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FROM ASHES TO ASHES Is Burial the Only Christian Option?

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SYNOPSIS

The practice of cremation has become increasingly acceptable since the 1970s. This acceptability, combined with its economic ease and apparent absence of theological conflicts, has enabled cremation to become established in Christian churches as an alternative to burial. The question must still be asked, however, Is it right for Christians to practice cremation? The answer is that no compelling biblical or nonbiblical arguments have been advanced for forsaking burial. Indeed, good biblical, theological, and symbolic importance may be found for burial, and thus there is no significant reason for Christians to forsake burial as a regular practice.

Should Christians be concerned about the disposal of the dead? Almost everyone eventually will have to make decisions about how to dispose of deceased loved ones. There are a number of indicators that many families are opting for cremation.¹ The average U.S. funeral home performs 27 cremations each year. In 1975, 7 percent of the people who died were cremated. In 1985, it was 15 percent. In 1992, it was 18.5 percent. Today the rate in the U.S. is 21 percent and it is projected to be 34 percent by 2010. What was once unpopular, even distasteful, is now a quick, inexpensive way to dispose of the dead.

In this article we seek to answer the question of whether it is right for Christians to regularly practice cremation. To answer this we first present and then critique the case for cremation, which includes biblical as well as nonbiblical arguments. Following this, the case for Christian burial is presented.

ALLEGED BIBLICAL ARGUMENTS FOR CREMATION

There are four main arguments put forth to justify cremation as an acceptable practice for Christians:

Fire Symbolizes Good to Jews and Christians. William Phipps, one of the significant supporters of cremation as a Christian practice, argues for Jewish and Christian acceptance by pointing to the symbolic use of fire. He writes, "In biblical times fire was often regarded as symbolic of the divine presence, so it was appropriate to feature fire in sacred ceremonies. God was represented by a flaming torch in an encounter with Abraham, and at Mt. Sinai 'the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire' (Exod. 24:17)."²

Since fire represents God, cremation can be a symbol of the believer entering into the presence of God.

Jesus Gave Little Attention to Disposing of the Dead. Phipps also argues that further allowance for cremation should be given because Jesus gave little attention to the disposal of the dead. In fact, His only words on the subject were, "Let the dead bury their own dead" (Luke 9:60). Jesus, Phipps argues, made a

negative reference to earth burial when He compared hypocrites to “whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men’s bones and everything unclean” (Matt. 23:27).

Paul’s Theology Deemphasized the Body. The apostle Paul, argues Phipps, found sacred value only in the living body. It was the living body that was the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:9), not the dead one. Phipps suggests that just as a temple is constructed for worship and is destroyed after it is no longer used for worship, the body may be dispensed with in a like manner. Paul viewed the body as an earthly tent that would soon be demolished after use. He concluded his view of death by stating, “We are confident...and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:8).

Paul has his fullest discussion on life after death in 1 Corinthians 15. There he stated “that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God” (v. 50). According to Phipps,

[Paul] did not believe that the residual dust in a tomb would be the substance of a new heavenly organism. When the apostle writes about “the resurrection of the dead,” he does not mean the reassembling and the reanimation of the corpse. The expression “spiritual body” (1 Cor. 15:5) which he uses does not refer to the physical skeleton and the flesh that hangs on it. Rather, in modern terminology, it means the self or the personality. What removed death’s sting for Paul was not gazing at a prettified corpse but the good news that mortal nature can “put on immortality” (1 Cor. 15:44).³

Phipps concludes his view of Paul’s theology by stating that it “is fully compatible with body disposal by cremation. Contrariwise, those who adamantly advocate earth burial because it enhances bodily resurrection have a weak New Testament foundation on which to stand.”⁴

Christian Acceptance of Cremation Is Growing. Phipps suggests a few reasons for the growing acceptance of cremation among Christians. First, “the broader tolerance most Christians now have on the subject [of cremation] is anchored in a reinterpretation of their basic sources of authority. They have realized that the method of corpse disposal in the biblical culture was not a major concern.”⁵

Second, people, as well as ministers, have observed that “cremation marks a shift away from the irreligious materialism that is pervasive in Western civilization.”⁶ Some have suggested that cremation encourages a wholesome attitude toward funerals. It eliminates the need for expensive caskets and embalming. It helps the grief process because there is no need to dwell on the dead, empty corpse.

Cremation Only Speeds the Natural Process. Another reason given in defense of cremation is that the Bible condemns humankind to return to dust (Gen. 3:19), and cremation only brings that condemnation to pass in a more speedy way. If the body will eventually become dust, then why not hasten it? Cremation seems to be an immediate fulfillment of what the Bible forecasts for all mortals. In short, if God ordained the natural process of returning to dust, then how can cremation be against the will of God?

