

# POPULAR BELIEFS

## ARE THEY BIBLICAL?



*Samuele Bacchiocchi, Ph. D.*

Biblical  
perspectives

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# POPULAR BELIEFS

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*ARE THEY BIBLICAL?*

[Part 1]

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[PART 1]

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## INTRODUCTION:

**S**ometimes the story behind a book is as interesting as the book itself. Let me share with you what compelled me to write *Popular Beliefs: Are They Biblical?* Three major factors stand out in my mind.

The first factor is the frequent discussions I have with Christians of different denominations about their beliefs. Participants at my weekend seminars, as well as subscribers to my Endtime Issues Newsletter, often ask me: Why are some of my beliefs biblically wrong? How can they be unbiblical, when they are held by the vast majority of Christians?

To answer these questions, I have devoted the past thirty years of my life researching and writing 18 books which examine some of today's popular beliefs from a biblical perspective. Furthermore, a large number of the 200 Endtime Issues Newsletters which I have emailed during the past 10 years to over 35,000 subscribers, examine popular beliefs historically and biblically. This book represents an expansion of several studies I posted in my newsletters. These are readily accessible at [www.biblicalperspectives.com/endtimeissues/](http://www.biblicalperspectives.com/endtimeissues/)

### **My Passion for Biblical and Historical Accuracy**

The second factor is my passion for biblical and historical accuracy. An example is the five years I spent at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, Italy, investigating for my doctoral dissertation the popular belief that the change from Sabbath to Sunday worship came about by the

authority of Christ and the apostles to commemorate the Lord's Resurrection.

The findings of my dissertation *From Sabbath to Sunday* are summarized in chapter 6 of this book, entitled "Sunday Sacredness." My study shows that the popular belief of Sunday sacredness lacks both biblical and historical support. Historically, I found that the origin of Sunday observance began approximately one century after Christ's death, during the reign of Emperor Hadrian (117-138), as a result of an interplay of political, social, pagan, and religious factors.

The conclusions of my investigation were well-accepted by the examining commission made up of five distinguished Jesuit scholars. An indication is the gold medal of Pope Paul VI awarded to me for earning the *summa cum laude* distinction in my school work and dissertation *From Sabbath to Sunday*. This experience has greatly encouraged me to re-examine the biblical validity and historical accuracy of other popular beliefs, such as those examined in this book.

### **The Demand for a Biblical Re-examination of Popular Beliefs**

The third factor that has motivated me to write this book is the increasing demand for a study that can help sincere and open-minded Christians to test the validity of their beliefs on the basis of the normative authority of the Bible. More and more Christians today are questioning the biblical validity of some of their denominational beliefs. This is partly due to the new climate of intellectual freedom that encourages people to take a fresh look at social, political, and religious issues. In Western countries most people no longer feel bound to blindly accept the beliefs of their churches. They want to find out for themselves if what they have been taught is based on biblical teachings or on church traditions.

Take for example the popular belief in the immortality of the soul which is examined at length in chapter 2 of this book. For centuries most Christians have accepted and still accept as biblical truth the dualistic view of human nature, as consisting of a material, mortal body and a spiritual, immortal soul. In recent years, however, a host of Bible scholars, philosophers, and scientists have re-examined this belief and found it to be contrary to Scripture, reason and science. Over one hundred studies produced by

Catholic and Protestant scholars are cited in my book *Immortality or Resurrection? A Biblical Study on Human Nature and Destiny*.

The massive scholarly assault on the traditional dualistic view of human nature, will eventually filter through the rank and file of Christian denominations. When this happens, it will cause considerable intellectual and personal crisis in the lives of Christians accustomed to believing that at death their souls break loose from their bodies and continue to exist either in the beatitude of paradise or in the torment of hell. Many Christians will be sorely disappointed to discover that their belief in life after death, has no biblical basis whatsoever. The Bible clearly teaches that the dead in Christ rest in the grave until resurrection morning.

What is true for the popular belief in the immortality of the soul is also true of other popular beliefs examined in this book: Purgatory, Hell as Eternal Torment, the Intercession of the Saints, the Mediation of Mary, Sunday Sacredness, Speaking in Tongues, Once Saved Always Saved, and Infant Baptism. Most of these popular beliefs trace their origin, not from Scripture, but from the Platonic dualistic view of human nature, consisting of a mortal body and an immortal soul. The adoption of this pagan belief in the second century, has had a devastating impact on Christian beliefs and practices.

### **Bible Scholars Find some Popular Beliefs to be Unbiblical**

The ten popular beliefs examined in this book have been investigated by scholars of different persuasions. In most cases they found them to be contrary to biblical teachings. Some of the findings of these studies are cited in this book where a chapter is devoted to each popular belief.

There is no question that Biblical scholarship is bound to cause a great deal of existential anxiety to millions of Christians who will be surprised to discover that some of their popular and traditional beliefs lack biblical support.

The purpose of this study is not to intensify such anxiety, but to encourage all Christians committed to the normative authority of the Scripture, to re-examine their traditional beliefs and reject those which are proven to be unbiblical. The Christian hope for a personal and cosmic redemption must

be grounded on the unmistakable teachings of God's Word, not on ecclesiastical traditions.

### **Importance of this Book on *Popular Beliefs: Are They Biblical?***

This research project has been very expensive in time and money. During this past year I have invested an average of 15 hours a day on this manuscript, because I believe it is desperately needed to call out of Babylon many sincere people who are sincerely seeking to know and to do the revealed will of God.

There are million of sincere Christians who do not realize that most of their popular beliefs are biblically wrong, while our Adventist beliefs are biblically right. This book *Popular Beliefs: Are they Biblical?* is designed to help these sincere Christians to re-examine their beliefs in the light of the normative authority of Scripture.

At this time our Adventist Church has not no compelling witnessing book that can help sincere people understand why their popular beliefs are biblically wrong, and our Adventist beliefs are biblically correct. This is what makes *Popular Beliefs: Are they Biblical?* so urgently needed. Adventists who have been looking for a book to give their friends who question about our Adventist beliefs, will be glad to know that finally such book is available. They will be glad to give to their friends *Popular Beliefs: Are They Biblical?* because the book exposes false teachings and affirms biblical truths in a calm, dispassionate, and objective way.

### **My Sincere Hope**

I have written this book with the earnest desire to help Christians of all persuasions to re-examine their popular beliefs in the light of the normative authority of the Bible. At a time when most Christians still hold to popular beliefs that derive from human traditions rather than from biblical revelation, it is imperative to recover those biblical truths that God has revealed for our eternal salvation.

It is my fervent hope that this book, fruit of many months of dedicated research, will help Christians of all persuasions to "come out" of the

Babylonian confusion of popular but unbiblical beliefs, and accept God's glorious plan for our present life and our future destiny.

**HOW TO ORDER *POPULAR BELIEFS: ARE THEY BIBLICAL?***

You can order *Popular Beliefs: Are they Biblical?* at the introductory prices given above, in four different ways:

(1) **ONLINE:** By clicking here:

[http://www.biblicalpherspectives.com/cart/catalog/index.php?cPath=26\\_35](http://www.biblicalpherspectives.com/cart/catalog/index.php?cPath=26_35)

(2) **PHONE:** By calling us at (269) 471-2915 to give us your credit card number and postal address.

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## Chapter 1

# THE NATURE OF THE BIBLE

## *Free from Errors or Full of Errors?*

**T**he logical starting point of our examination of the biblical

validity of some popular beliefs, is a study of the prevailing views of the nature of the Bible itself. This is an important starting point, because what people believe about the nature of the Bible, ultimately determines how they define and test their beliefs.

There are two major views of the nature of the Bible. They are known as “biblical errancy,” that is, “the Bible is full of errors,” and “biblical inerrancy,” that is, “the Bible is free from errors.” Each of these views is subject to a variety of interpretations. For the purpose of our study, we will limit our analysis to the main teachings of each view.

Biblical errancy is the view of liberal critics who maintain that the Bible is a strictly human, error-ridden book, devoid of supernatural revelations and miraculous manifestations. Consequently, the Old and New

Testaments are strictly human literary productions that partake of the shortcomings of their human authors.

By contrast, conservative evangelicals believe in the total inerrancy of the Bible. They affirm that the Bible is absolutely inerrant, that is, without error in its original manuscripts. For some, the inerrancy of the Bible extends to every reference to history, geography, chronology, cosmology, and science.

This chapter endeavors to show that both the errancy and inerrancy beliefs undermine the authority of the Bible by making it either too-human or too-divine. This reminds us that heresies come in different forms. Sometimes they openly reject biblical authority and teachings, while at other times they subtly distort scriptural authority and teachings.

### **Objectives of the Chapter**

This chapter examines the controversy over the errancy/inerrancy of the Bible. These opposing popular beliefs are championed by liberal critics on the one hand and by conservative evangelicals on the other. Our procedure will be first to trace briefly the historical origin of each movement and then to evaluate their teachings from a biblical perspective.

To place the current controversy in a historical perspective, brief mention will be made of how the circulation of the Bible has been opposed outside and inside the church. This will help us to understand the relentless efforts of the Evil One to prevent the message of God's revelation from reaching sincere people.

The chapter is divided in four parts. The first mentions briefly some past attempts to prevent the circulation of the Bible by Roman Emperors, the Catholic Church, English kings, Protestant church leaders, and communists governments.

The second part examines Biblical Criticism—commonly known as Higher Criticism. This movement has been largely responsible during the past three centuries for undermining biblical authority.

The third part looks at the popular belief in biblical inerrancy as taught by a large number of evangelicals who maintain that God guided the minds of the Bible writers in such a way that they were prevented from making any error. For many the Bible is supposed to be without error, not only with respect to religious teachings, but also in such areas as geography, astronomy, history, chronology, and the natural sciences. We will show that this teaching overlooks the human dimension of Scripture.

The last part sets forth the Seventh-day Adventist understanding of the inspiration and authority of the Bible. We shall see that Adventists hold to a balanced view of the inspiration of the Bible, by acknowledging that its source is divine, the writers are human, and their writings contain divine thoughts in human language. Properly understood the humanity of the Bible enhances its divine origin and authority.

## **Part 1**

# **HISTORICAL ATTACKS AGAINST THE BIBLE**

### **Roman Emperors Attempted to Destroy the Bible**

During the first three centuries some Roman emperors sought to uproot Christianity by destroying the Bible. For example, on February 23, 303 A. D. emperor Diocletian decreed that every copy of the Bible was to be handed over to the Roman police to be burned. Thousands of valuable

Biblical manuscripts were burned in public squares. Some Christians lost their lives for refusing to hand over their Bibles.

The aim of the imperial decree was to eliminate the presence of the Christian religion by suppressing its guiding light and normative authority. The reason given by leading philosophers and government officials was that Christianity was largely responsible for the socio-economic crises that were plaguing the empire at that time.

### **The Bible Outlawed in Moslem Countries**

With the rise of Islam in the seventh century, the Bible has been consistently outlawed in strict Moslem countries. To this very day distribution of Bibles is strictly forbidden in Moslem countries. Countless Christians have lost their lives for attempting to distribute Bible and/or share its teachings to receptive Moslems.

The success of ruthless Moslem rulers to uproot the Bible and Christianity is evident in the countries they conquered. For example, prior to the Moslem conquest of the seventh century, the North African countries of Lybia, Tunisia, Marocco, Algeria, were flourishing Christian nations that produced such church leaders as Augustine and Tertullian. Today, Christians and the Bible are practically non-existent in these countries.

The circulation of the Bible has also suffered from within Christianity at the hands of the Catholic Church, English kings, and Protestant church leaders. More recently, communist regimes also have attempted to prevent the circulation of the Bible and to discredit its teachings. Each of the above powers in different ways have assailed the Bible by preventing its circulation among the laity.

### **Catholic Attempts to Prevent the Reading of the Bible**

Historically the Catholic Church has been opposed to the translation of the Bible in the common languages of the people and to its circulation among the laity. The right to read and teach the Bible was reserved to the clergy.

For example, the Synod of Toulouse in 1229 A. D., presided over by a papal legate, celebrated the close of the Albigensian crusades by perfecting the code of the Inquisition and forbidding lay Christians to possess copies of the Bible. Canon 14 reads: “We prohibit also that the laity should be permitted to have the books of the Old or New Testament; unless anyone from motive of devotion should wish to have the Psalter [Psalms] or the Breviary for divine offices or the hours of the blessed Virgin; but we most strictly forbid their having any translation of these books.”<sup>1</sup>

A similar decree was promulgated at the Council of Tarragona in A. D. 1234. The Second Canon rules that “No one may possess the books of the Old and New Testaments in the Romance language, and if anyone possesses them he must turn them over to the local bishop within eight days after the promulgation of this decree, so that they may be burned . . .”<sup>2</sup>

In its fourth session, the Council of Trent (8 April 1546) reiterated the unmistakable Catholic opposition to the distribution of Scriptures by Bible Societies because “It is manifest, from experience, that if the Holy Bible, translated into the vulgar tongue [common language], be indiscriminately allowed to everyone, the temerity of men will cause more evil than good to arise from it”<sup>3</sup>

In his two encyclicals *Qui Pluribus* and *Nostis et Nobiscum*, promulgated respectively on November 9, 1846 and December 8, 1848, Pope Pius IX warned the Italian Archbishops and Bishops against the Bible Societies, saying: “Under the protection of the Bible Societies which

have long since been condemned by this Holy See, they distribute to the faithful under the pretext of religion, the Holy Bible in vernacular translations. Since these infringe the Church's rules, they are consequently subverted and most daringly twisted to yield a vile meaning. So you realize very well what vigilant and careful efforts you must make to inspire in your faithful people an utter horror of reading these *pestilential books*. Remind them explicitly with regard to divine scripture that no man, relying on his own wisdom, is able to claim the privilege of rashly twisting the scriptures to his own meaning in opposition to the meaning which holy mother Church holds and has held.”<sup>4</sup>

By calling the Bibles distributed by Bible Societies “*pestilential books*” to be treated by faithful Catholics with “utter horror,” Pious IX clearly expresses the historic Catholic condemnation of the reading of the Bible by lay people. The reason is the reading of the Bible has led countless Catholics to discover that their fundamental beliefs are based on ecclesiastical tradition rather than biblical authority.

### **The Waldenses Persecuted for Distributing the Bible**

For centuries the Waldenses faced physical, civil, and economic persecutions at the hand of the Catholic House of Savoy for translating and distributing portions of the Bible. The most cruel massacre of the innocent Waldenses took place in the Italian Piedmont valleys in 1655 by the army of Charles Emmanuel II, the Catholic Duke of Savoy. The whole Protestant world was shocked by this brutal massacre. Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658), Lord Protector of England, protested vigorously and John Milton, his foreign secretary and poet, dedicated this famous sonnet of *Paradise Lost* to the thousand of slaughtered Waldenses.

“Avenge, O Lord, thy slaughtered saints, whose bones

Lie scattered on the Alpine mountains cold,

Even them who kept thy truth so pure of old,

When all our fathers worshipped stocks and stones.”

### **The Bible in the Experience of our Family in Italy**

Incidentally, it was a Waldensian fellow carpenter who loaned a Bible to my father, while he was still a young devout Catholic. Reading that Bible proved to be a turning point in my father’s religious experience, as well as in the future of our family. When father sought the help of a priest to clarify Bible texts which contradicted Catholic teachings, the priest abruptly snatched away the Bible from my father’s hands, saying: “This book will breed only confusion and unrest to your soul. Leave it with me.” My father lost his Bible and had great difficulty in buying another copy, because the main supplier was the British and Foreign Bible Society which operated secretly out of a nameless apartment.

I experienced first hand the same Catholic opposition to the circulation of the Bible during the four Summers I spent in Italy (1952-1956) selling Bibles supplied to me by the British and Foreign Bible Society. Each Summer I earned a scholarship to attend our Academy in Florence by selling Bibles and religious books. On numerous occasions devout Catholics frantically sought me out to take back the Bibles they bought, because their priest told them that they were Protestant Bibles that would contaminate their home.

It is only since the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) that the Catholic Church has encouraged its members to read annotated Catholic Bibles. This recent decision has not significantly increased the reading of the Bible by Catholic, because in Catholic countries the Bible is still perceived to be a book for priests to read. The result is that for the vast majority of Catholics are still biblically illiterate.

## **Protestants' Attempts to Prevent the Circulation of the Bible**

Surprisingly, even Protestant rulers and church leaders have attempted to prevent the translation and circulation of the Bible. For example, Cuthbert Tunstall, Bishop of London, strongly opposed the efforts of William Tyndale (1494-1536) to translate and publish the Bible in English.

Tyndale, a brilliant Bible scholar trained at Oxford and Cambridge, was greatly distressed by the ignorance of the clergy and laity about the Bible. He determined to educate the English people about the Word of God by translating it in their own language. But, he faced enormous opposition from both secular and religious powers in England. Consequently, he was forced to go to Germany to continue his English translation of the New Testament.

In 1526 the first 3000 copies of the octavo edition of Tyndale's English New Testament were published in Worms, Germany. When copies reached England, Bishop Tunstall ordered them to be collected and burned at St. Paul's Cross in London. Eventually, Tyndale's New Testament became the basis for the King James translation.

Tyndale was relentlessly attacked for daring to translate the Bible into English. He was attacked not only by London Bishop Tunstall, but also by William Warham, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and by Thomas Moore, the Chancellor of the English Parliament. These men sent secret agents to trap him as he moved around from his Antwerp base. He was finally arrested and imprisoned in the Castle of Vilvorde, a few miles from Brussels. Early in October 1536 he was strangled in the courtyard of the castle. The effectiveness of the opposition to Tyndale's English translation of the New Testament was such, that of the 18,000 copies that were smuggled to England, only two known copies remain.



## Communists Attacks Against the Bible

In the past 100 years Communist governments have attempted to discredit the Bible and to prevent its circulation in their countries. They have used both educational and legal measures. Educationally, people have been taught that the Bible is a superstitious fairy tale book to be rejected by enlightened communist minds. Legally, many people have been arrested and imprisoned for attempting to smuggle Bibles into communist countries.

Autocratic political and religious systems feel threatened by the Bible because its message summons people to give priority to God in their thinking and living. When people accept the God of biblical revelation, making Him first and supreme in their lives, they will not give in to the demands of autocratic political or religious rulers who want the absolute allegiance to their persons, teachings, or parties.

**Conclusion.** The past attempts to suppress the Bible by burning it or banning it, have proven to be futile. Christians have been willing to suffer torture and death, rather than denying its truths which made them free. The Bible remains unchallenged year after year as the world's best seller. It is still the greatest force for the moral renewal of our human society.

Voltaire, the noted French infidel who died in 1778, predicted that within 100 years Christianity would be extinct. Instead, the irony of history is that twenty years after his death, the Geneva Bible Society used his very house and printing presses to publish copies of the Bible! No other book in history has been so hated, burned, and banned. Yet it still survives today and reaches almost all the people of the world with its close to 2000 translations. Its moral principles still serve as the moral foundation of many societies.

## **Part 2**

# **BIBLICAL CRITICISM**

The failure of the past attempts to prevent the circulation of the Bible has not weakened the Devil's determination to destroy its authority and influence. During the past three centuries he has adopted a new strategy which has almost destroyed the high view of the Bible previously held in the Christian world. The result has been a theological crisis of unprecedented proportions. This crisis has been precipitated by the introduction of a new method of investigating the Bible known as "Biblical Criticism," or "Higher Criticism."

### **Definition of Biblical Criticism**

The term "Biblical Criticism" describes the application of the modern literary and historical-critical methods to the study of the Bible. It critically analyses the biblical text with the aim of identifying literary sources, the manner and date of composition, conjecturing the authorship, and the literary development of the text.

In theory, the intent of Biblical Criticism is to enhance the appreciation of the Bible through a fuller understanding of its literary history and message. In practice, however, it destroys any confidence in the divine origin of the message of the Bible, because it presupposes its writings to be merely a human literary production, error-ridden, and entirely conditioned by the culture of the time.

### **Lower Criticism**

It is important to note that there is another category of criticism known as "lower" criticism, which is functionally different from "higher"

criticism. *Lower criticism* is concerned with ascertaining as nearly as possible the text of the original manuscripts from the surviving copies. In view of its function, lower criticism is commonly called *textual criticism*. The latter is more objective than higher criticism, because its scope is limited to an analysis of available textual manuscripts.

## **Higher Criticism**

The case is different with *Higher Criticism*. Though the higher critic is interested in the accuracy of the text, his overriding concern is to study the writings purely as *human literature*, rejecting a priori any possible divine inspiration of the writers and divine intervention into human affairs. He inquires into the date of the composition, the authorship, the possible use of sources, the culture that influenced the text. It is therefore frequently distinguished in literary, historical, source, form, and redaction criticism, depending on the aspect of higher criticism being examined.

The fundamental problem with higher criticism is his reliance on the critic's subjective speculations, rather than on verifiable scientific investigation. James Orr makes this point in his major article on "Biblical Criticism" in the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, of which he was Editor-in-chief. He wrote: "While invaluable as an aid in the domain of Biblical introduction (date, authorship, genuineness, contents, destination, etc.), [Biblical Criticism] manifestly tends to widen out illimitably into regions where exact science cannot follow it, where, often, the critic's imagination is his only law."<sup>5</sup>

This method of linguistic and historical research is not unique to our times. Similar methods were used in the past by Theodore of Mopsuestia (c.350-428) who used grammatical and historical indicators to exegete biblical texts. Even Luther used this method in his exegetical analyses of Bible texts. What is new is the radical approach of the study of

the biblical text, which consists in rejecting a priori any supernatural or miraculous divine manifestation in human history, thus forcing all the evidence to comply with these assumptions.

## **The Negative Impact of Biblical Criticism**

The negative impact of Biblical Criticism can be seen in the increasing number of Bible scholars, preachers, and lay-Christians who have lost their confidence in the trustworthiness of the Bible. While historically the Bible has been regarded as God's revealed Word, today liberal critics refuse to identify God's Word with the message of the Bible.

An increasing number of Christian leaders are joining the chorus of unbelief in casting doubts upon the trustworthiness of the Bible. The defection from a high view of the Bible is having a far more devastating impact on the future of Christian churches than the past attempts to suppress the Bible.

The anti-supernatural presuppositions of Biblical Criticism influences the methods used in contemporary biblical studies and the preaching of many ministers. Speaking of his own Baptist Church, Clark H. Pinnock, a respected Evangelical scholar who has served as President of the Evangelical Theological Society, sadly notes that "a considerable number of important Baptist leaders and thinkers have publicly and unequivocally rejected and sometimes denounced belief in the complete trustworthiness of the Bible. . . . And we must say that this shift of opinion has caused an ongoing and serious split between a large majority of Baptist people who hold the traditional Baptist and Christian view of the Bible and the majority of seminary and college professors who frankly do not."<sup>6</sup>

## **An Unprecedented Crisis**

With almost prophetic foresight, renowned systematic theologian, A. H. Strong, warned in 1918 of the severe dangers posed by negative Biblical criticism. “What is the effect of this method upon our theological seminaries? It is to deprive the gospel message of all definiteness, and to make professors and students disseminators of doubt. . . . The unbelief in our seminary teaching is like a blinding mist slowly settling down upon our churches, and is gradually abolishing, not only all definite views of Christian doctrine, but also all conviction of duty to ‘contend earnestly for the faith’ of our fathers.’ . . . We are ceasing to be evangelistic as well as evangelical, and if this downward progress continues, we shall in due time cease to exist.”<sup>7</sup>

These insightful observations highlight that Biblical Criticism has caused a crisis of unprecedented proportions in Christianity. What is at stakes is two versions of Christianity: one based on divine revelation and the other derived from human reason.

Surprisingly, as the authority of the Bible *is going down* in the Protestant world, the authority of the Pope *is going up*. The reason is simple. People resent tyranny, but welcome the voice of authority. And the Pope speaks with authority to the millions of Protestants who no longer know what to believe. To them the Pontiff has become, as Church Historian Martin E. Marty puts it, “a walking fortress of faith” in the midst of a godless society.<sup>3</sup>

## **The Ideological Roots of Biblical Criticism**

Biblical Criticism developed in the 18th and 19th centuries, partly as a reaction against the rigid Protestant teachings which were based on a verbal concept of inspiration. To counteract Catholic teachings, during the Post-reformation period, Protestants theologians exalted the authority of the Bible by teaching the radical concept of verbal inspiration. The Liberals

reacted against this radical view by going to the other extreme in rejecting any form of divine revelation.

Two major philosophical ideologies influenced the development of Biblical Criticism, namely *rationalism* and *evolutionism*. Rationalism, an outgrowth on the Enlightenment Movement of the eighteenth century, attempted to reduce Christianity to a religion developed by human reasoning, rather than by divine revelation.

Evolutionism applied to the biblical text Darwin's theory of the evolution of the species from simple to complex. The result was that the religion of the Bible was viewed as a product of a religious evolution. As Church Historian Earl Cairns explains, "critics emphasized the development of the idea of God from the primitive storm god of Mount Sinai to the ethical monotheistic god of the prophets"<sup>8</sup>

The end result was that within a relatively short period of time, the Bible came to be viewed as a distinctively human document, stripped of any transcendent authority. Hence, the Bible must be studied and interpreted in the same way as other literature, according to the methods of literary research. Unfortunately, this forcing of the Bible into the categories of secular literature, distorts its message and weakens its capacity to transform human lives.

While the Reformation weakened *ecclesiastical authority*, Biblical Criticism has weakened *biblical authority*. The result is that for many seminary professors and preachers, the Bible is no longer the normative, authoritative Word of God that reveals His will and purpose for mankind, but a fallible book that contains gems of truth mixed with error.

## **Biblical Criticism of the Old Testament**

The origin of Biblical Criticism is generally traced back to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Men such as Hugo Grotius (1583-1645), Thomas Hobbes (1668-1712), and Benedict Spinoza (1632-1677), analyzed the Bible as ordinary literature and began doubting the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, viewing it as the result of a long compilation of several editors.

Later scholars developed the “documentary theory” of the Old Testament. The culminating work was done by Julius Wellhausen in his *Prolegomena* (1878), where he presents the well-known Graf-Wellhausen four stages (JEPD) documentary hypothesis. According to this hypothesis the Old Testament was produced by several writers or redactors between the ninth and the fourth century B. C. Each of them reworked the material according to their religious traditions.

The application of the principles of Biblical Criticism not only radically changed the dates and the authorship of the Old Testament books, but also introduced a completely secular and evolutionistic study of their sources.

### **Biblical Criticism of the New Testament**

The application of the anti-supernaturalistic assumptions of Biblical Criticism were applied to the New Testament at about the same period. Herman Samuel Reimarus published in 1778 his *Fragments* where he denies the possibility of miracles, thus alleging that the New Testament writers were pious liars.

The liberal criticism of the New Testament culminated in the work of Rudolf Bultmann who was determined to strip away the mythology of the New Testament writers. He contends that all the references to heaven, hell, miracles, the Virgin Birth, the Incarnation, the Resurrection, the

Atonement through Christ's death, the Ascension and Second Advent, are myths and absurd superstitions, incredible for modern people.

For Bultmann, the New Testament is the outgrowth of an oral tradition in which the church creatively added supernatural elements to the life and teachings of Jesus. Consequently the study of the Bible must be approached in existential terms. People must find authenticity, security, and meaning beyond the words of Scripture to their existential meaning. Butlmann has exercised an enormous influence on the thinking of New Testament scholars and church leaders of main line denominations

### **An Evaluation of Biblical Criticism**

A fundamental problem of the critical movement is its failure to accept certain limitations in the investigation of the Bible. There is the limitation dictated by the unique character of the Bible. Its dynamic is different from any other religious book. No other book has produced a similar moral impact on people.

King Josiah was moved to repentance and reform by the reading of the law (2 Kings 22:10-13; 23:1-25). The translation and reading of portions of the Old Testament by Ezra brought about sweeping reforms in the lives of the people (Neh 8:1-6; 9:1-3). The translation and circulation of the Bible in the 16th century inspired reformatory movements in various parts of Europe. No other book by Plato, Muhammed, or Buddah has influenced moral changes or given such a lofty concept of God as the Bible.

This means that any critical investigation of the Bible must take into account that the Bible is not merely one of the many surviving religious documents of antiquity, but a unique book whose dynamic differs from any other book. It is only with an attitude of reverence that a genuine investigation of the Bible can be conducted.



Critics should also accept the limitation of the evidences available to test the accuracy of the Bible. To conclude that some statements of the Bible are inaccurate because they do not agree with the information available, means to ignore that sometimes the Bible is the sole witness of the events reported. During this past century new discoveries have often corroborated the trustworthiness of the biblical record.

An evaluation of the critical movement would not be complete without mentioning the spirit that animates their critical investigation of the Bible. Are the critics motivated by their presuppositions or by their religious faith? What is supreme in their thinking, their theories or their faith? The fundamentals of a biblical faith are divine creation, revelation, incarnation, resurrection, Second Advent, and regeneration by the Holy Spirit.

By contrast, liberal critics have no place for these beliefs. Ultimately, the question is: By which authority shall we investigate the Bible? Will our thinking be guided by critical presuppositions, or by the internal witness of the Scripture? If we make the critics' assumptions supreme, then we are obligated to reject anything in the Bible that does not fit them. Sadly, this is what has happened. Liberal critics have chosen to investigate the Bible on the basis of their humanistic and evolutionary assumptions, and consequently have been compelled to reject the fundamentals of the Christian faith.

When people make their philosophy their ultimate authority, it is not a long step before their reason becomes their own god. This is indeed the step that some liberal critics have taken. By accepting the evolutionary assumption that all things exist in a state of change and becoming, they assume that God is changing, the Bible will be outgrown, and Christianity will soon become a religion of the past. This leaves us without absolute truths, no moral standards, no meaning for this present life, and no hope for our future destiny.

## Conclusion

The major characteristics of Biblical Criticism can be summed up in two words: *humanistic* and *naturalistic*. It is *humanistic* because it assumes that the Bible is man's word about God, rather than God's Word to mankind.

It is *naturalistic* because it assumes that the Bible is the result of an evolutionary process. It is the outgrowth of people's apprehension of God, edited and amended over centuries. This evolutionary view ultimately robs God of His creative and redemptive power. It also deprives human life of meaning and hope for a glorious future.

The end result of Biblical Criticism is that the Bible loses its distinctive authority, becoming merely a piece of religious literature, important for the themes presented, but without any normative authority for defining beliefs and practices. If the Reformation weakened *ecclesiastical authority* by exalting *Sola Scriptura*, Biblical Criticism has weakened *Biblical authority* by exalting *human reasoning*.

The negative impact of liberal criticism calls for a responsible reexamination of the inspiration and authority of the Bible. In the next section we shall see how conservative Christians have responded to the attacks of liberal critics by developing the "Doctrine of Biblical Inerrancy."

## **PART 3**

# **BIBLICAL INERRANCY**

The question of the inspiration and authority of the Bible rarely troubled Christians until a century ago. They looked upon the Bible as the *source* of their belief. They accepted the authority of the Bible, without defining it in terms of being free from error. None of the major Catholic or Protestant creeds discuss the notion of possible errors in the Bible. It is only beginning from the nineteenth century that this question has dominated the religious scene.

A major contributory factor has been the negative impact of liberal criticism which, as noted above, reduced the Bible to a collection of religious documents filled with textual difficulties and errors. This critical movement has led many Christians to abandon their commitment to the infallibility of the Bible. In order to defend the traditional Christian view of the inspiration and authority of the Bible against the attacks of liberal critics, conservative Christians developed what has become known as the “Doctrine of Biblical Inerrancy.”

Defining the doctrine of biblical inerrancy is not easy, because it comes in a variety of forms. David Dockery, a Southern Baptist conservative scholar, has identified nine different types, which range from mechanical dictation to functional inerrancy.<sup>9</sup> For the purpose of our study we will limit our comments to the two most common views of inerrancy, known as “absolute” and “limited” inerrancy.

### **Absolute Inerrancy**

Dockery provides a fine definition of “absolute inerrancy” from the perspective of an advocate: “The Bible in its original autographs, properly interpreted, will be found to be truthful and faithful in all that it affirms concerning all areas of life, faith, and practice.”<sup>10</sup>

A similar definition was formulated by the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy which was formed to defend the inerrancy of the Bible from the negative attacks of liberal critics. In 1978 approximately 300 evangelical scholars and church leaders came together in Chicago to attend a conference sponsored by the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy. After three days of deliberations, they issued what is known as *The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy*.

The statement is designed to defend the position of Biblical inerrancy against the liberal conceptions of biblical criticism. The undersigners came from a variety of evangelical denominations, and included well-known scholars such as James Montgomery Boice, Carl F. H. Henry, Roger Nicole, J. I. Packer, Francis Schaeffer, and R. C. Sproul. The statement elaborates on various details in Articles formed as couplets of “We affirm ... and We deny ...”. For the purpose of this study we quote only a few significant statements.

“We affirm that Scripture in its entirety is inerrant, being free from all falsehood, fraud, or deceit. We deny that Biblical infallibility and inerrancy are limited to spiritual, religious, or redemptive themes, exclusive of assertions in the fields of history and science. . . . (Emphasis supplied)

“Being wholly and *verbally God-given*, Scripture is without error or fault in all its teaching, no less in what it states about God’s acts in creation, about the events of world history, and about its own literary origins under God, than in its witness to God’s saving grace in individual

lives. . . We deny that God, in causing these writers to use the *very words* that He chose, overrode their personalities. . . .

“We affirm that inspiration, strictly speaking, applies only to the autographic text of Scripture, which in the providence of God can be ascertained from available manuscripts with great accuracy.”<sup>11</sup>

This definition sound like the dictation theory, which is negated by the unique literary style of each writer and by the existence of discrepancies in the Bible texts. Yet, the acceptance of this position is seen by many evangelicals as a watershed of orthodoxy. They equate the authority of the Bible with its inerrancy, because they assume that unless the Bible can be shown to be without error in non-religious matters, then it cannot be trusted in the more important religious areas. They go as far as claiming that Christians cannot be legitimately be considered evangelical unless they believe in the absolute inerrancy of the Bible. The denial of such a belief is supposed to lead to the rejection of other evangelical doctrines and to the doom for any denomination or Christian organization. Shortly we shall show that these claims lack both biblical and historical support.

### **Limited Inerrancy**

Advocates of limited inerrancy object to conditioning the authority of the Bible to its being from error. They restrict the accuracy of the Bible only to matters of salvation and ethics. They believe that divine inspiration did not prevent Bible writers from making “errors” of historical or scientific nature, since these do not affect our salvation. For them the Bible is not free from errors in all that it says, but it is infallible in all that it teaches regarding faith and practice.

A good example of this position is Stephen T. Davis. In his influential book *The Debate about the Bible: Inerrancy versus Infallibility*,

Davis writes: “The Bible is *inerrant* if and only if it makes no false or misleading statements on any topic whatsoever. The Bible is *infallible* if and only if it makes no false or misleading statements on any matter of faith and practice. In these senses, I personally hold that the Bible is infallible but not inerrant.”<sup>12</sup>

The many limitations placed on inerrancy to salvage the credibility of the theory, make as much sense to the average lay person as terms like “square circle.” Ultimately the question is not, is the Bible without errors, but is it trustworthy for our salvation? To argue that divine inspiration prevented Bible writers from making errors on matters of faith and practice, but allowed them to make mistakes when dealing with historical or scientific matters, means to create an unreasonable dichotomy.

It would mean that the supervision of the Holy Spirit (inspiration) was partial and intermittent, depending on the subject being recorded. Such a view is negated by the clear statement “*All* Scripture is inspired by God” (2 Tim 3:16; Emphasis supplied). The question is not: Is the Bible fully or partially inspired? But, In what sense the supervision of the Holy Spirit influenced Bible writers to ensure the trustworthiness of their messages? This question will be addressed in the last part of this chapter.

## **A Brief History of the Inerrancy Debate**

Before examining some of the problems of the absolute inerrancy position, it is helpful to mention briefly its history. In his article on “Biblical Inerrancy,” Stephen L. Andrews offers a concise survey of the inerrancy debate.<sup>13</sup> He notes that most historians trace the origin of the inerrancy debate among evangelical to the late nineteenth century, when battles took place between liberal critics and fundamentalists. The so-called Princeton divines, A. A. Hodge and B. B. Warfield, were most influential in championing the doctrine of biblical inerrancy.<sup>14</sup>

The inerrancy position developed by the Princeton divines assumes that the Bible must be inerrant if it is in a real sense the “Word of God.” Simply stated, their reasoning is that if God is perfect, the Bible must be perfect (inerrant) because it is the Word of God. This absolute view of inspiration, despite protests to the contrary, results in a “dictation” view of inspiration which minimizes the human factor. This view was opposed by James Orr and G. C. Berkouwer, both of whom defended the limited inerrancy view.

### **Harold Lindsell’s *The Battle for the Bible***

The debate began to heat up again in the 1960s and reached a boiling point with the publication of Harold Lindsell’s *The Battle for the Bible* in 1976. In his book Lindsell goes to great length to show the alleged negative impact of the limited inerrancy view in evangelical churches and seminaries. He even went as far as naming the leading evangelical scholars who departed from the cardinal evangelical doctrine of absolute inerrancy, teaching instead limited inerrancy.

The reactions from both sides were intense. Fuller Theological Seminary defended its limited inerrancy position by publishing a symposium of essays edited by Jack Roger, a Fuller professor.<sup>15</sup> At the same time the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy was formed to defend the absolute inerrancy position as expressed in the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy cited earlier.

The following year Lindsell wrote his sequel, *The Bible in the Balance*, in which he responds to the criticism generated by his previous book. Since 1980 a host of eminent evangelicals have joined the inerrancy debate. The debate has somewhat subsided, but evangelicals remain deeply divided in two camps: absolute inerrantists versus limited errantists. It appears that what is fueling the inerrancy debate and causing Christian people to fight one another over this question, is a vested interest in

defending denominational interpretations of key doctrines. The ultimate concern appears to be the interpretation of Scripture, rather than its inerrancy.

## **Evaluation of Absolute Inerrancy**

The theory of absolute Biblical Inerrancy is largely based on deductive reasoning, rather than an inductive analysis of the biblical texts. The basic argument can be summarized in three statements: (1) The Bible is the Word of God, (2) God is never the author of errors, (3) therefore the Bible is free from error.

Lindsell expresses this view clearly saying: “Once it has been established that the Scriptures are ‘breathed out by God,’ it follows axiomatically that the books of the Bible are free from error and trustworthy in every regard.”<sup>16</sup> In other words, for inerrantists, as Everett Harrison puts it “inerrancy is a natural corollary of full inspiration.”<sup>17</sup>

Is this a sound reasoning? Does inspiration presupposes absolute inerrancy, that is, a text free from inaccuracies or errors of *any* kind? The Bible testifies to its own inspiration, but not to the inerrancy of all the information it provides. Inspiration is never defined in the Bible in terms of being free from errors. One will search in vain for a biblical passage that teaches that there are no inaccurate or misleading statements in the Bible. The reason is that its writers were not apologists or systematic theologians who had to deal with the modern critical views of the Bible.

The two classic statements on inspiration tell us that “all Scripture is inspired by God” (2 Tim 3:16), and “no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God” (2 Pet 1:21). The question is: In what sense is the Bible “inspired—God-breathed” and written at the “moving” of the Holy Spirit?



Was the Bible “wholly and verbally God-given,” as stated *The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy*? Did God cause Bible writers “to use the *very words* that He chose”? This hardly seems to be the case. We know that Bible writers did not passively write down what God whispered in their ears, because each of them uses his own language style and sources available. It is a known fact that many of the books of the Bible were compiled from older documents, history of kings, genealogies, and oral traditions. The fallibility of these sources is clearly reflected in the discrepancies we find in the Bible. A few examples will suffice to illustrate this point.

### **Examples of Discrepancies in the Bible**

In an article entitled “The Question of Inerrancy in Inspired Writings,” Robert Olson, Ph. D., former Director of the Ellen White Estate and my former Bible teacher, offers an impressive catalogue of the inaccuracies in the Bible confronting Bible scholars. For the sake of brevity, we cite only the first two of the catalogue:

“1. **Historical Uncertainties**—Did David kill 40,000 horsemen (2 San. 10:18) or 40,000 footmen (1 Chron. 19:18)? Did Jesus heal blind Bartimaeus as He approached the city of Jericho (Luke 18:35) or as He left it (Mark 10:46)? Was Hobab Moses’ brother-in-law (Num. 10:29) or father-in-law (Judges 4:11)? Did the cock crow once when Peter denied the Lord (Matt. 26:34, 69-75) or twice (Mark 14:66-72)? Does Cainan (Luke 3:36) belong between Salah and Arphaxad or not (Gen. 11:12)?

“2. **Numerical and Chronological Problems**—Did 24,000 die in the plague as in Numbers 25:9, or was it 23,000 as in 1 Cor. 10:8? Did Solomon have 40,000 stalls for his horses (I Kings 4:25) or was it 4,000 (2 Chron. 9:25)? Was Jehoachin eighteen (2 Kings 24:8) or eight (2 Chron. 36:9) when he began to reign? Did Ahaziah come to the throne at the age of 22 ( 2 Kings 8:26) or 42 (2 Chron. 22:2)? Was David the eighth son of

Jesse (1 Sam. 16:10,11) or the seventh son (1 Chron. 2:15)? Was the period of the judges 450 years in length (Acts 13:20) or about 350 years, as would be necessary if 1 Kings 6:1 is correct”<sup>18</sup>

There is also a significant discrepancy in the result of the census ordered by David and carried out by Joab, the head of his army. According to 2 Samuel 24:9 we are told that Joab reported to David that “there were in Israel eight hundred thousand strong men, capable of bearing arms; and in Judah five hundred thousand.” But in 1 Chronicles 21:5, Joab informs David that “there were in the whole of Israel one million and one hundred thousand men capable of bearing arms; and in Judah four hundred seventy thousand men capable of bearing arms.” Obviously, there is a substantial difference between the two sets of figures. One of them is inaccurate.

Another example is the price David paid to Arauna, the Jebusite, for the property where he built an altar and offered sacrifices to stay the plague that was decimating the people. According to 2 Samuel 24:25, David paid fifty shekels of silver for the property, but according to 1 Chronicles 21:25, David paid six hundred shekels of gold for the same property. The difference between 50 shekels of silver and 600 shekels of gold is enormous and can hardly be explained as a scribal error.

### **The Holy Spirit Allowed for Discrepancies**

It appears that two writers used two different sources. The Holy Spirit could have overcome the problem of the conflicting sources by whispering the correct figure in the ears of the two writers. Such method would have eliminated the presence of discrepancies and the need for scholarly debates. But the fact is that the Holy Spirit did not choose to suspend or suppress the human faculties of the writers to ensure absolute accuracy. Instead, He chose to allow for errors that do not affect our faith and practice. It is unwise for anyone to tell God what kind of Bible He should have produced in order for its books to be inspired and inerrant.

We have no right to define “inspiration” according to our subjective criteria of inerrancy in order to meet the challenge of biblical criticism. Instead, we simply need to look and see what sort of Bible has been produced under the supervision (inspiration) of the Holy Spirit. An open-minded look at the Bible *does* support the claim that it is inspired and authoritative for determining our beliefs and practices, but it *does not* validate the claim that it is free from any errors..

### **Were the Original Autographs Free from Error?**

Defenders of absolute inerrancy claim that only the original autographs were inerrant, not the existing Bible. This means that existing discrepancies and errors are supposed to be the result of transmissional errors. The original copies of the various books of the Bible were without error, because God inspired the Bible writers to write accurately.

The appeal to the original manuscripts to explain away existing errors leaves a permanently open door of escape for inerrantists. No matter how evident an error is, they can always evade the question by arguing that it is an error of transmission, which was not present in the original manuscript. This argument, as Stephen Davis points out, “does seem intellectually dishonest, especially if there is no textual evidence that the alleged error is indeed due to a transmission problem.”<sup>21</sup>

The scientific study of the variant readings of Bible manuscripts has advanced to the point where scholars today can establish with amazing accuracy the reading of the original manuscripts. Moreover, these problems are few in comparison with the whole Bible and do not affect its teachings.

