

# ***Lutheran Mission Matters***



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## *Encountering Mission*

# **Contemporary Approaches to Weddings, Funerals, and Burial Practices**

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**Abstract:** Church members and unchurched Christians have traditionally looked to the Church for help with milestone events such as funerals and weddings. However, people increasingly choose informal memorials, cremation and venue weddings instead of church-based ceremonies, reducing the opportunities for pastors to share the Gospel and connect people to the Church. Families who choose cremation are less likely to hold burial services or to invite pastors to lead informal memorials. Couples who choose venue weddings often use officiants who are not pastors. The transfer of milestone events from churches to secular settings and the increasing numbers of unchurched people call for contemporary approaches to ministry. Pastors may welcome funerals of unchurched people as evangelistic opportunities rather than approach funerals in the traditional way, primarily as Christian burials. Support groups provide a means to meet emotional needs. Deacons as well as pastors can officiate at memorial services and venue weddings when unchurched families feel more comfortable with this alternative. Churches may accept cremation as a godly Christian option and install columbariums for cremains, rather than dismiss cremation as a pagan practice. As people change how they commemorate rites of passage, the Church can adapt its ministry to bring Christ to people in times of need.

Funerals, weddings, and other milestone events have long been occasions for people to seek God's blessing upon important transitions in their lives, as well as for pastors to share the Gospel and connect people to the Church.



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However, the trend is that people are giving faith and the Church smaller parts in life's transitions. Meanwhile, some pastors and churches seem satisfied with being less involved with people at these times, especially if they have little or no church involvement. Both people and churches may be allowing societal fashion to influence how they show faithfulness to God and to ministry.

Many funerals and weddings have “moved” from the church to secular settings. People increasingly prefer to hold weddings and funerals outside the traditional church setting. Some people choose other venues because they offer things the church doesn't, or because of church restrictions on music or activities. The changes in where and how weddings and funerals are performed implicitly reduce the public place God has traditionally had in these transitions and hinder the Church's ability to incorporate people into the body of Christ.

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As society becomes less religious, it increasingly marginalizes churches and pastors. Many Christians are embarrassed about making public testimony to Christ in settings where unbelievers are present. Many believers and near believers in Christ believe they can exercise their faith in God-pleasing ways without being involved in a church or involving the Church in funerals and weddings.

It is helpful to recognize these developments and consider contemporary approaches and methods to engage people with the Gospel in this pluralistic society.

## **Wide Acceptance of Cremation**

Cremation of the body is an increasingly popular option. The National Funeral Directors Association's (NFDA) 2017 Cremation and Burial Report found that 50.2 percent of Americans chose cremation in 2016. The NFDA projects that the rate of cremation will reach 78.8 percent of deaths by 2035. In 2015, 32 percent of people who were cremated had no memorial service.

The decline of religious commitment and the lower cost of cremation are contributing to this change. The report notes that from 2012 to 2017, the proportion of Americans who feel it is very important to have religion as part of a funeral decreased from 49.5 percent to 39.5 percent.<sup>1</sup> Costs of cremation and burial vary widely depending on place and options. However, cremations cost from \$800 to \$3,000, while burials with casket and vault commonly range from \$8,000 to \$13,000.

The Church in the past resisted cremation, claiming that it was originally a heathen custom and implies a denial of the resurrection. The *Lutheran Cyclopedia* of 1954 noted that “sentiment among the more conservative bodies is still very strong against

the custom.”<sup>2</sup> Some pastors today are in the awkward position of opposing cremation, while members of their congregations are choosing it.

In recent decades, most churches have moved toward acceptance of cremation, judging biblical arguments against it as weak and unconvincing. The Vatican’s Holy Office (now the Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith) lifted the prohibition against cremation in 1963, although it opposes the scattering of ashes. This rule was incorporated into the revised Code of Canon Law of 1983 (Canon #1176) and the Order of Christian funerals.

## Funerals Outside of the Church

More cremations have led to fewer traditional funerals at a church, mortuary, or cemetery because there is no need for a service of burial. People are creative in finding ways to bury, retain, or scatter the remains, also called cremains. Federal, state, and local laws govern how family members can do this, though few people are aware of the laws.

