

Is Cremation Christian?

There is no Biblical command against cremation, but it was never the custom of God's people. Cremation was always done by the pagan nations. Jews and Christians throughout history have chosen to dispose of corpses by burial. Can God resurrect the body of one who has been cremated, eaten by a fish, or turned to gases in an explosion? Obviously, He can. But, should a committed Christ follower ever participate in cremation?

Many apparently think so since it has gathered such wide acceptance in recent years even among professing Christians. The ministers of America are strangely silent on the subject and very few church attendees have ever heard a sermon on the subject, much less studied the matter themselves.

Historically, cremation was considered a pagan method of disposing of the human body. Today, however, human reasoning, cultural acceptance, and economic factors determine what is right and what is wrong when it comes to funeral procedures, rather than the Word of God.

The Revelation on Cremation

For committed Christians, the issue is: "What does the Bible say about cremation?" Our faith is grounded in the Judeo-Christian ethic which means that we must consider what the Old and New Testaments say on this important subject, which will eventually affect every person. (Hebrews 9:27).

The Old Testament

Is there scriptural allowance for cremation in the Old Testament? The answer is "No!" The universal law and practice of God's people Israel was to bury the body, not burn it.

Take Abraham, for example. As the "Father of the Faithful," he chose to purchase a plot of ground for 400 shekels of silver as a place for burying his wife Sarah (Genesis 23:14). Why did he do that? Because it was the scriptural way to care for the dead. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were all buried, as were the more than two million Israelites who died in the desert.

The Old Testament forbade the Jews from following the customs of their pagan neighbors, and specifically ordered them to bury dead bodies (Deut. 21:23). When Moses died, God buried him in Moab (Deut. 34:6). Since that is God's method, should it not be ours. The Jewish commentary on the Law (The Mishna) denounced cremation as "an idolatrous practice."

The only case of a body being burned in Israel is recorded in Joshua 7:15. Achan and his family were stoned to death, and their bodies were ordered to be burned because of their horrible sin of rebellion against a holy God. Burning a body was a demonstration of God's 'fierce anger' in Bible days (Joshua 7:26). Should our remains be disgraced in this same way?

Amos 2 records the unpardonable sin of Moab, which was the burning of the bones of Edom's king (v. 1). The result of that sin of cremation in the 8th century BC was a God-sent "fire upon Moab." Burning has always been a demonstration of God's wrath. It is therefore not a fitting practice at biblical funerals.

The New Testament

In New Testament times the only bodies that were burned were those of criminals. The place of cremation was the garbage dump in the Valley of Hinnon which was located just outside the walls of the Holy City. There, in ancient times, human sacrifices were offered (2 Chron. 33:6) and the continuous burning of rubbish illustrated for the Jewish people unending judgment upon the wicked.

Jesus used the word "Gehenna" as a picture of Hell, where 'the worm does not die and the fire is not

quenched' (Mark 9:48). Burning was the symbol of shame and disgrace, hardly the proper imagery for a Christian funeral. Jesus said that the dead should be buried, not burned (Matt. 8:22).

Our Lord's own body was carefully placed in a tomb. He was "buried" the Scripture says. Our identification with Christ in His death is said to be a "burial" (Romans 6:4). Believer' baptism graphically pictures that spiritual relationship. Cremation therefore, is a violation and a distortion of that scriptural object lesson. It must not be done.

Every funeral in the New Testament included a burial, even for such persons as Annanias and Sapphira, and Judas! (Matt. 27:710). It is therefore a statement of gross ignorance for any Christian to say: "There is nothing in the Bible that forbids cremation."

The Origins of Cremation

According to the historical records, the idea of reducing a dead body to ashes originated in heathen lands. The Romans, who also invented a crucifixion kind of death, were among the first to practice this abhorrent custom. The Hindus in India have always burned their dead and then sprinkled the ashes on the Ganges River. Since they believe in reincarnation they want to dispose of the body quickly so that the next incarnation can take place. Should Christians emulate the Hindus? Interestingly, Christians in India believe that cremation is as pagan as idol worship, and therefore always bury their dead.

Cremation came to America via the uncivilized and non-Christian peoples of the Middle Ages. These same pagans bored out the eyes of Christians, tore out their tongues, burned them at the stake, and fed them to the lions.

The first crematorium in America was built in Washington, Pennsylvania in 1876 by some very ungodly and atheistic men. The Roman Catholic Church responded very quickly to the spreading of this evil practice by banning it in 1886. Long before that date however, Christian pastors spoke out against this practice and condemned this pagan way of disposing of a Christian's body.

It is therefore a rather recent development in our country, and sadly, it has now been adopted by many Christians as just another way to get rid of a dead body. Some Christians respond to this revelation by saying: "We know that cremation doesn't cause anyone to by-pass the judgment as some believe, and therefore it doesn't matter how we dispose of a loved one's body." Oh, yes it does!

For a person to request cremation for themselves or another person is to go against the Bible and all of sacred history. Burial is the only biblical method as we await the resurrection, and no amount of reasoning about burial space, the sanitation of this method, and the high costs of funerals can change that. The question of cremation is not debatable, for God has spoken the final word.

The Word of God is very clear on this subject, both by direct statements and spiritual examples. As Christians we are not permitted to do with our bodies as we please. Indeed, we are challenged to exalt Jesus Christ in our bodies, 'whether by life or by death.' (Phil. 1:20).

by Roy E. Knuteson, Pd.D. The Discerner vol 17 #4 Oct-Dec. 1997

"Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them." Ephesians 5:11.