

Is It Better to Bury or to Burn? Is Cremation a Christian Option?*

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1. Introduction

If I might adapt the apostle Paul's phraseology (1 Cor. 7:9), I would ask, "Is it better to bury or to burn?" Does it make any difference? Are there any ethical, theological, or philosophical issues involved in the choice to cremate the body of someone who has died? Is that even a relevant question?

The first American cremation was that of Colonel Henry Laurens, the president of the Continental Congress.¹ Laurens was paranoid of being buried alive,² so he specified in his will that his family would inherit his estate only if they cremated him, which they did in 1792. This event, however, was an anomaly. Cremation was otherwise unheard of in America for nearly a century. The next recorded cremation did not occur until 1876 when Baron Joseph Henry Louis Charles De Palm gained the (post humus!) notoriety of being the first corpse incinerated in a commercial crematory furnace. De Palm's cremation prompted a fiery debate regarding the acceptability of such a novel practice. Over the next three years there were only four more recorded cremations in America. It was not until the 1880s and 90s that any significant momentum can be seen for the practice of cremation. The debate was waged on several fronts, both pro and con, but by the beginning of the 20th century the practice had gained some degree of acceptance in American society. From 1884 to 1899 there was a 38% compound annual growth rate. With only 16 cremations in 1884, the number grew to 1,996 in 1899. By the end of the century there were 24 crematories in 15 states and 10,000 cremations had been performed—a startling number in such a short time and the largest number of cremations in any Western country, though this was still less than 1% of the deaths in America during this time.

The 20th century saw increased interest in cremation, though the growth rate was slower. The 1% boundary was crossed in the early 1920s, 2% in the 1930s, and 3% in the 1940s. By contrast, Great Britain's rate, though initially much slower, rapidly overtook the US rate, exceeding it in the 1950s. By 1967 Britain was cremating more than half of those who died, though the US cremation rate was still only about 4%. The cremation rates in the west have continued to increase, and most recently

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¹ North American Indians had practiced cremation for centuries, but the first Caucasian to be cremated in the Colonies or in the infant United States was Colonel Laurens.

² I am not sure how being cremated alive is any particular improvement; at least it is quicker!

at a much faster pace than in the first half of the 20th century. Since 1963 when the cremation rate was about 4% in the United States, it increased to 25% in 1999 and 29% in 2003.³ There are now nearly fourteen hundred crematories in the US which incinerate more than a half million corpses annually. American figures are still relatively low in comparison with some other western countries. As of 1999 Australia's cremation rate was over 50%; in Scandinavia, over 60%; and in Britain 70%. These figures contrast with Catholic countries such as Spain and Italy where it is still less than 10% or in Greece where the practice is illegal.⁴ The figures also contrast with the east where cremation is the norm. The rate in Japan, for example, is 98%. It is quite likely that the American rate will increase significantly in the next few decades. A survey in 1995 indicated that 43% of those surveyed would "likely" choose cremation for themselves.⁵

I take the time to cite the preceding statistics to demonstrate that this is an issue that the American evangelical church must face. In past generations this was largely ignored in our churches and in our seminaries. When I was a seminary student in the 1970s cremation was not mentioned in my ethics class or textbooks. I have never heard it discussed in a church setting. In a dozen years of pastoral ministry in the 1970s and 80s I do not remember anyone connected with the church ever being cremated, and for that matter, in the rural area of Michigan where I spent most of my pastoral ministry, I do not remember even hearing of a cremation. They may have occurred, but it was certainly not a common practice.

Perhaps my experience is idiosyncratic (or my memory faulty), but I suspect that discussion of cremation by conservative churches is less common than one might hope. My own attention was first focused on this topic only this past summer when one of the ladies attending the North Valley church plant died quite unexpectedly—but left a request that she be cremated. In the wake of that event (pun *not* intended!), I have had to grapple with the acceptability of such a practice for a Christian. The following paper is the record of my pursuit of this very question. I began my quest with no fixed opinion one way or the other.

³ The 2003 data comes from *USA Today*, 4/4/2005, p. 9D, "Cremation Gaining Acceptance Among Roman Catholics." There is considerable geographical variation in the cremation rate. Those states with the largest numbers of retirees who have relocated from out of state have the highest rate of cremation: Nevada, 61%; Arizona, 57%; and Florida, 49%. The lowest rates come from the Bible belt, including Tennessee, 3%; and Alabama, 4%. It is also noteworthy that in 2000 military funerals ran about 50% cremation, partly because Arlington National Cemetery has less stringent qualifications for burial there if it is a cremation (*U.S. News & World Report*, 3/20/2000, "A Grave Matter").

⁴ Anthee Carassave, "A Grave Issue," *Time*, web exclusive, 11/21/2005, <<http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1037623,00.html>>, accessed 11/21/2005. By contrast, the American Catholic rate has recently increased faster than the general population and is now at 30% ("Cremation Gaining Acceptance Among Roman Catholics," *USA Today*, 4/4/2005, p. 9D). The particular problem in Greece is caused by the refusal of the Greek Orthodox Church to allow cremation. In Athens 80% of the cemeteries are full—and plots are only rented for three years (after which the remains are moved to mass graves so the original burial plot can be reused).

⁵ The historical and statistical data in this paragraph (apart from items footnoted separately) have been summarized from Stephen Prothero, *Purified by Fire: A History of Cremation in America* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2001), 9–10, 15, 23–35, 42–45, 105–09, 127–28, 189–90. See particularly the graphs on pp. 108, 164.

Terminology

Let's first address the technical terminology involved, and then we will move on to the biblical data and other considerations. *Bury/Burial; Grave/Tomb*. The nonmetaphorical use of the word *bury* is technically defined as, "to place (a dead body) in the earth or a tomb or the sea."⁶ The more technical term for earth burial is *inhumation*: "to place in a grave."⁷ In this sense, a grave is a hole dug in the ground to bury a corpse. The word *tomb* has a somewhat wider reference; although it includes a dug grave, it may also refer to a natural or hewn cave or similar man-made structure—which may be above ground. *Tomb* and *grave* are sometimes not clearly distinguished in Bible translations, partly because it is not always possible to determine the nature of the burial in the context. As used in this paper, *burial* refers to placing a dead body in a dug grave, in a tomb, or under a cairn (i.e., a large pile of rocks); *inhumation* is only used in the more narrow sense of burial in a dug grave.⁸ There is a tendency in discussions of cremation, especially by advocates of that practice, to use *bury* in the sense, "to dispose of a corpse"—and assume that cremation is one way to bury.⁹ This is a sloppy use of language—though it is often helpful to cremation advocates by making the process appear to be just a variation of the more common (in our day and culture) burial practices.

Cremation. The reduction of a dead corpse to ash and bone fragments through rapid oxidation caused by intense heat is referred to as cremation. In older times this was done by burning the body on a pyre (normally outdoors).¹⁰ Today it is accomplished in special crematory furnaces heated to at least 2000° F. The process now takes only a few hours and produces 5–7 pounds of ash and bone (technically called *cremains*). Any metal pieces are removed¹¹ and the residue is run through a mechanical grinder to reduce the bone fragments to manageable size. The result is not the soft,

⁶ *Oxford American Dictionary* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1980), s.v. *bury*.

⁷ *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed. (Houghton Mifflin, 2000), s.v. *inhumation*.

⁸ These distinctions are English ones. The Hebrew and Greek terms cover a larger semantic domain: *qabār* and θάπτω refer to both burial and inhumation; *qeber* as well as τάφος and μνήμα/μνηεῖον all refer indiscriminately to grave or tomb. See the discussion later in the paper as to the referents of these terms in the Bible as well as the associated burial practices.

⁹ The *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed. (Houghton Mifflin, 2000), s.v. *bury*, explicitly defines burial as "by means other than cremation."

¹⁰ In modern cremations the body never contacts the flame; it is the intense heat in the furnace that reduces the body to ash. This is in contrast to the ancient practice of an open pyre in which the flesh was actually burned. (This method is still used in some parts of the world today.) I do not know to what extent bodies were reduced to ash in the ancient world. It is likely that many such cremations were only partial—i.e., the flesh was consumed, but the bones may have remained largely intact. In such cases the bones would still need disposal by burial. Irion's historical account suggests that this might vary depending on the wealth of the individual. Wealthy families could afford more elaborate pyres as well as pitch and oil to accomplish a hotter fire and thus a more complete cremation. Poorer families would have had only a smaller wood fire, and the poorest were limited to communal pyres. This is reflected in the ancient insult of referring to someone's ancestor as "half burned"—i.e., too poor to afford a sufficiently hot fire for a more complete cremation (Paul E. Irion, *Cremation* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968], 7–8).

¹¹ This might include metal parts of the casket if the body was cremated in a casket, or dental/surgical implants of various sorts. These are typically sorted out with a magnet.

light texture of wood ash; it is perhaps more like coal ashes (cinders) and is the consistency of aquarium gravel.

2. Biblical References to Cremation

Despite claims to the contrary,¹² there are very few references to cremation in the Bible, either directly or indirectly. There are only three instances of cremation recorded, though there is some additional data that is relevant to the question.

2.1. Instances of Cremation

1 Samuel 31:12–13 records the cremation of Saul and his sons. Following a disastrous battle with the Philistines, Saul's corpse is decapitated and hung on the city wall of Beth Shan along with his sons. To redress this affront, the valiant men of Jabesh Gilead undertake a night time commando raid of Beth Shan to retrieve the bodies. After moving the four corpses to a safe location at Jabesh (about 10 miles), they cremated them and buried their bones. This was only a partial cremation as the bones remained (presumably largely intact) to be buried. The bodies were likely already badly decomposed and had been previously mutilated, so the treatment is understandable. It was probably considered more honorable to cremate the royal retinue than attempt to haul the mutilated, stinking bodies elsewhere for the usual Jewish burial ceremonies.¹³ They were later commended by David for the *kindness* they showed Saul by doing this, suggesting that the king's honor may have been involved (2 Sam. 2:5).¹⁴ This action also enabled the much smaller Jewish military force to avoid further desecration by the victorious Philistines once the rescue had been discovered.¹⁵ The necessities of war are often different than "ordinary life."

