

TO BURY OR BURN? TOWARD AN ETHIC OF CREMATION

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The *Encyclopedia of Cremation* defines cremation as the practice of intentionally heating a deceased human body to “between 1,400 and 2,100° F to consume . . . the body’s soft tissue and reduce the skeleton to fragments and particles.”¹ This process, then, produces several pounds of ash that are stored, buried, or otherwise dispersed. Statistics show that while cremation has been a common interment procedure in lands apart from the *Corpus Christianum*,² historically speaking, cremation has been sparingly practiced in cultures that have been influenced by a Judeo-Christian ethic. Yet, since the middle of the twentieth century the number of cremations in the United States has been steadily rising to the point where currently, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, between one-quarter and one-third of all corpses are cremated.³

Perhaps because of the increase in the number of cremations in the United States is a relatively recent phenomenon, a moral discussion of cremation is absent from most major evangelical ethics and theology textbooks. Recently, however, the practice has received some attention from evangelical leaders in both popular and semi-academic media. For example, individuals who have addressed the issue of cremation over the last few years include Timothy George, Norman Geisler, John MacArthur, Albert Mohler, and Russell Moore, among others.⁴ Moreover, Christian periodicals such as *World Magazine*,

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¹ Douglas J. Davies and Lewis H. Mates, eds., *Encyclopedia of Cremation* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2005) 131. The *Encyclopedia* continues its description of the process of cremation, noting, “The remaining substance, the cremains, may be processed further by mechanically breaking the larger particles down, producing a consistent mixture of grain and powder, to be scattered or stored in an urn” (ibid.).

² Davies and Mates include a comprehensive chart in the *Encyclopedia of Cremation* that details the number of cremations and cremation rates in forty-seven selected countries from 1876 until 2002. Cf. ibid. 433–56.

³ In 2002, the Cremation Association of North America (CANA) reported that there were 676,890 cremations conducted in the United States, which amounts to 27.78 percent of all interments. By 2006 the cremation rate had risen to 33.61 percent. By way of comparison, in 1970 there were 88,096 cremations in the United States, or 4.59 percent of all deaths (ibid., 450, 456). Note that CANA estimates that cremations will reach 58.89 percent in the United States by the year 2025. For additional information and statistics, see <http://www.cremationassociation.org>.

⁴ Timothy George, “Good Question: Cremation Confusion,” *Christianity Today* (May 21, 2002) 66; Norman L. Geisler and Douglas E. Potter, “From Ashes to Ashes: Is Burial the Only Christian Option?” *Research Journal* 20 (July–September 1998) 28–35; John MacArthur, “Does the Bible Prohibit Cremation,” <http://www.gty.org/Resources/Articles/2210> (accessed January 20, 2010);

The Banner of Truth, Touchstone, The Christian Century, and Christianity Today have published materials on cremation in the last decade or so.

The fact that the practice of cremation is beginning to receive attention within the evangelical community is an indication that cremation is a topic about which contemporary believers are starting to inquire. Indeed, this is an encouraging sign, for evidence suggests that some who have contributed to the rising cremation rates over the last half century (i.e. those who have consented to, requested, or even facilitated cremation) may have done so without fully weighing the morality of the act. This can be concluded both from the lack of widespread ethical discussion about cremation—especially on an academic level—and from the utilitarian nature of many of the recent arguments that have been employed in order to justify the practice. For example, such rationales include expense, environmental concerns, and ease of arrangement, among many others.⁵

In light of the growing interest in cremation, this brief work will attempt to summarize some of the key historical, biblical, and theological considerations that have been a part of the moral discussion of cremation within the Judeo-Christian tradition. The goal of this article, then, is to provide the reader with the material needed in order to develop an informed ethic of cremation, as well as to suggest perhaps a general trajectory for the discussion. At the outset, however, it should be noted that regardless of one's position on the morality of cremation, the act has no bearing upon one's eternal state. As Russell Moore observes with regard to the ethics of cremation, "The question is not whether cremation is always [or ever] a personal

Albert Mohler, "Cremation Gains Ground in Colorado—Why?," <http://www.albertmohler.com/2005/06/06/cremation-gains-ground-in-colorado-why> (accessed January 20, 2010); Russell D. Moore, "Grave Signs," *Touchstone* 20/1 (January/February 2007) 24–27; Hank Hanegraaff, *Resurrection: The Capstone in the Arch of Christianity* (Nashville: Word, 2000) 129–32. Other examples of popular treatment of cremation by lesser known evangelicals include: A. Graybill Brubaker, "On Cremation for Christians," *Brethren in Christ History & Life* 28/1 (April 2005) 220–24; Samuel M. Brubaker, "Toward a Christian Perspective on Cremation," *Brethren in Christ History & Life* 28/1 (April 2005) 225–30; Steven A. Krelloff, "The Biblical Perspective of Cremation," *Journal of Modern Ministry* 2/3 (Fall 2005) 9–26; Alvin J. Schmidt, *Dust to Dust, Ashes to Ashes: A Biblical and Christian Examination of Cremation* (Salisbury, MA: Regina Orthodox, 2005); Carroll E. Simcox, *Is Cremation Christian?* (Cincinnati: Forward Movement, 2006); and, in a somewhat dated article, Robert L. Rayburn, "The Christian and Cremation," *Baptist Bulletin* 33/6 (November 1968) 12–13.

