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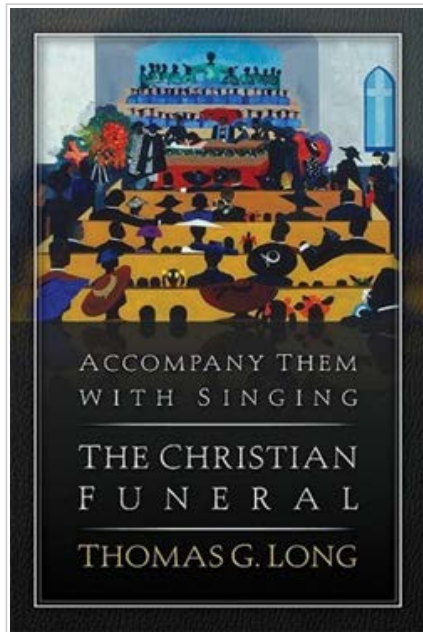
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## Worshipful drama

*The Christian funeral acts out the story of a person's life in light of the gospel -- a story that begins at baptism, writes Thomas G. Long in his new book "Accompany Them with Singing."*

by [Thomas G. Long](#)



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October 27, 2009

*In "Accompany Them with Singing -- the Christian Funeral," Thomas G. Long provides a theological and cultural critique of contemporary Christian funerals as well as a guide for clergy who perform them. The book "describes the Christian funeral, including its history, theology, structure, content, and practical features; and [explores] the tensions and possibilities of the Christian understanding of funerals in a contemporary culture that often holds radically opposed ideas about the meaning of death."*

*Long is the Bandy Professor of Preaching at Emory University's Candler School of Theology in Atlanta. He is the author or editor of numerous books on preaching and in 1996 was named one of the most effective preachers in the English-speaking world by Baylor University. He is ordained in*

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*the Presbyterian Church (USA).*

*This excerpt from the book examines the funeral as drama.*

### *Accompany them with singing*

In a funeral, what is true about all worship, namely, that the gospel story is reenacted in dramatic form, comes to particular focus around the occasion of a death. The major theme of a funeral is the gospel story, and the life story of the person who has died is a motif running through this larger theme; perhaps more precisely, a funeral is about the intertwining of these two narratives. At a funeral, the faithful community gathers to enact the promises of the gospel and the convictions of the Christian faith about life and death, as they are refracted through the prism of the life of the one who has died.

To say that a funeral is a gospel liturgical drama seems simple and true, but this is precisely one of the aspects of the Christian funeral most obscured and crusted over by so many contemporary funeral customs. When it is clear that the funeral is a dramatic reenactment of the gospel, this shines a bright light on what a funeral is not. Despite popular misconceptions, a funeral is not primarily a quiet time when people gather to reflect on the legacy of the deceased, a devotional service dealing with grief, a show of community support for the mourning family, or even a “celebration of life.” Good funerals, in fact, do all of these things -- console the grief-stricken, remember and honor the deceased, display community care, and give thanks for all the joys and graces experienced in the life of the one who has died. But these are some of the consequences of a good funeral, not its central meaning or purpose.

### *The funeral as drama*

While it is true that the gospel is proclaimed in the words of the funeral, it is also true that the gospel is proclaimed in the actions of the funeral. The whole funeral, as an act of drama growing out of baptism, proclaims the gospel.

When a Christian dies, the church gathers to act out the story of what this death means in the light of the gospel, but it is a story that began long before the person died. It is a story that began at baptism. Since a funeral is built on the foundation of baptism, we cannot fully grasp the dramatic aspects of a funeral without seeing them in baptism as well, and it is there that we must begin.

On the banks of Louisiana’s Ouachita River, the congregation of St. Paul’s Baptist Church, an African American congregation, gathers every year, after several days of fervent prayer meetings and vigorous revival preaching, to baptize new converts to the Christian faith. The older members of the church call this spot on the river “the old burying ground,” because of what Paul said about baptism: “Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom. 6:4). Here, in the flowing currents of the Ouachita, sinners are plunged beneath the waters symbolically to die with Christ, to be washed clean, and to be raised up to a new way of life.

On those days when the congregation of St. Paul’s gathers for baptism, the Ouachita River is, of course just the Ouachita, but in the drama of baptism it becomes much more. It is the Red Sea, the waters through which the children of Israel passed on their way to freedom and to the promised land. On baptism day, the Ouachita is also the Jordan River, the place of Jesus’ baptism, and it is the “river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb” (Rev. 22:1) through the heavenly city. “We gather here on this old river that drifts into the sea,” said the pastor of St. Paul’s, standing hipdeep in the water one baptismal day, “because we have come back here. Things may have changed uptown; banks may have gone out; shopping centers may have closed, but this old river just keeps on. So we thought the church would come back here and tell the Lord, we thank him for this old river.”

The candidates for baptism, wearing cotton robes sewn especially for them by the older women in the congregation, “the mothers of the church,” stand on the riverbank waiting. At the beckoning of the pastor, the deacons take each of them by the hand, one by one, and lead them down into the river, as the congregation sings old hymns and spirituals like “Take me to the water; take me to the water; take me to the water to be baptized.”