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With fewer services of burial, there is less need to find a pastor or church to officiate. When families desire informal memorials, a friend or family member may be called upon to lead it, or they may search for an officiant on the internet.

## Should Pastors Officiate at Funerals of People who Appear to Have Little or No Faith?

Consider this situation: Sean, a grandson of a now-deceased member of our congregation, called to ask if we would officiate at his mother’s funeral. He says that she believed in God and allowed neighbors to take him to Sunday School as a child, but that she did not go to church or pray openly at home. We would like more background, but Sean can’t think of any more details. Should we officiate at her funeral?

Pastors are sometimes asked to officiate at the funerals of unchurched people who seldom or never received the Means of Grace (the preached Word or the Lord’s Supper) for decades, or perhaps their whole lives. Is it faithful ministry to accept, or to decline, invitations to officiate? What principles do, or should, pastors follow in deciding what to do in any given case?

There are two general approaches in deciding whom to bury and how to conduct funerals. We label them here as *affirm* and *evangelize*. While there is crossover between the two and few people think that one excludes the other, this article uses the terms to describe the different *emphases* in funeral theory and practice. The two

positions are described here in unambiguous ways, as a help in thinking through the issue.

Traditionally, seminaries have taken what we call here an *affirm* approach, instructing pastors to decline these invitations because “*Christian burial is for Christians.*” The Concordia Theological Seminary (CTS) website offers an article by J. A. Petersen, which insists that pastors should refuse to “grant a Christian burial” to anyone who is theologically liberal or “willfully neglects” the Means of Grace. The author reasons that burial liturgies proclaim faith in Christ alone, which assures us of resurrection, and it is misleading to imply that such people will enjoy the resurrection.<sup>3</sup> He maintains that by burying a person, the pastor testifies to the faith of the deceased and *affirms* that the person will enjoy the resurrection of the faithful. By declining to bury a person, the pastor testifies that the person in all likelihood did not have saving faith, warning survivors not to follow a similar path. The author admits that “we can only judge by that which we see,” and that final judgment belongs to God. However, he states that in “Christian burial, the pastor does pass judgment; he pronounces him a Christian, calls him blessed,” and so it would be untruthful to grant Christian burial to those who showed little sign of faith.

A recent CTS video by Professor Richard Warneck also opposes funerals of apparent unbelievers. He allows that some pastors officiate at such funerals in order to present the Gospel but does not refute their practice in detail as Petersen does.<sup>4</sup> Applying the *affirm* principle, Warneck and Petersen would not officiate at Sean’s mother’s funeral.

These pastors consider faithful ministry in funerals to be *affirmation* that the deceased had hope in Christ. They indirectly reinforce unchurched people’s tendency to exclude God from their lives when they decline to officiate at funerals of people whom they consider to have lacked faith. This practice adopts a *defensive reaction* to growing unbelief in the world. The model is James’s making a doctrinal statement in the controlled setting of a church conference (Acts 15:13–21).

Other pastors consider faithful funeral ministry to be *evangelizing* ministry and think “*funerals are for evangelism.*” They consider a memorial service to be an evangelistic opportunity to present Law and Gospel to unbelievers, who seldom or never hear the Word of God. They see it not so much as a Christian burial, but as a secular opportunity to preach Jesus Christ at a time when people may be more open to the message because of their grief and fear of death. (Most cemeteries are secular settings in that they are owned by corporations and embrace atheists and all religions. Homes are secular settings when families do not practice the faith or have Bibles or Christian objects.) The pastors alter the service accordingly, structuring it more as an evangelistic message than as a Christian burial that affirms that the deceased was a believer and will enjoy the resurrection. They reinforce unchurched people’s desire to look to God at end of life. This practice adopts an *offensive engagement* of growing

unbelief in the world. The model is Paul's proclaiming the unknown God and resurrection in Christ in the contested setting of Areopagus (Acts 17:18–34). Applying the *evangelizing* principle, these pastors would likely officiate at Sean's mother's funeral.

The evangelistic approach is a "messier" experience than the affirmation approach. The affirmation approach generally requires that the family cede to the pastor complete control over how and where funerals and weddings are conducted and who speaks (usually just the pastor). The evangelizing approach generally gives up some control and reluctantly expects some mixed messages in exchange for the opportunity to preach the Gospel.

