

# **Magnifying Christ in My Body: Is Cremation a Legitimate Alternative to Christian Burial?**

**A Historical, Biblical, Theological, and Pastoral Analysis**

Report of the Study Committee of  
The Synod of the Reformed Church in the United States  
February 23, 2019

## Foreword

The 2015 Synod of the Reformed Church in the United States (RCUS) erected a study committee “to examine the theological and pastoral implications of cremation.” This report is the fruit of that committee’s labors. Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are in the New King James Version. The committee would like to thank Rev. Eric Bristley, who served on the committee from 2015-2018, and other officers and members of the RCUS who contributed valuable feedback and encouragement.

Soli Deo Gloria!

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February 23, 2019

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“Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death.” (Philippians 1:20b)

“I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.” (Romans 12:1-2)

“For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s.” (Romans 14:7-8)

*Heidelberg Catechism* Q1: What is your only comfort in life and in death?

A: That I, with body and soul, both in life and in death, am not my own, but belong to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ, who with His precious blood has fully satisfied for all my sins, and redeemed me from all the power of the devil; and so preserves me that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, that all things must work together for my salvation. Wherefore, by His Holy Spirit, He also assures me of eternal life, and makes me heartily willing and ready from now on to live unto Him.

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## Introduction

Is cremation an appropriate practice for Christians? Should believers in Jesus Christ regard burning bodies as no better or worse than burying them? Does the Bible lead us to conclude that cremating the dead is a matter of personal preference, and not an ethical or moral concern (the kind of choice that theologians call “adiaphora”)?

These are the kinds of questions being asked in the contemporary church more than ever before. Fifty years ago, the great majority of Christians in the U.S. buried their dead and did not consider cremation a viable option. Yet with cremation becoming increasingly common in American society, many are wondering whether it is a legitimate alternative to traditional Christian burial.<sup>1</sup>

Many evangelical Christians have concluded that cremation is indeed an acceptable alternative. The following statement sums up a common point of view: *“The Bible does not command us how to dispose of our dead. People were usually buried in biblical times, and while burial may be preferred, ultimately what we do with the body after death is not an ethical or moral concern.”*<sup>2</sup>

Is this a correct perspective? Is the Bible ultimately silent about whether believers may cremate their dead? Is it proper to regard the practice as a matter of Christian liberty? These are some of the questions this paper will examine and seek to answer in the light of God’s Word.

We will begin by surveying modern perspectives on cremation, especially within the American church. This survey will be followed by a brief history of cremation from ancient times to the present. We will then examine the Scriptures and consider the biblical and systematic theology that springs from them – especially as expressed in the great creeds of the Reformed Church – to see if cremation can be rightly understood as consistent with the Christian faith. Finally, we will tackle some common questions and pastoral concerns related to cremation.

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1 Members of the Reformed Church in the United States (RCUS) have expressed curiosity about the practice of cremation and how it fits with their understanding of life, death, and the coming resurrection since at least 1984, when the topic of cremation was brought up in a Question and Answer session at an RCUS Family Camp. Cf. *Reformed Herald*, Nov. 1984, p. 3.

2 John MacArthur’s view is typical among some evangelical Christians: “Scripture says nothing about a required mode of burial for either believers or non-believers. However, burying the body was the standard practice among the Israelites in the Old Testament and Christians in the New. . . . Obviously any buried body will eventually decompose (Eccles. 12:7). So cremation isn’t a strange or wrong practice – it merely accelerates the natural process of oxidation. The believer will one day receive a new body . . . thus the state of what remains of the old body is unimportant.” John MacArthur, “Does the Bible Prohibit Cremation?” (<http://www.gty.org/resources/questions/QA177/does-the-bible-prohibit-cremation>, retrieved 11/10/2015), emphases ours. See also Michael Horton, “Is It Okay for a Christian to Be Cremated?” (<https://corechristianity.com/resource-library/articles/is-it-ok-for-a-christian-to-be-cremated>, retrieved January 30, 2019).

## Scope of This Investigation

Before continuing, here are a few points of clarification about the scope of this study paper:

1) Cremation and burial are ancient customs, and each has been practiced in a variety of ways over the course of human history. This paper is not concerned with contrasting the various methods of cremation employed by man – whether by funeral pyre, furnace, crematories, or modern “green” methods. Neither does the discussion hinge on different methods of burial – whether in caves, cemeteries, mausoleums, or at sea. For our purposes, the various ways cremation and burial are practiced will be regarded as matters of indifference. The focus of this study paper will be to address a more fundamental issue, namely, *whether the practice of cremation (however it is done, whether by fire, intense heat, chemicals, etc.) ought to be regarded as a legitimate alternative to the traditional Christian practice of committing bodies to the earth.*

2) There are other after-death practices related to the human body that raise ethical concerns among Christians, e.g., organ donations, embalming, autopsies, and donating bodies to science. While we believe it would be helpful to evaluate such practices from a biblical and pastoral point of view, we will not be doing that in this paper, other than to offer some passing comments about embalming. Whatever one concludes about the suitability of embalming, autopsies, etc., does not necessarily affect what one concludes about the suitability of cremation. In any case, the RCUS Synod asked our committee to evaluate cremation. What Christians should think about other after-death practices is beyond the scope of our investigation.

3) Evangelical Christians agree that God will in no way be hindered from resurrecting believers in Christ who have been incinerated, lost at sea, eaten by wild animals, killed in explosions, etc. Of course He can. Of course He will. As relates to our investigation, all of that is beside the point. The question before us is not concerned with what God *can* do, but what Christians *should* do. In other words, how should believers in Christ, guided by the infallible Scriptures, care for their dead under normal conditions, as an expression of their faith, in a way that shows love and respect for the deceased and gives honor and glory to God? That is the main question this paper will seek to answer. May our gracious Lord be pleased to bless and strengthen His Church as we strive together to answer this question, “bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:2b-3).

## Definition of Cremation

The word cremation comes from the Latin word *cremare*, which means “to burn or consume with fire.” Cremation refers to “the practice of reducing a corpse to its essential elements by burning,”<sup>3</sup> usually by means of fire and intense heat. Dr. Kenneth Iserson describes the modern

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3 “Cremation,” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/cremation>, retrieved c. 12/28/2017).

method of cremation typically practiced in Western societies:

“Cremation uses intense heat [typically 1600 – 2000°F] to rapidly burn (oxidize) the body. The body contains bones (chiefly calcium phosphate), water (70-80 percent of non-bone tissue), and carbon-based soft tissues. The intense heat used during cremation evaporates the water, burns the soft tissues, and for the average-sized adult, reduces the bones to 4 to 8 pounds of ash and fragments.”<sup>4</sup>

After all soft tissues have been consumed, the remaining ash and charred bone fragments are typically placed in a cremulator, a device that pulverizes them into small, sandy bits. These pulverized bone fragments are commonly referred to as the “ashes” or “cremains.”<sup>5</sup>

Please note that when this paper references “cremation,” what is in view is *the intentional burning of human bodies as a means of disposal*, regardless of the methods employed (fire, heat, chemicals, etc.) or the various customs of people around the world and throughout human history.

### **Advent and Rise of Cremation in America**

During America’s first century, cremation was a virtually unknown practice. No crematories<sup>6</sup> were in operation, and American churches regarded the incineration of human bodies as an unchristian practice.

Cremation began to take root in the U.S. in 1876, when Dr. Julius LeMoyné built the country’s first crematory in Washington, Pennsylvania. A second crematory opened in 1884 in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. By 1900, twenty crematories were in operation across the nation, mostly in larger cities like New York, Los Angeles, Detroit, Pittsburgh, and Cincinnati.<sup>7</sup>

As the practice of cremation slowly gained a foothold in the American experience, it remained relatively rare. By 1965, only 3.87% of deaths in America resulted in a cremation.<sup>8</sup> The situation became more fluid in the late 1960’s, as cremation was increasingly regarded as a valid, low-cost alternative to burial. By 1999, the number of crematories in the United States had grown to 1,468, and the percentage of Americans choosing cremation had jumped to 25.4%.<sup>9</sup> The growth trend continued, until finally in 2016, the cremation rate in the U.S. hit 50.2% to become the majority practice.<sup>10</sup> Based on this percentage, more than 1,300,000 cremations were

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4 Dr. Kenneth Iserson, quoted from Norman L Geisler & Douglas E. Potter, *What in Cremation is Going on?: A Christian Guide to Post Mortem Decisions* (Kindle Locations 94-96), Bastion Books, 2014, Kindle Edition.

5 See “How Is a Body Cremated?” (<http://www.cremationresource.org/cremation/how-is-a-body-cremated.html>).

6 A crematory is a device that uses intense heat to reduce a human body to ash and bone fragments. A crematorium is a facility where bodies are cremated, typically a funeral home, cemetery, or even a church.

7 Cremation Association of North America, “Western History of Cremation” (<http://www.cremationassociation.org/page/HistoryOfCremation>, retrieved 12/14/2017).

8 Cremation Association of North America, “Historical Cremation Data – United States vs. Canada” (<http://www.cremationinfo.com/cremationinfo/pdf/webhistdata.pdf>, retrieved 10/15/2015).

9 Cremation Association of North America, “Western History of Cremation.”

10 National Funeral Directors Association, “NFDA Cremation and Burial Report Shows Rate of Cremation at All-time

performed in the United States in 2017.<sup>11</sup> Cremation is even more common today in Canada (70.2% in 2016) and other industrialized nations,<sup>12</sup> and the percentage of Americans choosing cremation is expected to climb significantly over the next decade.<sup>13</sup>

How did cremation become America's dominant method of bodily disposal in such a relatively brief period of time? As mentioned, the perception that cremation is a cheaper alternative than burial is perhaps the greatest single factor. Convenience, land scarcity, environmental concerns, pragmatism, and the decline of organized religion are other commonly-cited reasons.<sup>14</sup>

### **Growth of Cremation in the American Church**

As the practice of cremation has skyrocketed in American society, it has become increasingly common in Christian churches. A great majority of U.S. denominations now either accept cremation as a valid funeral rite or voice no official objection to the practice.<sup>15</sup> As the cremation tide continues to rise, the Church's longstanding practice of burying the bodies of its dead is being significantly challenged, with seemingly little resistance being offered.

The American clergy has largely accommodated the practice of cremation. Relatively few pastors and scholars voice formal opposition, and even when such opposition is raised, it is often weakly stated and includes significant qualifiers. The reasons why Christians have historically buried their dead seem all but forgotten in many quarters. Dr. Alvin J. Schmidt, former professor of sociology and Christian social ethics at Concordia Theological Seminary, summarizes the modern perspective:

“[M]ost Christian clergy and theologians . . . have largely acquiesced to the practice of cremation. Thus, today's Christians receive little or no guidance from their pastors or priests about whether cremation is biblically acceptable. Countless clergy tell their members that the Bible does not forbid cremation. Hence, members are left to conclude that choosing to be buried or cremated is a personal decision, devoid of any biblical, theological guidance. In contacting leaders and officials in mainline denominations, I have found the void of biblical guidance is common and widespread.

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High” (<http://www.nfda.org/news/media-center/nfda-news-releases/id/2511/nfda-cremation-and-burial-report-shows-rate-of-cremation-at-all-time-high>, retrieved 12/14/2017).

11 “Death and Mortality,” *National Center for Health Statistics* (<https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/deaths.htm>).

12 Industrialized nations with higher cremation rates than the U.S. include Japan (99.97%), South Korea (80.79%), Switzerland (85.44%), Sweden (81.33%), Denmark (80.9%), United Kingdom (76.32%), and The Netherlands (63.37%). *International Cremation Statistics 2015* (<https://tinyurl.com/incl2015>, retrieved 1/22/2018).

13 “Cremation Association of North America Infographic,” *2017 Annual Statistics Report* ([http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.cremationassociation.org/resource/resmgr/statistics/Infographic\\_July\\_2017.pdf](http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.cremationassociation.org/resource/resmgr/statistics/Infographic_July_2017.pdf), retrieved 12/14/2017).

14 “Why Is Cremation Becoming More Popular in the US?” (<https://www.nationalcremation.com/cremation-information/why-is-cremation-becoming-more-popular-in-the-us>, retrieved 12/21/2017).

15 That nearly all major denominations accept or at least accommodate the practice of cremation will be demonstrated in the next section of this paper, “History of Cremation and Burial,” pp. 5-16.

Moreover, the early Christians who rejected cremation are not presented to today's Christians as role models. Thus, numerous Christians today know little or nothing about the historical fact that their spiritual ancestors in the Roman era and later consistently spurned cremation."<sup>16</sup>

In a little more than a generation, American Christianity has shifted away from an exclusive commitment to burial to embrace cremation as a legitimate alternative, seemingly without giving the matter a second thought. So profound has been this change that it is now common for American Christians to hold that it is absurd, uncharitable and even pharisaical to suggest that cremation is wrong. Dr. Russell D. Moore, president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, comments:

"Of all the issues of controversy among Christians, I find few more incendiary than whether or not we should, well, incinerate the bodies of our loved ones. I find that Christians become agitated, defensive, and personally insulted more quickly on the question of cremation than on almost any other contemporary question. . . . [I]f someone had asked any previous generation of Christians or of pagans if cremation were a Christian act, the answer would have seemed obvious to them, whether they were believers or infidels: Christians bury their dead. . . . Today, however, an anti-cremation stance is often ridiculed by Christians as, at best, Luddite [opposed or resistant to technological change] and, at worst, carnal. When I counsel a family to reject the funeral director's cremation option, I am often asked: 'Can't God raise a cremated Christian just as he can raise a decomposed buried Christian?' The question is more complicated than whether God *can* reconstitute ashes. Of course he can. The question is whether we *should* put him in a position of having to do so in the first place."<sup>17</sup>

The general acceptance of cremation in theologically conservative U.S. churches can be traced to three basic assumptions: (1) the Bible nowhere specifically condemns the practice of cremation; (2) even though burial may be preferred, the practice of cremation should not be regarded as a matter of Christian ethics or morality; and (3) the Church should regard the practice of cremation as an acceptable method of bodily disposition. This paper will test the soundness of these assumptions. We invite the reader to consider the entire discussion before coming to any firm conclusions about the legitimacy of cremation as a Christian option.

## History of Cremation and Burial

### Cremation in the Ancient World

Along with burial, cremation was a widespread method of bodily disposal in the Ancient Near

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16 Alvin J. Schmidt, *Cremation, Embalment, or Neither?: A Biblical/Christian Evaluation*, (Kindle Locations 156-162), WestBow Press, 2015, Kindle Edition.

17 Russell D. Moore, "Grave Signs," *Touchstone* 20/1, Jan/Feb 2007, pp. 24–27, emphases his.



East (ANE).<sup>18</sup> The Akkadians (c. 2334 B.C. – c. 2154 B.C.) are known to have burned their dead, and cremation was also practiced by the Babylonians,<sup>19</sup> Hittites, Phoenicians, and Persians.<sup>20</sup> Typically the rite was associated with religious belief and ceremony. “Some [cultures] incinerated their dead to free the dead person’s soul from the body, which supposedly held it captive; others did it because they believed fire purified the soul; and all of them burned their dead because they did not believe in the physical resurrection of the body.”<sup>21</sup>

Cremation began to spread across northern Europe between 3000 – 2500 B.C., and over the next thousand years, the practice found its way to the British Isles, Ireland, and what is now Spain, Portugal, and Italy.<sup>22</sup> The Greeks embraced cremation as a funeral rite as early as 1000 B.C., particularly for their military heroes.<sup>23</sup>

The early Romans began cremating their dead c. 600 B.C., and there is evidence that by the fifth century B.C. the practice had become relatively common.<sup>24</sup> By the time the Roman Empire was formally established in 27 B.C., cremation was entrenched in Roman culture. Burning the dead was widely practiced, the creation of elaborate cremation urns was a prized skill for artisans, and the first columbariums<sup>25</sup> were beginning to appear.<sup>26</sup>

## Cremation and the Ancient Christian Church

When the Christian Church began to spread across the Roman Empire in the middle of the first century, it converged with a prevailing culture that believed cremation to be a perfectly legitimate method of body disposal. Given that many of the early Christians were recent converts from the same culture, one might expect the practice of cremation to have been fairly common in the early churches. However, this was not the case. On the contrary, the historical evidence indicates that early Christian churches eschewed cremation in favor of burial, with no

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18 One notable exception among ANE cultures was Egypt, which shunned cremation. Among those cultures that burned their dead, the rite was sometimes limited to nobles and war heroes.

19 A.H. Sayce, *Babylonians and Assyrians: Life and Customs*, New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1899, pp. 62-64.

20 “Azor,” “Burial,” “Columbarium,” “Megadim (Tel),” in Avraham Negev, *Archaeological Encyclopedia of the Holy Land*, New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1990; and D. R. W. Wood & I. H. Marshall, *New Bible Dictionary* (3rd ed.), Leicester, England, Downers Grove, Ill., InterVarsity Press, p. 996.

