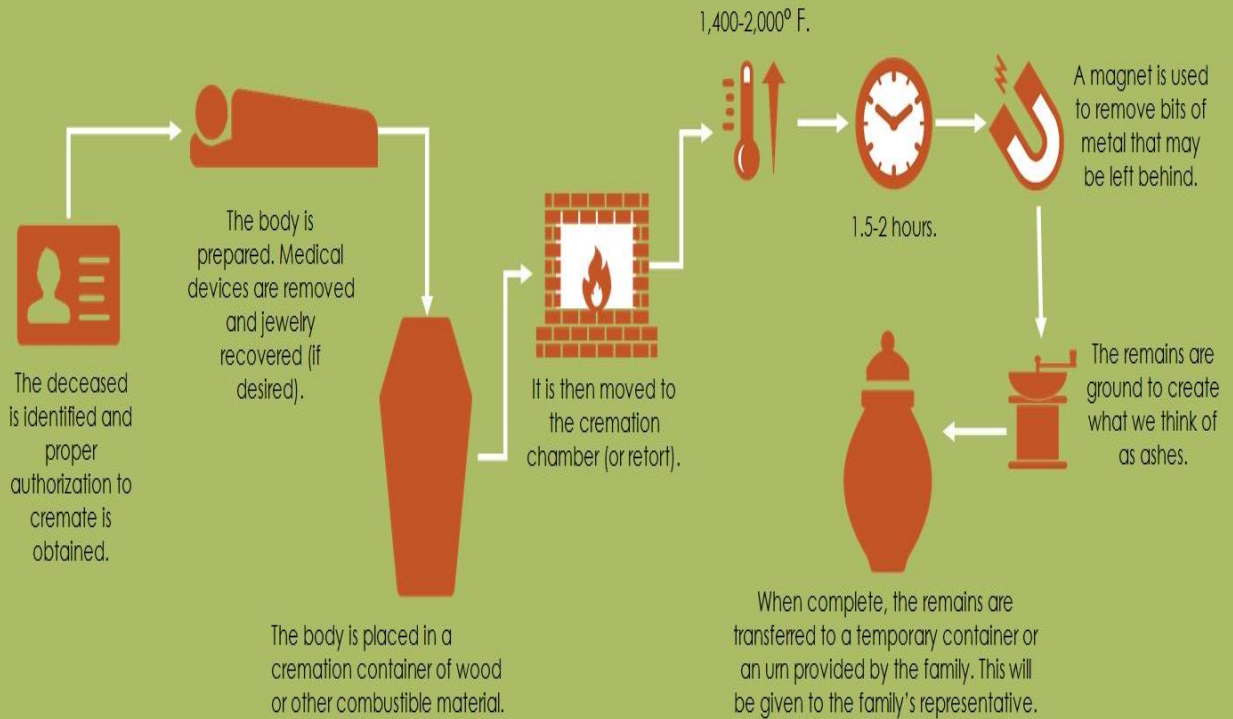


THE THEOLOGY OF CREMATION

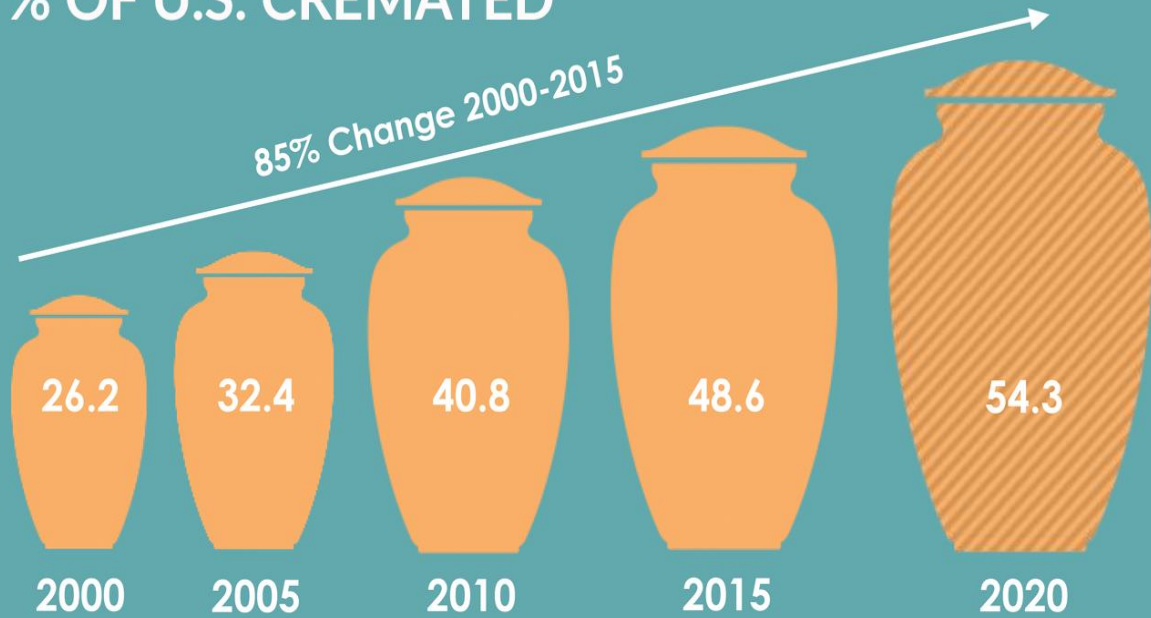
by **David L. Burris**



THE CREMATION PROCESS



% OF U.S. CREMATED



SOURCES: Funeral and Memorialization Information Council (FAMIC), Cremation Association of North America (CANA).

A New Way to Dispose of Corpses—With Chemistry!

Alkaline hydrolysis is a clean, green method for dissolving a body into its chemical building blocks; the runny remains just wash down the drain.



THE RESOMATOR STANDS monolithic in the corner of a room on the ground floor of a building at UCLA. The machine's mid-cycle, emitting a low hum like a lawnmower several yards away. It's a rectangular box as big as a van & its stainless steel panels neatly hide pipes, a panel of flashing lights & fuses, and cylindrical tank that holds the body.

All that's visible from the outside is a touchscreen and four lit-up buttons: three green, one red. Bodies enter through the same kind of circular steel door that's used on nuclear submarines.

Inside the high-pressure chamber: Potassium hydroxide's being mixed with water heated to 302 degrees Fahrenheit. A bio-chemical reaction is taking place, and the flesh is dissolving off the bones. In the course of about four hours, the strong alkaline base breaks down everything but the skeleton into the original components that built it: sugar, salts, peptides, and amino acids. DNA unzips into its nucleobases—cytosine, guanine, adenine, thymine. The body becomes a sterile watery liquid that looks like weak tea & smells like steamed clams. The liquid shoots through a pipe into a holding tank in the opposite corner of the room, where it will cool, reach an acceptable pH, and be released down the drain.

Alkaline hydrolysis was conceived in the mid-'90s to solve Albany Medical College's problem of research rabbit disposal—they were radioactive and therefore could not be burned or buried affordably—and in 2003 Minnesota became the first US state to allow its use on human remains. [Soon] the term 'cremation' will be thought of entirely as a water-based process.



The alkaline hydrolysis machine turns cadavers into liquid and pure white bone.

SPENCER LOWELL

On a small blue towel, below buckets of teeth & fillings (teeth are separated from bones—metal fillings aren't biodegradable & could break the cremulator in which the bones are ground into powder), is a collection of metal hip joints, valves, stents that propped open the chambers of hearts, pins, plates: things that remain on the tray after the flesh around them has disappeared. The process is gentle enough to render a hernia mesh as new as the day the surgeon implanted it, but strong enough to bleach the color out of glass eyes and fake fingernails.

The Resurrection Body

Excerpts: Eric Steinhart's "The Resurrection Body"

>Resurrection Replication:

"Our best science implies that all psychological properties and relations depend entirely on the structure of the brain and body. If that is right, then your earthly psychology continues without interruption in your resurrection replica. You should 'wake up' in your new body with all your memories, beliefs, desires, dispositions, and character and personality traits."

>Persistent Personages:

"You might object that your resurrection body isn't made of the same atomic parts as your earthly body. Since it isn't made of the same atoms, it can't be your body. The reply is that bodies change their atomic parts constantly over time. An old body is not likely to contain any atoms from its younger self. Since the gradual replacement of all your atoms does not disrupt your persistence, the instantaneous replacement of all your atoms shouldn't disrupt your persistence either."

Many people believe the very familiar term: “Ashes to Ashes - Dust to Dust” - is of biblical origin. Because of their assumption that it’s biblical, they further assume that there is absolutely nothing wrong with cremation, simply because the Bible clearly states: “Ashes to ashes”. Well, here is your very first reality check – have you ever searched or physically read the phrase: “Ashes to Ashes” in your Bible?

Your Answer: YES / NO If you selected “Yes” as your answer, you must please let me know in which Bible you read it, as this phrase does not appear in the 1611 King James Version and also not in the Bible I am using to quote in this book, which is the 1769 King James Version of the Holy Bible (known as the Authorized Version). Why is the correct answer “No”? Because the term “Ashes to Ashes” is simply not written anywhere in the Bible! It does not appear in the Bible, not even once! Why then, is this phrase so commonly accepted as a biblical phrase? Well, it comes from a book entitled: “Book of Common Prayer” & the phrase are listed in the “Funeral Service” section of the book. It is almost always used at funeral services, where the pastor or preacher stands at the grave, with the Bible in his hand and therefore, especially English folk, naturally assumes that this is a biblical phrase, which it is not. The literal phrase used in the Book of Common Prayer, (Burial Rite Section) is: “In sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ, we commend to Almighty God our brother (name); and we commit his body to the ground; earth to earth; ashes to ashes, dust to dust. The Lord bless him and keep him, the Lord make his face to shine upon him and be gracious unto him and give him peace. Amen.” The phrase however is based on Genesis 3:19 which read as follows: Gen 3:19 In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return. As you can see, there is nothing about “ashes to ashes”, but rather says: “unto dust shalt thou return”. This “dust”, however is a far cry from “ashes” as in the “ash” from a fire, ashes especially in the true sense of cremation.