Both approaches have uncomfortable aspects. The affirmation approach sometimes gives "Christian burial" to people who had "just enough" sign of faith (perhaps yielding to their families) or denies burial without truly knowing people's hearts. The evangelistic approach preaches salvation in Christ alone, but may imply approval of the deceased's lack of visible faith by officiating.

A funeral may become a bridge by which people come into the Church. Every church has some members who joined after a death in the family, and evangelistic funerals aim for this. Some pastors consciously plan a Christian burial for devout believers that affirms confidence in their resurrection but present a more explicitly evangelistic message at memorials of apparent unbelievers.

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## Venue Weddings

"Destination," or "venue," weddings at resorts and vacation spots have gained attention. But the bigger change is that "venue weddings" are increasingly replacing church weddings. Young adults commonly want weddings in attractive settings, such as parks, golf courses, vineyards, hotels, and retreats. They are often set in nature, such as mountains, beaches, lakes, and the countryside. Venues provide impressive settings for both ceremony and reception with fine dinners and alcoholic drinks.

The desire for exceptional services is one reason weddings have become expensive and profitable. The average cost of a wedding in 2019 is \$29,858, although it varies widely by location.<sup>5</sup> One result of living in a wealthy society is a demand for fine things, which has driven up the price of weddings, college, automobiles, homes, and other products.

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Venue weddings are favored by many religious young adults who are regular in worship and Bible study, not just the nonreligious.

This author has a total of fifteen married children, nieces, and nephews. All were raised in the Church by devout parents, in five states, and the great majority appear, until now, to have active faith themselves. Not many were rooted in one church at the time of their weddings, mainly because of the mobile nature of young adults.

Even though they have a church background, thirteen of the fifteen (including this pastor's children) were married in places other than a church, including a golf course, a park, a retreat, a hotel, a camp, and a bed and breakfast. A large number of these weddings were not officiated by pastors.

There is a growing and large number of nonreligious young adults today who are unlikely to look for a church and pastor to officiate at their weddings. In addition, two generations of Christians have been brought up in Calvary Chapel- and "seeker"-type churches that look like auditoriums and warehouses. Traditional churches may seem alien to them, and they may see church art as signs of religious error, based in part on Roman Catholic excesses like statues of saints.

There is an ironic contradiction in how people in our prosperous society judge financial cost. On the one hand, we are willing to spend ever larger amounts for weddings, but choose cremation because we are unwilling to spend comparatively much smaller amounts on burials.

## **Officiants at Venue Weddings**

A minority of venue weddings are served by pastors, partly because a smaller percentage of young adults are active in churches, compared to their parents' generation. Many pastors hesitate to do weddings outside of the church, especially for couples who are not members, for a variety of reasons. Pastors may feel used by couples who are "shopping" for wedding vendors. Wedding planners and venues may recommend officiants who will provide an emotional experience that appeals to diverse wedding parties, rather than clergy who offer a Christian ceremony. The lack of a Christ-centered wedding may affirm a couple's slide away from faith and the Church rather than toward it. While ministry to couples before and after weddings is more significant than the weddings themselves, ongoing ministry happens more often when pastors and churches are involved in the weddings than when they are not.

## **Engaging People in Transition**

Transitional and stressful times in life can serve to reignite faith and fellowship with other believers or, conversely, result in drifting from faith and fellowship. People are often open to ministry at critical times such as birth, marriage, change of residence, loss, tragedy, and death.

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The increase in venue weddings and cremation means that fewer people come to the Church for assistance at marriage and death. This calls for the Church to actively engage people at these times rather than passively wait for them to come to church and the pastor. This is a shift in orientation from pastoral care to evangelistic outreach.

This calls for the Church to actively engage people at these times rather than passively wait.

Here are methods churches are increasingly using to engage people evangelistically at transitional times.

### **Support Groups for People in Transition**

Support groups and classes enable churches to offer comprehensive care during transitional times. GriefShare and DivorceCare are thirteen-week classes that use video, homework, and discussion to help people work through emotions and life changes.<sup>6</sup> The length of the classes, friendships that develop among church members, nonmembers, and church leaders, and even a church location can create a bond between nonmembers and the church. Ideally, the classes are led by church members who have faced grief or divorce themselves, which helps make them effective leaders and releases the pastor for another activity.

