

# **BURIAL OR CREMATION**

## **A White Paper Exploring Biblical, Cultural and Historical Perspectives**

by

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### **Abstract**

Issues surrounding the contemporary conflict of choice, even confusion, relating to preferences for burial or cremation in the Christian community are examined in a reasoned measure.

The growing preference for cremation over burial within the culture at large over the last century, and especially its quite astounding rise in practice in the last half-century, has permeated the Christian church quite extensively as well, raising both a particular need of and a communicated desire for 'directed shepherding counsel' on the subject, even within decidedly evangelical congregations.

The motivating intention behind this white paper is to set forth a modicum of substantive content that might provide clarifying and edifying perspectives on the title issue. It is the author's hope that the present text might also assist in shaping convictions, especially where troubled uncertainty reigns, in relation to the formation of end-of-life choices both for individuals and for families.

The author believes that committed followers of Christ ought to ponder this issue with serious contemplation for it is not at all peripheral to one's 'faith pilgrimage', particularly if a person is devoted to please God in the broad sweep of one's life choices. This fact is accentuated relative to the issue of burial or cremation by the many and varied contemporary pressures exerted by the collision of economic, cultural and historical-traditional voices, all of which add complication and confusion in regard to choices confronting those who wish to please God in the full-scope of their 'faith-walk'.

The desired goal is that disciples might come to a place of enjoying a settled 'soul peace' springing from Spirit-fueled affirmations of conscience in individual exercise of liberty in Christ – a liberty that ought first to be bounded by Scripture, yet also respectfully conditioned by the deeply-rooted and consistently-practiced traditions hammered out by godly leaders over multitudinous generations of Church history.

## **Preface and Perspective**

The present text was composed in response to requested counsel received from a number of attenders in adult Bible studies where the author has lectured during the last several years. The contents of this white paper derive largely from a compilation of notes, somewhat hastily assembled, while accessing limited and scattered literature in a fairly cursory manner, plus ideas springing from a personal investment in meditative reflection while seeking to glean guiding principles out of both focused texts plus varied narrative sections across the breadth of Scripture. This printed composition is, admittedly, somewhat scattered in focus and the exposition of several of the addressed ideas could benefit significantly from amplified commentary combined with added 'polish' in presentation.

The reader will note that a host of questions appear dispersed throughout the text. This is a deliberate ploy emanating from the intentional purpose of stimulating a significant measure of personal contemplative reflection, both in depth and breadth, concerning the offered perspectives.

The utility of this composition, if any, is that serious 'seekers of counsel' from varied perspectives on the title issue might, as noted in the abstract, come to a place where they enjoy a settled 'soul peace' that springs from Spirit-fueled affirmations of conscience in the exercise of individual liberty in Christ – a liberty albeit that conforms to prescriptive Biblical texts and, at the same time, is informed by traditions rooted in Biblical narratives as well as Church history.

## Burial or Cremation: Biblical, Cultural and Historical Perspectives

### Preliminary fact to note:

The Scriptures contain no direct:

- command for burial (of the body of a deceased person)
- prohibition against cremation (of the body of a deceased person).

**But, ...**

Comment: Use of the term “cremation” is, in a real sense, a ‘softening’ of language. The issue of choice addressed here might be more directly and accurately differentiated as: “burial” or “burning”.

Might the fact that Scripture contains no direct prohibition against cremation of a person’s body comprise a legitimate basis to argue that Scripture condones cremation? Or, should that be seen as an unwarranted and speculative deduction?

Comment: Part of the goal of this brief study is to explore, and to develop in at least a cursory measure, some of the pertinent detail behind the noted **“But, ...”**.

- ◆ This detail must be shaped by appealing firstly to Biblical texts that provide explicit teaching with respect to death and care of the body, and secondly to principles that seem to be quite definitively implied in various Biblical narratives describing established practices in the context of the death of both righteous persons and unrighteous persons.
- ◆ Subsequently, and quite importantly, relevant and consistent detail needs to be gleaned from both historical and traditional practices, including trends that are largely ‘self-driven’ by the cultural reinforcement.

### Issues and elements to be explored:

Although Scripture gives no direct command respecting the mode of disposition of the body of a deceased person, some *a priori* questions of a quite fundamental nature ought to given careful consideration.

Ques. Are there discernible implications across various Biblical texts that would lend weight to one practice over the other?

Is this a point worthy of consideration with respect to the title issue?

Ques. Are there elements in the different modes of disposal of the body of a deceased person that speak, more or less eloquently and more or less pointedly, to distinctives pertaining to the death of a person and the promised eternal state?

Ques. Even though the end result of the death of the body is the same for every person’s body, namely dust, may there yet be a distinction with a difference that should be respected in relation to the selected mode of disposal of the body (whether decay via natural and earthy processes or via a humanly applied, accelerated process of burning)?

