

Cremation or Burial

Does Our Choice Matter?

by Justin Dillehay

For most of history, no one asked whether Christians should cremate their dead. Burial was such a standard practice that it was usually referred to as a “Christian burial,” and cremation was something people read about in Viking tales.

But things have changed in the West. And as cremation has become more common, it has become less strange. In many countries, cremation is now more common than burial, and often Christians now opt for cremation without a second thought. Nevertheless, “What do you think about cremation?” is a question I still get asked as a pastor, so it’s worth pondering.

I argue that “Christian burial” isn’t a misnomer but a fitting description.

It’s not that God is somehow unable to resurrect cremated remains (it’s easy for him). And it’s not that cremation is a violation of a direct biblical command (it’s not, but that doesn’t mean all cultural practices are an equally good fit with

Christian theology). Rather, I argue burial is a Christian act in the sense that it better reflects biblical precedents, biblical imagery, and biblical theology about the human body and its future.

For that reason, Christian burial is a practice worth reclaiming as a sorrowful yet joyful way to visibly proclaim the Christian hope amid a hopeless culture.

Ask the Right Question

While there's no moral prohibition on cremation in the Bible, Scripture gives numerous examples of God's people burying their dead and almost no examples of God's people being cremated. Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel, Joseph, Miriam, Moses, David, Elisha, John the Baptist, Stephen, and most famously Christ himself were all buried (Gen 25:10; 35:19, 29; 49:31; 50:14; Num 20:1; Deu 34:6; Jos 24:32; 1Ki 2:10; 2Ki 13:20; Mar 6:29; Act 8:2; 1Co 15:4).

It's worth asking why. There were other options—Stephen Prothero says that “with the notable exceptions of the Egyptians, the Chinese, and the Hebrews, cremation seems to have been the standard practice of the ancients.”¹ Yet burial was

¹ Steven Prothero, *Purified by Fire: A History of Cremation in America* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002), 5.

the standard practice of God's people in both Testaments. Why?

This pattern didn't stop with the completion of the Bible. History shows that as Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire, cremation disappeared and was replaced by burial. The same is true in basically every culture where Christianity has become dominant or influential. One could argue it has only been with the waning of Christianity's influence in the Western world that cremation has been making a comeback (though the rising population and funeral prices have also played a role). Why?

Why has burial always been the dominant practice among God's people throughout history, even when it was countercultural? Could there be natural fitness between Judeo-Christian beliefs about the human body and Judeo-Christian burial practices?

The answer is yes, for a simple reason. Namely, what we believe about the human body and its future influences how we treat the human body—even after it's dead.

The Body Among World Religions

To take one example: historically, Hindus have burned their dead. In places like India or Nepal, cremations are often done in public. This is at least

partly because of what Hindus believe about reincarnation and the human body. According to one Hindu website, “After death, the outer flesh, the physical body serves no purpose and the quickest way to release the soul & help in the re-incarnation process is to burn the body.”

There’s a natural fitness between Hindu beliefs about the body and the afterlife and Hindu cultural practices surrounding death—which shouldn’t surprise anyone.

Other religions view the body as a shell or a prison for the soul. While this doesn’t necessarily rule out burial, it does make belief in a bodily resurrection seem pointless—after all, who wants to go back to prison once he’s escaped (Act 17:32)? On the flip side, while not all who practice burial believe in a bodily resurrection, belief in a bodily resurrection does seem to lend itself to burial (as we see throughout Christian history).

Religion is part of culture, and cultural beliefs influence cultural practices.

The Body in Christianity

Christianity is different from Hinduism in this respect. As Christians, we don’t only believe in the immortality of the soul—we believe in the resurrection of the body. Unlike many other religions, Christianity has a positive view of the

human body and of creation in general. Scripture teaches that God created the world and everything in it and then pronounced it “very good” (Gen 1:31; see Gen 1 & 2). This is basic Christianity: the physical creation and the human body are good things made by a good God.

It’s also part of the basic Christian doctrine of the human person. As a human being, you could be described as either an embodied soul or an ensouled body. Both elements are vital. To separate soul from body is the definition of death (Jam 2:26). This means your body isn’t just a shell, with your soul constituting “the real you.” Your body is an essential part of your human nature.

