evidence, identifying common threads, points of divergence, and areas for further exploration.

The Normative Task of Theological Reflection

Richard Osmer describes the normative task of practical theology in terms of *prophetic discernment*. When a prophet spoke the words of God to a people, it was not in a mechanical or wooden way that ignored the context of the people he addressed. Instead, the prophet shaped their message, drawing upon previous theological traditions, language, and imagery, and applying those concepts to the situation faced by the audience, delivering the message in a language they could understand. Furthermore, delivering the prophetic message also meant participating in God's *pathos* and embracing His suffering both for the people and for creation. Put simply, prophecy took *discernment*.[3]

Similarly, practical theology's normative task is to apply theological concepts to the situations being investigated. It, too, is shaped by the considerations raised by the context being studied and, therefore, requires discernment and theological reflection to do it well. Osmer suggests three ways of using theology in a normative way: through

[3] Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 133.

interpretation, ethics, and good practices. These three ways are not mutually exclusive. It is common to combine them in theological reflection. Of the three options, this chapter will focus on *theological interpretation*, while the next chapter will draw upon *good practices*.

According to Osmer, in theological interpretation, a specific theological concept is used to interpret episodes, situations, and contexts.[4] This can involve appealing to a single overriding theological concept or drawing upon several different ones. For example, a practical theologian may use theological interpretation to correct popular judgments about a situation, expose an unrecognized sin in a situation or practice, or help reveal God's redemptive intent within a particular context. Thus, an essential part of the normative task of practical theology is understanding how to relate theological concepts to the findings of the non-theological disciplines.

Practical theologians have pursued different models of interdisciplinary dialogue. For example, a *correlational model* allows for theology and non-theological theories to mutually influence one another. As with any true dialogue, the correlation model includes the possibility of one discipline correcting the other, meaning traditional theological beliefs or practices may be revised in light of the findings from other disciplines.[5] However, theologians criticize that model for assuming that Christian doctrine is fallible and subject to correction or disproof. Attempting to avoid that complaint by distinguishing between the essentials and non-essentials of the faith means abandoning an authentic correlational dialogue. Given those concerns, a better model of theological

[4] Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 139.
[5] Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 165.

reflection is needed. Osmer points to the Chalcedonian model, which is exemplified by Karl Barth and elucidated by Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger.

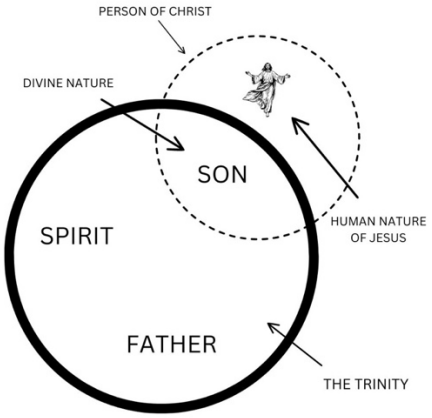
The Chalcedonian Definition of Christology

The Chalcedonian model of theological reflection refers to the Council of Chalcedon (AD 451), which met to clarify how it was that Jesus could be both divine and human. The way in which the council reconciled those two claims can be used as a pattern to approach the dialogue between theological claims and the claims of other disciplines.

Chalcedon was meant to reconcile warring Christological traditions.[6] It sought to avoid two errors: that of dividing Christ into two persons (or two sons) and that of asserting the existence of two natures before the union and only one after it.[7] The Council eventually decreed that Christ was to be acknowledged as having two natures: divine and human. These two natures are not mixed together but are instead "without confusion, without change, without division, without separation."[8] Each of Christ's natures is complete and whole in itself, without finally being separated because both are united in one Person or hypostasis. The Council was careful to say, "the difference of the natures being by no means taken away because of the union, but rather the distinctive character of each being preserved."[9] For a visualization of Chalcedonian Christology, see Figure 1:

[6] McGuckin, *The Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology*, 79.
[7] Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, 59.
[8] Hardy, *Christology of the Later Fathers*, 373.
[9] Hardy, *Christology of the Later Fathers*, 373.

Figure 1: Chalcedonian Christology



The divine nature and human nature are united in the one person of Jesus Christ. Those are the theological boundaries of how to understand what became the "orthodox" conception of Christology.

But as Sergius Bulgakov noted, the Chalcedonian definition was "more of a schema than a doctrine."[10] A schema is a structured framework or model that helps to organize or interpret information. The Chalcedonian definition was used as a schema to help organize and interpret the New Testament information about Christ's humanity and divinity. Practical theologians can use that same schema to help conceptualize how theology can interact with non-theological disciplines in theological reflection.

The Chalcedonian Model of Interdisciplinary Dialogue

According to Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger, Chalcedonian Christology provides a model for bringing theology into dialogue with other disciplines, as exemplified by Karl Barth. According to a Chalcedonian model of reflection, just as Christ's divine nature has

[10] Bulgakov, *Lamb of God*, 57.

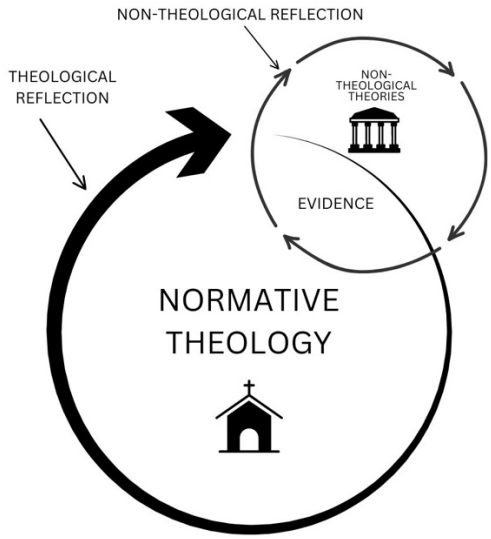
ontological priority over His human nature, so there is an asymmetrical priority of theology over other disciplines. Additionally, Barth distinguished between "speculative theories" and "exact sciences."[11] Both can be mined by theologians to yield profound insights into essential aspects of human life, which Van Deusen Hunsinger calls "secular parables of the truth."[12] But in Barth's approach, these "parables" cannot override the truth of the gospel. She explains that while Barth was "open to the truth wherever he found it," he objected to claims "that would compromise, dilute, or distort the gospel."[13] In other words, the gospel had epistemological priority over other truth claims. Instead of subsuming theology under a wider circle of disciplines, other sciences are placed within the larger circle of Christian theology, with Christ at the center. While true beliefs could occur apart from the gospel, their adequacy as parables had to be assessed. Thus, van Deusen Hunsinger proposes subjecting non-theological claims to four criteria:

1. The phenomena need to be in agreement with the witness of Holy Scripture.
2. They need to be in agreement with the historical dogmas and confessions of the church.
3. They may be tested by the fruit which is borne.
4. The phenomena may be significant for the life of the community.[14]

If a parable of truth passes these tests, it can be incorporated into theological reflection. This Chalcedonian approach may be pictured according to Figure 2.

[11] van Deusen Hunsinger, "Barth and Interdisciplinary Method," 783.
[12] van Deusen Hunsinger, "Pastoral Theology in a 'Barthian' Key," 4–5.
[13] van Deusen Hunsinger, "Pastoral Theology in a 'Barthian' Key," 4.
[14] van Deusen Hunsinger, "Pastoral Theology in a 'Barthian' Key," 10; van Deusen Hunsinger, "Barth and Interdisciplinary Method," 784–85.

Figure 2: The Chalcedonian Model of Theological Reflection



This Chalcedonian approach will be used to learn from the non-theological theories used in the last chapter. The question then becomes which theology is to be taken as normative. For the purposes of this chapter, I will focus on the theology of the cross (*theologia crucis*) as represented by the work of three theologians. Each theologian approaches the tradition slightly differently, and each perspective can offer compelling insight into the evidence previously considered.

Evaluating the Three Non-Theological Disciplines

Given a Chalcedonian model of theological reflection, do the three non-theological theories used in the last chapter pass the four criteria to be incorporated into theological reflection?

Agreement with Scripture

First, the proposals need to be in agreement with Scripture.[15] The theory may not contradict or usurp the Biblical narrative.

Ernest Becker's theory of death is consistent with Scripture's claim that death is an enemy to be defeated (cf. 1 Cor 15:26). His characterization of people attempting to achieve some sort of quasi-immortality through human projects not only finds precedent in Scripture (e.g., the Tower of Babel) but also represents a God-given desire to live forever. However, what Becker describes is a search for immortality that is not only misconceived but also sought in the wrong way. Pursuing false paths of salvation is also consistent with what the Bible warns about false gospels and mistaken views about how to have eternal life.

Similarly, David Zahl's theory of seculosity agrees with the Biblical testimony that human life is full of laws, that people have an innate sense of morality, and that they have a penchant for seeking to establish their own righteousness based on self-exertion. That does not mean those beliefs are true. But seculosity does help us see in what form they take in our culture.

Christian Smith's observation that many teens believe in what he characterizes as moralistic therapeutic deism (MTD) agrees with Scripture that people have an innate sense of God's existence, even if that conception is often mistaken and self-centered. It also confirms the Pauline charge that people falsely assume that God saves people based on their merit.

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[15] van Deusen Hunsinger, "Barth and Interdisciplinary Method," 784.

Agreement with Dogmas and Confessions

Second, the theory must agree with the historic creeds and confessions. Barth considered confessions such as the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, and the Chalcedonian definition to be standards that help the church to interpret Scripture faithfully.[16] Christians may learn new things about God, but any such proposals should be tested against those theological standards and may not contradict them.

In this case, none of the theories attempt to give new information about God. They attempt to explain the beliefs that motivate human behavior but do not claim they are true. Thus, none of the three theories disagrees with Christian dogmas or confessions.

Tested by Their Fruit

Third, the theories must be tested to see whether they are in harmony with the fruit of the Holy Spirit.[17] A proposal is to be judged according to whether or not it leads someone into greater bondage or greater freedom, such as into love, joy, peace, and the other fruits mentioned by Paul (Gal 5:22–23). In this case, none of the theories used here instruct people on how to live. They are descriptions of belief, not prescriptions for behavior. But those theories can help the Christian be more self-aware about having any unbiblical beliefs that might motivate their actions. That, in turn, can help people renew their minds (cf. Rom 12:1–12) to be more in line with the Spirit.

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[16] van Deusen Hunsinger, "Barth and Interdisciplinary Method," 784–85.
[17] van Deusen Hunsinger, "Barth and Interdisciplinary Method," 785.

Significance for the Life of the Church

Fourth, the phenomena must be significant for the life of the church.[18] It must help the church reflect upon the truth it presents to us, even bringing the community to a place of repentance. If the three theories accurately describe what people believe, then each one is significant for the life of the church because each one describes perspectives or convictions that are at odds with the gospel.

Regarding Becker's theory, Christians should not fear death or deny its reality in the ways described by Becker. Christ has conquered death and has authority over it (cf. John 11:25–26). Nor should we put our hopes in achieving quasi-immortality by undergoing heroic immortality projects. We will be clothed with immortality in the resurrection (cf. 1 Cor 15:54).

Regarding Zahl's theory, Christians should also resist pursuing any of the forms of seculosity, where we find our self-worth or sense of "justification" in what we do instead of in Christ. Justification before God is by faith in Christ apart from works (cf. Gal 2:16).

Regarding Smith's theory, MTD is not an orthodox view of God, and it does not accurately describe the purpose of the Christian life. God does not call us to be comfortable, but to pick up our crosses and to follow Jesus, even if that means going through trials and tribulations (cf. Jas 1:2–3; 1 Cor 1:3–5).

If the church has adopted any of these perspectives, it ought to repent of them and have its mind renewed by the gospel.

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[18] van Deusen Hunsinger, "Barth and Interdisciplinary Method," 785.

Summary

Each theory passes the four Chalcedonian criteria for judging whether a non-theological theory is a suitable dialogue partner with Christian theology. Having established the basis upon which our normative theology will interact with the non-theological theories, it is time to present the theology that will be used in this dissertation.

Presentation of the Three Theologies

In this section, we will summarize the normative theology to be used in our theological reflection, namely the theology of the cross. That tradition will be represented by the theologies of Gerhard Forde, Douglas John Hall, and Kōsuke Koyama, which will be summarized here.

Gerhard Forde's Theology of the Cross

Gerhard Forde (1927–2005) was a Lutheran theologian who self-consciously formed his theology of the cross in dialogue with Martin Luther. Following Luther,[19] Forde argued there are two kinds of theology, each of which tells its own story: the theology of glory and the theology of the cross.[20] For the purposes of this chapter, I will focus on how Forde understood salvation, especially justification by faith, in light of the theology of the cross.

[19] This chapter will not aim to trace each of Forde's claims back to their sources in Luther or distinguish Luther's views from Forde's. This decision reflects the nature of this work, which is not intended as a study in historical theology.

[20] Forde, *On Being a Theologian*, 5.

Defining the Theology of Glory

According to Forde, the theology of glory is the predominant narrative in our culture. He used two master images to explain what that story was. The first image borrows Paul Ricoeur's "myth of the exiled soul," which depicts the soul as being exiled from the "one" (i.e., God), and must return to God by gaining knowledge and changing its behavior, generally "purging or shucking off of the flesh and its lusts."[21] In other words, returning from exile depends on doing good works.[22]

The second popular image is that of a ladder. In the Middle Ages, the ladder was a popular symbol of the soul's struggle to reach perfection (e.g., John Climacus's *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*[23]). According to this image, Christians can progress toward salvation by climbing the ladder rung by rung, engaging in "works of pious sublimation" and "special spiritual exercises."[24] Forde claimed this basic understanding of spirituality is not exclusive to Christianity but is "a catchall for virtually all theologies and religions."[25]

However, for that kind of soteriological scheme to work, theologies of glory must assume a high anthropology rather than a low one. In other words, theologians of glory will admit that people are weakened by sin and will describe their works as less than perfect, but they will stop short of saying that people are addicted to or fully incapacitated by sin. [26] If they were addicted or fully incapacitated, it would undermine the possibility of climbing the ladder of salvation.

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[21] Forde, *On Being a Theologian*, 5.
[22] Forde, *On Being a Theologian*, 16.
[23] Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*.
[24] Forde, *Where God Meets Man*, 8.
[25] Forde, *On Being a Theologian*, 2.
[26] Forde, *Where God Meets Man*, 10.

