



## Trouble with Funerals Eulogy Overload

### Boosting Harry into heaven

You are in the pew at Harry’s funeral. The pastor welcomes everyone and announces: *“We are an Easter people and Alleluia is our song. We are here to celebrate Harry’s life.”* A hymn is sung. Scripture is read. And then the eulogies start.

A grandson goes first. He chokes up. Then breaks down. He is haltingly, tearfully effusive about Grandpa: *“We just know Grandpa is in heaven. He was such a wonderful Grandpa.”* It goes on and on.

Then Harry’s sister gives a eulogy about how wonderful Harry was as a brother, son, and father. It goes on and on.

Then a colleague from work stands up for Harry, citing all his good deeds at work and all his good works in the community. It goes on and on.

Then it is the pastor’s turn. He praises Harry’s many good works in church. The pastor talks about the stages of grief. Finally he mentions that God is a God of life, and we celebrate life, and we celebrate Harry’s life, and yes, Harry knew his Savior.

You go home depressed. **The Gospel was there, but it was just around the edges.**

And think of all the fringe Christians and others who only go to church for funerals. What kind of message did they get from this sentimental celebration of Harry’s “good works”? When funerals are like Harry’s funeral, the church has failed to preach the Gospel and thus failed both the living and the dead.

### Funerals are NOT therapy

*“We’re here today to pay homage to your loved one and to help you in the grieving process.”* To the contrary, a funeral is **not** group therapy, **not** counseling from the pulpit. A funeral should **not** be tailored to the deceased the way a wedding is tailored to a couple being married.

Rather, a funeral is a worship service, and its proper focus is the Christian hope. In the midst of death we are called to bring hope, as Paul writes in I Thessalonians 4:13b: *“[We do] not grieve as others do who have no hope.”*

The service is for the living, not the dead. The living need to hear the Christian message of hope. This Word shapes not just the sermon but also the welcome, hymns, and prayers.

While circumstances vary from funeral to funeral, the basic message does not. **Every funeral proclaims the Christian hope in the face of death and leaves the rest to the Lord.**

### Eulogy overload

Grieving families often want multiple eulogies. To allow this opens a Pandora’s box of problems: Speakers are often too emotional; they talk too long; they tell inappropriate stories; and the deceased rather than the Gospel becomes the center of the service.

Many church leaders are working to fix these problems. For example, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops recommends dioceses place strict limits on eulogies. Many dioceses now allow only one eulogy. A handful of dioceses forbid eulogies altogether.

*(continued on page 2)*



(continued from page 1)

How can pastors say “no” to several eulogies when pressured by grieving families?

A pastor should not have to face these emotionally charged situations alone. He or she needs to be backed up by a funeral policy established by the church council.

A family service can be held the night before the funeral where family members have a chance to let down their hair, weep, and eulogize about their loved one.

The next day at the funeral a single, five-minute eulogy may be included in the service. Because anguish can easily undermine the message which ought to pervade a Christian funeral, it often works best if the pastor reads the eulogy.

At the reception following the service a microphone can be provided for others to eulogize. PowerPoint presentations about the deceased, if desired, are appropriately included in this setting rather than at the funeral.

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#### **Editorial Team**

Don Johnson  
Meg Madson  
Mark Richardson

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#### **Contact Us**

Subscriptions, information, and back issues:

Jane Hussey Larson  
Tel: 952/442-4134  
Fax: 763-476-6110

#### **Mailing Address**

424 South Olive  
Waconia, MN 55387

#### **Visit Us Online**

[www.crossalone.us](http://www.crossalone.us)

### **The Church's song**

The church's song is what-God-in-Christ-has-done-for-us. Therefore a congregation ought to have a policy about hymns at funerals and the pastor ought to have final authority in hymn selection. Secular songs, such as *Somewhere Over the Rainbow*, *Memories*, and *My Heart Will Go On*, are not appropriate even if the deceased requested them.

#### **What not to say**

- *His time was up. His number was up. God wills it.* The famous words from Ecclesiastes 3:1-2: “For everything there is a season . . . a time to live and a time to die” – are often misunderstood to mean that there is a kind of fate involved in death when actually that passage is simply observing the fact that life has certain patterns.

It is important to point out that God does not will evil or do evil. Rather, God's original plan, “Plan A,” for a world without sin and death did not work out. Sin came into the world (Genesis 3) and that meant that God went with “Plan B” – in short, he solved the terrible problem of sin on the cross, by himself, without our help, and it is finished (John 19:30). God does not will evil; he overcame evil, sin, and death on the cross.

