

Christian Burial

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Introduction

Last October I received the request from our District Secretary, “to prepare an essay for the West Wisconsin District Delegate Convention to be held in Watertown in the summer of 1962, which is to be a popular presentation on the subject, ‘Christian Burial,’ not merely doctrinal in character but practical in its nature.” The subject, I can assure you, is never going to be popular although by its very nature all of us must participate in it—even once as its principle character. All of us cling to life as long as possible despite our Christian professions and what the poet Maecenas wrote many years ago of heathen people is true of all of us:

Though racked with gout in hand and foot,
Though cancer deep should strike its root,
Though palsy shakes my feeble thighs
Though hideous lump on shoulder rise
From flaccid gum teeth drop away;
Yet all is well if life but stay.

(Quoted by James S. Elliot, *Outlines of Greek and Roman Medicine*, p. 66)

That this subject of “Christian Burial” is a rather popular subject is evident from the fact that any number of essays on this and similar subjects have been written in our circles and have been presented at our various Conferences. I shall try to avoid duplicating what has appeared in many of these essays.

“Why does our pastor or church bury this person and then suddenly draw the line and refuse to bury someone else? Isn’t everyone entitled to a “Christian Burial?” Because of our training and our background, we so very quickly answer, “Of course not!” It is rather easy for people to get the idea that a Christian pastor is to bury anyone because that happens to be the opinion of the world in which we live. *The Encyclopaedia Britannica*, volume 4, page 409, edition 1959, makes the following statement in its article on burial, “All Men Are Entitled to a Christian Burial.” When people are ill they call a doctor and because he is a doctor of medicine, they know he must respond to their call for help. By the process of transference, they feel that when they are in need of someone to perform a burial, it is only natural to call upon a Christian pastor, whether they have any connections with the church or not and that he, automatically, must perform such a burial. The refusal on the part of a pastor to officiate at such an occasion is to them actually a case of malpractice, a refusal to perform a service or function to which they feel they are entitled, and which a pastor has a duty to perform. Since they make no effort to discover why they may have been refused, the Christian pastor who has declined this honor is branded as narrow, bigoted, and so forth.

Or a situation such as this may develop. The telephone rings in your study and the following conversation ensues, “This is Joe Below from Below Mortuary. Mr. Joe Smith, who is the brother of one of your good members, passed away at the hospital and the family has made the arrangements for the funeral and has asked me to call and tell you about these arrangements.” Now you happen to know that Mr. Joe Smith never entered a church for the past 70 years of his life but his brother is a member of your congregation. The conversation continues, “The Smith family has set the funeral for 2:00 PM on Wednesday afternoon and have indicated that Mrs. Jones of the local Jehovah Witness Kingdom Hall, who has such a pleasing voice will sing and the numbers chosen are, ‘Crossing The Bar,’ and ‘In The Sweet By and By.’ They asked Mrs. Jones to sing

because they do not care for the soloists at your church. As organist, the family has selected Mr. Doe from the Christian Crusade, and the family also wants you to know that Masonic rites are to be performed at the graveside.” Such a conversation is fantastic, of course, but individual parts of it do occur all too frequently. Very often the polite refusal on the part of a pastor to officiate under such circumstances is misunderstood and taken as an offensive attack by the member involved.

All of us are aware that within our ministry and the life of our congregations, the question of burying arises. There are those at whose funeral we are most happy to serve because we know that a true member of the Church Militant has been translated to the Church Triumphant and these words of the Scripture, “How precious in the sight of our Lord is the death of His saints,” are being fulfilled. We know this person to have confessed the Christian faith in life, looked to Christ for forgiveness and hoped for the resurrection of the body according to Christ’s promise, “Because I live ye shall live also.”

But what we are greatly concerned about is that it happens too often in our congregations that the pastor is asked to give Christian Burial to someone about whom there are doubts whether or not he is entitled to a Christian Burial. The purpose of this essay is to help us become clear in our minds as to what constitutes Christian Burial so we might work for sound Christian practice in this respect in our congregations.

It is true, “The Word of God does not prescribe nor command burial service nor does it contain a single example of a religious service and a burial. Yet in its burial service, more than in any other public service, has the Christian Church revealed the close relation between its doctrine and worship. In what the Church did with its dead, she brought to light either its correct conception of the Gospel or its religious superstition.” (*The Significance of the Lutheran Burial*) To understand this more fully, it will be necessary for us to approach the subject of “Christian Burial” with a brief historical study of the treatment of the dead.

Our Christian Burial practices and customs of today go back to the funeral practices found in early Hebrew culture. Among the Jews, burial commonly took place on the evening of the day of death. The burial was a family affair. It was the responsibility of the family to perform the last rights of love, to lay the body into the bosom of the earth from which it was originally taken as God had spoken in Genesis 3:19, “In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground, for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art and unto dust shalt thou return.” This seeming haste in burying the body on the same day of death was founded on hygienic necessity. The early Hebrews buried their dead without coffins. These came into limited use after the Babylonian captivity. The body was borne to the place of internment on a bier. When the grave was reached, the poor were laid on the ground or in a shallow trench and over them a mound of earth was shoveled. The rich were interred in natural caves or in artificial sepulchers hewn out of rock as was the grave into which the body of Christ was placed.

When death occurred, the nearest of kin “rent their garments.” Sandals were discarded, and for a long time, bare feet remained a symbol of death. Earlier Hebrews cut off a generous tuft of hair between the eyes or shaved off the beard to parade their sorrow. Similarly, the custom of throwing one’s self in the dust was later symbolically represented by sitting in the dust or placing dust upon the head. Fasting for the dead which began at the moment of death, ordinarily terminated at evening on the day of death. In the case of Moses’ and Aaron’s deaths, the mourning lasted up to thirty days (Numbers 20:29; Deuteronomy 34:8). Lamentation for the dead was a regular and important rite among the Hebrews. Hired mourners swelled the wailing of the family.