As Abigail Favale puts it, “Bodies are not just bodies, bodies are persons made manifest.” Augustine wrote about this in his classic fifth-century book *City of God*, and he applied it to how we care for our dead:

For if the dress of a father, or his ring, or anything he wore, be precious to his children, in proportion to the love they bore him, with how much more reason ought we to care for the bodies of those we love, which they wore far more closely and intimately than any clothing! For the body is not an extraneous ornament or aid, but a part of man’s very nature.

This is why God plans to resurrect our bodies rather than allow our bodies and souls to be separated forever in death.

Jesus was buried because God wasn't planning to allow his Holy One to see decay—instead, he was planning to raise him on the third day (Act 2:27; 1Co 15:4). And while most of Christ's younger brothers and sisters will see decay before we're resurrected, the same logic holds true of us: "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you" (Rom 8:11; cf. 1Co 15:51–55).

Just as Hindu theology influences their cultural practices, so early Christian theology influenced the church's cultural practices, notes theologian Timothy George: "As the catacombs in Rome attest, the early Christians insisted on burying their dead. Christian gravesites were called *coemeteria* (cemeteries), which literally means 'sleeping places,' reflecting belief in a future resurrection."

In short, belief in the human body's essential goodness and future resurrection is a fundamental part of the Christian faith and worldview. So if it has shaped cultural practices about how to treat the body after death, this should hardly surprise us.

Send the Right Signals

Given that Christians have almost universally practiced burial until recently, we should stop and think before simply following the current cultural trend. Death rituals don't arise in a cultural and theological vacuum. Is the current trend good?

More importantly, given the historical practice of God's people (both in Scripture and since), we need to consider whether natural fitness between Christian beliefs and Christian burial explains this universal practice. As Russell Moore once observed, "The question is not simply whether cremation is always a personal sin...The question is whether burial is a Christian act and, if so, then what does it communicate?"

I think the answer to Moore's question, is yes. Burial is a Christian act, and it communicates the belief that what's sown in weakness will one day be raised in power (1Co 15:42-43). This is how Paul describes the resurrection of the dead in 1 Corinthians 15—that most famous of all passages on the resurrection—where he uses the image of a seed planted in the ground:

Someone will ask, "How are the dead raised up? and with what body do they come?" You foolish person! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And what you sow is not the body that is to be,

but a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain (vv. 35-37).

Burying the body is like sowing a seed. Both go into the ground, and in both cases, what comes out of the ground is biologically continuous yet astronomically better. Christ uses the same imagery for his own death and burial when he says, “Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit” (Joh 12:24).

These aren’t so much proof texts that command us to bury our dead as they are imaginative pointers to the natural fitness between resurrection as a Christian belief and burial as a Christian practice.

Whether in farming or funerals, burial isn’t a final act but an opening act. It’s not just an end; it’s a beginning. This is the hope we have as saints in Christ. And this is an opportunity we need to take advantage of amid a paganizing culture. In Christian burial, we’re not simply disposing of a corpse; we’re planting a seed. Just as we sow in hope of the harvest, we bury in hope of the resurrection.

Reclaim Christian Burial

I agree with Moore’s admission: “What bothers me as a Christian minister is not so much that some of us are cremated as that the rest of us don’t seem

to care. Like the culture around us, we tend to see death and burial as an individual matter.”

But no man is an island, and funerals, like weddings, have always been community affairs with public implications. Though the responsibility for making funeral arrangements will inevitably fall to us as individuals, we ought to make those decisions steeped in Scripture and its imagery, not simply as pragmatic, ahistorical, American individualists being swept along by the tide.

I realize financial considerations are often a factor in choosing cremation over burial. And for those who would prefer to bury their loved ones but can't afford it, I have nothing but sympathy. But since naked sympathy isn't worth much, I'd suggest that if we as a church still believe burial is a Christian act, then we ought to put our money where our mouth is and offer financial assistance to such people.

I've argued there's a natural fitness between Christian beliefs about the body and the historic Christian practice of burial. My goal isn't to condemn or shame anyone who has chosen cremation for others (much less those who've simply carried out their departed loved ones' directives). My desire is forward-looking, to give us something to think about as we make decisions about our funerals and as we discuss plans with our

friends and loved ones, especially those who are in Christ.

Burial is a Christian act in that it better represents the biblical examples, biblical analogies, and biblical teachings on the body. So as our culture paganizes, let's be countercultural. Let's reclaim Christian burial. And let's say with our actions as well as our words, "We believe in the resurrection of the body."

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