

Is It Better to Bury or to Burn? A Biblical Perspective on Cremation and Christianity in Western Culture

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1. Introduction

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

I would propose to you that these are, indeed, important questions and ones that the church must face. In past generations this question was largely ignored in our churches and in our seminaries. I suspect that was because such a practice was rare—perhaps nearly nonexistent in conservative churches. Cremation was foreign, not only to conservative Christianity, but also to western culture. It was typically viewed as a pagan Eastern practice.

When I was a seminary student in the 1970s, cremation was not mentioned in my ethics class or textbooks.² In more than a half century I have never heard the subject 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 which I pastored ever being cremated. 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.

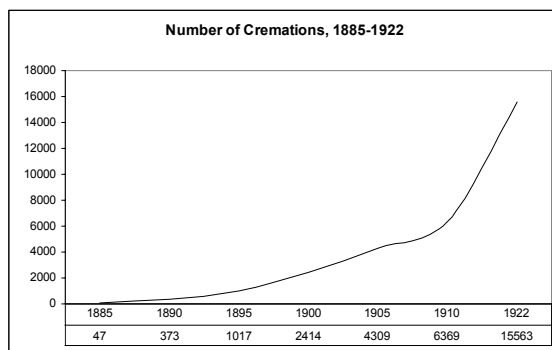
Perhaps my experience is atypical (or my memory faulty), but I suspect that discussion of cremation by conservative churches is less common than one might hope. My own attention was first focused on this topic only a year ago in connection with a new church that I was helping one of my students plant. In that inner city, heavily Roman Catholic and Russian Orthodox context, one of the ladies attending North Valley Baptist Church died quite unexpectedly—but left a request that she be cremated. Such a request was not only unusual for our church, it was also atypical in our community. In the wake of that event I have had to grapple with the acceptability of such a practice for a Christian. The following essay is the record of my pursuit of this very question. I began my quest for an answer with no fixed opinion one way or the other.

¹ I am certainly not suggesting that 1 Cor 7:9 has anything to do with cremation or that this is a hermeneutical use of the text. Though I would like to think this note is unnecessary, I have discovered that not everyone appreciates or understands what I intend only as a "clever" title!

² I have ten books on my shelf that deal with Christian ethics (a number of which were seminary textbooks for an ethics class) which might be expected to at least mention the subject of cremation. Not one lists it in the index or the table of contents.

What do we know of the practice of cremation in our country? Let me sketch briefly the history of the practice. As I do, I think the facts and statistics will demonstrate why this is becoming a much more urgent matter for the church at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

The first American cremation was that of Colonel Henry Laurens, the president of the Continental Congress.³ Laurens was paranoid of being buried alive, so he specified in his will that his family would inherit his estate only if they cremated his body. Although I am not sure how Laurens perceived the possibility of being cremated alive as any particular improvement over being buried alive, his family did cremate his (presumably dead!) corpse on an open pyre 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 notoriety of being the first person 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 limited 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.



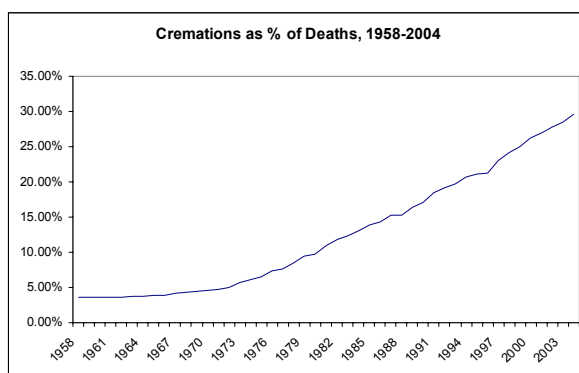
The 20th century saw increased interest in cremation, though the rate of increase was slower. The 1% boundary was crossed in the early 1920s, 2% in the 1930s, and 3% in the 1940s. By contrast, Great Britain's rate, though initially much slower, rapidly overtook the US rate, exceeding it in the 1950s. 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 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% by 2004.⁴ There are

³ Many (not all) 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.

⁴ The 2004 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

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 Greece⁵ where the practice has been illegal until two weeks ago.⁶ 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.⁷

So that is where we stand at the beginning of a new century. A funeral practice that was practically unknown 100 years ago has become mainstream and appears to be growing quite rapidly. What are we to make of this new cultural approach to death in the West? Is it a positive gain to be celebrated? Many would argue that it is. Is it a sinful, heathen practice to be forbidden for Christians? Is it an amoral practice in the proverbial "gray area" which should be left to individual preference?



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 the year 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").

⁵ Anthee Carassave, "A Grave Issue," *Time*, web exclusive, 11/21/2005, <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 burial plots are only *rented* for three years (after which the remains are moved to mass graves so the original plot can be reused).

⁶ On March 1, 2006 the Greek legislature voted to allow cremation by non-Greeks and those not part of the Greek Orthodox Church. Although the church remains strongly opposed to the practice, the law does make provision for church members to be cremated if certain conditions are met ("New Greek Law Permits Cremation," Reuters, *International Herald Tribune, Europe*, 3/3/2006, <<http://www.ihf.com/articles/2006/03/02/news/greece.php>>, accessed 3/4/2006).

⁷ 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. The figures have been verified from the tables given at <www.cremationassociation.org>.

Terminology

We will 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 deposit (a corpse) in the ground, in a tomb; to inter.”⁸ The more technical term for earth burial is *inhumation*: “the action or practice of burying in the ground.”⁹ In this sense, a grave is a hole dug in the ground to bury a corpse.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ *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 or barrow; *inhumation* is only used in the more narrow sense of burial in a dug grave.¹² 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.¹³ 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 more common (in our day and culture) burial practices.

Cremation. The disposal of a corpse by means of fire is referred to generally as cremation. Ancient practice as well as that in many places in the world yet today accomplished this on an open pyre in which the flesh is burned. In the ancient world it is likely that such cremations were often only partial. That is, the flesh was consumed, but the bones remained largely intact. In such a case the bones would still be disposed by burial. The wealth of the individual also had its effects. Wealthy families could afford more elaborate pyres as well as pitch and oil to enable 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.¹⁴

⁸ *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1971), s.v. *bury*. (Hereafter cited as *OED*.)

⁹ *OED*, s.v. *inhumation*.

¹⁰ This is the normal meaning of *grave*. Note the definition of *OED*: “a place of burial; an excavation in the earth for the reception of a corpse” (s.v. *grave*). Related terms, often implying shallow burial or burial “on” the ground under a manmade structure (which may be only a pile of dirt or rocks) or in a manmade tomb, include *cairn*, *tumulus*, *barrow*, (*sepulchral*) *mound*, and *sepulcher*; see also *cenotaph* (a monument sans body).

¹¹ *OED* offers two definitions which together reflect the summary above: “1. A place of burial; an excavation in earth or rock for the reception of a dead body, a grave.... 2. A monument erected to enclose or cover the body and preserve the memory of the dead” (s.v. *tomb*).

¹² These distinctions are English ones. The Hebrew and Greek terms cover a larger semantic domain: קִבְרָה and θάπτω refer to both burial and inhumation; קִבְרָה as well as τάφος and μνημα/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.

¹³ *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.”

¹⁴ Paul E. Irion, *Cremation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968), 7–8.

In contemporary Western culture this burning has seemed crude and distasteful to “modern (and postmodern) sensibilities.” As a result technology has been employed to accomplish the same end in a more “refined” process. Cremation in this context is therefore often defined or explained apart from any reference to burning. Thus we are told that cremation is the reduction of a dead corpse to ash and bone fragments through rapid oxidation caused by intense heat.¹⁵ This is accomplished in special crematory furnaces heated to at least 1400° F.¹⁶ Some cremationist literature claims that the body never contacts the flame; it is the intense heat in the furnace that reduces the body to ash.¹⁷ The process now takes only a few hours (depending on the size of the body) and produces 5–7 pounds of bone fragments (sometimes referred to by the neologism, *cremains*). These fragments are run through a mechanical grinder, shredder, or tumbler to reduce the bone fragments to a small size. Although popularly referred to as “ashes,” these remains are not like the soft flakes characteristic of wood ash; they are more like sand with some larger bone fragments the size of rice, though this depends on the equipment used (newer systems produce a very fine powder).

2. Biblical References to Cremation

What does the Bible say about the practice of cremation? Despite claims to the contrary,¹⁸ 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

The first biblical instance of a cremation is found in 1 Samuel 31 which records the cremation of Saul and his sons.

¹⁵ See, e.g., “Cremation Explained” (Cremation Association of North America, n.d.), 3: “The enclosed body is placed in the cremation chamber where through heat and evaporation the body is reduced to its basic elements.”

¹⁶ This varies depending on the age and type equipment used. Some states have legislated higher temperatures, though the industry contests the necessity of this, pointing to *increased* air pollution statistics as a result of a higher burn temperature. <www.cremationassociation.org/html/environment.html> and <www.cremationassociation.org/html/test_results.html>, both accessed 2/19/2006.

¹⁷ Although it *may* be true that in some types of crematory furnaces the corpse is never touched by the flame which generates the heat in the retort, this does not appear to be generally the case. (I cannot document any specifics of such a furnace design; I will assume that the cremationist literature claiming such [see the Appendix for one such claim, though the statement is a bit evasive] may be valid in some instances.) In what appears to be a fairly standard system, however, this is explicitly not the case. In a private tour of a local crematory the sexton explicitly pointed out the position of the flame in the retort and commented on the importance of positioning the corpse so that the flame was centered on the torso to insure the most complete and rapid burning. Also in the required paperwork for another crematory in my area the terms and conditions clearly specify that the body will be “totally and irreversibly destroyed by prolonged exposure to intense heat and direct flame” (“Maple Hill Crematory Authorization For Cremation and Disposition,” Archbald, Pa.).

¹⁸ 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 (Gen 38:24; Lev 20:14; 21:9; 1 Sam 31:11–13; 2 Chron 16:14, the last of which is likely invalid).

⁸The Philistines ... found Saul and his three sons fallen on Mount Gilboa. ⁹They cut off his head and ... ¹⁰fastened his body to the wall of Beth Shan.

¹¹When the people of Jabesh Gilead heard of what the Philistines had done to Saul, ¹²all their valiant men journeyed through the night to Beth Shan. They took down the bodies of Saul and his sons from the wall of Beth Shan and went to Jabesh, where they burned them. ¹³Then they took their bones and buried them under a tamarisk tree at Jabesh (1 Sam 31:8-13).¹⁹

Following a disastrous battle with the Philistines, Saul's corpse is decapitated by his enemies and hung on the city wall of Beth Shan along with his sons. To redress this affront, the valiant men of Jabesh Gilead²⁰ undertook a covert night time commando raid of Beth Shan to retrieve the bodies.²¹ After returning to Jabesh (about 10 miles distant) with the four corpses, they cremated the bodies there and then buried the bones. These 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.²² 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).²³ The necessities of war are often different from "ordinary life."

The second reference to a cremation in the Bible is found in connection with God's judgment of Moab for an otherwise unknown historical event that is recorded in Amos 2.

¹⁹ English citations of the biblical text in this essay usually follow the wording of the NIV, though a few changes have been made where helpful for clarity. When longer passages are cited the text is sometimes abridged for economies of space and time and to focus attention on the statements most directly related to the issue at hand. In such cases ellipses are always employed to indicate the elided material. Readers are encouraged to consult their own texts for the full account.

