

What honors God the most? Bodily Burial or Cremation:

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“And let my body have
A quiet resting-place
Within a Christian grave;
And let it sleep in peace.”

~ *“O God, Thou Faithful God”* ~

Johann Heermann (1558-1647)

What honors God the most? Bodily Burial or Cremation:

We will examine the important worldview and theological issue whether bodily burial or cremation *coheres* more closely with the biblical teachings of the Christian faith. If there is a qualitative difference between the two options, we are obligated as Christian believers to plan appropriately in view of the inevitable future of physical death.

In fact, every aspect of our being as believers (which includes our bodies) are under the submission of the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Preliminary statements:

1. There is no question that God can and will resurrect the bodies of those cremated, incinerated by fire, lost at sea, eaten by predators, etc. The issue is, if given the option, does burial or cremation bring the most glory to God?

Preliminary statements:

2. While there is no direct command that one is not to cremate, that does not necessarily mean that one should cremate. The question before us, given the inevitable...we are going to die unless the pretribulational rapture comes first (1 Thess. 4:13-18), which glorifies God the most: bodily burial or cremation?

Preliminary statements:

3. While I am addressing this issue vertically: what will give God the most glory, we should also consider (horizontally) what position offers the most respect to the inherent dignity of a person's body: bodily burial or cremation. Moreover, bodily burial offers the greatest biblical testimony that a Christian believes in a bodily resurrection rather than cremation which offers a word picture of "finality" and "termination."

Preliminary statements:

4. I posit that bodily burial offers to God the most glory and the most respect to the inherent dignity of the deceased. While cremation may not be necessarily unbiblical, bodily burial should be preferred.

What will give God the most glory following our deaths: bodily burial or cremation?

- I. Assumptions.
- II. Arguments against Cremation.
- III. Concluding Observations.
- VI. How Should We Then Live?

I. Assumptions:

- **1st Assumption: The Bible is Reliable.**
- **2nd Assumption: Scripture is the final and ultimate authority.**
- **3rd Assumption: Jesus Christ is our ultimate example on how we are to live.**
- **4th Assumption: Circumstances should not dictate the rightness of moral choices.**
- **5th Assumption: Vanity is sinful.**

1st Argument: Inherent Value of humanity.

1. Every human life is inherently valuable because every person is the handiwork of God. Psalm 139:13-16:

“For You formed my inward part; You wove me in my mother’s womb. ¹⁴ I will give thanks to You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; Wonderful are Your works, And my soul knows it very well. ¹⁵ My frame was not hidden from You, When I was made in secret, And skillfully wrought in the depths of my earth; ¹⁶ Your eyes have seen my unformed substance; And in Your book were all written The days that were ordained for me, When as yet there was not one of them.”

2nd Argument: The Image of God:

2. Every person is made in the image of God, Genesis 1:26-28:

²⁶ Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth. ²⁷ God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. ²⁸ God blessed them; and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

2nd Argument: The image of God:

2. Every person is made in the image of God, Genesis 1:26-28:

What does it mean to be made in the image of God?

- A. Representation (1:26; “*in*” is translated as “*as.*”)**
- B. Personality (intellect, will, and emotion);**
- C. Dominion (stewardship; to rule over);**
- D. Interpersonal (emphasis on “*our likeness*”)**
- E. Holistic (includes all of the above).**

3rd Argument: Public testimony of a biblical expectation: bodily resurrection:

- 3. Public testimony to Jesus' promise of the burial resurrection of both the saved and unsaved (1 Cor. 15; 1 Thess. 4:13-18; Rev. 20; John 5:28-29).**
 - A. Just as Jesus was raised from the death (15:1-11), the resurrection of believers is both necessary and inevitable (1 Cor.15:12-28).**
 - B. While some people say the resurrection of the human body is impossible because when a person dies his body decomposes and no one can reassemble it, Paul shows, that the resurrection of believers is not simply a resuscitation of human corpses but a resurrected of glorified bodies (1 Cor. 15:29-49). Therefore, we have assurance over death (1 Cor. 15:50-58).**

1 Corinthians 15:35-49:

- C. From this passage, particularly, 1 Cor. 15:35-49, the argument against resurrection was the impossibility of reassembling the human corpse; the idea is burial in the text, not cremation. Moreover, verse. 49 states, “*And just as we have borne the image of the earthy, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly (Adam/Christ analogy).*” Here, human life is characterized earthly-Adam; heavenly-Christ.

