

Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses



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May 1, 2008

TO ALL BODIES OF ELDERS

Re: Upholding the Scriptural View of Funerals

Dear Brothers:

We are pleased to inform you that the Governing Body has provided information for the African field on the subject of funerals. Starting in May 2008, this important information will be presented in four issues of *Our Kingdom Ministry*. What will this information contain?

By the time you receive this letter, you will *not* have received all four parts of *Our Kingdom Ministry* series on funerals. However, each part will discuss in detail various funeral customs that are practiced in many parts of Africa. Insight is given into the origins and ritualistic significance attached to these customs. The articles prepared by the “faithful and discreet slave” explain why those who are not Jehovah’s Witnesses practice certain customs. Bible principles will be considered and applied that will help us to see the reasons why true Christians should avoid such customs. Clear direction is given on how we can conduct funerals that are different from those in the world.—Matt. 24:45.

As you read this information, you will likely discover that many of the funeral customs discussed are being practiced in our own field. While many of us have personally observed the customs described in this material, few of us may have been aware of the connection these funeral customs have with unscriptural beliefs. In some cases, brothers may be participating in certain customs without even being aware of their spiritistic origin and meaning. Because of this, there will be a need for many of us to adjust our thinking and attitudes toward funeral customs that we may have considered acceptable in the past. How can the elders help the brothers in their local congregations to understand and accept this information, and make the necessary adjustments?

Discern The Principles: Over the years local funeral customs have been among the “strongly entrenched things” with which our brothers have had to contend. (2 Cor. 10:4, 5) How can we help our brothers to see the difference between what is right and wrong when it comes to funeral activities? The faithful elder Ezra, “prepared his heart to consult the law of Jehovah and to do it and to teach in Israel regulation and justice.” (Ezra 7:10) Like Ezra, Christian elders consult the Scriptures and look to the faithful slave for direction and guidance. They humbly make adjustments when they discern how Jehovah views matters. (Isa. 55:9) They prepare their hearts so as to understand how Bible principles apply to each situation. Only when we grasp Jehovah’s view of the funeral customs being discussed, and agree with the principles and the direction in our hearts, will we be able to help our dear brothers do the same. What Bible principles can be considered to help us decide whether or not a funeral custom is acceptable?

Quit Touching the Unclean Thing: Second Corinthians chapter 6, verse 17, sets out a very clear command for God's people: "*Get out from among them, and separate yourselves,*' says Jehovah, *'and quit touching the unclean thing.'*" When applied to funeral activity, this direct Bible counsel shows that any custom that is connected to the belief that the spirits of the dead influence the lives of the living—must be avoided. Participating in a custom linked to this belief would be an act of false worship that would offend and slander God.

While the false religions of Christendom have taken unclean customs and adapted them to fit their own religious teachings and ceremonies, true Christians realize that they cannot 'partake of the table of Jehovah and the table of demons.' (1 Cor. 10:21) Therefore, they make no attempt to sanitize unscriptural customs by removing certain unclean aspects of false worship and replacing them with elements of true worship. On the contrary, they recognize these customs for what they really are—God-dishonoring, pagan, and incompatible with true worship. (1 Cor. 10:20-21) Because they have maintained this position, they give people the opportunity to 'see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those serving God and those not serving him.' —Mal. 3:18.

Avoid Stumbling Others: Another important principle is found at First Corinthians chapter 10, verse 32. There we are told: "*Keep from becoming causes for stumbling to Jews as well as Greeks and to the congregation of God.*" How does this Bible principle apply to funeral customs? Our sincere concern for the welfare of others should motivate us to avoid being a source of distraction or stumbling to others.—Matt. 18:6.

While it is true that Jehovah's people do not believe the superstitious beliefs connected to many of the activities discussed in these *Our Kingdom Ministry* articles, it must be acknowledged that people in the community do attach spiritistic significance to these funeral customs. Hence, the information provided by the faithful slave pose some important questions that we do well to ask ourselves. Could our sharing in a particular funeral custom stumble fellow believers? Doing so could disrupt the spiritual unity of our brotherhood. Since Jehovah's Witnesses are well known for teaching the Bible truth that the dead are unconscious and not able to help or harm the living, could our actions and conduct at a funeral confuse others who know what we believe and teach about the dead? (Eccl. 9:5) Could it make it difficult for us to convince others when we try to explain that we do not believe in the spiritistic beliefs associated with these customs? (Rom. 2:21-24) An honest consideration of these important questions will help us to "make sure of the more important things . . . and not be stumbling others up to the day of Christ."—Phil. 1:10.

Your Example is Important: As you read and prepare the information in *Our Kingdom Ministry* on funerals, your example and attitude will be very important. It is important that all elders take the lead in shunning each and every funeral custom that is linked to the belief that the dead are alive and influence the lives of the living. When elders personally experience the death of a loved one, their strong faith in the resurrection helps them to maintain their spiritual balance by avoiding unclean funeral practices. They thus set a fine example for others by mourning and burying their dead loved ones in a way that reflects spiritual enlightenment, in a way that is modest, and tempered by Bible truth.—1 Thess. 4:13; 5:5, 8, 11.