Classes like The Marriage Course<sup>7</sup> are structured like GriefShare, but they add dinners and replace group discussions with private discussions between each couple. Such classes are more effective at helping people than officiating at funerals and weddings, and they can be effective evangelistic tools, especially when offered on a regular schedule.

### **Deacons Officiate at Funerals and Weddings**

Deacons often officiate at funerals and venue weddings. People who will not approach a church or pastor often will invite a deacon to lead a service, especially when an unchurched person knows a certified deacon.

While deacons are new to the Missouri Synod, historic churches, including all Lutheran churches in Europe, have centuries of experience with them. The historic church thought that deacons, unlike pastors, have one foot in the church and one in the community, because deacons commonly hold (or have held) a secular job, whereas pastors can seem less approachable, particularly in churches that emphasize the status of the office of pastor or require extensive education. Because of their place as a bridge into the community, deacons were assigned parts of the liturgy that reflect this status, such as prayers, the reading of the Gospel, and giving the cup in Holy Communion, “Thus, the office of deacon represented the link between the altar and the world.”<sup>8</sup>

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An informal poll among deacons in the Pacific Southwest District several years ago revealed that about forty percent of the deacons had officiated at funerals, and nearly ten percent had officiated at weddings. Other districts with a high number of preaching deacons also find that many deacons officiate at funerals. Some states prohibit unordained people from officiating at weddings and so do not allow deacons to do so, even though they have more claim to be ministers than people who simply purchased internet ordinations.

This poll reflects a very limited sample and was taken in a district in which there are a high number of preaching deacons. Most of them work in churches with their pastors rather than in churches where they provide primary pastoral care. Nonetheless, the poll reveals the growing ministry of deacons.

Deacons, like pastors, approach weddings and funerals as opportunities to present the Gospel and Christ Jesus, not as friends or employees paid to deliver an emotional ceremony. Classes that train deacons to preach and lead worship can or do include instruction on wedding and funeral services.

Deacons are committed to supplement and enlarge, not replace, the ministry of pastors. Online training in preaching and worship is available from the Mission Training Center, which is based at Concordia University, Portland.<sup>9</sup>

It should not be surprising that many unchurched people welcome scriptural Christian messages at weddings and funerals. George Barna found that three-quarters of unchurched people hold some conservative Christian beliefs, including that the miracles of the Bible actually took place, Jesus was born of a virgin, and the Bible is the literal Word of God. Twenty-eight percent said they are moderately or absolutely committed Christians.<sup>10</sup> Many left their church because of some kind of problem or conflict and hesitated to find another church, in the same way that divorced people may hesitate to marry again. When asked to officiate, the deacons and pastors should describe the Christian nature of the service so that the family can choose to accept or decline this type of ceremony.

### **Are Deacons Pioneers or Trespassers?**

Are deacons who preach and officiate at funerals and weddings trespassing on pastors' territory, or enlarging ministry as faithful servants? Are they evangelistic pioneers, taking advantage of opportunities to preach the Gospel off church grounds, or violating church law that only ordained pastors may preach?

Supporters of preaching deacons show that Stephen and Philip, two of the seven deacons of Acts 6–8, preached evangelistically and baptized. The Missouri Synod has a history of unordained men, such as *Besuchern* (visitors) and *Reisepredigern* (traveling preachers), who preached as needed.<sup>11</sup> Many Reformation-era churches were served by unordained preachers, and large churches depended on unordained

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preachers to help meet the demand of five hundred sermons a year.<sup>12</sup> The Confessions and C. F. W. Walther identify deacons as a kind of regularly called clergy distinct from pastors.<sup>13</sup> Deacons are restoring to the Church a type of Lutheran theology and ministry that the Missouri Synod has largely forgotten.

Deacons take advantage of opportunities to preach the Gospel at funerals of unchurched people who would likely not invite a pastor to preach nor hear the Gospel from secular officiants. This is one way that deacons expand and supplement, not supplant, the ministry of pastors.

### **Cremation or Burial?**

It is important to avoid offending people unnecessarily, especially at sensitive times, such as funerals. We mustn't diminish the Gospel message and hope of the resurrection by focusing on adiaphora (things which are neither required nor forbidden), such as the means of disposing of the body. Any method which is respectful of the remains is in keeping with the scriptural teaching that each human being—body and soul—is created in God's image.

