

Pastor Phair's Commendation of Burial Versus Cremation
9-28-09

Oakwood and its leadership respect the choices of individuals and its members regarding burial or cremation (Romans 14:5, 22). However, Pastor Phair earnestly commends burial, when possible, as the most faithful and honoring mode of disposal of the body of one who has physically died. If cremation is practiced for economical or practical reasons, Pastor Phair encourages that the cremains be respectfully placed in an urn and buried in the ground or placed in a burial structure (such as a community mausoleum). Phair discourages the practice of scattering the ashes or keeping them at home. [See the endnote to read Pastor Phair's brief biblical basis for his earnest recommendation].

The mode of disposition of a body has nothing to do with God's power to raise dead bodies. Clearly, Scripture teaches that God will raise totally decomposed bodies (1 Corinthians 15), and He will even raise the bodies of those who are "lost at sea" (Revelation 20:13)! And surely God is faithful and mighty to raise the bodies of martyrs who have been burned at the stake or beheaded (1 Corinthians 13:3; Matthew 14:10-12). No Christ-follower need be troubled about the future for a Christian loved one's body that has been cremated.

The manner of burial, when an option is available, is a question for the living as to which mode is most honoring to the body (1 Corinthians 6:19-20) and best expresses and declares the joyful expectation of the body's resurrection for those who trust in Jesus (John 11:38-39; Romans 8:23-25; 1 Corinthians 15:42-58; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). Within the Bible, God does not explicitly command burial or condemn cremation for all cultures and times. Therefore, Oakwood leaves it up to the personal convictions of those who are responsible to make this decision. However, Pastor Phair believes the Biblical evidence is very strong for the case that when a choice is available, a Christ-follower would make the far more honorable choice by selecting burial.

Where cremation is described in the Hebrew Scriptures it is never recorded with approval, and many instances speak of it in reference to the practice of those who did not know the one true God (2 Chronicles 33:5-6) and as a figure of God's judgment (Leviticus 20:14; 21:9; Deuteronomy 7:25, Joshua 7:15, 25; 2 Kings 23:19-20; Amos 2:1-2). Therefore, choosing to burn one's body is not a fitting symbol for Christ-followers to practice.

In contrast, burial or entombment of the body is the practice of the faithful in the Hebrew Scriptures (Genesis 23:19-20; 25:9-10; 35:19-20, 29; 49:30-32, 47:29-31; 50:2, 13; 50:26; Joshua 24:32; Numbers 20:1; Joshua 24:30; 1 Samuel 25:1; 1 Kings 2:10; 11:43; 15:8; 2 Kings 15:38; 2 Chronicles 32:33). Burial was specifically prescribed by God for those put to death for capital offenses; this was in contrast to cremation that was practiced by the cultures around them (Deuteronomy 21:23).

Burial was the practice of first century believers as recorded in the New Testament and throughout most of Christendom through the centuries. In fact, they purposefully choose to refrain from following the predominate practice of their Roman culture and chose burial instead as a distinct symbol of their faith. Furthermore, Jesus' followers used burial as the mode to express reverence for Jesus' body (John 19:40). It was even the mode God directly chose to respectfully dispose of Moses' body (Deuteronomy 34:5-6). Jewish and especially Christian

burial is more than biblical custom or Christian tradition. Rather, it is a special symbol of respect for the body that God created to house a person's soul and, for the body of a Christ-follower, as the temporary dwelling place of God's Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). Even more for us who are Christ-followers, burial is a joyful message that the body is in a temporary state (John 11:11; 1 Corinthians 15:51) while we confidently await Jesus' resurrecting and transforming it¹ when He triumphantly returns (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18).

¹ As there was a measure of continuity between Jesus' earthly body and His resurrected body, so there is for the bodies of believers in Jesus (1 Corinthians 15:42, 53).
