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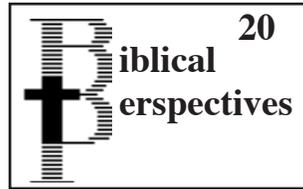
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# POPULAR BELIEFS ARE THEY BIBLICAL?

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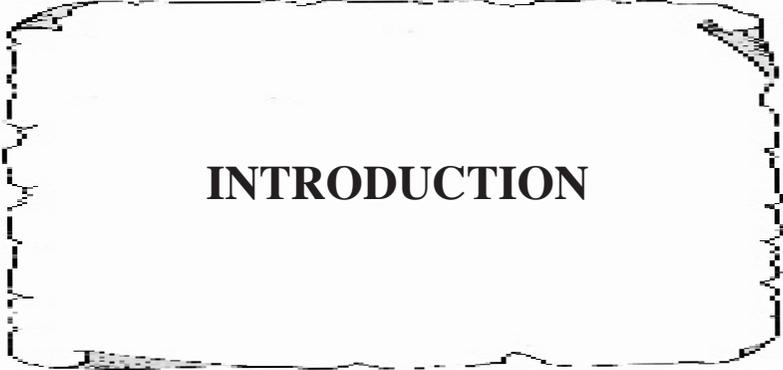
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## INTRODUCTION

*Popular Beliefs: Are They Biblical?* was born out of the frequent discussions 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 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 the studies posted in my newsletters, which are readily accessible at [www.biblicalperspectives.com/endtimeissues/](http://www.biblicalperspectives.com/endtimeissues/)

### **Reasons for Writing This Book**

Two major factors motivated me to spend one year of my life to further research and write this book on *Popular Beliefs: Are they Biblical?* The first, 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.” The study shows that this popular belief of Sunday sacredness lacks both biblical and historical support. Historically, 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 included in this book.

The second 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

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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 the afterlife 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, eternal torment in Hell, 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 sometimes in the second century, has had a devastating impact on Christian beliefs and practices.

The 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.

## **The Method**

This book examines ten popular beliefs from a Biblical perspective. I accept the Bible as the normative authority for defining Christian beliefs and practices. Because the words of the Bible contain a divine message written by human authors who lived in specific historical situations, every effort must be made to understand their meaning within their historical context. My conviction is that an understanding of both the historical and literary context of relevant Biblical texts is indispensable for establishing both their original meaning and their present relevance. This conviction is reflected in the methodology I have followed in examining those Biblical texts commonly used to support popular beliefs.

Though I am a member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church which I have served for over 35 years as Professor of Theology and Church History at Andrews University (in Berrien Springs, Michigan) and overseas, the aim of this book is to present, not an apologetic defence of what Seventh-day Adventists believe, but an objective and honest exposition of what the Bible teaches.

The teachings of this book do agree with the beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist church, but its aim is to examine popular beliefs from a biblical, not a denominational perspective. An indication is the almost total lack of references to Adventist sources. Practically all the scholarly studies cited in this book are authored by non-Seventh-day Adventist scholars.

Paradoxically, in numerous instances the denominational allegiance of these scholars does not prevent them from challenging their denominational beliefs. For example, chapter 10 on “Infant Baptism” cites two major studies published in 2005. The first is by David Wright, a patristic scholar who wrote the book titled *What Has Infant Baptism Done to Baptism?* His painstaking research discredits the popular belief that infant baptism was commonly practiced in the early church. Furthermore, he highlights the negative consequences of infant baptism in the history of the church.

The second study is by Hendrik Stander and Johannes Louw, two internationally known and highly respected Patristic scholars. The title of their book is *Baptism in the Early Church*. Though these two scholars are members of Reformed churches that practice infant baptism, they present a dispassionate examination of the early history of baptism, based on a careful treatment of the primary sources. Their conclusions discredit the teaching on infant baptism held by their churches. Studies such as these are cited to show that the conclusions of this book are shared by competent scholars of different denominations.

### **The Style**

Concerning the style of the book, I have attempted to write in simple, non-technical language. In some instances where a technical word is used, a definition is provided in parenthesis. To facilitate the reading, each chapter is divided into major parts and subdivided under appropriate headings. A brief summary is given at the end of each chapter. Unless otherwise specified, all Bible texts are quoted from the Revised Standard Version,

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copyright 1946 and 1952. In a few instances, some key words of a Bible text have been italicized for emphasis without footnoting them, since the reader is aware that the English Bible does not italicize words.

### **Acknowledgments**

It is most difficult for me to acknowledge my indebtedness to the many persons who have contributed to the realization of this book. Indirectly, I am indebted to the scholars who have written articles, pamphlets, and books on the popular beliefs examined in this book. Their writings have stimulated my thinking and broadened my understanding and approach to this subject.

Directly, I want to express my heartfelt gratitude to a dozen of professional people who have taken time in their busy schedules to read chapters of this manuscript, offering me valuable comments about the style and content. Words fail to express my gratitude for their valuable service to me.

A special thanks to Bruce Closser, Ph. D. who has been serving for the past 30 years as professor of English at Andrews University. He has made a significant contribution by correcting and improving the style of the manuscript. He has worked many hours on this manuscript, reworking sentences so that they would sound more English and less Italian.

Last but not least, I need to express my special thanks to my wife who has been my constant source of encouragement and inspiration during the past forty-six years of our married life. She saw little of me while I was researching and writing the eighteen books that I have authored. Without her love, patience, and encouragement, it would have been most difficult for me to complete this latest book.

### **Author's 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.



# Chapter 1

## THE NATURE OF THE BIBLE: Free From Errors or Full of Errors?

The logical starting point of our biblical examination of some popular beliefs is the evaluation of the prevailing views about the nature of the Bible itself. This is necessary because our view of the Bible ultimately determines how we define and test our beliefs.

Two major views of the nature of the Bible are common. One view concerns the concept known as “biblical errancy,” that is, “the Bible is full of errors;” the other pertains to the concept of “biblical inerrancy” which maintains that “the Bible is free from errors.” Each of these two 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 espoused by liberal critics who believe 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 reflect the shortcomings of their human authors. By contrast, conservative evangelicals believe in the absolute inerrancy of the Bible. They affirm that the Bible is absolutely 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 openly rejecting biblical authority and teachings while at other times subtly distorting scriptural authority and teaching.

### **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. We will first trace briefly the historical origin of each movement and then evaluate their teachings from a biblical perspective.

To place the current controversy in a historical perspective, we will briefly explore how the circulation of the Bible has been opposed both 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 into four parts. The first mentions some past attempts to prevent the circulation of the Bible by Roman Emperors, the Catholic Church, English Kings and church leaders, Protestant church leaders, Moslem countries, and communist 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 certain Roman emperors sought to uproot Christianity by destroying the Bible. 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 destroyed in public squares. Some Christians lost their lives for refusing to hand over their Bibles.

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

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## 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 the Bible and/or share its teachings to receptive Moslems.

The success of ruthless Moslem rulers in uprooting the Bible and Christianity is evident in the countries they conquered. For example, prior to the Moslem conquest in the seventh century of North Africa, the countries of Libya, Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria were flourishing Christian nations that produced such church leaders as Augustine and Tertullian. Today, Christians and Bibles 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 and of various English 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 has assailed the Bible by preventing its circulation among the laity.

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

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

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 that the laity should be permitted to have the books of the Old or New Testaments; 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

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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 that the reading of the Bible has led countless Catholics to discover that their fundamental beliefs are based on ecclesiastical traditions 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 of thousands of Waldenses. Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658), Lord Protector of England, protested vigorously and John Milton, his foreign secretary and poet, dedicated this famous stanza of *Paradise Lost* to the thousands of slaughtered Waldenses:

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“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 not only a turning point in my father’s religious experience, but also a major influence on 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 the Seventh-day Adventist Academy in Florence by selling Bibles and other 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 homes.

Only since the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) has the Catholic Church encouraged its members to read annotated Catholic Bibles. This recent decision has not significantly increased the reading of the Bible by Catholics because in Catholic countries the Bible is still perceived to be a book that only priests are authorized to read and interpret to the people. As a result, the vast majority of Catholics are still biblically illiterate. They rely solely on whatever Bible teaching their priest offers them.

### **English Churchmen Attempted to Prevent the Circulation of the Bible**

**Wycliffe’s Bible.** Surprisingly, even English church leaders have attempted to prevent the translation and circulation of the Bible. The first hand-written English language Bible, known as the Wycliffe Bible, was

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strongly opposed by English churchmen and the Pope himself. The translation was produced in the 1380's by John Wycliffe, an Oxford professor and theologian, with the help of his associates. Eventually the translation was revised by Wycliffe's younger contemporary John Purvey in 1388.

The translation was based on the Latin Vulgate since he and his colleagues did not know Hebrew or Greek. Since Wycliffe's Bible predated the printing press, the hand-copied Bibles circulated widely and were eagerly read. These manuscript Bibles brought Wycliffe into conflict with church officials at Oxford where he lived and taught during much of his life.

Wycliffe believed that the Bible ought to be the common possession of all Christians and ought to be made available for common use in the language of the people. He pursued his goal with vigor and determination against enormous opposition.

Several times Wycliffe was brought to trial in church courts, but his influential friends protected him. He died a natural death in 1384 at the age of 55 and was buried at his Lutterworth church where a memorial tablet on the wall says that his Bible "drew on him the bitter hatred of all who were making merchandise of the popular credulity and ignorance."

Twenty four years after Wycliffe's death, a church synod met at Oxford in 1408 to formally outlaw the reading of his Bible, especially in English translations. People were threatened with excommunication for reading the Bible. England had a Bible in its language before most other nations, but its reading was forbidden.

Despite severe penalties, many people continued reading Wycliffe's Bible in secret. The Pope was so infuriated by Wycliffe's opposition to the organized church and by his translation of the Bible into English that 44 years after his death, at the Council of Constance in 1415, he ordered Wycliffe's bones to be dug-up, burned, crushed and scattered in the river!

**Tyndale's New Testament.** Another noteworthy example of attempts by English church leaders to prevent the circulation of the Bible is Tyndale's English translation of the New Testament from Greek texts. He was a brilliant Bible scholar trained at Oxford and Cambridge. The ignorance of the clergy and of the laity about the Bible greatly distressed him. He was determined to educate the English people about the Word of God by translating it into 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.

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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, Cuthbert Tunstall, Bishop of London, 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 and publish the Bible into English 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.

Tyndale 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 smuggled to England, only two known copies remain.

### **Communist 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 demand 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 deny its truths which made them free. The Bible remains unchallenged year after year as the world's best selling book. 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 principles still serve as the moral foundation of many societies.

## Part 2 BIBLICAL ERRANCY

The failure of 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 proportion. 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. 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, Biblical Criticism 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 another category of criticism known as "lower" criticism functions different from "higher" criticism. *Lower criticism* concerns itself 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.

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## Higher Criticism

The case is different with *Higher Criticism*. Though higher criticism is interested in the accuracy of the text, its 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. Higher criticism inquires into the date of the composition, the authorship, the possible use of sources, and 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 its 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 a radical approach of the study of the biblical texts 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 the Bible has historically 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. This 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.

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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 dire warnings highlight the unprecedented crisis caused by Biblical Criticism. At stake are 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 (*TV Guide*, Sept 5, 1987, p. 34).

### **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

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the Post-reformation period, Protestant 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-stage (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 whom reworked the material according to his own 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. In 1778 Herman Samuel Reimarus published 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, too incredible for modern people to believe.

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 to their existential meaning beyond the words of Scripture. Bultmann 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. One such limitation is that dictated by the unique character of the Bible. No other religious book has produced a similar moral impact on people.

In the Biblical record, 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

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circulation of the Bible in the 16th century inspired reformatory movements in various parts of Europe. No other book by Plato, Muhammad, or Buddha 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. Only with an attitude of reverence can a genuine investigation of the Bible 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 this: 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 personal 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.

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**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. Only since the beginning of the nineteenth century has this question 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."

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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 ranging 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. . . . 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>

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This definition sounds 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 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 of any denomination or Christian organization. Shortly we shall show that these claims lack both biblical and historical support.

### Limited Errancy

Advocates of limited inerrancy object to conditioning the authority of the Bible to its being free 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 the work of 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 whether the Bible is without errors, but whether it is 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

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Bible fully or partially inspired, but, in what sense did the Holy Spirit influence 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

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book. Since 1980 a host of eminent evangelicals have joined the inerrancy debate. The debate has somewhat subsided, but evangelicals remain deeply divided: 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 presuppose 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 in *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 used his own language style and sources available. It is a known fact that several of the books of the Bible were compiled from older documents such as histories of kings,

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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 Biblical inaccuracies confronting scholars. For the sake of brevity, we cite only the first two listings of the catalogue:

“1. **Historical Uncertainties**—Did David kill 40,000 horsemen (2 Sam. 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 (1 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>

The results of the census ordered by David and carried out by Joab, the head of his army, yields similar discrepancies. According to 2 Samuel 24:9, 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, the two sets of figures differ significantly. 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

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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 a 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.<sup>19</sup>

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.<sup>20</sup>

### **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>

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

One example will suffice to illustrate this point. Mark tells us that in sending out His disciples on a preaching mission, 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).

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.

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## The Catholic Understanding of the Nature of the Bible

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The question of the accuracy of the Bible text is not discussed in official Catholic documents. 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 like 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> Moreover, “*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 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>

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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).

Clearly, 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 other 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.

**Adventist Objections to Absolute Inerrancy**

Adventists do not subscribe to the doctrine of biblical inerrancy for five significant reasons. 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.

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Second, the attempts of inerrantists to reconcile the differences between the biblical descriptions of the same event often result 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.

### Human Role in the Production of the Bible

A final reason why Adventists reject the Doctrine of Biblical Inerrancy is the recognition of the human role in the production of the Bible. "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*," Adventists believe 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>

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God inspired men, not their words. This means 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>

Seventh-day Adventists recognize 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>

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.

### **The Divine and Human Character of the Bible**

Adventists base their view of the nature of the Bible 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 human participation in order to ensure that the text is completely free of all errors.

The second is the liberal view of 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

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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>36</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 that “God has not put Himself in words, in logic, in rhetoric, on trial in the Bible.”<sup>37</sup>

### The Divinity of the Bible

The underlying unity of the teachings of the Bible suggests its divinity. About 40 authors wrote 66 books 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

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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 broken down social and racial discrimination; 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 marvelous 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 rest of the gods is generally achieved either by eliminating disturbing gods or by creating human beings for them to work in order for the gods to rest.<sup>38</sup>

In the creation Sabbath, however, the divine rest is secured not by subordinating or destroying competitors, nor by exploiting the labor of human beings 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 marvelous 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 church leaders, 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 bring 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.

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**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. 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 Beliefs: “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.”<sup>39</sup>

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## **Chapter 2**

# **THE IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL**

Throughout 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 scientific breakthroughs in our understanding of the nature of life, 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.

As a result few beliefs are more widely held in common today than that of the “immortal soul.” Virtually everyone is familiar with this belief. If questioned, 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? Average religious persons will answer “YES”! They simply assume that the Bible teaches the immortality of the soul. 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.

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We shall see that the biblical view of human nature is holistic, 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 will 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 Aristotle (384-322 B. C.) on the development of the Christian understanding of human nature. Then, we will briefly consider 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.

Our 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.

Our third objective is to compare and contrast the doctrinal and practical implications biblical holistic view of human nature with the Platonic dualistic view embraced by Catholics and most Protestants. We shall see that the 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 may find a fuller treatment of the subject in this book. For brevity’s sake, important topics like the biblical view of the human “spirit,” have been left out in this chapter.

## PART 1 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. Practically every society holds a belief in some form of life after death. The need for reassurance and certainty in

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the light of the challenge that death poses to human life has led people in every culture to formulate beliefs in some form 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**

Pinpointing the historical origin of the belief in the immortality of the soul is difficult since all ancient civilizations held to some form 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 felt so deeply 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. Egyptians spent a significant amount of time and money preparing for life after death. They practiced elaborate ceremonies to prepare the pharaohs for their next life, constructing massive pyramids and other elaborate tombs filled with luxuries the deceased were supposed to need in the hereafter. The famous *Book of the Dead*, a collection of ancient Egyptian funerary and ritual texts, describes in great detail 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.

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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 judgment 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 holistic view of human nature in which immortality is not an innate human possession, but a conditional gift of eternal life given to believers at the resurrection. This view, known as “Conditional Immortality,” 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, found in what was known as the Apocrypha of the Old Testament, are included in the Catholic Bible but omitted in the Protestant Bible and in the Hebrew Old Testament. They 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.

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The most influential Hellenistic Jewish writer Philo Judaeus (ca. 20 B.C. A. D. 47) systematically attempted 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 souls. 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 holistic 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.

Le Roy Froom concludes his 100-page 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 Belately Infiltrates the Church**

Christian writers adopted a modified form of the Platonic view of the immortality of the soul 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.

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**Tertullian: Eternal Torment**

Tertullian is rightly regarded as the founder of Latin theology. Born in a heathen home in Cathage, North Africa, he received legal training in Rome. At the age of forty, he returned to Carthage where he embraced the Christian faith after witnessing the courage of martyrs and the holy lives of Christians. His numerous apologetic, theological, and ascetic works in Latin, have influenced 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 teaching 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 particularly evident 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. He maintained that after a period of corrective punishment, all of them will be brought again into ultimate subjection to Christ.

Origen’s teaching largely derives 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>

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Both Tertullian's eternal torment of sinners and Origen's cleansing of the wicked by 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 minds to be guided by pagan philosophies rather than Scriptural teachings, brilliant men like Tertullian and Origen developed heresies that have undermined Christian beliefs and practices during the course of Christian history.

### **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.

Augustine's influence was so powerful that his theories regarding the natural immortality of the soul and the eternal torment of the wicked dominated for centuries. 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 enabled 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 Catholic thought until the appearance of Thomas Aquinas. During this time the teachings of Socrates and Plato became so widely accepted that the two men were frequently regarded as divinely inspired pre-Christian saints.

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**Thomas Aquinas Defines the Traditional Catholic Teaching of the Immortality of the Soul.**

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Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) is rightly considered by most Roman Catholics as their greatest theologian. His definition of Catholic teaching 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 Aristotle who viewed the soul primarily as a life principle. But Aquinas departed from Aristotle by claiming independent existence for the soul.

According to Aquinas, a substantial unity exists between the soul and the body, or more exactly, between 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 Catholic 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.

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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 between death and resurrection—known as 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 (Calvinistic) Presbyterian beliefs in the English-speaking world, states: “The bodies 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.

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## 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 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 claiming to converse 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 similarly high percentage of people who engage the services of mediums to communicate with the spirits 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 desire 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 for Christ’s Return to bestow the gift of immortality on 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.

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**PART 2**  
**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” in the inclusive biblical meaning of man and woman.

**Genesis 2:7: “A Living Soul”**

The most important Biblical statement for understanding human nature is found in Genesis 2:7. Not surprisingly, 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 dies 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-holistic 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, surprisingly 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> Such a clear definition of the biblical view of human nature in a Catholic book published with the official *imprimatur* is encouraging. The problem is that Mork’s scholarly study, though published with the *imprimatur*, does not affect the traditional dualistic Catholic view which is based on *traditio*, not on biblical research.

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 this proverbial statement: “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 as 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 Dom Mork: “Man as *nephesh* [soul] means that it is his *nephesh* [soul] that goes to dinner, tackling a steak and eating 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 deceptive translation “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 humans 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*, acknowledged as a classic study by scholars of different 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 life and death situations.

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

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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>

Hans Walter 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> Nothing in these passages suggests that the soul is an immaterial part of human nature equipped with personality and consciousness and 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). Texts such as these clearly indicate that the soul is the responsible person who thinks, wills, and sins, and consequently is subject to the death punishment.

Any physical or psychical activity was performed by the soul because such activity presumed a living, thinking, and acting person. In the Old Testament no division of activity between the soul and the body exists because both 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>

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## 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 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, deceptive 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).

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## 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 the fate of the soul is connected inextricably with the fate of the body which is the outward manifestation of the soul.

### PART 3 THE NEW TESTAMENT VIEW OF HUMAN NATURE

The New Testament shows a definite continuity with the Old Testament holistic 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 achieved, not when the soul is liberated from the body according to the Platonic dualistic sense, 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* ]

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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 souls, delivering their souls, restoring their souls to safety, and sustaining their souls 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 the concept 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

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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 holistic 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 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 resurrected 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–*pneumaticos* 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–*pneumaticos* who is guided by God’s Spirit.

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## No Natural Immortality

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. Nothing in the word *psyche*-soul 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

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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 souls of impenitent sinners as well as their bodies (Matt 10:28).

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 views 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.

Seventh-day Adventists uphold this biblical holistic view of human nature, though it is largely rejected by most Christian churches. For them it is more important to be true to Scripture, than to adhere to popular beliefs. Consequently, as stated in *Seventh-day Adventists Believe . . .*, they believe that in the Bible “The body and soul exists together; together they form an indivisible union. The soul has no conscious existence apart from the body. There is a text that indicates that the soul survives the body as a conscious entity.”<sup>44</sup>

#### PART 4

### 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 holistic view of human nature? Is not this a purely academic question? These important questions are briefly addressed 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.

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**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 are 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 the saints are not in heaven, but in their graves awaiting their resurrection at the Coming of Christ. Furthermore, the Bible clearly teaches 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.

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The Reformers eliminated the doctrine of purgatory as unbiblical, but they retained the doctrine of the immediate transit after the 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 weakens the Advent Hope and obscures and eclipses the expectation of the Second Advent. The reason is obvious. 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 disembodied souls. 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 regard 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 acknowledge that both our present life and future eternal life are a gift from God in Christ who will return to raise the dead and transform the living. It means to believe 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

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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>45</sup>

### Misconceptions about the World to Come

The belief in the immortal and spiritual soul has also fostered 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 as 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

On a more practical level, the dualistic view of human nature has cultivated a detachment of the soul 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 being more important than the preservation of the body, the physical needs of the body were often intentionally 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.

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Conrad Bergendoff 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>46</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>47</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>48</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 on a host of Christian beliefs and practices.

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### Implications of 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>49</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 opting 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, and 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 school programs should aim at the development of the mental, physical, and spiritual aspects of life. A good physical-

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education program should be considered as important as other academic and religious programs. Parents and teachers should be concerned about teaching good eating habits, the proper care of the body, and the importance of regular 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>50</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>51</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 are 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: marvelous 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 holistic thinking where body and soul are part of God’s marvelous 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

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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 the 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.

Regrettably 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, who invested great amounts 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.

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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 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 factors mentioned earlier with the result 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 Testament views of the "soul." We found that the Bible is consistent in teaching that human nature consists of 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 souls as well as the bodies (Matt 10:28) of impenitent sinners.

We noted that the dualistic view of human nature 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 price that most churches are unwilling to pay; yet it is a price that the faithful remnant

must pay in order to fulfill her mission to call upon sincere believers everywhere to “Come out of her my people, so that you will not share in her sins” (Rev 18:8).

## NOTES TO CHAPTER 2

1. See Table 2.1 Religious Belief, Europe, and the USA, in Tony Walter, *The Eclipse of Eternity*, 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, 1960, 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*, 1994, p. 93.
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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.
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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.
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42. Edward Schweizer, "*Psyche*," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed., Gerhard Friedrich, 1974, vol. 9, p. 648, note 188.
43. This view is expressed by Edward Schweizer (note 42), p. 650. Similarly, Tony Hoff notes that "Paul never used *psyche* for a life that survives death . . . [because] he was aware of the possibility of this very

distortion during this time. He knew the presence of a Platonic tradition would be particularly confusing to the Gentile converts” (“*Nephesh* and the Fulfillment It Receives as *Psyche*” in *Toward a Biblical View of Man: Some Readings*, editors Arnold H. De Graff and James H. Olthuis, 1978, p. 114.

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## Chapter 3

# LIFE AFTER DEATH

Belief in life after death seems to have come back from the grave. News weeklies cover 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 many religious individuals 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, noticeably more Catholics and Jews now believe in the concept. "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 survey conducted recently (2003) by the reputable Barna Research Group of Ventura, California, confirms that "the vast majority of Americans continue 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%) contends 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 intended to preserve the corporeal remains of the deceased. In the ancient world, the dead were provided for

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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 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.

This concern for sending one’s 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 consists of four parts. Part 1 provides a brief description mainly of the Catholic and Protestant views of the afterlife. Both believe in the transition of the saved souls to Paradise and of the unsaved souls to Hell. Protestants reject the Catholic belief in Purgatory.

Part 2 examines the Biblical teaching on 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 part of our being?

Parts 3 and 4 examine the Old and New Testaments teachings regarding the condition of the dead during the period between death

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and resurrection. The fundamental question we pursue in the last two parts is this: 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 writhes in the torment of hell?

## PART 1 BELIEFS ABOUT THE AFTERLIFE

The belief in some form of life after death is common in 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 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 the *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 the 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 to be an inhumane father who in desperation locks away his rebellious children in a horrible hovel, and then throws away for ever the key. We will say more about the 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 [are] still imperfectly purified, . . . after death. . . 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.<sup>10</sup> 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 and 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 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 superstitions 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>

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For example, the Westminster Confession (1646), regarded as the definitive statement of (Calvinistic) Presbyterian beliefs in the English-speaking world, states: “The bodies 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 the belief in purgatory as unbiblical.

Most conservative Protestants 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 souls 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 souls 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 at death the souls of those who have rejected Christ 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 Protestants 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 Dean Lloyd Kalland of Gordon Divinity School in Wenham, Mass.<sup>14</sup>

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Conversely, to most liberal theologians, Hell is alienation from God. “Hell is estrangement, isolation, despair,” says Dean Lloyd Kalland.<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 mention of the views of afterlife held by Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism. Suffice it to say that all of them share a 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 shows 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 continue 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 unnaturally 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.

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## Sin and Death

This allegorical 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 maintained 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 establishes 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 must 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 the 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. 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

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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 continues: “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 by 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 doctrines 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.

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## 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).

A study of the words “to die,” “death,” and “dead” in Hebrew and Greek reveals that death is perceived in the Bible as the termination 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

The 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 that no conscious soul 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

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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 opinion 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 will 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 on impenitent sinners at the end of time. 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 of 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).

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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), will experience the second death (Rev 20:6; 21:8) on the Day of Judgment. 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 a figurative meaning of death is to attribute to the word a meaning which is foreign to it. This runs contrary to language and grammar 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 called "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 throughout the Old and New Testaments, ending with Peter's statement that "the fathers fell asleep" (2 Pet 3:4). If the souls of the "fathers" were alive in Paradise, then 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.

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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 14:12) 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 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.

Two Greek words meaning “sleep” 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*. 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.” No comment about their souls being reunited with their bodies is made. It is evident that the whole persons were resurrected and not just the bodies. Speaking figuratively of Lazarus’ death, Jesus said: “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep [*kekoimetai*], but I go to awake him out of sleep” (John

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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 a “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 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

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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 their original feelings and individuality, but with no afterlife experience to share.

The Bible does not even hint that the soul of Lazarus, or of the other six persons raised from the dead, had gone to heaven. None of them shared having had a “heavenly experience” because 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 speaking here 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 points. First, 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

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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 consistent with the assurance Paul gave to his readers that living Christians would not meet Christ at His coming prior to 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 souls are immortal, he probably would have said that without Christ’s resurrection the souls 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 notable 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

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held such a belief, he hardly could have avoided making some reference 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 frequent Bible use of the "sleep" metaphor to describe the state of the dead in Christ raises the question of its implications about 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.

Second the use of the "sleep" metaphor inspires hope, assuring us 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 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 awakened to live again on Resurrection morning.

Third, 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, Martin Luther expressed this thought in a most graphic way: "Just as one who falls asleep and reaches morning

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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 historical accuracy, it must be pointed out that later in life Luther largely rejected the idea 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 religious 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 thus 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 refutes 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.

The Bible never suggests that immortality is a natural quality or right of human beings. The presence of the “tree of life” in the Garden of Eden shows that Adam’s immortality depended on his eating the fruit of the tree of life. Scripture teaches that “immortality is to be *sought* (Rom 2:7) and “put on” (1 Cor 15:53). It is, like ‘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 on looking for the philosophical idea of natural immortality of the soul in the Bible, ignore God's Word and corrupt the biblical faith with Greek dualistic ideas.

### Conclusion

Our study of the Biblical view of the nature of death has shown that both the Old and New Testaments explicitly teach that death is the *extinction of life* for the whole person. No remembrance or consciousness exists in death (Ps 8:5; 146:4; 30:9; 115:17; Ecc 9:5). The spirit or soul does not exist 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 and comforting 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 *SHEOL* IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Two words are 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 frequently misinterpreted to represent the place where disembodied souls continue to exist after 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*, which occurs 65 times in the Old Testament, 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*. *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 misled to believe that the Old Testament teaches the existence of a 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

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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 doest not give me up to Sheol," that is, the grave. The Psalmist here expresses confidence that God will not abandon him in the grave. In fact, the text is applied this way in Acts 2:27 to Christ who was not left in the grave by the Father. The text has nothing to say about a place of torment.

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 place of the dead.

Different translations often reflect the different religious beliefs of the translators. 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 attempted to defend the 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 place 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 proposed 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.

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### 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 tormenting the wicked or into the abode of spirits/souls clearly contradicts the Biblical description of *sheol* as the underground depository of the dead.

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

Since death is the termination of life and vitality, the state of the dead in *sheol* is described in terms opposite to the idea of life on earth. Life means vitality and activity; death means silence 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” (Eccl 9:2). They all go to the same place, *sheol*, the realm of the dead.

Solomon 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. The Bible describes such a state as “sleep.”

The phrase “and he slept with his fathers” (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 neither the rest of souls enjoying the bliss of paradise nor 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,’

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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 unconscious 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. 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> No souls are in *sheol* simply because in the Old Testament the soul does not survive the death of the body.

### PART 3 HADES 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 eleven references to *hades* (which is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew *sheol*) and five passages commonly cited in support of the belief in the conscious existence of the soul after death. The five 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 (the Greek OT) 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 joy, 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 Classical Greek 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 eleven times in the New Testament, is translated in the KJV ten times as “hell”<sup>41</sup> and one 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

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or the location of the dead, not to a place of punishment. The latter is designated as *gehenna*, a term which also occurs eleven 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 heaven is the highest.

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 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 pas-

sages, *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 destroyed. 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 ten 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

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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 unlike an allegory such as *Pilgrim’s Progress* where every detail carries a meaning, 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 necessarily 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 with 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 completely true in fact and completely 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 not only speaks but also seeks relief from the “finger” of Lazarus—all real body parts 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 can see and communicate with one another eternally. Ponder for a moment the case of parents in Heaven

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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 certain 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 ten of its eleven 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>

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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*, neither to endorse nor refute 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 defense 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

Dualists use the brief conversation between Jesus and the penitent thief on the cross next to Him (Luke 23:42-43) 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 a 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

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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 religious doctrine that the dead receive their reward at death. It would be better if translators would limit themselves to translating the text and leave the task of interpretation to the reader.

The question we face 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 Redeemed 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. This conclusion is not supported by Scripture.

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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 he 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. This means that Christ could hardly have told the thief that on that same 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. Rather, 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 of 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

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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. But for those who go on living with earth-bound temporal time there is an interval between death and resurrection. 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 what he had just described as the way in which believers will be with Christ, namely, *not by dying*, but by being resurrected or translated at His coming.

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 reference 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;

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1 Cor 15:42-58). The fact that Paul never even hinted about the conscious survival of a disembodied 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, exact definitions of life and of 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 expressed.

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.

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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 an enormous variety of interpretations which I discuss 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, 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 clothing represents the reception of immortality at Christ’s coming. These two references suggest that “clothing” can

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refer to 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. To Paul “naked” most likely symbolizes guilt and sin resulting in death, not 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 comprehensive transformation that human nature experiences 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 focused on the state of the body or the soul as such before or after death. Incidentally, he never speaks of the soul or 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 earthly is “mortal” and the heavenly is immortal (“swallowed up by life;” 2 Cor 5:4). The earthly is experienced “at home in the body” and “away from the Lord” (2 Cor 5:6). The heavenly is experienced “away from the body” and “at home with the Lord” (2 Cor 5:8).

Failing to recognize that Paul is speaking about two different modes of existence and not about the condition 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 empty because neither Jesus nor Paul is concerned with defining human nature ontologically, that is, in terms

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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 with warlike riders in heaven. 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 will 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

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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.

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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 perverted 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 twisted the translation 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, an ethereal view of paradise. Some of these popular heresies are examined in later chapters.

Today we face the challenge of helping sincere people recover the Biblical holistic 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."<sup>61</sup>

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 NOTES TO CHAPTER 3
 

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26. Ibid., XXXVII, p. 151.

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  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*, 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*, 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, 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).

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  47. Ibid.
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  49. Ibid.
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  59. Robert A. Morey (note 55), p. 214.
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## Chapter 4

# HELL AS ETERNAL TORMENT

Few religious teachings have troubled the human conscience over the centuries more than the traditional and still popular view of hell as a 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 suffer 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 many contemporary ministers fear preaching on such an unpopular doctrine.<sup>1</sup> This may be partly true. But the problem may also be that on some level they are aware 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.

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## 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?

The first of the two parts of this chapter 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. Part 2 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 holistic 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. 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 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

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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 under the earth. It was known by various names, including *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, hell was surrounded by a triple wall and a river of fire called Phlegethon.

In his book *Aeneid*, Virgil, a noted 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, the pope’s private chapel. On the left of Christ the risen saints receive their resurrection bodies as they ascend towards heaven. To 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, forces the damned out of his boat by pushing them before the infernal judge Minos—another Greek mythical figure. Hateful fiends gnaw at the

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skulls of suffering sinners while watching grotesque instances of hellish cannibalism. 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 in Hell's fire enter the Christian Church? A survey of the writings of the early Church Fathers suggests that this belief was gradually adopted beginning from the latter part of the second century 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>

The writer who has exercised the greatest influence in defining the Catholic doctrine of hellfire is Augustine (354-430), the Bishop of Hippo. Regarded as one of the most influential Catholic theologians, 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 Christians of his time already believed; but he systematized and defended the prevailing beliefs in an unprecedented way. Simply stated, Augustine's 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 the 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>

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Finally, 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 reasoned that salvation or damnation depended solely on the sovereign and inscrutable will of God (a view adopted by Calvin), ultimately making the God of the Bible an irrational, capricious, and unjust Being to be despised rather than 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 out Hell’s fire. 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.

Pope John Paul II’s attempt 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 galvanize the faithful. . . . Hell really exists and is eternal, even if nobody talks about it much any more”<sup>19</sup>

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**Protestant Views of Hell**

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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 New Testament image of fire and smoke, some preachers with more creative minds pictured hell as a bizarre horror chamber where punishment is based on a measure-for-measure principle. 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 ex-

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treme 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 Defense 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. We will discuss this in the last part of this chapter.<sup>26</sup>

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).<sup>27</sup> Others such as J. J. Packer, Larry Dixon, Kendall Harmon, Robert A. Peterson, and Donald Carson<sup>28</sup> were less combative but equally opposed to annihilationism.

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>

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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 here is limited to a few basic observations, some of which will be expanded in the second part of this chapter.

## PART 2 BIBLICAL TEXTS USED TO DEFEND HELLFIRE

### 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 no Biblical text 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

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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. “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 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 unquenchable fire 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 animal carcasses partially burned because the fire died out before the remains could be consumed.

The image of an unquenchable fire simply conveys 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. Unfortunately 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 where 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>33</sup> This means that the “contempt” is caused by the disgust over the decomposition of the bodies of the wicked 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>34</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 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.

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**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, its link with the practice of sacrificing children to the god Molech (2 Kings 16:3; 21:6; 23:10) earned it the name "Topheth," a place to be spit on or aborred. 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).

According to Josephus, 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 three times Jesus 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>38</sup>

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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 observes, "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.

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**“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 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>42</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>43</sup> 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

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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 evil opposition 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 progressively stronger language. 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 meta-

phorical 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> Unfortunately 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 John Walvoord says, “the lake of fire is, and it serves as a synonym for the eternal place of torment.”<sup>47</sup>

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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 by 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 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.

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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 holistic 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. We will consider this point 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

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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 3 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 church, 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

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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.

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### 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).

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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.

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## 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 are *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).

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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 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>59</sup> In our study of this text in chapter 3 we noted that Christ did not consider hell 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. No place in Scripture are the words "perish" or "destruction" twisted 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.

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**Paul and the Language of Destruction**

The language of destruction is used frequently 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 apollumeno*]” (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

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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. 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 evildoers, 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 suggest 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>

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### 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 in 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 that 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>

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## 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 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.

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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.

### Attempts to Make Hell More Tolerable

It is not surprising that during the course of history various attempts to make hell less hellish have been made. 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>66</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>

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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 do 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 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 commit-

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ted 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 reformatory 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 in 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

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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 the Devil, his demons, and the sinners he has tempted are consumed in the lake of fire and experience the extinction of the second death, that we truly can say 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>

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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 consumes them permanently. Today, it is encouraging to see that respected scholars and church leaders like Archbishop William Temple acknowledge that the Adventist belief in the annihilation of the lost is biblically correct and now support 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 in 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

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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.

#### 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 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*, Henry Paolucci, editor, 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.

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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, paragraph 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, p. 127.
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  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.

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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*, 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).
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  63. As cited by Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (1958), vol. 8, p. 782.
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  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

During the five years I studied at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome from 1969 to 1974, I occasionally worked as a tourist guide. One of the sites I liked to show tourists is called *La Scala Santa* or *The Holy Stairs*. These 28 marble steps, protected by wooden boards, are located opposite the Basilica of San Giovanni Laterano. According to Catholic tradition, Jesus ascended these stairs during his Passion when the steps were part of the *praetorium* of Pilate in Jerusalem. Medieval legends claim that Helena, mother of Constantine the Great, brought *The Holy Stairs* from Jerusalem to Rome about 326.

Devout pilgrims eagerly ascend *The Holy Stairs* on their knees, reciting prescribed prayers because they believe they will receive indulgences for themselves and their loved ones who are 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 was bombarded with probative questions from an inquisitive American tourist I had taken to *The Holy Stairs*. 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 one side and 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 500 years of indulgence to transit from purgatory to paradise? What is God going to do with the extra 508 years of indulgence that I worked for?" The priest responded pastorally, "My son, do not worry about the extra indulgences because God will automatically apply them to your relatives in purgatory."

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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, giving alms, reciting prayers for the dead, and even paying 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 basilica and by ascending the famous *Holy Stairs*. In pious devotion, Luther ascended the *Holy Stairs*; however, the results of that experience proved to be totally different than he expected.

“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> Luther’s son, Paul, claims that upon hearing these words, Luther realized how inconsistent were his actions with the words he had just heard. Immediately, he got up, turned around, and walked down the stairs.

Toward the end of 1512, Luther reread Romans 1:17 while preparing his lectures on the book of Romans: “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’s in Rome. His sales pitch included the infamous ditty: “As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs.”<sup>2</sup> Luther blasted Tetzel’s sales pitch expressly in several of the 95 Theses which he 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,

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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 marking 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, Luther and other Reformers rejected the doctrine of purgatory, teaching instead “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 which include 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. We will first define the Catholic arguments for purgatory and then present a biblical response to such arguments. The chapter examines three topics: 1) The Catholic doctrine of purgatory; 2) A historical glimpse of the doctrine of purgatory; 3) Biblical reasons for rejecting purgatory.

## **PART 1 THE CATHOLIC DOCTRINE OF PURGATORY**

The Doctrine of Purgatory, a unique and essential belief of the Roman Catholic Church, 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, which is achieved through prayer, fasting, almsgiving, pilgrimages to holy shrines, indulgences, and especially memorial masses, makes the soul holy and inherently pleasing to God. Simply stated, the Catholic Doctrine of Purgatory consists of the following six components:

1) Christ’s atoning sacrifice delivers us only from the ‘*reatus cul-pae*—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 the soul's 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 teaching 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 lives.

### **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 regarded as the most influential Catholic theologian, and because he provides perhaps the clearest explanation of Catholic beliefs. 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 Teologica* is still regarded as the most comprehensive rational definition and defense 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

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pain of *fire only* is ascribed to Purgatory because fire cleanses and consumes.”<sup>5</sup> Aquinas argues that in hell pain is inflicted by various types of tortures which punish the wicked eternally, but in purgatory pain is caused *only* by fire because fire cleanses and consumes the remains of sin. By cleansing the remains of sin, purgatory logically extends 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 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, as in the case of the impenitent thief crucified next to Christ.

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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). No temporal punishment remains 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 satisfac-

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tion, 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?

Unfortunately, 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 issue boils down to this question: Is salvation a divine gift of grace or it is a human achievement by works? Did Christ die 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, guilt cannot be transferred to an innocent person, but certain penalties, like the payment of a speeding ticket, can be paid by an innocent party, such as a parent on behalf of a guilty child.

The Bible makes no artificial distinction between the guilt or 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

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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 is executed at Christ's Return. After the final judgment, 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 judgment day, and another for those who die immediately before that day? 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>13</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>14</sup>

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The suffering of souls in purgatory can be alleviated or its duration shortened by offering prayers, giving alms, acquiring indulgences, and especially celebrating the sacrifice of the Mass. The reason is that purgatory is administered by the authority of the Pope and his representatives, the priests who 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.

## PART 2 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 parallels the origin of the belief in the immortality of the soul thus the two beliefs are closely connected. 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 fire before ascending to paradise. If the Christian church at large had remained true to the biblical holistic 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 no soul survives in purgatory, hell, or paradise. Without the belief in the immortality of the soul, a host of unbiblical beliefs that have plagued Christian church throughout the centuries would have never seen the light of day.

Adolph Harnack, a renowned 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

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fact, we noted in chapter 2 that Plato's dualistic view of human nature, which found its way into the Christian church toward the end of the second century, 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 speaks 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 Mac12:46).

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 purification where souls are cleansed before entering heaven."<sup>17</sup> Shortly we shall see that this argument ignores four important points. 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 indicates 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.

Last, the Old Testament never speaks of the purification of souls after death before entering paradise. As we learned in chapter 2, the fate of the soul is connected inextricably with the fate of the body—the latter being the outward manifestation of the soul.

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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 teaching 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. The catacombs offer 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 the 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>22</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>23</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>

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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**

The several centuries after Augustine saw no significant new developments 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), the Council of Florence (1439), and especially the Council of Trent (1545-1563). These various bodies 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

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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 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*. Unfortunately, this doctrine represents a radical denial of 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’s purifying 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 souls in purgatory led to the flourishing of incredible legends about the cruel sufferings endured by souls imprisoned in purgatory. These legends inspired the graphic depiction of purgatory in Dante Alighieri’s *Purgatory*, the second book of his *Divine Comedy*, and arguably the greatest example of medieval literary fiction.

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 sins they 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.

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Mystics such as Catherine of Genoa (1447-1510) 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 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 from Martin Luther at the time of the Reformation. Luther initially believed in Purgatory. In 1519 he said that its existence was undeniable; but by 1530 he concluded that the existence of Purgatory could not be proven 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) laid 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

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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>

Numerous Reformed Confessions of Faith, like the *Westminster Confession of the Presbyterian Church*, reaffirmed Calvin’s rejection of purgatory. The *Westminster Confession* 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. 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 from 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 paradigm 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

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as a debtor's prison where imprisoned souls 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 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 asked two additional 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 by Pope John Paul II to mitigate the fires of hell and purgatory by interpreting them as a condition of the soul rather than 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.

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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 Defense 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 violates the contextual meaning of each passage. A brief examination of these passages follows.

#### 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 the Jewish rebellion against the Syrian rulers when they attempted to force the Jews to adopt Greek beliefs and lifestyles. 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, amulets of idols, which the Law forbade them to wear, were found under their shirts. Judas and his men concluded that the

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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 comes from 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

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goes to Church officials' coffers. This whole teaching of paying money to relieve the suffering of loved ones in Purgatory is too obviously 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 they speak against praying for the dead.

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 sins 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."

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Catholic theologians interpret this text to mean that some sins which are not forgiven in this life 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> In 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, Norman Geisler and Ralph Mackenzie state that “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 blasphemes 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 unforgivable. How can a statement about the unforgivable mortal sin in the next life support the Catholic teaching that non-mortal sins will be forgiven then?

Third, and more significant still, is the fact that Christ is not speaking about punishment which Catholics argue will occur in purgatory, but about the unforgivable nature of the sin against the Holy Spirit. Christ's statement can hardly be used to support a belief in 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 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 burns 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>

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**A Response to the Catholic Interpretation of 1 Corinthians 3:11-15**

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Admittedly 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, and 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 souls from sin, but “discloses” and “tests” 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*.” Contrary to Catholic teachings, this passage says nothing about purging from sin but focuses instead on the rewards believers will receive for their service. What Paul seems to say here is that the work of some believers will stand the test of the final judgment 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?

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## 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 cleanse 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. The doctrine lacks not only biblical support, but it also openly contradicts the biblical view of salvation.

## PART 3 BIBLICAL REASONS FOR REJECTING PURGATORY

The Catholic doctrine of purgatory should be rejected for several biblical 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 purgatory “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. Our sins are never purged in a fiery purgatory after death because when we die, our bodies and souls rest in the tomb until Resurrection morning.

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## 2) Purgatory Contradicts Clear Biblical Teachings

A second reason for rejecting the doctrine of purgatory is the fact that it contradicts some of the 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 obey His commandments.

This fundamental biblical teaching is denied by the doctrine of purgatory which is based on the assumption that Christ's 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>

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#### **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 holistic 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 his 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 losing 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. The extra good works of the saints, called *works of supererogation*, that is, works done over and above the call of duty could be stored in the treasury of merits, from 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, “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

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paradise, what will happen to the millions of believers who die 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).

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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 doing penance in this world, and by enduring 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 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 in entering 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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## **Chapter 6**

# **SUNDAY SACREDNESS**

A most popular belief shared in common by Catholics and Protestants is Sunday sacredness. In both religious traditions Sunday is regarded as the “Lord’s Day,” established by Christ and the Apostles to commemorate Christ’s resurrection. The traditional view of Sunday sacredness is being challenged today by an alarming decline in Sunday observance. In Italy, where I come from, it is estimated that only 5% of Catholics attend Mass regularly on Sunday. About 95% of Catholics go to church three times in their lives: when they are hatched, matched, and dispatched.

The situation is essentially the same in most Western countries where church attendance runs below 10% of the Christian population. Church leaders see this strikingly low church attendance as a threat to the survival not only of their churches but also of Christianity itself. After all, the essence of Christianity is a relationship with God and if Christians ignore the Lord on the day which they view as the Lord’s Day, chances are they will ignore Him every day of the week as well.

President Abraham Lincoln eloquently expressed the vital function of the Sabbath for the survival of Christianity in a speech delivered on November 13, 1862. There he emphasized: “As we keep or break the Sabbath day, we nobly save or meanly lose the last and the best hope by which mankind arises.”<sup>1</sup> Obviously, for Abraham Lincoln, the Sabbath meant Sunday. But this does not detract from the fact that one of America’s outstanding presidents recognized in the principle of Sabbath-keeping the best hope to renew and elevate human beings.

Keenly aware of the implications of the crisis of Sunday observance for the future of Christianity, church leaders and scholars are re-examining the history and theology of Sunday in an effort to promote Sunday sacredness more effectively .

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**Popes' Passionate Pleas for a Revival of Sunday Observance**

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In their homilies and official pronouncements, both Pope John Paul II and Benedict XVI have made passionate pleas for a revival of Sunday observance. On May 31, 1998, Pope John Paul II promulgated a lengthy Pastoral Letter, *Dies Domini—The Lord's Day*, where he addresses the crisis of Sunday observance. He laments that the “strikingly low” attendance at the Sunday Mass indicates that “faith is weak” and “diminishing.”<sup>2</sup> He predicts that if this trend is not reversed it can threaten the future of the Catholic Church in the third millennium. He states: “The Lord’s Day has structured the history of the Church through two thousand years: how could we think that it will not continue to shape the future?”<sup>3</sup>

Benedict XVI expresses a similar concern in his homilies and pastoral letters. On the occasion of the 43rd anniversary of the promulgation of the Second Vatican Council constitution on the sacred liturgy, called “*Sacrosanctum Concilium*,” Benedict XVI wrote a pastoral letter to Cardinal Francis Arinze, Prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments. He said: “For the first Christians, participation in the Sunday celebrations was the natural expression of their belonging to Christ, of communion with his Mystical Body, in the joyful expectation of his glorious return. This belonging was expressed heroically in what happened to the martyrs of Abitene, who faced death exclaiming, ‘*Sine dominico non possumus*,’ without gathering together on Sunday to celebrate the Eucharist, we cannot live.”<sup>4</sup>

The Pope continues saying: “How much more necessary it is today to reaffirm the sacredness of the Lord’s Day and the need to take part in Sunday Mass! The cultural context in which we live, often marked by religious indifference and secularism that blot out the horizon of the transcendent, must not let us forget that the People of God, born from ‘Christ’s Passover-Sunday,’ should return to it as to an inexhaustible source, in order to understand better and better the features of their own identity and the reasons for their existence.”<sup>5</sup>

**Sunday Sacredness Derives from its Apostolic Origin**

The present “religious indifference and secularism” manifested in the alarming neglect of Sunday observance, has convinced Benedict XVI that it is imperative “to reaffirm the sacredness of the Lord’s Day” by returning to its “inexhaustible source” to be found in its “biblical” origin.