21 Alvin J. Schmidt, *Dust to Dust or Ashes to Ashes? A Biblical and Christian Examination of Cremation*, Regina Orthodox Press Inc., 2005, p. 98.

22 Cremation Association of North America, “Western History of Cremation.”

23 “*The Iliad* makes plain how elaborate and important cremations were [in Greek culture]. In that, Zeus himself forced Achilles to surrender Hector’s body to his father so that he, King Priam of Troy, could have it cremated royally. The greater the hero, the greater was the conflagration. Achilles set the pattern in providing a pyre 100 feet (30 metres) square for his friend Patroclus. Achilles himself was incinerated even more gloriously after his death—in ‘raiment of the gods’ after 17 days of mourning.” - Cited from “Cremation,” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/cremation>).

24 Cremation Association of North America, “Western History of Cremation.”

25 Columbariums were underground chambers that the Romans built for storing the ashes of the dead.

26 “A History of Cremation in the West: What, When and Where” (<http://iccf.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Cremation-Articles-VanBeck-History-10.12.pdf>, retrieved 12/28/2017).

apparent record of dissent. As Darrell Stein notes,

“Early church councils and synods did not issue any canons against cremation. Why not? There was no need to do so, because disposing of the dead by cremation was one cultural practice Christians did not imitate. *There is not a single recorded instance of Christians having ever cremated their dead.* There was no legalized prohibition against cremation in Christian Antiquity. None was needed, for the Christians by reason of their belief abhorred it.”<sup>27</sup>

Jews had always rejected cremation as a funeral rite. The *Mishnah*<sup>28</sup> taught that the custom of burning human bodies was unacceptable and a form of idolatry.<sup>29</sup> The strong Jewish aversion to cremation and equally strong commitment to burial, rooted in Old Testament teachings and practice,<sup>30</sup> carried over into the early Christian Church. As historian S.M. Houghton explains, Jewish practice “lies at the root of Christian custom. John’s Gospel includes the phrase, ‘as the manner of the Jews is to bury’, [verse 19:40], and the entire mass of Old and New Testament witness constitutes the strength of the argument for Christian burial as against the modern plea for cremation.”<sup>31</sup> Church historian Philip Schaff describes the ethos of the early church:

“The primitive Christians always showed a tender care for the dead; under a vivid impression of the unbroken communion of saints and the future resurrection of the body in glory. For Christianity redeems the body as well as the soul, and consecrates it a temple of the Holy Spirit. Hence the Greek and Roman custom of burning the corpse (*crematio*) was repugnant to Christian feeling and the sacredness of the body.”<sup>32</sup>

Following the apostolic era, Christians became known for opposing infanticide, child abandonment, abortion, and suicide because they believed in the sanctity of the human body.<sup>33</sup> They opposed cremation for the same reason, for they did not believe the sanctity of the body

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27 Darrell Stein, *Cremation or Bodily Burial: Which Brings God More Honor?*, ([http://k.b5z.net/i/u/2167316/i/Cremation\\_presentation\\_by\\_Darrell\\_Stein.ppt](http://k.b5z.net/i/u/2167316/i/Cremation_presentation_by_Darrell_Stein.ppt), retrieved 12/26/2017), emphasis ours.

28 The *Mishnah* is a written collection of Jewish oral rabbinic traditions compiled in A.D. 200. It was later combined with the *Gemara* (A.D. 500) to form the *Talmud*, the primary rabbinic authority of Judaism.

29 *Mishnah Avodah Zarah* 1:3: “And the Sages say: every funeral in which a conflagration is present [thereby] involves idol worship.” ([https://www.sefaria.org/Mishnah\\_Avodah\\_Zarah.1.5?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Mishnah_Avodah_Zarah.1.5?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en), retrieved 12/23/2017). *The Talmud Sotah* 14a adds, “Just as the Holy One, Blessed be He, buried the dead, as it is written: ‘And he was buried in the valley in the land of Moab’ (Deuteronomy 34:6), so too, should you bury the dead.”

30 Alfred Edersheim, commenting on the funeral practices of the Jews at the time of Christ, wrote, “Cremation was denounced as a purely heathen practice, contrary to the whole spirit of Old Testament teaching.” Alfred Edersheim, *Sketches of Jewish Social Life in the Days of Christ*, London: The Religious Tract Society, 1876, p. 169.

31 S.M. Houghton, “Earth to Earth: Considerations on the Practice of Cremation,” *Gospel Tidings* magazine, Vol. 9, Issue 8, originally published in *Banner of Truth* (<http://www.gospeltidings.org.uk/library/9/8/6.htm>, retrieved 12/19/2017).

32 Philip Schaff, *History Of The Christian Church*, (The Complete Eight Volumes In One), (Kindle Locations 17108-17111), Kindle Edition, orig. published 1882.

33 Darrell Stein, *Cremation or Bodily Burial: Which Brings God More Honor?*

ended when a person died. They also chose burial in no small part because Christ Himself was buried. Just as they had followed Jesus in life, it was their desire to follow Him in death by being laid to rest in the earth.

Christian antipathy toward cremation was fueled further by persecutors of the Church. Nero became infamous for his cruelties to Christians, including covering them with pitch and burning them alive.<sup>34</sup> Eusebius of Caesarea recounts the ghastly persecutions in Lyons, France in A.D. 177, where Christians were burned and their ashes scattered in mockery of the resurrection.<sup>35</sup> The Christian commitment to burial inspired other forms of persecution. Tertullian (c. A.D. 155 – c. 225) testified that in the year 202, a hostile Carthaginian mob violated Christian burial sites while shouting, ‘No *areae* – no burial grounds for the Christians!’<sup>36</sup>

So committed were the early Christians to caring for and burying the dead that it became an important part of their witness to those outside the Church. As Greg Uttinger observes, “in the ancient Church, burying the dead was reckoned a charitable work akin to tending the sick or feeding the hungry. It was a practical act of love, especially when the one buried was a stranger or an enemy.”<sup>37</sup> Even Roman Emperor Julian “the Apostate” (A.D. c. 331 – 363), a vociferous opponent of Christianity, testified that Christianity “has been specially advanced through the loving service rendered to strangers and *through their care of the burial of the dead.*”<sup>38</sup>

## The Church Fathers

The church fathers demonstrated regard for the human body and esteemed burial as integral to their faith. As evident in their writings, the teaching of Scripture was the foundation of their Christian commitment to burial, as it had been for the Jews. The primary scriptural teachings that underpinned their commitment were that man is created in the image of God,<sup>39</sup> that the bodies of Christians are temples of the Holy Spirit,<sup>40</sup> that Christians follow their Lord’s example in death

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34 Alfred Edersheim, *History of the Jewish Nation After the Destruction of Jerusalem Under Titus*, (Edinburgh: Thomas Constable and Co.), 1856, p. 110.

35 “The bodies of the martyrs, having thus in every manner been exhibited and exposed for six days, were afterward burned and reduced to ashes, and swept into the Rhone by the wicked men, so that no trace of them might appear on the earth. And this they did, as if able to conquer God, and prevent their new birth; ‘that,’ as they said, ‘they may have no hope of a resurrection, through trust in which they bring to us this foreign and new religion . . . and are ready even to go to death with joy. Now let us see if they will rise again, and if their God is able to help them, and to deliver them out of our hands.’” - Eusebius of Caesarea, from *The Complete Works of Eusebius of Caesarea (5 Books): Cross-Linked to the Bible*, (Kindle Locations 2445-2449), Kindle Edition.

36 Tertullian, “To Scapula,” chapter 3, *The Complete Ante-Nicene & Nicene and Post-Nicene Church Fathers Collection*, (Kindle Locations 45856-45857), Catholic Way Publishing, 2014, Kindle Edition.

37 Greg Uttinger, “Dead Bodies and Living Saints,” *Leben*, Volume 11, Issue 3, 2015, p. 3.

38 Julian, “Letter to Arsacius,” cited by Bruce L. Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, 4th ed., revised by R. L. Hatchett, Thomas Nelson, 2013, p. 38, emphasis ours.

39 Genesis 1:26-27, 5:1-2; 9:6; 1 Corinthians 11:7; James 3:9.

40 1 Corinthians 3:16-17, 6:15-20; 2 Corinthians 6:14-18; Ephesians 2:19-22; 1 Peter 2:5.

when they are buried,<sup>41</sup> and that the dead will be raised when Jesus Christ returns from heaven.<sup>42</sup>

A survey of the fathers demonstrates their commitment to burial on biblical grounds. Justin Martyr (A.D. c. 100 – c. 165) held that since the human body alone was fashioned by the hand of the Creator, it was “most precious of all to the maker.”<sup>43</sup> Marcus Minucius Felix (died A.D. c. 260) wrote, “we adopt the ancient and better custom of burying in the earth. See, therefore, how for our consolation all nature suggests a future resurrection.”<sup>44</sup> Irenaeus (c. A.D. 130 – 202), the great 2nd-century apologist, also connected Christian burial with the hope of resurrection:

“[A]s a bare grain is sown, and, germinating by the command of God its Creator, rises again, clothed upon and glorious, but not before it has died and suffered decomposition, and become mingled with the earth; so [it is seen from this, that] we have not entertained a vain belief in the resurrection of the body. But although it [the body] is dissolved at the appointed time, because of the primeval disobedience, it is placed, as it were, in the crucible of the earth, to be recast again; not then as this corruptible [body], but pure, and no longer subject to decay: so that to each body its own soul shall be restored.”<sup>45</sup>

Lactantius (A.D. 240 – c. 320), another noted apologist of the Ante-Nicene era,<sup>46</sup> referred to burial of the poor and strangers as “the last and greatest office of piety.”<sup>47</sup> He said that God commanded burial, citing Genesis 49:29-31<sup>48</sup> and Mark 14:8-9<sup>49</sup> as evidence. To Lactantius, burial was the only appropriate way to care for the human body as “the image and workmanship of God . . . [restoring] it to the earth, from which it had its origin.”<sup>50</sup>

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41 Romans 6:4; 1 Corinthians 15:1-4; Colossians 2:12.

42 Job 19:25-27; Mark 12:25; John 6:39; Romans 6:5; 1 Corinthians 15:20-23; 1 Thessalonians 4:14-16.

43 Justin Martyr, *On the Resurrection*, Chapter 7, *The Complete Ante-Nicene & Nicene and Post-Nicene Church Fathers Collection*, (Kindle Locations 11355-11356).

44 Marcus Minucius Felix, *The Octavius of Minucius Felix*, chapter 34, *The Complete Ante-Nicene & Nicene and Post-Nicene Church Fathers Collection*, (Kindle Locations 71732-71733).

45 Irenaeus, *Fragments from the Lost Writings XII*, *The Complete Ante-Nicene & Nicene and Post-Nicene Church Fathers Collection*, (Kindle Locations 20399-20403).

46 Ante-Nicene, i.e., the period of church history after the apostles and before the Council of Nicea (A.D. 325) that produced the transformative *Nicene Creed*.

47 Lactantius, *The Divine Institutes*, book 6, chapter 12, in *The Complete Ante-Nicene & Nicene and Post-Nicene Church Fathers Collection*, (Kindle Location 132276).

48 Genesis 49:29-31: “Then he [Jacob] charged them and said to them: ‘I am to be gathered to my people; bury me with my fathers in the cave that is in the field of Ephron the Hittite, in the cave that is in the field of Machpelah, which is before Mamre in the land of Canaan, which Abraham bought with the field of Ephron the Hittite as a possession for a burial place. There they buried Abraham and Sarah his wife, there they buried Isaac and Rebekah his wife, and there I buried Leah.’”

49 Mark 14:8-9: “She has done what she could. She has come beforehand to anoint My body for burial. Assuredly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be told as a memorial to her.”

50 Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, p. 386.

John Chrysostom (A.D. c. 349 – 407) wrote,

“The laws of nature are common to all men, that he who departs this life should be hidden in the earth, and delivered over for burial, and be covered up in the bosom of the earth, the mother of all; and these laws . . . [never] changed, but all reverence them, and keep them, and thus are sacred and venerated by all.”<sup>51</sup>

Augustine (A.D. 354 – 430) echoed those who came before him when he wrote,

“Our Lord Himself, too . . . applauds, and commends our applause, the good work of the religious woman who poured precious ointment over His limbs, and did it against His burial. And the Gospel speaks with commendation of those who were careful to take down His body from the cross, and wrap it lovingly in costly cerements, and see to its burial. These instances certainly do not prove that corpses have any feeling; but they show that God’s providence extends even to the bodies of the dead, and that such pious offices are pleasing to Him, as cherishing faith in the Resurrection.”<sup>52</sup>

With the Edict of Thessalonica in A.D. 380, Nicene Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, and thereafter burial eventually became the only method of caring for the deceased. Wherever Christianity spread, so did the practice of burial, and cremation was discontinued.<sup>53</sup> “Indeed, [Francis] 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.’”<sup>54</sup>

### Care for the Dead in the Medieval Church

Burial of the dead continued to be regarded as a necessary part of the Christian experience throughout the Middle Ages, even though funeral practices began to be layered with superstition and extra-biblical traditions. The early Christians in Rome generally buried their dead in catacombs – massive underground burial sites – mostly because land was so expensive. The catacombs began to fall into disuse and were eventually abandoned after the Visigoths invaded Rome in A.D. 410 and ransacked them.

In the mid-8th century, churches began adding churchyards to their properties for the purpose of burying the dead. “This new practice spread rapidly, and within a century it became a matter of custom everywhere. The churches became the caretakers of the dead.”<sup>55</sup> With this

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51 John Chrysostom, “On the Holy Martyr, Babylas,” *The Complete Ante-Nicene & Nicene and Post-Nicene Church Fathers Collection*, (Kindle Locations 347728-347730).

52 Augustine, *The City of God*, (Coterie Classics), (Kindle Locations 494-498), Hendrickson Pub., Kindle Edition.

53 F. L. Cross and Elizabeth A. Livingstone, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 431.

54 Francis Schaeffer, from *How Shall We Then Live?*, cited by David W. Jones in “To Bury or Burn? Toward an Ethic of Cremation,” *JETS*, June 2010, p. 337.

55 Greg Uttinger, “Dead Bodies and Living Saints,” *Leben*, Volume 11, Issue 3, 2015, p. 13.

development came the practice of consecrating cemeteries as holy ground, a concept that had been central to pagan thought. As Bertram Puckle notes, “we find many instances where it was insisted that consecrated ground should be isolated by walls or other means, and that special care should be taken that the ground so enclosed should not become neglected.”<sup>56</sup>

As the practice of burial continued to predominate in Europe, cremation became increasingly rare, due on at least one occasion to the threat of violent reprisal. In A.D. 782, Charlemagne issued the *Capitulatio de partibus Saxoniae* (“Ordinances Concerning Saxony”), which among other things declared the death penalty against non-Christian Saxons for practicing cremation.<sup>57</sup>

Misguided zeal for consecrated burial grounds led to strange excesses during the later medieval period. In 1302, Pope Boniface VIII issued his infamous bull *Unam Sanctam*, which among other things excommunicated *ipso facto*<sup>58</sup> those who dried, cut up, or boiled off the flesh of nobles fallen in battle to simplify the transportation of their bodies home for burial.<sup>59</sup> Burial (i.e., in consecrated grounds) was also denied such bodies. On the other hand, in 1428, the Roman Catholic Church disinterred the bones of John Wycliffe (who had died in 1384) and burned them, throwing his ashes into the River Swift. Wycliffe had been condemned in 1415 by the Council of Constance as a “notorious and obstinate heretic who died in heresy,”<sup>60</sup> and the disinterment, burning, and scattering of his body – also ordered by the Council – was intended as the exclamation point on the anathemas pronounced against him. According to Roman Catholic thinking, the removal of Wycliffe’s body from consecrated grounds effectively cut him off from the communion of saints both in this life and the next.<sup>61</sup> Yet despite the various superstitions and excesses of the medieval church, burial was considered as the only proper way for Christians to care for their dead.

### Care for the Dead and the Protestant Reformation

The Protestant Reformation sparked controversy not only over the consecration of cemetery grounds, but also regarding other medieval funeral rituals like interceding for the dead, ringing church bells, and administering Communion at funeral services.<sup>62</sup> However, one ritual the

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56 Bertram Puckle, *Funeral Customs: Their Origin and Development*, First Edition, 1929, Bertram Puckle, New Edition 2017 Edited by Tarl Warwick, Kindle Edition, p. 119.

57 Alvin J. Schmidt, *Cremation, Embalment, or Neither?*, (Kindle Locations 156-162), Kindle Edition.

58 *Ipsa facto*, Latin phrase, literally, “by that very act.” In other words, the pope declared that those who treated human bodies in such a way were by that very act excommunicated from the Roman Church.

59 *Studies from the Biological Laboratory*, Johns Hopkins University, ed. Newell Martin, 1888, Vol 2, p. 68.