- *We are here to celebrate life.* We do not deny death or regard it as natural or as our friend – or even as part of God's plan. As Hebrews 2:14 states:

“Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same nature, that through death he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage.”

Death is “the last enemy to be destroyed” (1 Cor 15:26). We follow the New Testament in identifying sin and death as two sides of the same coin: “The wages of sin is death” (Rom 6:23). “The sting of death is sin” (1 Cor 15:56).

### **Our Christian hope**

1 Peter 1:3: “We have a living hope” – because Christ lives, as we sing at Easter: “The strife is o'er, the battle done; Now is the victor's triumph won!”

When a Christian dies, his strife is over, his battle won because the Christian is baptized into Christ's death. Only in this light can we speak of death as good.

When someone dies, we point to the promises of God in texts such as these:

- Romans 8:32: “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him?”

- Romans 14:9: “For this reason Jesus Christ died and rose again that he might be Lord both of the dead and the living.”

- Romans 6:5: “For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.”

- I Cor 2:9: “But, as it is written, ‘What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him.’”

- Revelation 21:4: “[H]e will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away.”

In sum: Funerals fail when the eulogies are the main thing and the gospel is just around the edges.

A funeral is a worship service, and its proper focus is the Christian hope. It is a service for the living, not the dead.

# INNER EXPERIENCE IS AMBIGUOUS

A young farmer out in his field saw a cloud formation shaped like the letters “PC” –which he read as a sign from heaven – “Preach Christ.”

Off to seminary he went and became a pastor. He was a sincere Christian, but as a pastor he was inept and ruined the congregations he served.

His older brother just shook his head and said, “I told him the ‘PC’ mean ‘Plant Corn’ – he should have stayed where he was.”

How does a call to the ministry happen? An Anglican bishop describes her “inner call” as a direct, personal revelation:

“When I was about 15 . . . I heard a voice. I don’t think anyone else would have heard it, but it was as clear as anything. I heard a voice that said: ‘You are my beloved, and you will be my priest. And I will never leave or forsake you.’ I knew it was Jesus.”

Is a “call” to the ministry a vision in the clouds? A voice in the night?

## Deceptive angels

A survey reports that 40% of the population claims to have seen an angel – and every angel was reported to be a good angel!

But angels and visions are tricky. As Paul writes to the Corinthians: “Even the devil disguises himself as an angel of light” (2 Cor 11:14).

Visions and voices can be a kind of dream-like working out of inner desires and ambitions. Psychologists say that persons in transition or under heavy stress are prone to visions and voices.

## Luther’s “No” to visions

Everyone knows the story of Luther throwing an inkwell at the devil. What is less well known is

that he had the same reaction to visions of Christ. Luther from his *Table Talk* (WATR I:287, 8-27):

“Christ once appeared visible here on earth . . . and according to the divine purpose of God finished the work of redemption. . . . I do not desire that he should come again in the same manner, nor that he would send an angel to me. No, even if an angel would appear before my eyes, it would not add to my belief; for I have my Savior, bond and seal; I have his Word, Spirit, and sacrament; on these I depend, and desire no new revelations. And the more steadfastly to confirm me in this resolution to hold solely by God’s Word and not to give credit to any visions or revelations, I tell you what happened to me: On Good Friday last, I was in my room in fervent prayer when suddenly appeared upon the wall a bright vision of our Savior Christ, with the five wounds, steadfastly looking upon me, as if it had been Christ himself corporally. At first sight, I thought it was some celestial revelation, but I reflected that **it must be an illusion and juggling of the devil, for Christ appeared to us in his Word, and in a meaner more humble form;** therefore I spoke to the vision: Away with you, confounded devil: I know no other Christ than he who was crucified, and who in his Word is pictured and presented to me. Whereupon the image vanished, clearly showing of whom it came.”

For Luther personal experiences and private miracles may be the devil in disguise.

Moreover, for Luther seeking visions and private miracles is a sign of sin. He called it “enthusiasm” – believing in the god-within.

God, however, is not inside of us. Rather, he is outside of us and comes to us in his Word and sacrament, as Luther writes:

“In short: enthusiasm clings to Adam and his children from the beginning to the end of the world – fed and spread among them as poison by the old dragon. It is the source, power, and might of all heresies . . . . Therefore we should and must insist that **God does not want to deal with us human beings except by means of his external Word and sacrament.** Everything that boasts of being from the Spirit apart from such a Word and sacrament is of the devil” (*Smalcald Articles III/VIII/9-10; BC 323 [Kolb/Wengert]*).