²⁰ This may reflect their loyalty to Saul for his deliverance of that city 30 years earlier as his first "royal act" as king of Israel (1 Sam 11:1-11). It may also be relevant that many in Benjamin were descended from mothers from Jabesh Gilead (see Judg 21), indeed, Saul likely had a (great?) grandmother from Jabesh Gilead, accounting for his motivation to deliver that city. See Eugene H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 180-82. A contrary position is argued by Diana Edelman, "Jabesh-Gilead," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. D. N. Freedman, 3:594-95 (New York: Doubleday, 1992). She argues that the practice of cremation evident at Jabesh Gilead proves that the inhabitants were non-Semites, not Israelites. This conclusion, however, unjustly extrapolates one isolated event into an on-going, normative practice in the city. Given the historical background of Judges 21, it is practically certain that this was, indeed, an Israelite town. In the distress over the Benjamite disaster, the people ask, "Which one of the tribes of Israel failed to assemble before the Lord at Mizpah?" They discovered that no one from Jabesh Gilead had come to the camp for the assembly" (Judg 21:8). To circumvent this clear identity, one would have to postulate different inhabitants for Jabesh Gilead by the time of 1 Samuel 31—yet there is no evidence for this. Edelman avoids the problem by denying the historicity and accuracy of these texts.

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

²² 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). This appears more likely than the attempt to make this a special honor accorded Israel's "first royalty" as William E. Phipps proposes ("The Consuming Fire for Corpses," *Christian Century*, 4 Mar 1981, p. 221).

²³ The bones are later exhumed and reburied in the family tomb at Zela in Benjamin (2 Sam 21:11-14).

This is what YHWH says:

For three sins of Moab,
 even for four, I will not turn back my wrath.
 Because he burned, as if to lime,
 the bones of Edom's king,
²I will send fire upon Moab
 that will consume the fortresses of Kerioth.
 Moab will go down in great tumult
 amid war cries and the blast of the trumpet.
³I will destroy her ruler
 and kill all her officials with him,"
 says YHWH (Amos 2:1-3).

The Moabites burned the bones of an Edomite king, "as if to lime."²⁴ We can only speculate whether this was the result of a military victory (similar to the Philistines' treatment of Saul) or more likely, 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 forms of 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*. God's words are, "I will not turn back [my wrath from Moab] *because he burned ... the bones...*" (Amos 2:1).²⁵ Moab's action was considered not only sinful, but of such a magnitude as to prompt God's drastic judgment. This is as close as the Bible gets to condemning the act of cremation.²⁶

The only other reference to an actual cremation comes in Amos 6.

Adonai YHWH has sworn by himself—YHWH Elohim declares:

"I abhor the pride of Jacob
 and detest his fortresses;
 I will deliver up the city
 and everything in it."

⁹If ten men are left in one house, they too will die. ¹⁰And if a relative who is to burn the bodies comes to carry them out of the house and asks anyone still hiding there, "Is anyone with you?" and he says, "No," then he will say, "Hush!" We must not mention the name YHWH" (Amos 6:8-10).

As a result of Israel's sin (Amos 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

²⁴ Gary Smith suggests that the comparison of the remains with lime was to emphasize the totality of the destruction (Amos: A Commentary, Library of Biblical Interpretation [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989], 62). That is, there were no bones or bone fragments left to bury.

²⁵ The causal statement is expressed with לְ + infinitive construct. Note the parallels in Amos 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).

²⁶ 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 proof text which forbids cremation in all situations.

attempt to clean up the casualties. A relative is said to carry the bodies out of the house to burn them (6:10).²⁷ In the carnage of war, normal burial is not always possible, especially when the number of casualties is high.²⁸

These three examples—and especially the fact that there are *only* three—suggest that cremation was not the normal practice of God’s people. It was accepted (apparently, so far as the text indicates, without condemnation from God) in exceptional situations, viz., in war (1 Sam 31; Amos 6).²⁹ However when it was employed (apparently) as an inhumane act of desecration 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.

These three passages are either historical narrative or prophetic genre—and all under the governance of the old covenant. As such they are not, in and of themselves, normative. They merely record what happened in two specific situations or what would happen in a future judgment situation. It is not legitimate to build a theological conclusion on such texts. They do, however, form the first part of a larger picture of the biblical view of cremation. We must pursue other aspects of the question before attempting to formulate a conclusion.

²⁷ Other translations/interpretations of v 10 are possible. NASB substitutes a functional equivalent (“undertaker,” in place of “the one burning him” or “his burner”), and ESV opts for “anoints” rather than the more traditional “burns” (as in KJV, NIV, RSV, NRSV, HCSB). The use of “anoints” to translate *אָנִיחַ* reflects the proposal of G. R. Driver in “A Hebrew Burial Custom,” *ZAW* 66 (1954): 314–15. The text can also be understood as referring to someone who burns incense or a memorial fire for the deceased (see BDB, 977 and HCSB mg). For a discussion of the text and its meaning in this context, see John J. Davis, *What About Cremation? A Christian Perspective* (Winona Lake, Ind.: BMH, 1989), 66–69.

²⁸ 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; <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 Ezekiel 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.

²⁹ It is quite interesting that in the parallel account of Saul’s burial in 1 Chronicles 10:12 the cremation is omitted (as it also is in Josephus, *Ant.*, 6.14.8); the Chronicler—who may have been inclined to omit potentially offensive or negative details—tells us only that Saul was buried: “[they] took the bodies of Saul and his sons and brought them to Jabesh. Then they buried their bones under the great tree of Jabesh.” It is noteworthy, however, that the very next statement in the text is that “Saul died because he was unfaithful to the Lord so the Lord put him to death.... (1 Chron 10:13). Both of these features illustrate the very focused, selective nature of the Chronicler’s narrative (on which see Wm. LaSor, D. Hubbard, and F. Bush, *Old Testament Survey* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982], 630–37 and R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969], 1158–62).

2.2. God's Use of Fire for Judgment

There are a number of instances recorded in the Old Testament in which God employed fire to bring death in judgment, either directly or indirectly.³⁰ In these situations there is at least “partial cremation” of the bodies of those killed in judgment.

The death of Nadab and Abihu as judgment for offering unauthorized fire before the Lord comes by fire:

Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu took their censers, put fire in them and added incense; and they offered unauthorized fire before YHWH, contrary to his command. ²So fire came out from the presence of YHWH and consumed them, and they died before YHWH (Lev 10:1-2).

In this instance fire is the means of capital punishment. Just as fire from the Lord devoured the burnt offering in Leviticus 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.³¹ There is no statement in the text regarding the final disposal of the remains outside the camp.

The account of Korah's rebellion is explicit that God used fire to consume 250 people who rebelled against Moses' God-given authority:

Korah son of Izhar, the son of Kohath, the son of Levi, and certain Reubenites ... became insolent ²and rose up against Moses. With them were 250 Israelite men, well-known community leaders who had been appointed members of the council. ³They came as a group to oppose Moses and Aaron and said to them, “You have gone too far! The whole community is holy, every one of them, and YHWH is with them. Why then do you set yourselves above YHWH's assembly?”

¹⁶Moses said to Korah, “You and all your followers are to appear before YHWH tomorrow—you and they and Aaron. ¹⁷Each man is to take his censer and put incense in it—250 censers in all—and present it before YHWH. You and Aaron are to present your censers also.” ¹⁸So each man took his censer, put fire and incense in it, and stood with Moses and Aaron at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. ¹⁹When Korah had gathered all his followers in opposition to them at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting, the glory of YHWH appeared to the entire assembly....

³⁵And fire came out from YHWH and consumed the 250 men who were offering the incense.

³⁶YHWH said to Moses, ³⁷“Tell Eleazar son of Aaron, the priest, to take the censers out of the smoldering remains and scatter the coals some distance away, for the censers are holy—³⁸the censers of the men who sinned at the cost of their lives. Hammer the censers into sheets to overlay the altar,

³⁰ Sodom and 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.

³¹ 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 and 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.

for they were presented before YHWH and have become holy. Let them be a sign to the Israelites” (Num 16:1-38 *passim*).³²

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.³³

The final such account is found in Joshua 7 which records the initial defeat of the Israelites in their attempt to capture the city of Ai.

¹But the Israelites acted unfaithfully in regard to the devoted things; Achan ... took some of them. So YHWH’s anger burned against Israel.... ¹⁰YHWH said to Joshua, “... ¹¹Israel has sinned; they have violated my covenant, which I commanded them to keep. They have taken some of the devoted things; they have stolen, they have lied, they have put them with their own possessions....” ¹³“this is what YHWH, the God of Israel, says: That which is devoted is among you, O Israel. You cannot stand against your enemies until you remove it.... ¹⁵He who is caught with the devoted things shall be destroyed by fire, along with all that belongs to him. He has violated the covenant of YHWH and has done a disgraceful thing in Israel!” ...

²⁰Achan replied, “It is true! I have sinned against YHWH, the God of Israel. This is what I have done: ²¹When I saw in the plunder a beautiful robe from Babylonia, two hundred shekels of silver and a wedge of gold weighing fifty shekels, I coveted them and took them.” ...

²⁴Then Joshua, together with all Israel, took Achan son of Zerah, the silver, the robe, the gold wedge, his sons and daughters, his cattle, donkeys and sheep, his tent and all that he had, to the Valley of Achor.... Then all Israel stoned him, and after they had stoned the rest, they burned them.

²⁶Over Achan they heaped up a large pile of rocks, which remains to this day. Then YHWH turned from his fierce anger (Josh 7:1-26 *passim*).

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).

Once again, these are narrative records and as such, are not inherently normative. It is instructive, however, as to the associations that God’s OT people would have made with fiery events of this nature. Such a history of judgment fire “hardly provided a positive incentive for the burial practice of cremation”³⁴ in ancient Israel.

³² 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).

³³ 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).

³⁴ Davis, *What About Cremation?* 62.

2.3. Legal Stipulations for Cremation

The old covenant stipulated 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 capital punishment, but death and subsequent³⁵ 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 the corpse is intended to represent an exceptionally severe judgment.³⁶ 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.³⁷

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*. In each case, however, the punishment is exceptional and deliberately graphic. These instances parallel those already examined in that they do not portray normative Israelite funerary practice but appear in exceptional and judgment contexts.

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 dearth³⁸ of a positive symbolism of such language presents a situation in which cremation would have largely negative

³⁵ 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 (so C. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament*, 25 vols. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968], 2:427 and, in connection with Lev 21:9, Allen Ross, *Holiness to the Lord: A Guide to the Exposition of the Book of Leviticus* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002], 385–86). 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 Genesis 38:24 suggests this, but even if so, it is not a God-ordained action in this case). The events of Joshua 7 in which Achan is first stoned then burned probably portrays the normal procedure in such instances. For a contrary view (burned alive), see W. Bennett, “Death and Disposal of the Dead (Jewish),” in *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. J. Hastings, 4:497–500 [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1911], 4:498.

³⁶ The commentators say little (or nothing!) about this provision. R. Laird Harris, e.g., notes that this is a “peculiar provision” for a “type of incest [which] was regarded as especially reprehensible” (“Leviticus,” in *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. F. Gaebelin, 2:499–654 [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990], 613).

³⁷ 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.

³⁸ This is not a totally negative image, but the preponderance is clearly one of judgment. A positive image can be seen in Zechariah 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 the tongues of fire at Pentecost (Acts 2:3) form 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).

connotations in the cultures of the Bible.³⁹ 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; 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 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 Pet 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).

In themselves, these passages say nothing directly regarding cremation. They do, however, help us sense how God’s people would have viewed such a practice against their conceptual world view. Every culture has its ingrained figural associations, but these conceptions vary from culture to culture. For example, *oil* has very different associations and figurative connotations in our culture when compared with oil imagery in Bible times. Though perhaps not as negative to 21st century Americans, fire would have had a much more negative association for the Israelites. That fire would form any part of their funeral practice seems quite unlikely.⁴⁰

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

³⁹ 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 necessarily have the same response. On this, see the discussion below regarding cultural issues in the modern world.

⁴⁰ This leaves open, of course, the significance of such imagery today when the same associations are likely not present. The discussion above serves only to help us conceptualize an ancient world view and explain why cremation is apparently so foreign to the world of the Bible. Contemporary associations and significance in this regard is considered later in the essay.

