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The immortality of the soul: Could Christianity survive without it? (Part 2 of 2)

Editor's note: In part 1 of this two-part series, the author traced the mortalist viewpoint through the continental and English Reformation. He concluded the first part by listing theologians, scholars, and philosophers throughout the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries who believed in the mortalist viewpoint.

Throughout the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries a succession of able and prominent writers were persuaded of the essential correctness of the mortalist viewpoint and felt strongly enough about it to publish their convictions for their contemporaries and posterity. What, then, did they believe? Constraints of time and space will permit us to note only three or four of the main planks in the mortalist platform.

The authority of Scripture, correctly interpreted

Fundamentally, they believed in the Bible, that is, in the authority of Scripture as the source of revealed truth, and the final court of appeal in all controverted matters. But so did those whom they opposed, the immortalists. Wherein lies the difference? We may detect three points of emphasis and divergence in mortalist theology.

First, they insisted that what they believed was a correct methodology of biblical interpretation. This meant that the Bible should be interpreted literally, unless it was self-evident from the text itself that it was not to be so understood. An important case in point was the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31), frequently advanced by immortalists as textual evidence of the soul's existence beyond the grave. Mortalists argued that the story was inadmissible since a parable cannot form the basis of doctrine. Henry Layton says, "We take it not for proof, because it was but a parable, spoken without design to teach anything concerning the State of Man after death."[1] Overton likewise insists, "There was never such a man as Dives or Lazarus, or ever such a thing happened, no more than Jotham's trees did walk and talk."[2]

Second, no doctrine should be established on a single text or passage, but the whole weight of biblical evidence should be taken into consideration before any conclusion was reached. Mortalists were highly suspicious of doctrines formulated on less than all the evidence available. Layton contends that he is no "idolizer of the Scripture," but holds that "whatsoever doctrines or opinions can be proved by a strong current or stream of Scripture texts, ought to be accepted and believed as absolute truth and the very word of God."[3]

Third, and even more important, is the place of reason in the interpretation of Scripture. Richard Overton believed that the subordination of reason in biblical interpretation had contributed to the development of the innate immortality doctrine. The existence of the soul as an entity separate from the body, able to think and feel apart from the body, and its supposed departure either to heaven or hell at the moment of death, are all contrary to reason.[4] The subtitle of Layton's compendious work, *A Search after Souls,* emphasized the importance of reason in theological and philosophical inquiry as well as in the debate over the soul, "The Immortality of a Humane [sic] Soul, Theologically, Philosophically, and Rationally Considered." Similarly, while Milton regards Scripture as the final authority, as his *Treatise on Christian Doctrine* repeatedly demonstrates, it is not Scripture read blindly or subjectively. Thus to the "testimonies of Scripture" Milton contends "may be added . . . arguments from reason" in "confirmation" of biblical doctrine.[5]

John Locke, perhaps, shows the best example of mortalism's insistence on reason as necessary to biblical interpretation. His great theological treatise on the rational nature of authentic Christian faith,

The Reasonableness of Christianity, begins with a lengthy and reasoned exposition of the thnetopsychist view of man, commencing with the assertion, "To understand therefore what we are restored to by Jesus Christ, we must consider what the Scripture shews we lost by Adam." The process is one of rational consideration. From that point on, he assumes that true Christian faith is essentially reasonable, that is to say, it is always consistent with reason, sometimes beyond reason, but never contrary to reason. It was reason applied in the interpretation of the divine revelation in Scripture that led Locke to an unequivocal thnetopsychism.[6]

Human nature and destiny

Approached from these standpoints, the Bible led to a mortalist eschatology. In this context, the Genesis account of human origins is crucial to a correct understanding of human nature and destiny. A key text was Genesis 2:7: "And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul."[7] Overton's interpretation of this text is representatively mortalist. When God imparted the breath of life to the lifeless form of Adam, the man became "a living soul." Overton says, "That which was formed or made of the earth became a living soul, or creature, by breathing . . . the breath of life (and) that lifeless lumpe became a living soul."[8] Overton then adds an important rider, "that which was breathed before it was breathed, was not a living soul."[9] It was merely breath which, when infused into the body, caused a living soul, a man, to exist.

