

## On Christian Burial

At Easter, we Christians mark and celebrate the *historical fact* of the Resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. That is, Jesus returned from death, resurrected (with the *same body*) and not reincarnated (given a different body). In other words, Jesus retains the same body He bore on earth, though glorified and made greater. We will, too, according to 1 Corinthians 15. He lived in the flesh, and continues to do so. A key doctrine of the Christian faith is *the resurrection of the body*. Souls and bodies will be reunited in the Resurrection. We believe in the resurrection of the body...*this* body.

Yet before that the Resurrection, part of the Gospel message is that “For our sake Jesus was crucified under Pontius Pilate, he suffered death and *was buried...*” (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:3-4).

The fact is, there is plenty of *Biblical evidence* – both Old Testament and New Testament -- commending burial of the body. The earliest book of the Bible finds Job declaring that he would see God with his own eyes (Job 19:27), indicating the resurrection of the body. And in Genesis, we see Abraham – coming out of pagan Ur – burying his wife Sarah, and making arrangements for his own burial by purchasing the first burial ground among the Hebrews (Genesis 23:19).

*This body*, which will be raised from death, should be honored and treated with reverence, because God made it. God made our bodies for His glory. Human bodies are not inherently sinful -- that is a Gnostic teaching. Adam and Eve's bodies were not sinful, as God said His creation was very good. Jesus was fully human in the flesh, and His body is now immortal, as ours will be. The Lord Jesus was raised in *the body He was crucified in*. We shall be like Him. We too, will be raised in *this body*, as resurrection means life again in *this body*. The material part of us is not eliminated, but added to.

The body is for the Lord. God raised up the Lord and will also raise us up by His power. “Don't you understand that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, and you are not your own? You were bought at a price; so glorify God in your *body*.” It is God's, not yours.

It seems improper to “dispose” as *refuse* that which God has made, which Christ has died for, and in which the Holy Spirit lives. We care for the body-- both living and dead--as God's wonderful gift. Russell Moore writes, “For Christians, burial is not the disposal of a thing. It is caring for a person. In burial, we're reminded that the body is *not* a shell, a husk tossed aside by the

“real” person, the soul within. To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:6–8; Philippians 1:23), but *the body that remains still belongs to someone*, someone we love, someone *who will reclaim it one day.*” [*Touchstone*, “Grave Signs,” January/February 2007, emphasis mine.]

*Historical Christian evidence* supports an honored burial of the body. Oxford historian Diarmaid MacCulloch writes in his *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years*, that perhaps the earliest involvement of Christians with the government was as a burial society, and that the early Christians dug the catacombs under Rome for their burial (ultimately amounting to 68 *square miles* and 875,000 bodies) and that “universally archeologists are able to detect the spread of Christian culture through the ancient and medieval world by the excavation of corpse *burials oriented east-west*” (p. 1013). When the pagan Romans burned Christians at the stake or fed them to beasts, it purposely was intended to deny Christians the resurrection of their bodies.

Early Christians *reverenced* the body in their burial customs. They knew that when Christ returns, the body will be raised, and wanted to honor that body as much as possible in anticipation of that Day. “The early Church retained the Jewish practice of bodily burial and rejected the common pagan Roman practice of cremation. The basis for this rule was simply that God has created each person in His image and likeness (Genesis 3:19). Moreover, our Lord Himself was buried in the tomb and then rose again in glory on Easter. Therefore, Christians buried their dead both out of respect for the body and in anticipation of the resurrection at the Last Judgment” (William Saunders, “Does the Church Forbid Cremation?”).

Christopher Wadsworth, Anglican Bishop of Lincoln in the United Kingdom, said in 1874, “[T]he flames of funeral pyres, which once blazed in all parts of the Roman Empire, have been extinguished by Christianity,” (quoted in MacCulloch, p. 1013). Christians instead were buried in *cemeteries* (“sleeping places” in Latin), looking for the soon return of Christ. That return is now ever closer.

*Financial evidence* still points to burial. Some may object to what they call the “high cost of dying.” It's true that the average funeral cost with burial is about \$7,000, or \$120 per adult year of an average life expectancy (and easily covered by insurance). It's much less than the cost of one gourmet coffee per week of that same life expectancy. Adjusted for inflation, a burial costs about the same as it did 60 years ago (“Historical Cost of Adult Funeral with Burial – 1960-2019”).

What's interesting is that those who are de-ritualizing death (that is, setting aside visitation, funeral, and burial) -- tend to be those of the higher socio-economic levels, and not the poor. In other words, the cost isn't the factor. Alan Wolfelt, the grief counselor, points out that it is the *people who can afford it* who are omitting funerals today. It signifies avoidance and bypass of death. If it doesn't make *us* happy, then we don't want to spend money on it. If it is not convenient, we don't want to spend our time on it. And thus we short-circuit the grieving process (including caring for the body) and end up worse than ever.

If we are to honor God with our bodies in the glorious vitality and energy of life, then we should honor Him with our bodies in the process of death. The ***Heidelberg Catechism*** (so beloved by early Brethren, and valued to this day), answer #1, says, "My only comfort in life and death is that I am not my own, but belong *with body and soul, both in life and in death*, to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ." Our bodies are His in life, and in death. May we treat them with all the respect and honor with which we are able.

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