EQUIPPING PASTORS AND DEACONS FOR BEREAVEMENT

MINISTRY AT HICKORY GROVE BAPTIST CHURCH

CHARLOTTE, NORTH CAROLINA

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A Project

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by

John DePriest Harrill

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APPROVAL SHEET

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John DePriest Harrill

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I dedicate this ministry project to my wife, Lisa, who is a wonderful gift from God,

a woman who displays Christ's unconditional love each day to our family,

and to Hickory Grove Baptist Church.

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PREFACE

This ministry project required the support and help of the pastors and leaders of Hickory Grove Baptist Church. I was encouraged by several pastors to complete this project to further increase the knowledge and practice of pastoral care in the area of bereavement ministry to the body of our church. I was called by Christ to serve the body of HGBC over thirty years ago in adult education and pastoral care. I am grateful for Jesus Christ, the victor over Satan and death. I am grateful for our triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Second, I thank my supervisor, Dr. Jeffrey Hunter. His wisdom and support helped me to enjoy the writing process. His insight into bereavement ministry and the historical and cultural influences upon it were of great benefit.

Third, I thank the Lord for my wife and our three sons. Lisa's constant support has encouraged me to use God's gifts each day in ministry for my family and church. I am grateful for our sons who love our Lord and seek to serve him.

Fourth, the Lord has blessed me with a senior pastor, Clint Pressley, and a strong team of fellow pastors and deacons. Their witness of faithful service, doctrinal focus, and spiritual devotion continue to shape the ministry of the church. HGBC is a healthy church that exalts the name of Christ.

John Harrill

Charlotte, North Carolina

December 2021

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Lord will hold the leadership of the church responsible for the care given
to the local flock (Heb 13:17). There is a great need to train pastors and deacons to
minister to individuals and families suffering in times of death and bereavement. Many
spiritual questions arise during this painful season of life. The local body of Christ will be
biblically equipped by the teaching and training of pastors and deacons for shepherding
families suffering in times of end-of-life and bereavement.

Context

Hickory Grove Baptist Church (HGBC), in the mid-1980s, grew into a
megachurch.[1] Three campuses, a Christian school, and multiple ministries saw the church
reach a membership of nearly 19,000 on the membership roll. The church used an
attractional model of ministry to draw individuals to the church. Ministries received
budget monies when they drew the largest number of people into the church. Ministries
that trained individuals in discipleship or member care received smaller budgets and
pastoral support.

Evangelism with a focus on the invitation at the end of each worship service
was the weekly priority. A large number of HGBC members would rejoice over the view
of the church as, what Nathan Finn explains, "primarily an outreach center and the

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[1] Scott Thumma and Dave Travis describe *megachurch*: "A megachurch is simply a Protestant
church that averages at least two thousand total attendees in their weekend services." Scott Thumma and
Dave Travis, *Beyond Megachurch Myths* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007), xviii.

corporate worship services as catalysts for revival."[2] People were often encouraged that one of the primary reasons for attendance was to have their needs met by the church. Many of the ministry programs were to entertain, and the music was to stir emotions. Members who were guided by Moralistic Therapeutic Deism were not confronted.[3] In the area of hospital and bereavement ministry, the pastors encountered individuals and families who believed good living was the only requirement to enter heaven. The historical beliefs of Christianity were replaced by the siren call of cultural Christianity.

Cultural Christianity was common in the church. Individuals would walk an aisle, proclaim salvation, and walk away to rarely live for Christ. Many never bore any spiritual fruit in their lives. Seemingly, the church membership roll number, the number saved, and the number baptized were the numbers of most importance to the pastor, the church, and the SBC. Sadly, large numbers of these members were only seen on Christmas, Easter, or when a death occurred. Inactive members would call stating that they needed a pastor to preach their loved one's funeral. These calls still occur at our church today.

In 2010, the pastor of twenty-seven years retired, and the church called Clint Pressley as its new senior pastor. With the transition, the church's identity began to change. The model shifted to a focus on discipleship and missions. The church leadership removed many ministries which were not gospel-centered. In the church today, members

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[2] Nathan Finn, "A Historical Analysis of Church Membership," in *Those Who Must Give an Account: A Study of Church Membership and Church Discipline*, ed. John S. Hammett and Benjamin L. Merkle (Nashville: B & H, 2012), 70.

[3] Dean Inserra gives a clear definition of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism:
"Moralistic Therapeutic Deism" is a concept coined and explained by sociologists Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton in their book, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers.* Al Mohler identifies this as the "new American religion," and its tenets can be summarized as follows: 1. "A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth." 2. "God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions." 3. "The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself." 4. "God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem." 5. "Good people go to heaven when they die." Despite the fact that these principles align closely with the beliefs of many Americans, most people have never self-identified as "moral deists"—they just call themselves "Christians." (Dean Inserra, *The Unsaved Christian: Reaching Cultural Christianity with the Gospel* [Chicago: Moody, 2019], 36-37)

are now encouraged to focus on personal spiritual devotion, Bible study, and making disciples. The church leadership strives to be a more gospel-centered church. Worship is focused on glorifying God, not man. The pastors of the church now train using clear Christian doctrines and theology in all areas of ministry.

The leadership has now focused on helping individuals understand Christian doctrinal truths and how to apply these truths to their daily living. Sadly, the leadership have daily witnessed the fruits of teaching poor doctrine in the lives of many church members. Lifestyles supported by poor doctrinal beliefs must be constantly confronted. Many members are captivated by the lure of the prosperity theology and the ease of cultural Christianity. Members with little connection to the church other than a membership roll card still reach out to the church in times of sickness and death. Most of these families hold poor doctrinal beliefs when confronted with suffering and death.

Many have internalized the belief that Christ is love to the exclusion of the doctrines of hell and obedience to Christ and His commands. They have redefined scriptural truths to fit their belief that if a person lived a good life and said they were a Christian, then the individual is saved and in heaven. Many believe good works and good intentions are enough to receive God's love and heaven. The staff have often counseled families of individuals who walked a church aisle as children but have never shown desire for Christian growth in their life.

As leaders have worked to teach individuals the truths regarding poor doctrinal beliefs surrounding suffering and death, another issue arose. Due to many older members, higher suicide rates, drug overdose deaths, and with a large, inflated membership roll, the number of those in need of end-of-life and bereavement ministry has become overwhelming. In 2017, the pastoral care office held over forty funeral services for church families. In 2018, there were over fifty services. In the first five months of 2019, we led thirty services for bereaved families. Two of these services were for individuals who committed suicide, and another was for a six-day-old infant.

More often today than in the past, the pastoral care ministry has begun serving the role of the funeral home and funeral director. The congregation consists primarily of lower and mid-income families. Due to the rising cost of funeral services, many members opt for the lower cost of direct cremation for their loved ones. Families who choose this option do not have a funeral director to plan or direct the service, which have created an increasing number of logistical directives and manpower hours on the ministry office for the planning and implementation of memorial services.

HGBC has a young staff who are theologically sound but with little experience in walking individuals and families through a time of bereavement. HGBC has a deacon body structure that desires to focus on member care. Many of these deacons expressed the need for further training in bereavement ministry.

Rationale

Pastors and deacons must be equipped in bereavement ministry for the building up of the body of Christ biblically, theologically, and practically. As under-shepherds of Christ, HGBC pastors wish to teach biblical truths to those dying and to those grieving so they can be comforted and biblically equipped in their daily Christian walk. Training for member care in the area of bereavement ministry begins with understanding the role of under-shepherd as seen in 1 Peter 5:1-3. Pastors and deacons are to labor, exhort, and encourage the church body (1 Thess 2:9-12). Training prepares pastors and deacons to point the congregation to Christ's promises, his hope, and his presence in times of loss and sorrow. Those who understand biblical truths can then disciple others in these important life transitions.

The need to train pastors and deacons of HGBC in good theology is great. For a Christian, death completes sanctification. As Christians, we teach that Christ has victory over death (1 Cor 15:54-55). Bad theology may lead families to believe God is absent or against them in their time of sorrow. The multicultural diversity at HGBC creates differing socio-cultural and theological beliefs about suffering, death, and

grieving. Training pastors and deacons to teach and model good theology leads individuals to more fully comprehend the fullness of God's sovereignty, grace, mercy, and love. To better shepherd the church, a training program focused on the biblical doctrines of sin, suffering, and death must be a priority.

HGBC has a vision statement built upon a set of three pillars of purpose. As a church body, we are to "Exalt Christ, Make Disciples, Pass the Torch." The church pastors and leaders wish to exemplify these pillar truths in the area of bereavement ministry. The goal is to assist families to exalt Christ in times of death and grieving. The church staff wants to create disciples who understand biblical truths and can share these truths with others in their family and the community. The church pastoral care staff desires to pass the torch of ministry to younger pastors to minister appropriately, humbly, and with confidence to those hurting and grieving so that they can then celebrate God's goodness, mercy, and grace. Pastors and deacons are to be models to teach the next generation of pastors and deacons to excel in this life-supporting ministry.

Purpose

The purpose of the project was to equip pastors and deacons of Hickory Grove Baptist Church in Charlotte, North Carolina, for bereavement ministries.

Goals

The following goals determined the success of the ministry project.

1. Assess the current level of member care competency of the pastors and deacon bereavement team to minister to individuals and families at end-of-life and in bereavement.

2. Develop a four-session training curriculum for the pastors and deacon bereavement team to minister to individuals and families at end-of-life and in bereavement.

3. Equip the pastors and deacon bereavement team by teaching the developed curriculum to minister to individuals and families at end-of-life and in bereavement.

The completion of each of the three goals were dependent on defined measurement and the percentage level of success. The research methodology and instruments used to measure the success of each goal is detailed in the following section.

Research Methodology

The research methodology for this doctoral project included a pre-training ministry assessment survey, a post-training assessment survey, and an evaluation rubric.[4] The first goal was to assess the current level of member care competency of a number of the pastors and deacons of HGBC in bereavement ministry. This goal was measured by the Member Care Knowledge and Skill Survey (MCKSS).[5] The survey consisted of questions to test the understanding of biblical doctrine and practice of end-of-life/bereavement ministry. This survey was given four weeks before the training schedule. This goal was successfully met when pastors and the deacon bereavement team completed and returned the survey for analysis. These survey results informed the leadership of current knowledge and practice in ministry. These survey results helped shape the training curriculum in goal 2.

The second goal was to develop a training curriculum for pastors and the deacon bereavement team to minister to individuals and families transitioning into end-of-life and to grieving families after death. A four-session curriculum was created to further educate deacons and pastors in the theological and doctrinal understanding of death and dying, good practices of visitation, and family grief follow-up. This goal was measured by a panel of two pastors to evaluate the biblical faithfulness, teaching methodology, scope, and applicability of the curriculum.[6] This goal was considered

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[4] All of the research instruments used in this project were performed in compliance with and approved by the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary Research Ethics Committee prior to use.

[5] See appendix 1.

[6] See appendix 2.

successfully completed when a minimum of 90 percent of the evaluation criteria met or exceeded the sufficient level. If the 90 percent benchmark was not initially met, then the material was revised until it met the standard.

The third goal was to equip pastors and the deacon bereavement team by teaching the curriculum developed to minister to individuals and families at end-of-life and in bereavement. This goal was measured by administering a post-survey using the Member Care Knowledge and Skill Survey (MCKSS) that measured the pastors and deacon bereavement team's level of knowledge and confidence.[7]

This goal was considered successfully met when a t-test for dependent samples demonstrated a positive statistically significant difference in the pre- and post-survey scores. As well, this goal was successfully met when each pastor and deacon bereavement team member scored at the sufficient or above level on the evaluation rubric.

Definitions and Limitations/Delimitations

The following definitions of key terms are used in the ministry project:

Bereavement Ministry. The pastors and deacon bereavement team are to be the representatives of Christ and the church to those near death and the family after a death. By presence and conversation, the pastors and deacons are to share the gospel and its promises, offer counsel, and comfort through scripture, and to guide families in funeral planning.[8]

This ministry project included delimitations to provide focus and clarity. The participants included several pastors and those serving on the deacon bereavement team. A second delimitation was the size of HGBC. Hickory Grove Baptist is defined as a megachurch. The size of the church created a unique challenge for those ministering to

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[7] See appendix 1.

[8] This definition is adapted from Brian Croft and Phil Newton, *Conduct Gospel-Centered Funerals: Applying the Gospel at the Unique Challenges of Death* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 18-20.

persons in need of member care. Finally, the project was limited to a period of fifteen
weeks.

Conclusion

The Lord will hold the leadership of the church responsible for the care given
to the local flock. The local body of Christ will be biblically equipped by the teaching
and training of its pastors and deacons for good shepherding to those in times of end-of-
life and bereavement. The hopeful outcome of this project was to further the health of the
congregation of Hickory Grove Baptist Church.

CHAPTER 2

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON
PASTORAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR
BEREAVEMENT MINISTRY

> Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Cor 15:54b-57)[1]

The sting of death pierces the hearts and minds of Christians and especially those who have a weak understanding of the biblical doctrines of redemption, salvation, and heaven. Christians are often lacking in education about death and the grief process. Due to the influence of cultural Christianity, Western Christian traditions, and churches that teach weak doctrine, individuals who are nominal Christians have a poor understanding of biblical truths. Dean Inserra writes, "The most common belief in Cultural Christianity is that good people go to heaven."[2] Cultural Christians speak more about a good, loving God and little about a Holy God, because they do not fully understand their depth of sin or the reason for the cross of Christ. Cultural Christians speak of Jesus but do not know him as he is understood in traditional Christianity. Christ is given lip-service but not heart-service. Nominal and cultural Christians do not understand the promise of Christ as spoken by John Newton who in a sermon said, "Such shall be the triumphant victory of MESSIAH . . . death, in its cause, and in its effects, shall be utterly destroyed."[3]

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[1] All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version, unless otherwise noted.

[2] Dean Inserra, *The Unsaved Christian: Reaching Cultural Christianity with the Gospel* (Chicago: Moody, 2019), 51.

[3] John Newton, *The Works of John Newton* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth-Trust, 2015), 3:362.

In meeting with families to prepare their loved one's funeral service, many families as they prepare the eulogy, speak only of how good a person the deceased was while never speaking of their relationship to Christ. Inserra comments, "Many people think they're Christians but have no concept of the severity of sin, necessity of repentance, message of grace, or the overall message of the gospel."[4] Rather, I have found that families often find more solace in the words of Vince Gill's country song "Go Rest High on that Mountain,"[5] than in the Bible and its words of strength and comfort.

In Christian doctrine, death is the result of man's willful disobedience, breaking God's covenant in the garden of Eden: "And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" (Gen 2:16-17). Adam and Eve, who were created right and holy, disobeyed God's commandment to not eat of the tree of good and evil. By breaking God's covenant, mankind lives enslaved to the consequences of Adam and Eve's disobedience. Their actions and God's response are known as the doctrine of original sin. John Calvin defines original sin in this way: "Original sin is a hereditary depravity and corruption of our nature, diffused through all the parts of the soul, rendering us subject to the Divine wrath, and producing in us those works which the Scriptures call 'works of the flesh.'"[6]

One of the truths of the doctrine of original sin proclaims that the curse of death is the result of Adam and Eve's disobedience. Death's curse was placed on all mankind: "To the woman he said, I will multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. . . . And to Adam . . . by the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you

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[4] Inserra, *The Unsaved Christian*, 12.

[5] Vince Gill, "Go Rest High on That Mountain," track 11, *When Love Finds You*, MCA, 1994, studio album.

[6] F. W. Strothmann, ed., *John Calvin on God and Man* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1970), 25.

return to the ground, for out of it you were taken" (Gen 3:16, 19). By the sin of one man, all men are cursed to end their lives in death. The apostle Paul wrote, "For as in Adam all die" (1 Cor 15:22). Michael Horton writes, "As it is after the fall, we are dying from the moment that we are born."[7] Death is the punishment and curse to which all individuals fall. In classical Christianity, sin and death are seen as unnatural and unholy, a great enemy to man. Christians should understand the terrible condition to which they are born into as sinners before a holy God. Puritan writer James Janeway gives the example of one wicked child who near death came to understand this terrible truth. The child understood not only "his outwardly notorious sins, but he was in great horror for the sin of his nature, for the vileness of his heart, and for original corruption under it."[8]

Scripture speaks of death as the great enemy that Christ overcame by his death upon the cross and his resurrection from the grave. The apostle Paul writes these words in 1 Corinthians 15: 54-57:

> When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Calvin comments on this passage: "This victory will not be gradual only, but total and entire. Everything of mortality, that was hanging about these glorious victors, shall be swallowed up in perfect and endless life. Death is unstung first-disarmed-and then easily overcome."[9]

Christianity celebrates the victory of Christ as he conquered sin and death. The believer in Christ is promised eternal life and the resurrection of the earthly body at Christ's

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[7] Michael Horton, *Pilgrim Theology: Core Doctrines for Christian Disciples* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 422.

[8] James Janeway and Cotton Mather, *A Token for Children* (Grand Rapids: Soli Deo Gloria, 2009), 32.

[9] John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, *Calvin's Commentaries*, vol. 20 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 62.

second coming. Horton writes, "Immortality is not something that we possess by creation, but is a gift of redemption in Christ, 'who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel' (2 Tim 1:10)."[10] The Christian community waits expectantly for Christ's second coming to end the reign of sin and death. The Christian knows that Christ is victorious, but the death of a believer is still a time of grief and sorrow.

Yet Christians struggle to understand the death of a loved one. One Christian woman recently told me that she had been in bed for two weeks since her father's death. Repeatedly with her words, she questioned why God would allow her father, a man of strong faith and who taught Sunday School, to die a sudden, accidental death. She could not understand why God could allow the pain and suffering he experienced in the time of his death. She was angry, depressed, and disappointed in God.

This theme of struggling to understand God's purpose in death seems common for many Christian families in American. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross observed in her study of death in America that "dying is an integral part of life . . . but death has become a dreaded and unspeakable issue to be avoided by every means possible in our modern society."[11] Due to this struggle to avoid death and its reality, families become overwhelmed, defeated, and dissatisfied with God. Families often try to bargain with God and misuse Scripture to support their beliefs about who God is and how he works in the lives of his people. Inserra suggests these false understandings about God are often due to "the belief that they are on good terms with God because of church familiarity, a generic moral code, and a religious family heritage."[12] Individuals look to God to perform miracles in healing the sick and raising the dead. It is easy for individuals to become angry when God does not meet their will and desires. Often, cultural Christians do not understand doctrinal

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[10] Horton, *Pilgrim Theology,* 422.

[11] Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, *Death: The Final Stage of Growth* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1975), 5.

[12] Inserra, *The Unsaved Christian*, 25.

truths found in Scripture, and do not understand the person and the hope of Christ in their grief. One reason for this struggle is that many have not been taught clear scriptural doctrines by faithful under-shepherds of Christ. Families have heard clichés and shallow doctrines preached from church pulpits. False doctrines are commonly proclaimed as biblical truths. Sadly, individuals have neither clearly heard nor understand the gospel of Christ.

An essential element of the pastoral responsibility is a bereavement ministry in which the under-shepherds of the church are Christ's representatives. Elders/pastors share the gospel and its promises, first and foremost. An under-shepherd brings comfort, spiritual instruction, and hope to God's suffering people. Biblical bereavement ministry best comforts those in grief by the elder's presence and his application of scriptural doctrines. Walking alongside the hurting in a church body is the heart of pastoral ministry. Jim Wilson defines pastoral ministry as "participating with God and cooperating with His people in serving others to meet their needs, fulfill our calling, and bring glory to God."[13] One of the best examples of a Christ-focused under-shepherd who brings glory to God is the apostle Paul. In Acts 20, Paul provides a model for pastors and deacons to guard the truth of the gospel in times of death and bereavement, especially from those who would bring harm to the flock.

Church Leaders Are to Model Servanthood and Gospel Clarity (Acts 20:17-38)

In Acts 20:17-38, Paul gathers and charges the church elders of Ephesus in his final speech to them before he travels to Jerusalem and future imprisonment. In verses 18-27, Paul reminds the Ephesian elders of his example during his time in Ephesus. He reminds them of his character of sharing the gospel in public and private settings to Jew

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[13] Jim Wilson, *Pastoral Ministry in the Real World* (Wooster, OH: Weaver Books, 2015), 12.

and Greek. Paul states to the elders that he had declared the gospel with great integrity and fervor.

Paul's example is of a man who has given himself fully to the proclamation of the gospel and Christian ministry with integrity and great sacrifice to self. In sharing with the Ephesian elders, Paul uses his life and ministry as an example for them to imitate. He gives great emphasis to his faithfulness to proclaim the gospel in all circumstances and his humility before God. Paul never uses his preaching or his position to enrich himself and only wants to promote the gospel of Christ's grace to all peoples. R. Kent Hughes states that in these verses are four aspects of Paul's approach to ministry: "Paul has an unshakable commitment to God and God's people. Paul is committed to speaking God's word at every opportunity. Paul displays a commitment that transcends his concern for himself. This unshakable commitment produces in Paul a sense of comfort and a clear conscience."[14]

Paul knew that he may never speak to these elders again due to the Jewish leaders who would oppose him when he arrived in Jerusalem. Paul declares to the Ephesian elders that he has fulfilled his duty to the Ephesus church. Richard Longenecker points out that Paul, in verses 26-27, uses words that draw from Ezekiel 33:1-6. He declared that he has proclaimed the gospel clearly and he is innocent of their blood. These words bring to the elders' minds the picture of the watchman who is set in place to warn the community of enemies ready to ravage and steal.[15] Now it is their time to lead and watch over the church. I agree with Eckhard Schnabel that the survival of the church depends on their

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[14] R. Kent Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1996), 276-78.

[15] Richard Longenecker, *Acts*, in vol. 9 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 215.

leadership "adhering to the gospel and understanding its origin in God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit."[16]

In Acts 20:28, Paul charges the Ephesian elders with this same commitment to ministry that drove him. He charges the elders to "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood." Paul exhorts each elder to guard their character and to be responsible for the care of the local church body. First, Paul tells the elders to observe and evaluate their own spiritual life. Elders are to be morally and spiritually pure in their relationship to Christ and others. Second, Paul calls the elders to protect the church from those who would bring harm to the body and to individuals within the body. Richard Baxter wrote in *The Reformed Pastor*: "O therefore, brethren, lose no time! Study, and pray, and confer, and practice; for in these four ways your abilities must be increased. Take heed to yourselves, lest you are weak through your own negligence, and lest you mar the work of God by your weakness."[17]

Darrell Bock writes that the "role of shepherd to the flock is written in the present-tense infinitive and means to shepherd continually. The elder is to protect, rule, and foster care to the flock."[18] For elders, shepherding a church body is not something one does as a job with set hours. It is a position to which elders are selected by the Holy Spirit, as seen in verse 28. Elders are called by God and one's role is confirmed by the church. No under-shepherd can fulfill their role and responsibility without working alongside the church body. Wilson states that "ministry occurs with the support of a Christian community, which equips, encourages, and blesses the ministers. Ministry is

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[16] Eckhard Schnabel, *Acts*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 838.

[17] Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, ed. William Brown (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1829) 27.

[18] Darrell Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 630.

always cooperative."[19] An under-shepherd is active in the lives of those in the church body at all times, especially in times of crisis and bereavement.

