

# Who Can Be Accorded a Christian Burial According to Scripture?

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[Rhineland Pastoral Conference; Northern Wisconsin District WELS  
May 7, 1973 in session at St John's Ev. Lutheran Church, Phelps, WI]

Years ago, a member of a parish I once served remarked: "Pastor, it's funny you never hear anything bad about the dead person at a funeral—always good." When a remark like that comes out of the blue, you stop and think for a moment. Finally I said something to the effect that that was good, for we expect that the people buried from our churches are Christians without exception.

The motto "Christian funerals for Christians only" is one of long standing, and is familiar to almost all of our congregation members; but the need arises every once in a while to convince some members of it, let alone answering the non-church member.

Our theme presupposes that "Christian funerals for Christians only" is a correct procedure. The theme also answers its own question. "Who can be accorded a Christian burial?" In a word, Christians. Yet it remains for us to demonstrate how this motto has been deduced from Holy Scripture.

We will need to note the precedents in Biblical history regarding funerals and keep in mind the Scriptural basis for determining what a Christian is, what the Church is, what the function of the Church is, our duty toward confessional Christianity, proper ceremony, proper preaching, and proper counseling in connection with the death of a person and the disposal of his body.

We assume that our theme refers to a Christian burial being accorded by a Christian pastor or a Christian congregation. Since our Lord has not given us a direct command pertaining to burials (as He has in the preaching of the Word and administration of the Sacraments), and since there is no Scriptural mention of the form of ceremony (nor yet of limitations to their use in certain instances), in order to answer the question, we need to ask:

"Who Can Be Accorded a Christian Burial According to Scripture?"

I. What is a Christian Burial?

II. How does burial relate to the commission Christ has assigned to His Church on earth?

Burial of a body of a believer in the Lord has almost all of its Scriptural precedent recorded in the Old Testament, going back to the time of the Patriarchs and the Prophet Moses. In the New Testament, it is a custom carried over from Judaism, the burials of Jesus and John the Baptist properly belonging to the Old Testament era. The only mention of burial after Pentecost is that of Ananias and Sapphira, Acts 5: 6-10, and possibly Stephen, whose body was "carried by devout men," presumably for burial, Acts 8: 2. There doesn't seem to be a direct command in the Ceremonial Law regarding burial, although there is much by way of regulation governing the handling and disposal of a dead body.

The person that was hanged on a tree had to be buried that day, for he was considered accursed of God, Deut. 21: 22-23. It was forbidden to touch a dead body, although there was a purification ceremony prescribed in case someone should, Num. 19:11ff; and having touched a dead body did not disqualify one from celebrating the Passover, Num. 9: 6. A person was disgraced in death if his body was not buried, Dt. 28: 26; Ps. 79: 2; Ec. 7: 33; 16: 4; 25: 33; 34: 20. Otherwise, bodies were laid in a tomb in a rock or in the earth, embalmed by wrapping strips of cloth together with spices around the body. Fragrant materials were burned, days of mourning were proclaimed, lamentations were made, and in some cases mourners were hired.

Cremation was looked upon with horror. God sent fire and brimstone upon Sodom and Gomorrah for flagrant immorality, Gen. 19: 24. Cremation was assigned as punishment for private looting in time of war, Joshua 7: 15; and the penalty was carried out, v. 25. When King Josiah rid the land of idols and all

appurtenances to idol worship, he “burned men’s bones upon the altar” in the process, 2 Kings 23: 20. Other references are Amos 2: 1 and 6: 10.

In the New Testament, the disposal of a corpse is not governed by Ceremonial Law, as we know. It is in our Christian liberty to deal with a dead body according to our faith. We, therefore, do not despise or neglect it, but treat it with reverence to God. This is reflected also in the words of the committal ceremony: “May God the Father, who has created this body; may God the Son, who by His blood has redeemed this body together with the soul; may God the Holy Ghost, who by Baptism has sanctified this body to be His temple; -- keep these remains unto the day of resurrection of all flesh.”

The 1927 *Concordia Cyclopedia* states: “One of the principles stated by the reformers of the 16<sup>th</sup> century was this, that every Christian was entitled to a Christian burial, that is, that ordinarily the pastor of the congregation should conduct the funeral, whether in the church or at the house, in the name of the entire congregation. The idea underlying this principle was the manifestation of the fellowship of believers, both in this world and in the world to come, and to make open confession of the church’s doctrine of the resurrection,” p. 103.