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Benedict XVI states this belief with amazing clarity later on in the same pastoral letter to Cardinal Francis Arinze, saying: “Sunday was not chosen by the Christian community but by the Apostles, and indeed by Christ himself, who on that day, “the first day of the week,” rose and appeared to the disciples (cf. Mt 28:1; Mk 16: 9; Lk 24:1; Jn 20:1,19; Acts 20:7; I Cor 16: 2), and appeared to them again “eight days later” (Jn 20:26).” Did Christ establish Sunday by resurrecting on that Day? This important question will be examined below in part 3 of this chapter.

John Paul II expresses the same conviction in his Pastoral Letter *Dies Domini—The Lord’s Day*, that the solution to the crisis of Sunday observance must be found in recovering the “biblical” foundations of Sunday observance in order to keep the day holy. He wrote that today it is “more necessary than ever to recover the deep doctrinal foundations underlying the Church’s precept, so that the abiding value of Sunday in the Christian life will be clear to all the faithful.”<sup>6</sup>

The doctrinal foundations of Sunday observance are sought in its alleged “biblical” origin. This belief has led a host of Catholic and Protestant scholars in recent years to re-examine the origin of Sunday, in the hope of proving its biblical origin, authority and experience.<sup>7</sup>

A major question addressed in recent doctoral dissertations, books, and articles is the relationship between the Sabbath and Sunday. Simply stated the question is, Did Sunday begin as the continuation of the Sabbath, thus inheriting the sacredness of the Sabbath? Or, did Sunday begin as a new institution, radically different from the Sabbath, established by the church to celebrate Christ’s resurrection by means of the Lord’s Supper celebration?

To find an answer to this and other related questions, I spent five years at the Pontifical University in Rome, investigating for my doctoral dissertation how the change came about from Sabbath to Sunday in early Christianity. The findings of my investigation are presented in my book *From Sabbath to Sunday: A Historical Investigation of the Rise of Sunday Observance in Early Christianity*, published in 1977 by the Pontifical Gregorian University press. This chapter represents a brief summary of the highlights of my dissertation.

### **Objectives of this Chapter**

This chapter examines the popular belief of Sunday sacredness from a biblical and historical perspective. Attention will be given to the major biblical and historical arguments commonly used to defend the apostolic origin of Sunday observance.

The chapter divides into six major parts in accordance with the basic outline of my dissertation *From Sabbath to Sunday*. This means that each part of this chapter represents a summary of the fuller discussion found in a chapter of my dissertation. The seven parts of this chapter are:

- 1) The Theological Connection between Sabbath and Sunday
- 2) Jesus and the Origin of Sunday
- 3) The Resurrection and the Origin of Sunday
- 4) First Day Gatherings and the Origin of Sunday
- 5) The Jerusalem Church and the Origin of Sunday
- 6) The Church of Rome and the Origin of Sunday
- 7) Sun worship and the Origin of Sunday

### PART 1 THE THEOLOGICAL CONNECTION BETWEEN SABBATH AND SUNDAY

There are two major views today regarding the historical origin of Sunday and its relationship to the biblical Sabbath. The older, traditional view, which can be traced back to early Christianity, observes a radical discontinuity between the Sabbath and Sunday and argues that Sunday is not the Sabbath. The two days differ in their origin, meaning, and experience.<sup>8</sup>

The more recent view, articulated by Pope John Paul II himself in his Pastoral Letter *Dies Domini—The Lord’s Day*, maintains that Sunday began as the embodiment and “full expression” of the Sabbath; consequently the day is to be observed as a biblical imperative, rooted in the Sabbath commandment itself.<sup>9</sup>

#### **Traditional View: Sunday was Established by the Catholic Church**

According to the traditional view, which has been held by the Catholic Church and accepted by those Protestant denominations which follow the Lutheran tradition, the Sabbath was a temporary Mosaic institution given to the Jews, abrogated by Christ, and consequently no longer binding upon Christians today. Christians adopted Sunday observance, not as the continuation of the biblical Sabbath, but as a new institution established to celebrate Christ’s resurrection by means of the Lord’s Supper celebration.

This explanation virtually has been regarded as an established fact by Catholic theologians and historians. Thomas of Aquinas, for instance, makes this unambiguous statement: “In the New Law the observance of

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the Lord's day took the place of the observance of the Sabbath not by virtue of the precept [Sabbath commandment] but by the institution of the Church and the custom of Christian people."<sup>10</sup>

In his dissertation presented to the Catholic University of America, Vincent J. Kelly similarly affirms: "Some theologians have held that God likewise directly determined Sunday as the day of worship in the New Law, that He Himself has explicitly substituted the Sunday for the Sabbath. But this theory is now entirely abandoned. It is now commonly held that God simply gave His Church the power to set aside whatever day or days she would deem suitable as Holy Days. The Church chose Sunday, the first day of the week, and in the course of time added other days, as holy days."<sup>11</sup>

Even the new *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994) emphasizes the discontinuity between Sabbath and Sunday observance: "Sunday is expressly distinguished from the Sabbath which it follows chronologically every week; for Christians its ceremonial observance replaces that of the Sabbath."<sup>12</sup>

### **Recent View: Sunday is the Continuation and "Full Expression" of the Sabbath**

Recently both Catholic and Protestant scholars have argued for an apostolic origin of Sunday observance. According to these scholars, the Apostles themselves chose the first day of the week as the new Christian Sabbath at the very beginning of Christianity in order to commemorate Christ's resurrection.

This view is defended at great length by Pope John Paul II in his Pastoral Letter, *Dies Domini—The Lord's Day*, which was promulgated on May 31, 1998. In this lengthy document (over 40 pages) the Pope makes a passionate plea for a revival of Sunday observance by appealing to the moral imperative of the Sabbath commandment. For the Pope Sunday is to be observed, not merely as an institution established by the Catholic Church, but primarily as a moral imperative of the Decalogue. The reason is that Sunday allegedly originated as the embodiment and "full expression" of the Sabbath and consequently should be observed as the biblical Sabbath.<sup>13</sup>

John Paul departs from the traditional Catholic position presumably because he wishes to challenge Christians to respect Sunday, not merely as an institution of the Catholic Church, but as a divine command. Furthermore, by rooting Sunday-keeping in the Sabbath commandment, the Pope offers the strongest moral reasons for urging Christians "to ensure that civil legislation respects their duty to keep Sunday holy."<sup>14</sup>

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The attempts made by the Pope and other Church leaders to ground Sunday observance on the Sabbath commandment raises this important question: “If Christians are expected to observe Sunday as the Biblical Sabbath, why should not they observe the Sabbath in the first place?” What was wrong with the biblical Sabbath that needed to be changed to Sunday? To apply the Sabbath Commandment to the observance of the first day of the week, Sunday, can be confusing to say the least, because the Fourth Commandment enjoins the observance of the seventh day, not of the first day. This confusion may explain why many Christians do not take the observance of Sunday seriously.

John Paul speaks eloquently of the theological development of the Sabbath from the rest of creation (Gen 2:1-3; Ex 20:8-11) to the rest of redemption (Deut 5:12-15). He notes that in the Old Testament the Sabbath commandment is linked “not only with God’s mysterious ‘rest’ after the days of creation (cf. Ex 20:8-11), but also with the salvation which he offers to Israel in the liberation from the slavery of Egypt (cf. Deut 5:12-15). The God who rests on the seventh day, rejoicing in His creation, is the same God who reveals his glory in liberating his children from Pharaoh’s oppression.”<sup>15</sup>

Being a memorial of creation and redemption, “the ‘Sabbath’ has therefore been interpreted evocatively as a determining element in the kind of ‘sacred architecture’ of time which marks biblical revelation. It recalls that the universe and history belong to God; and without constant awareness of that truth, man cannot serve in the world as a co-worker of the Creator.”<sup>16</sup>

### **Sunday as the Embodiment of the Sabbath**

In the light of these profound theological insights into the Sabbath as being a kind of “sacred architecture” of time that marks the unfolding of God’s creative and redemptive activity, and as the defining expression of our relationship with God, one wonders how the Pope succeeds in developing a theological justification for Sunday observance. He does this by making Sunday the embodiment and full expression of the biblical Sabbath.

Without hesitation John Paul applies to Sunday God’s blessing and sanctification of the Sabbath at creation. “Sunday is the day of rest because it is the day ‘blessed’ by God and ‘made holy’ by him, set apart from the other days to be, among them, ‘the Lord’s Day.’”<sup>17</sup>

More importantly, the Pope makes Sunday the “full expression” of the Sabbath by arguing that Sunday, as the Lord’s Day, fulfills the creative

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and redemptive functions of the Sabbath. These two functions, the Pope claims, “reveal the meaning of the ‘Lord’s Day’ within a single theological vision which fuses creation and salvation.”<sup>18</sup>

The Pope maintains that New Testament Christians “made the first day after the Sabbath a festive day” because they discovered that the creative and redemptive accomplishments celebrated by the Sabbath, found their “fullest expression in Christ’s Death and Resurrection, though its definitive fulfillment will not come until the Parousia, when Christ returns in glory.”<sup>19</sup>

The Pope’s attempt to make Sunday the “extension and full expression” of the creative and redemptive meanings of the Sabbath is very ingenious, but it lacks biblical and historical support. The New Testament offers no indication that Christians ever interpreted Sunday to be the embodiment of the creative and redemptive meanings of the Sabbath. From a biblical and historical perspective, Sunday is not the Sabbath because the two days differ in authority, meaning, and experience.

### **Difference in Authority**

The difference in authority lies in the fact that while Sabbath-keeping rests upon an explicit biblical command (Gen 2:2-3; Ex 20:8-11; Mark 2:27-28; Heb 4:9), Sunday-keeping derives from an interplay of social, political, pagan, and religious factors. I have examined these factors at length in my dissertation *From Sabbath to Sunday*. The lack of a biblical authority for Sunday-keeping may well be a major contributing factor to the crisis of Sunday observance that John Paul rightly laments.

The vast majority of Christians, especially in the Western world, view their Sunday as a holiday to seek personal pleasure and profit rather than a holy day to seek divine presence and peace. I submit that a major contributing factor to the secularization of Sunday is the prevailing perception that there is no divine, biblical command to keep Sunday as a holy day.

The lack of a biblical conviction that Sunday should be observed as the holy Sabbath day may well explain why most Christians see nothing wrong in devoting their Sunday time to themselves rather than to the Lord. If there was a strong theological conviction that the principle of Sunday-keeping was divinely established at creation and later “inscribed” in the Decalogue, as the Pope attempts to prove, then Christians would feel compelled to act accordingly.

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### Difference in Meaning

John Paul recognizes the need to make Sunday-keeping a moral imperative and he tries to accomplish this by rooting the day in the Sabbath commandment itself. But this cannot be done because Sunday is not the Sabbath. The two days have a different meaning and function. While in Scripture the Sabbath memorializes God's perfect creation, complete redemption, and final restoration, Sunday is justified in the earliest Patristic literature as the commemoration of the creation of light on the first day of the week, the cosmic-eschatological symbol of the new eternal world typified by the eighth day, and the memorial of Christ's Sunday Resurrection.<sup>20</sup>

None of the historical meanings attributed to Sunday require the observance of the day by resting and worshipping the Lord. For example, nowhere does Scripture suggest that the creation of light on the first day ought to be celebrated through a weekly Sunday rest and worship. Even the Resurrection event, as we shall see, does not require a weekly or annual Sunday celebration.

The attempt to transfer to Sunday the biblical authority and meaning of the Sabbath is doomed to fail because it is impossible to retain the same authority, meaning, and experience when the date of a festival is changed. For example, if a person or an organization should succeed in changing the date of the Declaration of Independence from the 4th of July to the 5th of September, the new date could hardly be viewed as the legitimate celebration of Independence Day.

Similarly, if the festival of the Sabbath is changed from the seventh to the first day, the latter can hardly memorialize the divine acts of creation, redemption, and final restoration which are linked to the typology of the Sabbath. To invest Sunday with the theological meaning and function of the Sabbath means to adulterate a divine institution by making a holy day out of what God created to be a working day.

### Difference in Experience

The difference between Sabbath and Sunday is also one of experience. While Sunday-keeping began and has remained largely the hour of worship, Sabbath-keeping is presented in Scriptures as twenty-four hours consecrated to God. In spite of the efforts made by Constantine, church councils, and the Puritans to make Sunday into a total day of rest and worship, the historical reality is that Sunday observance has been equated with church attendance. John Paul II acknowledges this historical reality in chapter 3 of the Pastoral Letter entitled "The Day of the

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Church. The Eucharistic Assembly: The Heart of Sunday.” The thrust of the chapter is that the heart of Sunday observance is the participation in the Mass. He cites the new *Catechism of the Catholic Church* which says: “The Sunday celebration of the Lord’s Day and his Eucharist is at the heart of the Church’s life.”<sup>21</sup>

The end of Sunday church services marks for most Christians also the termination of Sunday-keeping. After church, they go in good conscience to the shopping mall, a ball game, a dance hall, a theater, etc. I was surprised to discover that even in the “Bible Belt” many shops open for business as soon as church services are over. The message is clear. The rest of Sunday is business as usual.

### **Sunday Hour of Worship versus Sabbath Day of Rest and Worship**

The recognition of this historical reality has led Christopher Kiesling, a distinguished Catholic Liturgist, to argue in his book *The Future of the Christian Sunday* for the abandonment of the notion of Sunday as a day of rest and for the retention of Sunday as the hour of worship. His reasoning is that since Sunday has never been a day of total rest and worship, there is no hope of making it so today when most people want holidays, not holy days.

By contrast, celebrating the Sabbath means not merely attending church services but consecrating its twenty-four hours to the Lord. The Sabbath commandment does not say, “Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy by attending church services.” What the commandment requires is to work six days and rest on the seventh day unto the Lord (Ex 20:8-10). This means that the essence of Sabbath-keeping is *the consecration of time*. *The act of resting unto the Lord makes all the Sabbath activities, whether they be formal worship or informal fellowship and recreation, an act of worship because all of them spring out of a heart which has decided to honor God.*

The act of resting on the Sabbath unto the Lord becomes the means through which the believer enters into God’s rest (Heb 4:10) by experiencing more fully and freely the awareness of God’s presence, peace, and rest. This unique experience of Sabbath-keeping is foreign to Sunday-keeping because the essence of the latter is not the consecration of time but rather church attendance, especially the partaking of the Eucharist.

In the light of the foregoing considerations, we conclude that the Pope’s attempt to make Sunday the theological and existential embodiment of the Sabbath is doomed to fail because the two days differ radically in their authority, meaning, and experience.

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**PART 2**  
**JESUS AND THE ORIGIN OF SUNDAY**

A popular view defended recently by several scholars is that Christ paved the way for the abandonment of the Sabbath and the adoption of Sunday keeping instead by His messianic claims and His provocative method of Sabbath keeping which caused considerable controversy with the religious leaders of His day.

A noteworthy example of this view is the symposium *From Sabbath to the Lord's Day* (1982), produced by seven British/American scholars and sponsored by the Tyndale Fellowship for Biblical Research in Cambridge, England. This symposium is generally regarded as the most scholarly defense of Sunday-keeping in our time. The authors maintain that Christ transcended the Sabbath law by His messianic claims. He acted against the prevailing Sabbath traditions in order to provide His followers with the freedom to reinterpret the Sabbath and to choose a new day of worship, better suited to express their new Christian faith.

The fundamental problem with this view is that it grossly misinterprets the intent of Christ's controversial Sabbath activities and teachings which were clearly designed, *not to nullify*, but *to clarify* the divine intent of the Fourth Commandment. Christ acted deliberately against prevailing misconceptions of the Sabbath, not to terminate its observance, but to restore the day to God's intended purpose.

It should be noted that whenever accused of Sabbath breaking, Christ refuted such charge of Sabbath breaking by appealing to the Scriptures: "Have you not read . . ." (Matt 12:3-5). Christ never conceded to have broken the Sabbath commandment. On the contrary He defended Himself and His disciples from the charge of Sabbath breaking by appealing to the Scriptures.

The intent of Christ's provocative Sabbath teachings and activities was not to pave the way for the abandonment of the Sabbath and adoption of Sunday keeping, but rather to show the true meaning and function of the Sabbath, namely, a day "to do good" (Matt 12:8), "to save life" (Mark 3:4), to loose people from physical and spiritual bonds (Luke 13:16), and to show "mercy" rather than religiosity (Matt 12:7).

By showing these vital functions of the Sabbath, Christ proved that "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27). Our Lord's choice of words in this text is significant. The verb "made—*ginomai*" alludes to the original "making" of the Sabbath and the word "man—*anthropos*" suggests its human function. Thus to establish the human and universal value of the Sabbath, Christ reverts to its very

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origin, right after the creation of man. Why? Because for the Lord the law of the beginning stands supreme.

This memorable affirmation alone suffices to refute the claim that Christ paved the way for the abandonment of the Sabbath and adoption of Sunday, because He established the permanent validity of the Sabbath by appealing to its original creation when God determined its intended function for the well-being of mankind.

### **The Sabbath and the Savior in Luke**

To appreciate more fully the relationship between the Savior and the Sabbath, it is necessary to study the Sabbath material found in all the Gospels and in Hebrews. Since this is not possible within the limited scope of this chapter, we will briefly focus only on the Sabbath in Luke and in Hebrews. The complete study is found in chapter 4 “The Savior and the Sabbath” of my book *The Sabbath under Crossfire*.

Luke opens his account of Christ’s ministry by describing Him as an habitual observer of the Sabbath: “On the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue as was his custom” (Luke 4:16; NIV). Apparently Luke intended to set Christ before his readers as a model of Sabbath-keeping, because he speaks of Christ’s customary Sabbath-keeping in the immediate context of His upbringing in Nazareth (“where he had been brought up”—v. 16). This suggests that the allusion is especially to the custom of Sabbath observance during Christ’s youth.

The word “Sabbath” occurs in Luke’s Gospel 21 times and 8 times in Acts.<sup>22</sup> That is approximately twice as often as in any of the other three Gospels. This surely suggests that Luke attaches significance to the Sabbath. In fact, Luke not only begins but also closes the account of Christ’s earthly ministry on a Sabbath by mentioning that His entombment took place on “the day of Preparation and the Sabbath was beginning” (Luke 23:54). A number of scholars recognize in this text Luke’s concern to show that the Christian community observed the Sabbath.<sup>23</sup>

Finally, Luke expands his brief account of Christ’s burial by stating emphatically that the women “rested on the Sabbath in obedience to the commandment” (Luke 23:56b—NIV). Why does Luke present not only Christ but also His followers as habitual Sabbath-keepers? The answer is that Luke intended to set before his readers Christ as “a model of reverence for the Sabbath.”<sup>24</sup> Such a model discredits Benedict XVI’s claim that “Sunday was not chosen by the Christian community but by the Apostles, and indeed by Christ himself.”

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## The Sabbath in Hebrews

The discussion of the Sabbath in Hebrews is crucial to our study because it shows the understanding and experience of the Sabbath by the New Testament church. The relationship between the Sabbath and the Savior is established by the author of Hebrews by linking together Genesis 2:2 with Psalm 95:7,11. By means of these two texts the writer of Hebrews explains that the Sabbath rest offered at creation (Heb 4:4) was not exhausted when the Israelites under Joshua found a resting place in Canaan, since God offered again His rest “long afterwards” through David (Heb 4:7; cf. Ps 95:7).

Consequently, God’s promised Sabbath rest still awaited a fuller realization which has dawned with the coming of Christ (Heb 4:9). It is by believing in Jesus Christ that God’s people can at last experience (“enter”—Heb 4:3,10,11) the “good news” of God’s rest promised on the “seventh day” of creation (Heb 4:4).

### Obsolete or Remaining?

Does Hebrews teach that the Sabbath, like the temple and its services, lived out its function with the coming of Christ? Or did the Sabbath acquire fresh meaning and function with His coming? Let us now look at what Hebrews has to say on this point.

Without question the author clearly teaches that Christ’s coming has brought about a decisive discontinuity with the sacrificial system of the Old Covenant. In chapters 7 to 10, the writer of Hebrews explains at great length how Christ’s atoning sacrifice and subsequent heavenly ministry have replaced completely the typological (“copy and shadow”—Heb 8 :5) function of the Levitical priesthood and its Temple. These services Christ “abolished” (Heb 10:9). Thus they are “obsolete” and “ready to vanish away” (Heb 8:13). But, does the writer of Hebrews place the Sabbath in the same category, viewing it as one of the “obsolete” Old Covenant institutions? This is indeed the conclusion drawn by people like Benedict XVI, who are eager to trace the origin of Sunday to Christ Himself; but a careful study of the passage proves otherwise.

The “*sabbatismos*—Sabbath rest” is explicitly and emphatically presented, not as being “obsolete” like the Temple and its services, but as being a divine benefit that still “remains” (Heb 4:9). The verb “remains—*apoleipetai*” is a present passive tense which literally translated means “has been left behind.” Thus, literally translated, Hebrews 4:9 reads as follows: “So then a Sabbath-keeping has been left behind for the people of God.”

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Professor Andrew Lincoln, one of the contributors to the scholarly symposium *From Sabbath to the Lord's Day*, has established that the term *sabbatismos* was used both by pagans and Christians as a technical term for Sabbath-keeping. Examples can be found in the writings of Plutarch, Justin, Epiphanius, the Apostolic Constitutions, and the Martyrdom of Peter and Paul.<sup>25</sup> Lincoln found that in each of the above instances “the term denotes the observance or celebration of the Sabbath. This usage corresponds to the Septuagint usage of the cognate verb *sabbatizo* (cf. Ex 16:23; Lev 23:32; 26:34f.; 2 Chron 36:21) which also has reference to Sabbath observance. Thus the writer to the Hebrews is saying that since the time of Joshua an observance of Sabbath rest has been outstanding.”<sup>26</sup>

The fact that according to Hebrews 4:9, the observance of Sabbath “remains” for believers in Christ, compellingly discredits Benedict XVI’s claim that the first Christians showed their belonging to Christ by celebrating Sunday.

### **The Meaning of the Sabbath Rest**

Is the author of Hebrews merely encouraging his readers to interrupt their secular activities on the Sabbath? Considering the writer’s concern to counteract the tendency of his readers to adopt Jewish liturgical customs as a means to gain access to God, he could hardly have emphasized solely the physical “cessation” aspect of Sabbath-keeping. This aspect yields only a negative idea of rest, one which would only serve to encourage existing Judaizing tendencies. Obviously then, the author attributes a deeper meaning to the resting on the Sabbath. This deeper meaning can be seen in the antithesis the author makes between those who failed to enter into God’s rest because of “unbelief—*apeitheias*” (4:6, 11)—that is, faithlessness which results in disobedience—and those who enter it by “faith—*pistei*” (4:2, 3), that is, faithfulness that results in obedience.

The act of resting on the Sabbath for the author of Hebrews is not merely a routine ritual (cf. “sacrifice”—Matt 12:7), but rather a faith-response to God. Such a response entails not the hardening of one’s heart (4:7), but the making of oneself available to “hear his voice” (4:7). It means experiencing God’s salvation rest not by works but by faith, not by doing but by being saved through faith (4:2, 3, 11). On the Sabbath, as John Calvin aptly expresses it, believers are “to cease from their work to allow God to work in them.”<sup>27</sup> This expanded interpretation of Sabbath-keeping in the light of the Christ event, negates any attempt to make Sunday the continuation of the Sabbath, thus bestowing upon it the sacredness of the Sabbath.

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**PART 3**  
**THE RESURRECTION**  
**AND THE ORIGIN OF SUNDAY**

The most popular argument used to defend the apostolic origin of Sunday is Christ's Resurrection and Appearances on the first day of the week. In view of its popularity and importance, careful consideration must be given to this argument.

In his Pastoral Letter *Dies Domini—The Lord's Day*, John Paul II affirms that the earliest Christians “made the first day after the Sabbath a festive day, for that was the day on which the Lord rose from the dead.”<sup>28</sup> He argues that though Sunday is rooted in the creative and redemptive meaning of the Sabbath, the day finds its full expression in the Resurrection of Christ. “Although the Lord's Day is rooted in the very work of creation and even more in the mystery of the Biblical [Sabbath] ‘rest’ of God, it is nonetheless to the Resurrection of Christ that we must look in order to understand fully the Lord's Day.”<sup>29</sup>

### **Vital Importance Attributed to Resurrection**

Numerous scholars argue that the Resurrection and Appearance of Christ on the first day of the week constitute the fundamental biblical justification for the origin of Sunday worship.<sup>30</sup> Since John Paul II offers a concise summary of this argument, I will respond primarily to his comments.

In his Pastoral Letter John Paul II writes: “According to the common witness of the Gospels, the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead took place on ‘the first day after the Sabbath’ (Mark 16:2,9; Luke 24:1; John 20:1). On the same day, the Risen Lord appeared to the two disciples of Emmaus (cf. Luke 24:13-35) and to the eleven Apostles gathered together (cf. Luke 24:36; John 20:19). A week later—as the Gospel of John recounts (cf. John 20:26)—the disciples were gathered together once again when Jesus appeared to them and made Himself known to Thomas by showing him the signs of His Passion. The day of Pentecost—the first day of the eighth week after the Jewish Passover (cf. Acts 2:1), when the promise made by Jesus to the Apostles after the Resurrection was fulfilled by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (cf. Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4-5)—also fell on a Sunday. This was the day of the first proclamation and the first baptisms: Peter announced to the assembled crowd that Christ was risen and ‘those who received his word were baptized’ (Acts 2:41). This was the epiphany of the Church, revealed as the people into which are gathered in unity, beyond all their differences, the scattered children of God.”<sup>31</sup>

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Numerous Catholic and Protestant scholars concur with John Paul in attributing to Christ's Resurrection and appearances on the first day of the week the fundamental reason for the choice of Sunday by the Apostolic church. In his doctoral dissertation on the origin of Sunday, Corrado Mosna, a Jesuit student at the Pontifical Gregorian University who worked under Vincenzo Monachino, S. J. (the same professor who monitored my dissertation), concludes: "Therefore we can conclude with certainty that the event of the Resurrection has determined the choice of Sunday as the day of worship of the first Christian community."<sup>32</sup>

The same view is expressed by Cardinal Jean Daniélou: "The Lord's Day is a purely Christian institution; its origin is to be found solely in the fact of the Resurrection of Christ on the day after the Sabbath."<sup>33</sup> In a similar vein, Paul Jewett, a Protestant scholar, writes: "What, it might be asked, specifically motivated the primitive Jewish church to settle upon Sunday as a regular time of assembly? As we have observed before, it must have had something to do with the Resurrection which, according to the uniform witness of the Gospels, occurred on the first day of the week."<sup>34</sup>

In spite of its popularity, the alleged role of the Resurrection in the adoption of Sunday observance lacks both biblical and historical support. A careful study of all the references to the Resurrection reveals the incomparable importance of the event,<sup>35</sup> but it does not provide any indication regarding a special day to commemorate it.

Harold Riesenfeld notes, "In the accounts of the Resurrection in the Gospels, there are no sayings which direct that the great event of Christ's Resurrection should be commemorated on the particular day of the week on which it occurred."<sup>36</sup> Therefore, "to say that Sunday was observed because Jesus rose on that day," as S. V. McCasland cogently states, "is really a *petitio principii* [begging the question], for such a celebration might just as well be monthly or annually and still be an observance of that particular day."<sup>37</sup>

Let me briefly mention seven major arguments which discredit the alleged role of Christ's Resurrection in the adoption of Sunday observance.

### **(1) No Command of Christ or of the Apostles**

Neither Christ nor any of His apostles issued any command regarding a weekly-Sunday or annual Easter-Sunday celebration of Christ's resurrection. We have commands in the New Testament regarding baptism (Matt 28:19-20), the Lord's Supper (Mark 14:24-25; 1 Cor 11:23-26) and foot-washing (John 13:14-15), but we find no commands or even sug-

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gestions to commemorate Christ's Resurrection on a weekly Sunday or annual Easter-Sunday.

### **(2) Christ Did not Establish a Memorial of His Resurrection**

Had Jesus wanted to memorialize the day of His Resurrection, the ideal time to institute such a memorial would have been the actual day of His Resurrection. Important divine institutions like the Sabbath, baptism, Lord's Supper, all trace their origin to a divine act which marked their beginning; but on the day of His Resurrection Christ performed no act to institute a memorial of His Resurrection. He did not tell the women and the disciples: "Come apart and celebrate My Resurrection." Instead He told the women "Go and tell my brethren to go to Galilee" (Matt 28:10) and to the disciples "Go . . . make disciples . . . baptizing them" (Matt 28:19). None of the utterances of the risen Savior reveal an intent to memorialize His resurrection by making Sunday the new day of rest and worship.

The silence of the New Testament on this matter is very important since most of its books were written many years after Christ's death and Resurrection. If by the latter half of the first century Sunday had come to be viewed as the memorial of the Resurrection which fulfilled the creation/redemption functions of the Old Testament Sabbath, as the Pope claims, we would expect to find in the New Testament some allusions to the religious meaning and observance of the weekly Sunday and/or annual Easter-Sunday.

The total absence of any such allusions indicates that such developments occurred in the post-apostolic period as a result of an interplay of political, social, and religious factors, which I have examined at length in my dissertation *From Sabbath to Sunday*.

### **(3) There is no Easter-Sunday in the New Testament**

The Pope's claim that the celebration of Christ's Resurrection on a weekly Sunday and annual Easter-Sunday "evolved from the early years after the Lord's Resurrection"<sup>38</sup> is negated by the absence of Easter-Sunday in the New Testament. It is a known fact that for at least a century after Jesus' death, Passover was observed not on Easter-Sunday, as a celebration of the Resurrection, but on the date of Nisan 14 (irrespective of the day of the week) as a celebration of the sufferings, atoning sacrifice, and Resurrection of Christ.

The repudiation of the biblical reckoning of Passover and the adoption of Easter-Sunday instead, are post-apostolic development which

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is attributed, as Joachim Jeremias puts it, “to the inclination to break away from Judaism”<sup>39</sup> and to avoid, as J. B. Lightfoot explains, “even the semblance of Judaism.”<sup>40</sup>

The introduction and promotion of Easter-Sunday by the Church of Rome in the second century caused the well-known Passover (Quartodeciman) controversy which eventually led Bishop Victor of Rome to excommunicate the Asian Christians (about A. D. 191) for refusing to adopt Easter-Sunday.<sup>41</sup>

Indications such as these suffice to show that Christ’s Resurrection was not celebrated on a weekly Sunday and annual Easter-Sunday from the inception of Christianity. The social, political, and religious factors that contributed to the change from Sabbath to Sunday and Passover to Easter-Sunday are discussed at length in my dissertation *From Sabbath to Sunday*.

#### **(4) Sunday is never Called “Day of the Resurrection”**

Sunday is never called in the New Testament a “Day of the Resurrection.” It is consistently called “First day of the week.” The references to Sunday as day of the resurrection first appear in the early part of the fourth century.<sup>42</sup> By that time Sunday had become associated with the resurrection and consequently was referred to as the “Day of the Resurrection.” But this development occurred several centuries after the beginning of Christianity.

#### **(5) The Lord’s Supper was not Celebrated on Sunday in Honor of Christ’s Resurrection**

In his dissertation on *Sunday: The History of the Day of Rest and Worship in the Earliest Centuries of the Christian Church*, Willy Rordorf argues that Sunday became the *Lord’s Day* because that was the day in which the *Lord’s Supper* was celebrated. This view is accepted by many, but it lacks biblical and historical support.

Historically we know that Christians could not celebrate the Lord’s Supper on a regular basis on Sunday evening, because such gatherings were prohibited by the Roman *hetariae* law—a law that outlawed all types of communal fellowship meals held in the evening.<sup>43</sup> The Roman government was afraid that such evening gatherings could become an occasion for political plotting.

To avoid the Roman police, Christians changed the time and place of the Lord’s Supper celebration. Eventually, they moved the service from

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the evening to the morning.<sup>44</sup> This explains why Paul is very specific on the *manner* of celebrating the Lord's Supper, but he is indefinite on the question of the *time* of the assembly. Note that *four times* he repeats the same phrase: "When you come together" (1 Cor 11:18, 20, 33, 34). The phrase implies indefinite time, most likely because there was no set day for the celebration of the Lord's Supper.

### **(6) The Lord's Supper Commemorates Christ's Sacrifice, not His Resurrection**

Many Christians today view their Lord's Supper as the core of Sunday worship in honor of Christ's resurrection, but, as we have seen, in the Apostolic Church the Lord's Supper was not celebrated on Sunday, and was not connected with the Resurrection. Paul, for instance, who claims to transmit what "he received from the Lord" (1 Cor 11:23), explicitly states that the rite commemorated not Christ's resurrection, but His *sacrifice* and *Second Coming*: ("You proclaim the Lord's death till he comes" (1 Cor 11:26).

### **(7) The Resurrection is not the Dominant Reason for Sunday-keeping in Earliest Documents**

The earliest explicit references to Sunday-keeping are found in the writings of Barnabas (about 135 A.D.) and Justin Martyr (about 150 A.D.). Both writers do mention the resurrection as a basis for Sunday observance, but only as the second of two reasons, important but not predominant. Barnabas' first theological motivation for Sunday keeping is eschatological, namely, that Sunday as "the eighth day" represents "the beginning of another world."<sup>45</sup> Justin's first reason for the Christians' Sunday assembly is the inauguration of creation: "because it is the first day on which God, transforming the darkness and prime matter, created the world."<sup>46</sup>

The seven reasons given above suffice to discredit the claim that Christ's resurrection on the first day of the week caused the abandonment of the Sabbath and the adoption of Sunday. The truth is that initially the resurrection was celebrated *existentially* rather than *liturgically*, that is, by a victorious Christian living rather than by a special day of worship.

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**PART 4**  
**FIRST DAY RELIGIOUS MEETINGS**  
**AND THE ORIGIN OF SUNDAY**

To support the claim that Sunday is a biblical institution that was observed by the Apostolic church, appeal is commonly made to the following three Bible texts: (1) 1 Corinthians 16:2, (2) Acts 20:7-12, and (3) Revelation 1:10. These passages are examined at great length in my dissertation.<sup>47</sup> In this context I limit myself to a few basic observations.

**1 Corinthians 16:2: Christian Sunday Gatherings?**

The first-day fund-raising plan recommended by Paul in 1 Corinthians 16:1-3 is commonly cited to prove that Christians came together for worship on Sunday during apostolic times. For example, John Paul II affirms that “ever since Apostolic times, the Sunday gathering has in fact been for Christians a moment of fraternal sharing with the poor. ‘On the first day of the week, each of you is to put aside and save whatever extra you earn’ (1 Cor 16:2), says Saint Paul in referring to the collection organized for the poor churches of Judaea.”<sup>48</sup>

John Paul II sees in the first-day fund-raising plan recommended by Paul in this text a clear indication that the Christian Church gathered for worship on that day. This view is shared by numerous Catholic and Protestant scholars.<sup>49</sup> Corrado Mosna argues that since Paul designates the “offering” in 2 Corinthians 9:12 as “service–*leiturgia*,” the collection [of 1 Corinthians 16:2] must have been linked with the Sunday worship service of the Christian assembly.”<sup>50</sup>

The various attempts to extrapolate from Paul’s fund-raising plan a regular pattern of Sunday observance reveal inventiveness and originality, but they rest on construed arguments and not on the actual information the text provides. Observe, first of all, that nothing in the text suggests public assemblies inasmuch as the setting aside of funds was to be done “by himself–*par’heauto*.” The phrase suggests that the collection was to be done individually and in private.

If the Christian community was worshipping together on Sunday, it appears paradoxical that Paul should recommend laying aside at home one’s gift. Why should Christians deposit their offering at home on Sunday if on this day they were gathering for worship? Should not the money have been brought to the Sunday service?

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### Purpose of the Fund-raising Plan

The purpose of the first-day fund-raising plan is clearly stated by the Apostle: “So that contributions need not be made when I come” (1 Cor 16:2). The plan then is proposed not to enhance Sunday worship by the offering of gifts, but to ensure a substantial and efficient collection upon his arrival. Four characteristics can be identified in the plan. The offering was to be laid aside *periodically* (“on the first day of every week”—v. 2), *personally* (“each of you”—v. 2), *privately* (“by himself in store”—v. 2), and *proportionately* (“as he may prosper”—v. 2).

To the same community on another occasion, Paul thought it necessary to send brethren to “arrange in advance for the gift . . . promised, so that it may be ready not as an exaction but as a willing gift” (2 Cor 9:5). The Apostle desired to avoid embarrassment both to the givers and to the collectors when finding that they “were not ready” (2 Cor 9:4) for the offering. To avoid such problems in this instance, he recommends both a time—the first day of the week—and a place—one’s home.

Paul’s mention of the first day could be motivated more by practical than theological reasons. To wait until the end of the week or of the month to set aside one’s contributions or savings is contrary to sound budgetary practices, since by then one finds empty pockets and empty hands. On the other hand, if, on the first day of the week before planning any expenditures, believers set aside what they plan to give, the remaining funds will be so distributed as to meet all the basic necessities. The text, therefore, proposes a valuable weekly plan to ensure a substantial and orderly contribution on behalf of the poor brethren of Jerusalem—to extract more meaning from the text would distort it.

### Acts 20:7-11: First-Day Troas Meeting

Fundamental importance is attributed to Acts 20:7-11 inasmuch as it contains the only explicit New Testament reference to a Christian gathering conducted “on the first day of the week . . . to break bread” (Acts 20:7). John Paul II assumes that the meeting was a customary Sunday assembly “upon which the faithful of Troas were gathered ‘for the breaking of the bread [that is, the Eucharistic celebration].”<sup>51</sup>

Numerous scholars share the Pope’s view. F. F. Bruce, for example, affirms that this statement “is the earliest unambiguous evidence we have for the Christian practice of gathering together for worship on that day.”<sup>52</sup> Paul Jewett similarly declares that “here is the earliest clear witness to Christian assembly for purposes of worship on the first day of the week.”<sup>53</sup> Statements like these could be multiplied.

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These categorical conclusions rest mostly on the assumption that verse 7 represents “a fixed formula” which describes the habitual time (“On the first day of the week”) and the nature (“to break bread”) of the primitive Christian worship. Since, however, the meeting occurred in the evening and “the breaking of the bread” took place after midnight (vv. 7, 11) and Paul left the believers at dawn, we need to ask: Was the time and nature of the Troas’ gathering ordinary or extraordinary, occasioned perhaps by the departure of the Apostle?

### **Special Farewell Gathering.**

The context clearly indicates that it was a special farewell gathering occasioned by the departure of Paul, and not a regular Sunday-worship custom. The meeting began on the evening of the first day, which, according to Jewish reckoning, was our Saturday night, and continued until early Sunday morning when Paul departed. Being a night meeting occasioned by the departure of the Apostle at dawn, it is hardly reflective of regular Sunday-keeping.

Paul would have observed with the believers only the night of Sunday and traveled during the day time. This was not allowed on the Sabbath and would not have set the best example of Sunday-keeping either. The passage suggests, as noted by F. J. Foakes-Jackson, that “Paul and his friends could not, as good Jews, start on a journey on a Sabbath; they did so as soon after it as was possible (verse 12) at dawn on the ‘first day’ — the Sabbath having ended at sunset.”<sup>54</sup>

### **The Breaking of the Bread.**

The expression “to break bread—*klasai arton*” deserves closer attention. What does it actually mean in the context of the passage? Does it mean that the Christians came together for a fellowship meal or to celebrate the Lord’s Supper? It should be noted that the breaking of bread was simply a customary and necessary part of the preparation for eating together. The act of breaking in pieces a loaf of bread by the host marked the opening action of a meal. In most European cultures, the same function is fulfilled by the host wishing “Buon appetito—Good Appetite” to the guest. This ritual gives permission to all to begin eating.

In the post-apostolic literature, the expression “breaking of bread” is used as a technical designation for the Lord’s Supper. But this is not the common meaning or usage in the New Testament. In fact, the verb “to break—*klao*” followed by the noun “bread—*artos*” occurs fifteen times

in the New Testament. Nine times it refers to Christ's act of breaking bread when feeding the multitude, when partaking of the Last Supper, and when eating with His disciples after His Resurrection (Matt 14:19; 15:36; 26:26; Mark 8:6; 9:19; 14:22; Luke 22:19; 24:30; 24:35); twice it describes Paul's commencing and partaking of a meal (Acts 20:11; 27:35); twice it describes the actual breaking of the bread of the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 10:16; 11:24); and twice it is used as a general reference to the disciples' or believers' "breaking bread" together (Acts 2:46; 20:7).

In none of these instances is the Lord's Supper explicitly or technically designated as "the breaking of bread." Furthermore, the breaking of bread was followed by a meal "having eaten—*geusamenos*" (v. 11). The same verb is used by Luke in three other instances with the explicit meaning of satisfying hunger (Acts 10:10; 23:14; Luke 14:24). Undoubtedly, Paul was hungry after his prolonged speech and needed some food before he could continue his exhortation and start his journey.

However, if Paul partook of the Lord's Supper together with a regular meal, he would have acted contrary to his recent instruction to the Corinthians to whom he strongly recommended satisfying their hunger by eating at home before gathering to celebrate the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:2, 22, 34).

The New Testament, as noted earlier, does not offer any indication regarding a fixed day for the celebration of the Lord's Supper. While Paul recommends to the Corinthian believers a specific day on which to privately set aside their offerings, concerning the celebration of the Lord's Supper he repeatedly says in the same epistle and to the same people, "When you come together" (1 Cor 11:18, 20, 33, 34), implying indeterminate times and days.

The simplest way to explain the passage is that Luke mentions the day of the meeting not because it was Sunday, but most likely because (1) Paul was "ready to depart" (Acts 20:7), (2) the extraordinary miracle of Eutychus occurred that night, and (3) the time reference provides an additional, significant, chronological reference to describe the unfolding of Paul's journey.

### **Revelation 1:10: "The Lord's Day"**

The third crucial New Testament passage used to defend the apostolic origin of Sunday observance is found in the book of Revelation. John, exiled on the "island of Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" (Rev 1:9), writes: "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day—*en te kuriake hemera*" (Rev 1:10).

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John Paul II claims that this text “gives evidence of the practice of calling the first day of the week ‘the Lord’s Day’ (Rev 1:10). This would now be a characteristic distinguishing Christians from the world around them. . . . And when Christians spoke of the ‘Lord’s Day,’ they did so giving to this term the full sense of the Easter proclamation: ‘Jesus Christ is Lord’ (Phil 2:11; cf. Acts 2:36; 1 Cor 12:3).”<sup>55</sup>

The implication of the Pope’s statement is that New Testament Christians not only called Sunday “The Lord’s Day,” but also expressed through such designation their faith in their Risen Savior. Numerous scholars share the same view. For example, Corrado Mosna emphatically writes: “By the phrase ‘Lord’s Day’ (Rev 1:10), John wishes to indicate specifically the day in which the community celebrates together the eucharistic liturgy.”<sup>56</sup> The phrase “eucharistic liturgy” is used by Catholics to describe the Lord’s Supper celebration in honor of the Risen Lord.

A detailed analysis of this text would take us beyond the limited scope of this chapter. In my dissertation *From Sabbath to Sunday*, I devoted twenty pages (pp. 111 to 131) to an examination of this verse. For the purpose of this chapter, I submit only two basic observations. First, the equation of Sunday with the expression “Lord’s day” is not based on internal evidences of the book of Revelation or of the rest of the New Testament, but on three second-century patristic testimonies, namely, *Didache* 14:1, Ignatius’ *Epistle to the Magnesians* 9:1, and the apocryphal *The Gospel of Peter* 35; 50. Of the three, however, only in the *Gospel of Peter*, written toward the end of the second century, is Sunday unmistakably designated by the technical term “Lord’s—*kuriake*.” In two different verses it reads: “Now in the night in which the Lord’s day (*He kuriake*) dawned . . . there rang out a loud voice in heaven” (v. 35); “Early in the morning of the Lord’s day (*tes kuriakes*) Mary Magdalene . . . came to the sepulchre” (v. 50, 51).

It is noteworthy that while in the genuine Gospels, Mary Magdalene and the other women went to the sepulchre “early on the first day of the week” (Mark 16:2; cf. Matt 28:1; Luke 24:1; John 20:1), in the apocryphal *Gospel of Peter* it says that they went “early in the morning of the Lord’s day.” The use of the new designation “Lord’s Day” instead of “first day of the week” clearly indicates that by the end of the second century some Christians referred to Sunday as “the Lord’s Day.”

The latter usage, however, cannot be legitimately read back into Revelation 1:10. A major reason is that if Sunday had already received the new appellation “Lord’s day” by the end of the first century, when both the Gospel of John and the book of Revelation were written, we would expect this new name for Sunday to be used consistently in both works,

especially since they were apparently produced by the same author at approximately the same time and in the same geographical area.

If the new designation “Lord’s day” already existed by the end of the first century and expressed the meaning and nature of Christian Sunday worship, John would not have had reasons to use the Jewish phrase “first day of the week” in his Gospel. Therefore, the fact that the expression “Lord’s day” occurs in John’s apocalyptic book but not in his Gospel—where the first day is explicitly mentioned in conjunction with the Resurrection (John 20:1) and the appearances of Jesus (John 20:19, 26)—suggests that the “Lord’s day” of Revelation 1:10 can hardly refer to Sunday.

### **No Easter Sunday Observance in Asia Minor**

A second important consideration that discredits the Pope’s claim that Sunday was called “Lord’s Day” in the “sense of the Easter proclamation” is the fact that the book of Revelation is addressed to the seven churches of Asia Minor who did not observe Easter-Sunday. Instead, they observed Passover by the biblical date of Nisan 14. Polycrates, Bishop of the province of Asia Minor, convened a council of the church leaders of Asia Minor (about A. D. 191) to discuss the summons received from Bishop Victor of Rome to adopt Easter-Sunday. The unanimous decision of the Asian bishops was to reject Easter-Sunday and to retain the Biblical dating of Passover.<sup>57</sup>

In light of these facts, it would be paradoxical for the Apostle John, who, according to Polycrates, kept Passover by the fixed date of Nisan 14 and who wrote to Christians in Asia Minor who like him did not observe Easter-Sunday, to have used the phrase “Lord’s Day” to express his Easter faith in the Risen Lord. Cardinal Jean Daniélou, a respected Catholic scholar, timidly acknowledges this fact when he writes: “In the Apocalypse (1:10), when Easter takes place on the 14 Nisan, the word [Lord’s Day] does not perhaps mean Sunday.”<sup>58</sup>

The only day that John knew as the “Lord’s Day” by the end of the first century when he wrote the book of Revelation, is the Sabbath. This is the only day of which Christ proclaims Himself to be “Lord—*kupios*.” “For the Son of man is lord of the Sabbath” (Matt 12:8).

### **Eschatological Day of the Lord**

The immediate context that precedes and follows Revelation 1:10 contains unmistakable references to the eschatological day of the Lord.

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This suggests the possibility that the “Lord’s Day” on which John was transported in vision could have been a Sabbath day in which he saw the great day of Christ’s coming. What greater vision could have given courage to the aged Apostle in exile for his witness to Christ! Moreover, the Sabbath is closely linked eschatologically to the Second Advent. The meeting of the invisible Lord in time on the weekly Sabbath is a prelude to the meeting of the visible Lord in space on the final day of His coming.

Summing up, the attempts to find biblical support for Sunday worship in the New Testament references to the Resurrection (Mark 16:2, 9; Luke 24:1; John 20:1), the first-day farewell night meeting at Troas (Acts 20:7-11), the first-day private deposit plan mentioned by Paul in 1 Corinthians 16:1-3, and the reference to the “Lord’s Day” in Revelation 1:10, must be viewed as well meaning, but devoid of biblical support.

## PART 5 JERUSALEM AND THE ORIGIN OF SUNDAY

Closely related to the alleged role of the Resurrection is the popular view that the Jerusalem Church pioneered the abandonment of the Sabbath and adoption of Sunday. I devoted chapter 5 “Jerusalem and the Origin of Sunday” of my dissertation *From Sabbath to Sunday* to a close analysis of this view. My investigation shows that this popular view rests on three major faulty assumptions.

### **Sunday Began in Jerusalem because Christ Arose There**

The first faulty assumption is that Jerusalem must be the birthplace of Sunday keeping because that is the place where Jesus arose on the first day of the week. It is alleged that immediately after Christ’s resurrection, the Apostles “no longer felt at home in the Jewish Sabbath service.”<sup>59</sup> and consequently they proceeded to honor Christ’s Resurrection in a distinctive *Christian day, Sunday*, and in a *Christian place, the Church*.

This assumption lacks biblical and historical support because in the Apostolic Church the Resurrection was seen as an *existential reality* experienced by living victoriously by the power of the Risen Savior, and not a *liturgical practice* associated with Sunday worship. We noted earlier that nothing in the New Testament prescribes or even suggests the commemoration of Jesus’ resurrection on Sunday. The very name “Day of the Resurrection” does not appear in Christian literature until early in the fourth century.