The ability to fulfill the role of under-shepherd comes from living a life of spiritual holiness. To live in this manner, there is a need for personal and mutual accountability. Accountability is crucial for an elder who is to watch over and protect the flock. When there is no accountability, the risk of scriptural, physical, emotional, and spiritual abuse is heightened. Accountability battles arrogance, totalitarianism, and false doctrine. Didymus the Blind, an early church father, wrote on the role of church leaders: "Bishops must pay heed to themselves . . . and just as he will not fall if he is attentive to himself by taking care for both the requisite virtues and his faith . . . he will neither start speaking the perverse things of heresies not follow selfish ambition."[20] There is a great responsibility for leaders to be accountable under the Lordship of Christ as they care for his flock.

Paul reminds church leaders in this passage and to leaders today that the church is built upon the blood of Christ. F. F. Bruce writes, "Redemption by the blood of Christ comes to clear expression here, but nowhere else in Luke-Acts."[21] Paul reminds the Ephesus church elders of who is the foundation and authority of the church and who has called them to their place of authority in the church. It is the church of God founded on the blood of Christ empowered by the Holy Spirit. Church leadership authority is based on the call of the triune God.

In Acts 20:29-31, Paul gives a warning to the elders of those who would attempt to destroy the flock by perverting the truth of the gospel. He calls these persons

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[19] Wilson, *Pastoral Ministry in the Real World*, 13.

[20] Didymus the Blind, quoted in Francis Martin, ed., *Acts,* Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament, vol. 5 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 254-55.

[21] F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 434.

fierce wolfs (λύκοι). This threat is twofold; it comes from outside the body and sadly from within the church. Elders are to battle those false teachers who speak perverse or twisted words (διεστραμμένα). Paul entrusts the elders to guide the flock with care. I. Howard Marshall states, "In face of such, church leaders must be constantly on the *alert,* like shepherds keeping awake to watch for marauding wolves at night."[22] The words of Paul in these verses echo Jesus' words in Luke 10:3 to the seventy-two who he sent out to proclaim the kingdom of God: "Go your way; behold, I am sending you out as lambs in the midst of wolves." The elders are to be as watchmen over the church as Paul had fulfilled this role while he preached and pastored in Ephesus.

In verse 31, Paul declares that he gave continual, tearful warning of the danger of false teacher's day and night. For Paul, guarding the flock was an intense responsibility, not to be taken lightly at any time. Ben Witherington states, "Paul is one who cares deeply about his converts, a man of pathos."[23] Paul loves those who he had led to Christianity, and he wants nothing to corrupt those he had shepherded.

Throughout history and today, the church has been embattled by those who would seek to draw Christians away from the truth of Scripture and implant in their heart false doctrines. Heretical teaching, cults, and secularism surround the church. In 1 Timothy 1:3-11, Paul speaks clearly to Timothy about those who are teaching false doctrines to the church. These individuals focus on myths, speculations, and false beliefs that lead not to spiritual growth in Christ but to unbelief and death. These false teachers are "contrary to sound doctrine, in accordance with the gospel of the glory of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted" (1 Tim 10-11). Paul has clearly defined battle lines between those

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[22] I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles,* Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 335.

[23] Ben Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 624.

who are false teachers and those who speak the truth of the gospel to the body of Christ, the church.

In Acts 20:32, God's grace is central to the ability of the elder to fulfill his role in the church. Albert Mohler notes, "For Paul, ministry was empowered by the gospel, and these elders needed to be reminded that God's hand and grace would be the primary means through which they would succeed."[24] Salvation by God's grace brings sanctification and his final inheritance to the believer.

In Acts 20:33-35, Paul uses his example of selfless living to challenge the Ephesian elders with the importance of giving rather than receiving. John Polhill comments, "Paul had begun his address by listing the qualities of his own ministry as an example for the Ephesian leaders to follow. He concludes with a final quality he had sought to model."[25] He shares Christ's words on this topic to set the standard for how they are to live their life of ministry to the flock. They are not to covet material items but to be willing to sacrifice for those placed under their authority in the body. Witherington maintains, "The Greco-Roman world was full of social networks grounded on the principle of reciprocity. Paul's exhortation is to break that cycle and serve without return."[26] Leaders are to be servants of the body.

In Acts 20:17-38, Paul's words to the Ephesus elders set an example for church leaders today. Paul used his life of servanthood as an example to be imitated. His life is an example of humility, gospel proclamation, selfless giving, and the importance of one's own spiritual growth. Andrew Clarke affirms, "The Word of God and a god-honoring lifestyle are the foundational tools of a Christian leader."[27]

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[24] Albert Mohler, *Acts 13-28 for You* (Charlotte, NC: Good Book, 2019), 117.

[25] John Polhill, *Acts*, New American Commentary, vol. 26 (Nashville: B & H, 1992) 430.

[26] Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 626.

[27] Andrew Clarke, *A Pauline Theology of Church Leadership* (New York: T & T Clark, 2008), 157.

Paul states the importance of teaching and protecting the church from those who would teach false doctrine or seek material gain from the church body. Paul exhorts the elders to impart wisdom to their flock. Elders, then and now, are to build up the faith of those in their care. Elders are to lead through teaching to bring a solid understanding of the gospel which allows the church body to better handle the trials of life and its many situations.

A church nurtured and protected by gospel-centered leaders can be strengthened spiritually and emotionally to faithfully follow Christ and the gospel throughout times of sickness, death, and grieving. By growing in faith and having solid doctrine, individuals can pass through times of death and sorrow with maturity of belief instead of becoming broken by the lies of false doctrines that distort gospel truth. False doctrine confuses the truth of the gospel and leads individuals away from the body, leaving them vulnerable to those who would take advantage of them spiritually, physically, emotionally, and monetarily.

Paul foresaw these issues, and he exhorts the leaders to be prepared and on guard at all times. Shepherds were to teach and defend the gospel to those in their care. Today's church leaders also are called to teach and defend the gospel to those under their care. This responsibility cannot be neglected. False Christian doctrines and a hostile culture surround today's church. Mohler observes, "Indeed, we have seen entire ministries forfeit their identity as children of God in order to set on the throne human authorities and personalities."[28] Christians are often at their most vulnerable spiritual and emotional state in times of death and grief. They are easily swayed by false beliefs about life after death and heaven. Sadly, many have been swayed by false doctrines and lies. For example, many have been taken in by the belief that their loved one did not have enough faith to be healed, or the misunderstanding of eternal security because a person

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[28] Mohler, *Acts 13-28 for You*, 110.

"walks a church aisle" and "prays a prayer of salvation." Families often hold the belief that the person was saved even in the knowledge that their loved one showed no spiritual fruit in their lifetime and never lived in any Christian manner.

Elders and deacons with gospel understanding need to be present to gently teach, guide, and encourage the individuals and the whole flock during this time. Under-shepherds are to teach right doctrine and gently guide the flock to gospel truths. This display of loving involvement in the lives of the people will be instrumental in growing a healthy congregation.

In the account of Acts 20:17-38, Paul did not send for one elder to come to him in Miletus, he sent for the elders, plural. It takes more than one individual leader to minister to the church body. This principle is seen in the words of Peter in 1 Peter 5:1-3.

A Multiplicity of Leaders Are Needed to Guard and Guide the Church (1 Pet 5:1-3)

The role of the under-shepherd is not accomplished by one man but is the role of a multiplicity of under-shepherds caring for those suffering during the time of death and grieving. Exegesis of 1 Peter 5:1-3 shows the need for care to those suffering by Christ-centered under-shepherds for instruction and comfort. In 1 Peter 5:1-3, Peter calls the elders (plural) to willingly shepherd the church. Peter, like Paul, challenges the elders to lead not from seeking gain or power but from a spirit of humbleness.

Peter calls himself a "fellow elder" in 1 Peter 5:1. David Helm remarks, "In identifying with them, Peter extends himself into the weighty work that needs to be done in light of God's judgment."[29] Peter did not see himself as ruling over other Christian leaders but as one who serves alongside other leaders. Peter Davids asserts, "It is clear that this is an inclusive term that, rather than stressing his authority, stresses his empathy

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[29] David Helm, *1-2 Peter and Jude: Sharing Christ's Sufferings*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 159.

with the elders in their task."[30] The position of elder is not singular but a position to be shared by multiple leaders who can work together for the good of the church body. Peter also notes that he was a witness to Christ's suffering. Wayne Grudem states, "Peter is an elder who has sinned, repented, been restored, and who will share with Christ in his glory."[31] Scripture tells of Peter's example of failure when he abandoned and denied Christ in the gospels and his restoration by Christ's mercy and grace.

In John 21:15-17, Jesus restores and charges Peter to love him foremost and then carry the responsibility to feed and care for the church. Daniel Doriani notes, "Jesus asked Peter: Do you love me? This is a great question for every church leader. Apart from our union with Jesus, whom we love, our labors bear no fruit."[32] This is a powerful and humbling example for pastors. Only Christ can forgive, call, and equip leaders for the church. Humans are morally and spiritually bankrupt. Even after leaders are appointed by Christ into his service, each individual leader still sins, causing struggles in ministry and in relationships. When a leader fails in ministry, he should humbly seek correction and forgiveness. After a period of accountability and restoration, Christ and the church may possibly continue to use the leader to serve in preaching, counseling, and caring for the church.

In 1 Peter 5:2-3, Peter charges fellow Christian leaders with the mission of caring for the flock of God, the church body. The New International Version interprets verse 2: "Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers." Peter is speaking to those in positions of leadership over the church body. He is speaking not just to one man but to many.

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[30] Peter Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 176.

[31] Wayne Grudem, *1 Peter*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, vol. 17 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 187.

[32] Daniel Doriani, *1 Peter*, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2014), 206.

Church leaders must understand and remember that the flock is God's flock. The church is his body, his people, his for all time past, present, and future. The church is not to be used for a leader's desires, instead leaders are called to watch over and care for the church as under-shepherds of Christ. Leaders are to follow Christ's biblical example and direction. They are to be gospel-centered in leading the church. When leaders view the church body as their own and stray from the gospel, the church becomes a place of brokenness. Daniel Doriani states, "Churches are regularly places of shallow relationships, weak teaching, dull worship, and lazy prayers. Worse some particular churches are breeding grounds for wounded relationships and heretical ideas, where worshippers are critics, and everyone is either angry or asleep."[33]

The position of elder is not a job like any other job one can seek to hold. The position of elder is appointed by the Holy Spirit as seen in Acts 20:28. Doriani explains, "The core of an elder's qualification is the love of Jesus. This love creates the essential desire to lead and to care for God's people."[34] Wilson states that church leaders are to "love, teach, and lead without regard for personal enrichment. Pastors devote themselves to the well-being of those under their care. They love Christ and his people."[35]

Peter gives caution to the elders about their motivation for ministry and their behavior in caring for the church body. Augustine preached to church leaders:

> So since the sole reason people are put in charge is to consider the interests of those they are in charge of, and not at all to attend to their own advantage but only that of those they are in service of- anyone put in charge who just enjoys being the boss and seeks his own honor and looks to his own convenience is feeding himself, not the sheep.[36]

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[33] Doriani, *1 Peter*, 209.

[34] Doriani, *1 Peter*, 206.

[35] Wilson, *Pastoral Ministry in the Real World*, 25.

[36] Augustine, *The Works of Saint Augustine*, vol. 1, *Sermons on the Old Testament*, trans. Edmund Hill, ed. John Rotelle (Ann Abor, MI: New City Press, 1990), 264.

Simon Kistemaker states that elders are to serve the flock "not because you must but because you are willing; not greedy for money but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted but being examples."[37] Elders are to care for the church willingly, eagerly, and as an example of Christ imitation. Robert Leighton and Griffith Thomas encourage leaders that "three evils are to be removed from church leadership: reluctance, covetousness, and wrong ambition. A ministry is not a trade to follow rather a calling that we choose to obey."[38] The warning is if elders do not turn from their pride, greed, and sense of entitlement or position, then they will become a danger or liability for the church body. Baxter writes, "The whole of our ministry must be carried on in tender love to our people . . . they should see that we care for no outward thing, neither wealth, nor liberty, nor honor, nor life in comparison of their salvation."[39] Church leaders must seek God's direction in leading the body. Gordon Clark reminds leaders, "It is not the elder's flock, to be fed as the elder may arbitrarily choose; but it is God's flock, and its care must be according to God's direction."[40] Those who lead are to love Christ and then love his people. Helm proposes, "We are to emulate Jesus, who came to serve and not to be served. Humility and sacrificial service are the hallmarks of godly leadership."[41]

When elders lead in the right manner and for the correct reasons, an elder's reward does not always come to him at that time. First Peter 5:4 sets the elder's reward at a future time. Clark tells leaders that "when the chief Shepherd shall appear, the reward will not be money, earthly honor, or ephemeral popularity, but a crown of glory that

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[37] Simon Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Epistles of Peter and of the Epistle of Jude*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987) 191.

[38] Robert Leighton and Griffith Thomas, *1, 2 Peter*, The Crossway Classic Commentary (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1999), 226.

[39] Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, 59.

[40] Gordon Clark, *1 & 2 Peter* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1982), 152.

[41] Helm, *1-2 Peter and Jude*, 163.

fadeth not away."[42] At all times, an elder is to reflect Christ's example and ultimately Christ's glory. The elders are called to acknowledge the authority of Christ as the Chief Shepherd in verse 4. Each is to serve the master Shepherd faithfully and fully. Kistemaker notes the contrast between the promised crown of glory to be received by the elder with the crown of thorns worn by Christ: "Jesus bore the crown of humiliation so that we may wear the garland of glory. Conclusively, the victim became the victor who shares his victory with his followers."[43]

The example of Christ can never be separated from the image of a suffering savior. Christianity has for centuries proclaimed Christ's suffering in the words of the Apostles Creed, "He suffered under Pontius Pilate, crucified, died, and was buried. He descended to the dead. On the third day, he rose again." Christians will suffer on this earth and experience death as did Christ. Church leaders are called to walk with individuals in the church body in their present suffering till the time of future glory. I agree with the words of Inserra: "Many people want the good-luck-charm Jesus, not the sacrificial Lamb of God whose death requires action."[44] How Christians respond as a body of believers to suffering and death is an important witness to the surrounding community.

Leaders Share in the Suffering of Christ and the Church (2 Cor 1:3-7)

Hope and comfort can come in times of suffering and bereavement by the ministry of encouragement through the Word of God. Elders are to bring the message of hope to those impoverished by grief and who need encouragement. Paul shares with the Corinthians a time of angst, pain, and suffering from his life experience. This experience shaped Paul's thinking about God's involvement in suffering. Paul tells the Corinthians

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[42] Clark, *1 & 2 Peter*, 153.

[43] Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Epistles of Peter and of the Epistle of Jude*, 194.

[44] Inserra, *The Unsaved Christian*, 38.

that their suffering can teach them to better comfort and minister to others who are suffering.

Murray Harris states that four principles about suffering and comfort are found in this passage: "Suffering patiently endured deepens our appreciation of God's compassion and never-failing comfort. Suffering drives us to trust in God alone. Suffering brings identification with Christ and his suffering. We experience God's comfort (his help, consolation, and encouragement) in the midst of our suffering."[45]

Second Corinthians begins differently than some of Paul's other letters. Instead of beginning with words of thanksgiving, Paul begins with a blessing toward God. In 2 Corinthians 1:3, Paul identifies God for who he is and for his sovereign character. God is seen in this passage as the father of Christ, the father of mercy, and the God of all comforts. Paul praised the holy trinitarian God. Paul wants the Corinthians to remember the role of God as the Father of Jesus Christ. God, as the father of Christ, brought redemption through his Son, Jesus Christ. Grudem states, "God the Father planned redemption and sent his Son into the world (John 3:16). The Son obeyed the Father and accomplished redemption for us (John 6:8)."[46]

This statement of God as the father of Christ implies sonship. Jesus is the divine son of God who shares the nature of the father. Michael Horton observes, "He is sovereign not only as God, but as the image-bearing son who finally fulfills the trial and commission he has been given as the covenantal head of his people."[47] Paul points the Corinthians to the Sovereignty and love of God through the Lord Jesus Christ. Scott Hafemann explains that Christians can know through Jesus Christ the mercy and comfort

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[45] Murray Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians,* The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 123.

[46] Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 249.

[47] Horton, *Pilgrim Theology*, 171.

"that comes from God in the midst of affliction and suffering."[48] Christ reveals God character to his followers.

Next, Paul praises God as the father of mercy. In this passage, Paul has experienced the mercy of God in his time of suffering and distress. One of the wonderful attributes of God is his mercy. Horton remarks, "God has freely chosen to bestow not only his love but also his compassion and mercy on those who deserve the very opposite."[49] God's mercy uplifts Christians in times of suffering and death and allows his people to not only survive hard times but to praise God even in the midst of struggle. In 2 Corinthians 4:1, Paul declares that his ministry of the gospel comes "by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart." Grudem states that Paul's words challenge Christians to "imitate God's mercy in our conduct toward others: 'Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy' (Matt. 5:7)."[50] The gospel of Christ is God's mercy to those he calls out of darkness into salvation and the presence of his glory.

Paul praises God as the author and originator "of all comfort" or encouragement (παρακλήσεως) in verse 3. Phillip Hughes notes, "The word comfort, whether as a noun or a verb, occurs no less than ten times in verses three to seven, building up in a characteristically Pauline manner a compelling impression of the comfort which God bestows upon His children."[51] God is the one who gives comfort in times of affliction. He is the source of all comfort for the Christian. David Abernathy remarks that in 2 Corinthians 1:4, comfort is "used in the sense of standing beside someone for the purpose

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[48] Scott Hafemann, *2 Corinthians*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 59.

[49] Michael Horton, *Core Christianity: Finding Yourself in God's Story* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 60.

[50] Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 201.

[51] Phillip Hughes, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 11.

of helping through a severe testing. The participle is in the timeless present tense, showing ongoing encouragement."[52] God comforts at all times and in all situations of affliction.

God's comfort comes from resting in God's sovereign being. R. Kent Hughes proposes, "There is no enduring comfort apart from him."[53] Christians can comfort others because they have experienced God's direct and personal comfort in times of afflictions. R. Kent Hughes also states, "No matter how great the sufferings a Christian is called upon to endure, they are matched (2 Cor. 4:17) by the comfort which God bestows."[54] God strengthens Christians to face suffering and afflictions in life.

Afflictions spring out of two sources in a Christian's life. First, afflictions can come from outside circumstances that surround one's life. Paul speaks of these in his own life in 2 Corinthians 1:8, 4:17, and 6:4-5. Severe afflictions from outside circumstances are not just personal but can impact Christian communities as it did in the churches of Macedonia: "For in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part (2 Cor. 8:2)." Second, afflictions can also attack a Christian mentally. Paul struggles with mental pain, fears, and suffering (2 Cor 2:4, 7:5).

Afflictions come to those who are truly living a Christian witness and lifestyle. Jared Wilson writes, "The New Testament writers in fact see suffering (afflictions) as itself a gift of grace. 'Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds' James 1:2."[55] Sadly, some Christians believe that afflictions come to those of weak faith and unbelief. They then struggle to understand why God has allowed afflictions to happen in their lives.

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[52] David Abernathy, *An Exegetical Summary of 2 Corinthians*, 2nd ed. (Dallas: SIL International, 2008), 23

[53] R. Kent Hughes, *2 Corinthians: Power in Weakness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 23.

[54] Hughes, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 13.

[55] Jared Wilson, *Gospel Deeps* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 122.

Paul speaks of sharing in the "sufferings of Christ" in verse 5. When Christians follow and serve Christ and his community, they will also share in Christ's suffering. George Beasley-Murray affirms, "Jesus warned his disciples of sufferings ahead of them, precisely in the context of Christian witness and service (Matt 5:10, John 16:33). Suffering is part of the church's mission."[56]

As a part of the body of Christ, Christians must be prepared to share in affliction and suffering. Many who identify themselves as Christians only want the blessings of good health, wealth, and happiness in their life. They have come to believe God has failed them or abandoned them, but this is not the case. Although suffering does not have a place in their theology, the New Testament is clear that Christians will indeed suffer for Christ and with Christ when obedient to him. Jerry Bridges speaks of the fellowship of suffering and communion of suffering in his book, *True Community*: "The universal testimony of those who have suffered for the sake of Christ and his church is that they have experienced a deep fellowship, an intimate communion with Him in the midst of their suffering."[57] When Christians suffer for Christ, comfort will come from Christ the good shepherd.

In 2 Corinthians 1:3-7, Paul links Christ's suffering and Christ's comfort. The two cannot be separated. In these verses, Paul praises Christ for how his comfort flows from his suffering. Christ was rejected, suffered, and died for God's plan of redemption. Paul identifies with Christ's suffering. Origen wrote, "Those who share in sufferings will share also in the comfort in proportion to the suffering they share with Christ."[58] Frank Carver states, "Paul believes that his own afflictions were a necessary part of God's

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[56] George R. Beasley-Murray, *2 Corinthians-Philemon*, The Broadman Bible Commentary, vol. 11 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1971) 11.

[57] Jerry Bridges, *True Community* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 2012), 127.

[58] Origen, quoted in Gerald Bray, ed., *1-2 Corinthians*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament, vol. 7 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999), 196.

redeeming activity . . . an integral part of Christian service."[59] Paul thanks God for his

suffering and deliverance by Christ. Carver affirms that these verses of 2 Corinthians 1:3-7

grant Christians "a profound understanding of God, an effective power to comfort others,

and later in verse 11, an enticing call to intercessory prayer."[60]

In 2 Corinthians 1:3-7, Paul displays emotional vulnerability as he shares with

the Corinthians how suffering shaped his thinking and his beliefs about Christ. Paul's

opponents in Corinth questioned his leadership due to his weakness of body and his

suffering (2 Cor 10:10). Thomas Schreiner observes that Paul "wants the Corinthians to

recognize the benefits of sufferings and thus see that God uses sufferings both in their

lives and in the lives of others. . . . Suffering brings hope."[61]

As leaders in the church, elders and deacons are to bring the knowledge of

Christ's suffering to those who suffer in times of bereavement. Leaders are to share their

experiences and be witnesses to others about the hope, peace, and strength of Christ. A

Christian's hope stems from the cross of Christ, his atoning death, and his victory over

death. For the Christian, Christ is the only hope in a broken and fallen world which

questions every Christian belief. Hafemann notes, "Christ is our refuge and strength, an

ever-present help in trouble (Ps. 46:1). . . . Our emotional comfort comes not from within

ourselves, but from God's commitment to sustain and save his people."[62] Christian

leaders are to be gospel-centered encouragers to those in trouble and need so they can

endure in times of affliction and sorrow.

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[59] Frank Carver, *2 Corinthians: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*, New Beacon Bible Commentary (Kansas City, KS: Beacon Hill Press, 2009), 81.

[60] Carver, *2 Corinthians*, 86.

[61] Thomas Schreiner, *Handbook on Acts and Paul's Letters* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2019), 191.

[62] Hafemann, *2 Corinthians*, 61.

**Leaders Are to Teach Correct Theology in
Times of Death and Suffering (Ps 23)**

Teaching Christ-centered theology is imperative for leaders as they guide their church body. This instruction is especially true in times of death. Wilson states, "Scripture is clear about what God can do. What grieving people are often unclear about is what He will do in their circumstance."[63] In today's culture, fewer families seem to understand basic Christian doctrines on death, heaven, and hell. They do not grasp the nature of God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as they spiritually and emotionally encounter the death of a loved one. Their theology is intertwined with cultural myths and false beliefs. Many use scriptures out of context to bring false hope and assurance to those suffering and in grief.

