

A Christian View of Burial and Cremation

In the last century or so, cremation technology, available land for burial, and a changing view of death in secular culture has shifted the favoured form of funeral from burial to cremation. Too often, this decision is made with an ethic of pragmatism (ends justify means) or utilitarianism (what will bring the family the least pain/ what will cost the family the least is best).

Before considering cost and convenience, Christians would do well to consider certain other facts.

Biblically, there is no explicit command to bury or cremate. This is precisely what places this topic in the realm of ethics. Instead, we have to gather some historical, theological and cultural information.

History of Burial and Cremation

1) From the book of Genesis, we find God's people burying their dead (Gen 23:19, 25:9, 35:8, 35:19, 35:29). This pattern continues right throughout the Old Testament and into the New. The Bible does not contain a single account of a believer's body being cremated. (King Saul's dismembered body was burned, and the bones then buried out of respect, 1 Sam 31:12-13).

Being narrative, these do not become imperatives. There could be many reasons they buried and did not cremate. There could have been instances of cremation not recorded. However, it is instructive to ask: "Why did God's people not bury *and* burn the way we do?" We could argue that technology is part of the answer, but many ancient cultures did cremate.

At the very least, the absence of cremations in Scripture should give us pause before embracing it wholeheartedly.

2) This practice of burial continued well into the Christian era, as the Roman catacombs prove. It seems that wherever Christianity spread, cremations ceased. The RC generally frowned upon cremation, as did the Eastern Orthodox church. Protestants universally buried until the late 19th century, when the technology to cremate more simply and practically was pioneered.

3) Cremation was present in Ancient China, and sometimes in Ancient Greece. In the western Roman empire, cremation was the standard until the first century A.D., often associated with military honors. With the spread of Christianity, cremation was frowned upon and disappeared for the most part in Europe by the fifth century A.D., except in unusual cases such as epidemics or war. The Vikings practised cremation until around 1050, by which time Christianity had penetrated most Viking nations.

4) Modern cremation began in the late 1800s with the invention of a practical cremation chamber by Professor Brunetti, who presented it at the 1873 Vienna Exposition. Championed by Queen Victoria's surgeon, Sir Henry Thompson, and driven by public concern for hygiene and health and clerical desires to reform burial practices, crematories slowly began opening in Europe and abroad. The first modern crematory in America was established in Pennsylvania in 1876.

The View of the Body As Seen in Funeral Rites

5) The view of the body's relationship to the soul influences the view of what to do with the body in death. Religions such as Hinduism, Jainism, Sikhism and Buddhism, mandate cremation. According to Hindu traditions, the reasons for preferring to destroy the corpse by fire, over burying it into ground, is to induce a feeling of detachment into the freshly disembodied spirit, which will be helpful to encourage it into passing to its next destination, lest it remain near its former body. Islam and orthodox Judaism forbid cremation, demanding that the body be treated with respect in life and death, and some even claiming that cremation will affect resurrection.

Scripture's View of the Body

1) 2 Corinthians 5:1-9. What are the images here used for the body. *Tent, habitation, clothing.*

It is possible to be absent from the body and still be alive. It is better to be with the Lord, but it is not desirable to be absent from the body. What then is the best situation?

2) Is the body you or is it not you? Russell Moore: "The Gospel of John tells us that "Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days" (John 11:17). The Holy Spirit chose to identify this body as Lazarus, communicating continuity with the very same person Jesus had loved before and would love again.

After the crucifixion of Jesus, the Gospels present us with an example of devotion to Jesus in the way the women—and Joseph of Arimathea—minister to him, anointing him with spices, specifically anointing, Mark speaks of *him* and not just "his remains" (Mark 16:1), and wrapping him in a shroud. Why is Mary Magdalene so grieved when she finds the tomb to be empty? It is not that she doubts that a stolen body can be resurrected by God on the last day. It is instead that she sees violence done to the body of Jesus as violence done to him, dishonor done to his body as dishonor to him.

When Mary mistakes Jesus for the gardener, she tells him she is despondent because they "have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him" (John 20:13). This body was, at least in some sense, still her Lord, and it mattered what someone had done to it. Jesus and the angelic beings never correct the devoted women. They simply ponder why they seek the living among the dead.

Your soul apart from your body is an unclothed you. There is a very real way in which the body, even in death, is identified with the person.

3) Does it matter how we treat the body? (1 Cor 6:19-20) How you treat the body defiles or does not defile you. Does it matter how you treat the body after you die? Is it possible to dishonour someone after they have died? (e.g. Wickliffe)

When pagan armies have wanted to show the deepest dishonour to conquered enemies, what would they do? They would dismember and mutilate the bodies of those they had already killed. They would pile the bodies in heaps and burn them. They would leave the bodies exposed for carrion and animals. Conversely, respect for one's enemies in warfare has always been shown in burying the bodies.

The Real Issue: Treatment Vs Preservation

The issue is not how to best *preserve* the body; it is how to *treat* the body in death.

