

ABSTRACT

THE BEST OF ALL, GOD IS WITH US:

A WESLEYAN APPROACH TO FUNERAL PREACHING

by

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Funeral sermons are opportunities for South Georgia United Methodist pastors to share hope for the grieving through the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is a time to share the Christian hope that death is defeated through the resurrection of Jesus. However, concerns have risen over whether these pastors are preaching biblical funeral sermons rooted in the resurrection of Jesus or if they are preaching eulogies that focus primarily on telling the story of the life of the deceased person.

This study explores Christian funeral practices throughout history and articulates a Wesleyan approach to funeral preaching. Four pastors participated in the pastor interviews, fifty-three participated in the clergy questionnaire, and three hundred and sixty-four lay people completed the laity surveys. The three research instruments were employed to evaluate the funeral preaching practices of South Georgia Conference United Methodist clergy. The findings suggest that the pastors and laity believe that the funeral sermon is primarily a time to eulogize the deceased and that the gospel proclamation of the resurrection is secondary.

THE BEST OF ALL, GOD IS WITH US:
A WESLEYAN APPROACH TO FUNERAL PREACHING

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by

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CHAPTER 1

NATURE OF THE PROJECT

Overview of the Chapter

Chapter One provides the framework for identifying Savannah, GA United Methodists' understanding of the purpose of the funeral sermon in order to recommend a Wesleyan theological perspective for funeral preaching. The researcher provides a rationale for the project from personal experience supported by research. Included in the overview of the research project are the research design, purpose statement, research questions, participants, and how results are collected and analyzed. To add support for this project, themes of the literature review and contextual factors are identified. Further discussion of the project results establishes the significance for and impact on the practice of ministry.

Personal Introduction

I serve as a United Methodist pastor in a congregation in Savannah, Georgia. It is an aging congregation so death and funerals are a regular experience for the church. I've learned that death is a time when many people are sensitive to God and theology, regardless of their personal faith. It is a prime opportunity for sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ by declaring Christ's conquering of death through the resurrection. It is also a time for the community to come together and share moments of mutual support, grief, and love.

However, in my ministry experience I have found funeral practices to be void of orthodox Christian theology. It is my belief that there are several reasons for this void. The funeral service itself is often controlled by the family and funeral home, forfeiting a

solid theological foundation. My role as a pastor is often the officiant of an already planned service, or at best I am asked to plan a service with the main planning question to determine what the dead “would want at his or her funeral.” The families’ expectation of the preacher at the funeral is to eulogize the deceased, not to proclaim the gospel. Services are being held in church sanctuaries less and in funeral home chapels more. Burial practices are decided based on practicality, not Christian theology. Music and songs during the service are geared more toward comforting the family with themes like heaven and angels. Preaching is often done by the family’s favorite preacher, sometimes not even in the same Christian tradition. For example, I have been asked to preach the funeral of a non-church member who was, along with her entire church family, part of a completely different Christian tradition. The underlying purpose of the funeral, I suspect, is about comforting the family and honoring the dead instead of the proclamation of the gospel and resurrection over death.

All of these issues together lead to some claims about the dying, the deceased, and Christian eschatology that are not grounded in orthodox Christian theology. I have heard the dead described as angels; and those who are sharing funeral planning responsibilities with me share a different view of eschatology such as belief in the rapture that makes a concise, biblical proclamation difficult.

Since funerals are important times in a community to worship and understand God, it is important that the pastor’s work around issues related to death, dying, and grief be guided and rooted in Christian theology. My project will address these challenges and hopefully provide a framework for grounding the funeral sermon in Christian theology.

Statement of the Problem

Funeral practices in Savannah, Georgia United Methodist churches are vitally important events in the community. They have the ability to proclaim hope in the face of death by focusing on the theology of the resurrection as provided by the church through the Holy Scripture. However, they have devolved into being primarily times of comfort with the message of the funeral being steered by the family and funeral homes.

A lack of focus on Christian theology in the funeral sermon could lead to a distorted understanding of God by the people within these communities. Instead of hope in the resurrection of Jesus and his eventual return being the focus, it is focused on the thought of loved ones being in heaven and looking down on family and friends. This could lead churches and Christian ministers to abandon their own theological understandings in order to fit into the current form of funeral practices. This distorted understanding of dying and death could affect the churches' understanding of Christian living and eschatology, which in turn affects Christian discipleship.

Purpose of the Project

The purpose of this project was to discern a Wesleyan theological perspective of death and resurrection in order to evaluate the funeral preaching of pastors in the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church.

Research Questions

Research Question #1

What do United Methodist pastors in the South Georgia Conference see as their primary role and responsibility in the funeral sermon?

Research Question #2

Do United Methodist pastors in the South Georgia Conference communicate a Wesleyan theology of death and resurrection to their congregations?

Research Question #3

What do United Methodist lay people in the South Georgia Conference expect from their pastors in the funeral sermon?

Rationale for the Project

Death is an unescapable reality for all. While the church has a developed theology of death and resurrection, funerals in Savannah, Georgia United Methodist churches have focused more on the person and less on God. It is important for the death process to involve the theological interpretation of the church, especially when the deceased and the family are Christians.

In addition, our world struggles with the reality of death. Much of what we do is an effort to avoid aging and death. From full medicine cabinets to cosmetic surgery, death is something to be avoided. It's a sign of weakness in American culture. Even when we face death we soften it with phrases like "passed away."

Pastors would want to attend to this matter because funerals are meant to be services of worship and not celebrations of life. Of course, an important part of the funeral is to provide comfort for the family and to speak of the life of the deceased. But this is only part of the gospel story that is proclaimed. In addition, religious people and non-religious alike are attuned to the divine more than usual when encountering death. It offers the pastor a rare moment to speak a word about God to a community that is willing to listen in an attempt to make meaning out of death.

In addition, the Church's understanding of death affects how they live as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ. The hope that is gained from declaring Christ as conqueror of death through the resurrection empowers Christians to live faithfully for the risen Christ. Christians are called to live resurrected lives by being the resurrected community.

Lastly, even though the primary focus of a funeral service should not be comforting the family, the hope found through the power of Jesus Christ's resurrection is comforting which is based on the truth and grace of the gospel and the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Definition of Key Terms

Several key terms used in this dissertation need to be defined. They included the following:

1. *Christian Funeral*-a Christian worship ceremony connected to the death of an individual.
2. *Orthodox Christian theology*-a theological belief system that is rooted in the early church which has extended into contemporary Christianity. Important beliefs for orthodoxy are the trinity, the divinity of Jesus, the bodily resurrection of Jesus, and the Apostles' Creed.
3. *South Georgia Conference*-a conference within the United Methodist Church under the leadership of a bishop and six district superintendents.
4. *District*-A group of churches within a geographical area of a United Methodist Conference under the leadership of a district superintendent.

Delimitations

For this project the researcher chose to work with selected pastors and laity from United Methodist churches in Savannah, Georgia in the Coastal District of the South

Georgia Conference and clergy throughout the South Georgia Conference. These delimitations are chosen because it is the region where the researcher served during the time of the project and also reflected the culture and setting. These delimitations also provided what was needed for the specific research on Savannah, Georgia United Methodist churches.

Review of Relevant Literature

For the biblical and theological section of the literature review I focused on the book of Genesis in the Old Testament to discover a biblical understanding of death. In the New Testament the research focused on Paul's theology of death and baptism from Romans and 1 Corinthians. The next section gave an ancient historical overview of the funeral practices of Romans, Jews, and the early church. The fourth section focused on how Wesleyans have historically taught death, resurrection, and eschatology. The last two sections share how the Western world and modernity have influenced Christianity's understanding of death and the role of preaching at the Christian funeral.

I relied on the works of John Wesley throughout the literature review as well as other Wesleyan scholars such as Craig Keener and Ben Witherington. I relied greatly on the work of homiletics professor Tom Long, particularly his book, *Accompany Them with Singing*. Long's research provided a helpful overview of funeral practices throughout the ancient world and church history. Homileticians such as Fred Craddock and Luke Powery as well as theologians Stanley Hauerwas and Walter Brueggemann were regularly consulted.

Research Methodology

Type of Research

This project used a pre-intervention study which relied on both qualitative and quantitative research methods.

Participants

I selected three groups to participate in the research of this project. The first group included all laity in South Georgia United Methodist churches in the coastal district were sent an email with a link to a forty-question survey (See Appendix A). The three hundred and sixty-four who participated allowed the researcher evaluate how laity understand the purpose of the funeral.

The second group was comprised of pastors of churches in the South Georgia conference of the United Methodist church who are either Elders in Full Connection or Provisional Elders were invited to participate in the study by answering a fifteen-question questionnaire (See Appendix B). The invitation was shared through an email. Their participation allowed the researcher to understand the theological proclamation of the church during times of grief and death by interviewing the resident theologian.

For the third group, four selected United Methodist pastors serving in Savannah, Georgia were invited for an interview with the researcher. This allowed me to personally interview local United Methodist pastors to have a more in-depth conversation about theology and funeral practices (See Appendix C).

Instrumentation

Three instruments were used for the research of this project. I developed a forty-question survey on surveymonkey.com (see Appendix 1) and invited all laity in the coastal district of the South Georgia conference to participate in the quantitative research

instrument. The survey evaluated how laity understand the purpose of the funeral and funeral sermon and the role on the pastor in the service.

I developed a questionnaire on surveymonkey.com (see Appendix 2) for clergy. It was sent out to all clergy in the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church. The fifteen-question questionnaire was qualitative and evaluated how clergy in South Georgia understand the purpose of the funeral and their role in the funeral sermon.

The third research instrument used (see Appendix 3) is a list of five interview questions that the I developed and used when conducting one on one interviews with four United Methodist Pastors in Savannah, Georgia.

Data Collection

By July of 2019 I developed and prepared the three research instruments. The laity survey and the clergy questionnaire were both developed on surveymonkey.com. In July of 2019, I had an email sent out to all qualifying clergy in the South Georgia Conference. I gave them until the middle of July to complete the survey. In August of 2019 I asked my District Superintendent to send out an email to all laity in the coastal district inviting them to participate. I gave them until the end of August to respond to the survey. For the pastor interviews I set up individual meetings over a three month time period, with the last one being on October 3, 2019.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data was collected through surveymonkey.com and personal interviews. Content analysis was utilized to determine the theology and practices of clergy related to funeral preaching based on their responses in the questionnaire and the

interviews. The quantitative data was collected through surveymonkey.com and measured the laity's theology and expectations of funerals.

Generalizability

This project focused on the theology and practice of funeral preaching of clergy in a particular setting. However, even though only clergy and laity in the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church were researched, funeral preaching is a ministry practice across the globe and in every Christian tradition. All clergy in the North American context and perhaps even beyond could benefit from the findings of this project.

Project Overview

Chapter 2 gives a review of literature related to the theology and practice of funeral preaching. Chapter 3 presents methods for securing the data. Chapter 4 discusses the qualitative and quantitative data that is collected on the study. Chapter 5 offers the major findings of the study.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW FOR THE PROJECT

Overview of the Chapter

How do Wesleyan pastors preach the gospel during a funeral? Do funeral sermons proclaim the good news of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ or something different? In order to develop a homiletical framework for Christian funeral sermons, particularly in the Wesleyan tradition, it is important to first understand death from a biblical, theological, and historical perspective. This literature review explores a Wesleyan biblical and theological interpretation of death by reviewing the creation story, the death and resurrection of Jesus, and Paul's writings of death and resurrection in his letters. It then focuses on historical funeral practices from the ancient world to contemporary America. The next section analyzes current popular views of death and resurrection in American culture compared to contemporary Christian practices particularly seen in Christian funeral sermons. The final section will focus on homiletical literature and discerns the role of preaching death and resurrection in the funeral service. This review researches a broad range of Christian traditions in these particular fields in order to identify a Wesleyan understanding of death and resurrection for funeral preaching.

Wesleyan, Biblical, and Theological Interpretation of Death and Resurrection

To determine a Wesleyan understanding of death and resurrection for preaching funeral sermons, it is necessary to analyze death in the Old Testament. Death is prevalent all throughout the Old Testament, therefore I will focus on death's first appearance as

seen in the first three chapters of Genesis, particularly focusing in on how Genesis makes meaning of death.

The Old Testament: Genesis 2 and 3

The first explanation for death in the Bible is in Genesis 2 and is the result of disobedience to God. Adam was granted access to every tree in 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 die.” (Gen. 2:17) Therefore, human agency, at least in some sense, plays a role in death. This does not suggest that humans would be immortal without sin, although, as Huang summarizes, many scholars throughout church history have made this point. John Wesley taught that Adam’s disobedience has its first effect on his body that, “being before prepared for immortality” and that its “original particles were incorruptible” (Outler and Heitzenrater; *John Wesley’s Sermons: An Anthology*, 17) Wesley in some writings seems to suggest that the human body was affected by Original Sin.

However, in other writings, Wesley speaks of human immortality being of the soul and not the body: “God has entrusted us with our soul, an immortal spirit made in the image of God.” (Wesley, the Good Steward) Throughout Wesley’s sermons and notes he proposes that “human beings are immortal souls temporarily joined to bodies.” (Jones, 147) John Calvin echoes Wesley when speaking of Adam’s earthly life. Adam’s life even without sin “truly would have been temporal; yet he would have passed into heaven without death, and without injury,” similar to Enoch in Genesis 5:21-24. (Hughes, 21) Calvin does differ in some ways from Wesley. He seems to suggest that life, even without sin, would still come to an end, but death would be avoided. Yet that brings in other theological points and questions of the afterlife that this paper will not focus on.

Physical, bodily death is seen as a departure from the earthly body in the earth. Huang summarizes this point: “In short, accepting death as part of God’s creation plan and the natural end of human beings is the attitude towards death expressed in the Hebrew Bible.” (Huang, 17) To conclude, death is not a threat for unholy living but a reality of life for a creature. (*Genesis Interpretation* Brueggeman, 48)

Throughout the canon of the Old Testament, death is seen as inevitable for humanity. (Huang; Achtemeier, 232) When the creation story is read in light of the entire narrative of the Old Testament, death is not seen as a punishment for sin but rather the result of life without God. In the words of John Wesley, it is a “spiritual death.” (Outler and Heitzenrater, 338) It’s used here as a metaphor of life separate from God and God’s original creative plan for humanity. (Achtemeier, 232) Genesis 2:7 says that Adam was made “using the dust from the ground, and then he breathed into his nostrils the breath of life” so that man became a living creature. (Wei Huang, 140) Adam became a living creature by the breath of God. Life is a gift from the breath of God while death or non-existence is the reality without God.

Even though the result of disobedience is death, it is not a physical death since Adam and Eve both survived after eating from the tree of knowledge of evil. Or at the very least death means more than just a physical death. (Wei Huang, 140-142; John Wesley’s Sermons, 17,18; Gen 2:17) In his sermon, “The New Birth,” Wesley speaks to what kind of death Adam and Eve experienced: “he died to God, the most dreadful of all deaths. He lost the life of God: he was separated from him in union with whom his spiritual life consisted. The body dies when it is separated from the soul, the soul when it is separated from God.” (John Wesley’s Sermons, 337) Karl Barth also speaks of death in the sense

that it separates us from God: “He describes sin as robbery of God because we deny the difference between ourselves and God and set up something of our own creation to receive our devotion. This sin assumes we are independent of God, and so it takes us out of relationship with God. Death has power in this world because it is inevitable; it brings destruction of ourselves and all we hold dear. The inevitability of death exposes the limits of our independence and the falseness of devotion to things of our own creation. Death brings us to crisis because in it we see the judgment of God” (Lancaster and Heaner, 102) God is creator and life is meant to be lived in him fully. Living for God is life but living outside of God is death. (Gen. 2:17)

Adam and Eve chose death and not life when they ate the forbidden fruit. Afterwards they were at the complete mercy of God for salvation from their deathly state. When discussing salvation from the body of death, Wesley suggests that the first step is “humility, knowing of ourselves, or just sense of our condition: which the evil spirit himself, either overruled by or mimicking the true God.” (John Wesley’s Sermons, 19) For Wesley, the first step of salvation from spiritual death is knowing our rightful place in the world. Allen McSween paraphrases this perspective: “Think for yourself! Act for yourself! Do not let anyone, even God, define for you what is good and evil.” (Bartlett and Taylor, 28) The decision made by Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit was an attempt to live outside of God which is death. Salvation is turning back to life with God in the garden.

The historical and cultural context gives meaning to the problem with Adam and Eve eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. We see this in two ways: First, two important characteristics for the gods during ancient times are divine wisdom and

immortality. (Dianne Bergant, ebook, Gen. 2:4b-25) The “envy of the gods” was to possess both. Possessing both would render the gods immortal. It was believed that the gods often shared one of these traits, but not both. This would explain why there were two trees: the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in the garden. To eat of both was an attempt to be like God. (Bergant) God forbade Adam and Eve access to one and as a result declared to them that immortality was not his intended purpose for embodied creatures. He had limits for Adam, Eve, and his creation. As a result, the potential for death is a human reality.

The second way that we see the death as living outside of God was with Eve’s interaction with the serpent. The Wesley Study Bible notes that “snake imagery in the ancient world credited serpents with a special knowledge of death” on account of its ability to produce venom or being capable of shedding its own skin. (Wesley Study Bible, Gen. 3:1-7) The first words of the serpent to Adam and Eve was a distortion about death. While explaining God’s word to the serpent in the garden they told the serpent about the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden; “nor shall you touch it or you shall die.” While God forbade eating from the tree, the serpent persuaded them with the false promise of eternal life and enlightenment: “You will not die, for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” The serpent persuaded them, and they embraced life outside of God, resulting in sin and death.

In summation, the creation story speaks of death not only physically but spiritually. God created humanity in his image and that image was put to death though the sin of Adam and Eve. The entirety of scripture tells of God’s redemptive work to conquer sin

and death and restore the image of God in humanity, ultimately through the power of the gospel (John Wesley's Sermons, 14). However, physical death is a reality for creatures and was always part of God's creation and not the result of disobedience.

Funeral preaching should not proclaim death as the result of sinfulness or as a reality outside of God's purpose for creation. Death was always a reality for earthly bodies and a pursuit of eternal life outside of a relationship with God is not God's will for creation. The New Testament continues the metaphor of death and is given new meaning through the teachings of Paul and the death of Jesus.

The New Testament

The creation account in the Old Testament understands death as an inevitability for created beings while also using death as a metaphor to explain humanity's fallen relationship with God. However, in order to determine a Wesleyan theology of death and resurrection for Christian funeral preaching, it is necessary to evaluate death in the New Testament as well. In order to discern how the New Testament understands death, this section will 1. evaluate Paul's letter to the Corinthians and discover Paul's theology about the body, death, and resurrection, 2. discuss Paul's understanding of the relationship between death and baptism, 3. determine Paul's understanding of the significance of the death and resurrection of Jesus; and 4. analyze Paul's words of hope to the church of Thessalonica in light of the deaths of fellow Christians.