60 Council of Constance under Pope John XXIII, Session 8, May 4, 1415

(<http://www.legionofmarytidewater.com/faith/ECUM16.HTM#4>, retrieved 1/2/2018).

61 Pope Leo the Great had remarked almost 1,000 years before Wycliffe’s disinterment, *Quibus viventibus non communicavimus mortuis communicare non possumus* (“We cannot hold communion in death with those who in life were not in communion with us”). There is no evidence Leo’s quote served as direct inspiration for the abuse of Wycliffe’s remains, but it summarizes the thinking of medieval Christianity regarding the relationship between living and dead Christians.

62 See Jeanine Curvers, *Burial Rituals and the Reformations in Early Modern Europe: A Comparative Study*, Master

Reformers agreed to continue was the practice of burying the dead. “The Reformers, when they had time to attend to the matter, tried to sweep away anything connected with the funeral service that smacked of superstition or popery. But they continued to insist that burial was an obligation and Christian burial a privilege and act of faith.”<sup>63</sup>

John Calvin called burial a “sacred and inviolable custom . . . an earnest of new life.”<sup>64</sup> He added that the rite of burial arose, “to teach that new life was prepared for the bodies thus deposited.”<sup>65</sup> For Calvin, the widespread practice of burial even among non-Christian cultures is evidence of God’s work in the minds of men:

“How religiously [the practice of burial] has been observed in all ages, and among all people, is well known. Ceremonies have indeed been different, and men have endeavored to outdo each other in various superstitions; meanwhile, to bury the dead has been common to all. And this practice has not arisen either from foolish curiosity, or from the desire of fruitless consolation, or from superstition, but from the natural sense with which God has imbued the minds of men; a sense he has never suffered to perish, in order that men might be witnesses to themselves of a future life . . . yet it cannot be denied that religion carries along with it the care of burial. And certainly (as I have said) it has been divinely engraven on the minds of all people, from the beginning, that they should bury the dead; whence also they have ever regarded sepulchres as sacred.”<sup>66</sup>

The great catechisms and confessions of the Reformation also show high regard for the human body, and burial of the dead is understood as the normative practice. For example, Article 37 of the *Belgic Confession of Faith* (1561) declares that at Christ’s Second Coming,

“all the dead shall be raised out of the earth, and their souls joined and united with their proper bodies in which they formerly lived.”<sup>67</sup>

*Heidelberg Catechism* (1563) Question #1 acknowledges that even in death, our bodies belong to the Lord:

“Q: What is your only comfort in life and in death?

A: That I, with *body* and soul, both in life *and in death*, am not my own, but belong to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ. . . .”

Paul declares this same hope in Romans 14:7-9: “For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore,

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Thesis in Comparative History, Utrecht University, 2010.

63 Greg Uttinger, “Dead Bodies and Living Saints,” p. 14.

64 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, tr. Henry Beveridge [1845], Vol. III, chapter 25, p. 615.

65 John Calvin, *Institutes*, Vol. III, chapter 25, p. 622.

66 John Calvin, *Calvin’s Complete Commentaries* (Kindle Locations 11457-11465), E4 Group, 2013, Kindle Edition.

67 All citations from the *Belgic Confession of Faith* and *Heidelberg Catechism* are from *The Three Forms of Unity: The Subordinate Doctrinal Standards of the Reformed Church in the United States*, 2011 edition. All emphases are ours.

whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and rose and lived again, that He might be Lord of both the dead and the living."

Question #57 of the *Heidelberg* also states:

"Q: What comfort do you receive from the resurrection of the body?

A: That not only my soul after this life shall be immediately taken up to Christ its Head, but also that *this my body, raised by the power of Christ*, shall be reunited with my soul, and made like the glorious body of Christ."

The same body that we confess will be "raised by the power of Christ" will also be laid to rest in the earth, as explained in one of Question #57's accompanying Scripture proofs: "For this corruptible [body] must put on incorruption, and this mortal [body] must put on immortality. So when this corruptible [body] has put on incorruption, and this mortal [body] has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory'" (1 Corinthians 15:53–54).

The *Westminster Standards*<sup>68</sup> (1647) confess the ongoing importance of the human body after death in several places. Question 86 of the *Larger Catechism* says,

"The communion in glory with Christ which the members of the invisible church enjoy immediately after death, is, in that their souls are then made perfect in holiness, and received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of *their bodies, which even in death continue united to Christ, and rest in their graves as in their beds, till at the last day they be again united to their souls.*"

Question 87 of the *Larger Catechism* adds,

"We are to believe that at the last day there shall be a general resurrection of the dead, both of the just and unjust: when they that are then found alive shall in a moment be changed; *and the selfsame bodies of the dead which were laid in the grave, being then again united to their souls forever, shall be raised up by the power of Christ. The bodies of the just, by the Spirit of Christ, and by virtue of his resurrection as their head, shall be raised in power, spiritual, incorruptible, and made like to his glorious body.*"

Question 37 of the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* is also clear:

"Q. What benefits do believers receive from Christ at death?

A. The souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness, and do immediately pass into glory; and *their bodies, being still united to Christ, do rest in their graves, till the*

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68 The *Westminster Standards* are the collective documents produced by the Westminster Assembly, a gathering of Calvinistic ministers from England and Scotland (and some laymen) that met from 1643-1652 to reform the Anglican Church. The documents produced include the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, *Larger Catechism*, and *Shorter Catechism*, which became the confessions used by Presbyterian churches around the world. Whenever these documents are quoted, all emphases are ours.



*resurrection.”*

Burial of the dead is also set forth as the Christian practice in *The Westminster Directory for the Publick Worship of God (1645)*:

“When any Person departeth this Life, let the dead Body, *upon the Day of Burial*, be decently attended from the House to the Place appointed for *publick Burial*, and there *immediately interred*. . . . Howbeit, we judge it very convenient, that the Christian Friends, *which accompany the dead Body to the Place appointed for publick Burial*, do apply themselves to Meditations and Conferences suitable to the Occasion. . . .”<sup>69</sup>

Christian burial – explicitly defined and understood as bodily interment – is consistently taught in the great Reformed confessions. It is always and only set forth as the way to care for those who had fallen asleep in Jesus. The rite of Christian burial was not understood as a mere custom or tradition, but a practice tied directly to biblical theology, one that had significant Christological and eschatological importance.

Furthermore, Chapter 26 of the *Second Helvetic Confession* (1566) declares that the Scriptures “command” burial as the prescribed way for believers to care for the bodies of the dead:

“*THE BURIAL OF BODIES*. As the bodies of the faithful are the temples of the Holy Spirit which we truly believe will rise again at the Last Day, *Scriptures command that they [bodies] be honorably and without superstition committed to the earth*, and also that honorable mention be made of those saints who have fallen asleep in the Lord, and that all duties of familial piety be shown to those left behind, their widows and orphans. *We do not teach that any other care be taken for the dead.*”<sup>70</sup>

## Perspective of Modern Denominations

The Roman Catholic Church (RCC) has historically disapproved of cremation. *The Code of Canon Law* of 1917 expressly forbade it, making it a disciplinable offense,<sup>71</sup> though “an exception was given in times of mass death and the threat of disease.”<sup>72</sup> The RCC position changed

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69 “Concerning Burial of the Dead,” from *The Westminster Directory for the Publick Worship of God*, 1645 (<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=njp.32101065101907;view=1up;seq=42>, retrieved 02/05/2019), emphases ours.

70 “Of the Burial of the Faithful, and of the Care to Be Shown for the Dead; of Purgatory, and the Appearing of Spirits,” Chapter XXVI of the *2nd Helvetic Confession of Faith* (<https://www.ccel.org/creeds/helvetic.htm>, retrieved 02/05/2019), emphases ours.

71 “The bodies of the faithful must be buried; cremation is forbidden. . . . If any one has in any manner ordered his body to be cremated, it shall be unlawful to execute the desire; if this order has been attached to a contract, last will, or any other act, it is to be considered as not added. . . . An *interdict ab ingressu ecclesiae* [“prohibition from entering church”] . . . falls on those who of their own accord give ecclesiastical burial to persons not entitled thereto by law.” - Rev. Stanislaus Woywod, O.F.M., *The New Canon Law : A Commentary and Summary of the New Code of Canon Law*, 1918, pp. 245, 382.

72 William Saunders, *Does the Church Forbid Cremation?* (<https://www.ewtn.com/library/answers/cremate.htm>,

dramatically during the Second Vatican Council (1962 – 1965), for in 1963 Pope Paul VI revoked canon 1203 of the 1917 Canon Law and permitted cremations under certain conditions (e.g., the ashes had to be buried, not scattered). The restrictions against cremation were further softened in 1997 by the Vatican’s *Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments*, which confirmed a decision by the National Conference of [American] Catholic Bishops that a Mass may be celebrated in the presence of cremated remains,<sup>73</sup> provided the cremation was not motivated<sup>74</sup> by either contempt for the body or a denial of the resurrection.<sup>75</sup>

Among other major denominations, only the Eastern Orthodox reject cremation,<sup>76</sup> though some ambiguity exists.<sup>77</sup> A survey of mainline Protestant and Evangelical churches reveals a spectrum of positions, ranging from open acceptance to tolerance to silence. What is notable is that virtually none condemn or teach against the practice.<sup>78</sup> The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) *Book of Common Worship* allows for both burial and cremation services,<sup>79</sup> and The Evangelical Lutheran Church does likewise.<sup>80</sup> The more conservative Lutheran Church Missouri Synod “has no official position on cremation.”<sup>81</sup> The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod says, “Scripture

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retrieved 12/26/2017).

73 Cardinal Raymond L. Burke, D.D., J.C.D., *On the Christian Burial of the Dead*

(<https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=3448>, retrieved 12/26/2017).

74 Implicit in the recent RCC appeal to personal motivations is the underlying recognition that the act of cremation inherently contradicts their theology (and biblical teaching) related to the human body and the Resurrection.

75 In 2016, *Ad resurgendum cum Christo* (“To Rise with Christ”) was published, which summarizes current RCC policy on burial, cremation, and the disposition of cremated remains. See *Instruction Ad resurgendum cum Christo regarding the burial of the deceased and the conservation of the ashes in the case of cremation, 25.10.2016* (<https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2016/10/25/161025c.html>).

76 In 1932, the Council of Bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad issued a statement about cremation which is representative of Eastern Orthodox thought. Excerpts: “The cremation of the bodies of the dead is contradictory to that which was established in the Christian Church from the very beginning. . . . Additionally, the history of religion demonstrates that cremation was practiced primarily by religions of satanic, militantly atheistic character and in the last decades is being disseminated under the influence of those who are unchristian and opposed to the church. . . . On the basis of the above facts, the Sobor of Bishops forbids the children of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad to burn the bodies of their departed in crematoria. Priests are obligated to explain to their flock the unchristian character of such a burial. They must not perform a church funeral service over those bodies who are designated for cremation.” - “On the Question of Incineration of Bodies of the Departed In Crematoria: A Decision of the Sobor of Bishops of The Russian Orthodox Church Abroad” (<http://orthodoxinfo.com/death/cremation.aspx#sobor>, retrieved 12/23/2017).

77 For further information, see Alvin J. Schmidt’s discussion in *Cremation, Embalment, or Neither?*, (Kindle Locations 2493-2523), Kindle Edition.

78 The Church of God (Restoration), a group of 18 congregations (eight in the U.S.), reject cremation as “pagan.” Among unorthodox cults, the Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, and Christian Scientists all tolerate cremation.

79 *Book of Common Worship*, Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993, p. 941.

80 “Worship Formation & Liturgical Resources: Frequently Asked Questions”

([http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/How\\_do\\_Lutherans\\_regard\\_organ\\_donation\\_and\\_cremation.pdf?\\_ga=1.238925129.855182274.1447360059](http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/How_do_Lutherans_regard_organ_donation_and_cremation.pdf?_ga=1.238925129.855182274.1447360059), retrieved 11/12/2015).

81 “LCMS Life Issues FAQs” (<https://www.lcms.org/about/beliefs/faqs/lcms-views#cremation>, retrieved 11/12/2015).

is silent on the issue of cremation. It is a matter of personal preference.”<sup>82</sup> The Church of England changed its teaching in 1969 to allow for cremation.<sup>83</sup> Similarly, the Episcopal Church approved of cremation as a funeral practice in 1979.<sup>84</sup> The United Methodist Church does “not insist upon burial as the only appropriate means of committing our earthly remains to God, and so are generally open to cremation as a viable alternative.”<sup>85</sup> The Disciples of Christ and United Church of Christ allow for cremation, while the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and other large Baptist associations like the American Baptist Churches take no official position against it.<sup>86</sup> The Assemblies of God admit cremation is “not the ideal for the Christian,” but the denomination stops short of rejecting the practice.<sup>87</sup> The Reformed Church in America and Christian Reformed Church have no stated policy regarding cremation.

Among North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC) churches, our committee was unable to find any official position statements regarding the practice of cremation.<sup>88</sup> There was a Reformed church on the other side of the world that opposed cremation: the Bible-Presbyterian Church of Singapore, which in 1987 published a 482-word summary statement in *The Far Eastern Beacon*.<sup>89</sup>

## Biblical Evidence

We turn now to the Holy Scriptures, which have much to say about burying the dead and burning the dead. Many passages will be cited, and we encourage the readers to study for themselves what God’s written Word declares about these topics.

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82 “Is There Any Scriptural Basis Against Cremation?” (<https://wels.net/faq/cremation/>, retrieved 12/23/2017).

83 *The Canons of the Church of England*, Sixth Edition 2000 ([http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/1969-1969\\_AA\\_VV\\_The\\_Canons\\_Of\\_The\\_Church\\_Of\\_England\\_%5BConvocations\\_Of\\_Canterbury\\_And\\_York\\_1964\\_1969%5D,\\_EN.pdf](http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/1969-1969_AA_VV_The_Canons_Of_The_Church_Of_England_%5BConvocations_Of_Canterbury_And_York_1964_1969%5D,_EN.pdf), retrieved 11/12/2015).

84 “Cremation” (<https://www.episcopalchurch.org/library/glossary/cremation>, retrieved 11/12/2015).

85 “How are cremation and organ donation consistent with resurrection of the body?” (<http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/how-is-cremation-and-organ-donation-consistent>, retrieved 11/12/2015).

86 Several well-known individual Baptist pastors have voiced opposition to the practice of cremation, among them Alistair Begg (<https://www.truthforlife.org/resources/sermon/on-death-and-dying/>), John Piper (<https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/should-christians-cremate-their-loved-ones>), and J. Vernon McGee (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FUaEzUd60UU>).

87 “Death and Burial” (<https://ag.org/Beliefs/Topics-Index/Death-and-Burial>, retrieved 12/23/2017).

88 We did find a brief article on a Q&A forum on the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) website that takes a negative view of cremation. The article represents the judgment of an unnamed OPC minister, who clarifies that “the Orthodox Presbyterian Church has never taken an official position on the subject of cremation.” The article concludes that “cremation is a poor and unbiblical substitute for burial.” - “Question and Answer: Is cremation un-Christian or unbiblical?” ([http://www.opc.org/qa.html?question\\_id=347](http://www.opc.org/qa.html?question_id=347), retrieved 11/12/2015).

89 “The Bible-Presbyterian Church of Singapore Statement on Cremation” (<https://www.wholesomewords.org/resources/crematasp.html>, retrieved 12/13/2017). The Bible-Presbyterian Church of Singapore has since dissolved, though many of its congregations still exist as independent congregations. See Rev. Dr. Timothy Tow, *The Singapore B-P Church Story*, 1995 ([http://www.febc.edu.sg/assets/pdfs/febc\\_press/The%20Singapore%20B-P%20Church%20Story.pdf](http://www.febc.edu.sg/assets/pdfs/febc_press/The%20Singapore%20B-P%20Church%20Story.pdf)).

## Biblical Significance of Burying Bodies

### 1. Burial is frequently portrayed in the Old and New Testaments as the way the godly care for and honor their dead.

Abraham, our father in the faith, buried his wife, Sarah (Genesis 23:19), and the patriarch was subsequently buried alongside her by his sons (Genesis 25:8-10).

Isaac was buried by his sons at Abraham's burial site (Genesis 35:29, 49:31).

Jacob instructed his son, Joseph, not to leave his body in Egypt, but to bury him with his fathers (Genesis 47:29-31, 49:29-33).

Near the end of his life, Joseph commanded that his body also be taken from Egypt and buried in the Promised Land, which was done some 400 years later (Genesis 50:24-26, cf. Exodus 13:19; Joshua 24:32).

The Israelites buried Miriam (Numbers 20:1) and Aaron (Deuteronomy 10:6).

God buried Moses (Deuteronomy 34:5-6).<sup>90</sup>

Joshua was buried in the mountains of Ephraim (Joshua 24:30).

Many of the judges were buried (Judges 8:32, 10:2, 5, 12:7, 10, 12, 15, 16:31).

Samuel was buried in Ramah (1 Samuel 25:1).

David buried Abner (2 Samuel 3:31-32).

