

Why Would a Christian Pastor Ever Refuse to Officiate at a Funeral?

Rev. John H. C. Fritz in his *Pastoral Theology* (a handbook which LCMS pastors study in seminary and are expected to consult as a guide throughout their ministry) 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” (p. 302). He understands that this often places a pastor in a “perplexing situation,” but insists this distinction must be made to avoid greater harm to the faith of the living and to the witness of Christ through His Church.

Furthermore, the bylaws of the congregational constitution of Immanuel clearly state that “As a Communicant Member they should: Attend divine services faithfully ... Lead Christian lives and do not live in manifest works of the flesh (Galatians 5:19-21) ... [and] Partake of the Lord’s Supper frequently after confirmation” (Chapter I, B. 1. a. c. d. “Responsibilities of Membership”). And it further states that “Self-exclusion [is] When a member of Immanuel Lutheran Church has not communed for three months ... Such self-exclusion *releases the individual* from all responsibilities to this congregation *and it also excludes the member from the privileges of Church membership*, any claim against the properties of this congregation *and Christian burial from this church*” [emphasis added] (Chapter I, C. Termination of Membership. e. Self-exclusion).

Furthermore, the bylaws of the congregational constitution of St. Paul’s clearly state that “the cemetery shall be maintained only for the members of this congregation and their immediate families” (Article VI, B, 1, a. “Eligibility”). And the congregational constitution stipulates that “No one can become *or remain* a member of, much less hold an office in our congregation, *nor enjoy the rights or privileges of a member unless* he ... does not live in manifest works of the flesh (Gal. 5:19-21), *but leads a Christian life*; [and] together with the congregation *partake of the Lord’s Supper with due frequency*, if he be of sufficient age” [emphasis added] (Article III, Congregational Membership, Qualifications, d, e).

Therefore by both his training and the stated will of the congregation in its constitution, the pastor should not consent to officiate the funeral of a person where there is no evidence of a Christian faith. This is particularly true when a person has actually revoked their membership by self-exclusion—that is by despising God’s Word in not coming to Church regularly (or calling on the pastor to make visits) that he or she may live in repentance and faith.

Of course, as with all Christian teachings, it is right to demand: Where is this written in Scripture? To answer this, we must break the issue into a series of important questions, each of which the Bible clearly addresses.

1. Will everyone go to heaven? (Universal Salvation)

Luke 3:23-24

²³ Someone said to him, “Lord, are only a few going to be saved?” He said to them, ²⁴ “Strive to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able.”

Matthew 7:13-14

¹³ “Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many.

¹⁴ For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.”

Matthew 22:1-14

¹ And again Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying, ²“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son, ³and sent his servants to call those who were invited to the wedding feast, but they would not come. ⁴Again he sent other servants, saying, ‘Tell those who are invited, “See, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding feast.”’ ⁵But they paid no attention and went off, one to his farm, another to his business, ⁶while the rest seized his servants, treated them shamefully, and killed them. ⁷The king was angry, and he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city. ⁸Then he said to his servants, ‘The wedding feast is ready, but those invited were not worthy. ⁹Go therefore to the main roads and invite to the wedding feast as many as you find.’ ¹⁰And those servants went out into the roads and gathered all whom they found, both bad and good. So the wedding hall was filled with guests.

¹¹“But when the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there a man who had no wedding garment. ¹²And he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?’ And he was speechless. ¹³Then the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ ¹⁴For many are called, but few are chosen.”

Jesus Himself is very clear that heaven is exclusive. Some—in fact many—will not be saved. His kingdom is so exclusive, in fact, that He sternly teaches that those who ignore His invitation—even using seemingly legitimate excuses such as “having to work”—make Him angry and kindle His wrath upon them.

Those who agree with Jesus’ teaching on this may reply that, while it is true some are not saved, everyone who has been Baptized will be saved. Indeed, Scriptures and the Catechism are clear that Baptism works salvation and gives faith. The Christian prizes Baptism as a great gift and daily drowns his sins through repentance and rises again as a new man to live a righteous life (see Romans 6). We must therefore confront a second question:

2. Is it possible for a baptized person to fall from faith and be eternally lost?

From the *Explanation to the Small Catechism* (CPH 2011 edition, pp. 295-296):

Yes. It is true that God’s promises in Baptism stand even if we do not believe them. However, all who reject God’s promises to them and die in unbelief have abandoned Baptism and do not receive what God has promised. They will be lost.