The earliest tombs of the Hebrews were placed upon the family lands or near the family dwellings and burial therein was restricted to family members. To be buried apart from one’s kin was a catastrophe regarded as a manifestation of the judgment of God. The early Hebrews sought to lie with their fathers and placed offerings in and before family tombs. These tombs were generally easy of access. For example, Abraham’s stood at the edge of his field; that of Joseph of Arimathea was in his garden; those of the kings of Judah were in Jerusalem in the royal gardens. Samuel and Joab were given burial in their own houses. Not all burials, however, were so convenient. Aaron, Eleazar, Moses and Joshua were buried in mountains; and Rachel on the highway from Jerusalem to Bethlehem.

During all historical periods, the ancient Hebrews interred their dead. While embalming was rarely practiced, both Jacob and Joseph were embalmed (Genesis 50:2-26) according to a custom that was foreign rather than strictly forbidden. No such tolerance was accorded cremation. When cremation took place, it was frowned upon as an indignity to the corpse; and it was regarded as a means of intensifying the disgrace of the death penalty (I Samuel 31:12; Amos 6:10; Joshua 7:25; Leviticus 20:14). At the root of this dislike was the belief that even after death there was a bond between the soul and the body, and that the spirits of the unburied, the cremated among them, on earth wandered about disconsolate and in pitiable conditions, and were driven into nooks and corners. To remain unburied was therefore, not only a disgrace but a misfortune (I Kings 14:11; Isaiah 23:12). For these reasons, it was the sacred duty for all to bury an unburied body. Criminals who had been stoned to death were considered buried beneath the mound of stones that had slain them (Joshua 7:26).

Men dreaded the thought that they might remain unburied; worse was the possibility that one's corpse might be devoured by wild animals. To violate a grave and destroy its contents were considered great outrages. For strangers, criminals, the extremely poor, a public place of burial was provided. The chief priest took the pieces of silver used to buy Judas, "And after they had consulted together they bought with them the potter's field, to be a burying place of strangers" (Matthew 27:7).

Early Christian beliefs regarding death and the disposal of the dead were built upon the Scriptures divinely revealed to both the Hebrews and then also the Evangelists and Apostles. Burial, of course, was still of utmost importance for the early Christians. Yet in St. Paul's memorable passage, ending: "For this corruptible must put on incorruption and this mortal must put on immortality...then shall come to pass the saying that is written, "death is swallowed up in victory. Oh death where is thy sting, oh grave where is thy victory," there is more than the suggestion that the disposition of the body after death by any one mode of burial was a matter of indifference. The resurrection was the *miracle* of God: bodies burned, buried, or lost at sea shared equally in the miraculous transformation, although the Church held it revolting that the human body, "Once a temple of the Holy Spirit, once sanctified and refreshed spiritually by the sacraments" should be burned, except in "well defined, isolated instances when because of disease or epidemic, cremation is absolutely necessary to prevent the disease" (William W. Buechel, *Christian Burial - What It Means*). The principle involved here is that of the common good. Cremation, too, has been frowned upon because of its pagan association, and because in later suspicion of foul play, it rendered an official examination of the body difficult.

Customarily, then, Christians buried their dead also because of the example of the Master who was buried in a grave hewn out of stone.

Death for the early Christian was a birth into eternity and a triumphal culmination of his life and, therefore, was not an event calling for hopeless and unconfined grief. Early Christian burial customs like those of the Hebrews were simple and unpretentious. Early canon law laid down simple requirements for the burial of the dead, asking only that the body should be decently laid out with lights beside it; that it should be asperged with water and incensed at stated times; that a cross should be placed upon the breast, or, in lieu of a cross, the hands should be folded; and then it should be buried in consecrated ground. No regulation required that the dead must even be buried in a coffin. According to Aristides, "When one of the poor members of Christianity passes out of this world, each one of the Christians, according to his ability, gives heed to him and carefully sees to his burial." Among the Hebrews, certain women of the community were assigned the task of assisting in the laying out of the body. This task was considered a contaminating influence, a legal defilement, and, consequently not to be undertaken by priests or members of the priestly class. However, this taboo did not extend into Christian funeral practice. Christians touched the dead; and since the body was considered "the temple of the Holy Ghost," it was possible for the laity and even the clergy to handle it without fear of legal defilement or need for ritualistic purification.

The Hebrews anointed the corpse with oils and spices. In reverential imitation of Christ's burial, the practice was followed among early Christians of anointing the dead with oils and spices with which Jesus was wrapped. The pagans did not approve of this custom, thinking it foolish for the living to waste expensive ointments on the dead, which they thought they might better employ in anointing themselves.

Among early Christians, as noted earlier, relatives and friends were admitted to view the face of the deceased and an interval of eight or more hours was required before burial. This delay between death and burial, varying in length according to custom and climatic conditions, served a psychological need in gradually conditioning friends and relatives to the changed conditions brought about by death; and the physical need in providing an opportunity for continued close observation of the corpse in the hope that it might return to consciousness.

The old Jewish custom of “watching” or “waiting” the dead was rooted in a genuine concern by relatives and friends that no person should be buried alive. To insure against such terrible contingency, the sepulcher was left unsealed for three days so that the corpse might frequently be scrutinized for signs of life. This is a custom which in later Hebrew burial, however, was replaced. This practice of leaving the grave uncovered was taken over by the early Christians. At the early Christian “wake,” instead of wailings of the mourners who might have been hired for that purpose by the Hebrews, outbursts of grief were held in check. The grimness of death for the latter had lost its edge; the dead were “asleep in Jesus.” The early Church differed from the pagan even from the Jewish nation by a cheerful and hopeful view of death, and by discarding lamentations, rending of clothes, and all signs of extravagant grief. The terrors of the grave were dispelled by the light of the resurrection and the idea of death was transformed into the idea of a peaceful slumber (Schaff p. 382) Although the Old Testament Jew hoped for the resurrection of the body (Job 19:25) the Christian had in the resurrection of Christ the fulfillment and demonstration of the resurrection to eternal life. They could not, therefore, mourn as those who had no hope (I Thessalonians 4:13). Cyprian writes: “No one should be made sad by death since in living is labor and peril, in dying peace and the certainty of the resurrection to eternal life.”