### **Does One Error Make the Whole Bible Suspect?**

Some inerrantists argue that unless the Bible is without errors in every single statement it makes, then the trustworthiness of all its teachings

becomes suspect. As Dan Fuller puts it, “If even one of its [Bible’s] statements could be in error, the truth of any of its statements becomes questionable.”<sup>22</sup>

The problem with this argument is that it conditions the trustworthiness of Bible’s teachings to the absolute accuracy of its historical, geographical, or scientific details. But nowhere do the Bible writers claim that all their statements are without errors. The reason is that, for them, the major events or message, were more important than its circumstantial details.

One example will suffice to illustrate this point. In sending out His disciples on a preaching mission, Mark tells us that Jesus allowed them to take a staff: “He charged them to take nothing for their journey *except a staff*; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts” (Mark 6:8; Emphasis supplied).

Matthew and Luke, however, have Jesus *specifically prohibiting* the taking of a staff: “Take no gold, nor silver, nor copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, nor two tunics, nor sandals, *nor a staff*” (Matt 10:9-10; Emphasis supplied). “Take nothing for your journey, *no staff*, nor bag, nor bread, nor money” (Luke 9:3; Emphasis supplied).

It is evident that the two accounts are inconsistent and at least one of the Gospels is in error. But this inconsistency does not destroy confidence in the event reported, namely, Christ commissioning His disciples. Apparently, for the Gospel writers the event was more important than its details.

The credibility of the great doctrines of the Bible does not hinge upon the precision of circumstantial details. The fear that if inerrancy collapses, then the great doctrines of the Bible collapse also, is groundless.

The fact is that such doctrines are believed by many Christians who do not subscribe to the theory of absolute inerrancy.

### **The Catholic Understanding of the Nature of the Bible**

The question of the accuracy of the Bible text is not discussed in official Catholic documents. The reason is that for the Catholic Church the accuracy of the Bible is an unquestionable fact based on her belief, clearly stated in the new *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, that the “*Sacred Scripture* is the speech of God as it is put down in writing under the breath of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>23</sup>

This sounds as a “Dictation Theory,” since it defines the Bible as the speech of God recorded “under the breath of the Holy Spirit.” The problem with the Catholic teaching is twofold. On the one hand it attempts to make the Bible a strictly divine book to be revered like the body of Christ. On the other hand it elevates *Tradition*, that is, the traditional teachings of the Catholic Church, to the same divine nature of the Bible.

The *Catechism* explains that the *Sacred Scripture* is the *written Word of God*, while *Tradition* is *living transmission of the Word of God* entrusted to the church. In other words, God reveals Himself through both the Bible and the traditional teachings of the Catholic Church.

Quoting from the document *Dei Verbum* (“Word of God”) of Vatican II, the *Catechism* says: “Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture are bound closely together and communicate one with the other.”<sup>24</sup> “*Tradition* transmits in its entirety the Word of God which has been entrusted to the apostles by Christ . . . As a result the Church, to whom the transmission and interpretation of Revelation is entrusted, ‘does not derive her certainty about all revealed truths from the holy Scripture alone. Both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honored with equal sentiments of devotion and reverence.’”<sup>25</sup>

This official statement expresses with amazing clarity the traditional Catholic teaching that *Scriptura et Tradition*, that is, Scripture and Tradition, are the two channels of divine revelation and constitute the normative authority for defining Catholic beliefs and practices.

## **Evaluation of the Catholic View**

By making her traditional teachings the “living transmission” of the Word of God, “accomplished by the Holy Spirit,”<sup>26</sup> the Catholic Church has substantially reduced and ultimately superseded the authority of the Bible. Cardinal James Gibbons acknowledges this fact saying: “The scriptures alone do not contain all the truths which a Christian is bound to believe, nor do they explicitly enjoin all the duties which he is obliged to practice.”<sup>27</sup>

On a similar vein Catholic Prof. John L. McKenzie from Notre Dame University states: “The Bible is the Word of God, but it was the church which uttered the word. It is the church which gives the believer the Bible . . . .”<sup>28</sup> By elevating her teaching authority, known as *Magisterium*, above the authority of the Bible, the Catholic Church has succeeded over the centuries in promulgating a host of dogmas that blatantly violate clear biblical teachings. The following popular but unbiblical Catholic teachings, are examined in subsequent chapters: immortality of the soul, Sunday sacredness, papal primacy, infant baptism, veneration and intercession of Mary and the Saints, penance, indulgences, purgatory, and eternal torment in hell.

## **Does Scripture Need to Be Supplemented by Tradition?**

It is pure arrogance for any church to claim that her teachings are the “living transmission” of the Word of God that leads believers to the “full truth” contained only partially in Scripture. But this is what the Catholic Church claims: “The Father’s self-communication made through

his Word in the Holy Spirit, remains present and active in the Church . . .”<sup>29</sup> Through the Holy Spirit “the living voice of the Gospels rings out in the church—through her in the world—leading believers to *the full truth*”<sup>30</sup> (Emphasis supplied).

The notion that the Bible contains only partially revealed truths to be supplemented by the teaching of the Catholic church, negates the all-sufficiency of Scripture. Paul declares that “All scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:16-17). Note that Scripture contains all the teachings needed for a believer to “be complete, equipped for every good work.” There is no need of *Tradition* to supplement Scripture.

Jesus spoke clearly against the deceptive way tradition can undermine the authority of Scripture. “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God, in order to keep your tradition! . . .making void the word of God through your tradition” (Mark 7:9, 13).

The New Testament writers constantly appealed to the Scriptures, not Tradition, to defend the validity of their teaching (Matt 21:42; John 2:22; 1 Cor 15:3-4; 1 Pet 1:10-12; 2:2; 2 Pet 1:17-19). Paul commended the Bereans for examining his teachings on the basis of Scripture, not tradition. “They received the word with all eagerness, examining the scripture daily to see if these things were so” (Acts 17:11).

It is clear that God’s revelation contained in the Scriptures has been and still remains the final authority to define Christian beliefs and practices. Any attempt to supersede the authority of the Bible by the teaching authority of any Church, represents, as Jesus said “a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God, in order to keep your tradition! . . .making void the word of God through your tradition” (Mark 7:9, 13).

## **Part 4**

### **SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST**

## **UNDERSTANDING OF THE NATURE OF THE BIBLE**

Seventh-day Adventists hold the Bible as a unique revelation of God's will and plan for humanity. They accept it as the infallible and normative authority for defining beliefs and practices. They believe that in this Book God provides humanity with the knowledge necessary for salvation.

The first Fundamental Belief of the Seventh-day Adventist Church offers a concise statement of the church belief about the Bible: "The Holy Scriptures, Old And New Testaments, are the written Word of God, given by divine inspiration through holy men of God who spoke and wrote as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. In His Word, God has committed to man the knowledge necessary for salvation. The Holy Scriptures are the infallible revelation of His will. They are the standard of character, the test of experience, the authoritative revealer of doctrines, and the trustworthy record of God's acts in history."

This Fundamental Belief shows that Adventists agree with conservative Christians that the Bible is divinely inspired and contains the infallible revelation of God's will for our lives. They fully accept the divine authority and complete reliability of the Scriptures, but they have never advocated the doctrine of biblical inerrancy.



## Adventists Objections to Absolute Inerrancy

There are five major reasons why Adventists do not subscribe to the doctrine of biblical inerrancy. First, Adventists believe that Bible writers were God's penmen, and not the pen of the Holy Spirit. They were fully involved in the production of their writings. Some of them, like Luke, gathered the information by interviewing eyewitnesses of Christ's ministry (Luke 1:1-3). Others, like the authors of Kings and Chronicles, made use of historical records available to them. The fact that both the writers and their sources were human, makes it unrealistic to insist that there are no inaccurate statements in the Bible.

Second, the attempts of inerrantists to reconcile the differences between the biblical descriptions of the same event, often results in distorted and far-fetched interpretations of the Bible. For example, Harold Lindsell tries to reconcile the divergent accounts of Peter's denial of Jesus at the crowing of the cock, by proposing that Peter denied Jesus a total of six times!<sup>31</sup> Such gratuitous speculations can be avoided by simply accepting the existence of minor discrepancies in the Gospels' account of Peter's denial.

Third, by basing the trustworthiness and infallibility of the Bible on the accuracy of its details, the doctrine of inerrancy ignores that the main function of Scripture is to reveal God's plan for our salvation. The Bible is not intended to supply us with accurate geographical, historical, or cultural information, but simply to reveal to us how God created us perfectly, redeemed us completely, and will restore us ultimately.

Fourth, Adventists find the doctrine of biblical inerrancy to be devoid of biblical support. Nowhere do the Bible writers claim their statements to be inerrant. Such a concept has been deduced from the idea of divine inspiration. It is assumed that since the Bible is divinely *inspired*, it must be *inerrant* also. But the Bible never equates inspiration with

inerrancy. The nature of the Bible must be defined deductively, that is, by considering all the data provided by the Bible itself, rather than inductively, that is, by drawing conclusions from subjective premises. A deductive analysis of the existing discrepancies in the Bible does not support the absolute inerrancy view.

## **Ellen White's Teachings**

A final reason for the Adventist rejection of the Doctrine of Biblical Inerrancy, is the teachings of Ellen White and the production of her writings. She clearly recognized the human role in the production of the Bible. She wrote: "The Bible points to God as its author; yet it was written by human hands; and in the varied style of its different books it presents the characteristics of the several authors. The truths revealed are all 'given by inspiration of God' (2 Tim 3:16); yet they are all expressed in the words of men. The infinite One by His Holy Spirit has shed light into the minds and hearts of His servants."<sup>32</sup>

Contrary to *The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* that claims that the Bible was "*verbally God-given,*" Ellen White taught that The Holy Spirit impressed Bible writers *with thoughts, not with words*. "It is not the words of the Bible that are inspired, but the men that were inspired. Inspiration acts not on the man's words or his expressions but on the man himself, who, under the influence of the Holy Ghost, is imbued with thoughts."<sup>33</sup>

God inspired men, not their words. This means, as Ellen White explains, that the Bible "is not God's mode of thought and expression. Men will often say such an expression is not like God. But God has not put Himself in words, in logic, in rhetoric, on trial in the Bible. The writers of the Bible were God's penmen, not His pen."<sup>34</sup>

Ellen White recognized the presence of discrepancies or inaccuracies in the production of the Bible and in the transmission of its text. “Some look to us gravely and say, ‘Don’t you think there might have been some mistakes in the copyists or in the translators?’ This is all probable . . . [but] all the mistakes will not cause trouble to one soul, or cause any feet to stumble, that would not manufacture difficulties from the plainest revealed truth.”<sup>35</sup>

For Ellen White, the presence of inaccuracies in the production or transmission of the Bible text is only a problem for those who wish to “manufacture difficulties from the plainest revealed truth.” The reason is that the presence of inaccurate details does not weaken the validity of the fundamental truths revealed in the Scripture.

### **Ellen White’s Writings**

The production of Ellen White’s writings has helped immensely the Seventh-day Adventist Church to avoid the pitfalls of inerrancy. Over a period of 70 years Ellen White wrote under divine inspiration numerous books and articles which have enriched the spiritual life of millions of believers.

While the original manuscripts of the Bible are no longer extant, most of Ellen White’s manuscripts are carefully preserved and readily available for investigation. A look at her manuscripts shows her painstaking efforts to improve the style by making corrections on the margins or above the text itself. In some manuscripts the corrections appear in different ink colors, reflecting the several attempts that were made to improve the style and grammar.

Sometimes the editing process continued even after the publication of her manuscripts. For example, corrections were made in the preparation of the new 1911 edition of *The Great Controversy*. In fact, Ellen White

specifically asked the various publishing departments and canvassing agents, both in America and overseas, to submit in writing their request for any correction they deemed necessary. European and American researchers participated in this project by locating documents needed to correct some of the historical inaccuracies.

Ellen White welcomed the participation of those who helped in making the necessary corrections in the new edition of *The Great Controversy*. She expressly stated: “I am thankful that my life has been spared, and that I have strength and clearness of mind for this and other literary work.”<sup>36</sup>

The fact that Ellen White insisted on the divine origin of her messages, but never claimed her writings to be inerrant or infallible in every detail, gives us reasons to believe that same is true for the biblical text. The supervision of the Holy Spirit did not prevent Bible writers from making statements which may not be accurate in every detail. Its concern was to ensure the trustworthiness and infallibility of the vital truths that affect our eternal salvation.

## **Scripture as Divine and Human**

The Adventist view of the nature of the Bible is based on two important verses: “All Scripture is inspired by God” (2 Tim 3:16) and “No prophecy came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God” (2 Pet 1:21). These verses emphasize the divine-human character of the Bible. The messages of Bible writers originated from God, but were expressed in human language, reflecting the cultural and educational background of the writers.

The recognition of the divine-human nature of the Bible rules out the two mistaken views of the Bible we have discussed in this chapter. The first is the inerrantists’ view that exalts the divine aspect of Scripture,

minimizing the human participation in order to ensure that the text is completely free of all errors.

The second is the liberal view of the critics who maintain that biblical writings simply reflect human ideas and aspirations. They believe they are the product of religious geniuses who were influenced—not by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit—but by the culture of their time

Adventists reject the mistaken views of the Bible held by inerrantists on the one hand and by liberal critics on the other. Instead, they hold to a balanced view of the Bible based on its testimony (2 Tim 3:16; 1 Pet 1:21) about its divine-human character. The divine-human aspects of the Bible are mysteriously blended together, somewhat similar to the union of the divine and human nature of Christ.

The book *Seventh-day Adventist Believe . . .* states: “A parallel exists between the incarnate Jesus and the Bible: Jesus was God and man combined, the divine and human in one. So the Bible is the divine and human combined. As it was said of Christ, so it can be affirmed of the Bible that ‘the Word became flesh and dwelt among us’ (John 1:14). The divine-human combination makes the Bible unique among literature.”<sup>37</sup>

### **The Humanity of the Bible**

The humanity of the Bible can be seen, for example, in the use of the *koine* Greek, which was the language of the market place, rather than that of classical literature. It is evident also in the poor literary style of such books as Revelation which has a limited vocabulary and some grammatical errors. It appears in the use of oral traditions by men like Luke, or of written records by the authors of Kings and Chronicles. It is reflected in the expression of human emotions in places like Psalm 137 which describes the feeling of the Hebrew captives in Babylon, saying: “O daughter of Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall be he who requites you with what

you have done to us! Happy shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!” (Ps 137:8-9).

Such violent language expresses the hurt of human emotions, but not the mode of God’s speaking. The God of biblical revelation does not delight in smashing babies against the rocks. It is important to remember the words of Ellen White: “God has not put Himself in words, in logic, in rhetoric, on trial in the Bible.”<sup>38</sup>

### **The Divinity of the Bible**

The divinity of the Bible is suggested by the underlying unity of the teachings of the Bible. About 40 authors wrote 66 over a period of 1600 years, yet they all share the same view of creation, redemption and final restoration. Only divine inspiration could ensure the underlying thematic unity of the Bible over the centuries of its composition.

Another indication of the divine character of the Bible is its impact upon human lives and societies. The Bible conquered the skepticism, prejudism, and persecution of the Roman world. It has transformed the social values and practices of societies that have embraced its teachings. It has given new value to life, a sense of worth to the individual, a new status to women and slaves, it has broke down social and racial discriminations, it has given a reason for living, loving, and serving to countless millions of people.

The divine character of the Bible is also indicated by its marvellous conception of God, creation, redemption, human nature and destiny. Such lofty conceptions are foreign to the sacred books of pagan religions. For example, in the Near Eastern creation myths, the divine rest is generally achieved either by eliminating disturbing gods or by creating mankind.<sup>39</sup>

In the creation Sabbath, however, the divine rest is secured not by subordinating or destroying competitors, nor by exploiting the labor of mankind, but rather by the *completion of a perfect creation*. God rested on the seventh day because His work was “finished . . . done” (Gen. 2 :2-3). He stopped *doing* to express His desire for *being* with His creation, for giving to His creatures not only *things*, but *Himself*. Such a marvellous concept of God who entered into human time at creation and into human flesh at the incarnation in order to become “Emmanuel—God with us,” is absent in pagan religions, where the gods typically partake of human failings.

The remarkable nature of the Bible is also indicated by its miraculous preservation through history, in spite of relentless efforts to destroy it. Earlier we mentioned the past attempts to suppress the Bible by Roman Emperors, Christian Kings, and communist regimes. In spite of these deliberate attempts to destroy the Bible, its text has come down to us substantially unchanged. Some of the oldest manuscripts brings us close to the composition of the originals. They reveal the amazing accuracy of the text that has come down to us. We can be confident that our Bibles are reliable versions of the original messages.

Ultimately the validity of the Bible is vouched for by conceptual and existential considerations. Conceptually, the Bible provides a reasonable explanation of our human situation and of the divine solution to our problems. Existentially, the teachings of the Bible give meaning to our existence and offer us reasons for living, loving, and serving. Through them we can experience the rich blessings of salvation.

## CONCLUSION

We have briefly traced the controversy between the errancy and inerrancy of the Bible. We have noted that the Bible is being attacked today by friends and foes. The pendulum is swinging to both extremes. On the one hand, the liberal critics reduce the Bible to a strictly human, error-ridden book, devoid of supernatural revelations and miraculous

manifestations. On the other hand, some conservative evangelicals elevate the Bible to such a divine level that they overlook the human dimension of Scripture. They affirm that the Bible is absolutely without error in all its references to history, geography, chronology, cosmology, science, and so forth.

Ultimately both the errancy and inerrancy positions are extreme, unbiblical views that undermine the authority of the Bible by making it either too-human or too-divine. The solution to these extreme positions is to be found in the key word *balance*—a balance that recognizes both the divine and human character of the Bible.

In her own way the Catholic Church has undermined the authority of the Bible by making her traditional teachings the “*living transmission*” of the Word of God. This has made it possible for the Catholic Church over the centuries to promulgate a host of unbiblical teachings, which have been largely responsible for leading countless Christians into apostasy.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has historically maintained a balanced view of the Bible by acknowledging both its divine and human character. Much of the credit is due to the prophetic guidance of Ellen White who unequivocally stated: “The Bible is written by inspired men, but it is not God’s mode of thought and expression. God, as a writer, is not represented. Men will often say such an expression is not like God. But God has not put Himself in words, in logic, in rethoric, on trial in the Bible. The writers of the Bible were God’s penmen, not His pen.”<sup>40</sup>

Simply stated, Seventh-day Adventists believe that the Bible is the product of a mysterious blending of divine and human participation. The source is divine, the writers are human, and the writings contain divine thoughts in human language. This unique combination offers us a trustworthy and infallible revelation of God’s will and plan for our present life and future destiny. As stated in the first Seventh-day Adventist



Fundamental Belief: “The Holy Scriptures are the infallible revelation of His will. They are the standard of character, the test of experience, the authoritative revealer of doctrines, and the trustworthy record of God’s acts in history.”

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## *Chapter 2*

# **“THE IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL”**

**T**hroughout human history, people have refused to accept the finality that death brings to life. They have tried to deny the reality of death by teaching various forms of life after death. A key component of this teaching has been the belief in the survival of the soul apart from the body at the moment of death.

In spite of all the scientific breakthrough, the popularity of the belief in the immortality of the soul has not subsided. On the contrary, it is spreading today like wildfire. According to a recent Gallup Poll, 71 percent of Americans believe in some form of conscious life after death.<sup>1</sup>

The popularity of this belief can be attributed, not only to the traditional teachings of Catholic and Protestant churches, but also to such factors as the polished image of mediums and psychics, the sophisticated “scientific” research into near-death experiences, and the popular New Age channeling with the alleged spirits of the past.

The result is that few beliefs are more widely held today than that of the “immortal soul.” Virtually everyone is familiar with this belief. If asked, the average religious person would define the belief something like this: A human being is composed of both body and soul. The body is the temporary physical flesh-and-blood “shell” that houses the soul. The soul is the nonmaterial, immortal component that leaves the body at death and lives on consciously forever in heaven or hell (or purgatory for the Catholics).

Is this popular belief taught in the Bible? Does the Bible teach that we have an immortal soul that leaves the body at death and heads on for heaven or hell, or purgatory? The answer of the average religious person is “YES”! They simply assume that the belief in the immortality of the soul is taught in the Bible. Is this true? Absolutely NOT! This chapter shows that the notion of an immortal soul co-existing with a mortal body, is foreign to the Bible. It derives mostly from Greek pagan philosophies that gradually entered into the Christian church.

We shall see that the biblical view of human nature is wholistic, not dualistic, that is to say, body and soul are not two distinct components, but an indissoluble unity. The soul is simply the animating principle of the body. So prepare yourself for what could be one of the big surprises of your life!

### **Objectives of this Chapter**

This chapter pursues three major objectives. First, we briefly trace the history of the belief in the immortality of the soul, by focusing first on the impact of the Greek philosophers Socrates (470-399 B. C.) , (Plato (427-347 B. C.) and Aristotles (384-322 B. C.) on the development of the Christian understanding of human nature. Second, we will mention briefly the key role played by Tertullian (155-240), Origen ((ca. 185-254),

Augustine (354-430) and Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) in leading the church to adopt the Platonic dualistic view of human nature.

The second objective is to define the biblical view of the soul. Our study of the “soul texts” found both in the Old and New Testaments, shows that contrary to popular beliefs, the soul is not an immaterial, immortal part of human nature that survives the body at death, but the animating, life principle of the body. It is often used as a synonym for the whole person.

The third objective is to compare and contrast the biblical wholistic view of human nature with the Platonic dualistic view that has been embraced by Catholics and most Protestants. We shall see that the two views have far-reaching doctrinal and practical implications, which largely determines what Christians believe about their present life and their future destiny. These two views impact directly or indirectly on a host of Christian beliefs and practices. The ultimate goal of this study is to lead truth-seekers to understand and accept the biblical view of our nature and destiny.

The material contained in this chapter is largely excerpted from my book *Immortality or Resurrection?* Interested readers can find a fuller treatment of the subject in the book. Important topics, like the biblical view of the human “spirit,” have been left out in this chapter, simply for the sake of brevity.

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## **PART I**

### **A HISTORICAL GLIMPSE OF THE BELIEF**

### **IN THE IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL**

The serpent's lie, "You will not die" (Gen 3:4) has lived on throughout human history to our time. The belief in some form of life after death has been held in practically every society. The need for reassurance and certainty in the light of the challenge that death poses to human life, has led people in every culture to formulate beliefs in some forms of afterlife. Such beliefs, as we shall see, reflect human attempts to achieve immortal life through human speculations, rather than divine revelation.

### **Egyptians' Belief in the Immortality of the Soul**

It is difficult to pinpoint historically the origin of the belief in the immortality of the soul, since all the ancient civilizations held to some forms of conscious life after death. The Greek historian Herodotus, who lived in the fifth century before Christ, tells us in his *History* that the ancient Egyptians were the first to teach that the soul of man is immortal and separable from the body. At death the soul passes through various animals before being reborn in human form. The cycle was supposed to take three thousand years.<sup>2</sup>

Nowhere in the ancient world was the concern for the afterlife so deeply felt as in Egypt. The countless tombs unearthed by archaeologists along the Nile offer an eloquent testimony to the Egyptian belief in conscious life after death. They spent an outrageous amount of time and money preparing for life after death. They practiced elaborate ceremonies to prepare the pharaohs for their next life. They constructed massive pyramids and other elaborate tombs filled with luxuries the deceased were supposed to need in the hereafter. The famous *Book of The Dead* is a collection of ancient Egyptian funerary and ritual texts, which describes in great details how to meet the challenges of the afterlife.

### **Greek Philosophers Promoted Immortality of the Soul**



The Egyptian belief in the immortality of the soul existed centuries before Judaism, Hellenism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. According to Herodotus, eventually the Greeks adopted from the Egyptians the belief in the immortality of the soul. He wrote: “The Egyptians also were the first who asserted the doctrine that the soul of man is immortal. . . . This opinion, some among the Greeks have at different periods of time adopted as their own.”<sup>3</sup>

The Greek philosopher Socrates (470-399 B. C.) traveled to Egypt to consult the Egyptians on their teachings on the immortality of the soul. Upon his return to Greece, he imparted this teaching to his most famous pupil, Plato (428-348 B. C.).

In his book, *The Phaedo*, Plato recounts Socrates’ final conversation with his friends on the last day of his life. He was condemned to die by drinking hemlock for corrupting the youths of Athens by teaching them “atheism,” that is, the rejection of the gods. The setting was an Athenian prison and the time the summer of 399 B. C. Socrates spent his last day discussing the origin, nature, and destiny of the human soul with his closest friends.

In the dialogue Socrates repeatedly declares death to be “the separation of the soul from the body” in which it is encased. His language is strikingly similar to that of many Christian churches today. “The soul whose inseparable attribute is life, will never admit of life’s opposite, death. Thus the soul is shown to be immortal, and since immortal, indestructible. . . . Do we believe there is such a thing as death? To be sure. And is this anything but the separation of the soul and body? And being dead is the attainment of this separation, when the soul exists in herself and separate from the body, and the body is parted from the soul. That is death. . . . Death is merely the separation of soul and body.”<sup>4</sup> In *Phaedo*, Plato explains that there is a judgement after death for all souls, according to the

deeds done in the body. The righteous souls go to heaven and the wicked to hell.<sup>5</sup>

This teaching found its way first into Hellenistic Judaism especially through the influence of Philo Judaeus (ca. 20 B.C. A. D. 47) and later into Christianity especially through the influence of Tertullian (ca. 155-230), Origen (ca. 185-254), Augustine (354-430), and Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274). These writers attempted to blend the Platonic view of the immortality of the soul with the biblical teachings on the resurrection of the body.

### **Two Groups of Jewish Writers During the Inter-Testament Period**

During the inter-Testament period, that is, the four centuries that separate the end of the Old Testament from the beginning of the New Testament, two groups of Jewish Apocryphal writers appeared. The earlier writers maintained the Old Testament wholistic view of human nature and the belief in Conditional immortality, that is, immortality not as an innate human possession, but as the gift of eternal life given at the resurrection. This line culminated in the Conditionalist witness of the *Dead Sea Scroll*.<sup>6</sup>

A later group of Jewish writers were influenced by the Greek belief in the immortality of the soul, prayer for the dead, and denial of the resurrection. These teachings are found in what are known as the Apocrypha of the Old Testament—books that are included in the Catholic Bible, but omitted in the Protestant Bible and in the Hebrew Old Testament. These books include 1 and 2 Esdra, 1, 2, 3, 4 Maccabees, Baruch, additions to Daniel, Judith, The Prayer of Manasseh, Sirach, Tobit, and the Wisdom of Solomon.

The most influential Hellenistic Jewish writer is Philo Judaeus (ca. 20 B.C. A. D. 47). He made a systematic attempt to prove the existence of an inner harmony between Plato and Moses, that is, between Jewish

religious thought and Greek philosophy. He taught that man has an irrational soul in common with all living creatures and a rational soul in common with the unbodied souls in the heavens. At the death of the body, the rational souls of the righteous return to the realm of the unbodied heavenly beings, which are soul. By contrast the souls of the wicked will suffer endless punishment.<sup>7</sup> Gradually this teaching infiltrated into the Christian Church, which was already influenced by a modified form of Platonism, called Neo-platonism.

### **Early Christian Church: Immortality is a Gift Received at the Resurrection**

Christ and the apostles confirmed and clarified the Old Testament wholistic view of human nature, by teaching that immortality is not an innate human possession, but a gift reserved for the righteous and bestowed at the resurrection. Unrepentant sinners will be ultimately destroyed.

This view continued intact throughout the writings of the so-called Apostolic Fathers (Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, the Didache, Barnabas of Alexandria, Hermas of Rome, Polycarp of Smyrna) and in a conspicuous line of later writers such as Justin, Irenaeus, Novatian, Arnobius, Lactantius, et cetera.

Le Roy Froom concludes his 100 pages survey of the writings of the Apostolic Fathers (writers who lived closest to the Apostles) by quoting from a similar exhaustive survey done by Henry Constable, an Anglican Irish Priest, who wrote: "From beginning to end of them [the Apostolic Fathers] there is not a word said of that immortality of the soul which is so prominent in the writings of later fathers. Immortality is by them asserted to be peculiar to the redeemed. . . . Not one stray expression of theirs can be interpreted as giving any countenance to the theory of

restoration after purgatorial suffering.”<sup>8</sup> The same conclusion applies to several later writers mentioned earlier.

## **Innate Immortality Infiltrates the Church**

Modified forms of the Platonic view of the immortality of the soul were adopted by Christian writers beginning from the latter part of the second century. The most influential promoters were Tertullian (155-240), Origen (ca. 185-254), Augustine (354-430) and Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274). We shall say a few words about each of them.

### **Tertullian: Eternal Torment**

Tertullian is rightly regarded as the founder of Latin theology. He was born in a heathen home in Cathage, North Africa, and received legal training in Rome. He returned to Carthage at the age of forty and embraced the Christian faith after witnessing the courage of martyrs and the life of holiness of Christians. His numerous apologetic, theological, and ascetic works in Latin, have been very influential on Latin Christianity.

Tertullian was the first to formulate the teachings of endless torment for the wicked, by applying the notion of the immortality of the soul to the saved and unsaved. He expressly taught that “the torments of the lost, will be co-eternal with the happiness of the saved.”<sup>9</sup>

Tertullian rejected Plato’s teaching of the pre-existence of the souls, but he embraced his teachings that “every soul is immortal.” He wrote: “For some things are known even by nature: the immortality of the soul, for instance, is held by many . . . I may use therefore, *the opinion of Plato*, when he declares: ‘*Every soul is immortal*’”<sup>10</sup> Note that the opinion of Plato is cited to support the belief in the immortality of the soul. No attempt is made to validate such doctrine by the authority of Scripture, obviously

because, as we shall see, in the Bible the soul does not exist apart from the body.

### **Origen: Universal Restoration**

The influence of Platonic dualism is evident especially in the writings of Origen (ca. 185-254), a man who came to be acknowledged as the most accomplished scholar of his generation. He rejected Tertullian's teaching of eternal torment, promoting instead the universal restoration of even the most incorrigible sinners, including the demons and Satan himself. After a period of corrective punishment, all of them will be brought again into ultimate subjection to Christ.

Origen's teaching derives largely from Plato's notion that the soul is an immaterial and immortal substance. In his *De Principiis* (On the Principle), Origen repeatedly refers to the "soul" as a "substance" which partakes of the "eternal nature" and "lasts for ever." "Every substance which partakes of that eternal nature should last for ever, and be incorruptible and eternal."<sup>11</sup>

Since the soul partakes of the divine nature and cannot be destroyed, Origen reasoned that the only way moral evil can ultimately be eliminated, is for God to restore even the incorrigibly wicked after His "consuming fire . . . thoroughly cleanses away the evil."<sup>12</sup>

Both Tertullian's eternal torment and Origen's cleansing fire, are unbiblical teachings which are fatal to true Christian faith, though in opposite ways. One threatened an eternal punishment that God never decreed and the other promised a universal salvation that God never authorized. In Scripture evil is a reality of this present time, not an inevitable part of eternity. By allowing their mind to be guided by pagan philosophy rather than Scriptural teachings, brilliant men like Tertullian

and Origen developed heresies that have undermined Christian beliefs and practices.

### **Augustine Sets the Immortal Soul Teaching for the Middle Ages**

Augustine (354-430), Bishop of Hippo, North Africa, is rightly regarded as the most influential Latin Father. His influence on theology was immense, particularly up to the thirteenth century when Thomas Aquinas appeared.

The influence of Augustine was so powerful that he secured the dominance for centuries of the doctrine of the natural immortality of the soul and the eternal torment of the wicked. Once he asked: “What simple and illiterate man or obscured woman that does not believe the immortality of the soul and a future life?”<sup>13</sup> It is evident that by that time this belief had become widely accepted. But the validity of a teaching is determined not by its popularity, but by its conformity to biblical witness.

For Augustine death meant the destruction of the body, which enables the immortal soul to continue to live in either the beatitude of Paradise or in the eternal torment of Hell. In *The City of God* he wrote that the soul “is therefore called immortal, because in a sense, it does not cease to live and to feel; while the body is called mortal because it can be forsaken of all life, and cannot by itself live at all.”<sup>14</sup>

Augustine modified the Platonic conception of the soul by teaching that a human being is a rational soul that *uses* a mortal, material body, but the soul is not *imprisoned* in the body. Furthermore, he taught that the soul does not pre-exist eternally, as maintained by Plato, but comes into existence when incarnated in a body.

Augustine’s modified form of Platonism dominated much of medieval Christian thought in the West until the appearance of Thomas

Aquinas. During this time the teachings of Socrates and Plato became so widely accepted that they were frequently regarded as divinely inspired pre-Christian saints.

### **Thomas Aquinas Defines the Traditional Catholic Immortal Soul Teaching**

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) is considered by most Roman Catholics as their greatest theologian. His definition of Catholic teachings has been largely unsurpassed. With regard to the nature of man, he developed a less radical dualism, by emphasizing the unity that exists between the body and the soul.

Contrary to the Platonic-Agustinian view in which the soul dwells in the body for a time without forming one substantial being, Thomas Aquinas considers the soul as *the form of the body*. His thinking was influenced by Aristotles who viewed the soul primarily as a life principle. But Aquinas departed from Aristotles by claiming independent existence for the soul.

According to Aquinas, a substantial unity exists between the soul and the body, or more exactly, the spiritual principle and the material principle, which are united as “form” and “matter” in order to form one complete being. “It is clear that the soul is united to the body by nature: because by its essence it is the form of the body. Therefore it is contrary to the nature of the soul to be deprived of the body.”<sup>15</sup>

Aquinas defended the immortality of the soul by arguing that it is a “substantial form” that exists independently of the body, but desires to be joined together again to its own body at the Resurrection. He strongly opposed those who held to the biblical view that the soul is the animating principle of the body, which is mortal until God confers upon it the gift of immortality at the Resurrection.

Aquinas' definition of the immortal soul as the *form* of the body, has become the traditional teaching of the Catholic Church that is still current today. In fact, Aquinas' language is reflected in the new *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which states: "The unity of the soul and body is so profound that one has to consider the soul to be the '*form*' of the body. . . . The Church teaches that every spiritual soul is created immediately by God—it is not 'produced' by the parents—and also that it is immortal: it does not perish when it separates from the body at death, and it will be reunited with the body at the final Resurrection."<sup>16</sup>

This definition of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, rightly represents what "the Church teaches," but not what the Bible teaches. Shortly we shall see that the teaching of the immortal soul that separates from the body at death, is foreign to the teachings of the Bible. It is derived, as our survey has shown, from Greek dualistic speculations that have perverted the teachings of the Word of God.

The belief in the survival of the soul contributed to the development of the doctrine of Purgatory, a place where the souls of the dead are purified by suffering the temporal punishment of their sins before ascending to Paradise. This widely believed doctrine burdened the living with emotional and financial stress. As Ray Anderson puts it, "Not only did one have to earn enough to live, but also to pay off the 'spiritual mortgage' for the dead as well."<sup>17</sup>

## **Reformers' Rejection of Purgatory**

The Protestant Reformation started largely as a reaction against the medieval superstitious beliefs about the afterlife in Purgatory. The Reformers rejected as unbiblical and unreasonable the practice of buying and selling indulgences to reduce the stay of the souls of departed relatives in Purgatory. However, they continued to believe in the conscious existence of souls either in Paradise or Hell.



Calvin expressed this belief far more aggressively than Luther.<sup>18</sup> In his treatise *Psychopannychia*,<sup>19</sup> which he wrote against the Anabaptists who taught that souls simply sleep between death and resurrection, Calvin argues that during the intermediate state the souls of the believers enjoy the bliss of heaven; those of the unbelievers suffer the torments of hell. At the resurrection, the body is reunited with the soul, thus intensifying the pleasure of paradise or the pain of hell. Since that time, this doctrine of the intermediate state has been accepted by most Protestant churches and is reflected in various Confessions.<sup>20</sup>

For example, the Westminster Confession (1646), regarded as the definitive statement of Presbyterian beliefs in the English-speaking world, states: “The body of men after death return to dust, and see corruption; but their souls (which neither die nor sleep) having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God who gave them. The souls of the righteous, being then made perfect in holiness, are received unto the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies: and the souls of the wicked are cast into hell, where they remain in torment and utter darkness, reserved to the judgment of the great day.”<sup>21</sup> The confession continues declaring as unbiblical the belief in purgatory.

## **Revival of the Belief in the Immortality of the Soul**

Public interest in the life of the soul after death has been revived in our times, not only by the teachings of Catholic and Protestant churches, but also through various attempts to communicate with the spirits of the dead through mediums, psychics, “scientific” research into near-death experiences, and New Age channeling with the spirits of the past.

In the late 1960s, the late Episcopal bishop James A. Pike gave new and widespread attention to the idea of communicating with the spirits of the dead by communicating on a regular basis with his deceased son.

Today our society is flooded with mediums and psychics who advertise their services nationwide through TV, magazines, radio, and newspapers.

In their book *At the Hour of Death*, K. Osis and E. Haraldson write: “Spontaneous experiences of contact with the dead are surprisingly widespread. In a national opinion poll . . . 27 per cent of the American population said they had encounters with dead relatives, . . . widows and widowers . . . reported encounters with their dead spouses twice as often—51 per cent.”<sup>22</sup> Communication with the spirits of the dead is not just an American phenomenon. Surveys conducted in other countries reveal a similar high percentage of people who engage the services of mediums to communicate with the spirit of their deceased loved ones.<sup>23</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The preceding survey has shown that Satan’s lie “You shall not die” (Gen 3:4) has lived on in different forms throughout human history, especially through the belief in the immortality of the soul and its separation from the body at death. The popularity of this belief, stems from the fact that attempts to disarm death by giving people the false assurance that they possess a divine element that lives on after the death of their body. Ultimately such a belief does away with the need of Christ’s Return to bestow the gift of immortality to believers at the final Resurrection.

Our only protection against the deceptive teaching of the immortality of the soul, is through a clear understanding of what the Bible teaches about the make-up of human nature, especially the relationship between the body and the soul. It is to this subject that we now turn our attention.

# **PART II**

## **THE OLD TESTAMENT VIEW**

### **OF HUMAN NATURE**

The logical starting point for the study of the Biblical view of human nature is the account of the creation of man. We use here the term “man” as used in Scripture, namely, including both man and woman.

#### **Genesis 2:7: “A Living Soul”**

The most important Biblical statement for understanding human nature is found in Genesis 2:7. It is not surprising that this text forms the basis of much of the discussion regarding human nature, since it provides the only Biblical account of how God created man. The text reads: “Then God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.”

Historically, this text has been read through the lenses of classical dualism. It has been assumed that the breath of life God breathed into man’s nostrils was simply an immaterial, immortal soul implanted into the material body. And just as earthly life began with the implantation of an immortal soul into a physical body, so it ends when the soul departs from the body. Thus Genesis 2:7 has been historically interpreted on the basis of the traditional body-soul dualism.

People who read the Old Testament references to *nephesh* (which in the King James version are translated 472 times as “soul”) with a dualistic mind-set, will have great difficulty in understanding the Biblical view of the body and the soul as being the same person seen from different perspectives. They will experience problems with accepting the Biblical meaning of the “soul” as the animating principle of both human and animal life. Furthermore, they will be at a loss to explain those passages that speak of a *dead person* as a *dead soul–nephesh* (Lev 19:28; 21:1, 11; 22:4; Num 5:2; 6:6,11; 9:6, 7, 10; 19:11, 13; Hag 2:13). For them it is inconceivable that an immortal soul could die with the body.

### **The Meaning of “Living Soul”**

The prevailing assumption that the human soul is immortal has led many to interpret the phrase “man *became* a living soul” (Gen 2:7 KJV) to mean that “man *obtained* a living soul.” This interpretation has been challenged by numerous scholars who are aware of the difference between the Greek-dualistic and the Biblical-wholistic conception of human nature.

For example, in his classic study *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, Hans Walter Wolff comments on Genesis 2:7 saying: “What does *nephesh* [soul] mean here? Certainly not soul [in the traditional dualistic sense]. *Nephesh* [soul] was designed to be seen together with the whole form of man, and especially with his breath; moreover man does not *have nephesh* [soul], *he is nephesh* [soul], *he lives as nephesh* [soul].”<sup>24</sup>

The fact that the soul in the Bible stands for the whole living person is recognized even by Catholic scholar Dom Wulstan Mork. In his book *The Biblical Meaning of Man*, published with the official Catholic *imprimatur*–approval, Mork writes: “It is *nephesh* [soul] that gives life to the *bashar* [body], *but not as a distinct substance*. Adam doesn’t have *nephesh* [soul]; he is *nephesh* [soul], just as he is *bashar* [body]. The

body, far from being divided from its animating principle, is the visible *nephesh* [soul].”<sup>25</sup>

From a Biblical perspective, the body and the soul are not two different substances (one mortal and the other immortal) abiding together within one human being, but two characteristics of the same person. Johannes Pedersen admirably sums up this point by a statement that has become proverbial: “The body is the soul in its outward form.”<sup>26</sup> The same view is expressed by H. Wheeler Robinson in an equally famous statement: “The Hebrew idea of personality is that of an animated body, not (like the Greek) that of an incarnate soul.”<sup>27</sup>

Summing up, we can say that the expression “man became a living soul—*nephesh hayyah*” does not mean that at creation his body was endowed with an immortal soul, a separate entity, distinct from the body. Rather, it means that as a result of the divine inbreathing of the “breath of life” into the lifeless body, man became a living, breathing being, no more, no less. The heart began to beat, the blood to circulate, the brain to think, and all the vital signs of life were activated. Simply stated, “a living soul” means “a living being.”

The practical implications of this definition are brought out in a suggestive way by Catholic Scholar Dom Wulstan Mork: “Man as *nephesh* [soul] means that it is his *nephesh* [soul] that goes to dinner, that tackles a steak and eats it. When I see another person, what I see is not merely his body, but his visible *nephesh* [soul], because, in the terms of Genesis 2:7, that is what man is—a living *nephesh*. The eyes have been called ‘the window of the soul.’ This is actually dichotomy. The eyes, as long as they belong to the living person, are *in themselves* the revelation of the soul.”<sup>28</sup>

## **Animals as “Living Souls**

The meaning of “living soul” as simply “living being” is supported by the use of the same phrase “living soul–*nephesh hayyah*” for animals. In our KJV Bible, this phrase appears for the first time in Genesis 2:7 when the creation of Adam is described. But in the Hebrew Bible we find the same phrase already in Genesis 1:20, 21, 24, and 30. In all four of these verses “living soul–*nephesh hayyah*” refers to animals, but translators of most English versions have chosen to translate it “living creature” rather than “living soul.” Why? Simply because they are conditioned by the belief that animals do not have a soul—only human beings have an immaterial, immortal soul.

Norman Snaith finds this “most reprehensible” and says . . . “it is a grave reflection on the Revisers [translators of the Authorized version] that they retained this misleading difference in translation. . . . The Hebrew phrase should be translated exactly the same way in both cases. To do otherwise is to mislead all those who do not read Hebrew. There is no excuse and no proper defense. The tendency to read ‘immortal soul’ into Hebrew *nephesh* and to translate accordingly is very ancient, and can be seen in the Septuagint . . .”<sup>29</sup>

Basil Atkinson, a former Librarian at Cambridge University, offers the same explanation. “Our translators [of the Authorized Version] have concealed this fact from us, presumably because they were so bound by current theological notions of the meaning of the word ‘soul,’ that they dared not translate by it a Hebrew word that referred to animals, although they have used it in the margin [of the Authorized Version] at verses 20 and 30. In these verses we find ‘the moving creature, even living soul’ (Heb.) (ver. 20); ‘every living soul (Heb. *nephesh*) that moveth’ (ver. 21); ‘Let the earth bring forth the living soul (Heb. *nephesh*) after his kind’ (ver. 24); ‘and to every beast of the earth, and to every fowl of the air, and to every thing that creepeth upon the earth, wherein there is living soul’ (Heb. *nephesh*) (ver. 30).”<sup>30</sup>

The use of *nephesh*—soul in these verses to refer to all sorts of animals clearly shows that *nephesh* is not an immortal soul given to man, but the animating principle of life or “the life-breath” which is present in both man and animals. What distinguishes the human soul from that of animals is the fact that humans were created in God’s image, that is, with godlike possibilities unavailable to animals.