⁵ These are noted as the top reasons for cremation in the article by Cathy Lynn Grossman, "Cremation Gaining Acceptance among Roman Catholics," *USA Today* (April 3, 2005) 9D. Geisler and Potter make the same claim. Geisler and Potter, "From Ashes to Ashes" 31. See also John J. Davis, *What about Cremation? A Christian Perspective* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1989); and C. A. Huddleston, "Ashes to Ashes: When Families Choose Cremation," *Journal of Christian Nursing* 25/3 (2008) 138–41. Other practical reasons for cremation often cited in the field literature include: request of the deceased, fear of being buried alive, ease of storage and/or transportation, and the therapeutic value for mourners. Interestingly, and perhaps accurately, in his book on cremation, Stephen Prothero argues that the greatest reason why cremation is practiced in the United States is style or worldview. Cf. Stephen Prothero, *Purified by Fire: A History of Cremation in America* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 2002). Santmire makes the same argument as does Prothero in H. Paul Santmire, "Nothing More Beautiful than Death," *Christian Century* 100/38 (December 14, 1983) 1155.

sin. The question is not whether God can reassemble ‘cremains.’ The question is whether burial [or cremation] is a Christian act and, if so, then what does it communicate?”⁶

I. HISTORICAL CONSIDERATIONS

For Christians, one of the factors that may be helpful to consider when discussing the morality of cremation is the historical context and customs of the peoples in Scripture. While detailed information concerning the funerary practices of all of the cultures that appear in the biblical narrative is not abundant, it is certain that the Greeks and Romans favored cremation, especially among the upper classes.⁷ In contrast, however, the Jewish people generally shunned cremation, with the *Mishnah* stipulating that cremation is an unacceptable heathen practice.⁸ In fact, in his *Histories* the first century writer Tacitus observed that one of the distinguishing characteristics of the Jews, as compared to Romans, is that Jews “prefer to bury and not burn their dead.”⁹

In spite of the Greco-Roman milieu of the biblical world, with the coming of Christ, general disdain for the act of cremation was carried over from the Jewish to the Christian faith. Indeed, Schaeffer notes that it is possible to trace the spread of the gospel across the Roman Empire by focusing upon cremation, for while “the Romans burned their dead, the Christians buried theirs.”¹⁰ In a similar manner, the last of the non-Christian emperors, Julian

⁶ Moore, “Grave Signs” 25. Note that “cremains” is not a vernacular term, but an industry-standard word for that which results from the cremation process. In a similar manner to Moore, George writes, “The real question for Christians is not whether one is buried or cremated but the meaning given to these acts” (“Cremation Confusion” 66). Likewise, Mohler notes, “There is no question that God can and will resurrect all human bodies on that day—no matter the disposition of the body. The primary issue . . . is a proper Christian respect for the body as the temple of the Holy Spirit” (“Cremation Gains Ground”). Price, too, reminds, “The issue is not so much whether God is able to raise the body, but how one is to be a steward over the body which God has given to him or her. . . . Man has been made a steward over the body, and even in death the body should thus be respected.” Timothy Shaun Price, “An Examination of Thomistic Substance Dualism in Comparison to Other Views with Specific Application to the Morality of Cremation” (Th.M. diss.; Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2007) 102, 127.

⁷ In his chapter entitled “Ancient Pyres” Phipps has a good historical summary of cremation practices in various cultures throughout Asia, Europe, and even the Americas. Cf. William E. Phipps, *Cremation Concerns* (Springfield, IL: Charles G. Thomas, 1988) 9–16. See, also, Paul E. Irion, *Cremation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968); and Arthur D. Nock, “Cremation and Burial in the Roman Empire,” *Harvard Theological Review* 25/4 (1932) 321–59. In addition, numerous articles in Davies and Mates, eds., *The Encyclopedia of Cremation* address ancient interment practices.

⁸ This according to Phipps, *Cremation Concerns* 20. Phipps cites *Adodah Zarah* 1.3, which in the Danby translation reads, “And these are the festivals of the Gentiles. . . . Where burning has place at the death there is idolatry; where burning has no place there is no idolatry.” *The Mishnah* (trans. Herbert Danby; London: Oxford University Press, 1933) 437.

⁹ Tacitus, *History* 5.5.