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 that practice.⁴¹

3. Biblical Funeral Practices

In contrast to exceptional instances involving cremation, we next consider the customary practices of God’s people in Bible times. 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 the terms קָבַר (“to bury”) and קֶבֶר (“grave”)—which together occur 200 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), or on a hill (2 Chron 32:33).⁴² This may be either earth burial in a dug grave, or interment in a tomb. In the NT θάπτω (“to bury”) is used 10 times, always of burial, e.g., in a tomb (Acts 2:29). Likewise ταφή (“burial”) and τάφος (“grave”), used 7 times total, describe burial, e.g., in a field (Matt 27:7).⁴³

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 tombs. Individual graves and small cemeteries would easily disappear if the rock piles marking the graves were destroyed, scattered, or reused.⁴⁴ 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.⁴⁵

⁴¹ 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. A representative article from this perspective is Daniel Schiff, “Cremation: Considering Contemporary Concerns,” *Journal of Reform Judaism* 34 (1987): 37–48. Similar views from the conservative wing of Judaism may be found in David L. Abramson, “Concerning Cremation: One Rabbi’s Perspective,” *Conservative Judaism* 51 (1998): 32–45.

⁴² 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.

⁴³ See also συγκομίζω (“to harvest,” used metaphorically of burial; see BDAG, 952), ἐνταφιάζω (“to prepare for burial, bury”), ἐνταφιασμός (“preparation for burial, burial”), and συνθάπτω (“to bury with,” only metaphorical in NT), as well as idiomatic expressions such as προστίθῃμι πρὸς τοὺς πατέρας αὐτοῦ (“to place with his fathers”). For details of the usage of these forms, see J. Louw and E. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, 2 vols. (2d ed., New York: UBS, 1989), Domain 52, “Funerals and Burial,” 1:530–31.

⁴⁴ 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

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.⁴⁶

Even criminals who were executed were granted burial. The Law contains specific provisions for this in the case of hanging (Deut 21:22–23).⁴⁷ 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).⁴⁸ 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).

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 (John 2). 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

which may have been inscribed or marked in some way to identify the nature of the grave (2 Kgs 23:17, a “tombstone” [NIV], or “monument” [HCSB] identified the grave of a particular prophet).

⁴⁵ A cemetery with over 800 such graves is found near Qumran—the piles of rock marking each grave are 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, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2004), 152–62.

⁴⁶ For details, see Elizabeth Bloch-Smith, “Burials,” *ABD* 1:785–89 and Rachel Hachlili, “Burials, Ancient Jewish,” *ABD* 1:789–94. Allusion to this “reburial” or “secondary burial” may be the significance of the OT phrase “gathered to his fathers” (e.g., Gen 25:8).

⁴⁷ 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.

⁴⁸ This is one of the few instances (perhaps the only?) of קבר not having inhumation as its referent—yet here the context makes it very clear that this is an exceptional “burial.”

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.⁴⁹ 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 records the details:

¹Then Moses climbed Mount Nebo from the plains of Moab to the top of Pisgah, across from Jericho. There YHWH showed him the whole land ... ⁴Then YHWH said to him, “This is the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob when I said, ‘I will give it to your descendants.’ I have let you see it with your eyes, but you will not cross over into it.” ⁵And Moses the servant of YHWH died there in Moab, as YHWH had said. ⁶He buried him in Moab, in the valley opposite Beth Peor, but to this day no one knows where his grave is (Deut 34:1-5).

The antecedent of the 3MS verb, וַיִּקְבֹּר (“he buried”), can only be YHWH.⁵⁰ In the situation, God could have handled the body in any number of ways. He could have taken it to heaven, he could have caused it to disintegrate into nothing, he could have left it exposed for birds of prey, etc., but God chose burial, not cremation or any other potential form of disposal. If this was God’s preferred method in the only such recorded instance, it ought to be treated as a significant precedent.

3.4. Summary of Biblical Data

When the biblical data presented above is considered, there is clarity and consistency. Although there are a variety of funerary practices attested in the ancient world, the biblical record consistently depicts burial. Cremation is virtually unknown in biblical practice, though it was a common (but not universal) practice in the ancient world. Both the Greeks (from Homeric times) and the Romans practiced cremation as the preferred means of disposing of a corpse.⁵¹ By contrast

⁴⁹ As a side note for the curious, the trade of “undertaker” (i.e., mortician, or funeral director) is a relatively recent development in burial practices (late-19th C. in America) and is due largely to the modern American/western 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 especially Karen P. Flood, “Contemplating Corpses: The Dead Body in American Culture, 1870-1920” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard Univ., 2001). Flood’s ch 2 pursues the development of the funeral profession in detail: “Controlling Corpses, Civilizing a Trade: The Emergence of the Funeral Directing Profession,” 67-106.

⁵⁰ This is not a passive construction as the NIV mg note suggests (“he was buried”).

⁵¹ Greek culture originally practiced burial during and before the Mycenaean period, cremation being introduced in Homeric times (see below). The earlier Roman practice was also burial; cremation, learned from the Greeks, became the “fashionable” practice of wealthier Romans (E. Hartland, “Death and Disposal of the Dead (Introductory),” in *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. J. Hastings, 4:411-44 [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1911], 4:423). See also Donna Kurtz and John Boardman, *Greek Burial Customs* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1971); J. Toynbee, *Death and Burial in the Roman World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1971); and Caroline Bynum, *Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336*. (NY:

with the Greco-Roman practice, the Egyptians rejected cremation, but in addition to burial, mummified the corpse before interment in graves or tombs.⁵² For Egyptian royalty this took the form of the extravagant pyramids, for the wealthy, a sealed tomb, but the common folk of Egypt received only earth burial. All, however, were apparently mummified to some extent.⁵³ Outside the biblical world cremation is the norm in Buddhism and Hinduism. The ancient Chinese and Japanese civilizations rejected cremation, though it was later (8th C. AD in Japan) adopted with the spread of Buddhism.⁵⁴ Islam rejects cremation.⁵⁵

The few instances of cremation in the OT are not presented as in any way typical. They are, instead, unusual and exceptional. Every such historical account, legal prescription, or prophetic proclamation is associated with or occasioned by war or judgment for sin. The biblical text suggests that cremation was viewed as abhorrent or at least offensive. The connotations of fire imagery in Scripture are consistent with this reaction.

These observations are strictly descriptive. There is no normative statement forbidding, allowing, or commanding cremation. (The only exception being the two legal dictates in tightly defined situations as retribution for particularly heinous sin.) On the other hand, it must be observed that neither is there any prescriptive statement establishing burial as the only acceptable practice for God's people. In and of themselves, descriptive statements in the biblical text are not normative. Even though we have a consistent, positive pattern of burial, and even though we have some indication of God's preference for burial in two particular situations (Moses and Jesus), we

Columbia University Press, 1995). The Greek practice can be seen in Book 23 of *The Iliad* which records Achilles' cremation of his friend Patroclus who had been slain by Hector in the battle with the Trojans on the plains of Troy.

“Those who were about the dead [i.e., Patroclus] heaped up wood and built a pyre a hundred feet this way and that; then they laid the dead all sorrowfully upon the top of it. They flayed and dressed many fat sheep and oxen before the pyre, and Achilles took fat from all of them and wrapped the body therein from head to foot, heaping the flayed carcasses all round it. Against the bier he leaned two-handed jars of honey and unguents; four proud horses did he then cast upon the pyre, groaning the while he did so. The dead hero had had nine house dogs; two of them did Achilles slay and threw upon the pyre; he also put twelve brave sons of noble Trojans to the sword and laid them with the rest, for he was full of bitterness and fury. Then he committed all to the resistless and devouring might of the fire” (*The Iliad of Homer*, transl. S. Butler [Roslyn, NY: Walter J. Black, 1942], 356).

⁵² There are other forms of “mummification” or “desiccation” of the corpse, particularly in “primitive” cultures, the most common being drying the body with smoke or solar heat. For details, see E. Hartland, “Death and Disposal of the Dead (Introductory),” in *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. J. Hastings, 4:411–44 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1911), 4:418.

⁵³ There were three “levels” of mummification; the method chosen depended largely on the financial means of the family. For extensive details, including citations from contemporary sources (both Egyptian and Greek), see H. Hall, “Death and Disposal of the Dead (Egyptian),” in *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. J. Hastings, 4:458–64 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1911), 4:461–62.

⁵⁴ For a historical survey of cremation, see Davis, *What About Cremation?* 19–33 and Hartland, “Death and Disposal of the Dead,” 4:411–44. Nock considers both cremation and burial practices in the Roman world, but also includes a wide-ranging survey of other contemporary cultures across the ancient world (“Cremation and Burial”). See also the related articles on death in Chinese, Buddhist, Hindu, Japanese, Greek, and Roman contexts in the *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics* (4:446–507 *passim*). The cultural, philosophical, and theological significance of cremation by various groups will be considered below.

⁵⁵ See <www.islamtoday.net>; specific reference to cremation on this site can be found at this shortened URL: <<http://tinyurl.com/hhszg>>.

cannot hermeneutically extrapolate a divine imperative for all situations. For this we need to involve additional considerations, both theological and cultural.⁵⁶

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? For that matter, what is a person? Are we only a body? Or is our real person only immaterial?

Flood comments on the difficulty of distinguishing what is “me” from what is “mine.” That is, are our bodies us, or simply ours? “Are our bodies separate from ourselves, something we *have* but are not part of who we are, or are they integral to our identities?” Or again she asks, “What vestige of a person still remains in the corpse? Is there anything about the body that needs to continue in the life beyond ... in order for the self to be complete? Or is the *true* self outside of or separate from the body?”⁵⁷ There are several theological considerations necessary to respond to such queries including the doctrines of both the body and the resurrection.

4.1. Christian View of the Body

Christians view the body differently 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—dust from the earth (עֶפֶר מִן־הָאֲדָמָה)—Adam’s body was dignified and animated by the breath of life (נְשִׁמַת חַיִּים) received directly from God. Thus both the material and immaterial⁵⁸ parts of humanity originated directly from God.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ On the question of normativity in historical narrative, see Rodney J. Decker, “Polity and the Elder Issue,” *Grace Theological Journal* 9 (1988) 263–66; also available online at <<http://faculty.bbc.edu/rdecker/documents/polity.pdf>>.

⁵⁷ Flood, “Contemplating Corpses,” 1. Pyne asks similar questions: “Is there a distinction between my body and *me*? Is the body the real *me*? Is there something to *me* besides (or inside!) my body? (Robert A. Pyne, *Humanity and Sin: The Creation, Fall, and Redemption of Humanity* [Nashville: Nelson, 1999], 76).

⁵⁸ The distinction between material and immaterial is not just a theological construct; it is a biblical distinction. Note, e.g., the contrast between body and spirit in 1 Cor 7:34 (τῷ σώματι καὶ τῷ πνεύματι) and Rom 8:10 (τὸ μὲν σῶμα νεκρόν ... τὸ δὲ πνεῦμα ζῶν), between flesh and spirit in 2 Cor 7:1 (σαρκός καὶ πνεύματος), and the inner and outer man in 2 Cor 4:16, (ὁ ἔξω ἡμῶν ἄνθρωπος ... ἀλλ’ ὁ ἔσω ἡμῶν). 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.

⁵⁹ 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 (dualism). 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]). For a helpful, non-technical summary of monism in its various forms (e.g., materialistic monism/pancorporealism,

Since the time God formed Eve's body from Adam's side, all human bodies and souls⁶⁰ 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 humans 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 distinct entities. “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.”⁶¹ Only in unity is there a complete person. As Murray phrases it,

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 indestructible. These two entities form one organic unit without disharmony or conflict. In the integral person they are interdependent. They coact and interact.⁶²

We thus view our bodies as gifts 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 philosophy.⁶³ Yoda may believe that “luminous beings we are, not this crude matter,”⁶⁴ but that is not a biblical view.

And we insist that indeed we do 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.⁶⁵

idealistic monism/panpsychism, and dual-aspect monism) as well as various forms of dualism, see Pyne, *Humanity and Sin*, 76–80.

⁶⁰ 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.

