

TENTMAKERS

Financial Counsel for Pastors, Deacons, and Seminarians

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BURYING THE DEAD, BIBLICALLY

by Gary North

There are numerous ways for pastors to offend individual members of a congregation. Perhaps the most efficient means of causing offense is to offer advice in the name of Jesus Christ which cuts into the income of a particular member. Nevertheless, it is imperative that pastors do so when called for. While it is unlikely that a congregation will have pornographers on the rolls, if it did, it would still be important for the pastor to warn his people against supporting the profits of that industry. This is an easily understood example. It gets more difficult when we face a profession which is not innately evil, but which tolerates or even encourages practices that border on the immoral and even cross over the line on occasion.

One very difficult problem to assess is any profession which contains elements of what we might call the priesthood. We believe in the priesthood of all believers, but some callings are involved in aspects of the sacred as the world understands the sacred. Usually, any profession which deals with sickness and health, life and death, will contain priestly elements. Because a person sets himself up as a skilled professional who can offer health, life, or comfort for the bereaved, he gains the confidence and, normally, an almost religious confidence from the client. In fact, the professional groups strive long and hard against the idea that their clients are clients. They are "patients" or "those who need comfort." The concept of "client" is too mercenary; it indicates a cash-nexus relationship, not a personal, priestly relationship. People are not mere "consumers" of such services; they are beneficiaries of personalized care.

The trouble with such professions is this: they are not financed by the tithe, which is the mark of the ordained priesthood, meaning a specific ecclesiastical or Christian service calling. These professionals are financed on a cost-per-service basis. In short, the seller of the service — called the "provider" — can charge whatever the traffic will bear, case by case. Furthermore, without exception, these professional groups have succeeded in getting state or Federal intervention into the economic picture. They call for, and receive, favored status. State licensing boards, invariably dominated by members of the professional group, make it illegal for non-licensed people ("amateurs") to practice the profession for money. This legislation is passed in the name of protecting the consumer — now called a consumer — from unscrupulous or unskilled ("unprofessional") practitioners.

Never forget one very basic fact: licensing which

prohibits free entry into a field simultaneously grants monopoly economic power to those who are licensed. It is revealing that these groups have made it illegal, meaning contrary to the ethical standard of the guild, to advertise prices. This is considered unprofessional conduct. In fact, it is the unprofessional conduct. It would bring price competition into play. It would make it easy for lower-cost professionals to lure "beneficiaries" away from high-cost practitioners. It would force others in the profession to cut costs, or live on lower incomes, or both. In short, it would allow the free market to spread information to shoppers — shoppers! — concerning available services. This, above all, is what guild-protected professionals fear. And, to be specific, I mean physicians, dentists, lawyers, and morticians.

The Death Industry

Half a century ago, morticians weren't called morticians. They were called undertakers. Remember the character on the old "Life of Riley" radio show, Digger O'Dell, the friendly undertaker? Remember his line, as he left Riley: "I've got to be shoveling off"? Well, he never made it onto the T.V. series. The professional morticians put enough pressure on the show to keep him off, or so I surmise. The morticians want to be regarded as professionals, which means licensed professionals, which means professionals who are protected from an open, competitive free market.

— Back in 1963, while I was attending seminary, I met a student who had been an embalmer before his conversion. After his conversion, he had left the industry. He loaned me a copy of Jessica Mitford's *The American Way of Death* (1963), which he said was a fair representation of the industry in Canada, where he had practiced. The book is a shocker, and no pastor should fail to read it. It has been reprinted by Fawcett Books for \$1.95. Order it locally, or write to Fawcett in Greenwich, Connecticut.

Mitford is an old-line political leftist, but she does have a fairly good grasp of the economics of the mortuary business, and it is indeed a business. Non-profit status protects their graveyards from local property taxation (the priestly element), but profit-seeking allied companies provide services. Not a bad deal! They have laws against price competition (or did before this book helped remove or modify such restrictions). They actively discriminate against low-cost cremations that scatter ashes from planes or boats. By "actively discriminate," I mean call in the police. Yet they rely heavily on the semi-priestly character of their services in a culture

which has developed perverse, anti-Christian attitudes towards death and burial Mitford cites one statement from the *National Funeral Service Journal* (which is sent to virtually no public-access libraries by the guild) for August, 1961:

A funeral is not an occasion for a display of cheapness. It is, in fact, an opportunity for the display of a status symbol which, by bolstering family pride, does much to assuage grief. A funeral is also an occasion when feelings of guilt and remorse are satisfied to a large extent by the purchase of a fine funeral. It seems highly probable that the most satisfactory funeral service for the average family is one in which the cost has necessitated some degree of sacrifice. This permits the survivors to atone for any real or fancied neglect of the deceased prior to his death . . .

