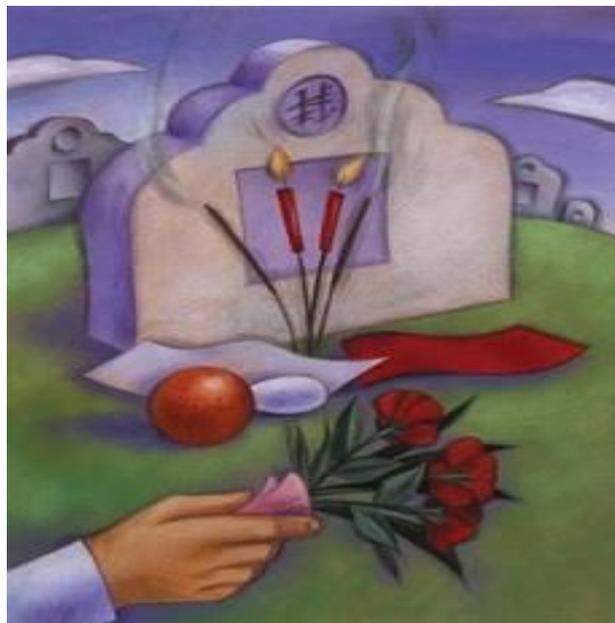


Can I...

- hold joss sticks?
- participate in a funeral procession?
- take the red string during the wake?

A practical guide for Christians when faced with a traditional Chinese funeral



THE QUESTIONS

We have to attend wakes and funerals.

- Sometimes, it is because the deceased was a friend.
- Sometimes, the deceased is a loved one.

What does a Christian do when he or she is confronted with traditional Chinese practices?

What can he/she participate in? What should he/she NOT participate in?

UNDERLYING BELIEFS IN CHINESE FUNERAL RITES

In order to respond rightly, we must understand the worldview of those who practice Chinese rituals. These are not in line with our Christian beliefs.

1. The soul lives on after death.
2. The dead has to be helped to journey to the other world. If steps are not taken to help the dead in this journey, the deceased will bring much disaster to the living.
3. There is a parallel between life on earth and life in the after world.
4. Merit can be acquired for the deceased from what is done for him/her by the living members.
5. Merit can be earned by the living by their good work of filial piety.

WHAT CHRISTIANS BELIEVE ABOUT DEATH

1. That the spirit of the person returns to God, whether immediately or it goes to a place before going to God at the judgement day is subject to interpretation and discussion.

For the dead person, it is not a big issue. When he/she “wakes,” he or she will be before God. It isn’t an issue with God either. He is the God of time. While we think in terms of linear time, He moves in and beyond time.

In Ecclesiastes 9:5-6, the dead are said to be ignorant of all human affairs. Human passions are absent and they are said to have nothing to do with the living. “For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no further reward, and even the memory of them is forgotten. Their love, their hate and their jealousy have long since vanished; never again will they have a part in anything that happens under the sun.”

2. There will be judgement. For those who are in Christ, they will be with Him forever.

Those who are without Christ (those who consciously choose to reject Him) they will be without Him forever. We call these states Heaven and Hell. No merits for the dead can be acquired by the living.

3. Heaven is a great place. There are no tears, no pain, no needs there. We will meet our loved ones who have died in Christ. God will supply everything we need.

4. God is more merciful than we can imagine. Those who died without Christ, we need to leave to His mercy and His grace.

5. The dead have no control over the living. They are under the power of God. The belief that the dead spirits have control over the living contradicts the scriptural teaching of the existence of a Personal Creator God who is in absolute control. We cannot give to the dead a prerogative that belongs only to God. Only God can bless and judge. The Lord Jesus Christ is Lord of both the living and the dead. Rom 14:9, "For tho this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and the living."

In Revelation 1, the Lord Jesus Christ is seen as having the keys of death and Hades. His power extends to the place of the dead. There is therefore no place for a system of thought which permits capricious spirits of the dead to rule and influence the destiny of men.

