

“Refusing Christian Burial?”

Dear Antwort Mann,

My Father-in-Law recently passed away and we looked for a pastor and church we could hire for the funeral. There is a Lutheran Church nearby but, when we asked the pastor to do the funeral, he said “no,” because we weren’t members of the church and my Father-in-Law never attended a church. I think that’s pretty lousy! Isn’t the church supposed to help people when they are in need? Signed, “Not Happy With Lutherans”

Dear “Not Lutheran,”

I must say that I’m speechless – not because the pastor wouldn’t do the funeral for your Father-in-Law, but that you are surprised. Tell me: If your Father-in-Law had never served in the military, would you ask that Military Honors be provided at the graveside for him? Would you be angry if those Honors were refused? Of course not! You wouldn’t expect Military Honors to be provided for one who wasn’t a veteran.

So, why is it different with the church? A Christian funeral is not a right, but a privilege given to those who have been baptized and lived out their faith in Christ through hearing His Word and receiving His gifts. The Christian funeral is for one who, as far as is humanly possible to know, has died in the Faith. Everything about a Christian (i.e. Lutheran) funeral points to Baptism, Christ’s death and resurrection, the life in Christ of the one who has died, and our sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life for him and for all who confess Christ. The Christian funeral is a witness, not only to the faith of the person who died, but to the One who has conquered death so that this person now has eternal life: Jesus Christ. This emphasis explains why many Lutheran pastors don’t allow “eulogies” for the deceased during the Service. It puts the focus in the wrong place.

Now, your father-in-Law may have been a very fine man, loved by all. But, as you indicated that your Father-in-Law belonged to no church, nor attended any Services during his life to keep him connected to Christ, being a fine man doesn’t entitle him to a Christian Funeral. As I said above, a truly *Christian* funeral means something, and it is for those who professed the faith, not just for anyone looking for a nice “send-off.” Besides, what would you expect the pastor to say during the funeral? The best he could say is: “We don’t know where this guy has ended up for his eternity.” Since your Father-in-Law left no evidence he was a Christian – he might have been, but we just don’t know – that pretty much negates everything that would normally be said at a Christian funeral.

I realize many people see the church as a Social Services-type agency – there to help people when in need. While the church does try to help people in their various needs, that doesn’t mean that it is obligated to give what rightly belongs to Christians to those who don’t give a tinker’s you-know-what for the church at other times. And if I may be so bold: because your Father-in-Law didn’t belong to a church in which he attended, supported, was taught and fed by the Means of Grace, and gave evidence of his belonging to Christ, it shouldn’t be expected that he should receive from the church in death what he didn’t want from it in life.

Now, so there’s no misunderstanding: If a pastor has provided spiritual care to someone in their last days, even if they never attended a church before; and if that person died confessing Christ as his Savior, then most pastors would be glad to do the funeral for that person. Similarly, a pastor would most certainly do funerals for the aged, sick and shut-ins who were unable to attend church for years, but died faithful to Christ. Likely, even when the circumstances of a person’s church membership is a bit “hincky,” but there is confidence that he died a Christian, there’s a fair to middlin’ chance that the pastor might do the funeral.

But if all you were looking for was someone to officiate at your Father-in-Law’s funeral, give opportunity for funny stories and nice things to be said about him, and maybe some generic prayer said to a generic god, then anybody could do that. You don’t need a pastor. His presence does not guarantee that the deceased will go to heaven and, under the circumstances, may keep others from taking seriously their need to repent and believe the Gospel before their own funerals need to be conducted.

In conclusion: A Christian Funeral is for those who are Christian by conviction, not by convenience. It is an honor given for members of the church who were faithful to it and continued with it until Christ calls them home. A Christian funeral is not for the unbaptized, the indifferent, the unbelieving. Even someone who might be on the membership rolls of a congregation, but who has steadfastly refused to hear God’s Word and receive the Means of

Grace in worship, rejected all encouragement to return, and wanted nothing to do with his fellow Christians at that place, might find that the honor of a Christian funeral may be denied him.

Again, why give something to someone in death what he did not want in life?

I guess you're not happy with Der Antwort Mann now, either. I'm very sorry. But repent of your own lack of involvement and interest in the Gospel, receive by faith the blessings of forgiveness and life that Christ has won for you by His death on the cross for your sins, join a congregation that teaches God's Word purely and administers the Sacraments as Christ has given them, and trust that His word and promise is for you. This way, in life or in death, you belong to Christ and to the eternal fellowship of all who confess His name.

“Be thou faithful unto death and I will give thee the crown of life.” Revelation 2:10

Best regards,

Der Antwort Mann