The important point to note at this juncture is that both man and animal *are* souls, because they both share the same animating life-principle or “life-breath.”

Summing up, in the context of creation the word “*nephesh*—soul” is used to designate the animating principle of life which is present in both human beings and animals. At this point, we wish to explore the broader use of *nephesh* in the Old Testament. Since *nephesh* occurs in the Old Testament 754 times and is rendered in 45 different ways,<sup>31</sup> our focus is on three main usages of the word that relate directly to the object of our investigation.

### **Soul as a Needy Person**

In his state-of-the-art book *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, which is virtually undisputed among scholars of various religious persuasions, Hans Walter Wolff entitles the chapter on the soul as “*Nephesh*—Needy Man.”<sup>32</sup> The reason for this characterization of *nephesh* as “needy man” becomes evident when one reads the many texts which picture *nephesh*—soul in dangerous situations of life and death proportions.

Since it is God who made man “a living soul” and who sustains the human soul, the Hebrews when in danger appealed to God to deliver their soul, that is, their life. David prayed: “Deliver my soul [*nephesh*] from the wicked” (Ps 17:13, KJV); “For thy righteousness sake, O Lord, bring my soul [*nephesh*] out of trouble” (Ps. 143:11, KJV). The Lord deserves to be

praised, “for he has delivered the soul [*nephesh*] of the poor from the hand of the evildoers” (Jer 20:13).

People greatly feared for their souls [*nephesh*] (Jos 9:24) when others were seeking their souls [*nephesh*] (Ex 4:19; 1 Sam 23:15). They had to flee for their souls [*nephesh*] (2 Kings 7:7) or defend their souls [*nephesh*] (Esther 8:11); if they did not, their souls [*nephesh*] would be utterly destroyed (Jos 10:28, 30, 32, 35, 37, 39). “The soul that sinneth, it shall die” (Ez 18:4, 20). Rahab asked the two Israelite spies to save her family, saying: “Deliver our souls [*nephesh*] from death” (Jos 2:13). In these instances, it is evident that the soul that was in danger and needed to be delivered was the life of the individual.

The soul experienced danger not only from enemies but also from lack of food. In lamenting the state of Jerusalem, Jeremiah says: “All her people sigh, they seek bread; they have given their pleasant things for meat to relieve the soul [*nephesh*]” (Lam 1:11). The Israelites grumbled in the wilderness because they no longer had meat as they had in Egypt. “But now our soul [*nephesh*] is dried away: there is nothing at all, besides this manna, before our eyes” (Num 11:6).

The theme of danger and deliverance associated with the soul [*nephesh*] allows us to see that the soul in the Old Testament was viewed, not as an immortal component of human nature, but as the uncertain, insecure condition of life which sometimes was threatened unto death. Those situations which involved intense danger and deliverance reminded the Israelites that they were needy souls [*nephesh*], living persons whose life depended constantly upon God for protection and deliverance.

### **Soul as Seat of Emotions**

Being the animating principle of human life, the soul functioned also as the center of emotional activities. In speaking of the Shunammite, 2



Kings 4:27 says: “Her soul [*nephesh*] is vexed within her” (KJV). David cried to the Lord, seeking deliverance from his enemies, saying: “My soul [*nephesh*] is also sore vexed. . . . Return, O Lord, deliver my soul [*nephesh*]” (Ps 6:3-4).

While the people were waiting for God’s deliverance, their soul was losing vitality. Tory Hoff notes that “because the Psalmist often wrote from within this experience [of danger], the Psalms include phrases such as ‘their soul fainted in them’ (Ps 107:5), ‘my soul melts for sorrow’ (Ps 119:28), ‘my soul languishes for salvation’ (Ps 119:81), ‘my soul longs, yea, faints for thy courts’ (Ps 84:2), and ‘their soul melted away in their evil plight’ (Ps 107:26). Job asked, ‘How long will you torment my soul’ (Job 19:2). It was also the soul that would wait for deliverance. ‘For God does my soul wait in silence’ (Ps 62:1). ‘I wait for the Lord, my soul waits and in his word I hope’ (Ps 130:5).

“Since the Hebrew knew all deliverance came from God, his soul would ‘take refuge’ in God (Ps 57:1) and ‘thirst for him’ (Ps 42:2; 63:1). Once the danger had passed and the intense, precarious nature of the situation was over, the soul would praise God for deliverance received. ‘My soul makes its boast in the Lord, let the afflicted hear and be glad’ (Ps 34:2). ‘Then my soul shall rejoice in the Lord, exulting in his deliverance’ (Ps 35:9).”<sup>33</sup>

Wolff rightly observes that the emotional content of the soul is equated with the self or the person and is not an independent entity. He cites, as an example, Psalms 42:5, 11, and 43:5 in which the same song of lament and of self-exhortation is found: “Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise him.” “Here,” Wolff writes, “*nephesh* [soul] is the self of the needy life, thirsting with desire.”<sup>34</sup> There is nothing in these passages to suggest that the soul is an immaterial part of human nature that is equipped with

personality and consciousness and is able to survive death. We shall note that the soul dies when the body dies.

## **The Soul as the Seat of Personality**

The soul [*nephesh*] is seen in the Old Testament not only as the seat of emotions but also as the seat of personality. The soul is the person as a responsible individual. In Micah 6:7 we read: “Shall I give my first-born for my transgression, and the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul [*nephesh*]?” The contrast here is not between body and soul. In commenting on this text, Catholic scholar Dom Wulstan Mork writes: “The meaning is not that the soul is the human cause of sin, with the body as the soul’s instrument. Rather, the *nephesh*, the whole living person, is the cause of sin. Therefore, in this verse, responsibility for sin is attributed to the *nephesh* as the person.”<sup>35</sup>

We find the same idea in several texts that discuss sin and guilt. “If a soul [*nephesh*] shall sin through ignorance . . .”(Lev 4:2, KJV); “And if a soul [*nephesh*] sins . . . he shall bear his iniquity” (Lev 5:1, KJV); “But the soul [*nephesh*] that doeth ought presumptuously . . . that soul [*nephesh*] shall be cut off from among his people” (Num 15:30, KJV). “Behold all souls [*nephesh*] are mine; . . . the soul [*nephesh*] that sinneth, it shall die” (Ez 18:4). It is evident that in texts such as these, the soul is the responsible person who thinks, wills, and sins, and consequently subjects to the death punishment.

Any physical or psychological activity was performed by the soul because such activity presumed a living, thinking, and acting person. In the Old Testament there is no division of activity between the soul and the body because are two manifestations of the same person. The soul includes and presumes the body. “In fact,” writes Mork, “the ancient Hebrews could not conceive of one without the other. There is no Greek dichotomy of soul and body, of two opposing substances, but a unity, man, who is *bashar*

[body] from one aspect and *nephesh* [soul] from another. *Bashar*, then, is the *concrete reality* of human existence, *nephesh* is the *personality* of human existence.”<sup>36</sup>

## The Soul and Death

The survival of the soul in the Old Testament is linked to the survival of the body, since the body is an outward manifestation of the soul. This explains why the death of a person is often described as the death of the soul. “When death occurs,” writes Johannes Pedersen, “then it is the soul that is deprived of life. Death cannot strike the body or any other parts of the soul without striking the entirety of the soul. Therefore it is also said to ‘kill a soul’ or ‘smite a soul’ (Num 31:19; 35:15,30; Jos 20:3, 9); it may also be called to ‘smite one as regards the soul,’ i. e. to smite one so that the soul is killed (Gen 37:21; Deut 19:6, 11; Jer 40:14, 15). There can be no doubt that it is the soul which dies, and all theories attempting to deny this fact are false. It is deliberately said both that the soul dies (Judg 16:30; Num 23:10 et al.), that it is destroyed or consumed (Ez 22:25, 27), and that it is extinguished (Job 11:20).”<sup>37</sup>

Readers of the English Bible may question the validity of Pedersen’s statement that the soul dies, because the word “soul” does not occur in the texts which he cites. For example, speaking of the cities of refuge, Numbers 35:15 says: “Anyone who kills any person [*nephesh*] without intent may flee there.” Since the word “soul–*nephesh*” does not occur in most English translations, some may argue that the text is speaking of the killing of the body and not of the soul. The truth of the matter is that *nephesh* is found in the Hebrew text, but translators usually chose to render it with “person,” presumably because of their belief that the soul is immortal and cannot be killed. Their unbiblical assumption is discredited by those texts which even in the English version clearly speak of the death of the soul. For example, Ezekiel 18:20 reads: “The soul that sins shall die” (See also Ex 18:4).

The fate of the soul is linked to the fate of the body. As Joshua conquered the various cities beyond the Jordan, we are told repeatedly “he utterly destroyed every soul [*nephesh*]” (Jos 10:28, 30, 31, 34, 36, 38). The destruction of the body is seen as the destruction of the soul. “In the Bible,” writes Edmund Jacob, “*nephesh* [soul] refers only to the corpse prior to its final dissolution and while it has distinguishable features.”<sup>38</sup> When the body is destroyed and consumed so that its features are no longer recognizable, then the soul no longer exists, because “the body is the soul in its outward form.”<sup>39</sup> On the other hand, when the body is laid to rest in the grave with the fathers, the soul is also at rest and lies undisturbed (Gen 15:15; 25:8; Jud 8:32; 1 Chron 29:28).

## **Conclusion**

The various usages of “*nephesh*–soul” in the Old Testament never convey the idea of an immaterial, immortal entity capable of existing apart from the body. On the contrary, we have found that the soul–*nephesh* is the animating principle of life, the life-breath, which is present in both human beings and animals. At death, the soul ceases to function as the animating life-principle of the body, because fate of the soul is connected inextricably with the fate of the body because the body is the outward manifestation of the soul.

## **PART III**

### **THE NEW TESTAMENT VIEW**

### **OF HUMAN NATURE**

The New Testament shows a definite continuity with the Old Testament wholistic view of human nature. The notion of the immortality of the soul, though popularly believed at that time, is completely absent

from the writings of the New Testament because its writers were faithful to the teachings of the Old Testament.

The New Testament reveals not only continuity with the Old Testament in the understanding of human nature and destiny, but also an expanded understanding in the light of the incarnation and teachings of Christ. After all, Christ is the real head of the human race, since Adam “was a type of the one who was to come” (Rom 5:14). While in the Old Testament human nature is related primarily to Adam by virtue of creation and the Fall, in the New Testament human nature is related to Christ by virtue of His incarnation and redemption. Christ is the fullness of revelation about human nature, meaning, and destiny.

The Greek word *psyche*—soul is used in the New Testament in accordance with the basic meanings of the Hebrew *nephesh*—soul that we found in the Old Testament. We briefly review the basic meaning of *psyche*—soul, giving special attention to the expanded meaning of the word in the light of Christ’s teachings and redemptive ministry.

### **“Soul” as Person**

The word “soul—*psyche*” in the New Testament denotes the whole person in the same sense as *nephesh* in the Old Testament. For example, in his defense before the Sanhedrin, Stephen mentions that “seventy-five souls—[*psyche*]” of Jacob’s family went down to Egypt, a figure and usage found in the Old Testament (Gen 46:26-27; Ex 1:5; Deut 10:22). On the day of Pentecost, “three thousand souls—[*psyche*]” (Acts 2:41) were baptized and “fear came upon every soul—[*psyche*]” (Acts 2:43). Speaking of Noah’s family, Peter says that “eight souls—[*psyche*] were saved by water” (1 Pet 3:20). It is evident that in texts such as these the “soul—*psyche*” is used as a synonym for person.

Within this context, we mention Christ's famous promise of rest to the "souls-[*psyche*]" of those who accept His yoke (Matt 11:28). The expression "rest for your souls-[*psyche*]" comes from Jeremiah 6:16, where rest for the soul is promised to people who walk according to God's commandments. The rest which Christ gives to the soul is not achieved, as in Platonic dualism, when the soul is liberated from the body, but when a believer accepts His gracious provision of salvation ("Come to *me*") and live in accordance to the principles of life He taught and exemplified ("learn of me").

### **"Soul" as Life**

The most frequent meaning of the word soul-*psyche* in the New Testament is "life." According to one reckoning, 46 times *psyche* is translated "life."<sup>40</sup> In these instances, "life" provides a fitting translation of the Greek *psyche* because it is used in reference to physical life. To facilitate the identification of the word soul-*psyche* found in the Greek text, *psyche* will be translated literally as "soul" in places where the RSV renders it as "life."

At the height of the storm, Paul reassured the members of the ship that "there will be no loss of souls [*psyche*] among you, but only of the ship" (Acts 27:22; cf. 27:10). In this context, the Greek *psyche* is correctly translated "life" because Paul is talking about the loss of lives. An angel told Joseph: "Rise, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's soul [*psyche*] are dead" (Matt 2:20). This is one of the many references to the seeking, killing, and saving of the soul-*psyche*, all of which suggest that the soul is not an immortal part of human nature, but the physical life itself which can be in danger. In accordance with the Old Testament, the soul-*psyche* is put to death when the body dies.

Jesus associated the soul with food and drink. He said: “Do not be anxious about your soul [*psyche*], what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not the soul [*psyche*] more than food and the body more than clothing?” (Matt 6:25). Here the soul–*psyche* is associated with food and drink and the body (the visible exterior) with clothing.

By associating the soul with food and drink, Jesus shows that the soul is the physical aspect of life, though He explains that there is more to life than food and drink. Believers can raise their desires and thoughts to heavenly things and live for Christ and eternity. Thus, Christ expanded the meaning of the “soul” by including the higher life or eternal life He came to offer mankind. The fact remains, however, that by associating the soul with food and drink, Christ shows that the soul is the physical aspect of our existence and not an immaterial component of our nature.

### **Saving the Soul by Losing It**

In the Old Testament, we found that the soul–*nephesh* is used frequently to denote the uncertainty of life, constantly facing the possibility of harm or even destruction. Consequently, the ancient Israelites were concerned about saving their soul, delivering their soul, restoring their soul to safety, and sustaining their soul through provisions, especially food. In this context, it must have been perplexing for the Jews to hear Christ saying: “Whoever would save his soul [*psyche*] will lose it; and whoever loses his soul [*psyche*] for my sake and the gospel’s will save it” (Mark 8:35; cf. Matt 16:25; 10:39; Luke 9:24; 17:33; John 12:25).

The impact of Christ’s statement upon the Jews must have been dramatic, because He had the audacity to proclaim that their souls could be saved only by losing them for His sake. The notion of saving the soul through losing it was unknown to the Jews because it is not found in the

Old Testament. Christ demonstrated His teaching by acting in a way that culminated in His own crucifixion.

He came “to give his soul [*psyche*] as a ransom for many” (Matt 20:28). As the Good Shepherd, He “laid down his soul [*psyche*] for the sheep” (John 10:11). By teaching that in order to save one’s soul, it is necessary for one to lose it, to give it up, and to lay it down, Christ expanded the Old Testament meaning of *nephesh*—soul as physical life by making it inclusive of the eternal life received by those willing to sacrifice their present life (soul) for His sake.

The Apostolic Church grasped this expanded meaning of the soul as denoting a life of total commitment to the Savior. Judas and Silas became men who “risked their soul [*psyche*] for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 15:26). Epaphroditus risked “his soul [*psyche*]” for the work of Christ (Phil 2:30). The Apostle Paul himself testified: “I do not account my soul [*psyche*] of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may accomplish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God” (Acts 20: 24).

If Paul believed that the soul is immortal, it is unlikely that he would have viewed it of no value and worth losing for the sake of the gospel. These texts show that the Apostolic Church lived out the new expanded meaning of the soul by living a life of total, sacrificial commitment to Christ. Believers understood that their soul as physical life could be saved only by consecrating it to the service of Christ.

The most foolish mistake anyone can make is “to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul [*psyche*]” (Mark 8:36). It is this soul—*psyche*, the life that transcends death, that is the primary object of redemption (Heb 10:39; 13:17; James 1:21; 1 Pet 1:9, 22). While the term “soul” is used considerably less frequently in the New Testament than in the Old Testament, these key passages indicate a significant expansion of its



meaning. The term came to include the gift of eternal life received by those who are willing to sacrifice their present life for Christ's sake.

### **The Death of the Soul Is Eternal Death**

This expanded meaning of the term soul–*psyche* helps us understand a well-known, but much misunderstood saying of Christ: “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul [*psyche*]; rather fear him who can destroy both the soul [*psyche*] and the body in hell” (Matt 10:28; cf. Luke 12:4). Dualists find in this text support for the concept that the soul is an immaterial substance that is kept safe and survives the death of the body.

This interpretation reflects the Greek dualistic understanding of human nature and not the Biblical wholistic view. The reference to God's power to destroy the soul [*psyche*] and the body in hell, negates the notion of an immaterial, immortal soul. How can the soul be immortal if God destroys it with the body in the case of impenitent sinners? Oscar Cullmann rightly notes that “we hear in Jesus' saying in Matthew 10:28 that the soul can be killed. The soul is not immortal.”<sup>41</sup>

In the preceding discussion, we have seen that Christ expanded the meaning of the soul–*psyche* to denote not only physical life but also eternal life received by those who are willing to make a sacrificial commitment to Him. If this text is read in the light of the expanded meaning given by Christ to the soul, the meaning of the saying is: “Do not fear those who can bring your earthly existence (body–*soma*) to an end, but cannot annihilate your eternal life in God; but fear God who is able to destroy your whole being eternally.” Christ's warning hardly teaches the immortality of the soul. Rather it teaches that God can destroy the soul as well as the body.

### **Paul and the Soul**

In comparison with the Old Testament, or even the Gospels, the use of the term soul–*psyche* in Paul’s writings is rare. He uses the term only 13 times<sup>42</sup> (including quotations from the Old Testament) to refer to physical life (Rom 11:3; Phil 2:30; 1 Thes 2:8), a person (Rom 2:9; 13:1), and the seat of emotional life (Phil 1:27; Col 3:23; Eph 6:6). It is noteworthy that Paul never uses *psyche*–soul to denote the life that survives death. The reason could be Paul’s fear that the term *psyche*–soul might be understood by his Gentile converts according to the Greek view of innate immortality.

To ensure that the new life in Christ would be viewed wholly as a divine gift and not as an innate possession, Paul uses the term *pneuma*–spirit, instead of *psyche*–soul. The Apostle certainly acknowledges a continuity between the present life and the resurrection life, but since he sees it as God’s gift and not something found in human nature, he uses *pneuma*–spirit instead.<sup>43</sup>

In his famous passage on the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul shows that he uses soul–*psyche* in accordance with the Old Testament meaning of physical life. He explains the difference between the present body and the resurrection body, saying: “It is sown a physical [*psychikon*] body, it is raised a spiritual [*pneumatikon*] body” (1 Cor 15:44). The present body is *psychikon*, literally “soulish” from *psyche*–soul, denoting a physical organism subject to the law of sin and death. The future, resurrected body is *pneumatikon*, literally “spiritual” from *pneuma*–spirit, meaning an organism controlled by God’s Spirit.

The resurrected body is called “spiritual,” not because it is nonphysical but because it is ruled by the Holy Spirit, instead of carnal impulses. This becomes evident when we note that Paul applies the same distinction between the natural–*psychikos* and the spiritual–*psychikos* to the present life in 1 Corinthians 2:14-15. Here Paul distinguishes between the natural man–*psychikos*, who is not guided by God’s Spirit, and the spiritual man [*psychikos*], who is guided by God’s Spirit.

## No Natural Immortality

It is evident that for Paul the continuity between the present and the future body is to be found not in the expanded meaning of the soul that we have found in the Gospels, but in the role of the Spirit of God that renews us in newness of life both now and at the resurrection. By focusing on the role of the Spirit, Paul negates the immortality of the soul. For him it is very important to clarify that the new life of the believer both in the present and the future is wholly a gift of God's Spirit. There is nothing inherently immortal in human nature.

The expression "immortality of the soul" does not occur in Scripture. The Greek word commonly translated "immortality" in our English versions of the Bible is *athanasia*. This term occurs only twice in the New Testament, the first time in connection with God "who alone has immortality [*athanasia*] and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has ever seen or can see" (1Tim 6:16). Obviously, immortality here means more than endless existence. It means that God is the source of life (John 5:26) and all other beings receive eternal life from Him.

The second time, the word "immortality–*athanasia*" occurs in 1 Corinthians 15:53-54 in relation to mortal nature, which puts on immortality at the resurrection: "For this perishable nature must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality [*athanasia*]. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality [*athanasia*], then shall come to pass the saying that is written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory.'"

The Christian Hope is based not on the immortality of the soul but on the resurrection of the body. If we want to use the word "immortality" with reference to human nature, let us speak not of the immortality of the soul, but rather of the immortality of the body (whole person) by means of

the Resurrection. It is the resurrection that bestows the gift of immortality on the body, that is, on the whole person of the believer.

## **Conclusion**

Our survey of the New Testament use of the term “soul-*psyche*” indicates that there is no support for the notion of the soul as an immaterial and immortal entity that survives the death of the body. There is nothing in the word *psyche*–soul that even remotely implies a conscious entity able to survive the death of the body. Not only does the New Testament fail to endorse the notion of the immortality of the soul, but it also clearly shows that the soul-*psyche* denotes the physical, emotional, and spiritual life. The soul is the person as a living being, with its personality, appetites, emotions, and thinking abilities. The soul describes the whole person as alive and thus inseparable from the body.

Christ expanded the meaning of soul-*psyche* to include the gift of eternal life received by those who are willing to sacrifice their earthly life for Him, but He never suggested that the soul is an immaterial, immortal entity. On the contrary, Jesus taught that God can destroy the soul as well as the body (Matt 10:28) of impenitent sinners.

Paul never uses the term “soul-*psyche*” to denote the life that survives death. On the contrary, he identifies the soul with our physical organism (*psychikon*) which is subject to the law of sin and death (1 Cor 15:44). To ensure that his Gentile converts understood that there is nothing inherently immortal in human nature, Paul uses the term “spirit-*pneuma*” to describe the new life in Christ which the believer receives wholly as a gift of God’s Spirit both now and at the resurrection.

Summing up our survey of the Old and New Testament view of human nature, we can say that the Bible is consistent in teaching that human nature is an indissoluble unity, where the body, soul, and spirit

represent different aspects of the same person, and not different substances or entities functioning independently. This holistic view of human nature removes the basis for the belief in the survival of the soul at the death of the body.

## **PART IV**

# **THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE DUALISTIC VERSUS THE WHOLISTIC VIEW OF HUMAN NATURE**

Someone may ask: What difference does it make whether a person holds to a dualistic or wholistic view of human nature? Is not this a pure academic question? These are questions we wish to briefly address in the last part of this chapter. We shall see that what Christians believe about the make-up of their human nature largely determines what they believe about their present life and ultimate destiny.

## **IMPLICATIONS OF THE DUALISTIC VIEW OF HUMAN NATURE**

We noted earlier that historically popular Christian thought has been deeply influenced by the dualistic teachings of Socrates and Plato, which were promoted in modified forms by Tertullian, Origen, Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas. The far-reaching implications of the dualistic view of human nature for Christian beliefs and practices is inestimable. Only a brief mention can be made in this chapter.

### **Doctrinal Implications of the Dualistic View of Human Nature**

Doctrinally, a host of beliefs derive from or are dependent upon the dualistic view of human nature. For example, the belief in the transition of the soul at the moment of death to paradise, hell, or purgatory rests on the belief that the soul is immortal by nature and survives the body at death. This means that, if the inherent immortality of the soul is an unbiblical concept, then popular beliefs about paradise, purgatory, and hell have to be radically modified or even rejected.

The belief that at death the souls of the saints ascend to the beatitude of Paradise has fostered the Catholic and Orthodox belief in the intercessory role of Mary and of the saints. If the souls of the saints are in heaven, it is feasible to assume that they can intercede on behalf of needy sinners on this earth. Thus, devout Christians pray to Mary and the saints to intercede on their behalf. Such a practice runs contrary to the Biblical teaching that “there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1Tim 2:5).

If the conclusion of our study is correct that the soul does not survive and cannot function apart from the body, then the whole teaching of the intercessory role of Mary and the saints must be rejected as an ecclesiastical fabrication. Truly, the acceptance of the Biblical holistic view of human nature can have frightening consequences for long-cherished Christian beliefs.

Similarly, the belief that at death the souls of those who are pardonable transit to purgatory, has led to the teaching that the church on earth has the power to apply the merits of Christ and of the saints to souls suffering in purgatory. Historically, this has been accomplished by granting indulgences, that is, the remission of the temporal punishment due to forgiven sin. Such a belief led to the scandalous sale of indulgences which sparked the Protestant Reformation.

The Reformers eliminated the doctrine of purgatory as unbiblical, but they retained the doctrine of the immediate transit after death of individual souls to a state of perfect blessedness (*heaven*) or to a state of continuous punishment (*hell*). We have found the latter teaching to be clearly negated by Scripture. Consequently, it is imperative to continue to the work of the Reformers, by rejecting as ecclesiastical fabrications the popular beliefs about purgatory, indulgences, and the transit of the souls to heaven or to hell.

### **Immortality of the Soul Weakens Second Advent**

Traditional dualism also has contributed to weakening the Advent Hope. The belief in the ascension of souls to heaven obscures and eclipses the expectation of the Second Advent. If at death the soul of the believer *goes up* immediately to the beatitude of Paradise to be with the Lord, there can hardly be any real sense of expectation for Christ to *come down* to resurrect the sleeping saints. The primary concern of these Christians is to reach paradise immediately, albeit as a disembodied soul. This concern leaves barely any interest in the coming of the Lord and the resurrection of the body.

To believe in the immortality of the soul means to regards oneself at least partly immortal in the sense of being incapable of passing out of existence. Such a belief encourages confidence in oneself and in the possibility of one's soul going up to the Lord. On the other hand, to believe in the resurrection of the body means to believes in Christ who will return to raise the dead and transform the living. This means believing in the *coming down* of the Lord to this earth to meet embodied believers, and not in the *going up* of disembodied souls to heaven to meet the Lord.

In the New Testament the Parousia guarantees a final consummation realized by a movement of Christ's *coming down* to mankind rather than individual souls *going up* to Him. The Advent Hope

is not “a pie in the sky when you die” but a real meeting upon this earth between embodied believers and Christ on the glorious day of His return. Out of that real meeting will come a transformation affecting humanity and nature. This great expectation is obscured and erased by the belief in individual immortality and heavenly bliss immediately after death.

Another significant implication of the individualistic hope for immediate immortality is that it overrides the Biblical corporate hope for an ultimate restoration of this creation and its creatures (Rom 8:19-23; 1 Cor 15:24-28). When the only future that really counts is the individual soul’s survival after death, the anguish of mankind can have only a peripheral interest and the value of God’s redemption for this whole world is largely ignored. The ultimate result of this belief is, as noted by Abraham Kuyper, that “by far the majority of Christians do not think much beyond their own death.”<sup>43</sup>

### **Misconceptions About the World to Come**

The belief in the immortal and spiritual soul has fostered also wrong ideas about the world to come. The popular concept of paradise as a spiritual retreat center somewhere up in space, where glorified souls will spend eternity in everlasting contemplation and meditation, has been inspired more by Platonic dualism than by Biblical realism. For Plato, the material components of this world were evil and, consequently, not worthy of survival. The aim was to reach the spiritual realm where souls liberated from the prison-house of a material body enjoy eternal bliss.

Our study shows that both the Old and New Testaments reject the dualism between the material world below and the spiritual realm above. The final salvation inaugurated by the coming of the Lord is regarded in Scripture not an *escape from* but a *transformation of* this earth. The Biblical view of the world to come is not a *spiritual heavenly retreat*



inhabited by glorified souls, but this *physical earthly planet* populated by resurrected saints (Is 66:22; Rev 21:1).

### **Practical Implications of the Dualistic View of Human Nature**

At a more practical level, the dualistic view of human nature has fostered the cultivation of the soul in detachment from the body and the suppression of physical appetites and healthy natural impulses. Contrary to the Biblical view of the goodness of God's creation, including the physical pleasures of the body, medieval spirituality promoted the mortification of the flesh as a way to achieve the divine goal of holiness.

The saints were ascetic persons who devoted themselves primarily to *vita contemplativa*, detaching themselves from the *vita activa*. Since the salvation of the soul was seen as more important than the preservation of the body, the physical needs of the body often intentionally were neglected or even suppressed.

The dichotomy between body and soul, the physical and the spiritual, is still present in the thinking of many Christians today. Many still associate redemption with the human soul rather than the human body. We describe the missionary work of the church as that of "saving souls." The implication seems to be that the souls are more important than the bodies.

Conrad Bergendoff rightly notes that "The Gospels give no basis for a theory of redemption which saves souls apart from the bodies to which they belong. What God has joined together, philosophers and theologians should not put apart. But they have been guilty of divorcing the bodies and souls of men which God made one at creation, and their guilt is not diminished by their plea that thus salvation would be facilitated. Until we have a theory of redemption which meets the whole

need of man we have failed to understand the purpose of Him who became incarnate that He might be able to save humanity.”<sup>44</sup>

## **Dualism in Liturgy**

The influence of dualism can be seen even more often in many Christian hymns, prayers, and poems. The opening sentence of the burial prayer found in *The Book of Common Prayer* of the Church of England is starkly dualistic: “Forasmuch as it hath pleased Almighty God of His great mercy to take unto Himself the soul of our dear brother here departed, we therefore commit his body to the ground.”<sup>45</sup> A phrase in another prayer in the same Office betrays a clear dualistic contempt for physical existence: “With whom the souls of the faithful, after they are delivered from the burden of the flesh, are in joy and felicity.”

The Platonic notion of the release of the soul from the prison-house of the body is clearly set forth in the lines of the Christian poet, John Donne: “When bodies to their grave, souls from the graves remove.”<sup>46</sup> Many of our hymns are thinly disguised dualistic poems. They speak of this earth as “a desert drear” and invite believers to look “up above the sky.” “I want to live above the world . . . on heaven’s tableland.”

Christians who believe the words of such hymns may be disappointed one day to discover that their eternal home is not “above the world . . . on heaven’s tableland,” but down here on this earth. This is the planet that God has created, redeemed, and ultimately will restore for our eternal habitation.

The far-reaching doctrinal and practical implications of the dualistic view of human nature that we have just considered should serve to impress the reader with the importance of the subject under consideration. This is not a mere academic question but a fundamental Biblical teaching that impacts directly or indirectly a host of Christian beliefs and practices.

## **IMPLICATIONS OF THE BIBLICAL HOLISTIC VIEW OF HUMAN NATURE**

The Biblical holistic view of human nature, according to which our body and soul are an indissoluble unit, created and redeemed by God, challenges us to view positively both the physical and spiritual aspects of life. We honor God not only with our mind but also with our body, because our body is “a temple of the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor 6:19).

Scripture admonishes us to present our “bodies as a living sacrifice” (Rom 12:1). This means that the way we treat our bodies reflects the spiritual condition of our souls. If we pollute our bodies with tobacco, drugs, or unhealthy food, we cause not only the *physical pollution* of our bodies, but also the *spiritual pollution* of our souls.

Henlee H. Barnette notes that “what people do to, for, and with others and their environment depends largely upon what they think of God, nature, themselves, and their destiny.”<sup>47</sup> When Christians view themselves and the present world holistically as the object of God’s good creation and redemption, they will be both convinced and compelled to act as God’s stewards of their bodies as well as of the created order.

### **Concern for the Whole Person**

Biblical holism challenges us to be concerned about the whole person. In its preaching and teaching, the church must meet not only the spiritual needs of the soul but also the physical needs of the body. This means teaching people how to maintain emotional and physical health. It means that church programs should not neglect the needs of the body. Proper diet, exercise, and outdoor activities should be encouraged as an important part of Christian living.

Accepting the Biblical holistic view of human nature means to opt for a *holistic* approach in our evangelistic and missionary endeavors. This approach consists not only in saving the “souls” of people but also in improving their living conditions by working in such areas as health, diet, education. The aim should be to serve the world and not to avoid it. The issues of social justice, war, racism, poverty, and economic imbalance should be of concern to those who believe that God is working to restore the whole person and the whole world.

Christian education should promote the development of the whole person. This means that the school’s program should aim at the development of the mental, physical, and spiritual aspects of life. A good physical-education program should be considered as important as its academic and religious programs. Parents and teachers should be concerned about teaching good eating habits, the proper care of the body, and a regular program of physical exercise.

The Biblical concept of the whole person also has implications for medicine. Medical science recently has developed what is known as *holistic medicine*. Holistic health practitioners “emphasize the necessity for looking at the whole person, including physical condition, nutrition, emotional make up, spiritual state, life-style values, and environment.”<sup>48</sup> At the 1975 graduating exercise of Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, Dr. Jerome D. Frank told the graduates: “Any treatment of an illness that does not also minister to the human spirit is grossly deficient.”<sup>49</sup> Healing and the maintenance of physical health must always involve the total person.

## **Cosmic Redemption**

The Biblical holistic view of human nature presupposes also a cosmic view of redemption that encompasses the body and the soul, the material and the spiritual world. The separation between body and soul or

spirit has often paralleled the division between the realm of creation and the realm of redemption. The latter has been associated to a large extent in both Catholicism and Protestantism with the salvation of individual souls at the expense of the *physical* and *cosmic* dimensions of redemption. The saints often are portrayed as pilgrims who live on earth but detached from the world and whose souls at death immediately leave their material bodies to ascend to an abstract place called “heaven.”

Dualism has produced an attitude of contempt toward the body and the natural world. Such an attitude of disdain toward our planet is absent from the Psalms, where the central theme is the praise of God for His magnificent works. In Psalm 139:14, David says: “I will praise thee; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made: marvellous are thy works; and that my soul knoweth very well.” Here the Psalmist praises God for his wonderful body, a fact well known to his soul (mind). This is a good example of wholistic thinking, where body and soul are part of God’s marvellous creation.

In Psalm 92, the Psalmist urges one to praise God with musical instruments, because, he says, “Thou, O Lord, hast made me glad by thy work; at the work of thy hands I sing for joy. How great are thy works, O Lord!” (Ps 92:4-5). The Psalmist’s rejoicing over his wonderful body and marvelous creation is based upon his holistic conception of the created world as an integral part of the whole drama of creation and redemption.

## **Biblical Realism**

The Biblical holistic view of human nature also impacts on our view of the world to come. The Bible does not envision the world to come as an ethereal paradise where glorified souls will spend eternity wearing white robes, singing, plucking harps, praying, chasing clouds, and drinking milk of ambrosia. Instead, the Bible speaks of the resurrected saints inhabiting this planet earth, which will be purified, transformed, and

perfected at and through the coming of the Lord (2 Pet 3:11-13; Rom 8:19-25; Rev 21:1). The “new heavens and a new earth” (Is 65:17) are not a remote and inconsequential spiritual retreat somewhere off in space; rather, they are the present heaven and earth renewed to their original perfection.

Believers enter the new earth not as disembodied souls but as resurrected bodily persons (Rev 20:4; John 5:28-29; 1 Thess 4:14-17). Though nothing unclean shall enter the New Jerusalem, we are told that “the kings of the earth shall bring their glory into it, . . . they shall bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations” (Rev 21:24, 26). These verses suggest that everything of real value in the old heaven and earth, including the achievements of man’s inventive, artistic, and intellectual prowess, will find a place in the eternal order. The very image of “the city” conveys the idea of activity, vitality, creativity, and real relationships.

It is regrettable that this fundamentally concrete, earthly view of God’s new world portrayed in the Scripture has largely been lost and replaced in popular piety with an ethereal, spiritualized concept of heaven. The latter has been influenced by Platonic dualism rather than by Biblical realism.

## **CONCLUSION**

The serpent’s lie, “You will not die” (Gen 3:4) has lived on throughout human history to our time. Our brief historical survey traced the origin of this belief in life after death to the ancient Egyptians. They spent an outrageous amount of time and money preparing for life after death.

The Greek philosophers Socrates and Philo adopted the Egyptian belief in life after death, but redefined it in terms of an immaterial, immortal soul that leaves the prison house of the mortal body at death. They viewed death as the separation of the soul from the body.

This dualistic teaching found its way into the Christian church toward the end of the second century. It was promoted first by Tertullian, and later on by Origen, Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas. For them death meant the destruction of the body, which enables the immortal soul to continue to live in either the beatitude of Paradise or in the eternal torment of Hell.

The belief in the survival of the soul contributed to the development of the doctrine of Purgatory, a place where the souls of the dead are purified by suffering the temporal punishment of their sins before ascending to Paradise.

The Reformers rejected as unbiblical and unreasonable the practice of buying and selling indulgences to reduce the stay of the souls of departed relatives in Purgatory. However, they continued to believe in the conscious existence of souls either in Paradise or Hell.

Today the belief in conscious existence after death is spreading like wildfire, due to such factors as the polished image of mediums and psychics, the sophisticated “scientific” research into near-death experiences, and the popular New Age channeling with the alleged spirits of the past. The result is that most people believe Satan’s lie that no matter what they do, they “shall not die” (Gen 3:4) but become like gods by living for ever.

To test the validity of this popular belief, we examined the Old and New Testaments view of the “soul.” We found that the Bible is consistent in teaching that human nature is an indissoluble unity, where the body, soul, and spirit represent different aspects of the same person, and not different substances or entities functioning independently. This holistic view of human nature removes the basis for the belief in the survival of the soul at the death of the body.

Christ expanded the meaning of soul—*psyche* to include the gift of eternal life received by those who are willing to sacrifice their earthly life for Him, but He never suggested that the soul is an immaterial, immortal entity. On the contrary, Jesus taught that God can destroy the soul as well as the body (Matt 10:28) of impenitent sinners.

We noted that the dualistic view of human nature consisting of a mortal body and immortal soul, has far-reaching doctrinal and practical implications. It impacts directly or indirectly on a host of popular beliefs and practices that run contrary to the Bible. Some of these popular unbiblical beliefs are examined in subsequent chapters.

The work that the Reformers began by eliminating purgatory, must now be completed by rejecting popular beliefs that are contrary to Scripture. It is unlikely that such a monumental task can be undertaken by Protestant or Catholic churches today, because any attempt to modify or reject traditional doctrines is interpreted as a betrayal of their traditional faith and can cause division and fragmentation. This is a too high price that most churches are not willing to pay. Yet it is a price that the faithful remnant must pay in order to fulfill her mission to call upon sincere believers every where: “Come out of her my people, so that you will not share in her sins” (Rev 18:8).

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## NOTES TO CHAPTER 2

1. See Table 2.1 Religious Belief, Europe, and the USA, in Tony Walter, *The Eclipse of Eternity* (London, 1996), p. 32.
2. James Bonwick, *Egyptian Belief and Modern Thought*, 1956 reprint, p. 80.



3. Herodotus, *Euterpe*, chapter 123.
4. F. J. Church, translator, *Plato's Phaedo*, in the Library of Liberal Arts No. 30, pp. 7-8.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 66-69.
6. For an excellent survey, see, Le Roy Edwin Froom, *The Conditionalist Faith of Our Fathers*, 1966, vol. 1, pp. 632-755.
7. See, Le Roy Edwin Froom, *The Conditionalist Faith of Our Fathers*, 1966, pp. 724-726.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 801.
9. C. F. Hudson, *Debt and Grace as Related to the Doctrine of a Future Life*, 1857, p. 326.
10. Tertullian, *On the Resurrection*, chapter 3, Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol. 3, p. 547; Emphasis supplied.
11. Origen, *De Principiis*, Book 4, chapter 1, sec. 36, in Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol. 4, p. 381.
12. Origen, *Against Celsus*, book 4, chapter 13, Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol. 4, p. 502.
13. Augustine, *Epistle 137*, chap. 3.
14. Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol. 2, 1995, p. 245.
15. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles* IV, 79.

16. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994, p. 93.

17. Ray S. Anderson, *Theology, Death and Dying*, 1986, p. 104.

18. See Hans Schwarz, "Luther's Understanding of Heaven and Hell," *Interpreting Luther's Legacy*, ed. F. W. Meuser and S. D. Schneider, 1969, pp. 83-94.

19. The text of this work is found in Calvin's *Tracts and Treatises of the Reformed Faith*, trans. H. Beveridge, 1958, vol. 3, pp. 413-490.

20. See, for example, Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, 1940), Vol. 3, pp. 713-30; W. G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology* (Grand Rapids, n.d.), Vol. 2, pp. 591-640. G. C. Berkouwer, *The Return of Christ*, 1972, pp. 32-64.

21. Westminster Confession, chap. 32, as cited by John H. Leith, ed., *Creeeds of the Churches*, 1977, p. 228.

22. K. Osis and E. Haraldsson, *At the Hour of Death*, 1977, p. 13.

23. Ibid., pp. 13-14. See also W. D. Rees, "The Hallucinations of Widowhood," *BMJ* 4 (1971), pp. 37-41; G. N. M. Tyrrell, *Apparitions*, 1953, pp. 76-77.

24. Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, 1974, p. 10.

25. Dom Wulstan Mork, *The Biblical Meaning of Man*, 1967, p. 34.

26. Johannes Pedersen, *Israel: Its Life and Culture*, 1926, vol. 1, p. 99.

27. H. Wheeler Robinson, *The Christian Doctrine of Man*, 1952, p. 27.
28. Dom Wulstan Mork (note 25), p. 34
29. Norman Snaith, "Justice and Immortality," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 17, 3, (September 1964), pp. 312-313.
30. Basil F. C. Atkinson, *Life and Immortality* (London, n. d.), pp.1-2.
31. The tabulation is from Basil F. C. Atkinson (note 30), p. 3.
32. Hans Walter Wolff (note 24), p. 10.
33. Tory Hoff, "*Nephesh* and the Fulfillment It Receives as *Psyche*," in *Toward a Biblical View of Man: Some Readings*, eds. Arnold H. De Graaff and James H. Olthuis, 1978, p. 98.
34. Hans Walter Wolff (note 24), p. 25.
35. Dom Wulstan Mork (note 25), p. 40.
36. *Ibid.* p. 41.
37. Johannes Pedersen (note 26), p. 179.
38. Edmund Jacob, "*Nephesh*," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Friedrich, 1974, vol. 9, p. 621.
39. Johannes Pedersen (note 26), p. 171.
40. The figure is given by Basil F. C. Atkinson (note 29), p. 14.

41. Oscar Cullmann, "Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?" in *Immortality and Resurrection. Death in the Western World: Two Conflicting Currents of Thought*, ed. Krister Stendahl, 1968, pp. 36-37.

42. Edward Schweizer, "Psyche," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed., Gerhard Friedrich, 1974, vol. 9, p. 648, note 188.

43. Cited in G. C. Berkouwer, *The Return of Christ* 1972, p. 34. The same view is expressed by Russell Foster Aldwinckle, *Death in the Secular City*, 1972, p. 82.

44. Conrad Bergendoff, "Body and Spirit in Christian Thought," *The Lutheran Quarterly* 6 (August 1954), pp. 188-189.

45. Cited by D. R. G. Owen, *Body and Soul. A Study on the Christian View of Man* 1957, p. 28.

46. From John Donne's poem, "The Anniversary."

47. Henlee H. Barnette, *The Church and the Ecological Crisis* (New York, 1972), p. 65.

48. *Encyclopedia Americana*, 1983 ed., s. v. "Holistic Medicine," p. 294.

