

CHRISTIAN BURIAL
Its Meaning and Practice

A DOCTRINAL ESSAY

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“Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: Yea saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours.” Rev. 14:13.

This topic has recently been raised in one of the congregations of our Parish, and this is a good thing. Members should be encouraged to discuss such doctrinal issues, and conscientiously inquire whether we have a sound Scriptural basis for all Church doctrine and practice. The question must never be: What do I think or how do I feel about this or that, but the question must ever be: What does God really say about this or that IN HIS WORD, THE BIBLE?

The great fundamental principle of the Confessional Lutheran Church is: In all matters of Christian doctrine and practice the Bible is the only safe, true infallible guide. Whoever refuses to accept this principle, can neither be a true Christian nor a true Lutheran.

It is from this angle then, namely that Scripture must be our guide in all matters of Doctrine and Practice, that we shall now examine

THE MEANING AND PRACTICE OF CHRISTIAN BURIAL

The following treatise of this subject is based on an article on Christian Burial which appeared in the Concordia Theological Monthly, Vol. V, No.7.

The right understanding and the correct practice concerning Christian burial is of vital importance to the members as well as to the Pastor of the congregation, especially in our day, when the opinion is widespread that Christian Burial should be denied no one, regardless of what the deceased has confessed and how HE HAS LIVED. At no time perhaps does the Pastor need the enlightened understanding and sympathetic support of his flock more than when he is compelled on Scriptural grounds to refuse to officiate at a funeral. The purpose of this treatise is to further this understanding and support. May the Lord of the Church grant His blessing!

WHAT A CHRISTIAN BURIAL IS

We must first inquire what a Christian Burial is, and what meaning such a burial has. Though a burial in itself is a purely civil affair - everyone must be buried, and anyone can bury, - yet because of the mode of burial among Christians, accompanied as it is by hymn-singing, prayer and preaching, it at once becomes a sacred, religious act, a part of our liturgy and public service. To the Confessional Lutheran Church the real essence of a Christian Burial consists in the words of committal: “We now commit his body to the ground: Earth to earth; Ashes to ashes; Dust to dust; in the hope of the resurrection unto Eternal Life through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

In these words the Church publicly and emphatically expresses the glorious hope of the resurrection unto Eternal Life, not just in a general way, but specifically for the body being buried. This same specific hope of resurrection to Eternal Life in heaven is also powerfully expressed in the grand words from St. Peter’s first Epistle: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to His abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Peter 1:3). We repeat again, the words of Committal and what they express are the essential part, the heart of a Christian Burial. Everything else in our burial ritual could be left out, and still it would be a Christian Burial, just as in the Sacrament of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper everything in an emergency could drop out except the Words of Institution.

Now; since the hope of resurrection to life Eternal can be expressed only with regard to Christians, it follows of itself, as night the day, that only Christians should be given a Christian Burial. According to our Church a Christian burial is a privilege and honour for those only concerning whom we in charity have reason to hope that they have died in the Christian faith. Says Scripture: "Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth."

A Christian burial is furthermore a testimony of Christian fellowship. It expresses the hope that those who here in this world were united in the Christian faith shall also be united hereafter in eternal life. As a testimony of fellowship, burial is also so regarded by the secret societies, or lodges, as statements from their authoritative writings clearly prove. Burial is often regarded in the same light by outspoken infidels, who have completely broken with the church and all religion. As a dying wish they have frequently requested that the church have nothing to do with their burial. Since they did not want the church's fellowship in life, they also did not want it in death.

Since burial is undoubtedly an expression of fellowship, and is also generally regarded as such, it clearly follows that those who would have nothing to do with Christian fellowship in life surely should not be forced into such fellowship after death. So much for the meaning of Christian burial.

