

Funerals on Sabbath, James White: Sab. funeral

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My dear Brother Ashbaugh:

We have your two letters of December 17 and 18 in which you raise questions about the funeral of Elder James White on the Sabbath day and in which you also refer to the compilation of Sabbath Readings for the Home Circle, which consisted of four volumes.

Now let us look first at the inquiry concerning the propriety of the funeral of James White on the Sabbath day. Your question implies that it would be improper to hold a funeral on the Sabbath day. Perhaps you are in possession of a purported E. G. White statement to the effect that such funerals are wrong. We do not have any such statement here in our office. Sister White was buried on the Sabbath, as was James White. On one occasion Sister White reproved those who condemned a man for holding his wife's funeral on the Sabbath day. She said that they did wrong in afflicting the afflicted by their condemnations. I have conducted funerals on the Sabbath, and I suppose that almost every Adventist minister will be required to do this at some time in his life, perhaps on more than one occasion.

The death of James White took place on the Sabbath, his burial a week later. In a pamphlet titled "A Memorial of Elder James White," under the section "The Funeral Services," I quote the following:

"Owing to the distance of many of the relatives from the scene of his death, a son being in California and a brother in Massachusetts, the date of the funeral was fixed for Sabbath, Aug. 13, one week from the day of his death. The brother in Massachusetts, Rev. Samuel White, was prevented by feeble health from attending; but W. C. White and wife arrived from Oakland, California, the day previous; and another brother of the deceased, Rev. John White, for many years a presiding elder in the Methodist Conference of Ohio, together with his son-in-law, were present from that State. These with Sister White, J. E. White and wife, and Mrs. Mary Chase, a sister of the deceased, who has for some time resided in Battle Creek, constituted the relatives who were present.

"Although the day was the most busy one in the week for those not of our faith, the people of this vicinity showed their respect for the deceased by attending the funeral in large numbers." (P. 21.)

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Please remember that we had no airplanes in those days. The year, as you know, was 1881. Some of the relatives traveling all the way from Oakland, California, could not arrive sooner. Sister White was present at the funeral and made a most impressive impromptu statement. Perhaps in God's providence the funeral was held on the Sabbath so that a larger number could be present and the influence of this godly man become mighty even in his death. Certainly the testimony of his wife at his funeral reached many hearts--perhaps many more than might have been reached had the funeral been held on any other day of the week. A funeral is a religious service; for that matter, so is a marriage. We have records of where Elder James White performed at least one marriage ceremony on the Sabbath. Tell me, Brother Ashbaugh, is there anything out of harmony with the spirit of the Sabbath in either marrying or burying the saints of God? Are not marriage and funeral services both religious services when conducted in the right way? You see, my dear brother, the custom today in marriages is to associate social activities and much of ornamentation and decoration and even glamor with the marriage ceremony. For that reason marriages as they are now conducted have added to them an air of splendor and elegance hardly to be equated with the simple, humble marriages of the saints in our churches fifty or seventy-five years ago. But the marriage per se is a religious institution and quite in harmony with the Sabbath--I emphasize again, when conducted properly.

Now coming back to funerals, let us say that there are occasions when Sabbath funerals are appropriate. It is true today as much as it was in Elder James White's day, or at the time of Sister White's death over thirty years later. But certainly we do not encourage Sabbath funerals and rarely plan them for the Sabbath itself. But when it seems best that the funeral be conducted on that day, wisdom will dictate on occasion that we go forward.

In some lands, bodies just will not keep, because it is impossible to embalm them, and Sabbath funerals are mandatory. There are some places where Sunday funerals are very difficult to arrange, and to extend the funeral for an extra day would be impossible. We must face the reality of life and solve our problems with sanctified good sense.

Now concerning the charge against Sister White that "In compiling Sabbath Readings for the Home Circle, Mrs. White included fiction, thus contradicting her teachings." This does not necessarily follow. While it is true that Sister White doubtless was the compiler of the Sabbath Readings, and while it is also true that some of these stories appear fictitious in nature, this is not to say that Sister White was inconsistent in her endorsement of Sabbath Readings.

To repudiate all imaginative literature is to reject the story of the rich man and Lazarus, as recorded in the book of Luke, and many of the parables of our Lord, as Jesus likened the kingdom of heaven to an imaginative sequence of events in the lives of imaginary characters. So it is possible, under certain circumstances, to liken the issues that face the church or a government to a sequence of events that transpire in the lives of imaginative figures in a story. The connotation and the setting of the story, the reputation of the author or the compiler, the object that is sought, the lesson that is taught, these must all be considered. All things are for our sakes, and God uses whatever instruments or devices are available just so long as the principles of His law are not violated and the interests of His kingdom are served.

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Sister White made reference to Uncle Tom's Cabin by Harriet Beecher Stowe, observing that it had served a good purpose, but she did not recommend that this novel be used by our people after that purpose had been served. Indeed, the purpose that it did serve was doubtless among non-Adventists, but that purpose was a good purpose in bringing the slavery issue to a head back in Civil War days.

Do not forget the allegorical Pilgrim's Progress by John Bunyan. And many a poem and precious bit of prose that has conveyed vital spiritual lessons through the imagery of a story should also be remembered. Why, Brother Ashbaugh, do the enemies of the cause seek to incarcerate Mrs. Ellen G. White within the prison walls or the straitjacket of a preconceived pattern? They judge her and the inspired writers of the Bible by their own narrow views.

It is clear that Sister White in condemning fiction and novels is condemning that which obviously is earthly, sensual, and devilish, and represents the wisdom from beneath. When she condemns religious novels, she obviously is leveling her weapons of spiritual warfare against the sentimental drivel that misrepresents true religion and debases it, much, I think, as Cecil DeMille's "King of Kings" and "Ten Commandments" misrepresent and debase true religion. I might add Ben-Hur, The Robe, and other such books which, while having many elements in them of goodness, are certainly perverted concepts of true religion.

Well, now, with this I must close. With fond Christian regards and a prayer that the Lord will be with you in the year stretching before us, I am

Faithfully your brother,

D. A. Delafield, Associate Secretary
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