6. Scriptural teaching on reverence to ancestors and elders:

The scripture has in no way discouraged respect for ancestors. Ex 13:19 ff and Gen 50:25 do imply such respect. A more specific command to honour parents who are still alive can be seen from Ex 20:12 and Eph 6:1, 2.

THE BASIC PRINCIPLE FOR OUR CHRISTIAN STAND

What do you believe in as a Christian about death?

If you believe say, "Belief A", then you should not be doing the actions that says you believe in "Belief B" which is contrary to "Belief A" eg. if you believe that the dead person is already with the Lord (in whatever state), you will not be acting as if you need to lead the dead person from an earthly existence to an underworld existence (eg. to the 18 levels of Hell).

The reasons are simple:

1. **Your loyalty to God is at stake.** If you believe God says reality is X, you cannot act before others in a way that says "reality is Y." Jesus said, "If anyone is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels." (Luke 9:26).
2. **Your integrity is at stake.** You need to be true to what you believe in to be able to hold your head up high as a person of integrity.

3. **Your witness in the Body is at stake.** If you compromise, it will hurt other Christians in the future. You add weight to their burden. Imagine a scenario where a non-believer says to a Christian, “Why don’t you want to hold the joss stick? Your sister who is also a Christian is holding a joss stick and bowing down. This might not happen at the funeral where you are involved with. It might be that someone, observing your action, will use this against another fellow Christian (unknown to you) three years down the road.
4. **Your witness to the Community is at stake.** If you dare not stand up for what you believe in, the community at large will think you have nothing you will stand for anyway, so nothing you preach is worth anything.
5. **It confuses non believers.** “Why your elder brother refuses to do the rites when you – also a Christian – have no problems doing the rites?”

MAKING OUR CHRISTIAN STAND WITH THE RIGHT ATTITUDE

1. Be prayerful in our dealing for at least two reasons:
 - a) This is a spiritual warfare. This struggle is very much a spiritual issue. The pressure to confirm is very great and emotions are highly charged during such occasions. Our loyalty to Christ is sometimes put to the test.
 - b) We need wisdom and spiritual discernment.
2. Be clear as to our objections:

We are not objecting to our Chinese tradition, nor to our respect of the deceased.

We are objecting to the unscriptural assumption of worshipping the dead. However, indiscriminate rejection of the rites often causes unnecessary misunderstanding and complication.
3. Be thoughtful in our approach:

To help rectify the misunderstanding and misconception of our parents and family members toward the Christian faith, we must be thoughtful in our approach. Be tactful and careful about communicating our reasons for not participating in the funeral rites with religious meanings.

FAQ

1. **What if you are the eldest son? Eldest sons usually have to carry out the rites in the family.**

- Let your non-Christian brothers / relatives do it since they do not share your Christian beliefs.
- Explain to them amicably and be firm in your position without putting down their beliefs.
- Affirm your love for your parent and your siblings in practical ways during and after the funeral.

2. **What if you have already accepted Christ but not yet baptised?**

You already belong to Christ (John 1:12). You cannot take part in what do you not believe in as a Christian.

GOING A STEP FURTHER

1. Our concern in the conflict is more than just problem-solving.
2. The evaluation of the issue should inspire us to a greater commitment to God and a stronger recognition of the Lordship of Christ in all aspects of our lives.
3. While there is still time, assure our parents and family in ways that are tangible to them. Mere words or just showing them the scripture passages on honouring parents would never be sufficient to get the message across to them. One has to "say" it in action, eg. regular support and monetary gifts, obedience and submission in our daily living, etc.
 - Take a further step forward in communicating our appreciation and respect for our parents by expressing the desire of learning more about this virtue of filial piety, or even to discuss with them all those ancient teachings. This act of humility and expression of interest communicates to them our respect for Chinese culture.
 - Take an interest in knowing more about our ancestors, their personal history, good deeds, their struggles, etc. This will convince them of our respect and regard for our ancestors. It will give them the assurance that we have not "forgotten our roots / origins."

REMEMBER, you are NOT ALONE in this as a Christian.