A number of false beliefs are commonly shared by Christians and non-Christians alike. They are spoken to bring comfort and healing but mainly bring false hope and assurance to hurting families. Examples of quotes often encountered: "Your loved one is a beautiful angel in heaven," "God needed your infant so he took him or her to heaven," "God takes the best people early," and "Your loved one watches over you and will protect you." When confronted with scripture and correct theology, individuals become confused and at times angry because it does not match what they have heard spoken or how they have wrongly interpreted the Bible.

Shallow cultural Christianity has embedded within it an image of God as the God of love who serves everybody's needs and saves everyone. Many individuals simply do not believe God only saves those who have regeneration through his son, Jesus Christ. They believe a God of love cannot ultimately cast anyone away from His loving presence and that all will be saved at some point. This idea is the heretical doctrine called universalism and it is not supported in Scripture.

As under-shepherds who need to teach doctrinal principles to those who lack basic biblical understanding, it is helpful to use a scripture passage that is somewhat

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[63] Wilson, *Pastoral Ministry in the Real World*, 35.

familiar to many families. One scripture that many have commonly heard or read at funeral services is Psalm 23. In some funerals, David's personal experience of walking with God through crisis is used to describe God's care for the deceased Christian through life and death. In other services, it is used to comfort a family as they "walk through the valley of the shadow of death" (v. 4). Due to this familiarity by individuals and families, this scripture can help pastors teach doctrinal truths to those hurting after the death of a loved one.

Psalm 23 gives a clear outline of how a sovereign God works in the daily lives of his people. Herman Selderhuis uses Martin Luther's quote on Psalm 23 to point to God as the Shepherd of His people:

> In spiritual shepherding . . . as little as a natural sheep can feed, direct, guide itself or guard and protect itself against danger—just so little can we poor, weak, miserable people feed and guide ourselves spiritually, walk and remain on the right path or by our own power protect ourselves against all evil and gain help and comfort for ourselves in anxiety and distress. . . . They must depend on God, their Shepherd, for all.[64]

The placement of Psalm 23 brings comfort to God's people. Psalm 22 is filled with a cry of desperation, a fear of enemies, and a sense of abandonment by the psalmist. In Psalm 23, the psalmist acknowledges the grace and mercy of God even in the midst of enemies and in an environmentally harsh land. Psalm 23 presents the picture of God as the shepherd in verses 1-4. Verses 5-6 portray God as host. Willem VanGemeren states that these six short verses have a "universal appeal which lies in the comfort it gives to those confronted with difficult periods of life."[65] The psalm presents God as a provider and protector to those in need of assurance and direction.

In Psalm 23, the psalmist speaks of God as his personal shepherd. Sidney Greidanus writes, "In all the other psalms where 'shepherd' is used as a metaphor for

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[64] Martin Luther, quoted in Herman Selderhuis, ed., *Psalms 1-72*, Reformation Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament, vol. 7 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2015), 188.

[65] Willem VanGemeren, *Psalms*, in vol. 5 of *The Expositors Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 214.

deity, the relationship is to the community. Indeed, in all the many uses of the metaphor in the entire Old Testament, it is always 'our shepherd.'"[66] The language used is of a personal relationship between Yahweh and the psalmist. Psalm 23 proclaims the sovereignty of God as he works in the daily lives of his people. In verse 1, God is the shepherd, and the psalmist is a part of his flock. Peter Craigie observes, "The imagery is one of individual care for the psalmist and of communal care for all his people. The psalmist is expressing confidence and trust in God's salvation."[67] The psalm builds a picture of God leading a body of his people through daily life with its struggles and dangers while intimately knowing each of his people within the flock. Greidanus states that the goal of Psalm 23 is "to encourage God's people with the good news that on their dangerous journey through life the Lord is with them so that they will lack nothing."[68]

Verse 2 portrays the shepherd who brings his sheep, his people to a quiet place. "He makes me lie down." Robert Bratcher and William Reyburn note, "This is not by force but due to the refreshing abundance of the green pastures and still waters."[69] It is a place of abundant provision and refreshing waters; a place to be still, a place where, as seen in verse 3, the person can be restored to strength.

Verse 3 points to how God brings restoration and redemption to the souls of his people. יְשׁוֹבֵב is the Hebrew for "He restores." Arno Gaebelein observes that it can also mean "to turn about, to return."[70] God turns his people from paths of unholy living to

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[66] Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Psalms: Foundations for Expository Sermons in the Christian Year* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 342.

[67] Peter Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 19 (Waco, TX: Word, 1983), 206.

[68] Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Psalms*, 349.

[69] Robert Bratcher and William Reyburn, *A Handbook on Psalms* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1991), 232.

[70] Arno Gaebelein, *The Book of Psalms: A Devotional and Prophetic Commentary* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1978), 114.

paths of right living. In leading the person on right pathways, which lead to holiness and salvation, God brings renewed hope and strength. Bratcher and Reyburn note, "Restoration is the result of Yahweh's care as he puts a new heart in me."[71] God restores those who are tired, anxious, and worried. Yet his guidance and his restoration of souls is not primarily for the psalmist and for God's people, but it is for the glory of God's holy name. It is for his glory, not his people's glory. He guides so that those who follow have salvation and righteousness before the Lord. God gives his guidance and care so his people can praise, honor, and worship him as Savior and holy God. God's people are to honor the name of God who keeps his promises to his people even when they are unfaithful before him.

Sheep are understood as helpless and needy animals—animals that are fearful and easily harmed. Sheep are at the mercy of the environmental elements and predators unless they have a trustworthy and loving shepherd. The words used in Psalm 23:1-4 portray God as a trustworthy shepherd.

Verse 4 is the center of the verses in Psalm 23. There is a shift in this verse from speaking about Yahweh in the third person to second person in this verse. Greidanus remarks that it is "a testimony about God and praise to God because the Lord as shepherd and host is with the psalmist and he lacks nothing."[72] St. Augustine comments, "Yea, though I walk in the midst of this life, which is the shadow of death. I will fear no evil, for Thou dwellest in my heart by faith: and You are now with me, that after the shadow of death I too may be with You."[73] Bruce Waltke and James Houston state that in this verse his rod and staff "symbolize that the shepherd is fully equipped to handle all

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[71] Bratcher and Reyburn, *A Handbook on Psalms*, 232.

[72] Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Psalms*, 347.

[73] Augustine, "Expositions on the Psalms," accessed on May 29, 2020. https://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/ted_hildebrandt/otesources/19-psalms/text/books/augustine-psalms/augustine-psalms.pdf, 113.

situations in our lives."[74] They are symbols of his power to guide and protect. The psalmist places his trust, his faith, and his hope in the provision, protection, and guidance of a holy God.

Allen Ross reminds the reader that verses 5-6 are a beautiful picture of "the persistent and loyal love of the Lord as God draws the psalmist back to full communion in the house of the Lord."[75] The image of God has shifted from the image of the shepherd to the image of host. Yet, the reader is presented with the knowledge and assurance of God's care and protection in every verse. God provides spiritually for his people to grow and to be fully refreshed by his holy presence and provision. VanGemeren observes, "In the presence of God, the fragrance of his rewards (oil) and the bounty of his provisions (cup) make one forget troubles and tears."[76] In verses 5-6, the psalmist is protected from his enemies, soothed by oil of welcome and the full cup of generosity from God. The psalmist is in a position of safety, goodness, and overflowing provision. The psalmist remains in God's holy presence; he dwells for all days in praise and worship to the God who has by his grace and mercy guided him throughout his days. He acknowledges that it is God who has brought him to a place of everlasting worship.

Elders and deacons can use Psalm 23 to guide and care for those they encounter who are hurting from loss and sorrow, and who are struggling with the crisis of death in their lives. Church elders and deacons can use the images of God's presence to uplift and encourage those hurting. Three images from the psalm are helpful: God as shepherd, God as with us, and the house of the Lord. Elders and deacons can trace each of these metaphors throughout the Old Testament into the promises of Christ in the New Testament. In the

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[74] Bruce Waltke and James Houston, *The Psalms as Christian Worship: A Historical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 441.

[75] Allen Ross, *A Commentary on the Psalms*, Kregel Exegetical Library (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2011), 1:557.

[76] VanGemeren, *Psalms*, 218.

Old Testament, "God as shepherd" to his people are seen in Genesis 48:15, Isaiah 40:10-11, and Ezekiel 34:30-3. In the New Testament, Jesus is portrayed as the good shepherd: John 10:11, 14, Hebrews 13:20, 1 Peter 2:25, 1 Peter 5:4, and Revelation 7:17, and 12:5.

Greidanus points Christians to the image of "God with us" as seen in verse 4 is in Genesis 26:3, 28:15, 48:21, and Exodus 3:2. This image of Jesus as "God with us" is seen in the New Testament in Matthew 1:23, 28:19-20, Acts 18:9-10, and Revelation 21:3. The image of dwelling in verse 6 is seen in John 14:1-3 as Jesus speaks to his disciples about his future and theirs.[77] These metaphors of God's presence in daily life bring hope, comfort, and strength to those in times of mourning and grief.

Anxiety in today's culture is common.[78] Those with anxiety include many cultural Christians who claim to profess Christ as savior. However, due to the structure of some denominations and the prosperity church movement, many have been scattered by uncaring or false shepherds. These Christians struggle with their position as a loved child of God when afflictions and death enter their lives. Psalm 23 reminds Christians of the nurture, protection, and provision of a sovereign God. It draws hurting individuals to the picture of Christ as the shepherd who gave his life to atone for one's sins and who is victorious over death. It comforts Christians by the knowledge of the presence and the wisdom of the Holy Spirit. He renews his people with His righteousness and fills each spiritually. The Psalm 23 uplifts God's people by the knowledge that the triune Lord has a place prepared at his heavenly table for all eternity.

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[77] Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Psalms*, 350.

[78] According to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America, "Anxiety disorders are the most common mental illness in the U.S., affecting 40 million adults." Anxiety and Depression Association of America, "Facts and Statistics," accessed June 29, 2021, https://adaa.org/understanding-anxiety/facts-statistics.

Conclusion

Elders and deacons are called to be under-shepherds to the church body with very distinct roles. Mark Dever states, "In practice if not in doctrine, many churches also confuse the New Testament roles of deacon and elder."[79] In the New Testament church, the role of deacon was one of service to the needs of the church body while the elders were to guide the church body in doctrinal truth and to spread the gospel through the teaching and preaching of Scripture. This distinction is seen in Acts 6:1-7. Deacons were appointed to serve those in the church body who were in need. Elders were responsible for the teaching and preaching of the Word. Dever writes about the New Testament distinction in roles in this way:

> The ministry of the Word of God is central to the responsibility of the elders, both in their public handling of the Word and in their lives. The deacons, meanwhile, should concern themselves with the practical details of church life: administration, maintenance, and the care of church members with physical need—all in order to promote the unity of the church and the ministry of the Word.[80]

As Under-shepherds of Christ, elders and deacons hold a great responsibility to lead and guide his beloved church. From the scriptures presented in this chapter, several important ideas for shaping pastoral ministry with the church need to be highlighted.

First, elders and deacons serve a sovereign God. This lesson is of the upmost importance for the local body of Christ to comprehend. God is in control of all. All of life falls under His sovereign reign. Elders and deacons are called to lead his people to glorify his name in all situations. The chief purpose of man is to glorify God. Too often elders or deacons seek self-glory and self-enrichment, which can destroy a church. Michael Wilder and Timothy Paul Jones state, "Those who are privileged to shepherd God's people are never lords over the flock. . . . Any power we possess has been divinely delegated to

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[79] Mark Dever, *Understanding Church Leadership.* (Nashville: B & H, 2016), 32.

[80] Dever. *Understanding Church Leadership*, 32-33.

guide God's flock toward his purposes."[81] Elders and deacons must hold one another accountable to serve faithfully and humbly before God and the local body of Christ.

Second, elders and deacons need look to their own spiritual growth. Elders and deacons cannot lead unless they are spiritually and doctrinally prepared. As church leaders, elders, and deacons must have a firm spiritual and theological foundation to help the congregation in spiritual growth. The biblical character qualifications for each are listed in 1 Timothy 3. Elders and deacons are to complement each other in the nurturing, protecting, and guidance of the congregation.

Third, the role of the under-shepherd is not accomplished by one man but is the role of a multiplicity of under-shepherds. Elders and deacons are to serve alongside God's people, using their God-given spirituals gifts and their specific roles to build up the body. The flock of Christ has many physical, emotional, and spiritual needs. The elders and deacons are to be sensitive to these needs and to provide care for these needs. Each is called to a role of stewardship and servanthood to nourish and protect the flock. Elders and deacons are to set an example of how to live holy lives for the flock.

Fourth, elders and deacons are to be in a constant state of awareness to combat false teachers and wrong doctrine. Wilder and Jones affirm, "Elders must guard the flock from heretical influences that will divert the convictions and the affections of the people"[82] away from Christ and his body. Clear guidance and training performed by the elders with support from the deacons is especially important in helping the church body understand doctrinal truths about the gospel, suffering, death, and lament.

Fifth, suffering will be a part of the life of elders as they shepherd the sheep. Suffering brings holiness to church leaders who understand that suffering with Christ will happen while serving the flock. Wilder and Jones remind leaders, "Suffering cultivates

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[81] Michael Wilder and Timothy Paul Jones, *The God Who Goes Before You: Pastoral Leadership as Christ-Centered Followership* (Nashville: B & H, 2018), 122.

[82] Wilder and Jones, *The God Who Goes Before You*, 182.

sympathy for the flock and deepens the leader's love for the flock."[83] Suffering shapes a leader's character and understanding of the cross of Christ. Suffering will shape how a leader will teach, preach, and council those in the flock. When elders and deacons walk with individuals and families through the valley of the shadow of death, they will point people to the comfort and hope of Christ, not to the temporary promises of the world.

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[83] Wilder and Jones, *The God Who Goes Before You*, 159.

CHAPTER 3

HISTORICAL/CONTEMPORARY ISSUES RELATED
TO BEREAVEMENT MINISTRY

"The death of someone you love is bad enough. It creates an absence in your life, and your awareness of it rises and falls, its peaks and troughs are as unpredictable and as dangerous as the waves of the sea, whose rhythms work beneath the surface according to their own mysterious logic." James Marwood[1]

The contemporary church often defaults to secular models, which impacts how congregations understand death and bereavement care. Traditional Christian models of mourning and lament, based on the doctrine of original sin, have little place in today's culture in working out one's grief. Over time, the cultural impact of denial of death and the Modern Death Awareness Movement (MDAM) in America have combined to influence the modern church and how it trains leaders to minister to those dying and the bereaved. Secular models of end-of-life and grief care are most often used by mainline churches today. Tim Keller states, "All of Western societies live within the secular frame and even many people who still profess fairly traditional beliefs in God, most are affected by this frame . . . secularization thins out traditional beliefs . . . and may be the worst possible preexisting condition in which to encounter suffering."[2]

These models most often support Moralistic Therapeutic Deism and do not have a classical, historical, and scriptural Christ-centered foundation that is based on the doctrine of original sin. Certain churches and pastors seek to promote health, wealth, and happiness, but these idols of secular living cannot give the comfort of a sovereign God or

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[1] Character James Marwood, speaking in Andrew Taylor, *The Fire Court* (London: Harper Collins, 2018), 182.

[2] Timothy Keller, *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering* (New York: Penguin, 2013), 57-58.

overcome the reality of suffering and death. As the gospel message has become diluted

and is often deemed irrelevant in American society and churches, funeral services have

changed in their content. A study by the National Funeral Directors Association found

that "the percent of respondents who feel it is very important to have religion incorporated

into a funeral service has decreased from 49.5 percent in 2012 to 39.5 percent in 2017, an

all-time low.[3]

<div align="center">

**Historical Models of Death and Bereavement Shape
Modern Christian Bereavement Ministry**

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Many mainline Protestant church ministers have been trained to address the

social and psychological needs of grieving individuals before they address the spiritual

needs of those in bereavement. Dean Inserra notes, "When biblical authority is neither

established nor believed then the only possible outcome for moral issues is that God will

change with the times. Culture, popular opinion, pragmatism, and the desire to be liked . . .

will become the governing authorities."[4] An example of this is seen in the content of many

modern Christian funerals that focus on sharing kind words about the deceased instead of

the reality of the gospel message. In Christian tradition, when a believer dies, it has been

an occasion of mourning and lament, not a time of celebration of the deceased's earthly

achievements.

Over the centuries, the doctrine of original sin has been challenged by a number

of voices within the Christian community while the secular community rejects this doctrine

completely. Some examples of the most outspoken voices within the Christian community

have been those of Pelagius, protestant liberalism, and currently the influence of moralistic

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[3] "The National Funeral Directors Association's 2017 Consumer Awareness and Preferences Study Reveals Inconsistency in Funeral Planning Practices." National Funeral Directors Association, "Funeral Planning Not a Priority for Americans," June 22, 2017, https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/funeral-planning-not-a-priority-for-americans-300478569.html.

[4] Dean Inserra, *The Unsaved Christian: Reaching Cultural Christianity with the Gospel* (Chicago: Moody, 2019), 160-61.

therapeutic deism. Pelagius was condemned by the early church for his teaching against original sin. Coelestius, one of Pelagius disciples, wrote of Pelagius belief that

> Adam was created moral . . . Adam's sin injured himself alone, not the human race; that there were men without sin before Christ's coming; that it is not through the death or the fall of Adam that the whole human race dies; it is not through the resurrection of Christ that the whole human race rises again . . . and that a man can be without sin, if he choose.[5]

Centuries later, Charles Finney during the Second Great Awakening in America, followed in Pelagius' footsteps by rejecting the doctrine of original sin as understood in traditional Christian doctrine. On original sin and free will, Finney breaks from Calvinism, Jonathan Edwards, and his New England roots. This is due to Finney's theology on moral law and natural ability.[6] Brooks Holifield states that Finney "rejected any notion that moral depravity referred to a sinful nature derived from the imputation of Adam's sin or the inheritance of Adam's nature."[7]. In his argument against original sin Finney gives this commentary on David's words in Psalm 51: "He broke out in the language of this text to express, not the antiscriptural and nonsensical dogma of a sinful constitution, but to affirm in his strong, poetic language, that he had been a sinner from the commencement of his moral existence, or from the earliest moment of his capability of being a sinner."[8] These men and many others have questioned the truth of this important doctrine of the faith.

As the debate over original sin continued over the centuries, the Roman Catholic Church developed another doctrine to add to their theology of death and afterlife: the belief of purgatory. Wayne Grudem writes, "In Roman Catholic teaching, purgatory is

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[5] Henry Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 53-54.

[6] For more on Finney's theology, see Douglas Sweeney and Allen Guelzo's comments on Finney's lectures in *The New England Theology: From Jonathan Edwards to Edwards Amasa Park* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006).

[7] E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 364.

[8] Charles G. Finney, *Charles G. Finney's Systematic Theology*, ed. Hames Harris Fairchild (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1944), 193.

the place where the souls of believers go to be further purified from sin until they are ready to be admitted into heaven."[9] This doctrine is not supported by Scripture and has been in dispute from the time of the Protestant Reformation. Martin Luther was outspoken against the Catholic Church's practice of offering masses for souls in purgatory. He wrote, "It is necessary to abolish all endowed masses for the dead, since we plainly see that they have become a mockery. God is deeply angered by these, and their only purpose is money-grubbing."[10]

In contemporary American culture, the concept of purgatory has created confusion for those questioning what the Bible speaks about death and the afterlife. Numerous American families have a blend of differing religious backgrounds, which often contradict one another. Catholic and Protestant doctrine has become merged in a great many families, especially families who rarely attend church services. This blending of Catholic and Protestant doctrines has created a poor understanding of true biblical doctrines about original sin, death and what follows after death for the believer and unbeliever.

In much of American society, the doctrine of original sin has no role in conversation on death and dying. It is important for church leaders to resist the pressure to discontinue preaching and teaching the truths of the doctrines of original sin, Christ's victory over death, and salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. There is great need for churches to focus on proclaiming Christ's victory over sin and death, his gift of eternal life, and God's divine judgement over all peoples. Keller states, "Early Christians believed in the resurrection—*that* is our future, and that meant we are

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[9] Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 817.

[10] Martin Luther, *Three Treatises* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973), 70-71.

saved as our individual selves—our personalities will be sustained, beautified, and perfected after death. And so, our ultimate future is one of perfect, unhindered love."[11]

Classical Christian models of a Christ-centered death, grief, and bereavement care, which proclaim the gospel and its hope to the suffering, have been lost in the mainline Protestant American church of today. Matthew McCullough believes Christians "rather than emphasizing death as the backdrop for our gospel—a major reason for the goodness of Christianity and the hope it offers—we have all too often behaved as if death isn't inevitable or devastating."[12] Christians have lost the understanding that the death of an unbeliever is of great mourning and anguish and that the death of a believer is a time of mourning but also the final union with Christ.

George Barna gives insight into this shift in American Christian thinking:

> Americans have a willingness to embrace beliefs that are logically contradictory and a preference for blending different faith views together which create unorthodox religious viewpoints . . . noting that among born again Christians—10% believer that people are reincarnated after death, 29% claim it is possible to communicate with the dead, and 50% contend that a person can earn salvation based upon good works.[13]

Nancy Guthrie states that modern Western "culture assumes that most people go to heaven . . . we comfort grieving people by saying things like, 'Well at least he's in a better place,' or we talk about what the deceased is doing in heaven."[14] A different Barna study in 2003 found that "81% of Americans believe in an afterlife of some sort and that Heaven and Hell exist . . . yet most Americans do not expect to experience Hell first-hand: just one-

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[11] Keller, *Walking with God*, 42-43.

[12] Matthew McCullough, *Remember Death: The Surprising Path to Living Hope* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 52-53.

[13] Barna Group, "Americans Describe Their Views about Life after Death," October 21, 2003, https://www.barna.com/research/americans-describe-their-views-about-life-after-death/.

[14] Nancy Guthrie, *What Grieving People Wish You Knew about What Really Helps (and What Really Hurts)* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 128.

half of 1% expect to go to Hell upon their death. Nearly two-thirds of Americans (64%) believe they will go to Heaven."[15]

It is important for Christian leaders to understand how this shift in understanding about death and afterlife has taken place in American culture generally and in many Christian models specifically. Michael Leming and George Dickinson write that there are three identifiable periods in the "American experience of death": living death (1600-1830), dying of death (1830-1945), and the resurrection of death (1945-present).[16] By studying these time periods, the reader can better understand the changes that have occurred to bring about beliefs that are contrary to orthodox Christian doctrine.

In the first time period (1600-1830), infectious disease and death were a common occurrence in American life. Jim Rasenberger notes these facts from an early nineteenth-century multi-decade mortality study in New York City that "found an average life span of thirty years in 1815, which fell to twenty-two years by 1837. The greatest number of deaths was in young children—40 percent would not make it to age five."[17] Death rates were high due to disease and the lack of modern medicines. Many families were confronted with the death of infants and children. Individuals died in the home and families surrounded the death bed of their dying loved one. A good example of how families understood death and its impact are the New England Puritans. Lemming and Dickinson point out that the "Puritans believed that a sovereign God ruled over the earth and displayed his sovereignty by intervening in the natural or social world. They

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[15] Barna Group, "Americans Describe Their Views."