¹⁰ Francis Schaeffer, *How Shall We Then Live? The Rise and Decline of Western Thought and Culture* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1976) 24. By way of example, Schaeffer cites the early Christians’ laborious duties in burying their dead, perhaps as many as three million corpses, in the subterranean catacombs under the city of Rome.

the Apostate (AD 332–363), identified “care of the dead” as one of the factors that contributed to the spread of Christianity throughout the Roman world.¹¹ The church historian Philip Schaff, too, identified Christians’ display of “decency to the human body” in showing care for the dead as one of the main reasons for the church’s rapid conquest of the ancient world.¹²

As Christianity spread, many of the Church Fathers wrote about death, burial, and especially the Christian hope of a future bodily resurrection.¹³ Although it could be argued that the Church Fathers’ common emphasis upon bodily resurrection had the effect of discouraging the practice of cremation,¹⁴ Phipps accurately observes that “Tertullian was the first Christian theologian to [explicitly] denounce cremation.”¹⁵ An example from Tertullian’s writings in which he mentioned cremation comes from his *On the Resurrection of the Flesh* where he claimed that only the heathen “burn up their dead with harshest inhumanity.”¹⁶ Also noteworthy is Tertullian’s *A Treatise on the Soul* in which he made reference to cremation, instructing his readers to “avert a cruel custom with regard to the body since, being human, it does not deserve what is inflicted upon criminals.”¹⁷ Tertullian, though, was just one of many early Christian writers to register opposition to the practice of cremation. For example, in his *Octavius*, Minucius Felix declared, “We do not fear loss from cremation even though we adopt the ancient and better custom of burial.”¹⁸

This unfavorable view of cremation found in the Church Fathers was echoed by the majority of Christian thinkers who followed. Indeed, the morality of cremation was generally not debated within the medieval church; rather, the practice was simply assumed to be a pagan act. In fact, with the convergence of church and state under Charlemagne (AD 742–814), in the *Paderborn Capitularies* cremation was even declared to be a capital offense.¹⁹ Here it was proclaimed, “If anyone follows pagan rites and causes

¹¹ Note that Julian also cited love of neighbor and honesty as major factors contributing to the growth of the early church. Cf. Donald Howard, *Burial or Cremation: Does It Matter?* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2001) 21.

¹² *Ibid.* The *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics & Pastoral Theology* also states, “First-century Rome . . . when the gospel arrived there, saw a change from cremation to burial.” David J. Atkinson and David H. Field, eds. *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics & Pastoral Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1995) 208.

¹³ For example, see Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.15–16; Augustine, *City of God* 22.8, 17–20; and Jerome, *Pammachius* 31, among many others.

¹⁴ In *Baker’s Dictionary of Christian Ethics* Ralph Martin writes that the Church Fathers’ “belief in the resurrection of the body was a powerful deterrent to the adoption of this method [i.e. cremation].” Carl F. H. Henry, ed., *Baker’s Dictionary of Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973) 149.

¹⁵ Phipps, *Cremation Concerns* 22.

¹⁶ Tertullian, *Resurrection of the Flesh* 1.

¹⁷ Tertullian, *Soul* 51.

¹⁸ Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 34. Davies and Mates also briefly discuss the influence of Irenaeus, Origen, and Augustine on early Christian views of cremation. Cf. Davies and Mates, *Encyclopedia of Cremation* 354.

¹⁹ Thomas G. Long, “Why Cremation? As Values Change, So Do Funeral Practices,” *Christian Century* 119/3 (January/February 2002) 31.

the body of a dead man to be consumed by fire, and reduces his bones to ashes, let him pay with his life."²⁰ Furthermore, in later medieval Christianity, church practice stipulated that heretics were to be burned at the stake—that is, cremated—while believers were to be buried. This critical view of cremation, then, became the default position of most later church thinkers, including the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformers, who adopted the view of cremation espoused by earlier theologians.²¹

It was not until the end of the nineteenth century that the church's position on cremation came under serious attack. As Moore notes, this challenge initially came from certain "anti-Christian 'freethinkers' who saw in the act of cremation a defiant rejection of the resurrection of the body."²² While the Protestant church remained silent on this issue, the Roman Catholic Church responded by officially banning cremation in canon law in 1886. The relevant laws state, "The bodies of the faithful must be buried, their cremation is forbidden. . . . Anyone who has requested that his body shall be cremated shall be deprived of ecclesiastical burial unless he has shown signs of repentance before death."²³ This ban, however, was fairly short-lived, as with his 1963 decree *de Cadaverum Crematione* Pope Paul VI softened canon law, allowing for cremation as long as the act is not motivated by reasons hostile to the Christian life.²⁴ Furthermore, in the 1994 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* the faithful are instructed that "the Church permits cremation, provided that it does not demonstrate a denial of faith in the resurrection of the body."²⁵

II. BIBLICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Given the regularity and inevitability of death, it is surprising that more examples of interment are not recorded in the Bible. Yet, while the sample

²⁰ Henry R. Loyn and John Percival, *The Reign of Charlemagne* (New York: St. Martins, 1975) 52.

²¹ Cf. Davies and Mates, *Encyclopedia of Cremation* 355. Note, also, the historical tendency of Protestant churches to have cemeteries (*coemeteria*, literally "sleeping places") located in close proximity to the church building.

²² Moore, "Grave Signs" 25. For an excellent summary of the challenge to the church's historical view of cremation, along with a detailed analysis of the growing acceptance of the practice in the United States throughout the nineteenth century, see Rodney J. Decker, "Is it Better to Bury or Burn? A Biblical Perspective on Cremation and Christianity in Western Culture" (William R. Rice Lecture Series; Allen Park, MI: Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, March 15, 2006) 16–35, available here: <http://www.dbts.edu/pdf/rlds/Decker-Cremation.pdf>. See also Phipps's discussion of factors that led to the acceptance of cremation in the United States (*Cremation Concerns* 27–43). Fraser, too, briefly discusses the acceptance of cremation in late nineteenth century America, noting that the first crematory in the United States was built in 1876 in Washington, PA. James W. Fraser, *Cremation: Is It Christian?* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1965) 15.