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If the primitive Jerusalem Church had pioneered and promoted Sunday keeping because they no longer felt at home with Jewish Sabbath keeping, we would expect to find in such a church an immediate break away from Jewish religious traditions and services. But the opposite is the case.

Both the book of Acts and several Judeo-Christian documents clearly reveal that the ethnic composition and the theological orientation of the Jerusalem Church were profoundly Jewish. Luke's characterization of the Jerusalem Church as "zealous for the law" (Acts 21:20) is an accurate description which hardly allows for the abandonment of a chief precept of the law, namely, the Sabbath.

### **Only the Jerusalem Church had Sufficient Authority to Change the Sabbath to Sunday**

The second faulty assumption is that only the Jerusalem Church, which was the Mother Church of Christendom, commanded sufficient authority and respect to persuade all the Christian churches scattered through the Roman Empire to change their weekly day of worship from Sabbath to Sunday. Less influential churches could never have accomplished this change.

The problem with this assumption is the failure to recognize that the Jerusalem Church did have the *authority*, but not the *desire* to change the Sabbath to Sunday, simply because it was composed almost exclusively of Jewish Christians who were zealous in the observance of the law in general and of the Sabbath in particular.

**Attachment to the Law.** The attachment of the Jerusalem Church to the Mosaic Law is reflected in some of the decisions of the first Jerusalem Council held about 49-50 A.D. (See Acts 15). The exemption from circumcision is there granted *only* "to brethren who are of the Gentiles" (Acts 15:23). No concession is made for Jewish-Christians who must continue to circumcise their children.

Moreover, of the four provisions made applicable by the Jerusalem Council to Gentiles, one is *moral* (abstention from "unchastity") but *three are ceremonial* (even Gentile Christians are ordered to abstain "from contact with idols and from [eating] what has been strangled and from [eating] blood" (Acts 15:20). This concern of the Jerusalem Council for ritual defilement and Jewish food laws reflects its continued attachment to Jewish ceremonial law and its commands. It would be unthinkable that this Church at this early time would change the Sabbath to Sunday.

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James' statement at the Jerusalem Council in support of his proposal to exempt Gentiles from circumcision but not from Mosaic laws in general is also significant: "For generations past Moses has had spokesmen in every city; he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues" (Acts 15:21). Most interpreters recognize that both in his proposal and in its justification, James reaffirms the binding nature of the Mosaic Law which was customarily taught every Sabbath in the synagogue.

**Paul's Last Visit to Jerusalem.** Further insight is provided by Paul's last visit to Jerusalem. The Apostle was informed by James and the elders that thousands of converted Jews were "*all zealous for the Law*" (Acts 21:20). The same leaders then pressured Paul to prove to the people that he also "lived in observance of the law" (Acts 21-24) by undergoing a rite of purification at the Temple. In light of this deep commitment to the observance of the Law, it is hardly conceivable that the Jerusalem Church would have abrogated one of its chief precepts—Sabbath keeping—and pioneered Sunday worship instead.

### **Paul Learned Sunday Observance from Apostolic Leaders**

The third assumption is that Paul learned about Sunday observance from the apostolic leaders of the Jerusalem church and taught it to his Gentile converts. The reason given for this assumption is that Paul could hardly have pioneered the abandonment of the Sabbath and adoption of Sunday without stirring up the opposition of the Jewish brethren.

The absence of any echo of controversy is taken to mean that Paul accepted Sunday observance as taught him by the Jewish brethren, and promoted this practice among the Gentile churches which he established.

In his book, *The Lord's Day*, Paul Jewett affirms, for example, "If Paul had introduced Sunday worship among the Gentiles, it seems likely that Jewish opposition would have accused his temerity in setting aside the law of the Sabbath, as was the case with reference to the rite of circumcision (Acts 21:21)."<sup>60</sup> The absence of such opposition is interpreted by Jewett and others as indicating that Paul accepted and promoted Sunday observance as taught him by the Jewish brethren.

This assumption is correct in maintaining that Paul could not have pioneered Sunday observance without stirring up the opposition of the Jewish brethren, but it is incorrect in assuming that the Jewish brethren taught Paul Sunday observance. The truth is that Jewish Christians were deeply committed to the observance of the law in general and of the Sabbath in particular. The absence of any controversy between

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Paul and the Jewish brethren rather indicates that the Sabbath never became an issue in the Apostolic Church because it was faithfully observed by all Christians.

On the basis of the above considerations, we conclude that the Jerusalem Church could hardly have changed the Sabbath to Sunday, because of all the Christian Churches, it was both ethnically and theologically the closest and most loyal to Jewish religious traditions.

## PART 6 ROME AND THE ORIGIN OF SUNDAY

The birthplace of Sunday observance must be sought in an influential Gentile Church with no significant Jewish roots. In the course of my investigation I found cumulative evidence pointing to the Church of Rome as the most likely birthplace of Sunday observance. There we find the social, religious and political conditions which permitted and encouraged the abandonment of Sabbath-keeping and the adoption of Sunday worship instead.

For the sake of brevity and clarity I will mention only seven major indications pointing to the Church of Rome as the birthplace of Sunday observance.

### **(1) Predominance of Gentile Converts.**

In the first place, the Church of Rome was composed predominantly of Gentile converts. Paul in his Epistle to the Roman Church explicitly affirms: "I am speaking to you Gentiles" (Romans 11:13). This means that while the Jerusalem Church was made up almost exclusively of Jewish Christians who were deeply committed to their religious traditions like Sabbath keeping, the Church of Rome consisted mostly of Gentile converts who were influenced by such pagan practices as Sun Worship with its Sun Day.<sup>61</sup>

### **(2) Early Differentiation from the Jews**

The predominant Gentile membership apparently contributed to an early Christian differentiation from the Jews in Rome. This is indicated by the fact that in A.D. 64, Nero blamed the Christians for the burning of Rome, though the Jewish district of Trastevere had not been touched by the fire.<sup>62</sup> This fact suggests that by A. D. 64 Christians in Rome were

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no longer perceived to be a Jewish sect by the Roman authorities, but a different religious movement. Most likely the reason is that by that time Christians in Rome no longer participated in the worship service of the synagogue, as they still did in Palestine.

### (3) The Preeminence of the Bishop of Rome

A third important consideration is the “preeminent authority” exercised by the Bishop of Rome after the destruction of Jerusalem in A. D. 70. Being the Bishop of the capital city of the Roman Empire, the Bishop of Rome took over the leadership of the Christian communities at large. His leadership is acknowledged, for example, by Ignatius, Polycarp, and Irenaeus, all of whom lived in the second century.<sup>63</sup>

Tangible proofs of the leadership of the Bishop of Rome are his leadership role in pioneering and promoting the change from Sabbath feasting to Sabbath fasting, as well as the change from Passover to Easter Sunday. He was the only one who commanded sufficient authority to influence the majority of Christians to adopt new religious observances, such as weekly Sunday and annual Easter Sunday

### (4) Repressive Anti-Jewish Measures

To appreciate why the Bishop of Rome would pioneer the abandonment of the Sabbath and the adoption of Sunday, it is important to consider a fourth important factor, namely, the fiscal, military, political, and religious repressive measures imposed by the Romans upon the Jews, beginning with the First Jewish Revolt against Rome in A. D. 66 and culminating with the Second Jewish Revolt in A. D. 135. These measures, which were introduced by the Roman government to punish the Jews on account of their violent uprisings in various places of the Empire, were especially felt in the city of Rome which had a large Jewish population.

Fiscally, the Jews were subjected to a discriminatory tax (the  *Fiscus Judaicus*) which was introduced by Vespasian and increased first by Domitian (A.D. 81-96) and later by Hadrian. This meant that the Jews had to pay a penalty tax simply for being Jews. Militarily, Vespasian and Titus crushed the First Jewish Revolt (A. D. 66-70) and Hadrian, the Second Jewish Revolt (A.D. 132-135). Religiously, Vespasian (69-79 A.D.) abolished the Sanhedrin and the office of the High Priest.<sup>64</sup> These repressive measures against the Jews were intensely felt in Rome which had a large Jewish population.

### (5) Anti-Jewish Propaganda

A fifth significant factor is the anti-Jewish propaganda by a host of Roman authors who began reviling the Jews racially and culturally, deriding especially Sabbath-keeping and circumcision as examples of Judaism's degrading superstitions. These authors especially derided Sabbath-keeping as an example of Jewish laziness. Contemptuous anti-Jewish literary comments can be found in the writings of Seneca (d. A.D. 65), Persius (A.D. 34-62), Petronius (ca. A.D. 66), Quintilian (ca. A.D. 35-100), Martial (ca. A.D. 40-104), Plutarch (ca. A.D. 46-119), Juvenal (A. D. 125) and Tacitus (ca. A.D. 55-120), all of whom lived in Rome most of their professional lives.

With Seneca (ca. 4 B.C.-A.D. 65) a new wave of literary anti-Semitism surged in the sixties, undoubtedly reflecting the new mood of the time against the Jews. This fervent stoic railed against the customs of this "accursed race—*sceleratissime gentis*," and especially their Sabbath-keeping: "By introducing one day of rest in every seven, they lose in idleness almost a seventh of their life, and by failing to act in times of urgency they often suffer loss."<sup>65</sup>

### (6) Hadrian's Anti-Sabbath Legislation

The sixth and most decisive factor which influenced the change of the day of worship from Sabbath to Sunday is the anti-Jewish and anti-Sabbath legislation promulgated by the Emperor Hadrian in A. D. 135. This repressive anti-Jewish legislation was promulgated by Hadrian after three years of bloody fighting (A. D. 132-135) to crush the Jewish revolt, known as the Barkokeba revolt. His Roman legions suffered many casualties.

When the Emperor finally captured Jerusalem, he decided to deal with the Jewish problem in a radical way. He slaughtered thousands of Jews, and took thousand of them as slaves to Rome. He made Jerusalem into a Roman colony, calling it *Aelia Capitolina*. He forbade Jews and Jewish Christians from ever entering the city. More important still for our investigation, Hadrian outlawed the practice of the Jewish religion in general and of Sabbath-keeping in particular throughout the empire.<sup>66</sup>

At this critical time, for the sake of expediency many Christians followed the lead of the Bishop of Rome in changing the time and manner of observance of two institutions associated with Judaism, namely the Sabbath and Passover. The Sabbath was changed to Sunday and Passover to Easter Sunday in order to avoid even the semblance of Judaism.

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### (7) Christian Theology of Contempt for the Jews

To understand what contributed to these historical changes, we need to mention a seventh important factor, namely, the development of a Christian theology of contempt for the Jews. This is what happened. When the Jewish religion in general and the Sabbath in particular were outlawed by Roman government and derided by Roman writers, a whole body of *Adversus Judaeos* (“Against all Jews”) Christian literature began to appear. Following the lead of Roman writers, Christian authors developed a “Christian” theology of separation from, and contempt toward the Jews. Characteristic Jewish customs such as circumcision and Sabbath-keeping were proclaimed to be signs of Jewish depravity.<sup>67</sup>

The condemnation of Sabbath-keeping as a sign of Jewish wickedness contributed to the abandonment of the Sabbath and the adoption of Sunday observance in order to clarify to the Roman authorities the Christian separation from Judaism and identification with Roman paganism.

### Measures Taken by the Church of Rome

To appreciate how the Church of Rome weaned Christians away from Sabbath-keeping and encourage Sunday worship instead, we shall mention briefly the theological, social and liturgical measures taken by the Church of Rome.

### Theological Measures

Theologically, the Sabbath was reduced from a creational institution established by God for mankind to a Mosaic institution given exclusively to the Jews as a trademark of their depravity. Justin Martyr, writing from Rome by the middle of the second century, argues in his *Dialogue with Trypho*, that the observance of the Sabbath was a temporary Mosaic ordinance which God imposed exclusively on the Jews as “a mark to single them out for punishment they so well deserve for their infidelities.”<sup>68</sup>

It is hard to comprehend how a church leader like Justin, who became a martyr for the Christian faith, could reject the biblical meaning of the Sabbath as a sign of covenant commitment to God (Ex 31:16,17; Ez 20:12,20) and reduce it instead to a sign of Jewish depravity. What is even harder to accept is the absence of scholarly condemnations for such absurd and embarrassing theology of contempt for the Jews—a theology which blatantly misinterprets biblical institutions like the Sabbath, in order to give biblical sanction to the political and social repression of the Jews.

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The sad lesson of history is that the need to be *politically correct* by supporting popular immoral policies such as the extermination of Jews, Moslems and heretics, or the perpetration of slavery, has caused some church leaders and theologians to become *biblically incorrect*. They fabricate unbiblical theologies which sanction popular immoral practices. It is impossible to estimate the damage done by these theologies of expediency to our society and Christianity at large.

### **Social Measures**

Socially, the negative reinterpretation of the Sabbath as a sign of Jewish wickedness led the Church of Rome to transform Sabbath observance from a day of feasting and joy into a day of fasting and sadness. The purpose of the Sabbath fast was not to enhance the spiritual observance of the Sabbath. Rather, as emphatically stated in the papal decretal of Pope Sylvester (A. D. 314-335), the Sabbath fasting was designed to show “contempt for the Jews” (*exacratione Judaeorum*) and for their Sabbath “feasting” (*destructione ciborum*).<sup>69</sup> The sadness and hunger resulting from the fast would enable Christians to avoid “appearing to observe the Sabbath with the Jews” and would encourage them to enter more eagerly and joyfully into the observance of Sunday.

### **Liturgical Measures**

Liturgically, the Bishop of Rome decreed that no religious assemblies and Eucharistic celebrations were to be held on Saturday. Pope Innocent I (A. D. 402-417) declared that “as the tradition of the Church maintains, in these two days [Friday and Saturday] one should not absolutely celebrate the sacraments.”<sup>70</sup>

Two contemporary church historians, Socrates and Sozomen, confirm Innocent I’s decretal. Sozomen (about A. D. 440) tells us that while “the people of Constantinople, and almost everywhere, assemble together on the Sabbath, as well as on the first day of the week, such custom is never observed at Rome and Alexandria.”<sup>71</sup>

Summing up, the historical evidence mentioned above indicates that the Church of Rome used theological, social, and liturgical measures to empty the Sabbath of any religious significance, and to promote Sunday observance instead.

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**PART 7**  
**SUN WORSHIP AND THE ORIGIN OF SUNDAY**

The social, political, and religious conditions mentioned above explain why the Sabbath was changed to Sunday, but they do not explain why Sunday rather than another day, such as Friday (the day of Christ's passion) was chosen.

### **Sun Worship and Sunday**

The influence of sun worship with its "Sun-day" provides the most plausible explanation. The cult of *Sol Invictus*—the Invincible Sun—as shown by Gaston H. Halsberghe in his dissertation, became "dominant in Rome and in other parts of the Empire from the early part of the second century A.D."<sup>72</sup> The Invincible Sun-god became the chief god of the Roman Pantheon and was worshipped especially on the *Dies Solis*, that is, "the Day of the Sun," known in our calendar as "Sunday."

### **Indirect Evidences**

Both indirect and direct evidence attests to the influence of Sun-worship on the origin of Sunday. Indirectly, people who had worshipped the Sun-god in their pagan days brought with them into the church various pagan practices. The existence of the problem is evidenced by the frequent rebukes by Church leaders to those Christians who venerated the Sun-god, especially on the Day of the Sun.<sup>73</sup>

The sun is often used as a symbol to represent Christ.<sup>74</sup> The earliest pictorial representation of Christ (dated about A. D. 240), which was discovered under the confession of St. Peter's Basilica during a 1953-1957 excavation, is a mosaic that portrays Christ as the Sun God riding the quadriga sun-chariot.<sup>75</sup> Sunrise also became the orientation for prayer and for Christian churches. The *dies natalis solis Invicti*, the birthday of the Invincible Sun, which the Romans celebrated on December 25, was adopted by the Christians to celebrate Christ's birth.<sup>76</sup>

### **Direct Evidence**

A more direct indication is provided by the use of the sun symbology to justify the actual observance of Sunday. The motifs of light and of the sun are frequently invoked by the Church Fathers to develop a theological

justification for Sunday worship. God's creation of light on the first day and the resurrection of the Sun of Justice which occurred on the same day coincided with the day of the sun.

In his *Commentary on Psalm 91*, Eusebius (263-339) writes: "The Logos has transferred by the New Alliance the celebration of the Sabbath to *the rising of the light*. He has given us a type of the true rest in the saving day of the Lord, *the first day of light*. ... *In this day of light, first day and true day of the sun*, when we gather after the interval of six days, we celebrate the holy and spiritual Sabbaths . . . All things whatsoever that were prescribed for the Sabbath, *we have transferred* them to the Lord's day, as being more authoritative and more highly regarded and first in rank, and more honorable than the Jewish Sabbath. In fact, it is on this day of the creation of the world that God said: '*Let there be light and there was light*.' It is also on this day that the Sun of Justice has risen for our souls."<sup>77</sup>

This statement from Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea and regarded as the father of church history, is significant for two reasons. First, it places the responsibility for the change from the Sabbath to Sunday upon the church: "All things whatsoever that were prescribed for the Sabbath, *we have transferred* them to the Lord's day. Second, it appeals to the creation of light on the first day of the week to justify the observance of Sunday observance.

On a similar note, Jerome (342-420), the translator of the Latin Vulgate, explains: "If it is called the day of the sun by the pagans, we most willingly acknowledge it as such, since it is on this day that the *light of the world appeared* and on this day the Sun of Justice has risen."<sup>78</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this investigation conducted over a period of five years at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome is as follows: The change from Sabbath to Sunday came about, not by the authority of Christ or the Apostles, but as a result of an interplay of social, political, pagan, and religious factors. Anti-judaism influenced the abandonment of the observance of the Sabbath at a time when the Jewish religion in general and Sabbath-keeping in particular were outlawed in the Roman Empire. Sun-worship influenced the adoption of Sunday observance to show differentiations from the Jews and identification with the customs and cycles of the Roman Empire.

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The change from Sabbath to Sunday was not simply one of names or numbers, but of authority, meaning and experience. It was a change from a divinely established *Holy Day* to enable believers to experience more freely and more fully the awareness of divine presence and peace in our lives, into an ecclesiastical *Feast Day* which has become an occasion to seek for personal pleasure and profit.

This historical change has greatly affected the quality of Christian living of countless people who throughout the centuries have been deprived of the physical, moral and spiritual renewal the Sabbath is designed to provide. The change has also contributed to the alarming decline in church attendance which is threatening the survival of mainline churches in numerous Western countries.

At a time when concerted efforts are made by popes, church leaders, and scholars to promote Sunday sacredness on the basis of its alleged apostolic origin, church leaders must help Christians understand that Sunday observance is a post-apostolic development that lacks biblical authority, meaning and experience.

As we live today in a tension-filled, rushing, and restless culture, our lives cry out for the release, renewal and realignment that awaits God's people on His Holy Sabbath Day.

Sabbath observance in this cosmic age can well be for modern Christians the fitting expression of a cosmic faith, a faith which embraces and unites creation, redemption and final restoration; the past, the present and the future; man, nature and God; this world and the world to come; a faith that recognizes God's dominion over the whole creation and over human life by consecrating to Him a portion of time; a faith that fulfills the believer's true destiny in time and eternity; a faith that would treat the Lord's day as God's *holy day* rather than as a *holiday*.

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 NOTES TO CHAPTER 6
 

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1. Quoted by R. H. Martin, *The Day: A Manual on the Christian Sabbath*, (1933), p. 184.
2. *Dies Domini*, paragraph 5.
3. *Dies Domini*, paragraph 30.
4. *Letter of His Holiness Benedict XVI to Card. Francis Arinze on the Occasion of the Study Day in Honour of the 43rd Anniversary of the Promulgation of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy. Sacrosanctum Concilium*, From the Vatican, 27 November 2006.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Dies Domini*, paragraph 6.
7. For example, see Corrado S. Mosna, *Storia della Domenica dalle origini fino agli Inizi del V Secolo*, 1969; Jean Daniélou, *The Bible and Liturgy*, 1956; Paul K. Jewett, *The Lord's Day: A Theological Guide to the Christian Day of Worship*, 1972; Pacifico Massi states categorically: "The Resurrection is the only plausible explanation for the origin of Sunday" (*La Domenica nella Storia della Salvezza*, 1967, p. 43). F. A. Regan affirms: "From the study of the above texts one may reasonably conclude that during the earliest days of the Church there was only one liturgical feast and this feast was the weekly commemoration of the Resurrection of Christ" ("Dies Dominica and Dies Solis: The Beginning of the Lord's Day in Christian Antiquity," Doctoral dissertation, The Catholic University of America, 1961, p. 191); See also Josef A. Jungmann, *The Early Liturgy to the Time of Gregory the Great*, 1959, pp. 19-21; also *The Mass of the Roman Rite, Its Origin and Development*, 1951, vol. 1, p. 15; Y. B. Tremel, "Du Sabbat au Jour du Seigneur," *Lumière et Vie*, (1962), p. 441.
8. See, for example, Donald A. Carson, editor, *From Sabbath to the Lord's Day* (1982).
9. *Dies Domini*, paragraph 8.
10. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1947, II, 0, 122 Art. 4, p. 1702.
11. Vincent J. Kelly, *Forbidden Sunday and Feast-Day Occupations*, 1943, p. 2; Pope John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, trans. William J. Gibbons, (1961), p. 76, notes: "The Catholic Church has decreed for many centuries that Christians observe this day of rest on Sunday, and that they be present on the same day at the Eucharist Sacrifice." John Gilmary Shea, "The Observance of Sunday and Civil Laws for Its Enforcement," *The American Catholic Quarterly Review* 8, (Jan. 1883), p. 139, writes:

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“The Sunday, as a day of the week set apart for obligatory public worship of Almighty God, to be sanctified by a suspension of all servile labor, trade, and worldly avocations and by exercises of devotion, is purely a creation of the Catholic Church.” Martin J. Scott, *Things Catholics Are Asked About*, 1927, p. 136, adds: “Now the Church . . . instituted, by God’s authority, Sunday as the day of worship.”

12. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1994, p. 524.

13. *Dies Domini*, paragraph 17.

14. *Dies Domini*, paragraph 67.

15. *Dies Domini*, paragraph 12.

16. *Dies Domini*, paragraph 15.

17. *Dies Domini*, paragraph 14.

18. *Dies Domini*, paragraph 17.

19. *Dies Domini*, paragraph 18.

20. For a discussion of the theology of Sunday as developed in the early Christian literature, see Chapter 9 “The Theology of Sunday” of my dissertation *From Sabbath to Sunday. A Historical Investigation of the Rise of Sunday Observance in Early Christianity*, 1977, pp. 270-302.

21. *Dies Domini*, paragraph 32. Cited from *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (note 12), p. 525, paragraph 2177. On paragraph 46 of *Dies Domini*, John Paul states: “Since the Eucharist is the very heart of Sunday, it is clear why, from the earliest centuries, the Pastors of the church have not ceased to remind the faithful of the need to take part in the liturgical assembly.”

22. Luke 4:16, 31; 6:1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 9; 13:10, 14, 15, 16; 14:1, 3, 5; 23:54, 56; Acts 1:12; 13:14, 27, 42, 44; 15:21; 16:13; 17:2; 18:4.

23. See, for example, I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 1978, p. 883; F. Godet, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Saint Luke*, 1870, II, p. 343; A. R. Leaney, *A Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Luke*, 1966, p. 288. The same view is implied by the translators of the New International Version: “Then they went home and prepared spices and perfumes. But they rested on the Sabbath in obedience to the commandment” (Luke 23:56).

24. M. Max B. Turner, “The Sabbath, Sunday, and the Law in Luke/Acts,” in the symposium *From Sabbath to the Lord’s Day*, 1982, p. 102.

25. Andrew T. Lincoln, “Sabbath, Rest, and Eschatology in the New Testament,” in the symposium *From Sabbath to the Lord’s Day*, 1982, p. 213.

26. *Ibid.*

27. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1965, vol. 2, p. 337. Karl Barth keenly observes that by resting on the Sabbath after the similitude of God (Heb 4:10), the believer “participates consciously in the salvation provided by him [God]” (*Church Dogmatic*, 1961, vol. 3, part 2, p. 50).

28. *Dies Domini*, paragraph 18.

29. *Dies Domini*, paragraph 19.

30. See above note 7.

31. *Dies Domini*, paragraph 20.

32. Corrado S. Mosna, *Storia della Domenica dalle origini fino agli Inizi del V Secolo*, 1969), p. 44.

33. Jean Daniélou, *The Bible and Liturgy*, 1956, p. 242.

34. Paul K. Jewett, *The Lord’s Day: A Theological Guide to the Christian Day of Worship*, 1972, p. 57. Pacifico Massi states categorically: “The Resurrection is the only plausible explanation for the origin of Sunday” (*La Domenica nella Storia della Salvezza*, 1967, p. 43). F. A. Regan affirms: “From the study of the above texts one may reasonably conclude that during the earliest days of the Church there was only one liturgical feast and this feast was the weekly commemoration of the Resurrection of Christ” (“Dies Dominica and Dies Solis: The Beginning of the Lord’s Day in Christian Antiquity,” Doctoral dissertation, The Catholic University of America 1961, p. 191). See also Josef A. Jungmann, *The Early Liturgy to the Time of Gregory the Great*, 1959, pp. 19-21.

35. The Resurrection of Christ is presented in the New Testament as the essence of the apostolic proclamation, faith, and hope. See, for example, Acts 1:22; 2:31; 3:75; 4:2,10, 33; 5:30; 10:40; 13:33-37; 17:18, 32; 24:15, 21; 26:8; 1 Cor 15:11-21; Rom 10:9; 1:1-4; 8:31-34; 14:9; 1 Thess 1:9-10.

36. Harold Riesenfeld, “The Sabbath and the Lord’s Day,” *The Gospel Tradition: Essays by H. Riesenfeld*, 1970, p. 124.

37. S. V. McCasland, “The Origin of the Lord’s Day,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 49, (1930), p. 69. Similarly, Paul Cotton affirms: “There is nothing in the idea of the Resurrection that would necessarily produce the observance of Sunday as a Day of Worship” (*From Sabbath to Sunday*, 1933, p. 79).

38. *Dies Domini*, paragraph 19.

39. Joachim Jeremias, “Paska,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Gerhard Friedrich, ed., 1968, vol. 5, p. 903, note 64.

40. J. B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 1885, vol. 2, p. 88.

41. For a discussion of the Passover controversy and its implications for the origin of Sunday observance, see my dissertation *From Sabbath to Sunday*, 1977, pp. 198-207.

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42. See, for example, Eusebius of Caesarea, *Commentary on Psalm 91*, *Patrologia Graeca* 23, 1168; *Apostolic Constitutions* 2, 59, 3. For texts and discussion, see C.S. Mosna, *Storia della Domenica*, pp. 233-240.

43. For a discussion of the *hetariae* law, see Samuele Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday*, pp. 95-98.

44. The moving of the Lord's Supper from the evening to the morning is suggested by Pliny's Letter to the Emperor Trajan (A. D. 112). The document is discussed in my dissertation *From Sabbath to Sunday*, p. 96.

45. *The Epistle of Barnabas* 15, 8.

46. Justin Martyr, *1 Apology* 67

47. See chapter 4 of my dissertation, *From Sabbath to Sunday*, entitled "Three New Testament Texts and the Origin of Sunday."

48. *Dies Domini*, paragraph 70.

49. See my dissertation, *From Sabbath to Sunday*, pp. 90-94.

50. Corrado S. Mosna (note 7), p. 7.

51. *Dies Domini*, paragraph 21.

52. F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 1954, pp. 407-408.

53. P. K. Jewett (note 34), p. 61.

54. F. J. Foakes-Jackson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 1945, p. 187.

55. *Dies Domini*, paragraph 21.

56. Corrado S. Mosna (note 7), p. 21.

57. For texts and discussion of the Easter controversy, see *From Sabbath to Sunday* (note 7), pp. 198-207.

58. Jean Daniélou, *The First Six Hundred Years*, 1964, vol. 1, p. 74.

59. Willy Rordorf, *Sunday: The History of the Day of Rest and Worship in the Earliest Centuries of the Christian Church*, 1968, p. 218; see also Corrado S. Mosna (note 7) p. 53.

60. Paul K. Jewett (note 34), p. 57. J. A. Jungmann, *The Mass of the Roman Rite*, 1950, vol. 1, pp. 20f., argues that the replacement of the Sabbath with Sunday occurred between the martyrdom of Stephen and the persecution of the year A. D. 44 as a result of the Jewish persecution. This view is discredited by the information available on the Jerusalem Church.

61. Leonard Goppelt, *Les Origines de l'Église*, 1961, pp. 202-203.

62. By the year 64, Nero identified the Christians as being a separate entity, well distinguished from the Jews. The Emperor, in fact, according to Tacitus (ca. A.D. 55-120), "fastened the guilt [i.e. for arson upon them] and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abomination, called Christians by the populace" (Tacitus, *Annales* 15,44).

63. For a discussion of the preeminence of the Bishop of Rome, see *From Sabbath to Sunday* (note 7), pp. 207-212.

64. See Ernest L. Abel, *The Roots of Anti-Semitism*, 1943, p. 97; S. W. Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, 1952, vol. 2, p. 10.

65. Seneca, *De Superstitiones*, cited by Augustine, *The City of God* 6, 11. Seneca also says: “Meanwhile the customs of this accursed race have gained such influence that they are now received throughout the world. The vanquished have given laws to their victors.” He then adds what he thought of Jewish sacred institutions: “The Jews, however, are aware of the origin and meaning of their rites. The greater part of the people go through a ritual not knowing why they do so” (loc. cit.).

66. The rabbinical sources speak abundantly of the restrictions imposed by Hadrian, whose reign is commonly referred to as “the age of persecution—*shemad*” or “the age of the edict—*gezarah*.” (S. Krauss, “Barkokba,” *Jewish Encyclopedia*, 1907, II, p. 509. The following quotation is a sample of statements often found in the Talmud regarding Hadrian’s anti-Jewish policies: “The Government of Rome had issued a decree that they should not study the Torah and that they should not circumcise their sons and that they should profane the Sabbath. What did Judah b. Shammu’a and his colleagues do? They went and consulted a certain matron whom all the Roman notables used to visit. She said to them: ‘Go and make proclamation of your sorrows at night time.’ They went and proclaimed at night, crying, ‘Alas, in heaven’s name, are we not your brothers, are we not the sons of one mother? Why are we different from every nation and tongue that you issue such harsh decrees against us?’” (*Rosh Hashanah* 19a in *The Babylonian Talmud*, trans. I. Epstein, 1938, XIII; p. 78. *Baba Bathra* 60b similarly states: “a Government has come to power which issues cruel decrees against us and forbids to us the observance of the Torah and the precepts . . .” (*Babylonian Talmud*, XXV, p. 246).

67. A whole body of anti-Judaic literature was produced by Christian writers in the second century condemning the Jews socially and theologically. It is beyond the scope of the present study to examine this literature. The following list of significant authors and/or writings which defamed the Jews to a lesser or greater degree may serve to make the reader aware of the existence and intensity of the problem: *The Preaching of Peter*, *The Epistle of Barnabas*, Quadratus’ lost *Apology*, Aristides’ *Apology*, *The Disputation between Jason and Papiscus concerning Christ*, Justin’s *Dialogue with Trypho*, Miltiades’ *Against the Jews* (unfortunately lost), Apollinarius’ *Against the Jews* (also perished), Melito’s *On the Passover*,

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*The Epistle to Diognetus, The Gospel of Peter, Tertullian's Against the Jews, Origen's Against Celsus.* For an excellent survey of Christian anti-Jewish literature of the second century, see F. Blanchetière, "Aux sources de l'anti-judaïsme chrétien," *Revue d'Histoire et de Philosophie Religieuse* 53, (1973), pp. 353-398.

68. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 23, 3.

69. Pope Sylvester's historic statement reads as follow: "If every Sunday is to be observed joyfully by the Christians on account of the resurrection, then every Sabbath on account of the burial is to be regarded in execration of the Jews (*exsecratione Judaeorum*). In fact all the disciples of the Lord had a lamentation on the Sabbath, bewailing the buried Lord, and gladness prevailed for the exulting Jews. But sadness reigned for the fasting apostles. In like manner we are sad with the saddened by the burial of the Lord, if we want to rejoice with them in the day of the Lord's resurrection. In fact, it is not proper to observe, because of Jewish customs, the consumption of food (*destructiones ciborum*) and the ceremonies of the Jews" (S. R. E. Humbert, *Adversus Graecorum calumnias* 6, *Patrologia Latina* 143, 933).

70. Pope Innocent I (402-417 A.D.) in his famous decretal established that on the Sabbath "one should not absolutely celebrate the sacraments" (*Ad Decentium*, Epist. 25, 4, 7, *Patrologia Latina* 20, 550); Sozomen (ca. 440 A.D.) reports that no religious assemblies were held on the Sabbath in Rome or at Alexandria (*Historia ecclesiastica* 7, 19); cf. Socrates, *Historia ecclesiastica* 5, 22.

71. Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History* 5, 22; *NPNF* 2nd, II, p. 132.

72. Gaston H. Halsberghe, *The Cult of Sol Invictus*, 1972, p. 26. The study is part of the series on *Oriental Religions in the Roman Empire* edited by the greatest authority on the subject, M. J. Vermaseren.

73. A concise survey of the influence of astrological beliefs on early Christianity is provided by Jack Lindsay, *Origin of Astrology*, 1972, pp. 373-400. The irony so often apparent in history is that even while some Christians fought heroically on one front, their position was infiltrated from another. For instance, Tertullian strongly rejected the pagan accusation that the Christians' rejoicing on Sunday was motivated by the worship of the Sun (see *Apology* 16, 1 and *Ad Nationes* 1, 13, 1-5, ANF III, p. 31 and p. 122). Yet on the other hand, he chides the Christians at length for celebrating pagan festivals within their own communities (*On Idolatry* 14 ANF III, p. 70).

74. For examples of literary application of the motif of the sun to Christ, see *From Sabbath to Sunday*, pp. 253-254.

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75. See E. Kirschbaum, *The Tomb of St. Peter and St. Paul*, 1959, pp. 3Sf.; P. Testini, *Archaeologia Cristiana*, 1958, p. 167. The mosaic came to light during the 1953-1957 excavations under the altar of St. Peter's basilica.

76. For a discussion of the literary documents, see *From Sabbath to Sunday*, pp. 254-261.

77. Eusebius, *Commentaria in Psalmos* 91, PG 23, 1169-1172.

78. Jerome, *In die dominica Paschae homilia* CCL 78, 550, 1, 52; the same in Augustine, *Contra Faustum* 18,5; in *Sermo* 226, PL 38, 1099, Augustine explains that Sunday is the day of light because on the first day of creation "God said, 'Let there be light! And there was light.' And God separated the light from darkness. And God called the light day and the darkness night" (Gen. 1:2-5).

## Chapter 7

# MARIOLOGY

Religion writers often speak of the modern age as “The Age of Mary.” A cover story article of *Time* magazine entitled *The Search for Mary* notes, “In an era when scientists debate the causes of the birth of the universe, both the adoration and the conflict attending Mary have risen to extraordinary levels. A grass-roots revival of faith in the Virgin is taking place worldwide. Millions of worshippers are flocking to her shrines, many of them young people. Even more remarkable are the number of claimed sightings of the Virgin, from Yugoslavia to Colorado, in the past few years.”<sup>1</sup> Apparently, the world has become mystified and mesmerized by the constant charm and fascination of the apparitions of Mary.

*Time* reports that the number of people making pilgrimages to religious shrines is growing; “at Lourdes, the biggest of France’s 937 pilgrimage shrines, annual attendance in the past two years has jumped 10%, to 5.5 million;” interest in Marian shrines in particular is growing with “people the world over . . . traveling enormous distances to demonstrate in person their veneration of the Madonna. The late 20th century has become the age of the Marian pilgrimage.”<sup>2</sup> Statistics offered by *Time* writers reinforce how rapidly interest in Mary has grown. “At Fatima, Portugal, the shrine marking the appearance of Mary before three children in 1917, draws a steady 4.5 million pilgrims a year from an ever widening array of countries. . . . In Czestochowa, Poland, attendance at the shrine of the Black Madonna has increased to 5 million a year, rivaling Fatima and Lourdes, since John Paul’s visit in 1979. Last August the Pope spoke there to 1 million Catholic youths. In Emmitsburg, Md., attendance has doubled in the past year, to 500,000, at one of the oldest of 43 major Marian sites in the U.S., the National Shrine Grotto of Our Lady of Lourdes.”<sup>3</sup>

In a similar cover story entitled “The Meaning of Mary,” *Newsweek* sums up the story of Mary, saying: “The secret of Mary’s mysterious power may be just this: having no history of her own, she entices every new generation to draw her portrait. The Bible offers only scraps to build on . . . From this meager line of development, Mary gradually

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grew in stature. Astonishingly, this obscure Jewish mother absorbed and transformed the most powerful pagan goddesses. She was the Madonna who gives life, but also the pieta who receives the dead. Once asceticism became the privileged road to Christian holiness, she became the perpetual virgin, the model of chastity and self-denial. In 431, the Council of Ephesus issued the first dogmatic statement of Mary: she was to be honored as *Theotokos*, the Godbearer or Mother of God . . . In the 19th century, long after many Protestant reformers had rejected the cult of the Virgin as popish nonsense, Pope Pius IX proclaimed the Immaculate Conception Catholic dogma.”<sup>4</sup>

### **John Paul: A Marian Pope**

The boom in pilgrimages to Marian shrines is almost overshadowed by reports of alleged new appearances of Mary in different parts of the world. This development brought great satisfaction to the late Pope John Paul II whose devotion to Mary was ingrained in his Polish homeland. When John Paul was made bishop in 1958, he emblazoned a golden “M” on his coat of arms and chose as his motto *Totus Tuus Sum Maria*, which is Latin for “I am totally yours Mary.” “During his countless visits to Marian shrines, John Paul invoked the Madonna in nearly every discourse and prayer he delivered. He personally believed that Mary’s personal intercession spared his life when he was shot in 1981 at St. Peter’s Square. Moreover, like many others, he was convinced that ‘Mary brought an end to communism throughout Europe.’”<sup>5</sup>

On October 8, 2000, before the image of the Virgin of Fatima, John Paul II consecrated the world and the new millennium to “Mary Most Holy.” Mary is indeed prominent in all the teachings of popes, and is the centerpiece in the lives of million of Catholics.

### **Mary is Seen as an Ecumenical Bridge**

Mary is becoming more and more the ecumenical bridge between Protestants, Muslims, and the Church of Rome. On November 21, 1964, the Second Vatican Council predicted in its *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, called *Lumen Gentium*, that Mary’s intercessions “before the Son in the fellowship of all the saints” may succeed in “bringing together in peace and harmony into one People of God” all the families of the earth (#69). At that time Protestants viewed this prediction as ridiculous, but today the situation has changed. Recent Protestant publications on Mary indicate that she could indeed be the ecumenical bridge that

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will unite Christians of all faiths by eroding the existing rejection of Catholic dogmas about Mary.<sup>6</sup>

After listing seven major publications written in collaboration between Catholic and Protestant scholars, Anglican John Macquarrie concludes: “Paradoxically, some of the most important expositions of Marian doctrine in this century have come to us from Protestant scholars from a variety of denominations. Mary does not belong to any church or denomination. *She is the mother of those who ‘have the testimony of Jesus Christ.’*”<sup>7</sup>

Increasingly Protestant writers accept Mary as the hope for the ecumenical unity of all faiths. In his book *A Protestant Pastor Looks at Mary*, Lutheran scholar Charles Dickson speaks of Mary as a “shining model of genuinely Christian hope. It is the hope for all humankind. Such a rereading and enlightened understanding on the part of the Protestant community will help to refocus the attention of the entire Christian world on Mary, not as a point of division, but as *the real bridge to unity for us all.*”<sup>8</sup>

In his article “Protestants and Marian Devotion: What About Mary?” Methodist scholar Jason Byassee writes: “To say, ‘Holy Mary, full of grace, pray for us sinners, now and in the hour of our deaths,’ seems to express an extrascriptural accretion. But perhaps asking Mary for her prayers is not in itself un-Protestant. To do so may even guard Christological dogma and defend against patriarchy. Who knows? *Mary might just be key to the future of ecumenism after all.*”<sup>9</sup>

The ecumenical quest for a rediscovery of Mary is exemplified by the collaboration between Protestant and Catholic scholars in the evaluation of Mary in the New Testament. The most notable result of this joint quest is the book *Mary in the New Testament* (1978, 340 pages), written by a team of Catholic and mainline Protestant scholars. A conference of Anglican and Eastern Orthodox theologians resulted in the important work *The Mother of God*. A series of conferences between Catholic and Lutheran scholars produced the book *The One Mediator, The Saints, and Mary* (1992). Paradoxically, some of the most important re-evaluation of Mary in recent years has come from Protestant scholars of different denominations.

### **Could Mary Become the Bridge to Unite Catholics and Muslims?**

Mary could become the bridge to unite Catholics and Muslims, because she is revered by both. This point was emphasized by speakers at a recent Christian and Muslim Conference on the role that Mary plays

in each religion. At the Conference, Janan Najeeb, director of the Milwaukee Muslim Women's Coalition, addressed the role Mary plays in the Islamic faith. She said: "Muslims do not believe Mary, who is known as 'Mariam' in their faith, is the mother of God. Nor do they believe her free of the human stain because they have no concept of original sin. Muslims do, however, revere Mary as the mother of Jesus, one of the five greatest prophets — though not the son of God. In the Islamic faith we see her as a 'perfected saint' whose purity and faithfulness make her an example for all Muslims to follow.

"All Muslims are taught from an early age to love, revere and honor Mary. It is hard to find a Muslim who is not spiritually elevated when reading the story of Mary. Mary is mentioned more times in the Quran than in the Bible, according to Najeeb. The 19th chapter of the Quran — entitled 'Mariam' — is devoted to Mary, and she is the only woman in the Muslims' sacred text who is referred to by her given name and not by reference, such as 'wife of' or 'daughter of.' So significant is her position in Islam that there are many Islamic scholars who believe her a prophet."<sup>10</sup>

Mary is becoming more and more the rallying point for Catholics and Muslims. In 1952 the famous Archbishop Fulton Sheen devoted a chapter "Mary and the Moslems" in his book *The World's First Love*. In it he expressed his firm belief that "Moslems will eventually be converted to Christianity, thanks to the devotion they already have to the Virgin Mary. In fact, God the Father seems to have a special plan to draw the Moslems to Jesus through His Mother, Mary" ([www.michaeljournal.org/marymoslems.htm](http://www.michaeljournal.org/marymoslems.htm)).

In recent years both Pope John Paul II and Benedict XVI have worked hard to develop a new partnership between the papacy and Islam based on the belief that Catholics and Muslims worship the same God of Abraham and venerate the same Mary, the Mother of Jesus. This belief is clearly expressed in the new official *Catechism of the Catholic Church* which affirms: "The Church has also a high regard for the Muslims. They worship God, who is one, living and subsistent, merciful and almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has also spoken to men. They strive to submit themselves without reserve to the hidden decrees of God, just as Abraham submitted himself to God's plan, whose faith Muslims eagerly link to their own. Although not acknowledging him as God, they venerate Jesus as a prophet, *his virgin Mother they also honor, and even at times devotedly invoke.*"<sup>11</sup>

Clearly, the Catholic estimation of Islam has undergone a fundamental change from the religion of "infidels" to that of believers who worship

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the same God of Abraham and venerate the same Mary, Mother of Jesus. The determination of the Popes to develop a partnership with Muslims stems from the simple fact that their 1.3 billion members outnumber the 1 billion Catholic members. By acknowledging the legitimacy of the Islam faith, the Pope is facilitating the Muslims' acceptance of His role as the leader of a future New World Order.

### Objectives of this Chapter

The overall objective of this chapter is to show the underlying strategy of the Catholic Church to develop dogmas that elevate Mary to positions and functions similar to those of Christ and the Holy Spirit. The goal is make Mary a Co-redeemer who dispenses grace and salvation. To accomplish this objective, the Catholic Church has developed at least six significant parallels between the Biblical teachings about Jesus and about His mother, Mary.

**The Bible** teaches that Christ was born sinless and lived a sinless life.

**The Catholic Church** declares that Mary was conceived without the stain of the original sin and lived a sinless life.

**The Bible** teaches that Christ alone offers grace and salvation.

**The Catholic Church** teaches that Mary dispenses grace and salvation.

**The Bible** teaches that Christ ascended to heaven to serve as the King of Kings.

**The Catholic Church** teaches the bodily assumption of Mary to heaven to occupy the position of the Queen of Heaven.

**The Bible** teaches that Christ is the one Mediator and Redeemer.

**The Catholic Church** teaches that Mary is Mediatrix and Co-redeemer.

**The Bible** teaches that the Holy Spirit is the believer's Helper and Advocate.

**The Catholic Church** teaches that Mary is the believer's Helper and Advocate.

**The Bible** teaches that Christ Himself with the Father and Holy Spirit is God, the all Holy One.

**The Catholic Church** teaches that Mary also is the All Holy One.

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In light of Mary's elevation to a position similar to that of Christ and of the growing acceptance of Mary among Catholics and Protestants as the hope for the ecumenical unity of all faiths, we must examine the popular beliefs about Mary in the light of the Scripture. For the sake of clarity our study of the popular beliefs about Mary follows this sequential order:

- 1) The Perpetual Virginity of Mary
- 2) The Immaculate Conception of Mary
- 3) The Bodily Assumption of Mary
- 4) The Mediatorship and Redemptive Roles of Mary
- 5) The Veneration of Mary

The procedure we follow in examining these popular beliefs about Mary is simple. First we state the Catholic and, where relevant, the Protestant defense of their beliefs about Mary, and then we submit such beliefs to a biblical evaluation. The chapter is divided into five parts corresponding to each of these beliefs.

## PART 1 THE PERPETUAL VIRGINITY OF MARY

The first parallel the Catholic Church attempts to make between Christ and Mary is that of their unique sinlessness. Like Christ, Mary is supposed to have been sinless from conception to her bodily assumption to heaven. This teaching has been promoted through two major dogmas known as the Perpetual Virginity of Mary and her Immaculate Conception. The Lateran Synod of A. D. 649 emphasized for the first time the threefold character of Mary's virginity, namely that "Mary was a Virgin before, during and after the Birth of Jesus Christ."<sup>12</sup> This means, says Catholic apologist Ludwig Ott, that "Mary gave birth in miraculous fashion without the opening of the womb and injury to the hymen, and consequently also without pains."<sup>13</sup>

The Catholic belief that Mary was a perpetual virgin, that is, she lived her all life as a virgin and died a virgin, is celebrated in Catholic liturgy as *Aeparthenos*, "Ever-virgin." The new *Catechism of the Catholic Church* affirms this belief, saying: "Christ's birth did not diminish his mother's virginal integrity but sanctified it. And so the liturgy of the Church celebrates Mary as *Aeparthenos*, the 'Ever-virgin.'"<sup>14</sup>

The *Catechism* summarizes the belief in Mary's perpetual virginity, saying: "Mary remained virgin in conceiving her Son, a virgin

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in giving birth to him, a virgin in carrying him, a virgin in nursing him at her breast, always a virgin.”<sup>15</sup> Mary’s virginity is seen as an essential prerequisite for her “to serve the mystery of redemption with him and dependent on him, by God’s grace”<sup>16</sup>

The *Catechism* continues saying: “Being obedient she became the cause of salvation for herself and for the whole human race. Hence not a few of the early Fathers gladly assert . . . ‘The knot of Eve’s disobedience was untied by Mary’s obedience: what the virgin Eve bound through her disbelief, Mary loosened by her faith. Comparing her with Eve, they call Mary “the Mother of all the living” and frequently claim: ‘Death through Eve, life through Mary.’”<sup>17</sup>

Notice that for Catholics Mary’s perpetual virginity and lifelong sinlessness enable her to serve as a Redeemer and dispenser of Christ’s grace. This belief, as we shall see shortly, is clearly expressed in Pius IX’s encyclical *Ubi Primum*, promulgated on February 2, 1849. Such a teaching is clearly negated by Scripture which teaches that “there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim 2:5).

### **Catholic Defense of Mary’s Perpetual Virginity**

Thomas Aquinas uses several arguments to defend the perpetual virginity of Mary. For example, he argues that if Mary had intercourse with Joseph after the birth of Jesus, that would be “an insult to the Holy Ghost, whose *shrine* was the vaginal womb wherein he had formed the flesh of Christ; wherefore it is unbecoming that it should be desecrated by intercourse with man.”<sup>18</sup>

Aquinas concludes his defense of Mary’s perpetual virginity, saying: “We must therefore simply assert that the Mother of God, as she was a virgin in conceiving Him and a virgin in giving Him birth, so did she remain a virgin ever afterwards. . . . Mary gave birth in miraculous fashion without opening of the womb and injury to the hymen, and consequently also without pains.”<sup>19</sup> This Catholic belief is expressed by the title “perpetual virginity.”