David was buried in Jerusalem (1 Kings 2:10).

Judah's kings were buried (2 Chronicles 9:31, 12:16, 14:1, 16:14, 21:1, 21:20, 22:9, etc.).

God promised Josiah that he would be buried in peace, not seeing the judgment God would send on Jerusalem (2 Chronicles 34:26-28).

John the Baptist was buried by his disciples (Matthew 14:12).

"Devout men" buried Stephen "and made great lamentation over him" (Acts 8:2).

Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus buried the Lord Jesus, wrapping His body in cloth with costly spices and laying it in a tomb where no one else had ever been laid, all of which was a sign of great honor and respect. Mary Magdalene and other women were also present at the burial and returned later to anoint Christ's body with spices (Matthew 27:59-60; Mark 15:46-16:1; Luke 23:52-56; John 19:40-42).

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<sup>90</sup> The significance of these verses will be discussed in "Theological Considerations," pp. 28-29.

## **2. Burial of the dead was practiced even when a body had been dismembered.**

King Saul was beheaded, and his body and those of his three sons were humiliated by the Philistines (1 Samuel 31:9-10). The men of Jabesh Gilead later buried Saul's bones (1 Samuel 31:13) and received David's blessing for showing "kindness" to Saul (2 Samuel 2:5).<sup>91</sup>

Ishbosheth was decapitated by his murderers (2 Samuel 4:5-7), and after the head was brought to David, it was subsequently buried in Abner's tomb (2 Samuel 4:12).

After John the Baptist was beheaded, his disciples buried his body (Mark 6:28-29).

## **3. Burial was practiced even for most of those who died under God's judgment.**

Deuteronomy 21:23, "His body shall not remain overnight on the tree, but you shall surely bury him that day, so that you do not defile the land which the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance; for he who is hanged is accursed of God."

Numbers 11:34, "So he called the name of that place Kibroth Hattaavah, because there they buried the people who had yielded to craving."

1 Kings 22:35, 37, "The battle increased that day; and [King Ahab] was propped up in his chariot, facing the Syrians, and died at evening. The blood ran out from the wound onto the floor of the chariot. . . . So the king died, and was brought to Samaria. And they buried the king in Samaria."

Ezekiel 39:11-12, "It will come to pass in that day that I will give Gog a burial place there in Israel, the valley of those who pass by east of the sea; and it will obstruct travelers, because there they will bury Gog and all his multitude. Therefore they will call it the Valley of Hamon Gog. For seven months the house of Israel will be burying them, in order to cleanse the land."

Acts 5:6, 9, "And the young men arose and wrapped [Ananias] up, carried him out, and buried him. . . . Then Peter said to her, 'How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out.'"

## **4. Non-burial of the dead is portrayed as a sign of dishonor and judgment.<sup>92</sup>**

Deuteronomy 28:25-26, "The Lord will cause you to be defeated before your enemies;

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91 That the men of Jabesh Gilead also burned the bodies of Saul and his sons will be considered in "Pastoral Answers to Common Questions," pp. 39-40.

92 We refer here to the practice of allowing dead bodies to be exposed to the elements, rather than covering up their shame with burial. In the Bible, this was understood as a sign of extraordinary judgment against those who were especially wicked.

you shall go out one way against them and flee seven ways before them; and you shall become troublesome to all the kingdoms of the earth. Your carcasses shall be food for all the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth, and no one shall frighten them away.”

2 Kings 9:35-37, “So they went to bury her, but they found no more of her than the skull and the feet and the palms of her hands. Therefore they came back and told him. And he said, ‘This is the word of the Lord, which He spoke by His servant Elijah the Tishbite, saying, “On the plot of ground at Jezreel dogs shall eat the flesh of Jezebel; and the corpse of Jezebel shall be as refuse on the surface of the field, in the plot at Jezreel, so that they shall not say, ‘Here lies Jezebel.’””

Psalm 79:1-4, “O God, the nations have come into Your inheritance. Your holy temple they have defiled. They have laid Jerusalem in heaps. The dead bodies of Your servants they have given as food for the birds of the heavens, the flesh of Your saints to the beasts of the earth. Their blood they have shed like water all around Jerusalem, and there was no one to bury them. We have become a reproach to our neighbors, a scorn and derision to those who are around us.”<sup>93</sup>

Ecclesiastes 6:3, “If a man begets a hundred children and lives many years, so that the days of his years are many, but his soul is not satisfied with goodness, or indeed he has no burial, I say that a stillborn child is better than he.”

Isaiah 14:20, “You will not be joined with them in burial, because you have destroyed your land and slain your people. The brood of evildoers shall never be named.”

Jeremiah 8:2, “They shall spread them before the sun and the moon and all the host of heaven, which they have loved and which they have served and after which they have walked, which they have sought and which they have worshiped. They shall not be gathered nor buried; they shall be like refuse on the face of the earth.”

Jeremiah 14:16, “And the people to whom they prophesy shall be cast out in the streets of Jerusalem because of the famine and the sword; they will have no one to bury them — them nor their wives, their sons nor their daughters — for I will pour their wickedness on them.”

Jeremiah 16:4, 6, “They [people of Judah] shall die gruesome deaths; they shall not be lamented nor shall they be buried, but they shall be like refuse on the face of the earth. They shall be consumed by the sword and by famine, and their corpses shall be meat for the birds of heaven and for the beasts of the earth. . . . Both the great and the small shall die in this land. They shall not be buried; neither shall men lament for them, cut themselves, nor make themselves bald for them.”

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93 That the bodies of some saints were not buried was not only a sign of dishonor and judgment, but also a cause of national mourning. Psalm 79 is a lament for the destruction of Jerusalem, and part of the grief of those who remained was that many had been killed and left unburied.

Jeremiah 25:33, “And at that day the slain of the Lord shall be from one end of the earth even to the other end of the earth. They shall not be lamented, or gathered, or buried; they shall become refuse on the ground.”

## Biblical Significance of Burning Bodies

### 1. The intentional burning<sup>94</sup> of human bodies is consistently revealed in the Old Testament as a sign of God’s contempt, wrath, and judgment.<sup>95</sup>

Exodus 32:9-10, “And the Lord said to Moses, ‘I have seen this people, and indeed it is a stiff-necked people! Now therefore, let Me alone, that My wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them. And I will make of you a great nation.’”

Leviticus 10:1-2, “Then Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it, put incense on it, and offered profane fire before the Lord, which He had not commanded them. So fire went out from the Lord and devoured them, and they died before the Lord.”

Leviticus 20:14, “If a man marries a woman and her mother, it is wickedness. They shall be burned with fire, both he and they, that there may be no wickedness among you.”

Leviticus 21:9, “The daughter of any priest, if she profanes herself by playing the harlot, she profanes her father. She shall be burned with fire.”

Numbers 16:35, “And a fire came out from the Lord and consumed the two hundred and fifty men who were offering incense.”

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94 By “intentional burning,” we refer to the practice of *burning bodies as a human or divine choice*. In citing the scriptural occurrences of this practice, it is not being suggested that the *unintentional* burning of bodies, as when people die in accidental fires or explosions, should be automatically perceived as signs of God’s judgment against the deceased. Similarly, it is not to imply that Christians who have perished in fires because of criminal acts or persecution (as when Reformers like Jan Huss and William Tyndale were burned at the stake) died under the judgment of God. Neither does this suggest that modern Christians who have cremated their loved ones have done so as *intentional* displays of contempt for the deceased. The point here is to demonstrate that *in the Bible*, whenever God or His people chose to burn a human body, *the deed itself* was intended as a judgment against the person whose body was burned. The one possible exception to this rule is the burning of King Saul’s body (1 Samuel 31:12), which occurred in very exceptional circumstances. See pp. 39-40 in “Pastoral Answers to Common Questions.”

95 Some biblical passages speak of bodies being burned, but not cremated in the modern sense (i.e., they were not reduced to bone fragments and ashes). For example, Nadab and Abihu were “*devoured*” by fire from God (Leviticus 10:2), but their *bodies* were then carried out of the camp (10:4-5). The purpose in citing such passages is not to equivocate on the meaning of “burning” and “cremation,” but to establish a more basic point, namely, that in the Bible, the deliberate burning of human bodies – whether the person was alive when burned, or whether the burning resulted in a charred corpse or undifferentiated ashes – is consistently portrayed as a judgment against the person. What is most important here is not the *degree* to which a human body was burned, but *the message conveyed* when that body was burned.

Joshua 7:15, 25, “Then it shall be that he who is taken with the accursed thing shall be burned with fire, he and all that he has, because he has transgressed the covenant of the Lord, and because he has done a disgraceful thing in Israel.” . . . And Joshua said, “Why have you troubled us? The Lord will trouble you this day.” So all Israel stoned him with stones; and they burned them with fire after they had stoned them with stones.”

1 Kings 13:2, “Then [the man of God] cried out against the altar by the word of the Lord, and said, ‘O altar, altar! Thus says the Lord: “Behold, a child, Josiah by name, shall be born to the house of David; and on you he shall sacrifice the priests of the high places who burn incense on you, and men’s bones shall be burned on you.””

2 Kings 1:9-10, “Then the king sent to [Elijah] a captain of fifty with his fifty men. So he went up to him; and there he was, sitting on the top of a hill. And he spoke to him: ‘Man of God, the king has said, “Come down!”’ So Elijah answered and said to the captain of fifty, ‘If I am a man of God, then let fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty men.’ And fire came down from heaven and consumed him and his fifty.”

2 Kings 23:16, 20, “As Josiah turned, he saw the tombs that were there on the mountain. And he sent and took the bones out of the tombs and burned them on the altar, and defiled it according to the word of the Lord which the man of God proclaimed, who proclaimed these words. . . . He executed all the priests of the high places who were there, on the altars, and burned men’s bones on them; and he returned to Jerusalem.”

Amos 2:1-2, “Thus says the LORD: ‘For three transgressions of Moab, and for four, I will not turn away its punishment, because he burned the bones of the king of Edom to lime. But I will send a fire upon Moab, and it shall devour the palaces of Kerioth. Moab shall die with tumult, with shouting and trumpet sound.”

Malachi 4:1, “For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, and all the proud, yes, all who do wickedly will be stubble. And the day which is coming shall burn them up,’ says the LORD of hosts.”

## **2. The intentional burning of human bodies is consistently revealed in the New Testament as a sign of God’s contempt, wrath, and judgment.**

Matthew 13:30, “Let both grow together until the harvest, and at the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, ‘First gather together the tares [symbolizing the sons of the devil] and bind them in bundles to burn them, but gather the wheat into my barn.”

Mark 9:43-44, “If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed, rather than having two hands, to go to hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched – where ‘Their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.”

Luke 3:17, “His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather the wheat into His barn; but the chaff [symbolizing



unbelievers] He will burn with unquenchable fire.”

John 15:6, “If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned.”

2 Thessalonians 1:7-9, “and to give you who are troubled rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power.”

Hebrews 6:8, “But if it bears thorns and briers, it is rejected and near to being cursed, whose end is to be burned.”

Revelation 20:12, 15, “And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works. . . . And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire.”

### Summarizing the Biblical Data

In the Bible, burial is consistently portrayed as the way the people of God cared for and honored their dead. On the other hand, both non-burial of the dead and the intentional burning of human bodies are consistently portrayed as signs of contempt, judgment, and curse.

This presents a significant challenge to those who disagree that the burial of bodies is *the* Christian practice, and who defend the practice of Christians burning their dead. Those who stake out this position stand against the unified practice and belief of God’s people, spanning at least 4000 years and multiple cultures. Lacking a radical new insight into Christian theology that credibly reinterprets all of the historical and biblical data running contrary to their position, we do not see how cremation can be defended as a legitimate Christian alternative to burial.<sup>96</sup>

On the other hand, here is how one defender of Christian burial summarizes the biblical testimony:

“There is no holy man or woman in the whole of Scripture, who chose to be cremated. . . . God’s way was exemplified when He personally buried Moses. The way of Christ is what he did himself – burial. If this was good enough for God, for Jesus, and for the Biblical Patriarchs and Matriarchs, it should be good enough for you and me.”<sup>97</sup>

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96 We will respond to some of the typical arguments by cremation supporters under “Pastoral Answers to Common Questions,” pp. 33-45.

97 Mike Effanga, *Strange Fire: The Biblical Case Against Cremation* (Kindle Locations 3366-3368), Worldwide Gospel Publishing, 2017, Kindle Edition.

## Theological Considerations from the Biblical Evidence

As we have shown, the historical and scriptural evidence points to the practice of Christians burying their dead, and not cremating. The weighty theological considerations that emerge from the historical and scriptural data compel us in the same direction, as will be demonstrated next.

### Man Is the Image of God

#### 1. Cremation does not show regard for man as the image of God, while burial does.

God made Adam, all of Adam, in His image (Genesis 1:26-27). It was not just the soul of Adam, but the whole man, body and soul, who was the image of God.<sup>98</sup> The invisible God was imaged in visible man.<sup>99</sup>

Some object to this notion because God has no physical body. But the fact that God has no body is exactly the point. The invisible God who has no body is witnessed in what has become visible. The first man Adam was created in the image and likeness of God, and though that image and likeness was in some sense lost when he rebelled against God, mankind retains the divine image. As Herman Bavinck writes,

“According to Scripture, the image of God is larger and more inclusive than the original righteousness. For, although this original righteousness has been lost through sin, man continues to carry the name of the image and offspring of God. . . . Even the body is not excluded from the image of God.”<sup>100</sup>

Jesus Christ, the incarnate, obedient, and physically resurrected Son, is the perfect image of God. As Paul writes, “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation” (Colossians 1:15). As Jesus said in John 14:9, “He who has seen Me has seen the Father.” Christians have been “predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son” (Romans 8:29), and our conformity to Christ’s image will not be complete until we also are clothed with physical resurrection glory (“these He also glorified,” Romans 8:30). “As we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly Man” (1 Corinthians 15:49). The restored image of God comprehends a glorified *body*.

As Zacharias Ursinus notes,

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98 Justin Martyr comments: “It is evident, therefore, that man made in the image of God was of flesh. Is it not, then, absurd to say, that the flesh made by God in His own image is contemptible, and worth nothing?” - Justin Martyr, *On the Resurrection*, chapter 7, *The Complete Ante-Nicene & Nicene and Post-Nicene Church Fathers Collection*, (Kindle Locations 11352-11353).

99 Louis Berkhof notes that “the image [of God] also includes the body of man and his dominion over the lower creation.” - *Systematic Theology* (Kindle Locations 4768-4769), E4 Group, Kindle Edition, orig. published 1949.

100 Herman Bavinck, “The Origin, Essence, and Purpose of Man,” (Kindle Locations 532-534, 589), Fig Books, 2012, Kindle Edition.

“Everlasting life is *the perfect restoration of the image of God*, with eternal joy and delight in God, heavenly glory, and the full fruition of all those good things which are necessary to a state of perfect happiness. In a word, it is the perfect conformity of man with God, consisting in the true and perfect knowledge and love of God, *and in the glory both of the soul and body of man.*”<sup>101</sup>

Does a dead body retain the image of God? Certainly. A physically dead body retains the image just as an unregenerate person retains the image of God (Genesis 9:6) despite being spiritually dead (Ephesians 2:1).<sup>102</sup> John Murray explains the biblical perspective regarding the Christian’s body after death:

“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 [identification of a person with his body] underlies the gravity of death and the return to dust. ‘To dust thou shalt return’, as also ‘Dust thou art.’”<sup>103</sup>

As noted earlier, *Westminster Larger Catechism* Question 86 confesses that the dead bodies of Christian believers continue to be united to Christ “*even in death.*” Accordingly, after the spirit departs at death, ought we not cherish and show respect to the human body, since it is God’s image – and especially so when caring for the dead bodies of Christian believers, who retain their identities even in death, and remain united to Jesus? Do we show love to our neighbor by burning his body? By no means. Following Paul’s instruction in 1 Corinthians 15:42-44, the Christian way to cherish and respect the image of God is by laying it in the earth, in hope of the resurrection.<sup>104</sup>

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101 Zacharias Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, The Synod of the Reformed Church in the U.S., 2004, Electronic Version 1.6, p. 546, emphases ours.

102 Norman L. Geisler and Douglas E. Potter helpfully observe, “According to Genesis 9:6, it is wrong to kill the body because it is linked to the image of God: ‘Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man.’ It 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).” - Norman L. Geisler and Douglas E. Potter, “From Ashes to Ashes: Is Burial the Only Christian Option?”, *Christian Research Journal*, Feature Article: DC765, volume 21, number 01, 1998.

103 John Murray, *The Nature of Man*, from *Collected Writings of John Murray*, 4 vols., ed. Iain Murray, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1976–82), pp. 14–22.