49. Cited by Norman Cousins, *Anatomy of an Illness*, 1979, p. 133. Among the many books on holistic medicine, the following may be noted: David Allen et al., *Whole Person Medicine*, 1980; Ed Gaedwag, ed., *Inner Balance: The Power of Holistic Healing*, 1979; Morton Walker, *Total Health: The Holistic Alternative to Traditional Medicine*, 1979; Jack La Patra, *Healing the Coming Revolution in Holistic Medicine*, New York, 1978.

### Chapter 3

## “LIFE AFTER DEATH”

**B**elief in life after death seems to have come back from the grave. News weekly covers it. Talk-show hosts discuss it. Popular books such as Moody and Kübler-Ross’ *Life After Life* and Maurice Rawlings’ *Beyond Death’s Door* examine case histories of out-of-body experiences. Even some pastors have begun preaching it again.

Once regarded by the secular community as a relic of a superstitious past and by believers as something too difficult to comprehend, belief in life after death is regaining popularity. According to a poll conducted by the General Social Survey, “A greater fraction of American adults believe in life after death in the 1990s than in the 1970s.”<sup>1</sup>

While the percentage of Protestants who believe in life after death has remained stable at 85 percent, there has been a noticeable increase among the Catholics and Jews. “The percentage of Catholics believing in an afterlife rose from 67 percent to 85 percent from 1900 to 1970. Among Jews, this percentage increased from 17 percent (1900) to 74 percent (1970).”<sup>2</sup>

A similar recent survey (2003) conducted by the reputable Barna Research Group of Ventura, California, confirms that “the vast majority of Americans continues to believe that there is life after death, that everyone has a soul, and that Heaven and Hell exist.”<sup>3</sup> “Belief in life after death . . . is widely embraced: 8 out of 10 Americans (81%) believe in an afterlife of some sort. Another 9% said life after death may exist, but they were not certain. Just one out of every ten adults (10%) contend that there is no form of life after one dies on earth. Moreover, a large majority of Americans (79%) agreed with the statement “every person has a soul that will live forever, either in God’s presence or absence.”<sup>4</sup>

The conscious or subconscious belief in life after death is reflected in the elaborate funeral arrangements which are intended to preserve the corporeal remains of the deceased. In the ancient world, the dead were provided for the next life with food, liquids, eating utensils, and clothes. Sometimes even servants and animals were buried with the corpse to provide the necessary conveniences in the next life.

Today, the mortuary rituals are different, but they still reveal a conscious or subconscious belief in life after death. The corpse is embalmed and hermetically sealed in a galvanized metal casket to retard decay. It is dressed in the finest clothes and placed on plush satin lining and soft pillows. It is sent on its way accompanied with items cherished in life, such as rings and family pictures. It is sacredly and silently interred in a cemetery, which is expertly manicured, surrounded by flowers, gates, and guards. The dead are surrendered to the “perpetual care” of the Lord in a professionally maintained and landscaped cemetery where no children play and no visitors disturb them.

The concern of people to send their deceased loved ones to the world of the dead with dignity and elegance reveals a desire to ensure their comfort in the afterlife. But, is there life after death? Are the dead conscious or unconscious? If conscious, are they able to communicate

with the living? Are they enjoying the bliss of paradise or the torments of hell? This chapter seeks to answer these questions by investigating the biblical view of death and of the state of the dead.

### **Objectives of This Chapter**

This chapter continues our investigation of the biblical view of human nature, by focusing on two major questions: First, What is the biblical view of death? And, second, What is the condition of the dead during the period between death and the resurrection? This period is commonly known as “the intermediate state.”

This chapter is divided in four parts. The first part provides a brief description mainly of the Catholic and Protestant views of the afterlife. We shall see that both hold in common the belief in the transition of the saved souls to Paradise and of the unsaved souls to Hell. Protestants reject the Catholic belief in Purgatory.

The second part examines the Biblical understanding of the nature of death. Does the Bible teach that death is the separation of the immortal soul from the mortal body? Or, does the Bible teach that death is the termination of life for the whole person, body and soul? In other words, is death according to the Bible the cessation of life for the whole person or the transition to a new form of life for the immortal component of our being?

The third and fourth parts examine the Old and New Testaments teachings regarding the state of the dead during the period between death and resurrection. The fundamental question we pursue in the last two parts is: Do the dead sleep in an unconscious state until the resurrection morning? Or, Is the soul of the saved experiencing immediately after death the bliss of paradise, while that of the unsaved writhing in the torment of hell?

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## PART 1

### BELIEFS ABOUT THE AFTERLIFE

The belief in some forms of life after death is common to most Christian and non-Christian religions. The reason, as noted in the previous chapter, is the common belief in the immortality of the soul, which presupposes the continuation of the conscious life of the soul after the death of the body. We found this belief to be contrary to the Bible which clearly defines death as the cessation of life for the whole person, body and soul.

For the purpose of this chapter, we briefly mention how three major wings of Christianity view life after death: Roman Catholics, Conservative Protestants, and Liberal Christians.

#### **Roman Catholic View of Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory**

The Catholic Church teaches that when a person dies, the soul leaves the body and is immediately evaluated in a *Particular Judgment* that determines three possible destinations for the disembodied soul: Heaven, or Hell, or Purgatory.

**Heaven.** The new *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains that the souls of a few believers “who die in God’s grace and friendship and are perfectly purified, live for ever with Christ.”<sup>5</sup> They are taken immediately to their eternal rewards in Heaven, where they enjoy the communion with the Trinity, the Virgin Mary, the saints, and the angels. “In the glory of heaven the blessed continue joyfully to fulfill God’s will.”<sup>6</sup>



**Hell.** Hell is the place where those who have died “with grave and unrepentant sins” which have not been wiped clean by church rituals,<sup>7</sup> will be severely punished without any hope of relief, for eternity. As stated in *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: “Immediately after death the souls of those who die in a state of mortal sin, descend into hell, where they suffer the punishment of hell ‘eternal fire.’”<sup>8</sup>

The torment of Hell will last forever, without any prospect of relief or mercy, but level of torture depends on the seriousness of the individual’s sin. Like the Catholics, Eastern Orthodox churches believe in Hell, but they teach that the precise form of punishment is not known to us.

The teaching that sinners burn eternally in Hell, makes God appear like an inhumane father who in desperation locks away his rebellious children in a horrible hovel, and then throws away for ever the key. More will be said about more implications of this popular belief in the next chapter.

**Purgatory.** The Catholic Church teaches that “all those who die in God’s grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, . . . after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven.”<sup>9</sup> The souls in Purgatory are systematically tortured with fire until they have paid the residual temporal punishment for their sins. The more purging is necessary, the longer a soul must suffer in Purgatory. This is a type of time-limited Hell during which they become fully cleansed and acceptable for admission to heaven.

As stated in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* “the Church commends almsgiving, indulgences, and works of penance undertaken on behalf of the dead.”<sup>11</sup> This means that friends and family members can shorten the stay of their loved ones in Purgatory, by paying for Masses, prayers, buying indulgences, and making pilgrimages to holy shrines.

The beliefs of the Eastern Orthodox Churches very closely parallel those of the Roman Catholic Church about Heaven and Hell. However, they have no formal belief about the existence of purgatory.

### **Conservative Protestants' View of Heaven and Hell**

We noted in chapter 2 that the Protestant Reformation started largely as a reaction against the medieval superstitious beliefs about the afterlife in Purgatory. The Reformers rejected as unbiblical and unreasonable the practice of buying and selling indulgences to reduce the stay of the souls of departed relatives in Purgatory. However, they continued to believe that the souls of the believers enjoy the bliss of heaven, while those of the unbelievers suffer the torments of hell. At the resurrection, the body is reunited with the soul, thus intensifying the pleasure of paradise or the pain of hell. Since that time, belief in heaven and hell has been accepted by most Protestant churches and is reflected in various Confessions.<sup>12</sup>

For example, the Westminster Confession (1646), regarded as the definitive statement of (Calvinistic) Presbyterian beliefs in the English-speaking world, states: "The body of men after death return to dust, and see corruption; but their souls (which neither die nor sleep) having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God who gave them. The souls of the righteous, being then made perfect in holiness, are received unto the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies: and the souls of the wicked are cast into hell, where they remain in torment and utter darkness, reserved to the judgment of the great day."<sup>13</sup> The confession continues declaring as unbiblical the belief in purgatory.

Most conservative Protestant believe that there are *only* two possible destinations for the soul after death. One either passes immediately into the glories of Heaven and the presence of God, or else

one is sent straight to the flames of Hell for eternal punishment, with no possibility of reprieve. Any other destination for the soul, such as the Catholic Purgatory, is merely an “invented” doctrine.

**Heaven.** Heaven is reserved for those who have been justified by faith in Christ’s saving work. The soul of believers ascend immediately after death to heaven, to live in the presence of Christ, while awaiting the resurrection of their bodies. At the final resurrection, the disembodied soul will receive new incorruptible bodies, and will live in the presence of Jesus Christ in the new earth where there is an absence of pain, disease, sexual activity, and depression.

**Hell.** Conservative Evangelicals believe that the souls of those who have rejected Christ, at death will be sent to Hell, a place of torment and eternal separation from God. Views vary on what punishments Hell may hold beyond isolation from God.

### **Liberal Protestants’ View of Heaven and Hell**

In general, liberal Protestant believe that at death people go to either Heaven, to live in the presence of God, or to Hell, to experience separation from God. But liberal Protestants hold to a wide range of non-traditional views. For example, some define heaven as the triumph of self-giving, not as a new heaven and a new earth. “Heaven is cordial, honest, loving relationships,” says Gordon’s Kalland.<sup>14</sup>

Conversely, to most liberal theologians, Hell is alienation from God. “Hell is estrangement, isolation, despair,” says Dean Lloyd Kalland of Gordon Divinity School in Wenham, Mass.<sup>15</sup> In his *Principles of Christian Theology*, Dr. John Macquarrie of Union Theological Seminary describes hell as “not some external or arbitrary punishment that gets assigned for sin, but simply the working out of sin itself, as it destroys the distinctively personal being of the sinner.”<sup>16</sup>

## **Afterlife in Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism**

Space does not permit to mention the views of afterlife held by Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism. It suffices to say that all of them share the belief in the survival of the soul at the death of the body. In Hinduism, for example, the ultimate goal is Moksha, that is, the self-realization and release of the soul from the cycle of death and rebirth. When Moksha is achieved, the soul becomes one with God.

The preceding brief description of the major Catholic and Protestant views of life after death, has served to show that these popular views stem from two assumptions: 1) Death is the separation of the immortal soul from the mortal body, 2) The soul is an independent, immaterial, and immortal component that survives the death of the body.

Are these assumptions biblically correct? Does the Bible teach that death is the separation of the immortal soul from the mortal body? Does the soul survive the death of the body and continues to exist in the bliss of Paradise or torment of Hell? To these questions we must now turn our attention by examining the biblical view of death.

## **PART 2**

### **THE BIBLICAL VIEW OF DEATH**

To understand the Biblical view of death, we need to go back to the account of creation where death is presented, not as a natural process willed by God, but as something unnatural opposed to God. The Genesis narrative teaches us that death came into the world as a result of sin. God commanded Adam not to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil and added the warning: “In the day that you eat of it you shall die” (Gen 2:17). The fact that Adam and Eve did not die on the day of their transgression

has led some to conclude that human beings do not actually die because they have a conscious soul that survives the death of the body.

## **Sin and Death**

This figurative interpretation can hardly be supported by the text, which, literally translated, reads: “dying you shall die.” What God simply meant is that on the day they disobeyed, the dying process would begin. From a state in which it was possible for them not to die (conditional immortality), they passed into a state in which it was impossible for them not to die (unconditional mortality).

Prior to the Fall the assurance of immortality was vouchsafed by the tree of life. After the Fall, Adam and Eve no longer had access to the tree of life (Gen 3:22-23) and, consequently, began experiencing the reality of the dying process. In the prophetic vision of the New Earth, the tree of life is found on both sides of the river as a symbol of the gift of eternal life bestowed upon the redeemed (Rev 21:2).

The divine pronouncement found in Genesis 2:17 places a clear connection between human death and the transgression of God’s commandment. Thus, life and death in the Bible have religious and ethical significance because they are dependent upon human obedience or disobedience to God. This is a fundamental teaching of the Bible, namely, that death came into this world as a result of human disobedience (Rom 5:12; 1 Cor 15:21). This does not diminish the responsibility of the individual for his participation in sin (Ez 18:4, 20). The Bible, however, makes a distinction between the first death, which every human being experiences as a result of Adam’s sin (Rom 5:12; 1 Cor 15:21), and the second death experienced after the resurrection (Rev 20:6) as the wages for sins personally committed (Rom 6:23).

## **Death as the Separation of the Soul from the Body**

A major question we need to address at this point is the Biblical view of the nature of death. To be specific: Is death the separation of the immortal soul from the mortal body, so that when the body dies the soul lives on? Or, is death the cessation of existence of the whole person, body and soul?

Historically, Christians have been taught that death is the separation of the immortal soul from the mortal body, so that the soul survives the body in a disembodied state. For example, the new *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states: “By death the soul is separated from the body, but in the resurrection God will give incorruptible life to our body, transformed by reunion with our soul.”<sup>17</sup> Augustus Strong defines death in similar terms in his well-known *Systematic Theology*: “Physical death is the separation of the soul from the body. We distinguish it from spiritual death, or the separation of the soul from God.”<sup>18</sup>

### **Massive Attack by Modern Scholars**

The above historical view of the nature of death as the separation of the soul from the body has come under a massive attack by many modern scholars. A few examples suffice to illustrate this point. Lutheran theologian Paul Althaus writes: “Death is more than a departure of the soul from the body. The person, body and soul, is involved in death. . . . The Christian faith knows nothing about an immortality of the personality. . . . It knows only an awakening from real death through the power of God. There is existence after death only by an awakening of the resurrection of the whole person.”<sup>19</sup>

Althaus argues that the doctrine of the immortality of the soul does not do justice to the seriousness of death, since the soul passes through death unscathed.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, the notion that a person can be totally happy and blessed without the body denies the significance of the body and empties the resurrection of its meaning.<sup>21</sup> If believers are already blessed in

heaven and the wicked are already tormented in hell, why is the final judgment still necessary?<sup>22</sup> Althaus concludes that the doctrine of the immortality of the soul rips apart what belongs together: the body and the soul, the destiny of the individual and that of the world.<sup>23</sup>

Roman Catholic Theologian Peter Riga of California's St. Mary's College acknowledges that the old idea of a soul that departs from the body at death "makes no sense at all." He goes on saying: "There is just man, man in God's image and likeness. Man in his totality was created and will be saved."<sup>24</sup>

This challenge of modern scholarship to the traditional view of death as the separation of the soul from the body has been long overdue. It is hard to believe that for most of its history, Christianity by and large has held to a view of human death and destiny which has been largely influenced by Greek thought, rather than by the teachings of Scripture.

What is even more surprising is that no amount of Biblical scholarship will change the traditional belief held by most churches on the intermediate state. The reason is simple. While individual scholars can and will change their doctrinal views without suffering devastating consequences, the same is not true for well-established churches. A church that introduces radical changes in its historical doctrinal beliefs undermines the faith of its members and thus the stability of the institution.

### **Death as Cessation of Life**

When we search the Bible for a description of the nature of death, we find many clear statements that need little or no interpretation. In the first place, Scripture describes death as a return to the elements from which man originally was made. In pronouncing sentence upon Adam after his disobedience, God said: "In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till

you return to the ground, for . . . you are dust and to dust you shall return” (Gen 3:19). This graphic statement tells us that death is not the separation of the soul from the body, but the termination of one’s life, which results in the decay and decomposition of the body. “Since man is created of perishable matter, his natural condition is mortality (Gen 3:19).”<sup>53</sup>

A study of the words “to die,” “death,” and “dead” in Hebrew and Greek reveals that death is perceived in the Bible as the deprivation or cessation of life. The ordinary Hebrew word meaning “to die” is *muth*, which occurs in the Old Testament over 800 times. In the vast majority of cases, *muth* is used in the simple sense of the death of men and animals. There is no hint in its usage of any distinction between the two. A clear example is found in Ecclesiastes 3:19, which says: “For the fate of the sons of men and the fate of beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other.”

## **Old Testament Descriptions of Death**

Hebrew noun *maveth* which is used in the Old Testament about 150 times and is generally translated “death,” offers us three important insights about the nature of death.

First, there is no remembrance of the Lord in death: “For in death [*maveth*] there is no remembrance of thee; in Sheol who can give thee praise” (Ps 6:5). The reason for no remembrance in death is simply because the thinking process stops when the body with its brain dies. “His breath goeth forth, he returneth to his earth; in that day his thoughts perish” (Ps 146:4). Since at death the “thoughts perish,” it is evident there is no conscious soul that survives the death of the body. If the thinking process, which is generally associated with the soul, survived the death of the body, then the thoughts of the saints would not perish. They would be able to remember God. But the fact is that “the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing” (Eccl 9:5).



Second, no praise of God is possible in death or in the grave. “What profit is there in my death [*maveth*], if I go down to the Pit? Will the dust praise thee? Will it tell of thy faithfulness?” (Ps 30:9). By comparing death with dust, the Psalmist clearly shows that there is no consciousness in death because dust cannot think. The same thought is expressed in Psalm 115:17: “The dead do not praise the Lord, nor do any that go down into silence.” Here the Psalmist describes death as a state of “silence.” What a contrast with the “noisy” popular vision of the afterlife where the saints praise God in Heaven and the wicked cry in agony in Hell!

Third, death is described as a “sleep.” “Consider and answer me, O Lord my God; lighten my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death” (Ps 13:3). This characterization of death as “sleep” occurs frequently in the Old and New Testaments because it fittingly represents the state of unconsciousness in death. Shortly we examine the significance of the “sleep” metaphor for understanding the nature of death.

In several places, *maveth* [death] is used with reference to the second death. “As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live” (Ez 33:11; cf. 18:23, 32). Here “the death of the wicked” is evidently not the natural death that every person experiences, but the death inflicted by God at the End on impenitent sinners. None of the literal descriptions or figurative references to death in the Old Testament suggests the conscious survival of the soul or spirit apart from the body. Death is the cessation of life for the total person.

### **New Testament References to Death**

The New Testament references to “death,” a term rendered by the Greek *thanatos*, are not as informative regarding the nature of death as those found in the Old Testament. The reason is partly due to the fact that in the Old Testament many of the references to death are found in the

poetic or wisdom books like Psalms, Job, and Ecclesiastes. This kind of literature is absent in the New Testament. More important is the fact that death is seen in the New Testament from the perspective of Christ's victory over death. This is a dominant theme in the New Testament which conditions the Christian view of death.

Through His victory over death, Christ has neutralized the sting of death (1 Cor 15:55); He has abolished death (2 Tim 1:10); He has overcome the devil who had power over death (Heb 2:14); He has in His hand the keys of the kingdom of death (Rev 1:18); He is the head of a new humanity as the first-born from the dead (Col 1:18); He causes believers to be born anew to a living hope through His resurrection from the dead (1 Pet 1:3).

Christ's victory over death affects the believer's understanding of physical, spiritual, and eternal death. The believer can face physical death with the confidence that Christ has swallowed up death in victory and will awaken the sleeping saints at His coming (1 Cor 15:51-56).

Believers who were spiritually "dead through trespasses and sins" (Eph 2:1; cf. 4:17-19; Matt 8:22) have been regenerated into a new life in Christ (Eph 4:24). Unbelievers who remain spiritually dead throughout their lives and do not accept Christ's provision for their salvation (John 8:21, 24), on the Day of Judgment will experience the second death (Rev 20:6; 21:8). This is the final, eternal death from which there is no return.

The figurative meanings of the word *thanatos*—death depend entirely on the literal meaning as cessation of life. To argue for the conscious existence of the soul on the basis of figurative meaning of death is to attribute to the word a meaning which is foreign to it. This runs contrary to literary and grammatical rules and destroys the connections among physical, spiritual, and eternal death.

## Death as Sleep in the Old Testament

In both the Old and New Testaments, death is often described as “sleep.” Before attempting to explain the reason for the Biblical use of the metaphor of “sleep” for death, let us look at a few examples. In the Old Testament, three Hebrew words meaning “sleep” are used to describe death.

The most common word, *shachav*, is used in the frequently occurring expression so-and-so “slept with his fathers” (Gen 28:11; Deut 31:16; 2 Sam 7:12; 1 Kings 2:10). Beginning with its initial application to Moses (“Behold, you are about to sleep with your fathers” – Deut 31:16), and then to David (“Thou shall sleep with thy fathers” – 2 Sam 7:12, KJV), and Job (“Now I shall sleep in the dust” – Job 7:21, KJV), we find this beautiful euphemism for death running like an unbroken thread all through the Old and New Testaments, ending with Peter’s statement that “the fathers fell asleep” (2 Pet 3:4). It is evident that if the souls of the “fathers” were alive in Paradise, Bible writers could not have regularly spoken of them as being “asleep.”

Another Hebrew word for “sleep” is *yashen*. This word occurs both as a verb, “to sleep” (Jer 51:39, 57; Ps 13:3) and as a noun, “sleep.” The latter is found in the well-known verse of Daniel 12:2: “And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.” Notice that in this passage both the godly and ungodly are sleeping in the dust of the earth and both will be resurrected at the End.

A third Hebrew word used for the sleep of death is *shenah*. Job asks this rhetorical question: “But man dies and is laid low; man breathes his last, and where is he?” (Job 14:10). His answer is: “As waters fail from a lake, and a river wastes away and dries up, so man lies down and rises not again; till the heavens are no more he will not awake, or be roused

out of his sleep [*shenah*]” (Job 14:11-12; cf. Ps 76:5; 90:5). Here is a graphic description of death. When a person takes the last breath, “where is he?” that is, “what is left of him?” Nothing. He does not exist any more. He becomes like a lake or river whose water has dried up. He sleeps in the grave and “will not awake” till the end of the world.

One wonders, would Job have given us such a negative description of death if he believed that his soul would survive death? If death introduced Job’s soul into the immediate presence of God in heaven, why does he speak of waiting “till the heavens are no more” (Job 14:11) and “till my release should come” (Job 14:14)? It is evident that neither Job nor any other Old Testament believer knew of a conscious existence after death.

### **Death as Sleep in the New Testament**

Death is described as sleep in the New Testament more frequently than in the Old. The reason may be that the hope of the resurrection, which is clarified and strengthened by Christ’s resurrection, gives new meaning to the sleep of death from which believers will awaken at Christ’s coming. As Christ slept in the tomb prior to His resurrection, so believers sleep in the grave while awaiting their resurrection.

There are two Greek words meaning “sleep” which are used in the New Testament. The first is *koimao* which is used fourteen times for the sleep of death. A derivative of this Greek noun is *koimeeterion* , from which comes our word *cemetery*. Incidentally, the root of this word is also the root of the word “home–*oikos*.” So the home and the cemetery are connected because both are a sleeping-place. The second Greek word is *katheudein*, which is generally used for ordinary sleep. In the New Testament it is used four times for the sleep of death (Matt 9:24; Mark 5:39; Luke 8:52; Eph 5:14; 1 Thess 4:14).

At the time of Christ's crucifixion, "many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep [*kekoimemenon*] were raised" (Matt 27:52). In the original, the text reads: "Many bodies of the sleeping saints were raised." It is evident that what was resurrected was the whole person and not just the bodies. There is no reference to their souls being reunited with their bodies, obviously because this concept is foreign to the Bible.

Speaking figuratively of Lazarus' death, Jesus said: "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep [*kekoimetai*], but I go to awake him out of sleep" (John 11:11). When Jesus perceived that He was misunderstood, He "told them plainly, 'Lazarus is dead'" (John 11:14). Then Jesus hastened to reassure Martha: "Your brother will rise again" (John 11:23).

This episode is significant, first of all, because Jesus plainly describes death as "sleep" from which the dead will awaken at the sound of His voice. Lazarus' condition in death was similar to a sleep from which one awakens. Christ said: "I go to awake him out of sleep" (John 11:11). The Lord carried out His promise by going to the tomb to awaken Lazarus by calling: "'Lazarus, come out.' And the dead man came out" (John 11:43-44).

The *awakening* of Lazarus out of the sleep of death by the sound of Christ's voice parallels the awakening of the sleeping saints on the day of His glorious coming. They, too, shall hear the voice of Christ and come forth to life again. "The hour is coming when all who are in the tombs *will hear his voice* and come forth" (John 5:28; cf. John 5:25). "For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a *shout*, with the *voice* of the archangel, . . . And the dead in Christ will rise first" (1 Thess 4:16).

There is harmony and symmetry in the expressions "sleeping" and "awakening" as used in the Bible for going into and coming out of a death state. The two expressions corroborate the notion that death is an

unconscious state like sleeping, from which believers will awake on the day of Christ's coming.

### **Lazarus Had No Afterlife Experience**

Lazarus' experience is also significant because he spent four days in the grave. This was not a near-death experience, but a real death experience. If, as popularly believed, the soul at death leaves the body and goes to heaven, then Lazarus would have had an amazing experience to share about the four days he would have spent in paradise. The religious leaders and the people would have done all in their power to elicit from Lazarus as much information as possible about the unseen world. Such information would have provided valuable answers to the question of life after death which was so hotly debated among the Sadducees and Pharisees (Matt 22:23, 28; Mark 12:18, 23; Luke 20:27, 33).

But Lazarus had nothing to share about life after death, because during the four days he spent in the tomb he slept the unconscious sleep of death. What is true of Lazarus is also true of six other persons who were raised from the dead: The widow's son (1 Kings 17:17-24); the Shunammite's son (2 Kings 4:18-37); the widow's son at Nain (Luke 7:11-15); the daughter of Jairus (Luke 8:41, 42, 49-56); Tabitha (Acts 9:36-41); and Eutychus (Acts 20:9-12). Each of these persons came out of death as if it were out of a profound sleep, with the same feeling and individuality, but with no afterlife experience to share.

There are no indications that the soul of Lazarus, or of the other six persons raised from the dead, had gone to heaven. None of them had a "heavenly experience" to share. The reason being that none of them had ascended to heaven. This is confirmed by Peter's reference to David in his speech on the day of Pentecost: "Brethren, I may say to you confidently of the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is still with us to this day" (Acts 2:29). Some could argue that what was in the

grave was David's body, not his soul which had gone to heaven. But this interpretation is negated by Peter's explicit words: "For *David did not ascend into the heavens*" (Acts 2:34). The Knox translation renders it, "*David never went up to heaven.*" The Cambridge Bible has the following note: "*For David is not ascended. Better ascended not. He went down to the grave and 'slept with his fathers.'*" What sleeps in the grave, according to the Bible, is not merely the body but the whole person who awaits the resurrection awakening.

### **Paul and the Sleeping Saints**

In the two great chapters on the resurrection in 1 Thessalonians 4 and 1 Corinthians 15, Paul repeatedly speaks of those who have fallen "asleep" in Christ (1 Thess 4:13, 14, 15; 1 Cor 15:6, 18, 20). A look at some of Paul's statements sheds light on what Paul meant by characterizing death as sleep.

In writing to the Thessalonians, who were grieving over their loved ones who had fallen asleep before experiencing the coming of Christ, Paul reassures them that as God raised Jesus from the dead, so He will through Christ "bring with him those who have fallen asleep" (1 Thess 4:14). Some maintain that Paul is here speaking of disembodied souls, which allegedly ascended to heaven at death and which will return with Christ when He descends to this earth at His return.

This interpretation ignores three major things. First, our study has shown that the Bible nowhere teaches that the soul at death ascends to heaven. Second, in the context, Paul is not speaking of immortal souls but of "those who are asleep" (1 Thess 4:13; cf. v. 14) and of "the dead in Christ" (1 Thess 4:16). "The dead in Christ will *rise* first" from their graves (1 Thess 4:16) and will not descend from heaven. There is no hint that the bodies *rise* from the graves and the souls *descend* from heaven to be reunited with the bodies. Such a dualistic notion is foreign to the Bible.

Third, if Paul really believed that “the dead in Christ” were not really dead in the grave but alive in heaven as disembodied souls, he would have capitalized on their blissful condition in heaven to explain to the Thessalonians that their grieving was senseless. Why should they grieve for their loved ones if they were already enjoying the bliss of heaven? The reason Paul did not give such an encouragement is obviously because he knew that sleeping saints were not in heaven but in their graves.

This conclusion is supported by the assurance Paul gave to his readers that living Christians would not meet Christ at His coming before those who had fallen asleep. “We who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep” (1 Thess 4:15). The reason is that “the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air” (1 Thess 4:16-17).

The fact that the living saints will meet with Christ at the same time as the sleeping saints indicates that the latter have not yet been united with Christ in heaven. If the souls of the sleeping saints were already enjoying fellowship with Christ in heaven and were to descend with Christ to earth at His second Advent, then obviously they would have an unmistakable priority over the living saints. But the truth is that both sleeping and living believers are awaiting their longed-for union with the Savior; a union which both will experience at the same time on the day of Christ’s coming.

Paul’s discussion of the sleeping saints in 1 Corinthians 15 confirms much of what we have already found in 1 Thessalonians 4. After affirming the fundamental importance of Christ’s resurrection for the Christian faith and hope, Paul explains that “if Christ had not been raised . . . Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished” (1 Cor 15:18-19). Paul could hardly have said that the sleeping saints would have perished without the guarantee of Christ’s resurrection, if he believed that their souls were immortal and were already enjoying the bliss of Paradise.



If Paul believed the latter, he probably would have said that without Christ's resurrection the soul of the sleeping saints would remain disembodied for all eternity. But Paul makes no allusion to such a possibility, because he believed that the whole person, body and soul, would have "perished" without the guarantee of Christ's resurrection.

It is significant that in the whole chapter which is devoted to the importance and dynamics of the resurrection, Paul never hints at the alleged reunification of the body with the soul at the resurrection. If Paul had held such a belief, he hardly could have avoided making some allusions to the reattachment of the body to the soul, especially in his discussions of the transformation of the believers from a mortal to an immortal state at Christ's coming. But the only "mystery" that Paul reveals is that "we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed" (1 Cor 15:51). This change from a perishable to an imperishable nature occurs for all, living and dead, at the same time, namely, at the sounding of "the last trumpet" (1 Cor 15:52). The change has nothing to do with disembodied souls regaining possession of their resurrected bodies. Rather, it is a change from mortal to immortal life for both the living and the dead in Christ: "The mortal puts on immortality" (1 Cor 15:54).

### **The Significance of the "Sleep" Metaphor**

The popular use of the "sleep" metaphor to describe the state of the dead in Christ raises the question of its implications for the nature of death. Specifically, why is this metaphor used and what insights can we legitimately derive from it about the nature of death? There are three major reasons for the use of the "sleep" metaphor in the Bible.

First, there is a similarity between the "sleep" of the dead and the "sleep" of the living. Both are characterized by a condition of unconsciousness and inactivity which is interrupted by an awakening.

Thus, the “sleep” metaphor fittingly represents the unconscious state of the dead and their awakening on the day of Christ’s return.

A second reason for the use of the “sleep” metaphor is suggested by the fact that it is a hope-inspiring figure of speech to represent death. It implies the assurance of a later awakening. As a person goes to sleep at night in the hope of awakening in the morning, so the believer falls asleep in the Lord in the assurance of being awakened by Christ on resurrection morning.

When we hear or say that a person is dead, we automatically think that there is no more hope of bringing him/her back to life. But when we say that a person is sleeping in the Lord, we express the hope for his or her restoration to life on the day of the resurrection. The “sleep” metaphor does not describe the sleeping condition of the dead, but the possibility of being awoken to live again on Resurrection morning.

### **The Sleep of Death as Unconsciousness**

A third reason for the use of the “sleep” metaphor is suggested by the fact that there is no consciousness of the elapse of time in sleep. Thus, the metaphor provides a fitting representation of the unconscious state of the deceased between death and resurrection. They have no awareness of the passing of time. In his early writings, Luther expressed this thought in a most graphic way: “Just as one who falls asleep and reaches morning unexpected when he awakes, without knowing what has happened to him, so shall we suddenly rise on the last day without knowing how we have come into death and through death.”<sup>25</sup> Again Luther wrote: “We shall sleep until He comes and knocks on the little grave and says, Doctor Martin, get up! Then I shall rise in a moment and be happy with Him forever.”<sup>26</sup>

For the sake of accuracy, it must be pointed out that later in life Luther largely rejected the notion of the unconscious sleep of the dead, apparently because of Calvin's strong attack against this doctrine. In his *Commentary on Genesis*, which he wrote in 1537, Luther remarks: "The departed soul does not sleep in this manner [regular sleep]; it is, more properly speaking, awake and has vision and conversation with the angels and God."<sup>27</sup> The change in Luther's position from the unconscious to the conscious state of the dead only serves to show that even influential reformers were not exempted from the theological pressures of their time.

Our study of the "sleep" metaphor in the Old and New Testaments has shown that the Bible uses the "sleep" metaphor frequently because it enshrines a vital truth, namely, the dead who sleep in Christ are unconscious of any lapse of time until their resurrection. The believer who dies in Christ falls asleep and rests unconscious, until he awakes when Christ calls him back to life at His coming.

### **The Meaning and Ground of Immortality**

Immortality in the Bible is not an innate human possession but a divine attribute. The term "immortality" comes from the Greek *athanasia*, which means "deathlessness," and hence unending existence. This term occurs only twice; first in connection with God "who alone has immortality" (1 Tim 6:16) and second in relation to human mortality which must put on immortality (1 Cor 15:53) at the time of the resurrection. The latter reference negates the notion of a natural immortality of the soul, because it says that immortality is something that the resurrected saints will "put on." It is not something that they already possess.

Nowhere the Bible suggests that immortality is a natural quality or right of human beings. The presence of the "tree of life" in the garden of Eden indicates that immortality was *conditional* to the partaking of the fruit of such tree. Scripture teaches that "immortality is to be *sought*

(Rom 2:7) and “put on” (1 Cor 15:53). It is, as ‘eternal life,’ the *gift* of God (Rom 6:23) to be *inherited* (Matt 19:29) by *knowing* God (John 17:3) *through Christ* (John 14:19; 17:2; Rom 6:23). In Paul’s view immortality is tied solely to the resurrection of Jesus (1 Cor 15) as the ground and pledge of the believer’s hope. Those who insist in finding the philosophical idea of the immortality of the soul in the Bible, ignore God’s revelation and insert dualistic Greek ideas into the Biblical faith.

## **Conclusion**

Our study of the biblical view of the nature of death, has shown that both the Old and New Testaments clearly teach that death is the *extinction of life* for the whole person. There is no remembrance or consciousness in death (Ps 8:5; 146:4; 30:9; 115:17; Ecc 9:5). There is no independent existence of the spirit or soul apart from the body. Death is the loss of the *total being* and not merely the loss of *well-being*. The whole person rests in the grave in a state of unconsciousness characterized in the Bible as “sleep.” The “awakening” will take place at Christ’s coming when He will call back to life the sleeping saints. The “sleep” metaphor is truly a beautiful and tender expression which intimates that death is not the *final* human destiny because there will be an awakening out of the sleep of death on resurrection morning.

## **PART 3**

### **THE STATE OF THE DEAD**

### **IN THE OLD TESTAMENT**

A major challenge to the conclusion that death in the Bible is the cessation of life for the whole person, comes from unwarranted interpretations given to two words used in the Bible to describe the

dwelling place of the dead. The two words are *sheol* in the Old Testament and *hades* in the New Testament. They often are interpreted to represent the place where disembodied souls continue to exist after the death and the place of punishment of the ungodly (hell). Thus, it is imperative for us to study the Biblical meaning and usage of these two terms .

### **Translations and Interpretations of *Sheol***

The Hebrew word *sheol* occurs 65 times in the Old Testament and is translated variously as “grave,” “hell,” “pit,” or “death.” These variant translations make it difficult for the English reader to understand the basic meaning of *sheol*. For example, *The King James Version* (KJV) renders *sheol* “grave” 31 times, “hell” 31 times, and “pit” 3 times. This means that readers of the KJV are often led to believe that the Old Testament teaches the existence of hell where the wicked are tormented for their sins.

For example, in the KJV, Psalm 16:10 reads: “For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell.” An uninformed reader will assume that the text means, “For thou wilt not leave my soul to be tormented in hell.” Such a reading is an obvious misinterpretation of the text which simply says, as rendered in the RSV, “For thou does not give me up to Sheol,” that is, the grave. The Psalmist here expresses confidence that God would not abandon him in the grave. In fact, this is the way the text is applied in Acts 2:27 to Christ, who was not left in the grave by the Father. The text has nothing to say about hell.

To avoid such misleading interpretations, the *Revised Standard Version* and *The New American Standard Bible* simply transliterate the Hebrew word into English letters as *sheol*. *The New International Version* usually translates it as “grave” (occasionally as “death”), with a footnote “*sheol*.” This translation accurately reflects the basic meaning of *sheol* as the grave or, even better, the collective realm of the dead.

Different translations often reflect the different theological convictions of the translators. For example, the translators of the KJV believed that at death the righteous go to Heaven and the wicked to hell. Consequently, they translated *sheol* “grave” when referring to the righteous, whose bodies rested in the grave, and “hell” when referring to the wicked whose souls are supposedly tormented in hell. A similar approach has been adopted by Old Testament scholar Alexander Heidel,<sup>28</sup> who has been criticized for arbitrarily handling the Biblical data.<sup>29</sup>

These interpretations of *sheol* as the dwelling place of souls (rather than the resting place of the body in the grave) or the place of punishment for the wicked, known as hell, do not stand up under the light of the Biblical usage of *sheol*. This fact is recognized even by John W. Cooper who has produced what is perhaps the most scholarly attempt to salvage the traditional dualistic view of human nature from the massive attacks of modern scholarship against it. In his book *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting*, Cooper states: “Perhaps most interesting for traditional Christians to note is the fact that it [*sheol*] is the resting place of the dead irrespective of their religion during life. *Sheol* is not the ‘hell’ to which the wicked are condemned and from which the Lord’s faithful are spared in glory. . . . There is no doubt that believers and unbelievers all were thought to go to *sheol* when they die.”<sup>30</sup>

The liberal *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* states even more emphatically that “Nowhere in the Old Testament is the abode of the dead [*sheol*] regarded as a place of punishment or torment. The concept of an infernal ‘hell’ developed in Israel only during the Hellenistic period.”<sup>31</sup>

In his classic study on *Israel: Its Life and Culture*, Johannes Pedersen flatly states: “*Sheol* is the entirety into which all graves are merged; . . . Where there is grave, there is *sheol*, and where there is *sheol*, there is grave.”<sup>32</sup> Pedersen explains at great length that *sheol* is the collective realm of the dead where all the deceased go, whether buried or

unburied. This conclusion becomes self-evident when we look at some usages of *sheol*.

### **Etymology and Location of *Sheol***

The etymology of *sheol* is uncertain. The derivations most frequently mentioned are from such root meanings as “to ask,” “to inquire,” and “to bury one’s self.”<sup>33</sup> In his dissertation on “Sheol in the Old Testament,” Ralph Doermann proposes a derivation from the stem *shilah*, which has the primary meaning “to be quiet,” “at ease.” He concludes that “if a connection between *sheol* and *shilah* is feasible, it would appear that the name is not connected with the location of the realm of the dead, but rather with the character of its occupants, who are primarily ‘at rest.’”<sup>34</sup> The difference between the two words is relative. More important is the fact that *sheol* denotes a place where the dead are at rest.

*Sheol* is located deep beneath the surface of the earth, because it is often mentioned in connection with heaven to denote the uttermost limits of the universe. *Sheol* is the deepest place in the universe, just as the heaven is the highest. Amos describes the inescapable wrath of God in these terms: “Though they dig into Sheol, from there shall my hand take them; though they climb up to heaven, from there I will bring them down” (Amos 9:2-3). Similarly, the Psalmist exclaims: “Whither shall I go from thy Spirit? Or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend to heaven, thou art there! If I make my bed in Sheol, thou are there!” (Ps 139:7-8; cf. Job 11:7-9).

Being situated beneath the earth, the dead reach *sheol* by “going down,” a euphemism for being buried in the earth. Thus, when Jacob was informed of the death of his son Joseph, he said: “I shall go down to Sheol to my son mourning” (Gen 37:35). Perhaps the clearest example of the location of *sheol* beneath the earth is the account of the punishment of

Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, who had revolted against the authority of Moses. “The ground under them split asunder; and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, with their household and all the men that belonged to Korah and all their goods. So they and all that belonged to them went down alive to Sheol; and the earth closed over them” (Num 16:31-33). This episode clearly shows that the whole person, and not just the soul, goes down to *sheol*, to the realm of the dead.

### **Characteristics of *Sheol***

The characteristics of *sheol* are essentially those of the realm of the dead, or the grave. In numerous passages, *sheol* is found in parallelism with the Hebrew word *bor*, which denotes “a pit” or any kind of subterranean hole, such as a grave. For example, the Psalmist writes: “For my soul is full of troubles and my life draws near to Sheol. I am reckoned among those who go down to the Pit [*bor*]” (Ps 88:3-4).<sup>35</sup> Here the parallelism identifies *sheol* with the pit, that is, the burial place of the dead.

Several times *Sheol* appears together with *abaddon*, which means “destruction,” or “ruin.”<sup>36</sup> *Abaddon* appears in parallelism with the grave: “Is thy covenant loyalty declared in the grave, or thy faithfulness in Abaddon” (Ps 88:12). The fact that *sheol* is associated with *abaddon*, the place of destruction, shows that the realm of the dead was seen as the place of destruction, and not as the place of eternal suffering for the wicked.

*Sheol* is also characterized as “the land of darkness and deep darkness” (Job 10:21), where the dead never see light again (Ps 49:20; 88:13). It is also “the land of silence” (Ps 94:17; cf. 115:17) and the land of no-return: “As the cloud fades and vanishes, so he who goes down to Sheol does not come up; he returns no more to his house, nor does his place know him any more” (Job 7:10).

### ***Sheol* as the Realm of the Dead**



All the above characteristics of *sheol* describe accurately the realm of the dead. The pit, the place of destruction, the land of darkness, the land of silence, the land of no-return are all descriptive of the realm of the dead. Furthermore we have some instances where *sheol* occurs in parallelism with death and the grave: “Let death come upon them; let them go down to Sheol alive; let them go away in terror to their grave” (Ps 55:16). By virtue of the parallelism, here *sheol* is identified with death and the grave.

The various figures used to describe *sheol* all serve to show that it is not the locality of departed spirits, but *the realm of the dead*. Anthony Hoekema, a Calvinistic scholar, reaches essentially the same conclusion in his book *The Bible and the Future*. He writes: “The various figures which are applied to *sheol* can all be understood as referring to the realm of the dead: *Sheol* is said to have bars (Job 17:16), to be a dark and gloomy place (Job 17:13), to be a monster with insatiable appetite (Prov 27:20; 30:15-16; Is 5:14; Hab 2:5). When we think of *sheol* in this way, we must remember that both the godly and the ungodly go down into *sheol* at death, since both enter the realm of the dead.”<sup>37</sup>

Any attempt to turn *sheol* into the place of torment of the wicked or into the abode of spirits/souls clearly contradicts the Biblical characterization of *sheol* as the underground depository of the dead.

### **The Condition of the Dead in *Sheol***

Since death is the cessation of life and vitality, the state of the dead in *sheol* is described in terms antithetical to the concept of life on earth. Life means vitality and activity; death means weakness and inactivity. This is true for all, the righteous and the wicked. “One fate comes to all, to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean” (Ecc 9:2). They all go to the same place, *sheol*, the realm of the dead.

The wise man offers a graphic description of the condition of the dead in *sheol*: “There is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going” (Eccl 9:10). It is evident that *sheol*, the realm of the dead, is the place of unconscious non-existence. “For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing, and they have no more reward; but the memory of them is lost. Their love and their hate and their envy have already perished, and they have no more for ever any share in all that is done under the sun” (Eccl 9:5-6). The main argument here is that death puts an abrupt end to all activity “under the sun,” and what follows death is *sheol*, the realm of the dead where there is a state of inactivity, without knowledge or consciousness. Such a state is best described as “sleep.”