Death, as the reversal of this process, occurs when a person ceases to breathe, when the breath leaves the body. When that happens, the person dies. He or she ceases to exist. The "soul" is no more because the living person is no more. Overton states death "returns man to what he was before he was, that is, not to be." After death, Overton says, "Man is void of actual Being... he absolutely IS NOT."[10] Priestley similarly affirms that God made the whole man from the dust of the ground, arguing "God made this man, who was lifeless at first, to breathe and live . . . the substance which was formed of the dust of the earth became a living soul, that is, became alive, by being made to breathe."[11]

Priestley, like all other mortalists, returns to the resurrection at the last day as the key to the future and immortality, for once again the process of death is then reversed. Although life ceases at the moment of death, this is not the end for the believer, for the temporary extinction of life at death is not the same as annihilation. When we say *a candle is extinguished* "we surely do not mean it is annihilated, that there is nothing left to light again."[12] This illustrates "precisely" what Paul had in mind by the resurrection of the dead. Priestley maintains, with Tyndale and all other mortalists, that Paul consistently stresses the resurrection as the gateway to immortality. So he concludes that human hope of a future life "depends upon the resurrection of the dead, and has no other foundation whatever."[13]

Origins of the immortal soul doctrine

Almost as important in mortalist minds as the biblical teaching on human nature and destiny, were the origins of the immortal soul doctrine. Once again there was widespread concurrence among mortalist writers in relation to this question, and once again Layton and Priestley may be taken as representative spokesmen.

Layton's collected works were published posthumously in two volumes, in 1706, under the title *A Search After Souls, or the Immortality of a Humane Soul, Theologically, Philosophically and Rationally Considered.* Layton's search began late in life, in 1690, after reading Richard Baxter's *Dying Thoughts,* in which Baxter re-affirmed the soul's ascent to heaven to be with Christ, stressing "the necessity of believing it." Layton remarked, "It seemed an over-great morsel to swallow all this together,"[14] embarking on a tireless campaign of clarification and refutation that lasted for the rest of his life. Layton came to believe early in this search that the idea of an immortal

THE GENESIS ACCOUNT OF HUMAN ORIGINS IS CRUCIAL TO A CORRECT UNDERSTANDING OF HUMAN NATURE AND DESTINY.

soul ante-dated Christianity by several centuries and that it could be found in many pre-Christian Greek philosophers, noting in particular Pythagoras, Anaxagoras and Plato, adding that most of the early Greek and Latin church fathers did not accept it.[15]

Priestley's *History of the Corruptions of Christianity* included a brief survey of the history of mortalism, in which he maintained that the first Christians did not believe in an immortal soul. The distinction between body and soul, "originally a doctrine of Oriental philosophy," had in later centuries spread into "the Western part of the world," a process that Priestley traces back through Greek thought to its earliest Egyptian, Chaldean, and possibly Persian and Indian origins, arguing that these pre-Christian pagan views had "exceedingly altered and debased the true Christian system."[16] Although some third-century Christians in Arabia kept mortalism alive, eventually they capitulated to the teachings of Origen. Priestley maintains that most of the later fathers were Platonists who "borrowed many of their explanations of Scripture doctrines from that system."[17] Thus Platonic dualism infiltrated the medieval church, resulting in the doctrine of purgatory that was built on the foundation of the immortal soul and eventually came to dominate medieval eschatology. Mortalists, in general, would have unhesitatingly concurred with that.

Immortalism and the redemptive work of Christ

Perhaps the most serious charge brought against the traditional view of the soul's immortality was that it undermined the redemptive work of Christ. We have already caught a hint of this concern in Tyndale's introduction to the second edition of his New Testament in 1534. In fact, Tyndale is much more explicit. In his famous dialogue with the erudite and very orthodox Sir Thomas More, Tyndale accuses More of proposing a way to eternal life contrary to that set forth in Scripture. The debate came to focus on the classic Pauline passages in 1 Corinthians 15 and 1 Thessalonians 4, which deal with the resurrection at the last day. With heavy irony, Tyndale challenges More:

> Nay, Paul, thou art unlearned, go to Master More and learn a new way. We be not most miserable, though we rise not again, for our souls go to heaven as soon as we be dead, and are there in as great joy as Christ that is risen again. And I marvel that Paul had not comforted the Thessalonians with that doctrine, if he had wist it, that the souls of their dead had been in joy, as he did with resurrection, that their dead should rise again. If the souls be in heaven in as great glory as the angels, after your doctrine, shew me what cause should be of the resurrection?[18]

Burns comments of Tyndale's robust psychopannychism, "He was certain that God had clearly announced that the resurrection of the body was the beginning of the whole salvation of Christians, not just an additional reward for souls already in joy."[19]

Two hundred and twenty-five years later, in 1756 to be precise, Peter Peckard published the first of three works in which he persuasively set forth the thnetopsychist understanding. "Scripture expressly asserteth the mortality of man, and the restoration to life from that mortality by Jesus Christ,"[20] he wrote. This theme ran throughout Peckard's work. The doctrine of the soul's immortality negated the redemptive work of Christ at its very heart, effectively rendering that work superfluous and unnecessary. In Peckard's own words:

> Jesus Christ came into the world on purpose to redeem men from death and to give them life and immortality. It is very certain that he could not redeem them from that state in which they were not, nor give them that life and immortality which they already possessed. So that by this scheme [the natural immortality of the soul] the whole notion of redemption by Jesus Christ is absolutely and entirely destroyed.[21]

Without question, this exists as the most damning accusation brought by mortalists against the inherent immortality of the soul. That doctrine, mortalists were convinced, was not only unbiblical, it was essentially and literally anti-Christian.