These arguments combined together would seem to make a strong case that it is biblically and theologically allowable for Christians to forsake the common practice of burial and adopt cremation.

Response to Biblical Arguments for Cremation

Fire and Actions of God. While fire in some cases may be seen as good or serve as a symbol for the divine presence, it is wrong to apply this to cremation. Fire was most often associated with warning and judgment (Lev. 10:1–2) — including eternal judgment (Matt. 25:4, etc.). To connect the burning of a human body with fire would more than likely bring images of human sacrifices (Lev. 18:21), criminals (Lev. 20:14; 21:9), and hell fire itself. Therefore, the symbol at best has a dual application and cannot be used to support cremation alone.

Jesus’ View. The fact that Jesus gave little direct attention to something does not mean it is without importance. Jesus gave little attention to spousal abuse and less to abortion, yet surely this does not indicate His approval of these practices. Jesus, however, did give great attention to the authority and

inspiration of Scriptures that clearly express the common practice and importance of burial (cf. Matt. 5:17–18; 22:29; John 10:35). Furthermore, Jesus attacked many Jewish traditions, but burial of the dead was not one of them.

When Jesus said, “Let the dead bury their own dead” (Luke 9:60), it was in response to an excuse a man gave Him when he desired to bury his father before following Jesus. The saying is a play on words in which Jesus identified the spiritually dead as those who do not follow Him. In effect, Jesus was saying, “Let the [spiritually] dead bury their own [physical] dead.”⁷ The passage has nothing to do with approval of cremation or condemnation of burial. Rather, the passage, if it suggests anything about corpse disposal, gives acknowledgment to burial as the common practice that was so ingrained in Jewish society that reference to it was very common. What is noteworthy is that Jesus never said, “Let the dead *cremate* their own dead,” but rather, “let the dead *bury* their own dead.”

Matthew 23:27 is likewise not a negative reference to burial. Rather, it is a negative reference to the scribes and Pharisees. It was they who appeared beautiful on the outside but who, like dead men in tombs, were unclean on the inside. The fact that the tombs of burial were so common to the people makes possible Jesus’ point concerning the religious leaders.

Paul’s Theology. Phipps’s belief that Paul devalued dead bodies is totally without warrant. First, Paul never taught a dead body should be despised or destroyed. Therefore, Paul’s emphasis on the living body (1 Cor. 6:9) cannot be used to teach there is no value in a dead body. Second, Paul’s analogy of the body being a temple of the Holy Spirit is applied only to the living body. Paul nowhere affirmed that the body, like a temple, should be destroyed (i.e., some imposed means of destruction) after it is used. Therefore, Phipps’s analogy, that it can be destroyed after it is used, does not follow. Third, Paul’s Jewish background would strongly suggest that he practiced and approved of burial as the means of disposing of dead bodies. In fact, Paul seemed to imply this by means of an analogy he used for the resurrection body. In 1 Corinthians 15:42 Paul said, “The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable.” In describing what happens to a body after death, Paul used an analogy of planting a seed, which is similar to burying a dead body (1 Cor. 15:36–44). This is because Paul’s view of the physical resurrection teaches that there is a continuity from the body of this life, which will be transformed and glorified, to the new resurrection body.

Phipps’s use of other Pauline references to the body are also taken out of context. Just because Paul preferred to be absent from the body and home with the Lord (1 Cor. 5:8), does not mean Paul did not care how the body was treated after death.

In 1 Corinthians 15:50, when Paul stated that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, he was referring to our corruptible bodies, as the very next phrase reveals: “For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality” (v. 53). Paul in no way was saying that this body is unimportant. He was simply drawing a contrast between the mortal body and the immortal body (vv. 45–50). The earthly body, because of its condition, cannot inherit the kingdom of God. God must change and raise it imperishable (vv. 51–54). Paul did not say that the resurrection body is without flesh and blood. Scripture clearly teaches that it will have “flesh and bones” because it will be like Jesus’ body (Luke 24:39; 1 John 3:2).