104 Job confessed this hope in Job 19:26-27a: “And after my skin is destroyed, this I know, that in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another.” The Hebrew for “my skin is destroyed” - עֲוֹרֵי נִקְפֵי-נְאֻת - is admittedly difficult, which the KJV colorfully translates, “my skin worms destroy

## Christians Are the Temple of the Holy Spirit

### 2. Cremation does not show regard for Christians as the temple of the Holy Spirit, while Christian burial does.

Clearly Christians would not want to burn down a temple that God has built. Yet this is what happens when Christians cremate their dead. Our bodies have been consecrated as His temple (1 Corinthians 3:16-17, 6:19-20; 2 Corinthians 6:16; Ephesians 2:21; 1 Peter 2:5), His dwelling place, and this does not change when we die. After our spirits depart to be with the Lord, our mortal bodies eventually dissolve into the earth, but God will raise up those same bodies incorruptible on the last day to be reunited with our spirits, so that the temple will be restored. 17<sup>th</sup> Century Reformed theologian Francis Turretin elaborates on this point:

“Since our bodies were made temples of the Holy Ghost (1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19) and have already begun to be glorified by the resurrection and ascension of Christ, it cannot be that they should perish and vanish into thin air, but they must forever remain the sanctuaries of the Holy Ghost. To this also they are consecrated by the use of the sacraments, when in baptism the symbol of burial and resurrection with Christ is given and in the Supper we are fed with heavenly food, which perishes not, but abides unto everlasting life: ‘Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day’ (Jn. 6:54).<sup>105</sup>

Turretin contended against the Socinian heresy, which denied that the bodies we now have will be resurrected and asserted that a different and entirely new body will be given us. The Socinians alleged that this new body would not be flesh and blood, but rather a spiritual body (according to their definition of “spiritual”). Although the Socinians may not have argued for cremation, their theology certainly meshes with the reasoning some cremation advocates employ, i.e., that what happens to our mortal bodies is ultimately unimportant.

Turretin argued five Scriptural proofs that the body to be resurrected will be the same body, though never again able to sin or experience pain, disease, decay, etc. His fifth proof is:

“The bodies of believers are by faith made members of Christ’s mystical body. They are fed with his body and blood unto eternal life. They are sanctified and made temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 3:16; 6:15). Therefore, the same bodies ought to be recalled to life. Otherwise it would follow that the members of Christ’s body partly perish and temples of the Holy Spirit are destroyed and never restored. Now is it consistent with reason that a building sacred to God, in which he condescended to dwell and which he

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this body.” Colorful as it is, the KJV captures the patriarch’s poetic expectation that he will be *buried*, in that “worms [will] destroy this body.” This understanding is evident in Job’s earlier lament in 17:14-16, “If I say to corruption, ‘You are my father,’ and to the worm, ‘You are my mother and my sister,’ Where then is my hope? As for my hope, who can see it? Will they go down to the gates of Sheol? Shall we have rest together in the dust?”  
105 Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, edited by James T. Dennison, Jr., translated by George Musgrave Giger, Vol. 1-3, Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992–1997, 20.1.16.

made a partaker of his own holiness, should be entirely demolished so as never to rise from its ruins? Again, the condition of believers in particular ought to be the same as that of the whole church universally. And yet the church cannot perish, nor can the gates of hell prevail against it; therefore neither against believers (which nevertheless would be the case if their bodies wholly perished and would never rise again)."<sup>106</sup>

Regardless of the intent of those who practice cremation, when the body of a Christian is destroyed in a crematorium, the temple of the Holy Spirit is being destroyed. Is it any wonder why the early Christians so vigorously and overwhelmingly rejected cremation? Burial instead of cremation reflected the belief of those early Christians that they had been redeemed by Christ "body and soul, both in life and in death," and that the proper way to cherish the believer who had fallen asleep was not to destroy his body, but to lay it in the earth as a testimony of hope in the restoration of the temple of God. As Paul boldly confessed in Romans 14:7-9: "For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and rose and lived again, that He might be Lord of both the dead and the living."

### Hope of Bodily Resurrection

#### **3. Cremation, by destroying the human body, runs contrary to the Christian hope of future bodily resurrection, while the burial of the Christian's body demonstrates this hope.**

Jesus Christ will return bodily from heaven on the last day to call forth all who are in their graves, and to raise them from the dead (John 5:28-29). In anticipation of this event, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:42-44, "The body is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption. It [the body] 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. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body." As the apostle looks forward to the day of resurrection, he describes the Christian practice of planting a mortal body in the earth, in hope that an immortal body will come out of the earth. As he says, "The body is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption." Destroying the body by burning is wholly inconsistent with the illustration of hope set forth in Christian burial. *Note that it is the depiction of hope, not hope itself, that is obscured in cremation.* For those who believe in Jesus, the assurance of resurrection and eternal life remains certain (cf. John 5:24, 11:25-26). Nevertheless, the demonstration of our hope is an important consideration when the believer decides how to treat his dead body, so that he may magnify Christ with his body in his death (cf. Genesis 50:25).

Paul teaches elsewhere that Christians who die are "asleep in Jesus" (1 Thessalonians 4:13-14), referring to the bodily rest of death, in hope of resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:18-20ff).<sup>107</sup> Just as

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<sup>106</sup> Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 20.2.7.

<sup>107</sup> In the Bible, to "sleep in Jesus" references the peaceful disposition of a Christian's body which has been laid to rest in the earth, with eyes closed. It cannot reference the soul, because the souls of the righteous are conscious and present with the Lord. Cf. Daniel 12:2; Matthew 27:52; John 11:11ff; Acts 7:60, 13:36;

those who sleep at night awake at daybreak, so also those who “are asleep” (i.e., who rest bodily in their graves, 1 Thessalonians 4:15) will wake bodily at Christ’s return (Job 19:25-27; Daniel 12:2; 1 Thessalonians 4:16; 1 Corinthians 15:52; John 5:28-29). Burying the bodies of the departed faithful is a picture of this hope; destroying their bodies by means of cremation destroys that picture.<sup>108</sup>

As the apostle declares, “For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: ‘Death is swallowed up in victory’” (1 Corinthians 15:53-54). Paul defines the hope of the Christian as the resurrection of our *present bodies* – newly dressed with incorruption and immortality. This is the same hope confessed in *Heidelberg Catechism* Question 57, which declares that “*this my body, raised by the power of Christ, shall be reunited with my soul, and made like the glorious body of Christ.*”

Article 37 of the *Belgic Confession* also confesses this truth:

“For all the dead shall be raised out of the earth, and their souls joined and united with their proper bodies in which they formerly lived. . . . And for a gracious reward, the Lord will cause [His faithful and elect people] to possess such a glory as never entered into the heart of man to conceive.”

Laying the bodies of the faithful to rest in the earth is a triumphant statement of our faith and hope in God, that the believer’s death (an apparent loss) will indeed be swallowed up in victory at the return of Christ from heaven. How may the destruction of these bodies be deemed in any way consistent with this faith and hope? What are we to do with the biblical illustrations about the believer’s peaceful sleep of death if we embrace a method of bodily disposal that obscures their meaning? How would it be possible to honor such Scriptures? The incompatibility of burning bodies and the Christian hope of bodily resurrection is yet another reason why bodily burial was embraced by the early Christians, and cremation was rejected.

## Ancient Practice of God’s People

### 4. Cremation opposes the ancient practice of God’s people, which is burial.

Abraham, our father in the faith, never owned any land in Canaan, except for a burial site he purchased at great expense.<sup>109</sup> The patriarch, his wife Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, Leah, and

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1 Corinthians 15:6, 18-20; 2 Peter 3:4; 2 Corinthians 5:8; Luke 9:30-31; 1 Samuel 28:18-19; Revelation 6:9-11.  
108 David Engelsma writes, “Cremation is not an option for Christians. The reason is not only the pagan origins of the burning of dead bodies, or that those who practice cremation lack the hope of the resurrection of the body and in some cases dread the possibility of the resurrection of the body and foolishly think to avoid resurrection (and judgment) by means of cremation. Nor is the reason only that burial accords with and expresses the Christian hope of the sowing of the body in the expectation of the harvest of the resurrection (I Cor. 15:35-44). But the reason for burial is also that in that body the believer has fallen asleep. It is fitting that the sleeping believer be put to bed in the earth. Burial is [a] distinctively Christian culture. It is the only honorable treatment of the body of the God-fearing man or woman that the Bible knows.” - David Engelsma, “The Intermediate State,” *The Standard Bearer*, Vol. 80; No. 9; February 1, 2004, p. 21.  
109 Cf. Genesis 23:12-18.

Jacob's twelve sons were all buried there.

Moses, Aaron, Miriam, David, Solomon, and all the kings of Israel/Judah were buried.

John the Baptist, Stephen the first martyr, and our Lord Jesus Christ were buried.

Church fathers like Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Lactantius, Chrysostom, and Augustine all firmly maintained that burial is the proper way for Christians to care for their dead. There is no historical evidence that any of the early Christians disputed this idea.

The Reformers, too, following this ancient legacy, supported burial as the only right way for Christians to care for their dead. They confessed that the "Scriptures command" the burial of Christians (*Second Helvetic Confession*, chapter 26).

There is powerful, indisputable evidence that the Church throughout all ages has been united on the great theological significance of the practice of burial, primarily because of faith that man is made in God's image, and that all men (the righteous and wicked together) will be raised bodily from the dead.

Cremation runs contrary to the Church's ancient commitment to burial, and to the biblical teaching that fuels it. It should be our desire as Christians to preserve the unity of the Spirit with the ancient church and honor our communion with the saints of old by embracing the funeral practice employed by those saints since the time of Abraham, especially since we have no biblical warrant to do otherwise.

## Burial of Moses

### 5. Cremation is contrary to the example set by God when He buried Moses.

Deuteronomy 34:5-6 says, "So Moses the servant of the Lord died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the Lord. And He [God] buried him in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth Peor; but no one knows his grave to this day."

What is the method of bodily disposal that God practiced? Burial. Cremation existed among the nations of that day. God certainly could have cremated Moses or removed him from the earth as he did with Enoch and Elijah. Either option would have ensured that neither the Israelites nor anyone else would ever find Moses or be able to worship his body or his tomb. Yet God chose burial – a demonstration of His love for the prophet – and made the location of the burial a secret.

God taught His people by His own example that we are to cherish the bodies of our dead, just as He cherished the body of Moses. When Christians bury the bodies of their dead, we imitate our loving, covenant-keeping God (Ephesians 5:1: "Therefore be imitators of God."). As Matthew Henry writes, "God takes care of the dead bodies of his servants; as their death is precious, so is

their dust, not a grain of it shall be lost, but the covenant with it shall be remembered.”<sup>110</sup> “Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints” (Psalm 116:15), and precious, too are the bodies of those saints!

## Burial of Jesus Christ

### 6. Cremation prevents Christians from the blessing of following their Lord in burial.

The grave is no longer a place of cursing for the Christian, but a place of rest and hope for bodily resurrection, for Jesus has gone before us. The bodily burial of Christians has therefore taken on an entirely new meaning, because of Christ’s redemptive work on their behalf. In the burial of His body, Jesus “sanctified the graves of the saints by His rest in the tomb” (*RCUS Directory of Worship*). Thus for Christians, following Jesus in death means that we are laid bodily to rest in the earth as our Master was, in sure hope that He will one day return to raise our bodies, just as He was raised (1 Corinthians 15:42-49). We who believe in Christ no longer have any reason to fear the grave, for in the rite of Christian burial, those who have “fallen asleep” in Him (1 Corinthians 15:20; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-15) are committed to the earth (put to bed, as it were) in sure confidence that the Lord will resurrect the bodies of those same saints on the day of His return. As Louis Berkhof notes,

“The burial of dead bodies was ordered by God to symbolize the humiliation of the sinner. . . . Consequently also the burial of Jesus forms a part of His humiliation. His burial, moreover, did not merely serve to prove that Jesus was really dead, but *also to remove the terrors of the grave for the redeemed and to sanctify the grave for them.*”<sup>111</sup>

Ursinus writes similarly that Christ was buried

“. . . that we might not be terrified in view of the grave, but might know that he has sanctified our graves by his own burial, so that they are no longer graves to us, but chambers and resting places in which we may quietly and peacefully repose until we are again raised to life.”<sup>112</sup>

This Gospel comfort is one of the reasons why the early Christians, living in a Roman culture where cremation was common, chose burial as the way to care for their dead, sometimes at

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110 Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Bible*, (<https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/matthew-henry/Deut.34.5-Deut.34.8>, retrieved 12/17/2017).

111 Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Kindle Locations 8021-8022 and 8024-8026), E4 Group, Kindle Edition, 1949, emphasis ours.

112 Zacharias Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, p. 396. The *RCUS Directory of Worship* also voices this hope in its graveside prayer: “Almighty God, You have destroyed death by the death of Your Son Jesus Christ; You have sanctified the graves of the saints by His rest in the tomb, and You have brought life and immortality to light by His glorious resurrection, so that all who die in Him abide in hope concerning their bodies, and in joy in their souls. We pray that You will receive our sincere thanks for the victory over death and the grave which He has obtained for us and for all who sleep in Him.” - From *The Directory of Worship for the Reformed Worship in the United States: Modern Language Version*, 2nd Ed., 1998, p. 66.



great personal sacrifice.

As the Scriptures teach, “Our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself” (Philippians 3:20-21; cf. Romans 8:23-25).

What is it that Jesus will transform? “Our lowly body.” As Christians, we therefore plant the bodies of the faithful in the earth as a testimony of our hope that our Lord will transform those lowly bodies and conform them to His glorious body at His return.<sup>113</sup> In observing this practice, we self-consciously follow Christ, whose mortal body was buried and whose glorified body was raised. We follow Jesus in death (burial of our bodies) as we do in life (suffering of our bodies), in hope that we will also be raised from the dead when He returns (glorification of our bodies).

As Ursinus concluded, Christ was buried:

“. . . that we may be confirmed in the hope of the resurrection, as we, after his example, shall also be buried, and shall be raised again by his power; knowing that Christ, our head, has opened up the way for us from the grave to glory.”<sup>114</sup>

## Cremation Is a Practice of Non-Christian Religions

### **7. Cremation has historically been the practice of religions that reject belief in bodily resurrection, the hope of the Christian faith which is pictured in burial.**

When Christians cremate their dead, they do not imitate the practice of the godly, nor of God, nor of Christ. When Christians cremate their dead, they imitate the religious practice of those who disbelieve the Bible and deny the resurrection of all men.<sup>115</sup>

Some Eastern religions, such as Hinduism and Jainism, mandate cremation.<sup>116</sup> Others, like Buddhism and Sikhism, usually cremate but allow for burial. The practice of burning corpses is common to these religions because in the Eastern way of thinking, the physical body is little more than a temporary vessel to carry the soul. It has no lasting significance, and therefore Eastern religions see no reason to cherish or preserve the body after death.

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113 Cf. John 5:28-29; 1 Corinthians 15:42-55; 1 Thessalonians 4:14-18.

114 Zacharias Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, p. 396, emphases ours.

115 It is noteworthy that Henry Steel Olcott, the Civil War colonel who in May 1876 publicly agitated for cremation in New York City when the practice was unknown in America, was an occultist who had co-founded the Theosophical Society with Madame H.P. Blavatsky the year before. Olcott’s “aim was to seek out and promote occult and esoteric teachings – including the rite of cremation.” - Mitch Horowitz, “How the Occult Brought Cremation to America,” *Leben*, Volume 11, 2015, Issue 3, p. 5. Besides introducing cremation to America and serving as the first president of the Theosophical Society, Olcott also wrote the *Buddhist Catechism* (1881), which was widely distributed and translated into many languages.

116 Hindus allow some exceptions to this rule, e.g., Hindu monks and young children are typically buried.

Indeed, according to Hinduism, the goal of the individual soul as it struggles through life after life, reincarnating again and again to a hopefully higher and higher level, is to eventually attain *Moksha* (Buddhism: *Nirvana*), which is liberation from the cycle of rebirths.<sup>117</sup> Cremation is regarded as a way to erase the past and remove that which holds a person down (i.e., the material body), so that he can move onward and upward to better things.

Obviously, few if any professing Christians practice cremation for such reasons. Yet it ought to give us pause that the underlying Eastern religious perspective – “it ultimately does not matter what happens to the body after death” – echoes in the arguments of Christians who defend cremation as an acceptable alternative to burial. The Bible warns us not to be conformed to this world (Romans 12:1-2), nor to copy rituals for the dead that accompany unbelieving religions (Deuteronomy 14:1-2). The consequences that befell Israel when they followed Canaanite practices were disastrous, because they were violating their obligation to be a holy people to the Lord (Leviticus 20:26). Additionally, we must beware of being swayed by “philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ” (Colossians 2:8).