Word Definitions The Hebrew word for “dust” is: “âphâr” and simply means “dust from clay, earth or mud”. Before we carry on, we must deal with two other verses as well. Gen 18:27 And Abraham answered and said, Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord, which am but dust and ashes: Here it would appear that Abraham is confirming that he is “ash”.

This very first observation, (however silly this may sound) is that Abraham is alive and well, whilst uttering these words; he is most definitely not “ashes” when speaking to God. He is “dust” however, because he was made of dust. This is confirmed in the following verse: Genesis 2:7 And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul. The logical question then is, what on earth could Abraham mean when he refers to himself as “ashes”? The answer is also rooted in the meaning of the Hebrew word. – The Hebrew word, is: “'êpher”, and apart from describing “ash”, it’s also used to describe something as: “worthlessness” (figuratively). There are many words, not only in the Bible, but also in our very own language which is the same word, but used in many different applications, both literally as well as figuratively. The clear answer then is, Abraham is simply referring to himself as (figuratively) worthless. This is not referring to ashes as in some left over remains as a result of burning.

Another verse which may be presented (in error) as defense for the term “ashes to ashes”, is as follows: Job 30:19 He hath cast me into the mire & I am become like dust and ashes. When we look at the word being used, we see that it’s the same word as Abraham used. This simply means that Job is so devastated, he simply feels “worthless”, which is the same as Abraham’s description of himself in the preceding passage (Gen 18:27). We must remember that the translators, some of which did very good work, had to decide which words to number with what definition, but we always have the context of the passage, chapter and particular book to help us comprehend the exact meaning of the word used, as seen from the previous passages. Now that we have a basic understanding of some of the words used and the context of the passage, we will continue with the questions and answers session in a moment, but just to recap...

Please answer this question again. Have you ever searched for or physically read the phrase: “Ashes to Ashes – Dust to Dust” in the Bible? Your Answer: YES / NO Well done! “No” is the right answer, as it does not appear in the Bible at all!

Cremation vs. Corruption

"The religious objection has been answered by the Bishop of Manchester, by Canon Liddon, and by the Earl of Shaftesbury. The bishop said: "No intelligent faith can suppose that any Christian doctrine is affected by the manner in which this mortal body of ours crumbles into dust and sees corruption." Canon Liddon said, in a sermon at St. Paul's Cathedral:—

"The resurrection of a body from its ashes is not a greater miracle than the resurrection of an unburnt body; each must be purely miraculous." Lord Shaftesbury said to me that any doubt as to the resurrection of a body because it had been burnt was an "audacious limitation of the Almighty"; and he asked, "What, then, has become of the blessed martyrs who were burned at the stake in ancient and modern persecution?" - "The Cremation of the Dead"

THE HISTORICAL DEBATE

THE HISTORIC JUDEO–CHRISTIAN VIEW ON CREMATION

Three [Old Testament] instances exist where it appears that cremation may have been done in an acceptable way. In the first (1 Sam. 31), the bodies of Saul & his sons, after being decapitated and placed on the wall of the city (Beth–Shan), are retrieved from the Philistines by the men from Jabesh Gilead. The men came by night, took the bodies, burned them, and buried their bones (1 Sam. 31:11–13). Although some scholars have attempted to show that *śārap* (burn) should be understood as an act to “anoint with resinous spices” this is not convincing for the following reasons. First, the word *śārap* is always used for a literal burning. R. Laird Harris, cites the evidence in the Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament, “The verb is much used and always is used for a literal burning. It’s used, sparsely, for burning sacrifices (Lev 4:12), the destruction of cities (Josh 6:24), the burning of children in human sacrifices (Jer 7:24) and in a very few cases of execution (Lev 20:14; 21:9, Gen 38:24). **The word is used for destructive burning not usually or ordinary kindling of fire or for metaphorical matters like burning with anger.**” Second, it seems to violate the context of the passage. If they did not burn the bodies one is left wondering how they got the bones to take back and bury. If one must accept the translation “anointed with spices” for *śārap*, then they must of used some other means to obtain the bones such as stripping the flesh, boiling the bodies, or waiting until decomposition. None of these methods seem probable given the Israelite respect for the body. Third, such an unusual usage of the word violates the clear conditions that probably existed. As H. W. Hertzberg notes, Their ‘burning’—this is the usual translation—of the bodies is surprising in view of the generally hostile Old Testament attitude to cremation. On the other hand, it would be understandable if that means were adopted here. The bodies will have been considerably damaged by the process of decomposition, which sets in quickly during the heat of the day, and by the ravages of carrion birds; and it was important to remedy the disfigurement of the bodies and rescue the bones for burial. In that case, the burning would have had to have been arranged so the bones were left intact. The men also might have feared that the bodies would fall back into the hands of the Philistines. Not wanting the bodies to be further disgraced they cremated them.