While on earth, the body of the Christian is the temple of the Holy Ghost, 1 Cor. .1, 16-17; 6,19, and will be redeemed from temporal and eternal death, even as the soul has been redeemed from eternal death, Romans 8: 21-23, where we read in the Revised Standard Version: “...the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.”

The manner of disposal of the lifeless body will not alter the resurrection. When the wicked try to prevent, or when unbelievers mock, the resurrection by having their bodies cremated or supposedly destroyed in another manner, they are disregarding God’s omnipotence and deceiving themselves. In the resurrection, “every eye shall see Him, and they also which pierced Him, and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of Him,” Rev. 1: 7. Therefore, although cremation and other unusual means of disposal are not in themselves sinful—for they are sinful only if done in unbelief—Christians generally avoid them as a testimony against scoffers. The Church of Rome adds a human argument, namely, that crimes have been solved by posthumous investigation—which would not have been possible, had the body been cremated.

A Christian burial, then, is the disposal of a corpse in a manner that follows the custom of believers down through the ages; reveres God as the body’s Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier; bears witness that the deceased at the time of death was in blessed communion with the saints in earth and heaven; and expresses the hope of resurrection of the body unto eternal life.

How does this relate to the commission Christ has given to His Church on earth? Our activity as a congregation is absolutely determined by the power of the Keys of the Kingdom. We have to go back to the basics: teach, preach the Gospel, administer the Sacraments, either forgiving or retaining the sins of those whom the Lord has added to or removed from the Church.

The world does not find this position suitable, but wants to arrogate temporal powers in the name of the Church. It was ever thus—in Israel of old, at the time of Christ, throughout the New Testament era to the present time, and ever will be. The political activism of the Church of Rome, Calvinists’ assuming the role of being the conscience of the state, the social gospel, and general *Diesseitigkeit* -emphasis placed on the life on earth—all these act to confuse the duties of the Christian congregation and pastor in the minds of the people. They don’t know what the business of the pastor is. When a pastor approaches a worldly about his soul and warns him of the wrath to come, he is told: “What I do is none of your business.” But when a pastor refuses a funeral, he is told: “But you can’t; why, that’s your business!”

The Divine Call to administer the Keys of the Kingdom is given to Christians, and to Christians only. The Keys are administered publicly by Christians through the called ministers in the name of, and for, the congregation. In times past, some have made a distinction, burying some from church and some from the funeral parlor or the home, ostensibly so as not to defile the house of God in doubtful cases, or even to witness

that the deceased was not a member. However, every funeral in which a pastor can in good conscience officiate is a church funeral—whether conducted from church, from the funeral parlor, or from elsewhere.

If the deceased was a member of a sister-congregation, your call dictates that you do not officiate at the funeral, except at the request or approval of that congregation and its pastor. He was not a member of your flock. In multiple deaths involving members of two or more follow-congregations, the funerals are sometimes held jointly at one location; in that case, the pastors may decide to officiate jointly.

When people come to you requesting the burial of one who belonged to an unorthodox church, you must refuse. Regardless of the truth you may intend to preach in such a case, you would be underscoring the false beliefs of the deceased by the mere act. It would be sinful unionism; but God's Word instructs us to "come out from among them," 2 Cor. 6: 17, and to "avoid them," Rom. 16: 17.

In pursuit of our calling, we are bound by Scripture to make a true confession of God's Word, applying both Law and Gospel without commingling the two. For this reason, some pastors have rationalized by saying they have opportunity, and eventually the duty to testify to the truth by accepting an unorthodox or unbeliever's funeral; whereas, if the survivors were to take the corpse to some sectarian preacher, all they will hear is that there is some good in all of us, presumably also in the deceased, and God will have mercy on our souls if we strive to develop that good into some redeeming feature in our lives.

However, to what can a pastor testify at a time like that? To the Gospel? That would be giving false comfort. To the Law? That would not only give the false impression that salvation is by the Law, but would also turn the people against him. One pastor reported an incident in which he did not want to take the risk of making the people angry at him. He said, "I took that funeral, and I ran that person down to the lowest notch and condemned him to hell! But I did it in Latin." That pastor was not of our fellowship.