According to Forde, having a high anthropology affects the theology of glory's view of grace. While theologians of glory will admit that people need grace, they will disagree over the amount each person needs because the purpose of this "grace" is to make up for whatever is lacking in human effort to climb the ladder. Forde saw that expectation as commonplace even among evangelicals who, while admitting that they do not perfectly fulfill the law, assume that "Christ will make up for our 'shortcomings.'"[27] In this way, Christ's work is assumed to make the ladder scheme work.[28]

According to Forde, one of the effects of downplaying the pervasiveness of sin is that it leads to a skewed perspective on human action. Theologians of glory cannot see things as they are but must filter out the evil the people do and focus instead on what they consider to be the good, whether it is really there or not. Forde referred to this as "seeing through" something rather than seeing it for what it really is.[29]

Forde claims the theology of glory both skews one's approach to life and affects one's theological language, which will become curbed, diluted, or constantly "trimmed" to "stroke the psyche" rather than attack the satisfied self. [30] He claims that theologians of glory tend not to speak about "sin, law, accusation, repentance, judgment, wrath, punishment, perishing, death, devil, damnation, and even the cross itself," because it risks offending people and therefore putting them off climbing the ladder. Thus, the offensive language "simply disappears" from the discourse.[31] And as preachers stop speaking about sin and sinners, people stop thinking of themselves in those terms and perceive

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[27] Forde, *On Being a Theologian*, 24.
[28] Forde, *Where God Meets Man*, 10–11.
[29] Forde, *On Being a Theologian*, 34–35.
[30] Forde, *On Being a Theologian*, x.
[31] Forde, *On Being a Theologian*, x.

themselves in terms of that curbed language. "To take a common example, we apparently are no longer sinners, but rather victims, oppressed by sinister victimizers whom we relentlessly seek to track down and accuse."[32] The focus of preaching changes from being gospel-centered to therapeutically affirming the person's efforts at self-improvement.[33]

Defining the Theology of the Cross

Forde explained that the theology of the cross tells a very different story about sin, salvation, and God, but it is difficult to write about the theology of the cross because it has less to do with propositional claims than with the experience of dying with Christ. For example, while a theology *about* the cross might speculate about why God forsook Jesus on the cross (e.g., "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"), a theology *of* the cross approaches it existentially: "We can't answer Jesus' question. We can only die with him and await God's answer in him."[34]

This concept of dying with Christ is an example of Forde's claim that law and gospel have different effects upon hearers.[35] Forde compares the law to an inescapable voice that "sounds in the heart" and always accuses people of failing to live up to God's requirements for humanity. He claims that the accusing voice is not limited to overtly legal demands:

> The "voice," for Luther, can and does arise from anywhere and everywhere. It is not limited merely to what one might call the sphere of morality. When man is separated from God anything and everything can betray him. The "voice," for instance, can arise from something as simple as the sudden rustling of the leaves in the forest…More unmistakably it arises from the demands which society makes

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[32] Forde, *On Being a Theologian*, ix.
[33] Forde, *On Being a Theologian*, x.
[34] Forde, *On Being a Theologian*, 3.
[35] Forde, *Where God Meets Man*, 17.

> of us, the demands of family and friends and the voices and faces of suffering humanity.[36]

For Forde, whatever accuses and condemns one for failing to live up to its demand acts as "law." Thus, the law is not meant to support the delusion of the ladder scheme of salvation. Through constantly accusing one of sin, it is meant to reveal that it is not possible to earn salvation based on behavior, shutting the doors to any other soteriological scheme and leaving Christ as the only possible way, truth, and life.[37] When the law has brought someone to Christ as their only hope, then it has been used correctly.

By contrast, Forde explains that the gospel does not follow the structure of a ladder. Instead of righteousness being achieved through works it is imputed through faith. To quote Luther: "He is not righteous who works much, but he who, without work, believes much in Christ" (Thesis 25).[38] Rather than assume that salvation comes through self-exertion, we must "utterly despair of our own ability."[39] Instead of demanding behavior modification, the gospel demands "naked trust" that receives righteousness as a complete gift."[40] In sum, this is the doctrine of justification by faith apart from works:

> We are justified freely, for Christ's sake, by faith, without the exertion of our own strength, gaining of merit, or doing of works. To the age old question, "What shall I do to be saved?" the confessional answer is shocking: "Nothing! Just be still; shut up and listen for once in your life to what God the Almighty, creator and redeemer, is saying to his world and to you in the death and resurrection of his Son! Listen and believe!"[41]

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[36] Forde, *Where God Meets Man*, 14.
[37] Nestingen and Forde, *Free to Be*, 15.
[38] Forde, *On Being a Theologian*, 103.
[39] Forde, *On Being a Theologian*, 65.
[40] Forde, *On Being a Theologian*, 26.
[41] Forde, *Justification by Faith*, 22.

The doctrine of justification impacts one's anthropology. The idea that God must *impute* righteousness to the believer instead of supplementing whatever natural righteousness one may have earned for oneself, reveals that people are total sinners.[42] Thus, Forde can say, "When God imputes righteousness he makes us sinners at the same time. he makes it quite plain that we do not have righteousness in ourselves and never will."[43] The gospel reveals us to be *simul justus et peccator*, simultaneously just and sinner.

According to Forde, that gospel proclamation comes as a shock to the old Adam, as it reveals that theologies of glory are based on pretentiousness, pride, and misrepresentations of the sinner's addiction to sin and inability to save oneself through works. The gospel thereby "simply shatters the old being's entire system of values and calculations."[44] It kills the old Adam's sinful aspirations by giving as a gift the salvation he tries to earn by works: "God's gifts are the death of him. For when you recognize the gift, you can see that all of the old Adam's attempts to impress God are worthless, just so much religious junk the old Adam puts on display to show himself off."[45] The gospel continues to kill the old Adam by absolving him over and over again: "God kills the old you each day with kindness. He keeps showering you with his promises and gifts until finally the old you just plain dies of it."[46]

In this account, the gospel changes the nature of preaching. According to Forde, while theologians of glory try to persuade people to use their wills to climb the ladder of

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[42] Forde, *The Preached God*, 235.
[43] Forde, *Justification by Faith*, 31.
[44] Forde, *The Preached God*, 230.
[45] Nestingen and Forde, *Free to Be*, 168.
[46] Nestingen and Forde, *Free to Be*, 172.

salvation, in a theology of the cross, the gospel does not persuade so much as invade, capture, and compel one to believe. Instead of trying to persuade a bound will to believe the good news by curbing and trimming theological language, the preacher proclaims the gospel promises in all their alienness, believing that the text has its own power to grasp the listeners. In Forde's memorable phrase: "Preaching is doing the text to the hearers."[47] The good news does something.

According to Forde, since theologians of the cross affirm that people are total sinners in need of a total justification, they can "see" things about a situation that theologians of glory refuse to see, lest they jeopardize their ladder scheme of salvation. The theologian of the cross does not need to minimize or "see-through" sin but can speak the truth about the reality of "the problems, joys, and sorrows of everyday life."[48]

In sum, for Forde, a theology of the cross opposes any scheme of salvation by works and preaches salvation by grace through faith. This allows theologians of the cross to be honest about sin and suffering in the world, a consequence strongly affirmed by our next theologian of the cross.

Douglas John Hall's Theology of the Cross and Suffering

Douglas John Hall is a Canadian theologian and a member of the United Church of Canada, representing a different trajectory for the theology of the cross. He does not approach it as would a Luther scholar (he names Forde as an example of that approach[49]), but looks instead for "the spirit and mood beneath the language" of the *theologia crucis*

[47] Forde, *The Preached God*, 91.
[48] Forde, *On Being a Theologian*, 10.
[49] Hall, *The Cross in Our Context*, 15.

to develop a theological stance in keeping with Luther but also "larger than Luther."[50] This chapter will concentrate on how Hall uses the theology of the cross to highlight the problem of triumphalism and the reality of suffering in the North American context.

The Theology of Glory and Triumphalism

Whereas Forde identified the theology of the glory with a commitment to salvation by works, Hall links it to the problem of *triumphalism*. At least, that is how the problem is manifested in North American culture. In an insight that would be welcomed by practical theologians, Hall argues that all theology is done in a specific context and, therefore, has a "historically conditioned character."[51] Theology not only deals with the Bible and tradition but also with what is occurring within culture.[52] And one thing occurring in our culture is that it is filled with perspectives that downplay "the complex problematique of human suffering."[53] These perspectives include a Neoplatonic denial that suffering is ontically real, a Stoic resignation that suffering is part of the foundation of the world, and the claim that suffering and death can eventually be overcome through technology. According to Hall, this fundamental denial of suffering is not merely theoretical but serves as the "spiritual-intellectual vision by which our society has been nurtured, almost from the outset."[54] In other words, North American culture is deeply triumphalistic, including its predominant expressions of Christianity.

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[50] Hall, *The Cross in Our Context*, 15.
[51] Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 22.
[52] Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 22.
[53] Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 35.
[54] Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 38–39.

However, Hall notes it is hard to consistently minimize suffering in the face of adversity. “Sickness, death, anxiety, the demonic, human failure, and all such negating elements of our experience may be called unreal in theory, but the theory does not prevent them from existing.”[55] This creates cognitive dissonance in the culture, resulting in attempts to repress the pain we experience and even leads to “the incapacity to suffer.”[56] While Hall recognizes that some repression is necessary for survival and coping with life, repression can become an unhealthy way of life, leading people to falsify reality and ignore vast areas of human experience in which suffering is pervasive. For example, North Americans can experience a “programmed indifference” to the flood of data about worldwide human misery provided by news reports of genocide, starvation, or war crimes that seemingly occur daily.[57] Insofar as repression can lead to ignoring, minimizing, or falsifying the reality of suffering, it can become a threat to our sanity and human survival.[58]

Interestingly, Hall recognizes that Western attitudes toward death have also been affected by this repression. “Some of us are old enough to remember when death was still called ‘death,’ when funerals were held in people’s parlors.”[59] But as our qualitative data has shown, much has changed in the funeral industry.

In sum, Hall argues that our culture needs an open forum to express the experience of negation that all people feel but cannot allow themselves to admit that they

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[55] Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 41.
[56] Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 41.
[57] Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 43.
[58] Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 42–43.
[59] Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 44.

feel.[60] The North American mind needs a better theology to help us face death and suffering. Hence, he turns to the *theologia crucis*.

The Theology of the Cross and Human Suffering

Hall denies that the theology of the cross is "a specific and objectifiable set of teachings or dogmas," preferring to see it as a "spirit and method" of doing theology that reflects upon "all the various areas and facets of Christian faith and life."[61] However, Hall believes it does follow certain overarching principles.

First, a theology of the cross believes in the compassion of God, which leads to a different understanding of His nature. Hall quotes John 3:16 to show that the incarnation and the gospel both have a worldly orientation.[62] God's love for the world sent the Son of God to be crucified within it, which means the cross is "simultaneously God's cross."[63] Hall appeals to Luther as having "christologized the deity," especially in using the language of "the crucified God," a concept Hall endorses.[64] This is not the impassable God of the philosophers, but one who chooses solidarity with a suffering creation and meets it with the greater reality of His suffering love.[65] For Hall, God's presence in the world is not obvious but "concealed, tentative, indirect, and paradoxical" and "revealed through the crucified one."[66] This is what Luther called the *Deus absconditus.* God "*hides* in the very act of self-manifestation."[67]

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[60] Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 46.
[61] Hall, *Waiting for Gospel*, 80.
[62] Hall, *Waiting for Gospel*, 83.
[63] Hall, *Waiting for Gospel*, 81.
[64] Hall, *Waiting for Gospel*, 82.
[65] Hall, *The Cross in Our Context*, 23.
[66] Hall, *The Cross in Our Context*, 20.
[67] Hall, *The Cross in Our Context*, 20.

Second, a theology of the cross is committed to realism about human suffering. Hall believes the theology of glory suffers from a lack of honesty (a point also raised by Forde). According to Hall, theologies of glory exaggerate the positive and downplay the negative in life, neglecting to see "the evil, sin, demonic, and death that manifest themselves unmistakably in everyday life."[68] By contrast, Hall says the *theologia crucis* has "an extraordinary commitment to truth telling, a rare determination to be honest in one's faith claims—rare, I mean, in the whole realm of religion."[69] Seen as a whole, the Christian tradition stands on two affirmations: (1) that human suffering is real, and (2) that it is not the last word and therefore should not be our ultimate concern.[70] The Judeo-Christian tradition is so committed to the reality of suffering that even loyalty to God does not trump being honest about the adversity that people experience. Astonishingly, while the Biblical authors can express almost unthinkable levels of trust in God during severe trouble, when that suffering becomes unbearable, the patriarchs and prophets will accuse God rather than deny the reality of the suffering neighbor.[71]

Third, the *theologia crucis* reframes the problem of suffering. The traditional approach articulates the problem as a contradiction between God's power and His love. As the argument goes, if God were all-loving, He would want to eliminate evil, and if He were all-powerful, He could do it. To solve the problem, it is suggested that God is either not all-loving or not all-powerful. However, Hall sees that as a misunderstanding of the nature of suffering. He argues that the problem of sin is such that "power is of no

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[68] Hall, *Waiting for Gospel*, 84.
[69] Hall, *Waiting for Gospel*, 84.
[70] Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 19–20.
[71] Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 27.

avail."[72] God created human beings with the freedom to be capable of genuine goods.[73] However, the freedom that makes genuine goods possible also makes it possible to choose the antithesis of good.[74] For Hall, that means some level of suffering may be unavoidable. He argues that "death itself can be life-serving."[75] Some good experiences in life are only possible if one can experience their opposites. For example, one cannot experience the feeling of compassion and sympathy without the possibility of death and suffering. Experiences of negation seem to be necessary corollaries to experiences of life. Therefore, Hall argues that God must allow suffering to exist to allow the higher human goods to be realized. That means solving the problem of evil is not a question of exercising sheer power. No amount of power can eliminate the logical corollary between the potential for good and the potential for suffering. However, Hall is careful to say there are limits to how godly suffering can serve life: "What is *not* intended, in the tradition of Jerusalem's interpretation of the matter, is not death as such but what we may call death-serving death, that is, death which draws attention *to itself* instead of drawing us the more fully into life."[76] While Hall reckons that a degree of pain is necessary for "the human potential for nobility, for love for wisdom, and for depth and authenticity of being," claiming that a "pain-free life would be a life-less life," that insight should not "be exaggerated to the point of celebrating or cultivating pain."[77]

Each of these points helps to form a response to the cultural commitment to triumphalism that Hall sees as being endemic in North American society, with its

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[72] Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 99.

[73] In affirming the reality of free will, Hall here differs from Forde's Lutheran commitment to the reality of the bound will and denial of freedom.

[74] Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 59.

[75] Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 61.

[76] Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 62.

[77] Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 63.

commitment to a theology of glory. Clearly, the *theologia crucis* requires developing a different way of thinking, which is a point also raised by our next theologian of the cross.

Kōsuke Koyama and the Crucified Mind

Kōsuke Koyama (1929–2009) was a Japanese Protestant theologian and missionary to Thailand. He explained that he began to develop a theology of the cross when he was fifteen, after experiencing the carpet bombing of Japan on March 10, 1945.[78] His perspective is especially valuable for this study because his characterizations and criticisms of Christian attitudes come from an Asian context. He noticed trends and habits of thoughts brought by Western missionaries, which may go unrecognized by Westerners themselves. Koyama was well known for using vivid images and metaphors to describe what he called a "crucified mind."

The Cross and the Lunchbox

What does it mean to have a mind shaped by the *theologia crucis*? Koyama invites us to imagine a Japanese businessman carrying his lunchbox to work. For Koyama, the lunchbox stands for human resourcefulness.[79] It has a handle, which is a symbol of efficient control. One can easily carry and wield a lunchbox by using the handle. By contrast, the cross has no handle, and it is not easy to carry. Koyama claims the Christian attitude can often be one of trying to put a handle on the cross, which means trying to domesticate and control God. When theology attempts to do that, it becomes idolatrous:

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[78] Koyama, "Reformation in the Global Context," 119; cf. Koyama, *Mount Fuji and Mount Sinai*, ix–x.

[79] Koyama, *No Handle on the Cross*, 2.

