

ST. JOHN'S LUTHERAN CHURCH

Red Bud, Illinois

Adult Bible Class

“Cremation”

I. Definition

Cremation is the disposal of a human corpse by reducing the body to ashes in a fire.

II. History

The practice of cremation in primitive times was not common. In the ancient civilized world cremation became the standard for the disposal of dead bodies. The only cultures that did not practice cremation were the Egyptians, Chinese and Hebrew.

A. Greek

Very early in Greek history people were buried in groups or in large chamber tombs. This practice was replaced by individual burials and the gradual replacement of inhumation by cremation. There is ample evidence of cremation in the Greek culture going back to 900 BC (the age of Homer). A pit was dug into which was placed a clay pot containing the remains of the person. A person was cremated along with objects to enjoy in the afterlife. Warriors were buried along with weapons of war. Adults were cremated, but children were buried.

B. Germanic

The Roman historian Tacitus writes of the worship of the god Mercury in northern Europe during the first century AD. This god was called Wotan in Germany, Woden in England and Odin in Scandinavia (Wednesday is named after this god). He was thought to be lord of the dead. Death in battle was the ultimate fate of his worshippers. Human victims sacrificed to him were killed with a spear-thrust and hanging at the same time. Cremation also was part of his worship.

C. Hindu

The Hindu religion practiced in India made cremation a major part of its worship. Their teaching is that that fire-god, Agni, consumes the material body at cremation and carries the soul to the heavenly world where it lives with the gods in perfect, carefree bliss. Bodies of the dead are cremated on the shore of the holy Ganges River. Afterwards the ashes may be scattered on the water.

D. Christian Era

The early Christian Church followed the Old Testament practice by burying dead bodies. They saw these bodies as simply being “asleep” and awaiting the resurrection to eternal life. They called the burial place a *koimeterion* from the Greek word for a dormitory where people slumbered. It is from this word that we get our word _____. Perhaps under the influence of Christianity the practice of cremation passed away (pun intended) from Roman society by the fourth century AD. In the 8th century the Holy Roman Emperor Charlemagne made cremation a capital crime in his realm. Not until the 19th century was cremation “resurrected” in Western society.

III. The Old Testament

Burials: How and where are the bodies of the dead disposed of in these passages?

Genesis 23:1-4, 17-20 _____

Genesis 25:7-10 _____

Genesis 35:19-20 _____

Deuteronomy 34:5-6 _____

Cremations: Who and why were the people in these passages cremated?

Leviticus 20:14 _____

Leviticus 21:9 _____

Joshua 7:24-26 _____

1 Samuel 31:12 _____

2 Kings 23:19-20 _____

What is God's reaction to those who had carried out the cremation of the King of Edom?

Amos 2:1 This is what the Lord says: "For three sins of Moab, even for four, I will not turn back My wrath. Because he burned, as if to lime, the bones of Edom's king."

IV. Current Popularity

At the beginning of the 20th century the Christian Church rejected the practice of cremation. It often was associated with the practices of heathen religions. Those who supported it often did so as a rejection of God's resurrection of the dead, thinking that by cremation, they could foil God's plan to raise their bodies from the dead.

In 1962 fewer than five percent of the people who died were cremated. In 1963 the Roman Catholic Church changed its position on cremation not only by accepting it, but also producing an order of worship for the practice. In 1969 the Church of England also accepted it. By 1992 twenty percent of all deaths were cremations. This rose to 22% in 1996 and 27% in 2001. An estimate is that it will be 40% by 2010.

Our Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, believing that Scripture neither commands nor forbids cremation, has taken no official position on this practice. The Lutheran Worship Agenda (1982) includes this note, "If the body is to be cremated, the ashes of the deceased are interred later using, with appropriate modifications, the Committal." The Pastoral Care Companion (2007) that accompanies Lutheran Service Book includes this note in its section "Committal," "In the case of cremation, the ashes are to be buried or interred at a cemetery plot, mausoleum, crypt, or columbarium. The practice of scattering the ashes of the deceased to the elements is discouraged among Christians."

V. God's Creation and the Promise of Re-creation

How do the following passages help us to consider what to do with a deceased body?

Genesis 2:7 and 3:19 _____

(Psalms 16:9-11; 22:14-15 and 103:13-14 refer to the dust of death)

Daniel 12:1-2 _____

John 5:28-29 _____

1 Corinthians 15:42-44, 51-57 _____

Philippians 3:20-21 _____

VI. Arguments For the Practice of Cremation

- A. Conservation of Resources and Space
- B. Less Cost With Cremation
- C. Acceleration of the Natural Process of Decay
- D. Health Concerns in a Time of Epidemic
- E. Ease of Transport When a Person Has Died Far From Home

VII. Arguments Against the Practice of Cremation

- A. Burial Is the Better Witness to the Teaching of the Resurrection of the Dead
- B. Burial Is a Better Way to Honor a Body that has been a Temple of the Holy Spirit
- C. (Odd) Business Practices Resulting from Cremation: Urns, Jewelry, Spreading of Ashes