Churches historically have often buried people in cemeteries on church grounds and interred well-known people inside churches. This is now rare, especially in urban areas.

However, churches are increasingly building columbaria on church grounds. A columbarium is a group of niches within a garden or a wall of brick or stone that contain the cremains of the departed. Columbaria range from small gardens to large mausoleums, such as the 4,746-niche installation under the Cathedral of our Lady of the Angels in Los Angeles. Columbaria can be home-made, site-built, or built off-site and delivered to churches.

Columbaria must have permits and follow federal, state, and local laws. Congregations establish their own bylaws to govern their columbaria. Rules may require all burial services to be done by church staff and detail who may and may not be interred there. Columbaria and burial ceremonies provide a direct link between families and the church. Columbaria in church settings can provide as distinct a Christian witness as cemeteries.

### **Is Cremation a Godly Practice?**

By building columbaria, a church states that cremation is as godly a practice as burial. There are several traditional arguments against cremation: Jews buried their dead, and God buried Moses (Dt 34:6). Some argue that cremation is tied to Hinduism and some forms of paganism, or that it may be an atheist's way to spite faith in God and the resurrection, or that it desecrates the body. There is also a nebulous feeling that God somehow needs a dead body in order to raise it (in the way Jesus and Lazarus

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were raised), which isn't possible if it has been reduced to ashes and scattered. Also, Orthodox Jewish law forbids cremation.

Critics of cremation cite the examples of Hebrew patriarchs, including Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, and David, who buried rather than cremated their dead.<sup>14</sup> The key question is whether ancient Hebrew practice should be raised to the level of moral requirement and prohibition for Christians. If so, we are in the uncomfortable position of having to accept many patriarchal practices that we believe to be immoral or unwise.

Several patriarchs were polygamous; Abraham married his half-sister. Genesis never even implies that Judah acted immorally when he visited a prostitute. Abraham arranged his son's marriage. Abraham required his family and servants (or slaves) to be circumcised. Later Jews were required to obey Mosaic Law, including dietary restrictions.

Patriarchal and Jewish practice is informative, but not normative. Early Christians accepted some Old Covenant beliefs and practices but rejected or did not continue others. Many aspects of the lives of the patriarchs reflect social mores of their time, not spiritual and moral requirements for all God's people.

### **Critics of Cremation Confuse Destruction by Fire with Dignified Disposal of a Corpse**

There are only two examples in the Bible of cremation as an alternative to burial by either Jews or Gentiles, and both are pictured as honorable or reasonable. Saul's body was burned by faithful Israelites to *prevent* desecration by enemies (1 Sm 31:8–13), which was seen as a valiant and honorable act. Amos 6:8–10 mentions cremation but does not oppose it. In context, Amos predicts large numbers of deaths during the siege of a city (“I will deliver up the city,” 6:8) and the necessity of cremating bodies, because it would not be possible to access a cemetery outside the city wall.

Critics of cremation confuse dignified burning of a human body as part of funeral practice with destruction of objects or people by incineration.

By comparison, imagine criminals who invade a house, kill its residents, and burn the bodies, house, and property. Is this an example of malicious and complete destruction of a household, or a warning not to cremate bodies of those who die of natural causes?

Critics of cremation commonly cite Amos 2:1 as a prime example of God's condemning cremation. Amos describes the sins of Moab and God's fitting retribution: “because he burned to ashes the bones of Edom's king. . . . I will send fire on Moab that will consume the fortresses. . . . I will destroy her ruler” (vv. 1–3). Did Moab sin by cremating Edom's king after he died, or by destroying its king and kingdom?

The parallel construction of the passage shows that God’s punishment fits Moab’s crime. God does not threaten to cremate Moab’s king after he dies, just as Moab cremated Edom’s king instead of burying him. God’s promised fire is not cremation but the destruction of Moab’s ruler, fortresses, and capital city by war. Thus, it is better to understand cremation as a proper alternative to burial than as the destruction of something by fire as found in this biblical account.