[16] Michael Leming and George Dickinson, *Understanding Dying, Death, and Bereavement*, 5th ed. (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt College Publishing, 2002), 51.

[17] Jim Rasenberger, *Revolver: Sam Colt and the Six-Shooter That Changed America* (New York: Scribner, 2020), 15.

knew they deserved death-the last enemy- death was painful and a punishment for sin."[18] For the Puritans, death was the final enemy, which was defeated by Christ.

Prayer was an important part of the funeral process: "The Puritans prayed not for the soul of the deceased but rather for the comfort and instruction of the living. An elegy was read which depicted the dead person as a saint freed from this world and entering eternal bliss."[19] Through prayer and sermon, families were allowed to grieve and to be comforted by God's Word and promise. Death, which comes to all man due to sin nature, has no hold on those in union with him.

In the second period (1830-1945), death was something to be hidden from society. In this era the modern funeral industry developed. Leming and Dickinson note, "Separation and specialization were strategies of control"[20] to set death apart from everyday life. Breakthroughs in medicine lengthened the America's lifespan. Over time, those dying were placed in medical facilities away from their home and in view by the family. Isolation and loneliness became common issues for those in the dying process.

Leming and Dickinson believe that the third period (1945-present) began with the use of atomic weapons of mass destruction and the mass murder of the Jewish people in the holocaust. The possibility of mass numbers of death and world destruction made mankind face the inevitability of dying and death. Individuals believed that the end of the world due to nuclear destruction was possible and inevitable. Today's media and gaming industry are filled with violent death scenes which glorify death. Classes teaching thanatology—the study of dying, death, and bereavement—began to be offered in colleges across America. Yet, even with this new understanding of mankind's mortality and exposure to death, Leming and Dickinson note that "many of the attitudes and

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[18] Leming and Dickinson, *Understanding Dying, Death, and Bereavement*, 51-52.

[19] Leming and Dickinson, *Understanding Dying, Death, and Bereavement*, 384.

[20] Leming and Dickinson, *Understanding Dying, Death, and Bereavement*, 53.

practices developed during the second time period are still very much a part of the American experience of death and dying today."[21] The fear and denial of death have remained a large part of the modern American culture.

Secular Models of Death and Bereavement Influence on American Christian Views of Death and Grief

The medical community, technology, and modern psychology have had a crucial impact on the Christian response to death and bereavement care in the American church of today. As medical science became the driving force in Western civilization, religion lost its priority in American society and the lives of many people. Filiz Peach notes, "The creator, the creation of the universe and man's central position as maintained by theology were questioned, and religious faith began to decline. Increasingly, the focus switched to life 'here and now' as man became more preoccupied with the material side of the world at the expense of the spiritual."[22] In contemporary American society, death is not defined for Americans in theological or philosophical terms, but in scientific medical terminology. The American Bar Association and the American Medical Association definition of death is: "An individual who has sustained either (1) irreversible cessation of circulatory and respiratory function, or (2) irreversible cessation of all functions of the entire brain, including the brain stem."[23]

For most of history, the death of a loved one most often took place in the family home. The individual was surrounded by family and close friends throughout the dying process. McCullough states, "From the medieval period until the twentieth century death was a public phenomenon . . . families, friends, and even children were familiar with

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[21] Leming and Dickinson, *Understanding Dying, Death, and Bereavement*, 54-58.

[22] Filiz Peach, "Death, Faith & Existentialism," *Philosophy Now*, accessed October 9, 2020, https://philosophynow.org/issues/27/Death_Faith_and_Existentialism.

[23] Leming and Dickinson, *Understanding Dying, Death, and Bereavement*, 43.

death and didn't attempt to hide it."[24] After death, the deceased would be on display in the home as family and neighbors gathered to mourn. All ages were exposed to the death and dying process of an individual. Death was not alien to a family.

As a young child, I remember when my grandfather died, and his body was placed in the home for several days surrounded by the family. Friends gathered with family to view his body and share meals together. We, as grandchildren, played in the rooms adjacent to where his casket was placed. Today this practice is regarded as odd to many who are used to family visitation and viewing of the deceased being held in a funeral home or church. Yet there is some movement to revive this practice. The Funeral Consumers Alliance explains,

> In the majority of states, a family, community or religious group can handle a death without a funeral director. You can prepare the body, acquire the necessary paperwork, hold a vigil or service, and transport the body to the burial site or crematory. Nine states, however, require you to hire a funeral director: Connecticut, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Louisiana, Michigan, Nebraska, New Jersey, and New York.[25]

The American culture that encourages the denial of death and the fear of death have created a culture where the medical community have moved the family's experience of death and grief from the home. Death has become a clinical and sterile process for many families. Clifton Bryant states, "The loss of the Puritan struggle with salvation has all but disappeared. The place of the confessor at the bedside has been increasingly filled by the medical practitioner."[26]

In present American culture families desire to have the best medical care for an individual. This desire has caused the process of end-of-life care to now be commonly performed in the hospital. McCullough reports, "By the 1980's just seventeen percent of

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[24] McCullough, *Remember Death*, 43-44.

[25] Funeral Consumers Alliance, "Your Funeral Rights," accessed August 7, 2021, https://funerals.org/?consumers=your-funeral-rights.

[26] Clifton Bryant, *Handbook of Death and Dying* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2003), 20.

deaths occurred in the home. In previous centuries, death happened where life happened."[27] Bryant believes that by the middle twentieth century in America arose "a growing fear and anxiety surrounding death which led to the refusal to discuss death, particularly with the elderly, infirm, or dying."[28]

The dying process is typically in a hospital Intensive Care Unit, or a hospice facility hidden away from the everyday life of the family. McCullough explains, "Death is no less inevitable than it's ever been, but many of us don't have to see it or even think about it. . . . When people die it is more likely than not in a medical facility, cordoned off from where we live, a sanitized, carefully managed, even industrial process that occurs when professionals decide to stop giving care."[29] Children are excluded, and death is often hidden. Timothy Keller states, "It is now normal to live to adulthood and not watch anyone dying. We live in denial of death and demand unrealistic and extreme medical procedures." [30]

The medical communities' focus is on the eradication of disease and the extension of life. An idolatry of life is pervasive in the interplay between the medical community and families. Often families ask doctors to "do something, anything" to prolong life and avoid the death of a loved one. Families, and medical caregivers, have an avoidance to discussing end of life directives. Families, and at times doctors, are in denial of a patient's terminal condition. Many who serve in the medical profession struggle with how to treat those who are actively dying. They are trained to save lives and have little training in how to talk with families about an approaching death. Catherine Jenkins states,

> The tension between a patient who has accepted his or her mortality and the physician, or larger medical community, who perceive death as a failure to maintain

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[27] McCullough, *Remember Death*, 36.

[28] Bryant, *Handbook of Death and Dying*, 21.

[29] McCullough, *Remember Death*, 19.

[30] Timothy Keller, *On Death* (New York: Penguin, 2020), 5-7.

life, points to a fundamental disconnect. This urge to prolong life at all costs can unfortunately translate into a well-intentioned, but potentially cruel, prolongation of the dying process, rather than a meaningful extension of life.[31]

Those dying, and families of those dying, are encouraged to continue treatments that prolong physical suffering, psychological pain, and emotional anguish. Typically, these treatments give the individual a poorer quality of life for a protracted period of time. Also, the financial cost of these medical treatments to lengthen a person's life span can drain a family's monetary resources. This situation creates spiritual, emotional, and financial crises for these families in time of grieving.

Due to the medical institutionalization of those near death, many family members are removed from the care of the dying and the presence of the deceased. Even when individuals are given a terminal medical prognosis, many families still do not make preparations for end of life. Families continue in a state of denial and silence. Frequently, families of the actively dying or who have died have few or no directives from their loved one for end-of-life care and funeral arrangements. Individuals and families rarely preplan and pay for the needed funeral services. "In 2015, 69 percent of adults over the age of 40 indicated they would prefer to pre-arrange their own service; however, only 17 percent had made arrangements."[32] This lack of planning creates pain and confusion for families after a death and who are in a state of sorrow and grief. Financial conflict can erupt as families are confronted with costs involved in the death of a family member.

During my pastoral ministry I have been with many families immediately after the death of a loved one long in dying who had no plan in place. They had never spoken together about securing a funeral home or preparing for a funeral service. Death was perpetually in a future time and that they would have time to make arrangements "another

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[31] Catherine Jenkins, "Life Extension, Immortality and the Patient Voice," in *The Power of Death: Contemporary Reflections on Death in Western Society*, ed. Maria-Jose Blanco and Ricarda Vidal (New York: Berghahn, 2015), 17.

[32] Funeral and Memorial Information Council, "New Study Shows Americans Recognize the Role of Memorialization in Healthy Healing Following the Death of a Loved One," accessed November 11, 2020, www.famic.org/famic-study/.

day." Planning for death and its aftermath was avoided due to how it might make the dying loved one feel unloved or unwanted.

When a person's death is near, the individual and his family often begin to struggle with their spiritual belief system. The question of "why?" is repeatedly asked by those dying or by family members. This question is directed toward God or to a doctor. When answers are not sufficient or do not suit a families' hopes, individuals or families can become angry and negative toward God or the medical community.

To help the medical community and families when confronted with the reality and issues involved with death, the modern Hospice program was developed. The Hospice organization's purpose was and is to improve quality of life as a person nears death. Palliative (comfort) care is given to the terminally ill patient as Hospice workers also support and encourage the family. Hospice is funded by the federal government under the Medicare program. Gail Sheehy notes that for a person to be placed in hospice care, the hospice doctor or "the primary doctor must warrant that the patient is expected to die within six months. The patient must agree that all life-prolonging treatments be stopped and only receive those treatments and medications which foster comfort care."[33]

In American culture, families have come to speak of death not directly but by the language of euphemisms. Terms such as "passed away," "expired," "gone to a better place," "at rest," and other terms are substituted for death. In Western culture, increasingly, adults use pseudo-Christian euphemisms to tell their children what happens when someone dies: "Grandad is up in heaven and looking down on us" or "Grandma is an angel in heaven now and she is watching over you." Speaking of death in direct terms has become uncomfortable and avoided. Death is not a proper topic to discuss with family or in polite society.

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[33] Gail Sheehy, *Passages in Caregiving: Turning Chaos into Confidence* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 320-21.

Some individuals may never be in the presence of a loved one as they die. They may never see the dead body of their loved one before burial or cremation. Personally, I have known many families who do not allow the children or teens to view the deceased at a funeral visitation. Thomas Long and Thomas Lynch write, "The dead have been made more or less to disappear, cremated as a matter of pure function and notably outside the context of faith."[34] Elisabeth Kubler-Ross stated from her medical practice and experience that "dying is now more lonely, mechanical, and dehumanized."[35]

Families have become detached from their loved one's dying process and from the grief that accompanies death. The emotional grieving for a loved one is hidden within, and it is believed that the grief cannot be publicly shared with others. Mourning individuals, after a short period of time, are told to move away from their grief and get on with life. Leming and Dickerson state that the "bereavement role is considered a temporary one, and it is imperative to relinquish it within a reasonable period of time. . . . There is a general American value judgment that normal grieving should be completed by the first anniversary of the death."[36] Grief that lingers is considered abnormal and unhealthy for the bereaved.

In Western culture, since death is now treated as a clinical process, the bereavement process for a family is oftentimes postponed. Families become consumed with the details of funeral planning and the priority of the legalities of the administration of the will and the estate of the deceased. Crystal Park and Roshi Halifax note, "One of the great problems that one faces in the Western way of dying is that business is so much a part of the experience which allows the survivors to avoid or be taken away from the

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[34] Thomas Long and Thomas Lynch, *The Good Funeral: Death, Grief, and the Community of Care* (Louisville: Westminster, John Knox, 2013), 184.

[35] Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: Scribner, 1969), 7.

[36] Leming and Dickinson, *Understanding Dying, Death, and Bereavement*, 454.

depth of their loss."[37] The focus is not on mourning and grief but on the property settlement and who gets the cash. Tragically, families clash over these issues with dire consequences. This conflict can end with families struggling with harsh emotions and broken relationships for many years into the future.

In the 1960s, The MDAM began, which has had a major impact on how Americans view death and on how to care those who grieve. According to the adherents of this movement, death is now the natural ending of one's life and should be accepted as normal. As normal, death is to be understood as a natural event to be celebrated. Lucy Bergman notes, "The language used in the American church of pairing resurrection and life, with death and in opposition to death which has been intrinsic to Christian faith has been lost to a brand-new language drawn from the MDAM. The model based on a psychological framework has reshaped pastoral care."[38]

The MDAM is in opposition to the classical Christian view of death. In Christian doctrine, death is understood to be abnormal and is a punishment for sin. Death is the great and final enemy to be mourned and lamented. It can only be overcome by a relationship with Christ. Russell Moore states, "Darwinian naturalism, along with most contemporary philosophies, assumes that death is the natural ending point to life. The Christian gospel insists otherwise, seeing death as an alien invader of the cosmic order, a curse from the Edenic fall, and a strategy of an enemy spirit to crush God's image-bearing humanity (Heb. 2:14-15)."[39] American culture struggles with the reality of death and how to interact with those dying and those grieving death.

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[37] Crystal Park and Roshi Joan Halifax, "Religion and Spirituality in Adjusting to Bereavement: Grief as Burden, Grief as Gift," in *Grief and Bereavement in Contemporary Society: Bridging Research and Practice*, ed. Robert Neimeyer et al. (New York: Routledge, 2011), 356.

[38] Lucy Bregman, *Preaching Death: The Transformation of Christian Funeral Sermons* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011), 3.

[39] Russell Moore, "Death Isn't Natural," April 3, 2010, https://www.russellmoore.com/2010/04/03/death-isnt-natural/.

One of the most respected voices of the MDAM is Elisabeth Kubler-Ross. She observes, "In the past, death was a feared and dreaded enemy who struck indiscriminately at the rich and poor, the good and bad alike. . . . Death does not have to be a catastrophic, destructive thing, indeed, it can be viewed as one of the most constructive, positive, and creative elements of culture and life."[40] She continues, "In the decades to come we may see one universe, one humankind, one religion that unites us all in a peaceful world."[41]

In the MDAM, death is now viewed as a normal biological occurrence, which is best confronted as a psychological process to be overcome by the dying and by those grieving the loss of a loved one. Kubler-Ross's best-selling book titled *On Death and Dying* presents a five-stage psychological process for those dying and those grieving to work through in their lives. This five-stage process has become, for many counselors and pastors, the focus on guiding grief for the bereaved. The bereaved are no longer comforted with scripture or Christian doctrine. The acceptance of death and emotional well-being is the now accepted goal when comforting those in mourning.

Kubler-Ross's five-stage process has evolved over the past thirty years in secular psychology into several models based on stages, phases, or tasks for individuals to be guided using a process of grief counseling. Many leaders in the medical and psychological community do not agree on any one model which is best for those grieving. William Worden notes, "The failure of both clinicians and researchers to recognize the uniqueness of the grief experience, even though the mourning tasks apply to all death losses, how a person approaches and adapts to these tasks can be quite varied. A one-size-fits-all approach to grief counseling or grief therapy is very limiting."[42] Bryant argues,

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[40] Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, *Death: The Final Stage of Growth* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975), 1-2.

[41] Kubler-Ross, *Death*, 3.

[42] J. William Worden, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy: A Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner*, 4th ed. (New York: Springer Publishing, 2008), 8.

"Death medicalized often ends in awkwardness and bewilderment and that the stages of death are used as a behavioral control function for grieving individuals"[43] He questions, "Is acceptance the highest stage to strive for?" in comforting those in grief.[44]

Christians understand grief as something they must walk through, lamenting the valley of the shadow of death. Grief is a response to the brokenness of this world that has ruled since the sin of Adam and Eve. McCullough notes that death "is and should be devastating, heart-breaking new. Death-acceptance is just as dishonest as death-avoidance. Instead for the Christian, death-awareness should lead to grief, not to some sort of callous death-acceptance."[45] Christians are to look beyond acceptance and hold to the promises of Christ's victory over death and his promise of hope for eternity.

For a number of years, American universities and colleges have trained and qualified grief counselors to treat individuals in bereavement. Lynne Simpson notes, "Bereavement was classified as code V.62.82 under 'Other Conditions That May Be a Focus of Clinical Attention' in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-4), the standard reference guide of the American Psychiatric Association."[46] The American Psychiatric Society and the *DSM-4* state that bereavement and grief are listed as a "cluster of treatable psychological symptoms such as depression, anxiety, despair, and apathy."[47]

Currently, the psychiatric community's thinking on bereavement is shifting. This shift is due to the realization of many grief counselors who now think, as Long and Lynch believe, that "the psychic distress of grief is normal and the vast majority of those

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[43] Bryant, *Handbook of Death and Dying*, 22.

[44] Bryant, *Handbook of Death and Dying*, 22.

[45] McCullough, *Remember Death*, 174-75.

[46] Lynne Simpson, "Beyond "Mourning and Melancholia," in Blanco and Vidal, *The Power of Death*, 29.

[47] Long and Lynch, *The Good Funeral*, 224.

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who go through the experience get over the pain with little help."[48] Psychiatrist Ronald Pie also questions the newer *DSM-5* and how it addresses bereavement: "The removal of the bereavement exclusion in the diagnosis of major depression was perhaps the most controversial change from DSM-4 to DSM-5. Critics have argued that removal of the bereavement exclusion will 'medicalize' ordinary grief and encourage over-prescription of antidepressants."[49]

It is important to note that the spiritual needs of the bereaved are not often considered in secular counseling. Instead, Dewi Rees notes that there are four main secular approaches to guiding individuals through the grief process: "Support groups, hospice lay counsellors, individual therapy, or the use of drug therapy."[50] Each of these help the individual deal with psychosocial, social, or physiological needs during bereavement.

In contemporary secular culture and mainline Protestant churches, grieving the loss of a loved one has become a psychological process more than a theological or spiritual response to sin and death. Mark McMinn, a leader in Christian counseling, notes, "The most striking thing about the psychological literature on sin is its relative absence."[51] Bergman states that Christian leaders like Wayne Oates and Paul Irion "welcomed the work of Kubler-Ross, the death awareness movement, and hospice and that these clergy leaders saw themselves as pastoral counseling experts."[52] Bergman goes on to say that these leaders saw death as normal and encouraged pastors to utilize "any

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[48] Long and Lynch, *The Good Funeral*, 224.

[49] Ronald Pie, "The Bereavement Exclusion and DSM-5: An Update and Commentary," *Innovations in Clinical Neuroscience* 11, nos. 7-8 (July-August 2014): 19.

[50] Dewi Rees, *Death and Bereavement: The Psychological, Religious, and Cultural Interfaces* (London: Whurr Publishing, 1997), 125.

[51] Mark McMinn, *Psychology, Theology, and Spirituality in Christian Counselling* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2011), 183.

[52] Bregman, *Preaching Death*, 185.

resources from psychology . . . bracketing some of the atheistic or antireligious personal opinions of the psychologists themselves."[53]

In the past, ministers focused on the funeral, proclaiming to a family the victory of Christ over death and his comfort through the God head and the Holy Scripture. Now several mainline Protestant, Evangelical, and Catholic ministers and priests lean toward the role of pastoral counselors, seeking to address the emotional and psychological needs of those in grief. Larry Platt and Roger Branch share the view that "the minister must be counselor to the terminally ill. He must understand something of the physical and psychological dynamics of dying."[54]

Another cultural influence upon the American view of death and mourning is that of Eastern philosophy and religion. As noted previously in the chapter, Barna reports that a number of Americans mix Christian and Eastern religious ideas together in their understanding of death and what comes after death for the deceased. Death as experienced through the eyes of East Asian culture is different from Western culture. Katherine Young reports that there are "four major views of natural death which emerge when Asian religions are compared: the cosmic, the existential, the familial, and the natural. People need to balance respect for the body and transcendence of it in order to live with health and purpose, thereby doing justice to their full humanity."[55]

Eastern religion is focused not on the individual self and personhood as seen in the Christian theology of man but on the individual as being part of the cosmic whole. Timothy Keller makes this observation about Hinduism: "There is not only no evil but no good, no individuals, no material world. Everything is actually part of the One, the All-

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[53] Bergman, *Preaching Death*, 185.

[54] Larry Platt and Roger Branch, *Resources for Ministry in Death and Dying* (Nashville: Broadman, 1988), 23.

[55] Katherine Young, "Death: II. Eastern Thought," accessed October 3, 2020, https://www.encyclopedia.com/science/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/death-ii-eastern-thought.

Soul, the Absolute Spirit. . . . We are part of everything."[56] This understanding

encourages the belief that death and mourning have an insignificant place in the Cosmic

whole. James Gire reports, "Eastern cultural beliefs are said to largely conceive of death

as a mere transition, and that the most effective way to defeat death is to accept it as a

primary fact of life."[57]

The philosophy of existentialism has also had a growing impact on the

American view of life and death. Philosophers such as Camus, Sartre, and Heidegger

have shaped much of Western thinking in the last half century. Existentialism believes in

the free will of the individual. Each individual should be allowed to determine his own

development by his will. Society should not restrict an individual's actions or rights.

They believe there is no transcendent being, no God. They believe man is not infinite and

death is the end of an individual. Man is seen as living in an absurd world and one must

try to bring meaning to his individual life by how he lives out that life till death. For the

existentialist, death is final and leads to nothingness.

A contemporary example of this thinking is seen in British philosopher Stephen

Cave. He writes that mankind's desire for immortality has created historical worldview

systems that promote injustice and exploitation of people groups. For Cave, the belief in

immortality creates major ills for the world by "teaching you a profound selfishness

which causes individuals to obsess about the infinite survival of your own individual

personality."[58] Cave believes instead that "a meaningful life and a productive society

require limitations that define them. We need finitude."[59]

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[56] Keller, *Walking with God*, 40.

[57] James Gire, "How Death Imitates Life: Cultural Influences on Conceptions of Death and Dying," accessed October 25, 2020, https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/orpc/vol6/iss2/3/.

[58] Stephen Cave, *Immortality: The Quest to Live Forever and How It Drives Civilization* (New York: Crown Publishing, 2012), 261.

[59] Cave, *Immortality*, 268.

Existentialism also has had a significant impact on modern theology and how some theologians have negated the traditional Christian view of death. Theologians such as Rudolf Bultmann, Paul Tillich, and John Macquarrie have influenced much of mainline Protestant thinking for the last half century. Macquarrie states, "For it is death that more than anything else brings before us the radical finitude of our existence, and it is in the light of this that every possibility must be evaluated."[60] For existential theology, the doctrine of original sin is a myth. Death and sin are distinct and separate. Macquarrie writes, "The fact that death appears in the myth of the fall as the penalty for sin tends to obscure the distinction between finitude (which belongs intrinsically to human existence) and sin (which is an imbalance or perversion affecting existence)."[61] This influence has permeated how some church pastors and leaders speak to those dying and how they comfort those grieving.

