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## Chrisitan Burial

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„Ehe denn Doktor Luther geschrieben hat, sind eitel dunkle, verworrene Schriften und Bücher von der Buße vorhanden gewesen.“ (Apol., XII, § 4.) Bei den Reformierten hat die Verwirrung bald wieder eingesetzt. Und sind wir nicht äußerst vorsichtig in unserm Studium reformirter Schriften, so wird die Verwirrung auch in unsere Theologie eindringen. (Fortsetzung folgt.) Th. Engelder.

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### Christian Burial.<sup>1)</sup>

*“Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth,”*  
Rev. 14, 13.

The topic “Christian Burial” might on first thought appear to be a topic that rightfully belongs to the pastoral conference. It should not require so much thought to realize, however, that the right understanding of this important subject and, following upon the right understanding, the correct practise concerning Christian burial is of vital importance to the members as well as to the pastor of the congregation, especially in our day, when the opinion is steadily gaining ground that Christian burial should be denied no one, regardless of what the deceased has confessed and how he has lived. At no time perhaps does the pastor need the enlightened understanding and sympathetic support of his flock more than when he is forced on Scriptural grounds to refuse to officiate at a funeral. The purpose of this paper is to further this understanding and support. May the Lord of the Church grant His blessing!

#### What a Christian Burial Is.

We must first inquire what a Christian burial is and what meaning such a burial has. Though a burial in itself is a purely civil affair,—every one must be buried, and any one can bury,—yet because of the mode of burial among Christians, accompanied as it is by hymn-singing, prayer, and preaching, it at once becomes a sacred, religious act, a part of our liturgy and public service. To the conservative Lutheran Church the real essence of a Christian burial consists in the words of committal: “Out of dust art thou come, unto dust shalt thou return, from the dust shalt thou rise again. Amen.” In these words is expressed the hope of resurrection to life, life eternal, not a general hope, as some would have it, but a specific hope for the body being buried. This same specific hope of resurrection to life is also powerfully expressed in the grand words from St. Peter’s First Epistle General: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to His abundant

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1) Paper read at the convention of the Norwegian Synod and reprinted by permission.



mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead," 1 Pet. 1, 3. We repeat again, the words of committal and what they express are the essential part, the heart of a Christian burial. Everything else in our burial ritual could be left out, and still it would be a Christian burial, just as in the Sacrament of Baptism and the Lord's Supper everything could in an emergency drop out but the words of institution.

Now, since the hope of resurrection to life eternal can be expressed only with regard to Christians, it follows of itself, as night the day, that only Christians should be given a Christian burial. According to our Church a Christian burial is a privilege and honor for those only concerning whom we in charity have reason to hope that they have died in the faith. "Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth," Rev. 14, 13.

A Christian burial is furthermore a testimony of fellowship. It expresses the hope that those who here in this world were united in faith shall also be united hereafter in life eternal. As a testimony of fellowship, burial is also regarded by the secret societies, or lodges, as statements from their authoritative writings clearly prove. As such burial is often regarded also by outspoken infidels, who have completely broken with the Church and all religion. As a dying wish they have often requested that the Church have nothing to do with their burial. Since burial is undoubtedly an expression of fellowship, it clearly follows that those who would have nothing to do with our Christian faith and fellowship in life surely should not be forced into such fellowship after death. So much for the meaning of Christian burial. We now consider the duty which the Church has towards her dead.

The Church has a duty toward her dead. We find that the Church of God has ever taken charge of her deceased members. In Deut. 34, 8 we read: "And the children of Israel wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days." When John the Baptist was beheaded by Herod, we are told in Matt. 14, 12: "And his disciples came and took up the body and buried it and went and told Jesus." It is proper at the burial of a Christian that not only the relatives and friends participate, but also the deceased's brothers and sisters in faith; in other words, that the congregation participate as a congregation. . . .