Achan’s body and his stolen wealth were burned as a means of removing accursed objects from Israel (Jo 7:1, 11–15, 24–25), in the same way that the accursed residents and property of Jericho and some other cities were previously burned (Jo 6:17–21; Dt 13:12–17). Jews in the past, like orthodox Jews today, sometimes burned or destroyed unclean things that could not be purified by water (Lv 13:52). Burning did not *cause* defilement; rather, it was used to *remove* defilement. By contrast, leaving a corpse exposed defiled the land (Dt 21:22–23).

If Christians are forbidden to cremate, it is surprising that the Bible does not explicitly forbid cremation, and that the Torah is surprisingly thin on laws regarding funeral practices and disposal of the body.

One argument against cremation amounts to “if pagans do it, then Christians should not,” citing early Christians who buried as a testimony against Romans who cremated. But this leaves Christians with the question of which pagan religion to oppose. Should Christians bury because Hindus and most ancient Romans cremate—or should they cremate because ancient Egyptians, Muslims, and Mormons bury? When ancient Hebrews buried, did they implicitly affirm the theological reasons for burial held by Egyptians? Doing things differently than unbelievers may be beneficial at times, but it shouldn’t be a primary guide for our beliefs and practices.

There is a common legend that atheists cremate in order to spite God and resurrection, and so Christians must reject cremation in order to avoid denying the faith. This is a little like saying that Christians should avoid going into space because a Russian cosmonaut asserted that God doesn’t exist because he didn’t see God in space. A few atheists like nineteenth-century Italian nationalist, Giuseppe Garibaldi, insisted on cremation, though he probably was opposing the temporal power of the Roman Catholic Church more than rejecting faith. Most atheists today are buried, which doesn’t suggest that they believe in resurrection, while others choose cremation for the same reason many theists do: because it’s practical.

The vague idea that God somehow needs the old body in order to resurrect it is fuzzy thinking. God recreates the body anew at the resurrection, not resuscitates it, whether it was cremated, eaten by animals, or decayed in a grave. God need only remember our DNA in

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not resuscitates it.

order to recreate our bodies from scratch, in much the same way as He created Adam.

North Americans today (with few exceptions) consider cremation to be an honorable way to dispose of the body, unconnected with religion, and don't think it conflicts with any belief in an afterlife. (First-century Romans who cremated still believed in a paradise-like afterlife, the Elysian fields.) The Church need not hold on to burial as a form of witness to the resurrection. In India, where cremation is common, Christian burial may serve as a witness to the resurrection, especially when Christian testimonies are engraved on tombstones. This author found it a moving experience to walk through a Christian crematory in the spiritual darkness of Delhi.

### **Pragmatic Disposal of the Body**

People who oppose cremation point to Abraham, who “buried” his wife Sarah in the cave at Mahpelah (Genesis 23), and state that this is a model for Christians to follow.

But did Hebrews consciously choose caves over cremation because it was morally and spiritually required, or because it was cheap, convenient, and effective? Did Abraham deliberately reject cremation to set himself apart from idolatry?

Saying that Abraham “buried” Sarah is a misnomer. Unlike modern burial, he didn't bury her body in the earth; he placed it in a cave. Does this imply that he rejected *both* burial and cremation as pagan practices, choosing a cave as the moral alternative? The Canaanites from whom Abraham bought the cave understood his desire to place the body in a cave, because they did the same. The Egyptians, Canaanites, and Philistines who often dominated parts of the land of Israel also buried or used caves.<sup>15</sup> Abraham followed, not rejected, local pagan practice. There is no record in the Bible of pagans in Palestine following a regular practice of cremating their dead. Hebrew prophets never cited cremation as one of the many reasons they opposed idolatry.

Caves were commonly used in the land of Israel as burial places because they were cheap, easy, and convenient. It wasn't necessary to dig graves in the hard rock of the earth, because a cave was already a hole. Hillsides in Israel are riddled with caves because its limestone is easily eroded by rainwater, and archaeologists have discovered cave cemeteries. The tomb Jesus' body was placed in was likely part of a cemetery built from caves along the hillside of Golgotha. Same-day burial was feasible for most people because the family cave tomb was always ready.

When bodies decomposed, bones were placed to the side of the tomb in a pit inside the cave, or, in New Testament times, were placed in a bone box called an “ossuary.” Other bodies from the same extended family were added to the grave when needed. A small cave served an extended family for generations; thus, new graves did not have to be constantly dug and cemeteries expanded.