⁶¹ Lorraine Boettner, *Immortality* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1956), 51.

⁶² Murray, “The Nature of Man,” 21.

⁶³ This was part of Pythagorean as well as Platonic doctrine; it is also found in Philo and would later become part of Gnosticism. 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.

⁶⁴ Donald F. Glut, *The Empire Strikes Back*, episode 5 of *Star Wars*, based on a story by George Lucas (New York: Ballentine Books, 1980), 123.

⁶⁵ *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* (Boston: First Church of Christ, Scientist, 1906), ch. 14, “Recapitulation,” 475.6. Earlier it is asserted that “there is no life, truth, intelligence, or substance in matter. All is infinite Mind and its

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). A key passage as regards the biblical doctrine of the human body is 1 Corinthians 6. When Paul explains that “you were *bought* (ἀγοράζω) with a price,” he concludes from this argument that we are therefore (δὴ) 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” (6:15).⁶⁶ 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 Spirit,⁶⁷ but which has had the privilege of being God’s temple, ought to be honored. Though not technically indwelt after death, if the body is a member of Christ due, in part to the resurrection, then this body is still, somehow, united to Christ.

If we treasure, for example, 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?⁶⁸ The Christian has a unique respect for the human body compared with most, if not all, of 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, that is, one which has both material *and* immaterial affects on the person.⁶⁹

infinite manifestation, for God is All-in-all. Spirit is immortal Truth; matter is mortal error. Spirit is the real and eternal; matter is the unreal and temporal. Spirit is God, and man is His image and likeness. Therefore man is not material; he is spiritual” (468.9–15). Death is defined in the glossary as “An illusion, the lie of life in matter; the unreal and untrue; the opposite of Life. Matter has no life, hence it has no real existence.... Any material evidence of death is false, for it contradicts the spiritual facts of being” (584.9–10, 15–16). These citations are available online at <www.spirituality.com>, accessible at these shortened URLs: <<http://tinyurl.com/zes7t>>, <<http://tinyurl.com/rguov>>, and <<http://tinyurl.com/mkpbz>>.

⁶⁶ 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.

⁶⁷ 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.

⁶⁸ 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. (The comparison with other sentimental values is suggested by Boettner, *Immortality*, 51).

⁶⁹ In using the term “holistic” in this context I do not intend a monistic view of the person. My reference might be more completely described as “holistic dualism.” (For an extensive biblical, theological, and philosophical discussion of one form of this position, see John W. Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989]. For a philosophical discussion of “substance dualism,” see J. P. Moreland, “A Defense of a Substance Dualist View of the Soul,” in *Christian Perspectives on Being Human*, ed. J. Moreland and D. Cioocchi,

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 in some way. In the words of 2 Corinthians 5, without our “earthly tent-house” (ἡ ἐπίγειος ἡμῶν οἰκία τοῦ σκίηνου, v 1)—that is, our body, we are “naked” (γυμνός, v 3) and “unclothed” (ἐκδύω, v 4) following death and prior to the resurrection.⁷⁰ This language reflects the uncertainty of what life will be like apart from the body since our only experience is with somatic existence. Although Paul’s figurative language speaks of our “mortal” (θνητός, v 4) body being “destroyed” (καταλύω, v 1) and consequently of receiving a “building from God” (οἰκοδομήν ἐκ θεοῦ, v 1), an “eternal, non-handmade house” (οἰκίαν ἀχειροποίητον αἰώνιον, v 1), our “heavenly dwelling” (τὸ οἰκητήριον ἡμῶν τὸ ἐξ οὐρανοῦ, v 2) with which we will be “clothed” (ἐπενδύομαι, v 4),⁷¹ this should probably be understood as a reference to receiving our resurrected body rather than as a description of our “real” spiritual, bodiless existence or as a reference to some sort of temporary body.⁷²

It is also significant that when someone is buried the NT still refers to the *person* as being buried. Consider the description of Jesus’ burial.

⁴⁴Pilate was surprised to hear that he was already dead. Summoning the centurion, he asked him if he [i.e., Jesus] had already died. ⁴⁵When he learned from the centurion that it was so, he gave the body

55–79 [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993].) From a biblical perspective, human beings are dualistic (i.e., they have both a material and immaterial aspect). As I expound in the paragraphs above, either part alone is not a complete person.

⁷⁰ Hughes explains that “the body ... is essential ... for the full expression of the personal and potential faculties of humanity. The soul of man is able to express itself adequately only in conjunction with the specially prepared instrument of the body.... At death the soul is separated from the body, and man’s integral nature is disrupted” (Philip E. Hughes, *Paul’s Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962], 170–71). See further his discussion in idem., *The True Image: The Origin and Destiny of Man in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 393–97.

⁷¹ The word used here is an interesting NT *hapax*: ἐπενδύομαι. The double compound (ἐπί + ἐν) is probably significant and not synonymous with the shorter form. It likely means “to put a garment on over an existing garment” (BDAG, 361) as both classical and koine usage outside the NT attest. The resurrection body is put on “over” the existing earthly body—which implies that the present body is not replaced or discarded, but must be resurrected for it to be “clothed over.” (This reference may also include the possibility of those living at the time of Jesus’ return who would receive their resurrection body “over” their still-living physical body.)

⁷² On the basis of this text and the bodily appearance on earth of departed but not-yet-resurrected people (i.e., Moses and Elijah at the Transfiguration), some sort of temporary body has been proposed (e.g., Lewis S. Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 8 vols. [Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947–48], 4:414–15, though Chafer uses only 2 Cor 5; and Homer A. Kent, Jr., *A Heart Opened Wide: Studies in II Corinthians* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982], 80–81, though tentatively). In this view, God creates a temporary body for the soul during the intermediate state. The concern seems to be that a person cannot exist apart from a body. It should be observed, however, that angels do this as their normal mode of existence. Paul also describes this body as αἰώνιος—eternal (5:1). If Christians were to already have a body (especially an eternal one) in the intermediate state, there would be no need for a subsequent resurrection. As to Moses and Elijah appearing with a body, it is unwise to extrapolate very unusual events as typical for all believers. An even less likely understanding of this passage, in my opinion, is that Paul refers to our receiving our glorified resurrection body immediately at death—a conclusion drawn by Murray Harris, *Raised Immortal*, 98–100, 219–26. This passage is difficult and numerous explanations have been offered (for a survey of the major options, see Ralph Martin, *2 Corinthians*, WBC 40 [Waco, TX: Word, 1986], 97–102). Most satisfactory, in my mind, is the view of Hughes, *Paul’s Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 153–83, which is similar to the newer replacement NICNT vol.: Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 255–77.

[πτῶμα] to Joseph. ⁴⁶So he [i.e., Joseph] bought some linen cloth, took him [αὐτόν] down, wrapped [him] in the linen, and placed him [αὐτόν] in a tomb cut out of rock. Then he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb. ⁴⁷Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph saw where he was laid (Mark 15:44-47).

When Jesus was buried the text *does* say that Pilate gave the body (πτῶμα, “corpse”) to Joseph of Arimathea, but Mark then tells us that Joseph wrapped *him* (αὐτόν) and placed *him* (αὐτόν) in the tomb. One might have expected αὐτό (neuter) if Mark had intended the pronoun’s antecedent to be understood as the corpse (πτῶμα), but αὐτόν is unambiguously masculine.⁷³ Mark refers to Jesus as a person—though what was taken down from the cross, wrapped, and placed in the tomb was, indeed, the corpse.⁷⁴

Only a few verses later in the account of the women’s arrival at the tomb on Resurrection Morning, the angel says, “You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him [αὐτόν]” (Mark 16:6). The statement is that “*he* has risen, *he* is not here” (both ἠγέρθη and ἔστιν are 3S verbs). Although the default 3S subject of ἔστιν could be read as neuter (“*it* is not here”), referring to the corpse, the antecedent in this context is *Jesus the Nazarene*. The angel says, “see the place where they laid *him*” (αὐτόν). What was “laid” in the tomb? Yes, it was a corpse (πτῶμα), but it can still be referred to in personal terms.

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. His soul was not *in the tomb*; it was the body that had lain in the tomb four days.

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.⁷⁵

This is not to suggest that a corpse is all there is of a person, but it certainly does argue that we ought not speak of the immaterial soul as the “real person” who only possesses a (disposable) body. To set “the transitoriness of the physical in bold relief against the everlastingness of the spiritual”⁷⁶ reflects a biblically deficient view of the person.

⁷³ This might be viewed as grammatical agreement with the antecedent based on “natural gender,” but since natural gender usually (only?) functions with a personal antecedent, it would require us to view πτῶμα as personal. Although that would result in the same conclusion (that someone who is buried is still viewed as a person), it seems better to suggest that the antecedent of the masculine form αὐτός is Ἰησοῦς (last mentioned explicitly in v 43, the referent being continued by two 3S verbs in v 44).

⁷⁴ Edwards is the only commentator I have found who discusses this grammatical point, calling it a “grammatical incongruity” that may indicate Mark’s reverence for Jesus and a “tacit testimony to the resurrection, that is, that the one who conquered death can never be referred to as a *something* rather than as a *someone*” (James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 489. But this may be an overly theological explanation; a more remote antecedent (i.e., Ἰησοῦς rather than πτῶμα) is the simpler grammatical explanation.

⁷⁵ Murray, “The Nature of Man,” 16.

⁷⁶ Phipps, “The Consuming Fire for Corpses,” 222.

A biblical view of the person 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 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" (πάντες οἱ ἐν τοῖς μνημείοις, John 5:28) 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" (ὡσπερ γὰρ ἐν τῷ Ἀδὰμ πάντες ἀποθνήσκουσιν, οὕτως καὶ ἐν τῷ Χριστῷ πάντες ζωοποιηθήσονται). Resurrection is co-extensive with those who died in Adam, that is, 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,⁷⁷ the earlier statement in v 22 is clearly a universal one since it is paralleled with the fall.⁷⁸ 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 (ζωοποιήσει καὶ τὰ θνητὰ σώματα ὑμῶν, Rom 8:11). Our "lowly bodies" are what will be "changed" to be like Jesus' glorious, resurrected body (μετασχηματίσει τὸ σῶμα τῆς ταπεινώσεως ἡμῶν, Phil 3:21). The mortal puts on immortality and the perishable puts on the imperishable (δεῖ γὰρ τὸ φθαρτὸν τοῦτο ἐνδύσασθαι ἀφθαρσίαν καὶ τὸ θνητὸν τοῦτο ἐνδύσασθαι ἀθανασίαν, 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."⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Note the "brothers," and "we" in vv 50, 51: τοῦτο δέ φημι, ἀδελφοί ... πάντες οὐ κοιμηθησόμεθα, πάντες δὲ ἀλλαγησόμεθα.

⁷⁸ 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 (τάγμα, "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 NASB 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.

⁷⁹ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983–85), 3:1198 [2d ed., 1998, p. 1205]. See also Pyne, *Humanity and Sin*, 62–64, who connects the resurrection of the body with the believer's future transformation into the image of God.

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.⁸⁰

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 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.⁸¹

This should be both reassuring to the believer and troublesome to the unbeliever. The believer can rest confidently in the certainty of a future glorified, resurrected body. That is true regardless of whether he is buried or cremated—whether cremated against his will, burned to death in a tragic accident or terrorist attack, or if martyred in a cruel, fiery testimony. As Christians we most certainly do not object to cremation on the basis that this in any way precludes the resurrection of our body or in any way lessens its resurrected glory. On the other hand, the certainty of resurrection ought to be a troublesome thought to an unbeliever. It is not uncommon to hear from non-Christians sentiment to the effect that “I want to be cremated because then God cannot resurrect or judge me.” Whether that is expressed by the unreflective or by deliberately provocative skeptics, it does not change the reality of God's promise that “those who have done evil will rise to be condemned” (John 5:29).

We affirm that there is a substantial, organic identity of the person's body in this life and in its glorified, resurrected state.⁸² “This new body has some connection or point of identity with the old body, but is differently constituted.”⁸³ 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.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ 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).