Some say, “I do not want to cremate for religious or philosophical reasons, but only to save money since burial is so costly (or for some other reason or personal choice).” Is this a legitimate way for a Christian to reason? Whichever way we treat the human body will *necessarily* be a religious concern, since man is the image of God, Christians are the temple of the Holy Spirit, and our bodies are not our own. The way a Christian uses his money is also a religious concern, for all of our resources, including our money, are to be used to the glory of God. Simply because a Christian might save money by cremating his departed loved one does not make that activity God-glorifying. We must be wary of the influence of materialism, which tends to consider physical possessions as more important than spiritual concerns. We must also be mindful of the admonition of our Lord that we cannot serve God *and* money (Matthew 6:24).

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117 Armutur V. Srinivasan, *Hinduism for Dummies*, (Indianapolis, IN: Wiley Publishing, 2011), pp. 268-340.

## Pastoral Application of the Biblical Evidence

### Pastoral Summary of the Historic Biblical and Christian Position<sup>118</sup>

In light of the preceding historical, biblical, and theological considerations, how may we summarize the Christian position? The one holy catholic and apostolic Church<sup>119</sup> has historically practiced burial and rejected cremation for the following reasons:

1. Each human being is an individual composed of body and soul, made in the image of God. Body and soul are united to reflect a singular likeness of our Creator and Lord.<sup>120</sup>
2. Death, the separation of body and soul, is God's judgment against man as a consequence of sin. Death was not natural to God's original design. It is an intruder and enemy that destroys the planned unity each human being is called to reflect.<sup>121</sup>
3. When a believer in Christ dies, his soul immediately goes to be with the Lord in heaven to enjoy comfort and happiness. However, the salvation His Lord secured at the cross is not experienced in the fullest sense until his body is raised and reunited with his soul when the Lord returns from heaven.<sup>122</sup>
4. Therefore, the body that dies is very important. It must be resurrected in order to complete the image and likeness of God, in conformity with Jesus Christ (i.e., becoming like Him).<sup>123</sup>
5. Hence, the Bible teaches believers to regard death as bodily sleep. The dead sleep in Christ (though their spirits are alive in heaven), and they will awake and rise again.<sup>124</sup>
6. When Christians commit a corruptible body to the earth as a seed, we do so in faith and hope that it will spring up as a glorified body at Christ's return.<sup>125</sup>
7. Acknowledging the value and dignity of the deceased Christian's body, the image of God and temple of the Holy Spirit, we reverently lay it in the earth, in hope of rising again. In the act of burial, we self-consciously follow our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom we are united in life and in death, who was laid in a tomb and rose again.<sup>126</sup>

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118 Adapted from a similar summary in "What to Think about Cremation?"

([http://www.traditioninaction.org/Questions/F011\\_Cremation.html](http://www.traditioninaction.org/Questions/F011_Cremation.html), retrieved 12/30/2017).

119 "One holy catholic and apostolic Church" echoes the *Nicene Creed*. The word "catholic" means "universal."

120 Genesis 1:26-27, 5:1-2; 9:6; 1 Corinthians 11:7; James 3:9.

121 Genesis 2:17; Psalm 104:29; Romans 5:15-19; 1 Corinthians 15:25-26; 2 Peter 1:13-14.

122 Luke 16:22; Romans 5:1; 1 Corinthians 15:19-23, 51-55; 2 Corinthians 5:1-8; 1 Thessalonians 4:14-16, 5:23; 1 Peter 1:3-5; Revelation 6:9-11.

123 Job 19:25-27; John 14:1-3; Romans 8:23, 29-30, 14:7-9; 1 Corinthians 15:42-54; 1 John 3:2.

124 Daniel 12:2; Matthew 27:52; Acts 7:60, 13:36; 1 Corinthians 15:6, 18-20; 2 Peter 3:4; 2 Corinthians 5:8; Luke 9:30-31; 1 Samuel 28:18-19.

125 John 11:24; 1 Corinthians 15:42-44; Galatians 6:8.

126 1 Corinthians 3:16-17, 6:19; 2 Corinthians 6:16; Ephesians 2:19-22; 1 Peter 2:5; Romans 6:4-5; Colossians 2:12.

## Pastoral Answers to Common Questions

**Isn't this like debating whether we should tithe mint and cumin? Are we wise to take a hard stance on such a relatively small matter? Should we not be more concerned about weightier issues like justice and loving our neighbor?**

The question of cremation versus burial touches directly on weighty issues such as (1) What is man? (the image of God); (2) What is a Christian? (the bodily temple of the Holy Spirit); and (3) What happens at Christ's coming? (the resurrection of "this my body"). These are hardly insignificant matters. As for loving our neighbor, such love includes cherishing his body after death, not destroying it.<sup>127</sup> The call for Christians to bury and not burn their dead is not a *pharisaical* concern, but a *Gospel* concern, as the Church has acknowledged throughout the ages.

**Is not cremation just as honoring to a human body as burial?**

A common perception among modern Christians is to regard cremation as a dignified and respectful way to care for the bodies of their loved ones. We believe much of this (mis)perception is due to people not witnessing the actual act of cremation, nor thinking deeply enough about what happens. In fact, cremation is a violent and destructive act committed against the image of God, and furthermore, in the case of a Christian, against the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:16-17<sup>128</sup>). As Loraine Boettner remarks,

"We cannot bring ourselves deliberately to take the body of a dear one . . . and give it to the flames for violent destruction, even though we know that the spirit has departed. If we attach a sentimental value to a Bible or an article of clothing or other keepsake, how much more should we treat reverently the body that has been so much more intimately associated with the person. No matter with what refinements cremation is carried out, it still carries with it the idea of violence and destruction."<sup>129</sup>

Norman L. Geisler and Douglas E. Potter elaborate on this idea,

"The answer to the question of the importance of this debate depends on what importance one places on a proper practice of what one believes, especially appropriate symbols. *In fact, only if one rejects important Christian truths does cremation make sense.* This is precisely the position of liberal Christians, and it is a reason why cremation finds wider acceptance in their congregations. Yet Christianity is not left intact after such

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127 This is not to suggest that Christians who have cremated fellow believers did so out of intentional hate for their departed. The point is that we ought not send mixed messages. The act of destroying a body is the *opposite* of cherishing a body.

128 "Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are."

129 Loraine Boettner, *Immortality*, (Kindle Locations 723-727) Kindle Edition republished by Papamoa Press, 2017, originally published 1956.

doctrines as the bodily resurrection are discarded or ignored (Rom. 10:9; 1 Cor. 15:16, 17). To reject symbolism is to say the thing it symbolizes is not important. *An attack on the symbol of burial and the anticipated resurrection of the body is an attack on important Christian doctrines.*"<sup>130</sup>

Gary Maassen, a member of our study committee, has served for years as a funeral home administrator. He comments on the typical modern cremation process: "The 1600 – 2000 degree process leaves brittle bone pieces that are then further crushed in a large steel tray, and then put in a processor taking them down to very small pieces like sand. The reference in Amos 2:1, 'because he burned the bones of the king of Edom to lime', is an accurate description. To witness the process is very troubling. Very few people would choose cremation if they had to witness it taking place."

If it is unthinkable to dispose of the bodies of our loved ones by other violent means, e.g., by chopping them with an ax or leaving them in a field for wild animals to eat, it should be equally unthinkable to submit those bodies to the violence of cremation.

The heart of God's Law is love – to love the Lord our God with all our hearts, souls, and minds, and to love our neighbors as ourselves.<sup>131</sup> To cherish one's own body is also portrayed positively in Ephesians 5:28-30.<sup>132</sup> Is it not therefore our Christian duty to love our neighbors as ourselves by cherishing the bodies of our departed loved ones even in death, especially since those bodies are in the image of the God whom we also love? Is this not the example set before us in the Gospels, where the disciples treated the body of Jesus with great care and reverence?<sup>133</sup> Which practice best shows love to our Christian neighbor? To cherish that body that belongs to Jesus (even in death<sup>134</sup>) and plant it carefully in the earth in hope of the future resurrection harvest? Or to submit that body to violent dissolution?

### **Is cremation a matter of personal conscience?**

No. The choice to burn a human body as a method of disposal is no more a matter of personal conscience than a choice to destroy the body some other way. Cremation is a violent mistreatment of God's image bearers. It is incompatible with the believer's resurrection hope and union with Christ in death, pictured in burial. It has been historically associated with non-Christian religions and is by nature an unchristian practice. This is why the Church rejected cremation for thousands of years. Christians believe that even in death, their bodies belong to

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130 Geisler and Potter, "From Ashes to Ashes," emphasizes ours.

131 Matthew 22:37–40; Luke 10:27; Deuteronomy 6:5; Galatians 5:14; 1 Corinthians 13:1-8.

132 Ephesians 5:28-30: "So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church. For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones." Notice how the believer's fleshly union with their Savior is referenced ("members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones").

133 Cf. Matthew 27:55-61; Mark 15:40-16:2; Luke 23:49-24:3; John 19:38-20:1.

134 "For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's" (Romans 14:7-8).

the Lord. His Word provides clear direction that the God-honoring way to care for the dead is by committing them unharmed to the earth. Thus burial is the practice of Christian piety. A conscience informed by the Word of God teaches that Christians should bury their dead.

### **Is it okay to cremate a body as long as I do not intend any disrespect?**

No. We do not use such reasoning when addressing other issues. For example, we would not allow someone to use images in worship, just because that person claimed to have a godly intent to praise God with images. Leviticus chapters four and five are clear that in God's sight, unintentional violations of His will are still violations. *Regardless of intent, the act of cremation is disrespectful.* It mistreats God's image, contradicts the biblical practice of God's people, and violates biblical ethics.

### **If a believer in Christ has been cremated, will he still be resurrected?**

Certainly. For those who believe in Jesus, the assurance of resurrection and eternal life remains certain (cf. John 5:24, 11:25-26). By His death, burial, and resurrection, the Son of God has accomplished complete redemption for His people, and an important part of the comfort we receive is that we no longer fear death, for Christ triumphed over it. We are assured that God will in no way be hindered from resurrecting believers in Christ who have died at the stake, been lost at sea, died in explosions, been cremated, etc.<sup>135</sup> As Paul triumphantly concludes, "I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39).

### **Do we need a specific command from Scripture to forbid cremation?**

Many object that the Bible nowhere specifically forbids the practice of cremation, so neither should Christians. Does the *Second Helvetic Confession* go too far when it says the "Scriptures command" burial? Must we have a positive command from Scripture (e.g., "Thou shalt bury and not cremate") in order to justify such a position?

The Christian faith does not necessarily require explicit biblical prooftexts to establish the validity of its every doctrine or practice. A sound and well-established principle of biblical interpretation is that God also expresses His will for His people through deductions made from Scripture by "good and necessary consequence" (*Westminster Confession of Faith* 1.6). This principle has to do with those areas of Christian belief and practice that are not *explicitly* taught or commanded in Scripture, but which are nevertheless *implicitly* set forth in the Bible. When

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<sup>135</sup> We heartily agree with Augustine, who thought it nonsensical "to fear that the omnipotence of the Creator cannot, for the resuscitation and reanimation of our bodies, recall all the portions [of the body] which have been consumed by beasts or fire, or have been dissolved into dust or ashes, or have decomposed into water, or evaporated into the air." - Augustine, *The City of God*, Book XXII, (Coterie Classics), 2016, Hendrickson Pub., Kindle Edition, p. 760.

the Scriptures teach a doctrine by good and necessary consequence, e.g., the Trinity,<sup>136</sup> that doctrine is no less authoritative than Scripture's explicit teachings, and is therefore no less important and necessary for Christians to believe.<sup>137</sup>

For example, when the Sadducees contended with Jesus about the resurrection (Matthew 22:23-33), our Lord used the methodology of "good and necessary consequence" to prove His case. The Sadducees were trying to trap Jesus in a silly argument, and the Lord wisely avoided their question. Instead, He took the opportunity to teach them (who denied the resurrection) the truth about life after death. Jesus referenced Exodus 3 and the burning bush – a passage that has nothing directly to do with the coming resurrection. He said, "But concerning the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was spoken to you by God, saying, 'I AM the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? God is not the God of the dead, but of the living." That Abraham and the other patriarchs are still alive and will be ultimately raised from the dead *is evidenced by God's name*, for that name implicitly teaches that the patriarchs are alive and in His presence even now, and will therefore be resurrected in the future. This is how Jesus used good and necessary consequence to silence ignorant speculation and establish the doctrine of the resurrection.<sup>138</sup>

As the apostle Paul says in Romans 15:4, "For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope." He also writes in 1 Corinthians 10:11, "Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come." According to the inspired words of the apostle, we are instructed how to live (and also how *not* to live) based on the biblical examples of the Old Testament people of God. Those examples from

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136 "In defending a most central tenet of Christian dogma, many of the early church fathers employed such logical deductions in their defence of the Trinity. No one can read the history of the doctrine of God's triunity without seeing what a major role good and necessary consequences played in coming to these dogmatic conclusions." - Stephen Unthank, "The Westminster Confession of Faith: Good & Necessary Consequence," (<http://www.placefortruth.org/blog/westminster-confession-faith-good-necessary-consequence>, retrieved 1/11/2018).

137 "One of the leading forms which . . . aversion to divine truth exhibits, is a dislike to precise and definite statements upon the great subjects brought before us in the sacred Scriptures. This dislike to precision and definiteness in doctrinal statements, sometimes assumes the form of reverence for the Bible, as if it arose from an absolute deference to the authority of the divine word, and an unwillingness to mix up the reasonings and deductions of men with the direct declarations of God. We believe that it arises, much more frequently and to a much greater extent, from a dislike to the controlling influence of Scripture, from a desire to escape, as far as possible without denying its authority, from the trammels of its regulating power as an infallible rule of faith and duty. It is abundantly evident, from the statements of Scripture as well as from the experience of every age and country, that men, in their natural condition, unrenewed by divine grace, have a strong aversion to right views of the divine character and of the way of salvation, or to the great system of doctrines revealed to us in the Bible; and are anxious to escape from any apparent obligation to believe them." - William Cunningham, *The Reformers & the Theology of the Reformation*, T. and T. Clark, 1862, p. 525.

138 See also Matthew 22:41-46, where Jesus uses good and necessary consequence from Psalm 110:1 to prove that the Son of David (human Messiah) is also the "Lord" (true God).

history, says the apostle, are intended for “our learning,” “as examples,” and “for our admonition.” Paul’s inspired teachings powerfully strengthen the “good and necessary consequence” argument for burial as *the* practice of God’s people, given the plethora of Old and New Testament examples of burial, especially the burials of Moses and Jesus.

If someone objects by insisting that a positive command of Scripture is required to prove the case, then what other practices should the Church reexamine? Perhaps we should no longer require Christians to worship on Sunday, since that practice is nowhere expressly commanded in Scripture. Certainly the Bible does teach Christians to worship on the Lord’s Day (Sunday), but the point here is that the practice of gathering for worship on the first day of the week is derived by good and necessary consequence from the Scriptures, not by a single verse that says, “Christians shall now worship on Sunday instead of Saturday.” We should not demand that the Bible must speak in a certain way or else we will not listen.

In fact, the Reformed creeds and confessions are loaded with statements derived by good and necessary consequence.<sup>139</sup> Essential beliefs like the Trinity and biblical Christology are founded upon it. The *Chalcedonian Definition*<sup>140</sup> confesses that Christ the Son of God is “acknowledged in two natures unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably; the difference of the natures being in no way removed because of the union, but rather the properties of each nature being preserved, etc.” We would never have gained such an exquisitely refined and vitally important creedal statement about our Savior apart from the Church using good and necessary consequence to summarize the comprehensive teaching of the entire Word of God. All of our creeds were derived by the right use of this hermeneutic. In a true sense, biblical and Reformed theology lives and dies on the principle of good and necessary consequence. Given this fact, it is truly puzzling that many today seem reluctant to affirm burial as the only proper way for Christians to care for their dead (as the Church did without controversy in every age until the late 19th century) and insist instead that such a notion may be affirmed only if it is shown to be explicitly taught in Scriptural prooftexts.

That said, we believe the following statements by the apostle Paul constitute sufficient proof in themselves that the Bible compels us to bury our dead: “So also is the resurrection of the dead. The body is sown [i.e., buried] in corruption, it is raised [resurrected] in incorruption. 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. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body” (1 Corinthians 15:42-44).

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139 The same also applies to statements of faith confessed in evangelical churches.

140 The *Chalcedonian Definition* was adopted by the Fourth Ecumenical Council at Chalcedon in A.D. 451. In response to two significant heresies being promoted in that day (Nestorianism and Eutychianism), the definition clarified for the church the orthodox biblical teaching that Jesus Christ is “truly God and truly man . . . in one Person and one Subsistence, not parted or divided into two persons.” This biblical understanding is echoed in *Heidelberg Catechism* Q18, which confesses that our Lord Jesus Christ is “in one person . . . true God and also a true and righteous man.”



Christians do not bury their dead out of empty tradition or superstition. We do not reject cremation out of fear that God is not able to raise people whose bodies have been burned. We practice burial because the Bible teaches that man is created in the image of God, that Christians have been consecrated as temples of the Holy Spirit, that Christ is coming to raise the dead, and that the ultimate salvation of a believer involves the reuniting of body and soul. Burial is presented in Scripture as the godly way to care for the dead, for it portrays our hope of future resurrection. Imitating the example of our Lord and His people, we plant our dead in the earth like seeds, with confidence that Jesus will one day come and call forth those same bodies from their resting places to resurrection glory.

