Biblical Christianity and Funeral Ceremonies

By Michael Wagner (October, 2011)

Those who believe that the original Westminster Standards are a true and accurate summary of Biblical doctrine frequently find themselves at odds with the surrounding culture. Not only are they out-of-step with the secular culture which increasingly idolizes sexual immorality and abortion, they are also out-of-step with the vast majority of professing Bible-believing Christians. During this current period of apostasy, spiritual darkness reigns across all the major English-speaking countries.

The old-time Presbyterians (or "paleopresbyterians") who stick with the original Westminster Standards in their entirety differ from most evangelical Christians over soteriology, eschatology, ecclesiology, worship, and undoubtedly other issues as well. One delicate issue that has not yet received much attention is that of funerals. What is the Biblical view of funerals?

To answer this question, a paleopresbyterian will consult *The Directory For The Publick Worship of God*, one of the authoritative documents in the Westminster Standards. It includes a section entitled, "Concerning Burial of the Dead," which begins, "When any person departeth this life, let the dead body, upon the day of burial, be decently attended from the house to the place appointed for publick burial, and there immediately interred, without any ceremony."

In short, the Westminster Standards teach that there should be very minimal religious activity surrounding the burial of dead human beings. This contrasts sharply with the modern view that burial should be attended by a large funeral service with preaching, singing, eulogies for the dead, and so on. Basically, the modern custom amounts to a worship service occasioned by the death of a person. What could be wrong with that?

As far as Christian practice is concerned, the idea of elaborate funeral services arose within the Roman Catholic Church. This fact helps to explain why the Puritans and Presbyterians decided to abolish funeral ceremonies: they were reforming the church according to the Word of God, so man-made doctrines and practices had to be discarded. Religious practices that could not be supported by Biblical teaching were rejected.

David E. Stannard, currently Professor of American Studies at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, wrote a book many years ago that contains some helpful information about this issue. His book is called *The Puritan Way of Death: A Study in Religion, Culture, and Social Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

Stannard argues that elaborate funeral ceremonies arose due to the invention of the doctrine of Purgatory by the Roman Catholic Church. Purgatory was a place where departed souls could be purified and made fit for Heaven. Friends and relatives of the deceased could reduce the time he spent in Purgatory through their own religious activities. Thus funeral ceremonies would be beneficial to the deceased by decreasing the amount of time he had to suffer in Purgatory.

> The elaborate and theologically crucial funeral ceremonies of Catholicism from the early Middle Ages onward were doubtless connected with a variety of beliefs and images, but none was so central as the conception of Purgatory, where those who had died in venial sin (mortal sin being sufficient to bring on eternal damnation) were purified through temporary suffering preparatory to entering heaven. Since it was believed as well that the prayers and activities of the living could serve to shorten one's term of purgatorial suffering, the ceremonies and rituals surrounding death took on major cultural significance (p. 98).

But as the Puritans correctly saw it, if the existence of Purgatory was a falsehood, then all of the doctrines and practices that followed from a belief in Purgatory must also be falsehoods. Since Purgatory does not exist, the funeral ceremonies devised to help those in Purgatory were not only useless, but also dangerous because they were false religious practices instituted by the authority of men.

> Concurrent with the Reformers' denigration of the "popish fiction" of Purgatory came their intense support of the idea of predestination. These fundamental alterations of Catholic dogma had many deep and wide-ranging effects, one of which—the one most important for present purposes—was the functional diminution of the need for elaborate funeral ritual. If the fate of the deceased had been determined in advance of his very earthly existence, and if there was nothing that any man or men could do to alter that fate, there was clearly no place for belief in a temporary afterlife state that was a cleansing way station between earthly and heavenly existence. Nor was there a place for the idea that the efforts of an individual, or his family and friends—whether made during his life, at the time of burial, or afterwards—might have any bearing on his ultimate postmortem fate (p. 99).

As Stannard notes, Puritan theology led to the conclusion that "there is no reason to assume that any sort of burial ritual can have any effect at all on the condition of the deceased." Biblically, then, there was only one way to deal with the funeral ceremonies. "As with so many other areas of Puritan concern, if there was no spiritual justification for a ritual its practice was not merely to be ignored—it was to be fiercely stripped away" (p. 101).

