



The Cremation Controversy

by Bruce Woolard

Cremation, of the deceased, has become a norm in Western society. The vast majority of modern families choose cremation over burial. What does the Bible say about this practise and should a Christian who has died be cremated?

Does the Bible give us a definitive answer?

BIBLICAL RECORD

The Bible's account is clear the ancient Hebrew people of the Old Testament buried their dead. The narratives of the burial of Sarah (Genesis 23:1-20). Rachel (Genesis 35:19-20), indicate that burial was common. Except in some unusual instances the Hebrews burnt the bodies of their heroes to prevent their enemies parading their dead icons as trophies of war. Saul and his sons are an example (1 Samuel 31:11-13).

In 1 Corinthians 13 Paul refers to burning the body as a practise of martyrdom. Some thought that they would receive a better body in the resurrection if they chose to be burnt at the stake (Hebrews 11:35-40).

RECORD OF HISTORY

In the ancient world cremation was normal among the Greeks and Romans. Hindus believe in re-incarnation and therefore, discard of the body as a used vessel, never ever to be resurrected. However, cremation was also practised among many pagan cultures stemming from Babylon. In contrast the Egyptians tried to preserve their dead by mummification. Discoveries in some Hebrew ossuaries in Palestine reveal Jewish people in later times, also practised cremation.

PERSONAL CHOICE

Whether burial or cremation the individuals choice should be accepted and honoured. It's a highly emotive issue that may divide grieving families. It's a topic that is so sensitive that an opposing argument could cause a great deal of unnecessary pain, conflict and heartache.

REASONS FOR BURIAL

Some believers who prefer burial, say:

- (1) The body of every human is created by God, in his image, and deserves to be treated with respect;
- (2) When the Word became flesh in the Incarnation, God uniquely hallowed human life and bodily existence forever;
- (3) The Holy Spirit dwells within believers, making their bodies vessels of honour;
- (4) As Jesus himself was buried and raised bodily from the dead, so Christians believed their burial was a witness to the bodily resurrection to come.

While Christian tradition clearly favours burial, the Bible nowhere explicitly condemns cremation. The Late Evangelist Billy Graham noted (what Christians have always believed) that cremation cannot prevent a sovereign God from calling forth the dead at the end of time.

The real question for Christians isn't whether they choose burial or cremation, but the meaning given to these acts. Our modern funeral customs tend to anesthetize us from the ugly reality of death with soft music, plush carpets, and expensive caskets. Presbyterian preacher George Buttrick once said, "There is nothing more incongruous than dressing up a corpse in a tuxedo!" Cremation, too, can desecrate rather than respect the dead. For example, families now can have a loved one's "cremains" turned into a piece of pottery!

Regardless of whether a believer chooses burial or cremation, the Christian church should offer a funeral liturgy in which the reality of death isn't camouflaged and the resurrection of the body is affirmed. We solemnize our loved ones' departure by reminding ourselves that we brought nothing into this world, and that we carry nothing out.

REASONS FOR CREMATION

Cremation prevents the body from the awful process of decay. Space for burial is becoming a global problem, further it's unsafe to visit grave yards because of crime.

It's less traumatic for grieving families to witness a burial and cremation helps to eradicate the visualisation of a loved ones body lying in a grave.

It's more convenient and less expensive than having to buy a plot of land and maintaining it.

CONCLUSION

God does not need one atom of our physical body to recreate a resurrected body (1 Corinthians 15:22-26 and 1 Corinthians 15:51-58).

2 Corinthians 5:8

“To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord”.

1 Thessalonians 4:13-14

“Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.”



041-3601127 / stdavids@telkomsa.net
www.stdavids.org.za