**Impt. Fact:** (a fact that simply must not be missed by anyone giving attention to this discussion)

- ◆ Resurrection of the body of every deceased person is an absolute certainty, and none will be affected by the mode chosen for disposal of the person’s body. In the eternal state all persons, whether righteous or unrighteous, will live and move and have their being as embodied persons. Yes, it is indeed certain that God is fully able to gather up the dust of a person’s body, no matter how the person died and no matter how widely scattered is the dusty remains of that person’s body (whether on the moon, or on some distant planet, or dispersed in the ocean). God will most certainly create, for every person ever born into Adam’s race, a resurrected body with exact conformity to His sovereignly determined likeness from before the creation of the world.

So, some may say, “It’s just a matter of personal choice (like preferring coffee or tea). Why even spend time on the subject.”

Others may say, “What’s the big deal!” “I’m going to be gone and the future resurrected body is not going to be affected by how my body got changed into dust!”

To those who may be dismissive with respect to the alternatives of burial or cremation, some further ‘personal level’ questions in relation to such a choice merit reflective contemplation.

Questions: Are you sure it’s “no big deal”, as you say? Have you considered seriously whether this issue of “burial vs. cremation” is indeed “no big deal”? How did you arrive at your conclusion? Simply by observing cultural trends and weighing economic concerns? Do you consider reasoning from such bases to be both convincing and satisfying?

## Cremation: Some Statistical and Historical Data

**US Data:** (see Piper blog)

Percentage of deaths choosing cremation

1960: 3.5% ≈ 4%

1999: 24.8% ≈ 25%

2014: 46.7% ≈ 47%

Late Note: The New York Times, in an article in 2017, stated that the cremation rate in the US surpassed 50% in 2016, and estimates that it will reach 64% by 2025

Note: In some states the number exceeds 75%. At present (2019), the rate is almost certainly in excess of 50%.

Comment: The trend is clearly sky-rocketing. The data reveal that it is not an overstatement to say that a 'sea-change' is occurring (has already occurred!) in the USA (and this includes the church ... especially the church) in the cultural practices involving the disposal of a person's body after death.

Ques. What has stimulated such a cultural change in the space of a single century of traditions fixed for multiple centuries?

Secondary Ques. Are the undergirding causes driving this change well founded? That is, do they rest on solidly reasoned principles, especially from a theological perspective? Does the subject merit a close examination, especially in the church?

Comment: Suggested forces giving rise to the rapidly growing choice of cremation.

- Economics (a significant, but not primary cause)
- Secularization of the culture (almost certainly the principal driver)
- Rise of Evolutionism, and its 'buy-in' by Liberalism

Quote: (Piper blog quoting an author named Timothy George)

"The first cremation in America took place in 1876, accompanied by readings from Charles Darwin and the Hindu scriptures. For many years, relatively few persons (mostly liberals and free-thinkers) chose cremation."

**Wikipedia Data (2008):**

Japan: 99.85% choose cremation over burial. Some argue that this high percentage is driven principally by space considerations – space for burial sites. However, it is undoubtedly also driven (perhaps even primarily) by the religious dominance of Buddhism.

Wikipedia Quote: (see Piper blog)

"Almost everyone adhering to Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism, and Jainism cremate their dead. ... Japan has one of the highest cremation rates in the world ..."

What about the trends in other Christian nations?

UK: 1960: 34.7% ≈ 35%

2008: 73.4% ≈ 73% (the rate slightly more than doubled in the last 40 years)

➤ [ See Insert #1 (next page): Quote regarding Sir Henry Thompson ]

Canada: 1970: 5.89% ≈ 6%

2009: 68.4% ≈ 68% (an 11-fold increase over the last 40 years)

**Fact (quite readily discerned):** Where Christendom has had but a small impact on the culture, cremation is by far the preferred method for disposal of the body of deceased persons ... and vice versa → where the Christian influence has been strong and sustained, burial is by far (it was certainly so in previous centuries) the preferred choice for disposal of the body of deceased person.

Ques. What should we say about such trends as exhibited above?

One response: A sound theological understanding of the human body is vital – and such understanding needs particular and programmed emphasis in the 21<sup>st</sup> century church.

All this to say, of course, the "Impt. Fact" emphasized in the opening statement in these notes(see previous page) will stand firm with enduring validity.

Note:

Canada lagged behind Britain considerably in proliferation of the practice of cremation.

Why?

Likely because the secularizing of the culture advanced at a slower pace.

The Christian roots declined faster in Britain, what with her devastating loss of life during both WWI and WWII.

➤ **Insert #1:** Quote from Howard, pp. 19-20

"The first cremation society in England was formed in 1874, mainly through the efforts of the Professor of Surgery at London University, Sir Henry Thompson. ..."

"Thompson belittled revelation and divine authority. He regarded Christ as a remarkable teacher, but really no more than a young Jewish enthusiast. In Thompson's view, any person of reasonable education would eventually become agnostic and discard any teaching involving supernatural revelation.

