

Funeral Songs I wouldn't be caught dead singing.

Chad Bird

One of these days, when the people gathered around the casket will be my own family and friends, I hope they bring their singing voices with them. Because there'll be music at my funeral. Lots of it.

I don't mean wordless mood music that sounds like death warmed over. I'm talking about melody married to words, songs that sing my body from the church to the cemetery.

My heart may not be beating, but I want my funeral to pulse with song.

But don't mistake all my musical interests in life with the music I'd choose for my funeral. I may have two-stepped to George Strait on Saturday night and marched to patriotic songs in the Fourth of July parade, but keep lyrics about bar stools and fireworks out of the service. There's a time and a place for everything, including various types of music. And there are many funeral songs I wouldn't be caught dead singing.

Why? Because my funeral will not be about me. And, if you're a Christian, I hope yours won't be either. The service will be focused on Jesus, as all Christian worship should be. Because Christ is the focal point, all readings, prayers, and songs will centre on him as well. This is no time for necro-narcissism, for an end-of-life liturgy that's all-about-me. A funeral is the time for the good news of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus for us all.

To keep the hymns zeroed in on Christ, don't sing songs that do this:

- 1. Songs that describe a heaven where even atheists would be happy.** These are songs that basically say about the deceased: "I know he's in a better place, on the other side of the rainbow, where he's happy and well and everything is right." Can we be honest? Heaven is not the destination of everyone who dies. When Christians die, they go to be with Jesus. And being with Jesus is what makes it paradise. Unbelievers wouldn't want to be there anyway since they reject the one who fills heaven with his presence. As C. S. Lewis said, "Hell's doors are locked on the inside." Heaven is only good because Jesus is there. Simply put: don't sing songs about heaven that aren't about Jesus. Because without him, heaven is just a washed up version of hell.
- 2. Songs that make the deceased sound like he wore a halo.** There's a lot of pretending that goes on at funerals, including in songs. The goodness of the departed is hammed up so much you'd think they sported a halo. We all know they didn't. They sported the same things we all do: selfishness, pettiness, impatience, greed, and plenty of other universal human weaknesses. Grandmas included. If we're going to praise a person's goodness in the funeral songs we sing, make sure that person's name is Jesus. He was not only good; he was good *for us*. God takes our badness and nails it onto his Son at the cross. And he

takes Christ's goodness and washes it into us at baptism. Sing about the Son - his good and perfect sacrifice for us.

- 3. Songs that address a nameless, faceless deity who lives upstairs in heaven.** We live in a country where most people claim they believe in God, but few can tell you much about him, even his name. And funerals commonly muddy the waters even more. God is "the man upstairs," "the power in the sky", "the Maker of all," "the Great Spirit." If you're a Christian, your God has a name: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And he has revealed himself to us in the face of that Son, Jesus Christ. We know no God apart from Jesus, in whom "all the fullness of the Deity dwells in bodily form," (Col 2:9). He is "the image of the invisible God," (1:15). Don't pick songs for a funeral that make God out to be a nameless, faceless power up in the sky. He is the Father who created the heavens and the earth; the Son who was born of the Virgin Mary, died and rose again; the Holy Spirit who dwells within us and the church. Sing of him and his undying love for us. Just as he has a name, so he knows us by name and has made us his own.
- 4. Songs that evoke nostalgic memories but give no concrete future hope.** There's nothing wrong with sharing happy memories of the deceased or playing their favourite secular songs. But save those for before or after the funeral. The funeral is a worship service. As such, keep it focused on the one being worshipped. In this service, God comes to give us hope in the midst of grief, life in the midst of death. Sing songs that declare that death is not the end. In fact, heaven itself is not the end. The goal of the Christian life is the resurrection of the body on the last day. At Christ's return, our bodies will be raised and glorified to be like Christ's body. We will live with him in the new heavens and new earth. Sing of that promise. Sing of the day when death will be no more, neither mourning nor crying nor pain. At a funeral, sing of the day when everything sad will come untrue (Tolkien).

There are hundreds, if not thousands, of high quality Christian hymns that we can sing at funerals (your pastor could provide a long list, if you need one). Don't settle for songs of vanilla spirituality or feel-good humanism. Sing of Jesus, who is the resurrection and the life, swaddled in the rhymes and melodies of music.