New Testament's Relationship to the Old Testament's Understanding of Body

Cultural understanding of death, especially in regard to the physical body, encountered a transformation from historical and cultural influences by the time the gospels and Paul's letters were written. (See Historical Funeral Practices below) Death is "total" in

traditional biblical thought, meaning that there wasn't a belief in a dichotomy of the body and soul as seen in Greek philosophy. (Achteimer, 232) The understanding of "soul" exists throughout all of scripture, but changed in the cultural times of the New Testament. In Hebrew, "soul" indicates "the unity of a human person. Hebrews were living bodies, they did not have bodies." (Achteimer, 1055) Greek culture influenced the meaning of "soul" in Jewish thought as early as the Wisdom of Solomon, presenting a dualistic understanding of body and soul, "a perishable body weighs down the soul." (9:15)

Yet, even with Greek and other cultural influences, the New Testament holds a similar view to "soul" as the Old Testament. The Greek word translates as "soul" in the New Testament is "*psuche*" and occurs over 100 times in the New Testament. One example is in Matthew 16:26: "For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul [*psuche*] or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?" (NIV) There are various usages of "soul" in the New Testament with "moderate" hints of dualistic views of body and soul. However, there is a unity of thought in both testaments with "soul" referring to the whole person with its existence lasting beyond death. (Achteimer, 1055)

Paul's Discussion of Body with the Corinthians

Paul's explanation of the body to the Corinthians does not divert from the theology of the body from Genesis 1-3. It speaks to the body being created for good and not the embodiment of sin. This is contrary to the Corinthians who denied the resurrection because of their unbelief that "the body could be reanimated after death" and their "Hellenistic" belief of spirituality that sought "to transcend corporeality." (Hays, 268)

In 1 Corinthians 15:42-49, in the context of addressing the resurrection of Jesus, Paul discusses the body by speaking of Adam in juxtaposition to Jesus: “So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. ⁴³ It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. ⁴⁴ It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.” Paul is explaining the difference between the physical body and the resurrected body. In doing this, he suggests that the current body that humanity possesses is subject to decay and death. This is a discussion that could easily lend itself to speaking of a dichotomy of body and soul, which could lead to a devaluing of the physical body. Yet, in describing it as perishable, as a natural body, and sown in weakness and dishonor, Paul isn’t using this language as a “pejorative” for the human body but rather to show its “present lowly state in comparison with its glorified one.” (Fee 785) Fee claims that Paul speaks of the body “in terms of its essential characteristics as earthly, on the one hand, and therefore belonging to the life of the present age, and as heavenly, on the other, and therefore belonging to the life of the Spirit in the age to come. It is spiritual, not in the sense of immaterial but of supernatural.” (Fee 786) For Paul, there is not a dualism between the physical body and the spiritual body. Rather, there is a continuity between the earthy and the resurrected body. When Paul speaks of the earthly body his metaphors do not speak of the body as sinful but rather as existing for this earthly world. Richard Hays adds that the usage of the word ‘seed’ “enables Paul to walk a fine line, asserting both the radical transformation of the body in its resurrected state and yet its organic continuity with the mortal body that preceded it.” (Hays 270) Both scholars see Paul

taking great care with the Corinthians to speak of the earthy body in positive terms and not as something that they should seek to transcend.

Paul continues his discussion of the body by comparing Adam and Jesus temporally in 1 Corinthians 15:45-49: “

Thus it is written, “The first man Adam became a living being;” the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual that is first but the natural, and then the spiritual. The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so also are those who are of the dust, and as is the man of heaven, so also are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall^[1] also bear the image of the man of heaven.”

By this Paul means that Adam’s body is “mortal and bound to the earth from which it came” while Jesus’ resurrected body “will be immortal.” (Hays, 272) This is seen elsewhere in Paul’s writing. In his letter to the Philippians he writes, “But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.” Hays, 273, Phil, 3:20-21) According to Hays, the Corinthians have possibly been influenced by Philo’s connection of the “the heavenly man with their own exalted knowledge and wisdom.” (273) Paul is pointing to an “eschatological event,” where “at the end” Jesus “will raise his people and transform them into his likeness.” (273) The Corinthians thought of themselves as “the heavenly man” which is why Paul is speaking temporally to Christ’s second coming and,

as he clearly articulated in Philippians 3:21, transformation of “our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.”

In his letter to the church of Corinth, Paul compares the physical body to the future resurrected body. His discourse on the body gives guidance for a Wesleyan understanding of the body for funeral preaching. He makes clear that there is a continuity between the earthly body and the resurrected body, which views the earthy body as good. Funeral preaching should not preach the dead, earthly body as sinful and the resurrected body as good. Both are part of God’s creation and there is a continuity between them both. The resurrection validates the importance of the body as God’s good creation.

Paul’s Connection of Death and Baptism

Until Paul gets to his discussion about death and resurrection, much of his discussion about sin and death is in a metaphorical/spiritual sense. Consistent with Old Testament theology, there is a distinction between the physical death and the spiritual in Paul’s writings. According to Lancaster and Heaner, because of Adam’s disobedience, “sin and death do not simply exist; they have dominion. Jesus Christ breaks their power” (Lancaster and Heaner, 102). For Paul, the initial step of leaving the old dominion of death behind for the new dominion is baptism. (107;Feasting, 355) Romans 6:3 says, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore, we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.” Those who are baptized have died to sin because they have been baptized into Jesus’ death. By participating in the death of Jesus, the follower of Jesus is dying to the lordship of sin and accepting the lordship of Jesus. (Lancaster and Heaner

107) For Paul, the death that happens for a Christian at baptism, to be “baptized in Jesus’s death,” is to die to the dominion of sin.

In John Wesley’s sermon, “On Sin in Believers,” he preaches from 2 Corinthians 5:17 when Paul says, “if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation.” His sermon speaks to the change that happens at baptism: “Every babe in Christ is holy, and yet not altogether so. He is saved from sin; yet not entirely: It *remains*, though it does not *reign*.” According to Wesley we are free from sin and death’s reign, guilt, and power. (Outler and Heitzenrater 58; Lancaster, 107) Luther says that sin remains for the Christian, but we now have the ability to resist it. (109) Wesley and Luther believe that after baptism sin and death still remain, even for the Christian, but it no longer reigns.

In order for Paul to make sense of what happens at baptism, he uses the language of death. This has already been discussed in the spiritual sense of death. Sin and spiritual death are what Paul is speaking of as being conquered through baptism. However, Paul does not only limit his relationship to baptism and death to the spiritual. He’s discussing a physical death as well in some sections when he discusses baptism. Peter Marty speaks of death’s importance at baptism for Paul: “baptism is inextricably linked to death. He summarily sweeps away all illusions among those who want to confine baptism to a bubbly ritual of religious happiness. He insists there is no such thing as baptism worth anything in the Christian life unless one takes death into account at the same time.” (Feasting, 342; Craddock, 87) Marty suggests that Paul’s connection of baptism and death is not only in the metaphorical sense but embodied in the flesh.

Baptism in the Christian tradition is a joining with Jesus Christ in his death on the cross. This will be discussed in more detail in the next section. However, understanding

what Paul means when he makes the connection of baptism and death is important for articulating a Wesleyan theology of death and resurrection for funeral preaching. To join Christ in death is not being crucified literally, but to die to sins and its reign in the life of a Christian. Paul uses the language of “death” not in the physical sense, but to speak of the radical, life-giving work of Jesus Christ’s death on the cross and the Christian call to be “crucified with Christ.” (Gal. 2:20)

Paul and the Death of Jesus

The previous section discussed death in the writings of Paul as metaphorical. Paul used the language and image of death to make meaning of sin and to understand baptism. However, Paul connects baptism and death to a physical death when he talks about the death of Jesus. In Romans 6:1-11 Paul speaks of sin, baptism, and death in the context of Jesus’ death on the cross:

What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has

dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

When someone dies to sin and is baptized, they are buried with Christ “by baptism into his death.” Paul links a Christian’s metaphorical death to the physical death of Jesus. There is a real body that dies and that body of Jesus. Since we are “buried with Him by baptism into death,” something really dies for the Christian at baptism. According to Mounce, “Christ’s death for sin becomes our death to sin.” (Mounce 149) The Christian in baptism participates in Jesus’ death on the cross.

While the Christian does not literally die at baptism, there is a real death of sorts. The beginning of the Christian life at baptism means the end of something else. (Feasting 342) Karl Barth quotes Martin Luther’s strong words on baptism: “Your baptism is nothing less than grace clutching you by the throat: a grace-full throttling, by which your sin is submerged in order that ye may remain under grace. Come thus to thy baptism. Give thyself up to be drowned in baptism and killed by the mercy of thy dear God, saying, ‘Drown me and throttle me, dear Lord, for henceforth I will gladly die to sin with Thy Son.’”(Barth 194) Luther shows God as the bringer of death through a forceful grace. Martha Moore-Keish paraphrases Karl Barth’s understanding of how baptism unites Christians with Christ’s death and resurrection: “he portrays baptism as a living Word that communicates both God’s judgment on human life and the freedom that emerges with the resurrection. Baptism thus unites us with Christ’s death and resurrection in the same way that every proclaimed word can do...by the grace of God as received by

receptive faith.” (Feasting, 344) Christ’s followers sin joins with Jesus’s physical death on the cross and resurrection through the grace of God.

A Christian’s baptism and faith in Christ also gives theological meaning to their own eventual deaths. Faith in Christ transforms how followers of Jesus view death. Thomas Long echoes the change that Christians see in death because of their faith in Christ:

The Christian faith intends to blur the boundary between the dying and the living...In baptism, new Christians die with Christ, which is a sign of hope. We have already died, we have already experienced the worst that can happen to a human being, and by dying with Christ, we also participate in the promise that we will rise with Christ. But to place a symbol of death at the very beginning of the Christian journey is also a sign of realism. It reminds us that we are not permanent and immortal, that we are made of dust and to dust shall we return. We walk in faith in a world where sin and death still exert their powers, indeed, in a world where the more faithfully we live for Christ, the more aggressive become the forces of death. “For while we live,” said Paul, “we are always being given up to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh” (2 Cor. 4:11). (Long, 108)

The beginning of Christian faith in baptism gives a transformed understanding of death. Death is entered into from the beginning, which frees the Christian to live eschatologically.

At the center of the Christian faith is the crucified Jesus. A Wesleyan understanding of death and resurrection for funeral preaching takes seriously the bodily death of Jesus and

how that influences how Christian's experience life as a baptized believer and our understanding of bodily death. Because of the physical death and resurrection of Jesus, Christians can experience forgiveness of sins through being baptized into Christ's death. A funeral preacher can also encourage Christians with hope as they face death because of the resurrection of Jesus.

"Those Who Have Died"

In the previous discussion of Paul's theology, the death and resurrection of individuals were treated metaphorically. This is important as it shows how Paul and the New Testament made meaning of death. Yet, Paul also speaks of the death of the Christian and "being raised" in the physical sense as well. In his letter to the Thessalonians, Paul discusses the Christians who have died:

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words." (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, NRSV)

The Thessalonians believed that Jesus would return soon and that none of the believers would die before then. Yet, the return of Jesus was delayed and eventually some Christians died. As a result, the Thessalonians are wanting to understand what it means that “believers have died, and what will happen to those believers at the Parousia?” (Gaventa, 63) Many of the new converts were recently pagans and associated death with a complete “lack of hope.” (Holmes 148) Paul gives the Thessalonians an understanding of death and the afterlife that’s rooted in the resurrection of Jesus. (Holmes 148)

Paul’s first response was to pastorally encourage them by separating those who grieve as if not having any hope. Ben Witherington states that Paul “connects grieving with being like the remainder of humanity that has no hope” and that since they are in Christ, they need not grieve. (Witherington 131) Witherington quotes Chrysostom who states that “to continue to endure misery for the departed is to act like those who have no hope.” (132). Holmes says that Paul’s not suggesting that Christians not grieve at all, but they shouldn’t grieve “to the same extent as those without hope” (148). When faced with death, Christians should not grieve as others because they have hope in their own deaths and they have a “proper knowledge of the fate of the Christian dead” which “should put a stop to hopeless grieving” (132). Pagans viewed death much differently from Christians and Jews. F.F. Bruce quoted Catullus, a Roman Poet who died 52 BC: “The sun can set and rise again/ but once our brief light sets/ there is one unending night to be slept through.” (Bruce 96) Yet, Christians viewed death as a reality but not as a “permanent state but as a temporary condition.” (Holmes 149) Because of the hope of the return of Christ and the resurrection, Christians have hope in the face of death. Because of the resurrection of Jesus, Paul gives hope to the Thessalonians in the face of the death of

their loved ones and with the possibility of their own deaths. Paul is focused here on believers in Christ and offers them assurance even in the face of death. That hope comes from “the coming of the Lord” which results in the dead in Christ rising first followed by those still alive in Christ being caught up to meet Jesus in the air and live with him forever. Paul is also concerned with how Christians are viewed by outsiders and wants them, even in death, to “conduct themselves in a way that is genuinely Christian, that is, in a manner consistent with the gospel message to which they have committed themselves.” (Holmes 146) Christians are witnesses of Christ, the resurrected Lord, even as they face death.

A funeral sermon can provide pastoral care and hope for a grieving family. The Christian hope is in God’s promise through Paul that those who are dead in Christ will rise when Christ returns. They are dead now but will join all Christians to meet Christ “in the air” at his return. Jesus conquered death through the resurrection, and those dead in Christ will also experience resurrection.

This section discussed the New Testament’s understanding of death by analyzing Paul’s theology of death and resurrection. Paul holds a view of death that is consistent with the Old Testament. He uses death metaphorically to explain sin and humanity’s separation of God. He also speaks of baptism as a death to sin and a joining with Christ’s death on the cross. The section ends by looking at Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians when he addresses the deaths of Christians. He encourages them that Christians should not grieve like the pagans grieve, but should find hope in death because of the resurrection of Jesus and the promise of both the living and the dead meeting Christ in the air always being with the Lord.

Historical Funeral Practices

This section will discuss Jewish and Roman funeral practices and offer a comparison with the funeral practices of the early Christian church. The comparison will reveal how early Christianity adopted cultural funeral practices and how their new faith transformed some of those practices.

Early Christian funerals eventually developed into a unique ceremony, but initially continued in the ways of Jewish and Roman funeral practices. (Paxton, 21; Long, 59) Funerals, even religious funerals, were not a Christian invention. (Fowler, *Caring through a Funeral* 88) A funeral is “the ceremony connected with the burial (or cremation, etc) of the body of a dead person” (*Oxford English Dictionary*). There is an historical broadness to funerals as seen in the word “ceremony.” Fowler explains the origins of the word: “Cere has the ancient root meaning of “wax.” A cerecloth is a cloth smeared with wax, making it waterproof, formerly used for wrapping a dead body. In related definitions, cere can mean “to anoint with spices,” “to embalm,” and “to shut up (a corpse in a coffin).” (Fowler, 88)

A Christian funeral is “a ceremony connected with burying the body of a dead person, like funerals in others traditions, but the ceremony itself takes the form of Christian worship.” (Fowler, 89) This puts a different emphasis on the service, making it theocentric instead of centered on the deceased and the mourners. However, a Christian funeral is not the only funeral that is theo-centric. Early Christians relied on Jewish and Roman funeral practices to honor and bury their dead (Paxton, 21). In order to discover a Wesleyan theology of death and resurrection for preaching funeral sermons, I will

analyze Jewish and Roman pagan funeral practices to discern how influential those practices are for Christianity and how Christianity eventually parted ways with some of those practices.

Jewish Funerals

Early Jewish funerals were “simple and driven by necessity” based on how quickly dead bodies decomposed. (Long, 60) By the first century AD when Jewish funerals were simplified. In place of extravagant funerals featuring lavish feasts, ornamental funeral biers and costly funeral garments, they sought simplicity for the sake of reducing the cost. This was supported by the rabbis and avoided a public shaming of the poor (Long 59).

The goal was to have the burial as soon as possible, “usually by sunset of the day of death.” (60) The eyes of the deceased were closed along with the mouth tied shut with a cinch. The bodily orifices were covered with cloth and the body was anointed with aromatic spices and wrapped in linen clothes and “placed on a bier or in a coffin.” Then the body was “carried to the place of burial, accompanied by mourners and family” (Long, 60; Paxton, 21)

Jews avoided touching the dead in obedience to Old Testament law. (Num. 19:11-13) This notion of death and contamination stands in the background of Jesus’ statement, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth” (Matt. 23:27). A Jewish tomb in Palestine would be whitewashed, not as a decoration but as a warning. Graves were often painted white, especially prior to

the Passover festival, to enable pilgrims to avoid becoming unclean through inadvertent contact with the place of the dead. The Lukan version of the same statement of Jesus makes this clear: “Woe to you! For you are like unmarked graves, and people walk over them without realizing it” (Luke 11:44)(Long, 64). Those who washed and cared for the deceased body were required to perform ritual washings and enter a period of separation from the community, lasting up to seven days (Long, 64). Therefore, uncleanliness and the need for purification was attached with death.

Jewish mourning practices followed a precise calendar: three days of weeping, abstention from work or personal care and adornment, and continued mitigated mourning down to the thirteenth day. The three days of weeping was inherited from Near Eastern beliefs in the soul lingering near the body for three days hoping to re-enter the body. By the third day the face started to decay, and hope was lost and death was final (Paxton, 21). This could explain Jesus’s delay in going to see Martha and Mary after Lazarus’s death, demonstrating to the Jews his power over death on the fourth day and raising Lazarus’s soulless body. (John 11:39; Paxton, 22)

The Jewish mourning ritual took many months and was divided into three periods: *shivah*, *shloshim*, and the prayer of the Kaddish. *Shivah*, or the “three days of weeping,” lasted seven days and was an intense period where family covered their heads, grieved, and refrained from work. The unsealed tomb would be visited by family to mourn and be certain of death. The second period, *shloshim*, was a less severe, but extended time of grief. This was a time for mourners to re-enter society. The third period followed where mourners often recited the Kaddish: “Exalted and hallowed be his great name in the

world which he created according to his will. May he let his kingdom rule in your lifetime and in your days and in the lifetime of the whole house of Israel, speedily and soon. Praised be this great name from eternity to eternity. And to this say, Amen” (Long, 61,62).

Palestinian Jews practiced *ossilegium*, also known as second burial. A year after burial, the bones of the deceased were collected from the tomb. (McCane, 36) This was a common practice in many cultures but held a theological importance for Jews. They believed that the wasting away of the body’s flesh represented a “gradual purification from sin and corruption” (63). Their return to the tomb to find a cleansed ancestor represented that they were now among the righteous. (Long, 62,63) Another reason for second burial was the importance for Jews to be buried in Israel, especially with their ancestors or "to be gathered to one's people/fathers" (Gen 25:8; 35:29; 49:33; Judg 2:10. (Long, 65;).

Jewish funeral practices were complex and grounded in caring for the body and mourning the dead. Some Jews saw death as a cleansing and purifying experience that made the deceased righteous. There was also an emphasis on “place” as seen with the practice of Jews wanting to be buried with family and in Israel. As this paper will discuss, the Christian faith inherited Jewish practices of caring for the body and simplifying the funeral process for the sake of the poor. In discerning a Wesleyan theology of death and resurrection for preaching funeral sermons, analyzing Jewish funeral practices is important as it roots orthodox Christianity in Jewish beliefs and practices while revealing how the resurrection of Jesus transformed some of those beliefs and practices.