At his death there were 10 crematoria in Britain. After his death cremations gradually increased, reaching 2000 per annum in 1922."

"... Liberal theology had invaded the churches, and, though cause and effect cannot logically be established, spiritual regression and the progress of cremation ran parallel to each other. At the same time, belief in the resurrection of the body and of Christ Himself was decreasing."

"In this way, burial lost its significance for the simple reason that death spelled the end of the body — a belief which is a clear contradiction of Biblical teaching."

**Note:**

Sir Henry Thompson died in 1904, two years after Parliament gave legal permission in 1902 for the practice of cremation — a change of historic consequence.

**Note:**

1922 is a mere 4 years following the end of WWI. The impact of this long and costly war, especially so far as the loss of British life is concerned, along with their deep national suffering, exacted a heavy toll on a culture already being assaulted and undermined by theological liberalism.

### Creation Fundamentals

As is true for many issues in life, creation fundamentals in *Gen. 1-3* ought to form the beginning point in defining laws, practices, and values which are important, if embraced, to the welfare of people and nations. The creation of human life and the entrance of death into the created realm find both their root and their definition in this text, as well as those associated core principles that inform us most beneficially with respect to the meaning of life and death — principles which ought to be integral to a person's worldview.

*Gen. 2:7*

"Then Yahweh Elohim formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul."

*Gen. 2:16-17*

"Then Yahweh Elohim took the man, saying, 'From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die.'"

*Gen. 3:17-19*

"Then to Adam [Yahweh Elohim] said, ... 'By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, because from it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.'"

*Ps. 103:14*

"For He Himself knows our frame (what we are made of), He is mindful that we are (but) dust."

*Eccl. 3:20*

"All go to the same place. All came from dust and all return to the dust."

*Eccl. 12:7-8*

"then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it. 'Vanity of vanities,' says the Preacher, 'all is vanity.'"

**Comment:**

Through God's judgment on creation because of man's sin, the body of every living creature is afflicted with a principle of decline and decay, the consequence of which is death of the body. The body is destined to disintegrate to dust: "to dust you shall return".

The word "shall" in *Gen. 2:17* is a most definite word, one communicating "devoid of any alternative".

That every creature's death is to be accompanied by disintegration of the remaining lifeless body into dust is a proven and undeniable fact of experience, and the authoritatively declared judgment from God which every creature is inescapably destined to pass.

**Question:** Does (might!?) the word of Yahweh Elohim that "man was formed from the ground", and that "to dust you shall return" because of sin, communicate any prescriptive implication with respect to burial of the body over cremation of the body?

*Isa. 26:19*

"Your dead will live; their corpses will rise. You who lie in the dust, awake and shout for joy, for your dew is as the dew of the dawn, and the earth will give birth to the departed spirits."

The surety of a future bodily resurrection of all who die is clearly affirmed. Might an affirmation of the Jewish tradition of burial of the body also be implied?

## Biblical Metaphors Pertaining the Disposition of a Person's Body after Death

### The Metaphor of "the planting of a seed"

*1 Cor. 15:35-38*

"But someone will say, 'How are the dead raised?  
And with what kind of body do they come?'  
You fool! That which you sow does not come to life  
unless it dies; and that which you sow, you do not sow  
the body which is to be, but a bare grain,  
perhaps of wheat or of something else.  
But God gives it a body just as He wished,  
and to each of the seeds a body of its own."

*1 Cor. 15:42-44, 49*

"So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown a  
perishable body, it is raised an imperishable body;  
it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in  
weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body,  
it is raised a spiritual body.  
If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body."  
"And just as we have borne the image of the earthy,  
we shall also bear the image of the heavenly."

One of the Biblical metaphors speaking in regard  
to the burial of the body of a deceased person is  
that of:

"a seed" → "a planting".

The Scriptures quoted to the left are definitive in  
setting forth the following correspondence:  
"disposal of the body" ↔ "planting of a seed".

Now, the choice between either the burial of the  
body or the cremation of the body,  
as viewed in relation to this "seed" metaphor,  
involves the following alternative:  
"planting the seed" ↔ "burning the seed".

Question: Does the "seed" metaphor carry any  
prescriptive weight that should be respected by  
those who claim to be God-fearers?

Or, can the metaphor apply with equal weight to  
burial of the body or to cremation of the body?

### The Metaphor of "a body asleep"

*Daniel 12:2*

"And many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will  
awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace  
and everlasting abhorrence."

*Matt. 9:18, 24-25*

"... behold, there came a synagogue ruler, and bowed down  
before [Jesus], saying, 'My daughter has just died;  
but come and lay Your hand on her, and she will live.'"  
"[Jesus] began to say, 'Depart; for the girl has not died,  
but is asleep.' ... [Jesus] entered and took her by the hand;  
and the girl arose."