While there is no question that God is able and will resurrect believers who have been cremated or incinerated whether by fire or by explosion (etc), the question is what will glorify God the most-if given the option.

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18:

D. 1 Thess. 4:13-18: The Pretribulational Rapture; cf. Rev. 3:10

¹³ But I do not want you be ignorant brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep [metaphor for dying], lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. ¹⁴ For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep [metaphor for dying] in Jesus. ¹⁵ For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ Then those who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord. ¹⁸ Therefore comfort one another with these words.

Revelation 20:11-15:

- E. The resurrection of the unsaved unto the Great White Throne Judgment (which is distinct from the Judgment Seat of Jesus Christ exclusively for believers in 1 Cor. 3:11-15; 2 Cor. 5:10): Revelation 20:11-15:

¹¹ Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them.

¹² And I saw the death, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works by the things which were written in the books. ¹³ The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades [all intermediate abodes] delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works. ¹⁴ Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. ¹⁵ And anyone not found written in the Book of Life were cast into the lake of fire [the rejection of the eternal gospel of Jesus Christ results in eternal condemnation].

John 5:28-29:

F. Jesus states:

“For a time is coming when all are in the graves will hear his voice and come out—those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned.”

~ John 5:28-29.

Summary of these resurrection passages:

*From reviewing these three central passages, 1 Corinthians 15; 1 Thess. 4:13-18, Revelation 20, and John 5:28-29, the early church believed that bodily burial was a **public testimony** to the promise of a bodily resurrection of the dead, believing this reunion of the soul and body will take place in the future. This is substantiated in history with over 4,000,000 bodies of Christians buried in the catacombs under Rome.*

4th Argument: Deuteronomy 21:22-23:

4. In the Mosaic Law Deuteronomy 21:22-23 affirms bodily burial even to a criminal:

“²² If a man has committed a sin deserving of death, and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, ²³ his body shall not remain overnight on the tree, but you shall surely **bury him** that day, so that you do not defile the land which the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance; for he who is hanged is accursed of God.”

*In ancient Israel “a hanging” was not one done by the neck. Rather, the “hanging” was actually an impaling of the corpse for public viewing after death by stoning. The result is that everyone would know that individual had brought guilt on the community. The exposure of the body was limited to one day. For that day, it reminded people of God’s judgment on the sinner.

5th Argument: Jesus Christ was bodily buried: Mark 23:50-56:

5. Even the Jewish leaders and Roman leaders respected the Jewish tradition of a bodily burial to the one whom they tortured and crucified: Jesus Christ.

⁵⁰ “Now behold, there was a man named Joseph, a council member, a good and just man. ⁵¹ He had not consented to their decision and deed. He was from Arimathea, a city of the Jews, who himself was also waiting for the kingdom of God. ⁵² This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. ⁵³ Then He took it down, wrapped it in linen, and laid it in a tomb that was hewn out of a rock, where no one had ever lain before. ⁵⁴ That day was the Preparation, and the Sabbath drew near. ⁵⁵ And the women who had come with Him from Galilee followed after, and they observed the tomb and how His body was laid. ⁵⁶ Then they returned and prepared spices and fragrant oils. And they rested on the Sabbath according to the commandment.”

6th Argument: Cremation is contrary to faith in the resurrection of the body.

6. Until the rise of humanism in the 19th century, Christians throughout history saw cremation as a mockery, an insult, and contrary to faith in the promise of a bodily resurrection.