Phipps’s denial of a physical resurrection, where the earthly body is unimportant to the resurrection body, is also false. His rejection of the physical nature of the resurrection body is based, in part, on Paul’s reference to a “spiritual body” (1 Cor. 15:44). “Spiritual,” however, was used here by Paul to mean immortal, not immaterial (i.e., nonmaterial). Paul used it to refer to a body dominated or directed by the spirit. It is a reference to the spiritual *source* of the body’s power, not a denial of its physical *substance*. It is a reference to the supernatural aspect of the body (1 Cor 15:40–44 ; cf. 10:4). Paul’s use of the parallelism that contrasts the natural and supernatural clearly indicates this usage. Furthermore, the reference to material things having a spiritual aspect to them was used elsewhere by Paul. In the same book he used that same word “spiritual” of a physical rock, physical food, and physical water (1 Cor. 10:3–4). It was their source that was “spiritual” or supernatural.

What about Phipps's suggestion that for Paul the sting of death is not well represented by a prettified corpse and that it is the mortal nature that puts on immortality? First, Phipps does not know what Paul's opinion was concerning the beautification of a corpse. Paul never wrote on the topic. Second, burying a corpse is the best representation of the Christian's victory over death. While it is true that God is able to resurrect our bodies no matter what their condition might be (i.e., via burial or cremation), it is important to preserve the body for theological reasons. Human nature is a soul-body unity, and it is soul and body together that put on immortality. Further, the corpse is a good representation of this hope because it is that very body that will have numerical identity with the glorified body. What better symbol to have than the very body that will someday be glorified?⁸ As Paul said, it is the same mortal body that will "put on immortality" (1 Cor. 15:53). Another body or form will not replace it.

Finally, in light of Paul's theological use and respect for the body, burial is a more compatible practice. There is, therefore, a precedence for earth burial not because it enhances bodily resurrection, but because it maintains a consistent expression of its theology that is well grounded in the New Testament.

Christian Acceptance. While the reasons Phipps gives for the wider acceptance of cremation among some Christians may be influential, they are nonetheless flawed. First, Christians should not reinterpret biblical theology so that cremation can be more acceptable. If the Bible is God's Word — as it claims and evidence supports it to be — then Christians today, even as in biblical times, do not have a right to reinterpret it to fit the current culture.⁹ For theological and not merely cultural reasons, burial as a method of corpse disposal was very important in biblical times.

Second, while extravagant materialistic funerals are certainly questionable, it is hard to imagine how the body of the deceased loved one contributes to this. Were all the early Christians and Jews materialistic because they preserved the body for burial? How does the body in a funeral make modern Westerners more materialistic than their Christian and Jewish ancestors who practiced viewing and burial? Whether corpse viewing is beneficial or not is an individual preference and cannot be used as an argument against burial per se.

From Ashes to Ashes. Simply because a human practice speeds up what God ordained does not mean it is right. God ordained that all fallen beings would die (Gen. 2:16–17; cf. Rom. 5:12), but this does not justify our killing them to speed up the process. God ordained pain (Gen. 3:16), but this does not mean we should inflict it on others. There is an important difference between what God can do and what we should do. Many babies naturally abort and most adults die naturally, but this does not justify our killing them (Exod. 20:13). Of course, there is a difference. The body is already dead before it is cremated; but this no more justifies cremating it than it does burning a flag because it is going to rot anyway. Again, there is significance in symbolism, and the symbolism of destroying a body that God created and that God will resurrect is the wrong message to send. Likewise, the simple fact that given time the body will turn to dust does not mean that we should turn it to dust immediately after death. God created the body, and He desires that we respect it even in death.

NONBIBLICAL ARGUMENTS FOR CREMATION

The following represent some of the more common nonbiblical reasons given to support the practice of cremation.

Cremation Is More Economical. The average cost for cremation in 1997 was around \$600 to \$900 dollars. The average cost of a funeral including embalming, casket, funeral service, and interment (not including the plot) is from \$3,000 to \$4,000. The comparison, it is argued, is easy to see. Cremation saves the family money.

Cremation Is Ecologically More Desirable. For one thing, cremation saves valuable land in many instances. Cremation in these situations is greatly needed. Phipps's point is that, as land becomes more scarce, cremation is more widely endorsed. Those choosing cremation realize that millions of acres of

choice land are already given over to cemeteries, and they are convinced that better use should be made of our limited soil.

Cremation Is Therapeutic for the Mourners. Phipps explains, “Finding no value in slow decomposition, some see no point in having morticians temporarily arrest this inevitable process by replacing the blood with embalming fluid. Nor do they find comfort in being deceived by cosmetics into thinking that the body is ‘just sleeping.’ On the contrary, a clean incineration that quickly reduces the body of the deceased to its component elements can be therapeutic for mourners by expressing the final severance of the physical bond.”¹⁰

Response to Nonbiblical Arguments

Ethics and Economy. The economical argument is appealing on a certain level since one can hardly argue to the contrary – cremation is less expensive than burial. Yet, what is least expensive is not always right. Doing evil is often cheaper than doing good. Sometimes a price has to be paid for doing what is right. If one has the means for burial, then one ought to do it.