God's judgment of Moab for an otherwise unknown historical event is recorded in Amos 2:1–3. The Moabites burned the bones of an Edomite king, "as if to lime."¹⁶ We can only speculate whether this was the result of a military victory (similar to the Philistines treatment of Saul) or a tomb desecration of a recently-buried Edomite ruler. It is particularly significant, however, that God's judgment is not pronounced on any military action, tomb raiding, political maneuvering, or other oppression. The text is quite clear that God's judgment "in kind" (i.e., by fire, v 2) is *because of their cremation of the king of Edom*: "I will not turn back [my wrath from Moab] *because he burned ... the*

¹² Prothero claims that "there are numerous references to cremation in the Hebrew Bible" (*Purified by Fire*, 6). He cites, however, only one reference in the text (a figurative allusion to God's judgment, Isa. 30:33), though adding four more in an endnote (one of which is likely invalid).

¹³ Eugene Merrill suggests that the purpose of the cremation was to hide the mutilation by the Philistines ("1 Samuel," in *Bible Knowledge Comm.*, 2 vols., ed. J. Walvoord and R. Zuck, 2: 431–55 [Wheaton: Victor Books, 1985], 2:455).

¹⁴ The bones are later exhumed and reburied in Benjamin (2 Sam. 21:11–14).

¹⁵ The retrieval of the corpses was a covert operation according to 2 Sam. 21:12.

¹⁶ Citations of the biblical text in this article usually follow the wording of the NIV, though I have made a few changes where I thought it helpful.

*bones....*¹⁷ Moab's action was considered not only sinful, but of such a magnitude to prompt God's drastic judgment. This is as close as the Bible gets to condemning the act of cremation.¹⁸

The only other reference to an actual cremation comes in Amos 6:8–11. As a result of Israel's sin (6:1–8) God prophesies judgment by military invasion and conquest of the city of Zion (6:8, "I will deliver up the city"). The devastation will be catastrophic, portrayed by the number of corpses left behind—ten of them in a single house. In the aftermath of this attack when the ruined city is left behind by the attacking forces, the few survivors hiding in the city will attempt to clean up the casualties. A relative is said to carry the bodies out of the house to burn them (6:10).¹⁹ In the carnage of war, normal burial is not always possible, especially when the number of casualties is high.²⁰

All three of these examples suggest that cremation was not the normal practice of God's people. It was accepted (apparently without condemnation from God) in exceptional situations, viz., in war (1 Sam. 31; Amos 6).²¹ However when it was employed (apparently) as an act of desecration (perhaps as a war act?) it was, at least on one occasion, explicitly condemned, and that *because* a body was burned. It is not any other action or attitude that prompted the cremation which was condemned; the perpetrators were condemned to judgment *because they burned* the body.

2.2. God's Use of Fire for Judgment

There are also a number of instances in which God employed fire to bring death in judgment, either directly or indirectly.²² In these situations there is at least "partial cremation" of the bodies of those killed in judgment.

¹⁷ The causal statement is expressed with 'al + InfC. Note the parallels in ch. 1 which give the reason for the judgment of other of Israel's neighbors (vv.3, 6, 9, 11, 13), as well as Israel's own judgment (2:4).

¹⁸ One must be careful not to transfer inappropriately what was perhaps a deliberate war atrocity to normal funeral practice. The point of the text is significant in this regard (see below), but it is not legitimate to cite this as a prooftext which forbids cremation in all situations.

¹⁹ Other translations/interpretations of v 10 are possible. NASB substitutes a functional equivalent ("undertaker"), and ESV opts for "anooints" rather than "burns" (as in NIV, RSV, NRSV). The use of "anooints" to translate *sarap* reflects the proposal of G. R. Driver in "A Hebrew Burial Custom," ZAW 66 (1954): 314–15. For a discussion of the text and its meaning in this context, see John J. Davis, *What About Cremation? A Christian Perspective* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH, 1989), 66–69.

²⁰ This is still true today. See the account of American troops being forced to cremate the bodies of Taliban terrorists in Afghanistan in *Time*, "Stench Prompted U.S. Troops to Burn Corpses," 10/21/2005, corrected version 11/3/2005; <<http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1125699,00.html>>, accessed 11/21/2005. There is one biblical passage that shows a contrast here. In the prophecy of Ezek. 39 (Gog and Magog) the massive casualties will be *buried*, not burned. The weapons will be burned, but the text describes a period of seven months during which the land is searched for human bones which are then marked and later buried. This contrasts with the picture of Amos 9 in that the bodies are not in a limited area (the city), but scattered across a large geographical area and have already been picked clean by birds and animals.

²¹ It is quite interesting that in the synoptic account of Saul's burial in 1 Chron. 10:12 the cremation is omitted; the Chronicler—who was often inclined to omit potentially offensive or negative details—tells us only that Saul was buried.

²² Sodom & Gomorrah (Gen. 19:24) might be added to this list, though the nature of the "burning sulfur" (NIV) is not clear. The judgment context would certainly be parallel.

The death of Nadab and Abihu (Lev. 10:1–2) as judgment for offering unauthorized fire before the Lord comes by fire: “so fire came out from the presence of YHWH and consumed them.” In this instance fire is the means of capital punishment. Just as fire from the Lord devoured the burnt offering in 9:24, so these men are said to be devoured by fire. There *are* remains since they are carried out of the camp (10:5), but if the contrast with the burnt offering a few verses earlier is deliberate, there was at least a partial cremation involved.²³ There is no statement in the text regarding the final disposal of the remains outside the camp.

The account of Korah’s rebellion (Num. 16) is explicit that God used fire to consume 250 people who rebelled against Moses’ God-given authority: “fire came out from YHWH and consumed the 250 men who were offering the incense” (v. 35).²⁴ Fire is both capital agent and undertaker—and this time there is reference to the “smoldering remains” (v. 37), which might suggest that this fiery judgment was more than a lightning strike. (The final disposal of the remains is not specified.) This judgment became the archetype of God’s judgment—the bronze censers used by these men were made into hammered plates and used to overlay the altar of burnt offering in the tabernacle, serving as a perpetual reminder of the dire consequences of sin.²⁵

The final such account is found in Joshua 7. As a result of Achan’s sin, both he and his family were first stoned to death and then burned (v. 25). The remains were not buried in the earth, but covered with a large pile of rocks. The burning was in direct obedience to God’s command that the guilty party be “destroyed by fire” (v. 15).

Such a history of judgment fire “hardly provided a positive incentive for the burial practice of cremation”²⁶ in ancient Israel.

2.3. Legal Stipulations for Cremation

The old covenant provided for cremation in two specific cases. In each such case it is judgment for sin—not sin in general, but particular sin for which God specified exceptional judgment. In the midst of a capital penal code section of the Law (which included human sacrifice, witchcraft, cursing parents, adultery, homosexuality, incest and bestiality), Leviticus 20:14 mandates not just

²³ This explanation is not beyond question. Though the parallel with the burnt offering in 9:24 would suggest a more complete burning, that there are remains which are carried out in their relatives’ tunics might suggest that at least the bones were left. (The tunics are more likely those of the men who carried them out rather than the tunics of Nadab & Abihu as implied by the NIV’s “still in their tunics,” though the text can be read either way. There is no equivalent of “still” in the text.) Alternately, the fire might be viewed as something similar to lightning, in which case the corpses, even though burned/charred would still be largely intact. The text is not sufficiently explicit to warrant dogmatism in this regard.

²⁴ This is in addition to the immediately preceding destruction of Dathan and Abiram and their families. Their judgment was distinct since they had insolently refused to even appear at the tabernacle (v. 12).

²⁵ There may have been a similar judgment on those Israelites who complained about the hardships in the wilderness: “fire from YHWH burned among them and consumed some of the outskirts of the camp” (Num. 11:1–3). It is not clear whether *people* were consumed by fire in this instance or if this consisted of “tent fires” (in which people may or may not have died).

²⁶ Davis, *What About Cremation?* 62.

capital punishment, but death and subsequent²⁷ cremation for a man who “marries both a woman and her mother.” While we may not understand why this particular sin receives a unique judgment, it is clear that cremation of a corpse is intended to represent an exceptionally severe judgment. A similar provision follows in Leviticus 21:9 in which the daughter of a priest who becomes a prostitute is to be “burned in the fire.” This is, again, intended as a more severe standard than prostitution in general since she has disgraced her father *who is a priest*. This presumably is also cremation following capital punishment.²⁸ These passages are unusual in that they are prescriptive provisions; most of the biblical data discussed earlier in the article as well as much of what follows is only descriptive—though the consistency of that descriptive data may be theologically significant.

2.4. Fire Symbolism in the Bible

Although not referring in most cases to cremation as such, there is abundant use of metaphorical fire symbolism in the Bible. The extent of such language and the dearth²⁹ of a positive symbolism of such language presents a situation in which cremation would have largely negative connotations in the cultures of the Bible.³⁰ This is true in both testaments. In the Old Testament, to select only a few representative instances from the prophets (where this symbol appears frequently), we read of God becoming a blazing fire which will consume the King of Assyria (Isa. 10:16–17) and of God’s tongue as a consuming fire on the nations (30:27–28). This figure even becomes “crematorial” as God describes the judgment awaiting the King of Assyria as a funeral pyre prepared in the Valley of Topheth, to be lit by his own breath (30:33). In Jeremiah God’s judgment is likened to an unquenchable fire among his people (4:4; cf. Lam. 2:3–4). The whole earth will be devoured by the fire of God’s jealousy (Zeph. 1:18; 3:8). A field of burning stubble is the picture of the day of the Lord in Malachi 4:1.

