

Origin of the Doctrine of Natural Immortality

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Present Truth, June 11, 1903

Here is a good short presentation on how the teaching of the “immortality of the soul” came into the Christian church, and how the teaching of the apostles was contrary to it. This article is included in the book, [*The Light Shines in Darkness*](#), and is also found in Chapter VIII of the book, *Ecclesiastical Empire*.

IN ORDER to get a clear understanding and appreciation of the standing of the papacy at the moment when the Roman Empire vanished, and she found herself alone in the midst of that vast scene of destruction and anarchy, it is essential to know the source of her strength, by which she was able to survive. And, in order to know this, it is essential that we sketch a certain portion of her preceding history.

In that dismal mixture of downright heathenism, and the profession and forms of Christianity in the philosophical schools of Ammonius Saccas, Clement, and Origen, in Alexandria, there was given birth to the element which, above all other things, have ever been the mainstay of the papacy—monkery, or monasticism: from the Greek word signifying,

“living alone, solitary; a man who retired from the world for religious meditation and the practice of religious duties in solitude; a religious hermit.”

In the philosophy of Ammonius, Clement, and Origen, all Scripture contains at least two meanings,—the literal and the hidden. The literal was considered the baser sense of the Scripture, and therefore a hindrance to the proper understanding of the hidden meaning with its train of farther hidden meanings, and, accordingly, was despised and separated as far as possible from the hidden sense, and counted as of the least possible worth. It was said that

“the source of many evils lies in adhering to the carnal or

external part of Scripture;”

that

“those who do so will not attain to the kingdom of God;”

and that, therefore,

“the Scriptures are of little use to those who understand them as they are written.”

Now, the basis of that whole scheme was their conception of man himself. It was because, in their philosophy, the body is the baser part of man, that the literal was counted the baser sense of Scripture.

It was because the body often betrays good men into sin, that, in their philosophy, the literal sense of Scripture was held to lead men into error.

In their system of philosophy, the body of man was but a clog to the soul, and hindered it in its heavenly aspirations; and therefore was to be despised, and, by neglect, punishment, and starvation, was to be separated as far as possible from the soul.

And from this it followed, in their imagination, that the literal sense of Scripture, which corresponded to man’s body,—was, likewise, a hindrance to the proper understanding of the hidden meanings of the Scripture, and was, therefore, to be despised, neglected, and separated as far as possible from the hidden sense or soul of the Scripture.

Heathen Philosophy

Whence came to them this philosophy of the nature of man? It was the adoption entire of the heathen conception of the nature of man: it was the direct continuation, under the Christian profession, of the heathen philosophy of the immortality of the soul. For, about the close of the second century,

...a new philosophic body suddenly started up, which in a short time prevailed over a large part of the Roman Empire, and not only nearly mellowed up the other sects, but likewise

did immense injury to Christianity. Egypt was its birthplace, and particularly Alexandria, which for a long time had been the seat of literature and every science. Its followers chose to be called Platonics [or Platonists]. Yet they did not follow Plato implicitly, but collected from all systems whatever seemed to coincide with their own views.

Plato had taught that the souls of heroes, of illustrious men, and eminent philosophers, alone, ascended after death into the mansions of light and felicity, while those of the generality, weighed down by their lusts and passions, sunk into the infernal regions, whence they were not permitted to emerge before they were purified from their turpitude and corruption.¹

This doctrine was seized with avidity by the Platonic Christians, and applied as a commentary upon that of Jesus. Hence a notion prevailed that only the martyrs entered upon a state of happiness immediately after death; and that, for the rest, a certain obscure region was assigned, in which they were to be imprisoned until the second coming of Christ, or, at least, until they were purified from their various pollutions.

Of the inquiries of the ancient philosophers of Greece and Rome with regard to the immortality of the soul, it has been well observed that...