It is clear that if this were indeed cremation it was **not normative**. Further, there is no prescription in the text that this is to be normative even for bodies that are mutilated. The text simply describes the actions of the men of Jabesh Gilead. It's interesting to note that the Chronicler didn't record that the bodies were burned (1 Chron. 10:12); Josephus (6 14.8) records that the bodies were buried. Further, the Scriptures record that David took the bones of Saul and his son (Jonathan) & buried them in the grave of Kish, Saul's father, in the country of Benjamin in Zela (2 Sam. 21:11–14). It is suggested by some that this shows the repugnance the Jews had toward cremation. The second instance of God's possible approval of cremation is in the book of Amos. Moabites and Edomites are the enemies of Israel and God judges them. Chapter two, verse one says, "Thus says the Lord: 'For three transgressions of Moab, and for four, I will not turn away its [Moab's] punishment, Because, he **burned** the bones of the king of Edom **to lime**" (NKJV). No circumstance or any reason is given for the death of the Edomite king or his subsequent cremation. First, it is important to point out the fact that God's anger and judgment is directed at the Moabites, who cremated the king of Edom, and not the Hebrews. Second, this was clearly **an act that reduced the bones to lime, presumably an ash or powder**. These two things, along with others, caused God's judgment upon Moab. Regardless, this was considered a transgression and was viewed unfavorably. Some have used this verse as a clear indication cremation should be considered a sin for believers under any circumstances. While it is clear that the act of the "burning of bones" is what God is judging, the Moabites are not being held to the Mosaic Law, which mentions nothing about cremation. But they are judged because of their **"burning of bones" which is an act desecrating the body** and is an offensive act towards the Israelites who value the body both culturally and theologically. In all likelihood such a crime involved capturing and killing the Edomite king and then desecrating a royal tomb in Edom by taking the bones & burning them. The reason we can't say this passage "proves" cremation is an intrinsic evil (sin) for all believers is because, as we've noted, there are other examples of cremation done by the Israelites under **exceptional circumstances (war/plagues) which aren't condemned or judged by God**. At best, this passage can be used to show that **cremation is wrong when done in conjunction with other crimes or intentionally done to offend others**.

Finally, Amos 6:9–10 records a reference to cremation. “If ten men are left in one house, they too will die. And if a relative who is to burn the bodies comes to carry them out of the house and asks anyone still hiding there, ‘Is anyone with you?’ and he says, ‘No,’ then he will say, ‘Hush! We must not mention the name of the LORD’” (NIV). While there are some interpreters that understand this instance to be referring to the burning of spices or as an act of punishment to make a funeral impossible the weight of evidence seems to agree this reference to cremation concerns the result of military slaughter or plague. The presence of ten dead men in the house is unusual. **Cremation could be used to avoid the spread of plague.** None of these passages may be used to defend cremation as a common practice.

Cremation in the Early Church

Historian Philip Schaff describes the general belief concerning the body and the attitude toward cremation the early church felt, “The primitive Christians always showed a tender care for the dead; under a vivid impression of the unbroken communion of saints & future resurrection of the body in glory. For Christianity redeems the body as well as the soul, and consecrates it a temple of the Holy Spirit. Hence the Greek and Roman custom of burning the corpse (crematio) was repugnant to Christian feeling and the sacredness of the body. Tertullian even declared it a symbol of the fire of hell, and Cyprian regarded it as equivalent to apostasy.” Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons, likely writing between 182–188 AD says, “But although [the body] is dissolved at the appointed time, because of the primeval disobedience, it is placed, as it were, in the crucible of the earth, to be recast again; not then as this corruptible [body], but pure, and no longer subject to decay: so that to each body its own soul shall be restored.” Tertullian ridiculed the pagan practice of cremation: “But (let the crowd deride): I on my side must decide it more, especially when it burns up its dead with harshest inhumanity, only to pamper them immediately afterwards with gluttonous satiety, using the selfsame fires to honor them & to insult them. What a piety is that which mocks its victims with cruelty? Is it sacrifice or insult (which the crowd offers), when it burns its offerings to those it has already burnt?” This statement isn’t surprising because sometimes dead Christians were burned during persecution by the heathen to ridicule their hope in the resurrection.