There are many who have walked this path before. Ask your Pastor, church and cell leaders to walk with you through this difficult period. Remember also that the Lord has promised that He will never leave you nor forsake you. You are not alone.

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SOME COMMON TRADITIONAL PRACTICES VS CHRISTIAN BELIEFS

	Practice	What it means	What we believe	Do we practice it?
1	Removing mirrors when body is returned to the house by undertakers	The spirit of the dead will realise its dead state if it cannot see itself in the mirror. The shock of it might lead the dead to reject is dead state, overstayng with the family instead of departing into the nether world.	The dead have returned to Christ.	No. Leave mirrors where they are.
2	Keeping body for three days or five days or seven days.	Odd numbers have to do with good and bad luck.	God is the Lord of Time and the Lord of our lives. Our times are in His hands. There is no such thing as good or bad luck.	Keeping the body for longer because some family members have yet to return from overseas or people need to have more time to say goodbye.
3	Long period before burial and amount / volume of crying / wailing; loud bands.	To state popularity of deceased or the filial affections of the bereaved.	Tears are gifts of God. There is no need for a 'performance' before others.	Do what is real, authentic and loving.
4	Giving out red strings.	Death is seen as 'bad luck' so giving red string (red = good luck) says: "May the bad luck (death) not pass to you ...". Red string to give good luck instead. Sweets given out to counter the bitterness of the event.	God is the Lord of our lives. There is no such thing as bad or good luck. Red strings cannot ward off evil. Only Christ can.	Instead of giving out red strings, give out cards with Scriptures on comfort in both English and Chinese. Put these cards in envelopes with words like "Righteousness" or "Blessing" printed on them. When offered red strings, refuse it politely and when asked why, use it as an opportunity to humbly witness to the Christian belief that God will protect us.

	Practice	What it means	What we believe	Do we practice it?
5	Wearing coloured patches on one's shoulder if one is a close relative.	It identifies the relationship the person has with the deceased – eg sackcloth or white for spouse and children, blue for grandchildren, green for great grandchildren and black for close relatives eg cousins, siblings. Exact colour depends on dialect group.	God puts us in families and the acknowledgement of our inter-relatedness is a good thing. It also identifies the bereaved family members to the visitor who can treat them with extra consideration and care.	Can continue this practice. It is a cultural act of respect / filial piety.
6	Lighting a joss stick and bowing.	Worship of the deceased (some interpret it as giving reverence, respect and filial piety to the deceased).	We are not to worship any human being – alive or dead. Since the use of joss stick is associated with worship rather than mere reverence, it might be wise not to use it.	Don't do it. Instead, stand before the coffin and say a prayer for the deceased / family.
7	Burning paper money.	To provide currency for the dead in the other world.	Currency won't be use in the next world. God will provide all that is needed.	Don't do it.
8	Personal items put in coffin plus coin, grains of rice or pearl.	Personal items for use in afterlife. Coins are to bribe officials of underworld. Rice to ensure deceased won't be hungry. Pearl to light the way in the underworld.	Same as #7. There are no 'bribe-able' official in the underworld nor need for food or light.	Don't do it. If personal items are placed as mere sentiments with no confusion on the part of family members, then it is ok. Unwanted clothes of the deceased may be left behind with the coffin since some charity organisations do not want to accept them.

	Practice	What it means	What we believe	Do we practice it?
9	Eldest son carries lantern and leads procession around the coffin 10 times on last night of wake.	Leading the deceased up different levels of hell with the light until they come to the bridge into the next world. Then urging the deceased to cross it, then burning the paper bridge to ensure they do not return to hell nor be pursued by the guardians of hell into the next world.	Scripture says that the deceased goes to God. There is no such journey through hell nor can we help the person in that journey.	Don't do it.
10	Washing hands / face after funeral or cross over small fire before entering the home.	To 'wash off' or 'ward off' the 'bad luck' of the event. Also linked with idea that the spirits cannot cross water or fire.	Spirits are only afraid of Jesus. No such thing as good or bad luck.	Wash hands and face for hygiene or refreshment.