...their reason had been often guided by their imagination, and that their imagination had been prompted by their vanity. When they viewed with complacency the extent of their own mental powers, when they exercised the various faculties of memory, of fancy, and of judgment, in the most profound speculations, or the most important labors, and when they reflected on the desire of fame, which transported them into future ages, far beyond the bounds of death and of the grave, they were unwilling to...suppose that a being, for whose dignity they entertained the most sincere admiration, could be limited to a spot of earth, and to a few years of duration.²

¹ Mosheim, *An Ecclesiastical History*, "Century II".

² Gibbon, *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Chapter 15.

The Fruit of Vanity and Self-Love

Thus it is plain that vanity, self-love, self-exaltation selfishness—is the root of the philosophy of the immortality of the soul. It was this that led them to consider themselves, in their souls, “immortal and imperishable” (for so Plato definitely puts it), and so, essentially a part of the Deity.

And this is confirmed by revelation. For, when God had said to the man whom He had formed and placed in dominion over all the earth and over every moving thing upon it:

Genesis 2

¹⁶ Of all the trees of the garden you may freely eat,

¹⁷ But of the tree which is in the midst of the garden you shall not eat of it, for in the day that you eat thereof you shall surely die.

Satan came with the words:

Genesis 3

⁴ You shall not surely die; for God does know that, on the day you eat thereof, your eyes will be opened and you will be as God.

The woman believed this Satanic word. So believing, she saw what was not true—that the tree was...

⁶ ...to be desired to make one wise,

—a philosopher; and...

⁶ ...she took of the fruit thereof and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her, and he did eat.

Christ Our Life

This is the origin of the philosophy of the immortality of the soul, in this world. The only reason why man did not die that day, even in the very hour when he sinned, is that there, at that moment, Jesus Christ offered Himself in behalf of man, and took upon Himself the death that would then have fallen upon the man. And thus He gave to man another chance, a probation, a breathing space, that he might choose life.

This is why God could immediately say to the deceiver:

Genesis 3

¹⁵ I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your seed and her seed: it shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel.

See also *Haggai* 2:7, *Romans* 16:20, *Hebrews* 2:16. And so it is written:

John 10

¹⁰ I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.

He came that they might first have life; and, without His then offering Himself, man never would have had life after he sinned.

And, having come that the man might first have life, this life to the man was and is solely for the purpose that he might use it in securing life more abundantly, even eternal life, the life of God.

Thus it is only by the gift of Christ that any man in this world ever has opportunity to breathe at all. And, the sole object of man's having an opportunity to breathe, is that he may choose life, that he may live and escape the death that is due to sin.

Earth-Life a Vapor

And so it is written:

James 4

¹⁴ What is your life?—It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away.

And, what is death—the death which men die in this world? It is even a sleep (see *John* 11:11-14; *1 Thessalonians* 4:15-16; *Acts* 24:15; *John* 5:28-29) from which there is waking only in the resurrection of the dead.

So the entering of Christ—Christ's gift of Himself when man had sinned—gave to man this life which is but a vapor, and which ends in this death which is but a sleep, between that life which is life indeed, and that death which is death in-

deed Therefore, to all mankind it is spoken for ever:

Deuteronomy 30

¹⁵ See I have set before you this day life and good, and death and evil.

¹⁶ Therefore choose life, that both you and your seed may live.

John 5

²⁴ He that hears my word and believes on Him that sent me, has everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life.

Life that is Life Indeed

Accordingly,

1 John 5

¹¹ This is the record that God has given to us eternal life, and this life is in His Son.

¹² He that has the Son has life; and he that has not the Son of God, has not life;

And this life which is life indeed, beyond this life which is a vapor and this death which is a sleep, is assured only in Christ, through the resurrection of the dead: as it is written:

Colossians 3

⁴ When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall you also appear with Him in glory.

1 Thessalonians 4

¹⁵ For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep.

¹⁶ For the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first;

¹⁷ Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air; and so shall we ever be with the Lord.

And, without the resurrection of the dead, there is no hereafter; for:

1 Corinthians 15

¹⁶ If the dead rise not...

¹⁷ ...your faith is vain; you are yet in your sins;

¹⁸ Then they also which are fallen asleep in Christ are perished.