Even if it is the truth, testimony is not received at a funeral of an unbeliever because people assume that the testimony applied to the deceased. Here, then; we have a case where the wrong application of the Divine Call makes the testimony of God's Word an offense, a stumbling block instead of the power unto salvation. The people are actually led to misbelief because the pastor chooses to pursue his calling on an occasion when he has no business to officiate. The noble end he has in mind does not justify the means. He must choose other means (i.e., other occasions or channels) to bear witness to the truth. Sufficient testimony for the moment is the refusal of the funeral. In every pastoral act, the pastor is identifying with the person he is serving. When he officiates at a funeral, everyone assumes that the deceased was of the same faith as the pastor.

But if the faith of the deceased was the same as that of the pastor and congregation, then the pastor should pursue his calling by conducting the funeral; God will bless his message, and his words will do their God-given work. Everyone present assumes that the deceased was entitled to be served by the pastor in burial because he was of the pastor's faith, just as lodge rites show the deceased was a lodge member, and as a military funeral indicates he was a member of the armed forces. When a Christian pastor officiates, everyone takes note: The deceased was a Christian. They then expect to take in the proceedings and to behold what a Christian and the Christian faith is like. It goes without saying that people who have manifested their impenitence by adherence to ungodly organizations may not be accorded a Christian burial.

Proper indoctrination of members, young and old, during the course of congregational work can forestall many problems. If the people are aware of the difference between orthodox and unorthodox doctrine and practice, also penitence and impenitence, and if they are conscientious about "having their house set in order" continually, including their duty toward the Baptism and emergency Baptism of infants, then, when an unbelieving relative dies, they will know why pastor cannot bury him; or at least it will not be so difficult to get them to understand.

Being buried as a Christian is a privilege because it testifies to God's grace. God was gracious to the deceased in life; he is gracious to him in death. "For whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord: whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord's," Rom. 14: 8.

The Christian should desire to confess his faith in Christ during his lifetime; and this desire should carry over to his death and burial. He should want the Christian faith proclaimed at his funeral. He knows, of course,

that he has not merited God's favor, and that anything said at his funeral would not alter his case. But he should desire to have testimony given at his funeral so that others may be saved by it; for hearts are tender and receptive in mourning, and the Word of God will greatly benefit the survivors. If it pleases God, the Word will also turn the hearts of the doubting and unbelieving.

By delineating the Christian faith at a funeral, it will be demonstrated that the Lord has chosen the deceased out of the world so that he should not be condemned with the world, (in. 15: 19; 1 Cor. 11: 32) and that the deceased in his lifetime held the hope of heaven through faith in Christ. This, then, gives the funeral address an evangelical tone, and this is as it should be; for, although both Law and Gospel are applied, the funeral service is meant for comfort.

Comfort can be given, however, only if the deceased was a Christian at death. Therefore an unbeliever cannot be given a Christian funeral. If the survivors of an unbeliever need to be led to contrition, apply the Law by refusing the funeral. If they say, "We know there is no hope for the dear departed, but we feel the need for help and comfort regarding our own souls," then proclaim the Gospel to them in a way other than by taking the funeral.

As for the person who never came to church while he was alive, he cannot be helped by carrying him before the Lord's altar when he is dead.

"Whenever I hear the church bells ring,  
I always pay a visit  
So when at last I'm carried in,  
The Lord won't ask, "Who is it?"

It has been suggested that a pastor can hold a devotion with his members, although he refuses the funeral of their unbelieving relative. Be very careful about this. Not only is the door opened to compromise but the circumstances grow, and soon they insist that the body of the deceased be present; after that, it's but a step to the cemetery. People are inclined to construe a pastor's offer to conduct a devotion as his acceptance of the funeral. This is especially true of the public.

Conscientious adherence to the Divine Call and to a clear confession of Scripture also dictates what the funeral order of service should be. Regardless of form, the words must confess faith in the Triune God, testify to membership in the Communion of Saints, and express the hope of heaven in the resurrection. This our liturgy does: "Forasmuch as it hath pleased Almighty God, in His wise providence, to take out of this world the soul of our departed brother (in Christ), we therefore commit his body to the ground ... in the hope of the resurrection to eternal life, etc." These words cannot apply to the unbeliever, nor to the one who was impenitent at the time of death—such as the case of one who has committed suicide. Nor can the pastor change the wording so as to gloss over impenitence and unbelief in an attempt to ease his own conscience; for such manipulation would only mislead the people and confirm unbelief.