Contemporary American culture has adopted a mix of beliefs that color its view of death and dying. Out of the twentieth century cultural movements and blending of Eastern and Western philosophies and religion has come a confusing perspective for individuals and the church. Paul Williamson writes that there are three main positions on death and afterlife for Western culture: "Agnostics—believe that the afterlife is unknown; Sceptics—believe that death is the permanent cessation of all our vital functions and the end of the biological process of life; and Believers—believe we will survive in some form after death but how we understand this varies greatly."[62]

Several other new trends in American culture are shaping how families are exposed to death and those dying. A new term has come into use: "Thanatechnology—

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[60] John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1977), 78.

[61] Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, 228.

[62] Paul Williamson, *Death and the Afterlife: Biblical Perspectives on Ultimate Questions* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2018), 5-6.

the use of online media for death and dying."[63] Facebook has taken the place of the local newspaper obituary page to post death, life information, and funeral service arrangements. Facebook live video is being to broadcast the funeral or memorial service to friends and family who do not physically attend the service. The deceased Facebook and Instagram accounts become a digital legacy and record of the deceased's life. Kathleen Gilbert and Illene Cupit ask, "Is thanatechnology changing how we grieve? By being global—will it create a uniform sense of the meaning of death and grief?"[64]

Another trend in how families view death and bereavement has currently impacted how many church pastors perform funeral services. Many families ask for a Celebration of Life service. The Celebration of Life service is theologically barren and empty. This type of service focuses on being a tribute to the life of the deceased and as a time of sharing memories. These services often leave the family emotionally hollow, without hope, in denial of their loss, and unsure of how to grieve and lament their loss. This type of service does not focus on honoring God or proclaiming the gospel message of Christ. Thomas Long states, "Especially among white suburban Protestants, funeral services are a downsized, 'personalized,' user-friendly, Hallmarky soiree: the customized, emotively neutral and religiously ambiguous memorial service to which everyone is invited but the one who has died."[65]

The focus of a Celebration of Life service is not on the lament of loss and the understanding of Christ's victory over death for the believer. Gone are the scriptures used for centuries on sorrow and lament or scriptures on Christ's promises; instead, these services focus on a person's earthly life. They focus on the habits, hobbies, and personalities of the deceased. They focus on stories of the past experiences of those who

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[63] Kathleen Gilbert and Illene Cupit, *Dying, Death, and Grief in an Online Universe* (New York: Springer Publishing, 2012), 4.

[64] Gilbert and Cupit, *Dying, Death, and Grief*, 5.

[65] Long and Lynch, *The Good Funeral*, 184.

knew the deceased. Videos of the deceased focus on the images of happier times, travel

logs of their journeys, milestones of their earthly life, and how they enjoyed their hobbies.

Long and Lynch state it this way: "The living gather at their convenience to 'celebrate the

life' in a kind of obsequy-lite at which therapy is dispensed, closure proclaimed, biography

enshrined, and spirits are supposedly lifted."[66]

In Celebration of Life services, Christ is rarely mentioned. Hope is given in

vague and uncertain terms, devoid of Christian doctrine and theology. The message of the

gospel is not shared in any form. Universalism is the theology of the day. George Barna

notes,

> Many committed born again Christians believe that people have multiple options for
> gaining entry to Heaven. Millions of Americans have redefined grace to mean that
> God is so eager to save people from Hell that He will change His nature and
> universal principles for their individual benefit. It is astounding how many people
> develop their faith according to their feelings or cultural assumptions rather than
> biblical teachings.[67]

In a Celebration of Life service, families are often assured that their dead loved one will

receive a heaven best described as a place where the rewards will be many. The dead will

receive personal materialistic riches. Heaven will be a place where all gather to enjoy

their long-lost family, favorite hobbies, and food.

Church pastors should discourage leading Celebrations of Life services and

encourage a more traditional funeral service for the bereaved family and friends. This

type of service should rely upon the gospel message. Daniel Akin, in the foreword of

Brain Croft's and Phil Newton's *Conducting Gospel-Centered Funerals*, shares,

"Funerals provide a rare opportunity to speak truth into the lives of many who never read

the Bible, seldom-if-ever attend church, and avoid spiritual issues when possible. We

must not miss the opportunity."[68]

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[66] Long and Lynch, *The Good Funeral*, 184.

[67] Barna Group, "Americans Describe Their Views."

[68] Brian Croft and Phil Newton, *Conduct Gospel-Centered Funerals: Applying the Gospel at*

Conclusion

Churches need pastors who will educate their congregation in Christian doctrine pertaining to death, mourning, and lament. The responsibility as under shepherds of Christ is to guide families who have been deceived by the culture of today and churches that no longer preach the gospel of Christ in times of death. McCollough reminds ministers to teach that, as Christians, "grief is not a dead end but the necessary pathway to Jesus, a valuable means to a blessed end, a tool to be repurposed and fully leveraged."[69]

Lament should be encouraged in times of dying and death. Church leaders are to encourage those in mourning to weep and to sorrow for one's loss. Grudem states, "Sometimes Christians think it shows lack of faith if they mourn deeply for a Christian who has died. But Scripture does not support that view, because when Stephen was stoned, we read that 'Devout men buried Stephen, *and made great lamentation over him*' (Acts 8:2)."[70]

Death and grief are not easy to discuss with those confronted with its reality. Individuals are uncomfortable talking about it because it opens one to heartbreak and sorrow. Death brings great change to a person's life and to their relationships. Under-shepherds of Christ are to press into the gospel. The need to share the great message of Christ's power over death, and how Christ has a plan for those who follow him, is of upmost importance. Ministers are to provide the hope of the gospel and to teach those within the church to understand biblical truths versus cultural myths which are often mixed with false doctrine.

Christians have the knowledge of Christ who brings hope and joy even as one weeps and mourns for those who die. Ministers would best teach the truth of Scripture as

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the Unique Challenges of Death (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 13.

[69] McCullough, *Remember Death*, 176.

[70] Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 814.

found written in the Heidelberg Catechism of 1563. It begins with this question: "What is

your only comfort in life and in death?" Believers are to answer:

> That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven; in fact, all things must work together for my salvation. Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.[71]

In life and future death, Christians are to focus on the victory of Christ over sin and

death. First Peter 1: 3-5 states the Christian's hope with these incredible words:

> Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

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[71] Reformed Church of America, "The Heidelberg Catechism," accessed November 10, 2020, https://www.rca.org/about/theology/creeds-and-confessions/the-heidelberg-catechism/.

CHAPTER 4

PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

The purpose of this project was to equip a portion of the pastors and deacons at Hickory Grove Baptist Church in bereavement ministry for the building up of the body of Christ biblically, theologically, and practically. As under-shepherds of Christ, HGBC pastors need to be prepared to teach biblical truths to those dying and to those grieving so they can be comforted and biblically equipped in their daily Christian walk. Training for member care in bereavement ministry begins with understanding the role of under-shepherd as seen in 1 Peter 5:1-3. Pastors and deacons are to labor, exhort, and encourage the church body (1 Thess 2:9-12). Training readies pastors and deacons to point the congregation to Christ's promises, his hope, and his presence in times of loss and sorrow. Those who understand biblical truths can then disciple others in these important life transitions.

The need to train pastors and deacons of HGBC in good theology is great. For a Christian, death completes sanctification. Christians believe that Christ has victory over death (1 Cor 15:54-55). Bad theology may lead families to believe God is absent or against them in their time of sorrow. The multicultural diversity at HGBC creates differing socio-cultural and theological beliefs about suffering, death, and grieving. Training pastors and deacons to teach and model good theology leads individuals to comprehend the fullness of God's sovereignty, grace, mercy, and love more fully. To better shepherd the church, a training program focused on the biblical doctrines of sin, suffering, and death must be a priority.

Training allows leadership to fulfill the goal of assisting families to exalt Christ in times of death and grieving. The church pastoral care staff desire to pass the torch of

ministry to younger pastors to minister appropriately, humbly, and with confidence to those hurting and grieving so that they can then celebrate God's goodness, mercy, and grace. Pastors and deacons are to be models to teach the next generation of pastors and deacons to excel in this life-supporting ministry.

Assessment Survey

The research methodology for this doctoral project included a pre-training ministry assessment survey, a post-training assessment survey, and lesson evaluation rubrics. The first goal of this project was to assess the current level of member care competency of a portion of the pastors and deacons of HGBC in bereavement ministry. This goal was measured by the Bereavement Ministry Knowledge and Skill Survey (BMKSS).[1] The survey consisted of questions to test the understanding of biblical doctrine and practice of end-of-life and bereavement ministry. This survey was given in week 3 to those recruited in weeks 1 and 2. This goal was successfully met when pastors and the deacon bereavement team completed and returned the survey for analysis. These survey results give vital information about the current knowledge and practice in ministry by those recruited for the bereavement care training sessions. The survey results were used to refine the training curriculum in goal 2.

This same survey was given to each participant one day after the training curriculum was presented. It was to be returned within one week so results could be compiled and tabulated.

Curriculum Development

The second goal was to develop a training curriculum for pastors and the deacon bereavement team to minister to individuals and families transitioning into end-of-life and to grieving families after death. A four-session curriculum was created to

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[1] See appendix 1.

educate deacons and pastors in the theological and doctrinal understanding of death and dying, to learn good practices of visitation, and how to follow-up with families grieving the death of a loved one. Five weeks (weeks 3-7) were allotted for the development of the four-session curriculum. The curriculum was then evaluated by two staff pastors to make corrections and to improve the curriculum. Two staff pastors were chosen for their knowledge of pastoral leadership in pastoral care: Dr. Mike Powers, the HGBC Harris campus pastor; and Rev. Arnold Kessler, a co-pastor of twenty-one years whose training was in hospital chaplaincy and hospice bereavement care.

The time for the training portion of this project was held during the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic created issues that affected the training process. The first issue which arose was to find those willing to take part in the training. Early in my doctoral process, a number of deacons on the HGBC bereavement care team volunteered to participate in the survey and training process. However, due to the heightened positive cases of Covid-19, several decided that they would not participate in the process. Other deacons expressed that they would not be involved in the training if it was presented in an online format due to "Zoom" fatigue.[2] The combination of the Covid-19 virus and the dislike of virtual communication platforms reduced the number available and willing deacons for the project. Only three of those who had originally volunteered to take part in the training decided to participate.

The HGBC campus pastor then decided, with the agreement of my SBTS project supervisor, that the training sessions would be presented in a one-day training unit. It was agreed that a one-day training unit would reduce the number of those who may miss a multiple day or multiple week training program due to the uncertainty of state lockdowns and quarantines. Before the training date, several of the pastors and the

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[2] "Zoom fatigue describes the tiredness and burnout associated with the overuse of virtual platforms of communication." Jena Lee, "A Neuropsychological Exploration of Zoom Fatigue," accessed May 24, 2021, https://www.psychiatrictimes.com/view/psychological-exploration-zoom-fatigue.

remaining deacons recruited for the training were experiencing quarantines due to Covid-19 exposures (including myself) or by having the contagion themselves.

A week-day training date was decided upon with consent of the campus pastors. By doing the training during the week, the pastors who were involved did not have miss their regular day off. The deacons who were recruited for the training were of retirement age and glad to take part in a week-day training.

With the knowledge of how the training was to proceed, lesson development moved from an outline to the writing of teaching notes for each of the four sessions. The first session's curriculum was built from the biblical foundation of this project's chapter 2. This material stressed the importance of elders and deacons as the spiritual under-shepherds of Christ in relationship to the church body. Scriptures clearly show a mandate for Christian leaders to care for the flock of Jesus Christ, especially from those who would bring harm by teaching false doctrines.

The second session's curriculum outlined the impact of secular culture and movements upon the church and bereaved families. The contemporary church often defaults to secular models, which impact how congregations understand death and bereavement care. One section of this curriculum highlighted the importance of leading families in mourning to understand the difference between a funeral worship service versus a celebration of life service, which is becoming more popular in many contemporary churches.

The third session's curriculum taught the importance of correct theology and how to respond to false doctrines when ministering in time of bereavement. Many families have a false understanding of correct Bible doctrine. Church leaders are most effective in their care of the flock when they confront in a loving manner these false beliefs and lead individuals to a correct understanding of the gospel message and Bible doctrines of death and eternity.

The fourth session trained leaders in right and good ministry practices. The session's curriculum focused on how to pre-plan and lead a funeral service and how to meet with families to guide them in their mourning. Resources for learning were prepared as handouts and two books were provided to each participant at the end of the training: *Comfort the Grieving* by Paul Tautges and *Conduct Gospel-Centered Funerals* by Brian Croft and Phil Newton.[3] Each lesson was evaluated and critiqued by the supervising campus pastor and a long time practicing pastoral care pastor.

Implementation of the Training Curriculum

The third goal of this project was to equip pastors and the deacon bereavement team by teaching the curriculum developed to minister to individuals and families at end-of-life and in bereavement. This goal was measured by administering a post-survey using the Member Care Knowledge and Skill Survey (MCKSS) that measured the pastors and deacon bereavement team's level of knowledge and confidence.[4]

Recruitment of Participants

During week 1 and 2, thirteen participants were recruited for the survey and training process. To begin the recruitment, a meeting was held by HGBC's three campus pastors (Harris, Mallard, and Latin American) and myself. As the need for bereavement care training for the pastoral staff was discussed, it became clear that eight of the church pastors would benefit from the training sessions. The eight pastoral staff chosen had either recently graduated from seminary or were currently in seminary. Only one or two of these pastoral staff members had ever prepared and led a funeral service. Most had

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[3] See appendix 3 (session 1-4 outline handouts and Curriculum teaching notes). Paul Tautges, *Comfort the Grieving* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014); Brian Croft and Phil Newton, *Conduct Gospel-Centered Funerals: Applying the Gospel at the Unique Challenges of Death* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014).

[4] See appendix 1.

never been with a family after the death of a loved one. Two other pastors volunteered to take part in the training to grow their skills in bereavement ministry.

The training opportunity was also presented to deacons who were involved in HGBC's bereavement care team. Three deacons volunteered to take part in the training. By the end of week 2, ten pastoral staff and three deacons had agreed to be trained in bereavement ministry.

In week 3, each participant received the pre-survey to be completed and returned that week. This survey was used to help guide the training lessons development. In this same week, an email calendar invitation was sent to assure the date, room assignment, and times were placed on their calendars. When the calendar invitation was received, the two staff from the Latin-American campus realized a scheduling issue. It was decided to train these two individuals a later date. Eleven participants were now scheduled for the training date.

In week 3, after knowing the number of the participants for the training date, a room was reserved on the HGBC church planning center site. This site ensures the configuration of tables and chairs for the room, sound and video equipment, meal requests, and any other needs for the owner of the event.

Online Preview Meeting

In week 8, an online meeting was provided one day before the bereavement training day. In this thirty-minute meeting, participants were given an introduction and overview of the training agenda and structure. Any questions concerning the content, or the timing of the training day were answered. Participants were reminded to bring a Bible and some method to take notes. They were told that a lunch was included in the training time. Each was asked to be prompt so the training could begin on time. Due to Covid-19, participants were informed that the seating would be spread for social distancing and to not attend if they had any health issues.

Bereavement Ministry Training Sessions

In week 8, a one-day training comprised of four sessions was presented over a four-and-a-half-hour period. A thirty-minute lunch break was provided between sessions 2 and 3. The lunch was provided by the HGBC kitchen staff.

It was helpful to have had the online preview meeting so that the presentation began promptly with the first session's curriculum. The teaching sessions were presented, and participants were allowed time to ask questions of the material. As questions were asked, experiences from my thirty-two years of ministry were shared to highlight correct theology and right ministry practices when shepherding families in time of bereavement. Questions of theology were discussed by the whole group.

During each session, participants asked many practical questions. Some of the questions asked pertained to meeting with families, leading a funeral service for non-believers, the cost of funeral home services in the area, and funeral traditions pertinent to the region. HGBC is a multiracial and multicultural congregation, so funeral home practices by race and cultural background were discussed.

Post-Training Survey

In week 8, the BMKSS survey was re-sent to each participant one day after the training date. This survey was to be completed and returned within one week. This time limitation ensured a period to study and compare the results to the pre-survey information. By comparing the pre- and post-surveys, an increase of knowledge in bereavement ministry was observed.

Online Post-Training Meeting

In week 9, an online post-training meeting was held. The online meeting allowed participants to ask follow-up questions or receive comments for clarity of ministry. It also allowed me the opportunity to thank each participant and to ensure all post-surveys were returned.

Survey Analysis and Curriculum Changes

During weeks 10 to 15, the pre- and post-surveys were statistically compared and analyzed, and *t*-test results were noted. The campus pastors also followed up with participants to evaluate the training's usefulness to each campus and reported the feedback to me. These results and participants' comments during the training and post-training meeting were used to rework each session's curriculum to help in future training dates.

Conclusion

The purpose of this project was to equip pastors and deacons for bereavement ministry at Hickory Grove Baptist Church, in Charlotte, North Carolina. Based on the statistical results, the evaluation rubric scores, and the participants' positive comments, the training sessions were helpful to equip in ministry skills, practical knowledge, and right theology. One deacon noted that the "right theology and confronting false beliefs" session "illuminated a number of misconceptions that had to be corrected in his theology and was a helpful tool to change moving forward."

Examples used from ministry experience throughout the training were helpful to bring discussion of right ministry practice to light. These shared experiences facilitated a more open environment for in-depth discussion. These examples also allowed the group to discuss mistakes made in the past ministry experiences and how to best guide families in times of bereavement care going forward.

Several participants noted that they would like further training and mentoring in the areas of bereavement care and family ministry. In discussion with the HGBC Harris campus pastor, future dates for training have been discussed to aid in the pastoral growth of the HGBC staff. Training for the deacon bereavement team can be provided at the yearly deacon training date in January of each year.

CHAPTER 5

EVALUATION OF THE PROJECT

"It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting,

for this is the end of all mankind" (Eccl 7:2)

In 1988, I became the single adult discipleship pastor on the staff of HGBC. At the time, I was also assigned the role of pastoral responsibility to minister to those in the congregation who were sick, dying, and the bereaved. Over the years, I have changed ministry titles and responsibilities many times, but I have always remained the lead pastor to those needing bereavement ministry. As I approach the later years of my ministry, I desire to train younger pastors and deacons to carry on ministering to families in times of death and mourning. First, this final chapter will evaluate the purpose of this project. Second, each project goal will be reviewed and assessed. Next, the strengths and weaknesses of the project will be examined. Fourth, options for change to the project are presented. Then, an overview of theological and personal reflections will be stated.

Evaluation of the Project's Purpose

The purpose of this project was to train pastors and deacons to minister to those dying and to individuals mourning after the death of a loved one. In the ever-changing culture surrounding the church, it is important for Christian leaders to clearly proclaim and model the gospel to those struggling with death. During the process of this project's training, Christian leaders were taught to uphold the gospel as central to bereavement ministry. In evaluating this project, those trained have shown a new maturity and a willingness to minister to families in bereavement. Before the training, participants were

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uncomfortable with ministering in this context. Often, they avoided these families and lost opportunities to grow those bereaved in their spiritual walk.

Those trained have displayed personal growth in their own doctrinal understanding of death and in bereavement ministry with grieving families. One of the pastors, who recently graduated from SBTS, expressed that the open doctrinal and theological discussion during the sessions helped him better understand his own personal mortality and the presence of death. Due to his cultural upbringing, he had several unresolved fears and doctrinal issues about the nature of death. As the lesson material was presented and discussed, many of the fears were resolved in his mind and heart. As a group, this growth of understanding was celebrated for this individual. He further hopes to share this understanding with his family overseas to grow their relationship with Christ.

At the end of the training date, most of the participants expressed a desire for further training in the classroom and in the field. This was an unexpected result of the training. One might ask if seminary-trained pastors need to receive training in bereavement ministry? Due to the number of pastors involved in the training, I expected that most would learn from the material but remain focused on their particular area of ministry for the current time. Yet, almost immediately, several actively sought to take part in funeral services and reach out to minister to bereaved families in the church. Their level of understanding for the need of bereavement care in our church grew from the training sessions. At this point, I have been able to mentor and teach several how to lead services for non-Christians with mercy and grace while clearly proclaiming the gospel to the family and those gathered for the services. Their engagement allowed me to mentor and pass the torch of gospel clarity in bereavement ministry to a next generation of pastors and deacons. The increased interest and desire to shepherd the bereaved by a multiplicity of pastors and deacons fulfills the purpose of the implementation of this ministry project.

Three goals determined the success of the ministry project.

Goal 1

The first goal of this project was to assess the current level of member care competency of pastors and the deacon bereavement team to minister to individuals and families at end-of-life and in bereavement. To complete this goal, a survey of thirty questions was developed and inputted into the online SurveyMonkey platform. This survey was then sent to thirteen participants. This goal was completed when it was returned and scored. The survey results were used in curriculum preparation to guide segments of the material to improve knowledge in areas deemed in need of improvement.

By the study of the participants' answers, it became clear that some doctrinal and practical areas needed to be addressed by the training process. Several participants did not feel equipped to minister to families during the death of a loved one. From the questionnaire, this was especially noticeable when bereavement ministry was to be given in times of suicide, sudden tragedy, and the loss of an infant. Biblical doctrine on lament and grief was needed, while the biblical doctrine of original sin was clearly understood. Table 1 explains the need for clear training in how to minister to a bereaved family.

Table 1. Pre-course areas of concern

Survey Question	Mean
Q 8. I struggle to discuss death openly and find myself using phrases like, "at rest" or "passed on."	2.3/6
Q 10. I have a good knowledge of what death is, what takes place, and the grief process.	3.3/6
Q 16. I am prepared to practically and theologically minister to a family whose loved one has committed suicide.	3.0/6
Q 17. I am prepared to practically and theologically minister to a family whose infant is dying or dead.	2.7/6
Q 18. I am prepared to practically and theologically minister to a family who has lost a loved one to a sudden tragedy.	3.0/6

Some of the doctrinal questions asked by the survey had been placed to study the theological understanding of HGBC deacons. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, there

were more pastors and fewer deacons involved in the training sessions. This factor meant that there was a greater theological degree of theological knowledge by most of the participants. Ministry practice to shepherd the bereaved became a focus during the training.

Goal 2

The second goal of this project was to develop a four-session training curriculum for pastors and deacons to minister to individuals and families at end-of-life and bereavement. The curriculum was approved and evaluated by the HGBC Harris campus pastor, Mike Powers. I also consulted and received advice to better the curriculum from Arnold Kessler, who specializes in pastoral care ministry. These men were helpful by their critique and encouragement. The section in session 3 on God's sovereignty and human suffering came from Power's interaction with the material. The use of my many pastoral experiences in ministering with bereaved families was encouraged by Kessler to exemplify right or wrong theology and shepherding practices. The curriculum evaluation rubric was used to critique the curriculum as it was developed. The evaluations rated the sessions on a 1 to 4 scale with 1 being insufficient to 4 being exemplary.[1] The two pastors scored the curriculum 251 points out of a possible 256 points. This score translates to 98.0468 percent. This goal was deemed successful when a minimum of 90 percent of the evaluation criteria met or exceeded the sufficient level.

Goal 3

The third goal of this project was to equip pastors and deacons by teaching the developed bereavement training curriculum. Eleven participants were trained during the one-day training. Success for this goal was deemed accomplished when the *t*-test for dependent samples statistically demonstrated a significant positive difference between the pre- and post-survey scores. Based on the pre-established criterion of a positive, significant

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[1] See appendix 2.

