

“Aionios”: The Word to Sharpen Our View of the Future

In this fall edition of *A JOURNAL FROM THE RADICAL REFORMATION*, we concentrate on an issue dear to the hearts of many radical Anabaptists. Our search for the biblical view of life after death has led us to question the cherished notion that death for the Christian means an immediate departure to heaven as a disembodied soul. Our reluctance to accept received opinion about the survival of the soul, as well as the endless suffering of wicked souls in hell, unites us with many in and outside the Anabaptist tradition. We have been encouraged in our conviction by the extraordinary array of famous names who see the influence of Plato behind what has come to be standard Christian teaching about the hereafter.¹

Greek philosophy has been at work to distort the way we read scriptural teaching not only about the intermediate state but also about future punishment. We are delighted to be able to reprint Professor Clark Pinnock’s fine challenge to traditional teaching in his article, “The Destruction of the Finally Impenitent.” Pinnock’s honest doubts about endless suffering for the wicked are part of an impressive interdenominational protest against a position which appears to be less orthodox than its exponents claim. “I would wish,” says the Swedish Lutheran Bishop, John Persone, “to change the doctrine concerning the state after death, for I must honestly confess that I cannot believe the doctrine of an eternal suffering, because I consider it both unbiblical and unreasonable. . . . I do not consider that the twentieth century loyal Lutherans are obliged to believe the doctrine of the Augsburg Confession regarding an eternal suffering—when ‘eternal,’ in harmony with our general usage of language, is taken to mean ‘without end’—because I consider this doctrine unbiblical. . . . For me it is inexplicable how a person, who holds the orthodox view [of final punishment], can at any time have a glad moment in this life. He is constantly mingling with people whose final destiny will be to be tormented eternally without end. . . . To me it is even more

inexplicable that such an ‘orthodox’ person can expect even a happy moment in eternity, when he knows that contemporaneously with his blessed estate, continue the endless torment and agony of innumerable millions of the accursed. Can he, if he loves his neighbors as himself, yes, even if he has just a little bit of human love and is not solely a selfish wretch, have even a single happy moment? . . . Death would often be the door to eternal damnation and to endless agony for his nearest of kin, for his parents, his brothers and sisters, for his companion, and his children. How can such a person, unless he is extremely wanton, have a single happy moment?”²

Scholarship’s sharpened linguistic techniques provide us with an escape from our problem. Quite simply, “eternal,” in our Bibles, is a mistranslation of “aionios,” which means “pertaining to the coming age of the Kingdom of God.” It is a semi-technical term to be applied to all the good (and threatening) things of the future. What the righteous are invited to inherit is “life in the coming age” or “the life of the coming age.” By contrast the wicked are ushered into “punishment excluding them from the coming age.” A step towards clarity was taken by *The Twentieth Century New Testament: A Translation into Modern English*³ when they rendered “everlasting punishment” (Matt. 25:46) as “aeonian punishment.” The length of the punishment is not described. It is a penalty based on exclusion from the Coming Age.

A major impetus would be given to intelligent Bible study if we were to substitute the words “pertaining to the coming age” wherever “aionios” is now confusingly rendered as “eternal.” Nigel Turner, with characteristic British understatement, wrote: “It is imprecise to render ‘aionios life’ as ‘eternal life.’ ”⁴

Our journal includes the final installment of Pastor Sidney Hatch’s account of his transition from orthodox Trinitarianism to biblical unitarianism. Wayne Nelson concludes his analysis of the Book of Judges. The remainder of our articles make a plea for a reexamination of well-entrenched views of life after death. We are convinced that tradition, rather than Scripture, has burdened us with complex problems about the nature of a merciful God in relation to endless torment. We share Professor Pinnock’s reserve about the influence of some of Christianity’s

²“Pastoral Letter,” 1910, 21, 24-25, cited in Froom, *The Conditionalist Faith of Our Fathers*, Vol. 2, 769-771.

³London: Horace Marshall & Son; New York, The Fleming H. Revell Co., 1904.

⁴*Christian Words*, T & T Clark, 1980, 452.

¹For a mine of information on “Conditional Immortality,” see L. E. Froom, *The Conditionalist Faith of our Fathers*, 2 Vols., Washington D.C.: Review and Herald, 1965.

most celebrated names. In a recent book⁵ he wrote: “Something ugly entered Christian theology with Augustine.” The intruder was a further impulse from Greek philosophy, and it has wreaked unspeakable havoc on the way we read Scripture.

⁵*A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions*, Zondervan, 1992, cited in *Christianity Today*, Sept. 14th, 1992, 40.