

The Lutheran Practice Of Christian Burial In The Light Of Holy Scriptures

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Nothing causes more emotional disturbance than the death of a loved one of a family or a close friend. This will often make clear thinking impossible, particularly in respect to the burial service. The matter of Christian burial and who is entitled to a Christian burial arises frequently. Difficulties arise as to who may take part in the burial service, which hymns and what music is appropriate.

The Rite of Christian Burial is a custom of the Church and it is impossible to find out when this particular custom began and how it developed. We know that burial of Christians by Christians was already practiced at the time of Christ. We recall the burial of John the Baptist by the disciples. But it must be acknowledged that nowhere in Scriptures is Christian burial commanded, nor is any form of service or special rite prescribed.

There may be some who will quickly take advantage of this statement and wonder why, especially, the Church did not grant this person or that a Christian burial; why this or that hymn or music was not permitted or why certain people were barred from taking an active part in the service proper. If there is nothing prescribed in Scriptures, how dare the pastor enforce certain "laws"? Let it be known, in view of this very prevalent opinion that Christian burial, although not commanded in the Scriptures, has properly become a common practice that is governed by the Scriptural principle of Christian fellowship.

What Is Meant by Christian Fellowship?

Much can be said regarding the matter of Christian fellowship because it involves everything the Church says or does. Christian fellowship is simply self evident among true Christians.

A Christian is a believer in Jesus Christ as his Savior. Now we all know that we cannot delve into a man's heart to ascertain whether or not he is a Christian. We cannot and dare not judge a person's heart. That is God's prerogative. He alone can look into a man's heart. We can only see a man's faith by his confession. If a man by word and deed confesses Christ and strives to lead a life that is pleasing to his Lord and Master, then we can say that he is a Christian. That means very simply that a true believer will be one who faithfully studies and hears the Word of God as Christ said John 8:47, "He that is of God heareth God's words." And, since God's word is the very life of every believer he will strive to keep this Word in its purity that he will seek to keep his brethren one in the faith by constant study and constant exhortation. For Christ said John 8:51-52, "If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."

To carry out this work of preserving the preaching of the Gospel in its truth and purity to exhort and edify one another, Christians will join together in churches. The Apostle declares concerning just this point Hebrews 10:25-25, "Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering; for he is faithful that promised; and let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: *Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is, but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching,*" This is one phase of the believer's life in fellowship, with his brother believers.

Another phase of this same Christian fellowship is the administration of the Sacraments, Baptism and Holy Communion. Christians will have their spiritual welfare at heart always. They will most certainly join not only in seeking the forgiveness of sins in Holy Communion, but will realize the need of it among all Christians and will therefore see to it that the Lord's Supper is administered regularly.

And the attendance of Christians at the Lord's Table is a confession of fellowship, of unity. Christians will not, cannot, hold fellowship with such who worship at false altars. Paul wrote the Corinthians "*For we being many are one bread, and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread.* Behold Israel after the flesh: are not they which eat of the sacrifices partakers of the altar? What say I then? That the idol is any thing, or that which is offered in sacrifice to idols is anything? But I say, that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to devils, and not to God: *and I would not that Ye should have fellowship with devils. Ye cannot drink the cup of the Lord, and the cup of devils: Ye cannot be partakers of the Lord's table, and of the table of devils*" (1 Co 10:17-21).

Moreover Christians singly and jointly will testify of their faith. No Christian can keep quiet when he has once come to know his Savior and the love of his gracious Father whom the Savior revealed to us (Jn 1:18). In Jn 20: 21-25 the Lord Himself tells us, "*As my Father hath sent me, even so send I you.* And when he said this he breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost: whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain they are retained." In I Pe 2:9-10, "Ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people, *that ye should show forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light;* which in time past were not a people, but are now the people of God; which had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy."

Thus true Christians testify of their faith in their own homes, training their children according to the command of the Lord, "bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord", Eph. 6:4. They will testify to friends and others. They will attend Church Services and thus confess their faith to others. They will support

their Church, call pastors to carry on the public ministry as Christ instituted it, support our Synodical Institutions where men and women are trained for teaching and preaching, they will send out missionaries into many places, all for but one purpose, to spread that Gospel far and wide in accordance with the wish and command of their Lord.