Roman Funerals

Since early Christianity was born under Roman influence and rule, understanding Roman funeral practices is important for comparing and contrasting them with early Christian funeral practices. A Roman funeral saw the funeral as the beginning of the passage into the land of death. The dead were buried with coins in their mouths to pay for passage to God. (Long 68) They were buried with jewelry and other items needed in the afterlife. (Long 67)

The passage of the body into the land of death continued with a family member standing over the dying body to try catching the last breath with a kiss as a sign of affection. After death, the eyes and mouth of the deceased were closed with the family shouting loudly the dead's name for "precaution against the false appearance of death." This was known as the *conclamatio mortis*. Then the dead body was washed and anointed and wrapped in diverse garments. The style of ceremony depended on the rank of the deceased. People of higher rank wore richer garments and a funeral gown and were buried with nice items such as jewelry. The procession included hired mourners and actors for the wealthy. The bodies were cremated, with a piece of the body removed for burial (Paxton 23; Long 66).

In rural locales, graves were in separate family plots, but every city had at least one "city of the dead" (necropolis) located, by Roman law, outside of the city, usually alongside a major road. When the procession arrived at the place of burial or cremation, some dirt would be thrown on the corpse and, if the body was to be burned, a finger or

other small portion of the body (known as the *os resectum*) was cut off for burial. (Long 66)

Food held a prominent part in Roman funeral ceremonies. Pipes were built into Roman graves to allow wine and food to be deposited down to the remains. Even some mausoleums had kitchens built in them. (Long 68) Meals were eaten at the grave on the day of the funeral, on the ninth and fortieth day, on the deceased's birthday, and during the *Parentalia*, a Roman religious festival held in honor of the dead (Paxton 23; "Parentalia | Roman Religious Festival"). Eating marked the transition of the dead and "organized the process of grief and mourning among the survivors." (Paxton, 24; Long, 67)

The Romans saw the funeral as the beginning of a journey of the living to the land of the dead. It was also a place where status and wealth could be on display based on the ceremonies and extravagance of the funeral. It was a communal experience where people gathered often for meals. Christianity was influenced by Roman pagan funeral practices. However, the following section will reveal how Christianity transformed some of these practices.

Early Christian Funerals

Christians adopted many of the funeral practices of the Jews and the Romans. However, their hope in the resurrection transformed many of those practices as Christian theology progressed. For Christian mourners, unlike Jews and Romans, a new meaning was found in death because of the resurrection of Jesus. Their embrace of the resurrection

of the dead caused them to distance themselves from the Jews and Romans in many practices (Paxton, 24; Long, 63).

For Jews, touching a dead body was unclean. Christians changed that, seeing the bodies as what souls passed through for salvation. Therefore, they saw the bodies of Christians as sacred and holy and handled them with care during the anointing and burial process. (Paxton, 25; Long, 64) A third century letter cited by Eusebius, Dionysius of Alexandria described this change: “With willing hands they raised the bodies of the saints to their bosoms; they closed their eyes and mouths, carried them on their shoulders, and laid them out; they clung to them, embraced them, and wrapped them in grave clothes” (Long, 64).

Christians differed from Romans in several ways with regard to funeral practices. They opposed placing a crown on the heads of the dead and considered it idolatry. They believed that only God was the Christian crown and only honored those who died a martyrs’ death (Paxton 25; Long 68).

Early Christians believed in the inclusion of all people in their communities, regardless of race, gender, or wealth (Gal. 3:28). They extended this belief to their funeral practices by not excluding the poor from certain burial sites (Paxton 25). Christians “volunteered to take care of bodies, both living and dead bodies,” writes Miles, “not just of their own families but also of the poor surrounding them.... This immediate, almost instinctive urge of Christians to care for the sick, the hungry, the old, and the poor aroused comment from their neighbors” (Miles, 14). The difference of how Christians and Jews viewed the dead and even the poor was evident in how bodies were handled.

Christians abandoned many Roman practices such as kissing the dead to catch and preserve the spirit of the deceased. When they did offer a last kiss to the dead, it was a simple act of tenderness. Bishop Ambrose of Milan interpreted why he kissed his brother at death: “It profited me nothing to have received your last breath, nor to have breathed on you in your dying moments. And yet, I thought that either I myself would receive your death, or that I should pour out my life into you. O that sad, yet very sweet pledge of the last kiss” (Long 68). At the moment before burial, Christians would kiss the forehead or cheek of the deceased, known as the “kiss of peace,” similar to the act of forgiveness and reconciliation during worship (71).

Jews practiced second burial, particularly to be buried in Israel with ancestors. Christians moved away from second burial because they viewed the “company of the faithful in eschatological terms rather than geographical ones” (Long, 66). Long adds that the church’s theology of Jesus influenced their understanding of the body: “Early Christianity inherited the treasure of this Jewish understanding of the body and intensified it with strong convictions about the incarnation and the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Doing so stirred Christians not to idealize bodies or to romanticize them, but to care for bodies, real bodies, both living and dead” which was perplexing and much different than current funeral practices among the pagans and Jews (Long, 29).

Christians avoided the Roman pagan practice of placing coins in the mouths of the dead to pay for passage in death, also known as the viaticum. Instead, the eucharist replaced the viaticum and was placed in the mouths of dying to “provide nourishment for the dead as they traveled to God.” This became so important that the practice was abused

by giving the Eucharist to those already dead, but it was condemned at the Council of Hippo (Long, 68).

Perhaps the greatest change for Christians from Roman pagans had to do with mourning. According to Long, “Christians experienced sorrow in death, of course, but they sought to subdue the loud and excessive Roman displays of grief with reverent quietness, the chanting of the psalms, the singing of hymns, and confident expressions of resurrection hope” (Long 69). Paul shares with the church in Thessalonica, “We do not want you to be uninformed...about those who have died..so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.” (1 Thess. 4:13) Instead of the sad songs of flute players, “Christians walked to the grave with only the music of human voices singing psalms and hymns” (Long 70). Christians also replaced black and red mourning garments of the Romans with white, representing baptism and eternal life.

Christian attitudes toward the body were as countercultural in antiquity as they are today. Miles writes,

“I emphasize the oddness of Christians’ behavior in the context of Roman culture, in order to indicate that behavior we may be tempted to characterize under “general goodness,” was in fact not something they could have learned from secular life. Rather, they cared for living bodies and dead bodies because they understood that the Incarnation of Christ had once and for all settled the issue of the value of human bodies.” (Death Is Nothing At All | Famous Funeral Poems)

Christians did not derive their attitude toward the human body from their Roman neighbors, from the great philosophers, or even from their own inner goodness, but from their theology of creation, incarnation, and their experience of Jesus Christ.

Wesleyan and Contemporary Theological Perspectives on Death

In order to recommend a Wesleyan understanding of death and resurrection for funeral preaching, it is necessary to discover how Wesleyans have historically viewed death and the resurrection through their experiences, teachings, theology, and practices.

“Good Deaths”

Early Methodists approached death with grace and assurance. Chris Johnson writes that early Methodists were “known for their “good deaths.” A physician who treated several Methodists made the claim to Charles Wesley, “Most people die for fear of dying; but, I never met with such people as yours. They are none of them afraid of death, but [are] calm, and patient, and resigned to the last.(Parry) When facing his own death, John Wesley said as his final words, “The best of all, God is with us.” In his funeral sermon for John Fletcher, he praised him by saying, “He walked with death always in sight.” (The Wesley Center Online: Sermon 133”) The theology of Methodists and their assurance of faith in the God of the resurrection gave them security and strength when facing death.

Death as Deliverance

John Wesley included a section in his hymnal for Methodist worship entitled “Describing Death” which reflected Wesleyan theology of death and resurrection. Speaking of death was common in Wesley’s time and singing hymns about death helped

Christians gain perspective on living in this life and treating death with a balance of penalty and promise (Maddox 248). The theology of these hymns speaks that “death holds nothing for a Christian to fear, indeed it should be welcomed as deliverance from the burdens of life into God’s loving care”(Maddox 248). Death is seen as a deliverance from the world’s brokenness and the channel into God’s presence.

The Bodily Resurrection

There was a hope in death in John Wesley’s theology because of his belief that the body’s death did not destroy the soul. While focusing on the soul when discussing death, Wesley also held a view that Christians would receive a new body at the future resurrection of the dead. In 1732 he preached a sermon in response to Benjamin Calamy’s claim that “the resurrection body was a fresh production of our original body in refined state, not a new body (to make this point he had to claim that God would preserve the dust of our body unmixed!” (Maddox 249) Throughout the writings of Wesley, a “commitment to bodily resurrection runs steady.” (Maddox 249) Death for Wesley is only the end for the earthly body. Through the resurrection, the soul will be joined to a new resurrected body, which in some sense is a continuation and redemption of the earthly body. The soul is not destroyed and the earthly body and resurrected are made new.

Wesley’s Continuity with Christian Tradition

The Wesleyan way of welcoming death is preceded by Paul and other early Christians. Faced with many life-threatening moments, he writes that “to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21 NIV). Ignatius, the third bishop of the church of Antioch, on account of his Christian faith was “arrested, condemned to death, and transported to Rome to face

execution by exposure to animals. Rather than seeking to avoid this fate, Ignatius embraced it; he would be a martyr” (Craddock et al. 144). Death for Ignatius was “achieving” God and led him into the full presence and communion with God. In his words, “Near to the sword is near to God.” Death in Ignatius’s theology, particularly martyrdom, was a completion of discipleship. (Craddock et al. 144) He also said, “Better to die for the sake of Jesus Christ than to be king over the utmost ends of the earth.”(Clairborne et al.) John Wesley and the Methodists joined in with Paul and those in the early church who saw death as closeness to God and not something to fear or flee.

Wesley and Glorification

Wesley’s teaching on the doctrine of glorification gives insight into his understanding of death. Glorification is “deliverance from the very presence of sin in the facet of the way of salvation” (Maddox, 190). Wesley believed that glorification was attainable for believers in this life, but that for most “it would be bestowed at the moment of death” and that it would “continue to ripen” in death for those who needed it (Maddox, 191) Maddox addresses the last point as the way that Wesley departs from most Western Christian traditions who see death as a place of rest until Christ returns and instead sees death as a place for growth (Maddox, 191). This adds to Wesley’s high view of death and its role in Christian discipleship.

Wesley and the Resting Place of the Dead

Wesleyan theology also speaks to the current resting place of the Christian dead. The United Methodist Church website offers the historic Christian and Wesleyan position that “those who believe will share eternal joy with God in heaven, while those who refuse God's love suffer endless separation from God.” (Communications, United Methodist:

Heaven) The article adds that the United Methodist Church has an ambiguous position on what happens immediately after death: “scripture references in both the Old and New Testaments seem to agree with the position that we remain asleep/dead until the final judgment. Other Biblical passages, such as Jesus' words to the thief on the cross "today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43), seem to indicate that we go to be with God immediately at the point of death.” Wesley supported the idea of an “intermediate state between death and the final judgment,” although it’s not supported by United Methodists. (Communications, United Methodist: Heaven) Even with ambiguity, there’s an agreement that the Christian dead are with God immediately following death, even though that has different meanings to different faith perspectives.

Death or Passing Away?

The language for “death” is also diverse and impacts meaning. New Testament writers and translations often substitute “death” or “dying” with the phrase “falling asleep,” especially in the King James version. Curious as to why more recent translations used “dying” and “death” instead of “falling asleep,” Howard Snyder interviewed four prominent Wesleyan biblical scholars to reflect on whether the New Testament speaks of Christians dying or falling asleep. Richard Middleton connected the language of “sleep” with the Old Testament “idea of lying down with ancestors.” Fred Long suggests that the New Testament speaks openly about death, with the examples of Paul and Jesus discussing their own deaths (Phil. 1:21, Heb. 9:27, Matt. 26:35). Long says that the New Testament doesn’t avoid it because “Christ faced it so squarely and directly. Yes, Jesus and Paul both refer to death as well as sleep when it comes to Christians, but sleep is the preferred term due to the resurrection belief.” Ben Witherington notes that “falling to

sleep” is an early Jewish idea and believes that it is a term used by those who believe in the resurrection. For Witherington, using the language of “sleep” is not to deny the reality of death but rather to speak of its temporality. “Yes, Jesus and Paul both refer to death as well as sleep when it comes to Christians, but sleep is the preferred term due to the resurrection belief.” Lastly, Craig Keener suggests that “falling asleep” was common language for death in antiquity, used by Jews and Gentiles alike. He highlights how often the gospels and the New Testament speak of death: “Nevertheless...the NT emphasis is on our past death with/in Christ and consequently our sharing his resurrection. Death is a transition, but we do not grieve in the same way as those who have no hope.” While there are diverse perspectives about “falling asleep” language in the Wesleyan tradition, the consensus is that, for those in Christ, death is only a bodily, physical reality and the language of “falling asleep” is helpful for understanding that those in Christ have hope beyond death because of the resurrection (Snyder).

For Wesleyans, there is an assurance and grace in the face of death. Death is not to be feared but welcomed as deliverance into the hands of God. Death is a means to glorification which is bestowed upon believers at death according to John Wesley. Wesleyanism has also offered a counter-cultural perspective on death rooted in the ancient church and Holy Scripture, with the foundation being the hope of the resurrection. For funeral preaching, a Wesleyan perspective of death and resurrection gives hope in the assurance that those dead in Christ are resting in God’s presence while awaiting the return of Christ and the redemption and resurrection of their bodies.

American Understanding of Death

In order to recommend a Wesleyan theological perspective for funeral preaching, this literature review has discerned a biblical, theological, and historical understanding of death from a Wesleyan perspective. In addition, it is necessary to determine how American views of death and resurrection compare to a Wesleyan Christian theology.

Death is a topic often avoided in America. Feifel states that “in the presence of death, Western culture, has tended to run, hide, and seek refuge.” (Feifel, introduction) According to McGill, the root for this avoidance in America is American optimism. He argues that Americans live in light of possibilities of wealth, health, and educational opportunities: “In the United States, wealth is not just a fact. It is a state of mind...the American way of life has been marked by extraordinary confidence” (McGill, 16). He goes on to call this optimism a “gospel of having.” “Death is thought of as something wholly outside of life and unrelated to life. Life is what is normal. Death is something that intrudes from outside. It befalls us” (McGill, 16). The end result of this is that “all human beings should devote themselves exclusively to life, for here lies all value and all meaning and all good.” (17) With a spirit of optimism that permeates American culture, it shouldn’t be surprising that American does not know what to do with death, other than avoid it.

One moment in history that influenced America’s understanding of death was during the time of the influenza epidemic and World War I. Death joined sex as the two topics to avoid, with death becoming number one. The rise of “self” made the thought of the self no longer existing difficult to talk about. (Samuel, ix-xxii) For McGill, it was Vietnam that “shook the [moral] fiber” of life and forced Americans to “include within their daily

horizons sham and evil and death as aspects inherent in life and not simply as accidental” (21).

The baby boomer generation is a large contributing factor to America’s understanding of death. Yet, McGill suggests that with the impending death of baby boomers, the “biggest generation,” America is about to enter a “death-oriented society” and is not prepared for it. Instead, America, especially the baby boomers or “eternally youthful generation,” is consumed with “priding themselves on thinking and acting young regardless of their age.” (Samuel, ix-xxii) Underlying all of the major literature written on death in America is “denial” and death is never wrestled with, and Americans “run away from any mark of death the instant it appears.” (Samuel) Therefore, Americans often aren’t able to deal with death when it happens. They are forced into planning funerals for loved ones and looking to professionals such as funeral home directors and clergy to assist in the process and make meaning of death.

America’s avoidance of death is manifested in multiple ways. One way is through a fascination with youth. McGill calls Americans who are in their state of eternal youth and avoidance “bronze people.” These are people committed to the “ethic of success” by doing everything to stay youthful and expunge “from their lives every appearance, every intimation of death.” (McGill 21) McGill speaks of the American view of seeing aging as shameful: “There are enormous industries that do nothing but help people conceal their age under some kind of youthful patina. In fact, the whole of American culture gives prominence to youth” (McGill, 19). It makes sense for Americans to prioritize youth when death is avoided. Success in the American experience is defined by “the degree to which the marks of decay and death are kept away” (McGill 20). In a culture where youth

is prioritized and aging is shameful, death and its eventual reality becomes antithetical to the American way of life and is hidden from the rest of life.

Another way to see America's avoidance of death is through literature about heaven and eternal life. Best-selling books such as "Proof of Heaven" and "Heaven is for Real" combat death by speaking of what is beyond. Death is not really death, but rather bypassed. Even those in the science community were asking these questions. Vernon Kellogg, an evolutionary biologist, asked the question following his friend's death: "Is death really just what it seems, and what the biology describes it to be, or is it what so many would like it to be, hope it is, and even firmly believe it is? Can the human being have an ethereal spirit existence apart from, or after, his bodily-machine existence? Is man immortal?" (Samuel 2) The religious and scientific communities in some instances have followed the American path, looking beyond death to avoid dealing with its reality. Wesleyan Christian preaching about death and resurrection must face death as a reality. A Christian proclamation of heaven and the afterlife is truth, but often birthed out of an attempt to extend an American version of life and not a Christian hope rooted in the resurrection of Jesus. In order for the hope of the resurrection to be intelligible, death must be taken seriously, acknowledged, and reckoned with.

Modern medicine has also influenced our understanding of death. Stanley Hauerwas, former Professor of Ethics at Duke Divinity School, says that "our dying has become the province of medicine" which has taken away our ability to speak of death. The hope of that possible next medicine and treatment often "results in a person dying without being able to have his or her dying storied by the story of the church." (Hauerwas, x) This is

because the church has allowed the secular understanding of death to infiltrate the Church's theology of death.

Yet, this avoidance of death is only on the surface. Even with the avoidance of death and American optimism, death haunts life in the background. A permanent condition of Americans is a state of "laughing on the outside while crying on the inside." (McGill et al. 30) The external optimism "sometimes seems to be only appearances. The law of bedrock reality seems to carry the feeling of death" (McGill 30). This has been the reality of American Christian theologies that avoid suffering and death such as Christian end times popular books and the prosperity gospel. Much of the literature can be described as dealing only with the "laughing on the outside." The fear of death is based on the American obsession with materialism with a view of the afterlife and heaven being an extension of that vision. These theologies have no power to speak to suffering and even death.

American optimism is an illusion, but an important, artistic work of the imagination. McGill makes the point of how this optimism provides a vision: "The illusory world is critical, in fact, because it performs an absolutely important function for the American people. It helps them conceal the horror of life which they half know to be there. In order for these sensitive Americans psychically to endure their existence at all, they have to interpose between themselves and actual life a dream world of success and cleanliness and health and beauty and perpetual youth" (35). He continues, "the more clearly Americans perceive grim horror and senseless suffering in their actual existence and the more eagerly they long for release, the more they are compelled to believe that this realm

of happy, healthy appearances is real”(36). American Christianity fills a void in this “optimistic illusion” by preaching of heaven as a place that renders death powerless and is a continuation of the American concept of life. This is contrary to an orthodox Christian theology which provides hope beyond death, but death and the ramifications of death are viewed as real. The resurrection conquers death not the American way by avoiding death, but by battling it head on. And life beyond death is not a continuation of the American dream, rooted in materialism, but a participation in life with God through the power of the resurrection. The difference is that Christianity looks to Jesus’s second coming as ushering in a new heaven and a new earth while the American, materialistic eschatological vision sees heaven as an extension of the American dream of prosperity, wealth, health, and youth.