Therefore pastors are free from having to have “an inner call” because all experiences and visions are ambiguous. Christ comes to us in his external Word and sacrament – as Luther says, a “meaner, more humble form.”

Congregations are free to reject clergy who use an “inner call” as a basis for their authority. The call to ministry is an external call; there is no certainty in inner voices.

## The call to public ministry

The call to public ministry is a matter of matching the need for preachers with the skills of those who are trained for ordained ministry.

(Of course, physical limitations, such as being blind or deaf, are not insurmountable barriers to ordained ministry.)

But in our day, as in Luther’s, there are individuals who **claim an inner call** but who can’t think or preach, or who are mentally unstable, or morally unsuitable for public leadership.

Christian leaders need to be strong and wise enough to say “No” to such people in order to protect congregations.

# GOOD HYMN – BAD HYMN

## “Rejoice, the Lord is King!”

Charles Wesley (1735-1790)

Rejoice the Lord is king! Your God and King adore;  
Rejoice, give thanks, and sing, And triumph evermore:

### *Refrain:*

Lift up your heart, lift up your voice;  
Rejoice, again I say, rejoice!

Our Savior Jesus reigns, The God of truth and love;  
When he had purged our stains, He took his seat  
above:

### *Refrain*

His kingdom cannot fail; He rules o'er earth and heav'n;  
The keys of death and hell Are to our Jesus giv'n:

### *Refrain*

His sits at God's right hand Till all his foes submit  
And bow to his command And fall beneath his feet:

### *Refrain*

## What's right?

It doesn't have the beat, but it has the meat. It's  
simple, but not simplistic.

A refrain, yes, but not one long refrain.

Old style, but look what it affirms – the hymn lifts up  
what the Lord has done, is doing, and will do!

And it's upbeat to boot.

\* \* \*

## Luther on salvation

“Since God has taken salvation out of my hands  
into his, making it depend on his choice and  
not mine, and has promised to save me, not by  
my own work or exertion but by his grace and  
mercy, I am assured and certain both that he is  
faithful and will not lie to me, and also that he is  
too great and powerful for any demons or any  
adversities to be able to break him or to snatch  
me from him.”

(*Luther's Works* 33:289)

## “I Bless You”

by Cal Tuttle

1982 Mercy/Vineyard Publishing

I bless You Lord, (I bless You Lord)  
I bless You Lord, (I bless You Lord)  
I kneel down, (I kneel down)  
Before You (before You) (Repeat)

### Chorus

With all of my heart (with all of my heart)  
With all of my mind (with all of my mind)  
With all that is within me  
I offer up (I offer up)  
A sacrifice of praise

I thank You Lord (I thank You Lord)  
I thank You Lord (I thank You Lord)  
I lift my hands (I lift my hands)  
To You (to You)  
(Repeat, then chorus)

I worship You (I worship You)  
I worship You (I worship You)  
I fall down (I fall down)  
Before You (before You)  
(Repeat, then chorus)

## 7/11 Praise songs

Praise songs like “I Bless You” are often called “7/11  
songs” because they have few words – about 7 words  
– and these words are repeated over and over – seems  
like 11 or more times!

In “I Bless You” the words “I,” “my,” “me” appear 28  
times in the song. The word “You” appears 18 times.  
Clearly the one praising is more central than the one  
praised.

Contemporary song books are filled with songs in  
which the word “I” dominates: “I Have Found You,” “I  
Just Want To Praise You,” “I Only Want To Love You,”  
“I'll Seek After You.”

Some church services open with 20 minutes of praise  
songs like “I Bless You.” So what, you may protest?  
Different strokes for different folks and all that.

Singing hymns to open a worship service can be  
done appropriately, but too often the repetitive words  
and rhythm are hypnotic. Carried along by the beat,  
there is a certain emotional pull, but it is mostly about  
you and me – the bland leading the bland.

# GREG MORTENSON'S OWN CUP OF TEA

Luther Seminary's Mid-Winter Convocation has as a guest speaker Greg Mortenson, whose book, *Three Cups of Tea*, has been a best-seller since its release in 2006. Mortenson is the son of Minnesota Lutheran missionaries to Tanzania.

*Three Cups* tells the adventure-filled story of how Mortenson, a mountain climber, was forced to give up his ascent of the second-highest peak in the world, K2. Lost and rescued by Balti villagers, "Dr. Greg" goes on to build schools in the rugged mountains that straddle Afghanistan and Pakistan.

