Question:

Burial or cremation. more and more Christians are opting for cremation for various reasons, such as more economic, easier etc. What is the Biblical viewpoint?

Answer:

Dear friends,

In deciding any question with ethical aspects, our first question should be whether God’s Word has anything to say on this subject. Our western society doesn't ask those questions anymore. Everything has to be practical, simple, economical or useful. But we as Christians are to be obedient to the Word of God.

Genesis is the book of ‘beginnings.’ It is the book that introduces many ‘firsts’ or ‘beginnings.’ It is therefore not surprising to find many references to the burial of the body. The only piece of land Abraham legally owned was the cave where he buried his wife and was later buried himself. Jacob gave command to be buried and so did Joseph, giving command that his bones were to be taken to Canaan. (Gen. 50:25) Although the Scriptures don’t specifically tell us, the burial of the body in those days was unique. The surrounding civilizations, with the exception of Egypt and very distant China, all burned the body of the deceased. Clearly, God’s people were distinct in this practice. In the time of the wilderness journey we read of Aaron’s burial (Deut 10:6). God buried Moses (Deut 34:5-6). So very consistently were people buried in the nation of Israel. On the other hand, God’s Word speaks about a judgment if someone wasn’t buried (Num. 25:4;Jer. 25:33).

Also in the NT, burial was the norm for believers. We don’t read in any of the Gospels about the burning of bodies. The Lord called Lazarus out of the grave and the young man of Nain was raised while on the way to his burial. Eventually the Lord Himself was buried. In the rest of the NT many references can be found to burial. Paul in 1 Cor. 15 speaks only about burial. When Paul uses the analogy of the seed cast into the ground, then this entire image doesn’t fit burning. A seed ‘burned' will never germinate into a ‘new body.’ Lastly, the NT refers several
times to the resurrection of the body of the believers. (Phil 3:21)

From this sketchy overview it is clear that burial is the accepted and sanctioned practice of the respectful disposal of the deceased bodies. There are times when bodies were burned or left unburied. But that was always in the context of a judgment. God burned up many disobedient Jews a few days after leaving Mt. Sinai (Num. 11:1-3). After Korah’s revolt, two hundred and fifty men were devoured by fire (Nu 16:35). Several severe offences were punishable by burning (Lev. 20:14; 21:19). In Joshua we read about the burning of Achan and his family after they were stoned to death. Later Jeremiah spoke the judgment of remaining unburied. (Jer. 16:4-6; 22:18-19) All in all it is clear that burning or cremation is associated with the curse.

Cremation isn’t a recent invention of a Western society. Prior to Christianity cremation was almost universal among Indo-European people and in North America. Hindus have burned their dead for centuries; it was common and fashionable among ancient wealthy Greeks and Romans. The main argument among the Romans was economical or convenience. However, in most ancient races cremation was for spiritual reasons. There was a fear that the spirit would return to the buried bodies to plague and terrify the living. For others the burning of the body would bring freedom for the spirit to enjoy the ‘after-life.’ As Christianity spread over the world, everywhere cremation ceased among the believers. One historian noted that you can trace the spread of Christianity in Europe by studying the cemeteries.

Already in 177 AD Christian martyrs were burned to mock their belief in the resurrection of the body. Somehow the heathens believed that by destroying the body they could prevent the resurrection. It needs not to be said, but it is clear that the resurrection of the body is in no way affected by the manner in which the bodies of the dead are disposed. Some have been eaten by sharks or burned as results of accidents. But that never stands in the way of God’s power.

After nearly 1800 years, in the countries where Christianity had entered, cremation was never considered as the way to dispose of the body. It is only in the late 1800’s that the voices for cremation are heard. Beginning with Italy, the practice slowly spread to other countries within Europe. It is noteworthy that the cremation practice reared itself always in the context of strong assaults upon the Christian faith from secular philosophy and scientific materialism. As the liberal theology invaded the church and the faith in the resurrection of the body decreased, so the acceptance for cremation grew.

Another aspect to consider is the dignity of our body. We have been created in the image of
God. Though fallen, there still is ‘enough dignity’ left that God instituted the death penalty for anyone who took the life of a fellow human. The reason is that “in the image of God made he man.” (Gen. 9:6) The body of the believers will be raised in a perfected state. That truth gives a dignity to the body in life and in death. It should also guide us in taking respectful care of the body of those who have deceased. Cremation is by definition a violent process of destruction. Incinerators in crematoria are fuelled up to reach temperatures between 800 and 1000 degrees Celsius. The left over bones are then broken down in what is effectively a tumble dryer with large steel balls.

In some way cremation is an attempt to escape the grim reality of death. All kinds of practices within our Western culture around the funeral are geared to hide the reality and smooth out the roughness of a death and burial. It can be argued that also cremation fits into this attempt to soften the reality of death. Yet it needs to be pointed out that all these attempts to ‘escape’ the reality do nothing to help the healing process; it rather complicates or hinders the proper healing.

In conclusion, all other pragmatic reasons and economic considerations have no ground. God’s will matters above all. Cities that cope with shortage of land because of their large populations will need to make critical choices to keep land plots available for burying the dead. It always strikes me how easily huge golf courses are built in new neighbourhoods. There seems to be no lack of land for that! In the end, it is all matter of priority. Our priority, however, needs to remain, “What will Thou have me to do?”

Pastor Vergunst