*John 11:11, 14*

"... after that [Jesus] said to them, 'Our friend Lazarus has  
fallen asleep; but I go, that I may awaken him out of sleep.'"  
"Then Jesus therefore said to them plainly, 'Lazarus is dead,'"

*1 Cor. 15:51*

"Behold, I tell you a mystery; we shall not all sleep,  
but we shall all be changed,"

*1 Thess. 4:15*

"For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who  
are alive, and remain until the coming of the Lord,  
shall not precede those who have fallen asleep."

Comment: It is logical that the body of every saint should, upon  
death of the body, rest in "sleep" until the appointed future  
moment of entering eternal life in an embodied state.  
To continue in an aging, perishable body until the appointed end  
of the age is truly a most unreasonable proposition.

A Biblical metaphor "sleep" is used exclusively  
in regard to the body of a regenerated person  
who has passed through death.

Note #1: Sleep is used as a euphemism for  
death of the body of a saint.

Point: Who calls 911 for emergency  
services when a loved one simply lies  
down to rest for the night?

Note #2. The metaphor "sleep" is, in each of  
the texts quoted to the left, a word  
communicating a definite sense of a future  
awakening → in each context, an awakening  
of the body of a deceased saint is in view.

Note #3. The "sleep" metaphor is used only in  
reference to the body, never in reference to  
the soul-spirit of a saint. The soul-spirit does  
not sleep – the soul-spirit is transferred from  
the body at the very instant of death to the  
presence of the Lord in heaven.

Question: Does this "sleep" metaphor, a term  
used only with respect to the body of a saint  
who has passed through death, even one  
awaiting a resurrective awakening, carry any  
suggestive preference for burial of the body  
over cremation of the body? Might the sense  
of "awakening" be more poignant with  
respect to a buried body or a cremated body?  
Or, is it a distinction without a difference?

Linguistic Note (in regard to the “sleep” metaphor):

The word “cemetery” is “*coemētērium*” in Late Latin, and “*koimētērion*” in Greek.

The root meaning is: “cemetery” → “sleeping place”

### **Biblical perspectives concerning the physical body of a saint:**

- ◆ the body of every person is created by God – every person is an embodied soul-spirit
  - it is a body created by God
- ◆ the body, as well as soul-spirit, of every regenerated person is a redemptive purchase of God
  - it is a body purchased by God
- ◆ the body of every regenerated saint is a habitation (dwelling) of the Spirit of God
  - it is a body indwelt by God through the Spirit
- ◆ every person, soul-spirit plus body, is a holistic creation purposed by God for His eternal glory
  - it is a body purposed for God’s glory and purposed to glorify God

Def’n. and Comment: “holistic” relates to the idea that the integrated whole of an entity has a substantive reality that is both independent of its separate parts and greater than the sum of those parts.

In the present context, a “holistic creation” means that man, as a person with image and likeness to God, is much more than just the combining of nominally distinguished parts (body + soul-spirit).

At the same time, and in relation to the true created essence of man, fullness of personhood involves a fully integrated and indivisible union of both body and soul-spirit – a true psychosomatic unity.

Thus, as a holistic creation purposed for the glory of God, man is in a somewhat dissonant state during the time of “body sleep” between death and resurrection.

This fact (man’s being a holistic creation) might well have been behind God’s inclining (directing?) the patriarchs’ choice (and maybe Adam’s choice) to bury the bodies of deceased persons.

Quote from John Murray (ref., Howard p. 23)

“John Murray reminds us that, 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. How eloquent of this is the usage respecting our Lord.

He was buried. He rose from the dead. In reference to Jesus the angel said, ‘Come and see the place where He lay.’ Jesus also said, ‘All that are in the graves will hear His voice.’

To Lazarus He said, ‘Lazarus, come forth.’ Believers are dead in Christ, they sleep through Jesus.

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. This underlies the gravity of death and the return to dust. ‘To dust *thou* shalt return,’ as also ‘Dust *thou* art.’ ”

### **Historical-Traditional Perspective of Note:**

The pattern of burial of the bodies of deceased persons has roots that find direct correspondence with Jewish practice going all the way back to the Patriarchal time of Abraham, and continuing unabated in every generation until the present time.

Furthermore, wherever Biblical Christianity has advanced, and wherever it has asserted an instrumental role in the shaping of the culture of a nation, the tradition of burial of the body of deceased persons in that nation has been adopted as prevailing custom.

Quote: Howard p. 14

“... the reasons for cremation among many ancient races, both primitive and civilized, were religious.

Many thought departed spirits would return to buried bodies to plague the living;

others that burning set the spirit free to enjoy unfettered bliss.

Some Animists in Irian Jaya burn their dead, whilst to other tribes the very idea is repugnant.”