The New Testament also frequently uses fire symbolism in a negative way. Jesus refers to fire in judgment terms in several of his parables or figures (e.g., Matt. 3:10, 11, 12; 3:12; 7:19; 13:40, 42, 50; 18:8; 22:7; 25:41, to use only Matthew as a sample). Paul describes the believer’s judgment in terms

²⁷ That “burned in the fire” refers to cremation subsequent to capital punishment (probably by stoning as earlier in the chapter) is an assumption not explicitly stated in the text. The OT, though recording “fire from YHWH” as the instrument of capital judgment on a number of occasions (see above), never portrays the equivalent of “burning at the stake” as a human-administered form of capital punishment (unless Gen. 38:24 suggests this, but even if so, it is not a God-ordained action in this case).

²⁸ Surprisingly (to us?), prostitution in general is never explicitly given capital status in the Law, though apparently cultural norms assumed this to be the case even pre-law (e.g., Gen. 38:24). Perhaps it was subsumed under the category of adultery in the Law.

²⁹ This is not a totally negative image, but the preponderance is clearly one of judgment. A positive image can be seen in Zech. 2:5 where YHWH is a “wall of fire” around his people—though this certainly has negative connotations for those who would seek to harm God’s people. In the NT, Acts 2:3, tongues of fire at Pentecost is a positive image. References to fire as a natural physical phenomenon are probably not relevant to this question (unless it is physical fire used in judgment).

³⁰ Such cultural associations only help us understand the responses of people within those cultures. The comments above do not intend to establish an atemporal interpretation of such symbolism in the sense that this is what fire must always symbolize. It usually *does* have negative associations in the biblical text, and those associations can never be ignored, but our contemporaries will not have the same response. On this, see the discussion below regarding cultural issues in the modern world.

of fire (1 Cor. 3:13, 15). Judgment on unbelievers is described throughout the NT, but especially in Revelation, in fiery terms reminiscent of the OT prophets (2 Thess. 1:7; Heb. 10:27; 12:18, 29; 2 Pt. 3:7; Jude 7; Rev. 8:5, 7, 8; 9:18; 11:5; 14:10; 16:8; 18:8; 19:20, etc.). James' use of fire is also negative, particularly as he portrays the sinful use of the tongue (3:5–6).

2.5. Other Bible Examples of Bodies Burned

There are several other instances in which bodies are burned in the Bible, though these are not really cremations as such. They are included for completeness (and because some are occasionally cited in the discussion), though they should not be used as a direct argument for or against cremation.

There are accounts of murder (or attempted murder) by fire. Samson's wife and father-in-law were murdered by their fellow Philistines who burned their house over them following one of Samson's rampages (Judg. 15:6). What, if anything, was done with the burned bodies is not said—though as a Philistine action it would hardly be relevant to a discussion of cremation in a biblical context. Likewise in Daniel 3 the Babylonian king attempted to execute the three Jews who refused to bow in worship—but in this case the “crematoria” furnace (probably a brick kiln) was ineffective due to divine intervention—they “quenched the fury of the flames” (Heb. 11:34).

The other notable instance of bodies being burned is that of human sacrifice as practiced by Israel's pagan neighbors and, sadly at times, by Israel herself. Accounts of such can be found in 2 Kings 17:17 and Jeremiah 7:30–31. This was clearly forbidden by the Law (Deut. 12:31; Lev. 18:21) and forms no parallel with the issues involved in cremation. It is possible, however, that associations and similarities between such atrocities and the practice of cremation may account for the Jewish shunning of the practice.³¹

3. Biblical Funeral Practices

There is an abundance of biblical material related to funeral practices. Only a sampling of the most relevant data can be included here.

3.1. Terminology and Examples

There is no dispute that the Bible presents burial as the standard way to handle a corpse. In the OT or the NT, the terms *qabār* and *θάπτω*—which occur almost 180 times—always assume burial, whether that is in a cave (Gen. 23:19), under a tree (Gen. 35:8), beside the road (Gen. 48:7), in the desert (1 Kgs. 2:34), in a garden (2 Kgs. 21:18), on a hill (2 Chron. 32:33), or in a field (Matt. 27:7).³² This may be either earth burial in a dug grave, or interment in a tomb.

The earth grave was typically the form of burial for the poor. There is less archaeological evidence for the existence of these burials simply because they are not as substantial as the tombs.

³¹ Davis suggests this connection (*What About Cremation?* 63). Though Reformed Judaism adopted and encouraged cremation in the 19th C., following the Holocaust even this liberal branch of Judaism has been reluctant to use cremation.

³² Most such references merely specify the locale (e.g., “he was buried in the city of Jerusalem”) with no indication of the physical nature of the inhumation.

Individual graves and small cemeteries would easily disappear if the rock piles marking the graves were destroyed, scattered, or reused.³³ There are, however, several large cemeteries in Bible lands that consist of large numbers of graves dug in the earth and covered with piles of rocks.³⁴

Depending on the social status and chronological period, the tomb is better known in Bible lands since it is an obvious, often a prominent, structure. These might consist of natural caves, but the best known (especially in the vicinity of Jerusalem and Jericho) are hand-hewn in soft rock. There are several styles and customs evident, but typically a tomb would be used for multiple interments, most commonly of family members. In some periods bodies were (permanently) buried individually in coffins placed in hewn niches or laid on rock shelves (without a coffin). In other times the initial burial was individual, but after a corpse had decomposed so as to leave only bones, the bones were transferred to an ossuary (a stone or pottery bone box or pottery jar) so as to make room for additional burials of family members.³⁵

Even criminals who were executed were granted burial. The Law contains specific provisions for this in the case of hanging (Deut. 21:22–23).³⁶ To refuse or deny burial for someone was always a sign of contempt—and often (though not always) the result of God’s judgment (Deut. 28:26; 2 Sam. 21:6, 9; 1 Kgs. 14:10–13; 2 Kgs. 9:10; Ps. 79:1–4; Jer. 8:2; 14:16; 16:4, 6; 25:33; Rev. 11:9). Part of God’s judgment on Jehoiakim was that he would “have the burial of a donkey—dragged away and thrown outside the gates of Jerusalem” (Jer. 22:19).³⁷ The massive number of corpses resulting from God’s judgment in the Babylonian invasion are compared with refuse lying on the ground (Jer. 25:33).

Cremation is virtually unknown in biblical practice, though it was a common practice in the ancient world. Both the Greeks and Romans practiced cremation as the preferred means of disposing of a corpse.³⁸ This was in contrast to the Egyptians who practiced embalming and burial in

³³ Headstones were not often used to mark dug graves in the ancient world. The normal practice seems to have been to build a large pile of rocks over the site to prevent animals from digging up the grave. Reuse of such rock piles in later times was not unknown. There is reference in the OT to erecting a pillar at the site of a grave (e.g., Gen. 35:20), some of which may have been inscribed or marked in some way to identify the nature of the grave (2 Kings 23:17, a “tombstone” [NIV], or “monument” [HCSB] identified the grave of a particular prophet).

³⁴ A cemetery with over 800 such graves is found near Qumran—the piles of rock marking each grave still largely intact. About 50 of these graves have been excavated; most are narrow vertical shafts about 4–6 feet deep, typically containing one body with no coffin (some have two bodies, and a few have traces of wooden coffins.) There is a similar cemetery containing 3,500 graves east of the Dead Sea. For details of both cemeteries, including photos and maps, see Yizhar Hirschfeld, *Qumran in Context: Reassessing the Archaeological Evidence* (Peabody, MA: 2004), 152–62.

³⁵ For details, see Elizabeth Bloch-Smith, “Burials,” *ABD* 1:785–89 and Rachel Hachlili, “Burials, Ancient Jewish,” *ABD* 1:789–94. This “reburial” or “secondary burial” may be the significance of the OT phrase “gathered to his fathers” (e.g., Gen. 25:8).

³⁶ Even enemy combatants of high rank (the five Amorite kings), though they were executed by hanging, were buried in a cave in Josh. 10:16–27.

³⁷ This is one of the few instances (perhaps the only?) of *qbr* not having inhumation as its referent—yet here the context makes it very clear that this is an exceptional “burial.”

³⁸ Francis Schaeffer points out that we can track the progress of Christianity across the ancient world in some instances by observing the cemeteries. He cites in particular the city of Avenches, a Roman stronghold in Switzerland. “Gradually Christianity came to Roman Avenches. We know this by studying the cemetery of

tombs. Outside the biblical world cremation was the norm in Buddhism and Hinduism. Originally Confucianism in China and Japan rejected cremation, but later adopted it.³⁹

3.2. *Jesus' Burial*

In one sense, Jesus' burial is simply one more example of common Jewish custom. As a narrative event it has no inherent normative force. But as with other aspects of Jesus' life, as Christians we often take his life as exemplary, if not technically imperative. Our wedding ceremonies often refer to Jesus blessing marriage by his presence at the wedding in Cana. He attended the Sabbath services, visited with "sinners," showed compassion to those who hurt, etc. In the same way, and to the same extent (and only to that extent), we are wise to consider his example in death, for in this case it is not *only* what would be normal for someone of his day and culture, but it was also ordained by God that he be buried (Isa. 53:9). The NT makes an emphatic point that his body did not suffer decay when he was buried (Acts 2:31; see also v 27, citing Ps. 16:10); cremation was not an option. None of these factors in their own right would, perhaps, be determinative, but since they complement all the other factors considered thus far, it should not be ignored that Jesus was, indeed, buried—not cremated—and that by God's choice.