Ethics and Ecology. The argument concerning land does have some legitimacy in certain circumstances. Land in some areas is scarce; but in general this is not the case. There is plenty of land in many countries and cities that can be accessed for the purpose of burial. Over 1,000 people can be buried in just one acre of land. Bodies can also be layered in the same grave or reburied similar to what is done in other countries.¹¹ Another option includes using or reusing above-ground crypts. This is often done in areas that have a high water table, which makes burial impossible.

Therapy and Morality. The therapeutic value argument cuts both ways. Some have argued that immediate cremation could lead to guilt and emotional problems. Alan Wolfelt observes that “seeing the body challenges the natural wish to avoid the reality of death. While [*sic*], at the same time, encouraging healthy acceptance of the death.”¹² Deciding what is best for the grieving process is quite difficult. As burial advocate John Davis says, “Much of the therapeutic value of any funerary ritual depends on cultural conditioning, prior understanding of the death experience, the circumstance of death itself, the relationship to the deceased, and the emotional make-up of the survivors.”¹³

THE CASE FOR BURIAL

Admittedly there is no direct command regarding burial or prohibition of cremation.¹⁴ While the act of cremation, as such, is not a sin or an intrinsic evil like murder, burial is the general pattern set down in Scripture.¹⁵ Its continued practice is a reasonable inference drawn from biblical truths. Thus we believe the evidence supports the conclusion that Christians, if at all possible, should practice burial. It is more symbolically appropriate to do so. There may be circumstances, however, that make burial unwise, against the law, or even impossible; but rare exceptions should not be used to eliminate the general practice of burial.

There are at least six reasons for holding that Christians should practice burial. Each will be briefly stated. Taken together they offer good evidence for preserving the Christian practice of burial.

Burial Follows the Example of Christ. Jesus’ interment is described in great detail and was clearly a burial (Matt. 27:57–61; John 19:38–42). The fact that Jesus was resurrected three days later (according to Jewish reckoning), in the same body in which He died, gives assurance to the believer (John 20:1–30; Phil. 3:20–21). Burial not only shows respect for the body but it also symbolically anticipates its future – in the resurrection. Cremation, on the contrary, is more of a picture that death is the end of everything. Just as Christian baptism is symbolized by death and resurrection (Rom. 6:1ff.), so proper Christian burial can be part of the same picture.

Jesus’ Burial Was According to the Gospel. Paul used Jesus’ burial as part of the Gospel message in 1 Corinthians 15. Burial is an essential part of the “gospel” since Paul defined the “gospel” as involving death, burial, and resurrection appearances. Burial is the seal of death and resurrection is proof that death

is not final (cf. Rom. 4:25; 2 Tim. 1:10). Hence, burial is a significant symbol since it portrays a crucial part of the gospel.

Burial Preserves the Christian Belief in the Sanctity of the Body. Christians believe God created man in His image (Gen. 1:26–27; 2:7).¹⁶ Even though God has no body (John 4:24), nevertheless in man this image of God is related to the body for at least three reasons. In Genesis 1:27 God included male and female bodies as associated with the image of God in man. According to Genesis 9:6, it is wrong to kill the body because it is linked to the image of God: “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man.” It would make no sense to have such a curse if the image of God applied only to the soul, which man cannot kill (Matt. 10:28). Jesus Christ in a body is the exact representation of God’s nature. The Son “is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being” (Heb 1:3). If the image of God could be perfectly represented in man apart from the body, then the body would not be essential to resurrection. Finally, the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19–20). The body is important in Christian teaching, dead or alive, because it was uniquely designed to give expression to the image of God in man.

Burial Symbolizes the Hope of Resurrection. As Paul taught, the very body that is sown perishable is raised an imperishable body (1 Cor. 15:42). This is best symbolized by burial, for it anticipates the final preservation of the body in the resurrection. The image presented of the dead being asleep (1 Thes. 4:13–18) is also preserved through burial. The Christian has escaped the judgment by fire presented in the Bible (Rev. 20:14). Cremation is the wrong picture to remind believers of *salvation in the body* by resurrection (cf. Rom. 8:11). On the other hand, cremation better symbolizes pantheism, which in its Eastern forms is usually associated with a *salvation from the body* by escaping the cycle of reincarnation.¹⁷

Early Christian Practice Supports Burial. Believers in the New Testament such as Ananias, Sapphira, and Stephen, were not cremated (Acts 5:6, 10; 8:1–2). To be sure, burial was a Jewish practice, and they were Jews, but they did not hesitate to reject Jewish practices that were contrary to their beliefs, such as circumcision (e.g., Gal. 2–3) and keeping the Jewish law (2 Cor. 3; Heb. 7–8). No such rejection of burial, however, is stated in the New Testament. When possible, early Christians were buried and cremation was looked on with great disdain because fire was often used to kill their martyrs.

