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Leadership Guides No. 5

Conducting a Funeral

Mourning is part of life. Biblically, there is no indication that a funeral was a religious ceremony. As with a wedding, it was a family affair. However, death is a time when thoughts turn to eternity and for religious people - especially our brethren - it is not inappropriate for an elder (and other brethren) to be there if wanted by the family to extend the comfort of the Word. It is a time for empathy with the bereaved.

Importantly, it is an aspect of mourning that you - and your congregation - give appropriate support (emotional and practical) for as long as may be needed after the funeral, especially to members of your own 'flock' and to those who are now alone (1 Timothy 5:1-16).

[following by Steve Kieler]

There are no laws limiting who may conduct a funeral. It need not be a minister. Should you find yourself called upon to officiate, don't panic. The simple do's and don'ts which follow will guide you through.

Preparation

Because of family circumstances or distress it may be necessary for you to help with arranging the funeral. As regulations vary from place to place you would be advised to consult with an official at a funeral parlour in your area. Practical considerations include choice of casket, documentation (death certificate *etc*), obtaining a burial plot, arrangement regarding floral tributes, time and place of burial or cremation. Always be sympathetic to the wishes of the family.

Depending on the closeness to the deceased or the family, emotions can be a significant concern. But don't be afraid. You can be very effective if you speak from the heart - even through your tears. You are there to comfort and not to perform. People are very patient and sympathetic to those who speak with emotion and find it necessary to stop to dry the tears.

Who's in charge?

You will find that things are quite simple in this respect. Usually it is a family member who requests that you assist. The funeral directors are usually co-operative. The format can be agreed on by the funeral home, the family and yourself as to time and location, and for how long you should speak. I would suggest it be held to not more than 20 minutes maximum. Crematoria especially often impose a time-limit.

What do I say?

The more important issue here is what do I not say. This is not a time for preaching or proselytizing. It is a time to comfort the bereaved. You will be delivering a "eulogy"*. Once I heard a speaker mention a negative trait of the deceased but it was a trait of which everyone was well aware and he skillfully turned it into a positive statement. You would have to be very polished to pull that off without offending.

Information about the deceased may be obtained from friends, family, or personal experiences. Give personal information and family history first then mention interesting stories and experiences. Write it out in notes if needed. *Prepare well.*

It is certainly appropriate to mention scriptures regarding death and the resurrection but rule #1 is to "be wise as

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serpents and harmless as doves.” Matthew 10:16

Tip: Talk to the friends and relatives. Their conversation can give you anecdotes and facts you can use.

At the Graveside

The entire service may be held at the funeral home or at the graveside or, as is customary, a church building - or a funeral parlor commemoration followed by a graveside interment service. Sometimes the family preference is to hold the service in the home. At the graveside you may make a closing comment regarding the state of the dead or waiting for the resurrection. Quote a scripture such as Psalm 103:1-22 or 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, and give a brief closing prayer.

Sample service outline:

Here is a short outline of what to include, and some scriptures you might read:

We are here to mourn the loss [commemorate the life] of *name*.

Name was born *date* the Son/Daughter of parents *name*.

He/She was preceded in death by *relatives' names*.

Our sympathy and prayers are with the family and friends of *name*.

Eulogy. The body of the eulogy may center on grief, death, loss, reflection on the life of the deceased, importance of friends and family, the resurrection, eternal life, fragility and temporality of life. You may want to combine one or more themes in your presentation or use your own thoughts.

A funeral is a time to remember the positive aspects of a person's life

Here are some scriptures that may be appropriate and to select from. Nave's Topical Bible is also a very useful tool:

Ecclesiastes 3:19-21 & 7:1-5 & 9:1-12 & 12:1-7; Job 14:1-15; Acts 24:14 -15; 1Thessalonians 4:13 -14; 1 Corinthians 15:13-20 & 50-58.

Don't be preachy (too many scriptures) or too morose. Even a little tasteful humor is okay.

*** *ADDENDUM***

Terms

A *eulogy* is a short talk, which means '*to speak well of*'.

Epitaph is a brief statement on a tombstone. The epitaph, if any, is usually written and engraved on the stone by a family member or friend. It is of interest to visit old graveyards and read the stones. Some epitaphs are sobering but once in a while you'll find a humorous or even an insulting one.

*See also the CGOM articles **When Someone Dies and After the Resurrection.***

*Also **Bible Basics Lesson 4 (What Is Man?)***

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