

The Bible Does Not Authorize Local Churches to Pay for Weddings & Funerals

INTRODUCTION

1. This study addresses the question whether a local church has Bible authority to use money from its treasury to pay for expenses such as weddings and funerals.
2. It is established that there is no Bible authority of any kind allowing a local church to pay for weddings or funerals from its own funds and resources.
3. The silence of the scriptures about such expenses do not authorize churches to do so. In fact, we know that the silence of God provides no authority at all.

A. Foundational Points

1. **There is a clear Bible difference between works of individual Christians & actions of the local church.**
 - a. Individual Christians may use their money without sin in any way authorized by God as a necessary or a good work (Acts 5:4, Matthew 20:15). They may also use their money to help the expenses of others.
 - b. A local congregation receives monetary gifts from its own members by commandment from God. In Paul's letters to the church in Corinth, we find these commands about giving:
 - i. On the Lord's Day – 1 Cor. 16:1-2
 - ii. As a responsibility of each Christian – 1 Cor. 16:1-2
 - iii. As each Christian prospers personally – 1 Cor. 16:1-2
 - iv. With a willing and cheerful heart – 2 Corinthians 9:1-7
 - v. The Bible shows us that these funds belong to the local church and they are spent only to sustain the work specified in the scriptures.
2. **Local Churches are authorized to perform ONLY three kinds of works: evangelism, edification of its members, and limited benevolence.**
 - a. Any local church may spend its money to carry out the work God has authorized the local church to do: evangelism, edification, and benevolence. The money must be used in ways authorized by scripture.
 - b. Evangelism can be local or in areas away from where the church is located. We see many examples in the New Testament of local churches supporting evangelism with their money.
 - c. Edification is done by each local church for its own members. Edification includes teaching, preaching, worship, discipline, Bible study .
 - d. The local church may conduct benevolence limited to:
 - i. **Meeting the genuine and basic life needs of its own members.** (Acts 2:44-45, 4:32-37, 6:1-6 and 1 Timothy 5:9-11). Careful study of Acts 2, 4 and 6 is helpful to discern between individual vs. church action. Needs were met by individuals as well by funds given to the apostles to distribute. In Acts 6, this work is assigned to qualified men who are tasked to meet genuine needs identified in the church.
 - ii. **Sending money to help needy saints in other churches** when there were life-threatening events (Acts 11:27-30). Agabus prophesied in Antioch about a coming famine, and the brethren there gave in proportion to their means. Barnabas and Saul delivered the gift to the elders in Judea.
 - iii. **Supporting preachers so they have what was necessary to live** (Philippians 4:16). Note that sometimes the preacher also had to work a secular job (Acts 20:33-35).
 - e. It is argued by some that paying for funerals or weddings is benevolence if the family cannot afford the expense. This idea is not supported anywhere in scripture. Expenses are burdensome when a society has unreasonable expectations about how lavish a ceremony must be. But paying for them from church money is not authorized. They are not essential

life needs – they are just ways to enrich those who conduct the services. God is not honored.

3. **Individual Christians May Give Money to Others Whether or Not They Are Christians.**
 - a. Fathers are to provide for their own families: 1 Timothy 5:8.
 - b. Galilean women helped support Jesus and His disciples: Luke 8:3.
 - c. Individuals helped Paul on his evangelism trips: Philemon, Mnason, Lydia, the Philippians Jailer, Priscilla and Aquila, Onesiphorus.
 - d. Among other things, this means individuals may choose to pay for weddings and funerals.
 - e. Good judgment should always be used in such matters.

B. The Bible Teaches that God's Word Is Higher than Human Traditions and Customs

1. **There are many traditions and customs found in all cultures and societies.** Traditions and customs arise for many different reasons. Participation in these may or may not be sinful. Christians must be very careful to never involve themselves in sinful traditions and customs.
2. **Human traditions never obligate either the local church or the individual Christian.** For example, Jesus's disciples were criticized for violating the customs of the Jewish elders. Matthew 15:1-20, Mark 7:1-23. Jesus' response proves the Jews sinned by respecting their traditions as much or more than the law of Moses, thereby corrupting the Word of God.
3. **Examples of customs and traditions that can easily lead to sin:**
 - a. **The Bride Price:** in some places it is common for a woman's family to demand money and/or a commitment from the man she wants to marry before they will give their daughter permission to marry him. When the amount is unreasonable, this can result in the man and woman choosing to live together in sin instead of marrying. It is debatable whether the custom itself is sinful, but the outcome certainly can be. See Genesis 29-31 for an example of the problems that resulted because of Laban's deceitful and exploitative demands of Jacob. When a church pays for this, the church misuses its resources.
 - b. **The custom of drinking alcohol at formal events:** this is done at many events and for many reasons all over the world. It is often justified by saying that it is only done occasionally, or that no one gets drunk. The Bible does not excuse for drinking alcohol to keep customs or traditions. To the contrary, it is forbidden (1 Peter 4:3-4; Eph 5:18).
 - c. **Religious traditions among the denominations:**
 - i. The Roman Catholic practice of confirmation: The "rules" regarding this ritual are controversial and have been changed many times. None of the terms and practices are scriptural in the least, yet it is taught as a necessary practice administered during the teen years.
 - ii. The Jewish tradition of the bar and bat mitzvah. The teaching related to these coming-of-age rituals are not ordained by God, but are derived from traditional Jewish writings external to the Old Testament.
 - iii. Observance of Christmas or other supposed holy days. There is no Bible command or example. Observance is a matter of choice if sin is not involved. (Romans 14:5-6).
 - iv. Many denominations enforce their own traditions of wedding rites and rules of divorce. Some of these traditions are unscriptural
 - v. Observance of secular customary or traditional Days such as: New Year's Day or Eve.
 - d. None of these practices are ordained by God and it is therefore **not a sin to ignore them.**
4. The local church is never authorized by God to spend its time or money observing customs and traditions! It is sinful if we try to bind anything as doctrine or include it in the work or worship of the church where no Bible command or example is given to do so.

