

The question has been raised about who may or may not be buried from the church.

The difficulty in answering this question comes from it not being directly addressed in Holy Scriptures. There are Bible passages which bear witness that Christians buried or prepared for burial the bodies of other Christians.

Biblical Witness of Christians burying fellow Christians

Matthew 14:10-12

¹⁰ *He sent and had John beheaded in the prison, ¹¹ and his head was brought on a platter and given to the girl, and she brought it to her mother. ¹² And his disciples came and took the body and buried it, and they went and told Jesus.*

Acts 8:2

² *Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him.*

Matthew 26:12-13

¹² *In pouring this ointment on my body, she has done it to prepare me for burial. ¹³ Truly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her."*

Christians do this out of reverence for the body, which is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19). Salomon Deyling (superintendent and professor of theology at Leipzig, 1677-1755) notes that the burial of human corpses is not a sacred act, nor does it count as a worship service. Indeed, the burial of human bodies can be an act of love and mercy for the neighbor whether the deceased is Christian or non-Christian. Eusebius, an early church historian, noted how Christians in Rome tended to those who were dying of the plague, along with their burial.

Inter-testamental Witness of Christians burying anyone in need of burial

We find this practice also in Old Testament times. The Jewish book of Tobit, which records the acts of a righteous Israelite, notes the following:

Tobit 1:16-18

¹⁶ *In the days of Shalmaneser I performed many acts of charity to my kindred, those of my tribe.*

¹⁷ *I would give my food to the hungry and my clothing to the naked; and if I saw the dead body of any of my people thrown out behind the wall of Nineveh, I would bury it. ¹⁸ I also buried any whom King Sennacherib put to death when he came fleeing from Judea in those days of judgment that the king of heaven executed upon him because of his blasphemies. For in his anger he put to death many Israelites; but I would secretly remove the bodies and bury them. So when Sennacherib looked for them he could not find them.*

Note, however, that already there are distinctions that are coming into play. On the one hand, burial is accorded to all (with no accompanying rites). On the other hand, godly honor, reverence and ceremonies are offered at burial to those who are temples of the Holy Spirit.

Biblical Witness concerning burial and those who despise the word of God

Furthermore, even when burial is rendered to all, not all who are buried are treated the same. Unbelievers and despisers of God's Word (which at times was expressed as 'wickedness' in the Bible) were buried apart from those who confessed and lived according to the hope granted them through faith in Christ Jesus. Thus we find Jeremiah testifying concerning the unbelieving king of Israel,

Jeremiah 22:18-19

¹⁸ *Therefore thus says the LORD concerning Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah: "They shall not lament for him, saying, 'Ah, my brother!' or 'Ah, sister!' They shall not lament for him, saying, 'Ah, lord!' or 'Ah, his majesty!'" ¹⁹ With the burial of a donkey he shall be buried, dragged and dumped beyond the gates of Jerusalem."*

Isaiah 53:9

And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.

This prophesy from Isaiah, which was made concerning the death and burial of Jesus, underscores the shame heaped upon Jesus. He who was righteous was given the shame of being put to death with the wicked.

And then we have the words of our Lord Jesus to the church, instructing the church how they are to work with those who despise God's word:

Matthew 18:15-17

¹⁵ *"If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. ¹⁶ But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."*

Matthew 8:21-22

²¹ *Another of the disciples said to him, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." ²² And Jesus said to him, "Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead."*

This text from Matthew 8 offers an interesting double entendre, where death refers to both spiritual and physical death. Were we to rephrase with this understanding, the text of Matthew 8:22 would be rendered, "And Jesus said to him, "Follow me, and leave the spiritual dead to bury their own bodily dead." Those who are separated from Christ in life are separated from him in death.

Application in the Context of the Early Church

That the early church understood Christ's words in this way, also, can be seen in the teaching of Pope Leo the Great (AD448):

"We cannot hold communion in death with those who in life were not in communion with us" ("quibus viventibus non communicavimus mortuis communicare non possumus").

Only those within the church (holy believers and lambs who hear the voice of their shepherd, Smalcald Articles, Article XII) could rest in the communion of the church. In the days of the early church, the

distinction was very easy to make: there was one, unified church. Those who were outside the church were either pagans, Jews, excommunicated persons, or heretics who had denied parts of the Christian faith. If a person was not a Christian, they would not receive the rites and honors of the Church at burial.