⁸¹ Boettner, *Immortality*, 50.

⁸² Gordon Lewis and Bruce Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987–94), 3:475. See also Herman Bavinck, *The Last Things*, transl. J. Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 133–38; his discussion of the nature of the resurrection is quite helpful and he relates it to the issue of cremation on p. 135.

⁸³ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3:1198 [2d ed., p. 1205].

⁸⁴ 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]).

Such a view of resurrection informs Paul's analogy in 1 Corinthians 15 of the body being planted.

³⁵But someone may ask, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?"
³⁶How foolish! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. ³⁷When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed, perhaps of wheat or of something else. ³⁸But God gives it a body as he has determined, and to each kind of seed he gives its own body. ³⁹All flesh is not the same: Men have one kind of flesh, animals have another, birds another and fish another. ⁴⁰There are also heavenly bodies and there are earthly bodies; but the splendor of the heavenly bodies is one kind, and the splendor of the earthly bodies is another. ⁴¹The sun has one kind of splendor, the moon another and the stars another; and star differs from star in splendor. ⁴²So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; ⁴³it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; ⁴⁴it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body (1 Cor 15:35-44).

There is an organic connection between a seed which is planted in the ground and the stalk of wheat 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 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 which is planted (the "seed") is perishable and dishonorable since it is dead and decaying; it is a weak and natural body. But the body raised, though organically connected with the body planted, will be imperishable, glorious, powerful, and spiritual.⁸⁵

In an effort to comfort those mourning the loss of a loved one we have too often adopted terminology that does not reflect a biblical view of resurrection or a full-orbed, biblical view of the human person. When we say, referring to a body lying in a casket, "This is not really Joe, it's just his body; the real Joe is in heaven with Jesus," we have not made a full biblical statement. It is certainly true that Joe is in heaven with Jesus (assuming Joe was a Christian),⁸⁶ but we have implied that the body in the casket is no longer important. More significantly, we have divorced the body from the person; it was only a disposable possession.⁸⁷ That corpse is certainly nonfunctional now that it has been separated from the immaterial, but it is still an integral part of the person, else there would be no point in a resurrection. If the spirit was the real person, there would be no further need for a body, or, if a body were desired, it could be created with no reference to the original body. God, however, has said that our mortal bodies will be resurrected and glorified.

5. Historical/Cultural Considerations

We turn next from theology to history and culture. In the milieu of cultural/historical and theological factors related to cremation, priority goes to the theological. Yet the cultural/historical

⁸⁵ For a fascinating discussion of various patristic and medieval explanations of how this might be best explained theologically, see Caroline Bynum, "Why All the Fuss about the Body? A Medievalist's Perspective," *Critical Inquiry* 22 (1995): 1–33, esp. 19–22 in reference to Origen and Aquinas.

⁸⁶ "Away from the body and at home with the Lord," 2 Cor 5:8; see also Phil 1:21–24.

⁸⁷ Pyne rightly points out that Christians often speak of "'changing hearts' and 'saving souls' and [using] phrases like 'the real me' as if that were somehow different from our bodies or distinguished from our behavior" (*Humanity and Sin*, 72).

issues cannot be ignored. In fact, they 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 both in the historical origins of cremation as well as in contemporary practices.⁸⁸ Cremation is perhaps best known historically in connection with the eastern religions, particularly those of Indian origin. “The religious and philosophical dimensions of 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.”⁸⁹

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.”⁹⁰ 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”⁹¹—that is, 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.⁹² 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.⁹³ Cremation is the

⁸⁸ 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 in the denominations of Protestant Christianity. Belief systems can vary widely, including issues such as cremation (both its practice and significance).

⁸⁹ Irion, *Cremation*, 13.

⁹⁰ Prothero, *Purified by Fire*, 6.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 6. See also Marcelle Saindon, “La crémation hindoue: perfectionnement rituel et caisson sacrificielle du cadavre en vue de l’ultime offrande,” [“Cremation: Perfective Rite and Sacrificial Burning of the Cadaver in View of the Ultimate Offering”] *Studies in Religion* 26 (1997): 57–74, which explains that cremation in Hinduism is “the last of the samskaras, or perfective rites, it brings about, by means of sacrificial fire, the ultimate perfection that enables the dead to complete their passage to the other world. The cremation is also a sacrifice, the Vedic sense of the term, in which the dead person is both one who sacrifices and the victim who is offered to the sacrificial fire. It is his last offering of his life as sacrificier. The cremation perpetuates the tradition of the sacrificial fire that cooks, refines and perfects the offerings. On the pyre, Agni, the Fire, destroys the corpse in appearance only, conveying it as an offering to the gods and ancestors. Agni, the sacrificial fire, is the mediator between humans and the gods” (cited from the RTA abstract).

⁹² “Buddhist Ceremonies,” <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 (<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 <www.yogichen.org/efiles/mbk16.html>, accessed 11/30/2005.

⁹³ 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.

final severance of the soul and the body.⁹⁴ 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.”⁹⁵

Although Confucianism originally forbade cremation, some later forms of Confucianism (e.g., in Japan) later embraced the practice and developed etiological explanations for it.⁹⁶ Today China’s cremation rate is at 47% and Japan’s is the highest in the world at 98%.⁹⁷

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.⁹⁸ “It is proper to restore to nature what is rightfully hers”⁹⁹—that is, the body belongs to “Mother Nature” and cremation 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.¹⁰⁰

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

⁹⁴ “Buddhist Ceremonies: Personal Ceremonies: Funeral Rites,” <www.buddhanet.net/funeral.htm>, accessed 11/30/2005.

⁹⁵ Irion, *Cremation*, 13.

⁹⁶ “In the summer of 1873, the Meiji [Japan] government’s Council of State declared a nationwide ban on cremation, a Buddhist practice that had long been considered barbaric and grossly unfilial by Confucian and nativist scholars.... Insisting that cremation was sanitary and that it also saved grave space while facilitating ancestor worship, cremation supporters appropriated state-sanctioned values and [won] repeal of the ban only two years after it went into effect. Ironically, the end result of the ban was a widely accepted rationale for cremation, which was transformed from a minority practice into a majority one. By the end of the 20th century, cremation had become the fate of nearly every Japanese” (Andrew Bernstein, “Fire and Earth: The Forging of Modern Cremation in Meiji Japan,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 27 [2000]: 297–334). [Cited from the RTA abstract.]

⁹⁷ “Table of International [Cremation] Statistics,” *Pharos International* [magazine of the British cremation society], winter 2002. Reproduced on the North American Cremation Society web site <www.cremationassociation.org/docs/intstat4.pdf>. Figures are for 2001.

⁹⁸ 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, though this only transfers the ultimate responsibility for disposal of the cadaver.

⁹⁹ This environmentalist argument is cited by Prothero, *Purified by Fire*, 155.

¹⁰⁰ 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 a number of 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 <www.funerals.org/faq/light.htm> and is reproduced as an appendix to this essay.

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 cremation 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).”¹⁰¹ It has been, in other words, a *theological* shift in how people view death—actually a shift in how the person is 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.¹⁰² These factors have almost universally been nonchristian. The movement gained momentum in the “Gilded Age” following the Civil War and involved class issues,¹⁰³ immigration, and the emerging sanitarian movement.¹⁰⁴ 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,

[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 graveyards, 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 gravestones gave way to willows, oaks, and acorns—naturalistic images of life, hope, resurrection, and immortality.¹⁰⁵

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. Liberal theology, though not initially part of the cremation movement, bought into modern science as a greater authority than the Bible. Since miraculous interventions by God were no longer allowed by science, there could be no literal resurrection of a corpse, so now the spirit was viewed

¹⁰¹ Prothero, *Purified by Fire*, 12. These “more modern versions of Christianity” are, of course, anything but orthodox! Flood is more blunt in her reference to the “Liberal Protestant ministers [who] used current scientific research to demonstrate the instability and mutability of the body (in life and in death). They asserted that the *true* self lay in the immaterial and static spirit” (“Contemplating Corpses,” iii; in much more detail, see her ch 3, “‘The Life of the Body Is Not Our Life’: Immortality and Definitions of the Self in Liberal Protestant Thought,” 107–39). In other words, a denial of bodily resurrection renders the body irrelevant after death.

¹⁰² For a fascinating history of these factors, see Prothero, *Purified by Fire* and Flood, “Contemplating Corpses.”

¹⁰³ 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.

¹⁰⁴ 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.

¹⁰⁵ Prothero, *Purified by Fire*, 48.

as the “real” person. As a result, resurrection was redefined to refer to the new, bodiless life of the person following death.

Following the rural cemetery movement by the old sanitarians, 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.¹⁰⁶ Since there was considerable Christian resistance to this sanitary solution, the arguments almost always included the theological. 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 of death 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 ... 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.¹⁰⁷

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.”¹⁰⁸ 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,¹⁰⁹ 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. Prothero demonstrates this explicitly (and he is no orthodox believer himself). He points out 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.”¹¹⁰ These “committed Christians” of whom Prothero speaks, however, were Christians of the liberal variety as his discussion in the context makes clear.¹¹¹ He is correct that most advocates of cremation were “religious”—but that in itself is little consolation. Flood summarizes the liberal emphasis as follows.

Liberal Protestant ministers were especially concerned with eradicating the popular notion that the earthly body would have some continued existence in the afterlife—an idea which in their view

¹⁰⁶ The history of this sanitary argument for cremation is recounted both by Prothero, *Purified by Fire*, 46–66 and Flood, “Contemplating Corpses,” 167–210. The “old” sanitarians were active in the early- to mid-19th century; the “new” sanitarians were late 19th and early 20th century (post-Civil War).

¹⁰⁷ Prothero, *Purified by Fire*, 71.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 73.

¹⁰⁹ 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).

¹¹⁰ Prothero, *Purified by Fire*, 80–81; see also his discussion on 73–76.

¹¹¹ On the liberal protestant clergy contributions to these issues, see also Flood, “Contemplating Corpses,” 107–211. This is a major focus of her study.

defied both science and rational thought.... [They] considered the immaterial world of the mind and spirit as the *true* reality and ... deemed an undue attention to the body as “unsophisticated.”¹¹²

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 characteristic American way of handling almost any issue. The 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%.¹¹³

In these first two stages of the cremation movement, “cremationists were not able to gain wide-reaching support for their cause.... In the end, the intervention of cremation was too radical, and the distance between the signifying object (the urn) and the person who died was too great to provide the comfort for most mourners.”¹¹⁴ During this period it was the funeral directors who made the greatest gains. Utilizing the recent innovations of modern scientific embalming as well as cosmetic retouching and other restoration techniques to create an *artificial* (and often “improved”) representation of the deceased (often described as “looking natural!”), the funeral industry was more in touch with the emerging consumer society of the time.¹¹⁵

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 four decades later. Projections are for continued increase with 43% anticipated by 2025.¹¹⁶ 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.¹¹⁷

¹¹² Ibid., 104. Later in the dissertation she refers to the synthesis of naturalistic science with liberal theology as evidence of immortality and the supremacy of soul over body: “at the moment of death, this transition from body to spirit became complete; the evolution out of the body was a liberating event which indicated the spirit’s entry into a more glorified existence” (132).

¹¹³ The details of this period are provided by Prothero, *Purified by Fire*, 105–59.

¹¹⁴ Flood, “Contemplating Corpses,” 255.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.; see her full discussion of these factors on 212–29, 242–50.

¹¹⁶ “Cremation Gaining Acceptance Among Roman Catholics,” *USA Today*, 4/4/2005, p. 9D.

¹¹⁷ 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.