"Theology that puts on a handle to the power of God is no longer a theology but a demonic theological idolatry. Theology must refuse to 'handle' the saving power of God."[80]

Instead of living by human resourcefulness and trying to control and manipulate God, the crucified mind has decided to live by the power of and seeks the wisdom and understanding of the crucified Lord and the more it apprehends the "foolishness and weakness of God" as revealed in Christ, the more its conventional spirituality is shaken. "This shaken mind is the crucified mind."[81]

The Impassioned God and Broken Christ

The crucified mind has a different understanding of the nature of God. Like Hall, Koyama does not take God to be impassible but impassioned.[82] The cross is an expression of God's love, which sent Christ to the "periphery" of human existence, where He entered into the experiences of pain, suffering, and marginalization that people so often experience. This love for us results in God having an "agitated" mind:

> But I find that the image of the agitated mind of God, given by Hosea, illuminates the "word of the cross" for me "from inside God," if we are allowed to say such a thing at all in our theology. The word of the cross points to God's agitated emotions because of God's love towards us. The word of the cross heals our history by giving it hope and life. It is this word of the cross that exposes the deception of "two theologies"—theology of instant gods, and theology of taking the name of God in vain—in the most profound fashion.[83]

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[80] Koyama, *No Handle on the Cross*, 3.
[81] Koyama, *No Handle on the Cross*, 8.
[82] Koyama, "The Asian Approach," 438; Koyama, *Water Buffalo Theology*, 108.
[83] Koyama, *Mount Fuji and Mount Sinai*, 241.

For Koyama, Christ came into the world to become broken. His brokenness changes our view of both God and neighbor. The broken Christ confronts us with a different picture of what God is like and how it is possible to relate to others. "By being broken he indicates to us the new possibility of embracing others. In my judgment here is a great spiritual message of Christianity to humanity. One must be broken in order to embrace others, and when this takes place, the 'truth is done.'"[84] Koyama believed that Christ's brokenness stands in stark contrast to much Western Christian tradition, whether Greek or Latin:

> Christian theology, under the influence of the Greek philosophical mind and the Latin administrative mind, has become largely a theology of the unbroken Christ. The theological meaning of the brokenness of Christ has been ignored. Both philosophical and administrative minds are attracted to the concept of "perfection" and they dislike "brokenness." Indeed, we question whether we can find hope in the broken Christ. How can we trust such a "weak," even repelling image of Christ? A strong Western civilization and the 'weak' Christ cannot be reconciled harmoniously.[85]

In contrast to having philosophical and administrative minds, a mind shaped by the theology of the cross is a mind captured by the brokenness of Christ. "This broken Christ—the torn and mutilated Christ—is the one who heals the broken world! The New Testament does not speak about a beautiful, unbroken, unmutilated Christ. What a strange faith that focuses itself upon the broken crucified Christ!"[86]

Examples of the Crucified Mind

Just as Hall referred to the hidden God, Koyama says the theology of the cross is apophatic.[87] God reveals Himself through Christ and yet remains hidden.[88] For example,

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[84] Koyama, "The Asian Approach," 444.
[85] Koyama, *Mount Fuji and Mount Sinai*, 242.
[86] Koyama, *Mount Fuji and Mount Sinai*, 242.
[87] Koyama, "Reformation in the Global Context," 125.
[88] Koyama, "Reformation in the Global Context," 125.

Koyama says that God's actions in the world are baffling because He does not work "comprehensively." Koyama cites the example of how Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead but did not raise everyone else in the graveyard. Jesus also healed all who came to Him but did not free humanity from every disease and infirmity. Hence, Koyama denies that God is "an obvious" God who produces "answer-theology" that works mechanically but is, instead, a "baffling" God who produces "invitation-theology."[89] Koyama means that God does not seek to answer each and every one of our questions to satisfy our curiosity or search for knowledge. Instead, Jesus invites people to walk with Him in the way to experience truth in practice and so be affected by His life.

This mindset produces a different reaction to suffering. A crucified mind faces suffering and flees to God in moments of grave doubt. For example, when Jesus cried to God from the cross, asking why God had forsaken Him, the Father did not provide any answers. And yet, despite the feeling of abandonment, Jesus fled to God against God.[90] That fleeing *to* God in the very moments when one would be tempted to flee *from* Him is what Koyama takes as living by faith without having an answer. "Jesus trusted in the forsaking God on the cross."[91]

This realism about suffering is another mark of the crucified mind: it rejects what Koyama calls "happy-ending religion." According to that kind of religion, Christianity is expected to be the way to good health, a better salary, and an improved social position. People provide testimonies about how Jesus is the solution to their problems. By contrast, the crucified mind knows that the Christian faith has no essential relationship with

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[89] Koyama, *No Handle on the Cross*, 71.
[90] Koyama, "Reformation in the Global Context," 125.
[91] Koyama, *Mount Fuji and Mount* Sinai, 247.

improving one's social standing. As much as it may lead to greater happiness, it can also make one regret the day of one's birth (e.g., Job). As Koyama insists, "The gospel (good news) is anything but a happy-ending religion."[92] When God is understood to be someone who exists to provide the faithful with a good life, He looks "cheap" and nothing more than "a predictable manager of happy-ending religion."[93] Koyama names the attitude that God is expected to act in a predictable manner in response to human action as "straight-application" theology.[94] It is another example of trying to domesticate God and to put a handle on the cross. But God does not work in such an obvious, efficient, and comprehensive way and the crucified mind does not expect Him, too.

By contrast, Koyama says the Christian way is a "Christlike-going" that leads to the cross, not away from it: "The Christlike going is a 'difficult going.' It is a painful going. It is a going in which one encounters the cross. It is a going in which one encounters the cross even without knowing how to carry it."[95] The way of the cross faces the reality of suffering, and depends upon Christ for its resourcefulness: "Its resourcefulness is basically crucified-and-risen resourcefulness," and not "self-generated resourcefulness."[96]

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[92] Koyama, *No Handle on the Cross*, 76.
[93] Koyama, *No Handle on the Cross*, 77.
[94] Koyama, *No Handle on the Cross*, 77.
[95] Koyama, *No Handle on the Cross*, 107.
[96] Koyama, *No Handle on the Cross*, 113.

Crucified Communication

The theology of the cross also leads to a different understanding of communication. The fact of the Incarnation leads to what Koyama calls incarnational communication: "Incarnational communication is the way in which God's event is communicated."[97]

First, incarnational communication of the gospel involves the whole person. It includes more than just the communicator's speech but their whole lives:

> To be a communicator of God is not at all an "armchair-affair." It is a "calamitous" assignment. It is not a "part-time job." It requires *all* of a person's life. In the conviction that "the Lord God helps me" (50:7), he must accept rejection and humiliation. He becomes the rejected, the humiliated, and the misunderstood (53:4). This rejected, humiliated, and misunderstood person is the communicator of the saving acts of God in history. He gives his "cheeks to those who pull out the beard." What an image of the communicator![98]

Koyama points to how the scars on the apostle Paul's body—the marks from the lashes he had received—were part of his apostolic preaching. God communicates His solidarity with creation, not through theory, but through the life of the communicator: "The God who says, 'Your problem is my problem' cannot be made real through 'communication-logy,' but only through the life of the communicator."[99]

Second, the incarnational communicator's mind is attuned to the complexity of the people being communicated to. This was a formative insight from Koyama's experiences as a missionary in Thailand. He quickly realized that there was a profound difference between the "library Buddhism" he studied in the seminary and the much more complicated reality of the "street-Buddhists" he met in the city.[100] The two are related,

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[97] Koyama, *Water Buffalo Theology*, 155.
[98] Koyama, *Water Buffalo Theology*, 156.
[99] Koyama, *Water Buffalo Theology*, 155.
[100] Koyama, "What Makes a Missionary?" 119.

but real people are much more complex than the systems they are expected to fit into.[101] While Osmer called for prophetic discernment, Koyama said a missionary must develop a "neighborology." He recalled a time when he attempted to evangelize a northern Thai woman but could not speak her dialect, which irritated her. "She was annoyed at me for looking at her *in my own terms.* She felt that she was only an object of my religious conquest."[102] She felt that he had not bothered to learn about her. The incarnational communicator must see the neighbor as they are in reality, not as they are imagined to be. That requires humbly understanding one's context. Instead of having what he calls a "teacher complex," Koyama argues that one must be just as interested in listening to and learning from others.[103] In that way, the crucified mind demands self-criticism.[104]

Summary

Now that we have presented the normative theology to be used in our theological reflection, we can use a theology of the cross to interpret the evidence and the non-theological interpretations from the first three chapters.

Theological Interpretation of the Evidence

As explained earlier, practical theology is interdisciplinary, purposefully seeking to interact with insights from other disciplines to better understand a situation, context, or practice. In the last chapter, we saw that the three non-theological interpretations deepened our understanding of the evidence, uncovering beliefs that may influence how

[101] Koyama, *Water Buffalo Theology*, 151.
[102] Koyama, *Water Buffalo Theology*, 65.
[103] Koyama, *Three Mile an Hour God*, 71.
[104] Koyama, *Three Mile an Hour God*, 72.

mourners choose to celebrate the dead in funerals. The goal of this section is to engage in the normative task of practical theology and to use the theology of the cross to help us further understand the meaning of the evidence. To accomplish that, the theologies of the cross articulated by Forde, Hall, and Koyama will be brought into dialogue with the evidence, as well as with each other, to understand better what the evidence reveals about contemporary beliefs about funerals. These analyses should help funeral preachers to better identify local theologies of funerals, mortality, and human destiny in their respective contexts.

Interacting with Becker

Theologians of the cross will find that Ernest Becker's theory of death denial confirms that mourners likely have a profound fear of death. What they will learn from Becker are the ways in which people actively repress that fear and how that energy is channeled into a wide range of activities meant to ward off death. It would not come as a surprise to theologians of the cross to learn that changes in funeral practices, such as the trend of moving away from wakes, viewings, and traditional funerals with a body present, reflect mourners' fear of dying and their unwillingness to face its reality. How those trends specifically manifest in the preacher's specific context will likely reflect local theologies of death, mortality, and human destiny. Whatever those beliefs may turn out to be, they may serve as barriers to hearing the gospel.

Following Forde, theologians of the cross will recognize that Becker's theory that people engage in immortality projects shows that people believe in a type of theology of glory and a secularized form of salvation by works. Though the salvation sought is not

that of the soul's entrance into heaven, it represents the same basic urge to live beyond death and the attempt to achieve quasi-immortality based on one's works. Fordean theologians of the cross would identify that popular belief as an example of the ladder schemes of salvation. Mourners holding to that belief will either not believe in justification by faith apart from works or find that concept hard to understand, given their assumptions about how to "live on" after death. They should be comforted with the truth that salvation is by grace, that it is given as gift, through faith in Christ (cf. Eph 2:8–9). They should be comforted with the truth that God justifies ungodly people who stop working and simply believe in the God who forgives (cf. Rom 4:5–6).

If Becker's theory is true, even secular mourners will be longing for some type of life after death, though their concept of that "afterlife" (such as it is) is falsely conceived. The theologian of the cross will recognize that redefining "immortality" as leaving a lasting legacy or as imprinting a lingering memory in the cultural consciousness is not a satisfying substitute for the gift of eternal life. That is especially the case since even notorious human beings "live on" in that way. The funeral preacher of the cross can comfort mourners with the promise of the resurrection—that the one who believes in Jesus will rise and never die again (cf. John 11:23–27).

Forde explained that preachers address what he called "the old Adam," which, put simply, represents attitudes that resist the truth of the gospel. Theologians of the cross can use Becker's concepts to help identify some of the pretensions of the old Adam who refuses to admit that he has no real solutions to the problem of death. After Becker, the funeral preacher can be more sensitive to attempts by mourners to sublimate the fear of death. Something as seemingly innocent as an overly effusive eulogy or the reluctance to

admit any of the decedent's flaws or failures may be motivated by a false gospel—a fear that the decedent has not done enough to "climb the ladder" to heaven (or its equivalent), which would be a projection of the mourner's own fears. Given this reluctance to admit one's sins or guilt, Fordean theologians of the cross may recognize the mourners' need to be comforted by a word of absolution. They may need to hear the message of forgiveness in Christ to counter the guilt of failing to live up to the demands of heroism.

Becker's thesis that people repress the fear of death helps to confirm Douglas John Hall's prognosis that North American culture denies or downplays suffering. Following Hall, the funeral preacher of the cross must resist such triumphalism and affirm the reality of suffering. Hall saw the need for society to have an avenue for being open about the suffering that everyone experiences but is reluctant to speak about. A theologian of the cross would see a funeral service as just such an avenue. The funeral preacher can honestly name the troubles that mourners may not be willing to name or face on their own. Even though current funeral trends suggest that mourners want a triumphalistic denial of death (e.g., celebration of life services), the funeral preacher of the cross would recognize that such services attempt to mask the forces of negation. Hall would say that mourners do not need funeral preachers to help them deny death but to embody compassion—a *suffering-with* the mourner—just as the crucified God came to suffer with and for humanity. The funeral preacher's role is not to come to help people "see through" their suffering but to comfort the mourner by coming alongside them to face the death together, just as Christ came to face death for us. The preacher will need to determine the level at which a triumphalist denial of death afflicts his or her community

or congregation. That will be uniquely part of determining the local theology or "neighborology" of that context.

Lastly, Kōsuke Koyama would likely see Becker's description of how people attempt to overcome death through immortality projects as an example of dependence upon one's own resourcefulness—of trying to put a "handle" on one's life. It also seems to be an attempt to put a handle on one's death, presuming to be able to control how one is remembered after death. That is not something that can be controlled, and Koyama would likely say that funeral preacher should not support such false expectations. Different communities will adhere to and express self-resourcefulness in various ways, and the funeral preacher will have to determine what are those local theologies. Instead of helping mourners to deny death, a funeral preacher with a crucified mind ought to comfort mourners by helping them understand their own brokenness, and by turning them to the broken Christ who went to the periphery for them. The funeral preacher's job is not to encourage belief in "happy-ending religion" according to which one's legacy guarantees quasi-immortality. The love of Christ embraces those who are not worthy to be embraced and who do not have a legacy worth remembering. Christ came especially for the people who are not brave enough, confident enough, or talented enough to undergo their respective hero projects. Such a preacher would emphasize that "the theology of the cross is fundamentally different from a theology of honour, prestige, and power."[105] We can be afraid of death and mourn the experiences of it in our lives, but we need not repress our fear of it as much as see it through Christ, whose torn and mutilated person heals the broken world. The funeral preacher of the cross recognizes that it is

[105] Koyama, *Mount Fuji and Mount Sinai*, 251.

undoubtedly a strange faith to find comfort in, but that is what it means to follow an unobvious God.

Interacting with Zahl

Theologians of the cross will find that David Zahl's theory of seculosity confirms that mourners will likely judge their self-worth based on their performances and project those concerns on the dead. Seculosity helps funeral preachers understand that even professed atheists may nevertheless share that expectation of having to be "justified" (to find "enoughness") by their works. Theologians of the cross will recognize that kind of performancism will likely be expressed in funeral practices such as obituaries and eulogies, and in changing rituals that increasingly celebrate the life and accomplishments of the deceased. The preacher who seeks to be sensitive to their audience will want to determine how performancism manifests in local theologies of human worth and of human destiny in their context. Different neighbors, in different socio-economic situations, may be in the grip of different levels and manifestations of performancism.

A Fordean theologian of the cross will recognize that Zahl's theory confirms that the accusations of the "law" are not limited to the Ten Commandments but can be found throughout society. The seculosity of parenting, work, or leisure are all examples of laws that accuse one of failing to meet society's many standards. While Luther could speak of the "terror" created by the accusation of the law, Zahl refers to the anxiety and burnout created by it. Knowing that mourners expect themselves and the decedents to live up to these standards—knowing that they likely suffer from performancism—a funeral preacher working with a mourning family should be sensitive to the temptation they will

feel to judge the dead according to what they have done, and to idealize the dead, not out of healthy respect for their memory, so much as out of an unhealthy sense of pressure from seculosity. Something as seemingly innocuous as a celebration of life service can be a projection of how the mourner expects to establish their "enoughness" based on self-exertion.