1 Corinthians 10:12 Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.

Luke 8:13 (*from the parable of the Sower*) And the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe for a while, and in time of testing fall away.

1 Timothy 4:1 Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons.

Mark 16:16

Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.

Faith and Baptism go together for salvation. Realizing the tragic consequences if we should fall from the faith given to us in Baptism, the Christian then earnestly desires to nourish faith so that it may grow and remain steadfast until death. Christ Himself has promised that where two or three are gathered in His name, there He is

present, and in the Divine Service He delivers to Christians His saving Word and faith-strengthening Sacraments. Thus, Christians will long to be in Church at every opportunity that they may stand in faith with confidence before the judgment seat of Christ. However, extraordinary circumstances sometimes present difficulties, which leads to a third question:

3. Does a person need to go to Church to be a Christian?

Matthew 7:21-23

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. ²² On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ ²³ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’

Jesus is clear that not even everyone who calls out His holy name is a true Christian. True faith will be evidenced by doing the will of God. Therefore, James also teaches:

James 2:19-20

¹⁹ You believe that God is one. Good for you! Even the demons believe that—and shudder. ²⁰ O foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is worthless?

Therefore while we do teach, according to Scripture, that faith alone saves (Ephesians 2:8-9), we also believe from Scripture that faith is never alone. It will always be accompanied by the fruits of faith—works giving evidence of the Christian faith. Scripture teaches us that true Christians keep Jesus’ commands, which includes going to church.

1 John 2:3

By this we can be sure that we have come to know Him: if we keep His commandments.

(See also John 8:31; 14:15, 21-22; 15:10; 1 John 5:3, 2 John 1:6)

Luther’s Small Catechism teaches:

The Third Commandment

Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.

What does this mean?

We should fear and love God so that we do not despise preaching and His Word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it.

From the *Explanation to the Small Catechism* (CPH 2011 edition, pp. 75-76):

We fear God and love God by not despising or neglecting His Word.

We despise and neglect God’s Word by:

A. Failing to gather together in worship to receive God’s Word and Sacraments;

Hebrews 10:25 Do not neglect to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encourage one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

B. Rejecting or disregarding God’s Word.

Luke 10:16 The one who hears you hears Me, and the one who rejects you rejects Me, and the one who rejects Me rejects Him who sent Me.

Our minds quickly think of situations in which a Christian desires to join with the Body of Christ for worship but is prevented by some insurmountable circumstance. What then? Of course, the Christian who hungers and thirsts after Christ's righteousness (Matthew 5:6) will rightly demand of the pastor that he bring God's Word and Sacraments regularly so that they may be received. If for some reason the pastor is unresponsive, the Christian will follow the example of the persistent widow who demands justice until her case is heard (Luke 18:1-8).

However, many people today have also been deceived by the world into complacency because they have accepted the worldly teaching that faith is a purely personal matter of the heart which no one aside from the individual him or herself can judge as true or false, living or dead. Indeed, Scripture does clearly teach that Christ alone will judge men's hearts at the Last Day (Romans 2:16, 2 Timothy 4:1). Some, then, would assert that pastors cannot make any judgments about an individual's faith and ought to treat everyone who has been baptized as if he or she were a Christian. Thus, we ask the fourth question:

4. How can a human being, such as a pastor, judge whether another person has a living faith?

Matthew 7:16-20

¹⁶ You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷ So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸ A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.

James 2:14, 17

¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? ... ¹⁷ So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

1 John 3:9-10

⁹ No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him; and he cannot keep on sinning, because he has been born of God. ¹⁰ By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother.

Hebrews 13:17

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they watch over your souls as those who must give an account. To this end, allow them to lead with joy and not with grief, for that would be of no advantage to you.

Acts 20:28

Keep watch over yourselves and the entire flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which He purchased with His own blood.

From these passages, it is evident that true faith will be plainly seen in the life and actions of the Christian. It is also evident that Scripture has placed pastors in a position of authority. Pastors take seriously Jesus' warning to "judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce, you will be judged" (Matthew 7:1-2). They bear the weighty burden of knowing they will answer for their judgments in such matters before Christ. It should be clear, then, that a Christian pastor's heart breaks when he must declare someone outside of the Christian flock. However, Jesus does not tell us we are never to judge. Rather, He would have us judge and evaluate ourselves first, so that we may then be of help to others. This is clear as He continues, "first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye" (Matthew 7:5).