WE NEXT CONSIDER THE DUTY WHICH THE CHURCH HAS TOWARD HER DEAD

The Church has a duty toward her dead. We find that the church of God has ever taken charge of her deceased members. In Deut. 34:8 we read: "And the children of Israel wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days." When John the Baptist was beheaded by Herod, we are told in Matt. 14:12: "And his disciples came and took up the body and buried it and went and told Jesus." It is proper at the burial of a Christian that not only the relatives and friends participate, but also the deceased's brothers and sisters in the faith; in other words, that the congregation participates as a Congregation.

THE PURPOSE OF CHRISTIAN BURIAL

The Christian burial has a three-fold purpose. First, with regard to the deceased. By giving the deceased a Christian burial, the Congregation declares openly before the world: "This man was one of us; through faith he was a member of Christ's holy Body, a soldier in Christ's army, a sheep of His flock. We are now laying our brother in faith to rest. He was a Christian; as a Christian he lived, and as a Christian, we believe, he died. And though we are committing his body to the dust, we believe it shall one day rise again, be reunited with the soul, and live and reign with God in all eternity. And we believe on that great day we shall see our brother in yonder blessed life, and there together with him sing the praises of our Saviour, the Lamb of God, who was slain and hath redeemed us to God by His blood." What a glorious confession to make before the world!

Again, a Christian burial is a sincere thanksgiving to God for everything that He has done for the departed; that through the means of grace, the Word and Sacraments, He brought him to faith, kept him in the true faith, and now at last granted him a blessed end. The prayer read at the grave-side contains the following words: "We humbly give thanks unto Thee for all the benefits and blessings which Thou hast during his life on earth bestowed upon this our beloved brother who has fallen asleep, in particular, that Thou hast brought him to the knowledge of Thy beloved Son, Jesus Christ."

From this we see that, as a Christian death is the most glorious thing that can fall to a man's lot here on earth, we in like manner do not exaggerate when we assert that a Christian burial is one of the grandest and most beautiful rites that the Christian Church has. It celebrates the joyful home-coming of a faithful soldier of the Cross after his struggle with, and victory over, all the enemies of his soul.

The second purpose, or object, of a Christian burial is with respect to the mourners. They are our brothers and sisters in faith. Their hearts have been wounded by the death of a dear one. In their sorrows they are tempted to regard their loss as an evidence of God's wrath. Or they are in danger of losing sight of the glorious Christian hope, and are mourning as those who have no hope. Christians have true sympathy with one another in the hour of need. With the only true and abiding comfort, the Gospel, they say to the mourning brethren: "Weep not! It is well, eternally well, with your dear departed one. 'Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord.'"

The third purpose of a Christian burial is with respect to the Congregation itself. Thereby the Christian Congregation confesses its faith before the whole world. At the graveside it most emphatically and in a very solemn manner declares that salvation can be obtained in no other way than in faith and obedience to the Gospel of Christ.

Moreover, a Christian burial is also a clarion call from yonder world to the Congregation, to each and every member of it, to think of his hour of departure, and to cling with ever firmer hold to his blessed Saviour, in Whom alone can he be ever ready and prepared to depart this life.

But this duty of Christian burial the Congregation does not owe to all people, nor is it an honour that the Christian Congregation can, without denying her Christian faith and hope, confer upon all and sundry. This leads us to the question:

WHEN MUST CHRISTIAN BURIAL BE REFUSED?

Established custom, public opinion and sentiment at once answer: "Under no circumstances should Christian burial be denied anyone." All too many, both within and without the church, look upon the Pastor as a kind of assistant undertaker. And many weak-kneed ministers, even Lutheran Pastors, alas, yield to these popular demands, and without further ado are ready and willing to bury anybody and anything.

Now, to refuse to officiate at a burial is not an easy thing. To be forced to tell a bereaved wife that for valid reasons you cannot give her husband a Christian burial is one of the most heart-rending duties that can fall the lot of a faithful shepherd of souls.