#### The Purpose of Christian Burial.

The Christian burial has a threefold purpose. First, with regard to the deceased. By giving the deceased a Christian burial, the congregation testifies before the world: "This man was one of us; through faith he was a member of Christ's holy body, a soldier in Christ's army, a sheep of His flock. We are now laying our brother in faith to rest. He was a Christian; as a Christian he lived, and



as a Christian, we believe, he died. And though now we are committing his body to the dust, we believe it shall one day rise again, be reunited with the soul, and live and reign with God in all eternity. And we believe that on that day we shall see our brother in yonder blessed life and there together with him sing the praises of our Savior, the Lamb of God, who 'was slain and hath redeemed us to God by His blood.'" Secondly, a Christian burial is a sincere thanksgiving to God for everything that He has done for the departed: that through the means of grace He brought him to faith, kept him in the true faith, and now at last granted him a blessed end. From this we see that, as a Christian death is the most glorious thing that can fall to a man's lot here on earth, we in like manner do not exaggerate when we assert that a Christian burial is one of the grandest and most beautiful rites that the Christian Church has. It celebrates the joyful home-coming of a faithful soldier of the Cross after his struggle with, and victory over, all the enemies of his soul.

The second purpose, or object, of a Christian burial is with respect to the mourners. They are our brethren and sisters in faith. Their hearts have been wounded by the death of a dear one. In their sorrow they are tempted to regard their loss as an evidence of God's wrath. Or they are in danger of losing sight of their glorious Christian hope and are mourning as those who have no hope. Christians have true sympathy with one another in the hour of need. With the only true and abiding comfort, the Gospel, they say to their mourning brethren: "Weep not. It is well, eternally well, with your dear departed one. 'Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord.'"

The third purpose of a Christian burial is with respect to the congregation itself. Thereby the Christian congregation confesses its faith before the whole world. It also is a clarion call from yonder world to the congregation, to each member of it, to think of his hour of departure and to cling with ever tighter hold to his blessed Savior, in whom he is ever ready and prepared to depart this life.

But this duty of Christian burial the congregation does not owe all people, nor is it an honor that the Christian congregation can, without denying her Christian faith and hope, confer upon all.

#### **When must Christian Burial be Refused?**

Established custom, public opinion, and sentiment at once answer, "Under no circumstances should Christian burial be denied any one." All too many, both within and without the Church, look upon the pastor as a sort of assistant undertaker. And many weak-kneed pastors, even Lutheran pastors, alas! yield to these popular demands and without further ado are ready and willing to bury anybody and anything.

Now, to refuse to officiate at a burial is not an easy thing. To



be forced to tell a bereaved wife that for valid grounds you cannot give her husband a Christian burial is one of the most heartrending duties that can fall to the lot of a faithful shepherd of souls.

But the conscientious Lutheran pastor dare not be swayed by established custom, public opinion, aye, not even by the sympathetic sentiments of his own heart, but he must act also here in strict conformity with the Word of God, which is the only true rule and guide in doctrine and practise, lest he fall under the condemnation of God's prophet, who says: "Woe unto them that call evil good and good evil; that put darkness for light and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!" Is. 5, 20.

Now, from the meaning and also from the purpose of Christian burial itself we have already noted powerful and sufficient grounds for denying Christian burial to non-Christians. But we must elaborate on this point. The Christian Church must refuse Christian burial to unbelievers first and foremost because it is unscriptural practise.

1. Here God Himself has set us an example in both the Old and the New Testament. Concerning the godless Jehoiakim, the son of Josiah, the king of Judah, God gave the following directions: "They shall not lament for him, saying, Ah, lord! or, Ah, his glory! He shall be buried with the burial of an ass, drawn and cast forth beyond the gates of Jerusalem," Jer. 22, 18. 19. To one of His disciples who, before following Him, first wanted to go and bury his father, who according to the text must have been a godless man, Christ Himself says: "Let the dead bury their dead," Matt. 8, 22. That is, let the spiritually dead, and not the Christians, who have been quickened to spiritual life, bury their physically dead. This has been the practise of the conservative Lutheran Church. It is told of Conrad Becker von Guestrow that he would rather be deposed from office than bury a manifest unbeliever.

2. Giving Christian burial to an unbeliever is also a denial of the way of salvation, which ever goes through repentance of sin and faith in Christ. By giving a Christian burial to unbelievers, the Church contradicts and denies her own teachings.