Moreover Christians will love one another. "By this all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another," spoke Christ, (John 13:35). Christians are of "the household of God"(Eph. 2:19), and they will join with one another to share their spiritual blessings. They will associate closely with their brethren in the faith and will (completely) separate themselves from those who are not in fellowship with them, who are not one in faith with them in obedience to the Word which tells them, "Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, and will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty" (2 Co 6:17-18).

Let us always be aware of this, that Christians are one in Christ through the working of the Holy Ghost. Christian fellowship is based on and limited to the word of-God. We cannot deny it to anyone whom God has given us as a brother. A man is our brother in faith whether he was a believer all his life or whether he became a believer on his deathbed. On the other hand, we cannot grant our fellowship to anyone whom God has not given us as a brother. If we would do this out of mistaken love, our fellowship would be a, a denial of God.

What Is Our Attitude To Be Toward Those Who Are Outside The Church And Not In Fellowship With Us?

Here we often find unclarity in the minds and hearts of people because this involves our human emotions and in some cases, human sentimentality. For that reason we should be aware of some pertinent facts.

Why is anyone outside of the Church? The truthful answer is that he is outside of the Church by his own choice. Again, we are not judging hearts. That is the Lord's prerogative. We must consider such and deal with such on the basis of their confession, their life, their words and deeds. Whether they are members of a Christless cult, errorist Christians, excommunicated Lutherans, confirmed Lutherans who have drifted away and are sinfully neglecting to use the Means of Grace, these people refuse to enter into fellowship with us as described in the previous chapter. This is their choice. Often they do this in spite of many earnest, patient invitations and warnings on the part of Christians.

When they disregard the admonitions, warnings and invitations of the Church extended to them by Church members, members of the Church Council, or the pastor, they are refusing to bear and accept Jesus Christ and his Word. He said, "He that heareth you heareth me; and he that despiseth you despiseth me; and he that despiseth me despiseth him that sent me. (Lk10: 16)

As Christians, we must never forget that we are the representatives of our Lord and that we are not merely dealing with others as "man with man". We are under the authority of Christ himself and therefore dare not yield one jot or tittle of the Truth to such a person or tone down the message to suit him. We dare not revise the Bible to suit those who do not agree with the teachings of the Bible. We must speak the Word, and everyone is judged by that Word. Christ said in John 12: 48, "He that rejecteth me and receiveth not my words, hath one that judgeth him: the word which I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day."

Have We A Duty Toward Such Who Are Outside The Church?

Most certainly. Read Acts 26:15-18. We are to preach the Gospel to them. We are to testify against the world, against sin. *All Christians*, not only the pastor, are to admonish those whom they find walking in sin.

Sometimes we are told, "I have nothing against the Church", and yet such a person does not attend services or remain in fellowship with us. Yes, such a person may even send his children to Sunday School, Christian Day School and Church services and permit them to be confirmed. He may even attend a service now and then on Christmas Day, Good Friday or on Easter Sunday.

Certainly we, the pastor, members of the family, relatives and other Church members should pray for them and make every effort to win them back for Christ because by their confession they are living in a state of sin. They are rejecting our fellowship and all that it implies. They refuse to confess the Lord, worship, use the Means of Grace, and labor in the Lord's vineyard. And in doing this they are rejecting Christ himself and his saving grace. "He that is of God heareth God's words; ye therefore bear them not, because ye are not of God"(John 8: 47). "Whosoever therefore shall be ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous generation; of him shall the Son of man be ashamed when he cometh in the glory of his Father with the holy angels." (Mark 8: 38).

However, if a person should persist in sinning, refuse to repent and hardens his heart, the time will come when we must also cease to invite and admonish him. Christ said Matthew 10: 14-15, "And 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. Verily I say unto you, It shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the Day of Judgment, than for that city." He also said Matthew 7:6, "Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you,"

Thus our fellowship with Christ and in Christ separates us from all those who do not confess him by word and deed and do not obey his Word. "Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers..." (2 Co 6: 14-18). If we would nevertheless fellowship with them, we would make ourselves guilty of unfaithfulness to the Lord and to His Word.

This Scriptural Principle of Christian Fellowship Governs the Practice of Christian Burial

Death, as it must finally to all men, comes upon those who are within the Christian fellowship and to those who are outside of this fellowship. To one, Christian burial can be given, to another it must be refused. On the basis of the Scriptural principle of Christian fellowship and all that it involves, as was briefly set forth in this writing, we will now discuss Christian burial and apply what we have learned thus far.