But the conscientious Lutheran Pastor dare not be swayed by established custom, public opinion, yes, not even by the sympathetic sentiments of his own heart, but he must act here also in strict conformity with the Word of God, which is the only true rule and guide in doctrine and practice. And he must do this lest he fall under the condemnation of the Word of God which says: "Woe unto them that call evil good and good evil; that put darkness for light and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter." (Isaiah 5:20).

From the meaning, and also for the Purpose, of Christian burial itself we have already noted powerful and sufficient grounds for denying Christian burial to non-Christians. But we must elaborate on this point. The Christian Church must refuse Christian burial to non-Christians and unbelievers first and foremost because it is unscriptural practice.

We also take the opportunity here to emphasise that an unbeliever is not only he who outrightly rejects the Gospel of Christ, but also he who nominally accepts it, but refuses to obey it.

We now proceed with a number of reasons where the Church must refuse Christian burial.

1. God Himself has set us an example in both the Old and New Testament. Concerning the godless Jehoiakin, the son of Josiah, King of Judah, God gave the following directions: "They shall not lament for him, saying, Ah Lord! or, Ah his glory! He shall be buried with the burial of an ass, drawn and cast forth beyond the gates of Jerusalem." Jer. 22:18f. To one of His disciples who, before following Him, first wanted to go and bury his father, who according to the text must have been a godless man, Christ Himself says: "Let the dead

bury their dead,” Matt. 8:22. That is, let the spiritually dead, the unbelievers, and not the Christians, who have been quickened to the spiritual life, bury their physically dead.

This has always been the practice of the conservative Lutheran Church. It is told of Conrad Becker of Guestrow that he would rather be deposed from office than bury a manifest unbeliever.

2. Giving Christian burial to an unbeliever is a flagrant denial of the Way of Salvation, which ever goes through repentance of sin and faith in Christ. By giving a Christian burial to unbelievers, the Church publicly contradicts and denies her own teachings.
3. Such a burial gets to be nothing but a sham. How, for example, could our ritual, which gives expression to the hope of resurrection to Eternal Life and is designed for Christians only, be used at such a burial? Or how could our funeral hymns, which all breathe positive Christian sentiments, be sung at such a funeral? For example, “For me to live is Jesus, to die is gain for me,” or “Asleep in Jesus, blessed sleep”? What blasphemous mockery when this is sung at the grave of an unbeliever!
4. Such practice must surely give offence to enlightened, earnest Christians. And such offence is no small matter in the eyes of our Saviour, Who says: “Woe unto him through whom offences come”!
5. Giving Christian burial to unbelievers furthermore strengthens worldlings in their ungodly ways and gives them a false hope. Must not the worldling conclude, and rightly so: “After all, it makes no difference whether one believes or not. One can ignore the Word of God and despise it, and still be called blessed in death”? Concerning such false comfort Dr. Walther, one of the greatest theologians of our church since Luther, says in one of his sermons: “Oh foolishness beyond all foolishness to live as an unbeliever and yet expect to die as a Christian; to walk on the wrong way and yet expect to reach the right goal; to refuse to strive against sin and yet expect to attain the Crown of Victory! May God deliver us all from such terrible deception.”

To demand a Christian burial for an unbeliever is furthermore most unreasonable. What would the Government say to a family that demanded a military funeral for a son who was not a member of the Armed Services, or who had even refused to serve in them? Or what would the Masonic Lodge answer to a request for a Masonic funeral for one who had never been a Mason, yes, who perhaps during his life had opposed the principles of the Order?

We have established the general rule: “A Christian burial for Christians only”, be the person pauper or President. We shall now enumerate a number of specific instances where a conscientious Lutheran Pastor must refuse to officiate at a burial.

