

Conducting a Funeral for an Unsaved Person

Question: What is your purpose, strategy, philosophy, etc. in conducting a funeral for a person who was not necessarily saved?

SOME GOOD THOUGHTS:

Always keep this in mind when preparing funerals: The primary purposes of a funeral/memorial event is to create an environment for family and friends to

- (1) remember the departed honourably,
- (2) grieve the loss authentically, and
- (3) provide hope for the future.

In that order.

We do not believe that the primary purpose of a funeral is evangelism – although that does occur as a result of doing the first three well.

When a believer departs, the challenge is often to not allow the people to pass from purpose (1) to purpose (3) without allowing a real experience with purpose (2). But when we fail to grieve authentically, the impact of purposes (1) and (2) become less effective and cause the service to feel shallow. Especially to those who are in grief. Without grief being given its proper place, we diminish the heart's capacity to heal.

When a person dies without Christ, the third purpose becomes the challenge, as purposes (1) and (2) are typically present, naturally. It is never advisable to comment definitively on the final state of the departed. Christ alone knows those who are His and the conditions of a person's heart in the moments before and during their death are a sacred secret between them and God.

While this is an uncomfortable position for an officiating minister to be in, it can still be an opportunity to minister encouragement to those present. If the deceased is not saved, a funeral service would not be the time to declare their eternal fate and make that the focal point. That would obviously discourage and add to the grief of those attending, especially the family. However, after honouring the person's life and memory within the sermon, this would be a good opportunity to share about the fleeting nature of life and mortality we all must face (this is all through Scripture). Then, share on how God made us for more than this life and how much He loves us. He is our Creator who also became our Saviour. You can share how eternal life is freely provided for us through Jesus and share the Gospel without referring to the one who just passed. Make it about those who remain. Make it about God's love. Give everyone hope. Tell people that now is always the best time to receive God's love by believing in Christ.

God alone is the Judge when it comes to eternal things, and only He truly knows what decisions people have made regarding eternity. Sometimes, we never really know for certain. If we don't know, we leave it with Him. Tell people that we must remember that God the Judge is the same God who gave His Son to suffer and die for us, so we could be saved. If anyone should be entrusted with eternal things, it should be God Himself. If He did this much to save us, then we can trust Him with righteous judgement. He cares more about our loved one than anyone on earth possibly could. We leave it with Him. This can bring a measure of comfort to those who are grieving the loss of an unsaved loved one. Remind people that for those of us who remain, we should not delay our own response to the Gospel, we should settle it

now. When we place our faith in Christ in this lifetime, we have the assurance of salvation that only He can bring.