



Palm West Community Church of Sun City West, Arizona

On the Matter of Cremation

Written in preparation of a congregation vote on the proposed columbarium, on Sunday, April 7, 2013. Adapted from article in our church newsletter, May, 2012

As a pastor I have been asked on many occasions for my feelings on cremation. This usually occurs when family members have lost a loved one. I immediately tell people that any decision is a matter for the family to decide. Cremation for some is a challenge emotionally and spiritually because of cultural norms for respectful and dignified treatment of loved ones' remains. No matter what are personal view, the practice of cremation is becoming more and more commonplace and it is important to come to terms with what it means for each of us, and immediate family, and members of our church who may decide on cremation for themselves.

Let me start by saying that ultimately it does not matter whether a person is cremated or buried. To put it another way, it doesn't matter with eternity in view. It is true that non-Christian religions have practiced cremation (I saw some while in Thailand) but those practices are entirely different from what is practiced in the Christian community today. My personal feelings have changed as I witnessed the respectful treatment of cremated remains and the use of columbarium by churches and cemeteries over the past decades of my ministry.

What does the Bible say about cremation?

Actually, the Bible does not say one way or another. Most Christian leaders (from mainline denominations and evangelical churches) acknowledge that cremation is not a sin. There is no commandment forbidding cremation. There is a passage that condemned the exhuming of human bones and burning them on the altar dedicated for animal sacrifices because it desecrated the altar and the sacrificial system (2 Kings 23:16-20). We know that the common practice in Israel's culture was burial in a tomb or cave as soon as possible after death. Some Christians who object to cremation feel that burial of an intact body reflects a respect that even Jesus' body received upon his death. Some object because, at the general resurrection, God will raise our bodies to reunite with our souls/spirits (1 Corinthians 15:35-58; 1 Thessalonians 4:16) and would not want to cremate/scatter a body's remains.

We must be careful not to use the Bible as a proof text either for the necessity of traditional burial or for cremation. While there are several examples of cremation in the Old Testament (Achan, Joshua 7:25; Saul, 1 Samuel 31:12; the King of Edom, Amos 2:1); they involved God's judgment and curse and in no way can be used on our modern process of cremation in respect to the person who dies and the family who honors those wishes. And when Paul offered his body to be burned (1 Corinthians 13:3), he was speaking of martyrdom, not cremation.

The Bible does not command a certain type of burial (it only gives accounts of burials). The Bible instead teaches what happens after we die (Philippians 3:21; 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17; 1 Corinthians 15). What really matters is that we have faith in Jesus and claim His forgiveness before we die and, when we die, our spirit remains with Him (2 Corinthians 5:6-10). Therefore, cremation does not make it more difficult for God to resurrect that new body. Those who died thousands of years ago have already turned to dust and would not be a problem for God our Creator! This is also true for those who are organ donors. Whatever the condition of body that remains will not affect our final resurrection outcome by the Lord.

Many Christians have been uncertain about cremation based on historical traditions regarding the proper disposal of the body. The four main reasons are: (1) The body of every human was created by God, bore his image, and deserved to be treated with respect because of this. (2) The centrality of the Incarnation. When the Word became flesh, God uniquely hallowed human life and bodily existence forever. (3) The Holy Spirit indwelt the bodies of believers, making them vessels of honor. (4) As Jesus himself was buried and raised bodily from the dead, so Christians believed that their burial was a witness to the resurrection yet to come. We also understand that upon the death the real soul/spirit/life of a person does not remain with the flesh, and though the flesh is destroyed, the person is eternal.

In thirty-five years of ministry I have observed many funeral plans and traditions. Most were beautiful and God-honoring. Yet I recall that a few families spent enormous sums of money to laud their deceased loved one with exorbitant caskets and many floral arrangements. One woman told me that she wanted only the most expensive casket out of guilt that she had not been the best wife while her husband was alive and wanted to “make up for it.” I have also observed funerals in which the deceased was cremated; and the cremains were tastefully presented without detracting from the respect of the deceased or the honor of the Lord. These observations have moved me to study Scripture, and in relating to many funerals who cremate their loved ones, I have grown to accept cremation as acceptable as another option available to people in the Christian church.

No matter what plan we accept for the treatment of our bodies after our death, the Christian must realize it is not whether one is buried or cremated but the meaning given to these acts. A person or family considering this issue should pray for wisdom (James 1:5) and follow the conviction that results. Whatever the decision, it is important to discuss it with your spouse, children and other loved ones and it should never become a divisive issue.

As a pastor, my desire is to respect each family’s decision, whether for traditional burial or for cremation. I am at peace with either way. Personally, I am considering cremation and upon making that decision it is important to make my intentions clear with my family. Ultimately, however, I feel Cristy and my children may have more to say about this than I. I won’t mind either way when I am gone.

- Bruce P. Schipul, Senior Pastor
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