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difference between the pre-test scores and the post-test scores of training participants, as determined by a *t*-test statistic, this goal was successfully completed. The mean score increased by 15 points from the pre-test to the post-test. The *t*-test demonstrated a positive statistically significant difference in the pre-and post-survey scores ($t_{(11)} = -3.17$ and a *p*-value one-tail of .0049, which is less than .05).[2] This score indicates that participants increased in their knowledge of bereavement ministry from the training received over the four sessions.

The survey results show a growth in confidence by participants in understanding death and the grief process. Growth was seen in the participants' understanding of how to minister to families in times of tragedy, suicide, loss of a child or an infant.

Table 2. Post-course change in areas of concern

Survey Question	Change in Mean
Q 8. I struggle to discuss death openly and find myself using phrases like, "at rest" or "passed on."	2.3 to 2.1[3]
Q 10. I have a good knowledge of what death is, what takes place, and the grief process.	3.3 to 4.6
Q 16. I am prepared to practically and theologically minister to a family whose loved one has committed suicide.	3.0 to 4.3
Q 17. I am prepared to practically and theologically minister to a family whose infant is dying or dead.	2.7 to 4.3
Q 18. I am prepared to practically and theologically minister to a family who has lost a loved one to a sudden tragedy.	3.0 to 4.3

Strengths of the Project

The strengths of this project became apparent from the discussions during the training sessions, comments from the participants, and follow-up discussion after the training. The greatest strength is seen in the participants' interest in wanting further training in areas of hospital ministry and bereavement ministry. Participants expressed

[2] See appendix 4.

[3] I address the negative change in Q 8 in the section on "Weaknesses of the Project."

how helpful it was to learn practical steps of funeral home selection, funeral planning, and preparation. Several pastors who have never walked with a family through funeral planning, a funeral service, and follow-up visits have now taken part in this process.

The second area of strength was the session on "The Influence of Secular Views on Death and Bereavement in the Church." Most of the participants had never studied how secular culture has shaped funeral services and bereavement counseling in the modern church. This led to much discussion on how pastors must take the lead to guide families in gospel-centered services and gospel-focused bereavement care.

The third strength came from sharing thirty-two years of pastoral experiences in a mega-church. Over the past several years, I have been urged by fellow pastors to write about the many pastoral experiences with bereaved families. I had resisted this request due to the fear that in writing these cases in book form that the focus would be on the situational experiences and not on the importance of correct biblical shepherding models and doctrine. By placing these experiences in a biblical training model, the case studies of ministering with families were used to highlight the concepts of shepherding, the importance of right theology, how to combat secular influences, and steps to guide families through death and lament.

A number of these case studies throughout the training modules focused on families in traumatic situations: suicide, drug overdose, murder, death of an infant, and sudden accidental death. Training module session 2 included an example of Atrium, the largest hospital system in Charlotte, North Carolina, chaplaincy office. Its model of ministry has changed over my many years of ministry in this community. When I began at HGBC, Atrium's chaplain office was helpful in supporting local churches and their emphasis was on Christian doctrine and care. This emphasis has changed over the years. Recently, Atrium's chaplain office introduced a video series to pastors in the community that focused on death and bereavement care. This series was void of Christian doctrine; instead, it was built upon a foundation of all world religions and with a further emphasis

on psychological and social models of bereavement care.

A great emphasis in the training was placed on the importance of pastors and deacons as under-shepherds of Christ to work together bringing care and comfort to the bereaved using correct biblical doctrine. The example of Peter serving alongside other elders in 1 Peter 5:1-3 and the example of Paul exhorting the Ephesian elders to minister to the flock in Acts 20:17-38 are important for the church battling today's false doctrines so often present in our culture and churches. Gospel-centered experienced pastors are responsible to mentor and encourage inexperienced pastors to shepherd using these biblical examples for ministry.

In follow-up with the HGBC campus pastors, each had spoken with training participants. The feedback they received about the training was of its value for the future ministry of each participant. Future training was discussed and will be planned in the coming months.

Weaknesses of the Project

The greatest weakness of this project was its timing. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, yearlong state restrictions and fear of the virus caused some individuals to decline being involved in the survey or training. It would have been beneficial for HGBC and its leadership to have more participation from the deacon body in the bereavement training day.

With the knowledge of frequent quarantines in HGBC leadership, the curriculum preparation time was shortened. It became apparent that the training would need to be presented in a half-day format and that it needed to take place before the church's Easter scheduling. This change reduced the number of weeks in which the training curriculum could be planned and written.

Early in the project, a part of goal 3 was to further educate participants through the process of one-on-one mentoring opportunities. As the pandemic lengthened throughout the year, area hospices, assisted living facilities, and hospitals' Covid visitation

restrictions changed this aspect of the project. At one point during the project, individuals were not allowed to visit in any facility, except virtually, those dying. Visitation was then opened to a limited number of family per day. It was only on rare exceptions that these facilities allowed one clergy member to visit those near death. Also, visits into individuals' homes were limited by families afraid of the virus being brought into the home. These restrictions and fears did not allow participants to receive one-on-one mentoring in most bereavement situations and this training element was removed.

Another weakness in the implementation of the project was the wording of several survey questions. For example, question 8: I struggle to discuss death openly and find myself using phrases like, "at rest" or "passed on." This question should have been worded into two questions. First, "I struggle to discuss death openly." Second, "I find myself using phrases like, 'at rest' or 'passed on.'" This would have allowed for a better understanding of the participants' thinking on how they interact with grieving families.

What I Would Do Differently

I plan to make changes to better the teaching curriculum. An example of changes would be the addition of Bible passages to contrast with the secular philosophies in session 3: "The Influence of Secular Views on Death and Bereavement." In the funeral planning session 4, I would add a handout listing local funeral home companies, contact information, and pricing.

Next, I would add another training session to the schedule. A session focused exclusively on ministering to families when traumatic death occurs would help many church leaders who have never been confronted with these situations. Many leaders are overwhelmed and struggle to respond in a helpful manner in these situations.

In times not under pandemic restrictions, the goal to mentor one-on-one would be reinstated into the training program. Having pastors and deacons learn from shepherding those in mourning gives the greatest benefit to those who have never had this experience. Mentoring can bring a confidence and a competency that cannot be gained in a classroom.

Theological Reflections

Post training, one participant posed the doctrinal issue of pastoral presence in the time immediately after death. The bereavement training stressed the importance of a pastor or deacon making time to be with a family as soon as possible to give spiritual support and prayer. Yet in seminary, he was trained that it was not best for a pastor to immediately attend to a family in their time of emotional pain and grief. The pastor or deacon should instead allow the family to learn dependence on God's sovereign and Holy presence. His seminary professor believed that by always running immediately to the family, it created a situation where the pastor becomes the emotional and spiritual focus. The family would then come to rely upon the pastor's comfort rather than on Christ's holy comfort.

This project is based on the foundation that pastors (elders) and deacons are under shepherds of Christ, one of a multitude of pastors and deacons who represents and shepherds the church body under the headship of Christ. The under shepherds are to be available and ready to guide families as they navigate the many questions surrounding death. R. Kent Hughes states in *The Pastor's Book* under the heading "Initial Pastoral Care—Immediate Visit with the Grieving," that "regardless of whether the death was expected or unexpected, the event requires a lot of hands-on ministry—'weep[ing] with those who weep' (Rom 12:15), just as Jesus did amid the mourning of Lazarus's sisters."[4]

Some families, due to denial of sickness and death, are not prepared to understand death in light of Scripture. Many have only a traditional and cultural understanding of death and it is a proper time to introduce Bible doctrines to a hurting people in need of the word. As they are presented God's Word, either read or in prayer, the Holy Spirit uses it to comfort their wounded spirit, to pierce their heart with truth. On the importance of comforting those in pain, Christopher Ash writes, "Comfort must be articulate and active. . . . Comfort is an action, sometimes called 'speaking to the heart,' that hopes and intends to bring about a change in how the sufferer thinks and feels about

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[4] R. Kent Hughes and Douglas Sean O'Donnell, *The Pastor's Book: A Comprehensive and Practical Guide to Pastoral Ministry* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 184.

his or her suffering."[5] The Bible spoken and prayed in the presence of a hurting family soon after the loss of a loved one brings comfort and right scriptural understanding.

Soon after leading the bereavement training day, I and one of the participants visited in the home of a faithful church member under hospice care upon his request. He had been a Christian for many years but was worried about his eternity. He spoke about incurring a large amount of medical debt due to cancer treatment and he was fearful that if he died not having paid this debt, he would receive hell. This question allowed me to clarify the gospel—how God had forgiven our debts and how the medical debt would not send him to hell. The time spend in this older gentleman's home reminded me and the participant of the importance of continually sharing the gospel message even with those who we believe to have a regenerated life in Christ. Many who are faithful in church each Sunday still struggle in times of death to fully understand the grace and mercy of the gospel message. Only the gospel of Jesus Christ can bring peace to those in fear and anguish.

For individuals to understand and grow in a gospel-centered view of death and bereavement, sermons need to be preached that teach the importance of lament and mourning. This year, the senior pastor of HGBC has preached through the book of Ecclesiastes. This series of sermons relate the truths of sorrow, death, and lament. They share the victory of Christ even in the hard times of life. This sermon series has helped families when death becomes real to them and their loved ones. They are better prepared to hear the truths of the Bible in their lives.

Personal Reflections

I began to personally reflect on this project during a weekend after seven funeral services in nine days. Six services for faithful Christ followers and one service for the parent of an inactive church member. The service for the member's parent was one where I doubt one in forty people were truly Christ believers. The majority were cultural

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[5] Christopher Ash, *Job: The Wisdom of the Cross* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 59.

Christians at best. I had doubts about the deceased state of eternity. The service was at a funeral home where I had little control over the music or speaker selection. I was careful not to preach a message of assurance that the deceased was in heaven but that for those who believe and live for Christ the hope of heaven and his ever-present comfort for those who mourn the loss of a loved one. These services are always heartbreaking to lead.

The next day, I led a service for one of HGBC's charter members who faithfully served Christ and the church for sixty-six years. She was one of eight who began HGBC, a church where the gospel has been preached and thousands have received Christ's redemption. She served humbly in many areas of the church and in her last year, even with many health issues, prayed for the church body. Those in attendance at her service included family members who are in Christian ministry and spoke to her gospel influence on their lives. The service celebrated Christ risen and victorious.

As I prepared for these services, I was reminded of a truth learned over thirty-two years in the ministry at one church: (1) a pastor must not bend the truth to tell people what they want to hear about their dead loved one; (2) a pastor is to faithfully teach and preach the gospel message to a family before the service, during the service, and after the service; (3) a pastor is to share the hard truths of heaven and hell and the desperate need for Christ's salvation; (4) a pastor is to preach the foulness of our sin nature and the sweet forgiveness and love of God who sent his son to bring atonement and victory over gruesome death and eternal damnation.

If one does a quick search for funeral services online, many services found are written by clergy or laypersons who seek to bring laughter to the grieving rather than share Jesus Christ. These services are person-centered, not gospel centered. With no gospel truthfully presented, families truly believe their loved one is in heaven—even when there is no proof—no church attendance, no spiritual walk, no fruit of the spirit. Families are deceived and remain ignorant of scriptural truths. For example, I overheard the daughter of the deceased before a funeral telling her son that grandad was in heaven, well and safe.

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From meeting with this man's wife and other children, I knew there was no evidence of any spiritual walk with Christ in this man's life—no daily Bible time or prayer, no church attendance, no time that he was ever known to have heard the gospel message. In fact, I was told he resisted attempts to attend church services with his family.

Too often, I encounter families with no real church involvement wanting me to affirm their loved one is well in heaven. There is no evidence of the gospel in their life. They are pagans. They want stories about the deceased, fond memories to bring a smile and laughter to their broken hearts. Yet when the gospel is presented, very often I see blank faces and hard hearts. So, the question is asked: how does one move families from lip-service to living out the gospel?

There is a great responsibility for pastors when meeting with families to plan a service. It is important to let families know the funeral service is a worship service first and foremost. The service is to glory God, not glorify the deceased. Pastors are to lead families to understand this important truth even before an order of service is put on paper.

Prayer is one of the important responsibilities of the pastor before the service. They are to pray for those who will attend the service to have a softness of heart for the gospel. They also pray for a movement of the Holy Spirit to bring individuals to Christ. Pastors pray for families to desire a message of hope and comfort found only in the gospel to be the primary focus of the service, not the funny life stories of the deceased.

Pastors must not forget that the funeral service is an important time to clearly preach the gospel. The funeral service is one of the very rare times many may ever hear the gospel presented as an adult. The gospel message must be the center of the service. It must not be lost in memorializing the person—the telling of the deceased's favorite meals, special trips, and precious memories of the grandchildren.

After the funeral, pastors should not forget those mourning. Too often in the busyness of daily life, those hurting are avoided and ignored. Too often there is hope that individuals will move on from their grief quickly, so others will not have to be confronted

by their pain. It is important to plan a time to meet with individuals or families to encourage them to continue a process of mourning and to question their own spiritual condition. Sadly, some families do not wish to have contact with the pastor. It is imperative that a pastor pray for their hard hearts. Thankfully, some individuals or families desire the counsel of a pastor or deacon to share the truths of Christ and his kingdom promises, His comfort and His Word.

Conclusion

One cannot lead families through times of death and bereavement without a sure understanding of the Bible and how to use it. John MacArthur tells those seeking to lead in the church that "training for pastoral ministry is a demanding, lifelong pursuit. It requires a man to give himself to the pursuit of godliness, to subject himself to the disciplines of learning biblical languages, doing exegesis, and formulating and understanding theology, and to hone his ministry skills through years of ministry and humble service."[6] Training, prayer, and preparation of the heart and mind spiritually allows the Christian leader to serve families in mourning.

Only preparation can allow a pastor to biblically speak to a family in the most crushing of tragic bereavement events. I have sat with a young mother after the murder of her infant by her husband and with a mother who found her son after death by overdose, his apartment ransacked by his friends for drug money. In these and many other tragic deaths, the only true consoling can come from the presence of the Holy Spirit, the sharing of God's Word, and the prayers of one's fellow believers. The words of Paul about Christ's suffering and comfort in 2 Corinthians 1:3-7 give hope to those in despair and mourning. Comfort comes not from ourselves but only from the victory of Christ over suffering and death. I have been reminded of this repeatedly as I minister to the bereaved in our HGBC congregation and to those outside our fellowship. Several times I have been stopped in a

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[6] John MacArthur, *Pastoral Ministry: How to Shepherd Biblically* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 105.

hospital hallway by families who have a loved one near death and who desire a pastor to read sSripture and pray with the individual.

Bereavement training at HGBC educated those willing to be prepared to walk with families in a time of sorrow, pain, and question by pointing to the gospel message of hope in Jesus Christ. "For you have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling" (Ps 116:8). Charles Surgeon writes about this verse of Scripture: "The triune God has given us a trinity of deliverances: our life has been spared from the grave, our heart has been uplifted from its griefs, and our course in life has been preserved from dishonour."[7] Christ's deliverance is the good news to share with those in grief. Christ gives the promise of victory over death. The Holy Spirit slows and wipes the tears from our eyes. God the Father, by providing His Son, presents to his children a path to go forward with assurance in this life when the path seems overwhelmingly dark and broken. Bereavement care training taught Christian leaders to always share the Bible's story of the centrality of the gospel in all situations. To tell the gospel message is the goal and mission to bring hope, peace, and comfort to those dying and those in grief.

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[7] Charles Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David: Christian Reflections on the Wisdom of the Psalms* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1988), 3:69.

APPENDIX 1

BEREAVEMENT MINISTRY KNOWLEDGE
AND SKILL SURVEY

Agreement to Participate
The research in which you are about to participate is designed to assess the current understanding of end-of-life and bereavement ministry theology and practice. John Harrill is conducting this research to collect data for a ministry project. In this research, you will answer questions before the project, and you will answer the same questions at the conclusion of the project. Any information you provide will be held strictly confidential, and at no time will your name be reported or identified with your responses. Participation is strictly voluntary, and you are free to withdraw at any time. By the completion of this survey, you are giving informed consent for the use of your responses in this project.

By the completion of this survey, you are giving informed consent for the use of your responses in this research.

[ ] I agree to participate personal ID#_____
[ ] I do not agree to participate

Section I
The first section of the BMKSS will obtain some demographic information about the individuals taking this survey.

Directions: Answer the following questions by filling in the blank space provided.

What is your current age? _____

How long have you been a Christian? _____

How long have you been a member of HGBC? _____

Section 2
Directions: Give your opinion on the following statements using the following scale:
SD = strongly disagree   D = disagree   DS = disagree somewhat
AS = agree somewhat   A = agree   SA = strongly agree
Please circle the appropriate answer.

1. I care for the spiritual growth of our congregation in times of bereavement.   SD D DS AS   A SA

2. I am equipped to minister to families during the death of a loved one.   SD D DS AS   A SA

3. I willingly provide care to those who have been unkind toward me or my own family.   SD D DS AS   A SA

4. I often operate outside my comforts/needs to minister to those in crisis.   SD D DS AS   A SA

5. Death is a topic that should be avoided and not discussed.   SD D DS AS   A SA

6. I am ready to die when the time comes.   SD D DS AS   A SA

7. A family is always changed by the death of a loved one.   SD D DS AS   A SA

8. I struggle to discuss death openly and find myself using phrases like, "at rest" or "passed on."   SD D DS AS   A SA

9. Every person should be allowed to die at home.   SD D DS AS   A SA

10. I have a good knowledge of what death is, what takes place, and the grief process.   SD D DS AS   A SA

11. I am comfortable discussing death or dying.   SD D DS AS   A SA

12. As a faith community, the pastors and deacons should discuss death and dying.   SD D DS AS   A SA

13. If presented with the opportunity, I can share the gospel with confidence.   SD D DS AS   A SA

14. I understand what the Bible says about death.   SD D DS AS   A SA

15. I know what the Bible says about lamenting and grief.   SD D DS AS   A SA

16. I am prepared to practically and theologically minister to a family whose loved one has committed suicide.   SD D DS AS   A SA

17. I am prepared to practically and theologically minister to a family whose infant is dying or dead.   SD D DS AS   A SA

18. I am prepared to practically and theologically minister to a family who has lost a loved one to a sudden tragedy.   SD D DS AS   A SA

19. Heaven is where everyone goes when they die   SD D DS AS   A SA

20. God is a God of love who does not judge mankind.   SD D DS AS   A SA

21. Death is a result of original sin.   SD D DS AS A SA

22. When a Christian dies, he/she will go to a place of waiting SD D DS AS A SA

23. When a Christian dies, he/she becomes an angel in Heaven.   SD D DS AS A SA

24. When someone commits suicide, he/she is eternally damned   SD D DS AS A SA
    to hell.

25. Family members who have died can communicate through   SD D DS AS A SA
    visions or signs.

26. Grieving children have a more difficult time dealing with   SD D DS AS A SA
    major loss than grieving adults.

27. Grief is a normal reaction for Christians who know their   SD D DS AS A SA
    loved one was saved.

28. Praying with the bereaved can bring comfort.   SD D DS AS A SA

29. Scripture can bring comfort to those grieving.   SD D DS AS A SA

30. Mourning and grief are different words for the same process. SD D DS AS A SA

APPENDIX 2

CURRICULUM EVALUATION RUBRIC

Training Curriculum Evaluation Tool					
Lesson One Evaluation					
Lesson One Evaluation 1= insufficient 2=requires attention 3= sufficient 4=exemplary					
Criteria	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**Comments**
The lesson is clearly relevant to the issues of end-of-life/bereavement ministry.					
The material is faithful to the Bible's teaching.					
The material is theologically sound.					
The thesis of the lesson is clearly stated.					
The points of the lesson clearly support the thesis					
The lesson contains points of practical application.					
The lesson is sufficiently thorough in its coverage of the material.					
Overall, the lesson is clearly presented.					

APPENDIX 3

BEREAVEMENT TRAINING OUTLINES
AND TEACHING NOTES

Bereavement Training Session 1 Outline:
The Importance of Pastoral Leader in the Church

Biblical Resources for Leadership:

Church Leaders Are to Model Servanthood and Gospel Clarity (Acts 20:17-38)

A Multiplicity of Leaders Is Needed to Guard and Guide the Church (1 Pet 5:1-3)

Leaders Share in the Suffering of Christ and the Church (2 Cor 1:3-7)

Leaders Are to Teach Correct Theology in Times of Death and Suffering (Ps 23)

Christians struggle to understand the death of a loved one.

Illustration: One Christian woman recently told me that she had been in bed for two weeks since her father's death. Repeatedly with her words, she questioned why God would allow her father, a man of strong faith and who taught Sunday School, to die a sudden, accidental death. She could not understand why God could allow the pain and suffering he experienced in the time of his death. She was angry, depressed, and disappointed in God.

This struggle to understand God's purpose in death seems common for many Christian families in American.

Partially, this is due to the struggle within families to avoid death and its reality. They deny that death is imminent for their loved one. We meet families who are overwhelmed, defeated, and dissatisfied with God. Families often try to bargain with God and misuse Scripture to support their beliefs about who God is and how he works in the lives of his people.

An essential element of the pastoral responsibility is to care for families in the time of death, to represent the church- the body of Christ. An under-shepherd brings comfort through spiritual instruction by sharing scripture to remind or tell of Christ's hope to those who are mourning/ suffering. An under-shepherd clearly speaks the gospel and applies Biblical doctrine to guide those in grief to a place where God can be glorified.

Biblical Examples of the Importance of Caring for the Flock of Christ

**Church Leaders Are to Model Servanthood
and Gospel Clarity (Acts 20:17-38)**

A. Paul tells the elders to observe and evaluate their own spiritual life. Elders are to be morally and spiritually pure in their relationship to Christ and others (v. 28).

Richard Baxter in *The Reformed Pastor*: "O therefore, brethren, lose no time! Study, and pray, and confer, and practice; for in these four ways your abilities must be increased. Take heed to yourselves, lest you are weak through your own negligence, and lest you mar the work of God by your weakness."[1]

Gentleman, bereavement ministry (visiting the sick and dying) can be the most rewarding work of your ministry (Story of older pastor who thanks God for being allowed to minister to those in need) but only if you are spiritually prepared, because it is also the most draining of ministry. When you sit with those weeping it can break your heart. Don't let it break your soul- don't let it destroy your belief in Christ. Stay in the Word.

Read from *Night* by Elie Wiesel: "On that day, horrible even among those days of horror, when the child watched the hanging of another child, who, he tells us, had the face of a sad angel, he heard someone behind him groan: "Where is God? Where is He? Where can He be now?" …. And I, who believe that God is love, what answer could I give my young questioner, whose dark eyes still held the reflection of that angelic sadness which had appeared one day upon the face of the hanged child? What did I say to him? Did I speak of that other Jew, his brother, who may have resembled him—the Crucified, whose Cross has conquered the world? Did I affirm that the stumbling block to his faith was the cornerstone of mine, and that the conformity between the Cross and the suffering of men was in my eyes the key to that impenetrable mystery whereon the faith of his childhood had perished?"[2]

B. Paul calls the elders to protect the church from those who would bring harm to the body and to individuals within the body. Paul calls them fierce wolves. They speak

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[1] Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, ed. William Brown (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1829), 27.

[2] Elie Wiesel, *Night* (New York: Bantam Books, 1960), ix-x.

false doctrine to bring harm to the body of Christ, most often for their own needs of greed, lust, power (v. 29).