3.3. *God as "Undertaker"*

There is one instance in which we might say that God served directly as the "undertaker" for a funeral.⁴⁰ When Moses died, God took care of his body—the only instance in all of Scripture in which God did so directly (i.e., not through a human intermediary). Deuteronomy 34:5–6 records the details: "Moses ... died there in Moab, as YHWH had said. He buried him in Moab, in the valley opposite Beth Peor, but to this day no one knows where his grave is." The antecedent of the 3MS verb (*yiqbōr*, "he buried") can only be YHWH.⁴¹ In the situation, God could have handled the body in any number of ways, but God chose burial, not cremation. If this was God's preferred method in the only such recorded instance, it ought to be treated as a significant precedent.

that time—the Romans burned their dead, the Christians buried theirs" (*How Should We Then Live? The Rise and Decline of Western Thought and Culture* [Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1976], 24).

³⁹ For a historical survey of cremation, see Davis, *What About Cremation?* 19–33. The cultural, philosophical, and theological significance of cremation by various groups will be considered below.

⁴⁰ As a side note for the curious, the trade of "undertaker" (AKA, mortician, or funeral director) is a relatively recent development in burial practices (mid-19th C. in America) and is due largely to our modern desire to avoid death as much as possible. Prior to the time of the undertaker, families and friends cared for the corpse, including preparing it for burial and the interment. On this, see James J. Farrell, *Inventing the American Way of Death, 1830–1920* (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 1980) and Karen P. Flood, "Contemplating Corpses: The Dead Body in American Culture, 1870–1920" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard Univ., 2001).

⁴¹ This is not a passive construction as the NIV mg note suggests ("he was buried").

4. Theological Considerations

Since cremation is both a cultural/historical as well as a theological issue, it is important to consider both aspects of the question. First, are there any significant theological implications of the various modes of burial?

4.1. Christian View of the Body

Christians view the body different from nonchristians. Since our authority in such matters is Scripture, we begin by noting that it was God himself who created the physical body of the first human (Gen. 2:7). Though formed from humble materials—the dust of the earth—Adam’s body was dignified and animated by the breath of life received directly from God. Thus both the material and immaterial⁴² parts of humanity originated directly from God.⁴³ Since the time when God subsequently formed Eve’s body from Adam’s side, all human bodies and souls⁴⁴ have originated by natural procreation and every human being has borne the image of God. God’s original creation—including the first two human bodies—was proclaimed to be “very good” (Gen. 1:31).

It is significant that human beings are not first and essentially soul/spirit with an appended body. God did not first create a soul and then place it into a body. In terms of origin, man was first body, then became a living being. Body and soul are not opposed to each other even though they are diverse entities. Only in unity is there a complete person.⁴⁵ We thus view our bodies as gifts

⁴² The distinction between material and immaterial is not just a theological construct; it is a biblical distinction. Note, e.g., the contrast between the inner and outer man in 2 Cor. 4:16, ἀλλ’ εἰ καὶ ὁ ἔξω ἡμῶν ἄνθρωπος διαφθείρεται, ἀλλ’ ὁ ἔσω ἡμῶν ἀνακαινοῦται. See other uses of the “inner man” in Rom. 7:22 and Eph. 3:16. BDAG cites numerous examples of this terminology in nonbiblical Greek; s.v. ἄνθρωπος, 5.a.; ἔξω, 1.a.β.; ἔσω, 2.

⁴³ On the material and immaterial (or: corporeal and incorporeal) parts of humanity, see John Murray, “The Nature of Man,” in *Collected Writings of John Murray*, 4 vols., ed. Iain Murray, 2:14–22 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1976–82); and Robert Gundry, *Sōma in Biblical Theology, with Emphasis on Pauline Anthropology*, SNTS 29 (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1976; reprint, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987). Gundry’s work is largely a critical analysis of Bultmann’s dictum that σῶμα in Paul refers to the person as a whole (Rudolph Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, transl. K. Grobel, 2 vols. [London: SCM, 1952], 192). Most religious and philosophical systems conclude with a truncated view of humanity, either all material or all immaterial. The biblical view of mankind is a unity of both. Morey suggests that this is the ancient problem of the one and the many treated in a reductionist fashion (Robert A. Morey, *Death and the Afterlife* [Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1984], 42–43). Some otherwise orthodox scholars have truncated views as well; e.g., Murray J. Harris has a monistic anthropology and argues for an immediate resurrection following death (*Raised Immortal: Resurrection and Immortality in the New Testament* [London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1983; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985]).

⁴⁴ I use the term “soul” here as a convenient shorthand for “the immaterial part of a human being.” (I intend nothing regarding the di/tricotomy debate.) The summary above is a deliberate statement of a traducian view as to the origin of this soul, though further elaboration or defense of such is beyond the scope of this article.

⁴⁵ “The body is as really and eternally a part of man as is his spirit, and the resurrection of the body is an indispensable part of his salvation” (Lorraine Boettner, *Immortality* [Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1956], 51. Or as Murray says with perhaps greater precision, “There are two entities in man’s constitution, diverse in nature and origin, the one derived from the earth, material, corporeal, phenomenal, divisible, the other derived from a distinct action of God, immaterial and ordinarily not phenomenal, indivisible and inde-

from God, as good things to be celebrated and honored (though not worshipped!) rather than as a prison of the soul (as the body was typically viewed in Greek philosophy⁴⁶). Yoda may believe that “luminous beings we are, not this crude matter,”⁴⁷ but that is not a biblical view. And we insist that we do, indeed, have a divinely-created, physical body, contra Christian Science (as well as some Eastern religions). Mary Baker Eddy wrote that,

Man is not matter; he is not made up of brain, blood, bones, and other material elements. The Scriptures inform us that man is made in the image and likeness of God. Matter is not that likeness. The likeness of Spirit cannot be so unlike Spirit. Man is spiritual and perfect; and because he is spiritual and perfect, he must be so understood in Christian Science. Man is idea, the image, of Love; he is not physique.⁴⁸

The Bible, by contrast, clearly says that “God formed man from the dust of the ground” (Gen. 2:7).

Salvation is not just a “spiritual” matter that relates only to the soul, the body being largely irrelevant; salvation also includes the body. The body will also be redeemed (Rom. 8:23). Our body will be transformed to be like our Lord’s glorious body (Phil. 3:21). When Paul explains that “you were *bought* (ἀγοράζω, *redeemed*) with a price,” he also concludes from this argument that we are therefore (δῆ) to “honor God with [our] body” (1 Cor. 6:20). The same passage provides an additional reason for respecting the body, and that is the fact that the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19) and it is even described as a “member of Christ”⁴⁹ (6:15). We are specifically commanded to “honor God with [our] body” (6:20) on this basis. True, this is a description of a live body, but upon death a body (which is no longer indwelt by the Spirit⁵⁰) which has had the privilege of being God’s temple ought to be honored. Though not technically indwelt after death, if the body

structible. These two entities form one organic unit without disharmony or conflict. In the integral person they are interdependent. The coact and interact” (Murray, “The Nature of Man,” 21).

⁴⁶ Irion summarizes the Greek view: “The dualistic assumptions of [the Greek philosophical system] made an obvious separation of soul from body a very desirable thing. Death and the dissolution of the body provided the means for the emancipation of the soul. This objective combined with the assertion of Heraclitus that fire was the underlying principle of all existence. Fire symbolized the purification and release of the soul and the unification of the body with its original elements” (*Cremation*, 6). See also Prothero, *Purified by Fire*, 7.

⁴⁷ Donald F. Glut, *The Empire Strikes Back*, v. 2 of the *Star Wars* trilogy, based on a story by George Lucas (New York: Ballentine Books, 1980), 123. Note also that Darth Vader’s body is cremated at the end of the story; as discussed elsewhere in this essay, death rituals reflect one’s world view.

⁴⁸ *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* (Boston: First Church of Christ, Scientist, 1906), ch. 14, “Recapitulation,” p. 475.6; online <http://www.spirituality.com/dt/book_lookup.jhtml?reference=SH+475:6>.

⁴⁹ The imagery here is not exactly transparent. It appears that Paul is referring to the fact that the Christian’s body is part of the body of Christ due to the resurrection. In other words, being part of the body of Christ is not just a spiritual relationship, but also an organic one in some way. It is real enough to make it unthinkable that such a human body would be united with a prostitute. In any event, it certainly speaks loudly regarding the status of the body in Christian theology. Further, see Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 257–66.

⁵⁰ Indwelling should not be thought of primarily in terms of physical presence (i.e., the Spirit is in some way locally present within the physical body of the believer). It is rather primarily a relationship—but a relationship that is specifically mediated in and through the physical body of the believer in such a way that the body can be viewed sacerdotally as a temple.

is a member of Christ due, in part to the resurrection, then this body is still, somehow, united to Christ.

If we treasure, e.g., the Bible of a loved one (sentimental though such a value may be), ought not we even more to honor the body of a loved one now with the Lord?⁵¹ The Christian has a unique respect for the human body compared with most, if not all, her competitors on the stage of world religions.

That humans do have an immaterial part of their being is also crucial on this point. Christians are not materialists. Death does not end one's existence. Although the specifics of what happens to the corpse do not affect the existence of the soul, death must be viewed from a holistic perspective, i.e., one which has both material *and* immaterial affects on the person. Death is defined theologically as the separation of the soul and the body (Jas. 2:26), though neither cease to exist. The body, apart from the soul is not functional, slowly but surely returning to dust until the resurrection. The soul apart from the body is also limited ("unclothed" per 2 Cor. 5:4).