²³ *Corpus Juris Canonici* 1203, 1; 1240, 1. Cf. Long, "Why Cremation" 31.

²⁴ Cf. Phipps, *Cremation Concerns* 57.

²⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par. 2301. For additional information on cremation within the Roman Catholic tradition, see J. Deedy, "Why Cremation Remains a Burning Issue for Catholics," *U. S. Catholic* 56/6 (June 1991) 20–25; John F. McDonald, *Cremation* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1967); H. Richard Rutherford, *Honoring the Dead: Catholics and Cremation Today* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2001); and Joel Schorn, "What Does the Church Say about Cremation?" *U. S. Catholic* 69/3 (March 2004) 38.

size may be small in number, Scripture clearly reports that biblical characters showed great care and respect to the bodies of their deceased loved ones,²⁶ with burial being the most common funerary practice.²⁷ For example, Abraham went to great lengths to secure a tomb in which to bury his wife Sarah, which was the first formal burial recorded in Scripture (Gen 23:3–18). In fact, for three generations the patriarchs in Abraham’s family, along with their wives, were buried in this same tomb. This cave later became known as the tomb of the patriarchs, as it was the final resting place for Abraham and Sarah (Gen 25:9), Isaac and Rebekah (Gen 35:29; 49:31), as well as Jacob and Leah (Gen 50:13).²⁸

A survey of the Bible reveals other notable examples of burial, too. For instance, these include Rachel, whom Jacob buried on the way to Bethlehem (Gen 35:19–20); Joseph, who made his sons promise to bury his bones in the land of Israel (Gen 50:25; Exod 13:19; Josh 24:32);²⁹ Aaron, the first high priest, who was buried in Moserah (Deut 10:6); Moses, who was buried by God opposite Beth-Peor (Deut 34:5–8);³⁰ Joshua, whom the Israelites buried in the hill country of Ephraim (Josh 24:30); Samuel, who was buried near his home in Ramah (1 Sam 25:1); David, who was buried with the kings in Zion (1 Kgs 2:10); John the Baptist, who was buried by his disciples (Matt 14:12); Lazarus, who was buried by his family in Bethany (John 11:17–18); and Stephen, the first martyr, whose body was buried by certain “devout men” near Jerusalem (Acts 8:2). Of course, the preeminent example of burial in Scripture is that of Jesus, who was placed in a tomb by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus (John 19:38–42), an event that was ordained by God (Isa 53:9).

²⁶ Note that the Jewish practice of preparing a body with perfumes and spices, such as was done for King Asa (2 Chr 16:14) and Jesus (Luke 24:1; John 19:39–40) was an expression of care, not an attempt at embalming or mummification.

²⁷ In Scripture to not show care toward a corpse, or to deny a decedent proper burial, was almost always a sign of judgment. Decker writes that in the Bible, “To refuse or deny burial for someone was always a sign of contempt—and often (though not always) the result of God’s judgment” (“Is it Better to Bury or to Burn?” 14). Examples of individuals who were denied a proper burial in Scripture include: Jehoiakim (Jer 22:19), Jezebel (2 Kgs 9:30–37), Ahab’s offspring (1 Kgs 21:17–24), as well as Sisera and Jabin (Ps 83:9–10). Note that the OT civil law stipulated that even those found guilty of a capital offense were to be buried (Deut 21:22–23). Interestingly, in the NT, even Ananias and Sapphira were buried after being killed for lying to the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:1–11). Other references relating to lack of burial being a sign of contempt or judgment include: 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; 29:22; Eccl 6:6; Rev 11:19.

²⁸ It is noteworthy that Jacob afforded his first wife Leah the honor of which he had deprived her in life by burying her by his side in the tomb of the patriarchs at her death (Gen 50:13).

²⁹ The writer of Hebrews reports this request, which was fulfilled when Joseph was buried in Shechem (Josh 24:32) as an act of faith. Hebrews 11:22 reads, “By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his bones.”

³⁰ The burial of Moses is one of the most intriguing in Scripture, for it was performed by God himself, and it was followed by a dispute between the archangel Michael and Satan, who apparently desired the body of Moses for an unspecified reason. In his epistle Jude reports, “But when the archangel Michael, contending with the devil, was disputing about the body of Moses, he did not presume to pronounce a blasphemous judgment, but said, ‘The Lord rebuke you’” (Jude 9). For a good exegetical and historical discussion of this verse, see Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude* (NAC; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003) 459–60.