C. Regarding the Meanings of Funerals and Weddings

1. There Is a Clear Difference Between a Burial and a Funeral.

- a. Both burials and funerals usually involve cultural customs and traditions.
 - i. A burial is putting a corpse out of sight and contact by placing it in a grave. This is viewed as important both in the Bible and in most cultures.
 - ii. A funeral is the mourning of someone's death.
- b. None of the above examples serves as Bible authority for how a funeral is to be conducted or paid for.

2. There Is a Clear Difference Between a Marriage and a Wedding.

- a. Marriage is the state of union that exists between one man and one woman as authorized by God. The Bible has clearly stated rules that govern marriage, divorce, and remarriage.
- b. A wedding is the event that formally recognizes and begins the state of marriage. How weddings are organized and conducted are often a matter of custom and tradition.

3. The Bible recognizes that funerals and weddings are part of daily life.

- a. Nowhere does God command how funerals and weddings must be conducted or regulate the details of funerals and weddings including how they are paid for.
- b. The presence of Christians at a wedding does obligate the church to cover the expense even if the bride and/or groom are Christians.

4. Bible references to funerals and weddings in the Bible do not mean the church was involved, obligated, or even approved.

D. Is Paying for a Funeral an Authorized Work of the Church?

1. A funeral is a common way to honor someone who has passed away.
 - a. How funerals are conducted usually depends on the customs and traditions in each culture.
 - b. Many funeral customs involve activities that are deeply traditional but also sinful.
2. The Bible recognizes that funerals were common events.
 - a. There are many examples in the Old Testament. Here is one regarding Jacob: Genesis 50:1-14. Just one example of many.
 - b. The old law of Moses commanded little about burial and nothing about funerals.
 - i. What is stated under the old law had to do with avoiding uncleanness from contact with a corpse. Num. 19:16; Deut. 21:22–23.
 - ii. Anyone executed for sin and then hanged on a tree was to be buried the same day. Deuteronomy 21:22-23.
 - c. There are frequent Bible references to customs and practices but no commands regarding how a funeral was to be conducted.
 - i. It was important to be buried close to one's family. Genesis 23, 49, 50; 2 Sam. 19:38.
 - ii. Tombs were often marked according to who was buried there.
 - iii. But for those who could not afford more, there was a burying ground for the "common people." 2 Kings 23:6, Jeremiah 26:23.
 - iv. Customs arose regarding preparation of the remains: John 19:40 is an example of the point to which the custom had progressed in the time of Christ.
 - v. We read of a "funeral procession" in the town of Nain: Luke 7:11–17.
 - d. In every case, both funerals and burials were matters for the family of the deceased.
 - i. The details about the burial of Christ and OT kings could be seen as exceptions.
 - ii. Otherwise, payment for funerals and weddings are family responsibilities.
3. Finally, if we insist that paying for funerals or weddings is still an act of benevolence, then it falls on the church to establish the following from scripture:
 - a. Prove that the inability to pay for a wedding or funeral is a matter of survival.

- b. Show the Bible pattern for doing this without partiality (respect of persons) (James 2:1-9). How much does the church pay? Who sets the standard? How is it enforced without partiality. Human judgment is not a reliable and consistent standard!
- c. Setting the rules for conduct, modesty, language, alcohol when tradition is in control.
- d. Explain why other non-essential customs and practices should not be included as well, such as paying for the secular education of children, buying motorbikes and autos, etc.
- e. There is no basis in scripture to resolve these problems consistently and without partiality.
- f. That is because paying for funerals and weddings and other non-essential practices that are not true needs is not a scriptural work of the church.

E. CONCLUSION

- 1. There is a clear difference between a burial and a funeral.
- 2. There is a similar clear difference between a marriage and wedding.
- 3. The work of the local church is described in the Bible. The work of the church does not involve matters of human custom or tradition or matters of personal responsibility.
- 4. Nowhere in the New Testament is there any command or example from God about the conduct of funerals and burials. The Bible does not command how funerals and weddings are to be carried out.
- 5. Nowhere in the New Testament is there any command or example from God about the local church being either obligated or permitted to pay the expenses for a funeral or a burial.
- 6. Funerals and weddings are matters of human custom or tradition and matters of personal responsibility.
- 7. Matters of customs and traditions are left to the family and friends to manage.