### **Are there any examples of cremation in the Bible?**

Besides the examples cited earlier (e.g., Leviticus 20:14, 21:9; Joshua 7:15, 25; 2 Kings 23:16, 20), there is an Old Testament reference to burning a human body that approximates the predominant modern method of cremation. It is found in Amos 2, where the Lord pronounces condemnation on the king of Moab for his “transgressions . . . because he burned the bones of the king of Edom to lime” (Amos 2:1). For this act, the Lord said He would “send fire upon Moab” and “consume the citadels of Kerioth.” “And Moab will die amid tumult” (2:2).

The specifics of this prophecy are difficult to pinpoint because the historical events Amos references are not mentioned elsewhere in the Bible. Yet as Rodney J. Decker notes,

“It is particularly significant . . . that God’s judgment is not pronounced on any military action, tomb raiding, political maneuvering, or other forms of oppression. The text is quite clear that God’s judgment ‘in kind’ (i.e., by fire, v. 2) is because of their cremation of the king of Edom. God’s words are, ‘I will not turn back [my wrath from Moab] because he burned . . . the bones . . .’ (Amos 2:1). Moab’s action was considered not only sinful, but of such a magnitude as to prompt God’s drastic judgment.”<sup>141</sup>

Amos 2:1-2 is obviously problematic for cremation defenders to account for, especially since God refers to the destruction of a human body as “transgression” (Amos 2:1).<sup>142</sup>

There is another passage in Amos to consider:

“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

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141 Rodney J. Decker, “Is It Better to Bury or to Burn? Pt. 1,” p. 34.

142 Matthew Henry comments, “It is barbarous to abuse human bodies, for we ourselves also are in the body; it is senseless to abuse dead bodies, nay, it is impious, for we believe and look for their resurrection.” - *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Bible*, emphases ours. Likewise John Calvin: “(T)he Prophet, I doubt not, charges the Moabites with barbarous cruelty. To dig up the bodies of enemies, and to burn their bones, this is an inhuman deed, and wholly barbarous.” - John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets*, Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999), p. 172.

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'" (Amos 6:9-10).

Verse ten refers to "one who will burn the bodies [and pick up] the bodies to take them out of the house." Is the inspired text suggesting that cremation was a normal and accepted method of disposing of the dead in Amos' time? Some important observations need to be made that mitigate against this conclusion:

(A) Regarding the phrase, "one who will burn the bodies," the words "the bodies" are not in the Hebrew text. They are added to English translations for readability, but a more literal translation would read, "the one who will burn picks up the bodies. . . ." One possible interpretation is "the one who will burn incense or spices [i.e., as a memorial for the dead] picks up the bodies, etc."

(B) The words "one who will burn" are alternately translated "undertaker" (New American Standard Bible) and "the one who anoints him for burial" (English Standard Version).

(C) Assuming the phrase "one who will burn the bodies" does indeed refer to a person who came to haul away dead bodies to be burned, the context must be considered. In Amos 6, the prophet predicts catastrophic judgment to come against Israel because of her sins. Amos 6:8, 11: "The Lord God of hosts says: 'I abhor the pride of Jacob . . . therefore I will deliver up the city and all that is in it.' . . . the Lord gives a command: He will break the great house into bits, and the little house into pieces." The prophet declares that *ten men in one house will all die* (v. 9). This contemplation of widespread death is horrifying, and the burning of bodies (v. 10) would be understood as an intensification of the horror.

(D) Even if Amos is suggesting that cremation of the dead was the typical practice of his time, the prophet lived in an age of national apostasy and divine judgment. If the Israelites were typically burning instead of burying their dead, it would be symptomatic of the moral and ethical chaos of that day.

Clearly Amos 6 is describing *exceptional events*, i.e., mass casualties resulting from a bloody invasion as a consequence of God's judgment, which possibly resulted in bodies needing to be burned out of health concerns or because there were not enough men left to dig graves. To derive from these exceptional events that the burning of human bodies was typical among godly Israelites, and that cremation is therefore an acceptable practice for Christians today, is uncalled for, especially since (1) it is at least possible that the bodies Amos mentions in verse 6:10 were not burned at all; (2) the people of Amos' day had wandered far from the Lord and are not to be regarded as examples of biblical piety; and (3) there is no corroborating historical record that cremation was ever typical among godly Israelites.

### **What about King Saul and his sons? Were not their bodies cremated with David's approval?**

Some have made more of the burning of King Saul's body than is warranted, to the point of finding in the event an implicit endorsement of cremation as a viable method for Christians to

dispose of their dead. Yet as with Amos 6:10, to derive such a conclusion from the biblical text is unjustified.

After King Saul's death, his body and the bodies of his three sons were mutilated by the Philistines. Saul's head was cut off, and all four bodies were fastened to a wall in Beth Shan for public ridicule. Brave men from the city of Jabesh Gilead who were loyal to Saul came and removed the four bodies from the wall. These men then apparently burned the bodies, certainly an unusual act, and we are not told why they did this.

Some commentators suggest that the bodies were burned to hide or remove the mutilations inflicted upon them by the Philistines.<sup>143</sup> Others say that the bodies were burned because they had been exposed to the open air for several days and were in a state of putrefaction. Still others suggest that the bodies of Saul and his sons were not burned at all, but rather that 1 Samuel 31:12 evokes a ceremony common to ancient times whereby perfumed spices (and not bodies) were burned as a special way of honoring the dead, especially those who had been kings and princes.<sup>144</sup>

Regardless, it is worth noting that the men of Jabesh Gilead did not cremate Saul and his sons, at least not in the modern sense, for their "bones" (not ashes) were then buried. Also, the Bible never says that David approved of the *burning* of Saul's body, only that he was pleased that the body had been rescued from the Philistines and *buried* (2 Samuel 2:4-7).<sup>145</sup> "David refers to their action [the retrieval and burial of the bodies] as 'this kindness and faithfulness' – a reminder that the proper burial of the dead had always been regarded in Judaism as an act of true piety."<sup>146</sup>

To derive authorization for Christians to destroy the bodies of their dead based on the exceptional events recorded in 1 Samuel 31:11-13 and 2 Samuel 2:4-7 is unfounded, especially given that in Scripture burning human bodies is consistently portrayed as a sign of divine judgment.<sup>147</sup> We know with certainty that Saul's death was a divine judgment against him (1 Samuel 28:18-19; 1 Chronicles 10:13-14). Given this context, the burning of Saul and his sons is perhaps best understood as a peculiar and extreme circumstance that marked the end of his unfaithful reign, and a final sign of God's displeasure with Saul; i.e., that the king had been judged and found wanting, and that his sons would not take the throne of Israel after he was gone (1 Samuel 28:16-19).

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143 Cf. Eugene Merrill, "1 Samuel," in *Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 2 vols., ed. J. Walvoord and R. Zuck (Wheaton: Victor, 1985), p. 455.

144 2 Chronicles 16:14 speaks of the burial of King Asa and the "very great burning for him" that apparently preceded it; i.e., a burning of "spices and various ingredients prepared in a mixture of ointments" to honor his godly legacy. Compare with Jeremiah 34:5, where the prophet tells King Zedekiah that "they shall burn incense for you and lament for you," as was done in "the ceremonies of your fathers, the former kings who were before you."

145 David himself later disinterred the bones and reburied them in Saul's own inheritance (2 Samuel 21:12-14). 1 Chronicles 10:11,12 does not even record the burning of the bodies, just the fact of burial.

146 Donald Howard, *Burial or Cremation: Does It Matter?*, The Banner of Truth Trust, 2001, p. 9.

147 Cf. Leviticus 10:2; 20:14; 21:9; Numbers 11:1-3; 16:35; Joshua 7:24-26; 2 Kings 1:9-12; Psalm 21:9; 2 Thessalonians 1:8; Matthew 3:10, 12; 10:28; 25:41; John 15:6; Hebrews 12:29; Revelation 14:9-11; 20:9, 15.

**Do not verses like Psalm 66:10<sup>148</sup>, Isaiah 48:10,<sup>149</sup> 1 Peter 1:7<sup>150</sup> present fire in a positive light and not as a symbol of God’s judgment?**

One of the arguments presented in this paper against cremation is not that *all* scriptural portrayals of burning are signs of God’s judgment, but that *the physical burning of human bodies* is consistently portrayed in such a light. Nevertheless, the answer to the question posed here is “No,” because in the three verses mentioned, the fire does in fact picture God’s judgment.

When “fire” is referenced as God’s purifying agent in the lives of believers, it is used to bring refinement in their lives, destroying what is impure. Such fire is not intended as a sign of His wrath against believers, but against their sin, and it works a good result in their lives, which is their sanctification. Thus *the fire is symbolic of God’s judgment*.

As Calvin remarks in his commentary on 1 Peter 1:7,

“Gold is, indeed, tried twice by fire; first when it is separated from its dross; and then, when a judgment is to be formed of its purity. Both modes of trial may very suitably be applied to faith; for when there is much of the dregs of unbelief remaining in us, and when by various afflictions we are refined as it were in God’s furnace, the dross of our faith is removed, so that it becomes pure and clean before God; and, at the same time, a trial of it is made, as to whether it be true or fictitious. . . . for as silver is without honor or value before it be refined, so [the apostle Peter] intimates that our faith is not to be honored and crowned by God until it be duly proved.”<sup>151</sup>

Thus the “furnace of affliction” (Isaiah 48:10) appointed by God is intended to target and remove the dross – that which is sinful and imperfect – from the lives of His people, as when silver is refined (Psalm 66:10). Regardless, the “furnace” and “fire” (1 Peter 1:7) do not reference literal fire directed against their physical bodies.

**Our bodies will turn to dust either way. “Ashes to ashes, and dust to dust.” Since our bodies will not be intact when Jesus returns, what difference does it make how one disposes of those bodies? Burning simply speeds up the natural process of oxidation. What is wrong with that?**

“Ashes to ashes, dust to dust” first appeared in the funeral rites of the 1549 edition of the Church of England’s *Book of Common Prayer*. (The original full expression in Old English was, “Earth to earth, asshes to asshes, dust to dust.”)<sup>152</sup> This saying has since found its way into other Christian burial rites and has become so well known that Christians now cite the expression in defense of the practice of cremation.

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148 Psalm 66:10: “For You, O God, have tested us. You have refined us as silver is refined.”

149 Isaiah 48:10: “Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver. I have tested you in the furnace of affliction.”

150 1 Peter 1:7: “that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ.”

151 John Calvin, *Calvin’s Complete Commentaries* (Kindle Locations 563842-563847), Kindle Edition.

152 *The Book of Common Prayer – 1549*, “The Ordre for the Buriall of the Dead”

([http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp/1549/Burial\\_1549.htm](http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp/1549/Burial_1549.htm), retrieved 12-20-2017).

The statement, “ashes to ashes,” is not found in the Scriptures, nor is the concept representative of biblical theology. Some cite Genesis 2:7 (“And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground”) and Genesis 3:19 (“For dust you are, and to dust you shall return”) as biblical justification for the saying. But this is eisegesis – reading something into the biblical text that is not there – since “ashes” are not mentioned or referenced anywhere in either context. Adam was formed from the dust of the earth, not from the remains of a fire.

Regarding the objection that cremation “simply speeds up the natural process of oxidation,” this may be true on a scientific level, but stating a scientific fact is no authorization to act upon that fact. If we feel justified subjecting a human body to burning simply to “speed up the natural process,” then would it be wrong to blow up that same body with dynamite? Would not that speed up the decay process, too? Why does one form of violence seem “okay” to our ears, but another sound so heinous? Is it because we have become conditioned to think that the burning of human flesh is somehow *not* violent?<sup>153</sup>

**Jesus was actually entombed. If we really want to follow Jesus in this regard, we should all be placed in crypts, or better yet, in caves.**

This objection misses the point. The issue is not *where* Jesus was buried, but *that* He was buried, with body intact, following the example of generations of godly believers that preceded Him.

When believers in Jesus follow their Lord in death by being laid to rest in the earth, the *location* of the burial – whether in a cave, a mausoleum, at sea, or six feet under – is a thing indifferent. The picture of hope presented in Scripture is one of *bodily interment*; i.e., that a corruptible body is committed to the earth, in hope that an incorruptible body will one day come forth when Jesus returns (cf. John 5:28, 29; 1 Corinthians 15:42-44). *Where* or precisely *how* the body is interred is of no consequence.

**Some Christians do not have the financial means to buy a cemetery plot and pay for a funeral. Cremation is all they can afford, and they ought not be made to feel guilty about it.**

This is perhaps the most common objection against burial – its high cost. We understand finances are a concern for many Christians. It is impossible to answer every nuance of this concern in this study paper. That said, in America there are low-cost ways to bury the dead that

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153 “Simply because a human practice speeds up what God ordained does not mean it is right. God ordained that all fallen beings would die (Gen. 2:16–17; cf. Rom. 5:12), but this does not justify our killing them to speed up the process. God ordained pain (Gen. 3:16), but this does not mean we should inflict it on others. There is an important difference between what God can do and what we should do. Many babies naturally abort and most adults die naturally, but this does not justify our killing them (Exod. 20:13). . . . Again, there is significance in symbolism, and the symbolism of destroying a body that God created and that God will resurrect is the wrong message to send. Likewise, the simple fact that given time the body will turn to dust does not mean that we should turn it to dust immediately after death. God created the body, and He desires that we respect it even in death.” - Geisler and Potter, “Ashes to Ashes.”

make the option of burial financially competitive with cremation.

For example, there are companies that make caskets that look very much like the “real thing,” and yet are made of compressed cardboard. The cost of such caskets is approximately \$400-\$700, which typically includes the padding, hardware, and other essentials one would expect in a casket costing five to ten times as much. This is one example of how the costs of burial can be significantly reduced when money is a factor.<sup>154</sup>

Christians should also be wary of spending exorbitant sums out of a sense of guilt, or to “prove” how much they loved the deceased. Even while doing the right thing, it is possible to fall prey to the sin of materialism. Christian burial services can honor the legacy of the deceased and yet be modestly priced.

We note, too, that there were many slaves and other poor people in the early church, and yet they managed to find ways to practice burial, often through the help of wealthier brethren who put verses like 1 Timothy 6:17-18 into practice: “Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty. . . . Let them do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share.” Our congregations would do well to set up and provide diaconal assistance for families who may struggle to afford a modest burial service and may be tempted to consider cremation instead.

It is true that even lower-cost burials may not be as inexpensive as cremation. Yet if we are convinced from the Bible that burial is the practice Christians are to follow, and we understand that we are often called to make sacrifices in the observance of our faith (Romans 12:1-2), with God’s help we can find a way to make it work, just as Abraham did when he bought a cemetery at great cost to bury his beloved wife Sarah.

### **What about embalming?**

This paper endorses Christian burial, but in doing so, we are not necessarily endorsing modern

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154 Gary Maassen, a member of our study committee and a funeral home administrator, on the perceived higher cost of burial vs cremation: “This is true, but, not to the extent many people believe. The cremation process using a reputable firm is somewhere around \$1,000. When the permits, death certificate, removal of the body from the place of death, making necessary arrangements with the family, final viewing of the body, urn, etc. are considered, the cost is probably from \$2,500 to \$3,000. A burial with the same limited services is really the difference between the \$1,000 cremation process and the cost of the casket and cemetery property. In an urban area the cost of a casket, grave space, the opening and closing of the space, and a burial vault would be around \$4,000. So about a \$3,000 difference. In rural areas this difference can be much less depending on the cost of the cemetery property and if the rural cemetery requires a burial vault. The other costs will remain the same. Almost all funeral homes will work with a family truly without resources. They know how to assist a family with applying for financial assistance from the county, etc. for the reimbursement of their costs. Some counties have required cremation if they are going to provide for this assistance. I can report that recently some counties are reversing this practice as they hadn’t given proper thought on what it meant to some families to be forced into cremation.”

embalming practices. The question of whether to embalm or not embalm is beyond the scope of our investigation.<sup>155</sup> We will only point out that embalming the dead is not required by federal law or by any U.S. state, though funeral homes may require it if the body is to be made available for public viewing.<sup>156</sup> Especially for those with budget concerns, not embalming may be a way to reduce funeral costs.

**Some Christians live in countries where burial is discouraged or even forbidden by civil law. What should they do?**

This is a good question, one that requires a careful and more fully developed answer than can be provided here, since a variety of factors could contribute to this scenario. In some cases, Christians may need to engage in civil disobedience, following the example of the Hebrew midwives or the apostles (Exodus 1:17; Acts 5:29). In other cases, Christians may need to use the legal means available to appeal to civil rulers to change laws or provide exceptions so that Christians may be allowed to bury, following the example of Daniel and his friends regarding the foods they were required to eat (Daniel 1). In some cases, a Christian may truly be oppressed and unable to express his faith as he would like, yet he does as much as he can, knowing that God will hold the civil rulers responsible for their oppression and restriction upon the godly to live out their faith.