The phrase “and he slept with his father” (cf. 1 Kings 1:21; 2:10; 11:43) reflects the idea that the dead join their predecessors in *sheol* in a somnolent, unconscious state. The idea of rest or sleep in *sheol* is prominent in Job, who cries in the midst of his sufferings: “Why did I not die at birth, come forth from the womb and expire? . . . For then I should have lain down and been quiet; I should have slept; then I should have been at rest. . . . There the wicked cease from troubling and there the weary are at rest” (Job 3:11,13, 17).

Rest in *sheol* is not the rest of souls enjoying the bliss of paradise or the torments of hell, but the rest of dead bodies sleeping in their dusty, worm-covered graves. “If I wait for the grave [*sheol*] as my house, if I make my bed in the darkness, if I say to corruption, ‘You are my father,’ and to the worm, ‘you are my mother and my sister,’ where then is my hope? . . . Will they go down to the gates of Sheol? Shall we rest together in the dust?” (Job 17:13-16, NKJV).

The dead sleep in *sheol* until the End. “A man lies down and rises not again; till the heavens are no more he will not awake, or be roused out of his sleep” (Job 14:12). “Till the heavens are no more” is possibly an

allusion to the coming of the Lord at the end of time to resurrect the saints. In all his trials, Job never gave up his hope of seeing the Lord even after the decay of his body. “For I know that my Redeemer lives, and He shall stand at last on the earth; and after my skin is destroyed, this I know that in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!” (Job 19:25-27; NKJV).

In summation, the condition of the dead in *sheol*, the realm of the dead, is one of unconsciousness, inactivity, a rest or sleep that will continue until the day of the resurrection. None of the texts we have examined suggests that *sheol* is the place of punishment for the ungodly (hell) or a place of conscious existence for the souls or spirits of the dead. No souls are in *sheol* simply because in the Old Testament the soul does not survive the death of the body. As N. H. Snaith flatly states it: “A dead body, whether of man, or bird, or beast is without *nepshesh* [soul]. In *sheol*, the abode of the dead, there is no *nepshesh* [soul].”<sup>38</sup>

## **PART 4**

### **THE STATE OF THE DEAD**

### **IN THE NEW TESTAMENT**

The New Testament says very little about the state of the dead during the intermediate period between their falling asleep and their awakening on the day of the resurrection. The primary concern of the New Testament is with the events that mark the transition from this age to the Age to Come: the return of Christ and the resurrection of the dead.

Our major source of information for the New Testament view of the state of the dead are the 11 references to *hades* (which is the Greek

equivalent of the Hebrew *sheol*) and 5 passages commonly cited in support of the belief in the conscious existence of the soul after death. The 5 passages are: (1) Luke 16:19-31, where we find the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus; (2) Luke 23:42-43, which reports the conversation between Jesus and the thief on the cross; (3) Philippians 1:23, where Paul speaks of his “desire to depart and be with Christ”; (4) 2 Corinthians 5:1-10, where Paul uses the imagery of the earthly/heavenly houses and of the unclothed/clothed conditions to express his desire to “be away from the body and at home with the Lord” (2 Cor 5:8); and (5) Revelation 6:9-11 which mentions the souls of the martyrs under the altar crying to God to avenge their blood. We proceed to examine each of the above in the order given.

### **The Meaning and Nature of *Hades***

The Greek word *hades* came into Biblical use when the translators of the Septuagint chose it to render the Hebrew *sheol*. The problem is that *hades* was used in the Greek world in a vastly different way than *sheol*. While *sheol* in the Old Testament is the realm of the dead, where, as we have seen, the deceased are in an unconscious state, *hades* in Greek mythology is the underworld, where the conscious souls of the dead are divided in two major regions, one a place of torment and the other of blessedness.

Edward Fudge offers this concise description of the Greek conception of *hades*: “In Greek mythology Hades was the god of the underworld, and then the name of the nether world itself. Charon ferried the souls of the dead across the rivers Styx or Acheron into his abode, where the watchdog Cerberus guarded the gate so that none might escape. The pagan myth contained all the elements of the medieval eschatology: there was the pleasant Elysium, the gloomy and miserable Tartarus, and even the Plains of Asphodel, where ghosts could wander who were suited

for neither of the above. Ruling beside the god was his queen Proserpine (or Persephone), whom he had raped from the world above.”<sup>39</sup>

This Greek conception of *hades* influenced Hellenistic Jews, during the intertestamental period, to adopt the belief in the immortality of the soul and the idea of a spatial separation in the underworld between the righteous and the godless. The souls of the righteous proceeded immediately after death to heavenly felicity, there to await the resurrection, while the souls of the godless went to a place of torment in *hades*.<sup>40</sup> The popular acceptance of this scenario is reflected in the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus to be examined shortly.

This view of *hades* as a place of torment for the wicked eventually entered into the Christian Church and influenced even Bible translators. It is noteworthy that the word *hades*, which occurs 11 times in the New Testament, is translated in the KJV 10 times as “hell”<sup>41</sup> and 1 time as “grave.”<sup>42</sup> The RSV transliterates the word as “Hades.”

The translation of *hades* as “hell” is inaccurate and misleading, because, with the exception of Luke 16:23, the term refers to the grave or the realm of the dead, not to a place of punishment. The latter is designated as *gehenna*, a term which also occurs 11 times in the New Testament<sup>43</sup> and is rightly translated “hell,” since it refers to the lake of fire, the place of doom for the lost. *Hades*, on the other hand, is used in the New Testament as the standing equivalent of *sheol*, the realm of the dead or the grave.

### **Jesus and *Hades***

In the Gospels, Jesus refers to *hades* three times. The first use of *hades* is found in Matthew 11:23, where Jesus upbraids Capernaum, saying: “And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades” (cf. Luke 10:15). Here *hades*, like *sheol* in the Old

Testament (Amos 9:2-3; Job 11:7-9), denotes the deepest place in the universe, just as the heaven is the highest. This means that Capernaum will be humiliated by being brought down to the realm of the dead, the deepest place in the universe.

The second use of *hades* in the teaching of Jesus occurs in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:23). We shall return to this shortly. The third use is found in Matthew 16:18, where Jesus expresses His confidence that “the gates of Hades shall not prevail” against His church. The meaning of the phrase “the gates of Hades” is illuminated by the use of the same expression in the Old Testament and Jewish literature (3 Macc 5:51; Wis. of Sol 16:13) as a synonym for death. For example, Job asks rhetorically: “Have the gates of death been revealed to you, or have you seen the gates of deep darkness?” (Job 38:17; cf. Is 38:18). The underworld was pictured as enclosed with cliffs, where the dead were locked in. Thus, what Jesus meant by “the gates of Hades” is that death shall not prevail against His church, obviously because He had gained the victory over death.

Like all the dead, Jesus went to *hades*, that is, to the grave, but unlike the rest He was victorious over death. “For thou wilt not abandon my soul to Hades, nor let thy Holy One see corruption” (Acts 2:27; cf. 2:31). Here *hades* is the grave where Christ’s body rested for only three days and, consequently, did not “see corruption,” the decay process resulting from a prolonged interment. Because of His victory over death, *hades*—the grave is a defeated enemy. Thus, Paul exclaims: “O death, where is thy sting? O grave [*hades*] where is thy victory?” (1 Cor 15:55, KJV). Here *hades* is correctly translated “grave” in the KJV since it is in parallel with death.

Christ now holds the keys to “death and Hades” (Rev 1:18), He has power over death and the grave. This enables Him to unlock the graves and call forth the saints to everlasting life at His coming. In all these

passages, *hades* is consistently associated with death, because it is the resting place of the dead, the grave. The same is true in Revelation 6:8, where the pale horse has a rider whose name “was Death, and Hades followed him.” The reason “Hades” follows “Death” is obviously because *hades*, as the grave, receives the dead.

At the end of the millennium, “Death and Hades” will give up their dead (Rev 20:13) and “then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire” (Rev 20:14). These two verses are significant. First, because they tell us that eventually *hades* will give up the dead, which indicates again that *hades* is the realm of the dead. Second, they inform us that at the End, *hades* itself will be thrown into the lake of fire. By means of this colorful imagery, the Bible reassures us that at the End, both death and the grave will be eliminated. This will be the death of death, or as Revelation puts it, “the second death.”

This brief survey of the use of *hades* in the New Testament clearly shows that its meaning and usage is consistent with that of *sheol* in the Old Testament. Both terms denote the grave or the realm of the dead and not the place of punishment of the ungodly.<sup>44</sup>

### **The Rich Man and Lazarus**

The word *hades* also occurs in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, but with a different meaning. While in the 10 references we have just examined *hades* refers to the grave or the realm of the dead, in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus it denotes the place of punishment for the ungodly (Luke 16:23). The reason for this exceptional use will be explained shortly. Obviously, dualists make great use of this parable to support the notion of the conscious existence of disembodied souls during the intermediate state (Luke 16:19-31). Because of the importance attached to this parable, we need to examine it closely.

First, let us look at the main points of the story. Lazarus and the rich man both die. Their situations in life are now reversed after their death. For when Lazarus died, he “was carried by angels to Abraham’s bosom” (Luke 16:22), whereas the rich man was taken to *hades* where he was tormented by scorching flames (Luke 16:23). Although a great gulf separated them, the rich man could see Lazarus in Abraham’s bosom. So he pleaded with Abraham to send Lazarus on two errands: first, to “send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool his tongue” (Luke 16:24) and second, to send Lazarus to warn his family members to repent lest they experience the same punishment. Abraham denied both requests for two reasons. The first, because there was a great chasm that made it impossible for Lazarus to cross over to help him (Luke 16:26); the second, because if his family members did “not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if some one should rise from the dead” (Luke 16:31).

Before looking at the parable, we need to remember that contrary to an allegory like *Pilgrim’s Progress*, where every details counts, the details of a parable do not necessarily have any significance in themselves, except as “props” for the story. A parable is designed to teach a fundamental truth, and the details do not have a literal meaning, unless the context indicates otherwise. Out of this principle another grows, namely, only the fundamental teaching of a parable, confirmed by the general tenor of Scripture, may be legitimately used for defining doctrine.

### **The Problems of a Literal Interpretation**

Those who interpret the parable as a literal representation of the state of the saved and unsaved after death are faced with insurmountable problems. If the narrative is an actual description of the intermediate state, then it must be true in fact and consistent in detail. But if the parable is figurative, then only the moral truth to be conveyed need concern us. A



literal interpretation of the narrative breaks down under the weight of its own absurdities and contradictions, as becomes apparent under scrutiny.

Contenders for literalism suppose that the rich man and Lazarus were disembodied spirits, destitute of bodies. Yet the rich man is described as having “eyes” that see and a “tongue” that speaks, as well as seeking relief from the “finger” of Lazarus—all real body parts. They are portrayed as existing physically, despite the fact that the rich man’s body was duly buried in the grave. Was his body carried away into *hades* together with his soul by mistake?

A gulf separates Lazarus in Heaven (Abraham’s bosom) from the rich man in *hades*. The gulf is too wide for anyone to cross and yet narrow enough to permit them to converse. Taken literally, this means that Heaven and Hell are within geographical speaking and seeing distance from each other so that saints and sinners eternally can see and communicate with one another. Ponder for a moment the case of parents in Heaven seeing their children agonizing in *hades* for all eternity. Would not such a sight destroy the very joy and peace of Heaven? It is unthinkable that the saved will see and converse with their unsaved loved ones for all eternity across a dividing gulf.

### **Conflict With Biblical Truths**

A literal interpretation of the parable contradicts some fundamental Biblical truths. If the narrative is literal, then Lazarus received his reward and the rich man his punishment, immediately after death and before the judgment day. But the Bible clearly teaches that the rewards and punishments, as well as the separation between the saved and the unsaved will take place on the day of Christ’s coming: “When the Son of man comes in his glory, . . . and before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them one from another” (Matt 25:31-32). “Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense, to repay everyone for what he has

done” (Rev 22:12). Paul expected to receive “the crown of righteousness” on the day of Christ’s appearing (2 Tim 4:8).

A literal interpretation of the parable also contradicts the uniform testimony of the Old and New Testaments that the dead, both righteous and ungodly, lie silent and unconscious in death until the resurrection day (Eccl 9:5-6; Job 14:12-15, 20, 21; Ps 6:5; 115:17). A literal interpretation also contradicts the consistent use of *hades* in the New Testament to denote the grave or the realm of the dead, not a place of punishment. We have found that in 10 of its 11 occurrences, *hades* is explicitly connected with death and the grave. The exceptional use of *hades* in this parable as a fiery place of torment (Luke 16:24) derives not from Scripture, but from current Jewish beliefs influenced by Greek mythology.

### **Current Jewish Concepts**

Fortunately for our investigation, we have Jewish writings that illuminate the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. Especially revealing is the “Discourse to the Greeks Concerning Hades,” written by Josephus, the famous Jewish historian who lived during New Testament times (died about A. D. 100). His discourse parallels very closely the narrative of the rich man and Lazarus. In it Josephus explains that “Hades is a subterraneous region where the light of this world does not shine. . . . This region is allowed as a place of custody for souls, in which angels are appointed as guardians to them, who distribute to them *temporary punishments*, agreeable to every one’s behavior and manners.”<sup>45</sup>

Josephus points out, however, that *hades* is divided into two regions. One is “the region of light” where the souls of the righteous dead are brought by angels to the “place we call *The Bosom of Abraham*.”<sup>46</sup> The second region is in “perpetual darkness,” and the souls of the ungodly are dragged by force “by the angels allotted for punishment.”<sup>47</sup> These angels drag the ungodly “into the neighborhood of hell itself,” so that they can see

and feel the heat of the flames.<sup>48</sup> But they are not thrown into hell itself until after the final judgment. “A *chaos* deep and large is fixed between them; insomuch that a just man that hath compassion upon them, cannot be admitted, nor can one that is unjust, if he were bold enough to attempt it, pass over it.”<sup>49</sup>

The striking similarities between Josephus’ description of *hades* and the parable of the rich man and Lazarus are self-evident. In both accounts we have the two regions that separate the righteous from the ungodly, the bosom of Abraham as the abode of the righteous, a great gulf that cannot be crossed, and the inhabitants of one region who can see those of the other region.

Josephus’ description of *hades* is not unique. Similar descriptions can be found in other Jewish literature.<sup>50</sup> What this means is that Jesus capitalized on the popular understanding of the condition of the dead in *hades*, not to endorse such views, but to drive home the importance of heeding in this present life the teachings of Moses and the prophets because this determines bliss or misery in the world to come.

### **Jesus’ Use of Current Beliefs**

At this juncture, it may be proper to ask, “Why did Jesus tell a parable based on current beliefs that do not accurately represent truth as set forth elsewhere in the Scripture and in His own teachings?” The answer is that Jesus met people on their own ground, capitalizing on what was familiar to them to teach them vital truths. Many of His hearers had come to believe in a conscious state of existence between death and the resurrection, though such a belief is foreign to Scripture. This erroneous belief was adopted during the intertestamental period as part of the process of Hellenization of Judaism and had become a part of Judaism by the time of Jesus.

In this parable, Jesus made use of a popular belief, not to endorse it, but to impress upon the minds of His hearers an important spiritual lesson. It should be noted that even in the preceding parable of the Dishonest Steward (Luke 16:1-12), Jesus uses a story that does not accurately represent Biblical truth. Nowhere, does the Bible endorse the practice of a dishonest administrator who reduces to half the outstanding debts of creditors in order to get some personal benefits from such creditors. The lesson of the parable is to “make friends for yourselves” (Luke 16:9), not to teach dishonest business practices.

John Cooper, though he has produced in my view the most scholarly defence of the dualistic view of human nature, acknowledges that the parable of the rich man and Lazarus “does not necessarily tell us what Jesus or Luke believed about the afterlife, nor does it provide a firm basis for a doctrine of the intermediate state. For it is possible that Jesus simply uses popular images in order to make his ethical point. He may not have been endorsing those images. He may not have believed them himself because he knew them to be false.”<sup>51</sup>

Cooper then asks the question: “What does this passage tell us about the intermediate state?” He flatly and honestly replies: “The answer may be, ‘Nothing.’ The dualist case cannot lean on this text as a main support.”<sup>52</sup> The reason he gives is that it is most difficult to draw conclusions from the imagery of the parable. For example, Cooper asks: “Will we be bodily beings [in the intermediate state]? Will the blessed and the damned be able to see each other?”<sup>53</sup>

### **Jesus and the Thief on the Cross**

The brief conversation between Jesus and the penitent thief on the cross next to Him (Luke 23:42-43) is used by dualists as a major proof for the conscious existence of the faithful dead in paradise before the

resurrection. Thus, it is important to take a close look to the words spoken by Jesus to the penitent thief.

Unlike the other criminal and most of the crowd, the penitent thief did believe that Jesus was the Messiah. He said: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom” (Luke 23:42). Jesus answered him, “Truly I say to you today you shall be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43). A major problem in the interpretation of this text is caused by the location of the comma, which in most translations, is placed before “today.” Thus, most readers and commentators assume that Jesus said: “Today you shall be with me in paradise” Such reading is interpreted to mean that “on that very day”<sup>54</sup> the thief went to paradise with Christ.

The original Greek text, however, has no punctuation and, translated literally, reads: “Truly to you I say today with me you will be in paradise.” The adverb “today–*semeron*” stands between the verb “I say–*lego*” and “you will be–*ese*.” This means that grammatically the adverb “today” can apply to either of the two verbs. If it qualifies the first verb, then Jesus said: “Truly I say to you today, you shall be with me in paradise.”

Translators have placed the comma before the adverb “today,” not for grammatical reasons, but for the theological conviction that the dead receive their reward at death. One would wish that translators would limit themselves to translating the text and leave the task of interpretation to the reader.

The question we are facing is: Did Jesus mean to say, “Truly, I say to you today. . .” or “Today you shall be with me in paradise”? Those who maintain that Jesus meant the latter appeal to the fact that the adverb “today” does not occur elsewhere with the frequently used phrase “Truly, I say to you.” This is a valid observation, but the reason for this exceptional attachment of the adverb “today” to the phrase “Truly, I say to

you” could very well be the immediate context. The thief asked Jesus to remember him in the *future* when He would establish His messianic kingdom. But Jesus responded by remembering the penitent thief *immediately*, “*today*,” and by reassuring him that he would be with Him in paradise. This interpretation is supported by two major considerations: (1) the time when the saved will enter upon their reward in paradise, and (2) the time when Jesus Himself returned to Paradise.

### **When Will the Redeem Enter Paradise?**

Throughout His ministry, Jesus taught that the redeemed would enter into His Father’s Kingdom at His coming: “Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (Matt 25:34; 16:27). Paul taught the same truth. At Christ’s second coming, the sleeping saints will be resurrected and the living saints translated, and all “shall be caught up together . . . in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord” (1 Thess 4:17). It is at that time, following the resurrection of the righteous, that the thief will be with Jesus in Paradise.

### **When Did Jesus Return to Paradise?**

Those who interpret Christ’s statement to the thief as meaning that on that very day the thief went to paradise to be with Christ, assume that both Jesus and the thief ascended to heaven immediately after their death. But such a conclusion can hardly be supported by Scripture.

The Scriptures expressly teach that on the day of His crucifixion, Christ went into the grave—*hades*. At Pentecost, Peter proclaimed that in accordance to David’s prophecy (Ps 16:10), Christ “was not abandoned in Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption,” but was raised up by God (Acts 2:31-32). *Hades*, as we have seen, is associated consistently in the New Testament with the grave or the realm of the dead. What this means is that

Christ could hardly have told the thief that on that very day he would be with Him in paradise, when He knew that on that day He would be resting in the grave.

Those who would argue that only Christ's body went into the grave while His soul ascended to heaven ignore what Jesus said to Mary on the day of His resurrection: "Do not hold me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father" (John 20:17). It is evident that Jesus was not in Heaven during the three days of his burial. He was resting in the grave, waiting for His Father to call Him back to life. Thus, the thief could hardly have gone to be with Jesus in Paradise immediately after his death when Jesus Himself did not ascend to the Father until some time after His resurrection. To appreciate more fully the meaning of being "with Christ in paradise," let us look at Paul's use of the phrase "being with Christ."

### **"To Depart and Be With Christ"**

In writing to the Philippians, Paul says: "My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account" (Phil 1:22-23). Dualists consider this text one of the strongest proofs that at death the soul of the saved immediately goes into the presence of Christ. For example, Robert Morey states: "This is the clearest passage in the New Testament which speaks of the believer going to be with Christ in heaven after death. This context deals with Paul's desire to depart this earthly life for a heavenly life with Christ. There is no mention or allusion to the resurrection in this passage."<sup>55</sup>

The fundamental problem with this interpretation is the failure to recognize that Paul's statement, "My desire is to depart and be with Christ" is a relational and not an anthropological statement. By this I mean, it is a statement of the relation that exists and continues between the believer and Christ through death, not a statement of the "state" of the body and soul between death and the resurrection.

The New Testament is not concerned about a ‘state’ which exists between death and resurrection, but about a relation that exists between the believer and Christ through death. This relationship of being with Christ is not interrupted by death because the believer who sleeps in Christ has no awareness of the passing of time.

For Paul those who “die in Christ” are “sleeping in Christ” (1 Cor 15:18; 1 Thess 4:14). Their relation with Christ is one of immediacy, because they have no awareness of the passing of time between their death and resurrection. They experience what may be called “eternal time.” But for those who go on living on earth-bound temporal time there is an interval between death and resurrection. The problem is that we cannot synchronize the clock of eternal time with that of our temporal time. It is the attempt to do this that has led to unfortunate speculations and controversies over the so-called intermediate state.

By expressing his desire “to depart and be with Christ,” Paul was not giving a doctrinal exposition of what happens at death. He is simply expressing his longing to see an end to his troubled existence and to be with Christ. Throughout the centuries, earnest Christians have expressed the same longing, without necessarily expecting to be ushered into Christ’s presence at the moment of their death. Paul’s statement must be interpreted on the basis of his clear teachings regarding the time when believers will be united with Christ.

### **With Christ at His Coming**

Paul addresses this question in his letter to the Thessalonians where he explains that both the sleeping and living believers will be united with Christ, not at death, but at His coming. “The dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and *so* we shall always be with the Lord” (1 Thess 4:17).<sup>56</sup> The “so” (*houtos*) refers to the manner or way in



which believers will be with Christ, namely, *not by dying*, but by being resurrected or translated at His coming. The word “so” in Greek *houtos* “means ‘in this way.’ Its place here at the beginning of the sentence is meant to explain the way believers will be with Christ, namely, through the resurrection.

It should be noted that in describing the union with Christ which believers will experience at His coming, Paul never speaks of disembodied souls being reunited with resurrected bodies. Rather, he speaks of “the dead in Christ” being risen (1 Thess 4:16). Obviously, what is risen at Christ’s coming is not just dead bodies but dead people. It is the whole person who will be resurrected and reunited with Christ. Note that the living saints will meet Christ at the same time “together with” the resurrected saints (1 Thess 4:17). Sleeping and living saints meet Christ “together” at His coming, not at death.

The total absence of any Pauline allusion to an alleged reunion of the body with the soul at the time of the resurrection constitutes, in my view, the most formidable challenge to the notion of the conscious survival of the soul. If Paul knew anything about this, he would surely have alluded to it, especially in his detailed discussion of what will happen to sleeping and living believers at Christ’s coming (1 Thess 4:13-18; 1 Cor 15:42-58). The fact that Paul never alluded to the conscious survival of the soul and its reattachment to the body at the resurrection clearly shows that such a notion was totally foreign to him and to Scripture as a whole.

### **“At Home With the Lord”**

In 2 Corinthians 5:1-10, Paul expresses again the hope of being with Christ by using several striking metaphors. This passage is rightly regarded as the “*crux interpretum*,” that is “the cross of interpreters,” primarily because the figurative language is cryptic and open to different interpretations. Unfortunately, dualistic interpreters are eager to derive

from this passage, as from Philippians 1:22-23, precise definitions of life survival of the soul after the death of the body. Such concerns, however, are far removed from Paul, who is using the poetic language of faith to express his hopes and fears regarding the present and future life, rather than the logical language of science to explain the afterlife. All of this should put the interpreter on guard against reading into the passage what Paul never intended to express.

The passage opens with the preposition “for-*gar*,” thus indicating that Paul picks up from chapter 4:16-18, where he contrasts the temporal, mortal nature of the present life which is “wasting away” (2 Cor 4:16) with the eternal, glorious nature of the future life, whose “eternal weight of glory [is] beyond all comparison” (2 Cor 4:17). Paul continues in chapter 5 developing the contrast between temporality and eternity by using the imagery of two dwelling places representative of these characteristics.

“For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. Here indeed we groan, and long to put on our heavenly dwelling, so that by putting it on we may not be found naked. For while we are still in this tent, we sigh with anxiety; not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. He who has prepared for us this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee” (2 Cor 5:1-5).

In this first section of the passage, Paul uses two sets of contrasting metaphors. First, he contrasts “the earthly tent,” which is subject to destruction, with the “building from God, a house not made with hands,” which is “eternal in the heavens.” Then Paul highlights this contrast by differentiating between the state of being clothed with the heavenly dwelling and that of being found naked.

The second section, verses 6 to 10, is more straightforward and contrasts being in the body and therefore away from the Lord, with being away from the body and at home with the Lord. The key statement occurs in verse 8 where Paul says: “We are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord.” This passage has been the object of enormous variety of interpretations which are discussed at length in my book *Immortality or Resurrection?* pages 180-186.

### **Heavenly and Earthly Modes of Existence**

After rereading the passage countless times, I sense that Paul’s primary concern is not to define the state of the body before and after death, but rather to contrast two modes of existence. One is the heavenly mode of existence which is represented by the “building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens” (2 Cor 5:1). The other is the earthly mode of existence which is typified by “the earthly tent” which is “destroyed” at death.

The meaning of the imagery of “putting on” or “being clothed” with “our heavenly dwelling” has more to do with accepting Christ’s provision of salvation than with “the spiritual body” given to believers at the Second Coming. Support for this conclusion can be seen in the figurative use of “heavenly dwelling” with reference to God and of “being clothed” with reference to the believer’s acceptance of Christ.

Paul’s assurance that “we have a building from God” (2 Cor 5:1) reminds us of such verses as “God is our refuge and strength” (Ps 46:1), or “Lord, Thou hast been our *dwelling place*” (Ps 90:1).<sup>57</sup> Christ referred to Himself as a temple in a way that is strikingly similar to Paul’s imagery of the heavenly dwelling “not made with hands.” He is reported to have said: “I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands” (Mark 14:58). If Paul was thinking

along these lines, then *the heavenly dwelling place is Christ Himself and the gift of eternal life He provides to believers.*

How, then, does a believer put on “the heavenly dwelling”? A look at Paul’s use of the metaphor of clothing may provide an answer. “As many as were baptized into Christ were clothed with Christ” (Gal 3:27). In this text, the clothing is associated with the acceptance of Christ at baptism. Paul also says: “This perishable being must be clothed with the imperishable, and what is mortal must be clothed with immortality” (1 Cor 15:53, NEB). Here the clothing represents the reception of immortality at Christ’s coming. These two references suggest that the “clothing” can refer to the new life in Christ, which is accepted at baptism, renewed every day, and consummated at the Parousia, when the final clothing will take place by means of the change from mortality to immortality.

In the light of the above interpretation, to “be found naked” or “unclothed” (2 Cor 5:3-4) may stand in contrast with being clothed with Christ and His Spirit. Most likely “naked” for Paul stands not for the soul stripped from the body, but for guilt and sin which results in death. When Adam sinned, he discovered that he was “naked” (Gen 3:10). Ezekiel allegorically describes how God clothed Israel with rich garments but then exposed her nakedness because of her disobedience (Ez 16:8-14). One may also think of the man without “the wedding garment” at the marriage feast (Matt 22:11). It is possible, then, that being “naked” for Paul meant to be in a mortal, sinful condition, bereft of Christ’s righteousness.

Paul clarifies what he meant by being “unclothed” or “naked” versus being “clothed” when he says: “So that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life” (2 Cor 5:4). The same concept is repeated in 1 Corinthians 15:35 which speaks of the transformation that human nature as a whole will experience at Christ’s coming: “For this perishable nature must put on the imperishable, and this mortal nature must put on immortality” (1 Cor 15:53).

In both passages, 2 Corinthians 5:1-5 and 1 Corinthians 15:35, Paul is not concerned with the state of the body or the soul as such before or after death. Incidentally, he never speaks of the soul nor of the “spiritual body” in 1 Corinthians 5. Instead, Paul’s concern is to show the contrast between the earthly mode of existence, represented by “earthly tent,” and the heavenly mode of existence, represented by the “heavenly dwelling. The former is “mortal” and the latter is immortal (“swallowed up by life;” 2 Cor 5:4). The former is experienced “at home in the body” and “away from the Lord” (2 Cor 5:6). The latter is experienced “away from the body” and “at home with the Lord” (2 Cor 5:8).

The failure to recognize that Paul is speaking about two different modes of existence and not about the state of the body or soul after death, has led to unnecessary, misguided speculations about the afterlife. A good example is Robert Peterson’s statement: “Paul confirms Jesus’ teaching when he contrasts being ‘at home in the body’ and ‘away from the Lord’ with being ‘away from the body and at home with the Lord’ (2 Cor 5:6, 8). He presupposes that human nature is composed of material and immaterial aspects.”<sup>58</sup>

This interpretation is gratuitous, because neither Jesus or Paul are concerned with defining human nature ontologically, that is, in terms of its material or immaterial components. Instead, their concern is to define human nature ethically and relationally, in terms of disobedience and obedience, sin and righteousness, mortality and immortality. This is Paul’s concern in 2 Corinthians 5:1-9, where he speaks of the earthly and heavenly modes of existence in relationship to God, and not of the material or immaterial composition of human nature before and after death.

### **The Souls Under the Altar**

The last passage we examine is Revelation 6:9-11, which reads: “When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who

had been slain for the word of God and the witness they had borne; they cried out with a loud voice, ‘O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before thou wilt judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell upon the earth?’ Then they each were given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.”

This passage is often cited to support the notion that the “souls” of the saints exist after death in heaven as disembodied, conscious spirits. For example, Robert Morey emphatically states: “The souls are the disembodied spirits of the martyrs who cry out to God for vengeance on their enemies. . . . This passage has always proven a great difficulty to those who deny that believers ascend to heaven at death. But John’s language is clear that these souls were conscious and active in heaven.”<sup>59</sup>

This interpretation ignores that apocalyptic pictures are not meant to be photographs of actual realities, but symbolic representations of almost unimaginable spiritual realities. John was not given a view of what heaven is actually like. It is evident that there are no white, red, black, and pale horses in heaven with warlike riders. In heaven Christ does not look like a lamb with a bleeding knife wound (Rev 5:6). Likewise, there are no “souls” of martyrs in heaven squeezed at the base of an altar. The whole scene is simply a symbolic representation designed to reassure those facing martyrdom and death that ultimately they would be vindicated by God. Such a reassurance would be particularly heartening for those who, like John, were facing terrible persecution for refusing to participate in the emperor’s cult.

The use of the word “souls–*psychas*” in this passage is unique for the New Testament, because it is never used to refer to humans in the intermediate state. The reason for its use here is suggested by the unnatural death of the martyrs whose blood was shed for the cause of Christ. In the Old Testament sacrificial system, the blood of animals was poured out at

the base of the altar of burnt offerings (Lev 4:7, 18, 25, 30). The blood contained the soul (Lev 17:11) of the innocent victim that was offered as an atoning sacrifice to God on behalf of penitent sinners. Thus, the souls of the martyrs are seen under the altar to signify that their blood had been symbolically poured at its base.

The language of sacrificial death is used elsewhere in the New Testament to denote martyrdom. Facing death, Paul wrote: “For I am already on the point of being sacrificed” (2 Tim 4:6). The apostle also says that he was glad “to be poured out as a libation” for Christ (Phil 2:17). Thus, Christian martyrs were viewed as sacrifices offered to God. Their blood shed on earth was poured symbolically at the heavenly altar. Thus their souls are seen under the altar because that is where symbolically the blood of the martyrs flowed.

### **No Representation of Intermediate State**

The symbolic representation of the martyrs as sacrifices offered at the heavenly altar can hardly be used to argue for their conscious disembodied existence in heaven. George Eldon Ladd, a most respected evangelical scholar, rightly states: “The fact that John saw the souls of the martyrs *under the altar* has nothing to do with the state of the dead or their situation in the intermediate state; it is merely a vivid way of picturing the fact that they had been martyred in the name of God.”<sup>60</sup>

The souls of the martyrs are seen as *resting* beneath the altar, not because they are in a disembodied state, but because they are awaiting the completion of redemption (“until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren should be complete” Rev 6:11) and their resurrection at Christ’s coming. John describes this event later on, saying: “I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their testimony to Jesus and for the word of God, and who had not worshipped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to

life, and reigned with Christ a thousand years. . . . This is the first resurrection” (Rev 20:4).

This description of the martyrs as “beheaded for their testimony to Jesus and for the word of God” is very much like that of Revelation 6:9. The only difference is that in chapter 6 the deceased martyrs are told to rest, while in chapter 20 they are brought to life. It is evident that if the martyrs are brought to life at the beginning of the millennium in conjunction with Christ’s coming, they can hardly be living in heaven in a disembodied state while resting in the grave.

To sum up, the function of the vision of the martyrs under the heavenly altar is not to inform us on the intermediate state of the dead, but to reassure believers, especially the martyrs who in John’s time and later centuries gave their lives for the cause of Christ, that God ultimately would vindicate them.

## **Conclusion**

Our study of all the relevant Biblical passages has shown that the notion of the intermediate state in which the souls of the saved enjoy the bliss of Paradise, while those of the unsaved suffer the torments of hell derives not from Scripture, but from pagan Greek dualism.

It is most unfortunate that during much of its history, Christianity by and large has been influenced by the Greek dualistic view of human nature, according to which the body is mortal and the soul immortal. The acceptance of this deadly heresy has conditioned the interpretation of Scripture and given rise to a host of other heresies such as Purgatory, eternal torment in hell, prayer for the dead, intercession of the saints, indulgences, and etherial view of paradise. Some of these popular heresies are examined in later chapters.



The challenge we face today is to help sincere people recover the Biblical wholistic view of human nature and destiny, and thus dispel the spiritual darkness perpetrated by centuries of superstitious beliefs.

This is the challenge the Seventh-day Adventist church is endeavoring to fulfill by divine grace. It is the challenge of leading people around the world to understand, accept, and live by some of the fundamental biblical teachings which are largely ignored or even rejected today.

In this chapter we have examined a fundamental teaching, namely, the biblical view of death and of the state of the dead. The conclusion of our investigation is aptly expressed in the **25th Fundamental belief** of the Seventh-day Adventist Church: “The wages of sin is death. But God, who alone is immortal, will grant eternal life to His redeemed. Until that day death is an unconscious state for all people. When Christ, who is our life, appears, the resurrected righteous and the living righteous will be glorified and caught up to meet the Lord. The second resurrection, the resurrection of the unrighteous, will take place a thousand years later.

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### NOTES TO CHAPTER 3

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18. Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 1970, p. 982.

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25. Martin Luther, *Werke* (Weimar, 1910), XVII, II, p. 235.

26. Ibid., XXXVII, p. 151.

27. Ewald Plass, *What Luther Says* (St. Louis, 1959), Vol. 1, par. 1132.

28. Alexander Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic and the Old Testament Parallels*, 1949, pp. 170-207.

29. See Desmond Alexander, "The Old Testament View of Life After Death," *Themelios* 11, 2 (1986), p. 44.

30. John W. Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate* (Grand Rapids, 1989), p. 61.

31. Theodore H. Gaster, "Abode of the Dead," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* 1962, p. 788.

32. Johannes Pedersen, *Israel: Its life and Culture*, 1991, vol. 1, p. 462.

33. Theodore H. Gaster, (note 31), p. 787.

34. Ralph Walter Doermann, "Sheol in the Old Testament," (Ph. D., dissertation, Duke University, 1961), p. 191.

35. See also Ps 30:3; Prov 1:12; Is 14:15; 38:18; Ez 31:16.

36. In Numbers 16:33 it is used of the rebels who "perished in Sheol."

37. Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids, 1979), p. 96.

38. N. H. Snaith, "Life after Death," *Interpretation* 1 (1947), p. 322.

39. Edward William Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes. A Biblical and Historical Study of the Final Punishment* (Houston, 1989), p. 205.

40. For an informative discussion of the adoption of the Greek conception of *hades* during the intertestamental period, see Joachim Jeremias, "Hades," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel (Grand Rapids, 1974), Vol. 1, pp. 147-148.

41. Matt 11:23; 16:18; Luke 10:15; 16:23; Acts 2:27, 31; Rev 1:18, 6:8; 20:13; 20:14.

42. 1 Cor 15:55.

43. Matt 5:22, 29, 30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15, 33; Mark 9:43, 45, 47; Luke 12: 5; Jam 3:6.

44. Karel Hanhart essentially reaches the same conclusion in her doctoral dissertation presented at the University of Amsterdam. She wrote: “We conclude that these passages do not shed any definite light on our problem [of the intermediate state]. In the sense of power of death, deepest realm, place for utter humiliation and judgment, the term Hades does not go beyond the Old Testament meaning of Sheol” (Karel Hanhart, “The Intermediate State in the New Testament,” [Doctoral dissertation, University of Amsterdam, 1966], p. 35).

45. Josephus, *Discourse to the Greeks Concerning Hades*, in *Josephus Complete Works*, trans. William Whiston (Grand Rapids, 1974), p. 637.

46. Ibid.

47. Ibid.

48. Ibid.

49. Ibid.

50. For a brief survey of the intertestamental Jewish literature on the condition of the dead in *hades*, see Karel Hanhart, “The Intermediate State in the New Testament,” Doctoral Dissertation, University of Amsterdam, 1966, pp. 18-31.

51. John W. Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate*, 1989, p. 139.

52. Ibid.

53. Ibid.

54. Norval Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, 1983, p. 611.
55. Robert A. Morey, *Death and the Afterlife*, 1984, pp. 211-212.
56. Emphasis supplied.
57. Emphasis supplied.
58. Robert A. Peterson, *Hell on Trial: The Case for Eternal Punishment*, 1995, p. 28.
59. Robert A. Morey (note 55), p. 214.
60. George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids, 1979), p. 103.

## *Chapter 4*

# “HELL AS ETERNAL TORMENT”

**F**ew teachings have troubled the human conscience over the centuries more than the traditional and still popular view of hell as the place where the lost suffer conscious punishment in body and soul for all eternity. The prospect that one day a vast number of people will be consigned to the everlasting torment of hell is most disturbing and distressing to sensitive Christians. After all, almost everyone has friends or family members who have died without making a commitment to Christ. The prospect of one day seeing them agonizing in hell for all eternity can easily lead thinking Christians to question how they can enjoy the bliss of Paradise, while some of their loved ones are suffering conscious punishment for all eternity.

It is not surprising that today we seldom hear sermons on hellfire even from fundamentalist preachers, who are still committed to such a belief. John Walvoord, himself a fundamentalist and staunch defender of the popular view of hellfire, suggests that the reluctance to preach on this subject is due primarily to the fear of proclaiming an unpopular doctrine.<sup>1</sup> This may be partly true, but the problem may also be the awareness that the

traditional and popular view of hellfire is morally intolerable and Biblically questionable.

Clark Pinnock, a respected evangelical scholar who has served as President of the *Evangelical Theological Society*, keenly observes: “Their reticence [to preach on hellfire] is not so much due to a lack of integrity in proclaiming the truth as to not having the stomach for preaching a doctrine that amounts to sadism raised to new levels of finesse. Something inside tells them, perhaps on an instinctual level, that the God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is not the kind of deity who tortures people (even the worst of sinners) in this way. I take the silence of the fundamentalist preachers to be testimony to their longing for a revised doctrine of the nature of hell.”<sup>2</sup> It is such a longing, I believe, that is encouraging some theologians today to revise the traditional, popular view of hell and to propose alternative interpretations designed to make hell more tolerable.

### **Objectives of This Chapter**

The issue addressed in this chapter is not the *fact* of hell as the final punishment of the lost, but the *nature* of hell. The fundamental question addressed is: Does the Bible support the popular belief that impenitent sinners suffer the conscious punishment of hellfire in body and soul for all eternity? Or, Does the Bible teach that the wicked are annihilated by God at the second death after suffering a temporary punishment? To put it differently: Does hellfire torment the lost eternally or consume them permanently?

This chapter is divided into two parts. The first part examines the traditional and popular view of hell as eternal torment. We trace this belief historically and then consider some of the main Bible texts and arguments used to support it.



The second part of this chapter presents the *annihilation* view of hell as a place of the ultimate dissolution and annihilation of the unsaved. Some call this view *conditional* immortality, because our study of the Biblical wholistic view of human nature shows that immortality is not an innate human possession; it is a divine gift granted to believers on condition of their faith response. God will not resurrect the wicked to immortal life in order to inflict upon them a punishment of eternal pain. Rather, the wicked will be resurrected mortal in order to receive their punishment which will result in their ultimate annihilation.

## **PART 1**

### **THE TRADITIONAL AND POPULAR**

#### **VIEW OF HELL**

With few exceptions, the traditional view of hell has dominated Christian thinking from the time of Augustine to our time. Simply stated, this popular belief affirms that immediately after death the disembodied souls of impenitent sinners descend into hell, where they suffer the punishment of a literal eternal fire. At the resurrection, the body is reunited with the soul, thus intensifying the pain of hell for the lost and the pleasure of heaven for the saved. This popular belief has been held historically not only by the Catholic Church, but also by most Protestant churches.

#### **The Origin of Hell**

The doctrine of the hellfire derives from and is dependant upon the belief in the immortality of the soul. The dualistic view of human nature consisting of a mortal body and an immortal soul that survives the death of the body, presupposes a dual destiny for the soul, either to Paradise or to Hell.

In chapter 2 we noted that the belief in the immortality of the soul is usually traced back to Egypt, which has been rightly called the “Mother of Superstitions.” The same holds true for the belief in Hell as a place of eternal punishment. Greek and Roman philosophers freely credit Egypt for the invention of the bliss and terrors of the invisible world.<sup>3</sup>

The Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans shared the view that hell is located deep down under the earth. It was known by various names, as *Orcus*, *Erebus*, *Tartarus*, and *Infernus*, from which derives our expression “infernal regions.” The gate of Hell was guarded by the three-headed dog Cerberus, who prevented any exit from the infernal regions. To ensure that there would not be any escape from the horrid prison of hell, a river of fire, called Phlegethon, and a triple wall surrounded it.

In his book *Aeneid*, Virgil, a famous Roman Poet (70-19 B.C.), gives us this brief description of hell’s agonizing punishments:

“And now wild shouts, and wailings dire,  
And shrieking infants swell the dreadful choir.”  
  
Here sits in bloody robes the Fury fell,  
By night and day to watch the gates of hell.  
  
Here you begin terrific groans to hear,  
And sounding lashes rise upon the ear.  
  
On every side the damned their fetters grate,  
And curse, ‘mid clanking chains, their wretched fate.’<sup>4</sup>

Virgil's images of hell were refined and immortalized by the famous fourteenth-century Italian poet, Dante Alighieri. In his *Divina Commedia* (*Divine Comedy*), Dante portrays hell as a place of absolute terror, where the damned writhe and scream while the saints bask in the glory of paradise. In Dante's hell, some sinners wail loudly in boiling blood, while others endure burning smoke that chars their nostrils, still others run naked from hordes of biting snakes.

