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Service should have been buried

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The recent meeting of the General Synod (February 2003) re-authorised the Series 1 Funeral Service. Previously this had been authorised for five years at a time, but has now been authorised until rescinded by the Synod. The service is not new, but the debate in the Synod is a sign of the times. Twenty-one out of 161 clergy present voted against (13%), compared to 37 out of 191 laity (19%). However, none of the Bishops voted against whilst 28 voted in favour (there are around 50 Diocesan and elected Suffragans who could have voted).

The long lingering death of 1928

Series 1 is the 1928 Burial Service. It was this service that was opposed by the Church Association in Parliament and their reason for doing so was that it was inconsistent with the doctrine of the Church of England and a denial of the gospel. In that inter-war period it is reckoned that evangelicals represented about a quarter of the Church of England. If our forebears are a barometer of the nature of evangelicalism then it shows that whilst we may talk up the numbers of evangelicals today we have changed what we consider important. It is telling that none of the Bishops voted against.

The commonest argument in favour of the service was that people wanted to use it. Several speakers said that they did not personally like the service, but recognised that others wished to continue to use it. This shows the way in which the relativism of our age has infiltrated the Church. Apparently, what you believe doesn't matter, so long as you believe it sincerely. But it also suggests that we do not care what others believe, and that it does not matter if people are deceived.

There is no common view of death, salvation and eternal destiny in the Church of England. This is not news, but it is a dreadful indictment of the Church. Moreover, there is clearly no agreement amongst many of those who claim the title 'evangelical'. In the light of this it is important to re-iterate the essentials of historic evangelical understanding and why that is soundly biblical.

What happens when you die?

We consist of body and soul. It was pointed out in the Synod that the word soul derives more from a Greek world-view. Whilst this may be true in regards the particular term, it is abundantly plain from Scripture that there is more to human existence than just the physical. For example, consider the valley of dry bones in Ezekiel. Flesh and sinews are put on the bones, but that does not make them live. It is only when the breath is blown into them that they live (Ezek. 37). (The Hebrew word *ruach* means breath, wind, spirit and is the word used of the Holy Spirit, it is not the same word as used for breath in Gen 2.7). Likewise when the Lord Jesus died on the cross we are told that he gave up His spirit (Jn 19.30). It is not possible for us to fully comprehend what this life force is but when it has gone we are left simply with a shell, the dead body. A person dies when the breath of the Lord blows on them (cf. Isa 40.7), then their spirit, their life force, departs.

Death is the consequence of sin and we die when the breath of God blows on us. The spirit departs but the body remains. The souls of the faithful are with Christ; there is no waiting. Jesus said to the thief, *today you will be with me in paradise*. Therefore to depart from this body is to be with the Lord. But that is not the end of the body. Christ will return as judge of all, our bodies will be

raised as resurrection bodies and we will come to judgment. The primary standard of judgment is the acceptance or rejection of Christ. The unrighteous are cast from the presence of God, which is the second death, hell. The righteous will enter rest. God will create a new heaven and a new earth and our new resurrection bodies will be incorruptible and eternal.

What is a funeral for?

Having got our doctrine clear we can begin to make sense of a funeral service. A reformed service is for the benefit of those who remain, not the departed. In such a service there will be thanksgiving for the deceased, and, if we are confident of their faith, that they have passed from death to life because they died in Christ and remain in Christ. There will therefore be expressions of our confidence in the promises of God and his eternal purposes. But we will also be conscious of the grief and pain for those who are left behind. Moreover, we will want to make sure that the opportunity is taken to affirm the great truths about life, death and salvation so that we face up to our own standing before God, the purpose of life, and our eternal destiny. It will be seen that these concerns are prominent in the Book of Common Prayer funeral service.

The funeral service also has a further practical purpose. In most cases there is a body to deal with. We are putting it away until the general resurrection. For this reason Christians have normally buried their dead. (I understand that some early Christians only buried the bodies until the worms had done their work and then exhumed the bones and placed them in caskets. In God's good purposes bones are very durable.) This is a direct expression of our sure hope in the general resurrection. Of course, we know that God created us out of dust and he can re-create us out of dust so if a body is burned or otherwise destroyed this does not restrict the power of God to re-create.

All this is reflected in the prayer of committal in the Book of Common Prayer funeral service when the minister says we '**commit** his **body to the ground**' and that we do so '*in sure and certain hope of the Resurrection to eternal life, through our Lord Jesus Christ*'. Contrast this with the prayers for the sick, in particular the prayer to be used for a dying person '*at the point of departure*'. There '*we humbly commend the soul*'. into the '*hands of a faithful Creator, and most merciful Saviour*' and we are told to pray for their salvation. This accurately reflects what we believe and leaves no doubts in peoples minds.

Plainly there are circumstances in which it would be possible for us to be praying for someone's salvation only to find later that they had already died and we did not know. But if we know that someone has died we are actually misleading people by praying in that way. Suppose that you had been praying for someone to recover from an illness, but eventually they died. If you then visited their grieving relatives, would you still pray with them for that person to recover? You could do, you might argue that time doesn't matter with God. But most people would think you a fool. If we know a person has died, and we understand what the Bible teaches, then we know that their destiny is fixed. What we do should reflect that fact.

To pray formally and publicly in a funeral service as if we think there is some uncertainty with God about their eternal future is not just foolish, it actually deceives people. This is especially so because people hold such peculiar ideas about death and because of the ways in which the Roman Church has misled people into believing that we can influence the future of the dead (though remember that Roman Catholics do not believe you can move a person from hell to heaven by your prayers or indulgences, merely that you can get them out of purgatory quicker). Our evangelical forebears knew this full well which is why they so passionately opposed the 1928 funeral service. In our day the popular and sentimental nonsense that affects so many people should make us doubly concerned to ensure that we do not mislead people.

History shows us that often they wilfully allow themselves to be misled because it allows them some freedom to sin now if they think that others will pay or pray for them after their death. For all these reasons we must say that the practice of praying for the dead is wrong. But supremely we must say that it is wrong because it is contrary to the revelation of God. Nowhere in His Word does the Lord require or permit that we should seek to influence the future of the dead. Therefore if we give that impression then we are not only deceiving people but also dishonouring God. Moreover, since we know that we can only be saved through a living faith in Christ then if we give people the impression that anything less, or more, than this is sufficient to set our eternal destiny we are debasing our Saviour and what He suffered for us.

At a funeral service our efforts are to be directed at the living, that in Christ they might find comfort, salvation and assurance.