

The Revival of Conditional Immortality

The heresies of one age may become the orthodoxy of another. Anabaptists and radical reformers have long hoped that this would be true of the doctrine of conditional immortality. The fifth Lateran Council in 1513 officially condemned what was seen as a dangerous theory about the nature of human beings, namely that they do not possess innately an immaterial and immortal soul which subsists in a state of consciousness after death.

The sophistication of today's Bible study seems to be leading to a renewed interest in the mortality of man. Following in the footsteps of John Milton and many Anabaptists a century earlier, protesters against a long-standing Greek philosophical invasion of the biblical faith are making themselves heard in various quarters.

Robert Capon offers a friendly invitation to rethink one's view of death:

If you are willing at least momentarily to suspend your attachment to the idea of a soul that lives after death (I don't suppose you will — or even should, maybe — get rid of it altogether), you will finally be able to see the Good News, which is that Jesus came to raise the dead. Not just dead bodies, but dead souls as well. . . .

There follows an amazing vindication of Jehovah's Witnesses and other "sectarians," who may not have been as deviant as alleged. "Those who horrify Christians by saying, 'When you're dead, you're dead; there's no life after death,'" are actually closer to faith in the Gospel than they know.¹

In the same vein Frederick Buechner tells us in a refreshingly "untheological" way that:

Immortal means death-proof. To believe in the immortality of the soul is to believe that though John Brown's body lies a-mouldering in the grave, his soul goes marching on simply because marching on

is the nature of souls just the way producing apples is the nature of apple trees. Bodies die, but souls don't. True or false, this is not the biblical view, although many who ought to know better assume it is.²

We are immensely encouraged by Dr. Buechner's candid statement about the destiny of man at death. His point is simply that pristine Christianity places no confidence in our capacity to survive as disembodied souls, but only in the hope that Jesus is coming back *to resurrect* the faithful dead.

Christianity Today's letters column gave space to a similar call for reform:

Despite reputable theologians frequently informing us that the appendant idea of an immortal soul is inconsistent with Hebraic thought, many evangelicals persistently defend this notion with great passion. . . .³

In this fall edition of *A JOURNAL FROM THE RADICAL REFORMATION* we republish the first half (the second half will appear in a subsequent issue) of Oscar Cullmann's important contribution to the biblical understanding of death and resurrection. This short work, originally given as Harvard's Ingersoll Lecture for 1954-1955, deserves to be widely read. We trust that readers will be alerted to the confusing presence of Greek philosophy which entered the Church in post-biblical times.

We publish also a chapter from a forthcoming book on the doctrine of the Trinity. Since so many believe it to be self-evident that the Trinity is a doctrine of Scripture, we call our readers' attention to some of the biblical arguments which continue to be advanced against Trinitarianism. While popular defenses of the Trinity build their case on a number of chosen biblical texts, there is a need to demonstrate that those very passages of Scripture have often been explained by Trinitarians themselves in a way which favors biblical unitarianism. As John Locke noted long ago, "There is scarcely one text alleged to the Trinitarians which is not otherwise expounded by their own writers."⁴

² Cited in Lyman Coleman and Richard Peace, *1 Corinthians, Mastering the Basics*, Serendipity Foundation, 1986, 115.

³ March 8th, 1993.

⁴ P. King, *Life of John Locke*, New York, 1884, Vol. 2, 103.

¹ *Parables of Judgment*, Eerdmans, 1990, 72.

In support of our conviction that the eschatology of the New Testament is “realistic” and “concrete,” we publish a fine essay by Professor George Buchanan, who has spent a lifetime in search of the early Christian expectation about the Kingdom of God.

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