

Of Funerals, Caskets & Christian Stewardship

Some subjects are hard to discuss in our culture. Funerals are one of them.

And that's a shame, because it's a subject we really should discuss.

The Rock County Ministerial Association tackled the topic last week, with funeral director Jeffrey Hartquist explaining various funeral options now available. He spoke particularly about cremation, which is a growing trend.

Let me be candid: I don't like cremation.

It's not a matter about which the Bible speaks clearly, so I would hesitate to call cremation a sin. But I would hesitate even more to recommend it.

In the Bible, burial is the norm. After Adam sinned, the Lord told our first father that he would live and eat by the sweat of his brow "until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are, and to dust you will return" (Gen. 3:19). When Abraham died, his sons buried him in the cave he had bought to bury Sarah, his wife. Isaac's sons buried him and Rebekah in the same manner; and Jacob's sons carried him from Egypt to Canaan for burial.

This practice is not without symbolic significance. In 1 Cor. 15:35-53, we read that our bodies are buried much as seeds are sown – in the expectation that something greater one day will come forth. When Christ returns, those who have died in Him will be up to meet Christ in the air – their bodies rising from the grave, to be reunited with their souls (1 Thess. 4:13-18).

That's our hope, as Christians: the reunion of our perfected bodies and our purified souls. When we bury the bodies of our loved ones, we testify to our hope in a powerful, visible way.

Cremation, on the other hand, involves burning the body – a practice which involves different symbolism.

In Scripture, the burning of bodies indicated judgment against those who embraced depravity (Lev. 20:14; 21:9; etc.). It was by fire that God expressed His judgment in destroying Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19:24) and those who rebelled against Him (Lev. 10:1-3). Burning represents the judgment due to those who are cut off from the Lord (John 15:6; Matt. 13:30,40).

Sometimes, the burning of a body can't be avoided. (Car wrecks and house fires come to mind.) That says nothing about the one who died; it's not a sign of judgment. But neither is it the kind of symbolism we should be celebrate.

Having said that, I sympathize with one of the most common reasons for choosing cremation: the cost.

Funerals are *expensive*. The services of the funeral director and staff at Hartquist Funeral Home (which seems average for the area) cost nearly \$2,400. Transportation of the body is \$250. Embalming and preparing the body costs another \$1,000. A one-day visitation at the funeral home adds \$350 to the bill. There's a \$270 charge for using the hearse.

Tallied up, the standard costs for a traditional funeral service with visitation come to \$4,785. That doesn't include the casket, burial vault, cemetery plot and grave opening charges. And casket costs usually *start* at \$1,000.

Cremations can offer substantial savings. At the least, there is no need for a burial vault, and a cemetery plot and casket become optional. Those are major incentives for folks who want to be good stewards.

But there also are other options.

I started thinking about those other options last summer, when I read about the burial of Rev. Billy Graham's wife. Known for her humility, Ruth Graham wasn't happy with the thought of her family spending thousands of dollars on a designer coffin. So she was buried in one of two coffins that she and her husband had purchased from the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola. Prisoners at that facility craft coffins (mostly for inmates) using birch plywood and foam liners. The simple, stately result cost the Graham family \$215 each.

An Internet search revealed that there are a variety of options for easing the cost of burial. Businesses like FuneralDepot.com and DignifiedCaskets.com sell steel caskets of the sort used by most funeral homes for prices starting at around \$800. Companies like ABC Caskets Factory (www.abettercasket.com) sell wooden coffins at prices starting around \$500. You can even find them on E-Bay, where Ozark Caskets sells steel coffins for \$459 and up.

For a hands-on approach, Kent Casket Industries (www.kentcasket.com) sells unfinished pine caskets for about \$420 (\$525 with shipping) that can be stored flat and assembled when needed. Other Web sites and books offer woodworking plans that let you built from scratch.

Mr. Hartquist says the Federal Trade Commission requires funeral homes to accept caskets obtained from a third-party. They also must allow the refusal of services like embalming (\$715) or rides to the cemetery (\$95 per car).

"Cutting funeral costs" – the whole discussion sounds morbid, doesn't it?

But it's something we should think about. We're called to be good stewards of that which the Lord has given (Matt. 25:14-30; Luke 16:10-13). And I haven't found a single reason from Scripture to favor a \$3,000 casket more than one made or purchased for \$300. What's more, that kind of savings eliminates one of the most common incentives for cremation: the cost.

I don't know what options might be best for your family. I don't even know (yet) what options might be best for mine.

But I do know that the time to consider and discuss those options is *now* – in the clear light of day, while our minds are not clouded by grief. I plan to get a price list from the local funeral home and to discuss the options with my family.

And together, we'll work to create a plan that allows us to be good stewards and enables us to witness to our eternal hope of life, even in death.