While Zahl speaks in terms of social and psychological pressures, theologians of the cross will recognize that seculosity is inconsistent with the doctrine of justification—it is, in essence, a false gospel. Thus, funeral preachers of the cross will also anticipate that seculosity will lead mourners to legalism and judgmentalism as people try to make themselves feel better about their performances by comparing their lives to those of others. Preachers can anticipate that mourns will feel stress and guilt for failing to meet the many different demands of seculosity, whether at work, at home, or in school. Fordean theologians of the cross will understanding seculosity to be a form of the theology of glory. The funeral preacher can comfort mourners with the good news that Christ died so that believers can be forgiven and given "enoughness" through faith in Him, apart from one's works. The way for funeral preachers to comfort mourners who assume a framework such as seculosity is not to be their life coach who encourages them to continue meeting those impossible benchmarks but to proclaim to them absolution in Christ.

Theologians in the tradition of Douglas John Hall's theology of cross will see in seculosity a confirmation of society's orientation to triumphalism. Seculosity demands that one meet the standards of "success" in all pursuits, and people expect to be able to do it. Seculosity expects triumph. Those who have had a measure of success in some areas

of life (e.g., Silicon Valley entrepreneurs, entertainers, or professional athletes) may feel a sense of "enoughness" because of it. Still, most people will fail to achieve those unrealistic ideals. Remembering what the decedent has accomplished is not wrong in itself. But a funeral preacher of the cross will want to discern whether the accolades are due to an underlying belief in triumphalism. Seculosity can help theologians of the cross identify how Hall's "culture of official optimism" expresses itself in different areas of life. It can help funeral preachers recognize in which areas mourners may be tempted to chronically falsify and filter out negative memories and experiences. Following Hall, a funeral preacher of the cross would want to name the pain, failings, and feelings of negation that people who have tried and failed to achieve "enoughness" are likely experiencing. The preacher can comfort mourners with the message that the crucified God knows the truth about one's life—warts and all. There is no need to repress or deny the failures one has experienced in the different avenues of seculosity. There is no need to keep up appearances to satisfy the demands of triumphalism. Instead of denying the negation, funeral preachers can help mourners face the pain and disappointments, just as God-in-Christ came to face the suffering for us and with us.

Theologians following Koyama will recognize that seculosity illustrates the attitude of trying to put a "handle" on one's life in an attempt to control one's own destiny. Obituaries and eulogies can become summaries of human resourcefulness, whereby decedents are pictured as being in complete control of their lives, moving from achievement to achievement, smoothly progressing through life according to their well-crafted plans, and propelled by their own grit and effort. In such accounts, God may be co-opted as the force that works obviously and mechanically to help Christians fulfill the

demands of seculosity, leading to Him being seen as a manager of "happy-ending religion." Zahl's theory of seculosity can help funeral preachers of the cross anticipate that mourners may feel guilt and uncertainty over whether their lives have been "enough" and can help explain the confusion that mourners may experience when a decedent's life or death has been tragic. Following Koyama, funeral preachers of the cross can help mourners develop a crucified mind and comfort them by pointing to God in Christ, who is "baffling," "not obvious," and "not comprehensive." Funeral preachers should invite mourners to "walk" with Christ, who has given us the promise of ultimate victory through His resurrection, not by drawing upon human resourcefulness.[106] Such victory is received by faith in Christ and is not attained by "handling" one's life.

Interacting with Smith

Christian Smith's account of MTD also helps funeral preachers of the cross to better understand their audiences. Fordean theologians of the cross will recognize that MTD not only represents a theology of glory but also fits the ladder scheme of salvation. People believe that their security, significance, and destiny depend upon self-exertion, understood in this case as being good and kind. If, according to Smith, people expect to be saved based on being good and kind, and if they believe God exists to make people happy, mourners will likely feel pressure to present the deceased as having been both good and happy and, therefore, as having been blessed by God and worthy of salvation. Mourners will, therefore, feel pressure to downplay any sin, suffering, or failure the decedents almost certainly experienced. They may also experience cognitive dissonance

[106] Koyama, *No Handle on the Cross*, 112.

between their therapeutic concept of God and the pain they are experiencing due to the death of their beloved family or friend. Such suffering may not fit their expectations of how God ought to work, intervening to make one happy. A Fordean preacher would recognize MTD as another ladder scheme of salvation. Though its moralism is minimal, laws such as "be kind" and "don't be offensive" do not have the power to make anyone kind or unoffensive. Instead, the gospel comforts mourners by revealing that righteousness does not come from being agreeable but through faith in Christ. God's "therapy" is not to make people happy but to "kill" the old Adam with the law and then raise him from the dead by the gospel. A Fordean preacher would not try to comfort mourners by reinforcing MTD's essentially false view of God and salvation but would comfort them by proclaiming God's grace in Christ.

A theologian of the cross influenced by Douglas John Hall would recognize Smith's findings about a therapeutic view of God is consistent with cultural triumphalism and optimism. People expect to be happy and successful, and MTD enlists God to make that happen. But as Hall notes, such triumphalism is hard to maintain in the face of persistent adversity. Indeed, Smith's follow-up study found that teenagers had to revise their MTD-like beliefs in the face of the difficulties they experienced in the years after Smith's first study. Likewise, mourners with MTD convictions will experience cognitive dissonance at the death of a loved one who may not have been very "happy." That experience may push them to revise their beliefs about God. Following Hall, funeral preachers of the cross will emphasize that mourners need a cruciform view of God. Instead of conceiving God as a therapist or butler, survivors will be comforted to hear that God came to die for us and suffers with us without taking that suffering away.

Moreover, mourners need to be invited into the life of the church understood as a community of suffering and hope. Of course, preachers can also expect that the suffering of Christ may be perceived as scandalous, especially to people who assume some form of MTD. The cross is inexplicable if the Father exists to make us comfortable and blessed. "The good news that *life* is available to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death has as its corollary the less enticing news that in order to avail ourselves of this life we shall have to know ourselves numbered among those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death!"[107] A theologian of the cross knows that a funeral service is not doing its good work if it does not help mourners know they are sitting in darkness and shadow. Rather than blind them to the forces of death, it should call them to serious reflection on their condition as human beings. If Hall is correct, rather than God existing to make us happy, God-in-Christ cannot prevent us from suffering because the human condition requires us to pass through trials to realize higher human goods.[108] For example, loneliness is necessary to the joy of human community. The good news of the cross is that God does not invite us to experience this creaturehood without fully assuming the human condition Himself in which He experienced temptation, finitude (i.e., kenosis), and forsakenness.[109] To deny these factors of human life in either funeral preaching or the funeral ritual would be to contradict human experience. Instead, the gospel invites us to accept these realities and, through the cross and resurrection be incorporated into the life of the Lord and learn to live as part of a community of disciples that embraces life in terms of the reality of the

[107] Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 129.

[108] This brings Hall into conflict with Forde, at least concerning the issue of sanctification, if not justification.

[109] Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 131.

"conditions of creaturehood."[110] Put simply, the *theologia crucis* leads to an *ecclesia crucis*.[111] The only answer the church can give to that suffering is to share it with others. Following Hall, a funeral preacher of the cross would regard the Christian funeral as part of the church's mission to share the burden of suffering with mourners to help them in their process of healing.

Finally, when MTD is compared to Kōsuke Koyama's vision of the cross, theologians will recognize that MTD embodies much (if not all) of what Koyama rejects as "obvious" religion, "straight-application theology," and "happy-ending religion." It shows no hint of having a crucified mind or developing a theology based on the reality of the cross. This is alarming, given how many of the teenagers Smith interviewed came from Christian homes. From the perspective of a theology of the cross, MTD would not only be a theology of glory but it could hardly be regarded as even nominally Christian.

Furthermore, Koyama's concern with "neighborology"—that is, with the importance of listening to and learning from one's neighbor—is supported by how Smith realized that no one seems to have ever asked the teenagers what they personally believed about God. They had been told what to believe and asked to answer questions based on materials they received in church, but they were never asked about what they believed about God. Consequently, teenagers found it hard to articulate their religious convictions during interviews with Smith. Koyama criticized Christians for having a "teacher's complex" that seeks to teach before listening. A crucified mind listens before it speaks. If that is a common experience, then funeral preachers of the cross need to take time to

[110] Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 133.
[111] Hall, *God and Human Suffering*, 143-44.

listen to mourners, ask them questions, listen to their answers, and develop their "neighborology" to better understand the audiences attending the funeral.

Furthermore, given that MTD depicts God as largely distant and non-interfering, theologians of the cross who follow Koyama will seek to comfort mourners by speaking to them about the impassioned, crucified God who acted in history through the incarnation. God is not a butler who is expected to serve us in obvious and comprehensive ways. A butler's work is obvious, efficient, and easy to control, while the work of the crucified God is far from obvious and does not seem very efficient. The death of a loved one, especially when tragic, does not appear to be consistent with the work of a butler whose purpose is to make one's life easy or comfortable, nor like that of a therapist who comes to make one happy. In those moments, God's presence is not only far from obvious, but it may also feel more like absence or abandonment, jeopardizing one's faith. In such cases, the theologian of the cross will counsel mourners that Jesus is not a "quick answer" or "a magic name which transforms the broken world into an instant paradise."[112] Jesus' "answer" is to suffer and be crucified. In those dark moments of feeling divine abandonment, funeral preachers of the cross will exhort mourners to "flee to God against God."[113] While MTD presents God as aloof, a funeral preacher with a crucified mind will demonstrate that Christ is present in the periphery of the funeral experience, walking with mourners in their suffering. Unlike an idol one carries, or to which one may affix a handle, the comforting truth is that God carries us.[114]

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[112] Koyama, *Mount Fuji and Mount Sinai*, 241.
[113] Koyama, *Mount Fuji and Mount Sinai*, 246.
[114] Koyama, *Three Mile an Hour God*, 46–47.

While funerals and celebrations of life services are often about grandeur—celebrating the deceased's achievements, wealth, and status—such grandeur contradicts the humility central to Christ's death. The crucified mind would challenge the materialism surrounding funerals and seek to emphasize the value of mourning as a community and of showing solidarity in suffering. A crucified mind would not advocate for funeral rituals that draw attention to the individual's resourcefulness. It would prefer to point to the shared human experience of death and the hope found in the resurrection. Instead of promoting practices that encourage mourners to avoid the discomfort of death's finality or offer sanitized versions of loss, a crucified mind would embrace the pain and vulnerability of death just as Christ did. Similar to Hall, Koyama's theology of the cross would lead one to think of funerals as spaces for genuine grieving and reflection on our own mortality. Ultimately, Koyama's theology would lead funeral preachers of the cross to reimagine funerals as counter-cultural moments that meditate on the crucified Lord: "this is the theme of Christian spirituality and Christian mission."[115] It should therefore also be the theme of Christian funerals.

Conclusion

This chapter has reflected upon the findings of the non-theological theories in dialogue with the theology of the cross as articulated by Gerhard Forde, Douglas John Hall, and Kōsuke Koyama. By applying the insights of these theologians to the empirical and non-theological evidence surrounding funeral practices, it is evident that many contemporary approaches to funerals, death, and mourning are examples of theologies of glory. Indeed,

[115] Koyama, *Three Mile an Hour God*, 73.

the three non-theological theories used to interpret the qualitative evidence (e.g., the denial of death, seculosity, and moralistic therapeutic deism) can all be taken as examples of theologies of glory. Assumptions about salvation by works, triumphalism, moralism, and the avoidance of suffering characterize these theologies. Consequently, when mourners hold those beliefs, it influences them to choose funeral rituals that over-emphasize the decedent's achievements while minimizing the reality of death, suffering, loss, and the need for communal grief. How those beliefs may manifest in a specific situation as a local theology cannot be known a priori. It is up to the preacher to develop a "neighborology" to determine what local communities believe so as to better preach the comfort of the gospel to them.

The theology of the cross challenges such beliefs, advocating instead for salvation that comes to us by grace through faith in Christ, apart from our own resources or accomplishments. It urges an incarnational and cruciform engagement with suffering, mortality, and the vulnerability that comes with death in imitation of God's own participation in suffering. Funeral preaching informed by the theology of the cross invites mourners to confront death. It does not ask them to deny their painful experiences but teaches them to hope in the crucified Christ who meets them in their suffering. That approach shifts the focus of the funeral from emphasizing one's personal glory to acknowledging the shared experience of suffering in light of the resurrection. Ultimately, funerals that adopt this crucified mindset call for a countercultural reimagining of funeral practices as moments of humility, truth-telling, and profound theological reflection. This subject will be taken up in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5

FUNERAL PREACHING OF THE CROSS: THE PRAGMATIC TASK

Introduction

The goal of practical theology is not only to reflect upon Christian practices in an interdisciplinary way but to transform both practitioners and practices for the better.[1] It does so by discovering new knowledge that has significance for better understanding the practice, which can then be employed to improve it. In other words, practical theology is not only theological but must eventually become practical, completing the cycle of research and reflection and "moving toward some graceful action."[2] In this chapter, the findings from the previous chapters will finally be put into practice. Funeral preaching will be reconceived in two ways: in terms of the *act* and *content* of funeral preaching. Though these suggestions may be "modest and limited,"[3] these real changes can help to improve the practice in general.

This chapter is divided into five parts. First, it will summarize what Richard Osmer calls the pragmatic task of practical theology, including six forms of change that may be expected to apply to a practice after theological reflection. Second, it will state nine problems with current practice. Third, it will suggest how the act of funeral preaching can be reconceived as the "ministry of the word" in answer to a set of problems

[1] Pattison and Woodward, "Introduction," 13.
[2] Whitehead, "The Practical Play of Theology," 47.
[3] Pattison and Woodward, "Introduction," 11.

with contemporary practice that was raised by the evidence. Fourth, it will suggest how the *content* of funeral preaching can be improved to better answer contemporary beliefs about funerals. Fifth, it will conclude with a synthesis of the recommendations.

The Pragmatic Task of Practical Theology

The final task of practical theological interpretation is what Richard Osmer calls the pragmatic task. He describes it "forming and enacting strategies of action that influence events in ways that are desirable."[4] This is the practical outcome of the practical theological enterprise. The cycle of research and reflection undertaken in the previous chapters is meant to generate a new understanding or theoretical basis upon which to take further action.[5] He explains this can be done by offering *models of practice* as well as *rules of art*. Models of practice offer practitioners "a general picture of the field in which they are acting and ways they might shape this field toward desired goals."[6] Rules of art are "guidelines about how to carry out particular actions or practices."[7] The end goal of both is "leading change."[8] Ballard and Pritchard present a more schematized picture of what changes and outcomes might be expected after completing the pastoral cycle of reflecting upon practices.

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[4] Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 176.
[5] Ballard and Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action*, 163.
[6] Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 176.
[7] Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 176.
[8] Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 176.

Six Forms of Change from the Cycle of Reflection

Ballard and Pritchard suggest six changes that may occur as the practical theologian moves from reflection to practice.[9] Each of these is easily applied to the role of the funeral minister.

First, the process should result in *cognitive change.* This means the outcome of the practical theological reflection should result in an intellectual change, whereby new things about the situation and the practice have been learned, leading to new and improved practices. Or it may spur a further turn of the cycle of research and reflection. In the case of this dissertation, understanding how the denial of death, seculosity, and moralistic therapeutic deism are likely to be some of the beliefs that mourners bring to the funeral service and which can act as barriers to hearing the gospel will help funeral preachers to minister more effectively to grieving families.