It is clear that the ceremonial burial of a body concerns the person to whom it belongs. Surely the bereaved are also to be considered. We express our condolences and seek to comfort them. But never the less it is "his or her funeral," and it is so considered and spoken of by everyone. When one takes part in such a burial one thus expresses are fellowship of some kind with him during his life. There are the family of the deceased, relatives, friends and associates. They show their connection with the deceased by taking part in the burial.

In the case of a Christian burial service, fellowship is thus also expressed. Often this is forgotten as is indicated when persons say, for instance, "For what good is the Church if it does not bury the dead." From our study of the work of the Church previous to this we learned that the Church is most certainly not a funeral parlor, it is not in the business of embalming or providing for the burial of a person. This is the business of the mortician, the funeral director. This is his manner of earning his living. It is of little consequence to him who or what the person was whom he must prepare for burial. His relationship to the deceased is of no consequence.

With the church this is an entirely different matter. It is entirely fitting and proper that the Church bury *her* dead. For in this manner we express the intimate fellowship that we had with the deceased during his life. The fellowship between Christians is the closest possible between men. The Bible says, "For we being many are one bread, and one body." (1 Co 10:17). We also read in 1 Co 12:26-51, "And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honored, all the members rejoice with it. Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular."

This is the fellowship that we express in our Lutheran practice of Christian burial. This is an enduring spiritual fellowship. At the burial service we join in turning to the Word of God that we the survivors believe and in which the deceased placed his faith during his life. We study such words of hope and life as we read in Revelations 14:15, "Blessed are the dead *which die in the Lord* from henceforth: Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labors; and their works do follow them." Or we recall the words of the Savior in John 6: 40, "This is the will of him that sent me, that everyone which seeth the Son and believeth on him, may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day." The Scriptures are filled with such words of comfort. These are the words from which the survivors derive their comfort and strength. They know that death is not a finale, but is a mere quiet sleep in the bosom of the earth to await the Lord's great call. For the Bible declares, "So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying written, Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Co 15: 54-57).

This is the reason why the Church can only participate in and conduct the burial service of such a person who was a fellow believer in the Word of God. Remember that we are not judging the heart. Jesus tells us that we are to know those who belong to him by their confession. They may have been in fellowship with us, one in faith with us all their life, or they may have entered fellowship with us in their last days, hours or minutes upon the earth.

The Lutheran burial service does not glorify the dead. Rather it is an offering up of thanksgiving to God for having brought the deceased to faith in his Savior during his life. And we are reminded to number our days that we may apply our hearts to wisdom. We glorify Jesus Christ, our Savior from all sins, from death and from the power of the devil, proclaiming to the world our sure hope of the resurrection of the body and life everlasting.

Why Can the Church Not Perform the Burial Rites for Any and All?

The Scriptural principle regarding Christian fellowship forbids that we bury those who were not of our fellowship with Christian ceremonies. It is true we could truthfully use ungodly dead as a warning and a call to repentance. But that most certainly is not what the relatives ask and expect of us when requesting that we preach at the funeral of their unchurched dead. They want an honorable burial. Therefore a Christian burial cannot be granted them. This would be an act of disobedience to and a denial of Christ. The pastor always officiates in the name of his Church and the Church represents Christ. It is Christ who said, "He that heareth you heareth me; and he that despiseth you despiseth me; and he that despiseth me despiseth him that sent me." The Lord in Scriptures commanded us to testify against ungodliness and to separate ourselves from those who are not willing to hear the call to repentance and have separated themselves from us. "Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers," says the Bible.

Participation on the part of the pastor in the burial service of one who was not in fellowship with the Church would be an out and out act of untruthfulness, whether the full ritual is used or whether no reference is made to the dead and the ritual changed. The very presence of the Church through the pastor involves the Church in an act of fellowship with the dead in the eyes of the world.