It is also significant that when someone is buried the NT still refers to the *person* as being buried. When Jesus was buried the text does say that Pilate gave the body (πτῶμα, *corpse*) to Joseph of Arimathea, who then wrapped it (αὐτόν, *it*, antecedent is πτῶμα) and placed it (αὐτόν) in the tomb (Mark 15:45–46). But only a few verses later in the account of the women's arrival at the tomb on Resurrection Morning, the angel says that "*he* has risen, *he* is not here" (both 3S verbs), but even more significantly, "see the place where they laid *him*" (αὐτόν). The antecedent in this context is *Jesus the Nazarene*. But what was "laid" in the tomb? Yes, it was a corpse (πτῶμα), but it can still be referred to as a *person*! This is not unique to Jesus' burial. When Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead his words were not, "Dead corpse, come to life"! Rather, speaking to the one who was *in the tomb*, Jesus said, "*Lazarus*, come out!" (John 11:43). He addresses Lazarus as a person, not as the corpse of a person.

Even in death the body that is laid in the tomb is not simply a body. It is the body of the person. More properly, it is the person as respects the body. It is the person who is buried or laid in the tomb.... So what is laid in the grave is still integral to the person who died. In and during death the person is identified with the dissolved material entity.⁵²

This contrasts sharply with materialistic views of the body which are blind to the immaterial aspects of death. In relation to the question of cremation this is important in that many materialists view death as the end; whatever is done to the corpse is irrelevant since the person simply ceases to exist at death. If, however, there is continuity between a person's body/soul in this life and in the resurrection, then it is not irrelevant how we treat a person's corpse.

4.2. Resurrection

Resurrection is a given in a Christian theology of death. From Jesus' promise to raise both those who believe on him as well as those who have done evil (John 5:21–30; 6:39–44), to Paul's great

⁵¹ The conclusion suggested here, to be examined more explicitly below, is that we do not honor the body by burning it. This is, to some extent, a cultural issue, but it is also a biblical issue.

⁵² Murray, "The Nature of Man," 16.

exposition of the future death-destroying resurrection (1 Cor. 15), to the final promise of those who come to life to reign with Christ a thousand years (Rev. 20:5–6) and then are given access to the tree of life by Jesus himself (Rev. 22:12–14), the resurrection is the bedrock of Christian hope. This is a hope that cannot be denied or disappointed by any destiny of the human body. Jesus’ own statement that “all who are in the graves” would be raised is not to be limited only to those who are inhumed, but is a clear figure for “everyone”—the figure reflecting the normal Jewish burial practice. This is stated clearly in 1 Corinthians 15:22, “for as in Adam *all* die, so in Christ *all* will be made alive.” Resurrection is co-extensive with those who died in Adam, i.e., the entire human race. Although the “all” who will be changed (i.e., resurrected) in 1 Corinthians 15:51 is limited by the context to believers (note the “brothers,” and “we” in vv 50, 51), the earlier statement in v 22 is clearly a universal one since it is paralleled with the fall.⁵³ The fact that all will be raised, even unbelievers, points to the value and significance of the body.

This resurrection is a *bodily* resurrection. It is our “mortal bodies” that will be given life (Rom. 8:11). Our “lowly bodies” are what will be “changed” to be like Jesus’ glorious, resurrected body (Phil. 3:21). The mortal puts on immortality and the perishable puts on the imperishable (1 Cor. 15:53). The resurrected body is not merely resuscitated; it is somehow transformed and receives new properties appropriate to the new form of bodily existence we will have after the resurrection. “There is a utilization of the old body, but a transformation of it in the process.”⁵⁴

The Bible never explains the mechanics of how God will raise anyone, let alone those cases we might deem more problematic. Cremation is not an obstacle for God. If he can raise Adam’s body and that of his fellow ante-diluvians, now long disintegrated into dust, the atoms of which could well now be scattered world wide, then he can also raise someone whose body is cremated.⁵⁵

We do not believe ... that in the resurrection there will be any difference between those who are buried in the graves of the earth and those whose bodies were destroyed by fire, or

⁵³ The statement of v 22 (“all will be made alive”) is *not* limited to believers by v 23 which refers to the resurrection of believers because the series begun in v 23 (“Christ ... those who belong to him”) is continued in v 24 by reference to the final group of those raised (including unbelievers): “the end” (τὸ τέλος), i.e., the last group. The passage is tightly structured: ἕκαστος ἐν τῷ ἰδίῳ τάγματι (“order,” then three “orders” are listed): 1. ἀπαρχὴ Χριστός, 2. ἔπειτα οἱ τοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐν τῇ παρουσίᾳ αὐτοῦ, 3. εἶτα τὸ τέλος. This sequence tends to be obscured by the verse break and in some English translations by the punctuation (period after v 23, so NIV, ESV, HCSB, NET, etc.; ctr. NA²⁷/UBS⁴, NASB [but adds an italicized word which doesn’t help], which use a comma). On this three-fold sequence, see BDAG, 988, s.v. τάγμα, 1.b.

⁵⁴ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983–85), 3:1198 [2d ed., 1998, p. 1205].

⁵⁵ The skeptics love to raise hypothetical problems of the impossibility of atoms shared by different bodies (the extreme example often being that of the missionary eaten by cannibals) proving the impossibility of such a resurrection. Though interesting for speculation, such situations prove little. Erickson wryly parodies the Sadducees’ question: “whose molecules will they be in the resurrection?” (though he has no problem with such situations; *Christian Theology*, 3:1198 [2d ed., p. 1205]). An interesting anecdote is recorded in Strong’s discussion of the resurrection: “The Providence Journal had an article entitled, ‘Who ate Roger Williams?’ When his remains were exhumed, it was found that one large root of an apple tree followed the spine, divided at the thighs, and turned up at the toes of Roger Williams. More than one person had eaten its apples. This root may be seen to-day in the cabinet of Brown University” (A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* [8th ed., 1907; reprint, Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1970], 1019).

devoured by wild beasts, or drowned in the sea, or blown to bits by the explosions of bombs.... There is no limit to the power of God. He who in the first place made the body from the elements of the earth can bring again the body that has been disintegrated by whatever means.⁵⁶

We affirm that there is a substantial, organic identity of the person's body in this life and in its glorified, resurrected state.⁵⁷ "This new body has some connection or point of identity with the old body, but is differently constituted."⁵⁸ How this is accomplished we are not told, but that is not our problem. God will be able to handle it quite nicely without our concern.⁵⁹

Such a view of resurrection informs Paul's analogy of the body being planted (1 Cor. 15:35–44). There is an organic connection between a seed which is planted in the ground and the wheat plant which grows from that seed—and that despite the fact that the atoms of the seed are not necessarily the same atoms to be found in the wheat plant which grows from it. Paul argues that the same is true of the resurrection. The body which is planted in the grave is not identical with the body that is raised (vv. 42–44). The body planted (= seed) is perishable, dishonorable (since it is dead and decaying), weak, and natural. But the body raised, though organically connected with the body planted, will be imperishable, glorious, powerful, and spiritual.

This biblical picture of the resurrection has important implications in regards to the cremation question. These will be considered in the concluding section of the paper.

5. Historical/Cultural Considerations

In the milieu of cultural/historical and theological factors related to cremation priority goes to the theological. Yet the cultural/historical issues cannot be ignored. In fact, that carry substantial weight in evaluating a Christian position on the question of cremation.

5.1. Significance of Cremation in Non-Christian Systems

The various nonchristian religions and philosophies which practice cremation do so for explicit theological/philosophical reasons. This is true in both the historical origins of cremation as well as in contemporary practices.⁶⁰ Cremation is perhaps best known historically in connection with the eastern religions, particularly Indian Hinduism. "The religious and philosophical dimensions of

⁵⁶ Boettner, *Immortality*, 50.

⁵⁷ Gordon Lewis and Bruce Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987–94), 3:475.

⁵⁸ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3:1198 [2d ed., p. 1205].

⁵⁹ It is not necessary to resolve such questions for the present purposes. Regardless of the outcome of the debate, e.g., between Murray Harris and Norman Geisler, as to the precise nature of the resurrection body or the time of this event, either side would agree with the centrality of the resurrection (on the debate, see: Harris, *Raised Immortal* and Norman L. Geisler, *The Battle for the Resurrection* (Nashville: Nelson, 1989).

⁶⁰ The brief summary which follows must be used with care since there is considerable diversity in the world religions. Though they appear monolithic to the West, there may be as much diversity in, e.g., the various sects of Buddhism as there are denominations in Protestant Christianity. Belief systems can vary widely, including issues such as cremation (both its practice and significance).

Indian thought imply that fire resolves the body into its basic elements of fire, water, earth and air, while at the same time purifying the spirit in preparation for its reincarnation.”⁶¹

Hinduism, for example, is known to have practiced cremation for thousands of years. The Vedas, the oldest Hindu texts, contain cremation hymns which reflect the belief that the soul would survive cremation and “fly birdlike to the world of the ancestors or the world of the gods.”⁶² More recent texts, the Upanishads (mid-first millennia BC) “describe cremation as a purification process in which burning the body cleanses the soul, preparing it for rebirth”⁶³—i.e., reincarnation.

Cremation has been practiced since the beginning in Buddhism and is generally viewed as superior to burial. Since the Buddha was cremated (483 BC), Buddhists follow his example when possible. In some forms of Buddhism, the “corpse is burned to allow the spirit to escape” to heaven or hell awaiting the next reincarnation.⁶⁴ The soul is often viewed as remaining in (or at least in contact with) the dead corpse for some time after physical death takes place.⁶⁵ Cremation is the final severance of the soul and the body.⁶⁶ Rig-Veda Buddhism uses a funeral hymn “invoking the fire god to speed the deceased on his way to the abode of the dead without consuming him.”⁶⁷

Although Confucianism originally forbid cremation, some later forms of Confucianism (e.g., in Japan) later embraced the practice and developed etiological explanations for it.