The liturgical forms do apply to confirmed believers and their children, if they are members of your congregation or a sister-congregation. In doubtful cases the deceased should be given the benefit of the doubt so that we do not unjustly judge. In some of those doubtful cases, if all were known, the burden of guilt may not lie with the deceased, but with others. The delinquent should be given a Christian burial if he is still a member; this points up the responsibility of carrying out church discipline. The person should be given a Christian burial even if he had been under Christian discipline, but it had not been established that he had been a heathen and outcast, also where action had not been properly taken for his removal from membership. If a person has been under your pastoral care, as when a shut-in looks only to you as his pastor or as when one is well along in his instruction class, such may be given a Christian burial without formal membership. In such cases, as also in the case of a deathbed convert, a confession of faith according to knowledge of the way of salvation (*via salutis*) is sufficient evidence of having been a Christian. Unbaptized children of members may be given a Christian burial. It does happen that children die before anyone can baptize them. We point out in such cases that our

merciful God did not bind us to an impossible obligation; and we should take comfort that, though we could not baptize the child, His promise is given not only to us, but to our children also, and that though He has bound us to Baptism, He has not bound Himself. But what do we do when members do not have their children baptized for a year or so, especially when they have been reminded of it several times? If that child dies unbaptized, one could take the funeral, however laying it upon the parents' conscience that God will be merciful to that child only because it was not the child's fault that it was not baptized.

Suicide cases may be accepted if it has been established that the person lost his ability to reason because of a psychosis. In such cases, the pastor should bear witness to that factor so as not to give the impression that all suicides are the result of mental illness. The public is so prone to say of any suicide: "He couldn't have been in his right mind." One pastor duly conducted the funeral of a mentally-ill widow who committed suicide. Later a member asked how he could do that. The pastor answered: "She didn't know what she was doing." Whereupon the member remarked: "She knew enough to tie the rope around her neck!" For this reason it is advisable to take some precautions. Where mental illness is suspected, get some verification ahead of time, especially if the person refuses to see a psychiatrist or is not institutionalized. Then in the event of a suicide, people will know of the mental irresponsibility. Even then the situation is difficult enough. People who do not understand mental illness tend to conclude that pastor set a precedent for all suicides; and great care must be taken to explain why each suicide case must be considered on its own merits, or a lack thereof.

A pastor must make a clear confession of faith at all times, but the time between death and the day of the funeral is so short. In doubtful cases, this sometimes finds the Church Council hurriedly summoned. And death is so final. It allows for no consultation with the person in question. Nothing makes a pastor so aware of this as a suicide case. Even if a note is left, saying, "I pray God will forgive me," there is nothing a pastor, or anyone else, can do but testify to the unbelief and deliberate sin in which the person died. The pastor must refuse the funeral.

Then there are those who want to be so helpful, saying of the deceased who was not a Member: "He was baptized a Christian," or "He was confirmed Lutheran." But the pastor has to point out that that person had fallen away from his Savior, which was evidenced by his life of despising the ministry of the Word and Sacraments. Though he had been born again, he had reverted to spiritual death; and though it is beyond human comprehension to ascertain whether he had sinned against the Holy Ghost (Mt. 12: 31) and was among those for whom it is impossible to be renewed again to repentance (Heb. 6: 4-6), we do know from his deeds that he was impenitent and, as far as we know, died in impenitence.

Here, then, comes the test for the survivors, similar to that given by Jesus in Matthew 8: 22: "Follow Me, and let the dead bury their dead." The survivors have a choice: Follow Jesus and face up to the truth that those who were dead in trespasses and sins cannot receive a Christian burial, or follow the beckonings of the sinful nature to set oneself stubbornly against the truth, holding resentment against the church for its not performing what they refer to as "a labor of love" for the deceased. Luther says: "Some pretend good works because they do not want to follow or believe. But Christ distinguishes them as dead and lost good works," (*Das Weimarische Bibelwerk*, St. Louis and Leipzig 1902, under Mt. 8: 22). Giving a Christian burial to one who has fallen away from the church is a "good work" which is lost on him, does no good, and is not accepted by God. Jesus, in effect, says: "Let such bury their dead who do not concern themselves in seeking the kingdom of God during their time of grace, and are also themselves spiritually dead in their sins." (*Das Weimarische Bibelwerk*, loc. cit.). The *Kretzmann Popular Commentary* says "... do not concern yourself about the mortal shell of your father, that is the business of the undertaker; let your concern be the kingdom of God. The discipleship of Christ is far more important than all duties toward even the nearest of relatives; if there is a conflict of interests, there can be but one choice." Jesus says "He that loveth father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me," Matthew 10: 37. If, then, the relatives and friends of the deceased take exception to Scriptural testimony which shows the deceased not to be entitled to a Christian burial, they have placed love for the deceased above love for God and His Word. The pastor should, of course, make further attempts to combat their resentment, further applying the Word of God; but if this fails, he can only console himself with Christ's