If death is not viewed as part of life in the American experience, then defining death is necessary. According to Arthur McGill, death for Americans is God. This is not the God of scripture but what is believed as “the final, the ultimate reality which controls” life (McGill, 44). Death is the absolute ruler of the world. This is the reason that Americans actually avoid it. In this sense, it actually has much more power for American culture. This belief has a devastating effect on Christian theology. McGill continues: “For many Americans the Christian God of love is not the real God at all. This god is only part of the illusory world of appearances. People would like this god to be real-my goodness yes! People try to lie their make-believe lies as if god were real. Yet on another level of their minds they believe that, for themselves, for all their values, and for all their loved ones, the final and ultimate god will be, not the Father of Jesus Christ, but the mutilating power of death” (McGill, 45). Therefore, death has profound and significant ramifications for

Christian theology in America, namely becoming the powerful god that all of life is centered around.

Americans see bodily death as something outside of life, therefore the cross and death of Jesus is problematic for an Americanized Christian faith. Since in many ways the Christian faith is about opposing death through assisting the poor and sick, many “American Christians will not hear of the Jesus who deliberately lays down his life on God’s initiative and expects all his followers to do the same” (McGill et al. 47). The reality of Jesus laying down his life is counter-cultural to the American nature of avoiding death at all costs. Therefore, American Christianity as a whole has become something different from the historic faith and its understanding of the death and resurrection has been a great contributing factor.

In order to articulate a Wesleyan Biblical theology of death and resurrection for preaching funerals, it is necessary to discern the American influence on Christian theology. The next section will reveal how protestant churches in the West have spoken of death and resurrection through funeral practices.

Protestant Church Funeral Practices

This section will give an overview of how protestant churches in the West have spoken of death and resurrection through funeral practices. It will cover American definitions of death, the role the body plays in the funeral, the influence of the funeral homes, funerals as communal worship, the location of the funeral and finally the purpose of the funeral.

American Definitions of Death

In a funeral sermon at St. Paul's Cathedral in 1910, Henry Scott Holland summarized the West's understanding of death in the 20th century: "Death is nothing at all." And this secular view of death influenced much of modern protestant funeral practices. In her book, *Preaching Death*, Lucy Bregman argues that the focus of funeral sermons "gradually transformed from loss to celebration," with death being avoided altogether. (Bregman vii)

American Christianity has been influenced significantly by the secular world in its view of death, resulting in a forfeiture of its role during the death process, something that has been historically important for the Church. McGill adds that churches in the United States are often "better teachers of this society's view of death than of Jesus' view" (McGill, 9). Not only do we define our lives by other stories, we also "outsource" death. The church is absent from the "local geography of dying," where the work of dying is done (Craddock, 30). Instead, the church is there for ceremonial purposes, often to sacramentalize an American understanding of death. American Christians hold to a more "American" view of death as one of weakness and failure. The problem is our belief that the "American" story and the "Christian" story of death are the same thing (Craddock, 26). Therefore, the funeral sermon of the gospel is often in competition with other "stories" being told at the death.

A Funeral Without a Body

This American and Western understanding of death is visible in the absence of the body at Christian funerals. Contemporary Protestant funeral practices are shifting focus from a funeral where the body is present to a memorial service to remember the dead.

Tom Long speaks to this current shift and its ramifications on a Christian theology of death and resurrection: “[This] means that Christian death practices are no longer metaphorical expressions of the journey of a saint to be with God. The saint is not even present, except as a spiritualized memory, a backdrop for the real action, which happens in the psyches of the mourners” (Long, 72). Long summarizes the theology of this practice:

A funeral governed by the gospel is built upon the eschatological hope that the deceased is not a static corpse or a gaseous and disembodied spirit, but an embodied child of God moving toward the communion of the saints. Thus, in the drama of the funeral, the whole congregation follows the deceased from the church to the cemetery or crematorium, traveling with the deceased all the way to the end and completing the dramatic action. By contrast, in a funeral governed by the more spiritualized understanding of death, the congregation sits still and reflects about the life of the deceased, seeking comfort in the claim that, though the body is dead, the soul lives on. Many contemporary funerals limp haltingly between these two theologies, sometimes the official liturgy trumpeting the first view and the improvised remarks of the clergy and other participants expressing the second” (Long, 96).

The lack of a body at the funeral removes the ability to proclaim the hope of the procession from being an embodied child of the living God to joining with the saints and God in death. It also moves the focus away from the body, which makes a weaker proclamation of the resurrection of the body through the resurrection of Jesus. If the

message of the gospel is that our bodies will be resurrected, the absence of the body, especially if the body is cremated, complicates the practice of funeral preaching.

When the body is not present at a funeral, the focus moves from the deceased to the mourners. And this focus is prevalent in modern protestant funerals. With the rise of modern-day funeral homes there has been a drastic transformation of funerals. Long adds that funerals are now “for the living, as we are prone to say... Taking the plot of the typical memorial service at face value, the dead are not migrating to God; the living are moving from sorrow to stability” (72). This has resulted in pastoral ministry during death becoming primarily about comforting the family instead of proclaiming “the story of Christ, setting the deceased story within it, to speak of Christ’s death and this death, to speak of the resurrection, the light in the darkness.” (Sheppy 4). Bregman echoes a similar idea about the purpose of the funeral being worship of God: “The underlying and most basic purpose of the Christian funeral is worship of God. The role of the minister is to turn the congregation’s attention away from anything less than this, and neither the dead person nor the pastor is to take center stage. ‘Comfort’ is the aim of the funeral, but this is achieved when our hearts touch God’s, and not through direct psychological consolations” (Bregman 21). All three authors acknowledge the importance of comforting the mourners in the funeral. However, the main focus of a funeral is holding up the worship of God as its participants gather around the body of a child of God and journey with that person from embodied living in the world into eternity with the community of the saints. Comfort in grief certainly happens in the context of Christian funerals, but authentic comfort in the face of death comes from the grace and truth of the

gospel and the worship of God who conquered death through the power of the resurrection.

The Influence of the Funeral Home

The location of the funeral service has experienced transition. Since the funeral being a processional to God diminished, the location of the funeral itself changed. In the 19th century, when embalming became a widespread practice, the modern funeral parlor developed. This created a major shift in Christian funerals. According to Long, the funeral directors “took the dead away from us in order to embalm them, and then they took the funeral itself away and turned it from a worship service into a vulgar display of conspicuous consumption” (Long 72). Long continues: “At a deeper level, though, the role of the funeral staff in this service raises a concern...it is important to say that the strong and active presence of the funeral professionals, almost “standing guard” over the coffin, treaded perilously close to communicating that the funeral was a production of the funeral home, rather than a worship service of the church” (Long 72) This removes power from the Church when making decisions about the funeral service, placing that power in the hands of the funeral home. The story of faith become merely part of multiple stories told about the deceased.

With the rise in funeral homes being in charge of the funeral, the role that the church plays is one of providing a ceremony for family and friends. Yet, the Christian funeral is more than just the ceremony. According to Long, “all of these actions taken together—the care of the body, the worship along the way, the farewell at the grave—all of them constitute the Christian funeral” (Long 88). It is not just a static service but rather an

experience, what Long calls “funeral as drama.” Based on Long’s definition of a funeral, contemporary protestant funerals are missing many important characteristics of a funeral.

Funerals as Communal Worship

At Christian funerals, the living gathers along with the dead body for worship. We gather at funerals to honor the dead because death is a communal experience. John Donne echoes this when he says that “No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main...Any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind. And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.” (Donne) Death affects everyone when people of significance are no longer presence in life. It is an acknowledgement of an important part of the community that will no longer be present. Yet even beyond the presence of a dead body, Christian worship itself is communal in nature. Speaking about the idea of “assembly,” Lathrop says that, “Assembly, a gathering together of participating persons, constitutes the most basic symbol of Christian worship. All other symbols and symbolic actions of liturgy depend upon this gathering being there in the first place” (Lathrop 21). This understanding only highlights even more the importance of having the deceased’s body present during the funeral procession and service. When we gather for worship at a Christian funeral, “we gather around the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Those who assemble are placing themselves in relation to Christ in the sense of participating in worship that affirms the truth of Christ, seen as the meaning of the world itself, before God” (Fowler 91). The Christian faith believes in the Church triumphant, people who are deceased but still in the presence of God. Therefore, worship is a cosmic, universal event. The deceased body in the casket is still in worship, joining the living and the dead.

The Location of the Funeral

The location of worship says a lot about a Christian's understanding of the funeral.

Protestant books of worship highlight the important roles of the church in funerals. The Presbyterian Book of Common Worship states that unless there are necessary reasons, "the Service for a believing Christian is normally held in the church, at a time when the congregation can be present" (The Presbyterian Book of Common Worship, 911). The Episcopal Church agrees that the ceremony should be "held in the church if at all possible and at a time when members of the congregation can be present...Baptized Christians are properly buried from the church. The service should be held at a time when the congregation has opportunity to be present" (Book of Common Prayer, 490). The Service of Death and Resurrection in the United Methodist Church agrees while allowing "the pastor may make adaptations" when necessary (United Methodist Book of Worship, 139).

Long speaks to the funeral location, noting the processional movement of the worship service:

Good arguments can be made for each of these locations, but the issue of place gets reframed when we remember that a Christian funeral is essentially not a sit-down affair but a processional. Although our current funeral customs have often made this hard to see, the main venue for a Christian funeral is not in a room but on a road, the pilgrim way. A funeral does not occur in only one place but moves from location to location. When a Christian dies, the community goes into action. The body is recovered, cared for, washed, dressed, and prepared for burial. When the time has come, friends and fellow Christians carry the deceased to the place of burial, worshipping as they go. This seamless movement from the place of death to

the place of departure is the final sector in the great arc of a Christian's life from baptism to the grave" (Long, 87).

Protestant books of worship agree that the funeral should, if at all possible, be held in the sanctuary with the body present.

The Purpose of the Funeral

The Episcopal Church's Liturgy notes Easter and the resurrection as the foundation for the funeral service:

The liturgy for the dead is an Easter liturgy. It finds all its meaning in the resurrection. Because Jesus was raised from the dead, we, too, shall be raised. The liturgy, therefore, is characterized by joy. This joy, however, does not make human grief unchristian. The very love we have for each other in Christ brings deep sorrow when we are parted by death...while we rejoice that one we love has entered into the nearer presence of our Lord, we sorrow in sympathy with those who mourn. (507)

Joy is found in the funeral because of Christ's resurrection and the hope for a future resurrection of Christians. Yet, this joy is not blind to the reality of death and the brokenness of the world. Both can be held up in the ceremony as sacred and important. It expresses clearly the twofold nature of what is done: the facts of death and bereavement and honestly faced, and the gospel of resurrection is celebrated in the context of God's Baptismal Covenant with us in Christ. (United Methodist Book of Worship, 139)

Christian Funerals in 20th and 21st century America have been influenced by American culture's denial of death. This has led to greater influence from the funeral homes and a tendency to make the ceremony more therapeutic and comforting for the family, often to

the neglect of the proclamation of the gospel. A Wesleyan understanding of death and resurrection would heed the wisdom of scripture, the early church, and contemporary worship books that, while leaving room for the comforting of family, calls for placing the proclamation of the death and resurrection of Jesus as central in worship and preaching at a Christian funeral.

Modern Christian Understandings of Death and Resurrection for Preaching

In light of biblical, theological, and historical foundations for a Wesleyan understanding of death and resurrection, what is to be said when the pastor preaches at a funeral? Is a funeral sermon necessary and important? Assuming that a sermon is part of the funeral, what constitutes a sermon that is rooted in a Wesleyan theology of death and resurrection?

Is a Sermon Needed at a Funeral?

In an age when preaching is believed by many to be no longer relevant, Lenny Luchetti speaks to the importance of words in scripture: “According to the biblical story, words matter. God did his best work through words.”(Luchetti 1). He goes on to recount how God spoke to his people in the Old Testament through the prophets and how Jesus and John the Baptist were both preachers. Throughout the biblical story and all of church history, the spoken word mattered. And words especially matter at a funeral. Hoffacker speaks to the importance of a sermon, especially at a funeral: “whatever their reason for coming, the crowd who assembles for a funeral are often more ready to listen to the preacher than is the usual Sunday congregation, because what brings people together at the funeral is undeniably a matter of life and death” (Hoffacker 4). When people are gathered at a funeral to honor a dead loved one, they are often more sensitive to a word

about life, death, and meaning. A funeral also provides a time to proclaim hope in the midst of death and grief. Therefore, a sermon at a funeral is necessary for a theological and biblical understanding of death and resurrection.

But how does the preacher discern what is needed to be said? A unique Wesleyan contribution to biblical interpretation is through the Wesleyan quadrilateral. Albert Outler discovered four “lenses” for “identifying the means and methods” in John Wesley’s work. (Luchetti 5; United Methodist Church 82) He articulated that John Wesley saw four areas; Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason to be “taken together [to] bring the individual Christian to a mature and fulfilling understanding of the Christian faith.” (Outler, “Wesleyan Quadrilateral” *Umc.org*) Scripture is the primary source for Christian understanding, but scripture is more fully understood through the assistance of tradition, experience, and reason. To discover a Wesleyan homiletic for preaching death and resurrection, I will draw on some of these lenses to discern a Wesleyan homiletic for funeral preaching with scripture as primary.

Scripture as Primary

For John Wesley, scripture was the primary means of knowing and understanding God (Luchetti, 5; Wright 101). John Wesley was a “homo unius libri” (a man of one book) “I allow no other rule, whether of faith or practice, than the holy scriptures.” (Oden) According to the Book of Discipline, scripture “containeth all things necessary to salvation” (United Methodist Church 66). For a Wesleyan funeral sermon, scripture is primary. However, it is not meant to be alone in the interpretative process.

Experiences of the Deceased

Scripture is primary for interpretation, but it should also be assisted by experience. According to Hoffacker, “A funeral preacher should be warned away from raising up the obituary without also raising the Bible”, but, says Hoffacker, it is equally unsatisfactory to lift up “the Bible but not the obituary” (8). Tom Long agrees: “Strange indeed would be the contemporary funeral in which mention of the life of the deceased is altogether omitted” (Long 186). This is perhaps no more important anywhere than when preaching a funeral sermon.

The life experience of the deceased and the remaining loved ones are important in funeral sermon planning and preaching. A preacher, especially when doing the funeral of someone he or she does not know, should “take advantage of the mourners’ extensive knowledge of the one who has died.” (Hoffacker, 18) Hoffacker speaks to finding what he calls “the key” to the sermon when reflecting on the life of the deceased and discussing the person with family and friends. He says that the “key may be an image, a phrase, a story, or some other feature that is connected with, or at least can be connected with the life of the deceased” (Hoffacker 18). This image can be gleaned from the life of the deceased. It can be related to a job, hobbies, or relationships. Yet it “enables the mourners to discover grace and resurrection anew, specifically in the circumstances around this death. The mourners experience an “aha!” moment of revelation, inspired by Christian hope” (Hoffacker, 18). The experiences and the stories of the deceased and loved ones are sacred and important for funeral preaching.

Much of modern funeral preaching consists of honoring and telling stories about the experiences of the deceased. Yet this can also be problematic during a Christian sermon.

Charles Campbell, when speaking of theology, says that “theology is not primarily concerned with individual, inner experience, but with the Scripture and language of the community.” (Campbell 52) According to Willimon, “long dissertations on the alleged virtues of the deceased are inappropriate at a Christian funeral because of our belief in the equality of death and our recognition that, at time of death, we hope not in our own virtues or deeds, but our hope is in the name of the Lord” (Willimon 111). McFarlane adds to this perspective:

Be careful not to turn the service into a memorializing of the deceased. In days gone by families were often disappointed because pastors at the funeral services hardly mentioned their loved one...since then, many funerals have taken a turn in the opposite direction and become one glorious idealized memory after another of the one now gone...A funeral service is always a worship service.” (McFarlane 50)

There is merit in speaking of the deceased in the funeral sermon, but it can also overtake the gospel story if care isn't taken by the preacher.

One theological problem of funeral sermons focusing almost entirely on the individual is the subtle idea that our deceased loved ones are alive only through our shared memories. Long challenges this potential idea:

The pastor's affirmation that the deceased would “never be forgotten,” though commonly said at funerals, is also ambiguous. Probably he meant to offer comfort by implying that, even though the deceased is now dead and gone, not all is lost, because the memory of his life and good works will live among us always. If that is what he meant, his words have the disadvantage of not being true. Cemeteries

are full of the graves of people no one remembers any longer. If the deceased are of value only if we the living can keep their memory alive, then we are to be pitied. As the psalmist truly says, “As for mortals, their days are like grass; they flourish like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more” (Ps. 103:15–16). The gospel does not place the burden on the living to keep alive the spiritual flame of memory. Rather, it affirms that the deceased is now raised to new life and sings in the great choir of the communion of saints standing in the presence of God. Only in this way, only in the life of God, is the deceased “never forgotten.” (Long, 97)

This idea of “never be forgotten” suggests that redemption and salvation for the deceased is located in our memories. Eternal life depends on us and our role is keeping the memory alive. Once the memory is gone, is the deceased gone as well? Hope and salvation needs to be placed in the death and resurrection of Jesus in Wesleyan funeral preaching.

Scripture as the “Lead Story”

If focusing on the life and stories of the deceased is problematic, then it is necessary to determine the focus of the funeral sermon. Twitchell suggests that “The funeral is not primarily about the deceased but about the God who created the deceased. This does not mean that funerals should be devoid of eulogies or remembrances of the dead, but it does mean that our focus remains on God: Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer” (Jonathan K Twitchell, 63). “The Greek word “eulogies” from which eulogy is derived, simply means “praise.” And that praise should ultimately be lifted to God who is found in scripture.

Fred Craddock et al., in their book “Speaking of Dying,” agrees that the importance of the sermon being biblical and theological and asks the question, “Of what story do I find

myself a part?” While trends in contemporary funeral preaching is to tell stories about the deceased, Craddock’s question offers a different lens through which a funeral sermon can develop. “If the church cannot offer hope when someone faces dying...its mission is deeply compromised” (Craddock et al. 21). Stories are important, but telling the story of the gospel in death is appropriate theologically for funeral preaching.

Stories can help “repair the damage” created by death (Craddock et al. 24). Craddock et al. say that “dying is a story” and for those who lose a loved one, making sense of dying for the bereaved is an attempt to repair their story. Dying changes stories. Therefore, the story of the gospel is a gift and the overarching narrative of all people. Long adds that “Ironically, the strongest rival to the gospel at a funeral is the life story of the deceased.” (Long 135) He continues, “Properly framed, though, the story of the deceased need not be a threat to the gospel at all. The funeral invites the story of the deceased to be told and desires that the one who has died be remembered, fully and well. But the gospel reminds us that the story doesn’t end there; it ends with God” (135). Done properly, the funeral preacher can tell the story of the deceased through the story of the gospel as well as the story of the gospel through the story of the deceased. It need not be a competition.

