

Passages: Funerals as Bridges for the Gospel

By Peter Clift

The very thought of having to conduct a funeral in Japan can strike terror into the heart of many a missionary pastor, and for good reason. He knows that he will probably be dealing with non-Christian relatives at some stage of the preparations, and that their expectations probably won't match his own convictions. He knows that he will be dealing with a difficult language and culture. He knows that there are set customs, language expressions and levels of politeness. He knows that he doesn't even know how much he doesn't know. Furthermore, he knows that he is Christ's representative, and that he must represent his Master's best interests as he understands them from his Master's Word. He does not want to compromise Biblical truth.

Yet he also knows that a brother or sister from his church has gone to be with the Lord; he knows that relatives are hurting over the loss of their loved one; he knows unbelievers will come to the funeral in numbers that he could never expect to reach otherwise; he knows they will be watching and listening to everything that goes on with an attention they never give at a wedding, or even in church; and finally, he knows that he has the perfect word of comfort for all who attend the funeral—the gospel of hope and love from the Living and True God of the universe.

If the deceased was not a Christian, the situation is trickier, since the missionary can't say publicly where the deceased is now. Nevertheless, the opportunity to show love and comfort, and to pray to the True God of Heaven and Earth for the mourning relatives exists. Out of the 15 or so funerals I have conducted, about half have been for unbelieving relatives of Christians in our church, and the families' reactions were uniformly positive.

What Do Japanese Expect of a Funeral?

My answer to this question depends upon two factors: whether we are speaking of the expectations of the deceased person or of his relatives, and what view of the afterlife each person holds.

Before his death, the typical Japanese person's wish is that his family not forget him. He believes he has been faithful in "worshiping" and caring for the memory of his own ancestors, and he expects that his children will not forget him—either at the funeral or after. The only way he can conceive of this care is if it takes the same form he gave to his ancestors. The form it takes varies according to the view of the afterlife each person holds, but still the deep instinct is, "*Don't forget me!*"

In the story of Lazarus and the rich man, our Lord tells us what the rich man wishes for following his death (and I paraphrase here): "I'd appreciate a little bit of human kindness. You can't do anything about getting me out of here, and I accept that. Don't worry about worshiping and remembering me now; just bend every effort to make sure my five brothers don't come to this God-forsaken place!"

Among non-Christian Japanese, broadly speaking there are three views of the afterlife, and hence three sets of expectations. The "True Atheist/Materialist" believes there's nothing after death but ashes, so all he expects is a decent farewell. Whether his wishes are known and followed depends upon his relatives.

The "True-Believer Buddhist," on the other hand, believes in reincarnation according to karma.

His status in the next life depends upon his efforts in the present life with the help of Amida Buddha, and he wants every bit of help he can get on his way to the next stage of the reincarnation cycle.

What he would like can be summarized as follows:

1) A Buddhist funeral at the biggest temple he or his family can afford, with as many officiating priests chanting sutras as possible.

2) The most expensive *kaimyo* (posthumous Buddhist name) he can afford, inscribed by the Buddhist priest on the *ihai* (funeral name plaque), which then goes into the *butsudan* (Buddhist ancestor shelf), to be the central object of veneration, prayers and memorials.

3) The assurance that his relatives will call the priest for memorial services on the 49th day, when his soul's destiny for the next reincarnation is finally settled. He also wants memorial services observed on the 1st, 3rd, 7th and 13th anniversaries of his death, and in much the same way.

4) He wants his descendents to remember him every morning with incense, the first water out of the tap and the first rice out of the pot, and with offerings of fruit, *omochi* and other items throughout the year.

5) He wants them to keep him up-to-date on the doings of family members.

6) He wants them to feel that he is always with them and interested in their lives. (At least that is how some Japanese have told me they envision their dead parents. Whether their parents are viewed as being actually able to do anything for the living is an open question.)

7) He wants the relatives to come and "worship" his memory at his grave at least twice a year at the spring and autumn equinoxes, when they will bring flowers, wash the tombstone and pull the weeds.

8) If possible, he would like his bones to be interred in the graveyard of the temple to which his family has been connected and registered at since the Edo Period. This gives the assurance that the local Buddhist priest will provide perpetual care.

Regarding all these funeral customs, the anthropologist would say that he simply wants to be remembered. The Christian might say that he wants to be like Lucifer in Isaiah 14:14, or like Adam and Eve in Genesis 3, who all wanted to be treated like God. Most Japanese, though, are not aware that the essence of sinfulness is self-will.

That leaves the third class of non-Christian Japanese: the "Irreligious yet Superstitious, Fearful, and Therefore Dutiful Person."