### **Reformers Believed in Mary’s Perpetual Virginity**

Surprisingly, the Protestant reformers affirmed their belief in Mary’s perpetual virginity. For example, Martin Luther (1483-1546) was true to the Catholic tradition when he wrote: “It is an article of faith that Mary is Mother of the Lord and still a virgin. . . . Christ, we believe, came forth from a womb left perfectly intact.”<sup>20</sup> The French reformer John Calvin

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(1509-1564) was not as profuse in his praise of Mary as Martin Luther, but he did not deny her perpetual virginity. The term he used most commonly in referring to Mary was “Holy Virgin.”<sup>21</sup>

The Swiss reformer, Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531), wrote on the perpetual virginity of Mary: “I firmly believe that Mary, according to the words of the gospel as a pure Virgin brought forth for us the Son of God and in childbirth and after childbirth forever remained a pure, intact Virgin.”<sup>22</sup> Elsewhere Zwingli affirmed: “I esteem immensely the Mother of God, the ever chaste, immaculate Virgin Mary; Christ was born of a most undefiled Virgin.”<sup>23</sup>

The Reformers’ almost universal acceptance of Mary’s continuing virginity and their widespread reluctance to declare Mary a sinner, was gradually rejected by their followers. The reason for their break with the past was partly due to a fresh examination of the biblical passages used to support Mary’s perpetual virginity. Also, the idolatrous practices that developed in association with the veneration of Mary and the rejection of clerical celibacy, eventually led most Protestant churches to reject several Catholic beliefs about Mary.

### **Anglicans and Catholics Agree on Mary**

In recent years, as noted earlier, the Protestant opposition to the veneration of Mary has weakened considerably. An example is the 57-page statement released by the joint commission of Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission on Marian devotion and doctrine. A key point discussed in the accord is the “non-Catholics view that Mary’s immaculate conception, her freedom from original sin and resulting sinlessness, contradicts the Bible’s teaching that ‘all have sinned’ (Rom 3:23) and that Jesus is the sole exception (Heb 4:15).” The accord responds to this traditional Protestant view, saying: “we can affirm together that Christ’s redeeming work reached ‘back’ in Mary to the depths of her being, and to her earliest beginnings without violating Scripture.” Regarding the Protestant past rejection of the Catholic belief in Mary’s assumption to heaven at the end of her life, the accord says: “we can affirm together the teaching that God has taken the Blessed Virgin Mary in the fullness of her person into his glory as consonant with scripture, since God directly received others (Elijah, Stephen, the thief on the cross).”<sup>24</sup>

On other significant Catholic beliefs like Mary’s perpetual virginity, her redemptive role, and her veneration by praying for her, the accord shows that Anglican theologians are seeking ways to embrace, at least in part, such beliefs. Evidently Protestant opposition to Marian devotion and veneration is gradually weakening.

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**Catholic Arguments from Scripture**

The Catholic dogma of the perpetual virginity of Mary is based on dogmatic assumptions, not on factual biblical teachings. This is evidenced by the fact that Catholic scholars cite only a few Bible verses to support the alleged perpetual virginity of Mary. For example, Catholic apologist, Ludwig Ott, summarizes them as follows: “From the question which Mary puts to the Angel, Luke 1:34: ‘How shall this be done, because I know not man?’ it is inferred [by some Catholic theologians] that she had taken the resolve of constant virginity on the ground of special Divine enlightenment. Others note that the fact that the dying Redeemer entrusted His Mother to the protection of the Disciple John (John 19:26), ‘woman, behold thy Son,’ presupposes that Mary had no other children but Jesus.”<sup>25</sup>

The references to Jesus’ “brothers” (cf. Matt. 13:55 ; Mark 6:3 ; Gal. 1:19 ) are interpreted by Catholics as referring to Jesus’ cousins, not blood brothers. Other Catholic scholars suggest that maybe these were Joseph’s sons by a previous marriage, thus preserving Mary’s perpetual virginity. The latter is very important in Catholic teachings because sex is associated with sin while virginity is seen as a prerequisite to achieving a higher level of holiness and ultimately sainthood.

**A BIBLICAL RESPONSE TO  
MARY’S PERPETUAL VIRGINITY****The Pagan Origin and Implications of Perpetual Virginity**

The Bible clearly teaches that Mary was a virgin before and at the time of the birth of her son Jesus (Is 7:14; Matt 1:18-25; Luke 1:26-27), but nowhere does it suggest that she remained a virgin afterwards. The roots of the dogma of Mary’s perpetual virginity must be sought in the pagan environment of the post-apostolic age when there was a strong emphasis on celibacy within certain heathen religions (Vestal virgins of pagan Rome, for instance) and “Christian” gnostic sects. Sexual intercourse, even within marriage, often carried the suspicion of sin. Such a view eventually led Augustine (354-430) to teach that original sin is transmitted through sexual procreation.

The association of sex with sin eventually gave rise to the idea that it was inconceivable that Mary should have engaged in normal marital relations after the birth of Jesus. To be sinless and holy Mary had to be virgin before and after giving birth to her son, Jesus. Her hymen had to

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remain intact during and after Jesus' birth, in order for Mary to achieve the highest state of holiness. This idea consolidated the tradition of celibacy for priests and nuns.

The whole idea of Mary's perpetual virginity undermines the integrity and humanness of Christ's incarnation by positing that He was not only conceived, but also born miraculously by the Holy Spirit. As the God-man, Christ could hardly have been "made like his brethren in every respect" (Heb 2:17) by partaking of "the same nature" (Heb 2:14), if He was snatched out from Mary womb miraculously, leaving Mary's hymen intact. If both Christ's conception and birth were strictly the work of the Holy Spirit who only borrowed Mary's womb for nine months, then the integrity and humanness of His incarnation are seriously jeopardized.

### God Created Sex

The whole idea of Mary's perpetual virginity is based on the perverse belief that sex is sinful. Such a belief is negated by Scripture. The first statement relating to human sexuality is found in Genesis 1:27: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." It is noteworthy that while after every previous act of creation, Scripture says that God saw that "it was good" (Gen 1:12,18,21,25), yet after the creation of mankind as male and female, Scripture says that God saw that "it was very good" (Gen 1:31).

This initial divine appraisal of human sexuality as "very good" shows that Scripture sees the male/female sexual relations as part of the goodness and perfection of God's original creation. Thus, the dogma of the perpetual virginity of Mary negates the positive Biblical view of sex, at the same time demeaning women who choose marriage rather than celibacy.

In Catholic teachings a woman who devotes herself to her family, bringing up her children in the fear of God, can hardly achieve the same state of holiness of a woman who chooses to remain virgin to serve the Lord. Such teaching can hardly be supported by Scripture which commends godly women like Hannah for devoting herself to the upbringing of Samuel (1 Sam 1 and 2).

### Christ's Birth Was Normal

The belief that Mary remained virgin *during* and *after* Christ's birth is discredited by all the descriptions of the event which indicate a normal

birth. Luke, for example, writes: “She gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths” (Luke 2:7). Paul speaks of Christ as “born of a woman” (Gal 4:4). In Matthew the angel explains to Joseph: “She shall bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus” (Matt 1:21).

None of these texts use the common words for a miracle, sign, or wonder. None of the texts refer to angels or to the Holy Spirit snatching Jesus miraculously out of Mary’s womb. They simply tell us that Mary “gave birth to her first-born son” (Luke 2:7). The idea of Christ’s miraculous birth without coming through the birth canal or causing pain is found only in the gnostic apocryphal writings of the second and third century, but is not in the inspired New Testament.

### Were Joseph and Mary Sexually Intimate After Jesus’ Birth?

Matthew suggests that Mary and Joseph were sexually intimate after Jesus’ birth. Matthew affirms that “before they came together, she [Mary] was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit” (Matt 1:18). The term, “came together,” (from *sunerchomai*) includes the idea of sexual intimacy (cf. 1 Cor 7:5). The verse implies that ultimately Joseph and Mary “came together” and experienced sexual intimacy.

Matthew declares also that Joseph “*knew* her not [Mary] *until* she had brought forth her firstborn son” (Matt 1:25; KJV). The phrase “knew not” suggests that Joseph did not have sexual relations with Mary until after the birth of Jesus. In Scripture a man *knows* a woman by becoming sexually intimate with her. “Now Adam *knew* Eve his wife and she conceived” (Gen 4:1). The phrase “she brought forth her firstborn son” (Luke 2:7; Matt 1:25), suggests that Mary gave birth in a normal way, not in a miraculous fashion. Scripture makes no mention of the Holy Spirit’s involvement in Jesus’ actual birth.

The adverb “until—*heos hou*” in the phrase, Joseph “knew her not *till* she had brought forth her firstborn” (Matt 1:25; KJV), implies that after the birth of Jesus, the couple had normal marital relations. As Jack Lewis points out, “elsewhere in the New Testament (Matt 17:9; 24:39; John 9:19) the phrase *until (heos hou)* followed by a negative always implies that the negated action did take place later.”<sup>26</sup> There is no valid reason to assume that Matthew 1:25 is an exception. Had Matthew wanted to convey the idea of Mary’s perpetual virginity, he would have simply written: “But he never had any union with her.”

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**Jesus is Called Mary's "Firstborn"**

In Luke 2:7 Jesus is called Mary's "firstborn—*prototokon*." While the term "firstborn" does not unequivocally demand that Mary had other children, the natural meaning is that she did. If the perpetual virginity of Mary was a common belief in New Testament times, Luke would have simply written that she brought forth her "only" son. That would certainly have settled the issue. Note that Luke wrote long after Christ's birth when Joseph and Mary were probably dead. If Jesus had been Mary's only child, with hindsight, he would have used the word "only begotten—*monogene*," not the word "firstborn—*prototokon*." In the context "firstborn" implies that Mary had other children. This seems to be confirmed by the fact that all the Gospels affirm that Jesus had brothers and sisters.

**Who Were Jesus' Brothers and Sisters?**

The Bible makes several clear references to Jesus' brothers and sisters in the context of his immediate family; these texts suggest that they were actual brothers, not cousins, as many Catholics believe. For example, Matthew writes: "Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And are not all his sisters with us?" (Matt 13:55-56; cf. Mark 6:3). This text suggests that Jesus had a large family of at least four brothers and two sisters.

Even John, the most mystical of all the Gospels, suggests that Jesus was not an only child. "After this he went down to Capernaum, with his mother and brothers and his disciples" (John 2:12). "So his brothers said to him, 'Leave here and go to Judea, that your disciples may see the works you are doing'" (John 7:3).

Paul also refers to James as the "Lord's brother," in his letters to the Galatians and Corinthians. "Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas, and remained with him 15 days. But I saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord's brother" (Gal 1:18-19). "Do we not have the right to be accompanied by a wife as the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas?" (1 Cor 9:5).

Catholic apologists offer two major explanations to reconcile these texts with their belief in the perpetual virginity of Mary. Some argue that the "brothers and sisters" mentioned were *half*-brothers and *half*-sisters of Jesus. They were Joseph's children from a previous marriage, thus preserving Mary's perpetual virginity. Others follow Jerome's argument that these were Jesus' cousins, not blood brothers.<sup>27</sup>

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The major argument used to defend these interpretations is that the Hebrew language lacks specific nouns for kinfolk. The Hebrew word *ah* and the Aramaic *aha*, can mean brother, stepbrother, cousin, nephew or any blood relative. This is true in Hebrew, but not in *Greek*. This interpretation ignores that all the four Gospels were written in *Greek*, not Hebrew. In fact, the Greek language has two distinct words for brothers and cousins. The Greek word for brother is *adelphos* and for cousin is *anepsios*. The latter is used in Colossians 4:10 where Mark is described as the *cousin-anepsios* of Barnabas. But the word *cousin* is never used in the references to Jesus' brothers and sisters. Had the Gospel writers known that James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas, were Jesus' cousins, they would have used the word *anepsios* to avoid any confusion.

The words "brother" and "sister" are consistently used in the New Testament in a family setting, and always refer to a literal blood brother or sister (Mark 1:16, 19; 13:12; John 11:1-2; Acts 23:16; Rom 16:15). Why should one assume that the terms, "brothers" and "sisters," were used by Matthew figuratively when he uses the term "mother" literally? If "sister" is literal in Acts 23:16 (Paul's sister), there is no reason to interpret the same word in a *different* sense in Matthew 13:56. It is an established hermeneutical principle that words should be understood in their literal sense unless a literal interpretation involves an obvious contradiction.

In ancient Greek specific words indicate different family members. For example, *adelphos* = brother; *adelphē* = sister; *anepsios* = cousin; *adelphos ouch omopatrios* = step brother; *adelphē ouch omopatria* = step sister; *progonos* = step-daughter or step son. This suggests that Matthew, John, and Paul could have clarified, if it was necessary, that Jesus' brothers and sisters were actually step-brothers and sisters.

The accounts of Joseph and Mary's travel first to Bethlehem and then to Egypt offer indirect support for this conclusion. Luke tells us that Joseph and Mary traveled from Nazareth to Bethlehem "to be enrolled" (Luke 2:5). If Joseph had at least six children from a previous marriage, we would expect them to travel with him as a family, especially since every member of the family was expected to register. The fact that only Joseph and Mary are mentioned by Luke suggests that at the time of their betrothal Joseph had no children. It is hard to believe that a godly man like Joseph would forsake his children to marry Mary.

Support for this conclusion is provided also by Matthew's account of the flight into Egypt. An angel instructs Joseph in a dream, saying: "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there till I tell you" (Matt 2:13). After the death of Herod, the same angel tells Joseph: "Rise, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who wanted the child's life are dead" (Matt 2:20).

In both instances the traveling party consisted only of Joseph, Mary, and the child Jesus. The Bible makes no mention of the six children that allegedly Joseph had from a previous marriage. Did Joseph leave them alone in Nazareth for several years until he and Mary returned from Egypt with Jesus? This could hardly have been the case since all the members of the family were expected to be enrolled. These considerations lead us to conclude that Mary most likely had other children besides Jesus.

### **Did Mary Resolve to Remain Perpetually Virgin?**

From the question which Mary puts to the Angel in Luke 1:34: “How shall this be, since I have no husband?” some Catholic infer that she resolved to remain virgin for the rest of her life. But Mary’s question hardly suggests that she took a vow of virginity. Had she done so, why did she become engaged to Joseph (Matt 1:18)?

The notion of Joseph and Mary living in a perpetual celibate state runs contrary to God’s ideal for marriage which is intended to bring together a man and a woman as “one flesh” (Gen 2:24; Matt 19:5-6). After the initial physical bonding, there is the continuing responsibility for husband and wife to honor their conjugal rights: “The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband” (1 Cor 7:3). Any abstinence is to be mutually agreed “for a season . . . but then come together again, lest Satan tempt you through lack of self-control” (1 Cor 7:5).

### **Did Jesus Entrust His Mother to John Because She had no Children?**

The fact that at the Cross Jesus entrusted His mother to John, saying: “Woman, behold, your son!” (John 19:26), is seen by Catholic apologists as an evidence that Mary had no children of her own. Ludwig Ott writes: “The fact that the dying Redeemer entrusted His Mother to the protection of the Disciple, John (John 19:26) ‘Woman, behold thy Son,’ presupposes that Mary had no other children but Jesus.”<sup>28</sup>

This assumption ignores that Jesus’ brothers at that time were not believers (John 7:5) and presumably were not present at the Cross. The argument that, according to the Mosaic law, the closest blood relative was required to watch over Mary overlooks the fact that Jesus was showing His compassion for His mother in the absence of those who should have been caring for her. Moreover, Christ taught that commitment to Him superseded the closest blood ties. When His mother and brothers ap-

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proached Him while He was teaching, He said: “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers? And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, and sister, and mother’” (Matt 12:48-50). With the exception of His mother, his own family at that time did not believe in Him. So He could only entrust his own mother into a believer’s hands. And John was close to Jesus and could be entrusted with His mother’s keeping.

### **Conclusion**

The Catholic dogma of Mary’s perpetual virginity is designed to prove that Mary was as sinless as Christ because she was virgin before, during, and after giving birth to her Son, Christ. The claim of perpetual virginity is used to prove her continuous sinlessness. This dogma lacks any reasonable biblical evidence. The few passages that are employed in defense of the dogma, do not even allude to the subject. But the Catholic Church does not depend upon biblical authority to define her teachings. She claims the authority to define her own dogmas, to write her own rules, and to create her own “Intercessors” (2 Thess 2:4).

The biblical truth is that like all genuine believers, Mary was a sinner saved by God’s grace, through faith, and not by any righteousness or preserving grace granted her at conception, nor by any vow of virginity within marriage as a way to achieve a higher holiness. She was a blessed woman for bearing God’s Son and bringing Him up in a dysfunctional family.

The dogma of Mary’s perpetual virginity is an ancient superstition that has been thrust upon sincere souls who have never been taught to question the voice of their Church. It is a sad reality that today millions of sincere people ignorantly and uncritically follow an autocratic system that openly opposes divinely revealed truths.

## **PART 2 THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION OF MARY**

The parallel between Christ’s virginal conception taught by Scripture and Mary’s Immaculate Conception is another step in the evolving Catholic doctrines that elevate Mary to the place of the Savior Jesus Christ. In a logical progression, the Catholic dogmas about Mary each build upon

the other and ultimately widen the gap between the biblical teachings and Catholic Marian teachings.

Philip Schaff, a renown nineteenth century church historian, observes that “from the Roman standpoint this dogma [of the immaculate conception] completes the Mariology and Mariolatry, which step by step, proceeded from the perpetual virginity of Mary to her freedom from sin after the conception of the Savior, then to freedom from sin after her birth, and at last to her freedom from original and hereditary sin [at conception]. The only thing now left is to proclaim the dogma of her assumption to heaven, which has long been a pious opinion in the Catholic Church.”<sup>29</sup>

Schaff’s prediction that the final step in the glorification of Mary would be the proclamation of the dogma of her assumption to heaven was fulfilled in 1950, that is, 57 years after his death. Schaff points out that the progressive glorification of Mary corresponded to “the progress in the worship of Mary, and the multiplication of her festivals. Her worship even overshadows the worship of Christ. She, the tender, compassionate, lovely woman, is invoked for her powerful intercession rather than her divine son. She is made the fountain of all grace, the mediatrix between Christ and the believer, and is virtually put in the place of the Holy Ghost. There is scarcely an epithet of Christ which devout Roman Catholics do not apply to the Virgin.”<sup>30</sup>

### **Definition of the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception**

Some people confuse the Catholic dogma of the *immaculate conception* of Mary with the biblical doctrine of the *virginal conception* of Christ. Jesus’ conception was most assuredly immaculate (sinless), but the Catholic Church applies this dogma to Mary, not to Jesus. It claims that Mary was preserved from original sin from the moment of her conception to the end of her life. How this allegedly happened will be explained below.

The official dogma of the Immaculate Conception, known as *Ineffabilis Deus*, was promulgated by Pope Pius IX on December 8, 1854, on the occasion of the Feast of the Conception. In the presence of more than 200 cardinals, bishops, and other dignitaries, Pius IX solemnly defined and promulgated this dogma, saying: “We declare, pronounce and define that the doctrine which asserts that the Blessed Virgin Mary, from the first moment of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege of almighty God, and in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, Saviour of the human race, was preserved free from every stain of original sin is a doctrine revealed

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by God and, for this reason, must be firmly and constantly believed by all the faithful.”<sup>31</sup>

### **The Glorification of Mary as a Channel of Grace and Redemption**

The promulgation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception represents the culmination of the glorification process of Mary as a channel of grace and redemption for mankind. The intent of the dogma is revealed in the encyclical *Ubi Primum* that Pius IX sent to the bishops on February 2, 1849 to solicit their opinions and to urge their cooperation in promoting the acceptance of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception that he would soon promulgate.

The encyclical contains revealing statements: “We eagerly desire that, as soon as possible, you appraise Us concerning the devotion which animates your clergy and your people regarding the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin and how ardently glows the desire that this doctrine be defined by the Apostolic See. And especially, Venerable Brethren, We wish to know what you yourselves, in your wise judgment, think and desire on this matter. . . . We are sure that it will be your pleasure to cooperate, zealously and diligently, with Our wishes and that you will hasten to supply Us with the replies which We have requested.”<sup>32</sup>

After appealing to the Bishops to accept and generate popular support for the belief in the Immaculate Conception of Mary, the encyclical continues stating: “The foundation of all Our confidence, as you know well, Venerable Brethren, is found in the Blessed Virgin Mary. For, God has committed to Mary the treasury of all good things, in order that everyone may know that *through her are obtained every hope, every grace, and all salvation*. For this is His will, that we obtain everything through Mary.”<sup>33</sup> More than six hundred prelates responded, and with the exception of four, all approved the papal definition of the Immaculate Conception.

Note that this papal encyclical clearly expresses what often Catholic apologists tend to deny, namely, the belief that through Mary “are obtained every hope, every grace, and all salvation. For this is His will, that we obtain everything through Mary.” By making Mary the dispenser of “every hope, every grace, and all salvation,” the Catholic Church elevates Mary to the redemptive place that belongs to Christ.

The new *Catechism of the Catholic Church* speaks of Mary as cooperating “in the Savior’s work of restoring supernatural life to souls. For this reason she is a mother to us in the order of grace.”<sup>34</sup> Ultimately, the heavenly ministry of Mary obscures the redemptive role of Christ be-

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cause if hope, grace, and salvation can be obtained through Mary, Christ's intercessory and redemptive ministry are hardly needed. The worship of Mary in popular piety supplants the worship of Christ. The end-result is the idolatrous worship of a *creature* rather than of the *Creator*.

### The Mechanics of the Immaculate Conception

To understand the Catholic definition of the Immaculate Conception of Mary, it is necessary to explain first the Catholic dualistic view of human nature. Simply stated, Catholics and most Protestants believe that every human being is born with a mortal body and an immortal soul. In chapter 2 we noted that in recent years numerous Catholic and Protestant scholars have rejected the Platonic dualistic view of human nature, embracing instead the biblical holistic view of body and soul.

According to the dualistic view, at conception a body is formed in the womb of a mother as a result of the insemination of a father. At the moment of the conception of the body, a soul is created and infused into the body. This process is called *animation*, that is, the implantation of an *anima* (which is the Latin term for the soul) into the body. Each soul is infused into the body with the stain of the original sin. Under normal circumstances such a stain is supposed to be removed at baptism soon after the birth of the child.

In the case of Mary, however, the stain of the original sin was not *removed* at baptism, but was *excluded* altogether from her soul at the time of conception. In other words, Mary's body was infused with a clean soul without the stain of the original sin. In addition, a special sanctity was conferred upon her that excluded from her body the presence of all depraved emotions, passions, and inclinations.

The immunity from the original sin in the soul, as well as the exclusion of inherited sin from the body, was given to Mary at conception by the same merits of Christ which cleanse believers from sin at baptism. Thus, the conception of Mary was immaculate because she was exempted from the presence of original sin in her soul and from inherited sin in her body. This is the essential meaning of the Catholic dogma of the Immaculate Conception.

This dogma goes beyond attributing sinless conception to Mary by claiming also that she lived a *totally sinless life*. As stated in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, "The Mother of God 'the All-Holy' (*Panagia*). . . [was] 'free from any stain of sin, as though fashioned by the Holy Spirit and formed as a new creature.' By the grace of God Mary *remained free of every personal sin her whole life long*."<sup>35</sup> Thus, according to the of-

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ficial Catholic teaching Mary was conceived without any trace of sin and she remained sinless during her entire life. Shortly we shall see that this teaching is clearly condemned by Scripture that teaches that “*all have sinned* and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23).

### A Long Debated Question

Catholic theologians have debated for centuries the question of the Immaculate Conception of Mary. The major divisive issue was whether Mary was sanctified, that is cleansed from sin, before or after the infusion of the soul into her body, a process known as *animation*. In the thirteenth century John Duns Scotus and the Franciscan monks promoted the view that Mary was cleansed from sin at the conception of the body and before the infusion of a soul without the stain of original sin. Thus, for them both the body and soul of Mary were never exposed to sin.

This view was opposed by Thomas Aquinas and subsequently by the Dominican monks. The reasons given by Aquinas may appear cavilous and nitpicking to a modern mind unfamiliar with hair splitting scholastic argumentations. Aquinas wrote: “The sanctification [cleansing from sin] of the Blessed Virgin cannot be understood as having taken place before animation [infusion of the soul], for two reasons. First, because the sanctification of which we are speaking, is nothing but the cleaning from original sin. . . . Secondly, because . . . before the infusion of the rational soul, the offspring conceived is not liable to sin.”<sup>36</sup>

Simply stated, Aquinas argues that Mary’s cleansing from sin took place after the infusion of the soul because it is the soul that makes a person rational and subject to sin. If both the body and soul of Mary were sinless from conception, then she would not need a Savior. Such a view, according to Aquinas, “is derogatory to the dignity of Christ” who is “the universal Savior of all.”<sup>37</sup> Mary needed a Savior like every other human being. This is an undeniable biblical truth.

The solution that Aquinas defends is that Mary was cleansed from sin after her conception and reception of the soul, but before her actual birth. In other words, Mary was immaculate, that is without sin, not from conception, but from the time of her actual birth. The difference between the two seems insignificant to a lay person, but it is most important in Catholic theology because it determines whether or not Mary was sinless from her conception or from her actual birth.

Note that for Catholics the issue is not Mary’s sinlessness. On this point they all agree that Mary was without sin. The only question that was debated is: “When did her sinlessness begin, at conception with the

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infusion of the soul, or nine months later at the time of her actual birth?” The dogma of the Immaculate Conception settled the question by declaring that Mary was sinless from the very moment of her conception.

This dogma is designed to reassure Catholic believers, as Pius IX stated, that Mary can dispense “every hope, every grace, and all salvation” because she was conceived sinlessly and lived all her life without any trace of sin. Her sinlessness qualifies her to be a Co-redeemer—a popular Catholic belief examined later in this chapter.

### **The Immaculate Conception is Derived from the Dualistic View of Human Nature**

A biblical response to this false teaching will be given shortly. At this juncture it is important to note that the whole dogma of the Immaculate Conception is based on the Platonic dualistic view of human nature according to which the soul is infused into the body at conception and leaves it at death. In chapter 2 we noted that such teaching is foreign to the Bible which teaches the holistic view of human nature.

We have seen that the Bible teaches that human nature consists of an indissoluble unity, where the body, soul, and spirit represent different aspects of the same person, and not different entities functioning independently. The soul is not infused into the body at conception, but is the animating principle of the body. Simply stated, in Scripture a living body is a living soul and a dead body is a dead soul.

The biblical holistic view of human nature removes the basis for the belief in the Immaculate Conception of Mary because it negates the notion of the infusion of the soul at conception. Nowhere does the Bible suggest that the original sin is a biological reality transmitted through the infusion of the soul at conception. Original sin is a basic moral condition of our fallen nature that influences everything in us and about us. “All have sinned and come short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23). The dogma of the Immaculate Conception represents one of the many heresies that derive from the dualistic view of human nature.

### **Historical Setting of the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception**

It is most instructive to look at the historical setting of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception *Ineffabilis Deus* promulgated in 1854 by Pope Pius IX. His pontificate, the longest in history, from 1846 to 1878, was a paradoxical time for the papacy. The greatest of

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these paradoxes was that while Pius IX was losing his territorial and temporal power, he tried to compensate by solidifying his religious power by promulgating dogmas to prove his authority and infallibility (a movement known as “ultramontanism”).

In 1849 Pius IX was expelled from Rome and was unable to return until the French intervened in his favor. After his restoration, instead of continuing some of the reformatory measures, he tried to rule as an absolute monarch. He clashed with the leading European powers of his time until on September 20, 1870, the troops of the new Kingdom of Italy took over the papal states.

Justo Gonzales, one of the most respected church historians of our time, notes that “While losing his power, Pius IX insisted on reaffirming it, even if this could be done only in religious matters. Thus, in 1854, he proclaimed the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. According to that dogma, Mary herself, by virtue of her election to be the mother of the Savior, was kept pure from all taint of sin, including original sin. This was a question that Catholic theologians had debated for centuries, without reaching any conclusion.”<sup>38</sup>

Gonzales continues, “the most significant fact from a historical point of view was that, in proclaiming this dogma as the doctrine of the church, Pius IX was the first pope ever to define a dogma on his own, without the support of a council. In a way the bull *Ineffabilis*, promulgating the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of Mary, was a testing of the waters to see how the world would react. Since the bull did not meet much opposition, the stage was set for the promulgation of papal infallibility [in 1870].”<sup>39</sup>

Historians Nicholas Perry and Loreto Echeverria emphasize the significant link between the two dogmas of Immaculate Conception and Papal Infallibility. They write: “Far from having coincidental gestation, the two dogmas are reinforcing and complementary. They are the consummation of an alliance between Rome and ‘Mary’ since earliest times. As the invisible maternal supervisor of the Church becomes equal to God—or as ‘pure’ as the Second Person of the Trinity—so her visible paternal counterpart makes a commensurate advance. When the world questions the Chair of Peter and its prerogatives, celestial confirmation is required. In turn, this supernatural factor can be ratified only by an incontrovertible, superhuman voice: that of infallibility.”<sup>40</sup>

With the success of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, Pius IX subsequently called the First Vatican Council which formally declared papal infallibility. The Immaculate Conception was the first Catholic dogma that was defined solely by papal authority. The Pope did ask for

the Bishops' input in the encyclical *Ubi Primum*, but in promulgating the dogma he made no mention of representing the views of the church at large. As stated by Maurice Hemington in his classic book *Hail Mary? The Struggle for Ultimate Womanhood in Catholicism*, the dogma of the Immaculate Conception "was a solitary decree. Mary was used as an instrument for solidifying hierarchical power in Catholicism."<sup>41</sup>

From a historical perspective, the promulgation of the dogma of Immaculate Conception in 1854 represents a single-handed attempt by Pope Pius IX to prove his papal authority on religious matters at a time when the political power of the popes was coming to an end. The end-result is that the Catholic Church today is plagued by unbiblical dogmas that cannot be undone because they were promulgated *ex cathedra*, that is, as official infallible papal pronouncements.

### A BIBLICAL RESPONSE TO THE DOGMA OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

Catholic sources acknowledge the lack of direct biblical support for the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. For example, *The Catholic Encyclopedia* admits that "no direct or categorical and stringent proof of the dogma can be brought forward from Scripture."<sup>42</sup> Two major texts are generally used to support the Immaculate Conception: Genesis 3:15 and Luke 1:28. We shall see that neither of these texts even alludes to this doctrine.

#### **Genesis 3:15: Is Mary the Woman at Enmity with the Serpent?**

Catholics believe that "the first scriptural passage [Gen 3:15] which contains the promise of the redemption, mentions also the Mother of the Redeemer." "I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you will bruise his heel" (Gen 3:15). Catholic sources generally interpret the enmity between Satan and the woman as representing the conflict between Satan and Mary. *The Catholic Encyclopedia* interprets the text saying: "The woman at enmity with the serpent is Mary. God puts enmity between her and Satan in the same manner and measure as there is enmity between Christ and the seed of the serpent. Mary was ever to be in that exalted state of soul which the serpent had destroyed in man, i.e. in sanctifying grace. Only the continual union of Mary with grace explains sufficiently the enmity between her and Satan. The Proto-evangelium [Gen 3:15], therefore, in the original

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text contains a direct promise of the Redeemer, and in conjunction therewith the manifestation of the masterpiece of His Redemption, the perfect preservation of His virginal Mother from original sin.”<sup>43</sup>

### **Was Mary the Sinless Eve?**

The identification of the woman at enmity with the serpent with Mary cannot be justified by the literal sense of the text. “The literal sense is that Eve (not Mary) and her posterity will win their moral warfare against Satan and his offspring, culminating in the crushing victory of the Messiah over Satan and his hosts. The ‘woman’ is obviously Eve, the ‘offspring’ are clearly the literal offspring of Eve (cf. Gen 4:1, 25), and the victory is the victory of Christ over Satan (cf. Rom 16:20).”<sup>44</sup>

Even allowing by extension for an indirect application of the woman to Mary, it is a gigantic leap from this to her immaculate conception, which is not implied in the text. The fact is that no necessary or logical connection exists between Mary being the mother of the Messiah and her sinless conception. A possible analogy between Eve and Mary suggests not Mary’s “sinlessness,” but the opposite. If Mary is analogous to Eve, then she shared in Eve’s sinful human nature. Jesus, her son, would have turned out like Cain, had he also been conceived through human sperm. But the miracle of the incarnation is that Jesus could share in our human nature without sharing in our “sinful nature,” because He was not conceived like Cain through human sperm (Adam or Joseph), but through His Father. Because God was his Father His life was rooted in the perfection of His Father.

If Christ had had a human father, He would also have had a sinful nature like that of Adam and all his offspring. He could not have escaped the judgment of death pronounced in Eden. But Mary’s ‘egg’ was germinated not by Joseph, but by the Holy Spirit. This means that the origin of Jesus is God; consequently, He was not subject to death by inheritance. He died by choice. Christ’s voluntary death makes possible His substitutionary sacrifice.

Contrary to the divine conception of Jesus, Mary was conceived through the natural intercourse of her parents—a fact that the Catholic Church accepts; consequently she inherited a sinful nature like every human being who comes into the world. No where does the Scripture support the Catholic teaching that Mary was cleansed from all forms of sins at conception by being infused with a soul unstained by original sin. The claim that Mary was sinless from conception is a pure fabrication of the

Catholic Church necessitated by her design to elevate Mary to the same place of Christ in order to empower Her to dispense grace and salvation like her Son.

### Luke 1:28: Does “Full of Grace” Imply Sinless?

Does the salutation of the angel to Mary “Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you!” imply that she was conceived without trace of sin? This is the interpretation of the new *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: “Through the centuries the Church has become ever more aware that Mary, ‘full of grace’ through God, was redeemed from the moment of her conception. That is what the dogma of the Immaculate Conception confesses. . . . By the grace of God Mary remained free of every personal sin her whole life long.”<sup>45</sup>

The Catholic interpretation of “full of grace” as meaning that “God redeemed [Mary] from the moment of her conception . . . [and] by the grace of God Mary remained free of personal sin her whole life,” reveals a lot of inventiveness, but it poses four serious problems.

First, the phrase “full of grace” is an inaccurate translation based on the Latin Vulgate “*gratia plena*.” The original Greek *kecharitomene* is correctly translated even by the Catholic New American Bible simply as “favored one.” The Vulgate’s inaccurate translation became the basis for the idea that Mary was extended grace throughout her life. Such grace enabled her to live without sin—a teaching that is foreign to Scripture.

Second, the context indicates that the salutation of the angel refers only to her state at that moment, not to her entire life. It does not affirm that she was full of grace from conception to translation. Rather the context shows that Mary was “highly favored” (KJV) because God gave her the privilege to give birth to His Son.” In verses 30-31, the angel says to Mary: “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.” Later Elizabeth greets Mary, saying: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!” (Luke 1:42).

These texts indicate that Mary was highly favored and blessed because God chose her to bear His Son. As Norval Geldenhuys comments: “God had given her His free and uncaused grace in a unique measure by choosing her as mother of His Son.”<sup>46</sup> Even a cursory reading of the context reveals that the grace she received for the task of being the mother of the Messiah did not prevent her from sinning during her entire life.

Third, the emphasis on the fullness of grace is misleading since even Catholic apologists acknowledge that Mary was a sinner in need of

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redemption. Ludwig Ott says that Mary “required redemption and was redeemed by Christ.”<sup>47</sup> To suggest that Mary was prevented from inheriting sins is biblically unwarranted. Instead, she was empowered by God’s grace to overcome sin.

Finally, the same term for “*grace-charito*” is used for believers in general. In their excellent treatment of Mariology entitled *The Cult of the Virgin*, Miller and Samples note that the Greek term for “full of grace”—*charito*—“is used of believers in Ephesians 1:6 without implying sinless perfection. So again nothing about Luke 1:28 establishes the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. That Mary was uniquely favored to be the mother of her Lord is the only necessary inference.”<sup>48</sup>

### **Mary Acknowledged her Need of a Savior**

In the Magnificat, Mary praised God as her Redeemer by singing, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and *my spirit rejoices in God my Savior*” (Luke 1:47; Emphasis supplied). The reason Mary called God *my Savior*, is because she knew that as a descendant of Adam, she was born in a sinful condition. The dogma of the Immaculate Conception undermines the integrity of her human nature, reducing her to an image and making her life a phantasm. It implies that Mary was never a true human being and never lived a true human life.

In the Bible redemption is not a miraculous intervention accomplished at conception without human participation. The Holy Spirit does not work impersonally without a free, human participation. Christ’s sinlessness was not mechanically guaranteed by his miraculous conception, but was His own achievement during His entire life through the enabling power of the Holy Spirit.

### **Conclusion**

The glorification of Mary as sinless from conception is a heresy that detracts from the uniqueness of the Son of God by placing a creature on equal footing with Him. *Sinlessness* is a quality reserved for Christ alone. *Savior* is a name that only Christ deserves. The angel instructed Joseph, saying: “You shall call his name Jesus, for he *will save* his people from their sins” (Matt 1:21; Emphasis supplied). Jesus is the only person who was born, lived, and died without sin. He is the only one qualified to save us from our sins because He alone is God. The dogma of the Immaculate Conception is Scripturally baseless, historically unjustified, and doctrinally unsound.

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**PART 3**  
**THE BODILY ASSUMPTION OF MARY**

Another significant indication of the Catholic Church's attempt to elevate Mary to the same place of Christ is the dogma of the Bodily Assumption of Mary to heaven. The parallel between Christ and Mary is self-evident. The biblical teaching that Jesus ascended into heaven as King of Kings is matched by the Catholic claim that Mary was assumed into heaven to serve as "Queen over all things."

The Roman Catholic dogmas concerning Mary reveal a progressive glorification of her status. We noted how Mary has been progressively elevated from being sinless to being immaculately conceived, to being bodily assumed into heaven, to being venerated as a Co-redeemer and mediator of grace (*Mediatrix*) and Queen of Heaven.

The growing exaltation and worship of Mary is pressuring the pope to promulgate a final dogma that would officially elevate Mary to the status of Co-redeemer. This teaching will be discussed more fully in the following section of this chapter. Over six million Catholics from nearly 150 countries have already signed a petition drive urging the pope to make a formal definition of the final Marian dogma "that the Virgin Mary is Co-redeemer with Jesus and cooperates fully with her Son in the redemption of humanity."<sup>49</sup> If and when the Pope promulgates this dogma declaring Mary to be *Co-Redemptrix—Co-redeemer* and *Mediatrix—Mediator* of All Graces and *Advocate* for God's people, the glorification of Mary will have reached the ultimate stage of her deification.

### **The Promulgation of the Dogma of the Bodily Assumption of Mary**

This dogma of the bodily Assumption of Mary was officially promulgated by Pope Pius XII on November 1, 1950—a day observed by Catholics as "All Saints Feast." Pius XII solemnly declared: "By the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, of the blessed Apostles Peter and Paul, and by Our own authority, We pronounce, declare, and define it to be a divinely revealed dogma: that the Immaculate Mother of God, the ever Virgin Mary, having completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory."<sup>50</sup>

To ensure that this dogma would be accepted without questioning, Pius XII added this frightening warning: "If anyone, which God forbid, should dare willfully to deny or call into doubt that which we have defined,

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let him know that he has fallen away completely from the divine and Catholic faith. . . . It is forbidden to any man to change this, Our declaration, pronouncement, and definition or, by rash attempt, to oppose and counter it. If any man should presume to make such an attempt, let him know that he will incur the wrath of Almighty God and of the Blessed Apostles Peter and Paul.”<sup>51</sup>

The *Catechism* expands the meaning of this dogma, saying: “The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin is a singular participation in her Son’s Resurrection and an anticipation of the resurrection of other Christians: ‘In giving birth you [Mary] kept your virginity; in your Dormition [sleeping in the grave] you did not leave the world, O Mother of God, but were joined to the source of Life. You conceived the living God and by your prayers, will deliver our souls from death.’”<sup>52</sup>

By promulgating the dogma of the Bodily Assumption of Mary, Pius XII succeeded in elevating Mary to the highest position as Queen of Heaven. “Mary finally attained to the highest crown of her privileges, that she would be immune from the corruption of the tomb, and in the same manner as her Son, she would overcome death and be taken away soul and body to the supernatural glory of heaven, where as Queen she would shine forth at the right hand of the same Son of hers, the Immortal King of Ages.”<sup>53</sup>

### **Is Mary Portrayed as the Queen in Heaven in Revelation?**

The belief in the enthronement of Mary as the Queen of Heaven is clearly negated by the vision of the throne of God found in Revelation chapters four and five. In the vision John saw God seated on the throne, surrounded by twenty-four elders and four living creatures. Christ, the Lamb, is on the throne. Thousand of angels encircle the throne. There is no Queen of Heaven next to Christ’s throne, for that would be an abomination to the Lord.

Jeremiah warns the people of Judah against the worship of the Queen of Heaven, saying: “Thus says the Lord of host, the God of Israel: You and your wives have declared in your mouths, and have fulfilled with your hands, saying, ‘We will surely perform our vows that we have made, to burn incense to the *queen of heaven* and to pour libation to her.’ Therefore hear the word of the Lord . . . Behold, I am watching over them for evil and not for good; all the men of Judah . . . shall be consumed by the sword and by famine, until there is an end of them” (Jer 44:25-27).

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The reason for God's condemnation of those who promote such worship of the Queen of Heaven is that He alone is to be worshipped and glorified. "Look to Me, and be saved, all you ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other" (Is 45:22; NKJV). Those who promote the worship of false gods like that of the Queen of Heaven are warned in Revelation that they "shall also drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is poured out full strength into the cup of His indignation" (Rev 14:10).

### **The Backlash of the Second Vatican Council**

The glorification by Pius XII of Mary as Queen of Heaven at the right hand of her Son experienced a delayed backlash at the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). In an article in *Time* magazine entitled "Cover Stories: Handmaid or Feminist?" Richard Osling writes: "Prior to Vatican II, Popes had proclaimed Mary the Co-Redeemer with Jesus. During the council, bishops were under pressure from the faithful to ratify the Co-Redeemer doctrine; instead they issued no decree on Mary at all. Rather she was incorporated into the Constitution on the Church, a move that placed the Virgin among the community of believers in Christ rather than in anything resembling a co-equal position."<sup>54</sup>

Osling explains that a reason for down playing the role of Mary at Vatican II, was "a concern over making Mary into a competitive divinity, a tradition common to many of the pagan religions that Christianity superseded. Remarks Warner: 'The great terror is that she will be worshipped above her son.'<sup>55</sup>

The concern of Vatican II was justified; popular piety has largely ignored the caution of the Council, choosing instead to venerate and often worship her above Christ Himself. In my homeland, Italy, for example, far more Catholics display in their homes the icon of the Sacred Heart of Mary than that of Christ. The popular prayer following the Rosary says: "Hail Holy Queen, mother of mercy, hail our life, our sweetness and our hope." This is the way pious believers offer their lives and hopes to the Queen of Heaven.

In the official litany of the Catholic Liturgy, Mary is called "Queen of Angels, Queen of Patriarchs, Queen of Prophets, Queen of Apostles, Queen of Martyrs, Queen of Confessors, Queen of Virgins, Queen of all Saints, Queen conceived without original sin, Queen assumed into heaven, Queen of the most holy Rosary, Queen of Peace"<sup>56</sup> The elevation of Mary to the role of Queen of Heaven and of all the believers who ever lived, is a pure Catholic fabrication, condemned in Scripture as an abomination to the Lord.

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**Pagan Worship of the Queen of Heaven**

The worship of the Queen of Heaven can be traced back to ancient times. We noted earlier that unfaithful Israelites worshipped the Queen of Heaven. “The children gather wood, the fathers kindle fire, and the women knead dough, to make cakes for the queen of heaven; and they pour out drink offerings to other gods, to provoke me to anger” (Jer 7:18). This is reminiscent of the ancient Phoenicians who called the moon Ahstoreth or Astarte, the Queen of Heaven.

In his article “Mary and the Pope: Remarks on the Dogma of the Assumption of Mary,” Prof. Hermann Sasses clearly acknowledges that “The Marian cult was the Christian replacement for the cults of the great female deities, which played such a great role in the life of pre-Christian pagan humanity, the holy virgins and divine mothers, the Babylonian Ishtar, whose cult had already forced its way into Israel, the Syrian Queen of Heaven, the great mother of Asia Minor, the Egyptian Isis, whose favor in the West is testified to by the long use of the name ‘Isidor’ among Jews and Christians. But unfortunately it was not only a Christian replacement for a pagan religion, it was likewise a pagan religion in Christian guise. The Marian cult is the last of the great cults of a female divinity, which made its way from the Orient into the Roman world, since in the second Punic War Rome had adopted the cult of the Magna Mater of Asia Minor.”<sup>57</sup>

Prof. Sasses continues, noting that the reason for the triumph of the veneration of Mary in Christendom is to be found in the fact that sinful man “perverts God’s order, because he does not acknowledge God as the Lord, and would rather make God subject to him, thus, the need for a feminine deity is of the essence of the natural, fallen man.”<sup>58</sup> A female deity devised to meet human needs can be more easily manipulated because, after all, she is tender Mother God, not the uncompromising Father God of the Bible.

**ARGUMENTS FROM SCRIPTURE FOR  
THE ASSUMPTION OF MARY**

The dogma of Mary’s bodily assumption to heaven is an amazing dogma which the Catholic Church defends by appealing to both Scripture and tradition. But in actual fact, this dogma has no Biblical or historical support. Noted defenders of this Catholic dogma acknowledge this fact. For example, Catholic apologist Ludwig Ott admits that “direct and express scriptural proofs are not to be had.”<sup>59</sup> Similarly Roman Catholic writer Eamon Duffy concedes that “there is, clearly, no biblical or historical

evidence for it . . .”<sup>60</sup> Yet some Catholic scholars still seek to find indirect support in a few Bible texts which we will briefly examine.

### **Does Matthew 27:52-53 Support the Assumption of Mary?**

The opening of the graves after Jesus’ resurrection which caused some saints to arise suggests to some Catholics the “probability” of the bodily assumption of Mary. Ott argues that “If the justified of the Old Covenant were called to perfection of salvation immediately after the conclusion of the redemptive work of Christ, then it is possible and probable that the Mother of the Lord was called to it also.”<sup>61</sup>

This interpretation is discredited by two major considerations. First, the text speaks only that “many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised” (Matt 27:52). We are not told if these saints were resuscitated like Lazarus or resurrected in their immortal bodies to be translated to heaven after completing their witnessing mission. If they were resurrected immortal, they would represent the “first fruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Cor 15:20). But Paul applies this phrase exclusively to Christ’s resurrection, though he lists the various appearances of Christ. It is surprising that the resurrection of some saints at the time of Christ’s resurrection is mentioned only by Matthew. If these saints were eventually translated to heaven, such an important event could hardly have escaped the attention of New Testament writers.

A second important point is that Mary is not mentioned in the group that was raised nor does the Bible ever suggest that she was raised at a later time. So this text offers no support whatsoever to the belief that Mary was bodily assumed into heaven.

### **Does Revelation 12:1-6 Support the Assumption of Mary?**

Revelation speaks of a woman who “brought forth a male child, one who was to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne” (Rev 12:5). Some Catholic authors maintain that this woman represents the mother of Christ who was assumed to heaven.<sup>62</sup>

This interpretation cannot be supported by this passage for two major reasons. First, the woman represented is not Mary, but the Church that was protected by God during a prophetic period of 1260 days. The dragon tried “to sweep her away with the flood” of persecutions, but he did not succeed because God protected her.

Second, it was not the woman, but Christ who “was caught up to God and to his throne” (Rev 12:5). An objective reading of the text can-

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not support the belief in Mary's bodily assumption to heaven. Likewise, the celestial imagery of "a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars" (Rev 12:1), can hardly depict Mary, the Queen of Heaven, as portrayed in the European Flag. The reason is simple. In Revelation, the woman is not "caught up to God" in heaven, but she "fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, in which to be nourished for one thousand two hundred and sixty days" (Rev 12:6).

It is evident that Catholic theologians are grasping for proof texts to defend the bodily assumption of Mary to heaven. Such texts do not exist because the Bible clearly teaches that only Christ ascended to heaven and was exalted at the right hand of God" (Acts 2:33). To claim that Mary rose from the dead and was taken to heaven to be accorded a status similar to that of Christ ultimately denigrates Christ's unique redemptive role.

### ARGUMENTS FROM TRADITION FOR THE ASSUMPTION OF MARY

The dogma of the Assumption of Mary lacks not only biblical support, but also early Christian evidence. No early Christian writer ever claimed to have seen a bodily relic of Mary and no city ever claimed to have Mary's remains. By contrast, everyone seems to know that the graves of Peter and Paul were in Rome and those of John and Timothy in Ephesus.