It has been claimed that any burial service is an opportunity to preach the Gospel even in the case of one who was unchurched and who would be completely disregarded at the burial service. We know that the same Lord who commands us to preach the Gospel, at times forbade men to do it. (cf. Matt. 10: 14-15.) The Lord himself remained silent before Herod. Surely here is an instance where his Word forbids that we preach the Gospel. Are we really preaching the Gospel when we fellowship in this manner with one who has to his very

end consistently denied this very Gospel? Are we not, rather, weakening our testimony against unbelief and ungodliness and our confession of the Cross, making men more secure in the evil of their ways, and leading them to think lightly of fellowship with Christ and with his confessors? Is it not true that the refusal of a pastor to officiate at a burial is a powerful call to repentance to all men in the community?

Let us consider the deceased whom we must refuse to bury. Is it not an injustice to the man to give him a Christian burial against his wish? He made his choice during his life, wrong though it was, despising our fellowship, refusing to confess Christ and to serve him. What right have we to thrust our fellowship on him now that he is no more able to protest and to speak over his body the Word that he despised and refused to hear.

What about the relatives and friends of the deceased? Yes, they are grief stricken. Yet the pastor will under circumstances be much better able to minister to their spiritual wants in private, rather than at the funeral of one outside of our fellowship. Neither dare we in any way weaken our testimony for Christ for sentimental reasons.

Yes there have been some that were offended and left the Church because a conscientious pastor refused to bury one who was not in fellowship with the Church. If they have not earnestly and continuously warned the erring one, they should smite their own bosom and penitently seek God's forgiveness. If they have done so, they will know that he, in despising their admonition despised the Lord. And they should stand with Christ. "He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me." "He that is not with me is against me." Leaving the Church to spite a conscientious pastor and Church Council or hate him is no argument against these men, but is spite and hatred for him whom these men serve and to whom they remained faithful and obedient.

Does A Suicide Come Under This Category?

It has been said that all those who take their own life were insane at the moment. Every person who has committed suicide has not been insane. Many such cases were a matter of careful premeditation. A person who takes his own life sins against the Fifth Commandment and sins grievously. Such a person has cut himself off from our Christian fellowship and is not entitled to a Christian burial.

Yet not every case of suicide is premeditated. There have been poor souls who were insane, irrational, who were not responsible for their actions that have taken their own life. In such a case we certainly must deal differently. For we remember that it is the Lord who has permitted this cross to be laid on such a person. And he judges righteously. If such a poor person was a believer in Christ before he lost his reason then we surely can only judge his actions, his confession for which he was responsible when they were controlled by his reason. We can look upon such a person as having been a Christian on this basis and we can give such a person an honorable Christian burial.

We would, however suggest a private burial service, one that is confined to the immediate family. This should not be misunderstood as weakness on the part of the Church, or that the Church is ashamed of this poor soul. No it is rather out of consideration for the family to protect it from the uncouth inquisitives whose only interest is something spectacular.

Will It Be Cremation or Burial?

Neither is advised or forbidden in Scriptures. But cremation has often been resorted to by unbelievers as their last flaunt against God. It is a challenge to God to raise their bodies on the last day. Since this is often the significance that is laid to cremation it is something which Christians will shun to avoid identifying themselves with such. And we will not wish to offend our brethren. However should circumstances and conditions arise such as serious epidemics, where it is a health problem and cremation is demanded, it could be resorted to without giving offense.

Who May Officiate At A Christian Burial?

This question has already been answered in so many words. Only a Lutheran pastor can officiate at a Lutheran burial service. But this principle is sometimes forgotten with regard to singers and others who are not in fellowship with us. It will not be necessary to point out that the entire burial service is that of Christian fellowship and must conform to our doctrine and practice. Therefore only those may serve as singers who are one in faith with us.

Hymns and Music

Hymns and music comes under the same category. They must express in every way the Scriptural principles and teachings which are the foundation of our burial service. Only too many choose sentimental, vague and sometimes clearly heathen hymns and music because it appeals to the ear. This is no occasion for such music and hymns. That is why every conscientious pastor must carefully study every bit of music involved in the service.

In Conclusion

It is for the purpose of Christian Education that these words were written. It is our hope that Christians will find a review of these facts connected with Christian burial helpful. In addition it was our desire to have the reader study these facts before an occasion of death in the family may cause him to desert his Savior and succumb to his flesh and his feelings. A faithful Christian will hold fast to his Savior and his Word also in the event of the death of a loved one.

But above all a discussion such as this gives us an opportunity to search the Scriptures and number our days that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom and finally be saved through our Savior Jesus Christ.