“Perhaps the main indication that the basic factors in favor were religious, is that wherever Christianity spread, cremation ceased among the believers. According to Francis Schaeffer, the spread of Christianity in Europe can be established by studying the cemeteries: Romans burned their dead while Christians buried theirs.”

“Christian burial was one further custom to accentuate the difference between believers and those around them. In itself it served as a protest against paganism and was recognized as such.”

Quote: F.D. Maurice (Howard, p. 32)

“The more I think of the way in which the children of Israel asserted their right to the possession of Canaan, in which they had not one foot of other ground, merely by burying their dead in it ... the more do I feel that every body put into this earth is a new invasion of Satan’s present dominion, a new declaration that Christ is coming to claim the earth for His Church.”

### **Burial or Cremation: The Examples of Moses and Jesus who is the Christ.**

That the mediators of both the old and the new covenants were buried after their physical deaths is both an explicitly stated truth of Scripture and an historical fact. Circumstances surrounding their respective deaths, with particular focus on the subsequent burial of their bodies, are considered briefly as relevant, exemplary actions steeped in cross-generational significance in regard to the topic of burial or cremation.

#### **Moses: An Old Covenant Example**

Moses’ death during the closing days of the exodus was peculiarly orchestrated by God. First, Moses was instructed by Yahweh to ascend Mt. Nebo and that he would die on the mountain (Deut. 32:48-50). Later, it was God Himself who informed the people of Israel that He personally buried the body of Moses after his death on Mt. Nebo (*Deut. 34:4-6*). Later still, only in the NT era was it revealed that Moses’ burial was peculiar in a further respect: Satan appeared on Mt. Nebo when God was about to bury the body and sought to gain possession of Moses’ lifeless body for his own evil ends (*Jude 9*). In the sovereign purpose and working of God, angelic intervention at the highest level was commanded, thwarting Satan’s alternate design for the body of Moses. It was in these peculiar respects that God’s holy purpose regarding Moses that a respectful burial of Moses’ body was realized – certainly a disposition of the body per the means and for the ends determined by God.

#### **Christ: The New Covenant Example**

The burial of Christ’s body following His crucifixion also involved providential intervention, one that insured a most respectful accomplishment in the face of Roman custom of burning. The Romans customarily burned the body of deceased persons, and quite particularly so in the case of bodies of executed criminals. In the case of Christ’s death, God had providentially led two wealthy and influential Jewish men to intervene at the highest level of political control in Jerusalem for the explicit purpose of taking possession of Jesus’ body. Only through such means was a proper burial (respecting created dignity as well as Jewish tradition) of Jesus’ lifeless body accomplished, and a burning of the body prevented.

Note: Crucified criminals often hung on their crosses for days – sometimes even for days after their death. Such practice was the custom in order to leverage crucified criminals as public examples accenting the surety and rigidity of Roman justice and terror, especially with respect to any who might engage in seditious and treasonous activity. Then, when the body would eventually be removed from the cross, that lifeless body would be quite unceremoniously (i.e., totally without respect for created human dignity) thrown onto the garbage dump where fires burned incessantly. Such was the case for the bodies of the two criminals crucified alongside Jesus, and such would have been the case for Jesus’ body short of Joseph of Arimathea’s courageous approach to Pilate, and his most respectful care for Jesus’ body (cf. *Mk. 15:42-47*).

In further relation to Christ’s burial, we are enlightened by the prophetic declaration of Isaiah (*Isa. 53:8-9*). Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, whether cognizant of Isaiah’s prophecy or not, were instruments in God’s purpose and design in the body of Christ’s incarnation. God’s purpose that His Holy One would not see corruption (*Ps. 16:10; Acts 2:25-31, 13:34-37*) was fulfilled through burial. This, by example, gives sanctified weight to the purposed ideal of God in the burial of the body after death, a purpose that is specifically connected with the forthcoming resurrection of the body from among other bodies of dead persons who have been buried.



## The Burial of Christ: A Consideration Respecting the Issue of Burial or Cremation

### Baptism

#### A Biblical Sacrament with Possible Implication Relating to the Disposition of a Saint's Body after Death

The sacrament of baptism as practiced in the evangelical Christian church is, at minimum, a physical act that has both specific and intimate relation to the death, burial, and resurrection of the body of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This foundational truth also stands as an undergirding reason why Christ's body was buried and not allowed to be burnt following His death. The eternal purpose of God was clearly evident in His providential working through Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus in their burial of Christ's body. In the very same way, the institution of the sacrament of baptism in its typical meaning and importance was purposed in relation to the formation of the Church, the body and bride of Christ.

Now, any connection between the baptismal immersion of a regenerated person into the water, signifying the death and burial of Christ, would have been violently corrupted if His body had been burnt in the refuse dump in Jerusalem in like manner as the bodies of the two criminals crucified beside Him.