Early church father Tertullian (ca. 160-ca.220) comments on Roman, pagan cremation are insightful in view of the Christian belief of a bodily resurrection:

“What pity is that which mocks its victims with cruelty.” (*On the Resurrection of the Flesh* 1).

**7th Argument: Cremation is associated with both Sin and Divine Judgment by God:
Joshua 7:1-15:**

7. Cremation is associated with the sin of Achan and severe divine punishment for that sin.

Achan, his household, and things were brought out to be stoned for his willful rebellion against God. They and all their things were stoned, then burned.

So, it's not good testimony to the Jewish people if one is cremated! It signifies sinfulness and divine judgment for that sin.

8th Argument: The Practice of Church History:

- Until the inroads of naturalism bodily burial in the 19th Century, cremation was not practiced in the Christian Church.
- In fact, early Christians considered cremation to be a pagan custom which was generally practiced by the Greek and Romans, who denied the bodily resurrection of the dead.
- Early Christians rejected cremation because it was violent and cruel against the dignity of human life; it was also a mockery of the belief in a bodily resurrection.

8th Argument: The Practice of Church History:

St. Augustine notes that “the caring for the burial of the dead is a love for the body (*cura mort.* 7.9) For the resurrection is about the body (c. *Faust* 11.3) which will take place in the beauty and delight of heaven (*civ. Dei* 22:30), for the beauty of the flesh can only be seen in relation to God (*retr.*1.26).”

~ *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, 107.

8th Argument: The Practice of Church History:

- Until the inroads of naturalism, who denied any aspect of supernaturalism, bodily burial in the 19th Century, cremation was not practiced in the Christian Church.
- Early Christians called every burial place a “*koimeterion*,” a word borrowed from the Greek that meant a dormitory where people slumbered. Thus, the word, “*koimeterion*” developed into the phrase, “*cemetery*” in English. Therefore, the word “*cemetery*” goes back to the early Christians and their belief that the dead are merely slumbering until resurrection.

8th Argument: The Practice of Church History:

In fact, *The Oxford Dictionary of Word Histories*: states:

“cemetery [late Middle English] *Cemetery* came via late Latin from the Greek *koimeterion* ‘dormitory’ from *koiman* ‘put to sleep’. The transference of sense to ‘burial ground’ is found in the work of Christian writers [pg. 89].”

Charlegmagne the Great made cremation a capital crime.

Sociological Testimony:

Alvin Schmidt, a Christian sociologist, who studied the impact of Christian faith upon societies offers an interesting assessment regarding American Indians:

“So consistent and influential did the Christian practice of burning their dead become over the centuries that today even American Indians have come to believe that inhumation [to bury a body] is the only proper way to dispose their dead, as has been shown by their insistence on burying recently repatriated human skeletons from museums, for instance. However, when the Europeans arrived on American soil in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, most American Indians did not bury their dead.

Schmidt continues:

“The Indians in the Northern Plains, in the Mackenzie subarctic region, and in many other locations did not inhumane their dead, but placed them on elevated scaffolds. In parts of the Yukon, California, and the Great Basin area, some tribes cremated the dead. The Choctaws skeletonized their deceased and then stored the bones in bone houses; some of the Pueblo buried their dead in refuse mounds. In still other parts of North America, Indians left their dead to be eaten by dogs and wolves. And the Teton Dakotas wrapped their dead in cloth and then placed them in forked trees.”

~ Alvin Schmidt, *Under the Influence: How Christianity Transformed Civilization* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 73.