For centuries the early church was completely silent regarding Mary's end. The first mention is by Epiphanius, a native of Palestine who moved to Cyprus in 390 where he was elected Bishop of Salamis. He specifically states that no one knows what actually happened to Mary. He wrote: "But if some think us mistaken, let them search the Scriptures. They will not find Mary's death; they will not find whether she died or did not die; they will not find whether she was buried or was not buried . . . Scripture is absolutely silent on the end of Mary . . . For my own part, I do not dare to speak, but I keep my own thoughts and I practice silence . . . for her end no-one knows."<sup>63</sup>

How then did the teaching of the Bodily Assumption of Mary become so prominent that eventually it was declared a dogma in 1950? The answer is to be found in the circulation of an apocryphal Gospel toward the end of the fifth century known as the *Transitus Beatae Mariae* (The Journeys of the Blessed Mary). This apocryphal Gospel gave rise to a score of *Transitus* accounts in Coptic, Greek, Latin, Syriac, Arabic, Ethiopic, and Armenian.

The first Church father to affirm explicitly the assumption of Mary is Gregory of Tours in 590 A. D. He based his teaching on the apocryphal *Transitus Beatae Mariae*. The problem is that the *Transitus* literature is regarded by all serious historians as a complete fabrication. Catholic Mariologist Juniper Carol explicitly states: “The *Transitus* literature is admittedly valueless as history, as an historical report of Mary’s death and corporeal assumption; under that aspect the historian is justified in dismissing it with a critical distaste.”<sup>64</sup> In a similar vein, noted Catholic theologian Karl Rahner acknowledges that “there is nothing of any historical value in such apocryphal works.”<sup>65</sup>

### Apocryphal *Transitus* Literature Condemned by Popes

Contrary to the claim of Pope Pius XII that the Assumption of Mary is “a divinely revealed truth dogma,” the historical reality is that the Catholic Church has developed this teaching on the basis of heretical writings which were officially condemned by the early Church. Sometime between 494 and 496 A. D. Pope Gelasius issued a decree entitled *Decretum de Libris Canonicis Ecclesiasticis et Apocryphis*, in which he officially set forth the distinction between canonical writings to be accepted and the apocryphal writings to be rejected. Among the apocryphal writings to be rejected, Gelasius includes *Liber qui appellatur Transitus, id est Assumptio Sanctae Mariae, Apocryphus* (The Apocryphal Book which is called *Transitus*, which is the Assumption of Holy Mary).<sup>66</sup>

Pope Gelasius explicitly condemns the *Transitus* literature and the teaching they promote, saying: “These and writings similar to these . . . have not only been rejected but also banished from the whole Roman and Apostolic Church and with their authors and followers have been condemned forever under the indissoluble bond of anathema.”<sup>67</sup>

It is noteworthy that this entire decree and its condemnation was reaffirmed by Pope Hormisdas in the sixth century around A.D. 520.<sup>68</sup> These historical facts prove that the early Church viewed the assumption teachings of the *Transitus* literature to be a heresy worthy of condemnation, and not as a legitimate expression of the pious belief of the faithful.

The condemnation of the *Transitus* literature may explain why prior to the seventh and eighth centuries there is a complete patristic silence on the doctrine of the Assumption of Mary. The renown Catholic liturgist, Gregory Dix, points out that “In Rome none of the five great festivals of our Dear Woman are older than 700 A.D. At that time the festivals of the Purification, the Annunciation, Assumption and Birth of Mary were taken over by Pope Sergius I, a Syrian from Byzantium. The Immaculate

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Conception developed as a festival and doctrine in the west first in Anglo-Saxon England, in the early eleventh century, on the basis of an older and different form of Byzantine origin.”<sup>69</sup>

### Conclusion

In 1950 Pius XII declared the dogma of the bodily assumption of Mary to be revealed by God. But our study has shown that such dogma lacks both biblical and historical support. The only ground Catholics have for believing that this dogma is “infallible” is because the Church declares it. The above facts have shown that the claim of infallibility is completely groundless.

How can a pope promulgate a dogma to be supposedly infallible, when earlier popes condemned its teaching as heretical? How can an early papal decree anathematize those who believed in the assumption of Mary as taught in an apocryphal Gospel, when now papal decrees condemn those who disbelieve it? The conclusion is that teachings such as Mary’s bodily assumption to heaven derive from legendary traditions of men, and not from biblical revelation.

## PART 4 THE MEDIATORSHIP AND REDEMPTIVE ROLES OF MARY

Another significant Catholic attempt to elevate Mary to a position similar to that of Christ can be seen in the push to proclaim the final Marian dogma dealing with Mary’s mediatorship and redemptive roles. Up to the present time the Catholic Church has defined four major Marian dogmas as central truths: the Motherhood of God (*teotokos*) proclaimed at the Council of Ephesus in 431, the Perpetual Virginity of Mary proclaimed at the Lateran Synod in 649, the Immaculate Conception proclaimed by Pope Pius IX on December 8, 1854, and the Bodily Assumption to Heaven proclaimed by Pope Pius XII on November 1, 1950.

Many Catholic believe that now is the time during the climax of the universally designated “Age of Mary,” to proclaim and define the fifth and final Marian dogma, that is, *Mary’s universal mediation as Co-redemptrix (Co-redemptress), Mediatrix of all grace, and Advocate for the People of God.*

An international lay movement, headed by *Vox Populi Mariae Mediatrici* (The Voice of the People for Mary Mediatrix) has already collected over 7 million hand-signed petitions from over 155 countries.

The petitions are being sent to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith at a rate of over 100,000 per month. These Catholics who are urging the pope to promulgate this dogma, can hardly be called a lunatic fringe, since they include 43 cardinals and over 550 bishops.

*Vox Populi* believes that the Marian dogma of *Co-redemptrix, Mediatrix, and Advocate* would answer the questions: What is Mary doing in heaven, body and soul? If she is Queen of Heaven, how does she rule her subjects? To answer these questions, they are asking the pope to make an infallible statement that “the Virgin Mary is Co-redeemer with Jesus and co-operates fully with her Son in the redemption of humanity.”<sup>70</sup> If this were done, Mary would be a vastly more powerful figure, something close to the fourth member of the Holy Trinity and the primary female face through which Christians experience the divine.

It is uncertain whether or not Pope Benedict XVI will promulgate this final Marian dogma, but the fact remains that there is a swelling support for crowning Mary with the dogmatic title of *Co-redemptrix, Mediatrix, and Advocate*.

### Mary as Mediatrix of All Graces

According to Catholic teachings, “although Christ is the sole Mediator between God and man (1Tim 2:5), since He alone by His death on the Cross fully reconciled mankind with God, this does not exclude a secondary mediatorship, subordinate to Christ.”<sup>71</sup>

Mary was called “mediatrix” in the 1854 bull *Ineffabilis* of Pope Pius IX, the same document that proclaimed Mary’s Immaculate Conception. Catholic authorities take the term to mean two things: “1. Mary is the Mediatrix of all graces by her co-operation in the Incarnation. And 2. Mary is the Mediatrix of all graces by her intercession in Heaven.”<sup>72</sup>

In his encyclical *Magnae Dei Matrix* (Great Mother of God) promulgated on September 8, 1892, Pope Leo XIII declares: “Nothing whatever of that immense treasure of all graces, which the Lord brought us . . . is granted to us save through Mary, so that, just as no one can come to the Father on high except through the Son, so almost in the same manner, no one can come to Christ except through His Mother.”<sup>73</sup>

The claim that no one can come to Christ except through Mary, is clearly contradicted by Jesus’ words: “I am the door; if any one enters by me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture” (John 10:9). “No one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father [not by Mary]” (John 6:65). “Come unto me, all who labor and are heavy laden,

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and I will give you rest” (Matt 11:28). Christ’s invitations are always direct and personal. They admit of no intermediary. He taught us to approach God directly as “Our Father who are in Heaven,” not as “Our Queen who art in Heaven.” To interpose human mediators between God or Christ and the believer, means to misconstrue the nature of God, making Him into a punitive and unapproachable Being to be feared rather than to be loved. Ultimately we end up worshipping the intercessors of human creation, rather than the God of divine revelation.

### Mary as Co-Redeemer with Christ

Over the years the term *Co-redemptrix*—*Co-redemptress* has come to denote a more active role of Mary in the redemption offered by and through her Son. In the final chapter of the Constitution of the Church *Lumen Gentium*, dedicated to Mary, the Second Vatican Council declares, “in suffering with Him as he died on the Cross, she cooperated in the work of the Savior, in an altogether singular way, by obedience, faith, hope, and burning love, to restore supernatural life to souls.”<sup>74</sup>

The Council’s text strongly emphasizes Mary’s suffering at the Cross with her Son. “She endured with her only begotten Son, the intensity of His suffering, joining herself with His sacrifice in her mother’s heart, and lovingly consenting to the immolation of this victim, born of her.”<sup>75</sup>

According to Vatican II, the redemptive role of Mary which began on this earth continues in heaven: “Taken up to heaven she did not lay aside this salvific duty, but by her constant intercession continued to bring us the gifts of eternal salvation.” For this reason “the Virgin is invoked by the Church under the titles of Advocate, Auxiliatrix, Adjutrix and Mediatrix”<sup>76</sup>

The title of Co-redemptrix does not appear in the Council’s texts. “Ecumenical sensitivity” was undoubtedly a prime factor in its avoidance. The concept, however, is conveyed several times in *Lumen Gentium* which speaks of Mary as “under and with him [Christ], *servicing the mystery of redemption*, by the grace of Almighty God” and as “freely cooperating in the *work of man’s salvation*.” The document further speaks of the “*union of the mother with the Son in the work of salvation*.”<sup>77</sup>

### The Usage of Co-Redemptrix by John Paul II

The reluctance of Vatican II to describe Mary as *Co-redemptrix* was overcome by John Paul II who uses the term frequently in his pub-

lished statements and speeches. If the subject of Marian co-redemption has regained respectability after a long postconciliar “dark night,” this is due in no small measure to the vigorous and persistent teaching of Pope John Paul II—a man who was totally dedicated to Mary. In greeting the sick after the general audience of 8 September 1982, the Pope said: “Mary, though conceived and born without the taint of sin, participated in a marvelous way in the sufferings of her divine Son, in order to be *Co-redemptrix of humanity*.”<sup>78</sup>

In an address at the Marian shrine in Guayaquil, Ecuador, John Paul II said that “by accepting and assisting at the sacrifice of her son, Mary is *the dawn of Redemption*; . . . Crucified spiritually with her crucified Son (cf. Gal. 2:20), she contemplated with heroic love the death of her God, she “lovingly consented to the immolation of this Victim which she herself had brought forth. . . . She was in a special way close to the Cross of her Son, she also had to have a privileged experience of his Resurrection. In fact, Mary’s role as *Co-redemptrix* did not cease with the glorification of her Son.”<sup>79</sup>

In commemorating the sixth centenary of the canonization of St. Bridget of Sweden on 6 October 1991, John Paul said: “Brigitta looked to Mary as her model and support in the various moments of her life. She spoke energetically about the divine privilege of Mary’s Immaculate Conception. She contemplated her astonishing mission as Mother of the Saviour. She invoked her as the Immaculate Conception, Our Lady of Sorrows, and *Co-redemptrix*, exalting Mary’s singular role in the history of salvation and the life of the Christian people.”<sup>80</sup>

In the Apostolic Letter *Salvifici Doloris* (February 11, 1984) John Paul II combines the intensive sufferings of Mary with those of Christ, making them both the basis of our redemption: “In her [Mary], the many and intense sufferings were amassed in such an interconnected way that they were not only a proof of her unshakable faith but also a *contribution to the Redemption* of all. . . . It was on Calvary that Mary’s suffering, beside the suffering of Jesus, reached an intensity which can hardly be imagined from a human point of view but which was mysteriously and supernaturally *fruitful for the Redemption of the world*. Her ascent of Calvary and her standing at the foot of the cross together with the beloved disciple were a special sort of *sharing in the redeeming death* of her Son.”<sup>81</sup>

This citation from *Salvifici Doloris* shows how John Paul II blends together the suffering of Christ with that of Mary to make them “*fruitful for the Redemption of the world*.” Many other statements from John

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Paul II could be cited expressing the same belief. He contributed in no small measure to vigorously promote the co-redemptive role of Mary. He firmly believed that Mary actively participated in the redemptive mission of her Son. In his general audience of June 22, 1994, John Paul II stated: "Mary co-operated with Christ in his work of redemption, not only preparing Jesus for his mission, but also joining in his sacrifice for the salvation of all."<sup>82</sup>

### **Mary Co-operates in the Redemption of Mankind**

Catholic scholars are eager to point out that Mary's redemptive role "must not be conceived in the sense of an equation of the efficacy of Mary with the redemptive activity of Christ, the sole Redeemer of humanity (1 Tim 2:5) . . . [for] she herself required redemption and in fact was redeemed by Christ."<sup>83</sup> Nonetheless, Catholic scholars maintain that Mary participated in Christ's redemption by sharing in His suffering. "In the power of the grace of Redemption merited by Christ, Mary, by her spiritual entering into the sacrifice of her Divine Son for men, made atonement for the sins of men, and merited the application of the redemptive grace of Christ. In this manner she co-operates in the subjective redemption of mankind."<sup>84</sup>

### **ARGUMENTS FROM SCRIPTURE FOR CALLING MARY A MEDIATOR AND CO-REDEEMER**

The Scriptures offer no evidence for calling Mary a mediator and Co-redeemer. Catholic apologists acknowledge this fact. Ludwig Ott admits that "express scriptural proofs are lacking. . . . Theologians seek a biblical foundation in a mystical interpretation of John 19:26."<sup>85</sup> The text reads: "When Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple whom he loved standing near, he said to his mother, 'Woman, behold, your son!'"

The mystical Catholic interpretation takes "woman" to mean Mary as the mother of mankind. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* comments on this text, saying: "Jesus is Mary's only son, but her spiritual motherhood extends to all men whom he came to save."<sup>86</sup> The implication is that by calling Mary "woman," Jesus acknowledged her as the mediator of mankind. This mystical interpretation is so farfetched that it only weakens the case for the doctrine. It only serves to show that the Catholic scholars are searching in vain for biblical support for a doctrine derived solely from subjective speculations.

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The issue of mediation between God and the believer is very serious because only through the God-man, Christ Jesus, is a person brought into a saving relationship with God. Christ said: "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me" (John 14:6). "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace which he lavished upon us" (Eph 1:7; cf. Col 1:14). "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

"For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim 2:5). The Catholic argument that "one" in Greek (*monos*) does not mean only one (*eis*), because there are other human intercessors on earth (1 Tim 2:1-2), ignores that the text speaks of heavenly intercessors for our salvation, not of human intercessory prayers for the wellbeing of kings and rulers (1 Tim 2:1-2). The fact of human intercessors on *earth* does not imply that the presence of intercessors in heaven besides Christ.

The Catholic teaching about the mediator role of Mary presents an inherent dilemma. On the one hand it admits that Christ offers to believers all the grace and salvation that they need. But, on the other hand, many Catholic documents exalt the role of Mary as the dispenser of all graces. This is a classic example of double-talk. Either the role of Mary is superfluous or the all-sufficiency of Christ's mediation is inadequate. Ordinary Catholics who pray to Mary as their motherly mediator can hardly be expected to put all their trust and confidence in Christ as their sole Redeemer.

The only way out of this dilemma is for Catholics to recognize the fundamental biblical truth that Jesus Christ is the *only* Mediator in heaven. "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household" (Acts 16:31). This is a solid biblical truth which the Vatican continues to deny by exalting Mary as a feminine Mediator, Co-redeemer, Advocate, and the Queen of Heaven.

There is no question that Mary, as the earthly mother of Jesus, was a godly woman used by God as a channel to bring the Redeemer into this world. But to elevate Mary to a semi-divine position in heaven, ruling as the Queen of Heaven, serving as Co-redeemer, and dispensing graces, attributes to Mary the functions and prerogatives that legitimately belong only to God.

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**PART 5**  
**THE VENERATION OF MARY**

A final significant indication of the Catholic Church's attempt to elevate Mary to the same place of Christ is the popular veneration of Mary. This practice represents the natural outcome of the Marian dogmas and teachings proclaimed over the centuries by the Catholic Church. By proclaiming the perpetual virginity of Mary, her immaculate conception, her bodily assumption to heaven, her heavenly roles as Mediator and Co-redeemer, the Catholic Church has fostered the popular veneration of Mary which often far surpasses the adoration of Christ. This is evident in one of the most popular Catholic prayers, known as the "Hail Mary," which ends: "Holy Mary, Mother of God. Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death."

**Mary a Worthy Example of Purity, Love, and Piety**

As the mother of the Savior of the world, Mary unquestionably holds for ever a special place among all women and in the history of redemption. She raised Jesus in the fear of God in what may have been a dysfunctional family where the Savior was not initially accepted by his brothers and sisters. It is perfectly natural to admire Mary as the best model of female purity, love, and piety. She stands as a shining example of motherly dedication, humility, and purity. Truly she was "Blessed among the women" (Luke 1:42).

**The Unbiblical Exaltation of Mary**

The problem is that neither the Catholic nor the Greek Orthodox churches stop here. Beginning from the middle of the fifth century (the Council of Ephesus in 431 when Mary was proclaimed *Theotokos*—Mother of God), they have overstepped the biblical boundaries, transforming "the mother of the Lord" (Luke 1:43) into the Mother of God, the humble "handmaid of the Lord" (Luke 1:38) into the Queen of Heaven, the "highly favored" (Luke 1:28) into the Dispenser of Graces, the "blessed among women" (Luke 1:42) into the heavenly Co-redeemer, Mediator, and Advocate. We might say that she has been transformed from the redeemed daughter of fallen Adam into the sinless Co-redeemer of mankind.

A first, Mary was exempted from inherited sinful tendencies, later even from original sin. After centuries of debates, she was proclaimed in 1854 to have been conceived immaculately, that is, without any stain of sin. Over the centuries the veneration of Mary has gradually degenerated into the popular worship of Mary. The result is that today devout Catholics scarcely utter a *Pater Noster* without an *Ave Maria*. They turn more frequently to the compassionate, tenderhearted mother for intercessions, than to the divine Son of God because they think that through Mary any petition will be more surely answered.

### The Distinction Between Adoration and Veneration

The Catholic Church teaches that there is a basic distinction between the adoration of God, known as *latria*, the general veneration of the saints, called *dulia*, and the special veneration of Mary, called *hyperdulia*. In his book *Introduction of Mary: The Heart of Marian Doctrine and Devotion*, Prof. Mark Miravalle explains the different meanings of the three terms.

“Adoration, which is known as *latria* in classical theology, is the worship and homage that is rightly offered to God alone. It is the acknowledgement of excellence and perfection of an uncreated, divine person. . . . Veneration, known as *dulia* in classical theology, is the honor due to the excellence of a created person. . . . Under the category of veneration we see the honor and reverence that the saints rightly receive. . . .

“Within the general category of veneration we can speak of a unique level of veneration . . . classically called *hyperdulia*, [which is] the proper devotion ascribed to the Blessed Virgin Mary. *Hyperdulia* or special veneration of Mary remains completely different and inferior to adoration that is due to God alone. Devotion to Mary is never to rival in nature or in degree the adoration proper only to God. While veneration of the Blessed Virgin will always be inferior to the adoration given uniquely to God, it will always be superior and higher than devotion given to all other saints and angels.”<sup>87</sup>

This theoretical distinction between the adoration of God, the general veneration of the saints, and the special veneration of Mary exists primarily in the mind of Catholic theologians, but they are largely unknown or ignored in the devotional life of most Catholics. This is evident when we consider the prayers offered to Mary, to be cited shortly.

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## ARGUMENTS FROM SCRIPTURE FOR THE VENERATION OF MARY

### Bible Texts Used to Support the Veneration of Mary

The Catholic defense for the veneration of Mary is largely derived from her exaltation, expressed in the Marian dogmas and teachings gradually promulgated over the centuries. It is based on the roles attributed to her by the Catholic Church as Mother of God, Mediatrix, Co-redeempress, Advocate, Intercessor, and Dispenser of graces.

The Biblical support for the veneration of Mary is non-existent. The few texts that are generally used make no allusion to any form of worship due to Mary. Catholic apologist Ludwig Ott summarizes the texts used for venerating Mary above all other creatures but below God. He writes: “The Scriptural source of the special veneration due to the Mother of God is to be found in Luke 1:28: ‘Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with thee,’ in the praise of Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Ghost, Luke 1:42: ‘Blessed art thou amongst women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb,’ in the prophetic words of the Mother of God, Luke 1:48: ‘For behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed,’ in the words of the woman in the multitude, Luke 11:27: ‘Blessed is the womb that bore thee, and the paps that gave thee suck.’”<sup>88</sup>

The conclusion drawn from these texts is that “in view of her dignity as the Mother of God and her fullness of grace, a special veneration is due to Mary.”<sup>89</sup> This conclusion can hardly be drawn from a plain reading of the cited texts.

### A Biblical Response to the Veneration of Mary

The texts cited say nothing about venerating Mary above all creatures but below God. The praise of Elizabeth “Blessed are you among women” (Luke 1:42), suggests that Mary was truly “Blessed” by the favor God granted her to bear His Son. Mary acknowledges this unique privilege, saying: “Henceforth all generations will call me blessed” (Luke 1:48). But note that nothing is attributed to Mary that is not attributed to other “blessed” people in the Bible. Rebekah was blessed before leaving her home to marry Isaac: “And they blessed Rebekah, and said to her, ‘Our sister, be the mother of thousands, of ten thousands; and may your descendant possess the gates of those who hate them’” (Gen 24:60). Abimelech

blessed Isaac, saying: “You are now the blessed of the Lord” (Gen 26:29). Moses pronounced a blessing upon the entire nation of Israel: “You shall be blessed above all peoples; there shall not be a male or female barren among you or among your livestock” (Deut 7:14).

The Bible pronounces as “blessed” all people who follow God: “Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked . . . but his delight is in the law of the Lord” (Ps 1:1-2). “Blessed are all those who put their trust in Him” (Ps 2:12). Many people in Bible history were found in the “favor” of God (1 Sam 2:26; Prov 12:2). Nowhere does the Bible hint at the veneration of “blessed” people.

Contrary to Catholic teachings, Mary was not blessed *above* all women, but was the most blessed *among* all women. Even the Catholic *New American Bible* reads: “Most blessed are you *among* women” (Luke 1:42; emphasis supplied). There is a significant difference between the two because being blessed *among* women does not make Mary worthy of veneration above all other women.

### No Veneration of Mary in the New Testament

There is not a single instance in the New Testament where veneration was given to Mary. When the magi came to the manger to visit the Christ child, Matthew 2:11 declares that “they prostrated themselves and *did him homage*, not Mary (emphasis added).”<sup>90</sup> Furthermore, the Scripture clearly forbids bowing down in veneration before any creature, including angels. When John the Revelator bowed down at the feet of an angel, he was told: “You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brethren the prophets, and with those who keep the words of this book. Worship God” (Rev 22:9).

The Bible clearly teaches that we are not to make “idols” of any creature or even to bow down to them in an act of religious devotion (Ex 20:4-5). In the Catholic Church the pictures or statues of Mary are mass-produced as icons for worship purposes. They are regarded as aids to worship in the sense that the believer kneels and prays before them in order to form a mental image of the real Mary that they are worshipping. Scripture condemns as idolatry the use of visual images as aid to worship. Paul explains that idolatry involves exchanging the glory of the immortal God for images of mortal beings: “Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man” (Rom 1:22-23). To venerate Mary as the Queen of Heaven by bowing down and praying before her icon or

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statue depicting her with 12 stars around her head reminds us of the old pagan idolatrous worship of the Queen of Heaven condemned in the Bible (see Jer 7:18). It also fosters the worship of Mary, known as Mariolatry, and Mariolatry is idolatry.

### No Real Difference Between Veneration and Adoration

Despite the attempts of Catholic theologians to differentiate between the adoration reserved for God, known as *latria*, the general veneration of the saints, called *dulia*, and the special veneration of Mary, called *hyperdulia*, there are no distinctions in the devotional life of practicing Catholics. They do not shift mental gears when they move from the *Pater Noster* to the *Ave Maria*. Prayer is prayer, whether it is addressed to the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit, or Mary and the saints. The very prayers devout Catholics address to Mary hardly make a distinction between adoration and veneration. Take for example, the popular book *Novena Prayers in Honor of Our Mother of Perpetual Help*, published with the official Catholic *imprimatur*. One prayer says:

“We have no greater help,  
no greater hope than you,  
O Most Pure Virgin; help us, then,  
for we hope in you, we glory in you,  
we are your servants.  
Do not disappoint us.”<sup>91</sup>

In the same devotional book are similar prayers where the power of Mary is described as greater than Jesus. This is one of them: “Come to my aid, dearest Mother, for I recommend myself to thee. In thy hands I place my eternal salvation, and to thee I entrust my soul. Count me among thy most devoted servants; take me under thy protection, and it is enough for me. For, if thou protect me, dear Mother, I fear nothing: nor from my sins, because thou wilt obtain for the pardon of them; nor from the devil, because thou art more powerful than all hell together; *not even from Jesus, my judge, because by one prayer from thee, He will be appeased.*”<sup>92</sup>

The notion that one prayer from Mary has the magic power to appease Jesus makes Mary into a wonder working woman and denigrates Jesus into a punitive Judge who needs to be softened by His compassionate mother. Such teachings are blasphemous to say the least.

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Similar striking examples of the worship of Mary can be found in Alphonsus de Liguori's (1696-1787) famous book, *The Glories of Mary* (1750 A. D.)—a book which has been published in over 800 editions with the official Catholic approval (*imprimatur*). Liguori was canonized as a saint in 1831 by Pope Gregory XVI. The massive circulation of his book in 72 languages has played a major role in promoting absurd claims about Mary. A few examples will suffice to show the extravagant claims of the book:

“Shall we scruple to ask her to save us, when ‘the way of salvation is open to none otherwise than through Mary.’

“Many things,” says Nicephoros, “are asked from God, and are not granted: they are asked from Mary, and are obtained.” “At the command of Mary all obey—even God.”<sup>93</sup>

Statements such as these about the way of salvation being open only through Mary who has the capacity to manipulate God to do her will are repugnant, if not blasphemous, to any Christian familiar with the biblical view of salvation and of God's character. The way of salvation is open, not through Mary, but through Christ alone: “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). It is preposterous to assume that the Creator God is obliged to take orders from a human creature, Mary.

The above sampling of statements suffices to show that the theoretical distinction between the adoration of God and the veneration of Mary hardly exists at the experiential level of devout Catholics. Part of the reason is that some of the prayers to Mary exalt her above God Himself. The end result is that million of sincere Catholics worship today a goddess fabricated by their Church, rather than the God of biblical revelation.

The worship of Mary is promoted throughout the year especially through what are known as the *Feasts of the Blessed Mary*. The Catholic liturgical calendar shows that all the major facts and fictions of Mary's life are celebrated with no less than 35 Marian Feasts. Some of the annual feasts like the Annunciation, the Immaculate Conception, the Purification, and the Assumption to heaven are the counterpart of the festivals of the birth, resurrection, and ascension of Christ. The goal is to establish an unmistakable parallel between Mary and Christ, which ultimately leads devout Catholics to the worship of Mary as a semi-divine being.

## CONCLUSION

Our study of the Marian dogmas and teachings proclaimed over the centuries by the Catholic Church, has shown that there has been a gradual and growing elevation of Mary to the same place of Jesus Christ.

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The strategies underlying the promulgation of the Marian dogmas have attempted to prove that Mary shares similar qualities and functions of the Lord Himself. By proclaiming the perpetual virginity of Mary, her Immaculate Conception, her bodily assumption to heaven, her heavenly roles as mediator, Co-redeemer and dispenser of graces, the Catholic Church has fostered a popular veneration of Mary which far surpasses the adoration of Christ. This is evident, as we have seen, in some of the prayers to Mary that suggest the extraordinary influence she exerts within the Trinity.

The most serious implication of the veneration of Mary which devout Catholics experience as actual adoration is that it detracts from the majesty of Christ and the honor due to Him alone. *Every magnification of Mary ultimately results in the denigration of Christ.* By exalting the human Mother of Jesus to a heavenly channel of intercession and redemption, the Catholic Church is obstructing and rendering needless the immediate access of believers to Christ's redemptive ministry in the heavenly sanctuary.

The Lord's command and promise to those who are misled by the deceptive Marian teachings and practices is clear: "Therefore come out from them, and separate from them, says the Lord, and touch nothing unclean; then I will welcome you, and I will be a father to you, and you shall be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty" (2 Cor 6:17-18).

### NOTES TO CHAPTER 7

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4. "The Meaning of Mary," *Newsweek*, August 25, 1997, p. 36.

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6. See for example, Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *Mary; Glimpses of the Mother of Jesus*, 1995 and a collection of essays she co-edited called *Blessed One; Protestant Perspectives on Mary*, 2002. Robert Jenson defends the role of Mary in his monumental two-volume *Systematic Theology*, (1997 and 1999) and in a collection of essays he co-edited, *Mary; Mother of God*, 2004. All of these elevate the role of Mary in the Plan of Salvation.

Years of ecumenical dialogue between French Catholics and Protestants have produced a book entitled *Mary in the Plan of God and in the Communion of the Saints*, 1999. The book calls for both a Catholic and Protestant "conversion" on the subject of Mary.

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  31. *Ibid.*
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## Chapter 8

# SPEAKING IN TONGUES

Speaking in tongues, known as *glossolalia*, has been the traditional hallmark of Pentecostalism – the fastest growing religious movement on earth. The term *glossolalia*, given to the modern phenomenon of speaking in tongues in Pentecostal and charismatic churches, derives from the Greek noun *glossa*, which means “tongue, language,” and the verb *laleo*, which means “to speak.” Thus, *glossolalia* is a literal translation of the two Greek terms meaning “speaking in tongues.” Linguist William Samarin explains that the term is commonly used to denote “a meaningless but phonetically structured human utterance believed by the speaker to be a real language, but bearing no systematic resemblance to any natural language, living or dead.”<sup>1</sup>

Tongue speaking has spread in nearly every Christian denomination in recent years. Some Churches have been divided on how to handle the manifestation of “speaking in tongues.” Some churches have totally rejected it while other have quietly supported; some congregations claim to have been spiritually enriched while others have been split over it. Speaking in tongue remains a controversial subject in spite of its phenomenal growth.

One of the most prominent distinguishing characteristics of Pentecostal and charismatic movements is their emphasis on the supernatural gifts of the Holy Spirit which are supposed to manifest themselves especially in tongues’ speaking, divine healing, and prophesying. Speaking in tongues is generally seen as the normative proof of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The importance of speaking in tongues is clearly set forth in the main doctrinal tenets of the Assemblies of God, which is the largest Pentecostal church in the United States and probably the most influential Pentecostal body in the world. Article 8 of their *Statement of Fundamental Truths* reads as follows: “The Baptism of believers in the Holy Ghost is witnessed by the physical sign of speaking with other tongues as the Spirit of God gives them utterance (Acts 2:4). The speaking in tongues in this instance is the same in essence as the gift of tongues (1 Cor 12:4-10, 28), but different in purpose and use.”<sup>2</sup>

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Pentecostals and charismatics firmly believe that all believers should seek the baptism of the Holy Ghost. This baptism is different from, and subsequent to the conversion experience. The initial physical sign of this Spirit-baptism is speaking with other tongues. Every believer should try to speak in tongues as the initial evidence of the Spirit-baptism. As a prominent Pentecostal author puts it: “All believers are commanded to receive ONE experience—the baptism or filling of the Spirit. Again, physical, emotional and intellectual reactions are varied as the recipients, but again ONE evidence uniformly accompanies the experience—*The witness of the Spirit through us in other tongues.*”<sup>3</sup>

### **The Fastest Growing Segment of Christianity**

Pentecostals and Charismatics have become the fastest growing movements of Christianity. According to mission statisticians David Barrett and Todd Johnson, there were over 553 million “Pentecostal/charismatics/neocharismatic” in the world in 2003; this is almost 27% of the Christian population. Barrett and Johnson project this figure to rise to 31% by 2225.<sup>4</sup> They represent the largest force in the Christian world after Roman Catholicism.<sup>5</sup> The largest church in the world (the Yoi Do Full Gospel Church) is a Pentecostal church in Korea, pastored by David Yonggi Cho. The church attracts 240,000 at its weekly worship services. Two Pentecostal Churches in Buenos Aires together attract 150,000 each week.

Historian Vinson Synan, dean of the Regent University School of Divinity in Virginia Beach, Virginia, predicts that if the Pentecostal-Charismatic renewal movement continues at the current rate of expansion, in ten years three quarters of a billion people will swell its ranks. This represents the most far-reaching renewal movement in the history of the Christian Church.<sup>6</sup>

### **Questions about Glossolalia**

The phenomenal growth of the charismatic movements raises new questions about glossolalia. Does the modern manifestation of speaking in tongues come from God or from Satan? Is it a supernatural phenomenon or a natural stimulation of the left cerebral hemisphere? Is it identical to the gifts of the Holy Spirit manifested on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2?

Some modern charismatics claim that the present day glossolalia is different from the speaking in foreign languages at Pentecost, but similar to Paul’s description of the spiritual gift of tongues in 1 Corinthians 12–14. Are there two different speaking in tongues in the New Testament, one

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consisting of speaking in foreign languages in Acts 2 and another manifested in “ecstatic utterances” in 1 Corinthians 12-14? Does the modern glossolalia meet the criteria stated by Paul in 1 Corinthians 14 for the legitimate exercise of the gift of tongues for edifying the church? Is speaking in tongues the fulfillment of the Latter Rain promised in Joel 2:28-29?

Charismatics generally believe that glossolalia is a final and significant end-time manifestation of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit before the Second Coming of Christ. Is this claim biblically sound? These are some of the questions that thoughtful, non-charismatic Christians are asking. They are trying to make sense of the Pentecostal and charismatic renewal movements, where speaking in tongues is an essential component of their personal and corporate worship. They want to know the meaning of speaking in tongues for their personal religious experience and its purpose for the church at large.

At one time traditional Pentecostals in North America were called “holy rollers,” a term that was used pejoratively. Today charismatic tongues-speakers enjoy great popularity and respectability. Benny Him, regarded as the greatest tongue speaker and faith healer of our time, conducts an average of 24 “Miracle Crusades” each year, packing stadiums with 50,000 to 60,000 people. His TV show “This is Your Day,” is one of the most-watched Christian TV programs in the world, with viewers in 190 countries.<sup>7</sup>

### **Objectives of this Chapter**

The explosion of studies on Pentecostal and charismatic renewal movements is so vast that it is impossible even for scholars to keep abreast with the rapid pace of publications on the subject. In his book *Glossolalia: A Bibliography*, Watson E. Mills lists no fewer than 1,150 titles. The objective of this chapter is rather limited. No attempt will be made to survey the vast amount of literature; we will limit ourselves first to describing the modern phenomena of glossolalia as it developed in the twentieth century. Then, we will turn to the New Testament to determine whether or not the popular belief in tongues-speaking is biblical.

As Bible-believing Christians our commitment must be to remain true to the teaching of God’s Word. We cannot build our doctrines on personal religious experiences. Our doctrine must be based on the teachings of Scripture, not on experience. The overall objective of this chapter is to examine the modern phenomena of tongues-speaking in the light of the witness of Scripture. We want to find out if the modern glossolalia can be identified with the speaking in tongues described in Acts 2 and 1 Corinthi-

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ans 14. We seek to know whether modern glossolalia respects or violates the clear instructions given by Paul regarding the use of tongues.

In accordance with this objective, this chapter is divided into five major parts:

1. The rise of “Speaking in Tongues” in the Twentieth Century
2. Speaking in Tongues in the Gospel of Mark
3. Speaking in Tongues in Acts
4. Speaking in Tongues in 1 Corinthians 12-14
5. Speaking in Tongues Today

### PART 1 THE RISE OF “SPEAKING IN TONGUES” IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

#### **Scarce Historical Evidence for Tongue-speaking until A. D. 1900**

The evidence for tongue-speaking during much of the history of Christianity is sporadic at best. Professor George W. Dollar of Dallas Theological Seminary has labeled the evidence “an almost complete silence.” He writes: “The voice of history is that God has majored on those things which are given priority in His own Word and not on those things which men claim by experience, however hectic or calm. The voice of history, therefore, is against the modern tongue movement and would stigmatize it as being unscriptural and unhistorical phenomenon arising out of the experiences, tempers, longings, desires, and emotional impulses so common in the last century.”<sup>8</sup>

Pentecostals have questioned the accuracy of Dollar’s conclusion by pointing to evidences for the continuation of glossolalia. A major example is the second century prophetic, charismatic movement called Montanism whose evangelists uttered obscure speech during their ecstatic trances. The problem is that speaking in tongues by sectarian Montanists drew stern criticism from both church leaders and pagan philosophers. Church leaders condemned Montanism because of the heretical teaching of Montanus, the founder of the movement. Claiming to be the incarnation of the Holy Spirit, he urged his followers to assemble in the city of Pepuza, Phrygia, to await for the end of the world. Montanus and his followers were expelled from the church because of their claim to have received revelations superior to the Bible.

Montanism was also strongly criticized by pagan philosophers. For example, the famous anti-Christian polemist Celsus, who composed his

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*True Discourse* in the early days of Montanism around A. D. 178, ridiculed the Montanist prophets for delivering their message of hell and brimstone by frequent “incomprehensible, incoherent, and utterly obscure utterances, the meaning of which no intelligent person could discover.” What Celsus found particularly offensive was the use of meaningless and nonsensical gibberish that “gave the chance to any fool or sorcerer to take the words in whatever sense he likes.”<sup>9</sup>

The awareness that tongue-speaking was exposing Christianity to unnecessary, negative criticism influenced church leaders to frown upon ecstatic utterances. The result was the cessation of glossolalia. In the fourth century the renowned preacher Chrysostom (347-407) comments on 1 Corinthians 12 and 14, saying: “This whole place is very obscure; but the obscurity is produced by our ignorance of the facts referred to and by their cessation, being such as then used to occur, but now no longer take place.”<sup>10</sup>

“If tongues and related phenomena could not be relied upon to authenticate Christianity, then the churches had to find something which could. Paul already pointed the direction here. The ‘fruit of the Spirit’ is not visible in tongues, prophecies, healing, and so on, as much as in ‘love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control,’ that is to say, in Christian behavior (Gal 5:22-23). These are self-authenticating. They do not need to be validated before they can serve as proofs of the superiority of Christianity.”<sup>11</sup>

### **The “Long Drought” of Glossolalia**

Historians speak of the “long draught” in the manifestation of tongues-speaking from the third to the seventeenth century. None of the Reformers showed any interest in glossolalia. On the contrary, Luther took some very hard swipes at the charismatic Zwickau Prophets for elevating their subjective experience of the Spirit above Scripture. He told them: “Nothing that you have advanced is based upon Holy Scripture, it is all a mere fable.” When one of the zealous prophets shouted back, “The Spirit, the Spirit,” Luther replied: “I slap your spirit on the snout.”<sup>12</sup>

Tongues-speaking was not reintroduced until the seventeenth century, that is, after what is called “the long drought.” It recurred in connection with the revival movements of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It accompanied the Wesleyan revivals, the Great Awakening of the 1740s, and the frontier revivals of the early 1800s. Generally glossolalia started conservatively and gathered momentum and increased in emotional fervor

as the revivals reached their climax. As soon as the revivals lost steam, speaking in tongues also declined.

Glossolalia must be seen as a secondary feature of revivalism. It broke out or faded out according to the rise and decline of the larger revivals. Not until the twentieth century did the tongues-speaking movement make a lasting and far-reaching impact on the church as a whole.

### **First Wave: Old Pentecostalism or Classic Pentecostalism**

During the twentieth century the charismatic movement has experienced three “waves” of development. The “first wave” appeared around 1900 and manifested itself in the traditional Pentecostal churches which perceive speaking in tongues as proof of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. In 1901 at Bethel Bible College, Topeka, Kansas, Agnes Ozman received what she called the baptism of the Spirit and spoke in “tongues.” The practice soon became part of the Holiness movement in the United States. In 1906, tongues were spoken on Azusa Street in Los Angeles, California. Out of these two events in 1901 and 1906 grew the mainline Pentecostal denominations, such as the Assemblies of God, which are still with us today.

### **Second Wave: Neo-Pentecostalism or Charismatic Renewal**

The “second wave” of the charismatic movement appeared in 1960 when “speaking in tongues” entered the most traditional churches of Christianity, including Methodism, Presbyterianism, Lutheranism, Baptism churches, and Roman Catholic churches. It became known as the neo-Pentecostalism or charismatic renewal. It was a new movement in the sense that it crossed denominational lines and barriers, but like the old Pentecostal movement it emphasized the gifts of the Spirit, most notably the gift of tongues.

“The movement soon entered the universities. This began in New England. In October of 1962, the glossolalia phenomenon broke out at Yale University, among members of the Evangelical Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship. Included in this new-Pentecostal revival were Episcopalians, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Methodists, and even one Roman Catholic. . . Thereafter, the movement spread to Dartmouth College, Stanford University, and Princeton Theological Seminary.

“Even more significant than these events is what happened in 1967. All roads lead to Rome. At the time of Spring vacation in 1967, there were in the Notre Dame area about 30 zealous Catholics who had

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received the ‘baptism of the Holy Spirit.’ In 1968, about 100 to 150 met for a Catholic Pentecostal conference. In 1969, there were about 450 Catholic Charismatics who met including about 25 or 30 priests. In 1970, the increase was more spectacular. Almost 1,300 attended the conference, including Catholics from Canada. In 1973, 22,000 Catholic Charismatics met together at Notre Dame, including Catholic participants from at least 10 foreign countries. In 1974, the Notre Dame conference was attended by 30,000 people. And finally, the 1975 international conference held in Rome attracted 10,000 pilgrims from 50 countries to hear Pope Paul VI express his warm appreciation for the movement. The movement was mushrooming not only in the Roman Catholic Church, but in all of the major Protestant denominations.

“The Kansas City Charismatic Conference was held in the summer of 1977. All three wings of the Pentecostal movement were present: (1) Old Pentecostals (sometimes called ‘classical Pentecostals’); (2) Protestant Charismatics; and (3) Catholic Charismatics. This was the biggest and most inclusive gathering of ‘baptized in the Spirit believers’ in modern history. There were nearly 50,000 participants in this 5-day conference. One speaker proudly hailed this conference as ‘the largest and most inclusive ecumenical assembly in the history of American Christianity.’ Almost half of the participants were Roman Catholics.”<sup>13</sup>

### **The Third Wave: The Signs and Wonders Movement**

The “third wave” of the charismatic movement, developed in the 1980s, is called the Signs and Wonders Movement because it stresses “power evangelism” whereby the gospel is explained and demonstrated by supernatural signs and wonders. The term “third wave” was first coined by C. Peter Wagner in 1983 when he wrote: “I see historically that we’re now in the third wave. The first wave of the moving of the Holy Spirit began at the beginning of the century with the Pentecostal movement. The second wave was the charismatic movement which began in the fifties in the major denominations. Both of those waves continue today.

“I see the third wave of the eighties as an opening of the straight-line evangelicals and other Christians to the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit that the Pentecostals and charismatics have experienced, but without becoming either charismatic or Pentecostal. I think we are in a new wave of something that now has lasted almost through our whole century”<sup>14</sup>

The Signs and Wonders movement emphasized not only the gift of tongues but also the gifts of prophecy and healing. These “waves” of the charismatic movement today influence nearly every Christian denomination in various shapes and forms.

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**Why Tongues-Speaking Did not Arise Before 1990?**

Why was the tongues-speaking movement largely absent until the dawn of the twentieth century? What caused this movement to suddenly emerge by 1900? A plausible answer is to be found in the reaction to rationalism that came to dominate not only the theology but also the worship experience of many churches in the nineteenth century. While the Middle Ages were “the age of faith,” when Christians apprehended the spiritual world through mystical literature, art, architecture, and music, the modern age that started with the Renaissance became known as “the age of reason.” People turned for guidance no longer to the saints and Madonnas but to the scientists. Rationalism, secularism, and materialism became the new focus of life.

It was within this context that Christianity began to feel the effects of rationalism and higher criticism of Scripture which killed all religious fervor, reducing the worship experience to a cold, lifeless, intellectual pursuit. This climate led to the rise of revival movements associated with glossolalia. These movements sought to help people recapture the emotional religious experience that had been largely lost in the rational, intellectually-oriented religious experience of the time.

William Richardson writes: “As people in the modern church reflected on the many years of seemingly lifeless liturgical order they had experienced, an explosive reaction took place. The longing for that earlier enthusiasm grew to the point that many believers simply decided that they could make it happen.”<sup>15</sup> Indeed, Pentecostal evangelists and missionaries were determined to make it happen by going to the uttermost parts of the earth, sharing their “gifts of the Spirit” with evangelistic zeal. The result has been that Pentecostalism has grown by leaps and bounds since its birth in the beginning of the twentieth century.

**Conclusion**

Summing up, from the second to the nineteenth century there were only few sporadic instances of tongue-speaking, mostly among heretical groups. From Montanus (2nd century) to Edward Irving (19th century), tongue-speaking was never considered to be part of mainstream Christianity. The rise of tongue-speaking at the dawn of the twentieth century was largely a reaction to the cold, lifeless worship practices influenced by the rationalistic, humanistic ideologies of the time. From an historical perspective tongues-speaking movements lack historical support. Until 1900 they were never part of mainstream Christianity. None of the Reformers sanctioned glossolalia.

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The witness of history is informative, but not decisive for Christians bound to the normative authority of the Bible. Thus, at this point we need to turn to the Scripture to find out if modern tongue-speaking conforms to the gift of tongues, mentioned in the Gospel of Mark, Acts 2, 10, 19 and 1 Corinthians 12 -14.

## PART 2 SPEAKING IN TONGUES IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK

The first person to speak about the gift of tongues was Jesus Christ Himself. He mentions it only once, according to the gospel record. The passage is found in Mark 16:17, which belongs to the so-called “longer ending” of the Gospel of Mark. The “longer ending” (Mark 16:9-20) has been the subject of countless studies. Some Bible scholars and translators have argued that the last twelve verses of Mark should be removed, but there are good reasons to believe that they should remain in our modern Bible translations.<sup>16</sup>

Christ made the following prediction: “And these signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues” (Mark 16:17; RSV). The context in which Jesus made this prediction is significant. Jesus also made several other statements to His disciples after his resurrection and shortly before His ascension. Among these, Christ promised His disciples the power to perform miracles and one of them is the ability “to speak in new tongues.”

### **The Meaning of the Words “New Tongues”**

The Greek words for “new tongues” are *glossais kainais*. The noun *glossa* is used with two major meanings. First, it is employed to describe the “tongue” as an organ of speech. For example, in the healing of a deaf man, Jesus “touched his tongue-*glossa*” (Mark 7:33; see also Luke 1:64; Rom 3:13; 14:11; 1 John 3:18; 1 Peter 3:10). Second, the word tongue-*glossa* is commonly used with the meaning of “language” (Phil 2:11; Rev 5:9; 7:9; 10:11; Acts 26, 11). The meaning of “languages” is employed in Mark 16:17 by the New American Standard Bible which translates “new languages.” This translation reflects the intended use of the original Greek *glossa*. The *Translator’s Handbook on the Gospel of Mark* explains that “tongues” in Mark 16:17 means “languages” because “the meaning here is the same as that in Acts 2:4-11.”<sup>17</sup> We shall see that this meaning is supported by linguistic and contextual considerations.

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The adjective *kainais* is usually translated “new” in the phrase “speak in new tongues.” A few English translators render the term “strange” (NEB, TEV). This translation reflects the translator’s understanding which finds no support in the New Testament where *kainais* is consistently used with the meaning of “new.” In Mark 16:17 the Greek term *kainais* seems to indicate “new” in the sense of a language which the speaker had not known before. To speak with “new tongues” means to speak in “languages” which were “new” to the speaker.

### The Purpose of Speaking in “New Tongues”

The purpose of speaking in “new tongues” is clarified by the immediate context of Mark 16:17 where Jesus promises to His disciples the enabling power of the Holy Spirit to empower them to “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation” (Mark 16:15). To equip the unlettered disciples to preach among other nations beyond the borders of Palestine, Christ promised them the power to speak other languages.

The fulfillment of Christ’s prediction occurred a few weeks later on the Day of Pentecost when the outpouring of the Holy Spirit equipped the disciples to speak foreign languages understood by Jews who had come to Jerusalem from a dozen different countries mentioned in Acts 2:7-11. “Each one heard them speaking in his own language” (Acts 2:6).

There is an unmistakable linguistic connection between the phrase “new tongues” of Mark 16:17 and “other tongues” of Acts 2:4. Only in these two passages do we find adjectives joined to the phrase “speaking in tongues.” The two adjectives *new* and *other* link the two passages together by clarifying that the promise to “speak in *new* tongues” of Mark 16:17 was fulfilled a few weeks later in Acts 2: 4, when the disciples spoke “in *other* tongues.”

The Great Commission’s context of Christ’s prediction, clarifies the purpose of the gift of speaking in tongues. The gift was promised, not to enhance personal religious experience by speaking the language of angels, but to equip Christ’s disciples to communicate the Gospel in foreign languages in countries where most people spoke mostly their native dialect.

This evangelistic purpose is absent in modern tongues-speaking, which consist of unintelligible babbling that is not related to any known language. No modern tongues-speaker is seeking to fulfill Christ’s commission by using his gift to communicate the Gospel in foreign languages spoken in foreign countries. Tongues-speakers do not proclaim the Gospel message because they utter meaningless and nonsensical gib-

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berish, incomprehensible to themselves and to the listening audience. For a fuller understanding of the gift of speaking in tongues, we now examine the references in the book of Acts.