The challenge for the preacher is to determine which story or “stories” to tell as the “lead story.” The funeral preacher is bombarded with a “tournament of narratives” as the sermon is being prepared (Craddock, 23). “Each story wants to become our story” (23). Military service, parenting, vocation, memberships, are all vying to be the lead story. “The death of Jesus means Christians have a storied death that enables us to speak to one another about our dying. It may well be, there, that one of the most determinative

witnesses Christians can make in our time is to be a people who know how to speak of dying.” (Craddock et al. xi) The Christian story, particularly in the Wesleyan tradition, comes primarily from scripture. It is the story that tells the truth about who we are. It is the Christian story and according to Bonhoeffer, “we become a part of what once took place for our salvation” when it is read as the church. (George et al. 207) When we say that the Bible is “true,” we mean that the Bible’s way of narrating the world is truthful. The Bible’s means of making meaning is trustworthy. Its way of understanding and constructing the world is faithful to things as they are, and in God’s good time, shall be.” (Willimon 119) The scripture is trustworthy in the funeral sermon to tell the story of the deceased’s life, death, and the hope of resurrection.

The biblical story that is called to the forefront at a funeral is the death and resurrection of Jesus. Death is already part of the identity of Christians. According to Paul, we are baptized into Jesus’ death (Romans 6). Contrary to the American attitude, Jesus lives to die and calls his followers to do the same. The story of Jesus gives preachers a new world to invite congregants to live into. A world where death is conquered through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Walter Brueggemann writes of the importance of poetic words when talking about this “real world”: “poetic speech is . . . the only proclamation . . . that is worthy of the name preaching” and such preaching is “the ready, steady, surprising proposal that the real world in which God invites us to live is not the one made available by the rulers of this age” (Brueggemann 3). That world is the world that the biblical story invites Christians into. And that world should be the “lead story” during the funeral sermon.

Speaking of the Deceased

Even though the funeral sermon should be rooted in the story of God, the deceased and the gathered body are also part of the story. How are preachers to speak of the deceased? Discussing whether the deceased should be considered saints or not, Long says, “In the New Testament, “saint” is not a label reserved for the rare person whose life shines with extraordinary holiness; it is used to describe the ordinary, garden-variety Christian. Baptism is a call to set out on a moral adventure in the name of Christ, but all Christians travel this path of discipleship hobbling and stumbling” (Long, 124). The words about the deceased in the funeral should speak less about what they accomplished when alive and more about who they were and are in Christ.

With modern funeral preaching focusing on heaven as the destination of the “saved,” the question arises whether the eternal state of the person should be addressed. With pastoral care and comfort of those who are grieving as one of the primary purposes of the funeral, the preacher runs the risk of having conflicting narratives if the eternal state of the deceased is assumed to be outside of God: “Even the most conservative of pastors run the risk of being universalists at a funeral.” “He’s in a better place.” “She’s reunited with her husband.” Instead, allow God’s word to stand on its own. “instead of attempting to speak about the state of the deceased, ministers affirm what Scripture says about Jesus” (Twitchell 68). The hope in a Christian funeral is not from a destination but in the resurrection of Jesus. That is why the resurrection of Jesus should be central to funeral preaching. There are various perspectives on the afterlife and salvation in orthodox Christianity. But the bodily resurrection of Jesus is grounded in historic Christianity, the Apostles’ Creed, and a key doctrine in Wesleyan Christianity.

Death as Mystery

Tom Long also encourages words that avoid giving details about the mystery of the afterlife:

We do not know what their life is like; we only know that the life they have is life in God, and that life we share. We do not know what their bodies look like; we only know that they are like us embodied, but unlike us their bodies are glorified and imperishable. We assume that the people God has raised from death are both discontinuous and yet continuous with who they once were, that God has raised them and not some utterly new creatures. This may well mean that we will recognize them, but we do not know how or in what ways. Because they have bodies, they must also have “place,” but all spatial language of “heaven.”

What we do know is that death changes, but does not destroy, our relationship to the dead. We stand on a great continuum of worship with the saints who have gone before us. We pray, and so do they. We praise God, and so do they. (Long 135)

Death is a mystery, and it is best that leave it as a mystery in funeral preaching. Our only certainty is in Christ’s death and resurrection.

Preaching is truth telling. Preaching tells the truth about scripture but also about people. Tom Long says that funeral preaching requires looking

at other people and “see for real,” they do more than look for the lovable qualities that can be found, if we squint hard enough, in most people. They look at them, and at themselves, in the light of Jesus Christ. All of us in the faith, fragmented as we are, nevertheless belong to Jesus Christ. Seeing each other as saints is not

finally about our virtues, but his. This is what Paul was talking about when he said that we no longer even look at people “from a human point of view.” The reason? We look at people not only as they are to the naked eye, but as they are when illuminated by the love of Christ, “If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (2 Cor. 5:17).

At a funeral, everything is aimed at this kind of “seeing for real,” at recovering and celebrating the true identity in Christ of the brother or sister who has died. We have already done this at baptism. There we insisted that despite all of the ways that the world may seek to distort this person’s true identity, indeed despite all of the ways this person herself or himself may forget and waste this identity, nonetheless this is and will remain a child of heaven, a daughter or son of God.” (Long 125-126)

The truth told about someone at their funeral is who they are in Christ. That person, regardless of their own lives and accomplishments, was and is loved by God. A funeral sermon provides an opportunity to tell the truth in the face of death; the truth about God, the truth about the deceased, the truth about humanity, and the truth about the world.

Lens of Death and Resurrection

When preparing a funeral, the preacher must encounter the scriptures through a different lens. A funeral is a specific context, so the Bible is read and interpreted through the lens of death and resurrection. This lens comes from the experience of death and mourning. Power points to the importance of experience in preaching:

This is why “the Bible says” is not enough for preaching hope, because a preacher should determine what the Bible says in relation to us, human experience.

Spiritual preachers read the Bible through experience, causing some to declare that social location conditions biblical interpretation...To proclaim hope in the domain of death, one must develop sensitivity toward human need in order to determine to whom and to what the sermon is supposed to minister. The spirituals reveal that human need is a critical lens through which one approaches Scripture for preaching hope...(Powery 113)

Will Willimon shares that when a preacher is reading and preparing a sermon, that reading reminds “the church that the Bible is produced by the community of faith and must be interpreted within that community under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit” (Willimon 114). Human experience of suffering and pain are starting points of funeral preaching. Marvin McMickle says that many people are led to the scriptures by “their pain and problems.” (McMickle 20) Luke Powery makes a similar point: “Real-life issues and situations are the starting point in the hermeneutical enterprise of preaching hope” (Powery, 114). In funeral preaching the gospel is read and interpreted through the lens of grief, pain, and death.

This does not suggest that human experience does the interpreting. Will Willimon, when speaking of preaching, says that the “major task of pastors is to assist congregations in reading carefully in order to align ourselves to a text, in order to submit and bend ourselves to the complex redescription of reality that is Scripture.” (Willimon 111) The scripture wants “power over our lives” instead of Christians having power over it. Powery moves away from Barth and Willimon when he says:

human bodies are more important than Bibles. Spiritual preachers proclaim “whatever he [or she] believes necessary for the people. The Bible is a source for preaching hope but the eyes of the preacher read the Bible with the eyes of human need. One does not interpret Scripture for Scripture’s sake but reads it for the life of a people who are in great need. (114)

Coming to the text because of “pain and problems” is important for scriptural interpretation, but Powery’s “hermeneutical freedom” potentially gives the preacher and congregation power over the Scriptures.

The purpose of experience being a lens for interpreting scripture is to discover how the text speaks to the congregation’s specific need and location. Powery points out how the spirituals do:

not just proclaim the resurrection of Jesus but link the hope of resurrection to one’s own situation and circumstance. It becomes a personal testimony or story of how “the Lord shall bear my spirit home.” He ’rose, He ’rose, He ’rose from the dead He ’rose, He ’rose, He ’rose from the dead... Whatever is the human need, it is insufficient to just tell the story of Jesus as found in the Bible. It is critical to see how that story relates to the human situation and then proclaim that.” (114)

The preacher goes from pulpit to pew, revealing that the preacher is part of the community” (Powery 28). This was certainly true with preachers during slavery, concretely seen in call and response. Since preaching is a communal act, a funeral sermon gathers all of the hurt of the people as part of the sermon prep. “The spiritual rose out of a situation not only of spiritual death but social death” (Powery, 30). Through the lens of death and resurrection, the preacher tells the story of God through the death experienced

by the congregation. In this way, the funeral sermon is a priestly act as the preacher's sermon is offered to God on behalf of the people's brokenness and pain.

Preaching Hope

Central in a Christian funeral sermon are words of hope. When mainstream society and atheism struggle with words and philosophies for death, Christians have a word of hope in death. Vaughn Roberts speaks to the source of that hope found in scripture:

The Bible's response to death is not a philosophy but a person: Jesus Christ. And here we find Jesus confronting death. Despite the fact that we turned away from him, despite the fact that death is what we deserve, God still loves us and he comes to earth in the person of his Son.

We are all on a long, slow march to death. Get used to it. He has no hope; it's just the way things are. But what a difference it is when we realize as we're walking toward death that God comes with us. God has joined our march and gone to death and come out the other side. This is not wishful thinking. It's based on a solid fact of history: Jesus died; Jesus was buried; Jesus rose again. That changes everything. We're still heading to death, but we know it's not the end.

(Roberts, "Good News When Your're Confronted by Death",
preachingtoday.com)

Christian preachers are not in denial of the reality of death. Rather, because of the death and resurrection of Jesus, there is hope in the face of death.

Luke Powery writes in detail about the experience of slaves in America. They were surrounded by death-literal death and what Powery calls "little deaths." Yet in the face of death a Christian preacher has a word of hope. Long says that "One role of a pastor is to

be sure that the witness of the gospel is not lost, this hopeful vision does not get whittled down to the small story of our private grief and mere personalism” (Long, 145). Powery adds that

suffering and death will not say the benediction at the end of the service of life. Hope will declare it in the Spirit, perhaps even with a celebratory doxology” (Rom. 8: 39). (Powery 83)

Spiritual preaching does not avoid human struggle and frailty as expressed in such experiences like betrayal. However, often the final word of a sermon will voice the good news of God in an attempt to be sure that the listeners will be left at a point of hope. Some refer to this as the “but” in preaching. William McClain writes, “No matter how dark a picture has been painted or how gloomy, there is always a ‘but’ or a ‘nevertheless’ or an element in the climax of the sermon that suggests holding on, marching forward, going through, or overcoming.” (Powery 94)

Spiritual preaching operates most effectively in this tension because, just as resurrection preaching does, “it takes death seriously, denying neither death nor the alienation, loneliness, anxiety, sin and evil which cluster around it.” (Powery 94)

In a word of hope, death is taken seriously. Death is visible as the people gather around a dead body and death. Yet, the final word is one of hope which is rooted in Jesus and the power of His resurrection.

For the Christian hope to have any power over death, it must take death’s sting seriously. Powery wrestles with the tension of hope in the face of death:

Spiritual preaching, though surrounded by death, is not afraid to proclaim death's death. It takes courage and vision because until the end of all time, the tension will remain. The tension will not cease until sorrow and mourning are no more. Tension will not disappear until death dies. There is no resolution until the day of God's jubilee. Thus it is essential for preachers to preach the tension of death and hope but to do so with a spiritual vision. If not, hope will remain unborn."(Powery 95)

He continues by discussing the importance of the preacher being a poet and able to cast a vision that is currently not visible: "Like a poet, when facing death the preacher is tasked to proclaim the "ought-ness" of life rather than the "is-ness" of it. By preaching a vision of what ought to be, they were able to generate hope." (Powery 95) Chuck Campbell echoes Powery: "Hope is always hope in 'things not seen,' hope in the midst of a world in which the visions are not yet the full reality." (Campbell 186) As Hebrews 11 says, "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." The preacher is called to preach through faith by recalling an unseen hope in the face of death. Preaching hope in death is a spiritual act of creativity and world building. As God created the world through His Word, a preacher who preaches the gospel has the power to create a world of hope and resurrection, even in the face of death.

Research Design Literature

This project was a pre-intervention project that focused on discerning a Wesleyan theological perspective of death and resurrection to evaluate the funeral preaching of United Methodist pastors in South Georgia. Both pastors and laity were participants in the research project.

This project used a mixed-method approach to research. The researcher developed three instruments: Clergy Questionnaire, Pastor Interviews, and Laity Survey. The researcher used insight from Tim Sensing's book, *Qualitative Research; A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses*. Sensing mentions "purposive samples" in qualitative research which "selects people who have awareness of the situation and meet the criteria and attributes that are essential to your research. They are more common in qualitative research and will be more useful for DMin projects." (Sensing 83) This method was deployed in this research project in an attempt to "provide depth" in the information gained from the research.

Summary of Literature

As I moved forward in my own context of Savannah, GA to identify a United Methodists' understanding of the purpose of the funeral sermon in order to recommend a Wesleyan theological perspective for funeral preaching, my research has yielded some key themes and arguments.

In looking at the Old and New Testaments, death in scripture often has multiple meanings. There is physical death which speaks to the end of life in this world, and there is a spiritual death which relates to humanity's non-existent relationship with God. When God told Adam and Eve that they would "surely die" if they ate of the forbidden fruit, the death that they experienced was life outside of the garden of Eden and a separation of God. Death is used throughout scripture metaphorically to describe the devastation of life outside of God. This is important when preaching about death, especially in the American context. My work in this literature review discovered that physical death is not to be feared for a Christian nor is it a sign of weakness. Death is not something that Christians

should do everything possible to avoid. When Paul speaks of death in Romans 6 as being the result of sin, he is using death in the metaphorical sense. Funeral preaching should make clear the differences in order to not conflate physical death with sinfulness.

Physical death is not weakness or the result of sin or the end of life with God. It is the end of an early life with the hope of a bodily resurrection and eternity with God through the power of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection.

In comparing the early Christian church to other funeral practices of its time, the care for the body and the hope in the resurrection characterize some key differences. While Jewish practices understood the body as unclean and avoided touching it unless absolutely necessary, the Christian church took great care in washing and caring for the dead body. For early Christians, the body was not unclean nor contaminated. Also, the hope of the resurrection transformed their view of the body and the context of the ceremony. Funeral preaching should speak of the body not as the sinful shell of saved souls but as God's creation, as the embodied way that God entered to the world, and as the way that Jesus will raise his believers to new life through the resurrection of the body.

A funeral sermon provides a necessary word of hope in the face of death. That hope is rooted in the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel is the story of God facing death by giving himself over to it and experiencing it for three days. Just as God encountered death, so will humanity. Yet, after three days, God in Jesus conquered death through the power of the resurrection. The funeral sermon is essential in contemporary Christianity because of alternative views of death that have influenced the western church. The Wesleyan understanding of death and resurrection provides an orthodox foundation for funeral preaching. It takes death seriously, while providing hope in the face of death. Wesleyan

Christianity values the experiences and stories of people while rooted the main story in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY FOR THE PROJECT

Overview of the Chapter

This chapter describes the research methodology used in this project. This chapter includes a review of the nature and purpose of the project, the research questions and instrumentation used to address each of the questions, and an overview of the project's cultural context, which includes the specifics of the participants in the study, the instrumentation, and the process of data analysis.

Nature and Purpose of the Project

The South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church is a group of nearly six hundred churches divided into six districts under an episcopal leader. Like all mainline churches, the United Methodist Church is an aging organization. Each year, the denomination declines in numbers, much of that decline happening because of the death of members. Therefore, funerals are a common occurrence in the life of these congregations and in the vocation of the clergy. The nature of this project was to evaluate how the laity and clergy in the conference understand and speak of death in the funeral event. This project evaluated the funeral preaching of United Methodist pastors in the South Georgia Conference to discern whether their funeral preaching is consistent with a Wesleyan theology of death and resurrection.

Therefore, the purpose of this project was to develop a Wesleyan theological perspective of death and resurrection in order to evaluate the funeral preaching of pastors in the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church. This discerned whether a Wesleyan theology of death and resurrection is

consistently proclaimed in funerals in the South Georgia Conference and also provide a resource for Wesleyan funeral preaching.

Research Questions

The following three research questions were used to aid in the research and development of research instruments for this project.

Research Question #1

What do United Methodist pastors in the South Georgia Conference see as their primary role and responsibility in the funeral sermon?

This research question addresses how United Methodist pastors in the South Georgia Conference understand their purpose when developing and preaching funeral sermons. It reveals how pastors see their purpose when considering the context of the sermon and other contributing factors and ultimately whether the funeral sermon is rooted in a Wesleyan theology of death and resurrection. To collect information for this question, a sixteen-question questionnaire was sent out to all provisional and ordained clergy in the South Georgia Conference. Questions 2-8 and 10 ask about the purpose, content, and logic of the funeral sermon. Questions 8,10, 11, 12 dealt with presuppositions that preachers have about funerals when developing a funeral sermon. Question 15 dealt with the planning and authority of the funeral.

In addition to the Clergy Questionnaire, the researcher interviewed four pastors using five questions that allowed the interviewees to explain their understand of their role in the funeral, particularly the funeral sermon.

Research Question #2:

Do United Methodist pastors in the South Georgia Conference communicate a Wesleyan theology of death and resurrection to their congregations?

This research question seeks to discern whether UM Pastors in the South Georgia Conference base their funeral preaching on a Wesleyan theology of death and resurrection. The literature review revealed other influential theologies and worldviews about death which contrast with a Wesleyan theological view. All three instruments were used to answer research question #2. Questions 2-5 in the clergy questionnaire explored how pastors understand the funeral sermon and its purpose. Questions 6-10 discussed the theological content in the funeral sermon. Questions 11-14 invited pastors to discuss their theological presuppositions about funeral planning and practices.

The “Laity Survey” revealed how laity understand death and how the funeral preaching of their pastors has influenced their theology of death and resurrection. Questions 3-5 and 18-21 dealt with what the content of the funeral service should be. Questions 7-8, and 11 revealed how laity understand death and what happens after death. Questions 2, and 12-17 discussed appropriate funeral practices according to the laity. Questions 22-31 shared common statements about death that participants share whether they agree or not. Questions 35-41 asked questions that determine whether other narratives or theologies should be allowed in the Christian funeral.

The clergy interviews all addressed the theology, content, and practice of funeral preaching for UM clergy, particularly for those who were interviewed.

Research Question #3:

What do United Methodist lay people in the South Georgia Conference expect from their pastors in the funeral sermon?

This research question addressed the expectations that United Methodist lay people have of the funeral sermon. The findings also discovered the theological beliefs and assumptions of death and resurrection held by the laity. To answer this question, findings from the “Laity Survey” to South Georgia Conference laity were analyzed. Every question addressed the laity’s understanding of death and resurrection as well as the purpose of the funeral and the funeral sermon.

Ministry Context

United Methodist pastors serving congregations in the South Georgia Conference is the ministry context for this research. South Georgia primarily consists of small towns and rural areas. Many of the towns have seen industry leave, followed by the town’s children and grandchildren leaving to find the jobs. As a result, much of South Georgia is aging and experiencing decline. Therefore, pastoral ministry consists of working with older people and providing funerals for the deceased.

These small-town communities all primarily have a Christian worldview. Whether that worldview is rooted in an orthodox Christian theology was to be discovered, but the majority of the population of South Georgia holds to some form of the Christian faith. Even those who do not attend church regularly still believe in the Christian worldview.