Second, it can result in *affective change*. This is a change in one's emotions and attitudinal response. One of the most prominent issues brought forth in this research is the way in which people under the influence of the denial of death, seculosity, or moralistic therapeutic deism, may want to deny and repress the reality of death. A theology of the cross seeks to face this profound sense of loss and suffering, principally by means of preachers demonstrating compassion to the mourner in his or her suffering, just as Christ entered history to suffer with and for us. A funeral preacher of the cross will not stand apart from grieving families but seek to walk with them in their grief, helping them to face the forces of negation for themselves.

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[9] Pritchard and Ballard, *Practical Theology in Action*, 166–167.

Third, it can result in *behavioral change*. This refers to new competencies or skills learned through engaging in the practice, especially in light of "exposed weaknesses or unexamined needs."[10] This chapter will suggest ways in which funeral preachers and ministers can improve their competency in ministering to mourners in the form of teaching and preaching.

Fourth, there can be *interpersonal change*. These are changes in how one relates to other people, whether individually or in groups. One of the goals of this research will be to improve how ministers relate both to mourners and to funeral directors, helping ministers better understand what mourners may be thinking and why they are choosing to remember the dead in particular ways, allowing the minister to better handle himself or herself towards them. In imitation of the crucified God who invites us to participate in His compassion, cruciform funeral preachers will also choose to be present with mourners in their whole journey of grief, rather than staying aloof from them.

Fifth, there can be *social and political change*. This occurs when the practitioner sees oneself "as part of a community with social and political responsibilities."[11] An *ecclesia crucis* may not change society, let alone politics, but it will desire to manifest the changes it wants to see in society, siding with mourners against the forces that would deny or downplay their suffering.

Sixth, there may be *spiritual change*. Ballard and Pritchard explain, "This is the area of unifying change, of a vision and practice which both empowers people of faith and subverts their idols. It is the area of deep, continuous re-formation from which flows (and sometimes erupts) the creative energy to engage in new ways with God's mission in

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[10] Pritchard and Ballard, *Practical Theology in Action*, 166.
[11] Ballard and Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action*, 167.

the world."[12] One of the research outcomes has been to show that many people are committed to a theology of glory. It has suggested that that false conception of salvation feeds many funeral rituals and current trends and changes in funeral rituals. This chapter will argue that funeral preaching must change to address that false theology and so better align with "God's mission in the world" through the cross.

These are the types of changes practical theologians might expect to make to practice and some of the significant ways in which the pragmatic task of practical theology can move from reflection into action. Even so, this chapter will show how, given the evidence of the previous chapters, these changes can occur to funeral preaching both in the *act* of funeral preaching itself and in terms of the *content* of funeral sermons.

Nine Problems Raised by the Research

The previous chapters conducted qualitative research into what is popularly believed about funerals. That evidence was then examined in light of non-theological theories in dialogue with normative theological traditions, in particular, a theology of the cross. Here are nine problems raised by the research with current funeral preaching practices.

First, there is a problem of uninformed mourners. Funeral directors note that many people come to a funeral without any clear idea of what the practice is for. As the exhaustive description noted, "Funeral workers agree there are several important reasons to have a funeral. These reasons are not often understood by mourners who continue to have funerals due to family traditions or to uphold community standards." They arrange funerals for their loved ones either because one was explicitly requested by the deceased

[12] Ballard and Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action*, 167.

or because they are following cultural traditions they do not understand, without having any thoughtful convictions about what the ritual means or why it is helpful. It may not be surprising that secular people or the unchurched do not understand the purpose of funerals. But it is alarming that church-going Christians can be no less confused or uninformed about such a common practice, which virtually every church can expect to experience, and which has been celebrated by Christians for millennia.

Second, there is a problem of preachers not meeting with families before the day of the funeral and not following up with them afterward. As the exhaustive description noted, “Funeral directors agree that a good pastor will connect with the family soon after getting the call. They will visit with the grieving family before the day of the funeral service. A bad practice is when the pastor only sees the family on the day of the funeral.” The exhaustive description also stated, “While mourners expect pastors to care for the family in the days leading up to and during the day of the funeral, funeral directors report that mourners are typically not given enough aftercare, with little follow-up with grieving families.” Funeral professionals suggested that a best practice was for ministers to meet with the family several days before the funeral event, to meet with the family, ask questions about the deceased, get to know them better, and be a source of comfort to them in their mourning. Funeral directors also indicated surprise that more pastors did not follow up with mourners after the funeral since grieving is a process that takes time, implying that pastoral care will be needed later on. Though many ministers do meet with families before and after, it is not considered absolutely mandatory.

Third, there is a problem with overly-long funeral sermons. As the exhaustive description noted, “A good funeral preacher is aware of the time and factors such as the

weather or room temperature, and will not preach longer than necessary." Funeral professionals agreed that long sermons were generally out of place in a funeral setting. However, while shorter sermons were considered better than long ones, some clergy insist on preaching at length.

Fourth, there is a problem of preaching about hellfire, sin, and damnation. Funeral directors agreed that those topics should be dropped from funeral preaching because they were considered inappropriate and offensive in a funeral context. As the exhaustive description noted, "Mourners do not want to hear about hell, still less to be told that is where the deceased has gone. They want to be told their loved one is in heaven." The reason why those subjects are unpopular is likely due to factors such as Christian Smith's theory about moralistic therapeutic deism which carried the expectation that all good people go to heaven. It may also be due to the cultural optimism and triumphalism pointed out by Douglas John Hall. Hearing about the possibility of not going to heaven does not fit either of those perspectives. The trouble is that while those topics may not be popular, they are an integral part of Christian proclamation and belief in the last things. From the perspective of a theology of the cross, it was claimed that the loss of such language was due to curbing doctrine to encourage people to keep climbing the ladder of salvation, as per a theology of glory. The loss of such language also represents sub-Christian theological trends. The revelation of the gospel includes both God's salvation and His wrath and judgment (cf. John 3:16, 18, 36; Rom 1:16–18; 2:5). While Christians disagree over who will be lost, on what basis, and over the nature of final punishment, it would be dishonest to exclude those doctrines from funeral preaching entirely simply because they are unpopular. The challenge is to preach those doctrines wisely.

Fifth, there is a problem with altar calls at funerals. That term refers to evangelistic sermons in which people are pressed or pressured to decide whether to become Christians or go to hell. Funeral directors generally agreed that altar calls should be dropped as inappropriate. This may be explained by the prevalence of MTD, where it is considered impolite to be too forceful or exclusive in presenting one's religious claims. As the exhaustive description noted, "Non-religious mourners also want to know that things will be fine for the deceased. They expect celebrants to say the dead are no longer in pain and suffering but are in a better place without defining what that place is." The difficulty with that recommendation is that it would contradict the very nature of Christian proclamation to exclude any presentation of the gospel. Omitting an invitation to faith is not a legitimate Christian option. The challenge is to preach the good news of Jesus Christ clearly and apply it to the funeral situation sensitively.

Sixth, there is a problem with portraying the deceased in overly-idealized ways. Funeral directors expressed dismay at the deceased being portrayed as saints. As the exhaustive description noted, "Mourners want to focus on the good aspects of the decedent's life, such as being remembered as a loving family member, a generous neighbor, or someone with fulfilling hobbies. However, the goodness of the deceased can be overemphasized to the point where they can be portrayed as a saint or nearly perfect." The dead are written about in obituaries and spoken about in eulogies in an overwhelmingly positive light, coming close to elevating them to sainthood when that may not have been the case. This may be because mourners believe that salvation depends upon being good and, therefore, they project that goodness unto the deceased. It may also be due to mourners believing that God's job is to make people happy, and

therefore, they depict the deceased as perfectly happy and fulfilled. Or such idealization may be due to mourners projecting seculosity's expectation that people only have worthwhile lives if they meet the benchmarks of success. In short, this problem speaks to the need for greater realism in remembering the dead. The challenge is to be realistic about the deceased's sins, as well as the good they would have done to friends and family, without falsely portraying them as perfect.

Seventh, there is a problem with many mourners being in denial about the reality of death itself. As the exhaustive description noted, "Funeral workers report that Americans can be in denial about the reality of death and are generally death-phobic." Funeral workers perceive that grieving families are wrestling with—or failing to wrestle with—their own mortality and finitude. This was confirmed by Becker's thesis about how people repress a fear of death, and by Hall's thesis that the triumphalism and optimism in North American society prevent people from facing the very real experiences of negation that we all suffer from. Trends such as the growth in celebration of life services serve to help survivors avoid the fact that a loved one has died, preventing them from attaining closure in the healing process. The challenge here is to help survivors face the reality of death and slowly come to terms with their finitude in a healthy way. And yet, that is an important purpose for funerals. As the exhaustive description also noted, "The most prominent reason to have a funeral is for closure." But closure cannot happen without facing one's own mortality.

Eighth, there is a problem with popular concepts of God. The evidence showed a lack of articulate belief in God. However, interpreting the evidence in light of MTD suggested that many mourners who believe in God have an unorthodox view of the

Creator's relationship to creation and to persons. Although atheistic mourners will deny that God exists, and agnostic mourners will deny taking a position for or against God's existence, both atheists and agnostics still have a concept of the God they ostensibly do not believe in.

Ninth, the evidence shows that most people believe in a form of salvation by works or what we have called a theology of glory. Becker's theory that people attempt to repress their fear of death by undergoing immortality projects, Zahl's theory that people seek "enoughness" through performancism, and Smith's theory that, according to MTD, God saves good people, are all consistent with conceiving of salvation being earned through one's behavior. Funeral preaching ought to help people understand salvation through the lens of the cross in a way that is consistent with the doctrine of justification by faith apart from works.

Each problem calls for practitioners to reflect upon how funeral preaching can be improved. The first three problems are practical and can be addressed by rethinking the *conduct* of funeral preaching. The next six problems are conceptual and can be addressed by rethinking the *content* of funeral preaching. We will suggest improvements for both conduct and content in the rest of this chapter.

Changing How Funeral Preaching Is Conducted

One of the normative models of theological reflection presented by Osmer involves drawing on past models of good practice to reform practices in the present.[13] The idea is that if practical theologians reflect upon how Christians acted differently in the past, it

[13] Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 152.

can help us reimagine practices in the present, generating "new understandings of God, the Christian life, and social values beyond those provided by the received tradition."[14] For example, Osmer cites the problem of a lack of Christian education in modern times. People do not know their own faith. Simply attending Sunday morning worship has not proven sufficient to teach people about Christian beliefs and practices. Faced with that educational problem, Osmer explains that modern churches have looked back in history to see how the ancient church addressed the concerns of educating the flock and rediscovered the ancient practice of having an adult catechumenate. Osmer explains that from the third to fifth centuries, new Christians participated in an extended period of education and training, whereby they participated in the liturgy of the church, catechesis, prayer, and moral training to help them learn and practice the Christian faith. That ancient model was revived to help reform current approaches to initiation.[15] Osmer presents this as an example of how normative theological reflection can look at past practices in order to correct present ones.

Osmer's example is particularly appropriate to the three practical problems raised earlier. Practitioners have generally thought of funeral preaching as being restricted to the funeral sermon. Funeral sermons are presented in terms of being a sermon for a special occasion. But what would happen if funeral preaching was self-consciously understood in light of a broader program of Christian instruction?

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[14] Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 152.
[15] Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 153.

Reconceiving Funeral Preaching as Ministry of the Word

Martin Thornton (1915–1986) was an English Anglican priest specializing in ascetic theology. Thornton was interested in recovering past practices to improve current ones and was especially inspired by the Caroline Divines, an influential group of theologians and clergy in the Church of England during the reigns of Charles I and Charles II in the 17th century.[16] He explains that while the 17th century was known as the golden age of Anglican *preaching*, it is a mistake to think the *sermon* itself was the "be-all and end-all" of Caroline pastoral practice. Instead, the sermon fit into an overall system of what Thornton terms "the ministry of the word."[17] It comprised three different kinds of instruction where the sermon was central but did not exist on its own. Instead, it was one part of a broader concept of how the pastor was expected to teach the congregation. "The sermon was literally central to Caroline pastoral practice because it was preceded by catechetical instruction and followed by spiritual guidance."[18] Thus, the three elements of this broader concept of the ministry of the word are *catechesis,* which preceded and laid the groundwork for sermons;[19] the *sermon*, for which the Caroline divines were famous; and *personal guidance*, where the pastor instructed individuals in whatever area was needed. All three types of instruction were considered essential and mutually reinforcing. Thornton quotes Jeremy Taylor (1613–1667) as saying that preaching alone cannot accomplish the whole duty of ministering to the soul with the Word of God. It had to be supplemented by catechizing and personal guidance: "for by preaching, and catechizing,

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[16] The term "Caroline" refers to the Latin form of Charles (*Carolus*), indicating their association with the reigns of the two kings. Key figures among the Caroline Divines included Lancelot Andrewes, William Laud, and Jeremy Taylor.

[17] Thornton, *Essays in Pastoral Reconstruction*, 128.

[18] Thornton, *English Spirituality*, 236.

[19] For example, Thornton quotes Richard Hooker in support of catechizing (see Hooker, *Of the Law of Ecclesiastical Polity*, Book V, Chap. 18)

and private intercourse, all the needs of souls can best be served; but by preaching alone they cannot."[20] Likewise, Thornton quotes Thomas Wilson (1663–1755) as pointing to the ineffectualness of preaching in the absence of personal guidance: "But to make your sermons more effectual (and I desire and require it of you) that you take an account of the state and condition of your particular flocks, during the approaching season, and visit and deal in private with those upon whom your sermons have probably had no influence."[21] Though Wilson may seem too skeptical about the efficacy of preaching, there is truth in saying that sermons by themselves have less influence than many pastors assume. Preaching ought to be supported or reinforced by complementary forms of teaching such as catechizing and personal guidance. The Caroline approach to the ministry of the word takes a more realistic view of how much reinforcement Christians need to develop a mature Christian mind. Developing such a mind requires more teaching than is possible through sermons alone. No matter how brilliant, Sunday morning sermons cannot accomplish the complete work of Christian instruction.[22] Christians need all three forms to be instructed well.

While Thornton wrote specifically about the Sunday morning sermon and did not specifically address funeral sermons, his general point remains valid. If the weekly sermon cannot bear the full weight of Christian instruction (irrespective of which tradition is being taught), then neither can the occasional funeral sermon provide all the instruction needed about matters relating to death, dying, and funerals. Thus, following

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[20] Thornton, *English Spirituality*, 237. The reference is to Jeremy Taylor, *Episcopal Charge*, 1661.

[21] Thornton, *Essays in Pastoral Reconstruction*, 129.

[22] For similar insights into the need for a wider view of the teaching ministry, this time from the Pietistic movement in Germany, Philip Jakob Spener (1635–1705) recommended understanding teaching in terms of catechism, conventicles (i.e., small groups), the sacramental life, and preaching. See Clifton-Soderstrom, *Angels, Worms, and Bogeys*, 30.

Thornton, this chapter proposes that we rethink the practice of funeral preaching in terms of "the ministry of the word." For the rest of the chapter, "the ministry of the word" will be used as a technical expression for this broader concept of Christian instruction as including catechizing, preaching, and personal guidance. And for this study, the "word" that is being preached may be defined by the theology of the cross and by the related tradition of law and gospel preaching.

