

The Old Hickory Bulletin

Old Hickory Church of Christ

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February 27, 2022

Volume 42, # 09

From Heaven or From Men?

Cremation at death is being practiced in the United States more widely than in the past. Many see it as a way to cut down on the expenses of one's death. To some people it is appealing because it prevents the decaying corruption of the flesh.

The focus of attention in this article is cremation. Christians are beginning to ask whether it is acceptable pursuant to the teaching of the Bible. Men have always been interested in the way in which the demise of themselves or loved ones is handled. Those who are Christians want to be sure that what they do is acceptable.

Question: Brother Hamilton, please give me your thinking on cremation for Christians.

Response: Cremation is an ancient practice and prevalent in several countries, such as India. It was generally practiced in the ancient world except in Egypt, Judea, and China. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, these three countries were important exceptions to the general rule. In Egypt, the dead were embalmed and so were Jacob and Joseph (Genesis 50:3, 26). Burying in sepulchres was the practice in Judea and numerous references to this are in both Old and New Testaments. Corpses were buried in the ground in China. This is probably the prevailing custom in the United States and many other western societies.

The word of God gives no specific instructions for Christians about how to deal with a dead body. It would, therefore, be presumptuous to detail how it should be done. However, there is much said about what did occur with the disposing of dead bodies. The first time that burial is mentioned is in Genesis 23. The children of Heth offered Abraham any sepulchre he might desire in which to bury Sarah, but Abraham bought the cave of Machpelah as a permanent burying place. Jacob received, at his request, a promise from Joseph to bury him in the burying place of his fathers (Genesis 47:27-31). When he died, his sons took him out of Egypt and buried him in the cave of Machpelah (Genesis 50:12-14). Joseph was embalmed and put in a coffin in Egypt (Genesis 50:26).

Jacob related much about the burying place purchased and said that Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah, and Leah were all buried there (Genesis 49:29-33). When Moses led the people out of Egypt, and as Joseph had requested, Joseph's bones were carried to

Canaan (Exodus 13:19). After they reached Canaan, Joseph's bones were finally buried in Shechem (Joshua 24:32).

When Moses died, God buried him in the valley of Moab, but no one knew where his sepulchre was (Deuteronomy 34:5-6). According to the custom of the Jews, Jesus was prepared for burial and laid in a new tomb (John 19:38-42; Matthew 27:57-61; Mark 15:42-47; Luke 23:50-56). When John the baptizer was beheaded by Herod, his disciples took his corpse and buried it (Matthew 14:10-12). At the death of Ananias and Sapphira, they were taken and buried (Acts 5:6-10).

It is in the tenor of the accounts and references made above that one reads in the Bible concerning the handling of corpses. However, there were occasions when men were burned. This burning is not spoken of as cremation, nor as the normal way in which bodies were disposed. If a man took both a wife and her mother, they all were to be burned (Leviticus 20:14). Achan and his family were burned with fire (Joshua 7:25). King Josiah sought to rid Israel of the idolatry which kings before him had brought into Israel. He took away the high places of Samaria and slew all the priests that were there and burned men's bones on the altars (2 Kings 23:19-20; 2 Chronicles 34:3-5). There are no instances of cremation as the method of disposing of the dead among the Jews in the biblical record.

Basically, it appears that this is a matter in the New Testament left to the judgment, discretion, and preference of individuals. However, it is striking that among God's people in both the Old and New Testaments there is no mention of cremation as the means of handling a body at death.

- Clinton D. Hamilton, via *Guardian of Truth*, 10/21/1993

Patterns to Follow

Patterns are very valuable in so many areas of life. Following a pattern (recipe) when preparing a meal for guests will prevent it from being a flop. When a pharmacist follows the prescription of your doctor, it can lead to healing and recovery. When your surgeon follows the established pattern for sterilizing surgical instruments serious complications are avoided. Following the established patterns in air traffic control prevents travelers from being killed. With these concepts firmly in mind, we request that you carefully consider the importance of following patterns found in the Bible.

"Follow the pattern" is an ancient lesson as Moses was commanded by God: "According to all that I am going to show you, as the pattern of the tabernacle and the pattern of all its furniture, just so you shall construct it." (Exodus 25:9). Further, "See that you make them after the pattern for them, which was shown to you on the mountain." (Exodus 25:40). Moses was faithful to the design pattern and consequently avoided sin and the displeasure of God (cf. Acts 7:44; Hebrews 8:5). Even before Moses, Noah had carefully

followed the divine instructions, the pattern for the ark (Genesis 6:13-22). When Solomon was chosen by God to build a temple, a sanctuary for God, his father, king David, provided the details (1 Chronicles 28:10-19), notice: "All this," said David, "the Lord made me understand in writing by His hand upon me, all the details of this pattern."