It seems clear, then, that as the apostle John noted in his Gospel, “The custom of the Jews is to bury” (John 19:40). Yet, there are at least three examples of cremation-type acts in Scripture. Considering these in canonical order, the first is found in 1 Sam 31:11–12 where it is reported that the bodies of Saul and his sons were burned after being rescued by the men of Jabesh-Gilead. This text reads, “But when the inhabitants of Jabesh-Gilead heard what the Philistines had done to Saul, all the valiant men arose and went all night and took the body of Saul and the bodies of his sons from the wall of Beth-shan, and they came to Jabesh and burned them there.” Note, however, that this was only a partial cremation at best, for the text continues, noting that the men “took their bones and buried them under the tamarisk tree in Jabesh and fasted seven days” (1 Sam 31:13). Furthermore, the parallel account of this event at 1 Chr 10:12 lacks any reference to cremation.³¹ It seems, then, that the burning of the bodies of Saul and his sons was not a formal cremation *per se*; rather, it was an act designed to conceal and/or avoid further desecration of their previously mutilated bodies.³²

A second example of cremation in Scripture occurs in the book of Amos. Here, as he confronted the sins of the nations that surrounded Israel, Amos declared, “Thus says the Lord: ‘For three transgressions of Moab, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment, because he burned to lime the bones of the king of Edom. So I will send a fire upon Moab, and it shall devour the strongholds of Kerioth, and Moab shall die amid uproar, amid shouting and the sound of the trumpet; I will cut off the ruler from its midst, and will kill all its princes with him,’ says the Lord” (Amos 2:1–3). Given that the peoples of both Moab and Edom were enemies of Israel, this is an interesting prophecy. Moreover, this is the only unambiguous reference to the act of cremation in the Bible, and as Decker has observed, “This is as close as the Bible gets to condemning the act of cremation.”³³ Yet, due to the limited amount of information contained in this brief passage, and since the event in question is not recorded elsewhere in Scripture, it is difficult to draw any firm conclusions regarding the ethics of cremation from this text.

³¹ In addition, when David was told of these events in 2 Sam 2:4–5, he was simply told that the men of Jabesh-Gilead had buried Saul, not that Saul’s body had been burned. Also, note that David later had the bones of Saul and his sons relocated to the tomb of Saul’s father Kish at Zela (2 Sam 21:12–14). Given the lack of reference to cremation in 1 Chr 10:12, as well as the citation of burial in 2 Sam 2:4–5, Baker asserts, “It appears that this was a mere burning of incense over them, afterward burying the bodies.” Baker cites the burning of incense at the tomb of King Asa (2 Chr 16:14) as corroborative evidence. Allen M. Baker, “Cremation,” http://www.banerofttruth.org/pages/articles/article_detail.php?1484 (accessed January 20, 2010). An additional passage that refers to the burning of incense, or actually the lack thereof, is 2 Chr 21:19–20, which details the burial of King Jehoram.

³² John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, eds., *Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament* (Colorado Springs: Victor, 1983) 455; Decker, “Is it Better to Bury or to Burn?” 6; MacArthur, “Does the Bible Prohibit Cremation.” As an alternative explanation, Phipps claims that the men from Jabesh-Gilead cremated Saul “in gratitude for Saul’s earlier deliverance of their town from an enemy” (*Cremation Concerns* 53). Moreover, Price suggests that the burning of Saul’s bones may have been a form of divine judgment for Saul’s apostasy (“An Examination of Thomistic Substance Dualism” 102, 122–23).

³³ Decker, “Is it Better to Bury or to Burn?” 7.

The final reference to cremation in Scripture also appears in the book of Amos. In Amos 6:8–11, as he pronounced divine judgment upon Israel, Amos prophesied of certain cremations that would occur following a coming military invasion. This text reads:

The Lord God has sworn by Himself, the Lord God of Hosts says: “I despise the pride of Jacob, and hate his palaces; therefore I will deliver up the city and all that is in it. Then it shall come to pass, that if ten men remain in one house, they shall die. And when a relative of the dead, with one who will burn the bodies, picks up the bodies to take them out of the house, he will say to one inside the house, ‘Are there any more with you?’ Then someone will say, ‘None.’ And he will say, ‘Hold your tongue! For we dare not mention the name of the Lord.’ For behold, the Lord gives a command: He will break the great house into bits, and the little house into pieces” (Amos 6:8–11).

While the reference to cremation here may itself be a form of divine judgment, which would be in accord with the symbolic use of fire in Scripture,³⁴ it seems more likely that the burning of bodies cited in this passage is just a practical necessity given the scope of the prophesied carnage. Moreover, there is some debate regarding the proper translation of the verb *sāraph* (סָרַף) in Amos 6:10, with most translations rendering the term “burn,” but others translating “prepare,” “anoint,” or some similar rendering.³⁵ As with the reference to the burning of bodies in Amos 2:1, then, it is difficult to formulate a normative