The so-called “Apostolic Constitutions” dated between the second and fifth centuries, and which very probably contain customs of the post-apostolic time, give a detailed description of the burial customs in the early church. The Apostolic Constitutions state that the early Christian burial service was looked upon as the duty of the congregation. Hymns of thanksgiving for the deceased were sung and prayers by the living were spoken that they too might enter upon eternal life. The bishop or pastor pronounced thanks that the dead brother or sister had persevered in his faith and in his Christian warfare even to death; or the deacons read portions of Scripture giving promise of the resurrection. In addition the Apostolic Constitutions report that the Lord’s Supper celebrated at every service was celebrated also at the burial of the dead, thus placing special emphasis on the doctrine of the *Una Sancta*, that those on earth and those in heaven belonged to one holy body of which Christ was the head. And so in our day we have not only the Marriage Eucharist—or Holy Communion—celebrated at weddings but also the Funeral Eucharist. But a custom was gradually being introduced into the Church at this time that on the third, seventh, and thirtieth day after the death of a believer, the congregation would remember the departed by name. This name was mentioned in connection with a great prayer of thanksgiving before the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. Soon, however, these prayers developed into prayers for the dead, and the Lord’s Supper was perverted into a sacrifice for the benefit of the dead. The Apostolic Constitutions contained a prayer like this, “let us pray for our brethren that are at rest in Christ, that God, the lover of mankind, who has received his soul, may forgive him every sin, voluntary and involuntary.” Strangely enough, the early Church was aware that once a person was dead he could not be helped. Again the Apostolic Constitutions state: “These things we say concerning the pious, for as to the ungodly, if thou givest all the world to the poor thou wilt not benefit him at all. For to whom the deity was an enemy while he was alive, it is certain it will be so also when he is departed.” For many, it was only a natural progression to believe that the burial service itself was the effective agency to change the status of the individual after death no matter what he might have professed in life. Quickly then the thought developed, “Let’s bury anybody.” Since one could benefit the dead by praying for them and since the Lord’s Supper celebrated at the burial was perverted into a sacrifice, for the purpose of aiding the dead into heaven, then the corrupt idea also followed that anyone, even the unchurched, even strangers, even an unknown man could be helped into heaven by a Christian Burial service. “Even today, regardless of what people say, there is in the request that a pastor officiate at the funeral of an unbeliever, the secret hope that such a funeral might in some way pave the way to heaven for the departed.” All

of this, certainly, was contrary to the Scriptures but even in that early day of the Christian Church, who paid attention to what God Himself said.

Another development in close connection with the unscriptural belief that the departed can be helped through prayers and a Christian funeral service was the reintroduction of the pagan idea that death is a long journey, often unpleasant, to eternal bliss and you have the fullfledged Roman doctrine of purgatory in which the departed faithful can be helped by special prayers and the saying of the Mass. We continue now with the historical presentation of early Christian Burial.

In the early periods, the emphasis in Christian funeral processions was upon the maintenance of subdued and reverent attitude. In contrast to the pagan world, instrumental music, actors and buffoons and the like, were excluded from the Christian funeral procession. Noisy exhibitions of grief were shunned. Young men, not for pay, but as a work of mercy, carried the bier to the place of internment outside the city or village (Acts 5:6). The early Christian funeral procession was limited to the corpse, its bearers and the family and friends of the dead. As it passed solemnly and quietly to the grave, psalms and hymns were sung. If possible, the funeral took place in the daytime to emphasize the belief that the dead person was entering into eternal light and life and not into gloom. Torches were carried at the head of the procession, not to light the way since such function was not needed, but as befits the progress of a victorious combatant. Lights carried before the dead symbolized both the glory into which it was hoped he had come, and the triumph of his new state. Many instances are recorded of the use of daytime torches in early Christian funeral processions. Lamps were employed as substitutes. When the body of St. John Chrysoston was removed from Comana to Constantinople, so many persons bearing lamps came out in ships to meet the corpse that the "sea was covered with lamps." Alms in the form of food and money were distributed to the poor at the grave, forerunner of our memorial wreaths.

While the earliest scattered converts to Christianity among the Jews were content to have their bodies interred without distinction among their Jewish brethren, as soon as Christian colonies developed among non-Christians, a demand arose for special places of burial, which could be the scene of a distinct ritual, as befitted a fundamental difference in viewpoint concerning the dead body. It was not possible for the small, struggling, persecuted early Christian Church to possess and maintain cemeteries such as we know today. The earliest Christian burials from Apostolic times to the persecution of Domitian were in family vaults erected outside the walls, along the roads leading from great cities. Out of this tomb burial and in response to an everincreasing need for more room, the catacombs developed. Originally, these were galleries, chambers or passages openly hewn out of soft rock with public entrances; their enormous later extension was due to crypt enlargement for burial purposes.

When the Christian persecutions came to an end at the close of the fourth century, the Church emerged from its long exile underground. A sign of its new freedom was the vogue for open air cemeteries. Archaeological research indicates that these were established in Rome and in North Africa before the reign of Constantine the Great. With the emergence of the Christian Church, and Christianity as the state religion, heathenish and pagan customs were also introduced at Christian Burial. Original simplicity was quickly displaced with pomp and circumstance, especially in the case of the leaders and so-called leaders of the Church. The early simple practices gave way in the funerals of saints, martyrs, and persons of civil and religious importance, to rites as costly and elaborate as those which had marked the burial of Greeks and Romans of comparable position. The state assumed the responsibility of seeing that all who needed it, received a decent Christian Burial. Laws were made to prevent overcharge. Under the supervision of the Church, every person who required it, was to have a free coffin. Even the poorest was to be borne to the grave in a procession which included a cross bearer, eight monks, and three acolytes. For a moment the burial of the wealthy and prominent occupies our attention. The custom of burying the dead in new white garments of linen to signify the putting on of the "new clothing of incorruption," yielded by degrees to the practice of burying persons in the costumes by which during life they had indicated their positions so that they continued "splended in ashes, pompous in the grave." Kings were arrayed in royal finery, emperors in imperial robes. Knights were shrouded in military

garments, the dead bishop wore his episcopal garb, and priests their priestly vestments. Monks wore the habits of their several orders, and so it went.