Many nonchristian philosophies adopt cremation for ideological purposes. This may vary from a pantheistic system emphasizing the suitability of returning the body to the earth with which it is one, to naturalistic atheism which assumes that there is nothing beyond death, to environmental “greenism” which argues that inhumation is environmentally irresponsible.⁶⁸ “It is proper to restore to nature what is rightfully hers”⁶⁹—that is, the body belongs to “Mother Nature” and cre-

⁶¹ Irion, *Cremation*, 13.

⁶² Stephen Prothero, *Purified by Fire*, 6.

⁶³ Prothero, *Purified by Fire*, 6.

⁶⁴ “Buddhist Ceremonies,” <<http://www.thaiworldview.com/bouddha/ceremon6.htm>>, accessed 11/30/2005. Cremation may not be immediate in some instances. For those with no family or inadequate financial resources to pay for cremation the body is sometimes buried. Even in such instances, however, there is typically a later exhumation for a mass cremation (as many as 40,000 in one 1998 mass burning) financed by benevolent societies (<<http://www.thaiworldview.com/bouddha/ceremon6.htm>>). Other forms of Buddhism allow either burial or cremation. On this see Yutang Lin, “Understanding Death in Chinese Buddhist Culture: Living and Dying in Buddhist Cultures; 3.2 Rituals and Activities Related to Death,” University of Hawaii at Manoa, 6/17/1995, transcript <<http://www.yogichen.org/efiles/mbk16.html>>, accessed 11/30/2005.

⁶⁵ Physical death comes officially 8 hours after the person is pronounced medically dead; so long as there is any warmth in the corpse, it is not yet finally dead.

⁶⁶ “Buddhist Ceremonies: Personal Ceremonies: Funeral Rites,” <<http://www.buddhanet.net/funeral.htm>>, accessed 11/30/2005.

⁶⁷ Irion, *Cremation*, 13.

⁶⁸ Amanda Bower, “Death Can Be Dirty. What’s a Greenie to Do?” *Time* 10/7/2002. The “green” objections range from the metal parts of a casket being placed in the earth, to the environmental hazards of embalming fluids (either leaking from the casket or being flushed down the drain in the funeral home), to the fact that inhumation takes away precious space in the earth that cannot be used by the living. They acknowledge that even cremation is not perfectly green since it employs fossil fuels to fire the furnace. The ideal green solution is said to be body donations to medical schools.

⁶⁹ This environmentalist argument is cited by Prothero, *Purified by Fire*, 155.

mation is said to be the natural way to return her property. This nature religion developed the theme that,

Cremation was both more natural and more beautiful than burial—as natural and beautiful as the sun. The practice restored to nature elements that, before death, constituted a living human body and, after death, nourished plants and animals. It was, moreover, a sensible use of land.⁷⁰

5.2. *Cremation in the United States*

The history and advocacy of cremation in the United States is itself instructive as regards to its compatibility with Christian thought. It has not been uncommon for cremation to be advocated as a deliberate rejection of Christian thought. It is not legitimate, however, to picture this as a contrast between spiritual and secular ideas, between religion and irreligion. Some advocates are advocates of atheistic secularism, but most are not. The changes in America regarding the practice of cremation over the past century are significant in that they entail a shift “from certain religious beliefs and metaphors (most of them Christian) to alternatives (some Asian, some New Age, and some more modern versions of Christianity).”⁷¹ It has been, in other words, a *theological* shift in how people view death—actually a shift in how the person was viewed in relation to his world and to God, and that deliberately and consciously away from an orthodox Christian worldview. The increasing popularity of cremation is often no less “spiritual” than traditional Christian burial, it is just a different spirituality—a nonchristian one.

There have been a variety of factors involved in the cremation movement in America, many of the details of which are beyond the scope of this paper.⁷² These factors have almost universally been nonchristian. The movement gained momentum in the “Gilded Age” following the Civil War and involved class issues,⁷³ immigration, and the emerging sanitarian movement.⁷⁴ Even these factors, however, often had religious and philosophical roots inimical to orthodox Christianity. As but one example, the rural cemetery movement, a project of the (original) sanitarians, had clear religious and philosophical overtones. As Prothero summarizes,

They [the rural cemeteries] symbolized a new, post-Calvinist optimism about the afterlife. While the fear of hell fire and damnation hovered like the plague over old urban grave-

⁷⁰ Prothero, *Purified by Fire*, 157. This analogy was most widely circulated by Frances Newton’s article “Light, Like the Sun,” *The Forum* (1937). It was later published as a book (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1937) and also reprinted in many places, twice in *Reader’s Digest*. Prothero summarizes the gist of the story (*Purified by Fire*, 155–57). It is available on the web at <<http://www.funerals.org/faq/light.htm>>.

⁷¹ Prothero, *Purified by Fire*, 12. These “more modern versions of Christianity” are, of course, anything but orthodox!

⁷² For a fascinating history of these factors, see Prothero, *Purified by Fire*.

⁷³ Cremation was portrayed as the refined practice of the cultured class versus burial by the crass, working class. Advocating cremation was therefore intended as one way to improve the American culture by refining the masses.

⁷⁴ The sanitarian movement originally loathed burial since it supposedly created “miasma” gases as the body decayed, and this spread disease. The later “new” sanitarians shifted their emphasis to germ theory after the miasma theory was disproved. In either case, cremation was viewed as the solution to the problem.

yards, these new rural cemeteries were places to celebrate life on earth and rest in the assurance of eternal life in heaven. As they became popular, the “graveyard” was rechristened the “cemetery” (literally, “sleeping chamber”), and gloomy death’s heads on grave-stones gave way to willows, oaks, and acorns—naturalistic images of life, hope, resurrection, and immortality.⁷⁵

Some parts of this might not sound too bad at first, but this description should be understood in terms of liberal theology which used Christian terminology with a whole new set of definitions. Following this development the new sanitarians sought better ways to dispose of the dead, turning from quarantine (i.e., in the rural cemeteries) to cremation as a more sanitary way to destroy germs being spread by rotting corpses in cemeteries. Since there was considerable Christian resistance to this sanitary solution, the arguments almost always included the theological. The cremation advocates argued vigorously against the biblical metaphors of death, seeking to persuade Americans that rather than planting or sleep or rest, the appropriate descriptions were rotting flesh, body snatchers, worms, decay, and worse. Cremation resolves all this by offering clean, pure ashes.

Cremationists undermined the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead, therefore, not so much by refuting it as by threatening to render it obsolete. It is the soul that is immortal, their rite seemed to say, not the body. The real resurrection occurred at the moment of death, not at the end of time. And what emerged out of the corpse’s decay was not a new body but a disembodied spirit.⁷⁶

The course of the debate and the many different arguments and tactics all relentlessly “nudged American popular theology toward new views of body and soul, death and immortality.”⁷⁷ Throughout the history of the pro-cremation movement in 19th and early 20th century it was almost exclusively unorthodox in leadership. Though this argument should not be pressed too far,⁷⁸ the histories written make it quite clear that “free thinkers,” whether they be Masons, Unitarians, Theosophists, or atheists, were the primary advocates of cremation in this early period, particularly those enamored by eastern thought.⁷⁹

The second stage in the cremation movement in America was not as agenda-driven as the first; “purity [of ideology] had given way to practicality.” In the 20th century, once cremation achieved some degree of legitimacy, it rapidly became a utilitarian, pragmatic, business-driven program. The

⁷⁵ Prothero, *Purified by Fire*, 48.

⁷⁶ Prothero, *Purified by Fire*, 71.

⁷⁷ Prothero, *Purified by Fire*, 73.

⁷⁸ It is, of course, true that unbelievers of many different sorts also bury their dead. The counter to this is that in doing so they are not deliberately casting their practice in anti-Christian terms (in which “Christian” refers to orthodox belief rather than the liberal, anti-supernatural variety of some of the free thinkers).

⁷⁹ Prothero, *Purified by Fire*, 73–76 demonstrates this explicitly (and he is no orthodox believer himself). He later says that “although the cremation movement attracted religious radicals, most cremationists appear to have been committed Christians, and the bulk of the rest adhered to alternative religious traditions such as Swedenborgianism, Spiritualism, Buddhism, and/or Theosophy, rather than to no religion at all” (80–81). These “committed Christians” of whom Prothero speaks, however, were Christians of the liberal variety as his discussion in the context makes clear. He is correct that most advocates of cremation were “religious”—but that in itself is little consolation.

focus was on building a network of crematories that spanned the country. The technology was perfected in what has been called the “bricks and mortar” period. The number of cremations crept slowly upward, but it was not until the late 1960s that the cremation rate reached 5%.⁸⁰

The third (and current) phase of this movement dates to 1963. This is the boom period reflected in the statistics given at the beginning of the paper. From a cremation rate of 4% in 1963 the practice of cremation has increased dramatically to nearly 30% only three decades later. Projections are for continued increase with 43% anticipated by 2025.⁸¹ What was the stimulus for this most recent boom in burnings? Prothero traces it directly to three major factors: Vatican II, an exposé of the funeral industry, and the rise of the counter-culture.⁸²

The Roman Catholic allowance for (but not advocacy of) cremation as part of the decrees of Vatican II removed a significant obstacle to cremation. The “Constitution of Sacred Liturgy” in 1963, and particularly the “Instruction with Regard to the Cremation of Bodies” relaxing the ban on the practice which had been in effect since 1886, still urged burial as more compatible with the doctrine of the resurrection, but cremation was no longer a sin. Though this has had little impact in some predominantly Catholic countries, it has resulted in the rapid increase in Catholic funeral practices in the U.S.⁸³

An even greater impact was made by the publication of Jessica Mitford’s muck-raking book, *The American Way of Death*.⁸⁴ An author could hardly be displeased with the reception accorded this book. It quickly became the number one listing on the *New York Times* bestseller list, resulted in a TV documentary, and the author being titled “Queen of the Muckrakers” by the press. There has been a revision, *The American Way of Death Revisited* (1978), which is still in print. The tone of the book can be gleaned from the first words of the revision:

When funeral directors have taxed me—which they have, and not infrequently—with being beastly about them in my book, I can affirm in good conscience that there is hardly an unkind word about them. In fact, the book is almost entirely given over to expounding *their* point of view.⁸⁵

The reference, of course, is to the funeral industry’s *private* point of view—one which is not on display for their customers! The impact of this book and the resulting government investigations by the FTC has rocked the funeral industry. Mitford’s book has also been a key factor in the substantial increase in “nontraditional” funerals, whether burials or, increasingly so, cremations. Funerals

⁸⁰ The details of this period are provided by Prothero, *Purified by Fire*, 105–59.