SPECIFIC INSTANCES

1. A Lutheran Pastor must refuse to officiate at the burial of those whom we classify as ungodly in their belief, such as manifest scoffers, free-thinkers, heathen, Jews, Mohammedans, Universalists, Unitarians, Christian Scientists, Modernists, in a word, all such as deny the Deity of our Lord Jesus Christ and the salvation through His blood alone.
2. A Lutheran Pastor must refuse to officiate at the burial of those whom we classify as ungodly in their way of life, such as murderers, thieves, adulterers, drunkards, etc. who, as far as we can judge, have died in their sins without repentance and faith. Neither shall he officiate at the burial of one who for valid reasons has been excommunicated from the Congregation and who never, as far as man knows, has repented of his sins.
3. Neither shall the Pastor officiate at the burial of a despiser of the Means of Grace, one who in his lifetime refused to have anything to do with the Christian Church, her Gospel and her

sacraments. Right here there is altogether too much laxity in the Christian Church, even in the Lutheran Church. One thing is preached from the pulpit, namely, that forgiveness of sins, life and salvation are to be found in the Means of Grace alone, namely in the Word and Sacraments, and then the pastor turns right round and grants a Christian burial to one who to the very end openly despised and wilfully neglected these life-saving means. But it is impossible for one who despises the Word and Sacraments to be a Christian. True, one may diligently use the Means of Grace and yet not be a Christian, but one cannot be and remain a Christian without using the Means of Grace. Please read this last sentence again, and then think it over. Such a person definitely shuts himself out from salvation. Hear the decisive words of our Saviour: "He that is of God heareth God's Words; ye therefore hear them not because ye are not of God", John 8:47: "So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God", Rom. 10:17.

The despising of the Means of Grace and of not going to Church is often regarded as a small sin, if a sin at all; but in reality it is the greatest of sins. Our Lord Himself brands it as greater than the sins of adultery and sexual immorality (See Mark 6:11) and pronounces the severest punishment in hell upon those who will not listen to His Word. Dr. Walther, in a sermon on the parable of the Wedding-feast (Matt. 22:1-14), says concerning the sin of despising the Word of God: "In comparison with the greatness and extreme wickedness of this sin all other sins are small. He who persists in this sin shuts himself out of heaven and plunges himself into hell. He wilfully and deliberately strikes his name from the Book of Life, and slaps the Son of God in the face, treads His precious blood under foot, and declares loudly before heaven and earth: I do not want to be saved; I want to be damned."

A Persistent despiser of the Means of Grace certainly should not be given a Christian burial. One who refuses to walk into the house of God while alive, certainly should not be carried in when dead.

4. Ordinarily a Pastor must not officiate at the burial of a suicide, even if he has belonged to the Congregation. Life is a sacred thing. God alone can give it, and God alone has the right to take it. Suicide is often but the expression of unbelief and its offspring despair, which certainly is not in harmony with our Christian faith and hope. There may, however, be different circumstances, e.g. an unbalanced mental condition (nerves) brought about by sickness, that would justify a Pastor in giving one who had otherwise conducted himself as a child of God an honourable Christian burial.
5. In cases of insanity, what then? If the person had been ungodly or a despiser of the Means of Grace before his insanity, and if he had had no rational moments during which he confessed his sins and faith in the Saviour, a Christian burial must be denied. Otherwise he is entitled to a Christian burial; for the peace of God which passes all understanding, is able to keep the heart and mind through Christ Jesus, (Phil. 4:7).
6. What attitude should be taken toward Catholics or Reformed church people? The position of our Church is this: A Lutheran Pastor must not officiate if the deceased has viciously attacked the Lutheran faith, and there is no evidence to show that he has changed his attitude. If a Lutheran Pastor is called to the deathbed of an unchurched Catholic or Reformed, and the dying person confesses himself to be a poor, lost sinner, who builds his hope of salvation on Christ alone, then surely a Lutheran Pastor would with joy officiate at his burial.
7. What about officiating when the body of the deceased is to be cremated? Cremation is not a Biblical or Christian mode of disposing of the dead. Both the Old and New Testaments take for granted that, as the body was originally taken from the earth, so it is to return to the earth again. In Gen. 23:19 we read: "Abraham buried Sarah, his wife." Deut. 34:5f. says: "So Moses, the servant of the Lord died there in the land of Moab,.... and He buried him in a valley in the land of Moab, over against Bethpeor; but no man knoweth of his sepulchre unto this day." Above all we have the example of our Lord Jesus Himself.