Schmidt also offers the following statistics:

“Today, contrary to centuries of Christian opposition, more and more denominations, even some conservative ones, are permitting their members to cremate the deceased bodies of their loved ones. However, before 1930 in the United States, cremation was considered “bizarre.” In 1996 about 22 percent of the dead in the United States were cremated, and it is estimated that by 2010 the number will climb to 40 percent. With the growing practice of cremation, many no longer see it as bizarre, but anew kind of bizarreness is now often present, especially with regard to how many survivors dispose of the ashes. Some have shot the ashes into space. Sometimes they are cast on the ocean, as in the case of John F. Kennedy Jr. in 1999. Frequently they are sprinkled on flower gardens. One firm in California mixes the ashes with gun powder and packs them in fireworks; an Iowa firm will, upon request, put the ashes into shotgun shells.”

~ *Under the Influence*, 73.

9th Argument: What accounts for the recent increase in cremation practices?

1. Ignorance of Church teaching, practice, & history.

2. Among non-Christians, a denial of the supernatural, a denial of the bodily resurrection, a rejection of heavenly future, and a reunion of the body and soul; cremation presents a word picture of termination and finality.

3. The impact of naturalistic, materialistic worldview upon Western thought and culture. Moreover, consider the following quote:

9th Argument: What accounts for the recent increase in cremation practices?

“It [cremation] was revived in Europe and North America in the late 19th Century often for practical and hygienic reasons connected with the rapid growth of cities, but also by freethinkers wishing to ridicule Christian belief in the resurrection of the body. Hence the Roman Catholic Church prohibited cremation for its members from 1886-1963. The relaxation of the Catholic ban was accompanied if not caused by a desire to see death given a simple, realistic, and final context, in contrast to the expensive and euphemistic trends that had developed in North America funeral parlors” [*New 20th Century Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, 242-3]³⁰.

9th Argument: What accounts for the recent increase in cremation practices?

4. The impact Hindu/Pagan/Gnostic/New Age practices that advocate a “prison release” of the “soul” from the “body” for purposes of such as beliefs as reincarnation, soul freedom, etc.
 - a. Cremation was common in the ancient world except in Egypt, Judea, and China.
 - b. Cremation gave way to burial in Greece and Rome from the 2nd century A.D. and disappeared altogether by the 5th Century.
 - c. Cremation has been usual in Hinduism since the mid-Vedic period.

- d. It is normal to cremate in Buddhist culture.
- e. It is practiced by Jains and some Zoroastrians though undesirable by Bahá'ís.
- f. The Egyptians believed that the preservation of the body was essential for the next life but the Hindus believed that the corpse must be completely turned into ash in order to allow the spirit to depart to a new body.

[See *New 20th Century Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, 142-3].

5. The inroads of naturalism in Christianity: Ex.:

- a. Roman Catholic Church, which once strongly condemned cremation, in 1963, changed its position and even created an “order of worship” for this practice; this is analogous to their other areas of theological compromise.
- b. 1969 the Church of England also accepted cremation which is also analogous to their modernistic interpretations of Scripture.
- c. Accepted by other Christian groups that also endorse, neglect, remain silent, or compromise towards abortion; they tend to be liberal, not always.

10th Argument: A Historical Correlation:

When the body is devalued, there is the tendency to devalue other aspects of humanity. On the other hand, when humanity is considered to possess inherent value, humanity is honored.

Eg., Roman culture before Christianity and American Post-Christian Culture.

Humanity is sacred,
inherently valued

When life is inherently sacred,
considered to be the handiwork of God,
then the gift of humanity is always
celebrated, no matter the age,
background, class, creed, crime, death,
deformity,
disability, disease, family, gender,
hardship, life, race, religion, sex, & sin.

The
Descending
Compromise

Body is not sacred

Unborn is not sacred.

No one is sacred.

Historically,
cremation is noted
to be
symptomatic of
a larger problem:
disregard for the
value of the
human person.

Humanity has
situational value

Abortion, Bio-medical engineering,
Eugenics, Euthanasia,
Gender/Sexual
Exploitation & Oppression,
Euthanasia, Infanticide,
Racism, & Slavery

III. Concluding Observations:

1. As often cited in Jewish burial services, “Job 1:21 states, *“Naked I came out of my mother’s womb (earth), and naked shall I return there; the Lord has given, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.”* We are to return to the ground and into dust, not ash.
2. Cremation presents a word picture of finality; it does not foster or promote the promise in a bodily resurrection as compared to bodily burial.
3. Cremation is more akin to pagan beliefs and practices as compared to the biblical teaching and historical stance of bodily burial (e.g., Moses and Jesus Christ were bodily buried).