⁸¹ “Cremation Gaining Acceptance Among Roman Catholics,” *USA Today*, 4/4/2005, p. 9D.

⁸² Prothero, *Purified by Fire*, 163–212. His actual wording (intended partly for rhetorical effect) is “in the summer of 1963 ... Pope Paul VI and the British satirist Jessica Mitford entered the picture. In November so did assassin Lee Harvey Oswald. Together Mitford, Paul VI, and Oswald—the sixties’ unlikeliest bedfellows—unwittingly conspired to rescue a dying rite” (to which he refers to cremation—and the pun is likely intentional). My summary above reflects the actual events to which Prothero’s rhetoric alludes.

⁸³ The details are given in Prothero, *Purified by Fire*, 165.

⁸⁴ Jessica Mitford, *The American Way of Death* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963).

⁸⁵ Jessica Mitford, *The American Way of Death Revisited* (New York: Albert A. Knopf/Random House, 1978; reprint, New York: Vintage Books/Random House, 1998), 3.

came increasingly to be viewed (by the “customers”) as a consumer issue.⁸⁶ The “traditional funeral” with its skyrocketing cost began to be challenged as any other commodity rather than accepted as inevitable. This led to cremation being viewed as a economic issue: a cheaper solution than burial.⁸⁷

The third major factor in the increased cremation rate since the early 1960s has been the rise of the counter-culture. Prothero suggests that the countercultural “60s” really began November 22, 1963—the date of John F. Kennedy’s assassination. “On that day America began to turn from optimism toward cynicism, from conformity to nonconformity, from excess toward simplicity.”⁸⁸ Since burial was traditional (in America), therefore the counterculture turned to cremation.

Thumbing its nose at the establishment, this countercultural way incorporated cremation rather than burial, the memorial service rather than the funeral. And participants expected these death rites would express the unique personality of the deceased. In an age that celebrated the living body, this alternative insisted on memorializing not the corpse but the living spirit of the person. Rather than gazing with their eyes on an embalmed corpse, non-conforming mourners were urged to recall with their hearts and minds the deceased’s eternal spirit. ‘We honor the memory of the dead person,’ Thomas Weber said, ‘not the cadaver.’⁸⁹

Another movement that was gaining steam at this same time, and often from within the counterculture, was environmentalism. “Save the Land for the Living” became a slogan of the cremationists. Funeral practices express one’s worldview. Thus the counterculture viewed embalming and burial as fake and artificial in contrast with cremation which to them expressed authenticity and naturalness. They did not want to conform to traditional religion but sought spirituality in “personal religion”—that is, one not dictated by an authority (such as God, the Bible, or the church), but based on one’s personal views. Cremation became “a vote against the ‘establishment’—an effort to make a more pluralistic America in which each individual was free to be true to himself or herself, not just in life but also in death.”⁹⁰

This attitude was encapsulated in the cremation of the Beatle, John Lennon, following his murder in 1980. There was no funeral, only a day designated as a public memorial service which was to take place “everywhere and anywhere” on December 14. The cremation was private and unannounced: “what had been a religious rite had become a secular technology.” But this was not a secular event; it was explicitly “spiritual”—only a spirituality that was not Christian. It reflected the

⁸⁶ Mitford’s book “has been hailed as a consumer classic on par with Ralph Nader’s *Unsafe at Any Speed*” (Prothero, *Purified by Fire*, 178). Nader’s book was first published in 1965 (Pocket Books); there was also an edition in 1972 (NY: Grossman) and is now available in a reprint edition (Knightsbridge, 1991).

⁸⁷ Prothero, *Purified by Fire*, 165–77 recounts the impact of Mitford’s book, the Federal Trade Commission’s investigation of the funeral industry, as well as several other consumer-related issues that grew out of the growing scandal. Once funeral directors recognized the inevitable, they embraced cremation and created new ways to spend as much for a cremation service as a burial. On this matter, see not only Prothero’s account, but also Lisa Carlson, *Caring for the Dead: Your Final Act of Love* (Hinesburg, VT: Upper Access, 1998).

⁸⁸ Prothero, *Purified by Fire*, 179.

⁸⁹ Prothero, *Purified by Fire*, 182.

⁹⁰ Prothero, *Purified by Fire*, 183–84.

belief that a person's spirit can be everywhere, no longer limited by the body. The cremation fire would free the spirit to fly to "the big upstairs."⁹¹

Cremation reflects the dramatic shifts in American views of "spirituality" and the radical pluralism of our postmodern culture.

In the same period when Americans were following Lennon into religious alternatives such as Transcendental Meditation, they were crafting ritual alternatives to the old American way of death and theological alternatives to the Judeo-Christian tradition.... They promoted values, such as simplicity and naturalness, cherished by the counterculture. And they helped make plausible alternative theological universes. As the public power of the Judeo-Christian tradition faded and the belief in hell virtually disappeared, belief in the traditional Jewish and Christian conception of the self receded too.... An alternative self-conception was edging its way from the margins into the mainstream of American culture.... [Many] were embracing an alternative view of the self as essentially spiritual.... And they wanted their exits from the world of bodies to reflect their alternative spiritualities. At least for them, white balloons [released at Lennon's Central Park memorial service] resonated as metaphors and cremation was the perfect rite.⁹²

"The perfect rite"—perfect for the expression of the highly individualistic (if not idiosyncratic) ethos of postmodernity as the baby boomers create their own pastiche of religion, including "doing death" their own way.⁹³ Perfect for the pluralistic relativity that refuses to accept a rooted epistemology, to acknowledge any sort of authority in matters religious or philosophical. Yet there runs a common thread in these diverse readings of reality and that is a rejection of the Judeo-Christian worldview in favor of one deeply tinged by heterodox (often Eastern) views of the person. Though some philosophical materialists deem cremation an appropriate dead end, most nonchristian Americans have a vague idea of life after death in which everyone makes it (somewhere!) "up there." Cremation thus frees the spirit from the body (echoing both eastern and ancient Greek ideas of the body as the prison of the soul) so that it can now be "everywhere." The specifics vary. Some have a pantheistic view of the spirit becoming part of "the Force" (a la *Star Wars*), others

⁹¹ Prothero, *Purified by Fire*, 184–86.

⁹² Prothero, *Purified by Fire*, 186–87.

⁹³ See the illuminating transcript from an NPR series in this regard: "Alternative Funerals," transcript of NPR series, "The End of Life," 3/10/1998, <<http://www.npr.org/programs/death/980310.death.html>>, accessed 12/7/2005. In part, "the growing individuality in death rituals comes in part from the influence of baby-boomers, who tend to turn every institution into a form of personal expression."

some form of reincarnation,⁹⁴ and some a nonchristian, pagan version of heaven (sans hell, of course).⁹⁵

6. Conclusion

Although my conclusion has been implied more or less directly at a number of points above, it remains to be asked more directly, is cremation a Christian option? Before addressing such a blunt question, we should begin with broader questions.

First, does the Bible ever command, encourage, or condone cremation as an acceptable practice for disposing of a believer's corpse? The obvious answer must be no. This practice is scarcely mentioned in the Bible, and when it is, it is almost always in a negative light. The practice and its associations are most commonly associated with judgment. In the cases where it is practiced by God's command (by statute or in ad hoc situations) it is always the result of sin and is intentionally used to dramatize the extent of the rebellion involved and the severity of God's judgment.⁹⁶

Is cremation ever allowed in the Bible? Though we might dispute exactly what is meant by "allowed," the biblical data does suggest that in exceptional situations the practice is not condemned. That is not exactly a positive endorsement of the practice! In the case of King Saul and his sons, as well as the prophetic picture in Amos 6, cremation is referenced, but in the context of war. In both instances the war was the result of disobedience (by Saul on the one hand, by Israel as a whole in the other). These are not appropriate instances on which to build a defense of cremation as a normal (or normative) practice. They *may* be adequate to allow it in unusual circumstances (though it is a scanty basis at best).⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Cremation is not the only resort in a reincarnation system. For the avant-garde (and wealthy) of the New Age, there is the option of mummification—the opposite end of the spectrum from cremation. The Salt Lake new age spiritual group known as Some Mum offers this option starting at \$35,000. The benefit? It gives the soul "time to adjust before having to vacate the body" ("Alternative Funerals," NPR transcript, 3/10/1998). Mummification is not the same as embalming. Whereas embalming is intended to make the corpse presentable for days or weeks, mummification preserves the corpse for hundreds, possibly thousands of years, thus the higher price tag.

⁹⁵ Supplementing these theological/philosophical worldview issues that are expressed in cremation are some additional pragmatic issues. Likely few of them would prompt the practice of cremation (that requires an ideology), but each of them make the worldview more attractive. The Cremation Association of North America lists eight trends that affect cremation: "People are dying older; migration to retirement locations is increasing; cremation is becoming more acceptable as a normal form of disposition; environmental considerations are becoming more important; level of education is rising; ties to tradition are becoming weaker; regional differences are diminishing; and the origin of immigrants is changing" (Prothero, *Purified by Fire*, 207–08; the data is from 1998, but no source is identified beyond the name of the cremation association).

