

Reconsidering Cremation

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The practice of cremation is not inherently evil. It is not a sin. However, this does not mean that we should be neutral about it. Anything that does not serve the Gospel should be discouraged even if, in itself, it is an adiaphoron. Burial of the Christian's body serves our confession of the Gospel better than does cremation.

This article will examine the reasons why burial (or inhumation) should be encouraged and why cremation should be discouraged. Included will be three arguments based on Scripture: 1) burial is the general pattern set down in Scripture; 2) burial better symbolizes the Christian's belief in the resurrection; and 3) burial better exalts the sanctity of the Christian's body.

Background to This Issue

As American culture becomes more secular, practices rooted in pagan ideology will become more prevalent and will continue to seep into the church. Cremation (from the Latin word *cremo* which means "to burn") is quickly gaining favor among Americans. The number of cremations in the United States has increased dramatically in recent years: In 1975, 7 percent of the people who died were cremated. In 1985, it was 15 percent. In 1992, it was 18.5 percent. In 1998, the rate in the U.S. was 21 percent and it is projected to be 34 percent by 2010. The reasons seem to come down to three: 1) it is more economical; 2) it saves space; and 3) it supports the common sentiment that the soul is more important than the body.

The church's proponents of cremation would say there is little direct or indirect instruction in the Scriptures as to the disposal of the body at the time of death. This is true. There are surely no explicit commands against it in Scripture. However, just because a practice is not prohibited does not make it wise. Burial, not cremation, has been the sacred custom of the disposal of the dead from the days of the Old Testament church. Cremation was practiced by pagan nations; burial bore witness that Christians had too high a regard for the physical body to do such a thing. Only recently has Christendom loosened its stance against cremation. Even though she allows it, the church does not prefer it. The Roman Catholic Church, as late as 1983, forbade cremation. In that year, canon law was revised (C1176, 3): "The Church earnestly recommends that the pious

custom of burial be retained; but it does not forbid cremation unless this is chosen for reasons which are contrary to Christian teaching." Before this revision of the Code, the Roman church would not give a catholic funeral to one who was cremated at his own request. In addition, according to Byzantine Canon Law, cremation is still not permitted in Eastern Orthodox churches; and, it takes a special dispensation from the bishop to relax this law. In Protestantism, it also has not been the standard practice. Many Lutheran churches still own cemeteries adjacent to their church building, a testimony to the important role churches played in the burial of the blessed dead. The church has always found burial to be the most fitting way for a Christian to be laid to rest. To cremate goes against the wisdom of the church and for that reason alone should give pause to one who is considering cremation. Following are three other reasons burial should be encouraged.

Burial is the General Pattern Set Down in Scripture

Whereas the Bible makes no direct command that we must bury the dead, it certainly witnesses to the sacred custom of burial with plenty of examples. Cremation, on the other hand, is a practice laden with bad connotations throughout the Scriptures. In the Old Testament, burning by fire was mostly reserved for idols, criminals, or enemies of Israel. Consider Achan's sin. After Joshua and his army exterminated the men, women and children of Jericho, Achan disobeyed God's command and looted the city. As punishment for the theft, God ordered that Achan and his family be stoned, and that their bodies be cremated. Moses destroyed the golden calf by burning it. God exterminated Korah and the 250 Israelite men with fire because they opposed Moses. God commanded that the idols of pagan gods be destroyed with fire. God proclaimed a death curse on Moab because that nation reduced the bones of the king of Edom to lime through burning.

Burial, however, is always treated honorably. In fact, not to be given a proper burial was considered a supreme dishonor and a curse. For example, King Jehoiakim was the son of Josiah and the ruler of Judah from 609 to 598 B.C. Because of his pride and his disobedience to God, he was cursed in the following words by the prophet

Jeremiah, "He shall be buried with the burial of a donkey." This meant he would be given no burial at all; his body would be dishonored by being left like a dead donkey on the ground for scavengers to eat.