With the rejection on Scriptural grounds of the doctrine of purgatory by the Reformers of the sixteenth century and of the mass and the mediation of the priesthood and prayers for the dead, the groundwork was laid for changes in funeral customs and practices based on those beliefs. Full change did not come instantly, so ingrained are habits. The Reformers insisted that Christians should therefore, be fittingly buried and the places should be properly maintained. Burial was a concern of the Church to be attended by the congregation, even, if possible, when the poor were buried. The tolling of bells summoned the congregation to a burial and if all did not come, the pastor and school children or at very least, the sexton and the grave digger, represented it. On the way to the cemetery, children and mourners sang Christian burial hymns. At the grave itself, prayers were recited, appropriate Scripture passages were read and alms giving, the forerunner of our memorial wreaths (cf. p. 12), for the poor were encouraged by the passing of alm boxes or collection plates. At the service at the church, the singing of hymns, the reading of Scripture lessons in themselves were supplemented by a brief sermon on death and resurrection. Occasionally, even among the early Protestants, the pious were fond of carrying the cross in the procession and of casting earth upon the body at the grave three times. Although they were then generally regarded with distrust, these practices have since been widely accepted as additions to the funeral rites.

But the Reformation did much more than merely effect a few outward changes in customs of Christian Burial. The Scriptural principles of burial are the exact opposite of what Rome teaches. In this respect, Luther restored the Gospel truth once more to a world of confused Christians. “The Lutheran Reformation rediscovered the Scriptural doctrine that this life is man’s time of grace and that the Means of Grace, the Gospel and the Sacraments, and the gift of prayer have been given to benefit and save the living. While the Roman Church at its burial service conducts the rites for the benefit of the dead body, the Lutheran Reformation devoted its attention to the living. While the Roman service centers upon the dead, the Lutheran service endeavors to comfort and edify the survivors. While in the Roman Church with the burial is begun a whole series of new activities on the deceased, for the Lutheran Church the burial is the final act in the interest of one whose eternal welfare has now been decided.”

Hear Luther as to what the Lutheran Reformation accomplished in regard to the dead and Christian Burial. “...we have driven the pestilential abomination from our churches, such as vigils, masses for the dead, processions, purgatory, and all other mockery and hocus pocus on behalf of the dead...nor do we sing a funeral hymn or doleful songs over our dead and at the graves, but comforting him, of the forgiveness of sins of rest, of sleep, of life, and of the resurrection of Christian who have died, in order that our faith may be strengthened and the people may be moved to proper devotion. For it is also meet and right that one conduct and carry out burials decently and fittingly in praise and honor of the joyful article of our faith, namely that of the resurrection of the dead,...to smother stinking, shameful death and to praise and confess the resurrection of the dead, so that weak faith and sorrow might be comforted thereby...”

For the Christian, burial is by no means the end, as St. Peter himself expresses it in his first Epistles: “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” (I Peter 1:3). It is true anyone can bury. But 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. Luther emphasized that all burial services should be divine services. As, in each divine service, the congregation confesses its faith in the one true God, confesses its sins and salvation through Christ, and confesses its hope in the resurrection from the grave, so all burial services should contain this same confessional element. It is evident that the duly called pastor in the congregation is the only one authorized to conduct such divine, confessional services. “The Lutheran confessions are clear and no pastor has a right to bury anyone who did not belong to his call without the expressed permission of the local pastor.” Now it is true, of course, that we by no means insist that it is only members who belong to our Lutheran congregations and members of our Synod who are saved. There may be a

true believer also in the heterodox church. But for us to grant a Christian Burial to such a person would be unionism; his own church must bury him. Again, we grant Christian Burial only to those who are in the care of our own congregation, not the members of a sister congregation, unless the congregation in question has given us permission to perform its duty on its dead. We owe it to all of our members to give them a Christian Burial when they die; for the mere fact that they hold membership with us is a confession on their part that they believe as we do. We owe Christian Burial also to those whom we have served through our pastor and who have confessed their faith in their Savior, as for example, people in their last illness who have called for the pastor and have turned to their Savior. In this category, we might include such also who have been attending our services and living as befits Christians, but die before they can take the necessary steps to become communicant members of our congregation. Yes, there might even be exceptional cases in which we might grant Christian Burial to him who for years had no contact with the Church. I think of some old, forgotten person who dies without calling the pastor, but has made faithful use of his Bible, Hymnal, and Prayer Book since the time when he was no longer able to come to church.

Christian Burial is a testimony of Christian fellowship. It expresses the hope that those who here in this world were united in faith shall also be united hereafter in life eternal. Since burial is an expression of fellowship, it clearly follows that those who have nothing to do with our Christian faith and fellowship in life surely should not be forced into such fellowship after death and neither does the false imposition of Christian Burial upon an unbeliever or scoffer, give to this individual who is dead, any right to believe or to expect a life everlasting with God.

While the pastor is conducting the burial service, he is to edify the believers by means of the preaching of the Word of God. He is to comfort the bereaved by reminding them of the resurrection of the dead. Such comfort is alone possible at the funeral of a confessed Christian. To bring this comfort to the bereaved at the death of a loved one who during his life never confessed his faith in Christ, the resurrection and life, would be nothing but sheer mockery. We are to bury only those who confessed their Christian faith, who confessed their sins, looked to Christ for forgiveness, and hoped for the resurrection of their bodies. The Bible outlines no ceremony to be used at the funeral service or at the grave. Nevertheless, it is surely a logical conclusion that Christian Burial ceremonies are only for Christians. Dean Fritz in his book "Pastoral Theology," on page 302, states, "A Christian pastor should not officiate at the funeral of a person concerning whom at the time of his death *there was no evidence of his being a Christian* (or self-evidently who at the time of his death was a member of another congregation, either orthodox or heterodox)." Christian pastors strengthen the indifference and the unbelief of many when they officiate at the funeral of unbelievers and even speak of such as having been Christians. A Christian Burial is a privilege of such as, as far as man can judge, have fallen asleep in the Lord.