He claims to be irreligious, yet he unquestioningly goes along with the practices expected of him by family and society. He himself 1) doesn't want to be forgotten, 2) wants to feel, "We did everything up right for old Grandpa, both before and after he died," and above all, 3) doesn't want others to feel any criticism with either old Grandpa's funeral and aftercare, or with his own. He therefore takes the way of least resistance, often grumbling about what a racket the whole business is.

What Image Do Japanese Have of Christian Funerals?

Christians, of course, in accordance with the first commandment of Exodus 20:3-5, view the worship of anything or anybody other than Jehovah, the Triune God of the Old and New Testaments, the Creator, Ruler, Savior and Judge of the Universe, as idolatry, spiritual adultery and dis-

loyal treachery. In obedience to the Second Commandment, they neither make, worship, bow down to, nor serve any man-made image.

Naturally, this is where trouble develops in Japanese society. The problem has been exacerbated by some Japanese Christians who have stated their convictions in a rather harsh and unfeeling manner, but no matter how it is stated, the offense remains.

While the foreign missionary can objectively see the idolatry of ancestor worship, he doesn't personally feel the sting of rejection, either the Japanese Christian's rejection of his relatives' customs, or being rejected by them. Further, the missionary is more used to asserting his own individuality than his Japanese fellow-Christians are.

As a result, many Japanese people think of Christians as good people, but as being "cold," and "stand-offish" toward the deceased or the rest of the family—or disrespectful and dishonoring, lacking filial piety. I have heard some use the phrase *osomatsu ni suru*, "You don't do it up right!" (literally, "do crudely or roughly") applied to Christian funerals, while others say, more kindly, "You don't do enough." Obviously these impressions can be used as an excuse for not considering the real claims of the gospel, but it's still clear that we Christians have an image problem.

I believe I can honestly say to the nation of Japan, "It is we Christians who truly honor the dead. We do not simply line up to put a pinch of incense before the picture of the deceased, and then walk out and never give another thought to how he lived or died. We do not honor the dead only through certain rituals performed on certain days or in certain ways, and ignore him the rest of the time. We cherish our picture albums of Grandpa, and we seek to recall at the Christian's funeral how dear old Grandpa lived, and we try to live constantly in a way worthy of how he would have wanted us to live.

Finally, we think it is unconscionable to live our lives heedless of Grandpa's needs while he is still alive and to then come to his funeral, offer a money gift and *oshoko* (incense), and think we've been a dutiful son or daughter. Rather, we have done all we could to take care of and please old Grandpa while he was alive, and we did that out of love for him, because our Lord Jesus Christ first loved us. Who truly honors the dead? Who truly loved old Grandpa? And who is doing his best to see that the younger generation is being loved and trained to walk in the ways of righteousness, both in society and before God? Simply because we refuse to go against our consciences to offer *oshoko* (which most everybody else does merely as a form), are we to be judged unfeeling, disrespectful and *osomatsu*? But defensive reactions like this are not enough. We have to show the Japanese there's a better way to conduct funerals.

Possible Approaches to Christian Funerals in Japan

Given the attitudes that many in society have toward Christians, how have Japanese Christians responded to both the Biblical strictures, and to Japanese customs, especially in conducting their own funeral services? There seem to be three general types of responses by Christians.

First, there are some I call "Rejectionists." They feel that the whole set of Japanese customs described in the paragraphs above on Japanese expectations are indelibly dyed with idolatry, and are to be rejected wholesale. In the place of these customs, they substitute a very simple service that is consciously designed to not resemble a Japanese service in any way. One can agree with their basic motivations, but I have the feeling that they reject many things in their culture that are moral-

ly neutral. They are exposed to the dangers of ending up culturally impoverished and at the same time being proud of their purity. This position does, however, serve as a reality check for the convictions and customs of all others. Ask yourself, “Am I doing this simply to conform to men’s desires, or to please my Lord? If I have to make a choice, which will it be?”

Second, some opt for “Total Conformity” to the surrounding society. They want to be tolerant, and they want to give no offense whatever, so they simply do many of the practices the general society follows, only they give these practices a Christian name. Some will offer incense and light candles, some will substitute a flower offering for an incense offering, but in either case it’s offered in worship to the deceased. They will write *goreizen* (literally, “before the spirit”) on their gift of money, and then place it before the picture of the deceased.

The third Christian position is what I call “Creative Adaptation,” or “Christian Substitution” and it is for the details of this position that I am indebted to Mr. Kitano of Maebashi. Basically, it boils down to two principles:

- 1) Do everything the family wants done.

- 2) Do everything in a completely Biblical way, with no compromise with idolatrous practices.