1.   False Christian doctrines and a hostile culture surround today's church. Mohler observes, "Indeed, we have seen entire ministries forfeit their identity as children of God in order to set on the throne human authorities and personalities."[3]

Christians are often at their most vulnerable spiritual and emotional state in times of death and grief. They are easily swayed by false beliefs about life after death and heaven. They want and long to hear those things to avoid suffering/pain – The lies ease pain when the truth is harsh to their ears, when truly Biblical based lament and mourning is needed to shape their soul.

2.   Paul states he admonished with tears (v. 31). He wept over the church of Ephesus. We are to do the same. Elders and deacons with gospel understanding are to teach the gospel, to guide using the gospel, and to encourage or even confront with the gospel those who mourn.

3.   Understand that we are to live and teach gospel truths to those who suffer, to those in grief and lament. It is essential and instrumental to do so to grow a healthy congregation.

4.   Also, we note in the account of Acts 20:17-38, Paul did not send for one elder to come to him, he sent for the elders, plural. It takes more than one individual leader to minister to the church body.

A Multiplicity of Leaders Are Needed to
Guard and Guide the Church
(1 Pet 5:1-3)

A.   The role of the under-shepherd is not accomplished by one man but is the role of a multiplicity of under-shepherds caring for those suffering during the time of death

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[3] R. Albert Mohler, Jr., *Acts 13-28 for You* (Charlotte, NC: Good Book, 2019), 110.

and grieving. Exegesis of 1 Peter 5:1-3 shows the need for care to those suffering by Christ-centered under-shepherds for instruction and comfort.

    1.   In 1 Peter 5:1-3, Peter calls the elders (plural) to willingly shepherd the church (v. 2).

    2.   Peter, like Paul, challenges the elders to lead not from seeking gain or power but from a spirit of humbleness (v. 3).

B.   Church leaders must understand and remember that the flock is God's flock. The church is his body, his people, his for all time past, present, and future. The church is not to be used as a leader desires, instead leaders are called to watch over and care for the church as under-shepherds of Christ.

    1.   Follow Christ's biblical example and direction.

    2.   When leaders view the church body as their own and stray from the gospel, the church becomes a place of brokenness.

    3.   Peter gives caution to the elders about their motivation for ministry and their behavior in caring for the church body (v. 3).

    St. Augustine preached to church leaders:

> So since the sole reason people are put in charge is to consider the interests of those they are in charge of, and not at all to attend to their own advantage but only that of those they are in service of- anyone put in charge who just enjoys being the boss and seeks his own honor and looks to his own convenience is feeding himself, not the sheep.[4]

C.   Church leaders are called to walk with individuals in the church body in their present suffering till the time of future glory.

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[4] Augustine, *The Works of Saint Augustine*, vol. 1, *Sermons on the Old Testament*, trans. Edmund Hill, ed. John Rotelle (Ann Abor, MI: New City Press, 1990), 264.

Dean Inserra: "Many people want the good-luck-charm Jesus, not the sacrificial Lamb of God whose death requires action."[5] How Christians respond as a body of believers to suffering and death is an important witness to the surrounding community.

**Leaders Share in the Suffering of Christ
and the Church (2 Cor 1:3-7)**

A. Hope and comfort can come in times of suffering and bereavement by the ministry of encouragement through the Word of God. Elders are to bring the message of hope to those impoverished by grief and who need encouragement. Paul shares with the Corinthians a time of angst, pain, and suffering from his life experience. This experience shaped Paul's thinking about God's involvement in suffering. Paul tells the Corinthians that their suffering can teach them to better comfort and minister to others who are suffering.

Murray Harris states that four principles about suffering and comfort are found in this passage:

1. "Suffering patiently endured deepens our appreciation of God's compassion and never-failing comfort.

2. Suffering drives us to trust in God alone.

3. Suffering brings identification with Christ and his suffering.

4. We experience God's comfort (his help, consolation, and encouragement) in the midst of our suffering."[6]

B. God's comfort comes from resting in God's sovereign being. R. Kent Hughes proposes, "There is no enduring comfort apart from him."[7] Christians can comfort

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[5] Dean Inserra, *The Unsaved Christian: Reaching Cultural Christianity with the Gospel* (Chicago: Moody, 2019), 38.

[6] Murray Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians,* The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 123.

[7] R. Kent Hughes, *2 Corinthians: Power in Weakness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 23.

others because they have experienced God's direct and personal comfort in times of afflictions.

C. Afflictions spring out of two sources in a Christian's life. First, afflictions can come from outside circumstances that surround one's life. Severe afflictions from outside circumstances are not just personal but can impact Christian communities as it did in the churches of Macedonia: "For in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part (2 Cor. 8:2)." Second, afflictions can also attack a Christian mentally. Paul struggles with mental pain, fears, and suffering (2 Cor 2:4, 7:5).

D. As a part of the body of Christ, Christians must be prepared to share in affliction and suffering. Prosperity Gospel preaches a false theology to many who identify themselves as Christians. Many only want the blessings of good health, wealth, and happiness in their life. When illness and death come to their home, they come to believe God has failed them or abandoned them. Suffering does not have a place in their theology, yet the New Testament is clear that Christians will indeed suffer for Christ and with Christ when obedient to him. Jerry Bridges speaks of the fellowship of suffering and communion of suffering in his book, *True Community*: "The universal testimony of those who have suffered for the sake of Christ and his church is that they have experienced a deep fellowship, an intimate communion with Him in the midst of their suffering."[8] When Christians suffer for Christ, comfort will come from Christ the good shepherd.

E. As leaders in the church, elders and deacons are to bring the knowledge of Christ's suffering to those who suffer in times of bereavement. Leaders are to share their

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[8] Jerry Bridges, *True Community* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 2012), 127.

experiences and be witnesses to others about the hope, peace, and strength of Christ.

A Christian's hope stems from the cross of Christ, his atoning death, and his victory

over death. For the Christian, Christ is the only hope in a broken and fallen world

which questions every Christian belief. Hafemann notes, "Christ is our refuge and

strength, an ever-present help in trouble (Ps. 46:1)… Our emotional comfort comes

not from within ourselves, but from God's commitment to sustain and save his

people."[9] Christian leaders are to be gospel-centered encouragers to those in trouble

and need so they can endure in times of affliction and sorrow.

**Leaders Are to Teach Correct Theology
in Times of Death and Suffering (Ps 23)**

As under-shepherds who need to teach doctrinal principles to those who lack

basic biblical understanding, it is helpful to use a scripture passage that is somewhat

familiar to many families. One scripture that many have heard or read is Psalm 23. This

scripture can help teach doctrinal truths to those hurting after the death of a loved one.

Psalm 23 gives a clear outline of how a sovereign God works in the daily lives of his

people.

Herman Selderhuis uses Martin Luther's quote on Psalm 23 to point to God as

the Shepherd of His people:

> In spiritual shepherding . . . as little as a natural sheep can feed, direct, guide itself
> or guard and protect itself against danger—just so little can we poor, weak, miserable
> people feed and guide ourselves spiritually, walk and remain on the right path or by
> our own power protect ourselves against all evil and gain help and comfort for
> ourselves in anxiety and distress. . . . They must depend on God, their Shepherd, for
> all.[10]

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[9] Scott Hafemann, *2 Corinthians*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 61.

[10] Martin Luther, quoted in Herman Selderhuis, ed., *Psalms 1-72*, Reformation Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament, vol. 7 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2015), 188.

A. Psalm 23: God as personal shepherd, who comforts and encourages, who brings restoration and redemption. The believer, Christ's sheep are to glorify and praise Him as the loving Lord who is with us and who provides His eternal home.

A warning to those who lead the church.

Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!" declares the LORD. Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who care for my people: "You have scattered my flock and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. Behold, I will attend to you for your evil deeds, declares the LORD. Then I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will set shepherds over them who will care for them, and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall any be missing, declares the LORD. (Jer 23:1-4)

The word of the LORD came to me: "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy, and say to them, even to the shepherds, Thus says the Lord GOD: Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts. My sheep were scattered; they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them. "Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: As I live, declares the Lord GOD, surely because my sheep have become a prey, and my sheep have become food for all the wild beasts, since there was no shepherd, and because my shepherds have not searched for my sheep, but the shepherds have fed themselves, and have not fed my sheep, therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: Thus says the Lord GOD, Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will require my sheep at their hand and put a stop to their feeding the sheep. No longer shall the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, that they may not be food for them. (Ezek 34:1-10)

B. Do not neglect or bring harm to the flock.

C. God will appoint another shepherd.

Paul's prayer for the church and its leadership. "And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding" (Col 1:9). Colossians

1:9 is an example of how the under shepherds are to pray for those under our care with diligence, persistence, and to pray continually for spiritual wisdom and understanding. [11]

Conclusion

Elders and deacons serve a sovereign God. This lesson is of the upmost importance for the local body of Christ to comprehend. God is in control of all. All of life falls under His sovereign reign. Elders and deacons are called to lead his people to glorify his name in all situations. The chief purpose of man is to glorify God. Too often, elders or deacons seek self-glory and self-enrichment, which can destroy a church. Michael Wilder and Timothy Paul Jones state, "Those who are privileged to shepherd God's people are never lords over the flock. . .. Any power we possess has been divinely delegated to guide God's flock toward his purposes."[12] Elders and deacons must hold one another accountable to serve faithfully and humbly before God and the local body of Christ.

Elders and deacons need look to their own spiritual growth. Elders and deacons cannot lead unless they are spiritually and doctrinally prepared. As church leaders, elders, and deacons must have a firm spiritual and theological foundation to help the congregation in spiritual growth. The biblical character qualifications for each is listed in 1 Timothy 3. Elders and deacons are to complement each other in the nurturing, protecting, and guidance of the congregation.

The role of the under-shepherd is not accomplished by one man but is the role of a multiplicity of under-shepherds. Elders and deacons are to serve alongside God's people, using their God-given spirituals gifts and their specific roles to build up the body. The flock of Christ has many physical, emotional, and spiritual needs. The elders and deacons are to be sensitive to these needs and to provide care for these needs. Each is

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[11] H. B. Charles, *It Happens After Prayer* (Chicago: Moody, 2013), 154-58.

[12] Michael Wilder and Timothy Paul Jones, *The God Who Goes Before You: Pastoral Leadership as Christ-Centered Followership* (Nashville: B & H, 2018), 122.

called to a role of stewardship and servanthood to nourish and protect the flock. Elders and deacons are to set an example of how to live holy lives for the flock.

Suffering will be a part of the life of elders as they shepherd the sheep. Suffering brings holiness to church leaders who understand that suffering with Christ will happen while serving the flock. Wilder and Jones remind leaders, "Suffering cultivates sympathy for the flock and deepens the leader's love for the flock."[13] Suffering shapes a leader's character and understanding of the cross of Christ. Suffering will shape how a leader will teach, preach, and council those in the flock. When elders and deacons walk with individuals and families through the valley of the shadow of death, they will point people to the comfort and hope of Christ, not to the temporary promises of the world.

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[13] Wilder and Jones, *The God Who Goes Before You*, 159.

Bereavement Training Session 2 Outline:
The Influence of Secular Views on Death
and Bereavement in the Church

"81% of Americans believe in an afterlife of some sort and that Heaven and Hell exist . .

. yet most Americans do not expect to experience Hell first-hand: just one-half of 1%

expect to go to Hell upon their death. Nearly two-thirds of Americans (64%) believe they

will go to Heaven."[14]

History of American Views of Death

Denial of Death

Modern Death Awareness Movement

Eastern Religion

Existentialism

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (Cultural Christianity)

Birth of the Celebration of Life Services

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[14] Barna Group, "Americans Describe Their Views about Life after Death," October 21, 2003, https://www.barna.com/research/americans-describe-their-views-about-life-after-death/.

Bereavement Training Session 2:
The Influence of Secular Views on Death
and Bereavement in the Church

The contemporary church often defaults to secular models, which impacts how congregations understand death and bereavement care. Traditional Christian models of mourning and lament, based on the doctrine of original sin, have little place in today's culture in working out one's grief.

George Barna gives insight into this shift in American Christian thinking:

> Americans have a willingness to embrace beliefs that are logically contradictory and a preference for blending different faith views together which create unorthodox religious viewpoints . . . noting that among born again Christians—10% believer that people are reincarnated after death, 29% claim it is possible to communicate with the dead, and 50% contend that a person can earn salvation based upon good works.[15]

A different Barna study in 2003 found that "81% of Americans believe in an afterlife of some sort and that Heaven and Hell exist . . . yet most Americans do not expect to experience Hell first-hand: just one-half of 1% expect to go to Hell upon their death. Nearly two-thirds of Americans (64%) believe they will go to Heaven."[16]

History of American Views of Death

A. Living death (1600-1830)- Puritan

Americans experienced death in the home with high death rates for children and adults. Puritans focused on a sovereign God. Over time Deism, the Enlightenment, and other religious movements slowly changed American thinking about death on how viewed death.

B. Dying of death (1830-1945): The professionalization of the death industry. Death moved from the home to the funeral parlor. Here death was beautified and now marketed. New customs were put into practice. Preachers like Charles Finney

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[15] Barna Group, "Americans Describe Their Views."

[16] Barna Group, "Americans Describe Their Views."

influence on the theology of Evangelicalism (2nd Great Awakening). Finney

followed in Pelagius' footsteps by rejecting the doctrine of original sin. Focus on

individual sin.

C.   The resurrection of death (1945-present)[17]

The advent of nuclear war, Modern Death Awareness Movement, denial of death,

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.

Denial of Death

Individual's faith in modern medicine supports a denial of death. Doctors take

an oath of healing and work hard to medically sustain an individual's life. Families often

make demands on a medical staff to preform extreme medical interventions to prolong an

individual's life. For many, science is sacred and can eventually overcome death.

Grief that lingers is considered abnormal and unhealthy for the bereaved.

In western culture death is now treated as a clinical process. Death became

hidden in our society, most die in the hospital or hospice house, few attend the bedside of

the dying or attend a funeral. Many avoid exposing their children to the reality of death.

The use of euphemisms for death, never speaking directly about death. We don't discuss

death, many even near death will not make plans for their burial or will speak about their

impending death. Families continue in a state of denial and silence. Frequently, families

of the actively dying or who have died have few or no directives from their loved one for

end-of-life care and funeral arrangements. Individuals and families rarely preplan and pay

for the needed funeral services. "In 2015, 69 percent of adults over the age of 40

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[17] Michael Leming and George Dickinson, *Understanding Dying, Death, and Bereavement*, 5th ed. (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt College Publishing, 2002), 51.

indicated they would prefer to pre-arrange their own service; however, only 17 percent had made arrangements."[18]

The dead are taken to a funeral home to dress them up and make them look alive.

Modern Death Awareness Movement

A. Death is natural, a biological process, a part of life, it is to be accepted and embraced.

B. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross: Five Stage of Grief: Denial/Isolation; Anger; Bargaining; Depression; Acceptance. (This is still taught in some churches today)

C. The influence of modern psychology: emotional support over spiritual support. Many churches brought into this model.

It is important to note that the spiritual needs of the bereaved are not often considered in secular counseling. Instead, Dewi Rees notes that there are four main secular approaches to guiding individuals through the grief process: "Support groups, hospice lay counsellors, individual therapy, or the use of drug therapy."[19] Each of these help the individual deal with psychosocial, social, or physiological needs during bereavement.

In contemporary secular culture and mainline Protestant churches, grieving the loss of a loved one has become a psychological process more than a theological or spiritual response to sin and death. Mark McMinn, a leader in Christian counseling, notes, "The most striking thing about the psychological literature on sin is its relative absence."[20]

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[18] Funeral and Memorial Information Council, "New Study Shows Americans Recognize the Role of Memorialization in Healthy Healing Following the Death of a Loved One," accessed November 11, 202, www.famic.org/famic-study/.

[19] Dewi Rees, *Death and Bereavement: The Psychological, Religious, and Cultural Interfaces* (London: Whurr Publishing, 1997), 125.

[20] Mark McMinn, *Psychology, Theology, and Spirituality in Christian Counselling* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2011), 183.

Bergman goes on to say that a number of Christian leaders saw death as normal and encouraged pastors to utilize "any resources from psychology.'"[21]

Example – Atrium's Chaplain Grand Rounds series on death.

D. Hospice movement: Death is natural, and this movement began to help individuals transition into death from life.

Eastern Religion

Death is natural, Death brings reincarnation, never eternal punishment or hell. Works brings one closer to perfection and the gods but no assurance of heavenly peace. Katherine Young reports that there are "four major views of natural death which emerge when Asian religions are compared: the cosmic, the existential, the familial, and the natural.

Existentialism

Existentialism focuses on the free will of the individual. Everyone should develop their own meaning for their creation and their death and should be allowed to determine his own development in life through their own will. Existentialism believes that society should not restrict an individual's actions or rights. For the existentialist, there is no transcendent being, no God. They believe man is finite and death is the end of an individual. Man is seen as living in an absurd world. One's existence is only defined by how one lives out that life till death. For the existentialist, death is final and leads to nothingness. Where for the Christian, life continues for an individual either in Christ's redemption or in the state of eternal hell.

A contemporary example of this thinking is seen in British philosopher Stephen Cave. He writes that mankind's desire for immortality has created historical worldview systems that promote injustice and exploitation of people groups. For Cave, the belief in

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[21] McMinn, *Psychology, Theology, and Spirituality*, 185.

immortality creates major ills for the world by "teaching you a profound selfishness which causes to obsess about the infinite survival of your own individual personality."[22] Cave believes instead that "a meaningful life and a productive society require limitations that define them. We need finitude."[23] (See Michael Horton's quote in lesson 4 of this project. This is the Christian answer to Existentialism).

For existential theology, the doctrine of original sin is a myth. Death and sin are distinct and separate. Macquarrie writes, "The fact that death appears in the myth of the fall as the penalty for sin tends to obscure the distinction between finitude (which belongs intrinsically to human existence) and sin (which is an imbalance or perversion affecting existence)."[24] This influence has permeated how some church pastors and leaders speak to those dying and how they comfort those grieving.

Insert for Latin American Campus Pastor Training: Articles on Hispanic Funeral Practice and Culture:

"Hispanic Funeral Traditions"[25]

"3 Things You Need to Know About Hispanic Funerals"[26]

"Hispanic Culture of Death and Dying"[27]

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[22] Stephen Cave, *Immortality: The Quest to Live Forever and How it Drives Civilization* (New York: Crown Publishing, 2012), 261.

[23] Cave, *Immortality*, 268.

[24] John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1977), 228.

[25] "Hispanic Funeral Traditions," accessed March 24, 2021, https://www.dignitymemorial.com/support-friends-and-family/hispanic-funeral-traditions.

[26] Crystal Penrose, "3 Things You Need to Know about Hispanic Funerals" accessed March 24, 2021, https://blog.funeralone.com/grow-your-business/unique-services/3-things-know-hispanic-funerals/.

[27] Julie Kirk, "Hispanic Culture of Death and Dying," accessed March 24, 2021, https://dying.lovetoknow.com/death-cultures-around-world/hispanic-culture-death-dying.

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (Cultural Christianity) Defined

Albert Mohler identifies this as the "new American religion," and its tenets can be summarized as follows: 1. "A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth." 2. "God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions." 3. "The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself." 4. "God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem." 5. "Good people go to heaven when they die." Despite the fact that these principles align closely with the beliefs of many Americans, most people have never self-identified as "moral deists"—they just call themselves "Christians." (Dean Inserra, *The Unsaved Christian: Reaching Cultural Christianity with the Gospel* [Chicago: Moody, 2019], 36-37)

Question: Are there other influences you have experienced in our culture that stands against our Christian beliefs?

Birth of the Celebration of Life Services

Focus is on the individual and their earthly life: Their relationships, their hobbies, their career. Rarely is there a focus on God, His righteousness and holiness, His sovereignty.

A. The celebration of life service is self-worship instead of God worship. Lament is typically removed from the services. Families are not confronted with the truths of sin, Christ, heaven, and hell. The deceased's life is the focus of the service. Humorous stories are often told about the deceased, the deceased favorite songs played, favorite foods at the funeral home or the gravesite, going to the bar to toast the deceased.

B. Illustration: The gentleman who came up to me after a service. In my face about not speaking about the man and his attributes. He was so angry; he wrote me several

emails after the service- belittling and berating me for the terrible service I lead for that individual.

Many families ask for a Celebration of Life service. The Celebration of Life service is theologically barren and empty. These services often leave the family emotionally hollow, without hope, in denial of their loss, and unsure of how to grieve and lament their loss because they do not focus on honoring God or proclaiming the gospel message of Christ. I love this quote: *Thomas Long states, "Especially among white suburban Protestants, funeral services are a downsized, 'personalized,' user-friendly, Hallmarky soiree: the customized, emotively neutral and religiously ambiguous memorial service to which everyone is invited but the one who has died."[28]*

Gone are the scriptures used for centuries on sorrow and lament or scriptures on Christ's promises instead Universalism is the theology of the day.

George Barna notes,

> Many committed born again Christians believe that people have multiple options for gaining entry to Heaven. Millions of Americans have redefined grace to mean that God is so eager to save people from Hell that He will change His nature and universal principles for their individual benefit. It is astounding how many people develop their faith according to their feelings or cultural assumptions rather than biblical teachings.[29]

In a Celebration of Life service, families are often assured that their dead loved one will receive a heaven best described as a place where the rewards will be many. The dead will receive personal materialistic riches. Heaven will be a place where all gather to enjoy their long-lost family, favorite hobbies, and food.

Church pastors need to discourage leading Celebrations of Life services and encourage a more biblical, theologically correct, and gospel-centered funeral service for the bereaved family and friends. This type of service should rely upon the gospel

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[28] Thomas Long and Thomas Lynch, *The Good Funeral: Death, Grief, and the Community of Care* (Louisville: Westminster, John Knox, 2013), 184.

[29] Barna Group, "Americans Describe Their Views."

message. Daniel Akin, in the foreword of Brain Croft's and Phil Newton's *Conducting Gospel-Centered Funerals*, shares, "Funerals provide a rare opportunity to speak truth into the lives of many who never read the Bible, seldom-if-ever attend church, and avoid spiritual issues when possible. We must not miss the opportunity."[30]

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[30] Brian Croft and Phil Newton, *Conduct Gospel-Centered Funerals: Applying the Gospel at the Unique Challenges of Death* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 13.

Bereavement Training Session 3 Outline:
Doctrinal Issues in Times of Bereavement

Combat False Teaching and Wrong Doctrine

Commonly shared false doctrinal beliefs of Christians and non-Christians

Leaders Are to Teach Correct Theology in Times of Death and Suffering

      A. Original Sin (Romans 5:12-19)

      B. God's sovereignty and human suffering (Col 1:16-17; Rom 5:3-4, 2 Cor 1:3-4)

      C. The Gospel Message (Col 1:13-21)

      D. Heaven (John 14:1-7)

      E. Hell (Matt 25:41-46)

      F. Lament (Ps 130)

Bereavement Training Session 3:
Doctrinal Issues in Times of Bereavement

Combat False Teaching and Wrong Doctrine

Elders and deacons are to be in a constant state of awareness to combat false teachers and wrong doctrine. Wilder and Jones affirm, "Elders must guard the flock from heretical influences that will divert the convictions and the affections of the people"[31] away from Christ and his body. Teaching Christ-centered theology is imperative for leaders as they guide their church body. This instruction is especially true in times of death.