The pastors selected were provisional and ordained clergy and at a minimum have theological training at the Masters level. The participants represent multiple, diverse contexts. Women clergy, African American and Hispanic clergy, younger and older clergy, clergy of small town and larger cities and difference size churches were all invited to participate.

There are also seven military bases in South Georgia. Patriotism is influential in South Georgia, especially in congregations. Patriotic elements are often included in funeral services.

Participants

The following section reveals the criteria for selection, the description, and the ethical considerations for the participants of the research.

Criteria for Selection

For my research I selected to study provisional and ordained United Methodist pastors in the South Georgia Conference. I chose these pastors because they are United Methodist, which is a Christian denomination founded by John Wesley and influenced by Wesleyan theology. I also chose them because they all have a Masters of Divinity degree at a minimum and have been formed theologically by seminary. These clergy were chosen because they represent the clergy who serve United Methodists in South Georgia. I also interviewed four pastors from the Savannah who fit the criteria.

I selected lay people from United Methodist churches in the Coastal district of the South Georgia Conference. Part of the study compares and contrasts the theology of the pastors and laity.

Description of Participants

I chose provisional and ordained clergy from the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church. The Connectional Conference provided contact information and a questionnaire was sent out via email. The participants were the ones who chose to respond to the questionnaire.

The laity involved were members of the churches in the Coastal district of the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church. An email was sent out to all churches

and their members. The participants were the ones who responded to the survey. Gender, ethnicity, or other categories are not known or considered. These are members of United Methodist Churches who have experience attending funerals of their UM clergy.

The four clergy selected for the interviews were chosen based on location and availability. All four clergy were male, but that was not intentional. One of the four was African American. They were selected because they represent local clergy formed in Wesleyan theology and called to preach and uphold that theology. They were selected because they are tasked to prepare and preach funeral sermons for their United Methodist Congregations.

Ethical Considerations

Participants were informed of the nature of the study by being provided an informed consent letter. The informed consent letters are found in Appendixes E, F, and G. To protect confidentiality, no names, titles, job positions, or other distinguishing characteristics are reported in the study. When a particular respondent is mentioned in the study, that person is identified as “one respondent.”

The investigator shared significant findings from the research in a colloquium with Doctor of Ministry colleagues and Asbury Theological Seminary faculty. All audio files were password protected and secured on the investigator’s recording device. The recording device was secured in a locked location. All data was deleted and all hardcopy data was shredded within a year after the conclusion of the research.

Instrumentation

This study had three instruments for research. The first instrument, “Clergy Questionnaire”, was emailed to all provisional and ordained clergy in the South Georgia

Conference of the United Methodist Church. The participants were asked to answer fifteen questions which asked a range of questions. The instrument was created on surveymonkey.com and designed to allow participants to answer questions to express their understanding of funeral preaching.

The second instrument, “Laity Survey”, was a survey emailed to all laity in the Coastal district of the South Georgia Conference. The survey was created on surveymonkey.com and designed to allow participants to answer questions related to death and funerals. The survey was divided into four sections. The first section had ten questions and gave the multiple choice answers of usually, rarely, or sometimes. While participants may have agreed with the multiple answers, they were encouraged to only select the one that answered it best. Section two had ten statements that the participants were asked to determine the regularity of certain practices in funerals. Section three was “True or False” and provided ten statements that are often associated with death, funerals, and the language and theology deployed. These questions sought to determine whether the participants agreed with the statements or not. The last section called for “yes or no” answers and provided ten questions or statements that requested the participants to indicate what should be allowed at funerals and what should not be.

The third and final instrument, “Clergy Interviews,” were five interview questions for United Methodist clergy. These were designed as open-ended questions which allowed the four participants to share their theology of death and resurrection and how they included their theology in the practice of funeral preaching. The four interviews all lasted between forty-five minutes to an hour.

Expert Review

I consulted three expert reviewers in the designing of research instruments for this project. While all three of the expert reviewers provided insight, the most significant change came through of the recommendation of Dr. Ellen Marmon. She encouraged the researcher to create four or five interview questions for one-on-one interviews with the researcher. In her words, this allows the researcher to “dig a little deeper.” The pastor interviews, created through the suggestions made by Dr. Marmon, did not replace, but were added to, the other two research instruments: the laity survey and the clergy questionnaire. The submitted researcher-designed instruments were approved by all expert reviewers.

Reliability & Validity of Project Design

The instruments used for this project asked questions to discern the understanding of death, resurrection, and the purpose of funeral preaching. All three instruments were for that purpose. The laity survey and the clergy questionnaire asked all participants the same questions. These questions and statements were arranged carefully to avoid preceding questions influencing following questions. These instruments are reliable because they targeted only those who could provide an answer from their experience. The instruments also received enough responses to have a consensus answer while also having differing responses. All of the participants received the same questions with no deviation.

The preacher’s interviews allowed the investigator to go deeper with the question. According to Sensing,

Interviews allow people to describe their situations and put words to their interior lives, personal feelings, opinions, and experiences that otherwise are not available to the researcher by observation...Interviews not only provide a record of interviewees' particular views and perspectives, but also recognize the legitimacy of their views. While every interview data is only a representation of the interviewee's opinions, experiences, and understandings, it does allow you to gain insight into thoughts that are not expressed through a person's actions or that are too sensitive for people to discuss in a group setting." (Sensing 102)

All three instruments acted as supporters of each other in the investigator's research.

Data Collection

This project's research is qualitative and pre-intervention. Qualitative research is "grounded in the social world of experience and seeks to make sense of lived experience." (Sensing) The investigator, therefore, researched the social world and lived experience of the participants in order to evaluate the understandings and practices of South Georgia United Methodists.

The generalization of the qualitative research was established by "describing the means for applying the research finding to other contexts. Fundamentally, the possibility of applying finding across settings is established through tickly detailed descriptions that enable audiences to identify similarities of the research setting with other contexts. Put another way, it enables other audiences to see themselves and/or their situation in the accounts presented." (Merriam 176-177)

The clergy questionnaire was the first instrument used in the research. An email was sent out to the participants and the responses were collected at surveymonkey.com. The

second instrument was the laity survey and the responses were also collected at surveymonkey.com. The interviews contained questions specific to the theology and praxis of the pastor's funeral preaching. They were the only instruments conducted in person. The interviews were recorded on a recording device and protected by a password. After the completion of the dissertation, the recordings were destroyed.

Data Analysis

The data was collected and analyzed in a mixed-method format. Swinton and Mowat suggest that "Data analysis is the process of bringing order, structure, and meaning to the complicated mass of qualitative data that the researcher generates during the research process." (Swinton and Mowat 57) The investigator collected and analyzed all data from the three research instruments. The clergy questionnaire was qualitative and developed and analyzed from surveymonkey.com. The pastor interviews were also qualitative and performed in person. The researcher recorded the responses to analyze. The laity survey was quantitative and a surveymonkey.com survey developed by the researcher was sent out to the participants. All instruments were recorded and kept safely on the researcher's computer and protected with a password.

CHAPTER 4

EVIDENCE FOR THE PROJECT

Overview of the Chapter

In South Georgia, funeral preaching is a regular practice of ministry among United Methodist clergy. During a funeral sermon, the preacher is tasked with preaching the gospel in light of the death of person from the church or community. Yet, there are multiple theologies and beliefs on death that could potentially influence South Georgia Conference United Methodist clergy and laity. The purpose of this project was to develop a Wesleyan theological perspective of death and resurrection in order to evaluate the funeral preaching of pastors in the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church. This was to discern whether a Wesleyan theology of death and resurrection is consistently proclaimed in funerals in the South Georgia Conference and also provide a resource for Wesleyan funeral preaching. The research had 53 participating pastors for the clergy questionnaire, 4 pastors who the researcher interviewed for the pastor interviews, and 364 participants for the laity survey.

This chapter describes the data collected from three research instruments. It shares the quantitative data from the laity survey and the qualitative data from the clergy questionnaire and the Pastor Interviews. Lastly, this chapter identifies the major findings collected from the data.

Participants

The participants in this study are lay and clergy members of the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church. The laity survey was sent to every lay person's email in the Coastal District. Of the emails sent out, 364 lay people responded

and completed the survey. The responses were anonymous, but no one under the age of eighteen participated and both men and women participated. The Clergy Questionnaire was sent out to all provisional and ordained elders and deacons in the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church of which fifty-three responded and completed the questionnaire. No one under the age of eighteen participated and both men and women participated. Lastly, the pastor interviews had four participants who met with the interviewer. One of the pastors is under the age of forty. The other three were all fifty-five and older. One of the four is African American.

Research Question #1: Description of Evidence

RQ1: What do United Methodist pastors in the South Georgia Conference see as their primary role and responsibility in the funeral sermon?

The qualitative instruments used to answer the first research question was the clergy questionnaire.”

Questions 2, 5, and 6 in the clergy questionnaire asked about the purpose and context of the funeral sermon. Question 2 asked: “What do you see as your primary purpose in the funeral sermon? What is the main thing that you are trying to communicate and accomplish?” Of the fifty-three responses, four themes emerged.

Table 4.1: Primary Purpose of the Funeral Sermon

<u>Response Given</u>	<u>Number of times answered</u>
To comfort the family	14
To give hope to the family	15
To praise God in worship	3
To honor the deceased	3

Of all of the responses, “to comfort the family” and “to give hope to the family” was the overwhelming response as the purpose of the funeral. Below are some of the responses from participants about comforting and giving hope to the family:

Table 4.2: To Comfort/Give Hope to the Family

Comfort and Hope found in Christ Jesus
 To bring comfort to the surviving family and friends
 To provide comfort to the family of friends of the deceased based on grace and comfort given in scriptures
 I view the funeral sermon as essentially pastoral, to comfort, support, and offer hope to the bereaved
 A healthy mix of comfort, hope, and inspiration
 Emotional and spiritual comfort given to family and friends
 To connect the resurrection of Christ with Christian hope so that mourners do not grieve as those who have no hope.
 Comfort the family with the gospel message of hope

Many of the responses had more than one answer, but comforting and giving hope to the family was shared most often as the primary role and responsibility of the funeral sermon.

Question # 5 in the clergy questionnaire asked, “Do you ever talk about the bodily resurrection for those who are in Christ in your funeral sermon? Why or why not?” Out of 31 responses, 18 responded “Yes” and 13 responded “No.” For those who do not talk about the resurrection, the following reasons were listed:

Table 4.3: Why Don’t You Speak of the Bodily Resurrection?

Perhaps that is a theology that might be off-putting to non-believer.
 Too much theology for grieving families
 No because the liturgy does that
 It is not necessary, even if the pastor has strongly held beliefs on bodily resurrection, to wade into this at a funeral
 That’s not the time to deal with theology of the “Creed and the End Times.”
 Perhaps that is best reserved for another teaching forum
 No! I do mention that Jesus is the first fruits of the bodily resurrection and that one day we will be like him.
 It is not included as a must-be-unpacked-thoroughly at every funeral formula

The reasons given for not talking about resurrection are often related to “too much theology” for a funeral. Since the majority of pastors understand comforting the family as the goal of the sermon, and since many understand the deceased as the main character of

the funeral, logically speaking theology isn't as important and sometimes antithetical to pastoral care according to most of the participants who answered "no."

Question #6 in the clergy questionnaire asks, "How do you communicate hope in your funeral sermon for the deceased, those who are mourning, and the world?" At the heart of this question is to determine how United Methodist pastors in the South Georgia Conference share hope in funeral preaching and if the hope proclaimed is rooted in scripture.

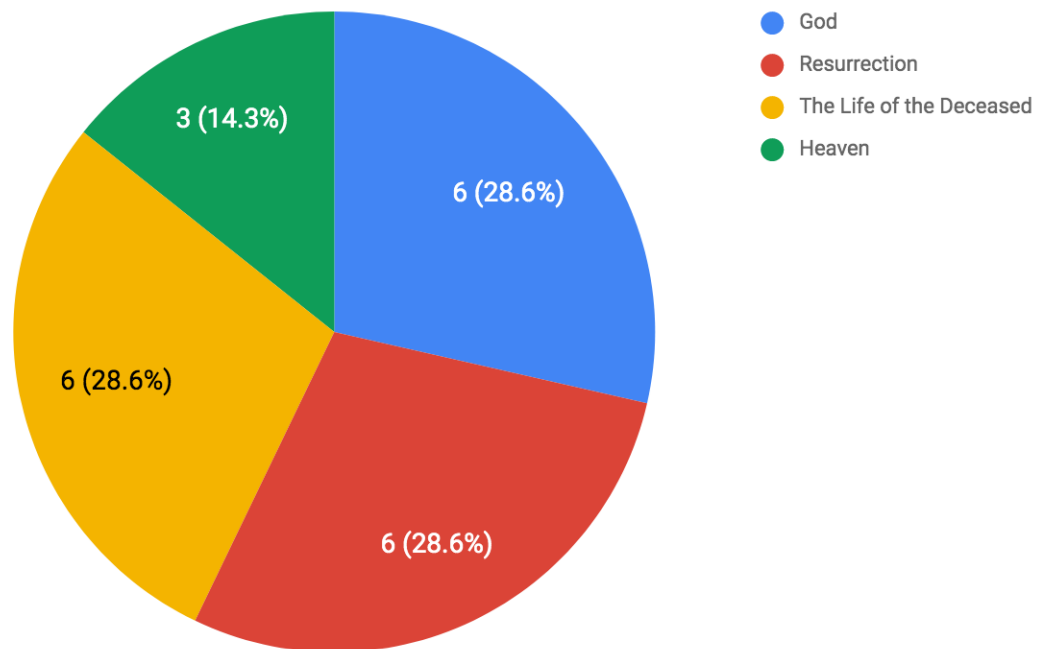


Figure 4.1. How do you communicate hope in the funeral sermon?

The four categories with the most responses were: God, Heaven, Resurrection, and the Life of the Deceased. Below are the more specific responses to these four categories.

Table 4.4: Hope in God

God

God who made us and saves us
 The mystery of God
 Jesus
 Our only hope is Jesus
 The Love of Jesus
 God's Grace

Six participants indicated that “resurrection” is the way that they communicate hope in a funeral sermon. More specifically, here are some responses in this category:

Table 4.5: Hope in the Resurrection

Resurrection

Death and resurrection
 Resurrection for the deceased, the mournful, and the world
 Death does not have the final say

Six participants also communicate hope in the funeral sermons through the “Life of the Deceased.” Some of the responses include:

Table 4.6: Hope Through the Life of the Deceased

Through sacred stories
 Through the deceased's testimony
 Through the fruit of the Christian
 The person's life

Distinction and Necessity of the Funeral Sermon

Questions #3 and #4 asked about the distinction and necessity of the funeral sermon. At the heart of these two questions is whether a sermon at a funeral is necessary at all. Question #3 asks, “What, if anything, is different about the funeral sermon compared to a regular sermon?” Out of over 34 responses, two common themes emerged. What makes funeral sermons different from regular sermons is that funeral sermons include the

element of eulogizing the deceased and are meant to comfort the family. The following responses were given highlighting the importance of the funeral sermon eulogizing the deceased:

Table 4.7: The Importance of Eulogy

More personal to individual
Uses stories from the deceased’s life as illustrations
I spend the majority of my time describing the individual
Funeral sermons are a proclamation of the gospel in light of the deceased’s life
More tightly focused on the person’s life
The funeral sermon is both person-centered and gospel-centered
I’m communicating about a particular person and their impact on the lives of the hearers
Focused on the loved one that has passed

Among the responses, there was disagreement on whether a funeral needed a sermon or a eulogy. Some of the responses revealed different perspectives on what constitutes a sermon. For example, respondent said, “I do not think of a eulogy as a sermon. A sermon is a specific message from scripture and rarely names a non-biblical individual.”

The other theme that emerged from this research question is that a distinctive element of funeral preaching as opposed to regular preaching is comforting the family. Following are some responses from the participants:

Table 4.8: The Difference of a Funeral Sermon

More directed at particular family
Comfort vs. challenges
Focuses more on comfort and hope
Directed to grieving family

Questions 9, 11, 12, and 13 helped answer Research Question #1 by analyzing the presuppositions and theology of the participants. Question 9 asked, “How important is

theology when you are preaching a funeral sermon?" All 34 respondents claimed that it's important to various degrees. Question #11 asks, "Where are the Christians who are dead?" There was a lot of uncertainty with this question. Many of the participants suggested that they did not know where the dead are and are not in a place to judge. Most of the responses were non-committal. Several suggested that a Christian funeral's purpose is not to talk about such matters, but rather the hope of Christ's resurrection. Question #12, "Is there anything that you try to avoid saying during a funeral sermon that you feel a need to correct?" This question produced a diversity of responses, with most focusing on bad theology said by family members. Respondents mentioned "God needed an angel" or "God needed her more than we did." Several also responded that the funeral isn't a time to have an altar call or to try "converting" people.

Question #13 asks, "Has a family ever wanted you to say something during the funeral sermon that you couldn't because of theological reasons? Out of 34 responses, 19 responded "no." Asking the minister to not speak about Jesus or to not read scripture was answered four times. Three participants responded that they have been asked and have refused to share "shallow heaven sentiments" during the funeral sermon.

Research Question #2: Description of Evidence

RQ2: Do United Methodist pastors in the South Georgia Conference communicate a Wesleyan theology of death and resurrection to their congregations?

In order to answer this research question the investigator developed a rubric for funeral preaching. (See Appendix D: Rubric for Wesleyan Funeral Preaching) This rubric compares and contrasts a Wesleyan and Modern/Secular/Western understanding of death

and resurrection. The rubric will assist in determining which view of death influences the preaching of South Georgia Conference pastors.

The instrument used and analyzed to answer research question #2 is the “Pastor Interviews.” The investigator met with each pastor for a personal interview. There were four pastors and each interview lasted approximately one hour. All four of the pastors were male. One was under the age of 40 while the others were 50 and over. One was African American. The other two were over fifty males.

Here are the four questions that guided the discussion:

1. How would you define a good funeral?
2. What are you trying to accomplish with your funeral and what is its overall purpose?
3. Where do you place hope in your funeral sermon?
4. What have you found helpful and challenging with your experience working with funeral home directors?
5. Do you ever feel that theology and pastoral care conflict with each other when offering care and preparing a funeral sermon?

Table 4.9: What is a Good Funeral?

Participant #1

“A family is comforted, inspired, and celebrates the life of the person that they love.”

“And Christ is lifted up in the midst of this.”

“And they leave with hope.”

Participant #2

“Preaches toward resurrection. Celebrates life, but is an Easter service.”

Participant #3

“A worship service where we gather not because of death but because they lived.”

Participant #4

Focuses on the person and how they made a difference in the world.”

Question #2 from the pastor interviews asked, “What are you trying to accomplish with your funeral sermon? What’s the overall purpose of the funeral?”

Table 4.10: The Purpose of a Funeral According to Pastors

Participant #1

“I use scripture to talk about how faith shaped this person’s life.”

“The main subject of the sermon is the one who died. A bad funeral is one where you leave and the person wasn’t lifted up.”

“The funeral doesn’t belong to the church. It’s for the family.”

“I come alongside of the family to offer guidance.”

Participant #2

“Celebrate life. Recognize loss. Preach about death.”