Always, the pastor's greatest concern is calling sinners to repentance and forgiving their sins, as Christ has commanded that he do. When the pastor is called upon to minister to someone in life, he proclaims God's Law and Gospel to accomplish this. When he is not called upon until after the death of a person who has long remained absent from the Church, he still must follow Christ's commands for the sake of the living, whose day of grace is not yet ended. Thus, we seek to know from Scripture the answer to a fifth question:

5. What is the pastor's responsibility in regard to those who are straying and lost in their sins?

Ezekiel 3:16-21

¹⁶ And at the end of seven days, the word of the Lord came to me: ¹⁷ "Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. ¹⁸ If I say to the wicked, 'You shall surely die,' and you give him no warning, nor speak to warn the wicked from his wicked way, in order to save his life, that wicked person shall die for his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. ¹⁹ But if you warn the wicked, and he does not turn from his wickedness, or from his wicked way, he shall die for his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul. ²⁰ Again, if a righteous person turns from his righteousness and commits injustice, and I lay a stumbling block before him, he shall die. Because you have not warned him, he shall die for his sin, and his righteous deeds that he has done shall not be remembered, but his blood I will require at your hand. ²¹ But if you warn the righteous person not to sin, and he does not sin, he shall surely live, because he took warning, and you will have delivered your soul."

John 20:23

²³ "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld."

Matthew 16:19

¹⁹ "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

God's commands are clear: pastors must warn sinners so that they may repent and be forgiven. However, some would argue that a time of sorrow, such as the death of a loved one, should lead a pastor to set aside this primary concern and officiate at a funeral of the one whose faith is in doubt for the sake of comforting the family and friends. This leads to the final question that gets at the heart of the larger issue, namely why a Christian pastor would ever refuse to officiate at a funeral:

6. What is the harm in a pastor doing a Christian funeral for someone who has, in word or deed, forsaken the faith?

Jeremiah 6:14

¹⁴ They have treated the wound of my people as if it were nothing serious. They say, "Peace, peace," but there is no peace!

Ezekiel 13:2-3, 9-10

² "Son of man, prophesy against the prophets of Israel who are prophesying. You are to say to the prophets who prophesy from their own heart: 'Hear the word of the Lord!' ³ This is what the Lord God says. Woe to the foolish prophets who follow their own spirit and prophesy things which they have not seen . . .

⁹ My hand will come upon the prophets who see empty visions and predict a lie. They will not remain in the council of my people. They will not be recorded in the register of the house of Israel, and they will not enter the land of Israel. Then you will know that I am the Lord God. ¹⁰ This will happen precisely because they have misled my people by saying, "Peace," when there is no peace. When someone builds a flimsy wall, look how the false prophets daub it with a coat of mud plaster.

God makes clear in these words to the prophets that those who claim to preach His Word must preach truth, even when it is hard to hear (or hard to say, as pastors dearly love their people and often find it difficult to speak God's Word of judgment to them). If a pastor speaks peace and assurance when he ought to call to repentance, he himself will stand condemned. Moreover, if by word or action the pastor gives the impression that one in whom there was no living evidence of faith is nevertheless in heaven, why should anyone else be concerned about his or her own faith? Indeed, if that is the case, why do we even need the Church at all?

Yet, the response will often come that by not doing the funeral the pastor is missing an "evangelism opportunity." That those coming to the funeral "need to hear the gospel." Often making the associated statement that "the funeral is for the living." In one sense that is true. The pastor must consider the message he proclaims about the gospel to those yet living.

Rev. Fritz in his *Pastoral Theology* explains, "When Christian pastors officiate at the funeral of unbelievers and even speak of such men as having been Christians, they thereby do not cause great fear to come upon the people, but rather strengthen the indifference and the unbelief of many and give serious offense to the world" (p. 304).

In other words, by not performing the Christian funeral rite the pastor *is* giving witness to the Gospel. Namely, that the way of the gospel is by repentance and faith [see Mark 1:15, Luke 24:46-47, Acts 16:31, Luke 13:3, Augsburg Confession XII].