*Three Cups* is an odd book because Mortenson is one of the two authors of the book, yet the story is told in the third person. Mortenson is tall (6'4"); his height is noted often. He is referred to as a hero several times in every chapter and praised non-stop by the people around him.

*Three Cups* is being lauded as one of the best inspirational books of our day: If Mortenson can make peace and progress with the Muslims of Pakistan and Afghanistan, why can't we all?

To be sure, Mortenson is to be applauded for starting schools to teach children to read and write. He is providing a moderate Muslim alternative to the Wahhabi madrassas. That said, there are still reasons not to jump on the *Three Cups* bandwagon.

**1. Mortenson prays to Allah.** He boasts that he was never proselytized in Pakistan. Of course not. He worshipped with the Muslims and prayed to Allah:

"With Manzoor he [Mortenson] knelt and crossed his arms to address Allah respectfully. . . . As he pressed his forehead against the still-warm ground, Greg Mortenson realized that, for the first moment during all his days in Pakistan, no one was looking at him as an outsider. No one was looking at him at all. *Allah Akhbar*, he chanted quietly, God is great, adding his voice to the chorus. . ." (68).

Mortenson claims that Jews, Christians, and Muslims worship the same God. Moreover, he states in an interview: "All people of the *kitab* [Arabic for 'the book'], which means the Torah, Koran, and Bible, are accorded equal respect under Islam."

Except that Muslims are taught that Jews are pigs, Christians are tolerated only if they are submissive to Islam, and anyone who wishes to leave Islam should be killed. What Muslim country upholds religious freedom as Western countries do? None.

**2. Mortenson educates girls but ignores the brutal repression of women under Islam:**

- Female circumcision? He doesn't mention it.
- Polygamy? Child marriages? Glosses over them.
- Honor killings? Doesn't mention it.

Again, *Three Cups* is a sunny, angelic tale of how bad, old "ignorance" can be overcome. Did we mention that he is tall and praised non-stop by people around him?

**3. Mortenson reduces evil to ignorance.** In *Three Cups* Islam itself is not a problem, only ignorance:

"Working over there, I've learned a few things. I've learned that terror doesn't happen because some group of people somewhere like Pakistan or Afghanistan simply decide to hate us. It happens because children aren't being offered a bright enough future that they have a reason to choose life over death" (292).

"The enemy is ignorance. The only way to defeat it is to build relationships with these people, to draw them into **the modern world** with education and business. Otherwise the fight will go on forever" (310).

A simple diagnosis. A simple solution. Just write a check to Mortenson and be positive.

"**The modern world,**" however, is the *Western* world of *Western* freedoms – freedom to criticize, to join and leave any religion, equal rights for women, and the separation of church and state. Extremist Muslims reject the freedoms of this modern world.

According to Mortenson there are over 25,000 extremist madrassas in Pakistan. He has started 75+ basic skills schools, but even **his schools teach the Qur'an as inerrant revelation.**

Because all Muslims hold the Qur'an is inerrant and cannot be criticized, it is not realistic to expect Islam to be reformed. There are no simple solutions.

*Three Cups of Tea* is popular because it reinforces the modern Western belief that all people are basically the same and all are basically good. The book is a stylized chronicle. Everyone is nice. Every problem has a peaceful solution if only we can have a good chat over a cup of tea.

Other books about village life in Pakistan tell a darker story. These books will never make the New York Times best-seller list.

Have you heard that "Dr. Greg" is tall and praised non-stop by people around him?

# WORLD WATCH

## NEW YORK

### Anti-religionist Bill Maher's pseudo-science

Bill Maher, late-night comic, is part of the New Atheist campaign to discredit religion, particularly Christianity, as irrational.

Maher himself, however, is no icon of rationality. In fact, he is a fervent advocate of pseudo-science. The night before his performance on Conan O'Brien, Maher told David Letterman – a quintuple bypass survivor - - to stop taking the pills that his doctor had prescribed for him. Maher proudly stated that he didn't accept Western medicine.

Anti-religionists such as Bill Maher bring to mind the assertion by G.K. Chesterton's fictional detective, Father Brown, that atheists, secularists, and humanists are susceptible to superstition: "It's the first effect of not believing in God that you lose your common sense and can't see things as they are."