Elders are well grounded in the truth, are experienced, and have a clear understanding of Bible principles. Even so, many of us may have never fully understood the spiritistic meaning behind some of the customs discussed in these articles. Perhaps we have practiced some of these funeral customs all of our lives. We may have viewed such customs as part of a culture that should be respected, not criticized. What should we do, however, when Jehovah's organization makes us aware that certain customs or practices are linked to unclean beliefs and are therefore not acceptable to true Christians? While we may feel somewhat reluctant to give up such practices, we would never want to have the attitude of the proud religious leaders of Jesus day who 'set aside the commandment of God in order to retain their traditions.' By doing that they suffered spiritually and 'made the word of God invalid,' not only to themselves, but also to those who followed their example. (Mark 7:9, 13) Therefore, mature Christian men know that doing what is pleasing to Jehovah is far more important than holding on to any longstanding custom or belief that we may have cherished in the past.—Phil. 1:9, 10.

Giving Assistance to Our Brothers: Some of our brothers may find it difficult to accept the information set out in *Our Kingdom Ministry*. Added to that, refusal to share in these funeral customs may result in criticism, insult, and mistreatment from unbelieving relatives, neighbors, and workmates. (John 15:19) While no one wants to be mistreated or be unpopular, elders will need to help the brothers realize that if we are determined to be "no part of the world," then there will be times when we will offend those in spiritual darkness. —John 17:16; 1 Pet. 4:4.

When helping our brothers to understand the direction that is now being given on funerals, elders would not want to simply tell someone "*the organization is now telling us that we should no longer follow this or that custom.*" That would be missing the point. The issue is not what the organization is telling us to do or not to do. **What is important to remember is that Jehovah is not pleased with those who dedicate themselves to him yet continue to follow pagan customs.** Therefore, the elders should endeavor to help the brothers see how Jehovah views matters and the need to stick closely to the laws and principles he has outlined in the Bible.

Normally, when there is death the brothers approach the elders for direction. What can you do to help? It is recommended that one or two elders may want to sit down and review the information from the four inserts in *Our Kingdom Ministry* with that one. Doing this may help the brothers avoid getting involved in activities that could endanger their spirituality. (Prov. 22:3) In addition, when reviewing the baptismal questions in *Organized to Do Jehovah's Will*, use question 24 in part 1 to make sure that the student understands what local funeral customs are unclean and why they should be avoided. Our main goal is to help the brothers understand the Scriptural principles and to see how they apply to each situation. We are confident that if this is done, they will make the needed changes so as to remain "no part of the world."—John 17:16.

Presenting the Information: As soon as you receive this letter, the presiding overseer should immediately arrange a meeting with the body of elders to read and discuss its contents. Please read the letter together and look up the scriptures, discussing their application. After this, a decision should be made by the entire body of elders as to who should conduct each part of the insert as they are received in the congregation. Which brothers should be used to present this material? They should be ones who fully understand and agree with the direction now being given by the "faithful slave." It is important that those chosen to deliver these parts have the freeness of speech necessary to present the material in an effective way.

Each Elder's Responsibility: All elders should pray for Jehovah's spirit to give them the wisdom and insight to clearly understand this important material. Before these matters are

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presented at the congregation service meetings, all elders should personally read each paragraph carefully, looking up the scriptures so as to discern their application. Think about how the Bible principles apply to each situation. The elders need to understand, not only *what* is being said, but also *why* it is being said. To accomplish this, you may need to read over the material more than one time. It is our hope that the elders who are not assigned to conduct these meeting parts will be thoroughly prepared when the material is discussed. This will enable them to support the one conducting the meeting with their well thought out comments.

The Conductor's Responsibility: The brothers chosen to present this information bear a heavy responsibility. You will need to prepare well. The conductor will need to identify the main points in each paragraph. Do not spend so much time discussing minor points that you are forced to rush through the more important material because of timing. Stick to the questions and the paragraphs as they appear in the article and do not speculate on questions that are not discussed in the material. Avoid getting into a discussion with the congregation on matters of personal opinion. These articles are to be considered as "food at the proper time" and there is no need to add or take away from the information presented. (Matt. 24:45) A *good reader*, perhaps another elder, should read each paragraph. Selected scriptures should likewise be read and clear application made.

If the meeting part falls on an assembly week, the material should be rescheduled. *Under no circumstances* should the material be condensed or presented in an abbreviated form. No paragraph should be skipped. Please use the entire time allotted to conduct these meeting parts. It would also be good to **remind the brothers that they should save each of these *Our Kingdom Ministry* inserts for future reference.** We are confident that you will present this valuable information in a way that will be simple, clear, and easy for all to understand.

Truly, Jehovah has 'taken out of the nations a people for his name.' (Acts 15:14) How happy we are to be separated from the spiritual contamination and darkness of this world. What a privilege it is to be serving Jehovah along with his faithful and discreet slave. Like them, we are willing to 'follow the lamb no matter where he goes.' (Rev. 14:4) As Jehovah continues to lead us, may we be determined to maintain our loyalty and trust in him and the "Lamb" Jesus Christ as they continue to protect and enlighten us with spiritual truth.

Please know that we appreciate your hard work and fine example to the Christian brotherhood. We take this opportunity to send our warm Christian love and greetings.

Your brothers,

*Christian Congregation
of Jehovah's Witnesses*

PS to elders: Please inform the congregation that these series of *Our Kingdom Ministry* inserts on funerals entitled 'Upholding the Scriptural View of Funerals—Part 1-4,' replaces the information in *Our Kingdom Ministry* insert of January 1996 entitled "Maintaining a Christian View of Funerals." Thank you.