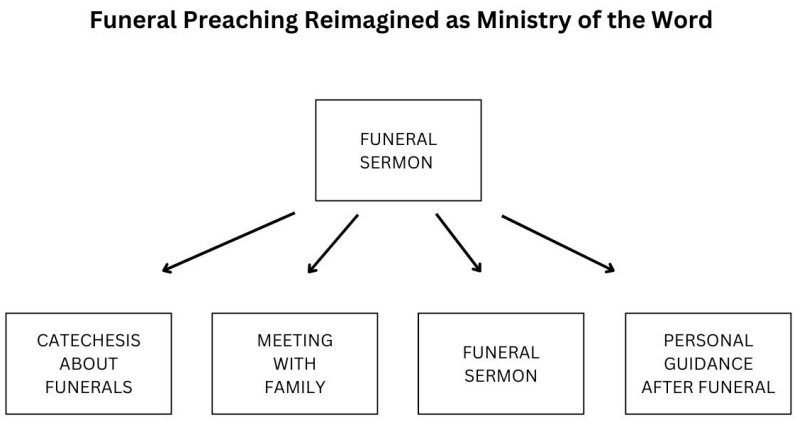
The Ministry of the Word Applied to Funeral Preaching

As was suggested, one way to improve funeral preaching is to rethink the role of the funeral sermon as being one part of Christian instruction about funerals that will also include *catechizing* and *personal guidance*. In other words, it requires greater humility about what a single funeral sermon can accomplish.

However, we may add a fourth type of instruction to the other three. All parties agree that the best practice for funeral preachers is to meet with the family before the day of the funeral. That time is its own unique moment in ministering to grieving families. That meeting, which may last for an hour or more, will be taken up with settling practical matters related to the funeral service and may not be the appropriate time for catechizing mourners. They will be too dazed in the aftermath of the death to be able to focus on doctrine. The meeting with the family a day or two before the funeral is not necessarily part of an overall practice of personal guidance, for in many cases, the minister will be meeting the family for the first time. Thus, it may be more helpful to take it as a unique pastoral moment, when preachers can assess the family's religious convictions, listen to their pains, and be a comforting presence to gently offer guidance in whatever way is

appropriate. These four moments in reconceiving funeral preaching as a broader ministry of the word can be depicted in the graphic in Figure 3.

Figure 3: An Expanded Conception of Funeral Preaching



Adopting that larger conception of Christian instruction can potentially clarify how funeral preachers can better minister to mourners and help to answer the first three practical problems raised by the research.

The Problem of Uninformed Mourners

The first problem gathered from funeral professionals is that of uninformed mourners. Many mourners are not sure why they should have a funeral or what it means. This includes Christian mourners who attend church are still uninformed about the meaning and purpose of the ritual. The temptation for the preacher is to address that problem in the funeral sermon itself. But mourners are not likely to be in an emotional or psychological state to be able to hear or understand a long discourse about the nature and purpose of

funerals. Instead of expecting the funeral sermon to bear the weight of that instruction, the problem of uninformed mourners can be addressed through the first aspect of the ministry of the word, namely, through *catechesis*. Pastors ought to make a point of teaching their congregations what a funeral means so people can be better prepared for when they experience the death of a loved one. This can be accomplished in several different ways. For example, instruction about funerals can occur during a Sunday morning sermon. Preachers can begin by devoting at least one sermon a year to the topic of funerals. In a yearly cycle of sermon planning, preachers will regularly address topics such as marriage and raising children because those are perennial features of human existence that we need to be instructed about. But every single congregant will also experience the death of a friend or family member. Many will find themselves responsible for organizing the funeral of a loved one. Almost all will attend one. Therefore, one would expect pastors to spend some time teaching their congregations about funerals and their role in Christian discipleship.

The meaning and purpose of funerals can also be taught in Sunday school, in home groups, or as part of a membership class to help Christians understand this aspect of church life, to help prepare them for the day they will have to experience a funeral first-hand. The catechesis does not have to be done by the pastor but can be entrusted to other teachers within the church.

Additionally, Osmer noted that participating in the liturgical rites was part of the early catechumenate.[23] People learned by engaging in the practices of worship. Learning through liturgical participation would be especially appropriate in the case of funerals.

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[23] Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 153.

Most churches host them. If so, members of the congregation could be encouraged to participate, whether they involve family members or not. There are several ways in which church members can help prepare for a funeral, whether it is preparing lunch for the mourning family, preparing the sanctuary for the funeral service itself, doing set-up and clean-up, helping with the music, or simply being present at the funeral. Engaging in these practices before having to arrange a funeral for one's own family would help Christians gain an understanding of what Christian funerals are meant to do. By combining prior catechetical instruction about funerals with participation in funerals, church members will be better prepared for when they have to have a funeral for their family or friends.

The Problem of Not Meeting with Families

The second problem raised by funeral professionals concerned ministers who do not meet with the family before the funeral. According to funeral directors, while the day of the funeral is central and significant, meeting the family beforehand and following up with them afterward is also important. Here again, thinking of funeral preaching in terms of a broader ministry of the word can help.

For example, most pastors agree that meeting with families before the funeral is not only a best practice but should be standard practice. Naturally, there can be extenuating circumstances that might make the meeting impossible, but it should be seen as normative, not optional. Ministers will usually meet with families before the funeral to help plan the order of service and ask questions about the deceased. The minister can then take those stories and reminiscences and incorporate them into the eulogy or sermon to

make it more personal. Of course, ministers are also there to be a comforting spiritual presence. These good practices can be reinforced by not thinking of them as optional acts of service but as a regular part of the ministry of the word. Formal catechesis a few days before the funeral would likely be out of place at that moment. Instead, the ministry of that meeting may consist more of words of comfort, encouragement, and sympathy. Funeral directors report that even mourners who are not affiliated with a church look to ministers for personal guidance during that time. Hopefully, the initial personal guidance given before the funeral will be followed up with personal guidance given after the funeral, when some of the shock and numbness of experiencing death will have worn off and when people may have been able to live with the questions long enough to ask them and be comforted by the answers.

This same approach answers the problem of preachers not following up with families after the funeral. If funeral preaching is restricted to the sermon, then following up with the family might be considered optional. But if one thinks of funeral preaching as also including personal guidance, following up with mourners would be a normal part of pastoral practice. Things that were not said—and perhaps could not be said—in the funeral sermon could be raised in those follow-up sessions. Furthermore, mourners could have the opportunity to ask all the questions they could not think about during their deepest throes of grief, questions that were raised only in the weeks and months following the funeral as they began to experience different levels of mourning.

The Problem of Long Sermons

The third problem we gathered from funeral directors is that of long funeral sermons. They recommend preaching a short sermon, as does the relevant literature.[24] Nevertheless, long sermons remain a problem. Preachers may want a funeral sermon to accomplish more than what a typical sermon can because they recognize that the funeral service will be the only time they will have with some mourners. If an atheist family member is visiting from out of state, the pastor cannot expect to ever see that person again. Thus, preachers may be tempted to include as much information as possible in that one sermon while the audience is gathered together. Or preachers may feel the need to preach a longer sermon to explain the relevant truths about death and personal eschatology that they have not already covered in their regular preaching. The truth is that the death of a loved one raises numerous theological questions about life, death, salvation, heaven, and hell, and trying to address them all at once will result in long funeral sermons that irritate mourners and funeral professionals.

A solution to these problems is to reconceive the funeral sermon as part of a wider pattern of Christian instruction. Clearly, every death raises numerous existential and theological questions that have generated centuries of heated discussion. But as Hughes notes, "a funeral sermon is not the place for a detailed analysis of the problem of suffering and its attendant questions of human worthiness and God's justice."[25] Much of what the funeral preacher may want to say about funerals should be said, not as part of

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[24] For example, Robert G. Hughes writes, "If asked about the scope of funeral message, many experienced pastors are quick to reply, 'keep it short.' Specifically, they favor a sermon in the five-to-ten-minute range. Given the mental and physical condition of mourners and their resulting attention span, that may be good advice." See Hughes, *A Trumpet in Darkness*, 75.

[25] Hughes, *A Trumpet in Darkness*, 58.

the funeral sermon itself, but as part of the catechesis before the funeral or as part of spiritual guidance in follow-up visits with the family. There will be less pressure to fit the whole range of what can be said about Christian funerals in one sermon.

Inherent Limitations of These Changes

Reconceiving funeral preaching to include a broader pattern of Christian instruction solves some of these practical problems but not all of them. One limitation is that the ministry of the word is focused on members of the minister's congregation. If there are out-of-town visitors, atheists, or unchurched mourners in the funeral assembly, the funeral sermon will likely be their only exposure to the pastor's instruction. They will not benefit from prior catechesis or from personal guidance afterward. The funeral sermon is all those visitors will hear. Nevertheless, given the strong resistance to long funeral sermons, the preacher should resist the temptation to overcompensate with a long sermon and be satisfied with giving a shorter one. If one-time visitors do not get as much out of it as they would a long sermon, that is an acceptable loss. There is no reason to suppose that unchurched visitors would be any less irritated by long funeral sermons than regular church-goers.

Although this new approach will generally not benefit members outside of the pastor's congregation, it can still apply to unchurched mourning families who often feel a personal connection to the minister who has conducted a family member's funeral, whether they attend their congregation or not. That personal connection opens the door to further ministry with the family in question, creating the possibility that the minister can give spiritual guidance to the mourning family after the funeral.

Summary of Three Changes to Practice

Earlier, we summarized the six changes that Pritchard and Ballard suggested may occur as the practical theologian moves from reflection to practice. Reconceiving funeral preaching as the ministry of the word touches on three potential changes: cognitive, behavioral, and interpersonal.

First, suggesting that funeral preaching be thought of as the ministry of the word to instruct Christians about end-of-life issues reflects a cognitive change about the funeral sermon. It means taking a more realistic and humble view of what a funeral sermon can accomplish on its own. It also means adopting a broader understanding of the need for Christian instruction about funerals and how that can be accomplished through catechesis and spiritual guidance following the funeral.

Second, the suggestions will result in a behavioral change. Thinking of the funeral sermon as one part of a threefold or fourfold ministry of the word requires the pastor to plan to spend more time with the mourning family, making it normative to meet with them before the funeral and to follow up with them for spiritual guidance afterward. It also requires the minister to develop a plan of catechetical instruction for their congregation, including involving the congregation in helping to set up and to participate in funerals held in the church.

Third, the suggestions will result in an interpersonal change. Viewing funeral preaching as also including catechesis and personal guidance will mean ministers have to invest more of their time with mourning families—as much as the families will allow (and as much as the minister's schedule will allow). As ministers follow up with

mourners in the weeks, months, and even years after the funeral, walking with them through their many layers of grief, the relationship with that family will become more intimate. The previous chapter discussed how the theology of the cross changes how one relates to mourners. For example, Kōsuke Koyama strongly criticizes the tendency to teach in an arrogant and self-righteous manner, calling it a "teacher complex."[26] A teacher with a crucified mind will want to listen and learn before teaching. Instead of engaging in what Koyama calls "one-way-traffic religion," by which he means a religion that asserts itself over others and where the teaching only goes one way, Koyama recommends a "Christ-like going" which he explains is "intensely two-ways."[27] The minister's walk with the mourning family ought to be one of sympathy and compassion, which is a "two-way" entering into their grief that will necessarily affect the minister. Using another vivid metaphor, Koyama explains that the average human walks three miles an hour.[28] That is how fast Jesus also walked with His disciples during the Incarnation. Walking is slow and inefficient compared to going "on a motorcycle or by supersonic jet."[29] Nevertheless, despite the inefficiency, God became slow for us. Koyama sees in that an important lesson for theologians of the cross: God takes time to teach people lessons. Koyama gives as an example the fact that God took forty years to teach the Exodus generation a lesson.[30] Similarly, a funeral preacher of the cross will expect that spiritual guidance after the funeral will proceed slowly. As the minister follows up with the mourners, going to the "periphery" with them, listening before

[26] Koyama, *Three Mile an Hour God*, 70.
[27] Koyama, *Three Mile an Hour God*, 72.
[28] Koyama, *Three Mile an Hour God*, 6.
[29] Koyama, *50 Meditations*, 9.
[30] Koyama, *Three Mile an Hour God*, 3–4.

speaking, and developing a careful "neighborology" for their context, the interpersonal relationship will deepen in ways that simply appearing for the day of the funeral would not accomplish.[31]

Reconceiving the Content of Funeral Sermons

The previous section explored three problems related to the *conduct* of funeral preaching. This section will deal with six problems related to the *content* of the funeral sermon. To be clear, this section will not be dealing with the content of catechesis or subsequent personal guidance. Those subjects will be suggested as areas of future research and reflection. However, reflecting upon the content that funeral sermons can cover will relate to the potential content of catechesis and spiritual guidance. Still, the focus of this section will be on the funeral sermon itself.

The six remaining problems were the problem of hellfire preaching, high-pressure altar calls, portraying the dead in overly-idealized ways, mourners being in denial about the reality of death and their own mortality, a problem with deistic concepts of God, and finally, belief in salvation by works. In order to refine the practice of funeral preaching to address these six problems, this study will draw upon the law and gospel tradition of homiletics which grows out of the theology of the cross. Understanding the different between law and gospel will help to re-imagine the structure of a funeral sermon.

[31] Koyama, *Water Buffalo Theology*, 64.

The Law and Gospel Preaching Tradition

Law and gospel preaching stems from the conviction that God has two primary messages.[32] Some have characterized this by saying God has two "sermons": there is the law, and there is the gospel. Perhaps the best summary of the distinction between the two messages was stated by Martin Luther in a sermon entitled, "How the Christian Should Regard Moses:"

> The law commands and requires us to do certain things. The law is thus directed solely to our behavior and consists in making requirements. For God speaks through the law, saying, "Do this, avoid that, this is what I expect of you." The gospel, however, does not preach what we are to do or to avoid. It sets up no requirements but reverses the approach of the law, does the very opposite, and says, "This is what God has done for you; he has let his Son be made flesh for you, has let him be put to death for your sake." So then, there are two kinds of doctrine and two kinds of works, those of God and those of men.[33]

Here, Luther presents the fundamental distinction between a word of law and gospel. James Nestingen is typical of practitioners in this school when he says, "the proper distinction of Law and Gospel is fundamental to sound preaching."[34] Preachers in this tradition distinguish between law and gospel in terms of their *content* and *function*. And both considerations will be brought to bear upon funeral sermons.

The Content of Law Preaching

Law and gospel differ in terms of their *content*. On the one hand, a sermon characterized by imperatives, where the preacher tells listeners what they must do for God and their neighbor—calling on them to change their behavior, forsake their sins, or take more

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[32] Dobberstein, *Law and Gospel*, 14.
[33] Luther, *Word and Sacrament I*, 162.
[34] Nestingen, "Distinguishing Law and Gospel, 27.

seriously the work of being a disciple—is primarily preaching *law*.[35] Commandments such as those found in Leviticus ("You shall be holy," Lev 19:2 NRSV) or in the Sermon on the Mount ("Be perfect," Matt 5:48 NRSV) both count as law in this sense. The law has its use, but not as a ladder of salvation. The principal use of the law is to reveal sins (Rom 7:7–8). Without it, people tend to deny or downplay their sinfulness. Like a mirror, the law reveals the many spots and blemishes that stain our character and lives, leading to the conviction of sin, not as an end in itself, but in service to the gospel. "The law's pronouncements of sin, guilt, punishment, death, and damnation are always in anticipation of the gospel promises."[36]

However, as we explored in David Zahl's seculosity and Gerhard Forde's theology of the cross, that sense of demand and condemnation is not limited to overtly religious laws, nor is it restricted to specifically theological or religious threats. The content of the law includes whatever condemns, accuses, crushes, or exposes. Zahl and Forde both argued that such demands can come from social pressure to conform to benchmarks of success. Representing the law and gospel preaching tradition, Nestingen agrees and shows how expansive this category can be: "Moral requirements, the law of the state, familial pressures, personal expectations—even a blown leaf, to take one of Luther's favorite examples—can all preach the Law. For each one of them can condemn, the rustling leaf probably most effectively because it makes its threats implicitly, letting the imagination fill them out."[37] A blown leaf can function as a law because it can remind one of the fleeting nature of life, warning that death will come to us, too. Thus, human

[35] Dobberstein, *Law and Gospel*, 27.
[36] Dobberstein, *Law and Gospel*, 41.
[37] Nestingen, "Distinguishing Law and Gospel," 31.

life is permeated by the voice of law. Indeed, if that is true of a rustling leaf, then the voice of law can certainly manifest itself in the situation of the funeral itself.