If we ask, why are we so concerned about the burial of the body when, after all, it is the soul that counts? We answer, God did not only create the soul but the body also. The Lord died for the body also. The risen body of the believer with the soul shall live eternally before God. The dead body was with fellow believers in this life as a member of the Church and the body of Christ and in view of the resurrection still is such a member. These thoughts we ought to keep in mind also when a little later on we briefly touch upon the matter of the autopsy or the post-mortem examination.

In our Christian Burial service, we testify to the world: This person was a believer and though we now commit his body to the dust, it shall rise again and reign with God in all eternity. And this he has done for the departed in bringing him to faith through the means of grace and granting him a blessed end. In our burial service we seek to comfort the mourners with the only comfort there is, the comfort of the Gospel, "Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth."

All of this may seem clear to us and we wonder, why should any fuss be made about this matter? I can understand what Fritz says in his "Pastoral Theology," page 305: "In no case should a Christian pastor officiate at the funeral of an avowed unbeliever or of a person who, as far as human judgment goes, did not die as a Christian." Those who had no love for the Word of God before death should not be forced into a confession of

faith after death. The Christian Church subscribes to these words of the Savior: “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned” (Mark 16:16). The Church confesses that they who died not believing in Jesus will be damned. If, however, a pastor were to officiate at a burial of a non-believer, he would be guilty of one of two sins, either of deception, trying to make people believe that the unbeliever was not an unbeliever, or of denial, denying that it is true that unbelievers are damned, by burying the unbeliever according to a ritual which says that the person who is being buried is saved. No conscientious pastor will care to make himself guilty of either of these sins.

What we have stated is good in theory, and I am sure that most of our members are quite willing to go along with it, until a situation arises within their own family whose nature is such that a Lutheran pastor feels almost conscience bound to refuse to officiate. The situation is delicate in the first place, a loved one has been taken away, emotions are quite evident, the departed, while a non-Christian, was a good provider, all the relatives belong to the Church and as usual, are divided into two parts, those who expect the pastor to officiate and perform Christian Burial and those who for reasons will object if Christian Burial is granted. Let’s not fool ourselves; the artillery lined up against the pastor will be formidable. There is custom, public opinion and even the desire to take the easy way out and satisfy as many people as possible. But the pastor must remind himself that he could well fall under the condemnation of God’s prophet who 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).

The arguments advanced against the Christian pastor’s stand to refuse to bury the non-Christian are old and do not change with the passing years although there are those who feel that they are new whenever they present them once more. With pontifical mien and with the false idea of what Christian love actually is, there are those who will immediately intone that we should not judge anyone, and if we refuse to bury a person, we are judging him and saying that he is damned. Is the Pastor or the Church Council actually passing judgment in such instances when Christian Burial must be refused, or is it not rather the Lord Himself who sayst “Faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the Word of God” (Romans 10:17). If anyone consistently refuses to hear the Word of God, God Himself declares that he has no faith, and we, by refusing Christian Burial, are merely repeating God’s judgment. So it is not we who judge him by not giving such a person a Christian Burial, but the sinner has convicted himself, and God in His Word has passed judgment on him.

The next argument usually advanced against the pastor in such instances is, I believe, an argument prompted by nothing more than pride and the desire to have at least an outward show of proper appearance at a funeral. The argument is, “You can’t bury a man like a dog.” Just imagine having a funeral and all the relatives present and not a Christian Pastor to officiate! Just what would the relatives say? The Pastor or the clergyman is looked upon as a bit of necessary garnish to make proper the final rites of man. In years gone by, the Christians were not bothered in this manner. The heathen Roman did not ask the despised Christian to lend them one of their pastors for burial. Times change. The use of the name Christian has changed. And so it comes that nowadays it is possible to borrow a clergyman who calls himself Christian to give a so-called Christian Burial to anyone who might die. And if we refuse to loan out our pastors for such purposes, then we are met with the argument: “You can’t bury a man like a dog.” Why not? The Scriptures are not sentimental about such instances. And in the Old Testament in the Prophet Jeremiah 22:18-19 we read, “Therefore thus said the Lord concerning Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, King of Judah: They shall not lament for him saying, Ah, my brother! or, Ah, my sister! 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.” And then in the Old Testament Jezebel, wife of King Ahab, didn’t receive much of a burial either. The Lord allowed the dogs to eat her before she could be buried. It is not our business to worry about the burial of the dead who do not belong to us. Rightly the Church has applied in such cases the words which Jesus once spoke: “Let the dead bury their dead” (Matthew 8:22).

In most of our communities, however, we do not only have the “marrying Sams”, but also the “burying Sams.” They stand at the graves of men who all their life stood aloof from the Church and perform the burial

rites of the Christian Church. They seek to justify their practice by saying that they are using this occasion only as an opportunity to proclaim God's truth to those assembled at the funeral home or grave, people whom they might otherwise never reach with God's message. Unfortunately, this practice is by no means limited to the sectarian pastor but is also known even in our Lutheran circles, and we hesitate to define this even a bit more closely.

We have said it before and we must repeat it again that while the Bible gives us no direct instruction as to the ceremonial that might be used at Christian Burial and in what cases only it should be used, nevertheless, it is surely a logical conclusion that *Christian Burial* ceremonies are only *for Christians*. When, therefore, we see a Christian Pastor standing at an open grave to which mortal remains of someone are to be committed, we naturally conclude that one who confessed the faith of the Church that the minister represents, at least one who, before it was too late made his peace with God through Jesus, is now being laid to rest in the hope of the resurrection unto eternal life. Do you think the United States government would grant a military funeral to the son of a family who had refused to serve in the Armed Forces of our nation? And your local Lodge isn't very generous either in the way in which it dispenses its burial favors. No one seems to question the right of such an organization to refuse its rites to non-members but woe to the Christian Church which dares stand up and limit its services.

The next most powerful argument which is usually advanced is this that the Christian Church by refusing Christian Burial is missing a wonderful opportunity to preach to the living. How can we more deeply impress upon the churchless that they are aliens in the Kingdom of God than by refusing any cooperation of the Church at the burial of their dead? Already in the refusal to bury the unchurched lies a preachment for the unbelieving relatives, a preachment of the Law warning them that the way of unbelief leads to damnation, warning them to repent, and the preachment of the Gospel inviting them to look to the Savior and be saved from their sins. We are not burying the living; we are burying the dead, and that is where the argument must center. The refusal of the Pastor to preach at such an occasion or to perform a Christian Burial is a sermon and an action that will be remembered long after anything that was said in a funeral sermon over an unbeliever.