Conclusion

While this essay has concentrated on the views of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English mortalists, it will not be inappropriate, in conclusion, to note that the mortalist interpretation of Scripture, or crucial elements of it, have survived until the present time. Two examples must suffice. The work of Oscar Cullman, cited at the beginning of this paper (see part 1) as a contemporary advocate of mortalist theology, appeared in time between them.

It is now 75 years since William Temple, then archbishop of York and shortly to become archbishop of Canterbury, published *Nature, Man and God*. Dr. Temple wrote, "Man is not by nature immortal, but capable of immortality." The "prevailing doctrine of the New Testament," he said, "is that God alone is immortal . . . and that He offers immortality to man not universally but conditionally."[22] It would be difficult to find a better summary of the mortalist position.

Just a few years have passed since the publication of N. T. Wright's latest book, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*.[23] Dr. Wright, the bishop of Durham and one of today's leading New Testament scholars, speaks of the infiltration of Christian thought by Greek philosophy and says, among many other things, "at least since the

Middle Ages the influence of Greek philosophy has been very marked, resulting in a future expectation that bears far more resemblance to Plato's vision of souls entering into disembodied bliss than to the biblical picture of new heavens and new earth."[24] Wright's consistent and repeated argument is that the resurrection at the last day, posited on the resurrection of Jesus Himself, is the key to immortality and eternal life.[25]

So, the question presents itself once again, Could Christianity survive without the immortality of the soul? If Christian history and historical theology are in any way reliable guides, the answer must be in the affirmative. M

1 Henry Layton, *Observations Upon a Short Treatise* (1697), 43.
2 Richard Overton, *Mans Mortalitie* (1644), 31. The parable of Jotham's trees is in Judges 9.
3 Henry Layton, *A Reply to a Letter Dated Sept.14, 1702* (1703), 70.
4 Richard Overton, *Man Wholly Mortal* (1655), 9–11, 33–35.
5 Milton, "Treatise on Christian Doctrine," in *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton,* D. M. Wolfe, ed., (New Haven and London, 1953–1982), IV: 191, 480.
6 John Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity, As Delivered in the Scriptures* (1695), 1. For a more extended discussion of Locke's *Reasonableness* and its significance and the significance of reason per se in Locke's theology, see Ball, *The Soul Sleepers,* 119–126, and Victor Nuovo, ed., *John Locke, Writings on Religion* (Oxford: Oxford, 2002), xliv-liii.
7 Quoted from the Authorized, or King James Version, the translation most used by scholars and writers after its publication in 1611.
8 Overton, *Man Wholly Mortal* (1655), 29.
9 Ibid., 30.
10 Overton, *Mans Mortalitie* (1644), 6, 7; emphasis in the original.
11 Joseph Priestley, *Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit* (1777), 115.
12 Ibid., 164
13 Ibid., 252.
14 Henry Layton, *A Search After Souls and Spiritual Operations in Man* (1691), 3.
15 Henry Layton, *Observations upon Mr. Wadsworth's Book of the Souls Immortality* (1692), 8, 16.
16 Joseph Priestley, *History of the Corruptions of Christianity* (1782), I: 156, 168, 266–8.
17 Priestley, *Disquisitions,* 294. Plato's immortalism appears in several of his works, notably the *Phaedo* (c.360 B.C.), in which Plato reflects the thinking of Socrates. The *Phaedo* was first translated into Latin only in 1160. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (p. 1300) notes that "the authority" accorded to Plato's teachings "throughout the Middle Ages, did much to secure for many Platonic notions a permanent place in Latin Christianity."
18 William Tyndale, "An Answer Unto Sir Thomas More's Dialogue" in *The Works of the English Reformers: William Tyndale and John Frith,* T. Russell, ed., (1831), II: 123.
19 Burns, *Christian Mortalism*, 101, 102.
20 Peter Peckard, *Observations on the Doctrine of an Intermediate State Between Death and the Resurrection* (1756), 4.
21 Ibid., 19. Peckard further explained, "By allowing men a natural principle of life, we do in effect hinder them from coming to Christ that they may have life." Ibid., 39.
22 William Temple, *Nature, Man and God* (1934), xxx, 461–463. See also his article, "The Idea of Immortality in Relation to Religion and Ethics," in *The Congregational Quarterly* X (1932), 17 in which he also called for a radical re-evaluation of the traditional doctrine of eternal torment in hell. Temple was a contemporary of the influential Oxford Old Testament scholar H. Wheeler Robinson, who in 1911 published a work with similar sentiments under the title *The Christian Doctrine of Man.*
23 N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2008).
24 Ibid., 80. Dr. Wright points out that Christian minds have been conditioned by Greek philosophy "whether or not we've ever read any of it." Ibid., 251.
25 Ibid., *passim,* noting in particular the index as a pointer to Wright's insistence on resurrection.

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