The Content of Gospel Preaching

However, when a sermon announces what God has done for us through Christ—if it shares the good news that God has forgiven us, redeemed us, and reconciled us to Himself—then the preaching is primarily *gospel*. Generally speaking, the gospel is "comforting and joyful; it comforts consciences and raises them up again."[38] But more specifically, the nature of the gospel is to give eternal salvation to the believer. Forde compares gospel preaching to what is done in the sacraments. "In the sacraments, that is, we do not just *explain* Christ or the gospel, or *describe* faith, or give instructions about how to get salvation, or whatever (though we may well do all of that), we just give it, do it, flat out, unconditionally."[39] Put more simply, "To preach is to give Christ to the hearer, to do the sacrament to them."[40] While the law is a general word that can come from anything that hints at sin or wrath (e.g., from a rustling leaf), the gospel is very specific. The comfort it gives to the conscience is the salvation God has wrought in Christ through His death and resurrection, which is then offered to believers. Contrary to much preaching, the gospel is not "a generic word of acceptance."[41] Instead, at the heart of the gospel is a rejection of salvation by works and an affirmation of the doctrine of justification by faith, apart from works on the basis of the death and resurrection of Christ

[38] Nestingen, "Distinguishing Law and Gospel," 31.
[39] Forde, *The Preached* God, 89.
[40] Forde, *The Preached God*, 91.
[41] Nestingen, "Distinguishing Law and Gospel," 32.

for us. Whereas the law demands, the gospel gives: "The nature of the gospel is to give, and to keep on giving. It gives to those who do not expect, deserve, or merit the gift."[42]

In sum, in the law and gospel preaching tradition, both elements have different content and functions. Distinguishing between them is essential. It will also be essential to funeral preaching.

The Movement of a Law and Gospel Sermon

Given the distinctions above, law and gospel sermons are meant to move from one to the other. As Grimenstein says, the movement from law to gospel mirrors "God's ultimate action of bringing people from death into life."[43] The sermon itself will want to incorporate both elements, moving from law to gospel, corresponding to the Christian's movement from death to life: "A sermon's ultimate goal is movement from Law to Gospel. Just as Christians are ones who have moved from death to life, so also do preachers move listeners from the death of the Law to the life that is in the Gospel."[44] There is a certain teleological progression to the content of law and gospel. Grimenstein explains that, in the same way that a physician may want a patient to understand the seriousness of his or her illness to lead him or her to be healed, the law reveals sin to move someone to the gospel.[45]

The basic structure and movement of a law and gospel sermon can be applied to funeral preaching to help address some of the problems raised in the research.

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[42] Dobberstein, *Law and Gospel*, 51.
[43] Grimenstein, *A Lutheran Primer*, 52.
[44] Grimenstein, *A Lutheran Primer*, 50.
[45] Grimenstein, *A Lutheran Primer*, 52.

Reimagining the Funeral Sermon

The content of the funeral sermon needs to be reimagined in light of the research and the problems raised by it. This section will take on that task by exploring two objectives of a good funeral sermon. It will then address the challenge of incorporating biographical features into the sermon without it becoming a eulogy. It will then present a three-point structure that moves from law to gospel and which addresses the six remaining problems raised by the research.

Two Objectives for the Funeral Sermon

Funeral sermons are unlike any other sermon.[46] The special context of the funeral, the fact they are given once for each individual, the cosmopolitan audience, the short preparation time, the time constraints for the sermon itself, the opportunities it creates for greater fellowship with the grieving family, and the public witness to the power of the gospel, all make it unique.[47]

Homileticians have suggested different purposes for funerals in general.[48] Hughes argues that the funeral sermon has two objectives.

The first objective is to "help mourners face the reality of death."[49] Hughes explains the funeral preacher wants to help mourners accept the finality of death, view grief as therapeutic, and avoid "mechanisms of denial."[50] As Becker's theory of death denial proposed, whole cultures have been created to help repress the fear of death. And

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[46] Wiersbe and Wiersbe, *Comforting the Bereaved*, 53.
[47] Daniels, *The Funeral Message*, 16, 23.
[48] Thomas Long gives eight purposes of a good funeral. See Long, *Accompany Them with Singing*, 136.
[49] Hughes, *A Trumpet in Darkness*, 79, emphasis was removed.
[50] Hughes, *A Trumpet in Darkness*, 79.

as Douglas John Hall argued, North American culture is particularly characterized by triumphalism and the denial of the forces of negation. The funeral preacher—especially one who is also a theologian of the cross—must take a stand against those forces and insist on being realistic about the pain and suffering that people experience. The reality of death and mortality is brought home all the more when one understands that God entered into the world to suffer and die with us and for us through Jesus Christ. Thus, funeral preachers of the cross want to comfort mourners with the message of the cross. But comforting them first requires that they acknowledge the discomfort and distress they are experiencing due to facing the death of someone they love, and are facing their own mortality as a result. This objective directly relates to the seventh problem that was raised by the research—the problem of death denial. There is a cultural denial of death that a responsible funeral preacher must anticipate and be able to address in the sermon.

The second objective of a good funeral sermon is to "assist mourners to discover the hope of new life in Christ."[51] Hughes explains this means the funeral sermon should project a vision of God that will comfort suffering Christians and to help them to see their situation and life from the perspective of the death and resurrection of Christ.[52] This, too, fits our emphasis on the theology of the cross, which seeks to understand all of life in light of Christ's death and resurrection and the good news that justification is by faith apart from works. This objective relates to the eighth, ninth, and tenth problems raised by the evidence, which surround questions of salvation and of God's character.

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[51] Hughes, *A Trumpet in Darkness*, 79.
[52] Hughes, *A Trumpet in Darkness*, 79.

This proposal will adopt Hughes' two objectives as the goal of a good funeral sermon of the cross. Indeed, it is a good summary of what a Christian funeral should try to accomplish in general.

Balancing the Biographical

One of the biggest differences between a Sunday morning sermon and a funeral sermon is that the latter should be personal in the sense of including biographical details about the deceased.[53] However, while funeral sermons grew out Greco-Roman practices of eulogizing the dead, the funeral sermon is not a eulogy. Balancing the biographical element with gospel proclamation has long been a tension in the preaching tradition. As the research showed, part of the challenge facing funeral preachers today is that contemporary funeral trends lean towards being excessively personal. Funerals can be planned around the deceased's personality, with the space, music, and decorations all customized to fit their interests or hobbies. Those kinds of funeral trends bear all the hallmarks of the "expressive individualism" of Christian Smith's theory of moralistic therapeutic deism. The most extreme form of that "triumph of the biographical" is a secular celebration of life services that focus entirely on the life of the decedent to the exclusion of any mention of God.

However, excessive individualism should not lead funeral preachers into the opposite error of omitting any reference to the life of the deceased. For example, Johnson writes about how, in the late sixteenth century, Elizabethan sermons did not mention the

[53] Gibson, *Preaching for Special Services*, 53.

deceased at all.[54] More recently, Bregman cited the example of one Roman Catholic Archbishop who enforced the rule that the funeral homily contain no personal anecdotes or memory of the deceased. Predictably, Bregman reported how that policy was met with outrage.[55] This is especially so for funeral preachers of the cross who will insist on realism about why the assembly has been gathered: to face the death of a particular person who was loved by that community and whose death is being experienced as a disorienting loss. As Robert Krieg wrote, "the funeral homily in which the dead person is not mentioned would be insensitive."[56] Thus, a funeral sermon ought to be personal without exclusively consisting of biographical details. The funeral sermon should do justice to the life of the deceased in light of Christian proclamation. A good funeral sermon will, therefore, deal with two stories: the story of God's love shown to us through the death and resurrection of Christ and the story of the deceased.[57]

A Three-Point Funeral Sermon Structure

With those objectives and concerns in mind, and also keeping in mind the six remaining problems raised by the research, this section will present is a three-point structure for a law and gospel funeral sermon. It is not the only way to structure a funeral sermon but it may improve upon what is typically done. The three points are:

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[54] See Johnson, "Resurrecting the Funeral Sermon," 39. More recently, Bregman cites the example of one Roman Catholic Archbishop who enforced the rule that the funeral homily contain no personal anecdotes or memory of the deceased at all. Predictably, Bregman reported how that the policy was met with outrage.

[55] See Bregman, *Preaching Death*, 173–74.

[56] Krieg, "The Funeral Homily," 222.

[57] Krieg, "The Funeral Homily," 234.

1. Name the trouble[58]

2. Identify a moment of grace[59]

3. Proclaim the gospel

Each of these points will be explained in turn. For the sake of space, this presentation will not cover points such as how to develop an introduction, a theme, or how to do Biblical exegesis.

Name the Trouble

As was stated earlier, one of the goals of a good funeral sermon is to help mourners face the reality of death. Preachers—especially those who consider themselves to be theologians of the cross—must help mourners wrestle with their own mortality and finitude. In the previous chapters, we examined some of the cultural forces at work that would lead people to deny or downplay the experiences of negation in one's life. Those forces must be anticipated and countered by the theologian of the cross.

Funeral sermons should not only typically mention basic biographical details about the deceased but should seek to capture the uniqueness of that person's life. As Gibson writes, "Every person who has died is unique. That is why the standard, repeated, retreaded sermon will not do."[60] A funeral sermon should be like a tailored suit: "The minister would do well to learn a lesson from the tailor. The tailor does not have the same size suit for every man."[61] Acknowledging every person's uniqueness will mean

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[58] Monson, *Afflicting the Comfortable*, 36. The language of "trouble and grace" in contemporary homiletical discourse is indebted to the work of Paul Scott Wilson in *The Four Pages of a Sermon*. See Wilson, *The Four Pages*, 16, 79–146.

[59] This was suggested to me by Paul F. M. Zahl in a private interview.

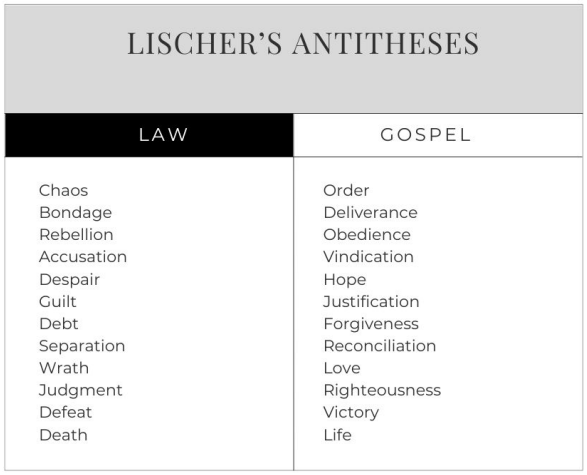
[60] Gibson, *Preaching for Special Services*, 55.

[61] Daniels, *The Funeral Message*, 25.

recognizing that every life has also had its own unique troubles. This is important because funeral professionals protested against the tendency to portray decedents as saints and opined there is a need for greater realism about the decedent's flawed character and the troubles they might have experienced. That one-sided portrayal was also seen in obituaries, which only highlighted the successes in one's life.

However, the need to acknowledge sin and trouble does not mean the funeral preacher needs to be overly specific. As Daniels wrote, "You do not need to take out the family skeleton and rattle its bones in the presence of the assembled multitude."[62] It is enough to be realistic about the sin, without getting into the details. There are more subtle ways of naming the sin without being too explicit. For example, Richard Lischer provides a list of law and gospel antitheses to help inspire preachers.[63] See the list in Table 2.

Figure 4: Law and Gospel Antitheses



[62] Daniels, *The Funeral Message*, 103.
[63] Lischer, *A Theology of Preaching*, 50.

Lischer's list can help the preacher identify the tragedy in the deceased's life without having to specify exactly what it was. Theologians of the cross know that every life has had trouble and has caused trouble. Compassionately ministering to people in their suffering and grief requires speaking about that trouble realistically. As Daniels asks, "What were the sorrows of his life? What deep disappointments had he suffered? What loved ones had one on to make the thought of heaven more attractive by their presence there?"[64] The deceased may have grown up in a broken home, suffered through the bondage of addiction, lived with depression, experienced a bankruptcy, or grieved the loss of a child. There is pain and trouble in every life.

Depending on what the pre-funeral interview with family and friends will reveal, any of Lischer's points may apply. Speaking about the trouble in their life lends realism to the biographical portrayal, will help create a connection with the mourners who will recognize the truthful portrayal, and will serve the function of being honest about the forces of negation that are a part of the human condition. Speaking frankly about the death can help mourners face it and their own mortality.

Additionally, naming the pain creates a connection with others. When Nicholas Wolterstorff wrote about the death of his son, he discovered there was universality in sharing his sharply particular pain of losing his son because his words gave "voice to the pain of many forms of loss."[65] That is a lesson for funeral preachers of the cross. But the account must be truthful and the preacher must get the facts straight. "Make no statement

[64] Daniels, *The Funeral Message*, 31.
[65] Wolsterstorff, *Lament for a Son*, 5.

in your sermon which you would not be able to substantiate, if necessary, before a court of law."[66]

This step in the funeral helps to address several of the problems raised by the research. It enables the funeral preacher to be realistic about sin (fourth problem), portrays the decedent in a way that is realistic about their flaws and troubles (sixth problem), and helps mourners to face the reality of death, mortality, and their own finitude (seventh problem).

Identify a Moment of Grace

After naming the trouble, the funeral preacher can identify a moment of grace in the person's biography. This is not yet the preaching of the gospel but serves as a bridge to help make the gospel intelligible. The moment of grace is a time when the decedent received unmerited favor, forgiveness, or absolution. It is a gift that was freely given in a moment of brokenness, when the decedent recognized their need for mercy. At this stage it does not have to be an explicitly Christian moment of grace (though it helps if it were). Looking at the corresponding gospel couplets in Lischer's list may give the funeral preacher ideas on how God's grace may have been experienced in the decedent's life. Hopefully, the funeral preacher will already know about such a moment through personal acquaintance with the decedent or through interviewing family and friends. Ideally, the moment will describe when the deceased had a decisive turn towards God, such as in a religious conversion. But it may also have come in a breakthrough after going through an addiction recovery program, or in finding forgiveness or a new start after a divorce, or

[66] Daniels, *The Funeral Message*, 27.

renewed purpose after losing a business. The moment of grace does not have to be explicitly religious. Non-religious people may have experienced moments of unmerited favor that the funeral preacher can then relate to gospel proclamation. Just as non-theological disciplines may contain "secular parables of truth" that can aid reflection on the gospel, so, too, identifying moment of (common) grace in the decedent's life may be thought of as an analogy for a gospel benefit that continues to move the sermon from law to gospel. This brings us to the third part of the funeral sermon.