The spiritual significance of "following the pattern" has not been lost when it comes to New Testament directives. Christians are warned to avoid sin and the displeasure of God. Many of His people disobeyed Him in the Old Testament (1 Corinthians 10:1-5). Notice the reason that the Lord gives for telling us about the failures among His people:

"Now these things happened as examples for us, so that we would not crave evil things as they also craved. Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; ... Nor let us act immorally, as some of them did, ... Nor let us try the Lord, as some of them did, ... Nor grumble, as some of them did, ..." (1 Corinthians 10:6-10).

These things are recorded so that we may avoid Israel's mistakes: "Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction... Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall." (1 Corinthians 10:11-12). Christians learn what to avoid by these examples. There are examples of disobedience that we should not follow (Hebrews 4:11).

On the other hand, the New Testament is rich with passages teaching the vital importance of following the examples, forms, patterns, and rules that are provided to grant mankind the spiritual blessings God has in store. "And those who will walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God." (Galatians 6:16). There is a rule or standard for every Christian to believe and obey. Those who agree with and follow this standard (rule) receive God's blessings; peace and mercy will be upon them. These provide the identifying characteristics of behavior for all who abide in the doctrine of Christ ("that form of teaching" - Romans 6:17-18). Paul admonished young Timothy to hold fast and copy this model: "Retain the standard of sound words which you have heard from me, in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus." (2 Timothy 1:13 – KJV, "Hold fast the form of sound words". See also Philippians 3:16.). All of the young preachers were to tenaciously adhere to the pattern and copy the model given by inspiration, by which sameness would be maintained. There must be no deviations from the truth (2 John 9-11; Galatians 1:6-10).

The most effective teaching our parents accomplished with us was their teaching by example. Titus was urged "to be an example of good deeds, with purity in doctrine," (Titus 2:7). As such, he was an effective teacher of both (cf. 1 Timothy 4:12). Our Lord, in washing the disciples' feet, gave "an example that you also should do as I did to you." (John 13:13-17). The Lord impressed upon them the nature of humble service as a Christian. And let us not forget that "Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps," (1 Peter 2:21).

These patterns are to be held fast and copied in order to maintain the unity of the faith. New Testament patterns are revealed in order that Christians of any generation have the opportunity to demonstrate faithfulness to the Lord by refusing to deviate from sound (spiritually healthy) doctrine. The New Testament "blueprint" informs all disciples of how to please the Lord in many things: God's plan of salvation, the worship of the church, the organization and work of the church, and the name we are to wear as servants of God. To please God, He requires that we conform to His pattern, that we might be blameless in the day of Christ. Any departures from His models, any setting aside of His patterns is regarded as unfaithfulness. Notice what the apostle John declared, "We are from God; he who knows God listens to us; he who is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error." (1 John 4:6).

May we encourage you to study, worship and work with us in adherence to the patterns of Christ? May the Lord bless you as you carefully study the Holy Scriptures.

- Gary Smalley

- * "The mighty oak tree was once a little nut that held its ground!"
 - * "The tongue must be heavy in deed because so few people can hold it!"
 - * "Sorrow looks back, worry looks around, and faith looks up!"
 - * "It isn't difficult to make a mountain out of molehill, just add a little dirt!"
 - * "It makes no sense at all to put too much interest in the dollar!"
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What Must I Do To Be Saved?

HEAR THE GOSPEL

(Romans 10:14-17; John 20:30-31; Romans 1:15-17)

BELIEVE IN JESUS CHRIST

(Acts 8:37; John 8:24; Hebrews 11:6)

REPENT OF PAST SINS

(Luke 13:3; Acts 2:38; Acts 17:30)

CONFESS CHRIST

(Romans 10:9-10; Acts 8:37)

BE BAPTIZED

(Romans 6:3-4; Mark 16:15-16; Acts 2:38; Acts 8:36-39; 1 Peter 3:21)

LIVE A FAITHFUL LIFE

(Revelation 2:10; 2 Peter 1:5-11; John 15:1-8; Hebrews 10:23-25)