For example, do they want you to pray when the body leaves the house to go to the church or crematorium? By all means do so, but pray only to the Lord God of Heaven and Earth, and give thanks for the life that the deceased lived.

Do they want you to conduct a memorial service on the first anniversary of the death? By all means do so, but take along some of your church believers, sing “What a Friend We Have in Jesus” and other hymns, read from Scripture, give a meditation on the meaning of life, pray for the Lord to comfort those who remain, give thanks for the life which was lived, and eat a meal with the family afterward, if that’s what they plan. I always offer the “full-course” funeral, and have yet to be taken up on the whole process, but that’s their choice.

Obviously, with the two principles above, we are committing ourselves to a pretty extensive series of duties. We are also trying to walk a fine line between two extreme positions. That means there’s going to have to be a lot of room for variation here from church to church, so loving toleration within the limits set by Scripture is the order of the day.

Let me further explicate the guiding principles of this position:

- 1) Our manner of approach is critical. We must be gentle, soft-spoken and polite, using correct terminology when explaining how we will conduct funerals. We need to understand where the family is coming from and what they expect. Confidence comes with experience, but the whole purpose of this article is to give you a running head start on gaining experience and to help you avoid giving offense. How often have good and right things been said in the wrong way!

- 2) We must have firm convictions from Scripture, and make them crystal clear to the family in a gentle way.

What principles?

We will not worship anything other than the Lord God Almighty. We will only bow to living persons, or to a Person. We will never even give the appearance of worshipping anything besides God Almighty; i.e., no *katachi dake* (just going through the forms, even when one’s convictions are otherwise). For example, relatives will say, “Yes, we understand you can’t worship Grandma in your heart. All we ask is that, for the sake of not creating a scene and disrupting family unity, you

simply go through the motions of offering *oshoko* and praying to her picture. Surely you can do that without compromising your faith.” No, the answer is that we cannot.

We tell the relatives (and the people who attend the different parts of the funeral) that since the deceased has already left this world, we can do nothing either to or for him. We are here to comfort and pray for the living, and we will pray to Almighty God giving thanks for the life that has just ended, doing our best to help the bereaved.

3) We want to do everything in good taste, and with good style. We want people to walk away from the funeral saying, “I really thought about Old Grandpa’s life today, and that was well done!” We have received this kind of feedback often, and it has encouraged us to think we were on the right track. Unbelievers have often said things like, “It was so bright in your church! The atmosphere was so different from a dark temple! I could actually understand the Bible readings! And the singing was wonderful—it took me back to school days when I learned, ‘What a Friend We Have in Jesus.’”

4) We want to give hope, joy and comfort to the family and all who attend. One perceptive missionary who attended a funeral I conducted for an unbeliever told me afterward, “Peter, preach less and pray more. I watched their reactions throughout, and your prayers of sympathy and for God’s comfort touched them far more than your message did.” Good advice! Christian prayers are totally different from other prayers, and this is where we beseech the Lord God to pour out his comfort on hurting people. They’re listening!

5) We want to have an attractive witness, to proclaim the gospel of salvation from sin and fear. We do not belabor human sin in a funeral, though we certainly don’t ignore it either. (After all, “the wages of sin is death,” and “The soul that sins shall die.”) But we do want to whet appetites for more truth and hope so that they come to church next Sunday for more. Be aware that your audience is listening better at a funeral than at any other time.

6) We have already talked about how Christians are the ones who “really do it up right,” who truly honor (not worship) the dead. This reminds us that, to put it crudely, we have competition out there—the Buddhist temples and priests, and we want the contrast to show! We do not do funerals for the money, but to show Christ’s love; nor do we do them out of form, but out of a sincere heart that really believes what the mouth is uttering.

7) Finally, I want to be able to offer to conduct funerals for unbelievers, particularly where I have a personal relationship with the deceased or with his family. Perhaps I am dreaming when I think that this is one way of infiltrating Japanese society for Christ, but I am aware of a lot of disgust out there with the commercialization of funerals by Buddhist priests. I just pray that we, along with Japanese pastors, will be able to exploit this dissatisfaction to turn people to the True and Loving God, and his Son, Jesus Christ.

This article is excerpted from “*Uh Oh, What Now? I Have to Conduct a Funeral!*”—*Funerals as Wonderful Opportunities to Proclaim the Gospel of Hope* published in *The Unseen Face of Japan: Culturally Appropriate Communication of the Gospel*, the report of the 42nd Annual Hayama Seminar held in 2001. To download the full text of this presentation as published in the Hayama report, including a Japanese vocabulary list of relevant words relating to funerals and some helpful checklists, go to: <http://www.mupjapan.org/hayama/Samples/ChristianFuneralsClift.doc>

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