Such trials can be a great challenge to our faith; therefore, it is important for the Church to express compassion and sympathy to those who suffer unjustly. The Lord sustains us by His powerful grace through such suffering. Praise be to God “who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God” (2 Corinthians 1:4). Additionally, we must remember that our hope is not found in the way our bodies are treated after death, but rather that in death, we belong, body and soul, to our faithful Savior Jesus Christ. For those who believe in Jesus, the assurance of resurrection and eternal life remains certain, no matter what happens to their bodies (cf. John 5:24, 11:25-26).

Additionally, for Christians who live in countries with limited space or opportunity for traditional burials, e.g., Japan and Singapore, burial at sea may be an honorable option. It allows the mortal body to be returned unharmed to the earth from whence it came, and the Bible comforts us that God has not forgotten those believers who have been buried in such a way, whether on purpose or by accident. (Revelation 20:13: “The sea gave up the dead who were in it.”)<sup>157</sup>

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155 See Alvin J. Schmidt’s thoughtful discussion on this topic in *Cremation, Embalment, or Neither?* (Kindle Locations 3347-3603), Kindle Edition.

156 See “Everything You Want To Know About Embalming . . . And Even the Things You Don’t” ([https://www.funerals360.com/blog/burial/the\\_truth\\_about\\_embalming/](https://www.funerals360.com/blog/burial/the_truth_about_embalming/)); and “Reasons People Avoid Funeral Planning: Embalming” (<http://agoodgoodbye.com/funeral-home-how-to/reasons-people-avoid-funeral-planning-embalming>).

157 For those who live in the U.S., current laws regulating bodily burials at sea are restrictive and can make the

### **What can pastors do to persuade church members to choose burial and make their wishes known to their family before they pass away?**

First, preach and teach the biblical significance of Christian burial to the entire congregation in order to raise awareness of the church's historic teaching and practice, and help them understand the many compelling reasons to bury rather than cremate. Second, urge church members to state their requests for burial in writing and give copies to family members and their local funeral home. Third, encourage church members to have conversations with their families about their desire for a Christian funeral and burial service.

### **There may be occasions when a church member dies, and the family members who make the funeral arrangements are not members of the church, or perhaps of any Christian church. These family members may consider cremation a legitimate and enticing option. What can be done to convince them to choose burial?**

If the pastor is asked by the family to sanction a cremation service, he should pass along to the family any previous conversations he may have had with the deceased church member in which that member expressed a clear desire to be buried, and explain the practice of the church, which does not allow for services involving cremains. Second, if the family is not dissuaded from cremating the church member, the pastor should still offer comfort and compassion and share the gospel with the family. Lastly, the pastor should make clear that he will not officiate any service in which cremains are present, nor participate in any "non-committal service" in which ashes are spread, stories are told, or the family is encouraged to believe unbiblical explanations about the presence of the loved one's spirit.

### **Constitutional Issues**

There is no mention of cremation in the *RCUS Constitution*, and no evidence that the authors of the *Constitution* contemplated the possibility of cremation being practiced in RCUS churches. We will therefore explore the question, "Is it *permissible* to conduct any service, public or private, with cremains present, and still be in harmony with the intent and wording of the *RCUS Constitution*, and consistent with the guidance prescribed in the *RCUS Directory of Worship*?"

Article 196 of the *Constitution* says, "Members of the Church, having died in the faith and hope of the Gospel, shall receive a Christian burial; the burial service may be conducted according to the order prescribed by the Church." While this sentence does not *explicitly* forbid cremation, it *explicitly* requires "Christian burial," a term which *implicitly* requires bodily interment, for "Christian burial" has been historically defined in that way. Thus, a straightforward reading of the *Constitution* does not conceive of the burial of cremains as a rite of the church, since no body can be present.

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process difficult and expensive. See "Answers to Questions about Direct Full Body Sea Burial" (<http://www.seaservices.com/directburial.htm>).



To illustrate, if a house is burned to the ground, one would not point to the ashes and say, “This is a house,” for the house is no more. In the same way, after a human body has been consumed in the fires of a crematory, would it be right to say, “This is a body”? No, for just like the house, the body has been destroyed, and thus the *picture* of hope conveyed by the act of Christian burial is also destroyed. Of course, the Christian’s *actual* hope of bodily resurrection can never be lost, no matter what is done to his body after death. All believers are safe in Jesus, and comforted by His sure promises (cf. John 6:39-40, 10:28-29). Note, too, that when we say “Christian burial is not possible for a person who has been cremated,” we are *not* suggesting in any sense that a believer in Jesus who may have been cremated was not a Christian. God alone is the Judge of souls, and the only judgment we are making here is that the rite of Christian burial is not possible if there is no body to be buried.

The graveside prayer in the *RCUS Directory of Worship* states that Christ has “sanctified the graves of the saints by His rest in the tomb.” Additionally, the words of committal state, “We therefore commit his *body* to the ground.” Again, once a cremation has taken place, it would be incorrect to pronounce these words since no body is present.<sup>158</sup> The prayer also says that “all who die in Him abide in hope concerning *their bodies*.” This statement reminds us that the burial of a Christian’s body communicates a message of hope to the world – a message that the bodies of all who believe in Jesus will one day emerge bodily from their graves to inherit eternal life, when the Lord returns from heaven (John 5:28-29). By contrast, the message told by cremation is radically different, and is incompatible with Christian hope and the language of the *Directory of Worship*.

For all these reasons, conducting any service, public or private, with cremains present, is not in harmony with the intent and wording of the *RCUS Constitution*, and is not consistent with the guidance prescribed in the *RCUS Directory of Worship*.

## Pastoral Responsibility to the Church

**Even though cremation has been historically regarded as incompatible with the Christian faith, it has nevertheless become common in American churches. How has this happened?**

There is widespread ignorance in the pews. Many Christians literally do not know – or at least are not sure anymore – that the Bible leads the faithful to bury and not cremate their dead. They seem unaware that believers in God have from the beginning cherished and not burned the bodies of their loved ones. They do not seem to realize that the Bible and the historic church have regarded the practice of burial as an expression of Christian piety, and that the way Christians treat the bodies

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<sup>158</sup>There is another angle to this question that should be considered. Those who work in the funeral business tell us that a person’s cremated remains can easily be mixed with remains of the previous occupant(s) of the crematory. Gary Maassen, a member of our study committee and long-time funeral administrator, says, “The incidental comingling of cremated remains is real. A reputable firm will allow the chamber to cool and then as thoroughly as possible sweep and even vacuum (using a steel vacuum) all the bone fragments from the chamber. Even the best practices can’t guarantee the possibility of some incidental comingling in the chamber, the tray, or the processor. I need not expound on what will happen if these best practices aren’t observed.” This alarming truth means that if an RCUS minister “commits [the cremated person’s ashes] to the ground,” he can never be sure he is not also committing remnants of another person (or persons) to the ground!

of the dead is thus an ethical concern, and not primarily a matter of convenience, personal choice, or financial expedience.

There is widespread confusion in the pulpits. Our committee corresponded with dozens of Reformed pastors, both inside and outside the RCUS, about the subject of cremation, including professors from Reformed and confessional seminaries. The most common evaluation we received was along these lines: *“Burial is preferred, but I do not see where the Bible explicitly condemns cremation, so I will not burden Christians with the idea that cremation is wrong, especially since burial is so expensive by comparison.”* This type of confused thinking has led to the confusion and ignorance in the pews, and is a significant reason why so many Christians are being left to do whatever seems right in their own eyes.

### **How may we summarize the doctrinal remedy for the current ignorance and confusion?**

- (1) In the Bible, bodily burial is not the *preferred* method of caring for the dead, it is the *only* proper method of caring for the dead, under normal circumstances.
- (2) Cremating human bodies is implicitly condemned by the Bible, for it is a violent mistreatment of God’s image bearers, and in the case of a Christian, a violent mistreatment of the temple of the Holy Spirit that remains united to Jesus Christ even in death.
- (3) Cremation obscures the *message* of resurrection hope for the Christian, as summarized in 1 Corinthians 15:42-44 and confessed in *Heidelberg Catechism* Q1 and Q57 and the *Belgic Confession of Faith* Article 37.
- (4) Cremation prevents believers from following the example of God, who buried Moses (Deuteronomy 34:5-6), and from following Jesus Christ in death, whose burial is integral to the Gospel message and comfort (1 Corinthians 15:1-4; Romans 6:3-4; *Apostles’ Creed*, *Heidelberg Catechism* Questions 41-44).
- (5) Cremation subjects the human body to burning, an act consistently portrayed in the Bible as a judgment against sin, making it an entirely inappropriate way to treat the bodies of those who have been redeemed from their sins.
- (6) Christian burial is an act of biblical piety, while the practice of cremation has been historically associated with religions that deny the resurrection of the dead.

As pastors and elders, we are obligated to challenge the consciences of men with these truths from the Word of God, especially since the question of burial versus cremation touches on a central concern of the Gospel – the hope of bodily redemption.

## How should pastors address this issue?

First, let us fulfill our primary duty, which is to authoritatively preach and teach the Word of God (2 Timothy 4:1-2; Matthew 28:19-20). Let us bring the sword of the Spirit to bear on the subject of caring for the dead, lest the Christian mind and Christian piety be lost. Let us rally behind the banner of *Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*, “The Church reformed and always reforming!”<sup>159</sup> Let us call the Church to hold fast to the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 1:3). It begins with us, the officers of Christ’s Church, to call God’s people to recommit to the care of our dead that God has clearly revealed and exemplified in His Word.

Pastoral instruction must be clear and patient. In little more than a generation, cremation has gone from a rare occurrence to the majority practice in America, one that has inevitably impacted many Christian families. The present problem is due in no small part to American clergymen being unsure of what the Bible teaches on the subject, unaware of ancient standards of Christian piety and orthopraxy, and opposed to making dogmatic assertions (e.g., “cremation is an unchristian practice”) because of the general aversion to dogma currently plaguing the Church. Is it any wonder that the people in the pews have no idea what to think? It will take time to undo and correct the damage that has been done. The need of the hour is for pastors to sound a clear note on this subject, and to call the Church back to “the ancient path, where the good way is, and walk in it” (Jeremiah 6:16).

Pastoral balance and compassion is key. As Paul said, we must “speak the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15). We must firmly and gently affirm that cremation is an unbiblical practice. We must also comfort those Christians who are grieved about mistakenly cremating their dead relatives, even as we affirm that cremation is a practice all Christian churches ought to reject. We should also be ready to admit that most cremations sanctioned by churches have been performed in ignorance of what the Bible teaches on the subject, and not as intentional acts of disobedience toward God or attacks against the deceased. Yet we must also call to people’s minds that being ignorant of God’s will does not excuse them if they violate that will.

Pastors must be courageous and unwavering. Some people will not want to hear what we are teaching concerning cremation. Let us not be silent in the face of such opposition. Let us be strong, and not tremble or be dismayed (Joshua 1:9). Let us be more concerned with offending God, rather than man. And let us not accommodate an unbiblical practice because we may otherwise be regarded as extreme. Some will oppose what we say because burial is often more expensive than cremation (see the previous discussion on pp. 42-43 on how to reduce costs). Let us be wary of contradicting the clear direction of Scripture and laying aside a 4000+ year legacy of God’s people burying their dead simply because it may force some church members to make monetary sacrifices. Do we not teach our people to serve God and not money?

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<sup>159</sup>See Carl Trueman, “What Semper Reformanda Is and Isn’t” (<https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/what-semper-reformanda-and-isnt>).

## Final Thoughts

As the practice of cremation continues to grow in the Christian Church, the modern tendency is to put the onus on the supporters of burial to prove their case: “Show me from the Bible why we cannot cremate our dead.” But this is upside down thinking. Since cremation as a funeral practice never existed among Christians before the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the burden of proof is on those who support cremation as a valid method of caring for the dead. Cremation proponents have no positive biblical support for their practice. Are we now to believe that the supporters of *burial* are required to prove that *cremation* is invalid? Quite the contrary. It is the supporters of cremation who are on the spot to show that their practice is consistent with the Christian faith. In our judgment, they have not proven their case.

Our case may be summed up this way: by His death and resurrection, Jesus Christ has purchased us body and soul (cf. 1 Corinthians 3:23, 6:20; 1 Peter 1:18-19). Our bodies are therefore not our own to do with as we please, but are to be treated in a way that glorifies God. This is true both in life and in death, for our bodies do not cease to belong to God even when we fall asleep in Jesus (Romans 14:7-8). This is consistent with what we confess in *Heidelberg Catechism* Q1, that “I, with body and soul, *both in life and in death*, am not my own, but belong to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.” Since mutilating and burning our bodies is not a God-honoring thing for us to do in life, then we ought not do such things after death.

What is the Christian message that cremation communicates? We cannot find one.

What is the Christian message that burial communicates? When we bury our dead, we imitate God (Ephesians 5:1), who buried Moses (Deuteronomy 34:5-6). When we are buried, we follow the example of Christ, who was also buried (John 19:40-42). When we are buried, we magnify Christ in our bodies at our death (Philippians 1:20). Every Christian has the opportunity to witness this gospel comfort to his family and friends when his body is buried, communicating hope in the bodily resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:42-49) at the return of the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18).

This issue is not going away. According to what we read, cremation is likely to become increasingly prevalent in American society. If church leaders do not sound a clear trumpet note, how will Christians know which direction to go? If we begin to accommodate cremation, where will it end? Bitter lessons from recent history tell us where it will end, with the Church abandoning the historic, biblical practice and embracing a “tolerant spirit” that celebrates ungodly behavior. We must call God’s people to recommit to the teaching of the Bible and the testimony and practice of the apostolic and universal Church, before we, too, succumb to this departure from Scripture.

The RCUS has been unafraid in the past to stake out positions that go against modern trends. Let us not be afraid to do so now. Bodily burial, and not cremation, is the practice of Christian orthodoxy. As officers of Christ’s Church, let us recommit to this practice, and do what God has so clearly shown us to do, without prevarication, vacillation, or compromise.

We urge the Synod of the RCUS to dogmatically reaffirm the teaching and practice of the Bible, the Reformed creeds, and the historic Christian Church: Burial is the way Christians care for the bodies of their dead, and cremation is not a legitimate alternative.

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“For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ.” (2 Corinthians 10:4-5)

“For if the trumpet makes an uncertain sound, who will prepare for battle?” (1 Corinthians 14:8)

## Recommendations Adopted by Synod

Following are the recommendations that were adopted by the 273<sup>rd</sup> Synod of the RCUS:

**Recommendation 1.** The RCUS affirms the following regarding the bodily burial of the dead:

A. It is the historic practice of the one holy catholic and apostolic Church (Genesis 25:8-10; 35:29; 47:29-31; 1 Kings 2:10; Matthew 14:12; Acts 8:2).

B. It is the biblical practice that imitates God (Deuteronomy 34:5-6; Ephesians 5:1).

C. It is the biblical practice that follows the example of our Lord Jesus Christ (John 19:40-42; Romans 6:4).

D. It is the biblical practice that witnesses to the hope for bodily resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:42-55; *Heidelberg Catechism* Questions 1, 57; *Belgic Confession of Faith* Article 37).

**Recommendation 2.** The RCUS affirms that, as a general rule, bodily burial should be practiced by the Christian Church.

**Recommendation 3.** While cremation is not an acceptable alternative, except under extraordinary circumstances, RCUS pastors have both the duty and liberty to preach the gospel in season and out of season, and in cases involving cremation should exercise their best judgment as to how best to compassionately minister the gospel of Christ to the grieving.

**Recommendation 4.** Recognizing that cremation has become an increasingly accepted practice in American society, and that there has been relatively little teaching on the subject of Christian burial versus cremation, the RCUS encourages church officers to patiently instruct those who are struggling to accept Christian burial as the biblical and confessional teaching (Ephesians 4:11-15; 2 Timothy 2:15, 24-25).

**Recommendation 5.** Since our bodies belong to Jesus in death, and we should magnify Christ with our bodies after death, the RCUS encourages its members to remember that burial services are not merely private events but gospel-centered worship services. Great care should be taken to plan burial services in such a way that the gospel hope of bodily resurrection is clear to all who attend. This includes the words read and sung, the message preached, and the burial of the body (1 Corinthians 6:19-20, 15:16-26; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Philippians 1:20).

**Recommendation 6.** The RCUS encourages its churches to be prepared, through the diaconate, to assist with funeral costs whenever a family struggles to afford a modest burial service (Galatians 6:10; 1 Timothy 6:17-18).

**Recommendation 7.** The RCUS commends the study and use of this study paper in its churches in order to teach its members the proper means of caring for the dead as demonstrated in the Word of God, the Reformed confessions, and the history of the Christian Church.