

Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses



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April 20, 2009

TO ALL CONGREGATIONS

Re: Scriptural view of funerals

Dear Brothers:

Expressions of appreciation for the directions published in the May, July, August, and September 2008, *Our Kingdom Ministry* inserts on conducting funerals have been received at the branch office. Many are grateful because these directions do not only help us to conduct ourselves in a way that is more acceptable to Jehovah but they have also made us wiser than our contemporaries and simplified our lives.—**Read 2 Corinthians 6:14-18**; Ps. 19:7, 11; 119:98.

As we all know, because of the unscriptural beliefs that are connected with many funeral customs practiced in Africa, the “faithful and discreet slave” prepared the four-part article entitled “Upholding the Scriptural View of Funerals,” to draw our attention to Scriptural principles that should guide us to remain separate from this world. (Eph. 4:17, 18; 1 John 5:19) There is no doubt that our faithful compliance with those Scriptural principles will give people the opportunity to ‘see the distinction between those serving God and those not serving him.’ (Mal. 3:18) We certainly do appreciate your desire to apply the counsel provided in our publications. Some questions have come up, however, about these recent directions on funerals. The following will provide direction on such matters.

PAYING A “FUNERAL TAX”

In some areas, the traditional rulers have made it obligatory for all residents to register with a “clan.” The “clan” is responsible to collect a funeral tax that is imposed on all residents whenever there is a funeral. Part of the tax money is used to assist bereaved family members while the other part could be used for development projects. This levy is usually paid during the “second funeral.” Failure by any individual to pay the levy can result in problems for him and his family. What can we do in such a situation without compromising our Christian stand?

In his letter to the Romans, Paul wrote: “Render to *all* their dues, to him who calls for the tax, the tax; to him who calls for the tribute, the tribute; to him who calls for fear, such fear.” (Rom. 13:7) The word “all” embraces every secular authority that is God’s public servant and that may demand monetary tax from us. (It would not however, refer to extended family members or others in the community who are not “secular authorities.”) Sometimes, though, a tax may seem unjust. It may happen that part of the tax money is used to finance something we disagree with, or programs that conflict with our neutral views. Yet we still pay all our taxes because it is the authority that must take responsibility for how it uses the tax money. In view of that, a Christian will not find it objectionable to pay a levy imposed by a traditional ruler although part of the proceeds may be used for things other than for development projects.—Matt. 22:17-21.

What is unacceptable is the “clan arrangement”—where one must be actively involved in clan activities or participate in a second funeral to pay this levy. The same applies to joining any organization to facilitate non-Christian funerals such as the “funeral associations” mentioned in Part 4 of the inserts.

As explained in the August and September 2008 inserts of *Our Kingdom Ministry*, there are sound Scriptural reasons why a Christian would avoid being present at post-funeral gatherings. (1 Cor. 15:33) Each individual Christian should therefore decide how to make his payment, doing so at times other than at the second funeral. In some areas in Ghana where similar situations exist, some have respectfully explained their position to the chiefs and other authorities and have been permitted to pay their contributions separately, perhaps before or after such gatherings, thus not bringing any reproach on themselves or others.

We do not want to offend others needlessly. Still, the Bible warns us that taking a firm stand for truth will result in the disapproval of a world alienated from God. (**Read John 15:18, 19; 2 Timothy 3:12;** 1 John 5:19) We therefore willingly take such a stand, knowing that we must be different from those who are in spiritual darkness.

AVOIDING COMPROMISE WITH UNBELIEVERS

The inserts in *Our Kingdom Ministry*, part 2 (under “Organizing the Funeral) and 3, (under “After-Burial Customs”) gave direction on how Christians may deal with unbelieving relatives. Questions have arisen regarding a situation where the believing family has decided to have the funeral at the Kingdom Hall so that it can be conducted in accordance with Bible principles and the non-Witness extended family members have agreed to cooperate with this arrangement. However, later the unbelieving family seeks to arrange a second funeral after the burial. How can a faithful Christian keep Jehovah’s standards in this matter?