Tertullian, in his Treatise on the Soul, refutes a position that says the soul (or a part of it) remains in the body after death. He rejects this view, but maintains the views aversion to cremation because of the sanctity of the human body: And on this account they won't have the body consumed at its funeral by fire, because they would spare the small residue of the soul. There is, yet, another way of accounting for this pious treatment, not as if it meant to favor the relics of the soul, but as if it would avert a cruel custom in the interest even of the body; since being human, it's itself undeserving of an end which's also inflicted upon murderers. Minucius Felix, a contemporary of Tertullian writing around 190 AD explicitly mentions cremation and the preferred practice of burial: Everybody, whether it is dried up into dust, or is dissolved into moisture, or is compressed into ashes, or is attenuated into smoke, is withdrawn from us, but it is reserved for God in the custody of the elements. Nor, as you believe, do we fear any loss from sepulture [by burning], but we adopt the ancient and better custom of burying in the earth.

Christian's rejected many Roman practices and beliefs, including cremation. The intense persecutions that many Christians faced involved the burning of their bodies as a direct mocking of the Christian belief in the resurrection. This is because Romans held the belief that burning human remains would make it impossible to be resurrected in the future. **Christians consistently rejected this view, holding to God's omnipotence, they believed God could raise any body regardless of its condition.**

Hence, cremation would naturally play no role in the early Christian practices. Eventually the influence of the Christians became widespread, even to the point cremation was unheard of under the reign of Constantine (400 AD) & eventually outlawed, by Charlemagne (789 AD). In biblical times cremation was very rare and only done when circumstances called for it, such as in the case of military campaigns or plagues. Burning a body was generally looked upon as judgment from God and reserved for criminals. The New Testament records no instances of cremation and the early church considered it to offensive to the doctrines of the resurrection of the body and immortality of the soul.

POINT & COUNTER-POINT

Cremation: why and why not

The case against cremation

After bouncing this idea off a few friends and theological types I soon found out that some Christians are strongly opposed to cremation. It's true there is no explicit command against cremation in the Bible, but there are still some texts that may apply in a less direct way.

- A brief look through Scripture will show that, at the very least, burial was the normal thing to do among God's people. For example, the Bible specifically mentions that Abraham, Isaac, Samuel and David were buried ([Gen. 24:9](#), [35:29](#), [1 Samuel 25:1](#), & [1 Kings 2:10](#) respectively). Additionally, when Moses died God selected a burial spot for him ([Deut. 34:6](#)).
- Also, when the Bible talks about fire, and specifically fire burning bodies, it is almost always portrayed in a bad light. In [Gen. 38:24](#) Judah threatens to burn his daughter-in-law to death as a punishment for adultery. This same punishment is prescribed in [Leviticus 20:14](#) for any man who marries a woman, and her mother. In Numbers 16 fire from God consumes 250 rebellious Israelites. The Lord curses Moab in [Amos 2:1](#) "because he burned, as if to lime, the bones of Edom's king." The New Testament also links fire with punishment. In Revelations 20:15, for example, those whose names were not written in the Book of Life were thrown into a lake of fire.

- Jesus was buried. Combine this with God's treatment of Moses and we have God burying someone, and God being buried.
- There is a lot of symbolism associated with burial that finds its origins in the Bible. For example [Col 2:12](#) talks about how we have been *buried* with Christ through baptism. There are no similar passages for cremation.

The case in favor

While these texts do at first seem to make a compelling case for burial, there is more still that can be said.

- Burial may have been the custom throughout Israel, but there are many Israelite customs we do not follow. We do not, for example, wash our feet after entering someone's house. Just because something is done a certain way in the Bible, does not mean that God commands us to do it that way today.
- While the Bible does talk about burning as punishment, it often refers to it as a way of killing the guilty, rather than as a means of disposing of their bodies. So this really isn't cremation. If you do want to make the link then it is worth taking a second look at Numbers 16. It is here that the earth swallows up Korah and his household, and all his men. "They went down alive into the grave" (vs. 33). So just as "cremation" can be a punishment, so too can "burial."
- [1 Sam. 31:12](#) recounts one of the very few examples in which cremation is specifically brought up in the Bible, and it is portrayed in a neutral, if not positive light. Saul's body is retrieved from the Philistines and burned by the "valiant men" of Jabesh Gilead.

- While fire is often spoken of as a means of punishment, John the Baptist promised that Jesus would baptize people with, "the Holy Spirit and fire" ([Luke 3:16](#)). Fire is also mentioned positively as a means of refinement ([Rev. 3:18](#)). So it seems clear then, that this is symbolic language, and that fire is not, in itself, bad.

Christian stewardship can also be a consideration here since cremation usually costs substantially less than burial– the main saving is in the cheaper casket and the fact there is no plot to buy.

Cost is not the most compelling reason, of course. The best case for cremation is really the case for Christian liberty: if there is not any scriptural directive on this issue, then each Christian is free to follow the dictates of his, or her own conscience.