### PART 3 SPEAKING IN TONGUES IN ACTS

Three passages in Acts mention speaking in tongues: Acts 2:1-13; 10:1, 24; 19:1-16. Our focus will be primarily on Acts 2:1-13 because here we find the dramatic account of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit which equipped the disciples to boldly proclaim the Messianic redemption in the *dialektos* (Acts 2:6, 8), that is, in the vernacular languages of the countries represented in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost.

#### The Outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2

At the dawning of the Day of Pentecost when the disciples were all gathered together in the Upper Room, suddenly the whole house was filled with the sound of a rushing “wind” (*pnoe*). This was both an audible and visible celestial visitation. “There appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each of them” (Acts 2:3; RSV).

The report emphasizes that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit was no mere subjective experience. What the disciples experienced was not the product of their imagination, but the reality of what they saw and felt. The phrase “and came to rest on each of them” (Acts 2:3), suggests that each one individually received the Holy Spirit. Undoubtedly this was a *permanent* endowment to last throughout their ministry.

#### The Nature of Speaking in Tongues in Acts 2

A significant aspect of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit was the gift of speaking in tongues: “And they were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.” (Acts 2:4; RSV). The word “gave” indicates that the gift of speaking in tongues is not a learned experience because it is given by the Holy Spirit.

This is in contrast to the practice of Pentecostalism of organizing so-called “tarrying” meetings intended to teach people “how to expand their consciousness in order to bypass the intellect,”<sup>18</sup> and thus be able to engage in glossolalia.

It is important to note that as soon as the Holy Spirit filled those present in the Upper Room, “they began to speak in other tongues, as the

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Spirit gave them utterance” (Acts 2:4). There was no time allowed for learning new languages: “They began” (*erxanto*) to speak right away. The important phrase is “they began to speak in *other* tongues” (Acts 2:4).

In our discussion of Mark 16:17 we noted that the Greek term *glossa* “tongue,” can refer to the “tongue” as an organ of speech and to “language,” whether native or foreign. In Acts 2 Luke clearly equated the term with “languages” in verses 6 and 8, by using the term *dialektos*: “Each one heard them speaking in his own language—*dialektos*” (Acts 2:6). The term *dialektos* means the “language of a nation or region.”<sup>19</sup> This is confirmed by verse 11 where we are told that the Jews who had come to Jerusalem from dozen different countries were surprised to “hear them [the apostles] telling in our own tongue (*dialektos*) the mighty works of God” (Acts 2:11).

Luke makes it abundantly clear that the miraculous gift of speaking in *other* languages at Pentecost was not a kind of tongues-speaking when believers spoke in an inarticulate, unintelligible speech which needed to be translated because no one could understand it. Instead, it was the ability to speak articulate, intelligible foreign languages which had not been learned by the speakers.

Further support for the interpretation of “tongues” as “languages” is provided by the fact that the Jews who had come from different countries understood the speech of the believers without the need of translation. This situation differs radically from 1 Corinthians 14 where translation is obligatory for any tongues-speaker because their speech was incomprehensible to the audience and to the speaker.

In the port city of Corinth (as in Jerusalem), lived people from many different countries. If the tongues-speakers in Corinth spoke known languages, they would have been understood by people who spoke those languages. The fact that Paul makes translation mandatory for any tongues-speaker reveals the apostle’s veiled intent to weed out those ecstatic speakers who disrupted the worship service with their incomprehensible speeches which no one could translate.

### **The Purpose of Speaking in Tongues**

Christ predicted in Mark 16:17 that the gift of tongues would be given to evangelize the world through the proclamation of the Gospel. Before His ascension Christ promised His disciples: “Before many days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 1:5). These promises were fulfilled in Acts 2 in the Pentecostal outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

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As the assembled believers came down from the Upper Room and entered the streets, they miraculously began speaking in foreign languages previously unknown to them. The crowd, which included people from different countries, “were all amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, ‘What does this mean?’” (Acts 2:12).

The Messianic proclamation on the Day of Pentecost resulted in the baptism of three thousand souls on that day (v. 41). This marvelous harvest of souls at Pentecost was accomplished through the miraculous gift of communicating the Good News to all who were present in Jerusalem on that festal occasion.

“The purpose of the gift of ‘speaking in tongues’ is to emphasize that God had lifted any linguistic barriers to the proclamation of the Good News. Furthermore, the gift of tongues as manifested through the Holy Spirit reveals that by means of this gift of audible communication the church has become worldwide. The 120 that were assembled were enlarged into a worldwide church with persons from all the civilized world of that day.”<sup>20</sup>

### **Tongues-Speaking: Brief but Catching Description**

The account of the miraculous speaking in tongues in Acts 2 is surprisingly brief in comparison to Peter’s messianic proclamation and the response of the crowd. Of the 47 verses, only 13 describe the tongues-speaking event. This suggests that for Luke what took center stage on the Day of Pentecost was not so much the endowment of the Holy Spirit to speak foreign languages, but the bold proclamation of the salvation offered through the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. It was the latter that led practicing Jews to become believing Christians. Nothing indicates that speaking in foreign languages per se converted anyone. People are convicted and converted not by the sound of foreign languages, but by the proclamation of the Gospel.

There are no indications that Peter preached in a foreign language on the Day of Pentecost. Most likely he spoke in Aramaic which was the common language of the Jews. The Pentecost tongues served primarily to show that the apostles were now equipped to communicate the Gospel in various languages spoken in the far reaches of the empire.

Another important function was to grab the attention of the people and predispose them favorably to listen to the message being proclaimed in the weeks, months, and years to come. The “sights and sounds” of the Day of Pentecost would long be remembered as the turning point in the religious experience of many Jews.

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“In brief,” as William Richardson points out, “Pentecost tongues served two purposes — first, to enable the apostles to communicate in various dialects, and second, to grab the attention of the crowds and thereby add credence and credibility to the words of the apostles.”<sup>21</sup>

### **Speaking in Tongues in Acts 10**

The second passage in Acts which mentions speaking in tongues is found in Acts 10 which recounts the story of the conversion of Cornelius. In this story we are transferred from the first manifestation of tongues-speaking among believing Jews in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 22:1-13) to the second occurrence of tongues-speaking among the Gentiles in Caesarea (Acts 10:1-47).

This episode shows especially the authenticating function of tongues-speaking. It occurred in the Cornelius story (Acts 10:46), right in the middle of Peter’s Bible study. While he was instructing the Gentile official and his household, Peter and his Jewish brethren “were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God” (Acts 10:45-46).

The speaking in tongues by Cornelius and his household was similar to that experienced by believers on the Day of Pentecost. Peter makes the connection between the two events when he reports to the Jerusalem brethren: “The Holy Spirit fell on them [in Caesarea] just as on us in the beginning. . . . God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us [at Pentecost] when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 11:15, 17). Peter was convinced that the gift of speaking in tongues by the believers in Caesarea, was “the same gift” of miraculously speaking foreign languages given to Christ’s followers on the Day of Pentecost.

### **The Purpose of Speaking in Tongues in Acts 10**

The gift of speaking in tongues manifested in Acts 10 served a different purpose from that of the Day of Pentecost. The latter was to equip believers with the ability to speak foreign languages to fulfill the commission to proclaim the Gospel to every nation. But the former was to break down the existing racial barriers between Jews and Gentiles created by Jewish traditions. A careful reading of the story helps us appreciate this purpose.

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Peter and his Jewish company were amazed to see Gentiles breaking out in tongues-speaking. They could not understand how the Gentiles “received the Holy Spirit just as we have” (Acts 10:47). The need for Cornelius and his family to speak in foreign languages was minimal, but the need for Peter and his party to break down racial barriers was great.

Peter testified: “Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality. But in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (Acts 10:35). In theory Peter accepted the fact that in God’s sight there is no distinction between Jews and Gentiles, but in practice Peter had difficulty accepting the fact that the Holy Spirit could fall upon a Gentile like Cornelius. Peter accepted the fact that Cornelius had the right to hear the Gospel, but he was still reluctant about baptizing him. As William Richardson puts it, “Preaching to and baptizing Gentiles was still a scary novelty for those first reticent missionaries.”<sup>22</sup>

Peter was aware of the fact that eventually he would have to face this probing question from the Jerusalem brethren: “Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?” (Acts 11:3). So probably he decided in his heart that he would act cautiously by waiting for clear directives from the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit overwhelmed him with just the evidence he needed to proceed with baptism: “They heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God” (Acts 2:46).

This is the only incident where tongues-speaking precedes baptism. In this instance, the purpose of tongues-speaking was not primarily to equip Cornelius and his household with the gift of foreign languages to preach the Gospel in other nations, but to convince Peter to proceed without delay in baptizing Cornelius. Peter told the Jerusalem brethren that he virtually had no choice: “Who was I that I could withstand God?” (Acts 11:17).

The bestowal of the same gift of speaking foreign languages upon the Gentile believers in Caesarea, served as an irrefutable sign for Jewish believers that God accepts Gentiles on an equal basis. The gift of tongues bestowed upon both Gentile and Jewish Christians, shows that both of them stood on an equal footing before God; both of them were endowed with the same spiritual gifts which break down language barriers and make it possible to communicate the Good News among all people.

This manifestation of speaking in tongues in Acts 10 offers no support for the glossolalia practiced today, that is, unintelligible speech for the personal edification of believers. The gift of tongues in Acts 10 broke down racial barriers which made it possible for Gentile and Jewish Christians to share alike in the task of evangelizing the world.

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**The Speaking in Tongues in Acts 19**

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The third and last reference to speaking in tongues appears in Acts 19:1-6, in the major metropolitan city of Ephesus. Paul arrived in Ephesus about A. D. 54, after visiting the churches in Galatia. There he met twelve Christian brethren who had no knowledge of the existence of the Holy Spirit (Acts 19:3). This became apparent when Paul asked them: “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” (Acts 19:2).

When these believers acknowledged complete ignorance of the work of the Holy Spirit, Paul asked them what kind of baptism they received. They responded that they were baptized “into John’s baptism” (Acts 19:3). Then Paul proceeded to explain the relationship between John’s baptism and Christian baptism: “John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus” (Acts 19:4). After being lead into a fuller understanding of the Christian faith, these believing brethren were willing to be baptized “in the name of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 19:5). Following baptism, Paul “laid his hands upon them, [and] the Holy Spirit came on them; they spoke with tongues and prophesied” (Acts 19:6).

There seems to be a connection among the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost to equip a nucleus of believers for the Gospel’s commission, the reception of the Holy Spirit by Gentile believers in Caesarea (Acts 10:46), and finally the gift of the Holy Spirit bestowed upon the newly baptized disciples in Ephesus. Under the endowment of the Holy Spirit the Christian mission advanced from Jerusalem to Caesarea to Ephesus to the end of the earth (Acts 1:8). At these various major centers, the Holy Spirit manifested itself in special ways, revealing progression in the evangelization of the world.

Luke reports the endowment of the gift of speaking in tongues in Ephesus with the same terminology he uses for the manifestation of tongues earlier in Jerusalem and subsequently in the city of Caesarea. The intent is to show that the gift to believers in these three cities, Jerusalem, Caesarea, and Ephesus was the same, namely, the miraculous speaking in foreign languages.

**Speaking in Tongues and Prophesying**

An ability to “prophesy” represented a new aspect of the outward sign of receiving the Holy Spirit. “The Holy Spirit came on them; they spoke with tongues and prophesied” (Acts 19:6). This is the first New Testament passage which links the two spiritual gifts of speaking in tongues

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and prophesying. Later we shall see that Paul speaks of prophesying in Corinth in the broad sense of communicating to the congregation a message of exhortation from God. “He who prophesies speaks to men for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation” (1 Cor 14:3). This prophetic ministry of “upbuilding and encouragement and consolation” (1 Cor 14:31) was not restricted to a few “prophets” with predictive abilities (such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel), but was open to all: “For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged” (1 Cor 14:31). In other words, at any given time each congregation member may receive a message of encouragement and comfort to share with the congregation.

In Acts 19:6 the two spiritual gifts of speaking in tongues and prophesying are mentioned together, apparently because they served a common function. The believers who received the gift of speaking a foreign language also received a message of “upbuilding and encouragement and consolation.” The gift of speaking a foreign language would be of little value if the speaker did not also receive from the Holy Spirit a message of encouragement and edification for the congregation. People are edified and converted not by the sound of a foreign language but by the message being proclaimed.

Later we shall see that in Corinth Paul distinguishes between the two gifts, apparently because tongues-speakers were misusing the gift to edify themselves rather than the congregation: “He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church” (1 Cor 14:4). For this reason, Paul places the gift of prophetic speech above the gift of tongues: “He who prophesies is greater than he who speaks in tongues, unless one interprets, so that the church may be edified” (1 Cor 14:5).

Acts 19:6 does not suggest that the gift of prophesying is greater than that of speaking in tongues. In fact the latter is mentioned first, suggesting that the two were equal. The reasons could be that the problems with tongues-speaking that troubled the congregation in Corinth were not yet present in Ephesus.

### **Does Spirit-Baptism Result in Glossolalia?**

Having considered all the passages in the book of Acts which mention speaking in tongues, we can now address the question: does the baptism of the Holy Spirit automatically result in glossolalia? This claim, commonly made by many Pentecostals and charismatics today, finds no support in Acts.

First, we have seen that in the book of Acts the gift of speaking in tongues is not the modern day glossolalia as unintelligible speech, but the ability to speak foreign languages to communicate the Gospel to many nations.

Second, believers in Ephesus were baptized in the name of Christ, not of the Holy Spirit. After baptism, Paul laid his hands upon the new believers who received the Holy Spirit which manifested itself in an ability to speak in tongues and prophesy. This means that the Spirit-baptism equipped believers to both speak in tongues and prophesy. By contrast, Pentecostals limit the baptism of the Holy Spirit only to tongues-speaking. Apparently the reason is that those who allegedly receive the gift of tongue-speaking at the baptism of the Holy Spirit can only speak unintelligible speech which cannot be used for edifying the congregation with a prophetic message of “upbuilding and encouragement and consolation” (1 Cor 14:31).

Third, “the book of Acts reports that numerous people in various settings were baptized without speaking in tongues. Some of these include the 3,000 at Pentecost (Acts 2:41), the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:38-39), Paul himself in Damascus (Acts 9:18), Lydia and her household (Acts 16:15), and the jailor in Philipp and his household (Acts 16:33).”<sup>23</sup>

Finally, Acts mentions people like Peter (Acts 4:8), Stephen (Acts 7:55), and Paul (Acts 13:8) who were filled with the Holy Spirit but did not speak in tongues.

## Conclusion

Our study of the gift of speaking in tongues in the book of Acts suggests the following conclusions:

1) The primary purpose of the Pentecost gift of tongues was to equip believers to speak foreign languages—*dialektos* (Acts 2:6, 8, 11) to communicate the Gospel to different nations.

2) In Acts 10 the purpose of the gift of tongues was to break down racial barriers to make it possible for Gentile and Jewish Christians to share alike in the task of evangelizing the world.

3) In Acts 19 the gift of tongues is manifested together with the gift of prophesying, apparently because they served a common function, namely, to equip believers not only to speak in foreign languages, but also to communicate a prophetic message of exhortation and edification.

4) At Pentecost, Caesarea, and Ephesus the special gifts of the Spirit, including tongues-speaking, were bestowed on entire groups. In none of these cases do we find what is present in Pentecostal churches today,

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namely, that some members have received the baptism of the Spirit and speak in tongues while the majority have not.

5) In the three instances we have just examined in the book of Acts, the special gifts of the Spirit, including tongue-speaking, were bestowed upon people who did not ask for them. This was true at Caesarea where the falling of the Spirit on Cornelius' household surprised both Cornelius and Peter. It was also true at Ephesus where Paul laid his hand on twelve believers who never asked for a special bestowal of the Spirit. These examples contradict the Pentecostal belief that the baptism of the Holy Spirit, which is followed by tongue-speaking, must be wrested from the Lord by believers through agonizing prayer.

5) The tarrying of the 120 disciples in Jerusalem while waiting for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit does not support the Pentecostal practice of urging people to attend "tarrying meetings," which often last late into the night, to plead for the baptism with the Holy Spirit.<sup>24</sup> This is an improper application of this passage. Jesus gave specific instructions to His disciples to tarry in Jerusalem (Luke 24:49) while waiting for the historical event of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. No tarrying meetings occurred in Caesarea or Ephesus. Making "tarrying meetings" a normative church practice out of a unique historical incident interprets a passage completely out of context.

6) The Pentecostal claim that the phrase, "filled with the Spirit," designates a post-conversion Spirit-baptism attested by tongues-speaking is negated by numerous examples in the book of Acts where people are described as being filled with the Spirit or full of the Holy Spirit without speaking in tongues (Acts 4:8; 4:31; 6:3; 6:5; 7:55; 9:17; 11:24; 13:9; 13:52). Only in Acts 2:4 is the expression, "filled with the Holy Spirit," applied to people who received the gift of tongues on the Day of Pentecost. We have seen that there are exceptional reasons why tongues-speaking was bestowed at Pentecost, Caesarea, and Ephesus, but such reasons do not apply to all believers today. The book of Acts includes numerous stories of large crowds as well as of single individuals being converted without speaking in tongues (Acts 2:41; 3:7-8; 9; 4:4; 5:14; 6:7; 8:36; 9:42; 11:21; 13:12; 13:12, 43, 48; 14:1, 21; 16:14, 34; 17:4, 11-12, 34; 18:4, 8; 28:24). These conversion stories do not support the Pentecostal contention that Spirit-baptism is necessarily followed by tongue-speaking.

7) References to the gift of tongues occur in the book of Acts only in unique situations. It occurs each time the Gospel makes its first entrance in ethnic groups of Jews and Gentiles as though to authenticate the Gospel commission. This Biblical evidence does not suggest that every believer should seek a post-conversion, Spirit-baptism evidenced by the initial physical sign of tongues-speaking.

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**PART 4**  
**SPEAKING IN TONGUES IN**  
**1 CORINTHIANS 12-14**

Chapters 12, 13, and 15 of 1 Corinthians are the only places in the Bible where speaking in tongues is discussed in detail; thus, a careful study of these chapters is important to biblically evaluating the Pentecostal and charismatic claims regarding the importance of tongue-speaking.

### **No Mention of Tongues-speaking in Two Listings of Spiritual Gifts**

It should be noted at the outset that Paul discusses tongue-speaking only in his epistle to the Corinthians. No reference to this subject is found in his other epistles. Even more surprising, Paul does not mention at all the gift of tongues-speaking in his two other lists of spiritual gifts found in Ephesians 4:11-12 and Romans 12:6-8. In Romans Paul specifically mentions the gifts of prophecy, service, teaching, exhortation, liberality in giving, and acts of mercy (Rom 12:6-8), but he leaves out tongues-speaking. Surely, if the gift of tongues was one of the outstanding endowments of the Holy Spirit, the apostle would have included it in this list.

It is also striking that in the two lists of spiritual gifts given in 1 Corinthians 12 (vv. 8-10 and 28), tongues and interpretation of tongues are mentioned last. Paul concludes this unit with the exhortation that believers should “earnestly desire the higher gifts” (1 Cor 12:31). This suggests that Paul viewed the gift of tongues differently than the Corinthians. They were inclined to place the gift first, but the apostle places it last because for him it was not one of the greater gifts. Paul states this conviction clearly in 1 Corinthians 14:5, saying: “He who prophesies is greater than he who speaks in tongues.”

These introductory observations should alert us to the need to keep Paul’s discussion of tongues-speaking in 1 Corinthians 12-14 in proper perspective. His teachings on tongues must be seen as part of his endeavor to address the many problems of the Corinthian congregation.

### **The Corinthian Church was a Problem Church**

The Corinthian Church gave Paul more headaches and heartaches than any other church that he served. As Anthony A. Hoekema succinctly puts it, “Some of the problems he had to deal with there were: the problem of factionalism and contentiousness, the toleration of gross immorality, the conducting of lawsuits against each other, the temptation to fall back into idolatry through eating meats offered to idols, abuses in connection with the Lord’s Supper, and the denial of the resurrection of the body.”<sup>25</sup>

This background helps us understand why the Corinthians also had problems with spiritual gifts. Their problem was not that they lacked spiritual gifts (“you are not lacking in any spiritual gift” – 1 Cor 1:7), but that they abused the gifts they had. This becomes evident from a careful reading of chapters 12-14 which suggests that many Corinthians were placing the gift of tongues at the top of the list of spiritual endowments, priding themselves in possessing it and using it excessively during their worship service.

Paul addresses the problem by showing that the gift of tongues was not nearly as important as many of the Corinthians thought it was. To accomplish this objective he uses two strategies. First, he places the gift of tongues and the interpretation of tongues last in the two listings of spiritual gifts given in chapter 12 (vv. 8-10 and 28). Second, he lays down strict rules for the exercise of tongues-speaking. If correctly observed, the Pauline rules, such as the translation requirement, would silence most tongues-speaking today.

### **Tongues-speaking at Corinth and in the Book of Acts**

Before proceeding to analyze Paul’s teachings on tongues-speaking in Corinthians 12-14, we need to address the question: Were the tongues spoken in Corinth similar to those mentioned in the book of Acts? Most scholars agree that the two are different. The Corinthian phenomenon is interpreted as ecstatic, unintelligible utterances that needed interpretation, while the Pentecostal speaking in various *dialektois* (Acts 2:6) is seen as a description of the miraculous ability granted to the Apostles to speak foreign languages understood by the foreigners visiting Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost.

In short, the Corinthian phenomenon is designated *glossolalia* while the Pentecost phenomenon is technically called *xenoglossia*. By *glossolalia* is meant, as noted earlier, an unintelligible and meaningless utterance believed by the speaker to be a real language, but incomprehensible to any one else. On the other hand, *xenoglossia* is an utterance in a foreign tongue intelligible to those who speak and hear the language.

This widely accepted interpretation has been rejected by J. G. Davis and R. H. Gundry<sup>26</sup> who maintain that all the references to speaking in tongues at Pentecost and at Corinth refer to speaking of foreign languages. They insist that neither Paul nor Luke meant “ecstatic utterance” when referring to Christian speaking in tongues. On the contrary, they refer to speaking in known foreign languages. Their major argument is that the Greek term *glossa* is commonly used in Biblical Greek for human languages and very seldom for “ecstatic utterances.”

This etymological argument fails to convince because Paul uses *glossais* for the tongues of angels (1 Cor 13:1) which are not human languages. He also says that “he who speaks in a tongue—*glosse* addresses God, not men, and no one understands him (1 Cor 14:2). It is highly unlikely that in these contexts tongues signify known human languages since no one could understand them. Greek lexicons indicate that *glossa* may indicate not only known human languages, but also incoherent utterance of certain forms of spiritual fervency.<sup>27</sup>

Clearly, the meaning of *glossa*–tongue must be determined by the context because sometimes a common term may be given a new meaning when describing a new phenomenon. This seems to be the case in the Corinthian congregation where speaking in tongues clearly refers, as we shall see, to abnormal verbal behavior.

### Differences Between Tongues-speaking in Acts and 1 Corinthians

A comparison between the accounts of tongues-speaking in Acts and 1 Corinthians shows some significant differences.

1) Tongues in Corinth could only be understood when they were interpreted either by the speaker (1 Cor 14:13) or by a member present in the assembly (1 Cor 14:27-28). This was not the case in the three tongues episodes recorded in Acts when people heard the disciples in their own “native language—*dialektos*” (Acts 2:8). No translation or interpretation was needed.

2) The tongues in Corinth are associated with a “sound—*phonai* (1 Cor 14:10-11) which needed to be interpreted. By contrast, the tongues at Pentecost were heard as “language—*dialektos*” (Acts 2:6, 8; cf. Acts 1:19; 21:20; 22:2; 26:14) which required no translation or interpretation for people who spoke those languages.

The use of the term *phonon*–sound is most likely influenced by the preceding example of the sound—*phonen* of lifeless instruments, like the flute, harp, and bugle. If the sound of these instruments is not clear, nobody will “know what is played” and nobody “will get ready for battle” (1 Cor 14:7-8). In the same way Paul explains that speech must have a clear sound to communicate a message. Otherwise it will be like “speaking into the air” (1 Cor 14:9). The fact that the sound of the Corinthians tongues-speakers was unclear suggests that they did not speak known languages as the disciples did in Acts 2.

3) The purpose of tongue-speaking in Corinth was self-edification (1 Cor 14:4), while their purpose in Acts was the validation and

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confirmation of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the equipment of believers to preach the Gospel to many nations (Acts 2:5-11). Nothing indicates that tongues were ever used in Corinth for preaching the gospel to unbelievers.

4) Tongues-speaking in Acts 2 occurred under the special circumstances of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. Such special circumstances were not present at Corinth.

5) In Acts tongues-speaking “appears to have been an irresistible and temporary initial experience, but at Corinth it was a continuing gift under the control of the speaker (1 Cor 14:27, 28).”<sup>28</sup>

6) The book of Acts contains no examples of Christians speaking in tongues during a church service. By contrast, in Corinth there seem to have been several church members who had a consuming passion to display the gift of tongues. As William Richardson puts it, “Paul was calling for congregational singing while tongue-speakers did only solos.”<sup>29</sup>

7) In each instance of tongues-speaking reported in Acts, every one in the group received the Holy Spirit and spoke with tongues. By contrast, in Corinth only a few spoke with tongues (1 Cor 14:27), but all were eager to speak at the same time, giving the impression to outsiders that they were “mad” (1 Cor 14:23).

These observations clearly suggest that there are important differences between tongues-speaking reported in Acts and that reported in 1 Corinthians. Most likely the differences concerned not only the purpose and the operation of tongues-speaking but also the nature of the tongues themselves.

### **The Nature and Function of Tongues in Corinth**

We have concluded that tongue-speaking in Corinth was different from that reported in Acts. Now the toughest question that remains to be resolved is the definition of the nature of tongues in Corinth. We have found that it is not a foreign language, but some kind of “ecstatic speech.” The word “ecstatic” is used here not as a technical term, but as a description of an experience that was deeply personal and emotional in nature.

William Richardson notes: “One thing is clear, human beings are complex, emotional creatures, and at times those emotions swell up into vocal expressions not intended to be heard or appreciated by any receiver. All of which suggests that the tongues experience behind all the Corinthian abuses was supposed to be private—or at least something that was between only the believer and His God.”<sup>30</sup> This explains why Paul rebukes those Corinthians who selfishly displayed in public what was intended to be a private experience.

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Most likely the spiritual gift hidden behind the abuses originally was a personal experience of prayer and praise difficult to put into words. “Occasionally, however, it burst forth in rapturous vocalizing, not unlike the continuous expressions of ‘hallelujah,’ which would need ‘interpretation’ before anyone else could fully benefit from the reasons behind such enthusiasm.”<sup>31</sup>

Paul explains in Romans 8:26 that “the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words.” This text suggests that sometimes it is difficult to vocalize our feeling because they are “too deep for words.” While praying or praising God it is possible to experience deep feelings that cannot be verbalized.

Sometimes ago I was invited to speak in a Seventh-day Adventist church where I witnessed during the praise service three members standing up, raising their hands, and uttering strange sounds. My first impression was that these persons had serious emotional and mental problems. But when I spoke with them after the service, I found them to be coherent and emotionally stable. Apparently they sensed the need to express their feelings through strange sounds that were “too deep for words.” It is important to recognize that different people experience spiritual realities in different ways.

Since interpretation was required (“he who speaks in a tongue should pray for the power to interpret” – 1 Cor 14:13), tongue-speaking was originally intended to be a private spiritual experience. But given the Corinthian desire to publicly display their gift (“since you are eager for the manifestation of the Spirit” – 1 Cor 14:12), what began as a private spiritual experience became a public display of tongue-speaking by people eager to show their spirituality.

Apparently in Corinth considerable pressure had built up for members to display publicly their tongue-speaking gift, even if no one could interpret what was said. The result was utter confusion that led outsiders to say “You are mad” (1 Cor 14:23). This explains why Paul was compelled to lay down strict rules intended to correct the abuse and restore order to the worship service.

Speaking in tongues in Corinth and among charismatics today is popular because it provides a perfect means to gain spiritual status without running the risk of fraud since no one in the church can tell if the tongue-speaker is divinely inspired or speaking his own mind. By contrast the gift of prophecy, which entails the ability to present messages of exhortation, “encouragement and consolation” (1 Cor 14:3), is much harder to camouflage because its message can be clearly understood and

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evaluated by the church. Thus, by promoting prophetic-speech in the place of tongue-speech, most likely Paul attempted to eliminate fraud in the Corinthian church.

The Corinthians' abuse of tongue-speaking must have been a local problem because the New Testament does not mention any other church with a similar problem. A partial explanation could be the location of the Corinthian church in the proximity of pagan temples where priests and priestesses communicated oracles, that is, strange messages from the gods. For example, in the temple of Aphrodite in Corinth "the Greek oracles with their frenzied priests and priestesses provided a fertile environment for the phenomenon of tongues in Corinth. One can readily understand that this problem should arise in Corinth and receive undue stress whereas it did not arise at such places as Philippi."<sup>32</sup> In other words, the worship practices in the local pagan temples influenced Corinthian believers to use ecstatic tongues in their worship service. As William Richardson notes, "given their former religious connections and behavior, it should come as no surprise if some of the Corinthians would not be satisfied with a quiet, dignified, silent-prayer type of worship service."<sup>33</sup>

### **1 Corinthians 12: Tongues Mentioned Last in the Two Listing of Spiritual Gifts**

The Corinthian Church, as noted earlier, was a problem church. One of its problems related to spiritual gifts. The Corinthian church members, as we have noted, did not lack spiritual gifts ("you are not lacking in any spiritual gift" 1 Cor 1:7); however, they were guilty of abusing such gifts as they had. In 1 Corinthians chapters 12 to 14, Paul clearly indicates that many Corinthians were placing the gift of tongues on the top of the list of spiritual endowments. They were eager to exercise it excessively in their meetings.

The prevalence of ecstatic speech among the frenzied priests and priestesses of the nearby temple of Apollo at Delphi may have influenced the Corinthians to place a high value on tongue-speaking. Paul addresses the problem in these chapters by showing that the gift of tongues was not nearly as important as many of the Corinthians thought it was.

We noted earlier that in the two listings of spiritual gifts Paul gives in 1 Corinthians 12:8-10 and 28, tongues and their interpretation are mentioned last. Even more striking is the fact that in the two other Pauline lists of spiritual gifts found in Ephesians 4:11-12 and Romans 12:6-8, tongues-speaking is not mentioned at all! If the gift of tongues was such an outstanding spiritual endowment, Paul would have mentioned

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it there, but we find no traces of it. The absence of tongues-speaking in Ephesians and Romans as well as their placement at the end of the listing in 1 Corinthians should convince contemporary tongue-speakers that their attempt to make the gift of tongues the supreme spiritual gift lacks biblical support.

### **1 Corinthians 12: The Church as a Body with Many Members**

In verses 12-27 of 1 Corinthians Paul illustrates how the Spirit “apportions to each one individually” (v. 11) spiritual gifts, by comparing the church to a body with many members. His point is that since the Spirit gives different gifts to various members, we cannot expect everyone to have the same gift. “If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? (1 Cor 12:17). Paul’s argument is a veiled rebuke to those who promoted tongue-speaking as the spiritual gift that all should possess.

Verse 30 indicates that not all the Corinthian believers had the gift of tongues: “Do all speak with tongues?” Apparently those who did not have the gift of tongues felt inferior to those who did, since so much importance was placed on this gift. Paul rejects the misconception, still very popular today, that the ability to speak with tongues sets a person off from other believers who have not received the fullness of the Spirit. He argues that all the spiritual gifts are necessary to the well-functioning of the body. No one can say “I have no need of you” (1 Cor 12:21).

There is not the slightest hint in 1 Corinthians 12 or chapter 14 that tongue-speaking proves the baptism of the Holy Spirit as Pentecostals claim today. In fact, Paul urges Corinthians to “earnestly desire the higher gifts” (1 Cor 12:31). The implication is that there are gifts of greater value. He makes this point by placing tongues and their interpretation last in his two listings of spiritual gifts.

### **1 Corinthians 13: The More Excellent Way of Love**

To bring home the truth that there is something far more important than the gift of tongues or any other spiritual gifts, Paul takes time in 1 Corinthians 13 to show the “more excellent way” of love. This chapter functions not merely to exalt the primacy of love, but to place the gift of tongues and all the gifts of the Spirit in their proper context.

“If I speak in the tongues of men and angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal” (1 Cor 13:1). This is a hypothetical sentence because no one can speak with the tongues of angels. The point is that even if one could speak with an angelic language, if he has

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no love, he would be a noisy gong or clanging cymbal. Without love his tongue-speaking would be worthless, hollow, hypocritical.

Paul's teaching is evident. Tongue-speaking has some value, but it is far more important for our lives to be filled with love. Our primary goal should not be the possession of gifts like tongue-speaking, but the cultivation of love which is greater even than faith and prophecy. The thrust of the entire chapter is "If I have not love, I gain nothing" (1 Cor 13:3).

### **1 Corinthians 14:1 - Prophecy is Superior to Tongues-speaking**

Paul opens chapter 14 by reiterating the main thrust of chapter 13, namely, "Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy" (1 Cor 14:1). In other words, spiritual gifts must be used to express love, not to promote one's prestige or honor.

Then Paul addresses without any preamble the problem of many Corinthians who preferred the gift of tongues above all other gifts. Paul states unequivocally that they should eagerly desire "especially the gift of prophecy" (1 Cor 14:1). The reason given is an amplification of the theme of chapter 13: "He who prophesies speaks to men for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church" (vv. 3-4).

Throughout the chapter Paul emphasizes the contrast between tongues and prophecy, favoring prophecy because it can edify the entire church, while the tongue speaker edifies only himself. The phrase "edifies himself" suggests that the tongue-speakers did not speak foreign tongues because it is hard to believe how a person could edify himself by speaking Chinese in a congregation where no Chinese were present and where Chinese was unknown to the speaker.

In view of the importance of love and of the fact that our gifts are to serve the whole church, it is evident that prophecy is superior to tongues, since the latter were not understood, unless they were interpreted. Hence Paul continues: "I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy. He who prophesies is greater than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interpret, so that the church may be edified" (v. 5; NIV).

Pentecostals appeal to the first part of 1 Corinthians 14:5 ("I would like every one of you to speak in tongues") to argue that Paul wants everybody to seek the gift of tongues. To reach this conclusion, they take the first clause out of context. When read together with the rest of the verse, the meaning is quite different: "I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy. He who proph-

esies is greater than one who speaks in tongues.” And in verse 39 Paul summarizes the whole discussion by tolerating tongues and positively enjoining prophecy: “So, my brethren, earnestly desire to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues.” Paul allows for tongues under strict conditions, but actively promotes prophesying because it edifies the entire congregation.

### **1 Corinthians 14:2-5 - The Nature of the Gift of Prophecy**

Most commentators agree that the gift of prophecy mentioned in 1 Corinthians 14 consisted not so much in communicating new truths or predictions to the church, but in expanding known truths which were generally neglected. We noted earlier that Paul speaks of prophesying in Corinth in the broad sense of communicating to the congregation a message of exhortation from God. “He who prophesies speaks to men for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation” (1 Cor 14:3).

This prophetic ministry of “upbuilding and encouragement and consolation” (1 Cor 14:31) was not restricted to a few “prophets” with predictive abilities (like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel), but was open to all: “For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged” (1 Cor 14:31). In other words, each member may receive at a given time a prophetic message of encouragement and comfort to share with the congregation. Such messages were more useful than speaking in tongues because they edified the entire congregation.

Since church members are told “to judge” or “to weigh carefully” the messages of the prophets (v. 29), clearly, the prophets’ utterances were to be in harmony with revealed truths. Furthermore Paul requires that a prophet “should acknowledge that what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord” (v. 37). This leads us to conclude that Paul considered the prophetic gift of exhortation and teaching Bible truths more useful than the gift of speaking in tongues, but even prophetic messages were to be tested by the congregation to ensure that they harmonized with revealed truths.

### **1 Corinthians 14:6-13 - The Analogy Between Tongue-speaking and Musical Instruments**

In verses 6 to 13 Paul continues to show that prophecy is superior to tongue-speaking by comparing the latter to the off-key or indistinct notes of a flute, a harp, or a trumpet, which cause confusion among lis-

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teners. “How will anyone know what tune is being played unless there is a distinction in the notes? Again, if the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle?” (vv. 7-8; NIV). He then makes the analogy explicit by saying: “So it is with you. Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying? You will just be speaking to the air” (v. 9; NIV). The implication is clear. Tongues-speakers uttered unintelligible words that no one could understand. This verse can hardly be harmonized with the concept of tongues as a foreign language. This very sharp expression was designed to forcefully expose the error of any Corinthian believer who was still overrating his gift of tongue-speaking.

The reference to the sound-*phonai* of musical instruments suggested to Paul another analogy, namely, that of a conversation between two persons who utter meaningless sounds-*phonai*. “There are so many kinds of voices (*phonai*-sounds) in the world, and none of them without signification. Therefore if I know not the meaning of the voice (sound), I shall be unto him that speaketh a barbarian, and he that speaketh shall be a barbarian unto me” (vv. 10-11; KJV).

Up to this point, and throughout the rest of the chapter, Paul consistently employs forms of the word *glossa* to refer to the tongue experience. But suddenly in verse 10 he switches to *phonai*-sound. Why? Most likely because he wanted to show that tongue-speakers in Corinth uttered strange sounds, not comprehensible foreign languages. This leads Paul to draw an obvious conclusion: “For this reason anyone who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret what he says” (v. 13; NIV), because without interpretation the gift is useless to the church.

The fact that the tongue-speaker is asked to pray for the ability to interpret what he says raises a question about the speaker’s ability to understand and interpret his or her own words. Why should a tongue-speaker have to pray for the separate gift of interpretation? Why would the Spirit give first unintelligible words and then supply the interpretation to those who prayed for it? “Such a setting,” as William Richardson points out, “would make it sound strange indeed to pray for a separate gift of interpretation. It is hard to imagine under what circumstances the Spirit would enable an apostle to speak a foreign language while withholding the needed gift of interpretation. On the other hand, if the Corinthian glossolalia was a personal euphoric experience, then prayer to understand and interpret its meaning is fitting.”<sup>34</sup>

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**1 Corinthians 14:14-19 - Prayer Must Engage both the Emotions and the Intellect**

In the next section (verses 14-19), Paul further explains why interpretation is so important. Apparently some Corinthians believed that one could experience spiritual realities more fully by engaging their emotions (“my spirit”) rather than their intellect (“my mind”). Paul indicates that this is a serious error. “For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my mind; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my mind” (vv. 14-15).

Paul’s compromise approach may sound evenhanded, but in reality Paul emphasizes the importance of engaging the mind in public prayer and praise so that any person present can signify their assent by saying “Amen.” “How can any one in the position of an outsider say ‘Amen’ to your thanksgiving when he does not know what you are saying?” (v. 16). The whole matter is summarized in verse 17: “You may give thanks well enough, but the other man is not edified.” In other words, praying or praising in tongues must be intelligible because it must edify the congregation.

To fend off any possible criticism by fanatical tongue-speakers that he did not understand their gift, Paul reassures the Corinthians that he could speak in tongues more than all of them (v. 18), but in the church he “would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue” (v. 19). This statement suggests that tongue-speakers were not speaking comprehensible foreign languages, but were uttering many unintelligible words. The full implication is that when the mind is fully engaged, then the language is intelligible and can edify the congregation. By contrast, words spoken “in a tongue,” even if endlessly multiplied, fail to instruct and edify the congregation.

**1 Corinthians 14:20-25 - Tongues-speaking Can Be a Sign of Spiritual Immaturity, Unbelief, and Divine Judgment**

In the next section of the chapter (vv. 20-25), Paul explains how undue exaltation of the gift of tongues is a sign of childish, immature thinking. “Brethren, do not be children in your thinking; be babes in evil, but in thinking be mature” (v. 20). To illustrate the immature thinking, Paul refers to an incident in Isaiah’s time when God warned He would speak to Israel by people of “strange tongues.” “By men of strange tongues and by the lips of foreigners will I speak to this people, and even then they will not listen to me, says the Lord” (Is 28:11).

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The event was intended to lead the people to repentance, but instead they stubbornly refused to listen: “yet they would not hear” (Is 28:12). “The fulfillment came a short time later when the Assyrian king, Sennacherib, sent his military officer, the Rabshaketh, to threaten King Hezekiah with invasion and defeat and urge him to surrender. The fact that God sent an advance warning of events to come served as a sign. Unfortunately, the sign fell on deaf ears. In spite of hearing the strange voices and different language of the Assyrian advance party in their street, the Israelites continued in their stubborn ways and paid little attention to the many warning words of Isaiah and the other true prophets. Thus that ‘sign’ turned out to be a ‘sign for unbelievers’ who stubbornly ignored it.”<sup>35</sup>

It is noteworthy that the unbelievers in Isaiah 18:11 are not foreigners, but the Israelites themselves who had rejected the clear word of God spoken through the prophets; consequently, they had fallen in such unbelief that God would let the foreign tongues of Assyria do His speaking to Israel for him. To be addressed in “other tongues” was a common theme of judgment in the Old Testament (Deut 28:49). For example, like Isaiah, Jeremiah predicts God’s judgment upon Judah’s apostasy, saying: “Behold, I am bringing upon you a nation from afar. O house of Israel, says the Lord . . . , a nation whose language you do not know, nor can you understand what they say” (Jer 5:15).

Paul uses in the same way the passage of Isaiah 28:11 to show that as the Assyrian tongues served to the Israelites as a sign of their unbelief, so the inordinate proliferation of tongues by some Corinthian members was as a sign of their unbelief.

Implicit in Paul’s selection of Isaiah 28:11 is an indictment against the Corinthians for their unbelief manifested in their abuse of tongue-speaking, among other things. This must be seen as a symptom of a much larger problem, since every chapter prior to 1 Corinthians 14 carries some form of indictment against them for their unruly and immoral behavior.

For those Corinthians who had a penchant for appearing more spiritual than others in the church, speaking in tongues was the perfect means to gain such status, since the risk of fraud was minimized by the fact that no one in the church could tell if the tongue-speaker was divinely inspired or speaking his own mind. By contrast the gift of prophecy would be much harder to camouflage because its message would be clearly understood and evaluated by the church.

The bottom line is that Paul is warning the Corinthians that a proliferation of tongues in the church was an illicit phenomenon. The more they engaged in that behavior the more they showed themselves to be unbelievers like the Jews of Isaiah’s time who no longer wanted to hear

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the clear prophetic message. Consequently, God forced them to hear His word through the babbling tongues of their Assyrian oppressors.

### **1 Corinthians 14:22 - Tongues are a Sign for Unbelievers**

In light of the experience of the apostate Jews in Isaiah's time, Paul states: "Thus, tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers, while prophecy is not for unbelievers but for believers" (1 Cor 14:22). As tongues became a sign of impending judgment for the unbelieving Jews in Isaiah's time, so the mass proliferation of tongues in the Corinthian church was a sign of sin and unbelief. The unbelief was not manifested in the rejection of the Christian message, but in the exhibition of a pseudo-faith which sought self-glorification. Although when legitimately used tongues remain a gift from God, history shows that legitimate tongues-speaking rarely occurs.

The modern tongues-speaking is promoted as a desirable, Spirit-led experience. Yet, beneath this profile, lies an almost total disregard for the biblical directives regarding tongues-speaking. Research shows that modern glossolalia is a self-generated and learned experience. It is a psychologically induced phenomenon which relies on the vast pool of information stored in the linguistic background of the speaker.

As Paul characterizes the proliferation of tongues in Corinth as a sign to unbelievers about God's ensuing judgment, so the proliferation of tongues in modern times is one of the signs that reveal the desperate spiritual condition of mankind. It is a sign that many choose to worship God through self-induced, artificial excitement, rather than through the order and decency (1 Cor 14:40) of genuine worship. It is a sign to summon mankind to the true worship of God in view of the impending judgment that lies ahead. "Fear God and give him glory, for the hour of his judgment has come; and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the fountain of the water" (Rev 14:7).

### **1 Corinthians 14:23-25 - Tongues are Not a Sign for Unbelievers**

Paul's statement in verse 22 that "tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers, while prophecy is not for unbelievers but for believers" seems to be contradicted by the following two verses (vv. 23-25) which state the opposite: unbelievers are offended by tongue-speaking, but they are convicted and saved by prophetic messages. "If, therefore, the whole church assembles and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are mad? But if all prophesy,

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and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all . . . he will worship God and declare that God is really among you” (1 Cor 14:23-25).

How can tongues-speech be a sign for unbelievers in verse 22 and an offence to unbelievers in verse 23? The resolution to this apparent contradiction is to be found in the two different contexts. The context of verse 22 is the unfaithful Jews who rejected not only the clear prophetic messages, but also the advanced warning given to them in the foreign languages and stammering lips of Assyrian invaders. This experience represents the stubborn refusal of many Corinthian to heed God’s directives about tongues-speaking, preferring instead to show their pseudo-faith. Thus, for them, tongues are a sign of their unbelief to be visited by God’s judgment.

The context of verses 23-25 is an “unbeliever” or “outsider” who is a truth-seeker. He enters the Christian assembly when “all speak in tongues” (v. 23). He reacts saying this must be a madhouse: “You are mad” (v. 24). But the same unbeliever responds to the intelligible prophetic proclamation of the Gospel, is convicted of sin, and worships God (v. 25). For him the confusion caused by speaking in tongues was a sign of madness, but the prophetic message that conveyed the Good News of salvation, was a sign of God’s love. The two different contexts explain why tongues are a sign for unbelievers in verse 22, and not a sign for unbelievers in verse 23. The former unbeliever is a person of persistent stubbornness and immaturity. The latter unbeliever is any non-Christian truth-seeker who is receptive to the message of the Gospel.

### **1 Corinthians 14:26-33 - The Abuse of the Gift of Tongues**

The next section of 1 Corinthians 14:26-33 describes several abuses of tongues-speaking among the Corinthians. These consisted especially of several people speaking in tongues at the same time (v. 27) and of tongues being spoken without interpretation being given or sought (v. 28). To remedy the problem, Paul gives the following clear instructions: “If any speak in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn; and let one interpret. But if there is no one to interpret, let each of them keep silence in church and speak to himself and to God” (vv. 27-28).

These definite restrictions ensured order and decorum during the worship service. “For God is not a God of confusion but of peace” (v. 33). Since God is the author of order and not confusion, it is reasonable to assume that He did not initiate all the tongue speaking occurring in the Corinthian church. The Holy Spirit could hardly have inspired someone

to speak in a tongue while another person was speaking, or cause someone to speak without inspiring someone else with the gift of interpretation to interpret the tongue.

This being the case, the unrestrained tongue-speaking in Corinth must have come from another source. Most likely the source was the Corinthians themselves who were most eager to display their overly-inflated egos. For some Corinthians, blurting out something that sounded like tongue-speech in order to gain recognition may have come as natural as breathing.

Since the Holy Spirit did not give to all the Corinthians the ability to speak in tongues, it is possible that some of those who did not have the gift could have become jealous of their brethren who did, and thus pretended that they also had the gift. Paul does not openly say that the manifestation of tongues-speaking in Corinth was not inspired by God. He merely states that God is not the originator of confusion. The implication is clear. God did not initiate the illicit tongues experience of the Corinthian congregation. The confusion occurred because God's instructions were not followed; consequently the Corinthian tongue-speech could hardly have been of divine origin since God does not contradict Himself.

### **1 Corinthians 14:26-33 - Definite Restrictions on Tongue-speaking**

It is important to note what Paul says about the exercise of the gift of tongues. He does not rule out tongue-speaking altogether, but he allows it under very definite restrictions. First, he rules that only two or three people are to be allowed to speak in a tongue at any given meeting and they are not to speak at the same time but in turn: "If any speak in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn" (v. 27).

Second, every utterance in tongues is to be accompanied by an interpretation. If there is no interpreter, then no one is to speak in tongues in the church service: ". . . let one interpret. But if there is no one to interpret, let each of them keep silence in church and speak to himself and to God" (vv. 27-28). Paul clearly forbids certain types of tongue-speaking: tongue-speaking that causes confusion in the church, which is done without interpretation, which is intended to enhance one's own prestige, and which does not edify the congregation.

It is evident that these basic rules are ignored by modern day tongue-speakers. Pentecostal or charismatic meetings, even those aired on TV for public consumption, show utter confusion as scores of people stand up, raise their hands, and utter strange, incomprehensible sounds. No interpretation is generally provided. If outsiders enter such meetings, as Paul puts it, "Will they not say that you are mad?" (1 Cor 14:23). The

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utter disregard for the biblical restrictions on tongue-speaking show that much of tongue-speaking today is not inspired by God's Spirit because God is a God of order, not of confusion.