3. Such a burial gets to be nothing but a sham. How, for example, could our ritual, which gives expression to the hope of resurrection to life and is designed for Christians only, be used at such a burial? Or how could our funeral hymns, which all breathe positive Christian sentiments, be sung at such a funeral? For example, "My life is hid in Jesus, and death is gain to me"; or, "I know of a sleep in Jesus' name"; or, "Asleep in Jesus, blessed sleep"; or, "*Nu har jeg vunden of stridt den gode strid*"; or, "*Bedre kan jeg ikke fare, end at fare til min Gud.*" What blasphemous mockery when sung at the grave of an unbeliever!



4. Such practise must surely give offense to enlightened, earnest Christians. And such offense is no small matter in the eyes of our Savior, who says: "Woe unto him through whom they come!"

5. Giving Christian burial to unbelievers further strengthens worldlings in their ungodly ways and gives them a false hope. Must not the world conclude, and rightly: "It isn't a question of faith or unbelief after all. One can live ungodly and still be called blessed in death"? Concerning such false comfort Dr. Walther says in one of his sermons: "Oh, foolishness beyond all foolishness to live as an unbeliever and yet expect to die as a Christian; to walk on the wrong way and yet expect to reach the right goal; to refuse to strive against sin and yet expect to attain the crown of victory! May God deliver us all from such terrible deception!"

To demand a Christian burial for an unbeliever is furthermore most unreasonable. What would the government say to a family that demanded a military funeral for a son who had refused to serve in the Army or Navy? Or what would the Masonic lodge answer to a request for a Masonic funeral for one who had never been a Mason, aye, who perhaps during his life had opposed the principles of the order?

We have established the general rule "A Christian burial for Christians only," be the person pauper or President. We shall now enumerate a number of specific instances where a conscientious Lutheran pastor must refuse to officiate at a burial.

#### Specific Instances.

1. A Lutheran pastor must refuse to officiate at the burial of those whom we classify as theoretically ungodly, such as manifest scoffers, free-thinkers, heathens, Jews, Mohammedans, Universalists, Unitarians, Christian Scientists, Modernists; in a word, all deniers of the deity of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and of the salvation through His blood alone.

2. A Lutheran pastor must refuse to officiate at the burial of those whom we classify as practically ungodly, such as murderers, thieves, adulterers, drunkards, etc., who, as far as we can judge, have died in their sins without repentance and faith. Neither shall he officiate at the burial of one who for valid reasons has been excommunicated from the congregation and never, so far as man knows, has repented of his sins.

3. Neither shall the pastor officiate at the burial of a despiser of the means of grace, one who in his lifetime refused to have anything to do with the Christian Church, her Gospel, and her Sacraments. Right here there is altogether too much laxity in the Christian Church, even in the Lutheran Church. One thing is preached from the pulpit, namely, that forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation



are to be found in the means of grace alone, the Word and the Sacraments, and then the pastor turns right around and grants a Christian burial to one who to the very end openly despised and wilfully neglected these life-saving means. But one who despises the means of grace cannot be a Christian. True, one may diligently use the means of grace and still not be a Christian, but one cannot be and remain a Christian without using the means of grace. Such a person shuts himself out from salvation. Hear the decisive words of our Savior: "He that is of God heareth God's words; ye therefore hear them not because ye are not of God," John 8, 47. "So, then, faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the Word of God," Rom. 10, 17. The despising of the means of grace is often regarded as a small sin, if a sin at all; but in reality unbelief is the greatest of sins. Our Lord Himself calls unbelief the sin of sins; for He includes all sins in this one sin. In speaking of the work of the promised Comforter, Jesus says that "He will reprove the world of sin, because they believe not on Me," John 16, 9. Walther, in a sermon on the Twentieth Sunday after Trinity, on the parable of the Wedding-feast, says concerning the sin of despising God's Gospel: "In comparison with the greatness and heinousness of this sin," namely, unbelief, "all other sins are small. He who persists in this sin shuts himself out of heaven and plunges himself into hell. He wilfully and deliberately strikes his name from the Book of Life, slaps the Son of God in the face, treads His precious blood under foot, and declares loudly before heaven and earth, 'I do not want to be saved; I want to be damned.'" A persistent despiser of the means of grace certainly should not be given a Christian burial. One who refuses to walk into the house of God when alive certainly should not be carried in when dead.