BY: [JON DYKSTRA](#)

Cremation - Dr. Nelson D. Kloosterman

Dr. Kloosterman, Professor of Ethics and New Testament at Mid-America Reformed Seminary.

Among the instructions the LORD gave to Old Testament Israel, we find these words about grieving customs: 'You are the children of the LORD your God; you shall not cut yourselves nor shave the front of your head for the dead. For you are a holy people to the LORD your God, and the LORD has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples who are on the face of the earth' (Deut. 14:1-2).

From these verses we learn that grieving for the dead is covenant business. Israel's funeral customs were to show Whose she was by sovereign election. The LORD had fixed a limit to her mourning, a limit which implied that one day, life would overcome death in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

As part of a covenantal style of life, believing funerals then — and now — constitute(d) a testimony to the watching world about the Source and Sustainer of life, the LORD God of heaven and earth. How people treat the bodies of the dead is, therefore, a religious and an ethical question.

Evaluating the growing popularity of cremation instead of burial among countries in the Western world should be approached within this framework.

Arguments for cremation

Five kinds of arguments are used to defend the permissibility of cremation; these include economic, hygienic, ecological, aesthetic and theological arguments.

The **economic argument** says that cremation is preferable because it is less expensive than burial. Costs connected with purchasing a cemetery lot, a coffin and burial vault, a grave stone or marker, and costs of maintaining the grave do not apply to cremation. Response: while it is true cremation is less expensive than burial as long as the ashes are scattered or cared for privately, and not preserved in a building or vault, even so, this argument by itself is insufficient to justify choosing cremation. The economic argument will convince only those who have already chosen cremation. The **hygienic** & ecological arguments claim that cremation is preferable as less threatening or dangerous to human health and to the environment.

In this context, some argue that burial takes too much valuable space. Response: modern regulations and procedures connected with burial avoid any threats to public health. The ecological-spatial argument is certainly overused in the West; even in the Netherlands, which is one of the most densely populated countries in the world, not one municipality has to resort to cremation because of a shortage of burial lots.

The **aesthetic argument** insists that cremation is preferable to the unaesthetic process of decay and decomposition associated with burial. Response: decay and decomposition are not pretty, but neither are the associations connected with burning flesh. And remember: Few of us will ever need to look at a decomposed corpse in a coffin or at a burning corpse in an oven. So, the argument really fails to justify either burial or cremation.

The **theological argument** suggests that cremation is permissible in view of the new, resurrected bodies we will receive. One Reformed theologian from South Africa, the late J. Heyns, wrote: 'The new body that is going to be raised will certainly display continuity with the natural body that has died, and will of course also be a glorified body; but this will in no way be affected by what happened to the natural body before and even during burial. Therefore, also for this reason, cremation is not to be rejected in principle' (Theologiese etiek 2/1:329). Response: Let the reader be warned: what Heyns has written is true, as far as it goes. He did not say that cremation is in principle acceptable, but only that one should not reject cremation on the basis of its effect on the natural body. Therefore, Heyns' observation is not really an argument for cremation.

The Bible favors burial

Without doubt, biblical examples indicate that burial is the preferred method of caring for a corpse. Negatively, the Bible talks about cremating corpses most often in contexts of divine judgment against wickedness (Sodom and Gomorrah; Achan and his family).

We find many positive examples of burial throughout Scripture. Abraham went to a great deal of trouble to buy a cave for burying his beloved wife Sarah (Gen. 23:3-20). Later Isaac and Ishmael buried their father Abraham alongside Sarah in what was to become the family grave for Old Testament patriarchs and matriarchs. We are told that the LORD Himself buried Moses (Deut. 34:6). Israel's and Judah's kings were buried alongside their ancestors.

In the New Testament we read of the burial of John the Baptist, of Lazarus and the lad from Nain, of Stephen and of the Lord Jesus. The burial of Jesus was proclaimed by the Old Testament prophets (Isa. 53:9), was prepared for by Mary's anointing (Matt. 26:12; Mk. 14:18), and was necessary for our redemption.

The relationship between burial and resurrection is emphasized by the apostle Paul as the pattern for the Christian life. To the congregation in Rome the apostle wrote, 'Therefore we were buried with Him [Christ Jesus] through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life' (Rom. 6:4). And to the church in Colossae, the Spirit of Christ said: 'In Him [Christ Jesus] you were . . . buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead' (Col. 2:11-12). This same symbolism is applied in 1 Corinthians 15 to our own physical resurrection.

In summary, we may draw two conclusions from the biblical evidence. First, the Bible gives no explicit commandment to bury the dead. Second, the Bible does give us the consistent example of believers in both Old and New Testaments as a convincing testimony about the surpassing value of burial.