Ques. Does the typical relation of baptism to the physical burial of Christ's body following His death, and the reality of the spiritual death of the "old nature" as an integral part of the Spirit's regenerative working, joined with the subsequent spiritual resurrection of a saint as a "new creation in Christ Jesus", lend any prescriptive or reasoned preference for either burial or cremation when a saint dies?

That is, when a saint dies physically, experiencing a death with corresponding likeness to that spiritual death of the old nature realized at the moment of regeneration, might that spiritual reality (known through revelation as occurring at the moment of regeneration) hold any preferential priority for burial or cremation as the means for disposal of the physical body?

*Rom. 6:3-7*

"... do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death?"

"Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, in order that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life."

"For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall be also [united with Him] in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, that our body of sin might be done away with [rendered powerless], that we should no longer be slaves to sin; for he who has died is freed from sin;"

The text quoted above is definite, precise and highly significant: "we have been buried" with Christ. "we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death" "we shall be also [united with Him] in the likeness of His resurrection"

As such, our identity with Christ per the baptismal typology – our true identity with Him in His death, burial, and resurrection – establishes a profoundly significant typical unity between Christ's body and that of every saint.

### Selected Summary Questions and Reflections

Ques. Is there a theological issue (alt., is there a Biblically-rooted, Creator-ward foundation) to be considered in regard to the mode of disposition of the body of a deceased person?

Ques. Is the Christian church at present, even extending back over much of the previous century, being considerably (decisively!?) influenced by the progressive secularization both of worldview and of the meaning of life?

And, might not this influence comprise a significant factor behind the very noticeable shift in preferences in 'Christian nations' from burial to cremation over the last 50 years?

If so, does this not suggest that such factors underlying this shift ought to be seriously assessed with respect to a church's position on this issue of burial vs. cremation?

Ques. Is there a 'faith-stewardship' factor that should undergird a Christian's decision concerning disposition of the body, considering that the body was both the former 'house' of the image of God and a temple of the Holy Spirit?

Since we know that the body of a saint becomes, upon the very moment of regeneration, a temple of the Holy Spirit, which endows every believer with an unqualified guarantee of the hope of resurrection, ought not such truth carry implication begging for due consideration as to the mode of choice in disposition of the body after death?

Note: The issue for Biblically-centered followers of Christ is simple (straightforward) when direct commands are encountered in Scripture → direct commands are to be received and embraced with simple and ready obedience.

For example: "you shall not murder"; "you shall not steal".

However, as in many issues encountered in life, situations frequently arise in varying contexts requiring choices of action where no direct commands exist. That is, life choices are not always "simple"; they are "complex" ... even the 'real stuff' of living in a fallen world. And, as such, issues are encountered where real choices of action must be made on bases which are neither easily nor readily discerned.

As Christians, we ought to be motivated to become a people who acknowledge a devoted dependence on the Biblical worldview. That is, we should readily acknowledge both the priority of commands as well as principles plus implications derived from reasoned gleanings that spring from a diligent study of the breadth of Scripture. Both sources of input should find a place in the ordering of our lives – in our living out our Christian liberty when confronted by options which seem not to have definitive Biblical prescription.

A growth in wisdom in this regard involves at least the following two principles.

- ◆ First, one needs to form, through consistent study and analysis, a growing ability and sensibility in Biblical reasoning.
- ◆ Second, our arrival at a Biblical reasoned framework for asserting life choices is not to be hastily accomplished in every generation, so to speak, "from scratch". That is, we ought to be reticent to indulge an attitude of 'total liberty of conscience' as to what we perceive 'in the moment' to be "better", "preferable", etc., and to do so independent of a due respect for conclusions hammered out by saints in previous generations when faced with similar complex choices.

We ought to remember that we are members of the body of Christ, a body with centuries of tradition, and that we are not an independent generation. We are, in truth, joined in a saintly union with all previous generations, even reaching back to the OT era and continuing through the whole of Church history. That is, we should acknowledge a dependence on Biblical reasoning that is both undergirded by developed personal convictions and also accompanied by gleanings of traditions and practices followed by devoted God-fearers. This starts, of course, with revelatory writings of the OT and the NT, but should move on to integrate our gleaned understanding of revelatory writings with traditions developed by leading expositors over the history of the Church.

Historical Example: Recovery of the foundations of the Gospel in the Reformation era, ascertained through diligent commitment to the 'sola scriptura' principle, has had profound relevance for how the church proclaims and teaches the doctrine of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone in our time. It is a foundation anchored solidly in Holy Scripture, but also has been powerfully and beneficially developed by generations of devoted expositors who supplied deep understandings of how the truths of Scripture should find application in 'life-choices', how Biblically-reasoned truth is to find expression when faith collides with the reality of daily choices.

**Living with a Settled Conviction and Pleasing God  
where  
Liberty in Christ Confronts Matters of Conscience**

It is this author's decided opinion that cremation ought not to be classified as a sin, and that it should not be so pressed in Christian circles. Yet, it is a deeply sensitive issue being pondered by many Christians.