4. Ordinarily a pastor must not officiate at the burial of a suicide, even if he has belonged to the congregation. Life is a sacred thing. God alone can give it, and God alone has the right to take it. Suicide is often but the expression of unbelief and its offspring despair, which certainly is not in harmony with our Christian faith and hope. There may, however, be extenuating circumstances, *e. g.*, an unbalanced mental condition brought about by sickness, that would justify a pastor in giving one who had otherwise conducted himself as a child of God an honorable Christian burial.

5. In cases of insanity, what then? If the person had been ungodly or a despiser of the means of grace before his insanity, and if he had had no rational moments during which he confessed his sins and faith in the Savior, a Christian burial must be denied. Otherwise he is entitled to a Christian burial; for the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, is able to keep the heart and mind through Christ Jesus, Phil. 4, 7.



6. What attitude should be taken toward Catholics or Reformed church people? The position of our Church has been this: A Lutheran pastor must not officiate when the deceased has viciously attacked the Lutheran faith and there is no evidence to show that he has changed his attitude. If a Lutheran pastor is called to the death-bed of a [unchurched] Catholic or Reformed and the dying person confesses himself to be a poor, lost sinner, who builds his hope of salvation on Christ alone, then surely a Lutheran pastor would with joy officiate at his burial.

7. What about officiating when the body of the deceased is to be cremated? Cremation is not the Biblical or Christian mode of disposing of the dead. Both the Old and the New Testament take for granted that, as the body was originally taken from the earth, so it is to return to earth again. In Gen. 23, 19 we read: "Abraham buried Sarah, his wife." In Deut. 34, 5. 6 we read: "So Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there in the land of Moab, . . . and He buried him in a valley, in the land of Moab, over against Bethpeor; but no man knoweth of his sepulcher unto this day." Above all we have the example of our Lord Jesus Himself. Concerning the woman who had anointed Him with precious ointment shortly before His death, Jesus said: "For in that she hath poured this ointment on My body, she did it for My burial," Matt. 26, 12. So the Lord desired it, and so it was done, as we see from the action of Joseph of Arimathea. Cf. Matt. 27, 59. 60. Cremation [as formerly commonly practised] is but an expression of materialism. In this manner the heathen peoples often dispose of their dead. Cremation is an insidious denial of the resurrection from the dead. Our Christian consciousness shrinks from it and can but shudder at the thought of it. A Lutheran pastor certainly cannot with a good conscience officiate at such a burial.<sup>2)</sup>

8. Lodge-members. A conscientious Lutheran pastor cannot and will not have anything to do with the secret societies, or lodges, in connection with funerals or in any other connections. It should not be necessary here to state the grounds. Nor can the pastor officiate where the deceased has made the Christless lodge religion his confession of faith, even if the lodge has nothing to do with the funeral. If one who has been a lodge-member renounces the lodge religion and confesses Christ as the only Savior of sinners, a Lutheran pastor will gladly officiate.

9. A true Lutheran pastor must not officiate at a funeral where a pastor of another faith is also to take part in the services. Here the many passages in Scripture that warn against unionism apply. To officiate under such circumstances would compromise the true

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2) When cremation is employed as a measure of economy, or when it is performed for the sake of shipping the ashes a great distance, our objections would not be urged.



faith and place truth and error on the same level. The Norwegian Lutheran Church of America, as we all know, officially tolerates such unionistic practise, and it is therefore not strange that such practise is gaining ground among them. By refusing to officiate in such a case, the pastor must take pains to explain that he, by declining to participate, in no wise thereby passes judgment upon the deceased.

We have tried to enumerate the chief outstanding instances when a Lutheran pastor must not officiate at a burial. No attempt has been made to cover every case. Peculiar circumstances may arise where the pastor is in doubt just what to do. In such cases he will plead with God for true pastoral wisdom and love and seek the counsel of his brethren in faith and office. Whenever he can do so with a good conscience, without compromising the truth of God's Word, the pastor will officiate. He is not looking for trouble. In cases where it is impossible to arrive at conclusive evidence, the pastor will give the party the benefit of the doubt. No Christian takes pleasure in the death of the wicked. But where there are no extenuating circumstances, where the case is clear-cut, there the pastor must refuse, though it means the hatred of the world and may even cost him the good will of many of his own church-members.