³⁴ Howard notes that burning of bodies is a frequent form of judgment in Scripture, observing, “Between the exodus and the conquest, hundreds of people were burned in divine judgment” (*Burial or Cremation* 16). Examples in Scripture where fire is used as a means of judgment include: Sodom and Gomorrah where God judged with burning sulfur (Gen 19:24); Judah intended to burn Tamar for extramarital intercourse (Gen 38:24); on account of their erroneous worship, God killed Nadab and Abihu with fire (Lev 10:1–2); the OT civil law commanded to burn with fire the man who married a woman and her mother (Lev 20:14); the civil law commanded to burn with fire the daughter of a priest who became a prostitute (Lev 21:9); some who complained against Moses were destroyed with fire (Num 11:1–3); 250 people were killed with fire during Korah’s rebellion (Num 16:35); in regard to the idolatry of the Canaanites, the civil law stipulated, “The carved images of their gods you shall burn with fire” (Deut 7:15, 25; note that this was obeyed by Moses in Exod 32:1–24; David in 1 Chr 14:12; and Jehu in 2 Kgs 10:26); the death of Achan and his family by fire (Josh 7:15, 25); under the reforms of King Josiah the bodies and bones of pagan priests were burned (2 Kgs 23:20; note that this was prophesied in 1 Kgs 12:28; 13:1); Samson’s wife and father-in-law were burned because of Samson’s defeat of the Philistines (Judg 15:6); King Nebuchadnezzar attempted to burn Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego for perceived insubordination (Dan 3:19–21; Heb 11:34); and the apostle Paul, somewhat obscurely, referred to theoretically giving his body to be burned (1 Cor 13:3). In addition, fire is used metaphorically and/or symbolically of judgment in many passages, including Isa 10:16–17; 30:27–28, 33; 66:15; Jer 4:4; Lam 2:3–4; Joel 2:30; Amos 1:7, 10–14; 2:2, 5; Zeph 1:18; 3:8; Mal 3:2, 5; Matt 3:10–12; 7:19; 13:40, 42, 50; 18:8; 22:7; 25:41; 1 Cor 3:13–15; 2 Thess 1:7; Jas 3:5–6; Heb 10:27; 12:18, 29; 2 Pet 3:7; Rev 8:5, 7–8; 9:18; 11:5; 14:10; 16:8; 18:8; 19:20; 20:15. Interestingly, though, passages that speak of individuals who encounter fire as a means of judgment in the afterlife do not describe the Lord’s annihilation of the body, but rather a place “where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched” (Mark 9:48). Note, too, that fire and burning are not always used negatively in Scripture, as the Lord is repeatedly referred to as a burning fire (Exod 24:7; Dan 7:9; Zech 2:5; Heb 12:29).

³⁵ Alternative translations include, “prepare” (CEV, MSG), “anoint” (ESV), “dispose” (NLT), and “undertake” (NASB). In addition, if one assumes a parallel between the description of end-times events in Ezekiel and Amos, support for alternative translations can be drawn from Ezek 39:11–16 where the bodies of Gog and Magog are buried, not burned.

position on the morality of cremation from the prophetic narrative in Amos 6:8–11.

III. THEOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Although church history witnesses considerable opposition to cremation, since the Bible does not explicitly address the morality of the practice, arriving at an ethic of cremation will necessarily involve a degree of theological construction. While such a process could focus upon a variety of doctrines, particularly issues related to anthropology and eschatology, two areas of Christian teaching that are especially relevant to the moral discussion of cremation are: (1) the dignity of the human body; and (2) the hope of a future bodily resurrection.

1. *The dignity of the human body.* In his work on cremation, Decker observes that “most religious and philosophical systems conclude with a truncated view of humanity, either all material or all immaterial.”³⁶ Indeed, it seems that some Christians fall into this error, at times, either by neglecting the physical aspects of redemption or, as Meilaender notes, by viewing the material body as “little more than a prosthesis used by the real self.”³⁷ While the dynamics of the relationship between the physical body and the soul/spirit is surely a complex and debated topic,³⁸ Scripture clearly presents the physical body as being no less dignified than the soul/spirit. Among other reasons, this can be concluded from the fact that the Lord himself created the material world, including the human body. Indeed, Scripture reports that God made man’s body out of the dust of the ground (Gen 2:7),³⁹ as he

³⁶ Decker, “Is it Better to Bury or to Burn?” 17, n. 59.

³⁷ Gilbert Meilaender, “Broken Bodies Redeemed: Bioethics and the Troublesome Union of Body and Soul” *Touchstone* 20/1 (January/February 2007) 35. Over the past several years there have been a number of important works in the field of theological anthropology that have sought to give a greater place to body theology. Among others, these works include: James R. Beck and Bruce Demarest, *The Human Person in Theology And Psychology: A Biblical Anthropology for the Twenty-first Century* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2006); Stanley Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001); F. LeRon Shults, *Reforming Theological Anthropology: After the Philosophical Turn to Relationality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003); and J. P. Moreland and David M. Ciochi, *Christian Perspectives on Being Human: A Multidisciplinary Approach to Integration* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993).

³⁸ For more on the body-soul discussion, see John W. Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Life-Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989); Joel B. Green and Stuart L. Palmer, eds., *In Search of the Soul: Four Views of the Mind-Body Problem* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2005); Meilaender, “Broken Bodies Redeemed” 30–37; and J. P. Moreland and Scott B. Rae, *Body & Soul: Human Nature & the Crisis in Ethics* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000). Unfortunately, however, these and other similar resources offer little explicit discussion of the morality of cremation.