III. Concluding Observations:

4. Cremation correlates to a weaker view of the inherent dignity of humanity as compared to bodily burial that promotes intrinsic value of humanity.
5. Cremation among Christians are often found in liberal groups who do not give importance to the biblical teaching of a bodily resurrection of believers whereby the soul and body will reunite in the future.
6. Cremation devalues the physical body over and against the spiritual soul. It even introduces a gnostic presupposition.
7. Though cremation is not forbidden in Scripture, the consistent practice throughout the O.T. and N.T. has been bodily burial.

III. Concluding Observations:

What honors God the most? Bodily burial, not cremation.

Justification:

- a. **Bodily burial is a testimony to biblical truth of a bodily resurrection as compared to the word picture of cremation: incineration, finality, and termination.**
- b. **Bodily burial follows the practices of both O.T. saints and Jesus Christ as compared to cremation which signifies sinfulness and divine judgment.**
- c. **Bodily burial preserves the inherent value of the human body as compared to cremation practices by societies who place lesser value upon all human people.**
- d. **Bodily burial was the practice of the Christian church as compared to cremation which is the main practice of pagan societies who do not operate within the consensus of Christianity (e.g., Hinduism).**

III. Concluding Observations:

- e. Until the inroads of naturalism (which presupposes a closed system whereby there is no supernaturalism, no divine revelation, no God, no miracles) impacted the church, the church resisted cremation; it was an insult and mockery of the Christian belief that Jesus Christ will resurrect the dead.
- f. Bodily burial is an on-going public testimony to non-Christians of belief in the future event to come: the reunion of the body and soul (1 Cor. 15; 1 Thess. 4:13-18) in the miraculous act of translation. Once again, incineration of the human body is a word picture of finality, termination. To the orthodox Jews, cremation reminds them of the Sin of Achan and God's judgment upon him and his household. To "spiritual" pagans it is more akin to the release of the soul from the "body prison" for purposes of "divine oneness" or "reincarnation."

IV. How Should We Then Live:

- A. Promote burial, not cremation.
- B. Reaffirm those who may have cremated loved ones that they will be resurrected; that is not the question before us.
- C. Share the Gospel of Jesus Christ while we have air to breathe.
- D. Prepare for death; make plans for bodily burial so family members don't have to make the choice for you.

IV. How Should We Then Live:

- E. Be a good steward of money; financially prepare for bodily burial.
- F. Be a **bodily testimony** to the biblical truth of a bodily resurrection and the reunion of the body and the soul (1 Thess. 4:13-18).
- G. Always pursue those duties that will give God the most glory, even if it is inconvenient, costly, and potentially taxing.
- H. Know what you believe and why.

Recommended Bibliography:

1. St. Augustine, *City of God*. Book 2 particularly examines the abhorrent practices of paganism in the Roman Empire.
2. Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Complete Works of Francis Schaeffer*, 5 volumes. Particularly vol. 5: *Christian View of the West*. His books, *How Should We Then Live* and *Whatever Happened to the Human Race* (co-authored with C. Everett Coop), powerfully demonstrate the cultural, ethical, moral, and political ramifications of embracing a situational value of humanity.
3. Alvin J. Schmidt, *Dust to Dust or Ashes to Ashes: A Christian Examination of Cremation*. This is perhaps the best contemporary defense for bodily burial that is available in print.
4. Alvin J. Schmidt, *Under the Influence: How Christianity Transformed Civilization*. By far one of the greatest books I've ever read, showing the positive influence Christianity has made upon Western thought and culture when obedient to the Scriptures; it is from a sociological perspective.