words: “Whosoever shall not receive you, nor hear your words, when ye depart out of that house or city, shake off the dust of your feet,” Mt. 10: 14. “For he that heareth you, heareth Me; and he that despiseth you, despiseth Me; and he that despiseth Me, despiseth Him that sent Me,” Mt. 10: 16.

When we said earlier that our testimony should be clear-cut, it may have sounded as though we were underestimating the difficulty of handling some cases—as though each problem had its cut-and-dried solution. We did not want to convey that impression. What we mean is that the truth of Scripture must be clear to others from our testimony; for we are ambassadors for Christ, who said: “He that is not with Me is against Me; and he that gathereth not with Me scattereth abroad,” Mt. 12: 30. It is the Lord Himself who makes His testimonies “very sure,” Pa. 93: 5.

As for the plea that they want to perform this “labor of love” for the deceased even though he was an unbeliever, it should be noted that the church has already performed its labor of love to him when it admonished him and pleaded with him in Jesus’ name and finally excommunicated him so that he would know he was not being received at the throne of grace because of his impenitence.

### **Conclusion**

In order to decide from a Scriptural viewpoint who can be accorded a Christian burial, it is necessary to carry out the function that the Head of the Church has assigned to the Church. Simply stated, the deceased needs to have been a Christian at the time of death—which presupposes penitence; and the ministrations of the Word of God at the time of the funeral need to be such that compromise neither Law nor Gospel, lest we become guilty of being wolves in sheep’s clothing and blind leaders, scattering the sheep and misleading the blind.

Whether the deceased was a Christian from infancy, or from youth on, or was converted on his deathbed, the Lord gives the same “penny” of grace to all whom He has called and chosen, Mt. 20: 1-16. Depth of knowledge of God’s kingdom and its working will not be the criterion; for the simple acceptance, in penitent faith, of Christ as the Son of God in His active and passive obedience is all that is going to count when the sinner must stand before the heavenly Judge. Such a soul has life. Jesus says, “Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat of the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, ye have no life in you,” in. 6: 53; you are spiritually dead; and if you should die in your impenitence and unbelief, you are to be buried by your kind, or at least by those whose business it is to bury—the undertakers. Your survivors have no business trying to pass you off as a Christian in your demise. The comfort and joy of the resurrection unto eternal life is reserved for the believers, for they have risen from spiritual death, and their souls are spared the part “in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone, which is the second death,” Revelation 21: 8.

The comfort which God gives at a Christian’s funeral is a solemn joy, not only of the prospect of a blessed reunion in heaven, but a joy akin to that of the angels of heaven who rejoice over each soul that repents. Testimony can be given that another Christian has reached the grave having “fought the good fight of faith,” 1 Tim. 6: 12; 2 Tim. 4: 7; and because he was “faithful unto death,” the Savior has given him “a crown of life,” Rev. 2: 10. He is confirmed in heaven, where there is no more danger of losing his faith and his soul’s salvation. That which Jesus taught concerning joy over spiritual rebirth and renewal during our time of grace also applies to eternal life and glorification: “It was meet that we should make merry and be glad; for this thy brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found,” Lk. 15: 32. That cannot be said of anyone who is not a Christian; and if it could not be said of him when he faced death, it should not be said of him after death has closed the door of his time of grace.

Therefore, though we have no specific command regarding burial, we are guided by the Lord’s injunction to apply the Divine Call, making a good confession of faith, bearing witness to the truth (Law and Gospel), proclaiming sin and grace, expressing the hope of eternal life, showing that the deceased was a member of the Communion of Saints and is blessed “from henceforth” because he “died in the Lord”, Rev. 14: 13.