⁹⁶ I fully realize that much of the biblical material is descriptive narrative and description is not, in itself, prescriptive. Description does, however, have greater force when there is a high degree of uniformity of such practices, and even more so when there are theological implications and principles drawn from or based on uniform narrative patterns. My argument in this paper is that it is this broader picture that frames the conclusion regarding cremation. Only when the theological considerations are included does the narrative pattern become significant. When the various cultural issues are added, then the conclusion becomes much more solid.

⁹⁷ I have in mind here such situations as massive natural disasters, the ravages of war, etc.

Must our funeral practices be dictated by the cultural practices of Bible times? Many Bible customs are strictly cultural in nature and contain no normative mandate (e.g, the “holy kiss greeting”). Others, however, either contain or embody theological truth and are used as such to teach Christian doctrine. Although the exact nature of a grave may be cultural (and perhaps even “geographical/geological”) in that it may be an earth-dug grave or a man-made monument/tomb, the practice of burial appears to be used theologically in the Bible. It is not only the basis of Jesus’ teaching on resurrection but is the basis of Paul’s extended theological explanation of resurrection. In such cases the practice should be viewed as not merely cultural but also theologically normative.

Is it irrelevant that when Christianity spread across the western world, cremation ceased to be the most prevalent practice?⁹⁸ Though burial was, indeed, Jewish, the early church was soon a Gentile majority as the gospel spread across the Roman world. In Gentile areas the norm was cremation due to the many centuries of Greco-Roman influence. Yet Christianity—even Gentile Christianity—never adopted or practiced cremation so far as we know. This would suggest that the Christian world view (including the Christian doctrines of creation and resurrection) inherently rejected a pagan practice viewed as incompatible with Christianity.

What practice best reflects the Christian hope of the gospel? Should we be concerned to testify to our hope even in the form of our funerals and the disposition of our corpses? I would suggest that this is the case and that burial of the body presents a much clearer picture of resurrection than does the deliberate destruction of the body by fire. Although only an analogy, Paul’s picture in 1 Corinthians 15 of death and resurrection as that of a seed which germinates is a deliberate and important analogy. True, some bodies are not planted in the grave; they may be interred in the sea, torn apart by wild animals or explosions, or burned to ashes. Paul’s analogy is based on normal experience, not the atypical experience of others. The analogy is deliberately chosen to illustrate the resurrection. If we are to proclaim the hope of the gospel in death, we are wise to conduct our funerals and dispose of our corpses in a similar way. Reducing a corpse to ashes and scattering it across the landscape does not seem to reflect the Christian hope of resurrection.⁹⁹ The mental picture seems to be at odds with our theology. It would seem most appropriate to preserve the deliberate biblical analogy of a seed planted rather than devise a new fiery picture—one never used theologically in the Bible to portray the death or resurrection of the believer.

How do we best express the honor due the human body? If we are, indeed, to honor the body as a good creation of God for the various reasons discussed earlier, how do we do this? Both burial and cremation produce essentially the same result: the dissolution of the body. Burial does so more slowly (and even more slowly when the corpse is embalmed¹⁰⁰), cremation more rapidly. Yet there is an important difference. Cremation is an active process in which people actually destroy the body in a very deliberate fashion. Burial is passive, allowing God’s normal processes (in a sin-cursed world) to accomplish this end without deliberate action by anyone. God’s judgment on Adam (and his intention for his race) was that he “return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust

⁹⁸ Prothero, *Purified by Fire*, 6.

⁹⁹ Yes, the ashes can be buried rather than scattered, but what sort of picture are we creating by first burning the body? This question is considered in the next paragraph above.

¹⁰⁰ Embalming is a nearly unique American practice of not much more than a century vintage. It was not until after the Civil War that this practice began. It is neither legislated nor necessary for burial. It does not preserve the corpse forever (for which mummification is necessary; see n. 94).

you are and to dust you will return” (Gen. 3:19). God has never charged us with the responsibility for destroying the body. It is his prerogative to return it to dust as he sees fit. We need not hasten the process (nor should we attempt to prevent it). Deliberate destruction by fire and grinding seems a quite inappropriate means by which to “honor” the body, and that despite the word games played by cremationists to make the burning and grinding sound palatable.¹⁰¹

So, is cremation a Christian option? Is it a wise or legitimate decision for Christians in regards to their own funeral preferences or those of their loved ones? I would not go so far as to declare flatly that cremation is sin. In some cases it may be acceptable without embarrassment, but it would appear that the wisest decision most compatible with Christian theology and the most effective in terms of Christian witness is inhumation.¹⁰²

When one adds to the considerations above the cultural significance of cremation in contemporary culture and in other world religions, this conclusion seems even stronger. It would seem to be significant that the practice of cremation has been so arduously argued and advocated by those opposed to our basic faith—and in deliberate contrast to it as well. We do ourselves no favor by adopting the rituals of our theological adversaries in spite of the theological and philosophical underpinnings of those practices.

The history of the practice demonstrates clearly that cremation has not been developed on Christian principles. In almost every instance it has been based on an actively nonchristian worldview. It has rarely been advocated as a “neutral” practice.¹⁰³ In essence I would argue that cremation has become both accepted and popular in an inverse proportion to a knowledge of the Bible and Christian theology. Whether this is in the mainline, liberal protestant denominations, in Romanism, or in *content-less, emotion-oriented, pragmatic evangelical and fundamental churches*, the result has been the same: the rejection of the biblical practice of burial for a rite originated by and advocated by a nonchristian worldview.¹⁰⁴

Christians sometimes respond to this sort of conclusion that it doesn’t matter what happens to the body because God will resurrect it anyway. While a partially true statement (in that God is not hindered by any form of disposal), this ignores the theological significance of the body and the deliberate resurrection imagery of burial.

Others argue that cremation is economically more sensible. There are two responses to this argument. First, since when have economic factors been determinative in theological issues?¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹ The epitome of these semantic games is Frances Newton’s “Light, Like the Sun” (see n. 70).

¹⁰² This might be described as an “active discouragement” position. In some situations cremation could well be considered sin if done as an act of defiance to God—but that is not a typical Christian motive.

¹⁰³ The only instances of “neutrality” of which I am aware are some Christians (who likely do not know the history and significance of cremation) and the reluctant funeral directors who built a business on cremation as an accommodation to a growing practice (i.e., business pragmatism and profit-seeking).

¹⁰⁴ True, many Christians who choose cremation do not view this choice with the same religious and philosophical connotations as do adherents of nonchristian religions or philosophies. It is often an “innocent” decision reflecting lack of information rather than an activist decision to advocate a particular worldview. This, however, only reflects that the church has failed to teach her people in this area.

¹⁰⁵ This is not to suggest that economic factors are irrelevant. It does claim, however, that in itself this does not constitute a determinative argument. The difference in the cost of a funeral is not between burial and cremation, but between extravagance and simplicity. It is likely that more savings could be realized in refraining from large quantities of costly floral arrangements and from abstaining from caskets that cost

Second, it is a false picture to see cremation as inexpensive and burial as expensive. The funeral industry has a financial motivation to make either alternative as expensive as possible. Funerals involving cremation can be just as expensive as burial. Contrariwise, it is possible to have a burial for far less money than the national average (which is probably around \$8,500, which may not include cemetery costs). It is both possible and legal (in most [not all] states, including Pennsylvania) to bury a body with no involvement of a funeral home at all. The family can handle all the arrangements themselves, including obtaining a death certificate, building or providing the casket and (in some localities) even burying the body themselves.¹⁰⁶ That is, after all, the way funerals have been handled until quite recently.¹⁰⁷ But that is another, as yet unwritten, paper: A Christian View of Death and Funeral Practices.¹⁰⁸

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thousands of dollars. There is no need to impress friends and family with extravagance in these areas, especially since they are of very temporary duration and value.

One aspect that does need to be considered in this regard is that in very northern climates it may not be possible to dig a grave during the coldest part of the year, necessitating storage of the corpse. I do not know what the legal or financial implications of this might be, or if there are other alternatives. This question came as feedback to the original version of this paper and I have not yet had time to pursue it. I note it here to balance the discussion and suggest an area for further study.

¹⁰⁶ For the details and instructions along this line, see Lisa Carlson, *Caring for the Dead*. There is also an NPR transcript that explores this option (“Do It Yourself Funerals,” transcript of NPR series, “The End of Life,” 12/8/1997, <<http://www.npr.org/programs/death/971208.death.html>>, accessed 12/7/2005).

¹⁰⁷ On this topic see not only Prothero’s account, but also Farrell, *Inventing the American Way of Death, 1830–1920*; Flood, “Contemplating Corpses: The Dead Body in American Culture, 1870–1920”; and Lisa Ann Kazmier, “A Modern Landscape: The British Way of Death in the Age of Cremation” (Ph.D. diss., Rutgers, 2005).

¹⁰⁸ This is the title for a paper that I have *not* written (yet). Perhaps at a later time.... I had at one time contemplated a section in the present paper that would have included some reflections on this issue, but time and space have conspired against that becoming a reality at this time—and the paper is already longer than can be presented in the usual Faculty Forum session.

There are numerous other questions related to cremation that have not been considered at all in this paper—all of them very relevant and important to evaluate from a Christian viewpoint. They include topics/questions such as the following. Should a pastor officiate at a cremation funeral/memorial service? How does a pastor handle counseling on this subject in a bereavement situation? What (and how) should a pastor do by way of teaching the flock entrusted to his care regarding funeral practices? And if you teach that cremation is less than Christian, how do you handle situations in which church folks have already cremated family members? What is a Christian to do in situations in which cremation is legislated (e.g., some parts of Japan)? Etc.

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