Michelangelo used his talent to paint scenes of Dante's *Inferno* on the wall of the Sistine chapel, which is the pope's private chapel. On the left of Christ the risen saints receive their resurrection bodies as they ascend towards heaven. On the right of Christ, devils with pitchforks drag, push, and hurl impenitent sinners into cauldrons of burning fires. Finally, at the bottom the Greek mythical figure Charon with his oars, together with his devils, makes the damned get out of his boat pushing them before the infernal judge Minos—another Greek mythical figure. Hateful fiends are gnawing at the skulls of suffering sinners, while watching hellish cannibalism going on. These graphic pictures of hell—depicted between 1535 and 1541 in the most important papal chapel—reflect the prevailing popular belief of the horrors of Hell fire.

### **When did Hell Catch Fire in the Christian Church?**

When did such a horrible belief in the eternal punishment of the lost by Hell fire, enter the Christian Church? A survey of the writings of the early Church Fathers, suggest that this belief was gradually adopted beginning from the latter part of the second century, that is, at approximately the same time as the belief in the immortality of the soul. Passing references to the punishment of the wicked in “everlasting fire,” are found in the writings of Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Cyprian of Carthage, Lactantius, Jerome, Chrysostom, and Augustine, to name a few.<sup>5</sup>

But the writer who has exercised the greatest influence in defining the Catholic doctrine of hellfire, is Augustine (354-430), the Bishop of Hippo. He is rightly regarded as one of the most influential Catholic theologian. He defined the doctrine of Hell in such a clear and well-structured way that it has become the standard teaching of the Catholic Church to this very day.

### **Augustine's Definition of Hell**

Much of what Augustine wrote about Hell, was already believed by many Christians in his time. But he systematized and defended the prevailing beliefs in an unprecedented way. Simply stated, Augustine view of Hell consists of five major components.<sup>6</sup>

First, Hell is a real eternal destiny that awaits the majority of the human race. "For as a matter of fact," Augustine stated, "not all, nor even a majority, are saved."<sup>7</sup> "The eternal damnation of the wicked is a matter of certainty."<sup>8</sup>

Second, Hell is severe. "The torments of he lost" will be "perpetual" and "unintermitted."<sup>9</sup> "No torments that we know of, continued through as many ages as the human imagination can conceive, could be compared with it."<sup>10</sup>

Third, Hell is endless, because the lost are 'not permitted to die.' For them 'death itself dies not.'<sup>11</sup> The lost are flung into an eternal fire "where they will be tortured for ever and ever."<sup>12</sup>

Fourth, Hell is the penalty of eternal damnation. It does not allow for repentance because the time for repentance has passed. As "eternal chastisement, it is inflicted exclusively in retribution for sins."<sup>13</sup>

Fifth, Hell is the just punishment for the wickedness of sins against God. No one has the right to complain against the justice of God. ‘Who but a fool would think that God was unrighteous, either in inflicting penal justice on those who had earned it, or in extending mercy to the unworthy?’<sup>14</sup>

God has the right to consign sinners to eternal death by denying them eternal salvation. “Assuredly there was no injustice in God’s not willing that they should be saved, though they could have been saved had he so willed it.”<sup>15</sup> Augustine’s reasoning that salvation or damnation depends solely on the sovereign and inscrutable will of God, (a view adopted by Calvin) ultimately makes the God of the Bible an irrational, capricious, and unjust Being to be despised rather than to be worshipped.

### **Catholic Definition of Hell**

Augustine’s articulation of the Doctrine of Hell has remained definitive for the Catholic Church to the present day, in spite of recent attempts to put the fire out of Hell. In 1999, Pope John Paul II threw a figurative pail of cold water on the popular image of hell as a place of unending flame, when he denied that hell is a place of fiery torment. He described it rather as “the pain, frustration and emptiness of life without God.”<sup>16</sup> He further claimed that the “lake of fire and sulfur” referred to in the Book of Revelation was symbolic.<sup>17</sup> These statements set off a brief but intense firestorm, particularly among fundamentalist Christians who firmly believe that hell is a place of eternal fiery torment.

The attempt of Pope John Paul II to take the fire out of Hell, has not changed the traditional Catholic doctrine of Hell, which is clearly stated in the new *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: “The teaching of the Church affirms the existence of hell and its eternity. Immediately after death the souls of those who die in a state of mortal sin descend into hell, where they suffer the punishments of hell, ‘eternal fire.’ The chief punishment of hell

is eternal separation from God, in whom alone man can possess the life and happiness for which he was created and for which he longs.<sup>18</sup>

This traditional Catholic view of Hellfire was reaffirmed by Pope Benedict XVI on March 28, 2007, during the celebration of the Mass at the Church of St. Felicity & Martyred Sons, in northern Rome. He said: “Hell is a place where sinners really do burn in an everlasting fire, and not just a religious symbol designed to galvanise the faithful. . . . Hell really exists and is eternal, even if nobody talks about it much any more”<sup>19</sup>

### **Protestant Views of Hell**

Faced with imaginations that had run riot over Purgatory and Hell, the Reformers Luther and Calvin, not only rejected the popular beliefs about Purgatory, but they also declined to speculate on the literal torment of hell. For example, Luther could talk about the wicked burning in hell and wishing for “a little drop of water,”<sup>20</sup> but he never pressed for a literal interpretation of hell. He believed that “it is not very important whether or not one pictures hell as it is commonly portrayed and described.”<sup>21</sup>

John Calvin preferred to understand the references to “eternal fire” metaphorically. “We may conclude from the many passages of Scripture, that eternal fire is a metaphorical expression.”<sup>22</sup> The more cautious approach of Luther and Calvin did not deter later prominent Protestant preachers and theologians from portraying hell as a sea of fire, in which the wicked burn throughout eternity.

During the following centuries, Protestant preachers were inspired more by Dante and Michelangelo’s frightening depictions of the torments of hell, than by the language of Scripture. They terrorized their congregations with sermons that were themselves pyrotechnic events. Not satisfied with the image of fire and smoke of the New Testament, some preachers with more creative minds pictured hell as a bizarre horror

chamber, where punishment is based on a measure-for-measure principle. This means that whatever member of the body sinned, that member would be punished in hell more than any other member.

“In Christian literature,” writes William Crockett, “we find blasphemers hanging by their tongues. Adulterous women who plaited their hair to entice men dangle over boiling mire by their neck or hair. Slanderers chew their tongues, hot irons burn their eyes. Other evildoers suffer in equally picturesque ways. Murderers are cast into pits filled with venomous reptiles, and worms fill their bodies. Women who had abortions sit neck deep in the excretions of the damned. Those who chatted idly during church stand in a pool of burning sulphur and pitch. Idolaters are driven up cliffs by demons where they plunge to the rocks below, only to be driven up again. Those who turned their back on God are turned and baked slowly in the fires of hell.”<sup>23</sup>

Renowned eighteenth-century American theologian Jonathan Edwards, famous for his sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” pictured hell as a raging furnace of liquid fire that fills both the body and the soul of the wicked: “The body will be full of torment as full as it can hold, and every part of it shall be full of torment. They shall be in extreme pain, every joint of them, every nerve shall be full of inexpressible torment. They shall be tormented even to their fingers’ ends. The whole body shall be full of the wrath of God. Their hearts and bowels and their heads, their eyes and their tongues, their hands and their feet will be filled with the fierceness of God’s wrath. This is taught us in many Scriptures. . . .”<sup>24</sup> Newspapers reported people leaving his sermons and committing suicide from the fear he instilled in them.

A similar description of the fate of the wicked was given by the famous nineteenth-century British preacher Charles Spurgeon: “In fire exactly like that which we have on earth thy body will lie, asbestos-like, forever unconsumed, all thy veins roads for the feet of Pain to travel on, every

nerve a string on which the Devil shall for ever play his diabolical tune of hell's unutterable lament."<sup>25</sup> It is hard to comprehend how the Devil can torment evildoers, when he himself will be "thrown into the lake of burning sulphur" (Rev 20:10).

### **Renewed Protestant Defence of Literal Hellfire**

In recent years the traditional, popular doctrine of literal hellfire, has come under fire by respected conservative Evangelical scholars like F. F. Bruce, Michael Green, Philip E. Hughes, Dale Moody, Clark H. Pinnock, W. Graham Scroggie, John R. W. Stott, John W. Wenham and Oscar Cullman. These men and others have embraced *annihilationism*, a view that the wicked will be resurrected to receive their punishment that will result in their ultimate annihilation. This is our view that will be discussed in the last part of this chapter.

Defenders of the traditional view of Hell did not remain silent. Some came out with pistols flaring like John H. Gerstner, *Repent or Perish* (1990). Other were less combative but equally opposed to annihilationism: J. J. Packer, Larry Dixon, Kendall Harmon, Robert A. Peterson, and Donald Carson.

Today, defenders of a literal eternal hellfire are more circumspect in their description of the suffering experienced by the wicked. For example, Robert A. Peterson concludes his book *Hell on Trial: The Case for Eternal Punishment*, saying: "The Judge and Ruler over hell is God himself. He is present in hell, not in blessing, but in wrath. Hell entails eternal punishment, utter loss, rejection by God, terrible suffering, and unspeakable sorrow and pain. The duration of hell is endless. Although there are degrees of punishment, hell is terrible for all the damned. Its occupants are the Devil, evil angels, and unsaved human beings."<sup>29</sup>



A comprehensive response to all the texts and arguments used to defend the traditional view of the eternal punishment of the wicked, would take us beyond the limited scope of this chapter. Interested readers can find such a comprehensive response in *The Fire that Consumes* (1982) by Edward Fudge and in my book *Immortality or Resurrection?* Our response is limited to a few basic observations, some of which will be expanded in the second part of this chapter.

## THE WITNESS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

The witness of the Old Testament for eternal punishment largely rest on the use of *sheol* and two main passages, Isaiah 66:22-24 and Daniel 12:1-2. Regarding *sheol*, John F. Walvoord says: “*Sheol* was a place of punishment and retribution. In Isaiah [14:9-10] the Babylonians killed in divine judgment are pictured as being greeted in *sheol* by those who had died earlier.”<sup>30</sup>

Regarding *sheol*, our study of the word in chapter 3 shows that none of the texts supports the view that *sheol* is the place of punishment for the ungodly. The word denotes the realm of the dead where there is unconsciousness, inactivity, and sleep. Similarly, Isaiah’s taunting ode against the King of Babylon is a parable, in which the characters, personified trees, and fallen monarchs are fictitious. They serve not to reveal the punishment of the wicked in *sheol*, but to forecast in graphic pictorial language God’s judgment upon Israel’s oppressor and his final ignominious destiny in a dusty grave, where he is eaten by worms. To interpret this parable as a literal description of hell means to ignore the highly figurative, parabolic nature of the passage, which is simply designed to depict the doom of a self-exalted tyrant.

### Isaiah 66:24: The Fate of the Wicked

The description of the fate of the wicked found in Isaiah 66:24 is regarded by some traditionalists as the clearest witness to eternal punishment in the Old Testament. The setting of the text is the contrast between God's judgment upon the wicked and His blessings upon the righteous. The latter will enjoy prosperity and peace, and will worship God regularly from Sabbath to Sabbath (Is 66:12-14, 23). But the wicked will be punished by "fire" (Is 66:15) and meet their "end together" (Is 66:17). This is the setting of the crucial verse 24, which says: "And they shall go forth and look on the dead bodies of the men that have rebelled against me; for their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh."

Peterson interprets the phrase "their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched" as meaning that "the punishment and shame of the wicked have no end; their fate is eternal. It is no wonder that they will be loathsome to all mankind."<sup>31</sup>

Isaiah's description of the fate of the wicked was possibly inspired by the Lord's slaying of 185,000 men of the Assyrian army during the reign of Hezekiah. We are told that "when men arose early in the morning, behold, these were all dead bodies" (Is 37:36). This historical event may have served to foreshadow the fate of the wicked. Note that the righteous look upon "dead bodies" (Hebrew: *pegerim*), not living people. What they see is destruction and not eternal torment.

The "worms" are mentioned in connection with the dead bodies, because they hasten the decomposition and represent the ignominy of corpses deprived of burial (Jer 25:33; Is 14:11; Job 7:5; 17:14; Acts 12:23). The figure of the fire that is not quenched is used frequently in Scripture to signify a fire that consumes (Ezek 20:47-48) and reduces everything to nothing (Am 5:5-6; Matt 3:12). Worms and fire represent a total and final destruction.

To understand the meaning of the phrase “the fire shall not be quenched,” it is important to remember that keeping a fire live, to burn corpses required considerable effort in Palestine. Corpses do not readily burn and the firewood needed to consume them was scarce. In my travels in the Middle East and Africa, I often have seen carcasses partially burned because the fire died out before consuming the remains of a beast.

The image of an unquenchable fire is simply designed to convey the thought of being completely burned up or consumed. It has nothing to do with the everlasting punishment of immortal souls. The passage speaks clearly of “dead bodies” which are consumed and not of immortal souls which are tormented eternally. It is unfortunate that traditionalists interpret this passage, and similar statements of Jesus in the light of their conception of the final punishment rather than on the basis of what the figure of speech really means.

### **Daniel 12:2: “Everlasting Contempt**

The second major Old Testament text used by traditionalists to support everlasting punishment is Daniel 12:2, which speaks of the resurrection of both good and evil: “And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.” Peterson concludes his analysis of this text, by saying: “Daniel teaches that whereas the godly will be raised to never-ending life, the wicked will be raised to never-ending disgrace (Dan 12:2).”<sup>32</sup>

The Hebrew term *deraon* translated “contempt” also appears in Isaiah 66:24 in which it is translated “loathsome” and describes the unburied corpses. In his scholarly commentary on *The Book of Daniel*, André Lacocque notes that the meaning of *deraon* both “here [Dan 12:2] and in Isaiah 66:24 is the decomposition of the wicked.”<sup>14</sup> This means that the “contempt” is caused by the disgust over the decomposition of their bodies, and not by the never-ending suffering of the wicked. As Emmanuel

Petavel puts it: “The sentiment of the survivors is disgust, not pity.”<sup>15</sup>

To sum up, the alleged Old Testament witness for the everlasting punishment of the wicked is negligible, if not non-existent. On the contrary, the evidence for utter destruction of the wicked at the eschatological Day of the Lord is resoundingly clear. The wicked will “perish” like the chaff (Ps 1:4, 6), will be dashed to pieces like pottery (Ps 2:9, 12), will be slain by the Lord’s breath (Is 11:4), will be burnt in the fire “like thorns cut down” (Is 33:12), and “will die like gnats” (Is 51:6).

The clearest description of the total destruction of the wicked is found on the last page of the Old Testament English Bible: “For behold, the day comes burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch” (Mal 4:1). Here the imagery of the all-consuming fire which leaves “neither root nor branch” suggests utter consumption and destruction, not perpetual torment.

## **THE WITNESS OF JESUS**

Traditionalists believe that Jesus provides the strongest proof for their belief in the eternal punishment of the wicked. Kenneth Kantzer, a most respected evangelical leader, who served as Editor of *Christianity Today*, states: “Those who acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord cannot escape the clear, unambiguous language with which he warns of the awful truth of eternal punishment.”<sup>35</sup>

Did Jesus teach that hell—*gehenna* is the place where sinners will suffer eternal torment or permanent destruction? To find an answer to this question, let us examine what Jesus actually said about hell.

### **What Is Hell—*Gehenna*?**

Before looking at Christ's references to hell—*gehenna*, it is helpful to consider the derivation of the word itself. The Greek word *gehenna* is a transliteration of the Hebrew “Valley of (the sons of) Hinnon,” located south of Jerusalem. In ancient times, it was linked with the practice of sacrificing children to the god Molech (2 Kings 16:3; 21:6; 23:10). This earned it the name “Topheth,” a place to be spit on or abhorred. This valley apparently became a gigantic pyre for burning the 185,000 corpses of Assyrian soldiers whom God slew in the days of Hezekiah (Is 30:31-33; 37:36).

Jeremiah predicted that the place would be called “the valley of Slaughter” because it would be filled with the corpses of the Israelites when God judged them for their sins. “Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when it will no more be called Topheth, or the valley of Hinnom, but the valley of Slaughter: for they will bury in Topheth, because there is no room elsewhere. And the dead bodies of this people will be food for the beasts of the air, and for the beasts of the earth; and none will frighten them away” (Jer 7:32-33).

Josephus informs us that the same valley was heaped with the dead bodies of the Jews following the A. D. 70 siege of Jerusalem.<sup>36</sup> We have seen that Isaiah envisions the same scene following the Lord's slaughter of sinners at the end of the world (Is 66:24). During the intertestamental period, the valley became the place of final punishment, and was called the “accursed valley” (1 Enoch 27:2,3), the “station of vengeance” and “future torment” (2 Bar 59:10, 11), the “furnace of Gehenna” and “pit of torment” (4 Esd 7:36).

## **Jesus and Hell's Fire**

With this background in mind, let us look at the seven references to *gehenna*—hell fire that we find in the Gospels. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus states that whoever says to his brother “‘you fool!’ shall be liable to

the hell [*gehenna*] of fire” (Matt 5:22; KJV). Again, He said that it is better to pluck out the eye or cut off the hand that causes a person to sin than for the “whole body go into hell [*gehenna*] (Matt 5:29, 30). The same thought is expressed later on: it is better to cut off a foot or a hand or pluck out an eye that causes a person to sin than to “be thrown into eternal fire . . . be thrown into the hell [*gehenna*] of fire” (Matt 18:8, 9). Here the fire of hell is described as “eternal.”

The same saying is found in Mark, where Jesus three times says that it is better to cut off the offending organ than “to go to hell [*gehenna*], to the unquenchable fire . . . to be thrown into hell [*gehenna*], where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched” (Mark 9:44, 46, 47-48). Elsewhere, Jesus chides the Pharisees for traversing sea and land to make a convert and then making him “twice as much a child of hell [*gehenna*]” (Matt 23:15). Finally, he warns the Pharisees that they will not “escape being sentenced to hell [*gehenna*]” (Matt 23:33).

In reviewing Christ’s allusions to hell–*gehenna*, we should first note that none of them indicates that hell–*gehenna* is a place of unending torment. What is eternal or unquenchable is not the punishment, but the fire. We noted earlier that in the Old Testament this fire is eternal or unquenchable in the sense that it totally consumes dead bodies. This conclusion is supported by Christ’s warning that we should not fear human beings who can harm the body, but the One “who can destroy both soul and body in hell [*gehenna*]” (Matt 10:28). The implication is clear. hell is the place of final punishment, which results in the total destruction of the whole being, soul and body.

### **“Eternal Fire”**

Traditionalists challenge this conclusion because elsewhere Christ refers to “eternal fire” and “eternal punishment.” For example, in Matthew 18:8-9 Jesus repeats what He had said earlier (Matt 5:29-30) about

forfeiting a member of the body in order to escape the “eternal fire” of hell—*gehenna*. An even clearer reference to “eternal fire” is found in the parable of the Sheep and the Goats in which Christ speaks of the separation that takes place at His coming between the saved and the unsaved. He will welcome the faithful into His kingdom, but will reject the wicked, saying: “Depart from me, you cursed, into *eternal fire* prepared for the devil and his angels; . . . And they will go away into *eternal punishment*, but the righteous into eternal life” (Matt 25:41, 46).<sup>37</sup>

Traditionalists attribute fundamental importance to the last passage because it brings together the two concepts of “eternal fire” and “eternal punishment.” The combination of the two is interpreted to mean that the punishment is eternal because the hellfire that causes it is also eternal. Peterson goes so far as to say that “if Matthew 25:41 and 46 were the only two verses to describe the fate of the wicked, the Bible would clearly teach eternal condemnation, and we would be obligated to believe it and to teach it on the authority of the Son of God.”<sup>30</sup>

Peterson’s interpretation of these two critical texts ignores four major considerations. First, Christ’s concern in this parable is not to define the nature of either eternal life or of eternal death, but simply to affirm that there are two destinies. The nature of each of the destinies is not discussed in this passage.

Second, as John Stott rightly points out, “The fire itself is termed ‘eternal’ and ‘unquenchable,’ but it would be very odd if what is thrown into it proves indestructible. Our expectation would be the opposite: it would be consumed for ever, not tormented for ever. Hence it is the smoke (evidence that the fire has done its work) which ‘rises for ever and ever’ (Rev 14:11; cf. 19:3).”<sup>39</sup>

Third, the fire is “eternal—*aionios*,” not because of its endless duration, but because of its complete consumption and annihilation of the wicked.

This is indicated clearly by the fact that the lake of fire, in which the wicked are thrown, is called explicitly “the second death’ (Rev 20:14; 21:8), because, it causes the final, radical, and irreversible extinction of life.

### **Eternal as Permanent Destruction**

“Eternal” often refers to the *permanence of the result* rather than the *continuation of a process*. For example, Jude 7 says that Sodom and Gomorrah underwent “a punishment of *eternal [aionios] fire*.” It is evident that the fire that destroyed the two cities is eternal, not because of its *duration* but because of its *permanent results*. In the same way, the fire of the final punishment is “eternal” not because it lasts forever, but because, as in the case of Sodom and Gomorra, it causes the complete and permanent destruction of the wicked, a condition which lasts forever.

Fourth, Jesus was offering a choice between *destruction* and *life* when He said: “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to *destruction*, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to *life*, and only few find it” (Matt 7:13-14).<sup>40</sup> Here Jesus contrasts the comfortable sinful life which leads to *destruction* in hell with the narrow way of trials and persecutions which leads to *eternal life* in the kingdom of heaven. The contrast between *destruction* and *life* suggests that the “eternal fire” causes the eternal destruction of the lost, not their eternal torment.

### **“Eternal Punishment”**

Christ’s solemn declaration: “They will go away into *eternal punishment*, but the righteous into eternal life” (Matt 25:46), is generally regarded as the clearest proof of the conscious suffering the lost will endure for all eternity. Is this the only legitimate interpretation of the text? John Stott rightly answers: “No, that is to read into the text what is not



necessarily there. What Jesus said is that both the life and the punishment would be eternal, but he did not in that passage define the nature of either. Because he elsewhere spoke of eternal life as a conscious enjoyment of God (John 17:3), it does not follow that eternal punishment must be a conscious experience of pain at the hand of God. On the contrary, although declaring both to be eternal, Jesus is *contrasting* the two destinies: the more unlike they are, the better.”<sup>41</sup>

Traditionalists read “*eternal punishment*” as “*eternal punishing*,” but this is not the meaning of the phrase. As Basil Atkinson keenly observes, “When the adjective *aionios* meaning ‘everlasting’ is used in Greek with nouns of *action* it has reference to the *result* of the action, not the process. Thus the phrase ‘everlasting punishment’ is comparable to ‘everlasting redemption’ and ‘everlasting salvation,’ both Scriptural phrases. No one supposes that we are being redeemed or being saved forever. We were redeemed and saved once for all by Christ with eternal results. In the same way the lost will not be passing through a process of punishment for ever but will be punished once and for all with eternal results. On the other hand the noun ‘life’ is not a noun of action, but a noun expressing a state. Thus the life itself is eternal.”<sup>342</sup>

## **Punishment of Eternal Destruction**

A fitting example to support this conclusion is found in 2 Thessalonians 1:9, where Paul, speaking of those who reject the Gospel, says: “They shall suffer the *punishment of eternal destruction* and exclusion from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.”<sup>36</sup> It is evident that the destruction of the wicked cannot be eternal in its duration, because it is difficult to imagine an eternal, inconclusive process of destruction. Destruction presupposes annihilation. The destruction of the wicked is eternal–*aionios*, not because the *process* of destruction continues forever, but because the *results* are permanent. In the same way, the “eternal

punishment” of Matthew 25:46 is eternal because its *results* are permanent. It is a punishment that results in their eternal destruction or annihilation.

The only way the punishment of the wicked could be inflicted eternally is if God resurrected them with immortal life so that they would be indestructible. But according to the Scripture, only God possesses immortality in Himself (1 Tim 1:17; 6:16). He gives immortality as the gift of the Gospel (2 Tim 1:10). In the best known text of the Bible, we are told that those who do not “believe in him” will “perish [*apoletai*],” instead of receiving “eternal life” (John 3:16). The ultimate fate of the lost is destruction by eternal fire and not punishment by eternal torment. The notion of the eternal torment of the wicked can only be defended by accepting the Greek view of the immortality and indestructibility of the soul, a concept which we have found to be foreign to Scripture.

## **THE WITNESS OF REVELATION**

The theme of the final judgment is central to the book of Revelation, because it represents God’s way of overcoming the opposition of evil to Himself and His people. Thus, it is not surprising that believers in eternal hell fire find support for their view in the dramatic imageries of Revelation’s final judgment. The visions cited to support the view of everlasting punishment in hell are: (1) the vision of God’s Wrath in Revelation 14:9-11, and (2) the vision of the lake of fire and of the second death in Revelation 20:10, 14-15. We briefly examine them now.

### **The Vision of God’s Wrath**

In Revelation 14, John sees three angels announcing God’s final judgment in language progressively stronger. The third angel cries out with a loud voice: “If any one worships the beast and its image, and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he also shall drink the wine of God’s wrath, poured unmixed into the cup of his anger, and he shall be

tormented with fire and sulphur in the presence of his holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up for ever and ever; and they have no rest, day or night, these worshippers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name” (Rev 14:9-11).

Traditionalists view this passage together with Matthew 25:46 as the two most important texts which support the traditional doctrine of hell. Peterson concludes his analysis of this passage, by saying: “I conclude, therefore, that despite attempts to prove otherwise, Revelation 14:9-11 unequivocally teaches that hell entails eternal conscious torment for the lost. In fact, if we had only this passage, we would be obligated to teach the traditional doctrine of hell on the authority of the Word of God.”<sup>44</sup>

This dogmatic interpretation of Revelation 14:9-11 as proof of a literal, eternal torment reveals a lack of sensitivity to the highly metaphorical language of the passage. In his commentary on *Revelation*, J. P. M. Sweet, a respected British New Testament scholar, offers a most timely caution in his comment on this passage: “To ask, ‘what does Revelation teach, eternal torment or eternal destruction?’ is to use (or misuse) the book as a source of ‘doctrine,’ or of information about the future. John uses pictures, as Jesus used parables (cf. Matt 18:32-34; 25:41-46), to ram home the unimaginable disaster of rejecting God, and the unimaginable blessedness of union with God, while there is still time to do something about it.”<sup>45</sup> It is unfortunate that this warning is ignored by those who choose to interpret literally highly figurative passages like the one under consideration.

### **“No Rest, Day or Night”**

The phrase “they have no rest, day or night” (Rev 14:11) is interpreted by traditionalists as descriptive of the eternal torment of hell. The phrase, however, denotes the *continuity* and not the *eternal duration* of an action. John uses the same phrase “day and night” to describe the living creatures

praising God (Rev 4:8), the martyrs serving God (Rev 7:15), Satan accusing the brethren (Rev 12:10), and the unholy trinity being tormented in the lake of fire (Rev 20:10).

In each case, the thought is the same: the action continues while it lasts. Harold Guillebaud correctly explains that the phrase “they have no rest, day or night” (Rev 14:11) “certainly says that there will be no break or intermission in the suffering of the followers of the Beast, *while it continues*; but in itself it does not say that it will continue forever.”<sup>46</sup>

Support for this conclusion is provided by the usage of the phrase “day and night” in Isaiah 34:10, where Edom’s fire is not quenched “night and day” and “its smoke shall go up for ever” (Is 34:10). The imagery is designed to convey that Edom’s fire would continue until it had consumed all that there was, and then it would go out. The outcome would be permanent destruction, not everlasting burning. “From generation to generation it shall lie waste” (Is 34:10).

## **The Lake of Fire**

The last description in the Bible of the final punishment contains two highly significant symbolic expressions: (1) the lake of fire, and (2) the second death (Rev 19:20; 20:10, 15; 21:8). Traditionalists attribute fundamental importance to “lake of fire” because for them, as stated by John Walvoord, “the lake of fire is, and it serves as a synonym for the eternal place of torment.”<sup>47</sup>

To determine the meaning of “the lake of fire,” we need to examine its four occurrences in Revelation, the only book in the Bible where the phrase is found. The first reference occurs in Revelation 19:20, where we are told that the beast and the false prophet “were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulphur.” The second reference is found in Revelation 20:10, where John describes the outcome of Satan’s last great assault

against God: “The devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulphur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.” God’s throwing of the devil into the lake of fire increases its inhabitants from two to three.

The third and fourth references are found in Revelation 20:15 and 21:8, where all the wicked are also thrown into the lake of fire. It is evident that there is a crescendo as all evil powers, and people eventually experience the final punishment of the lake of fire.

The fundamental question is whether the lake of fire represents an ever-burning hell where the wicked are supposed to be tormented for all eternity or whether it symbolizes the permanent destruction of sin and sinners. Three major considerations lead us to believe that the lake of fire represents the final and complete annihilation of evil and evildoers.

First, the beast and the false prophet, who are cast alive into the lake of fire, are two symbolic personages who represent not actual people but persecuting civil governments and corrupting false religion. Political and religious systems cannot suffer conscious torment forever. Thus, for them, the lake of fire represents complete, irreversible annihilation.

Second, the fact that “Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire” (Rev 20:14) shows again that the meaning of the lake of fire is symbolic, because Death and Hades (the grave) are abstract realities that cannot be thrown into or consumed with fire. By the imagery of Death and Hades being thrown into the lake of fire, John simply affirms the final and complete destruction of death and the grave. By His death and resurrection, Jesus conquered the power of death, but eternal life cannot be experienced until death is symbolically destroyed in the lake of fire and banished from the universe.

### **“The Second Death.”**

The third and decisive consideration is the fact that the lake of fire is defined as “the second death:” “The lake of fire is the second death” (Rev 20:14; cf. 21:8).

Since John clearly explains that the lake of fire is the second death, it is crucial for us to understand the meaning of “the second death” in New Testament times. This phrase occurs four times only in Revelation. The first reference is found in Revelation 2:11: “He who conquers shall not be hurt by the second death.” Here “the second death” is differentiated from the physical death that every human being experiences. The implication is that the saved who receive eternal life, will not experience eternal death.

The second reference to “the second death” occurs in Revelation 20:6, in the context of the first resurrection of the saints at the beginning of the millennium: “Over such the second death has no power.” Again, the implication is that the resurrected saints will not experience the second death, that is, the punishment of eternal death, obviously because they will be raised to immortal life.

The third and the fourth references are in Revelation 20:14 and 21:8, where the second death is identified with the lake of fire into which the devil, the beast, the false prophet, Death, Hades, and all evildoers are thrown. In these instances, the lake of fire is the second death in the sense that it accomplishes the eternal death and destruction of sin and sinners.

### **The Jewish Usage of the Phrase “Second Death”**

The meaning of the phrase “second death” is clarified by its usage in the Targum, which is the Aramaic translation and interpretation of the Old Testament. In the Targum, the phrase is used several times to refer to the final and irreversible death of the wicked. According to Strack and Billerbeck, the Targum on Jeremiah 51:39, 57 contains an oracle against Babylon, which says: “They shall die the second death and not live in the

world to come.”<sup>48</sup> Here the second death is clearly the death resulting from the final judgment which prevents evildoers from living in the world to come.

In his study *The New Testament and the Palestinian Targum to the Pentateuch*, M. McNamara cites the Targums (Aramaic commentary) of Deuteronomy 33:6, Isaiah 22:14 and 65:6, 15 where the phrase “second death” is used to describe the ultimate, irreversible death. The Targum on Deuteronomy 33:6 reads: “Let Reuben live in this world and die not in the second death in which death the wicked die in the world to come.”<sup>49</sup> In the Targum on Isaiah 22:14, the prophet says: “This sin shall not be forgiven till you die the second death, says the Lord of Host.”<sup>50</sup> In both instances, “the second death” is the ultimate destruction experienced by the wicked at the final judgment.

The Targum on Isaiah 65:6 is very close to Revelation 20:14 and 21:8. It reads: “Their punishment shall be in Gehenna where the fire burns all the day. Behold, it is written before me: ‘I will not give them respite during (their) life but will render them the punishment of their transgressions and will deliver their bodies to the second death.’”<sup>51</sup> Again, the Targum on Isaiah 65:15 reads: “And you shall leave your name for a curse to my chosen and the Lord God will slay you with the second death but his servants, the righteous, he shall call by a different name.”<sup>52</sup> Here, the second death is explicitly equated with the slaying of the wicked by the Lord, a clear image of final destruction and not of eternal torment.

In the light of its usage in Jewish literature, the phrase “second death” is used by John to define the nature of the punishment in the lake of fire, namely, a punishment that ultimately results in eternal, irreversible death. To interpret the phrase as eternal conscious torment in hell fire, means to negate its current usage and the Biblical meaning of “death” as cessation of life.

## CONCLUSION

Three major observations emerge from the preceding examination of the traditional view of hell as the place of a literal, everlasting punishment of the wicked. First, the traditional view of hell largely depends upon a dualistic view of human nature, which *requires* the eternal survival of the soul either in heavenly bliss or in hellish torment. We have found such a belief to be foreign to the wholistic Biblical view of human nature, where death denotes the cessation of life for the whole person.

Second, the traditionalist view rests largely on a literal interpretation of symbolic images such as *gehennah*, the lake of fire, and the second death. These images do not lend themselves to a literal interpretation because, as we have seen, they are metaphorical descriptions of the permanent destruction of evil and evildoers. Incidentally, lakes are filled with water and not with fire.

Third, the traditional view fails to provide a rational explanation for the justice of God in inflicting endless divine retribution upon unbelievers for sins they committed during the space of a short life. The doctrine of eternal conscious torment is incompatible with the Biblical revelation of divine love and justice. This point is considered shortly in conjunction with the moral implications of eternal torment.

In conclusion, the traditional view of hell was more likely to be accepted during the Middle Ages, when most people lived under autocratic regimes of despotic rulers, who could and did torture and destroy human beings with impunity. Under such social conditions, theologians with a good conscience could attribute to God an unappeasable vindictiveness and insatiable cruelty, which today would be regarded as demonic.

Today, theological ideas are subject to an ethical and rational scrutiny that forbids attributing to God the moral perversity presupposed by the



popular belief of the eternal punishment of the unsaved. Our sense of justice requires that the penalty inflicted must be commensurate with the evil done. This important truth is ignored by the popular view of hell that requires eternal punishment for the sins committed even during a short lifetime.

## **PART 2**

### **THE ANNIHILATION VIEW OF HELL**

Until recent times, the annihilation view of hell has been regarded by most Christians as a sectarian belief associated mostly with my own the Seventh-day Adventist church. This fact has led many evangelicals and Catholics to reject annihilationism a priori, simply because it was seen as a “sectarian” Adventist belief and not a traditional, popular Protestant and Catholic belief.

#### **Tactics of Harassment**

The strategy of rejecting a doctrine a priori because of its association with “sectarian” Adventists, is reflected in the tactics of harassment adopted against those evangelical scholars who in recent times have rejected the traditional view of hell as eternal conscious torment, and adopted instead the annihilation view of hell. The tactics consist in defaming such scholars by associating them with liberals or with sectarians Adventists.

Respected Canadian theologian Clark Pinnock writes: “It seems that a new criterion for truth has been discovered which says that if Adventists or liberals hold any view, that view must be wrong. Apparently a truth claim

can be decided by its association and does not need to be tested by public criteria in open debate. Such an argument, though useless in intelligent discussion, can be effective with the ignorant who are fooled by such rhetoric.”<sup>53</sup>

Despite the tactics of harassment, the annihilation view of hell is gaining ground among evangelicals. The public endorsement of this view by John R. W. Stott, a highly respected British theologian and popular preacher, is certainly encouraging this trend. “In a delicious piece of irony,” writes Pinnock, “this is creating a measure of accreditation by association, countering the same tactics used against it. It has become all but impossible to claim that only heretics and near-heretics [like Seventh-day Adventists] hold the position, though I am sure some will dismiss Stott’s orthodoxy precisely on this ground.”<sup>54</sup>

John Stott expresses anxiety over the divisive consequences of his new views in the evangelical community, where he is a renowned leader. He writes: “I am hesitant to have written these things, partly because I have great respect for long-standing tradition which claims to be a true interpretation of Scripture, and do not lightly set it aside, and partly because the unity of the worldwide evangelical community has always meant much to me. But the issue is too important to be suppressed, and I am grateful to you [David Edwards] for challenging me to declare my present mind. . . . I do plead for frank dialogue among evangelicals on the basis of Scripture.”<sup>55</sup>

### **An Appeal to Take a Fresh Look at Hell**

Emotional and Biblical reasons have caused John Stott to abandon the traditional view of hell and adopt the annihilation view. Stott writes: “Emotionally, I find the concept [of eternal torment] intolerable and do not understand how people can live with it without either cauterizing their feelings or cracking under the strain. But our emotions are a fluctuating,

unreliable guide to truth and must not be exalted to the place of supreme authority in determining it. As a committed Evangelical, my question must be—and is—not what my heart tells me, but what does God’s Word say? And in order to answer this question, we need to survey the Biblical material afresh and to open our minds (not just our hearts) to the possibility that Scripture points in the direction of annihilationism, and that ‘eternal conscious torment’ is a tradition which has to yield to the supreme authority of Scripture.”<sup>56</sup>

In response to Stott’s plea to take a fresh look at the Biblical teaching on the final punishment, we briefly examine the witness of the Old and the New Testament by considering the following points: (1) death as the punishment of sin, (2) the language of destruction, (3) the moral implications of eternal torment, (4) the judicial implications of eternal torment, and (5) the cosmological implications of eternal torment.

## **DEATH AS THE PUNISHMENT OF SIN**

### **“The Wages of Sin Is Death”**

A logical starting point for our investigation is the fundamental principle laid down in both Testaments: “The soul that sins shall die” (Ezek 18:4, 20); “The wages of sin is death” (Rom 6:23). The punishment of sin, of course, comprises not only the first death which all experience as a result of Adam’s sin, but also what the Bible calls the second death (Rev 20:14; 21:8), which, as we have seen, is the final, irreversible death experienced by impenitent sinners. This basic principle tells us at the outset that the ultimate wages of sin is not eternal torment, but permanent death.

Death in the Bible, as noted in chapter 3, is the cessation of life not the separation of the soul from the body. Thus, the punishment of sin is the

cessation of life. Death, as we know it, would indeed be the cessation of our existence were it not for the fact of the resurrection (1 Cor 15:18). It is the resurrection that turns death into a sleep, from being the final end of life into being a temporary sleep. But there is no resurrection from the second death. It is the final cessation of life.

This fundamental truth was taught in the Old Testament, especially through the sacrificial system. The penalty for the gravest sin was always and only the death of the substitute victim and never a prolonged torture or imprisonment of the victim. James Dunn perceptively observes that “The manner in which the sin offering dealt with sin was by its death. The sacrificial animal, identified with the offerer in his sin, had to be destroyed in order to destroy the sin which it embodied.”<sup>57</sup> To put it differently, the consummation of the sin offering typified in a dramatic way the ultimate destruction of sin and sinners.

The *separation* that occurred on the Day of Atonement between genuine and false Israelites typifies the separation that will occur at the Second Advent. Jesus compared this separation to the one that takes place at harvest time between the wheat and the tares. Since the tares were sown among the good wheat, which represents “the sons of the kingdom” (Matt 13:38), it is evident that Jesus had His church in mind. Wheat and tares, genuine and false believers, will coexist in the church until His coming. At that time, the drastic separation typified by the Day of Atonement will occur. Evildoers will be thrown “into the furnace of fire,” and the “righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (Matt 13:42-43).

Jesus’ parables and the ritual of the Day of Atonement teach the same important truth: False and genuine Christians will coexist until His coming. But at the Advent judgment a permanent separation occurs when sin and sinners will be eradicated forever and a new world will be established.

## THE LANGUAGE OF DESTRUCTION IN THE BIBLE

The most compelling reason for believing in the annihilation of the lost at the final judgment is the rich vocabulary and imagery of “destruction” often used in the Old and New Testaments to describe the fate of the wicked.

### The Language of Destruction in the Old Testament

The writers of the Old Testament seem to have exhausted the resources of the Hebrew language at their command to affirm the complete destruction of impenitent sinners. According to Basil Atkinson 28 Hebrew nouns and 23 verbs are generally translated “destruction” or “to destroy” in our English Bible. Approximately half of these words are used to describe the final destruction of the wicked.<sup>58</sup> A detailed listing of all the occurrences would take us beyond the limited scope of this chapter, beside proving to be repetitious to most readers. Interested readers can find an extensive analysis of such texts in the studies by Basil Atkinson and Edward Fudge. Only a sampling of significant texts are considered here.

Several Psalms describe the final destruction of the wicked with dramatic imagery (Ps 1:3-6; 2:9-12; 11:1-7; 34:8-22; 58:6-10; 69:22-28; 145:17, 20). In Psalm 37, for example, we read that the wicked “will soon *fade like grass*” (v. 2), “they shall be *cut off* . . . and will *be no more*” (vv. 9-10), they will “*perish* . . . like smoke they *vanish away*” (v. 20), “transgressors shall be altogether *destroyed*” (v. 38). Psalm 1, loved and memorized by many, contrasts the way of the righteous with that of the wicked. Of the latter it says that “the wicked shall not stand in the judgment” (v. 5). They will be “like chaff which the wind drives away” (v. 4). “The way of the wicked will *perish*” (v. 6). Again, in Psalm 145, David affirms: “The Lord preserves all who love him; but all the wicked he will *destroy*” (v. 20). This sampling of references, on the final destruction of the wicked is in complete harmony with the teaching of the rest of Scripture.

## The Destruction of the Day of the Lord

The prophets frequently announce the ultimate destruction of the wicked in conjunction with the eschatological Day of the Lord. In his opening chapter, Isaiah proclaims that “rebels and sinners shall be *destroyed together*, and those who forsake the Lord shall be *consumed*” (Is 1:28). The picture here is one of total destruction, a picture that is further developed by the imagery of people burning like tinder with no one to quench the fire: “The strong shall become tow, and his work a spark, and both shall burn together, with none to quench them” (Is 1:31).

We noted earlier that in the last page of the Old Testament English Bible, we find a most colorful description of the contrast between the final destiny of believers and unbelievers. For the believers who fear the Lord, “the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings” (Mal 4:2). But for unbelievers the Day of the Lord “comes, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all the evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes *shall burn them up*, says the Lord of host, so that *it will leave them neither root nor branch*” (Mal 4:1).

The message conveyed by these symbolic images is clear. While the righteous rejoice in God’s salvation, the wicked are consumed like “stubble,” so that no “root or branch” is left. This is clearly a picture of total consumption by destroying fire, and not one of eternal torment. This is the Old Testament picture of the fate of the wicked, total and permanent destruction and not eternal torment.

## Jesus and the Language of Destruction

The New Testament follows closely the Old Testament in describing the fate of the wicked with words and pictures denoting destruction. The most common Greek words are the verb *apollumi* (to destroy) and the noun *apoleia* (destruction). In addition, numerous graphic illustrations from both

inanimate and animate life are used to portray the final destruction of the wicked.

Jesus used several figures from inanimate life to portray the utter destruction of the wicked. He compared it to the following: weeds that are bound in bundles to be *burned* (Matt 13:30, 40), bad fish that is *thrown away* (Matt 13:48), harmful plants that are *rooted up* (Matt 15:13), fruitless trees that are *cut down* (Luke 13:7), and withered branches that are *burned* (John 15:6).

Jesus also used illustrations from *human life* to portray the doom of the wicked. He compared it to: unfaithful tenants who are *destroyed* (Luke 20:16), an evil servant who will be *cut in pieces* (Matt 24:51), the Galileans who *perished* (Luke 13:2-3), the eighteen persons *crushed* by Siloam's tower (Luke 13:4-5), the antediluvians *destroyed* by the flood (Luke 17:27), the people of Sodom and Gomorrah *destroyed by fire* (Luke 17:29), and the rebellious servants who were *slain* at the return of their master (Luke 19:14, 27).