A few objections to our practise will be stated and briefly answered.

1. The funeral is not for the sake of the dead, but for the living. Surely the pastor can go and preach to the living. Answer: We are not burying the living, but the dead. The whole service centers about him, and if it weren't for the deceased, there would be no funeral service.

2. But one need say nothing about the dead. We answer: To remain silent would be hypocrisy; we would be "dumb dogs that cannot bark." And the very fact that you must remain silent about the deceased is pretty good evidence that the pastor has no business officiating at such a burial.

3. A funeral service gives the pastor an excellent opportunity to testify to the issues of life and death. Answer: The most powerful sermon that can be preached on such an occasion is to refuse to preach. That sermon will be remembered long after anything that was said in a funeral sermon over an unbeliever.

4. The pastor can go and preach a sermon of warning, a thundering law sermon. Answer: By so doing, hearts are only embittered, and more is lost than gained.

5. But the family belongs to the congregation, and it is the duty of the pastor to comfort it in its sorrow. Answer: False comfort is no comfort. Privately the pastor can hold forth the true comfort of God's Word to the mourners.<sup>3)</sup>

3) We distinguish between services for the mourners and the commitment at the grave.



6. By refusing to preach, the pastor passes judgment upon the dead. No one knows what may have occurred between the deceased and his God in the last moments. Answer: We can only judge by that which we see. The pastor does not pass final judgment. That is God's office alone. But by giving one who to all appearances has lived and died without God and without hope a Christian burial, the pastor does pass judgment; he pronounces him a Christian, calls him blessed, and holds forth the hope of resurrection to life. By not officiating, the pastor suspends judgment, leaving final judgment to Him who "searcheth the reins and hearts," whose "judgments are true and righteous altogether."

7. Relatives and friends may leave the congregation. The congregation will be torn to pieces, etc. Answer: If they are enlightened Christians, they will not leave the congregation. And very often it happens that, so far from weakening a congregation, such a firm stand on the part of the pastor only serves to strengthen it. God's Church is never weakened if we follow God's Word. And even though some should leave the congregation, we should be more concerned about the favor of God and the salvation of souls than the favor or fear of man. And when we are accused of lacking love and being hard, we will remember that true "love rejoiceth in the truth" and that it was the tender Savior Himself, who died for us on the cross, that told us the startling parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus.

#### The Funeral Sermon.

The subject of Christian burial should not be left without our directing some special attention to the funeral sermon; for next to the words of committal the funeral sermon is the most important part of the Christian burial. In our day especially, when the funeral sermon is all too often turned either into a sentimental eulogy of the deceased or into a harsh sentence of judgment over the dead, it is of great importance that our people are instructed concerning what the funeral sermon should be and contain.

Incalculable harm has undoubtedly been wrought in the Church through the wrong kind of funeral sermons. "Many a funeral sermon helps to dig a grave for the Church itself." "One of the contributing causes to the apparently care-free security that many live in is the beautiful [?] church service and the complimentary ticket to heaven given in funeral sermons to any one that happens to die." Many people have undoubtedly been confirmed in their worldliness and unbelief by funeral sermons. On account of this shocking abuse earnest men in the Church have advocated the abolishment of funeral sermons. But here the striking old Norwegian saying applies: "*Man maa ikke kaste barnet ut med vaskevandet,*" "One must not throw out the child with the wash water."



The funeral sermon affords the Church through its official spokesman, the pastor, an outstanding opportunity to testify of the issues of life and death, and the most should be made of such golden opportunities. Many people attend funerals who rarely, if ever, go to church otherwise. If ever they are serious, if ever the uncertainty of life and the certainty of death is impressed upon them, if ever men are brought to realize that their "hearts are muffled drums beating funeral marches to the grave," it is then. It is hard for unbelief and skepticism to look death in the face. Their bold front often breaks down over the coffin and at the grave.

