

Is Cremation Christian?

“As North American society becomes progressively more secular, it is expected that cremation will gain in favor, and become the normal method of disposing of bodies.”—B.A. Robinson, Ontario Consultants of Religious Tolerance

- I. The Process of Cremation
 - A. Simply defined, cremation is the method of disposition in which the body of one who has died is quickly reduced by heat to its component elements.
 - B. The ancient practice of cremation (still used in some third-world countries) required elaborate rituals and a very large bonfire. The burning process took several hours, was frequently incomplete, and required attendants to both stoke the fire and reposition body parts in the fire.
 - C. By contrast, modern methods of cremation involve very high temperatures, typically between 1400 and 2100 (F). In some states the body is placed in a wooden casket and both are burned.
 - D. The cremated remains consist of bone fragments and particles weighing 4 to 8 pounds. Once incinerated, the remains are ground into a uniform granule form. (Pace makers are removed prior to cremation because their batteries may explode. Large debris such as artificial hips are removed and discarded.) The entire process takes about 3 hours.
 - E. Although attendants sweep the cremation chamber after each use, there is always a small portion of ash left in the chamber, eventually mingling with the next customer.
- II. The History of Cremation
 - A. The practice of cremation is very ancient, perhaps originating 3000 years before Christ. By 800 BC cremation was common in Greece and became the accepted practice in Rome by 600 BC.
 - B. Certain ancient societies, however, shunned cremation. Among these were the Jews, early Christians, the Egyptians (who embalmed) and the Chinese (who buried). As Christianity advanced in Europe, burial became the only method of disposing of bodies.
 - C. In the 1870's, an Italian professor named Brunetti developed the first modern cremation chamber—beginning a trend toward cremation that has continued to the present day.
 - D. In 1886 the Roman Catholic Church officially banned cremations. Church members as recently as the 1940's were excommunicated for arranging cremations. However, beginning in 1963, the Roman church has allowed for cremation while continuing to recommend burial.
 - E. Cremation has increased dramatically in America since the 1960's. In 1962 fewer than 5% of deaths were cremated. By 1999 that figure rose to 25%. Estimates state that cremation will rise to 40% of all deaths by 2010.
 1. The numbers are significantly higher in Canada, with cremation being utilized in 42.4% of all deaths in 1998.

2. Certain states lead the nation in cremation: Hawaii (60.6%), Washington (49.9%), Nevada (49.8%), Alaska (47.2%) and Montana (45.3%).

III. Is the practice of cremation compatible with Biblical Christianity?

A. Cremation is heathen in origin and pagan in purpose.

1. Cremation is practiced in the Hindu religion because of their belief in reincarnation.
2. Primitive, ritualistic cremation continues to be practiced by Christless heathen. Consider the account from Missionary David Cloud:

A few years ago I stood three or so feet from a burning corpse with a missionary pastor from Singapore and his wife who were visiting us. The head was already burnt beyond recognition and the skull was split open due to internal expansion from the heat of the fire. The lower legs and feet were unscorched, as they were protruding from the pile of burning wood and stubble upon which the man's body lay. The professional Hindu burners were poking the body from time to time to keep the members in the fire and adding stubble and wood as needed. The bones were contracting and popping; the bodily organs were frying and the juices sizzling in the intense heat...The air for a hundred yards or more was filled with the unmistakable, stomach-turning stench of burning human flesh. When the fire had burnt most of the body, the ashes and remaining members were shoved into the river.

B. God's people (both Old and New Testament) have always practiced burial.

1. The Bible repeatedly emphasizes the practice of burial among God's people: Gen. 25:8-10; Josh. 24:29-30; Mt. 14:10-12; Acts 8:2.
2. Precept may be legitimately derived from example (Romans 15:4; I Corinthians 10:11).

C. God's people practiced burial even when it was difficult and cumbersome. Joseph's body was kept in Egypt for 400 years, carried in the wilderness for 40 years, and was finally buried in the Promised Land (Gen. 50:24-25; Ex. 13:19; Josh. 24:32).

D. Christian burial is a public display of belief in a bodily resurrection (I Cor. 15:35-44). Paul likens death to a farmer planting a seed. The resurrection is like the sprouting of that seed. Note, farmers do not burn seeds before planting them. (See Job 19:25-27.)

E. God Himself practiced burial. When Moses died without entering the Promised Land, God buried him in a valley in the land of Moab (Deut. 34:5, 6).

F. Cremation is a sign of God's curse:

1. God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah with fire (II Pet. 2:6).
2. Nadab and Abihu died by fire (Lev. 10:1, 2).
3. Those who rebelled with Korah were consumed in fire (Num. 16:35)

G. God punished the Moabites because they "burned the bones of the king of Edom," not even sparing the bones for burial (Amos 2:1).