A large and important place is given to the burial of the faithful throughout the Bible. The whole of Genesis 23 is given to recording the death and burial of Sarah. Abraham's burial is described. The burials of Rachel and Isaac are mentioned. Almost one half of Genesis 50 describes Jacob's death and burial. In addition, the Israelites went to great effort to bury Joseph's body in the Promised Land; they retained it over 300 years in Egypt, then they transported it to the Promised Land. Beyond the Pentateuch, the burials of Joshua, Moses, Samuel, and David are described.

The New Testament also bears witness to the practice of burial. Though great damage was done to the body of John the Baptist, he was buried. Saints in Jerusalem, like Ananias and Sapphira, and Stephen, were not cremated, but buried.

The treatment of our Lord's body is perhaps the strongest testimony to the blessedness of burial. In fact, the interment of our Lord is described in detail. His body was buried with care and concern. This example should be a strong influence on our thinking as we consider our own funeral arrangements.

Burial Better Symbolizes the Christian's Belief in the Resurrection

Symbolism can be a powerful witness to what we believe. Throughout Scripture, the symbolism associated with the burial of believers gives a powerful testimony to our belief in the resurrection. The Apostle Paul uses symbolism that would seem to support the practice of burial. He refers to placing the body into the ground as "sowing." He uses the analogy of burying for planting a seed. He does not advocate destroying the seed and then burying it. St. Paul maintains there is continuity from the body of this life, which will one day be transformed and glorified, to the new resurrection body. Our spiritual, heavenly bodies will not be brand new bodies; they will be transformed from the very flesh that we bury into the ground.

The symbolism associated with fire is usually not positive. Fire in Scripture is often associated with child sacrifice and the burning of judged criminals. Though Scripture sometimes represents fire positively (the "pillar of fire" guiding the Israelites in their desert wanderings, for example) fire is associated with warning and judgment. Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, were destroyed by fire for offering profane fire. Jesus spoke of eternal death using the imagery of fire. He did the same in talking about being the True Vine. Those who do not

abide in him will be thrown into the fire and burned. The imagery associated with hell also has to do with flames and fire. The Christian rejoices that he has escaped judgment by fire as presented in Revelation.

When we can point to a casket at the funeral service and when we bury the body of our loved one we give a powerful symbolic witness to what we believe. Cremation does not match with that sort of symbolism.

Burial Better Exalts the Sanctity of the Christian's Body

The body of the Christian is holy, made in God's image and likeness, uniquely designed to express the image of God in man. God redeemed not just our soul, but also our body. Consider the words of St. Paul, "Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, who you have from God, and you are not your own: For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit which are God's." This underscores the precious nature of the body. It is nothing less than a vessel of his salvation.

Without bodies, we could not have received salvation; we could not have heard with our ears the precious Gospel. Nor could we have received the very Body and Blood of Christ without mouths. Through salvation, we have become Christ's own Body. Therefore, we should ponder deeply how we should fittingly dispose of such a sacred thing.

Human bodies are vessels in which God Himself has dwelt, forever sanctifying them. He has said that dust we are and to dust we shall return. It is fitting that He be left in charge of the speed of that process.

In addition, we must consider that our bodies are not our own. They have been bought with a price. They are not to be handled as though we can do what we want with them. God has given no express command to cremate. However, he has put his imprimatur on the practice of burial. We know that burial is an honorable way to treat what is His.

Conclusion

Cremation is not a sin; we cannot present this issue to our people as though it is. However, this does not preclude us from encouraging burial. The reasons explored in this paper are merely a start. The Lutheran pastor need not condemn the practice of cremation in order to encourage burial, but he should present the biblical witness to burial. Because the cremation option is driven by pocketbook concerns, it will probably make little difference. However, the God-pleasing witness to burial is a strong one and our people need to hear why

the church immemorial has always practiced inhumation. This issue is not an issue of ultimate spiritual importance. Still, the decision to cremate should not be made lightly.