Supplementing these theological/philosophical worldview issues that have stimulated the rise in cremation in America are some additional pragmatic issues. Few (if any) of them would, on their own, 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 nine trends that affect cremation: “1. People are dying older and choosing cremation for themselves. 2. Migration to retirement locations is increasing. 3. Cremation has become acceptable. 4. Environmental considerations are becoming more important. 5. Level of education is rising. 6. Ties to tradition are becoming weaker. 7. Regional differences are diminishing. 8. Religious restrictions diminishing. 9. Greater flexibility in memorialization services” (“Key

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” relaxed the ban on the practice which had been in effect since 1886. The church 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.¹¹⁸

An even greater impact was made by the publication of Jessica Mitford’s muck-raking book, *The American Way of Death*.¹¹⁹ She could hardly be displeased with the reception accorded her book. It quickly became the number one listing on the *New York Times* bestseller list, resulted in a TV documentary, and the author being designated by the media as “Queen of the Muckrakers.” There has been a revision, *The American Way of Death Revisited* (1978), which is still in print. The tone of this significant 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.¹²⁰

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 have 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 came increasingly to be viewed (by the “customers”) as a consumer issue.¹²¹ The “traditional funeral” with its skyrocketing cost began to be challenged as any other commodity rather than accepted as inevitable. This led to cremation increasingly being viewed as an economic issue: cremation was perceived as a cheaper solution than burial.¹²²

Trends Affecting Cremation,” online at <<http://www.cremationassociation.org/docs/keytrends.pdf>>, accessed 2/19/2006).

In addition it has been argued that other social factors are involved in the increase in cremation. David Penepent proposes that it is directly related to the breakdown of the family in the American culture: dysfunctional families without close family ties cannot cope with grief. As a result, he suggests that those anticipating death in this context are more likely to choose cremation so as “not to be any more trouble” to the family. Likewise the dysfunctional grief of the survivors is inclined to get rid of the body quickly (phone interview, David Penepent, funeral director at Herishon Funeral Home, Ithaca, NY, 3/10/2006). Mr. Penepent is not only a funeral director, but also a doctoral student, and he is also writing a book on cremation and dysfunctional grief. Whether his suggestions will all be borne out, that the disruption of traditional family structures and values may be involved in the increase of cremation in America may reflect related aspects of the changing spiritual values of the prevailing American worldview(s) that are discussed above.

¹¹⁸ The details are given in Prothero, *Purified by Fire*, 165.

¹¹⁹ Jessica Mitford, *The American Way of Death* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963).

¹²⁰ 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.

¹²¹ 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.

¹²² 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.

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.”¹²³ 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, nonconforming 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.”¹²⁴

Another movement that was gaining momentum at this same time, and often from within the counterculture, was environmentalism. “Save the Land for the Living” became a slogan of the cremationists.¹²⁵ 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.”¹²⁶

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 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.”¹²⁷

The cremation movement thus reflects the dramatic shifts in American views of “spirituality” and the radical pluralism of our postmodern culture.

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, Ver.: Upper Access, 1998).

¹²³ Prothero, *Purified by Fire*, 179.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 182.

¹²⁵ This slogan was coined for the British Cremation Society’s 1974 centenary, though it was used more widely (Kazmier, “A Modern Landscape: The British Way of Death in the Age of Cremation” [Ph.D. diss., Rutgers Univ., 2005], 4).

¹²⁶ Prothero, *Purified by Fire*, 183–84.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 184–86. It is significant that the logo of the American Cremation Society is that of a dove in upward flight, <www.cremationchicago.com>.

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.¹²⁸

“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.¹²⁹ 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 (pun intended!), most nonchristian Americans have a vague idea of life after death in which everyone makes it “up there”—somewhere! 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 some form of reincarnation,¹³⁰ and some a nonchristian, pagan version of heaven (though without hell, of course).

Cremation drew a clean, clear line between life and death, leaving no body behind to create ambiguity. For cremationists the transmutation of corpse into urn symbolized the transition from bodily to spiritual self—the complete transfer of identity from the physical to the ethereal realm; whatever part of personhood survived the moment of death was *not* to be found in the material remains.¹³¹

¹²⁸ Prothero, *Purified by Fire*, 186–87.

¹²⁹ Kazmier's study investigates “how a society's death practices suggest the construction of individual subjectivities within a social context” (“Modern Landscape,” 13); note the postmodern lingo in this statement. See also the illuminating transcript from an NPR series in this regard: “Alternative Funerals,” transcript of NPR series, “The End of Life,” 3/10/1998, <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.”

¹³⁰ 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.

¹³¹ Flood, “Contemplating Corpses,” 168.

These factors can be seen increasingly in pop culture. Death rituals reflect one's world view.¹³² The combination of computer animation technology,¹³³ science fiction, and pagan theology has made the *Star Wars* series a vivid microcosm of the eclectic, postmodern, western worldview. Whether in the original trilogy or in the subsequent prequels, whether on screen, DVD, or in book form, these productions both reflect the pop theology/philosophy of our day as well as promulgate and popularize nonchristian concepts. Significantly, the Jedi "religion" practices cremation. Both Qui-Gon Jinn in the first episode, *The Phantom Menace*, and the "redeemed" Darth Vader at the end of *Return of the Jedi* are cremated.¹³⁴ Other people, however, are buried. For example, the funeral ceremonies of both Anakin Skywalker's mother, Shmi, a slave woman, and Luke Skywalker's mother, Padmé Amidala, a Senator and former Queen, are portrayed as burials—Shmi's a simple interment in the family graveyard on Tatooine, Padmé's an elaborate royal funeral on Naboo.¹³⁵ The glorification of cremation in the *Star Wars* series (the Jedi heroes are the ones who are cremated) reflects the increased acceptance of cremation in western culture and it also encourages the practice.

By contrast, another recent media sensation, the movie and video versions of J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*,¹³⁶ though including instances of cremation, presents it in a negative light. The standard funeral practice in *LOR* is that of burial. Balin is buried in Moria (*FR* 2.4.319–20). The Kings

¹³² This is clearly argued in Flood's dissertation, the closing sentence of which summarizes that "decisions about how best to present and represent an individual's life at the time of his or her death reflect a culture's views of body and self, change and continuity, reality and illusion" ("Contemplating Corpses," 260–61). See also Kazmier's comments from the British cremation context: "the means by which people handle their own demise or handle the farewell of a loved one say much about a society's values (both religious and secular), priorities, pre-occupations, identity, and memory" ("Modern Landscape," 13). Later she comments that "a society expresses much about itself and its values and concerns whenever a rite of passage is involved. Any ritual for the dead must speak to the living, but it also speaks *about* them" (21, italics in original).

¹³³ *Star Wars* was one of the first films to make extensive use of computer-generated animation and special effects and marks a milestone in such technology. Although these effects look amateurish by today's standards, they were spectacular in the 1970s.

¹³⁴ The death of other Jedi are recorded in the several books and movies, but the two cremations noted above are the only ones for which any sort of funeral ceremonies are depicted. Even Yoda's death (the only "peaceful" death in the entire series!) is not commemorated in any way. He dies quietly in his bed while talking to Luke and (at least in the book) his body simply disappears leaving an empty bed (James Kahn, *The Return of the Jedi*, episode 6 of *Star Wars*, based on a story by George Lucas [New York: Ballantine, 1983], 61; Obi-wan's body also disappeared when he was killed by Darth Vader, [George Lucas, *Star Wars*, episode 4, later re-titled *A New Hope* (New York: Ballantine, 1976), 168]). Death in *Star Wars*, at least for a Jedi, is not the end, for at least some of the Jedi continue to appear to and communicate with the living from their "position" within the Force. Qui-Gon is said to have first learned how to do this after death (episode 3), and Obi-wan's postmortem appearances to Luke form a key part of the plot in episodes 5 and 6. Obi-wan warns Darth Vader that if he (Obi-wan) is killed, he will become "more powerful" as part of the Force (Lucas, *Star Wars*, episode 4, 168).

¹³⁵ To my knowledge, these are the only four death rituals in the saga. Though many other deaths are recorded, none receive a funeral as part of the narrative. The burial of Padmé is only implied in the video; the funeral scene shows an elaborate coffin, etc., but never hints at cremation. The viewer would almost certainly assume burial.

¹³⁶ Abbreviations in this section are as follows: *LOR*, *The Lord of the Rings*; *FR*, *Fellowship of the Ring* (vol. 1 of *LOR*); *2T*, *The Two Towers* (vol. 2 of *LOR*); *RK*, *The Return of the King* (vol. 3 of *LOR*). *LOR* was first published by J. R. R. Tolkien in 1954–55 (London: George Allen & Unwin). Page numbers given here are from the 50th anniversary edition (NY: Houghton Mifflin, 2004). Citations are by: book, chapter, page. The book and chapter numbers given here will enable the identification of the relevant references in the numerous other editions.

of Rohan are all buried in the Barrows of the Mark near Edoras (2T 3.6.507). In the video (though not in the book) Théoden's son, Théodred, is placed in the King's Tomb as his cousin, Éowyn, sings a lament. The soldiers of Rohan who are killed in the battle with the Orcs on the edge of Fanghorn Forest are buried in a mound (2T 3.3.459–60), as are the Riders of the Mark who died in the battle of Helm's Deep, though Háma, the Captain of the King's Guard, is buried in a separate grave as a special honor (2T 3.8.545). King Théoden is initially buried in a tomb in the Hallows with the other kings of Gondor (RK 6.5.969), but later is carried back to Rohan and "laid in a house of stone ... and over him was raised a great mound" in the Barrowfield at Edoras (RK 6.6.975–76). In the final battle of *LOR* during the Scouring of the Shire (not included in the movie version), the hobbits who died in the Battle of Bywater are buried together and a garden planted around their graves (RK 6.8.1016).

By contrast, enemy combatants killed in battle are usually burned. The Riders of Rohan do so to the Orcs killed near Fanghorn (2T 3.2.440). The enormous quantity of enemy dead following the Battle of Helm's Deep is so great that though they are piled together for burning, there is not enough wood for the necessary fire (2T 3.8.545). They are ultimately buried in a pit and a cairn raised over them by the Ents (2T 3.8.553). The ruffians killed in the Scouring of the Shire are also buried in an old sand pit (RK 6.8.1016).

This pattern even extends to significant animals and plants. The withered White Tree in the Court of the Fountain in the Citadel of Gondor is not burned when King Elessar finds a young Nimloth sapling to replace it. Instead they laid the dead tree "to rest in the silence of Rath Dínen" (RK 6.5.972). The carcass of the winged "fell beast" ridden by the Lord of the Nazgûl which was slain by Éowyn is burned, but Snowmane, King Théoden's horse, is buried in a dug grave (RK 5.6.845).

The most striking instance of cremation is the "suicide-cremation" of Denethor, Steward of Gondor. Not only is the event itself tragic, but Tolkien places on the lips of Denethor an explanation. As he sits by the side of his unconscious son, Faramir, whom he thinks to be fatally injured, Denethor's broken cry is:

I will go now to my pyre. To my pyre! No tomb for Denethor and Faramir. No tomb! No long slow sleep of death embalmed. *We will burn like heathen kings* before a ship sailed hither from the West. The West has failed. Go back and burn! (RK 5.4.825–26, italics added).

And so Denethor dies in despair on a makeshift pyre in the House of the Stewards in Rath Dínen¹³⁷ (though Faramir is rescued from his father's despair). He dies with Gandalf's rebuke ringing in his ears:

Authority is not given to you, Steward of Gondor, to order the hour of your death.... And only the heathen kings, under the domination of the Dark Power, did thus, slaying themselves in pride and despair, murdering their kin to ease their own death (RK 5.7.853).

Other than mass cremations of slain enemy combatants in the midst of the carnage of war, only the wicked chooses cremation in *The Lord of the Rings*.¹³⁸ Significantly, Tolkien wrote a half century

¹³⁷ This is the way Denethor dies in the book, though not in the video, in which he leaps 700' to his death from the battlement of the Citadel.

ago (1954) and reflects an essentially Christian worldview rather than the contemporary views of the movie's script writers. Even in the film version, this worldview remains largely intact. The contrast with *Star Wars* is striking and illustrates the change in the prevailing American worldview(s) in the intervening 30 years.¹³⁹ The *Star Wars* generation is proving to be much more accepting of cremation as normal than was Tolkein's generation.¹⁴⁰

6. Conclusion

Although my conclusion has been implied more or less directly at a number of points above—increasingly so in the last section, it remains to be asked more directly, is cremation a Christian option? Before addressing such a blunt question, we should begin with some broader queries.