For the Christian funeral is not at all the same as a memorial service or a "celebration of life." It proclaims that the deceased clung by faith to the sure and certain hope that, despite being a poor miserable sinner, he or she was saved from damnation through the death of Jesus Christ.

Furthermore, as Rev. Richard Warneck (professor of Pastoral Theology at Concordia Seminary St. Louis, MO) describes, "In this Christian rite and committal, the deceased is embraced by all that is Christian: the prayers of the Church, the reading of the Holy Scriptures, the remembrance of Holy Baptism, the Church's confession of faith and profession of Christian teaching in the words of the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and finally the words of the committal followed by the Aaronic Benediction." (Warneck, R. H. (2018). *Pastoral ministry: Theology and practice*. Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.)

Is it fitting to apply this Christian funeral rite to one who was indifferent to such things in life? When the life of the deceased does not show the evidence of repentance, eager reception of the Word and Sacraments, or clear confession of Jesus Christ as the only way of salvation, it becomes impossible for the pastor and the Church to vouch in a Christian funeral that this person truly was a child of God. For a pastor to perform a funeral when the deceased has forsaken the church and faith would, by all accounts, both make the pastor lie and give a poor witness to the way of the gospel to those yet living.

Therefore, as Rev. Fritz concludes, “Christian burial is a privilege of such as, as far as man can judge, have fallen asleep in the Lord and . . . to all those who have despised the Word of God till the day of their death this privilege should, according to the Scriptures, not be accorded. Cf. Jer. 22:18, 19; Matt. 10: 14, 32-39” (p. 304-305).

In conclusion: What every Lutheran Christian pastor *wants* to do is to perform a Christian funeral. The Christian funeral proclaims the blessed and sweet comfort of the Gospel. To be sure, along with our Savior, every Christian pastor “desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4). Yet, when it is clear that the deceased has in his or her life forsaken the Church and faith, it is not Scripturally appropriate to perform a Christian funeral.

Despite the “perplexing situation” this may put the pastor in with people he cares about, the pastor shall not seek the approval of people over that of Christ. He must be faithful to Scripture and strive to please God in the proclamation of God’s truth which calls us all to live—daily—in repentance and faith, that we may have confidence when we all shall stand before the judgment seat of God.

Therefore, no matter how uncomfortable it may be for him at times, the pastor must do as he promised in his Ordination, to “admonish and encourage the people to a lively confidence in Christ and in holy living.” If he neglects this responsibility in trying to please people, he would not be a servant of Christ [see Galatians 1:10].

“God’s Own Child, I Gladly Say It”



1 God’s own child, I glad - ly say it: I am bap - tized
 2 Sin, dis - turb my soul no long - er: I am bap - tized
 3 Sa - tan, hear this proc - la - ma - tion: I am bap - tized
 4 Death, you can - not end my glad - ness: I am bap - tized
 5 There is noth - ing worth com - par - ing To this life - long



in - to Christ! He, be - cause I could not pay it,
 in - to Christ! I have com - fort e - ven strong - er:
 in - to Christ! Drop your ug - ly ac - cu - sa - tion,
 in - to Christ! When I die, I leave all sad - ness
 com - fort sure! O - pen - eyed my grave is star - ing:



Gave my full re - demp - tion price. Do I need earth’s
 Je - sus’ cleans - ing sac - ri - fice. Should a guilt - y
 I am not so soon en - ticed. Now that to the
 To in - her - it par - a - dise! Though I lie in
 E - ven there I’ll sleep se - cure. Though my flesh a -



trea - sures man - y? I have one worth
 con - science seize me Since my Bap - tism
 font I’ve trav - eled, All your might has
 dust and ash - es Faith’s as - sur - ance
 waits its rais - ing, Still my soul con -



more than an - y That brought me sal -
 did re - lease me In a dear for -
 come un - rav - eled, And, a - gainst your
 bright - ly flash - es: Bap - tism has the
 tin - ues prais - ing: I am bap - tized



va - tion free Last - ing to e - ter - ni - ty!
 giv - ing flood, Sprin - kling me with Je - sus’ blood?
 tyr - an - ny, God, my Lord, u - nites with me!
 strength di - vine To make life im - mor - tal mine.
 in - to Christ; I’m a child of par - a - dise!

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