

A Survey of Funeral Customs

Bill McDowell has written a master's thesis on the subject of funeral customs. We felt his last chapter, "What Should a Christian Do?" would be especially informative for all you ministers. Do not construe this as "orders from Headquarters." It is for your education in general — the first of many helpful features we hope to include in future issues of the Bulletin. Any contributions you send in for this area are welcomed.

— Jon Hill

"DOWNRIGHT PAGAN" decries Edgar S. Born, Jr., director of worship for the United Lutheran Church — describing many modern funerals! (*The Christian Century*, p. 717.)

Other church representatives are equally as vociferous in denouncing today's trend of burial — but these practices continue! The objections are against the secular ostentation with which "the deceased" is treated. The elaborate preparations, long and senseless "wakes," viewing of the body, materialistic display and needless expenses are causing more than casual concern in many religious communities.

Though it is seldom done, the first recommendation by church bodies is to notify the local pastor of a death. He should then be responsible to assist the family in their time of need.

Ministers' Responsibilities

It has long been recognized as one of the prime functions of the minister to help in time of death. The ancient Waldenses made specific note of this:

And whereas, in former times, it hath been the custom to cause the disconsolate widow to spend much money on singers and ringers, and on persons who eat and drink, while she weeps and fasts, wronging the fatherless children; *it is our duty*, from motives of compassion, to the end that one loss be not added to another, *to aid them with our counsel and our goods*, according to the ability which God hath bestowed on us, taking care that the children be well instructed, that they may labor to maintain themselves, as God hath ordained, and live like Christians (*History of the Church of Christ*, vol. iii, p. 447).

Contrary to the modern conception of the minister "staying out" of the "physical" needs of a death-stricken family, those ministers felt a duty, a compassion, a responsibility to *do* something to relieve the burden of the widow!

Times have not changed so much, after all. Great amounts of money are still being squandered needlessly on "singers, ringers, eating and drinking!" How often does a minister see this happen today, feel personally appalled, but does *nothing* about it, because he feels it might be "out of place" for him to speak up? Without realizing it, Mr. Brown echoed the very wording of the Waldenses by stating: "Every Christian has a responsibility to live his faith. Funerals are a good place to begin" (*The Christian Century*, p. 717).

But records indicate the average minister is ill-prepared to be of real help in these matters and is relegated to a "simple flunky" who says a few ritualistic words at the funeral service!

A *responsible* minister will *make it his business* to know the facts and be fully prepared to give *wise* counsel to the survivors on both spiritual *and* physical matters of death and burial so that his charges may "*live like Christians*"!

The Christian's Responsibility

To "live like a Christian" in a time like this, the Christian must do at least *two* things: (1) He must thoroughly know, understand, believe and have faith in what the *Bible* plainly teaches about death and the resurrections; and (2) he must be practical, realistic and concerned with the living even during the crisis time of grief and mourning.

The Church and the ministry *should* be respon-

sible to explain the Bible teachings and also give simple guidelines in practicality in times of crisis. A great deal has been written on the subject in the last decade. Ruth Mulvey Harmer does a creditable job in her book, *The High Cost of Dying*. She quotes some very practical and helpful suggestions:

1. When death comes, call your minister. Look to him for counseling not only regarding spiritual matters, but in connection with some of the practical details of the funeral.
2. Think seriously of holding the funeral service in the church. There is no rental or clergy fee for church members.
3. Costly caskets and expensive floral displays are not necessary for the expression of sorrow and affection. Gifts to medical research, libraries, charitable and educational organizations, and the church make significant and lasting memorials.
4. In order to keep the funeral as spirit-centered as possible, consider: (1) having the casket closed before the service begins or (2) having a private burial or cremation followed by a memorial service in a church.
5. If there is a graveside service, consider keeping it as simple and private as possible, perhaps having only intimate friends and members of the family present.

Although these must be considered strict recommendations by undertakers and other more "liberal-minded" people, they are liberal compared to the strict simplicity of Bible times. Those who adhere to the Bible example would tend to *avoid cremation*, not because they think they could not be resurrected if burned, but because they seek to follow the *example* of the Bible — which shows burning in the "lake of fire" as a punishment for criminals and those who have lost eternal life.

The entire burial procedure should be kept as simple as possible. The deceased should be buried as quickly as practical, considering family problems and needs. The funeral should be brief and simple with a reasonably inexpensive *closed* casket and preferably a *graveside* service. The indignities of embalming can be omitted in this way, if desired.

To be avoided, if possible, are the long, arduous and wearying "funeral procession"; the exhausting and pagan-influenced "wake"; and the expensive and needless "feast" afterward which makes a severe drain on the family's already-damaged reserves.

An alternative, the memorial service, is sometimes helpful, but this is relatively new and could

be offensive to relatives if they did not fully understand.

Most people do not wish to think about death nor discuss it, until too late, and harsh reality is upon them without warning! Like Abraham, the Christian should think and plan in *advance* for the inevitability of death.

Advance Practicality

Confusion reigns supreme at the death of the unprepared! Yet, a few simple precautionary measures could avoid a great deal of confusion. There are certain arrangements every family should make. The first important step is to have or acquire a safe place to keep all valuable papers — preferably a bank safety deposit box.