As such, the option of cremation begs for a balanced and clarifying examination that is infused with substantive and meaningful Christian perspectives.

The present white paper on the burial or cremation subject represents this author's attempt at providing reasoned underpinnings that might, at least in some measure, fill an apparent lack of Christian literature providing a discriminating discussion of the topic.

Holding that the cremation option ought not to be cast as a sinful choice, this author prefers to categorize the burial or cremation alternative as a personal matter of "conscience" or "faith-choice". Now, since both faith and conscience ought to rest on Biblical foundation, we can appeal to the Apostle Paul's address in *Rom. 14* concerning the exercise of Christian liberty in the context of just such matters.

The Apostle gives guiding counsel relative to a Christian's "walk of faith" in the first century church context where converts from pagan backgrounds fellowshiped alongside converts from Judaism.

The enunciated principles in *Rom. 14* that might provide relevant guidance to the burial-cremation 'faith-choice' are quoted in the text boxes to the right.

Now, in reference to the noted matter of conscience and faith-choice before us, not in respect to sin, we can distinguish noteworthy alternatives such as:

- acceptable (agreeable) vs. better
- allowable (not forbidden) vs. desirable
- appropriate (proper) vs. preferred

Commentary Note: Appearance of "The faith" in the first sentence of *Rom. 14:22* has reference to:

- a faith pertinent to exercising a choice of 'real-life' action when faced with alternatives involving matters of conscience such as in view in the text;
- an enlightened faith – a faith that enables one to discern essential distinctions pertaining to the exercise of a mature understanding of one's liberty in Christ; even one which finds expression with 'fruit of the Spirit' balance consistent with a wider-scope discernment gleaned both from commands, narratives of Scripture, and longer-standing Christian traditions and practices.

*Rom. 14:5b*

"Let each man be fully convinced in his own mind."  
(NASB)  
"Let every one be definite in his own convictions."  
(Phillips)

*Rom. 14:22*

"The faith which you have, have according to your own convictions before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves."  
(NASB)

"Your personal convictions [on such matters (as of choice and conscience)] exercise as in God's presence, keeping them to yourself—striving only to know the truth and obey His will.

Blessed, happy, to be envied is he who has no reason to judge himself for what he approves—who does not convict himself by what he chooses to do."

(Amplified)

"The faith which you have, keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves."

(ESV)

Author's Disclaimer

*Rom. 14* deals with matters on which differences of opinion, or of divergent scruples, or of disputes pertaining to rooted rituals or traditions, etc. exist within the context of a church fellowship.

Now, this author is quite cognizant that the issues motivating the Apostle Paul to pen this text involved his need to counsel interactions between 'weaker' and 'stronger' brothers in the expression of their 'faith-walk' in the culture of their day.

Clearly the issues of "conscience/choice" which the Apostle addresses are quite distinct from the burial or cremation option addressed here. Nevertheless, it is this author's opinion that particular principles highlighted by Paul in a particular first century context can provide helpful guidance for Christians seeking counsel with respect to the uncertainty, even confusion, of personal choice as it is to be exercised in light of the marked rise in popularity and perceived propriety that the cremation option poses today.

It is the author's sincere hope that the various perspectives discussed herein will assist in providing a desired measure of clarity for those who are seeking to negotiate personally the burial or cremation matter of 'conscience/choice' in their own context in the present culture. The desire is, especially, for those who have a sincere desire to please God in this very non-trivial, 'end of life' expression of their 'stewardship of faith', that a restful peace might emerge through the exercise of their choice on the basis of personal conviction.

Fact to be Reckoned and Respected: We in our present generation do not practice our faith in isolation from nor in a context of independence with respect to either Biblical history or traditional understandings that have been distilled through repetitive examination over multiple generations within the Church. We do not forge our independent convictions as to any “personally preferred godly practice” without respectful regard for the extensive “cloud of witnesses” who have sojourned before our time in this common pilgrimage of faith. This synergistic approach in a Christian’s ‘faith walk’ becomes especially important in light of the fact that the god of this world is tirelessly pressuring the culture to move down paths that are at cross-purposes and cross-practices to authentic truth and godliness.

The early Christian era was decidedly influenced by Jewish history and practice, and rightfully so. God’s special revelation came through the Jews who “were entrusted with the oracles of God” (*Rom. 3:2*). As such the early Church did not re-invent many of the underpinnings of what it meant to “obey God”, and to “please God”, and to be godly in one’s stewardship of life under God. So, as Christians in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we too are in possession of a long-standing and deeply-rooted tradition that can, and which properly should, give guidance with respect to living out a Biblically-reasoned worldview in the broad scope of this present age. It is in this light (at least in this author’s opinion) that Jewish and Christian traditions with respect to this issue of burial or cremation should not be quickly or thoughtlessly tossed aside. To the contrary, those traditions ought to be granted thoughtful respect ... with the proviso, of course, that each generation is prepared to subject them to objective Biblical reasoning.