³⁹ Given the emphasis that the apostle Paul later placed upon the chronology of creation (1 Tim 2:13), it would seem that if the body and soul/spirit were to be evaluated separately, an argument could be made that the physical body should be given greater emphasis than the soul/spirit, not vice-versa, for the body was created first. Yet, since both the dust of the ground, which gave rise to man’s body, and the breath of God, which animated man, were of divine origin it seems better to view man as a holistic being.

pleased (1 Cor 15:38), before animating it with his own breath. Moreover, upon completing his work of creation, the Lord declared all that he had made, including the human body, to be “very good” (Gen 1:31). Man dare not call evil what God has called good (Isa 5:20).

The creation narrative also reports that man was made by God in his own image (Gen 1:26–27). Although the essence of the *imago Dei* certainly extends beyond man’s physical constitution,⁴⁰ if man is a holistic being, consisting of both physical and spiritual elements, it could be argued that in some non-essential way, mankind bears the *imago Dei* in a corporeal sense.⁴¹ Interestingly, the book of Genesis later records that a man found guilty of murder shall forfeit his own life, for, “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image” (Gen 9:6). Concerning this passage, Geisler observes, “This would make no sense to have such a curse if the image of God applied only to the soul, which man cannot kill (Matt 10:28).”⁴² As Boettner explains, then, “The body is as really and eternally part of man as is his spirit.”⁴³

The dignity of the human body is also demonstrable by the incarnation of Christ. While “God is spirit” (John 4:24) and thus has no body, in his incarnation, Jesus took on human flesh. As the author of Hebrews wrote, “Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things” (Heb 2:14), yet was without sin (Heb 4:15). By the very act of incarnation, then, Jesus demonstrated and invested considerable value in the human body. Therefore, as Stott claims, “Christians should treat the human body, with its strange and idiosyncratic design, with special respect. Why? Because this is the form in which God became flesh.”⁴⁴ More-

⁴⁰ While a thorough discussion of the *imago Dei* falls beyond the scope of this work, helpful resources include G. C. Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962); Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986); Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *The True Image: The Origin and Destiny of Man in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989); and Meredith Kline, *Images of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980).

⁴¹ Erickson notes that while few have emphasized the bodily and physical aspects of the position, nevertheless, “the substantive view [of the image of God] has been dominant during most of the history of Christian theology.” Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983) 498. Grudem observes that even non-somatic aspects of the substantive view of the *imago Dei* involve the body for “almost everything we do is done by means of the use of our physical bodies—our thinking, our moral judgments, our prayer and praise, our demonstrations of love and concern for each other—all are done using the physical bodies God has given us.” Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 448. J. van Genderen and W. H. Velema also have a stimulating discussion on the corporeal aspects of the image of God. They write, “The image of God . . . also has an ontic aspect. With this we mean that being human in body and spirit (in contrast with any other creature) is part of the image of God. . . . The image of God is unthinkable without involving this human nature physically created by God. . . . The image of God is unthinkable without involving this ‘substantial’ (corporeal) basis.” J. van Genderen and W. H. Velema, *Concise Reformed Dogmatics* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2008) 321. Note, too, that the apostle Paul emphasized the unity of human beings, as he referred to a disembodied soul/spirit as being “naked” and “unclothed” (2 Cor 5:1–5).

⁴² Geisler, “From Ashes to Ashes” 6.

⁴³ Loraine Boettner, *Immortality* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2000) 51.

⁴⁴ John Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today* (4th ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006) 436. Some have claimed that verses in the OT civil law that prohibit the cutting and/or tattooing of the

over, Jesus' incarnation, death, burial, and bodily resurrection made possible the redemption of mankind. Scripture reports that this includes man's physical body (Rom 8:23), which was purchased by Christ (1 Cor 6:20), is now a "member of Christ" (1 Cor 6:15), is a "temple of the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor 6:19), and will one day be transformed into the glorious likeness of Christ's risen body (Rom 8:11, 29; 1 Cor 15:49; 2 Cor 3:18; Phil 3:10, 21; Col 3:1-4; 2 Thess 2:14; 1 John 3:2).

Despite the dignity that Scripture affords the human body, though, some could claim that such respect is only valid while the body and soul/spirit are joined in life. Grudem observes, "Someone may object that some bodies completely decay, are absorbed into plants, and then eventually into other bodies, so that nothing of the first body can be found."⁴⁵ Indeed, barring the Lord's return, "the dust returns to the earth as it was" (Eccl 12:7), for death and decomposition are inevitable.⁴⁶ Yet, given a holistic view of man, claiming that the body loses its value when separated from the soul/spirit seemingly puts one in the position of having either to assert the same in regard to a disembodied soul/spirit, or to claim that the body's value is derived from the soul/spirit. The former is an ostensibly untenable position, and the latter appears to marginalize the concept of man as a unified being. It seems better, then, to view both the physical body and the soul/spirit, which are separated at death, to be equally dignified. Indeed, just as the soul/spirit is renewed at conversion (2 Cor 5:17), so the physical body will be renewed at the end of the age.

2. *The future bodily resurrection.* A second teaching that may impact the ethics of cremation is the doctrine of the future bodily resurrection. In fact, in their work on cremation, Davies and Mates assert that "the starting

body (Lev 19:28; 21:5; Deut 14:1) ought to be considered in a discussion of the morality of cremation; yet, it seems that such laws were not prohibiting cutting and/or tattooing *per se*, but rather the idolatry that was often attached to such acts.