Concerning the woman who had anointed Him with precious ointment shortly before His death, Jesus said: "For in that she hath poured this ointment on My body, she did it for My burial." (Matt. 26:12). So the Lord desired it, and so it was done, as we see from the action of Joseph of Arimathea, (Matt. 27:59f.).

Cremation is often but an expression of materialism. In this manner the heathen peoples often dispose of their dead. In civilised countries cremation is very often practised for the express purpose to deny the resurrection from the dead. The ashes of the cremated are often scattered over land or sea to proclaim by that very action that the dead will never rise again. Our Christian consciousness shrinks from the very thought of this and shudders at it. A Lutheran Pastor could not with a good conscience officiate at such a disposal of a dead body.

When cremation is employed as a measure of hygiene, or of economy, or when it is performed for the sake of shipping the ashes a great distance, our objections would not be urged or insisted upon.

8. Lodge Members A conscientious Lutheran Pastor cannot and will not have anything to do with the secret societies, or lodges, in funerals or in any other connection. It should not be necessary here to state the grounds, for lodge religion and their religious principles are a negation of all that a true Christian believes and holds dear. If one who has been a lodge-member renounces the lodge-religion and confesses Christ as the only Saviour of sinners, a Lutheran Pastor will gladly officiate.
9. A true Lutheran Pastor must not officiate at a funeral where a minister of another faith is also to take part in the services. Here the many passages of Scripture that forbid Unionism apply. To officiate under such circumstances would compromise the true faith, and place truth and error on the same level. It is sad to see official toleration of such unionistic practices gaining ground even in many Lutheran synods today. By refusing to officiate in such a case, the Pastor must take pains to explain that he, by declining to participate, in no wise thereby passes judgement upon the deceased.

We have tried to enumerate the chief outstanding instances when a Lutheran Pastor must not officiate at a burial. No attempt has been made to cover every case. Peculiar circumstances may arise where the Pastor is in doubt just what to do. In such cases he will plead with God for true pastoral wisdom and love, and he will also seek the counsel of his brethren in faith and office. Whenever he can do so with a good conscience, without compromising the truth of God's Word, the Pastor will officiate. He is not looking for trouble. In cases where it is impossible to arrive at conclusive evidence, the Pastor will give the party the benefit of the doubt. No Christian takes pleasure in the death of the wicked. But where there are no extenuating circumstances, where the case is clear-cut, there the Pastor must refuse, though it means the hatred of the world, and may even cost him the goodwill of many of his own church-members. The Scripture says: "If I yet pleased men, I should not be the servant of Christ." (Gal. 1:10).

SOME OBJECTIONS AND THEIR ANSWERS

1. "The funeral is not for the sake of the dead, but for the living. Surely the Pastor can go and preach to the living."

ANSWER: "We are not burying the living but the dead. The whole service centres around him, and if it were not for the deceased, there would be no funeral service at all."

2. "But one need say nothing about the dead."

ANSWER: To remain silent would be hypocrisy; we would be “dumb dogs that cannot bark.” And the very fact that you must remain silent about the deceased is pretty good evidence that the Pastor has no business officiating at such a funeral.

3. “A funeral service gives the Pastor an excellent opportunity to testify to the issues of life and death.”

ANSWER: The most powerful sermon that can be preached on such an occasion is to refuse to preach. That sermon will be remembered long after anything that might have been said in a funeral sermon over an unbeliever.

4. “The Pastor can go and preach a sermon of warning, a thundering law sermon.”

ANSWER: By so doing, hearts are only embittered, and more is lost than gained.

5. “But the family belongs to the Congregation, and it is the duty of the Pastor to comfort it in its sorrow.”

ANSWER: “False comfort is no comfort.” As a matter of fact, it would be wicked and hypocritical. Privately the Pastor can hold forth the true comfort of God’s Word to the mourners.

