

Thomas G. Long. *Accompany Them With Singing: The Christian Funeral*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009. 213 pages. \$24.95

Sometimes a demand for reformation begins with a text nailed to a church door, sometimes in a text written for pastors, preachers, and their faith communities. In *Accompany Them With Singing: The Christian Funeral*, Thomas G. Long calls for a reformation of American churches' culture of death and practice of a Christian funeral. In the spirit of Luther, his thesis, artfully shaped and evangelically argued, immerses his readers in the practice and theology of the Christian funeral understood as the completion of its sacramental source: baptism. With the passion of a 16<sup>th</sup> century reformer, Long calls for *ad fontes*, a return to the primary scriptural and theological sources of life in Christ. He argues that this return will stimulate a critical reformation of a pastoral rite that currently suffers from overexposure to disembodied spirituality and sentimental pastoral care.

The beginning and ending of human life requires an embodied theology, grounded in the triune God and the order of creation so that whatever rituals we create “do not obscure the essential humanity of the experience” (9). The argument for re-forming this pastoral rite is presented in two parts: (1) the theological, and (2) historical background of human ritual and Christian practices followed by a directive path into the planning and practice of Christian funerals in a complex cultural and religious context. Long directs our attention to the growing trend of bodiless ceremonies that intentionally replace mourning with celebration. In doing so he draws on insights from countless interviews with pastors, funeral directors, and hospice workers. Bodies – human bodies – are tangible material objects with dimensions that exist in space, and the practices of cremation, truncated graveside ceremonies, and memorials rather than funerals are practices that marginalize the body. Long examines moments of understandable tension and antagonism between funeral professionals and pastoral leaders, but sees the basic problem as being a wider rift in the culture. The intentions and patterns of a rapidly shifting American way of death are also signs of how we honor the living, so Long explores how these changes emotionally hinder or enhance our connection to the Christian community and its historical practices.

Those who turn to this text for its preaching insights will find that Long's eight purposes of a good funeral sermon distill his research into a rich mixture of theology and scripture. The first is *kerygmatic*: “In the valley of the shadow of death, you are there” (189). Each of these principles comes with a liturgical refrain drawn from scripture. The list consists of *oblational*: “Bring an offering and come into God's courts.”; *ecclesial*: “Such is the company of those who seek God.”; *therapeutic*: “In the day of my trouble, I seek the Lord.”; *eucharistic*: “O give thanks to the Lord.”; *missional*: “That I may walk before God in the light of life.”; *commemorative*: “Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations.”; and *educational*: “Teach us to number our days” (189-195). The list is evocative, rather than fully developed, yet they are clearly derived from the opening arguments of the book, evidence that Long is intentional about preaching what he practices.

These eight key themes are interwoven with congregational narratives and liturgies that are composed of “sequential movements: gathering, procession, service of prayer and word, holy communion, and sending” (154). The metaphor of journey is primary in Long's presentation of a Christian life and death, and “being buried with Christ in baptism” is the first as well as the final step of this pilgrimage of faith. Those liturgical traditions that understand the sacrament of

baptism as the primary event of Christian initiation are seen as potential centers for reformation. This raises a question about the relevance of these principles for those communities of faith that emphasize other aspects of Christian discipleship as primary. Is Christian initiation to be understood as the irreplaceable core of orthodox practice of holy living and dying? Are these two, baptism and funerals, seen as necessarily related for a practice to be considered Christian? A second question might be directed not at Long's text, but at those churches whose grasp on its psalm-signing processional tradition is weakening from its own process of aging. What hope can be found for resurrection? Perhaps it will take a reformation. Long's text is a richly informative and suggestive book. It is an engaging guide, and will be an asset for new pastors, a resource for scholars, and a basis for engaged conversations between those who offer palliative and pastoral care.

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