Christianity & Application in the Context of the Modern Church

Since the time of the Reformation, however, Christianity has been split into denominations. It began with the Reformed, the Enthusiasts, the Lutherans, and the Roman Catholics. There were three basic ways that the churches related to each other:

- They denied salvation and membership to those who rejected membership in their church body (Roman Catholic)
- They allowed any belief to be taught within their churches, as is seen in the example of the Prussian Union, where government officials commanded Reformed and Lutheran congregations to merge into one (Reformed, Enthusiasts)
- They recognized that wherever the word was taught in its truth and purity, there the Holy Spirit would work to create faith, even though it would be a faith mingled with false teachings (Lutheran)

Contrary to popular jokes and belief, Lutherans have never claimed that they will be the sole inhabitants of heaven. We recognize the faith that exists in members of other church bodies. However, due to the false beliefs that also exist in those church bodies, we do not have communion of fellowship with them in this life (for where there is false belief, there is a rejection of Christ's teaching, of which we cannot become participants, c.f. 2 Corinthians 6:14-18). Our view, therefore, is that these Christians in other church bodies are erring brothers and sisters in Christ – but brothers and sisters in Christ nonetheless.

Christian Burials in our Modern Context

What then to do with erring brothers and sisters in Christ? The Roman Catholic Church excluded them from Christian burials completely, not allowing them even in church cemeteries. This was not, however, the practice of Lutherans. Roman Catholics and Reformed Christians were given burial within (Lutheran) church cemeteries as they were Christians. However, such Christians were buried without the ceremonies of the church. This was recognition that our fellowship was broken here on earth due to persistence in a belief that was not in full agreement with the Scriptures.

In our American context, this practice is followed when pastors will often perform a funeral service for a non-member of a congregation, but without the ceremonies of the church (outside of the church building, etc...). It is important to emphasize that such a practice does not mean we believe the deceased was a non-Christian. It is a recognition that there was separation in beliefs while upon earth, a separation which will ultimately be healed in heaven by our Lord, when all sin (and all sinful divisions) are forgiven and healed.

Christian Burials for those outside the Church

Matthew 7:21

²¹ *“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.*

These heart-rending words from our Lord also reveals a sad situation: in the last times there will be many who call themselves Christians, but who are not as they fail to hear and believe the words of our Lord (John 10:4-5, 16). In the language of Luther's Small Catechism, they are "despisers of God's Word" (Small Catechism, Third Commandment and Meaning).

Only God can read the heart (1 Samuel 16:7). As human beings, we can only know what is in a person's heart by their outward confession (by word and deed) to us. What is the confession/profession of faith we are given when a person wants nothing to do with the Gospel in their life— when they have willfully and habitually remained apart from the proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of Christ's gifts? It is a confession that they are not Christian (even though they may hold membership within a Lutheran Church or some other denomination). They are ones who close their ears to the voice and call of the Good Shepherd.

We must ask ourselves, why do they seek fellowship in the church (why do they seek the word of Christ) after their death, and the time of faith has come to an end? CFW Walther notes that some hearts are so hardened that they are "content to depart as a non-Christian, yet receive a Christian, honorable burial." To permit such a burial is to bear false testimony concerning salvation through Jesus Christ alone, even as he said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes unto the Father *except through me*" (John 14:6). It creates a stumbling block to evangelism, grants false hope, and permits unbelievers to continue in their belief that they may receive salvation apart from repentance and the forgiveness of sins granted in the word of God.

Conclusion

Our Lord Jesus has given us his word of salvation – a word that consists in both Law and Gospel. While we love our neighbor to the greatest extent that we are able, sometimes that love must be expressed in a word of Law. At times, the church must refuse to give false comfort by granting a Christian burial or Christian honors to those who remained outside the church in their lives. Sometimes, such a refusal may be given simply because the deceased – as a member of another Church body – never was able to give a confession of faith (and the officiant at the funeral cannot speak concerning that confession of faith). However, following the examples from above, these may be times when burials may be permitted, but without church honors and ceremonies.

For further reading, see *Pastoral Theology*. CFW Walther (Tr: Matthew Harrison). "The Obligations of the Preacher Regarding Burial." pp. 358-361. "Use of Sponsors at Baptism." pp. 162-163. "Which Sins are Subject to Church Discipline" pp. 402-403.

May the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ grant us boldness to confess his Name clearly, and forgiveness for the times when our confession of him falters. Amen.

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