Participant #3

“Make the congregation feel like you knew them all of your life.”

“Leave thinking, “I should be a better person.”

Participant #4

“Reflects on the person and how they touched lives.”

“The person is the central character.”

Table: 4.11: Where Do You Place Hope in the Funeral Sermon?

Participant #1

“Scripture-a graceful God as revealed in Jesus Christ.”

“What do we learn from a person’s life that shapes us going forward.”

“The person as example-Legacy.”

“How are you not separated from them by death?”

“What about them carries on within you?”

Participant #2

“The resurrection and the God who brings life out of death.”

Participant #3

“First fruits of the resurrection. If there’s no resurrection there’s no hope.”

Participant #4

“Hope is in Jesus.”

Table 4.12: Funeral Home Directors

Participant #1

“Most are really helpful and see their job as a ministry.”

“It’s the family’s funeral.”

“I struggle with the increasing amounts of funerals that no longer take place at the church.”

Participant #2

“When they know you, they’ll do what you want.”

“They bring a sense of dignity to death.”

Participant #3

“My only issue is when they make plans without my authority

Participant #4

“Family has the final say.”

4.13: Theology or Pastoral Care?

Participant #1

“People over doctrine.”

“Christ cared more about people than he cared about doctrine.”

“I can teach them good theology later. That’s not a time to do that.”

Participant #2

“Hallmark moments. Feel-good stuff isn’t helpful.”

Participant #3

“I avoid saying things like, “God needed an angel.” I also avoid trying to make sense of things like suicide.”

Participant #4

“I don’t use my position to make proclamations about the person’s destination.”

All of the pastors interviewed avoid talking about death and the purpose of death in the funeral sermon. Several said that they discuss it during regular sermons, but funeral is not a time or place to make meaning of death. While all four participants acknowledge that the funeral service is a worship service, three of the four said that the main purpose is comforting the family. In addition, three out of four said that the main character of the

sermon is the deceased. When discussing where hope is found, two said that hope is found in the resurrection of Jesus.

Based on the responses of the pastors and the funeral preaching rubric, these four pastors have elements of both a Wesleyan and a modern/secular understanding of death and resurrection, with the western/secular having a greater influence.

Research Question #3: Description of Evidence

What do United Methodist lay people in the South Georgia Conference expect from their pastors in the funeral sermon?

To answer research question #3, the investigator emailed the laity survey to all laity in the coastal district of the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church. Of those emailed, 362 responded and gave consent to participate in the survey. The responses revealed three enlightening categories of thought from the laity: their understanding of the purpose of the funeral, their understanding of theology, and their understanding of where hope can be found in death.

Purpose of the Funeral

The first cluster of questions will analyzed how laity understand the purpose of the funeral.

Question #2 asked the participants how to describe a Christian funeral. Of the 319 responses, the majority responded that a funeral is a “Celebration of Life.”

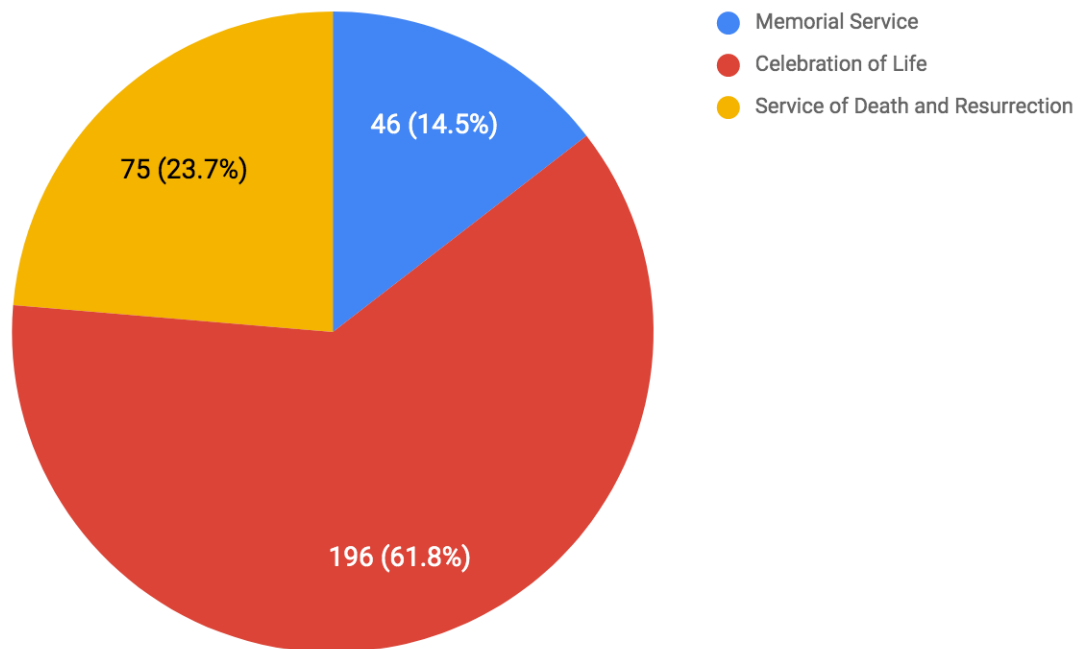


Figure 4.2: What is a christian funeral?

With 242 respondents answering that a funeral is either a memorial service remembering the deceased or a celebration of the person's life, over 75% of participants understand the deceased as the central character in the ceremony.

Question #3 continues that perspective when it asks, "What is the purpose of the funeral?"

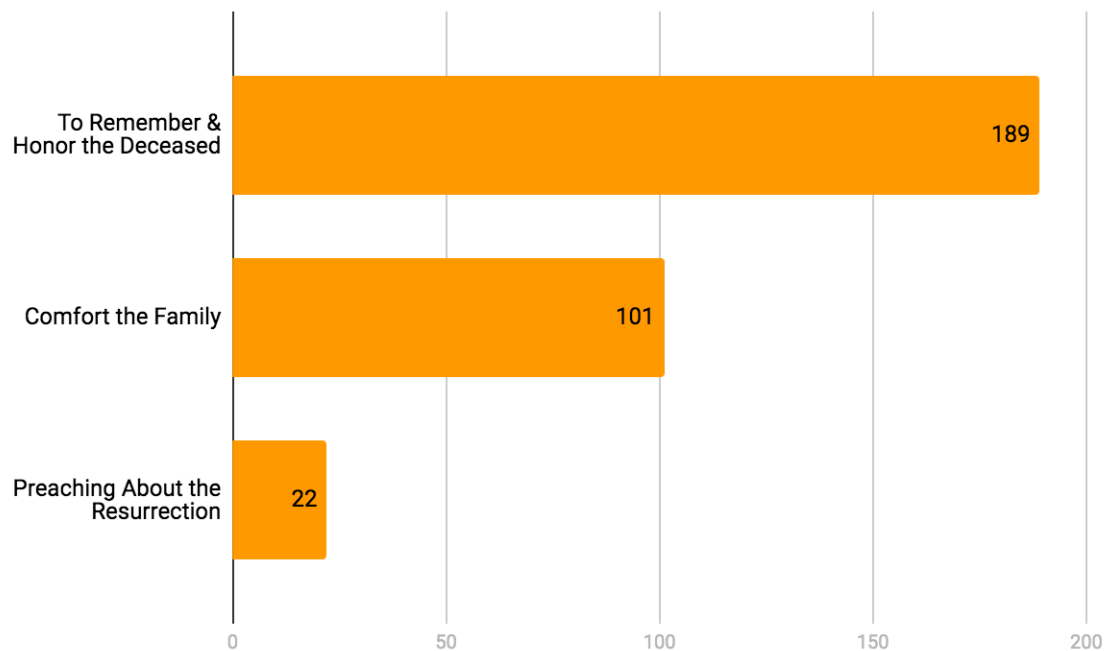


Figure 4.3: What is the purpose of the funeral?

Out of 319 responses, 189 said that the purpose is to remember and honor the deceased. 101 said that comforting the family was the primary purpose. Only 22 participants said that “preaching about the resurrection of Jesus” is the main purpose. Question #4 asks about the main character of the funeral sermon.

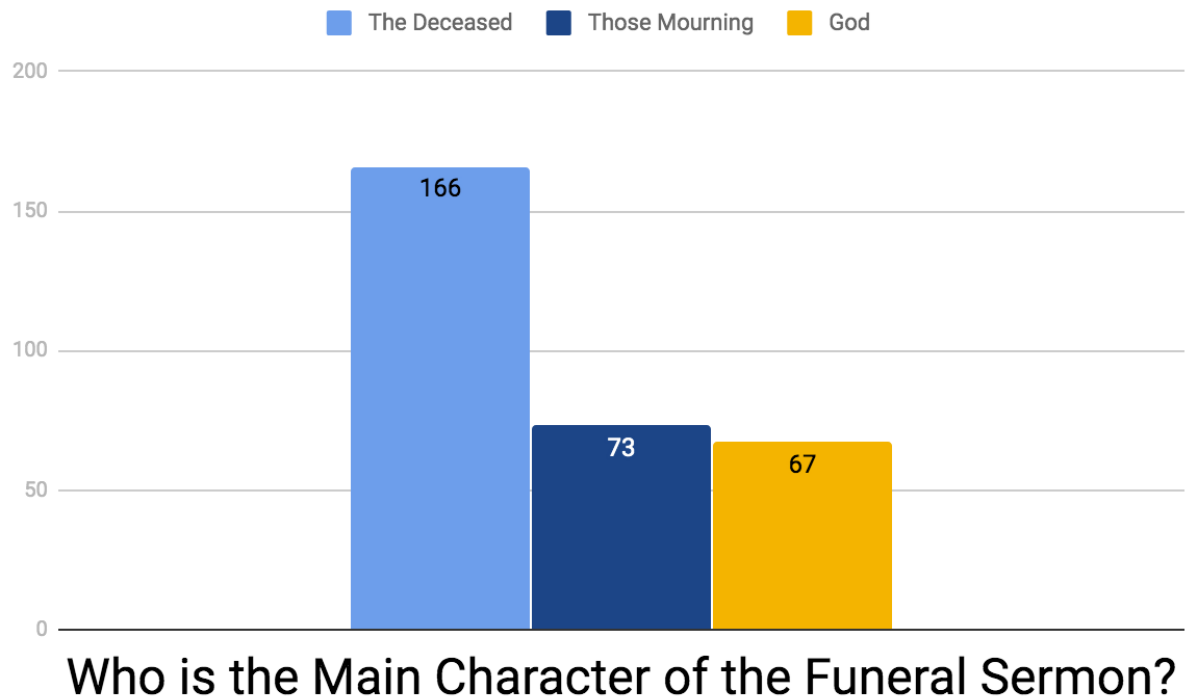


Figure 4.4: Main character of the funeral.

Question #5 asked what the primary story should be in the funeral sermon. 218 said the deceased and 96 said the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The laity's understanding of the purpose of the funeral is for the deceased to be central.

Theology of death

The next cluster of questions that will be analyzed will analyze the role that theology plays in understanding death. Several of the questions from the Laity Survey discerned the theology of the participants. Question #7 asked, "What happens to a Christian after they die?" Seventy-eight percent answered, "heaven" while 14% answered that the dead "wait, in death, for the return of Jesus.

Question #8 asked, "What do Christians become after they die?" One hundred and sixty responded "dead, but spiritually with God and awaiting the resurrection";

seventy-four responded “not sure”; sixty responded that Christians become “spirits”; and twenty-seven responded that Christians become “angels.”

Question #9 asked, “What’s more important, good theology or pastoral care?” The following figure shows that the laity are overwhelmingly in favor of pastoral care being more important.

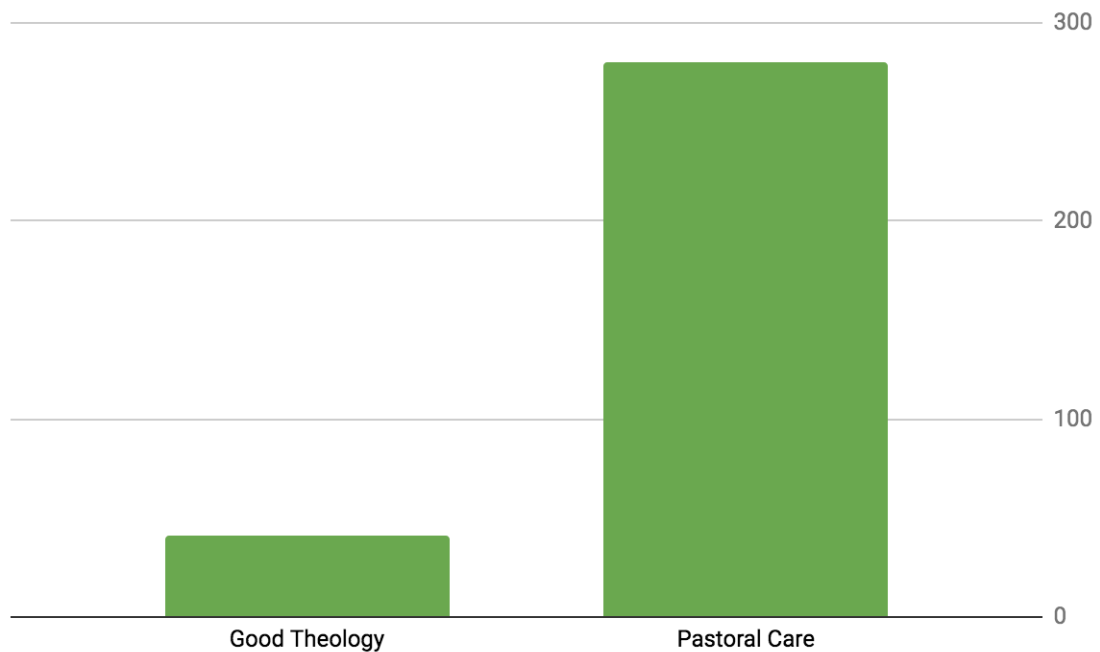


Figure 4.5: Good theology or pastoral care?

Hope in Death

The last cluster of questions that the investigator analyzed related to how the laity understand hope in death based on their responses to the survey.

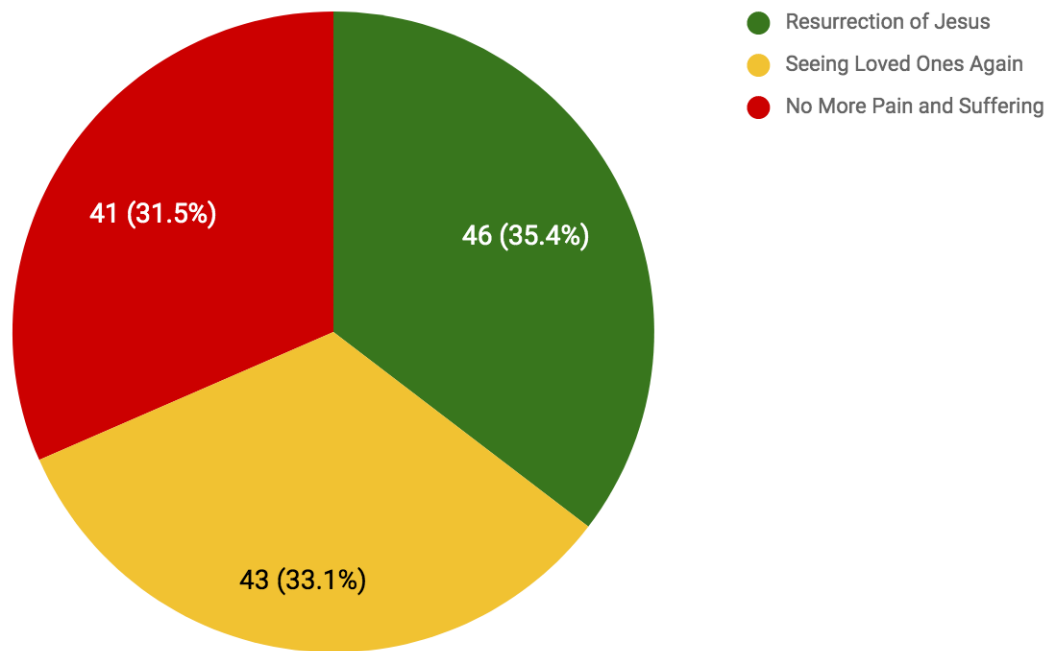


Figure 4.6: Christian hope in death

Question #19 asked whether the funeral should talk about the resurrection. 208 said “usually.” Question #20 asked whether the Christian funeral should avoid talking about death to help people move away from grief with 241 answering “rarely.” In Question #20 over 80% of the respondents said that the funeral sermon should be based on a passage of scripture.

Summary of Major Findings

The data collected from the three research instruments yielded significant findings for determining how South Georgia United Methodist clergy and laity understand the purpose of funeral sermons. These are the major findings from the research:

1. Both the laity and the clergy believe that the main character in the funeral sermon should be the deceased person.
2. Both laity and clergy understand that the primary purpose of the funeral is to comfort the family.

3. Both laity and clergy understand that pastoral care is more important than theological substance during a funeral.
4. Based on the “funeral preaching rubric,” pastors in the South Georgia Conference are greatly influenced by a western/secular understanding of death.

CHAPTER 5

LEARNING REPORT FOR THE PROJECT

Overview of the Chapter

The task of funeral preaching is to share the good news of the gospel with hope in the face of death. This project's purpose was to discern a Wesleyan theological perspective of death and resurrection in order to evaluate the funeral preaching of pastors in the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church.

This chapter identifies four major findings from the research project and explains how they relate to my literature review, my personal observations, and the information received from the research instruments. Lastly, this chapter will share the limitations of the research study, unexpected observations, and recommendations for further study.

Major Findings

Below I will share the four major findings from my research project.

First Finding: The Main Character in the Funeral Sermon.

Both laity and clergy believe that the main character in the funeral sermon should be the deceased person. I have observed that pastors in southern Georgia United Methodist churches focus primarily on the deceased person as the main character during funeral sermons. While scripture is often included, the sermon is more eulogy than theology. By this I mean that the main content of the sermon is the story of the deceased person's life. The research of chapter four confirmed this perspective, with the majority of laity and pastors stating that the primary character of the funeral sermon is the deceased. Pastors eulogize in their funeral sermons and laity expect the same.

In my literature review, I shared how the early church viewed the funeral as a worship service. Funerals were not a creation of the Christian faith, but they were transformed in the Christian tradition by making the service theo-centric. Hope was proclaimed through the good news of the resurrection of Jesus who conquered death. The church also took possession of the dead body, caring for it for burial. This gave more power to the church and its message during the season of grief. From the death to the burial the church proclaimed hope in death through the power of the resurrection of Jesus.

I also shared the views of modern homileticians about the content of the funeral sermon. While the funeral sermon should certainly be personal to the deceased, the primary story should be the gospel. Thomas Long says that, “Ironically, the strongest rival to the gospel at a funeral is the life story of the deceased” (Long 135). Care must be taken in weaving the story of Jesus and the story of the person together to proclaim the hope of the resurrection. When the story of the deceased becomes the primary story, the hope of Jesus’s death and resurrection is not central and do not have the final word.