And:

³² If after the manner of men I have fought with beasts at Ephesus, what advantages it me if the dead rise not? Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.

Immortality Only by the Gospel

This is the true course, and the only true course, to immortality: not merely immortality of the soul, but the immortality of both soul and body. For Christ has bought, and will redeem, the body equally with the soul; He cares, and would have men care, for the body equally as for the soul; as it is written:

3 John

² I wish above all things that you may prosper and be in health, even as your soul prospers.

1 Timothy 6

¹⁶ God only has immortality.

2 Timothy 1

¹⁰ [Christ] has brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel.

Thus immortality is the gift of God, and is obtained only by believers of the Gospel. And to these it is given only at the resurrection of the dead; as it is written:

1 Corinthians 15

⁵¹ ...We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed,

⁵² In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump; for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.

⁵³ For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality.

⁵⁴ So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swal-

lowed up in victory.

⁵⁷ Thanks be to God, which gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Christ and Him Crucified

This is the truth as to immortality. This is the true way of mankind from mortality to immortality. But, it is directly antagonistic to the Platonic or pagan idea of immortality, and of that way to it.

This is evident on its face; but it is aptly confirmed by an incident that occurred at the very seat of the original Platonic philosophy—in Athens itself.

Paul, in one of his journeys, came to Athens, where he remained several days, and talked...

Acts 17

¹⁷ ...in the synagogue with the Jews, and with the devout persons, and in the market daily with them that met with him.

And, in all his speech, he preached the Gospel:

- Christ and Him crucified:
- Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God:
- Christ and the resurrection of the dead: and
- life and immortality only through Christ and the resurrection of the dead.

Acts 17

¹⁸ Then certain philosophers of the Epicureans and of the Stoics encountered him. And some said, What will this babler say? other some, He seems to be a setter forth of strange gods.

And this...

¹⁸ ...because he preached unto them Jesus and the resurrection.

This was altogether a new doctrine, something which they never had heard. Therefore,

¹⁹ They took him, and brought him unto Areopagus, saying, May we know what this new doctrine, whereof you speak,

is?

²⁰ For you bring certain strange things to our ears: we would know therefore what these things mean.

And when, standing on Mars' Hill, he preached to them the Gospel, and called upon all...

³⁰ ...to repent:

³¹ Because He has appointed a day in the which He will judge the world in righteousness by that Man whom He has ordained; whereof He has given assurance unto all men, in that He has raised Him from the dead.

³² When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked: and others said, We will hear you again of this matter.

This account demonstrates even by inspiration that the Christian conception of immortality is not in any sense that of Plato and the other philosophers. If Paul had preached in Athens the immortality of the soul, no one in Athens would ever have counted him "a setter forth of strange gods." Such preaching would never there have been called "new doctrine." Nothing of that sort would ever have been "strange things to their ears."

But Christianity knows no each thing as the immortality of the soul. Therefore Paul preached:

- immortality as the gift of God through Jesus Christ and the resurrection from the dead;
- immortality to be sought for and obtained only through the faith of Christ, by believers in Jesus;
- immortality only through Christ and the resurrection of the dead.

He preached that, without the Gospel, all men are lost, and subject to death. For, to the Greeks he wrote:

2 Corinthians 4

³ If our Gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost,

⁴ In whom the god of this world has blinded the minds of them that believe not, lest the light of the glorious Gospel of

Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them.

He preached the Word,—not that the soul is “immortal and imperishable,” but that:

- “the soul that sins, it shall die.” (*Ezekiel* 18:4);
- “the wicked shall perish.” (*Psalms* 37:20);
- “they shall be as nothing;” (*Isaiah* 41:11-12);
- “yet a little while and the wicked shall not be; yea, you shall diligently consider his place, and it shall not be.” (*Psalms* 37:10);
- “the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord;” (*Romans* 6:23).

Ezekiel 33

¹¹ 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; turn, turn from your evil way; for why will you die?