### Conclusions Drawn from 1 Corinthians 12 to 14

Our examination of 1 Corinthians 12 to 14 leads to several important conclusions about tongues-speaking. Paul does not forbid tongue-speaking, but he definitely does not attach the high value attributed to them by Pentecostals and charismatic. While the Corinthians placed tongue-speaking at the top of the list of spiritual gifts, Paul places it at the bottom.

Paul severely warns against any illicit elevation of tongues over other gifts, and warns that proliferation of tongues in the church is a sign of unbelief because it creates a pseudo-faith. Conversely, in the modern charismatic movement tongues-speaking is promoted as the hallmark of the baptism of the Holy Spirit; however, underneath this profile is a total disregard for the biblical directives regarding tongues-speaking. This in itself suggests an illicit origin of the movement.

Paul rebukes the mentality which viewed the ability to speak in tongues as the sign of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. He clearly affirms in 1 Corinthians 14:22 that "tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers." We noted earlier that in light of the passage of Isaiah 28:11, the unbeliever Paul had in mind is not an outsider, but some Corinthian members themselves who were eagerly promoting the inordinate proliferation of tongues, contrary to God's directives.

The burden of the whole discussion about tongues-speaking in 1 Corinthians 12 to 14 is that the proof of being filled with the Holy Spirit is not glossolalia, but an abounding love toward one another. Tongues-speaking for Paul is not a sign of spiritual maturity, but the opposite. "Brethren, do not be children in your thinking; be babes in evil, but in thinking be mature" (1 Cor 14:20).

The Corinthian church is the only New Testament church that contained numerous tongue-speakers. This can hardly be interpreted as a sign of spiritual maturity since Paul blames tongue-speakers for much of the confusion and the lack of mutual edification in the church. No where does Paul tell his readers that they must seek the gift of tongues. We do not find the slightest hint that tongues-speaking was the hallmark of spirituality or a litmus test of spiritual growth. If anything, Paul emphasizes the opposite. He urges the Corinthians to seek the gift of prophecy: "So, my brethren, earnestly desire to prophesy and do not forbid speaking in tongues, but all things should be done decently and in order" (1 Cor 14:39-40).

Paul never holds up tongues as a goal for Christians to achieve. Since his whole thrust of 1 Corinthians 12 to 14 is to temper the Corinthian enthusiasm for tongues-speaking, tongue-speakers today would do well to respect Paul's teachings by recognizing the secondary nature of the gift.

Throughout 1 Corinthians 14 Paul clearly favors prophecy over tongues because prophetic messages benefited the church at large, not just the individual. "He who prophesies speaks to men for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation" (1 Cor 14:3). Repeatedly Paul emphasizes that participation in church worship must benefit the entire congregation.

The Pentecostal influence is felt today along denominational lines. Even those churches that have not given in to the extremes of movement have embraced some of the reasoning behind this movement. The face of worship is changing, the need for doctrine is belittled. The guidance of the Spirit supersedes the directives of the Word of God. Feeling has replaced objective truth. We must be careful not to allow these trends to creep into our churches. May our worship and our lives be God-centered, rather than self-centered.

The conclusion that emerges from our study of 1 Corinthians 12 to 14 is that Paul does assign some value to tongues-speaking, but he carefully regulates and circumscribes its use. The reason is that spiritual gifts, especially tongues, had upstaged Christ. We must never allow church worship to become a display of individual gifts. Our Christian worship is to glorify God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Whenever the *methods* of worship, whether tongues or drama or rock music or organs, become more spectacular than the One to be praised, then a change must take place. For "to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen" (Eph 3:21).

## PART 5 SPEAKING IN TONGUES TODAY

So far we have looked at those Bible passages dealing with speaking in tongues. Let us now evaluate the modern tongue-speaking movement from a theological perspective. For the sake of brevity, we will consider only a few statements that embody Pentecostal beliefs.

### **Every Believer Must Seek a Post-conversion Spirit-baptism, manifested in Speaking in Tongues**

A distinctive doctrine of Pentecostal churches is that every believer must seek a post-conversion Spirit-baptism which is manifested in tongues-

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speaking.<sup>36</sup> This teaching, that a converted person must still undergo the baptism of the Holy Spirit, is foreign to Scripture.

When the Spirit regenerates us, He enters our lives and dwells within us. Paul expresses this thought clearly in Roman 8:9: “You are not in the flesh, you are in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Any one who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.”

In other words, if one belongs to Christ, he has the Spirit of Christ and the Spirit dwells in him. If the Spirit dwells in a person, there is no need for a “second blessing” or for the “Spirit-Baptism.” The same thought is expressed in 1 Corinthians 3:16: “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?”

Nowhere in the New Testament are believers asked to seek the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Instead, Paul explains to the Galatians, “If we live by the Spirit, let us walk by the Spirit” (Gal 5:25). The implication is clear. Christians who have been converted have the Spirit because it is only the Spirit that can regenerate us. Paul does not admonish Christians to seek for the baptism of the Spirit, but to walk more fully by the enabling power of the Spirit.

### **A Spiritual Blessing Must Be Manifested by a Physical Sign**

Pentecostals believe that speaking in tongues is the initial physical sign of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. They point to the four episodes in the book of Acts where tongue-speaking followed the reception of the Holy Spirit.<sup>37</sup> But these instances were associated with Pentecost or an extension of Pentecost. There are no indications in Corinth that tongue-speaking was the result of being filled with the Holy Spirit.

Acts includes numerous examples of people who were filled with the Spirit or full of the Holy Spirit but did not speak in tongues: Peter (Acts 4:8), the believers (Acts 4:31), the seven deacons (Acts 6:3), Stephen (Acts 6:5; 7:55), Saul (Acts 9:17), Barnabas (Acts 11:24), Paul on Cyprus (Acts 13:9), the disciples at Antioch of Pisidia (Acts 13:52).

In the Bible the proof of being filled with the Spirit is not a physical sign but a spiritual condition. Paul makes this point in Galatians 5:22-23 where he lists the fruits of the Spirit: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.” By focusing on the physical gifts of the Spirit, like tongues-speaking, Pentecostals run the risk of ignoring the spiritual fruits of the Spirit.

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### Two levels of Christians

Pentecostal theology tends to create two levels of Christians: those who have been baptized with the Holy Spirit and those who have not. Pentecostal writers teach that only Spirit-baptized persons have been sealed with the Spirit and have adequate power for service.<sup>38</sup> This would imply that the vast majority of Christians who have not received the Spirit-baptism lack adequate power for Christian service.

This teaching of two-levels of Christianity is devastating to the unity of the church. It discriminates between a great multitude of ordinary Christians and a small class of elite Christians. Such a teaching is not only unbiblical, but is also insulting to God because it turns God into a discriminatory Being. Paul clearly states in Galatians 3:28: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male or female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

### Both Personal Experience and Scripture Are Held as Final Authority

The importance attributed to the Holy Spirit in Pentecostal theology is reflected in the attempt to make the guidance of the Spirit equal, if not superior, to the authority of Scripture. In discussing doctrines with Pentecostal friends, I have often come to an impasse, because their subjective experience of the Spirit overrides the objective, normative authority of Scripture.

One cannot have it both ways. Truth is determined either by Scripture or by personal experience. In his book, *Pentecostal Truths*, Warren Litzman engages in typical Pentecostal double-talk on the authority of Scripture versus personal experience. Responding to those who object to tongue-speaking, because many well-known Christians never spoke in tongues, he asks: “Are we to look at human experience in order to find truth or are we to accept what the Scriptures say?”<sup>39</sup>

His answer is clear. Three pages later, he defends the practice of laying on of hands to impart the gift of tongues, saying: “Our own experience as a Pentecostal movement . . . for fifty years people have been receiving the Baptism at times through laying on of hands . . . it has been my thrill to lay hands on as many as 127 in a single service, and see them all filled with the Spirit.”<sup>40</sup>

The problem with this reasoning is the failure to recognize that personal experiences must be tested by Scripture, not vice versa. The personal experiences of the Spirit differ from one individual to another. This

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means that ultimately the Spirit-experience of each individual becomes the ultimate authority. The litmus test becomes, How do I feel about this teaching? rather than, What does the Word of God say?

### CONCLUSION

The preceding survey of a few distinctive Pentecostal beliefs, shows that Pentecostal theology is largely inspired by a subjective experience of the Spirit, rather than by the objective authority of Scripture. It is a theology that appeals to emotions and makes people believe that they have physical evidence of the power of the Spirit in their lives. Pentecostal preaching is more concerned proving the possession of the gifts of the Spirit like tongue-speaking, rather than expanding and applying the meaning of the Scripture to daily life. Ultimately, Pentecostal theology and preaching foster the kinds of spiritual pride that Paul strongly condemns in 1 Corinthians 12 to 14.

### A Few Lessons from the Pentecostal Movement

So far our evaluation of the tongue-speaking movements has been largely negative. Yet there are positive lessons we can learn from these movements that are spreading like wildfire. Surely the new “outburst of tongues” that crosses denominational lines has something to say about the condition of Protestant churches. If there were no deficiencies in the churches, charismatic movements would never have gained a foothold. What is there in the charismatic movements that appeals to so many Christians? Let me briefly enumerate a few lessons we can learn from these movements.

(1) The Pentecostal emphasis on the physical experience of the Holy Spirit which appeals to many Christians today teaches us that churches need to seek the enabling power of the Holy Spirit more fully. Apart from the Spirit, all the programs, projects, and organizations, will be powerless.

(2) The Pentecostal appeal to the emotional needs of people teaches us that churches must make a greater effort to satisfy emotional needs. We do not need to go to the extremes of some Pentecostal churches where emotional excitement is sometimes mistaken for spirituality. Excessive emotionalism does not glorify God. “Let things be done decently and in order” (1 Cor 14:40). But human beings have an emotional side that needs to be met in church worship.

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Christians who leave one denomination to join another usually do it not for doctrinal reasons, but to satisfy some basic needs that are not met in their church. As Anthony Hoekema observes, “Unchurched people in the neighborhood will not be attracted by churches which are as cold as ice or by preachers who are as dry as dust.”<sup>41</sup>

(3) Pentecostal church services teach us to leave more room for spontaneity in worship and more opportunity for audience response. Obviously we should not follow the “holy disorder” that prevails in some Pentecostal services, but we can encourage a greater congregational participation. There is no reason for a single individual always to be at the center of a church service. In the synagogue service, Scripture was read and expanded by half-a-dozen lay persons. The same was true of the apostolic home churches. There was considerable interaction, sometimes resulting in disorderly conduct (1 Cor 11:20-22).

(4) We can also learn from our Pentecostal and charismatic friends the importance of being ready at all times to witness for our Lord and to become involved in outreach projects. Pentecostals are usually eager to share their faith and to participate in far-flung missionary endeavors. In this area they offer a worthy example for many Christians to follow.

Summing up, valuable lessons can be learned from our Pentecostal friends that can enhance our worship and witnessing. This can be done without accepting their fundamental teaching that every believer ought to seek the baptism of the Holy Spirit which is initially evidenced by speaking in tongues. We have found this teaching is devoid of biblical support, but its practical emphasis on the enabling power of the Spirit, spontaneity in worship, and dedication to witnessing for their faith, deserves appreciation and emulation.

## NOTES TO CHAPTER 8

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  21. William E. Richardson (note 15), p. 55.
  22. *Ibid.*, p. 56.
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  37. *Ibid.*, p. 266.
  38. Ralph M. Riggs, *The Spirit Himself*, 1949, pp. 73-75.
  39. W. L. Litzman, *Pentecostal Truths*, 1961, p. 25.
  40. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
  41. Anthony A. Hoekema (note 25), p. 137.

## Chapter 9

# ONCE SAVED ALWAYS SAVED

Many Protestant churches today teach the doctrine of “once saved, always saved.” The basic idea is that once a person becomes a child of God, he/she can commit no sin that can cause them to lose their salvation. Many people find this doctrine comfortable because in essence it relieves them of all personal responsibility in their relationship with God.

Christians who believe that they are saved and can do nothing to jeopardize their salvation are not concerned about how they live. This is why the doctrine is also known as the “preservation of the saints” or “eternal security.” Our study will show that this is a dangerous doctrine because it can deceive someone into thinking that a spiritual relationship with God is not as secure as it seems. This chapter addresses an important question: Can Christians be saved at one point in their lives and then lose their salvation and die in an unsaved condition? The answer of those Christians who have been influenced by Calvinistic teachings is “No!” For them salvation is the result, not of a human response, but of divine election.

This teaching of the divine election and perseverance of the saints is clearly defined in official documents of the Reformed confessions. For example, the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, which is largely influential within Presbyterian, Congregational, United Church of Christ, some Baptist churches, and others, states in Chapter 17 on “The Perseverance of the Saints:” “I. They whom God hath accepted in his Beloved, effectually called and sanctified by his Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace; but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved.

“II. This perseverance of the saints depends, not upon their own free-will, but upon the immutability of the decree of election, flowing from the free and unchangeable love of God the Father; upon the efficacy of the merit and intercession of Jesus Christ; the abiding of the Spirit and of the seed of God within them; and the nature of the covenant of grace; from all which ariseth also the certainty and infallibility thereof.”<sup>1</sup>

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The point of this quotation is that people are saved not by the free exercise of their will but by “the immutability of the decree of election,” that is, by the decree of God who elects some people to be saved and some to be lost. If this teaching of unconditional predestination were true, then God would in effect cause some people to remain saved, even if they later choose to return to a life of sin.

Other documents try to moderate the harshness of Calvin’s view of divine election based on predestination by teaching that believers are eternally secure of their salvation when they accept Christ as their personal Savior. *The Standard Manual for Baptist Churches* affirms: “We believe that the scriptures teach that such as are truly regenerated, being born of the Spirit, will not utterly fall away and perish, but will endure unto the end; that their persevering attachment to Christ is the grand mark which distinguishes them from superficial professors; that a special Providence watches over their welfare; and that they are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation.”<sup>2</sup>

Today this belief in the eternal security of salvation is popularized by evangelical preachers of different denominations. For example, when Billy Graham was asked: “How big a sin do you have to commit before you lose your salvation?” he replied: “I am convinced that once a person sincerely and honestly trusts Christ for his or her salvation, they become a member of God’s family forever—and nothing can change that relationship.”<sup>3</sup>

This belief in the eternal security of one’s salvation plays a vital role in the lives of many Christians today because it affects how they view God, themselves, and their salvation. Ultimately it impacts their day-to-day Christian lifestyle by determining the way they relate their behavior to their salvation. The popularity and far reaching consequences of this belief call for a close biblical examination of its validity.

### Objectives of This Chapter

This chapter examines the popular doctrine that a saved Christian is always saved from a biblical perspective. For the sake of clarity, this study is divided into five parts according to the major aspects of this doctrine:

1. Two Views of the Eternal Security in Salvation
2. The Predestination and the Perseverance of the Saints
3. The Case for Unconditional Salvation
4. The Case for Conditional Salvation
5. Salvation is Assured but not Guaranteed

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**PART 1**  
**TWO VIEWS OF THE**  
**ETERNAL SECURITY IN SALVATION**

The doctrine that those who are truly saved cannot fall from the faith and be lost appears in two different forms. The first is the traditional Calvinistic doctrine found in the Reformed Christian confessions of faith. The second is the non-traditional doctrine found in some Baptist and other evangelical churches. Both views teach that once Christians have been saved, they are always saved. Both reach the same end, namely, the eternal security in salvation, but they reach it by using different paths.

According to the traditional doctrine, a person is secure in salvation because he or she was predestined by God whereas in the non-traditional doctrine a person is secure because he or she has accepted Christ as a personal Savior.

### **The Traditional Doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints**

The Reformed Calvinistic tradition has consistently taught that the perseverance of the saints is the natural outcome of God's predestination of some men and women to salvation. All deserve to be lost, but God arbitrarily and irresistibly shows His grace to a selected few, not because they have responded to His love, but because of His sovereign will.

God clears the elects of their guilt by atoning for their sins through Christ's sacrifice. He irresistibly draws them unto Himself by regenerating their hearts and convincing them to put their faith in Him. Consequently, the elects persevere in their salvation because God has made satisfaction for their sins and through the help of the Holy Spirit preserves them unto the end.

Traditional Calvinists also believe that the elects inexorably proceed to sanctification by becoming holy, rejecting sin, and obeying God's commands. This means that a regenerated person will not reverse the course of sanctification because it is outside his or her ability to alter fundamentally the infinite, mysterious, and immutable purpose of God.

On a practical level, traditionalists do not claim to know who is elected and who is not. The only guide they have is the verbal testimony and the fruits of each individual. Anyone who does not persevere unto death is regarded as have been unconverted from the very beginning. The problems with this arbitrary view of salvation will be considered shortly.

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## The Non-traditional Doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints

The non-traditional doctrine of the perseverance of the saints shares the same traditional Calvinistic view that people are saved purely by an act of divine grace that does not depend on a human response. The believer can do nothing to affect his or her salvation. The major difference from the traditional Calvinistic view is found in their understanding of sanctification. While traditional Calvinists believe that divine election results in sanctification, that is, a progressively more righteous life, non-traditionalists believe that the gift of salvation is independent from a person's character and life. The person declared just before God on account of Christ (justification), does not necessarily live a progressively more righteous life (sanctification).

Proponents of the non-traditional doctrine see the work of salvation as performed by God alone. Human beings have no part in their salvation beyond receiving it. Consequently they cannot undo what God has done. In other words, a person's status before God does not necessarily influence his or her life, a belief that is sometimes called *carnal Christianity*.

Despite the different understanding of the relation between sanctification and salvation, both traditionalists and non-traditionalists share the same view that a saved Christian cannot be lost. They both find support for their doctrine in certain scriptural passages to be examined shortly.

### PART 2 THE PREDESTINATION AND THE PERSEVERANCE OF THE SAINTS

To understand the popular belief that a saved person is eternally sure of salvation, it is important to consider first its source, namely, the traditional understanding of predestination as first formulated by John Calvin. Those who accept the latter must of necessity conclude that saved persons persevere in the faith and are ultimately saved no matter what they do.

In 1536 Calvin published *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, which was the best systematic theology the world had ever known up to that time. Calvin's ideas have permeated the Protestant world and will continue to do so until our Lord returns. He developed an incredible theological system that knows few rivals. He took Augustine's concept of predestination and developed it to its logical end. If man is not free and God predestinates some to salvation and some to damnation, then salvation depends upon the sovereign will of God. This teaching ignores the fact that God created human beings to be free, and thus responsible

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for their own salvation or perdition. God is indeed the sovereign ruler of the universe, but His sovereignty and predestination are not common partners.

The popular belief in unconditional salvation comes from the doctrines of Calvin summarized by the acronym “TULIP.” “TULIP” stands for the five main points of Calvinism:

1. **Total Depravity.** Human beings are totally depraved because of the pervasive nature of sin which makes it impossible for them to seek after God.

2. **Unconditional Election.** Salvation is decreed by God. Human beings have no part in the process beyond receiving it.

3. **Limited Atonement.** Jesus “paid” the price only for the elects whom He desires to save. The unsaved do not benefit from Christ’s sacrifice.

4. **Irresistible Grace.** God irresistibly draws the elects to put their faith for salvation in Him. Faith is entirely a gift of God.

5. **Perseverance of the Saints.** Through the help of the Holy Spirit the elects persevere to the end.

According to this doctrinal system, before God created anything He chose those who would be saved and those who would be damned for all eternity. Human beings have no choice in their salvation (no free will) because they have no ability to seek God (Total Depravity); consequently, it is by God’s Unconditional Election that anyone is saved.

In his *Institutes of Christian Religion*, Calvin states: “By predestination we mean the eternal decree of God, by which he determined with himself whatever he wished to happen with regard to every man. All are not created on equal terms, but some are preordained to eternal life, others to eternal damnation; and, accordingly, as each has been created for one or other of these ends, we say that he has been predestinated to life or to death.”<sup>74</sup> It is clear that for John Calvin *unconditional election* is the result of predestination, that is, “the eternal decree of God” by which “some are preordained to eternal life and other to eternal damnation.”

This means that salvation is *not* the result of believers working together with God, but of God’s sovereign will. It is irresistible because human beings can do nothing but accept it. Overpowered by God, believers cannot choose to reject Him and consequently their eternal salvation is secured. Those who accept this understanding of predestination can logically conclude that those who have been elected by God are forever saved. Eternal security logically requires absolute predestination.

This teaching, as we shall see, is foreign to the Bible which teaches that God offers to all the opportunity to choose whether they wish to be

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saved or not. No one is “locked” in an irresistible salvation scheme because salvation is conditionally based upon faith and is available to all.

If it were true that the eternal destiny of every human being has already been decreed before hand by divine election, then we may ask, why does God allow Christians to fall, to be tempted, and to sin if He Himself can keep them from falling? If God’s irresistible grace guarantees that a saved person is always saved, why doesn’t His grace also prevent such a person from sinning in the first place? It is much more rational to believe that God initiates a love and faith response in the human heart, and then He gives us the power of choice to accept or reject His gift of salvation.

### **The Roots of Eternal Security Are Found in Gnosticism**

Some scholars trace the roots of eternal security back to the Gnostic teachings that found their way into the early church, especially through Augustine. For example, Jeff Paton notes: “Ultimately, the roots of eternal security are in the Gnosticism that preceded Augustine. But it was Augustine that has the unwelcomed honor of leavening the whole lump.”<sup>5</sup>

Gnosticism was a religious movement that flourished during the second and third centuries A. D., and presented a major challenge to Christianity. Most Gnostic sects professed Christianity, but their beliefs differed sharply from those of the majority of the early Christians. The term Gnosticism is derived from the Greek word *gnosis* (“revealed knowledge”). The Gnostics taught that sparks or seeds of the Divine Being were imprisoned into certain human beings. Reawakened by knowledge, the divine element in humanity can return to its proper home in the transcendent, spiritual realm.

The gnostics divided mankind into three categories: the spiritual (*pneumatic*), the carnal (*hylic*), and the in-between (*psychic*). Spiritual Christians were a special or higher class than ordinary Christians. They were said to be saved regardless of what they did because they had received, as the elect of the good deity, a divine spark into their beings that allowed them to be redeemed. This teaching is strikingly similar to the Calvinistic doctrine that God elected some people to be saved and others to be lost.

The second class, the carnal, was assumed to be beyond salvation because their lives were governed by material wants and desires. The in-betweens were believed to be capable of salvation if they followed the Gnostic teachings.

It is not difficult to see the striking similarity between Gnostic and Calvinistic teachings. There are some differences, but the essence of their teachings is similar. Both Gnostics and Calvinists agree that Christians are saved not by means of their choice, but on account of their nature. Both

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taught that people are saved on account of their election. The Gnostic spirituals claimed to be the “elect seed” because they had a divine spark in their being. Calvinists say that they are elected to salvation by the sovereign will of God. Both agree that their divine election is not affected in a negative way by their actions.

Both Gnostics and Calvinists taught that no sinful action affects their eternal salvation. The dualistic Gnostic teaching was illustrated by comparing their spiritual nature to a pure golden ring and their material body to a pile of manure. The ring can be placed into a pile of dung, but is not affected by the filthiness of the dung. Its purity remains unchanged.

Both agree that there is nothing that can cause a saved person to lose salvation. The Gnostics took this teaching to its ultimate conclusion by pursuing their own lust and passions without restraints. Calvinists, however, believe that Christians who are saved grow in sanctification, though they would not lose their salvation, if they did not. The similarities outlined above between Gnosticism and the Calvinistic doctrine of “Once saved, always saved” are too numerous to be ignored. They serve to remind us that the teaching of eternal security is pagan in its origin and stands in open opposition to the teaching of the Bible.

### **A Biblical Evaluation of the Predestination of the Elect**

The notion of God’s arbitrary predestination of some to salvation and others to perdition is contrary to the overall teaching of the Bible. The message of the Bible is that God is both just and merciful. He not only created humankind perfectly, but after their rebellion, He implemented a plan that could redeem all those who would accept it. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). Note that the text does not say that God will save only those whom He has predestined, and condemn to ultimate extinction the rest. Rather, verse 18 explains: “He who believes in him is not condemned; he who does not believe is already condemned, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God” (John 3:18).

What determines our salvation is not an arbitrary divine election, but a personal acceptance of Christ’s sacrifice on our behalf. It is our *continuing* faith in Christ’s sacrifice that finally saves us.

### **Predestination in Romans 8:28-30**

None of the texts quoted so far suggest an arbitrary divine predestination to salvation. To support their position, predestinarians appeal to passages of Paul, especially Romans 8:28-30 and Ephesians 1:3-14.

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In Romans 8:28-30, Paul declares: “We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.”

It is evident from this and similar passages that the Bible teaches a form of predestination, but it is not the kind taught by Calvin. The key to interpreting correctly this passage (and Ephesians 1:1-12) is recognizing that Paul speaks of calling, predestination, justification, and glorification in a *corporate*, not an *individual* way. It includes potentially all human beings, not individual persons.

To interpret Romans 8:28-30 (and other similar passages) as teaching that God chose who should be saved and who should be lost before the foundation of the world means to impose an interpretation upon them that conflicts violently with the overall Scriptural teaching. The Calvinistic doctrines of election and predestination violate the truth of the Gospel.

### **Romans 8:28-30 from a Corporate Perspective**

When we examine Romans 8:28-30 from a corporate perspective, the meaning of Paul’s statements becomes clear. “Whom he foreknew” simply means that God foreknew every individual to whom He gave life. This passage does not speak of the specific time at which God foreknew certain specific individuals before they came into existence, but of every person to whom He gave life.

“He also did predestinate to be conformed in the image of his Son,” simply means that God predetermined and preplanned that every human being would be like Christ by living a holy and righteous life.

“Those whom he did predestinate, them he also called.” God predetermined what all human beings should be by calling them through the Gospel to be what He wants them to be.

“And whom he called, them he also justified.” This statement refers to those who actually responded to the call and received from God the justification and finally the glorification.

Robert Shank authored a monumental work entitled *Elect in the Son*. In chapter five, “The Called According to His Purpose,” he provides a thorough exegesis of Romans 8:28-30. First, he examines the phrase, “whom he called,” and shows conclusively that the call was issued to all, but only those who responded came to be designated as “the called.” Shank’s conclusion of this point is worth quoting.

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“Reference to believers as ‘the called’ and ‘the elect’ does not in any way imply the positive, unconditional reprobation of other men. The corporate election of Israel to temporal privilege did not constitute the reprobation of the rest of the world, for the way always was open for all men to become proselytes and to share in the heritage of Israel. Furthermore, Israel was called to be God’s channel of blessing for all mankind. In like manner, the corporate election of the Church does not constitute any reprobation of the rest of mankind. To the contrary, the Church is to be the vehicle of grace and salvation for the world. The Israel of God comprehends all men potentially, and the election of grace may be realized in any man. ‘Look unto me and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth, for I am God, and there is none other’ (Isaiah 45:22). The call is to all, and all who respond in faith to God’s universal call are ‘the called according to his purpose’ and those whom he justified.”<sup>6</sup>

Next, Shank discussed the phrase, “whom he justified,” and shows that God has acted through Christ to justify all men who will meet the conditions for justification. He stresses that the ground of this justification is the grace of God but the condition is a believing, obedient faith. Paul makes this point clear in Romans 3:26, by stating that God “proved at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies him who has faith in Jesus.” It is evident that God’s justification is offered, not arbitrarily to selected individuals, but to all who have “faith in Jesus” and obey the Gospel.

The function of predestination in Romans 8 is not to teach that God arbitrarily elects certain individuals to be justified and glorified while condemning others to destruction, but that believers have nothing to fear because nothing can separate them from “the love of Christ” (Rom 8:35). This point is made in Romans 8:31-32, the very verses that follow immediately the passage about predestination. Paul draws this conclusion from what he said about predestination, justification, and glorification: “What shall we say to this? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him?” (Rom 8:31). God gave his Son “for us all,” not for a selected few. Calvin’s notion of a limited atonement for a selected few is foreign to the teaching of the Scripture.

### **Predestination in Ephesians 1:3-14.**

This passage is a great hymn of praise for the spiritual blessings God has bestowed upon believers through Jesus Christ. Paul states that God “chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him” (Eph 1:4). Note that the “us” refers to

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the Ephesians as a whole. God had predestined all of them to salvation without the exclusion of a single person.

God's criteria for choosing people before the foundation of the world are that they "should be holy and blameless before him." "Thus, God predetermined the kind of character upon which He would bestow all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ—namely, a character that would represent a holy and unblemished life. In this way, all have the opportunity to conform themselves to the characteristics that God requires. When Paul says, 'having predestined us to the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself,' he is stressing that God predetermined that those who would be holy and without blemish would be adopted as children."<sup>7</sup>

An important thing to note when studying the verses about predestination is that nowhere does Scripture indicate that predestined believers will never fear that they might fall away. "Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 1:18 about 'those who are perishing' and those 'who are being saved.' Both phrases employ present participles, indicating that the individual destinies are not yet 'sealed.' Predestination applies only to the present situation. The Bible tells of God predestining people living at that time to what they are at present, but not to what they shall or can only be."<sup>8</sup>

In the next section we will see that warning against falling away punctuate even those sections that speak about predestination. If the ultimate destiny of believers is already predetermined, such warnings would be superfluous and unnecessary.

Scripture always presents faith as the human response to God. If salvation was the result of divine election and irresistible grace, then faith would not be necessary since God chooses whom He wills, regardless of the individual response. While God is sovereign, He leaves room for us to accept or reject Him. God predestines, not apart, but in harmony with our response of faith.

## Conclusion

The Bible clearly teaches that God wants every human being to be saved. Christ's atoning sacrifice is for all, not for a selected few. The invitation and call of salvation is extended to all.

The predestination verses examined above must be interpreted in harmony with the general teachings of the Bible. We have found that the proper interpretation of the predestination verses is that God predetermined and foreordained that every person who lives by faith holy and unblemished lives are elected, justified, and glorified by God.

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**PART 3**  
**THE CASE FOR UNCONDITIONAL SALVATION**

Is it possible to know absolutely and confidently that one is saved? Is it possible for those who currently believe they are saved to have assurance that they will remain in a state of grace until the end of their lives? The answer of many Christians influenced by Calvinistic teachings is “Yes!” Their certainty rests especially upon the doctrine of predestination.

If God did indeed choose certain individuals for salvation beforehand, and they cannot refuse His election, then their salvation is unconditional. Christians who accept this understanding of predestination must logically adopt the belief that once saved, always saved. For them the case is closed. To support their belief, they appeal not only to the predestination texts examined above, but also to other Scriptural passages which they interpret as proof of the unconditional eternal security of their salvation. For the sake of brevity we shall examine only the major proof texts offered by the defenders of unconditional salvation.

**John 10:27-29: God Preserves those who Follow Christ**

“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I give them eternal life and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand” (John 10:27-29).

Believers in unconditional salvation argue that in this passage Christ teaches that those who receive eternal life cannot lose it and perish. In his book, *Can a Saved Person Ever be Lost?* John R. Rice says: “Notice a triple promise here concerning the security of God’s sheep. First, Christ gives them ‘eternal’ life. Second, they shall ‘never’ perish, and third, neither shall any pluck them out of Christ’s hand.”<sup>9</sup>

The problem with this interpretation is the failure to take the context into account. Christ’s statement shows that God preserves those who follow Him. The chapter focuses on what the Good Shepherd does for his sheep rather than on what they do. It contrasts the Good Shepherd with mercenary shepherds who do not care for the sheep. The sheep that shall never perish and whom no one will snatch from the Father’s hand are those who listen to the voice of the Good Shepherd and follow Him. These are the only persons who will “*never perish.*”

The verb “follow” is a present indicative in the Greek which indicates a *continuous action*. They continue to follow Jesus and remain faithful to Him. Indeed, these are the people who will “never perish.” Jesus did not

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include in His promise those who would turn away from Him and start “to follow Satan.” But they could turn away as Judas did, though it would be the exception rather than the rule.

### **John 5:24: Believers Have Eternal Life**

Several passages in John are used to prove the belief that once believers are saved, they are always saved (John 4:13-14; 5:24; 6:37-40, 44, 50; 15:2; 17:11-12; 3:3-8). The first three are used to show that those who believe in Christ have eternal life and have “passed from death to life.”

“Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears my word and believes him who sent me, has eternal life; he does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life” (John 5:24). This verse is used to prove that those who believe in Christ have eternal life because they will not be condemned. The problem with this interpretation is the failure to recognize that eternal existence is indeed a gift from God that comes with our faith in Jesus Christ, but it is not eternal in the sense that we cannot lose it. Rather, it is something that we possess as long as we believe in Christ and follow Him.

The verb “believes” (v. 24) is a translation of the Greek *pisteuon* which is a present participle indicating a *continuous action*. Thus, what Christ is saying is that as long as we continue believing and trusting in Him, we will never be condemned.

### **John 3:3-8: Born Again Christians Do not Need to Be Reborn**

Jesus’ statement to Nicodemus, “Verily, verily, I say unto thee, except a man is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3), is interpreted to mean that born again Christians cannot be reborn again. As a person who is born in this world is the son of his father no matter what happens, so the individual born of God’s Spirit is His son for ever: Once a son always a son.

The problem with this analogy is the failure to recognize a difference between biological and spiritual birth. The two births are not identical. Spiritual sonship is not the same as biological, physical sonship because people cannot choose their biological parents, but they can choose to become the spiritual sons and daughters of God. The claim that we are God’s children forever because of our spiritual rebirth can only be true if we have faith and love for God.

Before we become Christians, we are the “sons of the evil one” (Matt 13:38; Acts 13:10; 1 John 3:10); in other words, the devil was our spiritual father (John 8:44). However, this spiritual father-child relation-

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ship changes at the moment of conversion. We can be thankful that our spiritual father-child relationship with the evil one can be terminated.

### **Philippians 1:6: God will Bring Our Salvation to Completion**

“And I am sure that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.” (Phil 1:6). This text is used to prove the unconditional eternal security of our salvation. This interpretation fails to consider how God initiated the salvation process. Not by an arbitrary divine election, but by a voluntary faith in Jesus Christ. If it is our voluntary acceptance of Christ’s provision of salvation that allows God to do His work in us, then God cannot complete it without our continued response.

The same thought is expressed in Galatians 3:3 which speaks of starting with the Spirit and ending with the flesh. “Are you so foolish? Having begun with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh?” (Gal 3:33). It is evident that God will save only those who remain under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The same principle applies to those verses that speak of the Holy Spirit as a seal and a guarantee of our salvation (Eph 1:13-14; 2 Cor 1:22; 2 Tim 2:13).

The seal of the Holy Spirit is not placed arbitrarily upon the elect, but upon those who accept the Gospel and believe in Christ. “You also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the Gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit” (Eph 1:13). The text is clear. The seal of the Holy Spirit is received by those who hear the Gospel and accept Christ.

### **Hebrews 13:5b: “I will Never Fail You nor Forsake You”**

Once saved, always saved believers appeal to this text to claim that they are eternally secure because God has promised never to leave them or forsake them.

Does this text teach unconditional salvation? The answer is to be found in the original setting of the verse which is found in Deuteronomy 31:6, 8. God exhorts Israel to “be strong and of good courage” because “he will not fail you or forsake you” (Deut 31:6). But 10 verses later in the same chapter God predicts that the people will forsake Him: “This people will rise and play the harlot after the strange gods of the land, where they go to be among them, and they will forsake me and break my covenant which I have made with them” (Deut 31:16).

On the following verse God predicts that he will forsake and punish the people: “Then my anger will be kindled against them in that day, and I

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*will forsake them* and hide my face from them and they will be devoured; and many evils and troubles will come upon them, so that they will say on that day, ‘Have not these evils come upon us because our God is not among us?’ (Deut 31:17).

The whole chapter bears out that God’s promise never to leave or forsake His people is conditional upon their obedience. If we “forsake” God by turning to wickedness, He will “forsake” us. Believers in unconditional salvation read in Hebrew 13:5 something that is not there. The text of Deuteronomy does not even deal with the guarantee of salvation, but instead with the promise of temporal protection and prosperity which can be negated by sin.

### **Hebrews 10:10, 14: Christ’s Sacrifice Guarantees Eternal Salvation**

“And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all . . . For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified” (Heb 10:10, 14). Believers in once saved, always saved interpret this text in the sense that eternal salvation was accomplished by Christ once for all.

This interpretation ignores the context of the passage which contrasts the efficacy of the Old Testament’s sacrifices with Christ’s sacrifice. The former did not truly eliminate sin, “Otherwise, would they have not ceased to be offered? If the worshippers had once been cleansed, they would no longer have any consciousness of sin. But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sin year after year. For it is impossible that the blood of bulls and goats should take away sin” (Heb 10:2-4). But Christ’s sacrifice triumphed over the sin problem. “For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified” (Heb 10:14).

The point of the passage is not that Christ by His sacrifice saved all once and for ever, but that His sacrifice does not need to be repeated like the Old Testament ones. It does not teach that believers are saved “once for all,” but with Christ’s sacrifice that was offered “once for all.” Nowhere does the passage teach unconditional salvation.

### **Conclusion**

None of the texts we have examined support the popular belief that once individuals are saved they are always saved. Instead, the consistent teaching of Scripture is that our eternal security of salvation depends upon our continuous faith and trust in God who can prevent Satan from snatching us out of His hands. But if we cease to exercise faith and reject God’s protection, God cannot force us into heaven. Our salvation

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is based, not on an unconditional divine election, but on a conditional human acceptance of the gift of eternal life.

#### PART 4 THE CASE FOR CONDITIONAL SALVATION

Can a person who has accepted Christ as his personal Savior at one point in his life later lose his salvation and die in an unsaved condition? In other words, can a saved Christian lose his salvation by “falling away” from the faith later in his life? In the previous section we noted that many Christians influenced by Calvinistic teachings reject the notion of conditional salvation. They believe that “once saved always saved.” To support their belief they appeal to texts which, upon closer examination, negate such a belief.

At this point we wish to take a closer look at some of the biblical passages which clearly teach that salvation is conditional upon obedience and warn against the possibility of spiritual failure.

#### **The Conditional Nature of God’s Promises**

In the Scripture both material and spiritual blessings depend upon the relationship of the people to God. To the Israelites, whom God had chosen as His special people, He says: “*If you obey the voice of the Lord your God, being careful to do all commandments which I command you this day, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. . . . But if you will not obey the voice of the Lord your God or be careful to do all his commandments and his statutes which I command you this day, then all the curses shall come upon you and overtake you*” (Deut 28:1, 15).

God’s chosen people were not constrained to obey by virtue of their election. Instead, they were free to obey or disobey. Their repeated apostasy eventually led God to replace them with the Gentiles. This shows that God can and does reject His chosen if they prove to be unfaithful.

The Gentiles have no better guarantee than the Jews that God will continue to use them to fulfill His mission, irrespective of their response to God. Paul tells us that the Jews “were broken off because of their unbelief, but you [Gentiles] stand fast only through faith. So do not become proud, but stand in awe. For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you” (Rom 11:20, 21).

#### **Warning Against Complacency**

No one can be complacent about his/her salvation, thinking that they will make it into God’s Kingdom because they have been saved. The

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Bible contains constant warnings against complacency. The conditional “*if*” passage of Deuteronomy mentioned earlier, finds several parallels in the New Testament.

“*If* you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love” (John 15:10). “*If* a man does not abide in me, he is cast forth as a branch and withers” (John 15:6). “You are my friends *if* you do what I command you” (John 15:14). “We share in Christ, *if* only we hold our first confidence firm to the end” (Heb 3:14). “He has now reconciled . . . , *provided* that you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the Gospel which you heard” (Col 1:23). This sample of biblical passages suffices to show that our salvation is conditional on our continual faith response to our Savior.

### Warnings against Falling Away

The Scripture clearly teaches that it is possible for believers to fall from saving grace and lose their salvation. This teaching is found in two sets of passages that speak about falling away. First, there are those texts which warn directly against the falling away of believers. Second there are those texts which say that only those who continue to believe to the end will be saved.

One example of warning against falling away is found in Galatians 5:4: ‘You are severed from Christ, you would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace.’ The Galatians had joyfully received the Gospel, were justified by faith, and received the Holy Spirit (See Gal 3:1-5). Yet Paul says to these former Christians: “You are severed from Christ . . . you have fallen away from grace.” The meaning is clear. Those who had been true believers were now in danger of a falling way and no longer being Christians. If once saved always saved were true, then Paul’s words have no meaning and his deep concern for the falling away of the Galatians was unnecessary.

Similar warnings about the possibility of falling away abound in the Scripture. “Therefore let any one who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall” (1 Cor 10:12). “Therefore we must pay the closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. For if the message declared by angels was valid and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? (Heb 2:1-3).

“Take care, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we share in Christ, if only we hold our first confidence firm to the end” (Heb 3:12-14).

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These passages are so forceful and so evident that the belief once saved, always saved is hopelessly doomed. The many Scriptural admonitions to persevere in the faith presuppose the continual exercise of the freedom of choice. On this basis it is illogical to conclude that a decision of faith taken today will affect irreversibly the rest of one's life.

Howard Marshall keenly notes, "We have to reckon with the warnings addressed to believers against falling away. . . . These warnings exhort believers not to lose the salvation which they have already received or to surrender the faith which they already possess; they cannot be regarded as commands to believers to test themselves to see if they were truly converted at the beginning. . . . The positive command is not to begin to be a genuine believer, but to continue and persevere in the faith which one already has. . . . The New Testament takes for granted a present experience of salvation of which the believer is conscious. Here and now he may know the experience of Christian joy and certainty. He is not called to question the reality of this experience on the ground that it may be illusory he was never truly converted; rather, he is urged to continue to enjoy salvation through abiding in Christ and persevering in the faith."<sup>10</sup>

### **Only Those Who Endure to the End Will Be Saved**

A second set of Bible passages warn about the possibility of falling away and teach that only the believers who continue to believe until the end will be saved. Examples of these passages abound.

Jesus said to His disciples: "But he who endures to the end will be saved" (Matt 10:22). Christ repeated the same teaching at the end of His prophetic discourse: "You will be hated by all for my name's sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved" (Mark 13:130). These statements clearly admit the possibility of falling away permanently. Christ's warning utterly discredit the popular belief that a believer who is once saved is always saved. Salvation presupposes a constant commitment of faith and obedience to the end.

We noted earlier that Paul expresses the same teaching in Colossians 1:21-23: "And you, who once were estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh through his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him, *provided* that you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel which you heard."

In Hebrews also we find a clear admonition to hold fast to the end: "Take care, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today,' that none of you may be hardened

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by the deceitfulness of sin. For we share in Christ, if we hold our first confidence firm to the end” (Heb 3:12-14).

Each of the above passages teaches essentially the same thing. You are a believer now, but be careful because there is a real possibility that you may fall away. Remember, only those who continue to believe and obey the Gospel until the end will receive eternal life. If the popular belief once saved, always saved were true, then all the warnings about the possibility of falling away from the faith are misleading and misguided. But the fact is that the Scriptures make it plain that there is a constant possibility for believers to fall away from the faith – a reality called “apostasy” (2 Thess 2:3).

### **There is No Room for Self-complacency in the Christian Life**

The Christian life permits no room for self-complacency. Paul himself entertained the possibility that he might be lost: “Well, I do not run aimlessly, I do not box as one beating the air; but I pommel my body and subdue it, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified” (1 Cor 9:26-27). If Paul could feel insecure about his eternal salvation, it would be presumption for anyone else to think differently.

We have nothing to fear as long as we live in constant dependency upon the enabling power of God’s Spirit, but we need to be aware of the temptation to become self-sufficient, independent from God. The problem is not God capriciously abandoning us, but we deliberately choosing to turn away from Him.

Hebrews highlights the problem of turning away from God saying: “It is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they then commit apostasy, since they crucify the Son of God on their own account and hold him up to contempt’ (Heb 6:4-6).

The passage clearly speaks of believers who have experienced the blessings of salvation, the power of the Holy Spirit and God’s goodness. It is because of the privilege they had to partake “of the Holy Spirit,” and to taste “the goodness of the word of God,” that it is impossible to restore them to a saving relationship with God, if they commit apostasy.

A similar teaching is found in Hebrews 10:26-29: “For if we sin deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sin, but a fearful prospect of judgment, and a fury of fire which will consume the adversaries. A man who has violated the law of Moses dies without mercy at the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by

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the man who has spurned the Son of God, and profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and outraged the Spirit of grace?"

In this passage we are told that believers who received the knowledge of the truth, accepted Christ, and were sanctified by His atoning sacrifice will face a greater judgment than those who were never converted in the first place. The believer with greater knowledge deserves greater punishment. This means that when one becomes a Christian he is not guaranteed to be always saved to the end of his life because no one knows who will persevere to the end. "Therefore let any one who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor 10:12).

The warnings, admonitions, and the "if" conditional statements we have examined all teach the same truth, namely, that Christians do not have an absolute guarantee that they will automatically persevere in their faithfulness to God until the end. Christians know that they must renew their commitment to Christ daily. There is no room for self-complacency. Our eternal security of salvation does not rest on an arbitrary divine election of the saved and unsaved, but on our daily choice to renew our faith-commitment to God.

## PART 5

### SALVATION IS ASSURED BUT NOT GUARANTEED

The most agonizing problem in the assurance of salvation is not whether a person has accepted all the basic Bible truths, but whether the acceptance of those truths gives the assurance of being saved. What makes this agonizing is that there are many people today, as in the past, who think that they are saved when they are not.

For example, in Matthew 7:21-23, Jesus says, "Not every one who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do so many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you, depart from me, you evildoers.'"

The agonizing question for many is: Do I really have the assurance of salvation? Is my eternal destiny secure? Is my faith real? We have seen that some well-intentioned people influenced by Calvinistic teachings try to lessen the problem by making salvation an irreversible act of God who elected beforehand some to salvation and some to perdition. Some try to generate assurance by denying that any kind of life-change is really necessary to demonstrate the reality of salvation. Such teaching is clearly contradicted by James' statement: "So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead" (James 2:17).

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Ultimately the strategies used to generate assurance of salvation by teaching once saved, always saved can backfire because they do not bring peace to tormented souls. Worst of all, they give the false assurance of salvation to people who should not have it because they have never experienced the life-changes that show the reality of faith.

So far we have seen that the doctrine of unconditional salvation attempts to offer the eternal security of our salvation by making the latter a divine decision rather than a human choice. We have seen that from beginning to end the Bible teaches that believers do not have an absolute guarantee that they will automatically persevere in their faithfulness to God until the end. Instead it teaches that believers by their free choice must accept the provision of salvation and daily renew their faith-commitment to God.

### The Assurance of Salvation

While there is no guarantee that Christians can never fall, the Scriptures do offer the assurance that nothing can separate trusting believers from God. Although we have no guarantee that we will be ultimately saved no matter how we live, this does not mean that we cannot have the assurance that God has saved us.

Although as believers we can never become boastful or presumptuous, we can rest in the assurance that as long as we follow Jesus in our beliefs and practices, our salvation is secure. “I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things future, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord” (Rom 8:38, 39).

Paul could confidently say: “If God is for us, who is against us? He who did spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all, will he not give up all things with him?” (Rom 8:31-32). The fact that God did not spare anything for our salvation, not even His own Son, gives us reason to trust and believe Him all the more. We can rest in the assurance that “He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil 1:6).

In many ways our Christian life must be lived in a tension between uncertainty and confidence. We are uncertain about our final destiny because we cannot be *absolutely* sure that we will continue to maintain a faith relationship with Christ. Yet, we can be confident that God will sustain us, protect us, and preserve us to the end. This tension is a vital component of our Christian life. It challenges us daily not to become self-confident and presumptuous, but to depend upon God by trusting Him and obeying him.

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Howard Marshall reaches the same conclusion when he states: “The conclusion to which we find ourselves being led is that the New Testament knows the possibility of failure to persevere and warns against it, but it emphasizes the greater possibility of a confidence in God and a continuing faith which, as it is sustained by God, is preserved from fear and from falling.”<sup>11</sup> “But we can say firmly that, while it is possible for a Christian to fail to persevere after a genuine experience of salvation, yet, with all the promises of a faithful God to sustain those who trust in Him, the main emphasis of the New Testament is on confidence and assurance of final salvation.”<sup>12</sup>

Let us therefore not “throw away our confidence, which has great reward” (Heb 10:35), but live in the reassurance that God “is able to keep you from falling and to present you without blemish before the presence of his glory with rejoicing” (Jude 24).

### CONCLUSION

The doctrine of “once saved, always saved” is widely accepted by many Christians today because it relieves them of their personal responsibility for their eternal salvation. Christians are taught to believe that their eternal salvation is secure because it largely depends upon God’s election rather than their human choice. We have found this doctrine to be dangerous because it deceives people into thinking that they are saved when in reality they may not be.

The Bible clearly teaches that God wants every human being to be saved. Christ’s atoning sacrifice is for all, not for a selected few. The invitation and call of salvation is extended to all.

Our study of the predestination verses of Romans 8:28-30 and Ephesians 1:3-14, has shown that the proper interpretation of these verses is that God predetermined and foreordained that every person who lives by faith holy and unblemished lives, are elected, justified, and ultimately glorified by God.