It should not require an advanced degree in theology to spot the errors in this statement. The idea that man can atone for his sin through his own sacrifice is the psychological basis of masochism. The idea that anything man can do to reduce the effects of sin in his life, apart from full surrender to Jesus Christ, is paganism or humanism. Yet the longings in the hearts of men for release from sin can be capitalized on, especially by semi-priests. This view of the function of the funeral is, as Mitford points out, pagan to the core. The fact that it can be sold to modern Americans indicates just how close modern humanism is to ancient paganism,

Buyers' Ignorance

The heart of all state-enforced regulations that make price competition and price advertising illegal is the desire to reap monopoly rewards through the ignorance of the buyer. Even where such restrictions on advertising are not enforced by law (such as in the life insurance industry), the element of semi-priesthood does its work. The consumer is assured that the seller is not really a seller, but a helpful counselor, just as if he were not working on commission. The old rule, "Never ask a barber if you need a haircut," is supposed to be safely dispensed with. The closer you are to a priestly topic, especially death, the more reticence a buyer has to shop around, or discuss such "mundane" topics as price. So those who sell on commission reap higher commissions per sale.

The problem with death is that we seldom expect it. We have an innate tendency to think that we, or the ones we love, have at least another five years to live, even when the mortality tables tell us otherwise. So when death comes, we are caught unprepared. We have not shopped around for a coffin — pardon me, a casket — or the lowest cost burial service. The body is getting cold, rigor mortis is setting in, and if we wait to shop around, it will start stinking. These "mundane" facts of life create profit opportunities for the local mortician. When buyers cannot shop, when grief and confusion make price comparisons almost impossible, the seller is in a strong competitive advantage.

The terrible fact of American life is this: the churches and synagogues have not established truly priestly alternatives. Once we buried our dead in the church plot, we had a coffin made by a local craftsman, possibly a church member. We buried people quietly and inexpensively. In the case of the seventeenth-century American Puritans, they did not even bring the body into the church for a special burial service. Yet today "open caskets" — the embalmer's special subsidy from church neglect of theology or good taste — are common. Why? The Episcopalians and synagogues at least have closed caskets. What has happened to the rest of us?

The first person to be called by the family member who has just witnessed a death of a relative, or has been told of it by a hospital representative, ought to be the pastor. And the pastor ought to know exactly what to do, simply because the church has an established procedure. The deacons should be called in. If the church has done its work well, there would be at least one coffin in reserve, purchased in advance as inexpensively as possible. The deacons should call in the coroner or physician to certify the death. Then the body should be transferred to some local mortuary which has a special arrangement with the church, at a specially agreed-upon price. Or the body should be taken wherever the family has decided to take it. Yes, if necessary, the deacons should transport it in a van. This keeps the body out of the hands of any mortuary which has not yet agreed upon a price, since it is too difficult to get it back once it is out of the place of death.

If there have not been prior arrangements — and if not, the deacons have been negligent in their duty if the death was expected — then the pastor and a deacon must accompany the family to the mortuary and take charge of the buying of a coffin. Under no circumstances should the pastor be lured away from the family during the time that the family is in the casket show room. Stay with the family at all times. This is the true priestly function. As Mitford's book points out, this is the most feared thing by the mortuary industry: that a family can allow it to put a true priest, not a profit-seeking pseudo-priest, in charge of the purchase. It puts the real priest across the bargaining table from the pseudo-priest. The result will be a lot of money retained by the bereaved family.

It would be nice if some Christian craftsman would design an inexpensive easily constructed coffin kit, making it available to all churches or other groups. This coffin could be constructed by a local person in a church. It would have more meaning, and a far lower price tag, than some high-pressure, high-price product that the mortician sells to an emotionally disturbed client. At the very least, it would be good if plans for a simple casket were available for local people to see as required. If you know of such a kit, or plans, please contact me, and I will announce its availability to all people on the mailing list. If you have the talent to design and/or produce such an inexpensive coffin, please get busy. The churches need your service.

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