Wilson states, "Scripture is clear about what God can do. What grieving people are often unclear about is what He will do in their circumstance."[32] Few families seem to understand basic Christian doctrines on death, heaven, and hell. They do not grasp the nature of God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as they spiritually and emotionally encounter the death of a loved one. Their theology is intertwined with cultural myths and false beliefs. Many use scriptures out of context to bring false hope and assurance to those suffering and in grief.

Commonly Shared False Doctrinal Beliefs
of Christians and Non-Christians

They are spoken to bring comfort and healing but mainly bring false hope and assurance to hurting families.

A. Illustration: Examples of quotes often encountered: "Your loved one is a beautiful angel in heaven," "God needed your infant so he took him or her to heaven," "God takes the best people early," and "Your loved one watches over you and will protect you." "God is Love and He would never send anyone to hell for eternity."

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[31] Wilder and Jones, *The God Who Goes Before You*, 182.

[32] Jim Wilson, *Pastoral Ministry in the Real World* (Wooster, OH: Weaver Books, 2015), 35.

When confronted with scripture and correct theology, individuals become confused and at times angry because it does not match what they have heard spoken or how they have wrongly interpreted the Bible.

B. Shallow cultural Christianity has embedded within it an image of God as the God of love who serves everybody's needs and saves everyone. Many individuals simply do not believe God only saves those who have regeneration through his son, Jesus Christ. They believe a God of love cannot ultimately cast anyone away from His loving presence and that all will be saved at some point. This idea is the heretical doctrine called universalism and it is not supported in Scripture.

Question: "Can any of you share other false believes you have heard or had to respond to?"

Leaders Are to Teach Correct Theology
in Times of Death and Suffering

A. Teaching Christ-centered theology is imperative for leaders as they guide their church body. This instruction is especially true in times of death. Wilson states, "Scripture is clear about what God can do. What grieving people are often unclear about is what He will do in their circumstance."[33] Few families seem to understand basic Christian doctrines on death, heaven, and hell. They do not grasp the nature of God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as they spiritually and emotionally encounter the death of a loved one. Their theology is intertwined with cultural myths and false beliefs. Many use scriptures out of context to bring false hope and assurance to those suffering and in grief.

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[33] Wilson, *Pastoral Ministry in the Real World*, 35.

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B. Biblical doctrines which impact how Christians understand death and mourning.

   1. *Doctrine of Original Sin*: In meeting with families to prepare their loved one's funeral service, many families as they prepare the eulogy, speak only of how good a person the deceased was while never speaking of their relationship to Christ. I agree with Inserra: "Many people think they're Christians but have no concept of the severity of sin, necessity of repentance, message of grace, or the overall message of the gospel."[34] Rather, I have found that families often find more solace in the words of Vince Gill's country song "Go Rest High on that Mountain,"[35] than in the Bible and its words of strength and comfort.

The Christian doctrine of original sin shapes the Christian's understanding of death: Death is the result of man's willful disobedience, the breaking of God's covenant in the garden of Eden: "And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" (Gen 2:16-17). Satan created mistrust in Adam and Eve, who were created right and holy, who then disobeyed God's commandment to not eat of the tree of good and evil. (Satan tells Eve and Adam that you will not die if you eat of the tree. Adam and Eve believed this lie, ate of the tree and now they faced death, from which only the gospel can bring salvation). Once God's covenant was broken, mankind now lives enslaved to the consequences of Adam and Eve's disobedience. Their actions and God's response are known as the doctrine of original sin. John Calvin defines original sin in this way: "Original sin is a hereditary depravity and corruption of our nature, diffused through all the parts of the soul, rendering us subject to

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[34] Inserra, *The Unsaved Christian*, 12.

[35] Vince Gill, "Go Rest High on That Mountain," track 11, *When Love Finds You*, MCA, 1994, studio album.

the Divine wrath, and producing in us those works which the Scriptures call 'works of the flesh.'"[36]

One of the truths of the doctrine of original sin proclaims that the curse of death is the result of Adam and Eve's disobedience. In Genesis, we find distrust instead of trusting obedience, betrayal of God's command and death. Death's curse was placed on all mankind: "To the woman he said, I will multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. . . . And to Adam . . . by the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken" (Gen 3:16, 19). By the sin of one man, all men are cursed to end their lives in death. The apostle Paul wrote, "For as in Adam all die" (1 Cor 15:22). Michael Horton writes, "As it is after the fall, we are dying from the moment that we are born."[37] Death is the punishment and curse to which all individuals fall. In classical Christianity, sin and death are seen as unnatural and unholy, a great enemy to man. Christians should understand the terrible condition to which they are born into as sinners before a holy God. Puritan writer James Janeway gives the example of one wicked child who near death came to understand this terrible truth. The child understood not only "his outwardly notorious sins, but he was in great horror for the sin of his nature, for the vileness of his heart, and for original corruption under it."[38]

Scripture speaks of death as the great enemy that Christ overcame by his death upon the cross and his resurrection from the grave. The apostle Paul writes these words in 1 Corinthians 15: 54-57:

> When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting? The sting of death is

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[36] F. W. Strothmann, ed., *John Calvin on God and Man* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1970), 25.

[37] Michael Horton, *Pilgrim Theology: Core Doctrines for Christian Disciples* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 422.

[38] James Janeway and Cotton Mather, *A Token for Children* (Grand Rapids: Soli Deo Gloria, 2009), 32.

sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Calvin, in his notes on this passage, states, "This victory will not be gradual only, but total and entire. Everything of mortality, that was hanging about these glorious victors, shall be swallowed up in perfect and endless life. Death is unstung first-disarmed-and then easily overcome."[39]

Christianity celebrates the victory of Christ as he conquered sin and death. The believer in Christ is promised eternal life and the resurrection of the earthly body at Christ's second coming. Horton writes, "Immortality is not something that we possess by creation, but is a gift of redemption in Christ, 'who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel' (2 Tim 1:10)."[40] (This is the Christian's answer to Existentialism). The Christian community waits expectantly for Christ's second coming to end the reign of sin and death. The Christian knows that Christ is victorious, but the death of a believer is still a time of grief and sorrow.

2. *God's sovereignty and human suffering:* We believe God is Absolute, Eternal, Infinite, Supreme, all authority, all powerful. Man suffers for results of original sin and Satan's persecution. God's sovereignty is over all suffering. It is His sovereignty which brings spiritual growth to those who suffer. Great Resource: Suffering and the Sovereignty of God by John Piper.

   (Speak to the question of suicide)

3. *The Gospel Message*: Christ paid the penalty for our sins. For the Christian, suffering and death are not the result of the punishment for our personal individual sin but it is the result of our living in a fallen world. Christians still experience sickness or injury. Death for the Christian now

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[39] John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, *Calvin's Commentaries*, vol. 20 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 62.

[40] Horton, *Pilgrim Theology,* 422.

becomes the door to our sanctification. Christ brings us through death into union fully with God. *Read Rom. 8:17*. With Christ, death is something not to be feared but that which can bring us joy. Death brings us into the full presence of Christ. *Read Heb. 2:15*.

4. *Heaven*: What happens when Christians die: The body is dust and will return to the earth. The soul, our spirit is immediately in the presence of God. (2 Cor. 5:8, Luke 23:43) Purgatory is not a Protestant belief. Also, Soul Sleep is not in the Bible. New imperishable body (1 Cor. 15). Immortal soul and perishable body are the traditional Christian teaching: See Westminster Confession of Faith (1647): Chapter XXXII. Of the state of man after death, and of the Resurrection of the dead.

"The bodies of men, after death, return to dust and see corruption: (a) but their souls (which neither die nor sleep) having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God who gave them: (b) the souls of the righteous, being then made perfect in holiness, are received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God, in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies. (c) And the souls of the wicked are cast into hell, where they remain in torments and utter darkness, reserved to the judgment of the great day."[41]

5. The importance of teaching about *Hell*:

Hell is real. (Matthew 13:42) Hell is not annihilationism. (Those who do not believe have no further existence and will not suffer in Hell.) The Bible is clear, there is eternal punishment (Matthew 25:46).

There is not a purgatory nor is there universalism. Hell is eternal punishment who those not redeemed by Christ.

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[41] The Westminster Confession of Faith (1647), accessed February 18, 2021, https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/westminster-confession-faith/.

Our culture and many churches have removed the biblical truths of who God is- They focus on God as loving but never judging, never eternally punishing. Many will teach and preach that man is not personally or collectively (i.e.-Nazi Germany) responsible for sin. Shame and guilt are foul words and are repressive.

6. *Lament:* We bring our sorrow and pain before the Lord. Mark Vroegop states that lament comes from the knowledge "that the world is broken, God is powerful, and he will be faithful. Lament stands in the gap between pain and promise."[42] Vroegop further states that "lament is a prayer in pain that leads to trust."[43] This prayer of pain allows the Christ to share their pain and sorrow with Christ in their suffering. It acknowledges God's sovereignty, his gospel, his mercy, and grace. It brings the individual(s) into worship.

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[42] Mark Vroegop, *Dark Clouds Deep Mercy* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 26.

[43] Vroegop, *Dark Clouds Deep Mercy*, 158.

Bereavement Training Session 4 Outline:
Funeral Practices and Bereavement Outreach

Visiting the Bereaved

Funeral Planning and Protocol (Funeral Policy Handout to guide: How to prepare and lead a Funeral, memorial, and graveside services)

Bereavement Care after the Funeral

Ministry and Funeral Service Challenges due to the Covid-19 Pandemic

Final Handouts and Closing Questions

<u>Recommended Reading:</u>
Dark Clouds Deep Mercy by Mark Vroegop
Gentle and Lowly by Dane Ortland
The Reformed Pastor by Richard Baxter
A Token for Children by James Janeway and Cotton Mather
Suffering is Never for Nothing by Elisabeth Elliot
Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering by Tim Keller
On Death by Tim Keller
40 Questions about Heaven and Hell by Alan Gomes

Bereavement Training Session 4:
Funeral Practices and Bereavement Outreach

As an under-shepherd, we meet with those hurting and in need. Bereavement ministry is one of the most draining, but it is also one of the most rewarding of ministries.

We are to guide them not with the comfort of our culture but with scripture, doctrine, and accountability.

We are to guard them from false doctrine and from those that would take advantage of them in a time of vulnerability. The funeral and the time around it are one of the greatest teaching times about right theology (If presented in a loving, caring manner. You cannot proclaim that the deceased is in Hell in blunt terms.) Often many in the family have rarely attended a gospel preaching church service. This is the opportunity to clearly share the gospel message with kindness.

Visiting the Bereaved

It is important to visit a family promptly after a death (if possible). Use Handout for visiting and communicating with the family.

Schedule for Outreach and Follow-up:
Visit soon- home, hospital
Funeral planning with family: at the funeral home or in the home, or at the church

Practical Tips:

Be present physically to give spiritual and emotional support and care.
Share the hope of the gospel. Repeatedly.
Encourage others to surround those grieving- social isolation is a concern- (I.E.- Covid has had a negative impact.)
Do not let your own sense of helplessness keep you from reaching out.
Some who are grieving can be volatile in their behavior. (Story of family who lost daughter to drug OD)
Listen to those grieving to understand where they are spiritually and emotionally.
Be careful as you guide a family spiritually – be true to the Bible. Do not misuse scripture or agree with a false scriptural understanding on the part of a family member.
Be silent and let the family grieve. (Job 2:11-13) They will respond with different emotions at different times. (Example of Mary and Martha in John 11/ Example of King David in 2 Samuel 12)
Those grieving will often repeat stories and details surrounding the death over and over.
Encourage those grieving to talk about the decreased. Use the deceased name when you do speak with the family. (Many avoid speaking about the deceased and this causes pain

for the remaining family.)
Encourage those grieving to discuss their spiritual condition.
Help the bereaved deal with practical issues at hand. Do they have a funeral home, etc.?

Visiting with Families after a Traumatic Death:

> Suicide
> Infant Death
> Murder
> Car Wreck
> Sudden unexpected Death

**Funeral Planning and Protocol (Funeral Policy
Handout to Guide: How to Prepare and
Lead a Funeral, Memorial, and
Graveside Service)**

Our central focus should always be the Gospel message. When we avoid preaching the gospel and we try to minimize death, we avoid telling others about the truth of Jesus Christ/the gospel.

R. Kent Hughes states, "The responsibility of the pastor who conducts a Christian funeral is to lift high the cross and the empty tomb—in other words, to preach the gospel!"[44]

Brain Croft and Phil Newton state: "Gospel-centeredness is making the gospel of Jesus Christ the primary purpose and focus of the funeral. . . . As ministers of the gospel of Jesus Christ, our chief aim is to bring God glory by making much of Jesus in all circumstance and situations—especially funerals.[45] The gospel spoken helps families understand the truth, only in Christ can you become a new creation.

C. J. Mahaney puts it this way: A Christian's "name is not just now on a gravestone but on Christ's hand."[46]

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[44] R. Kent Hughes, *The Pastor's Book* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 192.

[45] Croft and Newton, *Conduct Gospel-Centered Funerals*, 14.

[46] Matthew McCullough, *Remember Death* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 79.

Many funerals never have the gospel presented. Pastors speak about heaven but do not include how one must be transformed by the gospel in this life. Many families are falsely led to believe their loved one has received the blessing and joy of heaven when there is no evidence in the deceased life of a life lived for Christ. (No church involvement, no daily seeking the Lord in prayer or Bible reading. Their Bible is dusty and placed on a shelf.)

Harry Reeder in an article gives this advice to a pastor:
1. The question from some would be: "Don't you have a responsibility to tell them that the unbeliever who died is under the judgement of God? The answer is no. We have a responsibility to say that any and all who have not put their trust in Christ are rightly under the judgement of God. Only God knows the condition of the heart and a person's eternal destination."
2. We are to "speak the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15) To paraphrase a Puritan divine, Truth without love is barbarity and love without truth is cruelty.
3. When a service for a believer's service- A pastor is to help individuals to understand that their loved one or friend has just gone from the land of the living to the land of the dying but the help them see the exact opposite is true. They have left the land of the dying to go to the land of the living.[47]

Elders train to be prepared for when a death occurs:

Phil Newton states that there are Six areas of responsibility when caring for a bereaved family. (From my experience, the family is a blend of some saved, others who are nominal/cultural Christians, and unsaved individuals. They bring with them a mixture of beliefs and wants for the service.)

1. Biblical Guidance
2. Comfort through the Word and your presence
3. Represent Christ, the Church, and the Gospel, (You cannot tell a family what they want to hear. Always be faithful to the gospel.)
4. Declare the sufficiency of the gospel
5. Build deeper relationships
6. Be ready to offer long-term counsel [48]

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[47] Harry Reeder, "The Pastor and the Funeral," accessed February 23, 2021, https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/the-pastor-and-the-funeral/.

[48] Croft and Newton, *Conduct Gospel-Centered Funerals*, 18-23.

Speak on the tension between funeral tradition, Gospel-centered funerals, and a Celebration of Life Memorial.

Funeral vs Celebration of Life:

C. O. L. focus is on the person's life on earth- the social and the psychological. A C.O.L. is most often a service of Self-Worship instead of a Gospel-centered service.

Whereas a funeral focuses on a celebration of heaven, God's salvation, and Christ triumphant. A funeral should be focused on the Gospel message.

Bergman states "The proper task of a Christian funeral is not to help a family say goodbye nor to linger on the occupation, hobbies, and family life of the deceased but to focus on the worship of God."[49]

A funeral service focuses on the Worship of God and the question if one is prepared for life after death.

*Some funerals are not a traditional funeral or a celebration of life but a focus on grief as taught in today's culture. They heavily lean on Kubler-Ross and today's theories of grief rather than leaning on the history of Christian lament. Again, these have a human focus not a God focus. Its focus is on death is natural to man and on how to guide those mourning through a process of grief not a worship of God in how he has broken the cycle of sin and its punishment of death.

R. Kent Hughes states "Death is an enemy (1 Cor. 15:26) but also an evangelist. It gets our attention."[50]

Bereavement Care after the Service

1. Contact individuals and families two days after the service by personal visit or phone call.
2. Sympathy Card mailed to the home.

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[49] Lucy Bregman, *Preaching Death: The Transformation of Christian Funeral Sermons* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011), 20-21.

[50] Hughes, *The Pastor's Book*, 183.

3. Follow up contact two to three weeks after the service to access grieving process.
4. Grief Counseling offered.

Ministry and Funeral Service Challenges due to the Covid-19 Pandemic:
1. Hospitals and Hospice facilities closed for visiting the sick and dying.
2. Families afraid to allow pastors/deacons into their home to visit before and after a death.
3. Families who decided not to have a funeral service or who postponed a service to a much later date. (Several services were postponed up to a year in time.)
4. Private funeral services for family and close friends only. Some services were limited in number by state mandated rulings.
5. The rise in funeral services live streamed using various online formats. Example: Facebook live.
6. Families decided to forego a viewing/visitation time before or after a service.
7. Families asked to be separated during visitation by the use of stanchions to allow for social distancing and to not be touched.

Final Handouts and Closing Questions

To Handout at the last session:
1. Book: *Conduct Gospel-centered Funerals* by Brian Croft and Phil Newton
2. Book: *Comfort the Grieving* by Paul Tautges
3. Visiting the Bereaved
4. Kevin DeYoung's article on: "Some Thoughts on Ministering to the Sick and Dying"
   https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/some-thoughts-on-ministering-to-the-sick-and-dying/   accessed 2/1/2021.
5. Hickory Grove Baptist Funeral Policies and Practices
6. HG Office Funeral Planning Outline

Recommended Reading:
Dark Clouds Deep Mercy by Mark Vroegop
Gentle and Lowly by Dane Ortland
The Reformed Pastor by Richard Baxter
A Token for Children by James Janeway and Cotton Mather
Suffering is Never for Nothing by Elisabeth Elliot
Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering by Tim Keller
On Death by Tim Keller
40 Questions about Heaven and Hell by Alan Gomes

Isai 49:13 "For the LORD has comforted his people and will have compassion on his afflicted."

Visiting the Bereaved [51]

What to Say:
1. Do be personal. If possible, share remembrances of the deceased.
2. Do be specific about how you will help.
    (Prayer, contacting church and class, funeral guidance etc.)
3. Do reflect the loss. Don't act as if nothing has changed in their life.
4. Do respect their privacy.
5. A quiet presence and a few simple statements can make a world of difference.

What not to say:
6. "It's probably for the best." "You will get over it."
7. "God needed him more than you did." "Things could be worse."
8. Do acknowledge their loss. ("This must be hard for you.")
9. Do not say "I'm so sorry."
    It's hard to respond too, instead add something to it.
    "I'm so sorry. I know how special he was to you."
    "I'm so sorry. I'm really going to miss them too."
10. Do not say, "You shouldn't feel that way." Instead, encourage the person to express their feelings.
11. Do not try to answer their question: "Why?" with secular answers. Share the biblical truths about a fallen world and its corruption. Share the hope of Christ, his presence, and his promises.
12. Do not put a timetable on recovery. Allow them time.
13. Do not minimize their pain.

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[51] I compiled the information for this handout over many years. The original source(s) for the text is unknown at the time of writing.

**Hickory Grove Baptist Funeral Policies
and Practices (2019 Edition)**

Date and Time of Funerals Service
1. Dates and times for funerals held at Hickory Grove Baptist are to be arranged in consultation with the pastoral care ministry office.
2. Funeral services will be subject to the church planning calendar and the HGCS daily schedule.
3. Campus Location of the service will be decided by the pastoral care office in consultation with the family. At the Harris campus, the Worship Center, Chapel, and Latin Campus Chapel are the designated locations for services.

Funeral Service Officiate
1. All services will be conducted by a pastor of HGBC.
2. All other Clergy participation and others must first be approved by the pastoral staff before arrangements for the service are completed.

Structure of the Funeral Service
1. A funeral service held in the church is a service of worship, celebrating the deceased's life and the promise of eternal life through Jesus Christ. Consequently, all parts of the service are to be consistent with the present worship practices of the church.
2. The outline of the funeral and burial service must be approved by the pastoral care office before completed.

Funeral Service Music
1. Only music appropriate to a worship service shall be allowed. A funeral is a service of Christian worship.
2. All instrumental and accompaniment music, soloists and solos, and all guest musicians must have prior approval of the music ministry office.

Video Presentation
1. If a video is to be used during the service or visitation, it must be submitted to the pastoral care office 24 hours prior to the service for review.
2. All presentations should be in DVD or USB drive format.

Family Photos and Mementos
1. All displays or photos must be appropriate to a worship setting.
2. All displays and photos must be removed within 3 hours of the conclusion of the service.

Nursery
1. No nursery care or space is provided for funeral services.

Family Meal
1. The church will do everything reasonable to accommodate a member's request for a family meal before or after a funeral service.
2. Facility location will be upon ability of rooms.
3. Church Food Services are available by request and availability. There is a fee for using this service.

HGBC Office Funeral Planning Check List for
Pastoral Care Assistant to Complete
(Last updated 2020)

NAME OF DECEASED:
DATE OF DEATH:
VISITATION DATE AND TIME:
FUNERAL DATE AND TIME:

Reserve rooms needed for service and possible meal in planning center

Check to see if the person is on Homebound list and delete

Order Flowers

Enter Meal service in planning center if applicable

Create Program information, Poster – send to Creative department for design and printing.

Send Information details to departments involved

Send Bereavement to HGBC Main Users Group

Add to Deacon Pastoral Care Update

Add deceased name to Prayer Guide for following week

Add deceased name to OneNote Main Ministry team update

Check Bride's Room for bottled water in fridge and on counter morning of funerals

Request clean-up for Worship Center

Send card to the family

Obituary to membership assistant. (And to accounting if there is a memorial)

Mail Funeral service CD's/DVD's/video online links to closest family

Technical (music and video needs: Video, mics, I-mag information)

APPENDIX 4

T-TEST: PAIRED TWO SAMPLE FOR MEANS

Table A1. *T*-test: paired two sample for means

	Variable 1	*Variable 2*
Mean	140.2727273	155.8181818
Variance	109.6181818	126.1636364
Observations	11	11
Pearson Correlation	-0.121134518	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	10	
t Stat	-3.171564839	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.004980569	
t Critical one-tail	1.812461123	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.009961137	
t Critical two-tail	2.228138852	

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ABSTRACT

EQUIPPING PASTORS AND DEACONS FOR BEREAVEMENT
MINISTRY AT HICKORY GROVE BAPTIST CHURCH
CHARLOTTE, NORTH CAROLINA

John DePriest Harrill, DMin
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2021
Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Jeffrey W. Hunter

This project sought to provide equipping in end-of-life and bereavement ministry for pastors and deacons of Hickory Grove Baptist Church. Chapter 1 gives the context of ministry at Hickory Grove and the rationale and goals for this project. Chapter 2 shows the biblical directives and responsibilities required to shepherd the flock of God. Chapter 3 examines the historical, contemporary, and practical issues related to the project to guide the training of pastors and deacons for end-of-life and bereavement ministries.

Chapter 4 gives a detailed outline of the project, including a timeline. Chapter 5 provides an evaluation of the project and its goals. This project provides the church with the means to faithfully shepherd the flock through the end stages of life and the process of grieving.

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