When those baptized come out of the river, they are taken to an improvised dressing room, from which they emerge dressed in dazzling white “Sunday clothes,” and they go back to the river to sing and pray

while others are baptized. Then the whole congregation goes back to the church building for a festive ceremony in which these new Christians are “fellowshipped into the church.”

Notice that the Baptists of St. Paul’s Church don’t just talk about their convictions concerning baptism; they act them out in a dramatic piece of what could be called Christian community theater there on the river. Baptism is about dying and rising with Christ. Baptism is about being washed clean from sin. Baptism is about being welcomed into a community of the faithful as a brother or sister in Christ. Baptism is about responding to a holy call and setting out on an adventure of faith. Every one of these claims about baptism, and more, is acted out in the drama of the baptismal service.

The same is true whenever and wherever baptism is performed. Whether it is the Baptists assembled on the banks of the muddy Ouachita or a Lutheran congregation around the font in a candle-lit church in Wisconsin or an assembly of Catholics observing the sacrament of baptism in a Texas cathedral, though the details may differ, the essential baptismal drama is the same. In the waters of baptism -- river, lake, pool, or font -- Christians “die” to the old self, and emerge from the waters to set out on a journey of new life. One of the earliest names for the Christian movement was “the Way” (Acts 9:2), because the faith was not understood as a set of ideas or intellectual beliefs, but as a journey down a road, a way of life. Just as Jesus came up out of the baptismal waters of the Jordan River and set out on the road to the cross, just so, Christians pass through the waters of baptism and begin to travel, following in the path of Jesus. Christians do not take this road alone, but, as the baptismal drama makes plain, they travel in the company of the saints. Those being baptized are visibly and audibly surrounded by the faithful, who pray and sing these new Christians along their baptismal way. The prayer for the baptismal journey in the Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer* points toward the road: “Send them into the world in witness to your love,” and then names the destination, “Bring them to the fullness of your peace and glory.” The church promises in the words of the Presbyterian *Book of Common Worship*, “to guide and nurture [them] by word and deed, with love and prayer, encouraging them to know and follow Christ.”

A Christian funeral is a continuation and elaboration of the baptismal service. If baptism is a form of worshipful drama performed at the beginning of the Christian life, a funeral is -- or should be -- an equally dramatic, and symmetrical, performance of worship performed at the end of life. When Christians traveling along the baptismal path die, the company of the faithful who were there to guide them at the beginning are also there to carry them at the end. In baptism, new Christians are “buried with Christ by baptism into death,” and they come up from the waters raised to “walk in newness of life.” In funerals, these same Christians, having traveled the pilgrim way, are once again buried with

Christ in death in the sure confidence that they will be raised to new life. In baptism, the faithful sang them into this new way of life; now they gather around to sing them to God in death. Just as they washed the new Christian in the waters of baptism, they now lovingly wash the body of the deceased. Just as they adorned the newly baptized Christian with the garments of Christ, they now adorn the deceased in clothes fitting to meet God and perhaps place a pall, a symbol of the garments of baptism, over the coffin. As the church has been traveling with the baptized saint along the road of faith, the church now walks with the deceased on “the last mile of the way” to the place of farewell.

The funeral, then, is not just a collection of inspiring words said on the occasion of someone’s death. It is, rather, a dramatic event in which the church acts out what it believes to be happening from the perspective of faith. In this sense, a Christian funeral is a piece of theater, but it has more in common with ancient forms of religious drama than with popular theater. The philosopher Martha Nussbaum once contrasted ancient Greek drama with more contemporary Broadway style theater. Today, observed Nussbaum, a playgoing audience sits quietly in a darkened theater, “in the illusion of splendid isolation,” and watches the actors perform on a stage “bathed in artificial light, as if it were a separate world of fantasy and mystery.” Not so in ancient Greece. Greek plays “took place during a solemn civic/religious festival, whose trappings made spectators conscious that the values of the community were being examined and communicated.” Also, the plays were performed in broad daylight and “in the round,” that is, in the midst of the community. People could look across the stage and see the faces of their neighbors and fellow citizens on the other side. “To respond to these events,” says Nussbaum, “was to acknowledge and participate in a way of life.” Greek drama, like other forms of art, “was thought to be practical, aesthetic interest a practical interest—an interest in the good life and in communal self-understanding. To respond in a certain way was to move already toward this greater understanding.”

Just so, at a funeral the congregation does not gather as an audience to hear and see a production performed “on stage” at the front of the church or funeral home chapel. In fact, the congregation at a funeral is not an “audience” at all; they are the actors, and they are themselves on stage, moving and

gesturing at the right times; singing, speaking, and praying their lines in the great drama of death and life. “[A]ll Christians are performers,” claims [theologian Shannon] Craigo-Snell, “and the entire Christian life is a performance in which we attempt to enact and create the events called for by the script/Scripture. Those who sit in the rear pew on Sunday mornings are no less actors than the clergy up front.” Even those neighbors, friends, and family members who are not a part of the church but who have come for this funeral are welcomed with the hospitality of God and invited to take up powerful roles in this drama.

*Excerpted with permission from “Accompany Them With Singing -- The Christian Funeral” by Thomas G. Long, published in 2009 by Westminster John Knox Press.*