But now we come to those instances where members of the family of the dead are members of our church and want their pastor to bring them comfort in their bereavement even though the dead person was not a Christian. What has been said before still applies. The pastor may comfort the family privately but let the pastor be careful that his words might not be construed as giving approval to the way the unbeliever lived here upon earth. Let him not express pious wishes that perhaps there was a final moment of repentance. Let the words of the pastor rather direct the family to follow more zealously and earnestly the Savior who alone can give them life.

In all of this, let us be careful not to violate our principles concerning Christian Burial because to do so is to deny the truth which we preach at other times; it is in the last analysis to deny our Savior, and we know what He has to say about this sin. We preach the Word also when we refuse to bury the unbeliever for thereby we emphatically proclaim the Word: "He that believeth not shall be damned." God's Church is never weakened by following God's Word. And if we are faced with the risk and threat that people will leave the Church because we refuse to bury those who quite evidently have not been Christians and the question must be faced quite squarely and honestly, whether people who threaten such actions actually enlightened Christians. And we must ask ourselves even a more painful question, whether we have been remiss in instructing publicly the members of our congregation in regard to the truths of Christian Burial?

What about such instances in which the question arises whether or not we should and must make an exception to our rule of Christian Burial? An instance of that nature arises when one of our members commits suicide. I imagine that the position of the Pastor Enno Duemling, who was formerly Institutional Pastor in Milwaukee, is quite generally accepted in our circles: "A Christian pastor may officiate at the funeral of persons who, on their own accord have terminated their own life but cannot be held responsible for it, as in definite cases of types of insanity or during a period of elevated fever temperatures. If it is clearly evident that the deceased was utterly impenitent, Christian committal of such a body must be refused. Never should a Christian

pastor insist in giving a Christian Burial to a suicide who deliberately took his own life.” While we do not disagree with this statement, we do feel that it leaves so many questions unanswered. It is true many pastors have solved this question of the burial of a suicide in one of two ways. There are those who state, “I do not have the problem of burying the suicide because it is my policy and that of my church not to bury a suicide.” I sometimes wonder whether that is the true Gospel spirit. I sometimes wonder just exactly what a pastor would do in an instance where he believed a suicide had been committed and it was later discovered that it was not suicide, but actually murder. On the other hand, we find those who will simply bury anyone and above all, a suicide, and that again is a position which does violence to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I am sure that I am not going to solve the issue for anyone. We commonly state that where circumstances enable us to give the suicide the benefit of the doubt, in supposing that he acted as he did because he was irresponsible, we are bound to guide ourselves by his attitude and actions to when he was still responsible, and if he at that time was a Christian, to grant him a Christian Burial.

There is one matter I would like to touch upon, however, and that is the use of the term “deliberately.” I imagine that when we use the term we mean that the person was in possession of his senses and then took his own life. We then put ourselves in the position of judging whether or not that person was in possession of his five senses and whether the suicide was a “deliberate” act. How do we determine whether or not it was a “deliberate” and considered act on the part of the victim? I asked a psychiatrist whether or not there was such a thing as “deliberate suicide,” and he answered that in certain very general realms we might speak of “deliberate suicide.” He cautioned us that those who were professed Christians and lived the life of a professed Christian and would then still attempt suicide, that while he would not want to make a flat statement, he, personally, felt that such individuals were definitely in need of psychiatric treatment and were by no means responsible for their acts or deeds. He questioned the use of the term “deliberate” in connection with what he called “gross” suicide. He was much more concerned about what he would call “refined” suicide. Into that category he would place the man who visits his doctor and is told by the doctor that his physical condition is such that he will have to pay serious attention to his diet. Upon subsequent visits the doctor ascertains that his advice has been totally disregarded. Subsequently, the man dies of a heart attack. The psychiatrist asked me, did that man commit suicide or did he not? Many of you perhaps will feel that such an example ought not to be cited in such a paper as this and yet I feel it is fitting and is a subject which all of us must consider. What about the individual who drives his automobile at an excessive rate of speed and crashes into a telephone post or a tree or a bridge abutment? The psychiatrist continued, everyone feels sorry, and usually a funeral service is held in the church with a very large attendance and everyone bemoans the tragic loss of life by accident. The psychiatrist continued, I feel that in many of these instances it is not alone deliberate suicide if we care to use that term, but when others are involved, it may actually even be murder. Just how do we as a Christian pastor now deal in cases such as this? Or is it our practice because of the nature of the case to remain silent? We are quite concerned about the individual who takes a gun and puts it to his head and pulls the trigger or takes a rope and hangs himself from a beam, but how concerned are we about these other refined cases of suicide in which we will perform Christian Burial, seemingly without any qualms of conscience whatever.

And now what about these cases where a congregation and perhaps even a pastor has been rather lax in practice over against members who have been quite delinquent in church and communion attendance for a period of years. We tell people that it is our practice to give Christian Burial only to those who lived and died as Lutheran Christians, and as the earmarks of Christian living, we mention church-going, communion attendance, giving, and upright living. If these characteristics are lacking, in whole or in part, we refuse Christian Burial. But if those who lack these characteristics are still listed as members, we have little choice in the matter; we must treat them as we treat other members who have died. But it is the fault of any congregation if it permits such circumstances to arise. The Pastor, the Church Council, yes, all the members knew of such a person’s sin, and all had the duty according to Matthew 18 to admonish the brother. Had this duty been performed, had Church discipline been practiced, the unpleasant situation that a pastor must officiate at a funeral of one whom, he must judge, has been damned, would not arise.

What about the case of one who has apparently been a good member but dies in a sin as for example, in an accident, while he is drunk, or shot while attempting burglary? Evidently the same practice ought to be observed as in the case of a suicide. God says, "When I shall say to the righteous, that he shall surely live; if he trusts to his own righteousness and commits iniquity, all his righteousnesses shall not be remembered; but for his iniquity that he had committed, he shall die for it" (Ezekiel 33:13; I Corinthians 6:9-10). (But let us also keep in mind that even when one of our children sins or commits a wrong we do not automatically disown it and cast it out of our family, but still remain its parents, so we in such instances remember the love of God even to a malefactor on a cross.)