## ORLANDO

### The Episcopal Church is a "Legal Shell"

Episcopalian Rev. Gary L'Hommedieu, pastor and columnist for VirtueOnline:

"The Episcopal Church has become a legal shell with timid survivors who cannot make anything but institutional statements in support of institutional ends. Doctrine has been bargained away. All that remains are familiar phrases, emptied of meaning, retained for occasional use in public relations. Even these have largely fallen out of use, replaced by secular hot button phrases like 'justice' and 'inclusiveness' – words which never mean anything in particular but always adapt themselves to institutional ends."

(VirtueOnline 9/28/08)

## PARIS

### Scientology sued for fraud in France

The Church of Scientology faces trial on "organized fraud" charges in Paris, with the possibility that if it loses, it could be banned in France.

The Church of Scientology, whose members include actors Tom Cruise and John Travolta, is registered as a religion in the US but is viewed by authorities in France as a money-making sect. The Los Angeles-based Church was founded in 1954 by science fiction writer Ron Hubbard.

In 2007 German authorities declared the Church of Scientology unconstitutional.

## MINNEAPOLIS

### Taxpayer funded Muslim schools

Can you imagine a taxpayer funded Catholic school in your community? A Lutheran one? No way.

In Minneapolis there is a taxpayer funded school where Islam plays a central role: Buses don't leave daily until after-school Islamic Studies is over; Friday Prayers is an all-school weekly assembly; the girls wear headscarfs; the cafeteria serves halal food (permissible under Islamic law).

A new Islamic charitable organization, Minnesota Education Trust (MET), has applied to sponsor three more such schools. At first MET was turned down for failing to document the required \$2 million fund balance. MET then submitted statements showing more than \$3 million in assets and \$2 million in income in its first year.

## MAINZ

### Lehmann condemns self-important bishops

Cardinal Lehmann, former chairman of the Catholic German Bishops' Conference, has issued a blistering attack on his fellow bishops, accusing them of having "a problematic, theologically exaggerated concept of their episcopal office."

He said this exaggerated view of the bishop's office had led to "episcopalism," with bishops continually referring to their rank.

## PITTSBURGH

### George Will misses Luther's fly ball

Syndicated columnist George Will writes on the Bishop of Pittsburgh who has seceded from The Episcopal Church:

"The Rev. Robert Duncan, 60, is not a Lutheran, but he is a Luther, of sorts. The former Episcopal Bishop of Pittsburgh has, in effect, said the words with which Martin Luther shattered Christendom and asserted the primacy of individual judgment and conscience that defines the modern temperament: 'Ich kann nicht anders' – I cannot do otherwise."

Close, but no cigar. Luther said, "My conscience is captive to the Word of God." That's a different ballgame than "My conscience is captive to my experience."

For Luther the Christian conscience is free only because God has "captured" it. Authority is not rooted in councils, popes, bishops, or even a book. Authority is the Word of God.

**SALT LAKE CITY**

**Shirtless “Men on a Mission” Calender**

Brigham Young University has revoked the diploma of a man who created the 2008 “Men on a Mission” calender featuring shirtless Mormon missionaries.

Chad Hardy, 31, of Las Vegas was expelled from the Mormons on July 13. He plans to challenge the decision.

**PRAGUE**

**Happy is the rescued Hedgehog**

A Czech animal sanctuary is rescuing the humble hedgehog – 350,000 of the spiky creatures are accidently killed every year.

In recent weeks 60 hedgehogs have been handed over to the Valise Center near Prague. Most of the little buggers are orphaned youngsters who need feeding so they are ready to hibernate for the winter. Using doll baby bottles, the rescue workers feed the hedgehogs until they are nice and plump and then they are released back into the wild.

**OSLO**

**Lutheran Finn wins Nobel Peace Prize**

Martti Ahtisaari, former President of Finland, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize October 10, 2008.

In the early 1990s he ran the U.N. mission to Iraq after the first Gulf War, watching Saddam Husein’s brutal repression up close. Twelve years of **failed negotiations** later, Mr. Ahtisaari defended the U.S. invasion: “*Since I know that about a million people have been killed by the government of Iraq, I do not need much those weapons of mass destruction.*”

Ahtisaari goes against the grain of conventional opinion.

**WITTENBERG**

**Luther on the Two Kingdoms (LW 13:194)**

“Constantly I must pound in and squeeze in and drive in and wedge in this difference between the two kingdoms.... The devil never stops cooking and brewing these two kingdoms into each other. In the devil’s name the secular leaders always want to be Christ’s masters and teach him how he should run his church. Similarly, the false clerics always want to be the masters....and to teach people how to organize the secular government.”

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"The third eulogy will be delivered by Harry's colleague...."

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