As you are aware, arrangements for the funeral of a faithful Christian end with the burial. Nevertheless, it is recognized that the extended family may plan something elsewhere that we may not have any control over. Still, Christians should ensure that they do not take part in any such arrangement. (2 Cor. 6:14-18). Consider, for example, a situation where a Christian family decides to organize a funeral and Bible talk in the home of the deceased. After the burial, the extended family members continue with a second funeral at the same location. Could it be said that the Christian family is not involved even if they are not present? Really to those looking on it would appear that the Christian family is participating in the custom that they said they were against. On the other hand, consider a situation where the deceased is laid for viewing in his home, then taken to the Kingdom Hall for the funeral talk. After the burial nothing else goes on in the house. However, the extended family members decide to hold their own second funeral at a different location. While we cannot stop them from their activity, true Christians would not be involved in **any way** either by providing a location, financial support, supplying drinks, chairs, canopies or the like toward the second funeral.

Consider another scenario: A deceased Christian is laid for viewing at a different location (not his home) and then after a talk at the Kingdom Hall a second funeral is held at that location (where he was laid). Could it be said that the Christian family directly or indirectly contributed to the holding of the second funeral? This would surely be so in the minds of onlookers. The principle to keep in mind is not sharing with unbelievers in unchristian funeral practices.—*km* 8/08 insert, pars. 12, 13.

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For this reason, it is preferable that the Christian funeral program be organized at the Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses. As a reminder, such a gathering should be simple, modest and dignified. (*w09* 2/15 pp. 29, 31; *km* 8/08 p. 3) The funeral will end with the burial of the deceased. The Christian family and congregation should not be connected in any way, whether by location or provisions, with anything else planned by the extended family members, after the Christian family has clearly expressed their disapproval of what the non-Witness family members plan to do.

VIEWING THE BODY AT THE KINGDOM HALL

The third question has to do with whether the coffin could be opened in the Kingdom Hall for viewing of the body. Doing this is not wrong in itself. What should be avoided would be worldly displays of unrestrained wailing, talking to the deceased, dancing around the coffin, bowing the head in greeting to the deceased, and other displays of hopeless mourning. (Eccl. 9:5, 6; *read 1 Thessalonians 4:13*.) Therefore, if it is so desired, and no unscriptural acts are envisaged, the coffin may be opened briefly in the Kingdom Hall. The elders will determine whether this is done before or after the talk. The entire body of elders is responsible to ensure that nothing detracts from the dignity of the Christian funeral arrangements. It would be wise to explain well in advance, especially to any unbelievers who plan to be present, how things will proceed and what will be permitted in the Kingdom Hall during the Christian funeral. (Prov. 22:3) Attendants should be assigned to assist in keeping order throughout the program. All of us should remember that the Kingdom Hall is the place where the only true God, Jehovah is worshipped, and when we attend funerals we can all do our part to ensure that his righteous standards are maintained.—Psalm 97:10.

We trust that our comments above will help clarify matters. Please accept our warm Christian love and greetings.

Your brothers,

*Christian Congregation
of Jehovah's Witnesses*

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PS to elders: Please arrange for this letter to be read by the entire body of elders when it is first received and thereafter schedule it to be read to the congregation during the very next “Local Needs” part that appears on the schedule for Service Meeting. (Please have it read by an elder who can read clearly and with good emphasis. When reading to the congregation, have a different qualified brother assigned to **read the four scriptures indicated.**) Thereafter, retain it in your congregation’s permanent file of policy letters.

Note to body of elders only:

The question has been asked as to what position the congregation should take toward someone who attends a wake-keeping, wears a mourning cloth, or shares in pre-burial or post-burial rituals, as these are connected to false worship or spiritistic practices. We direct as follows:

To involve oneself in pagan practices, such as those mentioned in the *Our Kingdom Ministry* of July and August 2008, offends Jehovah and is a serious matter. Therefore, such acts could be appropriately handled judicially. However, it is recognized that the range of issues concerning funerals in our recent publications will require adjustments that may take some time. Therefore, elders would want to patiently try to educate and adjust the thinking of the brothers. First, elders will want to provide loving and clear Scriptural counsel, striving to “readjust . . . in a spirit of mildness.” (Gal. 6:1) However, when, a publisher ***unrepentantly continues*** to engage in such practices, after such kind and loving help from the elders, perhaps even openly stating that they do not agree with what the faithful slave has published, then judicial action would be appropriate. This is because by adamantly continuing to engage in such acts, he would be promoting apostate views, cause division and disrupt the peace of the congregation. Thank you for taking note of this direction. — See *Pay Attention*, pages 94 and 95.

c: Travelling Overseers