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.

Second, 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 on 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).¹⁴¹

¹³⁸ The only exception to this of which I am aware is a historical note in the appendix to *LOR*. Though not part of the epic proper (the relevant events predate those recounted in *LOR* by many years), these background histories describe the Battle of Ananulbizar between the dwarves and the orcs at the gate of Moria. The number of dwarves killed was so great that they could not be buried. Instead they were burned on many pyres (*LOR*, Appendix A.III., "Durin's Folk," 1075). In a footnote Tolkein explains that "such dealings with their dead seemed grievous to the Dwarves, for it was against their use; but to make such tombs as they were accustomed to build (since they will lay their dead only in stone not in earth) would have taken many years. To fire therefore they turned, rather than leave their kin to beast or bird or carrion-orc. But those who fell in Azanulbizar were honoured in memory, and to this day a Dwarf will say proudly of one of his sires: 'he was a burned Dwarf, and that is enough' (ibid., 1076 n.1).

¹³⁹ I count the 30 years from Tolkein's publication of *Lord of the Rings* in 1954 to *The Return of the Jedi* (the first *Star Wars* episode to portray cremation) in 1983.

¹⁴⁰ I suspect that it would be an interesting study to evaluate the views of death expressed in *Star Trek* as well, but I am not a "Trekkie," so that task must await the attention of others. The following two books may be a useful starting point: Jennifer Porter and Darcee McLaren, eds., *Star Trek and Sacred Ground: Explorations of Star Trek, Religion, and American Culture* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000)—see particularly ch. 7, "Intimations of Immortality: Death/Life Meditations in *Star Trek*," by Jon Wagner, 119–38; and Ross Kraemer, William Cassidy, and Susan Schwartz, *Religions of Star Trek* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2003)—particularly ch. 5, "What Happens When You Die?" 159–86.

¹⁴¹ I have in mind here such situations as massive natural disasters, the ravages of war, etc., though even in such cases with large numbers of casualties mass grave burials may be more realistic.

I fully realize that much of the biblical material is descriptive narrative and narrative is not, in itself, prescriptive. Narrative does, however, have greater force when there is a high degree of uniformity of practice in a wide variety of situations, and even more so when there are theological implications and principles drawn from or based on uniform narrative patterns. My argument in this essay is that it is this broader picture that should frame our conclusion regarding cremation. Only when these theological considerations are included does the narrative pattern become significant. When the various cultural issues are added, then the conclusion becomes much more secure.

Third, 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. In Bible times it was customary to greet one another with a kiss. Although commanded by Paul (e.g., 1 Thess 5:26) and still practiced in other cultures, in an American context this precise practice is avoided in favor of a handshake which avoids inappropriate implications. The form of the greeting is not theologically significant. Other customs, 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 mound or 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?¹⁴² Though burial was, indeed, a Jewish practice, the early church was soon a Gentile majority as the gospel spread across the Roman world. In Gentile areas the norm was often cremation due to the many centuries of Greco-Roman influence. Yet Christianity—even Gentile Christianity—never adopted or practiced cremation. 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.

Fourth, 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

¹⁴² Prothero, *Purified by Fire*, 6. 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 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). This assumption needs to be qualified somewhat in that only the outlying provinces made the change as a result of Christian influence. The change had already begun in the 2d C. AD in the Roman heartland, and that apparently due to changing cultural fashions, not the influence of Christianity. Just as the adoption of cremation in imitation of Greek practice had earlier been a fashionable practice, even so the use of the elaborate sarcophagus for burial came into vogue in the 2d C. AD and dominated by the 3d C. (A. D. Nock, "Cremation and Burial in the Roman Empire," *Harvard Theological Review* 25 [1932]: 321–59). There is little doubt that in due time Christianity did exert considerable influence in the practice of burial, but this influence was primarily on Christians prior to the 4th century; it was not a cultural force on the Roman practice at large in the earlier centuries. For a survey of the influence of Christianity on the practice of cremation from the 4th C. onwards, see Alvin J. Schmidt, *Under the Influence: How Christianity Transformed Civilization* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 72–74.

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. Burning and grinding a corpse to ash does not seem to reflect the Christian hope of resurrection.¹⁴³ 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.

Fifth, 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 embalmed¹⁴⁴), 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 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 by cremation or other means, nor should we go to great lengths 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.¹⁴⁵

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, at least in the West,¹⁴⁶ inhumation.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴³ Even if the ashes are buried rather than scattered, what sort of picture are we creating by first burning the body? This question is considered in the next paragraph above.

¹⁴⁴ Modern 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. 130). There are some states which do mandate embalming if the cause of death was from a particular contagious disease.

¹⁴⁵ The epitome of these semantic games is Frances Newton's "Light, Like the Sun" (see n. 100 and the Appendix to this essay).

¹⁴⁶ This essay has not attempted to address the question of appropriate Christian practice in Eastern cultures or in countries where cremation may be legally mandated. I have insufficient knowledge of such matters to attempt such a discussion.

¹⁴⁷ 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. Many of the arguments in this essay would also be relevant in considering another recent innovation for disposing of corpses: freeze drying them and then using vibration to reduce them to powder. A description of this process can be found in the article, "Sweden's New

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 orthodox Christianity as well. We do ourselves no favor by adopting the rituals of our theological adversaries in spite of the theological and philosophical underpinnings of such 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.¹⁴⁸ 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 and the consequent loss of Christian values related to family, life, and death. Whether this is in the mainline, liberal protestant denominations, in Romanism, in content-less, emotion-oriented, pragmatic evangelical and fundamental churches, or in churches that are simply unreflective, the result has been the same: the rejection of the biblical practice of burial for a rite originated in and advocated by a nonchristian worldview. 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.

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 advantageous (since it is perceived to be less expensive).¹⁴⁹ There are two responses to this argument. First, since when have economic factors been determinative in theological issues?¹⁵⁰ This is not to suggest that economic factors are irrelevant. It does claim, however, that in itself this does not constitute a determinative argument.

Second, it is a false picture to contrast cremation and burial in terms of cost. The difference in the cost of a funeral is not between burial (expensive) and cremation (inexpensive), but between extravagance and simplicity. The funeral industry has a financial motivation to make either alter-

Funeral Rite” in the *Telegraph* (a UK newspaper: <www.telegraph.co.uk>); the article is available online at <<http://tinyurl.com/ade45>>, accessed 2/18/2006.

¹⁴⁸ I speak here of *advocacy* of the practice of cremation. Those who engage in advocacy usually have an agenda—and it is not likely to be a biblical one. There are Christians who *accept* cremation and argue that it is a neutral practice (e.g., Pyne, *Humanity and Sin*, 99: “Our understanding of the body does not favor one method of disposing of human corpses over another”—and he follows with a mention of cremation), but this is different from advocating the practice.

¹⁴⁹ This is not the most common reason for the increase in cremation, though this varies by community. I have been told by a pastor friend from another state that in his experience those selecting cremation usually do so for financial reasons. However, our local funeral director tells me that this is rarely a consideration in his experience; most who choose cremation do so out of principle or preference. Note that cost is not one of the major trend factors listed by the Cremation Association of North America (see n. 117).

¹⁵⁰ In his (relatively brief) discussion of cremation, Hank Hanegraaff makes the same point: “economic considerations should not be valued more highly than ethical considerations—eternal values are ultimately more significant than economic values” (*Resurrection* [Nashville: Nelson, 2000], 130).

native as expensive as possible.¹⁵¹ Funerals involving cremation can be just as expensive as burial and burials can be far less expensive than they usually are.

A Christian should be concerned to be a good steward even in death. This should be a priority both for those of greater means as well as for those with limited resources. Impressing others with extravagance is not a Christian virtue. Funerals can be far less expensive by foregoing many of the “professional” services offered by the funeral industry.¹⁵² According to the National Funeral Directors Association, the average cost of an American funeral in 2004 was \$6,500¹⁵³—not including cemetery costs which can easily add several thousand dollars additional.

Although it is true that direct cremation is less expensive than the typical American funeral,¹⁵⁴ so is direct burial. Direct cremation involves no professional funeral home services. There is no viewing, no embalming, no casket, etc. The body is transported directly to the crematory for disposal.¹⁵⁵ Direct burial is similar; it involves no viewing or embalming, uses an inexpensive casket,¹⁵⁶ and the body typically is interred within one or two days of death. A private family graveside service can be conducted by the pastor with a memorial service held sometime later. The only necessary costs are for the casket, the cemetery plot, and related charges to open and close the grave.¹⁵⁷ When economic factors are considered, cremation is not the only alternative.

¹⁵¹ Certainly there are some funeral directors who do not attempt to inflate such costs, but it is sometimes difficult to determine this—something that grieving families are not typically in a position to do. Likewise some extravagant funeral costs are at the request of the family. I have talked with one funeral director who recounted two cremations for which the total costs were \$7,000 and \$10,000 respectively (phone interview, David Penepent, funeral director at Herishon Funeral Home, Ithaca, NY, 3/10/2006). I have talked with another funeral director who told of cremations in which very expensive, full hardwood traditional caskets (mahogany, oak, etc.) were requested by the family—and burned with the body (personal interview, Lawrence Young, funeral director at Young Funeral Home, Clarks Summit, Pa., 3/9/2006). This not only constitutes a considerable waste (though perhaps not much more than burying the equivalent in the ground!), it creates problems for the crematory since it results in a much larger quantity of ashes—far more than will fit in an urn (personal interview, Robert Jones, owner of R. H. Jones Crematory, Tunkhannock, Pa., 3/8/2006).

¹⁵² Expensive hardwood caskets, large floral displays, fancy hearses, embalming, cosmetology, and other professional mortuary services quickly escalate funeral costs.

¹⁵³ National Funeral Directors Association, “NFDA Fact Sheet,” <<http://www.nfda.org/nfdafactsheets.php>>, accessed 3/4/2006. These figures vary by region. In my part of the country I have had a funeral director suggest that the average *including* cemetery costs is only around \$6,000, but those are verbal estimates, not documented statistics (personal interview, Lawrence Young, funeral director at Young Funeral Home, Clarks Summit, Pa., 3/9/2006).

¹⁵⁴ The average cost of a cremation is about \$1,850 “without the cost of burial and other fees” (Jack Springer, director of the Cremation Association of North America, as cited in “Casket Makers Rethink Business Strategy,” Yahoo News, 3/7/2006, <http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20060307/ap_on_bi_ge/changing_casket_makers_2>, accessed 3/8/2006).

¹⁵⁵ This varies by state. Some states legislate that a licensed funeral director must handle the body and that the body must be held for 24 hours before disposal.

¹⁵⁶ Caskets can be purchased from various sources, including online sellers, at enormously less money than what is charged by funeral homes. (Do a web search for “cremation caskets” to find the inexpensive ones, otherwise you will only find the traditional, expensive models. A cremation casket can also be used for burial—even the “alternative container” type made of heavy cardboard.) Caskets can also be built by family or friends.

¹⁵⁷ In addition, states which legislate that a licensed funeral director must be involved would add some additional cost, though these would be minimal in comparison with a traditional funeral. I have heard objections that this is much more expensive in northern areas where the cemeteries are closed in the winter due to deep frost and heavy snow. As a result, burial arrangements pending a spring interment involve cold storage of the body which some people assume is

Although not many may be willing to do so these days, it is both possible and legal in some (though not in all) states to bury a body with no involvement of a funeral home at all. The family can sometimes handle all the arrangements themselves, including obtaining a death certificate, providing the casket, and (in some localities) even burying the body themselves.¹⁵⁸ That is, after all, the way funerals have been handled until quite recently.¹⁵⁹ To the extent allowed by law, we should attempt to return to some of these earlier practices as a means of ministry to grieving families and as a testimony to unbelievers. There is potential for significant local church ministry in this area. It would also be a way of demonstrating that what we say we believe does make a difference in how we live—and in how we die.