There is the question whether Christian Burial may be accorded a Lodge member. The general rule applies that Church discipline ought to be exercised with such while they are still alive so that their status is made clear to them before they die. If we must conclude that a person was deliberately hiding his Lodge membership and playing the hypocrite during his life, then our attitude can hardly be any different from the case of those who die in their sin without any opportunity to repent. If we must give the dead the benefit of the doubt, then I feel we ought to grant him Christian Burial, but the family must choose either a Christian funeral or a Lodge funeral. The family can't have both. That would be rank unionism. It is possible in larger congregations in larger cities that an individual belongs to a secret organization and is quite open about it and yet such membership never reaches the attention of the pastor or the congregation. In our day with our shifting population and the tendency on the part of so many to retain their membership in their local congregation even when they have moved to another city or to other states, it is possible that such have joined these organizations in the cities where they live and now upon their death, they are returned to their home city and to their home congregation and perhaps receive a full Christian Burial without the local pastor even being aware of such Lodge membership. I can also conceive the case where someone would be a member of some minor Lodge Order without realizing that he was guilty of an act which amounted to denial of the Savior. There are cases in which a Lodge member requests the services of a pastor shortly before his death and there is time to speak to him only about his sinfulness and his Savior without referring to the Lodge question, which calls for considerable explanation and discussion. If such a person would confess his faith before he dies, I believe he is entitled to a Christian Burial. I am not going to enter at this time upon the entire matter of "social membership" in the Lodge and what our practice should be in cases of such deaths. There are questions which have been tossed to and fro within our circles for such a long period of time and, sad to say, there seems to be such a variety of practice on this matter within our circles that all of us perhaps could do some honest soul searching in regard to this matter. The Lodge plainly teaches that the departed is sent to the Grand Lodge above because the Lodge member led a moral life and lived up to the principles of his Order, and what inconsistency it would be for me to permit such teaching side by side with the Christian teaching that the sinner is saved, not by his merits, but solely through the suffering and death of his Savior.

What about cremation? The usual view expressed is this. Cremation is not the Biblical or Christian mode of disposing the dead. Both the Old and the New Testament take for granted that as the body was taken originally from the earth, so it is to be returned to earth again. There are those who feel that cremation is but an expression of materialism. In this manner the heathen people often dispose of their dead. Cremation is believed to be an insidious denial of the resurrection from the dead and there are those who insist that a Lutheran Pastor certainly cannot with a good conscience officiate at such a burial. Perhaps one of the most effective ways of discouraging the custom of cremation is to have people witness it for that usually settles the problem. On the other hand, I believe, we have also advanced to that point where we no longer ought to regard everyone who requests cremation as being either a heathen or a pagan, and that the only reason such have for wanting their bodies cremated is that they want to destroy all evidences of human life and desire to be scattered to the four winds so that there could be no resurrection and no appearance before the judgment seat of Christ. True, cremation is not the customary way in which Christians have disposed of their dead. Surely, we can cite any number of Scripture passages which show that people in Scripture buried their dead but be that as it may, let's not fall all over ourselves when people request cremation. In many instances today, it may simply be the

question of convenience. Our population is constantly on the move and there are those who would like to have the ashes of their loved ones interred near the home where the family finally settles in our country.

One of the questions which every family must face when one of its members dies in an accredited hospital is that of the autopsy or the post-mortem examination. I have been asked to say just a few words in regard to that examination and whether or not it should be performed. God's words as such have nothing to say on this subject, quite evidently because it was not a problem in Old Testament or Apostolic times. Hospitals, however, today depend upon the number of autopsies or post-mortems performed within their walls for accreditation. My opinion in this matter, of course, is only subjective. In a recent *Medical Trade Journal* there appeared an article dealing with this subject. In it the writer encouraged the doctor to gain the support of pastor, priest or rabbi to encourage the members of the family to grant permission to have such post-mortems performed upon the members of their family. Pity the pastor who would allow himself to be used in this manner or pity the pastor who would stand in a hospital corridor loudly urging the family not to have the post mortem performed because it violates the "laws of the Church."

In case of a sudden undiagnosed death, most of us would quickly agree that an autopsy could be performed, providing we knew the surgeon or pathologist who was going to do it. The argument of the medical profession that a "post" is nothing more than an operation would make even television's Ben Casey smile. Frankly, few patients would ever recover from such an operation were it performed upon them while they were living. If medical science is to be advanced and future lives spared, then I am sure a family will quietly bring this sacrifice. But after a long hard struggle with death and a long severe illness, it would be my personal preference to let me rest after I have died and to be spared the surgeon's knife once more. Medical science has made tremendous advances in past years and the old argument that "they can learn something from every death" does not necessarily hold water today any longer because of our modern methods of medical diagnosis. There are those who will not allow such examinations to be performed upon members of their society or group.

Bodies of loved ones are no longer taken to their homes after death. Perhaps it is just as well. Our modern life and our modern homes no longer can be accommodated to such strains and resulting confusion, it seems. We now have Funeral Homes or Funeral Chapels which usually do not resemble chapels at all. The Funeral Home becomes actually a display case for the embalmer's art. The highest compliment that can be paid to the funeral director is the statement, "My, how nice he or she looks, just as though he were going to speak to us." Rest assured, he or she won't. For the Christian, "The strife is o'er, the battles won," and the embalmer's art does nothing to change the Christian's blessed lot.

Everyone complains about the cost of a funeral. A funeral is the largest single expense most families ever incur, excepting the purchase of a home or an automobile. United States funeral costs have risen 42.4% in the last decade and are increasing at nearly twice the rate of living costs, according to a recent *Saturday Evening Post* article. Our members should be encouraged, certainly in this respect, to avoid any gross display of show or pomp at the time of a funeral. But this is a very delicate matter and the desire, to "do what's right" and provide "a decent burial" is a rather powerful motivation to spend far too much on the funeral. In most of our communities, however, our funeral directors are honest, upright businessmen and very often even members of our congregation, and in our experience have done everything to discourage an unnecessary outlay of money at the time of a funeral. In this connection, may we state, that the pastor again will not act as an advisor to the family in its choice of funeral home, coffin, and so forth. The man who does deserves all the trouble he gets.