All of these figures denote capital punishment, either individually or collectively. They signify violent death, preceded by greater or lesser suffering. The illustrations employed by the Savior very graphically depict the ultimate *destruction* or *dissolution* of the wicked. Jesus asked: "When the lord therefore of the vineyard cometh, what will he do unto those husbandmen?" (Matt 21:40). And the people responded: "He will miserably *destroy* [*apollumi*] those wicked men" (Matt 21:41).

Jesus taught the final destruction of the wicked not only through illustrations, but also through explicit pronouncements. For example, He said: "Do not fear those who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him [God] who can *destroy both soul and body in hell*" (Matt 10:28). John Stott rightly remarks: "If to kill is to deprive the body of life, hell would seem to be the deprivation of both physical and spiritual life,

that is, an extinction of being.”<sup>80</sup> In our study of this text in chapter 3 we noted that Christ did not consider hell a the place of eternal torment, but of permanent destruction of the whole being, soul and body.

Often Jesus contrasted eternal life with death or destruction. “I give them eternal life, and they shall never *perish*” (John 10:28). “Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to *destruction*, and those who enter it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few” (Matt 7:13-14). Here we have a simple contrast between life and death. There is no ground in Scripture for twisting the word “perish” or “destruction” to mean everlasting torment.

Earlier we noted that seven times Christ used the imagery of *gehenna* to describe the destruction of the wicked in hell. In reviewing Christ’s allusions to hell—*gehenna*, we found that none of them indicates that hell is a place of unending torment. What is eternal or unquenchable is not the punishment but the fire which, as the case of Sodom and Gomorra, causes the complete and permanent destruction of the wicked, a condition that lasts forever. The fire is unquenchable because it cannot be quenched until it has consumed all the combustible material.

### **Paul and the Language of Destruction**

The language of destruction is used frequently also by the New Testament writers to describe the doom of the wicked. Speaking of the “enemies of the cross,” Paul says that “their end is *destruction [apoleia]*” (Phil 3:19). In concluding his letter to the Galatians, Paul warns that “The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap *destruction [phthora]*; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from that Spirit will reap eternal life” (Gal 6:8, NIV). The Day of the Lord will come unexpectedly, “like a thief in the night, . . . then sudden *destruction [olethros]* will come upon them [the wicked]” (1 Thess 5:2-3). At Christ’s



coming, the wicked “shall suffer the punishment of eternal *destruction* [*olethron*]” (2 Thess 1:9). We noted earlier that the destruction of the wicked cannot be eternal in its duration because it is difficult to imagine an eternal inconclusive process of destruction. Destruction presupposes annihilation.

In view of the final destiny awaiting believers and unbelievers, Paul often speaks of the former as “those who are being saved—[*hoi sozomenoi*] and of the latter as “those who are perishing—[*hoi apollumenoi*]” (1 Cor 1:18; 2 Cor 2:15; 4:3; 2 Thess 2:10). This common characterization is indicative of Paul’s understanding of the destiny of unbelievers as ultimate destruction and not eternal torment.

### **Peter and the Language of Destruction**

Peter, like Paul, uses the language of destruction to portray the fate of the unsaved. He speaks of false teachers who secretly bring in heresies and who bring upon themselves “swift *destruction*” (2 Pet 2:1). Peter compares their destruction to that of the ancient world by the Flood and the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah which were burned to ashes (2 Pet 2:5-6). God “condemned them to *extinction* and made them an example to them who were to be ungodly” (2 Pet 2:6). Here Peter states unequivocally that the extinction by fire of Sodom and Gomorrah serves as an example of the fate of the lost.

Peter alludes again to the fate of the lost when he says that God is “forbearing toward you, not wishing that any should *perish*, but that all should reach repentance” (2 Pet 3:9). Peter’s alternatives between repentance or perishing remind us of Christ’s warning: “unless you repent you will all likewise *perish*” (Luke 13:3). The latter will occur at the coming of the Lord when “the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and the works that are upon it will be *burned up*” (2 Pet 3:10). Such a

graphic description of the destruction of the earth and evildoers by fire hardly allows for the unending torment of hell.

### **Other Allusions to the Final Destruction of the Wicked**

Several other allusions in the New Testament imply the final destruction of the lost. We briefly refer to some of them here. The author of Hebrews warns repeatedly against apostasy or unbelief. Anyone who deliberately keeps on sinning “after receiving the knowledge of the truth,” faces “a fearful prospect of judgment, and a fury of fire which will *consume* the adversaries” (Heb 10:27). The author explicitly states that those who persist in sinning against God ultimately experience the judgment of a raging fire that will “*consume*” them. Note that the function of the fire is to consume sinners, not to torment them for all eternity. This truth is reiterated consistently throughout the Bible.

Jude is strikingly similar to 2 Peter in his description of the fate of unbelievers. Like Peter, Jude points to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah “as an example of those who suffer the *punishment of eternal fire*” (Jude 7, NIV). We noted earlier that the fire that destroyed the two cities is eternal, not because of its *duration*, but because of its *permanent results*.

We noted earlier that the language of destruction is present, especially in the book of Revelation, because it represents God’s way of overcoming the opposition of evil to Himself and His people. A text not mentioned earlier is Revelation 11:18, where at the sounding of the seventh trumpet John hears the 24 elders saying: “The time has come for judging the dead . . . and for *destroying* those who destroy the earth.” Here, again, the outcome of the final judgment is not condemnation to eternal torment in hell, but destruction and annihilation. God is severe but just. He does not delight in the death of the wicked, let alone in torturing them for all

eternity. Ultimately, He will punish all evildoer, but the punishment will result in their eternal extinction, not eternal torment.

This is the fundamental difference between the Biblical view of final punishment as utter extinction and the traditional, popular view of hell as unending torment and torture. The language of destruction and the imagery of fire that we have found throughout the Bible clearly suggests that the final punishment of the wicked is permanent extinction and not unending torment in hell. In the light of this compelling Biblical witness, I join Clark Pinnock in stating: “I sincerely hope that traditionalists will stop saying that there is no Biblical basis for this view [annihilation] when there is such a strong basis for it.”<sup>60</sup>

## **THE MORAL IMPLICATIONS OF ETERNAL TORMENT**

The traditional view of hell is being challenged today not only on the basis of the language of destruction and the imagery of the consuming fire we find the Bible but also for moral, judicial, and cosmological considerations. To these we must now turn our attention. Let us consider, first, the moral implications of the traditional view of hell which depicts God as a cruel torturer who torments the wicked throughout all eternity.

### **Does God Have Two Faces?**

How can the view of hell that turns God into a cruel, sadistic torturer for all eternity be legitimately reconciled with the nature of God revealed in and through Jesus Christ? Does God have two faces? Is He boundlessly merciful on one side and insatiably cruel on the other? Can God love sinners so much as He sent His beloved Son to save them, and yet hate impenitent sinners so much that He subjects them to unending cruel torment? Can we legitimately praise God for His goodness, if He torments sinners throughout the ages of eternity?

Of course, it is not our business to criticize God, but God has given us a conscience to enable us to formulate moral judgments. Can the moral intuition God has implanted within our consciences justify the insatiable cruelty of a deity who subjects sinners to unending torment? Clark Pinnock answers this question in a most eloquent way: “There is a powerful moral revulsion against the traditional doctrine of the nature of hell. Everlasting torture is intolerable from a moral point of view because it pictures God acting like a bloodthirsty monster who maintains an everlasting Auschwitz for His enemies whom He does not even allow to die. How can one love a God like that? I suppose one might be afraid of Him, but could we love and respect Him? Would we want to strive to be like Him in this mercilessness? Surely the idea of everlasting, conscious torment raises the problem of evil to impossible heights.”<sup>61</sup>

John Hick expresses the same concern: “The idea of bodies burning for ever and continuously suffering the intense pain of third-degree burns without either being consumed or losing consciousness is as scientifically fantastic as it is morally revolting. . . . The thought of such a torment being deliberately inflicted by divine decree is totally incompatible with the idea of God as infinite love.”<sup>62</sup>

## **Hell and the Inquisition**

One wonders if the belief in hell as a place where God will eternally burn sinners with fire and sulphur may not have inspired the Inquisition to imprison, torture, and eventually burn at the stake so-called “heretics” who refused to accept the traditional teachings of the church. Church history books generally do not establish a connection between the two, evidently because inquisitors did not justify their action on the basis of their belief in hellfire for the wicked.

But, one wonders, what inspired popes, bishops, church councils, Dominican and Franciscan monks, Christian kings and princes to torture

and exterminate dissident Christians like the Albigenses, Waldenses, and Huguenots? What influenced, for example, Calvin and his Geneva City Council to burn Servetus (a Spanish scientist who discovered the circulation of the blood) at the stake for persisting in his anti-Trinitarian beliefs?

A reading of the condemnation of Servetus issued on October 26, 1553, by the Geneva City Council suggests to me that those Calvinistic zealots believed, like the Catholic inquisitors, that they had the right to burn heretics in the same way God will burn them later in hell. The sentence reads: “We condemn thee, Michael Servetus, to be bound, and led to the place of Champel, there to be fastened to a stake and burnt alive, together with thy book, . . . even till thy body be reduced to ashes; and thus shalt thou finish thy days to furnish an example to others who might wish to commit the like.”<sup>63</sup>

On the following day, after Servetus refused to confess to be guilty of heresy, “the executioner fastens him by iron chains to the stake amidst fagots, puts a crown of leaves covered with sulphur on his head, and binds his book by his side. The sight of the flaming torch extorts from him a piercing shriek of ‘misericordia’ [mercy] in his native tongue. The spectators fall back with a shudder. The flames soon reach him and consume his mortal frame in the forty-fourth year of his fitful life.”<sup>64</sup>

Philip Schaff, a renowned church historian, concludes this account of the execution of Servetus, by saying: “The conscience and piety of that age approved of the execution, and left little room for the emotions of compassion.”<sup>65</sup> It is hard to believe that not only Catholics, but even devout Calvinists would approve and watch emotionlessly the burning of a Spanish physician who had made significant contributions to medical science simply because he could not accept the divinity of Christ.

The best explanation I can find for the cauterization of the Christian moral conscience of the time, is the gruesome pictures and accounts of hellfire to which Christians constantly were exposed. Such a vision of hell provided the moral justification to imitate God by burning heretics with temporal fire in view of the eternal fire that awaited them at the hands of God.

It is impossible to estimate the far-reaching impact that the doctrine of unending hellfire has had throughout the centuries in justifying religious intolerance, torture, and the burning of “heretics.” The rationale is simple: If God is going to burn heretics in hell for all eternity, why shouldn’t the church burn them to death now? The practical implications and applications of the doctrine of literal eternal hellfire are frightening. Traditionalists must ponder these sobering facts. After all, Jesus said: “By their fruits ye shall know them” (Matt 7:20, KJV). And the fruits of the doctrine of hellfire are frightening bad.

### **Attempts to Make Hell More Tolerable**

It is not surprising that during the course of history there have been various attempts to make hell less hellish. Augustine invented purgatory to reduce the population of hell. Some Protestant theologians today such as Hendrikus Berkof and Zachary J. Hayes, are proposing a purgatorial view of hell, similar to the Catholic doctrine of Purgatory. After a period of punishment in hell, each inmate will become sufficiently purified to be accepted into Heaven.<sup>69</sup>

Others have tried to take the fire out of hell by replacing the physical torment of hell with a more endurable mental torment. At the General Audience of Wednesday, 28 July 1999, John Paul II explained that hell is not a physical place but “the state of those who freely and definitively separate themselves from God.” He denied that hell is a place of fiery torment and described it rather as “the pain, frustration and emptiness of

life without God.”<sup>67</sup> Surprisingly the Pope’s statement clearly contradicts the new *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which clearly states: “The souls of those who die in a state of mortal sin descend into hell, where they suffer the punishment of hell, ‘eternal fire.’” (#1035).

Like John Paul II, Billy Graham believes that “hell essentially is separation from God forever. And that is the worst hell that I can think of. But I think people have a hard time believing God is going to allow people to burn in literal fire forever. I think the fire that is mentioned in the Bible is a burning thirst for God that can never be quenched”<sup>68</sup>

In an interview with Richard Ostling of *Time* magazine, Billy Graham stated: “The only thing I could say for sure is that hell means separation from God. We are separated from his light, from his fellowship. That is going to be hell. When it comes to a literal fire, I don’t preach it because I’m not sure about it. When the Scripture uses fire concerning hell, that is possibly an illustration of how terrible it’s going to be—not fire but something worse—a thirst for God that cannot be quenched”<sup>69</sup> If the fire of hell is “a burning thirst for God that can never be quenched,” then the wicked should not be in hell in the first place. How can God consign to hell people who have a burning thirst for Him?

These creative attempts to lower the pain quotient of hell, by reducing it from a physical condition to a psychological state, does not substantially change its nature, since it still remains a place of unending torment. Ultimately, any doctrine of hell must pass the moral test of the human conscience, and the doctrine of literal unending torment, whether physical or psychological, cannot pass such a test. Annihilationism, on the other hand, can pass the test for two reasons. First, it does not view hell as everlasting torture but permanent extinction of the wicked. Second, it recognizes that God respects the freedom of those who choose not to be saved.

Our age desperately needs to learn the fear of God, and this is one reason for preaching on the final judgment and punishment. We need to warn people that those who reject Christ's principles of life and His provision of salvation ultimately will experience a fearful judgment and "suffer the punishment of eternal destruction" (2 Thess 1:9). A recovery of the Biblical view of the final punishment will loosen the preachers' tongues, since they can proclaim the great alternative between eternal life and permanent destruction without fear of portraying God as a monster.

### **THE JUDICIAL IMPLICATIONS OF ETERNAL TORMENT**

The traditional, popular view of hell is challenged today also on the basis of the Biblical vision of justice. As John Stott concisely and clearly puts it: "Fundamental to it [justice] is the belief that God will judge people 'according to what they [have] done' (e.g., Rev 20:12), which implies that the penalty inflicted will be commensurate with the evil done. This principle had been applied in the Jewish law courts in which penalties were limited to an exact retribution, 'life for life, eye for an eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot' (e. g., Ex 21:23-25). Would there not, then, be a serious disproportion between sins consciously committed in time and torment consciously experienced throughout eternity? I do not minimize the gravity of sin as rebellion against God our Creator, but I question whether 'eternal conscious torment' is compatible with the Biblical revelation of divine justice."<sup>70</sup>

It is difficult for us to imagine what kind of rebellious lifestyle could deserve the ultimate punishment of everlasting, conscious torment in hell. As John Hick puts it, "Justice could never demand for finite sins the infinite penalty of eternal pain; such unending torment could never serve any positive or reformative purpose precisely because it never ends; and it renders any coherent Christian theodicy [that is, the defense of God's



goodness in view of the presence of evil] impossible by giving the evils of sin and suffering an eternal lodgment within God's creation."<sup>71</sup>

### **Unlimited Retaliation is Unknown to the Bible**

The notion of unlimited retaliation is unknown to the Bible. The Mosaic legislation placed a limit on the punishment that could be inflicted for various kinds of harm received. Jesus placed an even greater limit: "You have heard that it was said . . . But I say to you" (Matt 5:38-39). Under the ethics of the Gospel, it is impossible to justify the traditional view of eternal, conscious torment because such a punishment would create a serious disproportion between the sins committed during a lifetime and the resulting punishment lasting for all eternity.

Part of the problem is that as human beings we cannot conceptualize how long eternal torment really is. We measure the duration of human life in terms of 60, 70, and in few cases 80 years. But eternal torment means that after sinners have agonized in hell for a million years, their punishment has hardly begun. Such a concept is beyond human comprehension.

Some reason that if the wicked were to be punished by annihilation, "it would be a happy relief from punishment and therefore no punishment at all."<sup>72</sup> Such reasoning is appalling, to say the least. It implies that the only just punishment that God can inflict upon the unrighteous is the one that will torment them eternally. It is hard to believe that divine justice can be satisfied only by inflicting a punishment of eternal torment.

The human sense of justice regards the death penalty as the most severe form of punishment that can be imposed for capital offenses. There is no reason to believe that the divine sense of justice should be more exacting by demanding more than the actual annihilation of the unrighteous. This is not a denial of the principle of degrees of accountability which, as we shall see, determines the "gradation" of the suffering of the lost. The punitive

suffering, however, will not last forever; it will terminate with the annihilation of the lost.

### **Gradation of the Punishment**

Extinction does not exclude the possibility of degrees of punishment. The principle of degrees of accountability based on the light received is taught by Christ in several places. In Matthew 11:21-22, Christ says: “Woe to you, Chorazin! woe to you, Bethsaida! for if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it shall be more tolerable on the day of judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you” (cf. Luke 12:47-48). The inhabitants of Tyre and Sidon will be treated more leniently in the final judgment than those of Bethsaida, because they had fewer opportunities to understand the will of God for their lives.

Christ alludes to the same principle in the parable of the Faithful and Unfaithful Servants: “And that servant who knew his master’s will, but did not make ready or act according to his will, shall receive a severe beating. But he who did not know, and did what deserved a beating, shall receive a light beating. Every one to whom much is given, of him will much be required; and of him to whom men commit much they will demand the more” (Luke 12:47-48). In the final judgment, each person will be measured, not against the same standard, but against his own response to the light received (see Ezek 3:18-21; 18:2-32; Luke 23:34; John 15:22; 1 Tim 1:13; James 4:17).

Millions of persons have lived and are living today without the knowledge of Christ as God’s supreme revelation and means of salvation. These people may find salvation on account of their trusting response to what they know of God. It is for God to determine how much of His will is disclosed to any person through any particular religion.

In Romans 2, Paul explains that “when Gentiles who have not the law do by nature what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus” (vv. 14-16).

It is because God has written certain basic moral principles into every human conscience that every person can be held accountable—“without excuse” (Rom 1:20)—in the final judgment. A pleasant surprise will be to meet among the redeemed “heathen” who never learned about the Good News of salvation through human agents. Yet they will not perish because they simply followed the light of their conscience.

## **THE COSMOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF ETERNAL TORMENT**

A final objection to the traditional view of hell is that eternal torment presupposes an eternal existence of a cosmic dualism. Heaven and hell, happiness and pain, good and evil would continue to exist forever alongside each other. It is impossible to reconcile this view with the prophetic vision of the new world in which there shall be no more “mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away” (Rev 21:4). How could crying and pain be forgotten if the agony and anguish of the lost were at sight distance, as in the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31)?

The presence of countless millions forever suffering excruciating torment, even if it were in the camp of the unsaved, could only serve to destroy the peace and happiness of the new world. The new creation would turn out to be flawed from day one, since sinners would remain an

eternal reality in God's universe and God would never be "everything to every one" (1 Cor 15:28).

The purpose of the plan of salvation is ultimately to eradicate the presence of sin and sinners from this world. It is only if sinners, Satan, and the devils ultimately are consumed in the lake of fire and experience the extinction of the second death, that we truly can say that Christ's redemptive mission has been an unqualified victory.

Summing up, we can say that from a cosmological perspective the traditional view of hell perpetrates a cosmic dualism that contradicts the prophetic vision of the new world where the presence of sin and sinners is forever passed away (Rev 21:4).

## CONCLUSION

The traditional and popular view of hell as eternal torment grew out of the Greek dualistic view of human nature, consisting of a mortal body and immortal soul. William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury (1942-1944), rightly acknowledges that "If men had not imported the Greek and unbiblical notion of the natural indestructibility of the individual soul, and then read the New Testament with that already in their minds, they would have drawn from the New Testament a belief, not in everlasting torment, but in annihilation. It is the fire that is called *aeonian* [everlasting], not the life cast into it."<sup>73</sup>

For the past 150 years Seventh-day Adventists have been criticized for teaching this important biblical truth, namely, that hellfire in the Bible, does not torment the lost eternally, but consume them permanently. Today, it is encouraging to see that respected scholars and church leaders like Archbishop William Temple, acknowledging that the Adventist belief in the annihilation of the lost, is biblically correct. They are supporting the Adventist belief by challenging and abandoning the popular belief in hell

as eternal torment, on the basis of Biblical, moral, judicial, and cosmological considerations.

Biblically, eternal torment negates the fundamental principle that the ultimate wages of sin is death, cessation of life, and not eternal torment. Furthermore, the rich imagery and language of destruction used throughout the Bible to portray the fate of the wicked clearly indicate that their final punishment results in annihilation and not eternal, conscious torment.

Morally, the doctrine of eternal conscious torment is incompatible with the Biblical revelation of divine love and justice. The moral intuition God has implanted within our consciences cannot justify the insatiable cruelty of a God who subjects sinners to unending torments. Such a God is like a bloodthirsty monster and not like the loving Father revealed to us by Jesus Christ.

Judicially, the doctrine of eternal torment is inconsistent with the Biblical vision of justice, which requires the penalty inflicted to be commensurate with the evil done. The notion of unlimited retaliation is unknown to the Bible. Justice could never demand a penalty of eternal pain for sins committed during a mere human lifetime, especially since such punishment accomplishes no reformatory purpose.

Cosmologically, the doctrine of eternal torment perpetuates a cosmic dualism that contradicts the prophetic vision of the new world, free from the presence of sin and sinners. If agonizing sinners were to remain an eternal reality in God's new universe, then it hardly could be said that there shall be no more "mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away" (Rev 21:4).

We began this chapter by asking: Does the Bible support the popular belief that impenitent sinners suffer the conscious punishment of hellfire in

body and soul for all eternity? Our careful investigation of the relevant Biblical texts has shown that this popular view lacks biblical support.

The Bible teaches that the wicked will be resurrected for the purpose of divine judgment. This will involve a permanent expulsion from God's presence into a place where there will be "weeping and grinding of teeth." After a period of conscious suffering as individually required by divine justice, the wicked will be consumed with no hope of restoration or recovery. The ultimate restoration of believers and the extinction of sinners from this world will prove that Christ's redemptive mission has been an unqualified victory. Christ's victory means that "the former things have passed away" (Rev 21:4), and only light, love, peace, and harmony will prevail throughout the ceaseless ages of eternity.

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#### NOTES TO CHAPTER 4

1. John F. Walvoord, "The Literal View," in *Four Views on Hell*, William Crockett, Editor, (1992), p. 12.

2. Clark H. Pinnock, "Response to John F. Walvoord," in *Four Views on Hell*, William Crockett, Editor (1992), p. 39.

3. In his book *The Origin and History of the Doctrine of Endless Punishment*, Thomas Thayer writes: "In attempting to set out the Egyptian notions on the subject [of Hell], it is difficult to choose between the conflicting accounts of the Greek writers, Herodotus, Diodorus Siculus, Plutarch, etc, as well as of the modern interpreters of the monumental hieroglyphics. Still, with regard to the main question, they are tolerably well agreed . . . that the whole matter of judgment after death, the rewards of a good life, and the punishments of a bad life, with all the formal solemnities of trial and condemnation, originated and was perfected among

the Egyptians. From them it was borrowed by the Greeks, who made such changes and additions as fitted the system to the genius and circumstances of that people.” (p. 93).

4. Christopher Pitt, Translator, *Aeneid*, 1823, p. 385.

5. For a convenient listing of statements by the Early church Fathers, “The Early Church Fathers Speak on Hell,” [www.geocities.com/Athens/Rhodes/3543/Hell.htm](http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Rhodes/3543/Hell.htm)

6. For an excellent survey of Augustine’s view of Hell, see see George Hunsinger, “Hellfire and Damnation: Four Ancient and Modern Views, *The Scottish Journal of Theology* 51 # 4 (1998), pp. 406-434.

7. Augustine, *The Enchiridion on Faith, Hope, and Love*, ed. Henry Paolucci, 1961, p. 97

8. Ibid., p. 92.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

12. Augustine, *City of God*, ed. David Knowles (1972), XXI, 23.

13. *City of God* XXI, 14.

14. *The Enchiridion*, p. 98

15. Ibid., p. 95

16. Reuters, July 29, 1999.

17. Maureen McKew, "Hell! Who Put the Fire Out," *Villanova Magazine* (Summer 2000), p. 16.

18. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1994, 1035.

19. Richard Owen, "Pope Says Hell and Damnation Are Real and Eternal," *Timesonline*, March 28, 2007.

20. Martin Luther, *Luther's Works: Commentaries on 1 Corinthians 7, 1 Corinthians 15, Lectures on 1 Timothy* (1873), vol. 28, pp. 144-145.

21. *Luther's Works*, vol. 19, p. 75.

22. John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (1949), pp. 200-201.

23. William V. Crockett, "The Metaphorical View," in *Four Views of Hell*, ed. William Crockett, (1992), pp. 46-47.

24. Jonathan Edwards, in John Gerstner, *Jonathan Edwards on Heaven and Hell* (1980), p. 56.

25. As cited by Fred Carl Kuehner, "Heaven or Hell?" in *Fundamentals of the Faith*, ed. Carl F. H. Henry (1975), p. 239.

26. John Stott and David L. Edwards, *Evangelical Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue* (1988); Philip E. Hughes, *The True Image: The Origin and Destiny of Man in Christ* (1989); John W. Wenham, "The Case for Conditional Immortality" in *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell* (1992); Edward Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes: The Biblical Case for Conditional Immortality* (1994); Clark Pinnock, "The Conditional View," in *Four Views on Hell* (1997); Oscar Cullman, *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?* (1958).



27. John H. Gerstner, *Repent or Perish* (1990).

28. J. I. Packer in *Evangelical Affirmations* (1990); Larry Dixon, *The Other Side of the Good News: Confronting the Contemporary Challenges to Jesus' Teaching on Hell* (1992); Kendall Harmon, "The Case against Conditionalism: A Response to Edward William Fudge" in *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell* (1992); Robert A. Peterson, *Hell on Trial: the Case for Eternal Punishment* (1995); D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (1996).

29. Robert A. Peterson, (28), pp. 200-201.

30. John F. Walvoord (note 1), p. 15.

31. Robert A. Peterson (note 28), p. 32. See also Harry Buis, *The Doctrine of Eternal Punishment* (1957), p. 13.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

33. André Lacoque, *The Book of Daniel* (1979), p. 241.

34. Emmanuel Petavel, *The Problem of Immortality* (1892), p. 323.

35. Kenneth Kantzer, "Troublesome Questions," *Christianity Today* (March 20, 1987), p. 45. Similarly, W. T. G. Shedd writes: "The strongest support of the doctrine of Endless Punishment is the teaching of Christ, the Redeemer of man. Though the doctrine is plainly taught in the Pauline Epistles, and other parts of Scripture, yet without the explicit and reiterated statements of God incarnate, it is doubtful whether so awful a truth would have had such a conspicuous place as it always has had in the creeds of Christendom. . . . Christ could not have warned men so frequently and earnestly as He did against 'the fire that never shall be quenched,' and 'the

worm that dieth not,' had He known that there is no future peril to fully correspond to them" (*Dogmatic Theology* [1888], pp. 665-666).

36. Josephus, *War of the Jews* 6, 8, 5; 5, 12, 7.

37. Emphasis supplied.

38. Robert A. Peterson (note 28), p. 47.

39. John Stott and David L. Edwards, (Note 26), p. 316.

40. Emphasis supplied.

41. John Stott (note 26), p. 317.

42. Basil F. C. Atkinson, *Life and Immortality. An Examination of the Nature and Meaning of Life and Death as They Are Revealed in the Scriptures* (Taunton, England, n. d.), p. 101.

43. Emphasis supplied.

44. Robert A. Peterson (note 28), p. 88. The same view is expressed by Harry Buis, who wrote: "These passages from the epistles and Revelation give evidence that the apostles follow their Master in teaching the serious alternatives of life. They teach clearly the fact of judgment, resulting in eternal life or eternal death, which is not cessation of existence, but rather an existence in which the lost experience the terrible results of sins. They teach that this existence is endless" (note 38, p. 48).

45. J. P. M. Sweet, *Revelation* (1979), p. 228.

46. Harold E. Guillebaud, *The Righteous Judge: A Study of the Biblical Doctrine of Everlasting Punishment* (Taunton, England, n. d.), p. 24.

47. John F. Walvoord (note 1), p. 23.

48. As cited by J. Massyngberde Ford, *Revelation, Introduction, Translation and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible (1975), p. 393.

49. M. McNamara, *The New Testament and the Palestinian Targum to the Pentateuch* (1958), p. 117.

50. Ibid.

51. Ibid., p. 123.

52. Ibid.

53. Clark H. Pinnock (note 2), p.161.

54. Ibid., p. 162.

55. John Stott (note 26), pp. 319-320.

56. Ibid., pp. 314-315.

57. James D. G. Dunn, "Paul's Understanding of the Death of Jesus," in *Reconciliation and Hope: New Testament Essays on Atonement and Eschatology*, Robert Banks, Editor (1974), p. 136.

58. Basil F. C. Atkinson, *Life and Immortality. An Examination of the Nature and Meaning of Life and Death as They Are Revealed in the Scriptures* (Taunton, England, n. d.), p. 103.

59. John Stott (note 26), p. 315.

60. Clark H. Pinnock (note 2), p. 147.

61. Ibid., pp. 149-150.
62. John Hick, *Death and Eternal Life* (1976), pp. 199, 201.
63. As cited by Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (1958), vol. 8, p. 782.
64. Ibid., p. 785.
65. Ibid., p. 786.
66. Zachary J. Hayes, "The Purgatorial View," in *Four Views on Hell*, Stanley N. Gundry, Editor (1992).
67. Reuters, July 29, 1999.
68. "Graham," *Orlando Sentinel*, April 10, 1983.
69. Billy Graham," interview with Richard Ostling, *Time* magazine, Nov. 15, 1993.
70. John Stott (note 26), pp. 318-319.
71. John Hick, *Death and Eternal Life* (1976), p. 201.
72. Harry Buis, "Everlasting Punishment," *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (1978), vol. 4, p. 956.
73. William Temple, *Christian Faith and Life* (1931), p. 8.

## Chapter 5

# “PURGATORY”

**D**uring the five years I studied at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome from 1969 to 1974, occasionally I worked as a tourist guide. One of the sites I liked to show to tourists is called *La Scala Santa* or *The Holy Stairs*, which consists of 28 marble steps, protected by wooden boards. It is located opposite the Basilica of San Giovanni Laterano.

According to Catholic tradition, the stairs were part of the *praetorium* of Pilate in Jerusalem, which Jesus ascended during his Passion. Medieval legends claim that *The Holy Stairs* were brought from Jerusalem to Rome about 326 by Helena, mother of Constantine the Great.

Devout pilgrims are eager to ascend *The Holy Stairs* on their knees, reciting prescribed prayers, because they are promised to receive indulgences for themselves and their loved ones in purgatory. On September 2, 1817 Pope Pius VII granted to pilgrims ascending the stairs in the prescribed manner, an indulgence of nine years for every step. An indulgence is the remission or limited release from the temporal punishment believers must suffer in this life or in purgatory for venial (minor, forgivable) sins they have committed.

One day I took to the *The Holy Stairs* an inquisitive American tourist, who bombarded me with probative questions. When we entered the *Holy Stairs*, the Passionist Father caring for the shrine, gave us a small card with the picture of the *Holy Stairs* on the one side, and the instructions on how to receive nine years of indulgence per step on the other side.

After reading about the nine years of indulgence per step, the American tourist asked the Passionist Priest: “Please, Father, could you explain to me what will happen if I ascend the *Holy Stairs* in the prescribed manner four times, earning a total of 1008 years of indulgences, but I need only for 500 years of indulgence to transit from purgatory to paradise? What is God going to do with the 508 extra years of indulgence that I worked for?” The priest responded in a pastoral manner, saying: “My son, do not worry about the extra indulgences, because God will automatically apply them to your relatives in purgatory.”

This experience illustrates how the fear of purgatory motivates pious Catholics to undertake pilgrimages to “holy shrines,” to perform disciplines like ascending the *Holy Stairs*, fasting, alms giving, the recitation of prayers for the dead, and even to pay for memorial masses, all in the hope of shortening the temporal punishment in purgatory for themselves and/or their loved ones.

## **The Experience of Luther**

When Luther was sent to Rome in the Fall of 1510 to resolve some disciplinary reforms of the Augustinian convents in Germany, he wished that his parents were dead that he might help them out of purgatory, by celebrating the Mass at the St. John Lateran basilicas across the street, and by ascending the famous *Holy Stairs*. However, the results of that experience proved to be totally different.

“He ascended on bended knees the twenty-eight steps of the famous Scala Santa . . . that he might secure the indulgence attached to this ascetic performance since the days of Pope Leo IV in 850, but at every step the word of Scripture sounded as a significant protest in his ear: ‘The just shall live by faith’ (Rom 1:17).”<sup>1</sup> Upon hearing these words, according to Luther’s son, Paul, he realized the inconsistency of what he was doing with the words he had just heard. So he got up, turned around, and walked down the stairs.

Later toward the end of 1512, Luther revisited Romans 1:17, while preparing his lectures on the book of Romans. He read again: “For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, ‘He who through faith is righteous shall live’” (Rom 1:17). This text became

for Luther “a gate to Paradise,” because it lifted away the oppressive burden of having to prove himself worthy to God. An unspeakable joy flooded his heart.

With his newfound peace, Luther could no longer tolerate the crass abuses of the church, personified by the notorious salesman Johan Tetzel, a Dominican friar commissioned to sell indulgences to fund the construction of St. Peter in Rome. His sales pitch included the infamous ditty: “As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs.”

Luther blasted this ditty expressly in several of his 95 Theses that were nailed to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg on October 31, 1517: “27. They preach only human doctrines who say that as soon as the money clinks into the money chest, the soul flies out of purgatory. 28. It is certain that when money clinks in the money chest, greed and avarice can be increased; but when the church intercedes, the result is in the hands of God alone.”<sup>3</sup>

Luther’s challenge of the Doctrine of Purgatory was the first shot across the bow that marked the beginning of the Reformation. At that early stage, however, Luther opposed primarily the abuses of this doctrine, not the doctrine per se. Later, however, the doctrine of purgatory was openly rejected by Luther and other Reformers “who taught that the souls are freed from sin by faith in Christ alone without any works, and therefore, if saved, go straight to heaven.”<sup>4</sup>

Of all the Catholic teachings, the doctrine of purgatory offers the clearest understanding of the Catholic system of salvation as a *dispensation* of her church. To understand how the system works, we need to consider a cluster of related beliefs such as the treasury of merits, prayers to and for the dead, and indulgences for the dead.

## **Objectives of this Chapter**

This chapter examines the popular belief in purgatory by considering several significant components of this doctrine. Our procedure is first to define the Catholic arguments for purgatory and then to present a biblical response to such arguments. This is the outline of the topics examined in this chapter.

- 1) The Catholic Doctrine of Purgatory.
  - 2) A Historical Glimpse of the Doctrine of Purgatory
  - 3) Biblical Reasons for Rejecting Purgatory
- 

## **THE CATHOLIC DOCTRINE OF PURGATORY**

The Doctrine of Purgatory is a unique and essential belief of the Roman Catholic Church. It is based on her teaching that salvation is a gradual process of sanctification that starts with the sacrament of baptism when sanctifying grace is initially infused in the new born baby, and continues throughout the present life and in most cases after death in purgatory.

The process of sanctification makes the soul holy and inherently pleasing to God. The sanctification of the soul is achieved through prayer, fasting, almsgiving, pilgrimages to holy shrines, indulgences, and especially memorial masses. These good works make the soul increasingly attractive to God.

Simply stated, the Catholic Doctrine of Purgatory consists of the following components:

- 1) Christ's atoning sacrifice delivers us only from the '*reatus culpae*—guilt of our sins' and the punishment of eternal death.
- 2) For all the sins committed after baptism, the believer must make satisfaction by penance and good works.
- 3) Before a soul can enter heaven, it must be purified from all sin and satisfy the demands of divine justice.



4) If the satisfaction and purification of the soul is not completed in this present life, it must be accomplished after death in purgatory.

5) The eucharist (Mass) is a propitiatory sacrifice that can secure the pardon of post-baptismal sins, in accordance to the decision of the officiating priest. Therefore if a memorial Mass is celebrated on behalf of a soul in purgatory, it reduces and alleviates her temporal punishment.

6) The pope and his representatives, the priests, have the power to forgive sins, that is, to exempt penitent sinners from the obligation to make satisfaction for their sins. Usually this is done by granting a partial or full (plenary) indulgence, which reduces or eliminates the temporal punishment in purgatory.

Our study will show that this Catholic teachings ignores that the sanctification/purification of our lives is an *experiential* process that occurs in this life, not after death in purgatory (cf. 1 Cor 3:10-13; 2 Cor 5:10; Rom 8:1-6). For believers the only experience after death, as we have shown in chapter 3, is their glorification on resurrection morning at Christ's coming. Shortly we shall see that in scripture sanctification is not a process of *paying* for our sins that continues in purgatory, but a process through which God by His grace delivers us from the *presence* and *power* of sin in our present life.

## **The Goal of Purgatory**

In Catholic theology the goal of purgatory is to achieve the complete cleansing of every vestige of sin before the soul can come into the presence of God. Thomas Aquinas explains this teaching with clarity. I will quote frequently from him, because he is rightly regarded as the most influential Catholic theologian who perfected the Catholic beliefs like no one had ever done before.

At the Pontifical Gregorian University where I spent five years, theology students were required to take courses on Aquinas' theology, known as "Thomistic Theology," because his *Summa Theologica* is still regarded as the most comprehensive rational definition and defence of Catholic doctrines. He is fondly called "The Angelic Doctor."

Aquinas clearly states: “The chief purpose of the punishment of Purgatory is to cleanse us from the remains of sin; and consequently the pain of *fire only* is ascribed to Purgatory because fire cleanses and consumes.”<sup>5</sup> What Aquinas is saying is that while in hell the pain is inflicted by various types of tortures to punish the wicked eternally, in purgatory the pain is caused *only* by fire, because fire cleanses and consumes the remains of sin. By cleansing the remains of sin, purgatory is seen as the logical extension of the process of salvation that begins in this present life— a process that is administered by the Church.

The fire of purgatory is essentially the same as the fire of hell. The difference is not in the nature of the fire but in its function. Quoting Pope Gregory, Aquinas explains: “Even as in the same fire gold glistens and straw smokes, so in the same fire the sinner burns [in hell] and the elect is cleansed [in Purgatory]. Therefore the fire of Purgatory is the same as the fire of hell . . . Purgatory is either close to, or the same place as hell.”<sup>6</sup>

Aquinas illustrates the function of purgatory by comparing it to the payment of a debt. “Whoever is another’s debtor, is freed from his indebtedness by paying the debt. And, since the obligation incurred by guilt is nothing else than the debt of punishment, a person is freed from that obligation by undergoing the punishment which he owed. Accordingly the punishment of Purgatory cleanses from the debt of punishment.”<sup>7</sup>

Catholic teachings differentiate between the expiatory punishments of this present life and those suffered in purgatory. In his book *The Doctrine of Purgatory*, Jesuit scholar John A. Hardon, S. J., explains the difference in this way: “We should also distinguish between the expiatory punishments that the poor souls in purgatory pay and the penalties of satisfaction which souls in a state of grace pay before death. Whereas before death a soul can cleanse itself by freely choosing to suffer for its sins, and can gain merit for this suffering, a soul in purgatory can not so choose and gains no merit for the suffering and no increase in glory. Rather, it is cleansed according to the demands of Divine Justice.”<sup>8</sup>

### **Can Physical Suffering per se Purify Sinners?**

The notion that the souls in purgatory have no choice but to suffer passively and patiently in the purifying fire until God is satisfied that they

have been purified sufficiently to earn admission to paradise, suggests that physical suffering per se can purify sinners, even without being able to make moral choices through the free exercise of the will. This teaching, as we shall see, is clearly contradicted by the biblical view of salvation, which is achieved through the suffering of Christ, not of sinners. Suffering per se can harden sinners, like in the case of the impenitent thief crucified next to Christ.

Scripture teaches that Jesus “made purification of sins” (Hebrews 1:3) on the cross. His blood can cleanse the vilest penitent sinner (Hebrews 9:14). There is no temporal punishment remaining for which believers must atone in purgatory for the vestiges of sin, because Jesus paid it all: “He Himself is the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 2:2). This fundamental “Good News” of the Gospel is denied by the Catholic Doctrine of Purgatory.

### **The Roman Catholic Penitential System**

The doctrine of purgatory is an integral element of the Roman Catholic penitential system. According to that system, sin consists of *culpa et paena*, that is, of guilt and punishment. Through His sacrifice, Christ bore our *guilt* and released us from the *eternal punishment* of hell. But, the sinner must bear the *paena*, that is, the *temporal punishment* of sins and make satisfaction by penance and good works. This satisfaction must be completed and the soul must be purified from all sin, before it can enter paradise.

Every sin debits temporal punishment to the sinner’s account. Acts of penance, suffering, and indulgences credit this account. Since sinners may not be able to make full satisfaction for their sins in this life, the punishment of purgatory in the afterlife is necessary to balance the ledger.

Thomas Aquinas explains the latter concept saying: “If one who loves and believes in Christ, has failed to wash away his sins in this life, he is set free [from his sins] after death by the fire of Purgatory. Therefore there remains some kind of cleansing after this life. . . . One who after contrition for his fault and after being absolved, dies before making due satisfaction, is punished after this life in Purgatory. Wherefore those who deny Purgatory speak against the justice of God.”<sup>9</sup>

Pope Paul VI reiterated this teaching in his *Apostolic Constitution on Indulgences*, promulgated on January 1, 1967. The Pope stated: “That punishment of the vestiges of sin may remain to be expiated or cleansed . . . even after the remission of guilt, is clearly demonstrated by the doctrine of purgatory. In purgatory, in fact, the souls of those ‘who died in the charity of God and truly repentant, but before satisfying with worthy fruits of penance for sins committed and for omissions,’ are cleansed after death with purgatorial punishments”<sup>10</sup>

This teaching that sins forgiven under the authority and regulations of the Catholic Church, must still be atoned through punishment inflicted upon the penitent sinners in this life and, for most people, also after death in purgatory, derives from the Catholic doctrine of satisfaction, not from scripture. According to this doctrine, before a sin can be absolved (forgiven), reparation must be made by fasting, almsgiving, recitation of prayers, pilgrimages, indulgences, and other good works.

### **A Denial of the Good News of the Gospel**

The Catholic doctrine that forgiven sinners must still pay the punishment of their sins, runs contrary to the Good News of the Gospel, that “if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). This text clearly states that God is faithful and just, both to forgive us and to cleanse us when we confess our sins. The cleansing from sin is a divine provision of grace, not a human achievement by suffering patiently in the flames of purgatory. The blood of Christ cleanses us from all sins. Were not Paul’s sins all forgiven at the moment he believed? Did Jesus tell the penitent thief that he would eventually be with Him in paradise, after paying the due punishment for his sins in purgatory?

It is unfortunate that the Catholic doctrine of satisfaction denies the all-sufficiency of Christ’s sacrifice, by claiming that God, after forgiving the guilt of sin through the sacrifice of His Son, still expects forgiven sinners to pay for the *temporal* punishment of their sins. This is called the *temporal* punishment to distinguish it from the *eternal* punishment inflicted upon the unsaved in hell.

The whole issue boils down to this question: Is salvation a divine gift of grace or it is a human achievement by works? Did Christ die only to bear *only* our *guilt* and the *eternal punishment* of our guilt, but not its *temporal punishment*? Does the Bible distinguish between the *temporal punishment* we must bear and the *eternal punishment* that Christ has borne for us? Can guilt be legally transferred upon an innocent person? In our human system of justice, the guilt cannot be transferred to an innocent person, but certain penalties, like the payment for a speed ticket, can be done by an innocent party, such as a parent on behalf of a guilty child.

The Bible makes no artificial distinction between the guilt or the punishment of our sins paid by Christ's sacrifice. It simply tells us that "God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. (Rom 5:8). "Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures" (1 Cor 15:3). "He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. . . . and *the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.* (Is 53:5-6).<sup>11</sup> Texts like these clearly teach that Christ's atoning sacrifice paid in full the punishment of our sins. The teaching that penitent sinners must suffer themselves the temporal punishment of their sins, is a clear denial of the all-sufficiency of Christ's atoning death. This fundamental biblical truth will be expanded shortly.