Proclaim the Gospel

The moment of grace then allows the sermon to move to the proclamation of the gospel. Whatever the moment of grace is, even if it is only an analogy of God's grace, it will be fulfilled by some gospel benefit made possible by Christ's death and resurrection. For example, the experience of being forgiven by one's family after struggling with substance abuse can be an analogy for how God accepts and forgives the sinner in Christ. Or finding new love after a painful divorce can be like being born again. Or beating cancer can be like a resurrection from the dead. Whatever the moment of grace in the life of the deceased may be, the preacher can identify it and move to the related gospel truth, such as forgiveness, new birth, or resurrection in Christ. Given the moralism implied by Becker's immortality projects, Zahl's seculosity, and Smith's MTD, funeral preachers can make clear that salvation is a gift of grace, made possible due to God's love in sending Christ to suffer for sin, die on the cross, and rise from the dead. The gospel is possible because God willingly became "the crucified God," who entered into human suffering to make our salvation possible.

To be clear, the decedent need not have been a Christian who experienced this gospel benefit personally. The "secular" moment of grace is being used as a jumping-off point for making the gospel existentially relevant to the funeral audience. If the decedent had come to faith in Christ, then that makes it all the more relevant to the sermon. But the gospel can be proclaimed as true even if the decedent was not a Christian.

The foundation of one's gospel preaching will be to announce the death and resurrection of Christ. Paul summarizes the gospel in 1 Cor 15:1–11. As the apostle explained, what was of first importance in his preaching was that "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Cor 15:3–5). As a result of Christ's atoning death on the cross, there are numerous ways in which Jesus saves believers, including giving everlasting life (John 6:47), reconciliation to God (Rom 5:10), redemption (Rom 3:24), cleansing (1 Cor 6:11), clothing in righteousness (Phil 3:9), justification (Rom 3:26), glorification (Rom 8:30), being made a child of God (John 1:12), forgiveness (Eph 1:7), acceptance (Eph 1:6), deliverance from the powers of darkness (Col 1:13), transference into the kingdom of His love (Col 1:13), freedom from slavery to sin (Rom 6:6–7), heavenly citizenship (Eph 2:19), freedom from condemnation (Rom 8:1), access to God (Heb 10:19–20), peace (Col 3:15), and rest (Heb 4:3), to name only a few. Any one of these benefits may be relevant to something that happened to the deceased, or which may be existentially relevant to the funeral audience. The soteriological benefits made possible by the death and resurrection of Christ are far richer than what even many Christians may know. The seeming repetitiveness of certain funeral preaching can be

improved by enlarging one's view of salvation and by becoming better acquainted with all the spiritual blessings available in Christ (cf. Eph 1:3).

This way of presenting the gospel can avoid the extremes of giving a high-pressured altar calls or threatening people with hell, which funeral professionals complained of. In this model, the language of law and gospel is not curbed to avoid offending the hearer, but neither are they proclaimed in a deliberately provocative or manipulative way. Instead, the funeral preaching of the cross trusts the gospel promise to do its work, either convicting people of sin or grasping the hearer and creating faith in the gospel without the need for demanding dramatic public expressions of faith (i.e., altar calls). As Monson says, "Saving faith does not come to our listeners by exhorting them to have faith…This is an example of taking a gospel text (God's action of grace) and turning it into a law sermon (our action required)."[67]

Consequently, this approach to preaching a law and gospel funeral sermon answers several of the problems raised by the research. It presents a better alternative to the problem of preaching about hell, sin, and damnation (fourth problem). It addresses misconceptions about God's deistic detachment from the world by preaching the love of the "crucified God" who suffers with mourners (eighth problem). And against widespread moralism, it makes clear that salvation is by grace, through faith, based on the death and resurrection of Christ (ninth problem).

[67] Monson, *Afflicting the Comfortable*, 14.

Use Colloquial Language

The research showed that preachers should expect a disconnect between the convictions of Christian orthodoxy and what a mixed funeral audience likely believes. Many people do not understand why they should have a funeral. And just as many have unbiblical expectations about the nature of God and salvation, which then affects what they hope a funeral will achieve. The decline in religious influence in many sectors of American society, combined with larger intellectual trends such as MTD and seculosity, will result in unique local theologies that will act as intellectual barriers to understanding the gospel. All this means that funeral preachers will have to take special care to preach in such a way to reach a mixed audience with the Christian message. The gospel will have to be "translated" into the language of the neighbors in that specific context. The meeting with the family prior to the funeral should help the preacher assess what the mourning family understands, and so, in what language the gospel should be articulated to best reach them. A working-class unchurched family in rural North Texas will likely require a different kind of funeral sermon "language" than one composed for the upper-middle class in urban centers such as Dallas, Austin, and Houston.

Summary of Changes to Practice

Of the several changes to practice one would expect to find, this reimaging of funeral sermons covers most of them.

It involves a *cognitive* change in learning how to preach better to an audience that is in denial about death, struggling with their own mortality, and who believes in some level of moralistic works salvation. It also involves learning to balance the biographical

and doctrinal elements of a funeral homily by locating the story of the deceased in the greater story of Christ's death and resurrection.

It involves the *affective* change of identifying the pains of the decedent in order to better identify with mourners, and to help them face those pains, especially fear of their own eventual deaths. This helps mourners achieve closure.

It can involve the *social* change of no longer bowing to the pressure of having to deny the reality of death and suffering, whether in the life of the deceased or in the experience of the audience. It can mean the Christian funeral can become a counter-cultural moment of honesty about the pains of death, the fear of finitude, and the reality of all the forces of negation referred to by Douglas John Hall, among other theologians of the cross.

And it involves the *spiritual* change of learning to identify with a relational God who identifies with us in suffering and by learning to participate in a sympathetic community of the cross—one that does not deny the terrors of death but which understands them in light of the message of Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Resurrection Sunday.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter completes the practical theological task by finally proposing some modest improvements to the practice of funeral preaching. Further experience will lead to further reflection and revisions of the practice. As Ballard and Pritchard remind us, "It must be remembered that the cycle is not a single discrete event, but part of a

spiral of action and reflection leading to new action and further reflection."[68] The proposal highlighted several key areas where the qualitative evidence and analysis showed that funeral preaching could be improved in terms of its performance and content. Drawing on earlier models of Christian practice, especially the Caroline Divines, this chapter argued that funeral ministers should adopt a broader conception of funeral preaching as part of what has been called "the ministry of the word." This ministry includes preaching a sermon, catechesis, and personal guidance. When all three are taken together, ministers can better support mourners through their grief and offer more meaningful funeral experiences.

This chapter also suggested ways of improving the content of funeral sermons to answer the criticisms made of them by funeral directors. It advocated for a more realistic portrayal of the deceased's life while avoiding the extremes of beatification and judgmentalism by proposing a three-part structure, beginning by naming trouble in the life of the deceased, identifying a moment of grace experienced by them, and then moving to proclaim the corresponding gospel benefit to mourners. By following this threefold structure, preachers can not only connect the gospel to a realistic biography of the deceased but can also help mourners come to terms with their own experiences of negation that are a part of the human condition but which they are so often taught to repress or deny. This method of preaching a funeral sermon can help mourners experience the comfort of the cross and guidance that resonates with their experiences of adversity. Ultimately, these changes aim to align funeral preaching with the theology of the cross, offering hope and transformation by helping mourners face death in light of

[68] Ballard and Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action*, 163.

Christ's death in the context of a community shaped by participating in the greater reality of God's suffering love.

CONCLUSION

This study opened with the example of Tim Perry, who intended to preach a comforting funeral sermon to a mourning family, only to discover he was speaking a religious language they no longer understood. Consequently, this study explored the challenges faced by Christian ministers in conducting funeral services in a rapidly changing cultural context. As a work of practical theology, the goal has been to refine the practice of funeral preaching by understanding contemporary beliefs about funerals to contextualize funeral sermons better. By employing qualitative research, engaging in interdisciplinary dialogue, and theological reflection, the dissertation offers meaningful insights into how funeral preaching can be adapted to better address mourners' needs and effectively communicate the gospel.

Review of Key Findings

The dissertation's core findings emerged through a two-part gathering of qualitative evidence, through qualitative content analysis of obituaries and conducting phenomenological interviews with funeral professionals. These two sets of evidence illuminated prevailing cultural attitudes toward death, remembering the dead, and the purpose of funerals. Key observations include the following.

Shifting Cultural Perspectives

Secularization continues to alter the cultural landscape of death and mourning. Funeral directors report an overall decline in religious influence on funerals, though that waning influence depends upon what part of the country one is located in. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been an increase in attendees from unchurched backgrounds. Funeral congregations can be expected to hold diverse and often conflicting beliefs about the afterlife, grief, and the purpose of funeral rituals.

Themes in Remembrance

Obituaries and interviews revealed common themes in remembering the deceased, including educational achievements, career milestones, military service, family relationships, hobbies, and personal virtues. These elements highlight what contemporary culture values in a life well-lived, namely, it must have met different benchmarks of success. There is a near-total lack of any mention of personal failures, to the point that funeral professionals complained about the beatification of decedents.

Coping with Loss

Mourners frequently express feelings of grief and loss, often framing their experiences in terms of missing the deceased's presence, qualities, or shared activities. However, there was also evidence of deeply rooted denial of death and a refusal to face one's mortality. This was especially seen in the rise of celebration of life services that put all the focus on the life of the decedent. And yet, despite this sense of loss, the evidence also suggests

mourners are trying to repress their fear of death and grappling with their mortality in how they choose to remember the dead.

Hope for an Afterlife

While explicit religious references in obituaries were not universal, some included implicit connections to faith traditions, such as church affiliations, but did so without articulating robust theological convictions. The interviews with funeral directors also pointed to general beliefs about the afterlife without providing much by way of doctrinal specificity. These findings suggest that beliefs about the afterlife remain significant for many mourners but are increasingly varied and individualized.

Moreover, when the evidence was reflected upon in an interdisciplinary way, it suggested that the lived religion of mourners cannot be assumed to fit orthodox denominational molds. Indeed, the inarticulate nature of these references supports the theory that many people adhere to moralistic therapeutic deism or hope to attain quasi-immortality through leaving behind a legacy of memorable projects.

Challenges in Preaching

Funeral preachers must address a mixed audience of atheists, unchurched mourners, and those within Christian communities whose lived beliefs may diverge from their traditional denominational theology. This calls for a nuanced and sensitive approach that uses the gospel to comfort mourners and bridge cultural and theological gaps.

Limitations of the Research

While the findings contribute valuable insights to inform the practice of funeral preaching, given that practical theology pursues small-scale research, the study also faced certain limitations.

Geographic and Cultural Scope

The research primarily used data from obituaries within a specific cultural and geographical context: the Dallas-Fort Worth area. While the interviews with funeral workers represented experiences from around the United States, they were still limited to this country. This may limit the generalizability of the findings to other regions or cultures with different funeral traditions.

Reliance on Secondary Narratives

Obituaries and interviews provide indirect insights into popular beliefs about funerals and death. However, it is not part of a funeral worker's job to ask mourners about their theological convictions. A funeral worker may have no theological convictions or an inarticulate theological framework and be ill-equipped to discern the finer points of what mourners believe. Thus, the obituaries and interviews may not have fully captured the theological convictions of mourners had they been interviewed directly.

Theological Assumptions

This study approached the research from a Christian perspective and, more specifically, from the perspective of a theology of the cross, which then shaped its interpretation of

findings. While this framework enriches the analysis, it may only resonate with some theological traditions or audiences.

Areas for Future Research

The process of pastoral reflection keeps moving from reflection to improved practice to more reflection to more improvements to practice. Thus, the dissertation opens several promising avenues for future exploration:

Direct Engagement with Mourners

Popular beliefs are constantly changing, requiring practical theologians to continue investigating. Given that this research depended upon secondary narratives, future research can ethically and sensitively incorporate the voices of mourners themselves, providing richer insights into their lived experiences, beliefs, and expectations of funerals. Those future inquiries can be approached using the findings of this dissertation as a foundation and framework to ask more exacting questions about what people believe.

Expanding Interdisciplinary Dialogue

While this dissertation used the work of three theologians of the cross, it may be helpful to engage additional non-theological theories (e.g., trauma systems therapy, single session therapy) and other theological frameworks (e.g., Kierkegaard, Christian existentialism) to offer fresh perspectives on funeral preaching and its role in helping mourners cope with loss.

Testing the Suggestions

This dissertation proposed that funeral "preaching" be reconceived as "the ministry of word," which has at least three parts: catechesis, the funeral sermon, and spiritual guidance. It also suggested a model for law and gospel funeral sermons designed to help connect a realistic portrayal of the deceased to the hope of the gospel. Building on the suggestions made here, a follow-up study could be developed to see if such a program of Christian instruction leads to improved outcomes for mourners.

How the Research Has Shaped My Understanding of the Practice

Practical theology is rooted in one's ministry experience, so allow me to give a personal note at this point. When I was an undergraduate at McGill University, my parents, who had always had a rocky marriage, finally divorced. Within a short time—a matter of weeks—the family had disintegrated, my childhood home was sold, and I found myself homeless. It was one of the most painful periods of my life.

Flipping through a theological dictionary and looking up the word "pain" led me to the work of Kazoh Kitamori, a Japanese theologian of the cross. And that, in turn, led me to the wider tradition of the *theologia crucis*. I discovered that Canada's foremost theologian of the cross, Douglas John Hall, taught at my school, and was about to give his last class before retiring—a doctoral seminar on the theology of the cross. I felt a visceral need to take that class and to learn more about that theology. Soon after, I stopped Dr. Hall between classes, introduced myself, and asked special permission to take his last class. He said no. It was a doctoral seminar, I was an undergraduate, and the class was already full. But I was so desperate to know more about the *theologia crucis*

that I emotionally poured out my heart to Dr. Hall, explaining all that I was going through, how I had come across Kitamori, which then led me to Dr. Hall's own work. He listened silently. I remember that he was visibly moved. He shared with me that he had once met Kitamori in Japan and that he was a remarkable man. He told me he would talk to the registrar. The next semester, I took what ended up being the most impactful class of my theological education. It fundamentally changed how I view God as revealed in Christ. I found comfort in knowing that God was with me in my suffering.

Studying practical theology at McMaster Divinity College and undertaking practice-led research has again fundamentally changed how I view theology. The well-known "scandal of the evangelical mind" is alive and well in my Christian circles in Texas. People have genuine faith in Jesus as their Lord and Savior, but it is often unreflective, overtly anti-intellectual, and is not faith that is seeking understanding. Practical theology has helped me maintain a disciplined mind, keeping me open to searching for the truth, honest about what I find, and earnest in seeking better ways to serve Christ's church. That approach to theology complements what I learned about the theology of the cross and deepens my commitment to that tradition. Generally speaking, practical theology has helped me think of doing theology from the ground up, in contact with real people and their experiences. That was already a value I shared from the tradition of the *theologia crucis*, but practical theology provides an intellectual framework to more effectively put those practices into practice.

The way that this study on funeral preaching has changed my practice of funeral preaching in particular, remains to be seen. I am planning on putting into practice what has been recommended here. I am thinking especially about how to be more intentional

about following up with grieving families, not just once, but planning to do so over several years in a more "Christ-like going."

Concluding Thoughts

As American society continues to grapple with the complexities of secularization and moralistic therapeutic individualism, funeral preaching remains a vital pastoral practice that can offer comfort, meaning, and hope in the face of death. This dissertation underscores the importance of understanding the beliefs and experiences of mourners to bridge the cultural and theological gaps that often hinder effective communication of the gospel. By rooting funeral preaching in the theology of the cross, the study provides a model for addressing the pain of loss with the redemptive message of Christ's death and resurrection.

Ultimately, *Comforted by the Cross* is meant to call Christian ministers to engage more deeply with the evolving cultural landscape while remaining faithful to the transformative message of the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In doing so, funeral preaching can continue to hope to mourners, helping them towards closure in the face of death and offering a profound reminder of the eternal comfort found in Christ alone

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