If ever therefore the issues of life and death should be proclaimed clearly, convincingly, and fearlessly, if ever we should preach as "dying men to dying men," it is at a funeral. To the casket before us we can point as concrete, indisputable evidence of the awful truth that "the wages of sin is death," but at the same time we can over the mortal remains of a child of God joyfully, aye, boastfully, point to the glorious hope of life eternal as the "gift of God through Jesus Christ, our Lord." Sin and grace should be stressed in every sermon and certainly should resound clearly in every funeral sermon. It should be emphasized that the deceased was, and confessed himself to be, a poor sinner, whose only comfort and hope in view of his sins was the grace of God in Christ Jesus.

In an article on funeral sermons (*Lehre und Wehre*, Vol. 15, p. 112) Pastor E. W. Keyl, in the following statement, points out what a funeral sermon should contain: "The funeral sermon should, as the Gospel-lesson of the widow's son of Nain teaches us, vividly picture two processions to us: first, a death procession, which proclaims louder than words, 'In the midst of life we are in death'; and secondly, a procession of life, which unites in the song of victory, 'In the midst of death we are in life.' Funeral sermons should testify whence death comes, namely, from sin, and whence life comes, namely, from Christ. Funeral sermons should admonish us to constant preparation for death as well as to constant fellowship with Christ, the Destroyer of death and the Giver of life. Funeral sermons should admonish us faithfully to use our time of grace." (Freely translated from Keyl.) By following this advice, the true aim of the funeral sermon is attained, namely, to admonish, to warn, to instruct, and, above all, to comfort and strengthen in order that souls may be won for the blessed hereafter also on this occasion.

By preaching Law and Gospel, sin and grace, one avoids the danger of making the funeral sermon too personal, that is, of saying too much about the deceased, a fault all too common in funeral sermons to-day. By preaching sin and grace, one also avoids the dangerous and disgusting practise of making a eulogy out of the funeral sermon, of placing verbal floral offerings on the casket of



a sinner, whose only hope, as certain as he is a Christian, is the grace of God earned for sinners by Christ's death on the cross.

The custom prevalent among the ancient heathen of Greece and Rome of engaging an orator to pronounce a eulogy at funerals, to praise the virtues of the departed, in order that his memory might be cherished among men and that he might find favor among the gods, has, alas! been revived in our day, and all too many preachers are to be had who for the reward of money or for the praises of men are willing and glad to serve in this capacity. No wonder that funeral sermons have been sarcastically called "lying sermons."

Would that the spirit of Christian Ernst, Duke of Saxony, might pervade every preacher and every hearer of every funeral sermon! This pious Christian before his dath made the request that all praise of him should be withheld in his funeral sermon and only the grace of his Savior be praised.

This does not mean that we must never point to the virtues or good works of the deceased Christian. Scripture does not forbid this. The thing to be avoided is the appearance that these good works are in any way the ground of salvation instead of only the fruits, the evidence of faith in the Savior's work and merits.

Neither should the funeral sermon be an attempt to play upon the emotions and feelings of the mourners. The funeral service should not be an emotional spree. The number of tears that a preacher may cause to flow at a funeral is by no means a proof of the true value of the sermon. Sentiment has its rightful place in the funeral service; but let it be true sentiment, flowing naturally from the conviction of sin and the joy of God's grace. "Instead of dwelling upon sentimental incidents from the death of the departed, there ought to be more said about another death, that on Calvary's hill."

May our consideration of this solemn subject "Christian Burial" serve to remind each and every one of us of our death's day, which also is to be our great day of entrance into life, so that we may be constrained to pray daily:—

Who knows how near my life's expended?  
 Time flies, and death is hasting on;  
 How soon, my term of trial ended,  
 Death may be here and life be gone!  
 My God, for Jesus' sake I pray  
 Thy peace may bless my dying day.

My many sins, O veil them over  
 With merits of Thy dying Son!  
 I here Thy richest grace discover,  
 Here find I peace, and here alone.  
 My God, for Jesus' sake I pray  
 Thy peace may bless my dying day.

JUSTIN A. PETERSEN.