



# FEATURES

produced by Baptist Press

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May 6, 1975

75-72

## Simple Service Emphasizes Christian Aspects of Death

By Teena Andrews  
For Baptist Press

Many clergymen and other persons have come to deplore what they consider the extravagant and materialistic funeral practices in our society which place the emphasis on the dead body instead of the living soul of the deceased.

The desire to de-emphasize the physical body has led many memorial and funeral societies being formed in this country to make as one of their objectives the encouragement of the memorial service, in which the accent is on the life of the departed rather than the physical remains.

Often, in this type of service, the casket is closed and the body is not viewed. In more and more cases, the body is disposed of before the service, so that funeral activities can end on a note of worship, rather than with the interment.

Baptist pastors in various parts of the country see a definite trend in this area. M. D. Forest Lowen, pastor of Greece Baptist Church in Rochester, N.Y., and member of a local memorial society, notes:

"There is a strong de-emphasis upon the body as a part of the Christian funeral. Quite often the casket is closed throughout the funeral, and we are moving more and more toward the memorial service with the body and the casket completely absent from the service."

DeLowen adds that, as a Christian pastor, he sees this as the proper attitude of the Christian faith about death, with strong emphasis upon the immortality of the soul, as opposed to the physical body.

Robert Seymore, pastor of Olin T. Binkley Memorial Baptist Church, Chapel Hill, N.C., points out that one advantage of the memorial service is that the logistics of having a casket in view are avoided.

"At a memorial service usually the graveside service has taken place previously, so there is not such anxiety about getting a good-looking casket," he says.

He strongly advocates a practice his church has adopted, the use of a funeral pall, or a drape to cover the casket, so that every casket looks alike.

Seymore sees a general trend toward the memorial-type service in his area, among Baptists and other denominations.

Other persons, such as funeral director Raymond Shannon, vice president of the Chattanooga (Tenn.) Funeral Homes and member of Brainerd Baptist Church, emphasize that as Christians, our bodies are temples of the holy spirit and should be treated reverently.

Shannon speaks with the experience of a person who has been on both sides. Eight years ago he lost his own 21-year-old daughter in an accident.

"The person who indwells it makes the body sacred," he said.

"God used us to give our daughter her body. We could no more just throw that away when she died than we could throw away her pictures, even though both are just reflections of her," he said.

Other pastors, such as Hardy Clemmons, pastor of Second Baptist Church, Lubbock, Tex., agree it is a mistake to make too little of the body. Clemmons feels that "people who are experiencing any grief need to be able to focus on the body of the deceased.

"I don't think the body ought to be shuttled away until people have had an opportunity to get what benefits they do out of seeing the person. Sometimes this person has been suddenly killed and it helps people to realize that he or she is, in fact, dead," he said.

Clemmons echoed statements by pastors in other parts of the country in describing the trend toward interment prior to the hour of worship at the church.

"We try to have a very positive and celebrative service in the light of the resurrection," he said. "Most of our deaths have a tragic aspect, because our church is a young church, but we try to make it a service of worship and not a eulogy.

"This way the people go home having experienced the ministry of the church in worship rather than having to leave the graveside with that as their last remembrance," he said.

Memorial services for Davis Woolley, former executive secretary of the SBC Historical Commission in Nashville, were memorable.

Woolley and his wife Kate had planned a type of memorial service they felt would be most true to their beliefs as Christians, their plans evolving over a number of years.

When Woolley was a pastor, his wife wrote in The Baptist Program Magazine that they became concerned about the "less-than-Christian attitudes and practices of certain bereaved church members," who sank into hopelessness at the loss of a loved one, instead of rejoicing in the victory over death given by Jesus Christ.

The guidelines they began with included keeping expenses at a minimum and suggesting contribution to some worthy cause in lieu of flowers, Mrs. Woolley wrote.

More importantly, they wanted the service to be one of worship with congregational participation.

When Davis Woolley died, the funeral director was instructed to use the least expensive casket available.

There was no viewing of the body, the burial was private, and Mrs. Woolley received friends at home.

The public memorial service was an event more to worship God than to praise Woolley.

"I do not think one could discard the traditional practices associated with death on impulse," Mrs. Woolley says. "It was not our desire to be sensational.

"We hoped that our actions would say, 'The most wonderful thing has happened! Jesus has given him victory over death!'" (BP)



**BAPTIST PRESS**

News Service of the Southern Baptist Convention

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May 6, 1975

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Anguish Plagues Baptist  
Missionaries to Vietnam

By William T. Roberson,  
Evacuated Southern Baptist Missionary to Vietnam

**BANGKOK, Thailand (BP)**--The war in Vietnam is over. Americans are out of South Vietnam, including Southern Baptist missionaries.

Thirty-four of the Baptist missionaries appointed to Vietnam have stood by helplessly in neighboring countries, watching their adopted country fall apart piece by piece during the past few weeks.