### **The Duration of Purgatory**

The punishment of purgatory is temporal, not eternal like that of hell, because "the purifying fire will not continue after the General Judgment"<sup>12</sup> In other words, according to Catholic teachings, the purging fire of purgatory will last only until the General Judgment executed at Christ's Return. After the final judgement, purgatory will be shut down and there will be only heaven and hell.

This teaching is contradicted by the fate of penitent sinners who die or are alive when Christ comes to shut down purgatory. Will these sinners be given a special dispensation to enable them to enter paradise without first being purified by the cleansing fire of purgatory? Does God have a double standard, one for those who die long before the great judgement Day, and other for those who die immediately before that Day? And what about believers who are alive at the time of Christ's Coming? Will they be

admitted to paradise without the purgatorial cleansing of venial (minor) sins? Questions such as these highlight the irrationality of the doctrine of purgatory.

### **The Intensity of Purgatory**

“The pains of Purgatory,” writes Aquinas, “are more grievous than all the pains of this world.”<sup>14</sup> The intensity and duration of the purgatorial pains are proportional to the gravity of the sins committed in this life. This means that believers may have to endure the expiatory and purifying fire of purgatory for a few hours or for thousand of years, depending on their “sin load.”

Aquinas explains this Catholic teaching, saying: “Some venial [minor] sins cling more persistently than others, according as the affections are more inclined to them, and more firmly fixed in them. And since that which clings more persistently is more slowly cleansed, it follows that some are tormented in Purgatory longer than others, for as much as their affections were steeped in venial sins.

“Severity of punishment corresponds properly speaking to the amount of guilt: whereas the length corresponds to the firmness with which sin has taken root in its subject. Hence it may happen that one may be delayed longer who is tormented less and *vice versa*.”<sup>12</sup>

The suffering of the souls in purgatory can be alleviated or their duration shortened, by offering prayers, almsgiving, indulgences, and especially the sacrifice of the Mass. The reason is that purgatory is administered by the authority of the Pope and his representatives, the priests. They have the right to decide at their discretion whether to remit entirely or partially the penalty of sins to be expiated by the souls detained in purgatory. This teaching is based upon the dispersion of the “treasury of merits,” which is a “heavenly bank” administered by the Catholic church. The bank contains the merits of Christ, Mary, and the saints. Shortly we shall see that this teaching grossly misrepresents the biblical view of salvation as a divine gift of grace, and not a dispensation of the church.

## **A HISTORICAL GLIMPSE**

# OF THE DOCTRINE OF PURGATORY

A historical survey of the origin and development of the Doctrine of Purgatory would take us beyond the limited scope of this chapter. The most we can offer here is a glimpse of a few significant developments.

## **The Origin of Purgatory**

The origin of purgatory runs parallel to the origin of the belief in the immortality of the soul, because the two beliefs are closely connected, the former dependant on the latter. It was the belief in the survival of the soul that contributed to the development of the doctrine of purgatory, a place where the souls of the dead are purified by fire before ascending to paradise.

If the Christian church at large had remained true to the biblical wholistic view of human nature, and had rejected the Greek dualistic view of the mortal body and immortal soul, it would have never developed the doctrine of purgatory or of hellfire. The reason is simple. If the soul, as shown in chapter 2, is the animating principle of the body that ceases to exist with the death of the body, then there is no survival of the soul in purgatory, hell, or paradise. These and a host of other unbiblical beliefs that have plagued Christian church throughout the centuries, would have never seen the light of day.

Adolph Harnack, a renown nineteenth century German historian, argues that purgatory entered the Church via the Hellenistic dualistic philosophy and thus represents an intrusion of “unbiblical” and “unrealistic ideas into Christianity.”<sup>15</sup> I fully concur with this view. In fact, we noted in chapter 2 that Plato’s dualistic view of human nature, found its way into the Christian church toward the end of the second century. It was promoted first by Tertullian, and later on by Origen, Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas. The same is true of some of the premises of purgatory which entered the Christian church at about the same time, though the formal definition of the doctrine of purgatory did not occur until the twelve century.

## **Greek “Purgatory” Adopted by Hellenistic Jews**

The notion of a purification of the soul by fire after death is part of the Greek philosophy developed by Plato. “The idea of a purification by fire after death became familiar to the Greek mind, and was taken up by Plato, and wrought into his philosophy. He taught that no one could become perfectly happy after death, until he had expiated his sins; and that if they were too great for expiation, his suffering would have no end.”<sup>16</sup>

The Greek belief in the purification of the soul after death was eventually adopted by Hellenistic Jews during the inter-testamental period. This can be inferred from 2 Maccabees 12:42-46, which speak of Judas Maccabeus (died 161 B. C.) sending two thousand silver drachmas to the Jerusalem Temple to pay for sin offerings on behalf of fallen soldiers. “He made atonement for the dead, so that they might be set free from their sins” (2 Mac 12:46).

This is the primary text used by Catholic apologists to defend the view that “the Jewish people believed in the existence of a state of purgation where souls are cleansed before entering heaven.”<sup>17</sup> Shortly we shall see that this argument ignores four things. First, 2 Maccabees is an apocryphal book which does not belong to the inspired Old Testament canon accepted by the Jews and most Christians.

Second, praying for the dead is condemned in another apocryphal book 2 (4) Esdras 7:105, thus showing that even the apocrypha disagree on prayers for the dead.

Third, a closer look at the text indicate that prayers and sacrifices were offered for the dead, not to alleviate their suffering in purgatory, but to plead for God’s mercy on the Day of the Resurrection. The analysis of this text will be done shortly.

Lastly, the Old Testament never speaks of the purification of souls after death before entering paradise. The reason, as shown in chapter 2, is that the fate of the soul is connected inextricably with the fate of the body—the latter being the outward manifestation of the soul.

The Platonic teaching of the immortality and purification of the soul after death, found its way into Hellenistic Judaism during the inter-testamental period, as indicated by 2 Maccabees, written in the second



century before Christ. Some scholars maintain that Christians may have adopted the practice of praying and giving offerings for the dead from Hellenistic Judaism.<sup>18</sup> This is altogether possible, since we noted in chapter 2 that Plato's teachings on the immortality of the soul, found its way into the Christian Church through Hellenistic Jewish writers like Philo and Josephus.

## **Purgatory in the Early Church**

The Doctrine of Purgatory as known today was developed in the late Middle Ages, but the premises of purgatory are already present in the early church, especially by the practice of praying for the dead. In the catacombs there are several examples of how the faithful offered prayers for their departed relatives and friends.<sup>19</sup>

An ancient liturgy of the fourth century illustrates the custom of offering prayers for the dead: "Let us pray for our brother who has fallen asleep in Christ, that the God of the highest charity towards men, who has summoned the soul of the deceased, may forgive him all his sin and, rendered well-disposed and friendly towards him, may call him to the assembly of the living."<sup>20</sup>

Some writers before Augustine explicitly teach that souls still stained with sin need to be purified after death before they can enter paradise. Cyprian (died 258) taught that penitents who die before being absolved by Sacrament of Penance, must satisfy the remaining requirements after death before their admission to paradise.<sup>21</sup>

Both Clement of Alexandria (about 150-215) and his disciple, Origen (about 185-254), developed not only the teaching of the immortality of the soul, but also the view of the purification of the soul after death,<sup>21</sup> drawing from the notion of the purifying function of fire in the Bible. Origen taught that the souls of the elect immediately entered paradise, but those which are not yet purified, passed into a state of punishment, penal fire, conceived as a place of purification.<sup>22</sup>

Augustine (354-430) laid the foundation, not only for the doctrine of the immortality of the soul, but also for that of purgatory. He defended the existence of purgatory as a matter of faith, and taught that the deceased

are “benefited by the piety of their living friends, who offer the Sacrifice of the Mediator [memorial Masses], or give alms to the Church on their behalf.”<sup>24</sup>

Toward the end of his book *The City of God*, Augustine discusses a concept that sounds like Purgatory. He wrote: “But temporary punishments are suffered by some in this life only, by others after death, and by others both now and then; but all of them before that last and strictest judgment. But of those who suffer temporary punishments after death, all are not doomed to those everlasting pains which are to follow that judgment.”<sup>25</sup>

### **Purgatory in the Middle Ages**

After Augustine there are no significant new developments for several centuries in the doctrine of purgatory. In fact, in his book *The Birth of Purgatory*, Jacques Le Goff argues that purgatory was “born” in the late twelfth century, when purification after death was first said to be carried out in a specific place called *purgatorium*, the Latin term for purgatory.<sup>26</sup> This view has been rightly criticized as being too restrictive, because, as we have seen, ancient documents indicate that long before the twelfth century Christians were offering prayers and Masses for the dead, believing that they could influence their destiny. The coining of the term *purgatorium* represents simply the refining of existing beliefs.

After the twelfth century, the Doctrine of Purgatory was amplified and systematized by Thomas Aquinas, the Council of Lyons (1274), Florence (1439), and especially the Council of Trent (1545-1563). They rationalized the state and purpose of purgatory by arguing that its cleansing fire was needed to purify Christians of venial (minor) sins and to pay the debt of temporal punishments still owed for such sins.

The Council of Trent summarized and formalized the Doctrine of Purgatory, largely as a response to its rejection by the Reformers. The Council placed an anathema upon those who denied the need to pay the debt of temporal punishment in purgatory. “If anyone says that, after receiving the grace of justification the guilt of any repentant sinner is remitted and the debt of eternal punishment is blotted out in such a way that no debt of temporal punishment remains to be paid, either in this life or

in purgatory, before the gate to the kingdom of heaven can be opened: let him be anathema.”<sup>27</sup>

Shortly before its closing sessions (1563), the Council of Trent issued a special *Decree on Purgatory*, which summarized the previous definitions and cautioned against some of the abuses that gave rise to the Protestant opposition: “The Catholic Church, by the teaching of the Holy Spirit, in accordance with Sacred Scripture and the ancient tradition of the Fathers, has taught in the holy councils, and most recently in this ecumenical council, that there is a purgatory, and that the souls detained there are helped by the prayers of the faithful, and especially by the acceptable Sacrifice of the Altar [Mass].

“Therefore, this holy council commands the bishops to be diligently on guard that the true doctrine about purgatory, the doctrine handed down from the holy Fathers and the sacred councils, be preached everywhere, and that Christians be instructed in it, believe it, and adhere to it.”<sup>28</sup>

*The Catholic Encyclopedia* notes that “the Council of Trent (Sess. XIV, can. xi) reminds the faithful that God does not always remit the whole punishment due to sin together with the guilt. God requires satisfaction, and will punish sin...”<sup>29</sup> This portrayal of a vengeful, punitive God, demanding the full satisfaction for every sin ever committed, negates the biblical view of a loving God, willing to sacrifice His Son to atone for all our sins.

This official definition of the Catholic Doctrine of Purgatory by the Council of Trent, was reaffirmed at the Second Vatican Council and is reiterated in the new *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.<sup>29</sup> Unfortunately, this doctrine represents a radical denial the biblical view of salvation as a divine provision through Christ’s atoning sacrifice to liberate and purify sinners from the power and penalty of sin. The notion of purgatory to purify the souls of penitent sinners through fire, “the prayers of the faithful, and especially by the acceptable Sacrifice of the Altar [Mass],” is foreign to Scripture. It represents a misguided attempt to make salvation a human achievement, rather than a divine gift of grace.

## **Obsession with the Suffering in Purgatory**

The medieval obsession with the state of the souls in purgatory led to the flourishing of incredible legends about the cruel sufferings endured by the souls imprisoned in purgatory. These legends inspired the graphic imagination of the greatest medieval literary fiction, Dante Alighieri's *Purgatory*, the second book of his *Divine Comedy*.

Dante's Purgatory is a lofty island-mountain, the only land in the southern Hemisphere, consisting of seven level terraces, each inhabited by a different group of sinners, doing penance to expiate their sins committed on earth. For example, the proud are forced to circle their terrace for aeons bent double in humility; the slothful have to run around crying out examples of zeal and sloth; while the lustful are purged by fire.

Mystics such as Catherine of Genoa (1447-1510) also made the suffering of purgatory a central theme of their visionary teachings, thus fixing the idea in the Western mind. In her *Treatise on Purgatory*, Catherine wrote: "When gold has been purified up to twenty-four carats, it can no longer be consumed by any fire; not gold itself but only dross can be burnt away. Thus the divine fire works in the soul: God holds the soul in the fire of Purgatory until its every imperfection is burnt away and it is brought to perfection, as it were to the purity of twenty-four carats, each soul however according to its own degree."<sup>30</sup>

The desire to assist the suffering souls in purgatory led to a thriving demand for masses and indulgences in order to lessen the time and intensity of their suffering. The merchandising of purgatory eventually became the major contention in the great religious crisis known as the Reformation.

## **The Rejection of the Doctrine of Purgatory**

During the Middle Ages, the Albigenses, Waldenses, and Hussites all denied the existence of purgatory, mostly on the ground of their understanding of salvation as a divine gift of grace. But the major rejection of the Catholic Doctrine of Purgatory came at the time of the Reformation.

Martin Luther initially accepted the belief in Purgatory. In 1519 he said that its existence was undeniable. But by 1530 he came to the

conclusion that Purgatory could not be proven to exist from biblical passages. Later that year he rejected the concept of Purgatory entirely.

Since that time, every major Protestant denomination rejected the Catholic notion of a state of purification in purgatory between death and the celestial glory. John Calvin (1509-1564) set the theological groundwork for the rejection of purgatory, by teaching that salvation is a divine gift of grace alone, without the need of satisfaction for sins in purgatory. He wrote: “We should exclaim with all our might, that purgatory is a pernicious fiction of Satan, that it makes void the cross of Christ, that it intolerably insults the Divine Mercy, and weakens and overturns our faith. For what is their purgatory, but a satisfaction for sins paid after death by the souls of the deceased? Thus the notion of satisfaction being overthrown, purgatory itself is immediately subverted from its very foundation.

“It has been fully proved that the blood of Christ is the only satisfaction, expiation, and purgation for the sins of the faithful. What, then, is the necessary conclusion but that purgation is nothing but a horrible blasphemy against Christ? I pass by the sacrilegious pretences with which it is daily defended, the offences, which it produces in religion, and the other innumerable evils, which we see to have come from such a source of impiety.”<sup>31</sup>

Calvin’s rejection of purgatory was reaffirmed in numerous Reformed Confessions of Faith, like the *Westminster Confession of the Presbyterian Church*, which says: “Prayer is to be made for things lawful, and for all sorts of men living, or that shall live hereafter; but not for the dead, nor for those of whom it may be known that they have sinned the sin unto death.”<sup>32</sup>

*The Thirty-nine Articles* of the Anglican (Episcopal in the USA) Church (1563), are equally clear. They place the existence of purgatory in the same category with image worship and invocation of the saints: “The Romish Doctrine concerning Purgatory, Pardons, Worshipping and Adoration, as well of Images as of Reliques, and also invocation of Saints, is a fond thing vainly invented, and grounded upon no warranty of Scripture, but rather repugnant to the Word of God.”<sup>33</sup>

The study of the biblical view of salvation led Protestant Reformers to reject the whole doctrine of purgatory and to dismantle all the practices associated with it. The result was, not only a religious reformation but also a social and economic revolution.

### **Recent Attempts to Quench the Fire of Purgatory**

In recent times attempts have been made to quench the fires of purgatory, by defining it as a state of being immersed in Christ's love rather than being imprisoned in a place of purifying fire. For example, Pope John Paul II used his Wednesday general audience in late July and early August 1999, to discuss topics related to life after death. Repeating his theme in the two previous talks on heaven and hell, at the August 4 general audience the Pope said that "Purgatory does not indicate a place, but a condition of life. Those who, after death, live in this state of purification are already immersed in the love of Christ, which lifts them out of the residue of imperfection."<sup>34</sup> He then encouraged Christians to pray and do good works on behalf of those in purgatory.

Commenting on this model shift from a place of suffering to a state of purification, Marcus Gee wrote in *Globe and Mail*, "Having tried to take the puffy clouds out of heaven and the fire and brimstone out of hell, the Pope is now attempting to demystify God's waiting room purgatory."<sup>35</sup>

This is an important model shift from the idea of purgatory as a debtor's prison where imprisoned souls are to pay off the temporal punishment of their sins, until they reach "a process of purification," to a more humane purgatory where souls are "immersed in the love of Christ." But the pope is still eager to retain the idea that souls in purgatory need our "prayers and good works" to help them through the process. This is not surprising since the contributions priests receive for memorial masses to be offered to help souls transit through purgatory, still remain a major source of income of the Catholic Church.

### **Purgatory is Still a Major Source of Income for the Catholic Church**

I learned about the income generated by Purgatory in a most practical way from a conversation with Father Masi, a classmate at the Gregorian University in Rome. He was serving as the parish priest of the

Church of San Leone Magno (St. Leo the Great). One day he asked me for a ride because his car was being repaired. While driving him home, I asked him: “How many members do you have in your parish?” He replied: “About 16,000.” I followed up with two other questions: “What is the average attendance to your Sunday Masses and how much offering do you receive?” He replied: “The attendance ranges between 150 to 200 members and the offering is only between 2000 to 3000 lire, that is, between 2 to 3 dollars each Sunday.”

Surprised by such a low attendance and offering, I asked him the final question: “How do you survive?” He replied: “Mostly from the donations we receive at the time of baptisms, weddings, and funerals. On those occasions, Catholics make generous donations to the church. The largest donations come in the form of properties given to the church by dying members, eager to pay for memorial masses to be celebrated on their behalf or on behalf of their loved ones. On the basis of the size of the donations, a priest commits himself to offer a certain number of masses to shorten the stay of the donors in purgatory.

### **The Catholic Doctrine of Purgatory has not Changed**

In spite of recent attempts of Pope John Paul II to mitigate the fire of hell and purgatory by interpreting them as a condition of the soul, rather than fiery places of punishment, the fact remains that the traditional view of purgatory as the place where souls undergo the final purification by fire before being admitted to paradise, still remains the official teaching of the Catholic Church.

The new *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, largely based on the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, clearly affirms: “All who die in God’s grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven.

“The Church gives the name Purgatory to this final purification of the elect, which is entirely different from the punishment of the damned. The Church formulated her doctrine of faith on Purgatory especially at the Councils of Florence and Trent. The tradition of the Church, by reference to certain texts of Scripture, speaks of a *cleansing fire*. As for certain

lesser faults, we must believe that, before the Final Judgment, there is a *purifying fire*.”<sup>36</sup>

## CATHOLIC DEFENCE OF PURGATORY

The Catholic Church appeals both to Scripture and Tradition to defend their dogma of Purgatory. Four major texts are cited in support of purgatory, namely, 2 Maccabees 12:42-46, Matthew 12:42-46, Matthew 12:32, and 1 Corinthians 3:15. None of these texts, as shown below, teach the purification of souls in purgatory.

The *New Catholic Encyclopedia* openly acknowledges that “the doctrine of purgatory is not explicitly stated in the Bible.”<sup>37</sup> Neither is it taught implicitly in Scripture, since the Roman Catholic use of Scripture to support purgatory violate the contextual meaning of each passage. A brief examination of these passages follows at this point.

### **2 Maccabees 12:42-46**

The classic text used to defend purgatory, is found in the Book of Maccabees (2 Macc 12:42-46). This text is used to prove the alleged Jewish belief in the existence of a state of purgation where souls are cleansed before entering heaven. The context of the text is the story of Judas Maccabeus (died 161 BC) who led out the Jewish rebellion against the Syrian rulers because they attempted to force the Jews to adopt Greek beliefs and lifestyle. He successfully defeated the Syrian army and renewed religious life by rededicating the temple; the feast of Hanukkah celebrates this event.

In the process of gathering the bodies of the Jewish soldiers who had fallen in battle, amulet of idols, which the Law forbade them to wear, were found under their shirt. Judas and his men concluded that the soldiers had died because they had committed this sin of disobedience. The text continues describing what happened next: “So they all blessed the ways of the Lord, the righteous Judge, who reveals the things that are hidden and fell to supplication, begging that the sin that had been committed should be wholly blotted out.



“And the noble Judas exhorted the people to keep themselves from sin, after having seen with their own eyes what had happened because of the sin of those who had fallen. He also took a collection, amounting to two thousand silver drachmas, each man contributing, and sent it to Jerusalem, to provide a sin offering, acting very finely and properly in taking account of the resurrection. For if he had not expected that those who had fallen would rise again, it would have been superfluous and foolish to pray for the dead; or if it was through reward destined for those who fall asleep in godliness, it was a holy and pious thought. Therefore he made atonement for the dead, so that they might be set free from their sin” (2 Mac 12:42-46).

Catholic writers argue that this text shows that the Jewish people in pre-Christian times believed “in a state of purgation after death and in the ability to help the faithful departed by prayers of intercession on their behalf.”<sup>38</sup>

### **A Response to the Catholic Use of 2 Maccabees 12:42-46**

Our response to the Catholic use of this text to prove purgatory, can be stated by the following five major points.

First, 2 Maccabees is not part of the inspired canon of the Old Testament, but of what are known as the Apocrypha books. These books were not accepted by the Palestinian Jewish community who treated as canonical (inspired) only the current 27 Old Testament books . In 90 A. D. the Council of Jamnia formally excluded the Apocrypha from the canonical Hebrew Scripture, declaring that the *Tanakah* was complete, that is, the entire revelation of God to His people concerning His promise.

Second, the teaching of this passage about giving money to pray and offer sacrifices for the dead, is in itself sufficient to prove the lack of Divine inspiration in this book of the Maccabees. No other book of Holy Scripture contains this doctrine, which is negated by the biblical view of divine forgiveness. In fact, ask yourself, Why would God ask living believers to pay money to relieve people in Purgatory? What good is earthly money to God? In fact, to whom will the money go? Obviously, it goes to Church officials’ coffers. This whole teaching of paying of money to relieve the suffering of loved ones in Purgatory just smacks of an

ecclesiastical money scheme, rather than of a divine provision of forgiveness.

Third, the Apocrypha were not accepted by Jesus and the apostles, who never quoted them in the New Testament. They were rejected also by important early Church Fathers, like Jerome, the great biblical scholar who translated the official Roman Catholic Latin Bible, called *Vulgate*. Jerome distinguished between the *libri canonici* and *libri ecclesiastici*, the latter referring to the books of the Apocrypha, a term that was not yet in current use. They were formally added to the Roman Catholic Bible by the Council of Trent only after the Reformation (1546 A. D.), in a futile attempt to support purgatory and prayers for the dead which Luther attacked. Yet, even the Council of Trent inconsistently rejected some apocryphal books, such as (2 [4] Esdras 7:105 ), because it speaks against praying for the dead (see chap. 9).

Fourth, it is important to note that 2 Maccabees 12:42-46 contradicts the Catholic Doctrine of Purgatory, because Judas prayed for the fallen soldiers on “*account of the resurrection. For if he had not expected that those who had fallen would rise again, it would have been superfluous and foolish to pray for the dead.*” The point to note in this text, is that prayers and sacrifices were to be offered for the dead, not to alleviate or shorten their sufferings in purgatory, but to gain more blessings for them on resurrection Day. Praying that the sin of the dead might be forgiven on resurrection day, is not the same as praying for the alleviation of their sufferings in purgatory. Both teachings are unbiblical, but two errors do not add up to one truth.

Fifth, the text is unbiblical by teaching that prayer and sacrifice for the dead can atone for their sins. By sending money to offer sacrifices for fallen soldiers, Judas Maccabeus was not following the Old Testament Scriptures. Among the many precepts of the Law of Moses, there was no sacrifice intended for the dead. The text as it stands clearly contradicts the Catholic Doctrine of Purgatory, because it speaks of God’s dealing with sinners at the resurrection, not in purgatory.

### **Matthew 12:32: Forgiveness of Sin After Death?**

The second passage used by Catholics to support the concept of forgiveness of sin after death, is Matthew 12:32 which reads: “Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit, will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.”

Catholic theologians interpret this text to mean there are sins which are not forgiven in this life that may be forgiven after death in purgatory. Ludwig Ott, a foremost Catholic apologist, argues that this text “leaves open the possibility that sins are forgiven not only in this world but in the world to come.”<sup>39</sup> On a similar vein John Hardon, S. J., states: “Here Christ recognizes that there exists a state beyond this world in which the penalty due for sins, which were pardoned as to guilt in the world, is forgiven.”<sup>40</sup>

The same interpretation is found in the new *Catholic Catechism of the Catholic Church*: “As for certain lesser faults, we must believe that, before the Final Judgment, there is a purifying fire. He who is truth [Christ] says that whoever utters blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will be pardoned neither in this age nor in the age to come. From this sentence we understand that certain offenses can be forgiven in this age, but certain others in the age to come.”<sup>41</sup>

### **A Response to the Catholic Use of Mathew 12:32**

The Catholic use of this passage to support their belief in the forgiveness of sins after death, is a slender thread on which to hang a weighty doctrine. Three major considerations discredit the Catholic interpretation of this text.

First, as stated by Norman Geisler and Ralph Mackenzie, “the text is not speaking about forgiveness in the next life after suffering for sins, but the fact that there will be *no forgiveness for this sin in ‘the world to come’* (Matt. 12:32 , emphasis added) How can the denial that this sin will not ever be forgiven, even after death, be the basis for speculating that sins will be forgiven in the next life?”<sup>42</sup>

Jesus simply wanted to emphasize the gravity of the sin against the Holy Spirit which would *never* be forgiven, as the parallel passage in the Gospel of Mark records: “But whoever blasphemates against the Holy Spirit

will *never* be forgiven; he is guilty of an eternal sin” (Mark 3:29; NIV).<sup>43</sup> To say that something can never happen either in this world or in the world to come, is a familiar way of saying that it can never be forgiven under any circumstances.

Second, purgatory involves the forgiveness only of venial (minor) sins, but the sin against the Holy Spirit is not venial, but mortal because it is unforgiveable. How can a statement about the unforgiveable mortal sin in the next life, support the Catholic teaching that non-mortal sins will be forgiven then?

Third, more significant still is the fact that Christ is not speaking about punishment, which Catholics argue will occur in purgatory, but about the unforgiveable nature of the sin against the Holy Spirit. Christ’s statement can hardly be used to support the belief in a purgatory, where the debt must be paid to the last ‘penny,’ either by the pains of torment or by the payment of living relatives, or a combination of the two.

Fourth, even if Christ’s statement did imply punishment, it would be for the unsaved, not for those who are ultimately saved, as is the case with those who go to purgatory. A statement about the punishment of the unsaved, cannot be legitimately used to defend the belief in the purgatorial punishment of the saved.

In the light of the above considerations, the Catholic use of Matthew 12:32 to support their doctrine of purgatory, shows the lack of real biblical support for the doctrine.

### **1 Corinthians 3:11-15: Sin and its Punishment or Service and its Reward?**

A third text Catholics use to defend their doctrine of Purgatory is 1 Corinthians 3:11-15, which reads: “For other foundation no man can lay, but that which is laid; which is Christ Jesus. Now if any man build upon this foundation, gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay stubble: Every man’s work shall be manifest; for the day of the Lord shall declare it, because it shall be revealed in fire; and the fire shall try every man’s work, of what sort it is. If any man’s work abide, which he hath built thereupon,

he shall receive a reward. If any man's work burn, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved, yet so as by fire."

Catholics believe that in this verse Paul "affirms the reality of purgatory." John Hardon, S. J, writes: "In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul says that 'the fire will assay the quality of everyone's work,' and 'if his work bums he will lose his reward, but himself will be saved, yet so as through fire' (1 Cor 3:13, 15). These words clearly imply some penal suffering. Since he connects it so closely with the divine judgment, it can hardly be limited to suffering in this world, but seems to include the idea of purification through suffering after death, namely in purgatory."<sup>44</sup>

Similarly, Ludwig Ott notes that "The Latin Fathers take the passage to mean a transient purification punishment in the other world."<sup>45</sup> The new *Catechism of the Catholic Church* interprets "the fire" mentioned in this text as the cleansing and purifying that the soul suffers in purgatory to make expiation for sin<sup>46</sup>

### **A Response to the Catholic Interpretation of 1 Corinthians 3:11-15**

It must be admitted that 1 Corinthians 3:11-15 is a difficult text to interpret, but the Catholic interpretation of this text ignores the following three important points.

First, in this text Paul is speaking about the *testing of works* on the Day of Judgment and not about the *suffering of souls* in purgatory. The Apostle says that "the fire will test each one's work," that is, the works of every Christian will be tested and everyone will be rewarded accordingly. Unworthy works will be burned up and the individual will lose the reward though he himself will be saved. Simply stated, the question here is not about *sin* and its punishment, but about the *reward* for service rendered by those who are already saved.

Second, "the text says nothing about believers suffering the temporal consequences for their sins in purgatory. They are not burned in the fire; only their *works* are burned. Believers see their works burn but they escape the fire."<sup>47</sup> If the fire was referring to the purgatorial cleansing of sin, rather than to the testing of works, why should those who had built

with gold, silver, precious stones suffer along with those who had built with unworthy wood, hay and straw?

Third, the “fire” mentioned in the text does not purge our soul from sins, but “discloses” and “test” our “work.” Verse 13 says clearly, “the work of each will come to light, for the Day will disclose it. It will be *revealed with fire*, and the fire will *test the quality of each one’s work*.”<sup>48</sup> Contrary to Catholic teachings, there is nothing in this passage about purging from sin. The focus is on the rewards believers will receive for their service.

What Paul seems to saying here is that the work of some believers will stand the test of the final judgement while that of others will disappear. The emphasis is on the importance of producing works acceptable to God. We can work for God for the wrong reasons and selfish motives.

The meaning of the last verse 15 is problematic. The NIV reads: “He himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames” (1 Cor 3:15). This may be a proverbial expression meaning “saved by narrow escape,” or as we would say today “escaped by the skin of his teeth.” Paul seems to be driving home this point. Thank God that you have been saved, but what are you going to do with this opportunity? Will you squander it, or will you serve the Lord wholeheartedly?

## CONCLUSION

The above analysis of a few texts commonly used to prove the Catholic doctrine of Purgatory, has shown that such doctrine lacks biblical support. The notion of a purgatorial process after death to remove the vestiges of sin, is foreign to Scriptural teachings. The Bible never presents personal sufferings or works as the expiation or satisfaction of our sins. It is not the flames of purgatory that cleanses penitent sinners from their sins, but “the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin” (1 John 1:7).

In reading Ludwig Ott’s *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, regarded as a standard Catholic authority on dogma, it is interesting to note how many times he admits that the doctrine of Purgatory “is not explicitly revealed in Scripture” or that “express scriptural proofs are lacking.”<sup>48</sup>

These phrases point to the fact that purgatory has no basis in Scripture. Not only the doctrine lacks biblical support, but it also openly contradicts the biblical view of salvation.

## **BIBLICAL REASONS FOR REJECTING PURGATORY**

There are several biblical reasons for rejecting the Catholic doctrine of purgatory. For the sake of brevity and clarity, we mention six major reasons.

### **1) The Doctrine of Purgatory is not Taught in the Bible**

The first and most obvious reason for rejecting the Catholic doctrine of purgatory, is the fact that it is not taught in the Bible. We noted earlier that even its advocates admit that “is not explicitly revealed in Scripture.” Having adopted the doctrine on extra-biblical grounds, especially on the teachings of some church fathers, Catholic theologians have sought to find here and there a passage which can be explained in accordance to their teachings. But there is no Bible text which speaks of purgatory.

There is no evidence that purgatory ever formed a part of the instructions of Christ or his Apostles. The reason is simple. In the Bible our eternal destiny is decided during our lifetime. There is no purging of our sins in a fiery purgatory after death, because when we die, our body and soul rest in the tomb until Resurrection morning.

### **2) Purgatory Contradicts Clear Biblical Teachings**

A second reason for rejecting the doctrine of purgatory is the fact that it contradicts some of its clearest and most important biblical teachings. If there is one truth clearly taught in the Bible, it is the certainty of salvation for believers who confess and forsake their sins, accept Christ as their personal Savior, trust in Him and obeying His commandments.

This fundamental biblical teaching is denied by the doctrine of purgatory, which is based on the assumption that Christ meritorious atoning sacrifice is not sufficient for our salvation. Sinners must also make satisfaction for their own sins during the present life and, in most cases, after death in purgatory. This teaching is foreign to the Bible, which reassures us that “we are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forth as an expiation by his blood to be received by faith. . . . For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from the works of law” (Rom 3:24-25, 28; RSV).

“Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt. But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness” (Rom 4:4-5; KJV). There is nothing more incompatible with the nature of the Gospel than the idea that believers must “satisfy divine justice” for their sins both during their lifetime and after death in purgatory. Yet this unbiblical belief lies at the very foundation of the doctrine of purgatory. If the Catholic Church would accept the full satisfaction for our sins provided by Christ’s atoning sacrifice, their doctrine of purgatory would collapse immediately.

### **3) Purgatory Denies the All sufficiency of the Cross**

A third biblical reason for rejecting the doctrine of purgatory is its denial of the all-sufficiency of Christ’s atoning death. Hebrews declares emphatically that Christ’s suffering on the cross accomplished our salvation once for ever and for all. “For by one single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified” (Heb. 10:14; RSV). This verse demonstrates the completed, sufficient nature of the work of Christ.

“To affirm that we must suffer for our own sins is the ultimate insult to Christ’s atoning sacrifice! There is a purgatory, but it is not *after* our death; it was *in* Christ’s death. For ‘when he had accomplished *purification* from sins, he took his seat at the right hand of the Majesty on high’ (Heb. 1:3; emphasis added). ‘Purification’ or purging from our ‘sins’ was ‘accomplished’ (past tense) on the cross. Thank God that this is the only purgatory we will ever have to suffer for our sins.”<sup>49</sup>

### **4) The Doctrine of Purgatory is Based upon the Greek Dualistic View of Human Nature**



A fourth biblical reason for rejecting the doctrine of purgatory is its derivation from the Greek dualistic view of human nature. This view, as shown in chapter 2, found its way into the Christian Church by the end of the second century. According to the dualistic view, the body is the temporary physical flesh-and-blood “shell” that houses the soul. The soul is the nonmaterial, immortal component that leaves the body at death and lives on consciously forever in heaven or hell or in purgatory for the Catholics.

The belief in the survival of the soul contributed to the development of the doctrine of Purgatory, a place where the souls of the dead are purified by suffering the temporal punishment of their sins before ascending to Paradise.

Our study of the use of the “soul, body, and spirit” in both the Old and New Testaments (chapter 2), has shown that the Bible is consistent in teaching the indissoluble unity of the human nature, where the body, soul, and spirit represent different aspects of the same person, and not different substances or entities functioning independently. This wholistic view of human nature removes the basis for the belief in the survival of the soul in purgatory, or hell, or paradise.

It is most unfortunate that the acceptance of the pagan belief in the immortality of the soul, has conditioned the interpretation of Scripture and given rise to a host of heresies such as purgatory, eternal torment in hell, prayer for the dead, intercession of the saints, treasury of merits, indulgences, and an ethereal view of paradise. These heresies have obscured the biblical view of salvation as a divine gift of grace, by promoting instead salvation as a dispensation of the church.

## **5) The Doctrine of Purgatory Depends upon the Treasury of Merits Administered by the Catholic Church**

A fifth reason for rejecting the Catholic doctrine of purgatory is its dependency upon the treasury of meritorious works administered by the Pope and its representatives, the priests. According to Catholic theology, the church administers a treasury of merits, which is a kind of heavenly bank, where are deposited the merits obtained by Christ on the Cross and earned by the saints who did more good deeds than it was necessary for

their salvation. Rather than loosing the extra merits, God deposits them in a bank known as “the treasury of merits.” These merits can be dispensed by the church in the form of indulgences, especially to souls suffering in purgatory.

The treasury of merits is based on the belief that Christians may be more than perfect by doing more than the law requires for their salvation. They can even render satisfaction to God’s justice so meritorious as to be more than sufficient for the pardon of his own sins. These superfluous merits are like money deposited in the bank of heaven, from which the church can draw by granting partial or plenary (full) indulgences, especially to the souls suffering in purgatory.

The extra good works of the saints are called *works of supererogation*, that is, works done over and above the call of duty. The thought is that some saints had a surplus of merit (more than they needed to get to Heaven). Rather than losing these merits, God stored them in the treasury of merits, which the church can draw to grant indulgences on behalf of souls in purgatory. An indulgence is the remission of a temporal punishment for a sin whose guilt God has already forgiven.

Pope Clement VI was the first to declare in the Jubilee Bull (A. D. 1343) the doctrine of the “Treasury of the Church.” According to Ludwig Ott, a foremost Catholic apologist, the Bull speaks of “the merits (= atonements) of Mary, the Mother of God, and of all the chosen, from the greatest to the least of the just, [who] contribute to the increase of the treasury from which the Church draws in order to secure remission of temporal punishment.”<sup>50</sup>

The fundamental reason for rejecting the belief in a treasury of merits administered by the Catholic Church to grant indulgences, is the very concept of merits. In the Bible salvation is not merited; it is obtained by grace through faith. Paul explicitly says: said explicitly, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not from you; it is the gift of God; it is not from works, so no one may boast” (Eph. 2:8-9). Likewise, in Romans 4:5 the Apostle declares: “when one does not work, yet believes in the one who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness.” It is “not because of any *righteous deeds* we had done but because of his

mercy, he saved us” (Titus 3:5 , emphasis added). In Scripture merits and grace are mutually exclusive

“The whole idea that one can buy an indulgence, the very reason that prompted Luther’s reaction against the abuses in the Church, is repugnant. The inspired words of St. Peter himself will suffice: “. . . *you were ransomed from your futile conduct . . . not with perishable things like silver or gold but with the precious blood of Christ* as of a spotless unblemished lamb” ( 2 Pet 1:18-19 , emphasis added).<sup>51</sup>

## **6) The Doctrine of Purgatory Contradicts Other Catholic Doctrines**

A sixth and final reason for rejecting purgatory is its inconsistency with the Catholic teaching that purgatory will be shut down at the Second Coming. Since all believers are supposed to suffer for the temporal consequences of their sins in purgatory before they can enter paradise, what will happen to the millions of believers who dies or are alive when Jesus Returns? Will they receive a special dispensation that will admit them to heaven without first paying for the temporal punishment of their sins in purgatory?

If purgatory is not necessary for those who die or are alive when Jesus comes, why should it be necessary for those who lived long before Christ’s Return? Does God have a double standard of justice, sending some through the fiery purification of purgatory, while exempting others from this fiery experience?

These senseless contradictions can be resolved simply by recognizing that Christ’s atoning sacrifice covers both the temporal as well as eternal consequences of our sins. Thus, there is no need for purgatory to pay for the temporal consequences of anyone’s sins. Christ paid it all.

Of course, this does not mean that we are exempted in this present life from the temporal consequences of our sins. God does allow us to go through the crucible fire of pain and trials to chasten and purify our character (cf. 2 Cor. 4:17 ; Gal. 6:7 ; Heb. 12:4-11 ). But our present sufferings do not stem from the need to placate the sense of justice of a vindictive God who wants us to pay to the last penny the debt of our sins. Christ’s atoning sacrifice on the cross completely satisfied God’s justice

on behalf of the sins of the entire human race ( Rom. 3:21-26 ; 5:18-19 ; 2 Cor. 5:21; 1 John 2:2).

## CONCLUSION

The doctrine of purgatory and its accompanying teachings about the treasury of merits, indulgences, and prayers for the dead, highlights the fundamental difference between the Catholic and the biblical view of salvation. In Catholic theology salvation is dispensed by the church, especially through the sacramental system. The church has the authority to grant partial or plenary (full) remission of the temporal punishment of sin by selling memorial masses and indulgences. These can alleviate, shorten, and even eliminate the time spent in the purging fires of purgatory.

By contrast, in biblical teaching salvation is a divine gift of grace, not a human achievement. Jesus died to pay the penalty for all of our sins (Rom 5:8). “He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed” (Is 53:5).

Jesus suffered for our sins so that we could be delivered from suffering the penalty of our sins. To say that we must also suffer for our sins to meet the demands of divine justice, is to say that Jesus’ suffering was insufficient. To say that we must atone for our sins through the purging fire of purgatory, is to deny the sufficiency of Christ’s atoning sacrifice (1 John 2:2). Simply stated, the Catholic doctrine of purgatory is contrary to everything the Bible says about salvation.

We agree with Catholics on the necessity for “purgatory” or “cleansing” of our sins, before we can enter into the glorious presence of the Lord. But we disagree on how this cleansing is achieved. Catholicism insists that after baptism believers must expiate their sins by penance in this world, and by the purging fire in purgatory. But Scripture teaches that only the blood of Christ cleanses our lives from sin.

The Bible recognizes the value of suffering and trials allowed by God to perfect our character. Our heavenly Father disciplines us, His children, with appropriate trying experiences so that we learn to despise

sin, and grow into Christian maturity. But, the Bible never presents our personal suffering or works as the expiation or satisfaction for sin.

The reassuring message of Scripture is: “You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God” (1 Cor 6:11). It is not the purgatory’s flames that cleanse the sinner from evil, but “the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin” (1 John 1:7).

In the New Earth the Redeemed will never be heard boasting about how they succeeded to enter heaven through penances and indulgences. Instead, they joyfully sing: “Unto him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood, and has made us kings and priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen” (Rev 1:5,6). Jesus Christ, and nothing else, is our purification, our purgatory.

If you sense the need to experience complete forgiveness and cleansing, the time and place is now in this present life, not after death in the purifying fires of purgatory. If you have failed to live according to God’s moral principles, do not despair. We serve a merciful and compassionate God who is eager to forgive us and cleanse us of the sins we confess to Him: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

Do I believe in purgatory? My answer is “Yes, I believe in God’s purgatory. But my purgatory is the Jesus Christ who forgives and cleanses us from all our sins.”

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## ENDNOTES

The six pages of footnotes have been left out in an attempt to reduce the length of this paper.

## WHO IS DR. SAMUELE BACCHIOCCHI?



Dr. Samuele Bacchiocchi is an Italo-American scholar who has studied and lived in several countries. He was born and brought up in Rome, Italy, a stone-throw from the Vatican wall. For his college education he went to England where he earned a B. A. degree in Theology at Newbold College. From England he came to America for his graduate studies and earned a M. A. and a B. D. degrees at Andrews University Theological Seminary. Upon completing his seminary training in 1964, he went with his wife, Anna, to Ethiopia where he served for five years as Bible and History teacher.

In 1969 Dr. Bacchiocchi returned to his native city of Rome to study at the prestigious Pontifical Gregorian University, where he was the first non-Catholic to be admitted in over 450 years of its history. At the Gregoriana he spent the next five years working toward a *Doctoratus* in Church History. He was awarded a gold medal by Pope Paul VI for attaining the academic distinction of *summa cum laude* for his class-work and dissertation *From Sabbath to Sunday*.

After completing his doctorate in 1974, Dr. Bacchiocchi was invited to teach in the Religion Department of Andrews University, in Berrien Springs, Michigan. He has served at Andrews for 26 years as Professor of Theology and Church History until his retirement on July 2000. He travels extensively around the world lecturing at universities, theological seminaries, professional meetings, and religious gatherings.

Dr. Bacchiocchi has contributed numerous articles to religious journals and magazines. He has authored 15 books, which have been favorably

reviewed by many scholars of differing persuasions. You can read below a brief description of each book, chapters from each book, and comments from scholars who have reviewed the books.

For the past twenty years Dr. Bacchiocchi has conducted seminars in many parts of the world, helping thousands to understand and experience more fully Biblical truths. If you wish to contact Dr. Bacchiocchi for any question, you can reach him by phone at (269) 471-2915, or by email at [sbacchiocchi@biblicalperspectives.com](mailto:sbacchiocchi@biblicalperspectives.com), or by mail at 4990 Appian Way, Berrien Springs, Michigan 49103.

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