Burial Allows Proper Memory of the Dead. Burial or entombment, as Christians practice it, allows for an important part of the Christian belief — respect for and memory of the dead in the body in which we knew them. Regardless of whether the body is present or absent in a service, the knowledge of their burial puts their life in proper perspective as God made it and will one day restore it. In this way, Christian truth can be properly proclaimed. It is particularly important to promote such doctrines as creation and redemption at such a crucial time as ours in which these defining doctrines of Christianity are being compromised.

How Important Is Burial versus Cremation? The answer to the question of the importance of this debate depends on what importance one places on a proper practice of what one believes, especially appropriate symbols. In fact, only if one rejects important Christian truths does cremation make sense. This is precisely the position of liberal Christians, and it is a reason why cremation finds wider acceptance in their congregations. Yet Christianity is not left intact after such doctrines as the bodily resurrection are discarded or ignored (Rom. 10:9; 1 Cor. 15:16, 17). To reject symbolism is to say the thing it symbolizes is not important. An attack on the symbol of burial and the anticipated resurrection of the body is an attack on important Christian doctrines. It is analogous to burning a U.S. flag, which is a symbol of our country. To burn the flag is to attack the country it symbolizes. Likewise, to burn the body is to attack the person — and the God who created man in His image (Gen. 1:27; 2:7). Furthermore, it denies the resurrection in a symbolic way by pronouncing death final.

Of course, there are circumstances where burial is not possible. In those cases, we must do the next best thing we can do to preserve the original intent. In the Old Testament when a Jew could not keep the Feast of Passover on the first month because he was contaminated, he was commanded to keep it on the second month (Num. 9:6–13). He was not to neglect doing it altogether. Likewise, even when cremation is called

for because of bacterial or viral contamination, it should be done with regret and respect. For example, the ashes should be preserved, not cast to the wind or sea.

A FINAL THOUGHT

From the Christian perspective, burial is the pattern used in Scripture and has been historically followed by the church. Of course, it should be pointed out that cremation is no hindrance to the act, or event, of the resurrection. God, in His omnipotence, is certainly able, if He so chooses, to collect every atom and molecule, no matter where it is found in the universe, and reconstruct our same bodies in a glorified state. It does not follow from this, however, that cremation is an acceptable general practice. Whereas burial is an important practice and symbol in Scripture, cremation is a poor symbol of scriptural truth. While cremation is not an intrinsic evil, it nonetheless symbolically vitiates some important biblical truths. In this sense, cremation is a hindrance to the promotion of resurrection truth and should not be a regular practice of Christians. We thus conclude that all Christians should practice Christian burial unless extraordinary circumstances do not permit it.

NOTES

- 1 Joanne Leonard, "Ashes to Ashes," *The Saturday Evening Post* March–April 1994, 63-64.
- 2 William E. Phipps, "The Consuming Fire for Corpses," *The Christian Century*, March 1981, 221.
- 3 William E. Phipps, *Cremation Concerns* (Springfield, IL: Charles C Thomas, 1989), 55.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid., 53.
- 6 Ibid., 59.
- 7 Robert H. Stein, *The New American Commentary: Luke*, vol. 24 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 301.
- 8 See Norman L. Geisler, *The Battle for the Resurrection* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1989).
- 9 See Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, rev. & exp. ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986).
- 10 Phipps, "The Consuming Fire for Corpses," 221.
- 11 John Davis, *What about Cremation? A Christian Perspective* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1989), 77.
- 12 Alan Wolfelt, *Death and Grief: A Guide for Clergy* (Muncie, IN: Accelerated Development, 1988), 123, as cited in Davis, 79.
- 13 Davis, 79-80.
- 14 Despite efforts to show the contrary by James W. Fraser (*Cremation: Is It Christian?* [Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1985]), a more proper investigation of texts related to cremation shows this to be the case. See John J. Davis, *What about Cremation?* ch. 4.
- 15 This is the position articulated by Davis, *What about Cremation?* 89-90.
- 16 See Norman L. Geisler, *Knowing the Truth about Creation* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Books, 1989), ch. 1.
- 17 See Norman L. Geisler and J. Yutaka Amano, *The Reincarnation Sensation* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1987).