Of course, people at that time were still dying and needed to be buried. How was that to be done in a Biblical fashion? Stannard quotes at length from a book by John Canne that was published in 1634. The book was entitled *A Necessitie of Separation from the Church of England.* Canne, referring to Puritans as "Nonconformists," described their burial practices as follows:

> Concerning burials, this they say: all prayers either over or for the dead, are not only superstitious and vain, but also are idolatry, and against the plain scriptures of God. . . . as

for the white or black cross, set upon the dead corpse, and ringing a three-fold peal, the practice is popish: mourning in black garments for the dead, if it be not hypocritical, yet it is superstitious and heathenish: funeral sermons, they also utterly condemn, because they are put in the place of trentals, and many other superstitious abuses follow thereby. To be brief . . . the Nonconformists will have the dead to be buried in this sort, (holding no other way lawful,) namely, that it be conveyed to the place of burial, with some honest company of the Church, without either singing or reading, yea, without all kind of ceremony heretofore used, other than that the dead be committed to the grave, with such gravity and sobriety as those that be present may seem to fear the judgments of God, and to hate sin, which is the cause of death; and thus do the best and right reformed churches bury their dead, without any ceremonies of praying or preaching at them (p. 104).

Stannard summarizes the situation as follows: "In England, then, the Puritan approach to funeral ceremony and ritual was to avoid and castigate it" (p. 108).

When Puritan settlers arrived in New England, they held to the same view about funerals as the Puritans who remained back in old England. Stannard cites a seventeenth century authority in support of this view:

Thomas Lechford's report on his travels in New England in the late 1630s and early 1640s suggests that during this time the familiar simplicity of burial practice was the rule in these expatriate Puritan communities. "At Burials," he wrote, "nothing is read, nor any Funeral Sermon made, but all the neighborhood, or a good company of them, come together by tolling of the bell, and carry the dead solemnly to his grave, and there stand by him while he is buried." (p. 109).

However, Stannard says that after the mid-seventeenth century, New England Puritans began to accumulate man-made funeral ceremonies. Indeed, Puritan and Presbyterian opposition to funeral ceremonies gradually dissipated everywhere (as did the opposition to so many unbiblical worship practices) over the ensuing decades and centuries. Few Bible-believing Christians today are even aware that funerals were controversial to their forefathers.

Interestingly, twentieth-century writer Arthur W. Pink, who spent much time studying the Puritans, also came to oppose funeral ceremonies. In his book *Gleanings From Elisha: His Life And Miracles* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1981), he writes the following concerning Elisha's death:

"And Elisha died, and they buried him" (2 Ki 13:20). It is to be noted that nothing is said here of any burial service. Nor is there anywhere in the Scriptures, either in the Old Testament or the New Testament. Elaborate, mournful ceremonies are of pagan origin and are neither authorized nor warranted by the Word of God. If the body of Christ was tenderly and reverently interred without the mummery of any "service" over His corpse, shall the disciple be above his Master! What slaves many are to "the way of the heathen" (Jer 10:2), and in what bondage do they let themselves be held through fear of public opinion, afraid of what their friends and neighbors would think and say if they should be regulated only by Holy Writ (p. 254).

It would appear that Arthur Pink's study of the Bible led him to the same position on funeral ceremonies as the Puritans and original Presbyterians.

All Christians will face, at one time or another, the death of loved ones. Those who truly love God will want to know His perspective on funeral ceremonies and how best to honor Him under such difficult circumstances. Therefore this is an issue that needs to receive more attention from those who desire to follow the Lord in every area of their lives.

For more than three centuries the Westminster Standards have been recognized as faithful summaries of Biblical doctrine. When *The Directory For The Publick Worship of God* says that burials should be "without any ceremony," it is directly challenging the current practice of conducting funerals. The Bible does not provide any warrant for funeral ceremonies, and the history of the development of funeral ceremonies demonstrates that they arose largely as a result of false doctrine. Clearly, modern Christians need to question their own beliefs and practices concerning funerals, and bring them into line with the Word of God.

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