In this regard, and especially when faced with difficult personal “matters of conscience”, we need to be prepared to ask ourselves:

“am I being influenced in my choices primarily by the present culture, or am I allowing input from a reasoned respect for long-standing and tested traditions to shape my conclusions.”

Of course, as already emphasized, in all cases we are to be ready and inclined to have our minds directed with a ‘ruling dose’ of Biblical reasoning.

With these comments in view, especially in regard to such an issue as burial or cremation, we should rather step back and ask:

“Am I (and is the Christian church) being rightly or wrongly influenced by the burgeoning secularization of the culture in our day – even a secularization that is, in truth, being driven largely by an increasing import of pagan ideology (religion) while simultaneously ‘throwing off’ creation fundamentals and of Gospel foundations.”

It is an indisputable fact that the encroachment of philosophies of naturalism, evolutionism and humanism is exacting a heavy toll on a culture once distinguished by, and beneficially prospering under, a dominance of the Judeo-Christian worldview.

Point to Ponder:

We live our lives dominated to a significant degree with an ‘in the immediate moment’ disposition of mind. That is, because we seldom devote attention to historical contexts and established traditions, we are easily swayed by recently-advanced philosophies and socially-pressed dogmas to adopt revised cultural practices — even those which readily, and with little resistance or even reluctance, direct us away from fundamental roots and valued traditions. Many traditions providing direction for fellow members of the body of Christ over centuries had deep Biblical root, and were instituted and emphasized by a company of individuals with deep spiritual foundation. These ‘shapers of worldview’ and ‘formative developers of traditions’ had convictions forged through studied examination of Scripture, and steeled through costly, persevering effort during times of reformation within the Church. Such traditions were developed with a driven concern that the church truly be, and in every generation become, the body of Christ functioning faithfully under the headship of Christ. The 21<sup>st</sup> century church would be wise to retreat or re-invent traditional understanding only with great reluctance and studied evaluation leading to rooted conviction.

## Appendix: Selected Add-On Notes

Quote from Howard booklet, p. 14-16

In 177 AD, heathen persecutors of the church at Lyons burned the martyrs bodies and threw their ashes into the Rhone. "This they did," said contemporary records, "as though they could overcome God and rob the martyrs of the new birth (of their bodies)." They did it, as they say, "that [the Christians] might have no hope of the resurrection, in confidence of which they have introduced a new and strange religion amongst us, despising torments and ready to face death with joy. Now let us see whether they will rise again, and whether their God will help them and deliver them out of our hands."

The *Letter of the Churches* in Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History* also describes how the martyrs of Lyons were scourged, thrown to the wild beasts and burned. Those who suffocated in prison were given to the dogs. Witnesses wrote that the authorities:

"kept a careful guard by night and day lest any should receive funeral rites. And then they actually exposed what the wild beasts and the fire had left behind mangled or charred, as the case might be – a – a and the heads of the others together with their severed trunks, and guarded them likewise from burial with a military watch for many days ... We were plunged in great grief, in that we could not bury the bodies in the earth ... In every possible way they kept guard, as if the prevention of burial would bring them great gain."

... Such strong positions taken by Christians and pagans show how the heathen believed that by destruction of the body they could stop its resurrection, and the importance of the doctrine in the early church. The heresy that burial or burning can affect the final judgment and destiny of the body is still held in the modern world. H.G. Wells, for example, believed that a martyr who was hanged and buried instead of being burned would benefit at the resurrection.

... What the martyrdoms of Lyons and the observations of archaeologists cited by Schaeffer do prove is that within the first two centuries of the Christian era, burial was tenaciously held as the distinctive Christian custom. It remained so until well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Quote: (Al Mohler, Aug. 15, 2017 blog)

"We are not spirits in our reality merely trying to escape this world to get to the next [as viewed for example, in Buddhism and Hinduism]. No, we are creatures made in the image of God, the only creature made in the image of God, and our body is a part of God's desire for us in creation and a part of His glory. That's ... one of the reasons why there's been a deep reverence for the body in Christianity and an [historical] aversion to cremation."

Quote: (Al Mohler, May 17, 2018 blog)

"... especially thinking of funerals, [such] particular moments intensify the understanding that basic fundamental issues are at stake. ... at those moments, the worldview that is displayed is going to be theological in one way or another. The only question is: what theology?"

"We understand that every single death brings about decisions that are deeply rooted in and will reveal worldview, and we also understand that the very issues that are so worldview intensive at death are precisely because of the worldview significance of life."

Phil. 3:20-21

"For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself."

Comment: In light of the Biblically-rooted truths reviewed concerning the body, ought not there to be a reverential respect for the body? And, should (might?) this respect also pertain to issues pertaining to the mode of disposition of the body of a deceased saint?