What would it have cost Abraham to cremate a body? It requires about 220 pounds of wood<sup>16</sup> and three hours to cremate a human body, because it is 65 percent water. Even in New Testament times, cremation would have been costly and difficult due to deforestation, the arid climate, and large number of deaths in Israel's population of two million.

From a practical and technological standpoint, the situation is now reversed. Cremation has become practical, and burial is becoming impractical. The number of deaths in huge urban areas add to the rarity and cost of available land for grave sites. Graves take up a lot of space due to the casket and vault; they are not reused as caves were.

Cremation has become much more feasible due to the efficiency and low cost of natural gas. Huge amounts of wood or coal would be needed to cremate large populations, and the disposal of the ashes of the fuel itself would be a problem. Natural gas has a much smaller carbon footprint, leaves no fuel ash, and transportation is easy.

The Hebrews used caves or dug holes for burial because it was practical, not because the Torah and morality demanded it, and Americans choose cremation for the same reason.

The Hebrews used caves or dug holes for burial because it was practical, not because the Torah and morality demanded it.

It is inaccurate Bible interpretation to insist that the pragmatic practice of placing bodies in caves or tombs is a divine command and a moral and spiritual necessity.

### **Why You Burn or Bury Is the Critical Issue**

The purpose, method, and circumstances of burning a body are more important than the actual burning, just as the purpose, method, and circumstances of *burying* a body are more important than the burial itself. The word *cremation* is used to distinguish honorable disposition of a body from incineration, which is destroying trash. Crematories allow families to hold funeral rites in the crematory as part of the cremation. On the whole, North Americans consider cremation an honorable alternative to burial.

The laws and practices ruling cremation are different from those governing incineration, in order to preserve dignity. Crematories are designed to cremate only one body at a time, and cremation of multiple bodies is illegal, in order to honor the individual. Exceptions are sometimes made for stillborn twins or mother and baby who die in childbirth.

Critics of cremation deride it as a violent process, which is a disgusting and dishonorable treatment of the human corpse. How does natural decomposition

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compare? A corpse discolors, bloats, and then ruptures as a result of the buildup of gases. Maggots feed on the flesh, tissues liquefy, fluids froth, and gasses vent through natural openings and ruptures, with putrid odors. If given the choice of watching either cremation or decomposition, most people would probably choose cremation as less repulsive.

### **What Makes Disposal of a Body Dishonorable?**

*Respect versus shame* is the key issue regarding treatment of the human body, whether alive or dead. When ancient Hebrews and Christians buried or placed bodies in caves, they were concerned with respect and shame, not with what the pagans did. Exposure, abuse, ridicule, and neglect bring shame to the body. When alive, a person was shamed by being stripped naked in public, shaved, abused, beaten, defaced, or dismembered. The shaming was done as punishment for crime, or more often as an act of war. After death, a body was shamed by being exposed for ridicule, as Saul and criminals were (1 Sm 31:8–13; Dt 21:22–23), or exposed to the elements, where they would decompose (Ps 53:5) or be eaten by animals (defaced). Neglected bodies were shamed because there was no one to honorably dispose of them (Ps 53:5).

*Respect versus shame*  
is the key issue.

There are a few exceptions to the rule of shame by exposure, abuse, ridicule, and neglect. For example, defacement is accepted for a higher purpose when it is used in medical organ transplant, and autopsy or dissection may be done to preserve the lives of others.

Cremation, ancient and modern, is not shameful, because bodies are treated with dignity and respect; they are not exposed, abused, ridiculed, or neglected, and families consider it respectful.

*Not all burial of bodies is considered honorable* or acceptable. When a murderer buries the body, it is dishonorable because it hides the crime and prevents honoring the dead. Mass burial in war or genocide is dishonorable because it is an act of war and doesn't honor the dead. Korah and those who rebelled against God with him were suddenly buried in earth (Nm 16:31–33). Just as it is improper to use these examples of dishonorable burial as reasons to prohibit all burial, it is incorrect to use examples of dishonorable burning of the dead as reasons to prohibit cremation.