What about the flowers at a funeral? Much has been said and written against the waste of flowers when someone "important" dies. We have no argument with that. But have you ever attended a funeral at which there were no flowers? Perhaps you liked it—I do not. A modest display of flowers, who will criticize that? Many churches today limit the number of floral pieces which can be brought into the church at the time of the funeral.

In this connection, we might speak of the use of the flowers after the funeral service. If they are to be used in the church for the Sunday service, it may be advisable to "work over" some of the larger floral pieces and salvage what remains and arrange one or two attractive bouquets. I am not thrilled by some large floral

piece standing in the chancel of the church on a Sunday morning, knowing that everyone is whispering, “That’s from the funeral last Wednesday.”

We have already spoken about the history of “Memorial Wreaths” (cf. p. 6). Yet I will raise a voice of protest, perhaps a single voice, against what I consider to be a degeneration of even this custom. All too often the Memorial Wreaths are little more than an additional Building Fund Envelope for the local congregation. If members within a local congregation upon the death of one of their members designate the Memorial Wreaths for the local congregation and its “sinking fund,” well and good. But to remember a member of another congregation with a contribution to the Building Fund in your own church, in my opinion, you may differ, is a rather questionable use of a good Christian custom.

What about the funeral service itself? Fortunately or unfortunately, the old custom of conducting a separate service at the Funeral Home or at the home of the deceased has disappeared. I definitely prefer to conduct the funeral service in the church, but circumstances at times makes this almost impossible. For the service itself, we might state that within our congregations we have about as many forms of funeral services as we have congregations. But the funeral service is always a *service* and not just “a passing out” ceremony. Our organists and singers on a Sunday morning are members of our churches, that is self-understood. But what about a midweek funeral service? If you are fortunate enough to have a Christian Day School with a capable organist, perhaps a few soloists, “count your blessings.” Many of us are not that blessed. The organist who presides on a Sunday morning perhaps has a full time job during the week and her employer is somewhat reluctant to lose her services every time you have a funeral and the same may hold true of your singers.

In the absence of the regular organist and soloist or groups of singers, what can be done? It is possible to conduct a funeral service without music! Another solution to the problem might be to ask the assistance of organists and singers from a sister congregation. But when your nearest sister congregation is located thirty or forty miles from your own, this presents difficulties and our families might be somewhat reluctant to pay that additional expense. Some may feel inclined to use recordings but to me that seems out of place. Others feel that in such instances it is possible to engage organist and soloist not from our congregations and confession. Their argument is that they are merely engaging professional service and that a question of confession and of religious unionism is not involved. At best this is still a questionable practice.

There are those who urge that the whole congregation sing our funeral chorales and hymns at a funeral service. I agree. But that has its limitations. It may still, be the custom in your community and congregation that everyone attends the funeral service and thus it would be possible to follow that practice. That doesn’t hold true today, however, as much as it did in the past. Often I feel myself fortunate if I have enough pallbearers for the funeral and if all the members of the immediate family are present for the funeral. In general, even among the mourners, we find people of every hue and color as far as church affiliation goes, and these know nothing of our hymns and funeral customs. The organist would most likely play a solo if one expected these people to sing. So we have the custom of having a soloist, trio, quartet, etc. Since most of our members remain unacquainted, by choice, with that section in our Hymnal named Death and Burial, Judgment and Life Everlasting, the choice of hymns is usually very limited and about the only thing that changes from one funeral service to the next is the coffin and the corpse.

The funeral sermon should of necessity be brief and to the point. Of funeral sermons, Reu says: “Funeral addresses, which, when they must be held, should always be held for the sake of the living, should contain a public witness to the hope in the resurrection, a last tribute of love, and a solemn reminder of the inexorable hour of death. They require texts testifying to the life power that comes from Christ to all believers and overcomes death; the faithfulness of God, who will be a father to the fatherless and a judge of the widows and who never forsakes them that trust in Him; the seriousness and reality of death, showing the worthlessness of everything external; the importance of life in preparation for a blessed death. The personal element has its place in the funeral address and may determine the choice of text, especially when the departed was not only a well known member of the congregation but made a marked impression upon it in his life. But in such cases, the choice of text no less than the development of the sermon must be characterized by inflexible truthfulness,

without exaggeration, without suppression, speaking the truth, yet always in love, nowhere is lying tact or loveless judgment more frequently found than at funerals; many a funeral sermon helps to dig a grave for the Church itself.”

The funeral service at the graveside will of course, be brief. There are those who insist that at the committal, the ground from the grave will be sprinkled upon the coffin and there are those who will use flowers. What difference does it make because nowhere in Scripture is this act commanded or forbidden?

The day and age when every congregation had its own cemetery or “God’s Acre” is fast disappearing. Congregations perhaps form associations which have their own cemeteries and their own rules and regulations about whom they will permit to be buried in the confines of that cemetery. The custom of “perpetual care” eliminates that one eyesore one so frequently sees along country roads and that is the unkempt graveyard with graves overgrown with weeds presenting a thoroughly discouraging picture to the passerby. In this connection, a word of caution ought to be expressed in regard to the formation for profit on the part of one individual or a group of individuals of burial places known as Memorial Gardens, etc. While State regulations are quite strict in this respect, they still will not prevent the unscrupulous from using and abusing the innocent.

Many parts of this essay, I imagine, could have been shortened or lengthened according to individual preferences. May God grant that in our burial practice we too, may heed the admonition of God’s Word given through His Apostle Paul, to be “blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world; Holding forth the word of life” (Philippians 2:15-16). And may our prayer always be:

My end to ponder teach me ever
 And, ere the hour of death appears,
 To cast my soul on Christ, my Savior,
 Nor spare repentant eyes and tears.
 My God, for Jesus’ sake I pray
 Thy peace may bless my dying day.
(Lutheran Hymnal, 598, stanza 3)