Burial as a witness to Christ

Concerning the second conclusion, we must readily admit the customs of the Bible are not necessarily the infallible standard for our customs. Therefore, the examples found in the Bible are not by themselves sufficient or decisive for our conduct. But these examples are not in the Bible 'by themselves'! They are presented within the context of divine activity, the work of Jesus Christ in His humiliation and exaltation. These obedient acts of our Lord Jesus Christ included His burial, something we confess every Lord's Day. Followers of Christ travel the route of death, burial, resurrection & ascension to glory. First Corinthians 15 speaks of a body transition from mortality to immortality, from perishability to imperishability. In that process our burial is a very important stage. Our bodies are entrusted to the earth, whence they came, and as a consequence of God's judgment upon our sin, they return to the dust from which they were made.

This message of mortality, dissolution and resurrection, a message that obtains expression in burial, is not 'spoken' in cremation. 'Sowing' the body in the earth, knowing that it will return to dust, sends a different message than pulverizing a body to ashes and scattering them in the wind.

The choice becomes one of bearing witness, in our death, to the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Regardless of the fact that after awhile the net result is the same (dust and ashes aren't that much different in the end), burial is a clearer, more consistent expression than cremation of the pathway pioneered by our Savior and followed, in life and in death, by His disciples.

Moreover, today the practice of cremation occurs within a religious context. As a symptom of our secularizing culture, cremation cannot be understood apart from the worldview of God-denying, man-worshiping secularism. Isolating cremation from its accompanying worldview often happens when people defend cremation as the cheapest, healthiest, quickest and nicest way to dispose of corpses.

Burial is preferable unless . . .

If we maintain that the Bible gives us no explicit commandment to bury, we must also say that the Bible contains no explicit prohibition against cremation.

Certain situations may occur where cremation is unavoidable. Think of epidemics where public health requires the disposal of diseased corpses in order to prevent the spread of infection. Or think of wartime, where a large number of casualties makes usual burial procedures impossible.

Moreover, in countries where the Christian faith has had little or no influence, burial is either impossible or extremely difficult. In Japan, for example, beside space limitations, and the exorbitant costs connected with burial make cremation more necessary. Even in countries where Christianity has lost its influential position, burial can become an exception presenting difficulties to believers. The possibility of losing the privilege of burying our dead requires us to preserve that freedom as long as possible.

Is Cremation Christian?

Article ID: DC765 | By: Norman L. Geisler and Douglas E. Potter

Is Cremation Christian- An Introduction

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. 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.

Is Cremation Christian- ALLEGED BIBLE 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.

Is Cremation Christian- 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 doesn't 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 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 (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 Corinthians 15:44). "Spiritual," however, was used here by Paul to mean immortal, not immaterial. 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's 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.

Is Cremation Christian- 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

Is Cremation Christian- 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 & 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. 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. (like New Orleans)

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.” 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

Is Cremation Christian- 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.

Norman L. Geisler, PhD. was the author or co-author of more than 100 books and hundreds of articles.



Is cremation okay for Christians?

Yes, it is okay for Christians to be cremated. There is nothing in the Bible that speaks against it. Normally, people from Old & New Testaments were buried since cremation wasn't the custom. Plus, cremation can be difficult since it requires a large amount of heat and fire, so it is much easier to bury a person. Still, there are biblical occurrences of people being burned.

- [Joshua 7:25](#), “And Joshua said, ‘Why have you troubled us? The LORD will trouble you this day.’ And all Israel stoned them with stones, and they burned them with fire after they had stoned them with stones.”

- **1 Sam. 31:12**, “all the valiant men rose and walked all night, and took the body of Saul and the bodies of his sons from the wall of Beth-shan, and they came to Jabesh, and burned them there.”
- **2 Kings 23:20**, “And all the priests of the high places who were there he slaughtered on the altars and burned human bones on them; then he returned to Jerusalem.”

Ultimately, there’s no difference between bodily cremation & burying. When the body is buried, given enough time, it will come to disintegrate. So, cremation and burying ultimately lead to the same physical condition of complete corporeal disintegration.

In the **resurrection**, our infinitely powerful God who knows all things will be able to produce our resurrected bodies. There is nothing to prevent God from accomplishing His promises to raise us.

To Bury or to Burn?

Cremation in Christian Perspective

DAVID JONES

So how do we develop a biblical ethic of cremation? I'd suggest Christians begin to address this issue by considering three questions foundational to any ethical methodology.

1. What Moral Norm(s) Apply in This Situation?

There are three passing references to cremation in the Bible worth considering ([1 Sam. 31:11-12](#); [Amos 2:1-3; 6:8-11](#)), but as I've explored elsewhere, these references are largely incidental and give no explicit moral guidance. An appeal to the moral law as embodied in the Decalogue may be helpful, however, because the eighth commandment addresses material stewardship. The embodied moral norm is stated negatively as "Do not steal" ([Exod. 20:15](#)). However, it could be stated positively as "Respect material goods" or "Properly steward material possessions." And stewardship is not synonymous with frugality. To steward means to properly care for something & thus the cheapest and easiest option—usually cremation— isn't necessarily the moral one.