Churches would be wise to do more to teach biblical values and principles of death so that Christians are better prepared to handle decisions regarding such matters in times of grief. Too often we have been content to comfort those who grieve with the hope of the resurrection (and that is certainly appropriate), but we have done so without addressing the implications of a Christian view of the body in death. This teaching should be both practical and timely.¹⁶⁰ Such teaching is not heard well in the midst of tears; it must be part of the regular teaching ministry of the church *before* it is needed.

Jesus once said, “Let the dead bury their own dead” (Matt 8:22). That statement refers, I think, to those who are spiritually dead burying those who are physically dead. Jesus’ intent in that statement was not to specify the mode of disposing of a corpse. I think, however, that we might adapt his words¹⁶¹ to express the conclusion of this essay: let the living (i.e., those who are genuine, regenerate followers of Jesus) *bury* their dead, for it is better to bury than to burn.



very expensive. This is, however, a minimal cost, typically \$50-100, even if it involves the entire winter (phone interview, David Penepent, funeral director at Herishon Funeral Home, Ithaca, NY, 3/10/2006).

¹⁵⁸ For the details and instructions along this line, see 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, <www.npr.org/programs/death/971208.death.html>, accessed 12/7/2005. My *impression* is that some of these options have disappeared in recent years due to some widely publicized scandals involving funeral homes and crematories. In reacting to these abuses, state governments have been “helpful” in trying to protect its citizens, but in doing so have also increased costs for both cremation and burial. I have not documented this conclusion, so be advised that some additional investigation is in order on the topic. I do not profess to offer legal advice in this paper.

¹⁵⁹ On this topic see not only Prothero’s account, but also Farrell, *Inventing the American Way of Death*; Flood, “Contemplating Corpses”; and Kazmier, “Modern Landscape.”

¹⁶⁰ There are numerous resources that can be adapted for such use. As a few suggestions in addition to many cited above, see the following web resources: Funeral Consumers Alliance, <<http://www.funerals.org/>>; *Funerals: A Consumer Guide*, Federal Trade Commission, <<http://www.ftc.gov/bcp/online/pubs/services/funeral.pdf>>; Christopher Solomon, “How to Plan an \$800 Funeral,” at <<http://tinyurl.com/qmbo>> on the <<http://moneycentral.msn.com/>> site; and “Funeral Planning 101,” <<http://www.funeralplanning101.com/>> (all accessed 3/4/2006).

¹⁶¹ In “adapting” his words I am not suggesting that this is what Jesus means or that this is what the text can be made to mean. Rather I am simply using a variation of well-known, memorable wording to express my own conclusion in the same way that I began the essay with an adaptation of Paul’s words.

Appendix A

Sample Funeral Costs

Although rarely published publicly, there are standardized price lists for funeral costs. Funeral homes are required to give the family an itemized printed price list when they make decisions regarding funeral arrangements. The following listing is from one funeral home which has posted their price list on the web.¹⁶² There are many variations based on region, specific setting, and individual funeral home, but these may offer some approximations to provide some idea of what is involved.

Services of funeral director and staff	
Minimum service fee ¹⁶³	\$1,852
Preparation of the body	
Embalming	450
Refrigeration, up to 3 days	185
Refrigeration, beyond 3 days (per day)	50
Bathing and handling	100
Cosmetizing	100
Dressing and casketing	100
Dressing, casketing, and cosmetizing	185
Restoration	75
Special care for autopsied cases	100
Use of facilities and staff	
Visitation at the funeral home (per day)	295
Funeral service at the funeral home	495
Staff services: funeral service at other facility	495
Memorial service at the funeral home	495
Staff services: memorial service at other facility	495
Equipment and staff services at graveside service	395
Reception center	265
Additional charge for Sunday/holiday	275
Additional charge for evening service	295
Package pricing for funerals¹⁶⁴	
Basic package	5,013
Heritage package	7,644
Prestige package	9,225
Package pricing for cremations	
Efficiency package	1,595

¹⁶² Jon Deitloff Funeral Centre, Spring Grove Cemetery and Arboretum, Cincinnati, Ohio, <www.springgrove.org>, accessed 3/8/2006. (The specific pricing info can be accessed at <<http://tinyurl.com/j76go>>.) It appears that these are only the major items since the web page contains additional, unitemized listings for such things as “transportation” and “miscellaneous items.”

¹⁶³ The web page (see previous note) says that “this fee for our basic services and overhead will be added to the total cost of the funeral arrangements you select. This fee is already included in our charges for direct cremations, immediate burials, and forwarding or receiving remains.”

¹⁶⁴ These packages include a variety of options, but all include the casket and burial vault; none include the cemetery plot or interment charges from the cemetery.

Tribute package	1,945
Heritage package	2,840
Providence package	3,835

Appendix B

Light, Like the Sun by Frances Newton

Text from <www.funerals.org/faq/light.htm>
[For the significance of this article, see note 100.]

Father was 87 when he died. And I, at 41, had never before seen death, knew nothing of funeral rites. My husband and I sometimes argued about “what one did” when death came. He believed in cremation. I refused even to think of such an end. It was bad enough to die without becoming a bonfire, I thought. And I liked the idea of returning to the earth and becoming part of nature.

We had come out from New York to visit Father on his birthday. He seemed more alert and active than he had for years. And then, just as we were leaving, he fell and broke his hip. The doctors told me frankly that recovery was unlikely. And they warned me that in any case I should “make all arrangements.”

Fiercely, I set myself against death. I knew what the doctors meant, but I was still unwilling to face the issue. By the end of the second week, however, I knew that the time had come to make preparations. So, with heavy hearts, we started out to find a burial plot. All the country churchyards nearby were full or reserved for parishioners. Only the city cemeteries were left. We went to one of them.

It was a cold, wet mid-December day and, as we looked at plots, a feeling of utter horror swept through me. There, in that manufactured park with its ghoulish artificiality, with its interminable monuments to bad taste, wealth and social position, we were planning to place the body of a beautiful and dignified old man who had lived generously and loved beauty.

“Is there no place where he can be alone, without being crowded like this?” I asked. The young man who was piloting us about shook his head. “This is the most desirable burial ground in the city, and it is almost filled.”

We passed open graves ready to receive the dead—mounds of rain-drenched earth wet and sodden on the smoke-begrimed snow. When the young man quoted price, my heart sank further. I hadn’t realized that it was so costly to bury one’s dead. The only plot I would consider cost \$1700. Gently, the man reminded me that I was seeing the cemetery under the worst possible conditions, that it was beautiful when the trees were out, that many of Father’s old friends and associates were lying there. But finally, noting my silence, he said, “If I had to do what you’re doing today, I’d choose cremation. “Never,” I said. Then I looked out at that dreadful panorama of soot-stained stones. “Tell me about it,” I asked.

“I think it would be better if you went to our crematory,” he said. You might find there what you miss here.” He directed us to a friendly and unpretentious Gothic chapel. My husband explained to the verger in charge that we wanted to learn about cremation—about what actually happened. “Tell me everything,” I said. “I can stand what I know. It’s what I don’t know that frightens me.”

The old verger seemed to understand. In front of the high altar, in the tiny chancel, lay a catafalque of dark-gray stone. There were flowers, and a lovely rose window threw warm colors on the stone floor. “The casket is brought in and placed on the catafalque,” explained the verger. “The pallbearers stand on either side and the usual service for the dead is read. At the words “ashes to ashes, dust to dust,” the casket is sprinkled with ashes and with dust. I press this button, and the casket sinks a foot below the floor, leaving only the flowers showing. The priest gives the benediction, and the service is over.”

“What happens when we go away?” I asked.

He took us into the receiving chamber, beneath the chancel. “When the congregation has left the church” the verger said, “a friend of the family accompanies me and the undertaker to this room. I press this lever and the catafalque bearing the casket is lowered into the retort. “What is the retort?”

We passed into another vaulted room, white like the other. In the center was a small brick structure, with square gilt doors. The verger opened these revealing an inner door. He raised it and we looked into a long, white tiled chamber. The

verger explained how the casket was placed in the retort, the door electrically sealed for four hours. “Afterward the ashes are gathered and sealed in a container to be placed in a niche in the chapel or given to the relatives.”

I was still not satisfied. “Does it burn?” I asked. “Like a bonfire?” The thought of flames touching someone I loved, charring his beauty, was insupportable.

The old man asked, “Have you ever looked into the sun? You know how bright and clear it is. That is what surrounds the body and consumes it. Light, like the sun.”

Light, like the sun. A sense of triumph came over me. Sunlight over Father working in his garden. Sunlight on his white head as he sat on the terrace reading. The warmth of sunlight bringing life to growing things, falling benignly on the aging, “When his time comes, I shall bring him here.”

But, as we drove away, my husband was not satisfied. “All your life you have wanted burial. I may have over-influenced you. Tomorrow I want you to go to some friend of your father, someone nearer to his own generation, and tell him of your decision.”

“But you still feel the same, don’t you?” I asked.

“More strongly than ever. Burial in modern urban surroundings is even more barbarous than I had realized. And to me there is something monstrous about spending a couple of thousand dollars on a plot of ground and a stone when the same amount would provide a living memorial to your father.”

“Why not take the difference between the cost of cremation and the expense of burial and establish a scholarship—or some sort of revolving loan fund—at his old university? Your father always believed in youth, has served youth all his life. Why not create a memorial that will be a living influence among those he always tried to help?”

More than anything I had heard, this last suggestion seemed to alleviate the pain the afternoon had brought. I went to the provost of Father’s university, a man kindly and sympathetic, but well aware of the world he was living in.

“To me there is no question,” he said. “Burial is part of an outworn social order. In building highways, it is often necessary to cleave through some little country cemetery, leaving a few forlorn stones on one side of the road and a few on the other. Or workmen, when excavating, disturb a skull, a handful of bones, someone’s dearly beloved of 70 or 100 years ago. To me that is real desecration. And yet the dead cannot hold back progress. Perhaps eventually it will no longer be possible to be buried. Cremation may become obligatory. And think what all this real estate and stone masonry would mean, translated into scholarships. We could then take care of the brilliant youngsters who have little money. The dead, then, would truly enrich the soil.”

Father died a week later. I sat beside him for a little while. My plans were made. I felt no grief—rather, a strange sense of elation, a feeling that all was well with all of us.

The following day, they carried him down to the university chapel. There, in a glory of sunlight and flowers, with his old friends around him, the Episcopal service for the dead was read.

On the drive to the crematory, we passed the cemetery with its soot-stained stones and snow, its uncovered ugly clay where the earth had been freshly broken, and I had a great singing thankfulness that we were not to lay him there. Inside the little chapel, sunset light gleaming through the windows fell on the casket covered with yellow roses, daffodils and iris. Warmth and color, Light and beauty.

“And so we commit his body. . .”

The casket sank out of sight, but in the aperture there were flowers, vivid, gay and strong.

And so we left him. Not for me the agony of knowing that his frail body lay in the cold earth. All I knew on the empty journey home was that around the gentle, kindly old man there was light, like the Sun.”

Father’s memorial does not lie in a mound of earth and a stone. To me, he has not died. For I know the fruits of his labors are being used to help students, such as he was once himself. To these unknown students he is bringing light, like the sun.

As the trend continues, the cemeteries of the future may become green and open parks, with appropriate buildings harboring inscriptions about each person whose ashes are sheltered within. Thus, the character of our cemeteries would change from places of death to places of life.

Those of us with deceased loved ones know that they will be with us always—their memories aren’t locked in the graveyards where they are buried. For me, my father lives on in the straight furrows of the Kansas fields he plowed. My mother still lives in her remembered laughter.

The soul is not anchored to a tombstone or a tiny plot of ground. Let us seek the ways to honor our dead not because they died, but because they lived.

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