It is common for advocates of cremation to point out that a buried person will undergo decay, and nothing will be left of that body, just as very little is left of the cremated body. They conclude that both modes come out at the same place, therefore neither one is preferable.

However, this misses the point. The point of burial is not to *preserve* the remains of the loved one. How God will do the miracle of resurrection is beyond our understanding, as are all miracles. We can be certain that Christians who were eaten by lions, burned by Nero, drowned and lost to the sea or died in some other violent or destructive way will be partakers of the resurrection.

Burial does not pretend to help God out when it comes to resurrection. In other words, we miss the point when we say that both burial and cremation end up with the same amount of destruction done to the body. None of us is trying to embalm bodies to perfectly preserve them so as to give God more to work with on the day of resurrection.

Instead, the point is that we are to honour a human being, even in death. A human being is body, soul & spirit (1 Thes 5:23). In fact, we are told that the body is the Temple of the Holy Spirit. While it is true that the spirit is absent from the body at the point of death (2 Cor 5:8), this does not mean that the body loses all dignity and honour. Indeed, observe how we dress and beautify the body placed in the casket for viewing. We understand that though the person has gone on to face heaven or hell, his or her body remains and we show respect to them in respecting the body. I suggest that respect for the body has always been understood as giving it a proper burial.

Are funerals simply the way in which we dispose of remains? For Christians, burial is not the disposal of a thing. It is caring for a person. In burial, we're reminded that the body is not a shell, a husk tossed aside by the "real" person, the soul within. To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:6–8; Phil. 1:23), but the body that remains still belongs to someone, someone we love, someone who will reclaim it one day.

The Christian view of Resurrection

When Paul discusses the future resurrection of the body, he uses an analogy.

1 Corinthians 15:35-38 But someone will say, "How are the dead raised up? And with what body do they come?" ³⁶ Foolish one, what you sow is not made alive unless it dies. ³⁷ And what you sow, you do not sow that body that shall be, but mere grain -- perhaps wheat or some other grain. ³⁸ But God gives it a body as He pleases, and to each seed its own body.

1 Corinthians 15:42-44 So also is the resurrection of the dead. The body is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption. ⁴³ It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. ⁴⁴ It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body.

When Paul keeps using the term *sow*, it is because he is comparing the human body to a seed, because that is what one sows. How does one sow seed? You put it into the ground.

The act of Christian burial is an act of sowing the now dead human body into the ground, in anticipation of its resurrection as a glorified body. Christian burial is a witness to an onlooking world. We say by our actions that we believe this body will be raised up to new life, as a dead seed sprouts

in spring. By contrast, a materialist sees no need to symbolise a future for the body, because he doesn't believe one exists. In that case, the body can be destroyed totally.

Another image frequently used of the death of a Christian is found in verse 51

1 Corinthians 15:51 ⁵¹ Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed --

Sleep. The image of sleeping is one of lying down, waiting to be awakened.

When we think of these two events – burial and cremation, we have to ask, which better pictures the idea of sowing the body, expecting the future harvest of resurrection? Which pictures someone lying down, resting? Christians believe that the afterlife is not some ghostly, transparent and non-material existence. We believe in a final resurrection that will be more real and physical than we are now.

If the funeral rites communicate something like: so-and-so is gone, and we will never again know him and see him in the physical form in which we knew him here, then I suggest the message is sub-Christian.

Do symbols matter? We must remember that God cares about how we symbolise matters, particularly at such significant events. We care about the mode of baptism, because we think it is important to demonstrate that identification with Christ is a full immersion into His death and resurrection. God cares about the analogies and messages we make and send. For a funeral act to communicate that we think the body is of little more significance to the deceased person seems to send a message that is not thoroughly biblical and Christian. The mode of funeral is not commanded like the mode of baptism is, but it should give us some thought.

Practically

- 1) Given the meaning of the body, the meaning of resurrection, and the meaning of symbolising this, it is a poor choice to favour cremation purely for simplicity's sake.
- 2) Cost may eliminate burial for some people as a viable option. However, the cost is not night and day, if one opts for a modest burial. Also, new laws require that every cremation must be preceded by a full autopsy, which drives up the price. What tends to make burials expensive is the choice of casket, the kind of tombstone, or even the location of the burial ground, and these can be negotiated. I do understand when cost is simply prohibitive, and a family chooses cremation. But if your conscience is persuaded to see the value of burial for a Christian, then I would suggest researching the costs, and seeing if they are really beyond you. Typical funeral policies will cover the cost of either a cremation or a low-cost burial. The prevalence of Jewish and Moslem populations at least means that the authorities can not make burials prohibitively expensive.
- 3) When a person has written it into his or her will that he or she desires to be cremated, we must honour that request. However, to all living Christians I say: the desire to bless your families with simplicity and cost-effectiveness by asking for a cremation might be well-intentioned, but consider if you might not bless them even more, by allowing them to honour you once more, in the act of sowing your body to the ground in expectation of

resurrection, by laying your body down to rest, to sleep, awaiting the day of your awakening. Consider if this might not be a far greater blessing than saving some money, and saving some time.