As mentioned earlier, the Judeo-Christian tradition has historically understood the biblical call to stewardship of material possessions to teach that burial is the best way to handle (or steward) the body of a decedent — regardless of a cost-benefit analysis.

As the apostle John wrote, “The custom of the Jews is to bury” ([John 19:40](#)). By way of example, individuals in Scripture who were buried—not cremated—include: Rachel ([Gen. 35:19-20](#)), Joseph ([Genesis 50:25](#); [Exodus 13:19](#); [Josh. 24:32](#)), Aaron ([Deut. 10:6](#)), Moses ([Deut. 34:5-8](#)), Joshua ([Josh. 24:30](#)), Samuel ([1 Sam. 25:1](#)), David ([1 Kgs. 2:10](#)), John the Baptist ([Matt. 14:12](#)), Lazarus ([John 11:17-18](#)), Stephen ([Acts 8:2](#)), and, of course, Christ ([John 19:38-42](#)).

2. Which Method Best Demonstrates Love of God and Love of Neighbor?

Scripture teaches us that love of God and love of others (even deceased others) is a mark of Christlike character (cf. [John 11:1-44](#)). So which method of interment best demonstrates love of God and of neighbor? Assuming a holistic view of human beings, the body of the decedent itself should be respected & shown neighbor-love by those choosing the interment procedure—including the person making plans for interring his or her own body. Among doctrines that shape & inform such neighbor-love toward a corpse — including one’s own — are the dignity of the human body and the future bodily resurrection.

The dignity of the human body is supported by such biblical teachings as God’s “very good” ([Genesis 1:31](#)) creation, humanity made in the image of God ([Gen. 1:26-27](#)), the incarnation of Christ ([Heb. 2:14](#)), and the redemption of the human body ([Romans 8:23](#)).

Likewise, the future bodily resurrection is taught in passages such as [1 Corinthians 15:35-49](#) and [Philippians 3:20-21](#). Note, too, that in Scripture buried corpses are referred to as persons—often by name—not as things or former persons ([Mark 15:45-46](#); [John 11:43](#)). Moreover, the most prevalent word used in the New Testament to describe death of a believer is “sleep,” a term employed by both Jesus (cf. [Matt. 9:24](#); [Mark 5:39](#); [Luke 8:52](#); [John 11:11](#)) and Paul (1 Cor. 11:30; 15:6, 18, 20, 51; [2 Cor. 5:6-8](#); [1 Thess. 4:13-16](#)).

In view of these passages, we understand the body is more than just a temporary shell inhabited for a season. The real “me” has both material and also immaterial components. Indeed, man is a holistic being with a body, soul, and spirit. Though at death the human body no longer houses a soul/spirit, the body nonetheless needs to be shown respect and dignity. Just as the soul/spirit is renewed at conversion ([2 Corinthians 5:17](#)), so the physical body will be renewed and reunited with the soul/spirit at the end of the age ([1st John 3:2](#); [Romans 8: 23](#)). Such reasoning begins to give moral direction to the ethics of cremation.

3. Which Method Would Bring the Most Glory to God?

The main options available to most are cremation and burial. For a variety of reasons, those facing this decision may lean more toward one option or the other—yet rarely is the glory of God cited as rationale. Rather, funerary choices are based usually on utilitarian factors such as expense, environmental concern, and ease of transportation, among other pragmatic rationales. Again, the cheapest or easiest option isn't always (or even usually) the path that brings the most glory to God.

From biblical times until the middle of the 19th century, the church was nearly united in the view that burial brings the most glory to God. Believers have reasoned that burial best reflects proper stewardship of the body and divine value in the material world, most visibly depicts the gospel message, most clearly communicates the hope of the future bodily resurrection, and most plainly expresses the promise of an eternal physical existence. Certainly, not all will agree with this position, but the early church built this view on biblical and theological moorings (and not on the Platonic dualism widespread in the biblical world). Indeed, given cremation was common in the Greco-Roman world, we know that this consistent preference does not reflect utilitarian ethics or cultural accommodation. Rather, burial reflects a distinctly Judeo-Christian worldview.

Despite the [early] church's historic preference for burial, not all deaths afford loved ones an opportunity to choose the method of interment. Factors such as the location and manner of death, nation-specific legal parameters, as well as the resources of the surviving family bear on funerary practices and decisions.

After all, within the Christian tradition funerals aren't simply ways of disposing of dead bodies, nor are they about remembering the departed or expressing grief. For believers, funerals ought to be Christ-centered events, testifying throughout to the message & hope of the gospel.

David W. Jones is associate professor of Christian ethics and director of the ThM Program at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina.

A Restoration Plea:



* Restorer Plea Same As Reformer Meiderlin on "Essentials"