### **The Value of Burial**

The New Testament uses the burial (planting) of a seed and the burial of the body as illustrations of the resurrection. Just as a seed is buried but springs to new and better life, so the body is buried and springs to new and better resurrection life (1 Cor 15:36–

38). Just as Christ was buried and raised, so His disciples will be as well. These are powerful images of the resurrection to reflect on at funerals and Bible studies.

However, a traditional illustration of resurrection is the phoenix which rises from the ashes. This mythological bird dies in flames, only to be reborn from the ashes; and Romans, such as Pliny the Elder, referred to this myth. Nonetheless, Christians since Clement, the bishop of Rome and martyr, used the phoenix to illustrate resurrection in general and Christ's resurrection in particular. The phrase in the funeral service, "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust in the certain hope of the resurrection" may echo this symbol. The phoenix symbol uses cremation as an essential part of the image of death and resurrection, rather than as an argument against resurrection.

### **Adapt Ministry to Fit Circumstance**

One strength of the Christian Church over the centuries is its ability to adapt ministry and fellowship to fit circumstance. The Church has prospered under dictatorship and democracy, when legal and illegal, when favored by society and when rejected, when there are many openings for ministry and evangelism, and when they are few. Faithful ministry looks a little different in one society than it does in another.

As people change how they commemorate transitions, such as the beginning of a marriage and the end of a life, the Church can adapt its ministry to bring faith in Christ Jesus to bear in providing loving assistance, at times of joy and at times of deep need.

### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> "NFDA Cremation and Burial Report Shows Rate of Cremation at All-time High," NFDA News Releases, National Funeral Directors Association, July 18, 2017, <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>.

<sup>2</sup> Erwin Lueker, ed., *Lutheran Cyclopedia* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1954), 271.

<sup>3</sup> J. A. Peterson, "Christian Burial," *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, July 1934. Posted on the Concordia Theological Seminary website, <http://media.ctsfw.edu/Item/GetFullText/5624>. This detailed case against funerals of apparent unbelievers explicitly rejects the practice of officiating in order to present the Gospel. It condemns cremation, except in rare cases of expediency, and refuses to bury those who are cremated. Almost the entire article describes when to *refuse* to officiate at funerals.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Warneck, *Detailed Information about Pastoral Theology and Practice—Volume 59—Funerals for Suicides or Unbelievers (Video)*, <http://media.ctsfw.edu/Video/ViewDetails/1762>

<sup>5</sup> ValuePenguin by Lending Tree, "Average Cost of a Wedding (2019)," <https://www.valuepenguin.com/average-cost-of-wedding>.

<sup>6</sup> [www.griefshare.org](http://www.griefshare.org), [www.divorcecare.org](http://www.divorcecare.org)

<sup>7</sup> <https://themarriagecourses.org>



<sup>8</sup> Fred Precht, *Lutheran Worship, History and Practice* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1993), 235.

<sup>9</sup> [www.missiontrainingcenter.com](http://www.missiontrainingcenter.com). Districts provide deacon training through various agencies including the Concordia Lay Deacon Program offered by Concordia College New York.

<sup>10</sup> George Barna, *Grow Your Church from the Outside In* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2002), 68, 79.

<sup>11</sup> *Workers for His Harvest, Concerning the Public Ministry of Word and Sacrament*, Board of Directors of the Northwest District, 2017. Although this was originally written as a dissent to a Synodical resolution, it cites much historical information and theology that supports preaching by qualified men who are not ordained pastors.

<sup>12</sup> Ernest G. Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 622, 623, 626, 627, 629, 625.

<sup>13</sup> John Juedes, “Deacons in the Lutheran Confessions and Walther,” 2018, unpublished paper.

<sup>14</sup> An example of a book which holds that Christians are prohibited from cremating the dead is Alvin Schmidt, *Cremation, Embalment, or Neither?* (Bloomington, IN: Westbow Press, 2015). This article answers several claims made in that and similar books.

<sup>15</sup> Megan Sauter, “Philistine Cemetery Unearthed at Ashkelon,” *Bible History Daily*, June 17, 2018, Biblical Archaeology Society, <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/news/first-ever-philistine-cemetery-unearthed-at-ashkelon/>.

<sup>16</sup> “How Much Energy is required for a Human Cremation?” <https://quora.com/How-much-energy-is-required-for-a-human-cremation>.