The biblical framework of this finding focuses on how hope in death is found in the resurrection of Jesus. Jesus defeated death not through memories of himself but through His bodily resurrection. Paul encourages the church of Thessalonica that Christians should not grieve as the world grieves because Jesus is alive and when Christ returns, those in Christ will “be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words.” (1 Thess. 4:17b-18)

Second Finding: Primary Purpose of the Funeral

Both laity and clergy understand that the primary purpose of the funeral is to comfort the family. I have observed funerals to be more about comforting people and less about

Christian worship. The songs that are picked out often lack good theology and are instead personal favorites of the deceased or family. The eulogies are usually aimed at comforting the family by telling stories of the deceased. Also, the family has most of the influence and often has the final say in what happens in the funeral worship service. In the words of one of my interviewed pastors, “the funeral is for the family” and “we will do whatever they want to do.” Of course, caring for the family with pastoral care is important, but placing that in front of worshipping the God who conquers death runs the risk of misplacing hope. In addition, it raises the question of what influence can be had on the funeral worship service when the grieving family, sometimes people who are not Christian or attend irregularly, are given power in the worship planning process. Assuming that unchurched people attend funerals, what sort of God does the funeral sermon proclaim?

The literature review revealed how the rise of the funeral home influenced the purpose of the Christian funeral. According to Long, the funeral directors “took the dead away from us in order to embalm them, and then they took the funeral itself away and turned it from a worship service into a vulgar display of conspicuous consumption.” (Long, 72 of 196) When the funeral home took possession of the body, the church’s authority in the service grew less significant. The family and the funeral home took the lead in making arrangements while the pastor comes alongside to provide pastoral care for the family. This has influenced not only the pastoral care surrounding the funeral, but also the service and sermon itself. As a result, the purpose of the funeral shifted from one of worship of God and the proclamation of hope to a service that provides comfort to the family.

In the Old and New Testaments, death is seen as inevitable for humanity. Throughout the bible there is a consistent meaning of death being part of the human experience. It is not the result of sin, but the reality that we are created as mortals. Therefore, death should be acknowledged. Often, in an attempt to comfort the family, death is glossed over and even ignored. To experience the good news of Jesus conquering death through His resurrection, we have to accept death as a reality. Funeral preaching should not neglect speaking of death. Families should have room to grieve. That said, the biblical witness is that death does not have the final say. Only when death is acknowledged and the resurrection of Jesus is proclaimed can a funeral sermon share biblical hope and the family can be comforted with the truth of the gospel.

Third Finding: Pastoral Care More Important

Both laity and clergy understand that pastoral care is more important than theological substance during a funeral. As one pastor told me during an interview, pastors during the funeral planning should prioritize “people over doctrine.” In other words, pastoral care should be the goal, even if it is to the extent where good theology is neglected. As a result, this has led to many parts of the funeral service being done with little care for theology and more care for pastoral or pragmatism. For example, we are seeing a rise in cremations. One lay person suggested, “It’s just a body.” When I spoke to laity and clergy about cremation before and during the research, they were in favor of cremation for pragmatic purposes. When asked about the meaning of death during the research, pastors suggested that explaining death should be avoided during funerals. Pastors and laity alike had very little to say about the physical body. And with no overarching theology to guide the funeral planning, clergy and laity alike are left to their own

thoughts and sensitivities. This leads to phrases like “God just wanted another angel” or “God needed them more than we did.” These words are offered for the purpose of comfort and care, but they lack good theology. I believe that clergy prioritize pastoral care over theology because they struggle to make the connection for how good theology can be pastoral and provide hope during the funeral.

The literature review highlighted the role that secular culture has played in a theology of death and how it has influenced funeral preaching. This leads the church to being, in McGill’s words, “better teachers of this society’s view of death than of Jesus’ view” (McGill, 9). Therefore, there is not a real difference between a Christian theology of death and a secular one preached at a funeral. It also has devastating consequences on Christian teaching about death and eschatology. As I shared in the “American Understanding of Death” section in the Literature Review, “A Christian proclamation of heaven and the afterlife is truth, but often birthed out of an attempt to extend an American version of life and not a Christian hope rooted in the resurrection of Jesus. In order for the hope of the resurrection to be intelligible, death must be taken seriously, acknowledged, and reckoned with.” To proclaim a Christian message of hope in a funeral sermon, Christian theology must be prioritized and distinguished from secular culture.

The biblical witness of death is one of hope for those in Christ. Hope certainly should be central in the Christian funeral, but that hope must be rooted in biblical hope. As Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 is discussing the resurrection of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, and the resurrection of the body, he says these words about death in verses 54-56: “Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, o death, is your victory? Where, O death, 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.” Through Christ’s death, bodily resurrection, and the hope of bodily resurrection for those in Christ, death has no power! A proclamation of this truth in the funeral sermon will provide pastoral care for the family rooted in good theology.

Fourth Finding: Influence of Western/Secular Understanding of Death

Based on the “funeral preaching rubric,” pastors in the South Georgia Conference are greatly influenced by a western/secular understanding of death. My reason for doing this project in the first place was because of my suspicion that many pastors were influenced more by a secular understanding of death than a biblical one. In my experience in Methodist churches over fifteen years I have observed funeral services and funeral sermons that were more anthropocentric than theo-centric and death-evading than death-acknowledging; with little care taken for the proclamation of gospel message of death and resurrection. I have had many families tell me that instead of a “Service of Death and Resurrection,” they would rather have a “Celebration of Life.” My attempt to understand the reasoning for this approach to funerals led me to research this project. Comparing the research with the preaching rubric, much of funeral preaching in the South Georgia conference falls under the western/secular category.

The literature review revealed the influence of western secularism on the teachings of the church in modernity. In the western world, death is seen as a weakness and something to be avoided. Modern medicine works hard to eradicate death at all costs. This influence has made churches, particularly pastors, avoid dealing with death and engage instead with celebrating life. Instead of proclaiming hope in death, death is in a sense avoided and the service takes the form of a celebration. In addition, mainline pastors have approached

discussing death and hope beyond death vaguely. This has resulted in a fragmented theology of death and resurrection in the western world which opens up the church to a western/secular influence.

A biblical and theological framework gives a radical alternative to understanding death. Because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, death is conquered and hope is found in the face of death. Death is not avoided and there is a place for mourning in the Christian tradition. Instead of hope coming from remembering the deceased and celebration, hope is rooted in the resurrection.

Ministry Implications of the Findings

1. The first ministry implication from the research is the revelation of a clear need for better funeral preaching/preparation training for United Methodist pastors. From my personal experience in seminary I had very little training in how to preach a funeral. The training that I did receive was gained through personal experience in the practice of ministry and learning for myself. In light of the findings of this study there clearly needs to be training provided for funeral preaching that is rooted in Wesleyan/biblical theology.

2. The second ministry implication is for the pastor to see the funeral service as an evangelistic opportunity. Funerals are a rare opportunity where people who are unchurched, de-churched, inactive members, or irregular attenders come to worship. Funerals provide an opportunity to share the gospel with people who are often ready to hear a word of good news. That said, it is important to share the gospel in a way that does not take advantage of the emotional state of the mourners. Altar calls should be avoided unless there is a valid contextual reason for having one. Instead of making the funeral

sermon a eulogy, it should instead be a sermon that is personal to the deceased with the goal of sharing hope in the good news of the resurrection of Jesus.

3. A third ministry implication is for the pastor to take authority in the planning of the funeral sermon. The pastor certainly should consult with the family, value their input, and use their suggestions if possible. However, since the funeral is a worship service and the sermon is an opportunity to proclaim the gospel, the authority for planning the funeral service and sermon should be given to the pastor.

Limitations of the Study

Overall, I do not believe that any limitations influenced the overall results of the research. I did have someone share with me that she felt some of the questions in the laity survey were confusing. She mentioned that she felt that of the options offered, she could not choose just one. I also had hoped to personally interview more than four pastors and would have preferred to have a female participate.

Unexpected Observations

One unexpected observation from the study was how differently laity and clergy understand the role of theology in the funeral and how the laity's understanding has the most influence. The study reveals that clergy place a much higher value on good theology compared to laity, but the practice of clergy is more guided by pastoral care concerns.

Recommendations

First, in future research, I would recommend actually listening to funeral sermons being preached instead of just relying on pastors sharing their theology and practices in interviews. While I believe my research gained accurate insight, often what preachers

believe about preaching and what they actually preach can be different. My funeral preaching rubric can be used to analyze the funeral sermons.

Second, I would also recommend a future researcher to interview lay people who recently lost a loved one. This would allow the researching to ask questions of what they heard in the funeral sermon, how did it provided comfort to those who are grieving, and whether hope in the resurrection of Jesus was made clear in the sermon and the service as a whole.

Third, I would also like to expand this research to see how pastors in other parts of the country and the world practice ministry around dying, death, and funerals. Also, how does ethnicity, race, gender, and other categories play a role in how we understand death and funeral preaching?

Overall, this research project gained a wealth of insight into the funeral preaching practices of South Georgia United Methodist clergy. However, there are many other areas and opportunities for research.

Postscript

This journey has been challenging and fulfilling. In the middle of the project I moved to a new church in a new city which caused me to make changes in my research. However, that proved to give me even more insight into the South Georgia setting. I was fortunate to have a great dissertation coach in Dr. Lenny Luchetti who provided timely insight and helpful suggestions. This project gave me the opportunity to meet new people and share in deep discussions about the good news of Jesus Christ.

APPENDIXES

Appendix A: Laity Survey

Question #1: Do you give consent to participate in the survey as described above?

- A. Yes
- B. No

Question #2: What is the best description of a Christian funeral?

- A. A Memorial Service
- B. A Celebration of Life
- C. A Service of Death and Resurrection

Question #3: What is the purpose of a funeral?

- A. To remember and honor the deceased
- B. To preach about heaven
- C. To preach about the resurrection
- D. To comfort the grieving

Question #4: Who should be the main character (s) in the funeral sermon?

- A. The deceased
- B. God
- C. The non-Christian
- D. Those needing to be comforted

Question #5: Which story should be primary in the funeral sermon?

- A. The story of the life of the deceased
- B. The story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.
- C. The story of the deceased's family and friends.

Question #6: While planning a funeral is a collaborative effort, who has the final say in planning the funeral service?

- A. the pastor
- B. The funeral home
- C. The family

Question #7: What happens to a Christian after they die?

- A. They go to heaven.

- B. They wait, in death, for the return of Jesus
- C. They die, but physically and spiritually
- D. They go to purgatory
- E. None of the above

Question #8: What do Christians become after they die?

- A. Angels
- B. Spirit
- C. Dead, but spiritually with God and awaiting the resurrection
- D. Not sure

Question #9: What more important during a funeral: Good theology or pastoral care?

- A. Good theology
- B. Pastoral café

Question #10: What is the Christian hope in the face of death?

- A. Heaven
- B. The resurrection of Jesus
- C. Seeing loved ones again
- D. No more pain or suffering

Question #11: Which phrase best describes death?

- A. Death is nothing at all.
- B. Death is the result of sin.
- C. Death is part of being human.

Question 12: Should the body be present during the funeral?

- A. Usually
- B. Rarely
- C. Sometimes

Question 13: Should Christians be cremated?

- A. Usually
- B. Rarely
- C. Sometimes

Question 14: Should there be an opened casket?

- A. Usually

- B. Rarely
- C. Sometimes

Question 15: Should the funeral be in the sanctuary?

- A. Usually
- B. Rarely
- C. Sometimes

Question 16: Should there be an altar call during the funeral service?

- A. Usually
- B. Rarely
- C. Sometimes

Question 17: Should the officiating pastor have the final say in what's allowed at the funeral service?

- A. Usually
- B. Rarely
- C. Sometimes

Question 18: Should funerals help people overcome their grief and sadness?

- A. Usually
- B. Rarely
- C. Sometimes

Question 19: Should the funeral sermon talk about the resurrection of Jesus?

- A. Usually
- B. Rarely
- C. Sometimes

Question 20: Should the funeral sermon avoid talking about death in an effort to help people move away from grief?

- A. Usually
- B. Rarely
- C. Sometimes

Question 21: Should the funeral be based on a biblical passage of scripture?

- A. Usually
- B. Rarely

C. Sometimes

Question 22: "God needed a new angel."

A. True

B. False

Question 23: "Heaven gained a new angel."

A. True

B. False

Question 24: "Christians don't really die."

A. True

B. False

Question 25: "He's in a better place."

A. True

B. False

Question 26: "That's her body, but that's not really her anymore."

A. True

B. False

Question 27: "Through death, God has healed him."

A. True

B. False

Question 28: "She is now watching over us."

A. True

B. False

Question 29: "He's my guardian angel."

A. True

B. False

Question 30: "He now lives in our hearts."

A. True

B. False

Question 31: "We will see her again."

A. True

B. False

Question 32: Other than the funeral sermon, I feel like my pastor adequately preaching on death from the pulpit.

- A. Yes
- B. No

Question 33: If you suddenly became responsible for making funeral arrangements, do you feel adequately prepared?

- A. Yes
- B. No

Question 34: If your church had a funeral planning event for members to pre-plan their own funerals, would you take advantage of the event?

- A. Yes
- B. No

Question 35: Is a Christian funeral a worship service?

- A. Yes
- B. No

Question 36: The music, prayers, and other elements of the service should be focused on sharing about the deceased's life and not necessarily Christian focused?

- A. Yes
- B. No

Question 37: If the deceased was not a Christian, should that be mentioned in the funeral service?

- A. Yes
- B. No

Question 38: If someone served in the military, it should always be mentioned during the funeral service.

- A. Yes
- B. No

Question 39: If someone served in the military, "Taps" should be the last thing done at the end of the graveside service.

- A. Yes
- B. No

Question 40: If someone served in the military, it is appropriate for the Christian's coffin to be covered in the American flag.

- A. Yes
- B. No

Question 41: If the deceased is a Christian, the last thing spoken over his or her life at the comital should be about his or her identity in Christ.

- A. Yes
- B. No

Appendix B: Clergy Questionnaire

1. Do you give consent to participate in this questionnaire as described above?
2. What do you see as your primary purpose in the funeral sermon? What is the main thing that you are trying to communicate and accomplish?
3. What if anything is different about the funeral sermon compared to a regular sermon?
4. Is a sermon necessary for a funeral? Why or why not?
5. How do you communicate hope in your funeral sermon for the deceased, those who are mourning, and the world?
6. Do you ever talk about the bodily resurrection for those who are in Christ in your funeral sermon? Why or why not?
7. What if anything do you say about Jesus during your funeral sermon?
8. How do you explain death in the funeral sermon?
9. How important is theology in the funeral sermon?
10. Who is usually the main character in your funeral sermon?
11. Where are those who are dead and are 1) Christians, 2)not Christians, and what do you say about each in the funeral sermon?
12. Is there anything that you try to avoid saying in the funeral sermon? Is there a bad theology common in funeral sermons that you feel a need to correct?
13. Has a family ever wanted you to say something during the funeral sermon that you could not because of theological reasons? If so, what?
14. Is it important for the body to be present during the funeral? Why or why not?

15. Who plans the funeral service that you officiate? Do you feel that you have proper authority in the development of the service?
16. Do you give an altar call in response to your funeral sermon? Why or why not?

Appendix C: Pastor Interview Questions

1. In an interview discussing his book, *Accompany Them With Singing*, Dr. Thomas Long talks about the changing landscape of funerals. He says this: “Pastors are confused by what constitutes a good funeral.” How would you define a good funeral?
2. What are you trying to accomplish with your funeral sermon? What is the overall purpose of the funeral?
3. Where do you place hope in your funeral sermon? Where do you invite others to find hope, but Christian and non-Christian?
4. What have you found helpful and challenging when working with funeral home directors and employees?
5. Do you ever feel that theology and pastoral care conflict with each other when offering care and preparing a funeral sermon? If so, why and how? Can you share an example?

Appendix D: Rubric for Wesleyan Funeral Preaching

	Wesleyan/Biblical Understanding of Death and Resurrection	Modern/Secular/Western Understanding of Death and Resurrection
Physical Death	Death is a reality of being mortal. Death is not the result of sin. It should be embraced as a holy moment. Part of the Christian life	Death is a sign of weakness. Death is avoided. Outside of life.
After Death	Dead, but awaiting the resurrection of the body. Resting in Christ.	In heaven. Angels With loved ones.
Primary Story in the Funeral	The story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.	The story of the life of the deceased.
Hope in Death	The Resurrection of Jesus The resurrection of the body	Comforting the Family The Afterlife The End of Suffering
The Funeral	Service of Death and Resurrection	Held to honor the deceased. Celebration of Life.
The main character of the funeral sermon	God-Father, Son, and Holy Spirit	The deceased The family
The purpose of the funeral	Worship God who conquers death through resurrection	Comfort the family and honor the deceased

Appendix E: Informed Consent for Laity Survey

You are invited to be in a research study being done by Josh Duckworth from the Asbury Theological Seminary. You are invited because you are a lay person in the Coastal District of the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church. The Survey deals with the topic and your perception of death and resurrection, particularly your perceptions and expectations of the funeral sermon and the funeral service.

If you agree to be in the study, you will be asked to answer forty questions in the survey. There are four sections in the following survey. Instructions for each section is below.

Only Josh Duckworth will know who participated. If any quotes or points from your response is shared in the dissertation, a name will not be used but instead the phrase “one respondent” will be used. If the study makes you feel uncomfortable at any point, you are welcome to stop at any time. You can ask Josh Duckworth questions any time about anything in this study.

Answering "yes" to the following question means that you have read this or had it read to you, and that you want to be in the study. You agree that you have been told about this study and why it is being done and what to do.

Appendix F: Informed Consent Form for Clergy Questionnaire

You are invited to be in a research study being done by Josh Duckworth from the Asbury Theological Seminary. You are invited because you are either a Provisional, Full Elder, or Deacon in the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church. The Questionnaire deals with the topic and your perception of death and resurrection, particularly how you preach of both in the funeral sermon.

If you agree to be in the study, you will be asked to answer the questions in the questionnaire. Please answer all of the fifteen questions thoughtfully. Only Josh Duckworth will know who participated. If any quotes or points from your response is shared in the dissertation, a name will not be used but instead the phrase “one respondent” will be used. If the study makes you feel uncomfortable at any point, you are welcome to stop at any time. You can ask Josh Duckworth questions any time about anything in this study.

Answering "yes" to the following question means that you have read this or had it read to you, and that you want to be in the study. You agree that you have been told about this study and why it is being done and what to do.

Appendix G: Informed Consent Form for Pastor Interviews

You are invited to be in a research study being done by Josh Duckworth from the Asbury Theological Seminary. You are invited because you are either a Provisional, Full Elder, or Deacon serving a United Methodist Church in Savannah, GA. The interview questions deal with the topic and your perception of death and resurrection, particularly how you preach of both in the funeral sermon.

Only Josh Duckworth will know who participated. If any quotes or points from your response is shared in the dissertation, a name will not be used but instead the phrase “one respondent” will be used. If the study makes you feel uncomfortable at any point, you are welcome to stop at any time. Only fully completely interviews will be used. You can ask Josh Duckworth questions any time about anything in this study.

Signing below means that you have read this or had it read to you, and that you want to be in the study. You agree that you have been told about this study and why it is being done and what to do. You also grant consent to allow the interviewer to record the interview on his cell phone.

Yes, I give consent to participate in this study:

Name

Date

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