One volume can hardly contain the thoughts which have raced through the minds of the missionaries and their children. Many times each day they have prayed for Vietnamese Christians and friends left behind and recalled the evangelistic upsurge underway before South Vietnam fell.

Except for a return trip on April 24 by the Baptist Mission's chairman, Earl Bengs, and its social ministries director, Gene Tunnell, to aid evacuation of Vietnamese Baptists, all the missionaries had evacuated Vietnam by April 14.

Each missionary made his or her own decision to evacuate, after praying and seeking the advice of American and Vietnamese officials, Vietnamese co-workers and personnel of sister religious missions.

Memory of the narrow escape of missionaries Bob Davis and Gene Tunnell from Danang remained vivid in their minds.

None of the missionaries left Vietnam without great anguish. Most sensed they may never return. None, although they had to leave most personal belongings behind, suffered any danger or physical harm, but watching their field of service fade into oblivion has been traumatic.

One missionary suggested that a more rapid collapse of the delta and Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City), such as occurred in the northern provinces, might have made decision-making easier. Each missionary had kept hoping for the possibility of a return to service.

Some of the missionaries served in Vietnam for 15 years or more. Herman Hayes, for example, left Saigon on April 10, only four days after he and his wife, Dottie, marked their 16th anniversary as missionaries to Vietnam. They were the first couple to enter Vietnam in November, 1959.

Adding to the frustration, recent months of missionary service in Vietnam had been marked by encouraging evangelistic response. Decisions for Christ had become a mass movement in the Binh Dinh Province, where Bob and Priscilla Compher worked for the last six years. Hundreds awaited baptism. Compher baptized 60 converts on his last Sunday in Qui Nhon, only days before that city fell to Communist control.

Revival fires were spreading to other provinces. Wide-spread response to the gospel was evidenced during October and November, 1974, in the Camranh area. More than 100 were baptized there in one mass service.

Memories of these events continue to rekindle the strong desire in the hearts of the missionaries to return for service in Vietnam.

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Bold new approaches and programs were being projected by the missionaries before they were forced to evacuate. Hard hours of planning had gone into the formulation of a statement of objectives and goals for the next 25 years. This seems only a vague dream now.

Now the missionaries find themselves wishing they could have stayed a little longer--to have accomplished just a little more. Some mentioned guilt about leaving too soon. Others suggested some ministry could have been extended. Hindsight, more knowing than foresight, is a condemning and cruel punishment.

The unknown events which will take place behind Communist lines haunt all the missionaries. Dread and fear of what the Communists will do to those who have held public offices are most intense.

Vietnamese who have been in the South Vietnamese armed forces or who have taken a strong verbal stand against Communism, as well as many others, stand in jeopardy of mass execution. The missionaries know these possibilities are most real. Terror left in the hearts of national Christians is like a paralyzing plague.

Some Vietnamese faced these matters with great panic. Others with more maturity were willing to face whatever is ahead. One young Christian army officer spoke calmly about a possible future under Communism.

"I am the Lord's," he said. "I am convinced I must do my duty to my country as long as it stands. If the Communists take over and I am permitted to live, I shall be happy in the Lord. If I am killed, I shall be happy to be with the Lord."

The acting pastor of one of the Baptist churches remained behind with his congregation because of his desire to assist them in a time of crisis. He had an air ticket to flee with his family, but he stayed. He had been associated with Americans for many years and had been employed by the American military. His courage and devotion to his people have been an unmatched boon to other Christians.

Several Vietnamese, in talking with missionaries, spoke irrationally because of their dread of a Communist take-over. The mention of suicide, even among the Christians, was not uncommon. Many of these persons have personally witnessed public executions over the last three decades. Their fear was as vivid as their memory.

The faces and pleas of these Christians, as they said their last "goodbyes," remain vivid in the minds of the missionaries. They linger unabated like the oppressive fragrance of the Jasmine trees which dot the Vietnamese countryside.

Most of the missionaries are young enough to have the greater part of their missionary career still ahead of them. Some will transfer to neighboring mission fields. Hopefully all will continue in missionary service.

They will never forget their many Vietnamese friends and Christians who remain. Memory of the spiritual awakening among the churches and the maturation of many of the Christians gives the sad hearts of the departed missionaries a new hope.

These men and women will always be thankful for their opportunity to bear a witness for Christ in that tiny, war-torn country. The scattered presence of Baptist churches up and down the length of South Vietnam is a continuing offering to God behind the Bamboo Curtain.

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#### CORRECTION

In the BP news story dated 5/2/75, headlined "Baptist Launch Refugee Resettlement Assistance,"--the fourth paragraph of page 4, please correct the last line to read, ". . . Dawson, the board's associate director of language missions and director of immigration and refugee services."