⁴⁵ Grudem, *Systematic Theology* 834, n. 8. In this passage, Grudem continues, "But in response we must simply say that God can keep track of enough of the elements from each body to form a 'seed' from which to form a new body (see Gen 50:25; Job 19:26; Ezek 37:1-14; Heb 11:22)" (ibid.). In his classic systematic theology book, somewhat humorously, Strong comments on this objection writing, "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 (1603-83). More than one person had eaten its apples. This root may be seen today in the cabinet at Brown University." A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1907) 1019. Note that the root that Strong mentions has since been moved to the John Brown House of the Rhode Island Historical Society where it may still be viewed.

⁴⁶ While the decay of the body is inevitable, it is not a natural event *per se*, rather it is a facet of the Edenic curse and, as such, is part of the divine punishment for sin (Gen 3:19). Howard writes, "The dissolution of the body is not a natural process which we are at liberty to hasten or delay at will. It is the punishment which God has inflicted upon sin" (*Burial or Cremation* 23). Some cremation advocates seem to overlook this fact, and in so doing fail to distinguish between actively facilitating bodily decay and passively allowing decomposition to take place. Note that it is a logical error to appeal to the normativity of consequences in order to justify the morality of an act.

point for Christian debates on the mode of disposal [of the body] is the resurrection."⁴⁷ While this claim may be hyperbole, given the emphasis that is placed upon this doctrine in Scripture, most believers would affirm the importance of the future bodily resurrection. Indeed, Job declared, "For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God" (Job 19:25–26); the apostle Paul wrote, "Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Cor 15:20); and, in the book of Revelation, John referred to Jesus as "the firstborn of the dead" (Rev 1:5). Certainly, then, the teaching that believers will one day be resurrected in a glorified, physical body is an important component of orthodox Christian theology.

Despite the significance of the doctrine of the resurrection, though, specific details about this event are sparse in Scripture, and the exact process by which God will physically resurrect the decomposed and scattered bodies of the faithful is not fully explained. In 1 Cor 15:35–49, which is the most detailed treatment of the bodily resurrection in the Bible, the apostle Paul simply likens the resurrection process to a seed being planted in the ground, which "God gives a body . . . as he has chosen" (1 Cor 15:38). In applying this passage to the morality of cremation Howard notes, "The burial of the body gives explicit expression to the analogy of the seed sown resulting in a future harvest; it is a distinctive testimony to the future Christian hope of resurrection."⁴⁸ While this is true, however, one dare not read too much into Paul's seed/body analogy, for contextually the apostle was simply defending the fact of the resurrection, not attempting to explain the mechanics and metaphysics of the event.

The lack of specific, biblical details about the resurrection notwithstanding, the truth of this doctrine may impact the ethics of cremation, for as Phillips observes, "It is always the case that our views of the afterlife will influence how we handle the bodies of those who have died. . . . Our theology will shape the way we approach all of life's greatest events."⁴⁹ Interestingly, in Scripture, not only is burial the normative practice, but also buried corpses are referred to as persons, often by name, not as things or former persons (Mark 15:45–46; John 11:43). Moreover, the most prevalent word used in the NT to describe the death of a believer is "sleep," a term that was employed by both Jesus (Matt 9:24; Mark 5:39; Luke 8:52; John 11:11) and Paul (1 Cor 11:30; 15:6, 18, 20, 51; 2 Cor 5:6–8; 1 Thess 4:13–16). Therefore, while the resurrection is not contingent upon a particular form of interment, in light of the manner in which death and the deceased are described in Scripture, some forms of disposing of a corpse may be preferable to others.

⁴⁷ Davies and Mates, *Encyclopedia of Cremation* 353.

⁴⁸ Howard, *Burial or Cremation* 30.

⁴⁹ Richard D. Phillips, "Is Cremation Appropriate for Christians?," http://www.tenth.org/qbox/qb_000709.htm (accessed January 20, 2010).

IV. CONCLUSION

After reviewing some of the key historical, biblical, and theological considerations that have been a part of the moral discussion of cremation within the Judeo-Christian tradition, ultimately the practice must be viewed as an *adiaphora* issue. This being said, however, it seems legitimate to draw the following three conclusions. First, church history witnesses considerable opposition toward cremation with the normative practice of the church being burial. Second, while Scripture is silent on the specifics of how to treat the deceased, both the example of biblical characters and the general trajectory of related passages seem to be in a pro-burial direction. Third, the body is theologically significant; thus, both the act of and the imagery conveyed by the treatment of the deceased ought to be weighed carefully.

Certainly not all deaths will afford loved ones an opportunity to choose the method of interment. Indeed, factors such as the location and manner of death, nation-specific legal parameters, as well as the resources of the surviving family will bear upon funerary practices and decisions. Yet, if given a choice, those left behind ought to consider carefully what is being communicated in their handling of the body of a decedent. After all, within the Christian tradition, funerals are not simply ways of disposing of dead bodies, nor are they solely about remembering the departed or expressing grief. Rather, for believers, funerals ought to be Christ-centered events, testifying to the message and hope of the gospel.