A safety deposit box can be rented for about \$5.00 to \$20.00 per year, depending on the size of box needed. The bank usually supplies a handy listing of all important papers which should be kept in the box. Our modern technical society demands records unheard of and unneeded in the past.

Regardless of age, an adult with a family should have a *will*. Many would be shocked to find that state laws vary a great deal and very rarely allow the estate to be divided as they might wish. The solution is a concise and *well-planned* will. This should be properly made out and kept in the safety deposit box.

Other items should be checked and also included in the box. A great deal is lost each year by survivors who are not familiar with benefits available through various sources. For example: veterans are eligible for a \$250.00 burial payment, military burial in a national cemetery and a free grave marker. Social Security makes a burial payment ranging from \$120 to \$255. There are death benefits in many accident and hospital policies. Unions, fraternal orders and some employers also have similar benefits available. In addition, many fatalities are covered under state workmen's compensation laws or other insurance policies.

The funeral director is familiar with most of these, but he will investigate primarily to find out how much he can charge for his services. He should not have this knowledge as a bargaining point in his favor! That is like asking a car dealer how much he will sell the car for, and he gains access to your bank account and requests the amount he knows you have available. It is an unfair advantage! The wise person keeps that advantage for himself.

An up-to-date record of personal and business finances is also wise to include — mortgages,

debts, payments — those items which would quickly tell a widow where she stands and help her avoid as much confusion as possible. One more advantage to include in the safety deposit box is information concerning a memorial society.

The Memorial Society

Because of the unfair advantages and flagrant practices of the funeral industry, societies have been formed to assist the average individual in his struggle against the high cost of death. Principally, a memorial society is a voluntary grouping of people who have joined together to obtain dignity, simplicity and economy in funeral arrangements through advance planning. It provides the advantage of collective bargaining to obtain the desired services at a moderate cost.

Joining a memorial society is not like joining a "union" or politically oriented club or organization. There is a nominal lifetime fee of \$15.00 which makes these services available. Information can be obtained through the Yellow Pages of the telephone book or from:

Continental Association of
Funeral and Memorial Societies
59 East Van Buren Street
Chicago, Illinois 60605

Generally, these societies encourage cremation, but are concerned about a simple burial as well. This simple burial can be obtained at a much reduced price through the society. A sampling of the latest costs through the society showed the traditional funeral to be from \$400.00 to \$500.00 (maximum), and a "simplified" traditional funeral to be from \$250.00 to \$350.00 (Jennifer Schroeder, Secretary, Chicago Memorial Society, personal interview, May 12, 1970). These costs are exclusive of cemetery costs which must be arranged individually.

In addition to price advantages, the society has prepared very helpful and instructive material to assist at the time of death. The memorial society provides a distinct advantage in our age of commercialism and extravagance in the funeral industry!

The Final Step

No one desires or anticipates death! It is an *enemy*, the *last enemy* to be destroyed in God's plan of salvation! (I Cor. 15:24-25.) To a world confused, unsure and frightened about death, the Christian can and must set the true example of hope and confidence — looking with certainty toward the coming resurrection from the dead when death shall be conquered for all time! □

PLAIN TRUTH COMMENTS

(Continued from page 86)

have all he has coming. I'm only 17 years old, but even I can't ignore facts like that. Thank you sincerely for the article.

— Perri D.,
Gilmer, Texas

SO YOU'RE A HOUSEWIFE

Your article "So You're a Housewife" by Paul W. Kroll is truly a life saver to my personal fulfillment and also the happiness of our home. The PLAIN TRUTH is helping me to fill the unanswered gaps in my life. No words could ever express what it has done for me.

— Mrs. R. T.,
College Park, Georgia

I'm in prison. One day soon, God willing, I'll be home. I made a mistake and I'll pay for it. But you folks are blessings that'll change my whole life; not only mine but my wife's. To start with, I was blessed with an exceptional woman who has stuck with me in doing this time. In the June issue of *The PLAIN TRUTH*, the article "So You're A Housewife," I learned a great deal. It was directed to women, but I read it anyway. My wife is a great woman. Thank you so very much for helping me to see.

— R. M.,
Riverton, Wyoming

Reading your article "So You're A Housewife," June 1972, I couldn't help but laugh at your "A magazine of understanding" line. That article was total bologna. . . . Not once was there a mention of the husband helping a bit with housework! I am not surprised to see a man wrote the article. Can he really expect me to accept his rap? I ask this man to spend only one year (when for us women it's more like 50 years) dusting the house, vacuuming the house, rearranging the house, cooking in the house . . . and see how long he can keep thinking how almighty important he is. What's wrong with a real marriage of being equal where the man gets up off his bottom and cleans after himself? I can't believe it. I could write 5,000 pages. I just can't believe you're serious.

— Sheila S.,
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

COMMENTS ON THE JULY PLAIN TRUTH

WHAT YOU CAN DO (ASPIRIN)

In the July issue of *The PLAIN TRUTH*, appeared an article, very frightening, about the uncommon knowledge about the common aspirin. I am writ-