6. “By refusing to conduct the burial service, the Pastor passes judgement upon the deceased. No one knows what may have occurred between the dead and his God in the last moments.”

ANSWER: We can judge only by what we can see. The Pastor does not pass judgement. That is God’s office alone. But by giving one who to all appearances has lived and died without God and thus without hope a Christian burial, the Pastor does in fact pass judgement; he pronounces him a Christian, he calls him blessed, and holds forth the hope of resurrection to life. And such a judgement flies in the face of all that Scriptures teach concerning this point. By not officiating, the Pastor suspends judgement, leaving final judgement to Him who “searcheth the reins and hearts,” whose “judgements are true and righteous altogether.”

7. “Relations and friends may leave the Congregation. The Congregation will be torn to pieces, etc.”

ANSWER: If they are enlightened Christians, they will not leave the Congregation. And very often it happens that, so far from weakening a Congregation, such a firm stand on the part of the Pastor only serves to strengthen it. God’s Church is never weakened if we follow God’s Word. And even though some may leave the Congregation, we should be more concerned about the favour of God and the salvation of souls than the favour or fear of man. And when we are accused of lacking love and being hard, we will remember that true love “rejoiceth in the truth”, and that it was the gentle, loving Saviour Himself, Who died for us on the cross, that told us the startling, hard story of the Rich Man and Lazarus, (Luke 16:19-31).

8. “It is true, the deceased did not go to church nor did he go to communion, but he said he used to read his Bible at home and listen to the ‘Lutheran Hour’.”

ANSWER: If he really did read his Bible at home, he must have come across these passages: “He that heareth you heareth Me; and he that despiseth you despiseth Me; and he that despiseth Me despiseth Him that sent Me,” (Luke 10:16); again: “Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is”, (Heb. 10:25); and concerning the Lord’s Supper, Christ commanded: “This do ye in remembrance of Me.” Moreover, as a Lutheran he must have once learned the following: “We should fear and love God that we may not despise preaching and His Word, but hold it sacred, and gladly hear and learn it.” (Third Commandment). All this talk about reading the Bible at home is usually just a smoke-screen. To attend Worship Services is God’s command, and whoever deliberately disobeys God’s command is not a Christian. St. Peter asks: “What shall be the end of them that obey not the

Gospel of God”? (1 Peter 4:17), and St. Paul provides the answer, 2 Thess. 1:8f.: “In flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ; who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of His power.”

And as for the “Lutheran Hour”, it was not put on the air to keep people from attending church services, but to proclaim the Gospel to the nations.

9. “The deceased was baptised and confirmed in our church, therefore we must give him christian burial.”

ANSWER: That he was baptised and confirmed in our church was good. Then he should also have known what the will of God was in regard to church attendance and Communion. And did he not at his Confirmation at the Lord’s Altar give the solemn promise “to be true to Thee in faith and obedience unto my end”? And we might point out here the grave responsibility a Christian Congregation has over against fringe members and back-sliders. The Lord has given to every Congregation very precise instructions in Matt. 18:15-18. And if a Congregation neglects or takes no notice of the Lord’s instruction, it is simply giving the back-slider his ticket to hell, and both Pastor and every member of the Congregation will be called to account, and it will not go well with them. See Ezek. 3:17-21.

To give a Christian burial to a lost soul will not help him, nor will it help Pastor and Congregation at the Final Judgement.

10. “People won’t join the church.”

ANSWER: They won’t feel the need of joining the church if at the burial of a manifest unbeliever they are given to understand that you can after all have the hope of Eternal Life without hearing God’s Word and using the Sacraments. Moreover, Christ did not command us to build up a big church with a large number of members, but our instructions are to proclaim faithfully and in every instance His Law and Gospel “as a witness unto all nations.”

Through such preaching, teaching and practising He Himself “adds to the Church such as should be saved.” (See Acts 2:47).