Our examination of the texts commonly used to support the belief that once individuals are saved, they are always saved, has shown that none of them support such a belief. When attention is given to the context of each passage, their teaching is consistent with the rest of the Scriptures that our eternal security of salvation depends upon our continuous faith and trust in God who can prevent Satan from snatching us out of His hands. But if we cease to exercise faith and reject God’s protection, God cannot force us into heaven. Our salvation is based, not on an unconditional divine election, but on a conditional human acceptance of the gift of eternal life.

Support for this conclusion is provided by the warnings, admonitions, and the “if” conditional statements that we have examined. We have found that all of them teach the same truth, namely, that our eternal security of salvation does not rest on an arbitrary divine election of the saved and unsaved, but on our daily choice to renew our faith-commitment to God. It is only those “who endure to the end [that] will be saved” (Matt 10:22).

Finally we have seen that our Christian life must be lived in a tension between uncertainty and confidence. We are uncertain about our final destiny because we cannot be *absolutely* sure that we will continue to maintain a faith relationship with Christ. Yet, we can be *confident* that God will sustain us, protect us, and preserve us to the end. This tension challenges us daily not to become self-confident and presumptuous, but to depend upon God by trusting Him and obeying him.

Summing up, the popular belief that once an individual is saved, he is always saved, is an unbiblical, deceptive belief that causes untold damage to the spiritual lives of countless millions of Christians. Instead of guaranteeing the eternal security of salvation, it ultimately undermines the assurance of salvation which depends not on an unconditional divine election, but on a conditional human acceptance of the gift of eternal life.

### NOTES TO CHAPTER 9

1. *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 17 “Of the Perseverance of the Saints,” paragraphs 1 and 2.
2. Edward Hiscox, *The Standard Manual for Baptist Churches*, 1929, p. 67.
3. See: [www.billygraham.org/qna/qna.asp?i=1777](http://www.billygraham.org/qna/qna.asp?i=1777)
4. John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book 3, Chapter 21, Section 5.
5. Jeff Paton, “A Historical Examination of the Doctrine of Eternal Security,” [www.eternalsecurity.us/a\\_historical\\_examination.htm](http://www.eternalsecurity.us/a_historical_examination.htm)
6. Robert Shank, *Elect in the Son*, 1970, pp. 197-198.
7. F. Furman Kearley, *The Biblical Doctrine of Predestination, Foreordination, and Election*, 1998, p. 15.
8. Sakae Kubo, *Once Saved Always Saved*, 1977, p. 17.
9. John R. Rice, *Can A Saved Person Ever Be Lost?* 1943, p. 21.
10. I. Howard Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God: A Study of Perseverance and Falling Away*, 1969, pp. 199-200.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 206.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 207.

## Chapter 10

# INFANT BAPTISM

The importance of baptism in the New Testament is acknowledged by all Christians. In fact, more coverage is given to baptism than to the Lord's Supper. The first public appearance of Jesus was heralded by John's baptism. The first public act of Christ was to be baptized. One of Jesus' last recorded commands to his followers was "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit" (Matt 28:19). The first evangelistic sermon of the apostolic church resulted in a mass-baptism.

In every case of conversion described in the book of Acts, baptism is mentioned. As G. R. Beasley-Murray, a Baptist scholar, observes: "Baptism is . . . a part of the proclamation of Christ. In an Apostolic sermon it comes as its logical conclusion."<sup>1</sup> In his epistles, Paul frequently reminded Christians of what happened to them when they were baptized and became members of Christ's body, the church. Thus, he summoned them to behave accordingly! (Gal 3:27; 1 Cor 1:12-17; Rom 6:3-9; Eph 4:5; Col 2:12).

With the rare exception of churches like the Quakers and the Salvation Army, Christians of all denominations have regarded baptism as the rite of entrance into the church. Yet, despite the important role that baptism has played in the history of the church, no other institution has caused so much controversy, division, hostility, and mutual mistrust. In many ways the history of baptism is the story of the water that has divided and still divides Christians.

The issue is not only the meaning, but also the method or mode of baptism. Is baptism primarily a symbolic, public confession of faith or a sacrament that removes from the soul the guilt of the original sin? Should baptism be administered only to those who publicly profess to understand and accept fundamental Bible truths and express a personal commitment to Christ? Or, should baptism be administered also to infants who cannot answer questions about faith? Should baptism be practiced by immersion or by sprinkling drops of water over the head of a newborn baby?

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Today most Christian churches practice infant baptism. Among them are the Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox Church, the Anglican Communion, the Lutherans, the Presbyterians, the Methodists, the Assyrian Church of the East, the Church of the Nazarene, the Reformed Churches in America, the United Church of Christ, and the Continental Reformed Churches.

The churches within the Protestant tradition that reject infant baptism include the Baptists, most Pentecostals, the Mennonites, the Plymouth Brethren, the Seventh-day Adventists, most non-denominational churches, the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Christadelphians, and the Latter-day Saints. Comparatively speaking, the churches that practice infant baptism far outnumber those which baptize believing adults ("believer baptism").

### The Tragedy of the Reformation

Disagreements over the meaning and mode of baptism can be traced back to the Reformation. At that time Christians attacked each other verbally and physically with a ferocity totally at variance with Christ's command to "love one another" (John 15:12, 17). One of the tragedies of the Reformation is that its leading Reformers, Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli, killed fellow Christians for the crime of baptizing or rebaptizing adult believers rather than infants. Their criminal acts raise serious questions about their understanding and experience of the transforming power of divine grace.

One of the most revealing examples of the Reformers' intolerance is provided by the story of the tragic conflict which erupted in the sixteenth century between them and the promoters of adult baptism known as Anabaptists, which means "Re-baptizers." The Reformers were determined to preserve the Catholic practice of baptizing infants, though they gave a different meaning to the ordinance. By contrast, the Anabaptists rejected infant baptism, known as *paedobaptism*, from the Greek word *pais*, meaning "child."

The sixteenth century Anabaptists represented a large number of radical movements who condemned the Reformation as half-hearted and incomplete. They wanted to complete the reformation by returning to the teachings and practices of the Apostolic Church. They all rejected paedobaptism (infant baptism), and baptized or rebaptized only those who came to a decisive understanding of Bible truths and were prepared to make a personal commitment to Christ.

The influence of the Anabaptist Reformers survives today and can be seen in denominations like the Seventh-day Adventist church, which were

once regarded as the lunatic fringe of Christendom. Now, however, some historians recognize that certain modern religious movements represent genuine Christian strands that rightfully challenge mainline denominations to reexamine their traditional teachings. For example, G. H. Williams, the British scholar who has painstakingly examined the writings of several modern religious movements, concludes: “Christians of many denominations are finding themselves . . . closer to the despised sectaries of the Reformation Era [such as Anabaptists] than to the classical defenders of a reformed *corpus christianum* [Reformation teachings].”<sup>2</sup>

### An Example of the Reformers’ Intolerance

An example of the Reformers’ intolerance toward Anabaptists is the trial and execution of Felix Manz, a Swiss leader of the movement. At his trial in January 1527, Felix Manz freely confessed to being a teacher of adult baptism, forbidden in Switzerland: “We bring together those who are willing to accept Christ, obey the Word, and follow in His footsteps. We unite them by baptism, and leave the rest to their present conviction.”<sup>3</sup>

The Clerk of the Courts wrote this explanatory comment in the records: “They do not allow Infant Baptism. In this way they will put an end to secular authority.”<sup>4</sup> This revealing comment shows the concern of the local government to preserve the practice of infant baptism in order to ensure the commitment of the people to secular authorities that controlled the state church. Being baptized as an infant into the state church meant being loyal and committed to the state for the rest of one’s life.

Even more extraordinary is the outburst of Manz’s accuser, Ulrich Zwingli, one of the leading Swiss Reformers. Speaking at the trial of Anabaptist Manz, Zwingli shouted: “Let him who talks about going under [the water by immersion] go under.”<sup>5</sup> What seemed to be poetic justice was carried out literally by the local authorities who condemned Felix Manz to death by drowning.

“Led into the boat, he was forced to sit up and his arms were passed around his bent knees and bound at the wrists. Next a stick was pushed between the knees and elbows to secure him in this position. The boat was rowed to the center of the [Limmat] river, and the helpless prisoner was thrown overboard, to choke in the dark, deep waters.”<sup>6</sup>

One wonders, How could Protestant spiritual leaders kill fellow Christians for the crime of obeying their understanding of biblical teachings regarding baptism or other doctrines? How could Calvin influence the Geneva’s Council on October 24, 1553 to sentence to death by burning Michael Servetus for denying the Trinity and infant baptism? Regarding

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infant baptism, Servetus said: “It is an invention of the devil, an infernal falsity for the destruction of all Christianity.”<sup>7</sup> Servetus was well-known not only for his theological treatises, but also for his scientific discoveries. He was the first European to describe the function of pulmonary circulation of the blood—a discovery that was largely rejected at that time.

One wonders, how could such outrageous criminal acts happen just few years after the beginning of the Reformation in Europe? An answer is to be found in the prevailing misconception that fighting and suppressing “heretics” was more important than loving them. As the church of Ephesus in Revelation lost its first love in the process of fighting those “who call themselves apostles but are not” (Rev 2:2, 4), so Christians with a passion to fight perceived heretical teachings, often became heartless and brutal in the suppression of alleged heretics.

Thankfully, Christians today rarely attack each other physically over baptismal issues. The new climate of tolerance tends to downplay doctrinal differences, focusing instead on areas of cooperation such as joint action against social injustices. Doctrinal differences remain in a dormant condition like sleeping dogs.

But when a church becomes active, conducting evangelistic meetings, then doctrinal differences wake up and leap into action. Christians find themselves debating old questions: Is baptism necessary for salvation? Should baptism be administered only to those who profess faith through a clear understanding of fundamental Bible truths and are willing to express publicly their personal commitment to Christ? Or, should the church baptize infants of Christian parents who wish to give to their off-spring the assurance of belonging to the family of God? These are some of the questions we wish to address in this chapter which focuses primarily on the popular belief and practice of infant baptism.

### **Objectives of This Chapter**

This chapter examines infant baptism, commonly called “paedobaptism,” from both a biblical and historical perspective. The chapter is divided into four major parts:

1. Infant Baptism in Scripture
2. An Evaluation of Arguments for Infant Baptism
3. Infant Baptism in History
4. Problems with Infant Baptism

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Biblically, we seek to understand the New Testament teachings regarding baptism and their implications for infant baptism. We shall see that the witness of the New Testament does not support infant baptism because baptism is always linked to the command to repent and believe, something that infants cannot do. Moreover baptism represents the believer's identification with Christ's death and resurrection by dying to sin and being resurrected to a new life in Christ, an experience that innocent babies cannot have.

Historically, we shall trace the origin and theological development of infant baptism. We shall see that during the Middle Ages, infant baptism stood for the sacramental power of the Catholic Church while adult baptism was condemned as evangelical "heresy." During the Lutheran Reformation, infant baptism symbolized state Christianity while adult baptism represented evangelical reformatory movements, and those who practiced it were committed to restoring apostolic beliefs and practices.

Through Calvin's teachings, infant baptism came to represent a predestinarian view of the Gospel, while adult baptism reflected a strong belief in human freedom. The Anabaptists believed that Luther and Calvin did not take their 'Reformation' far enough. Thus, they rejected infant baptism as unbiblical because it served to perpetuate state churches filled with nominal Christians.

By way of conclusion we shall reflect on some of the significant problems that stem from the belief and practice of infant baptism. We shall see that infant baptism has contributed to the ritualization of Christianity and the secularization of the church, besides fostering a false security of salvation.

## PART 1 INFANT BAPTISM IN SCRIPTURE

There is much confusion today about baptism in the various Christian denominations. Some practice infant baptism while others practice believers' baptism. Some baptize by *immersion* (dipping), while other by *aspersion* (sprinkling). Still other baptize by *affusion* (pouring). Some teach that baptism removes the stain of the original sin while other see baptism as being primarily a public confession of faith and personal commitment to Christ.

The confusion can hardly be attributed to a lack of biblical clarity on baptism. The Bible is abundantly clear on the meaning, mode, and results of baptism. The problem is the accumulation of ecclesiastical traditions that have gradually obscured the meaning and function of baptism over the centuries.

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When the Reformers shouted *Sola Scriptura* and defended this principle tenaciously against Catholic teachings, it was inevitable that her teaching on baptism would be subjected to a serious examination in the light of the Scriptures. Diligent study led many Anabaptists to discover that the New Testament does not even mention infant baptism and knows nothing of all the ceremonies and traditions that gradually came to clothe the rite of baptism. Their study of Scripture led them to the conclusion that infant baptism could not be supported by the teachings of the Apostles.

In fact, the New Testament offers no evidence for infant baptism. This fact is recognized today almost unanimously by theologians and biblical scholars. Even Friedrich Schleiermacher, known as the Father of Modern Theology, openly stated: “All traces of infant baptism presumably found in the New Testament must first be put into it.”<sup>8</sup>

Since our focus in this chapter is on the popular belief in infant baptism, we will limit our analysis to the major New Testament texts and reasons used for defending the validity of infant baptism.

### **John the Baptist Did not Baptize Infants**

John the Baptist baptized penitent adults, not infants. His baptism was a water baptism of repentance, preparing the way for the coming of Messiah. It was administered to those who came with a penitent heart to seek forgiveness for their sins. It was a “believer’s baptism,” because he did not baptize infants. “John the Baptizer appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4).

John’s baptism was apparently similar to the proselyte baptism that was administered to Gentile converts to Judaism. In both instances, there are no indications that a water baptism of repentance was administered to infants. The reason is that babies are innocent and have no willful sin to confess and repent of.

### **Jesus Was Baptized as an Adult, not as an Infant.**

The baptism of Jesus serves as a model for Christians to follow. He was baptized not as an infant, but as an adult “to fulfill all righteousness” (Matt 3:15). Jesus’ baptism as an adult gave this ordinance divine sanction (Matt 3:13-17; 21:25). Since Christ, the Sinless One, was baptized as an adult to “fulfill all righteousness,” we who are sinners ought to follow His example by being baptized at an age when we can make an intelligent decision to accept Him as our personal Savior.

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**Christ's Disciples did not Baptize Infants**

Jesus Himself did not baptize, but His disciples did administer a baptism similar to that of John the Baptist. They baptized those who repented of their sins and accepted by faith Christ as their personal Savior. It was a believer's baptism (Acts 2:41; 8:12, 16; 10:48; 11:16; 18:8; 19:4). There is no evidence that they ever baptized infants.

**Baptism is Always Linked to a Command to Repent and Believe**

It is significant that baptism in the New Testament is always linked to the command to repent and believe in Christ, something that infants cannot do. On the day of Pentecost Peter said to the people: "Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. . . So those who had received his word were baptized; and there were added that day about three thousand souls (Acts 2:38, 41).

This passage clearly indicates that repentance of sin and acceptance of Christ were the prerequisites for receiving baptism by the mass of believing Jews who eagerly accepted Jesus of Nazareth as their expected Messiah. Repentance requires a mature understanding of sin and a decision to turn away from it. This is something that infants cannot do.

A similar example is found in the conversion story of the Ethiopian eunuch. When he asked Philip: "See, here is water! What is to prevent my being baptized?" Philip responded: "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And he answered and said, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him" (Acts 8:36-38). This passage makes it abundantly clear that the condition for receiving baptism is belief in Christ. This condition excludes infants from being baptized because they are incapable of believing.

**Instruction Precedes Baptism**

At the end of His ministry Christ commanded His disciples: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matt 28:19-20). In this statement Christ mentions three successive stages:

1. Make disciples of all nations.
2. Baptize those who become disciples.
3. Teach those who are baptized to observe Christ's commandments.

Note that baptism is to be administered to those who become disciples and those who are baptized are to be taught to observe Christ's commandments. Both of these conditions are beyond the power of children to fulfill.

In the same commission given in Mark 16:16, instruction and believing are given as the pre-conditions for baptism: "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned."

Here baptism is linked to salvation, but not in the sense that it automatically guarantees salvation. The salvation or the condemnation of a person is not guaranteed by the ritual of baptism, but by what baptism represents, namely, a faith response to Christ and the acceptance of His provision of salvation. This is clearly indicated by the statement that people will be condemned, not for failing to be baptized, but for refusing to believe: "He who does not believe will be condemned."

In Mark baptism is preceded by preaching and believing. The reason is that baptismal candidates must understand what they are expected to believe in. They must be taught what it means to be a follower of Christ both in terms of beliefs and practices. Obviously babies are not mentally and spiritually capable of being instructed and making a personal commitment to Christ.

### **The Meaning of the Word "Baptism Precludes Infant Baptism"**

The English word *baptize* comes from the Greek verb *baptizo*, which means "to deep in or under water."<sup>9</sup> When applied to water baptism, it signifies an immersion or dipping of a person under water.

Since the very meaning of the verb *baptize* presupposes the immersion of the believer under water – a practice attested in the New Testament and early Christian literature – babies can hardly be baptized by immersion without endangering their lives. This explains why baptism by sprinkling was introduced later on to accommodate babies. But as J. K. Howard observes, "the New Testament offers no evidence that sprinkling was ever an apostolic practice, indeed the evidence all points to it being a late introduction."<sup>10</sup>

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**Baptism Was Practiced by Immersion in the New Testament**

The accounts of water baptism in the New Testament involve immersion of adults, not sprinkling of babies. We read that John baptized *in* the river Jordan (Matt 3:6; Mark 1:5) and “in Aenon near Salim, because there was *much water* there” (John 3:23). Only immersion requires “much water.” Jesus was baptized by immersion. We read that John baptized Jesus “*in* the Jordan” and after the baptism Jesus “*came up out* of the water” (Mark 1:9, 10; cf. Matt 3:16).

Baptism by immersion was also the normal practice of the Apostolic Church. We are told that when Philip the evangelist baptized the Ethiopian eunuch, they both “went into the water” and “came up out of the water” (Acts 8:38-39). Baptism by immersion precludes the baptism of babies because they are too young to be immersed under water without risking their health. This is a reason why there are no instances of infant baptism in the New Testament.

**Baptism Is an Appeal to God for a Good Conscience**

In the New Testament, baptism is not a mere water ritual, but an outward expression of an inward appeal to God for a clear conscience: “Baptism, which corresponds to this [Noah’s family saved through the flood’s water], now saves you, not as removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a clear conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet 3:21).

Baptism is valid only when it represents a sincere appeal to God for a change of heart and mind (Rom 12:2). It saves in the same ways as the confession of the lips saves in Romans 10:9: “If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” Since infants are too young to appeal to God for a change of heart and to confess their belief in Jesus Christ, their baptism by sprinkling is a meaningless ritual devoid of biblical support.

**Baptism Symbolizes Death to Sin and Resurrection to a New Life**

While the Gospels and Acts report the incidents of baptism, Paul expands the deeper theological meaning of baptism. For example, he explains that through baptism the believer identifies with Christ’s death and resurrection. “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with

him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom 6:3-4).

Through baptism a believer symbolically enters into an intimate relationship with Christ. Howard notes: “In the symbolic act of baptism, the believer enters into the death of Christ, and in a real sense that death becomes his death; and he enters into the resurrection of Christ, and that resurrection becomes his resurrection.”<sup>11</sup>

How does a believer identify with Christ’s death and resurrection? By symbolically burying his sins in the watery grave and being raised into a newness of life. Paul explains that in baptism “our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin” (Rom 6:6). “We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom 6:4).

This profound theological meaning of baptism as identification with Christ’s death and resurrection by dying to sin and being raised by faith into newness of life is obviously incomprehensible to an infant. A new born baby cannot identify through baptism with Christ’s death and resurrection, nor can he experience death to sin and resurrection to a newness of life. No infant can be buried with Christ in baptism and raised up with Him through faith.

### **Baptism Presupposes a Conversion Unknown to Innocent Infants**

Baptism incorporates believers into the church within the context of a conversion experience known as “new birth,” not “infant birth.” This is why in the New Testament *believers*, not infants, were baptized — “both *men* and *women*” (Acts 8:12, 13, 29-38; 9:17-18; 1 Cor 1:14). As Karl Barth admits, “Nowhere in the New Testament is infant baptism either permitted or commanded.”<sup>12</sup> Similarly, G. R. Beasley-Murray concludes: “I find myself unable to recognize in infant baptism the baptism of the New Testament Church.”<sup>13</sup>

Since innocent infants cannot experience conversion, they do not qualify for baptism. This does not mean that they are excluded from the new covenant community. Jesus included them in His kingdom of grace, saying: “Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven. And he laid his hands on them” (Matt 19:15).

Jesus never suggested that unless children were baptized and had the stain of the original sin removed from their souls, they could not become members of the kingdom of heaven. Instead, pointing to unbap-

tized children, He said: “to such belongs the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 19:15). The kingdom of heaven belongs to children not because of their infant baptism, but because their state of innocence precludes the willful sinning of adults who need a conversion experience. Believing parents fulfill a vital role in guiding their children into a relationship with Christ that will eventually lead them to baptism.

## Conclusion

Infant baptism is unknown in the New Testament simple because at a tender age infants cannot fulfill the conditions of baptism, namely, instruction, repentance, acceptance of Christ as their personal Savior, and conversion by dying to a life of sin and being risen to a newness of life.

Baptism presupposes a conversion (“new birth”) experience unknown to infants. Innocent infants are unaware of sinful tendencies in their lives; consequently, they cannot be expected to repent of their sins and to accept by faith Christ as their personal Savior.

Baptism marks one’s entrance into God’s kingdom. This mark is signified by a heart-change manifested in repentance and faith-acceptance of Christ. By receiving baptism, believers identify with Christ’s death and resurrection by symbolically burying their sins in the watery grave and being raised into a newness of life (Rom 6:4-6). This profound theological meaning of baptism is obviously incomprehensible to an infant.

At what age should young people be baptized? No hard and fast rule can be laid down because some young people are ready for baptism at an earlier age than others. The youth can be baptized when they understand the meaning of baptism and are willing to surrender their lives to Christ by living according to the teaching of God’s Word. Parents play a vital role in fostering the spiritual growth and character development of their children.

## PART 2 AN EVALUATION OF THE ARGUMENTS FOR INFANT BAPTISM

To grasp the disagreement between Infant Baptists, known also as *paedobaptists*, and Believers’ Baptist, called also *credobaptists*, one needs to understand the *roots* of the disagreement. This is to be found in a different understanding of the nature of faith, the role of baptism in salvation, the nature of grace, and the function of the sacraments.

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Simply stated, Credobaptists view baptism as a public confession of faith which symbolically tells the world that one is a Christian. Only those who have faith in Christ become members of God's new covenantal community, the church, through baptism. Baptism is merely a symbol that does not convey grace.

By contrast, Paedobaptists generally agree that baptism is a sign that a person is a member of God's covenant community which includes both believers and children of believers. Baptism is not merely a symbol but a channel of grace through which God conveys spiritual power, unmerited favor, and for Catholics, the removal from the soul of the stain of original sin.

If baptism is a sign that a person is a member of God's covenant community of faith, then, Infant Baptists contend, children of believers must be baptized to become members of that community. In other words, baptism is seen as a passport, a sign that you are a member of a particular country, and if a child is a member of that country, he should be allowed to have a passport. We shall now see that this concept is foreign to Scripture. It largely derives from a misunderstanding of the relationship between circumcision and baptism.

### **Infant Baptism is Largely Based on the Covenant Theology**

We have now arrived at the critical difference between Infant Baptists and Believers' Baptists, which is to be found in the different understanding of the relationship between the Old and New Covenant. Infant Baptists develop their belief out of their so-called Covenant Theology. Supporters of the Covenant Theology reject the distinction between the Old and New Covenants. They maintain that the Bible knows only one covenant of grace. This is interpreted to mean that the blessings of circumcision find their counterpart in infant baptism.

This belief in the one covenant of grace is common to all Reformed theologians. They apply this belief to infant baptism by claiming that whenever God makes a covenant with men and women, He always includes their children in the blessings of the covenant. In the New Testament children are included in God's covenant with their parents. Support for this conclusion is drawn largely from the stories of household baptism to be examined shortly.

### **Does Infant Baptism Correspond to Circumcision?**

Reformed theologians maintain that baptism in the New Covenant follows the same design and function of circumcision in the Old Covenant. All newborn male Jews were to be circumcised to become part

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of the covenant community of Israel. The sign of circumcision was not dependent upon the faith of the parents insofar as eternal life was concerned. Parents were simply expected to obey the law of circumcision, to ensure that their sons through circumcision would become recipients of the covenantal blessings of land and prosperity promised to Abraham.

Infant Baptists believe that the New Testament baptism is the counterpart of the Old Testament circumcision. Just as the Passover festival was replaced by the Lord's Supper, so circumcision was replaced by infant baptism. Circumcision as the sign of the Covenant has changed its external form to reflect new spiritual realities. Because of Christ's shed blood, the bloody sign of circumcision has been transformed into the bloodless sign of the washing with water of baptism.

In his chapter "Baptism as a Sacrament of the Covenant," Reformed theologian Richard L. Pratt writes: "Reformed theologians and commentators typically focus on baptism as an initiation into covenant by pointing out a similar analogy between baptism and circumcision. As the *Belgic Confession* states, 'Having abolished circumcision, which was with blood, he established in its place the sacrament of baptism . . . Baptism does what the circumcision did for the Jewish people.'"<sup>14</sup>

Infant Baptists believe that there is compelling evidence that circumcision has been replaced by baptism. To support their belief, they appeal especially to Colossians 2:11-12: "In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men, but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism."

Many Infant Baptists interpret this text as teaching that baptism has replaced the function of circumcision. This means that for them infant baptism is less a statement of faith than an assumption of identity. It says that infant baptism is a sign of covenantal inclusion into the community of faith, just as circumcision was a sign of inclusion into the Abrahamic covenant.

The problem with this interpretation is the failure to recognize that the analogy between circumcision and baptism has both similarities and differences. In the New Testament those who are circumcised in God's sight are not those who have been baptized at birth into the covenant community of faith, but those who have put off *the sinful nature*. This means that in the New Testament the concept of circumcision has been transformed from an *outward physical* sign into an *inward experience of spiritual circumcision* that is tied to baptism. The latter is *not an external physical sign* like circumcision performed on new born babies, but a *internal spiritual sign of new birth* in Christ experienced by all believers.

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### A Fundamental Error of Infant Baptists

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A fundamental hermeneutical (interpretative) error of Infant Baptists is their emphasis on the *inner continuity* between the Old and New Covenants – an emphasis that causes them to ignore the *external discontinuity* between the two. They simultaneously “Christianize” the Old Testament by reading it as if it *were* the New, and “Judaize” the New Testament by reading it as if it *were* the Old.<sup>15</sup>

Infant Baptists Christianize the Old Testament by restricting the significance of circumcision to purely spiritual blessings while ignoring its national and political function. They also Judaize the New Testament by applying the national function of the Old Testament circumcision to baptism. The latter concept is foreign to the New Testament teachings on baptism.

Circumcision and baptism are not the equivalent of each other. In the first place, no one is born into the New Covenant; whereas all circumcised infants in Israel were born into the Abrahamic covenant, no one is born into the New Covenant. In the second place, no one receives baptism as the sign of the New Covenant automatically, without repenting and accepting Christ by faith. Third, while the promises of the Old Covenant were of a temporal nature, linked to the land of Canaan, the promises of the New Covenant are eternal and linked to the new earth.

In the Old Covenant circumcision was the sign of national identity, given as a birthright to any new-born Jewish infant. In the New Covenant baptism is a sign of spiritual identity – received only by faith and repentance, not automatically by birthright. In the Old Covenant circumcision was mandatory for all male infants. In the New Covenant baptism is not mandatory for infants. It is mandatory only for those who believe and repent. Thus we see that circumcision had a different purpose than baptism. Circumcision was commanded by God for all male infants. By contrast, baptism is given only to those who believe and repent.

From a historical perspective it is worth noting that the belief that baptism replaces circumcision represents a late development when the church and state became a unified body, controlled by the Bishop of Rome. At that time, the doctrine of baptism replacing circumcision was developed to justify the theology of infant baptism. This process is discussed at length in the scholarly study *Baptism in the Early Church* (2005) by Professors Hendrick Stander and Johannes Louw, both recognized authorities in the field of Patristic studies. We shall refer shortly to this important study.

Infant Baptists use a number of New Testament passages to support their belief that in the New Covenant infant baptism replaces circumcision as the sign of covenantal inclusion. For the sake of brevity we will examine only a few of them.

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## Household Baptisms

In the Old Testament, if the head of a household converted to Judaism, all the males in the house, even the infants, were circumcised. Infant Baptists argue that the same pattern continues in the New Testament. Household baptism allegedly implies that the rules for membership in Abraham's covenant continue in the New Testament. The main difference is that the sign of circumcision is replaced by infant baptism.

To support this belief, Infant Baptists appeal to four major stories where the head of a household is baptized with all of its members: *Cornelius' household* (Acts 10:46-48), *Lydia's household* (Acts 16:15), the *Philippian jailer's household* (Acts 16:33), and *Stephanas' household* (1 Cor 1:16). Paedobaptists claim that "it is inconceivable that in all these households there were no little children and infants. When their parents and other responsible members of the household were baptized, the children were obviously included as well."<sup>16</sup>

This popular assumption is discredited by a closer look at these household baptisms which reveals that its members were baptized because they "believed," not because the head of the household was converted.

### **Cornelius' Household (Acts 10:44-48)**

Peter's explicit warrant for baptizing Cornelius and his household is that "these people . . . have received the Holy Spirit just as we have" (Acts 10:47), and NOT because the covenant head of the household had been converted. Luke explicitly mentions that while Peter was speaking "the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word" (Acts 10:44). The reception of the Holy Spirit by the members of the household implies that each member had been converted and for that reason they were baptized. The Holy Spirit is not given arbitrarily to unbelievers.

### **Lydia's Household (Acts 16:14-15)**

Lydia is described as a "worshipper of God" who "opened her heart to give heed to what was said by Paul" (Acts 16:14). Her baptism signified her acceptance of the message proclaimed by Paul. "She was baptized with her household" (Acts 16:15). Nothing in the passage suggests that Lydia's household included infants.

The fact that she was a business woman who traveled extensively to sell her "purple goods" suggests that she had no husband and therefore no children. In his scholarly study *Did the Early Church Baptize Children*, Kurt Allen reaches the same conclusion, saying: "Lydia could not

have had children or infants when her household was baptized, since no husband is mentioned in her account of Acts 16.”<sup>17</sup> To read infants into the text goes against the context. Thus, the baptism of Lydia’s household has no significance for infant baptism.

### **Philippian Jailer’s Household (Acts 16:25-34)**

The entire household of the Jailer heard the message of the Gospel: “And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all that were in the house” (Acts 16:32). The implication is that all the members of the household heard the Gospel, believed, and were baptized. As stated by Paul Jewett, “Taken at its face value, the account of Acts sets before us a hearing, believing, rejoicing household that received baptism.”<sup>18</sup> The passage offers no support for infant baptism. It would be exceedingly strange if only the jailer believed the Gospel and the infant members of his household were baptized without believing.

### **Stephanas’ Household (1 Corinthians 1:16)**

Paul informs us that he did “baptize also the household of Stephanas” (1 Cor 1:16). He describes the members of Stephanas’ household as his “first converts in Achaia” who “devoted themselves to the service of the saints” (1 Cor 16:15). It is evident that a *household conversion* occurred, not merely a household baptism. The fact that all the members of Stephanas’ household were converted and devoted themselves to the service of the saints hardly supports the notion that some of them were baptized infants. Conversion and service presupposes mature believers. Infants are not old enough to devote themselves to the service of the saints.

### **Peter’s Pentecostal Speech (Acts 2:38-39)**

In his Pentecostal sermon, Peter appealed to the Jews saying: “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children and to all that are far off, every one whom the Lord our God calls to him” (Acts 2:38-39).

Most Infant Baptists interpret this text to mean that God has given a “special” promise to the children of Christian parents which insures that they are included in the covenant community. This privilege is not granted to children of non-Christian parents. This interpretation shows that Infant Baptists are so attuned to the Old Testament echo of this text (“you and your children”) that they ignore the expanded teaching of the

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New Testament (“and to *all* that are afar off, every one whom the Lord our God calls to him”).

The three phrases of this passage must be taken together: (1) you, (2) your children, (3) all that are far off. The promise is equally applied to all three categories of people. There is nothing special about “your children” which cannot be said about the other two categories.

The immediate context suggests that the promise Peter is speaking about is the promised outpouring of the Holy Spirit predicted by Joel. This special promise is not just for covenant children, but for *all who hear the Gospel* – “all that are far off.”

### 1 Corinthians 7:14: The Influence of the Believing Spouse

First Corinthians 7:14 mentions the sanctifying influence of a believing spouse upon unbelieving spouse and children: “For the unbelieving husband is consecrated through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is consecrated through her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is they are holy.”

Most Infant Baptists appeal to this passage to prove their case for infant baptism. They argue that this passage implies infant baptism in a most obvious way. But a closer examination reveals that this passage offers no support for infant baptism. In fact, it argues against it.

Infant Baptists interpret this passage to mean that the children of at least one believing parent are “covenantally holy,” that is, members of the covenant community of faith. They are not “externally unclean,” like the children of non-Christian parents. But this interpretation is clearly discredited by the use of the root word for “holy–*hagia*,” which is applied to *both* the child and the unbelieving spouse. If they are both “covenantally holy,” why are they not *both* baptized and included in the covenant community?

Infant Baptists will baptize the child, but not the unbelieving spouse, because they maintain that the meaning of “holy” is applied to the child in a *different* way than to the spouse. This is irresponsible eisegesis, that is, reading a foreign meaning into the text, because the same root word is applied to both.<sup>19</sup>

Stan Reeves concludes his detailed analysis of 1 Corinthians 7:14, noting that this passage “provides a strong argument against paedobaptism. Paul’s argument is founded on the similarity between the case of unbelieving spouses and the case of believers’ children. If the holiness of the unbelieving spouse falls short of qualifying him/her for baptism, then by Paul’s reasoning the holiness of believers’ children falls short of this

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too. If the church at Corinth admitted their children to baptism and church membership, but denied this to unbelieving spouses, then the two groups were in quite different circumstances. Thus, Paul's argument would be completely invalid. Since Paul's argument must be valid, we are forced to conclude that the church at Corinth did not admit their children to baptism or church membership."<sup>20</sup>

### Inconsistencies in the Infant Baptists Practice

There are inconsistencies in the way Infant Baptists apply their teachings on baptism. On the one hand they base their theory of baptism upon the principle of the continuity between the Old and New Covenant, but on the other hand, they violate this very principle by allowing for discontinuity in their practice of infant baptism. This dilemma is to be expected because once biblical teachings are misinterpreted, inconsistencies are bound to arise in their application.

For example, Infant Baptists do not allow their little children to participate in the Lord's Supper. This is a significant inconsistency because in the New Testament the replacement of the Passover Meal with the Lord's Supper is more explicitly taught than the replacement of circumcision with baptism. Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper within the context of a Passover meal with His disciples (Matt 26:17-30; Mark 14:12-26; Luke 22:7-30).

Under the Old Covenant, *every* member of the household was expected to participate in the Passover meal. "According to what each can eat you shall make your count for the lamb" (Ex 12:4). No profession of *faith* was required to participate in the Passover meal. Yet most Infant Baptists do not allow their little children to participate in the Lord's Supper because they believe the ordinance is intended only for adults. This suggests that they are accommodating their interpretation of Scripture to their established practice, rather than *judging* their practice by what they consider to be the teaching of the Scripture.

Another inconsistency can be seen in the fact that Infant Baptists do not baptize *all* the family members at the same time. This is inconsistent with their interpretation of the household baptisms in Acts, which they believe included even the infants. In order to justify their failure to baptize spouses, adult children, little children, and every other member of the household, they appeal to cultural considerations and to the requirements of a confession of faith by each member of the family. But these considerations negate their interpretation of the household baptisms as inclusive of all the members, even infants.

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**Conclusion**

Our analysis of the traditional arguments for infant baptism has shown that they are based on faulty interpretation of biblical texts – an interpretation which is largely influenced by the so-called Covenant Theology. We found that a major problem with the Covenant Theology, which is used to defend infant baptism, is that it overlooks significant discontinuities that exist between the meaning and function of circumcision and baptism. In the New Covenant we become members of the community of faith not through natural birth, but through spiritual rebirth, signified by baptism.

Our closer examination of the major biblical passages used to support infant baptism has shown that none of them mention or even suggest infant baptism. As stated by the German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher, “All traces of infant baptism presumably found in the New Testament must first be put into it.”<sup>21</sup> In their scholarly study cited earlier *Baptism in the Early Church*, Professors Hendrick Stander and Johannes Louw warn that “it is unsound to scrutinize the New Testament writings for allusions to infant baptism, since the latter involved a later historical development.”<sup>22</sup> By this they mean that it is a futile effort to look for infant baptism in the New Testament since the practice started in the latter part of the third century. The significance of their scholarly study is considered in the next section.

### **PART 3 INFANT BAPTISM IN HISTORY**

The history of baptism remains a hotly debated issue among scholars eager to prove that their denominational practice is supported by the witness of early Christian documents. For example, the question of infant baptism in the early church has been the object of intense debate between two respected German scholars, Joachim Jeremias and Kurt Aland. Jeremias produced a major volume in 1958, published in English under the title *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries*. He attempts to prove that infant baptism was the normative practice among Christians during the first three centuries.

#### **Believer’s Baptism Was Dominant in the Early Church**

In 1961, Kurt Aland, Professor of theology at the University of Münster, responded to Jeremias with a critique published in English under the title *Did the Early Church Baptize Infants?* In this volume Aland contends that adult baptism was normative in the early church, and that

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infant baptism was introduced around A. D. 200, but the practice did not become normative until the end of the fourth century. This is the prevailing view of the latest scholarly studies.

The different conclusions stem largely from two different methods of investigation. Jeremias relied heavily on *indirect* evidence to build his case for infant baptism. By contrast, Aland used primarily *direct* evidence to show that believer's baptism was normative in the early church.

A major reason for the confusion is that the history of baptism in the early church has been obscured by the apologetic writings of both Catholic and Protestant authors against the sixteenth-century Anabaptists who rejected infant baptism, practicing instead believer's baptism.

In recent scholarship infant baptism has been losing ground and the believer's baptism is increasingly accepted as the normative practice of the first two centuries. What has contributed to this development has been primarily the effort of paedobaptist scholars to re-examine the subject dispassionately through a careful treatment of the primary sources. Their conclusions discredit the claim of their churches regarding the widespread practice of infant baptism in the early church. An example of this trend can be seen in two recent scholarly studies.

### **David Wright, *What Has Infant Baptism Done to Baptism?***

In 2005 patristic scholar David Wright wrote a book titled *What Has Infant Baptism Done to Baptism?* published by Paternoster Press, England. Though Wright belongs to a church that baptizes infants, his book is critical of the claim that infant baptism prevailed in the first two centuries. He shows that infant baptism was a post-apostolic development, not the dominant practice of the apostolic church.

Wright concurs with other scholars in placing the dominant period of infant baptism during the Middle Ages. He writes: "The timescale of infant baptism's long reign extends from the early medieval period, from about the sixth century, that is to say, after Augustine of Hippo, who died in 430. It was he who provided the theology that led to infant baptism becoming the general practice for the first time in the history of the church, perhaps in the later fifth century, more likely in the 500s or even later."<sup>23</sup>

Wright shows that the introduction of infant baptism brought about "a truly massive change in the history of Christ's church. From being a company recruited by intentional response to the gospel imperative to discipleship and baptism, it became a body enrolled from birth. It was arguably one of the greatest sea changes in the story of Christianity. It led, as we have seen, to the formation of Christendom, comprising a Christian empire made up of Christian nations or peoples. Christianity

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became a matter of heredity, not decision. The famous and telling words of Tertullian, *fiunt, non nascuntur, Christiani*, ‘people are made, not born, Christians’, were turned upside down.”<sup>24</sup>

### **H. Stander and J. Louw, *Baptism in the Early Church***

Another significant scholarly study on the early history of infant baptism was produced in 2005 by Hendrik Stander and Johannes Louw, both internationally known and highly respected Patristic scholars. Both of them were heads of Greek at the Department of Ancient Languages of the University of Pretoria, and each of them has written over 100 books and articles in the field of their expertise. The title of their book is *Baptism in the Early Church*. Though these two scholars are members of Reformed churches that practice infant baptism, they present a dispassionate examination of the early history of baptism based on a careful treatment of the primary sources.

The denominational allegiance of these two authors does not prevent them from challenging the popular notion that infant baptism was dominant in the early church. Though they belong to paedobaptist churches that are covenantal in their teachings, their goal is to be objective, honest, and thorough in their quest to understand how the early church understood and practiced baptism.

The book consists of 26 chapters, each of which is devoted to an analysis of the writings on baptism by one significant church leader during the first four centuries. Chapter 25 deals with tomb inscriptions and baptisteries large enough for immersion that have been found in ancient ruined churches.

Their investigation concludes that infant baptism was practically unknown during the first two centuries. It gradually developed in the third century in North Africa and “during the latter part of the fourth century in Europe and Asia.”<sup>25</sup> They write: “The patristic literature of the first four centuries clearly shows how infant baptism developed. Probably the first instances known occurred in the latter part of the third century, mostly in North Africa, but during the fourth century infant baptism became more and more accepted and though believer’s baptism of people of responsible age, still continued in many areas, the development of the church (after church and State became reconciled) into a more unified body, controlled by the see of Rome, provided a theological base for infant baptism to be accepted.”<sup>26</sup>

We shall see that the theological basis that dominated the Middle Ages was the Augustinian teaching that baptism removes from the soul the stain of the original sin and, consequently, it must be given to infants

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as soon as they are born. This teaching dominated the Catholic Church during the Middle Ages and has continued up to the present.

### Early Christian Writers of the First Two Centuries

The limited scope of this chapter allows us to briefly mention only four Christian writers of the first two centuries who make statements about baptism. Their testimonies are significant because they show that adult baptism was the common practice of their days.

*The Didache (or The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles).* The date of this document is uncertain. Scholars date it between A. D. 60 and 110. It is generally regarded as the earliest church manual, though of dubious origin. The passage relevant to our study reads as follows: “And concerning baptism, baptize thus: Having first rehearsed all these things, baptize in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, in running water. But if you do not have running water, baptize into other water; if you cannot in cold, then in warm. But if you have neither, pour water three times on the head in the name of the Father and Son and Holy Spirit. But before the baptism let the baptizer fast, and the baptized, and any other who are able; but you must order the baptized to fast one or two days before.”<sup>27</sup>

The words, “Having first rehearsed all these things,” most likely refers to the common practice for baptismal candidates to make public statements of their beliefs.<sup>28</sup> It is also evident from this passage that fasting was part of the pre-baptismal preparation. Fasting was more than abstinence from food; it also included a period of prayer and spiritual introspection. This aspect of pre-baptismal preparation automatically excludes infants.

*The Didache* not only gives instructions on the practice of baptism, but also shows that baptism was a prerequisite for full church membership which entitled the believer to participate in the Lord’s Supper. “But let no one eat or drink of your Eucharist, except those who have been baptized in the name of the Lord; for concerning this also the Lord has said, Give not that which is holy to the dogs.”<sup>29</sup> These instructions clearly exclude the baptism of children.

*The Epistle of Barnabas (130 - 138).* This book, dated by the majority of scholars between A. D. 130 and 138, was written by a pseudonymous Barnabas probably at Alexandria. The main objective of the work is to show that the Jews misunderstood the Scriptures because they interpreted the Mosaic laws literally. Barnabas proposes an

allegorical interpretation of the Mosaic laws to prove that they pointed to the Christian dispensation.

In discussing baptism, he offers some information on its practice at his time. He writes: "Let us further inquire whether the Lord took any care to foreshadow the water of baptism and the cross. Concerning the water, indeed it is written in reference to the Israelites, that they should not receive that baptism which leads to the remission of sins . . . Further, what says He? 'And there was a river flowing on the right, and from it arose beautiful trees; and whosoever shall eat of them shall live for ever.' This means that we go down into the water full of sin and foulness, and we come up, bearing the fruit of fear in our hearts and having hope on Jesus in the Spirit."<sup>30</sup>

In this passage Barnabas says that the Jews do not have the baptism that brings remission of sin. Only the Christians have this baptism. It is significant that baptism is linked to the remission of sin, and not to the covenant or circumcision. The notion of the remission of sins is later expanded by Augustine to include the removal from the soul of the stain of the original sin.

The phrases "going down into the water" and "coming up," were used as technical terms for immersion. This description of baptism by immersion obviously excludes infants. This is further corroborated by the fact that the candidate is foul when he enters the water and has "the fruit of fear in his heart" when he comes out of the water. This is again a description of the cleansing character of baptism as a symbol of remission of sins. This experience can hardly be attributed to innocent infants.

**Justin Martyr (100 - 165).** The next significant testimony regarding adult baptism comes to us from Justin Martyr. He was born of pagan parents about A. D. 100 in Flavia Neapolis (formerly Shechem in Palestine). He came to Christianity after searching in vain for truth in the pagan philosophies of his time. The most notable Greek apologist of the second century, he wrote two apologies between 148 and 161 to defend the Christian faith. He addressed them to Emperor Antoninus Pius. Sadly, his efforts were of little avail, for, as his name implies, he died as a martyr in Rome about 163 during the reign of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius.

In his *First Apology*, Justin explains that baptism is the means whereby men and women dedicate themselves to God and are made new through Jesus Christ. "As many as are persuaded and believe that what we teach and say is true, and undertake to be able to live accordingly, are instructed to pray and to entreat God with fasting, for the remission of sins that are past, we praying and fasting with them. Then they are brought by

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us where there is water, and are regenerated in the same manner in which we were ourselves regenerated. For, in the name of God, the Father and our Lord of the universe, and of our Saviour Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit, they receive the washing of water.”<sup>31</sup>

In this passage Justin clearly spells out the requirements for baptism in his time. First, the candidate had to believe in the truth of the Christian teachings. Second, he must live in accordance to such teachings. Third, the baptismal candidates had to spend some time in devotion and fasting to ask God to forgive all their past sins. Note the sequential order: An *acceptance* of Bible truths which is followed by a *commitment* to live accordingly. This is followed by a period of *devotion* that culminates in baptism. Obviously these conditions exclude the baptism of infants.

This is confirmed by a later statement that baptismal candidates were then allowed to participate in the Lord’s Supper. “No one is allowed to partake but the man who believes that the things which we teach are true, and who has been washed with washing [baptized] that is for the remission of sins, and unto regeneration, and who is so living as Christ has enjoined.”<sup>32</sup>

The process of preparing candidates for baptism was long and laborious. It usually lasted about three years. Baptismal schools, known as *Catechetical schools*, were established where church leaders instructed baptismal candidates by lecturing to them in a classroom setting.<sup>33</sup> Baptism was usually conducted once a year at Easter time.

Stander and Louw rightly point out that “In the light of Justin’s detailed discussion on baptism in the second century, it is surprising that modern scholars still endeavor to quote him as ‘proof’ for the practice of infant baptism. They ignore the above explicit accounts but prefer to resort to vague statements which can be interpreted either way.”<sup>34</sup>

**Tertullian (c. 160 - c. 225).** Toward the end of the second century a brilliant lawyer was converted to Christ in the bustling city of Carthage in North Africa. The circumstances of his conversion are uncertain, but we know that he became one of the most influential church leaders of his day, writing numerous treatises that have influenced the church ever since. He is known as the “Father of Latin Christianity.”

Tertullian addressed the needs of the church by writing numerous theological, ethical, and disciplinary treatises. He was the first Church Father to write (about 200 A. D.) a full treatise on baptism – *De Baptismo*, in addition to commenting upon the subject in several other works.<sup>35</sup> His comments about infant baptism reveal that the practice was being introduced at that time – a practice of which he strongly disapproved.

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*De Baptismo* is supremely important for the study of the subject because it contains the first explicit reference to infant baptism in all Christian writings, Scriptures included. He disapproves of the practice for reasons mentioned shortly. Due to the limitations of this chapter we will quote only a couple of excerpts.

The most quoted statement runs as follows: “And so, according to the circumstances and disposition, and even age, of each individual, the delay of baptism is preferable; principally, however, in the case of little children. For why is it necessary – if (baptism itself) is not so necessary – that the sponsors likewise should be thrust into danger? Who both themselves, by reason of mortality, may fail to fulfill their promises, and may be disappointed by the development of an evil disposition, in those for whom they stood? The Lord does indeed say, ‘Forbid them not to come unto me.’ Let them come, then while they are growing up; let them come while they are learning, while they are learning whither to come; let them become Christian when they have become able to know Christ. Why does the innocent period of life hasten to the remission of sins?”<sup>36</sup>

The two theological convictions, that infants are innocent and that baptism “washes away sin,” lead Tertullian to question the wisdom of baptizing infants. Being innocent, infants do not need the washing away of their sins by baptism. He advises also the unmarried, the virgins and the widows to postpone their baptism until they “are firmly established in continence.”<sup>37</sup>

Tertullian does not speak of infant baptism as it is understood today within the theological framework of the covenant and circumcision. He merely disapproves the practice which was being adopted by some Christians to baptize children at a very early age. It is remarkable that Tertullian refers to sponsors who as a safeguard went through the ceremony on behalf of the infants, in case the little ones died before they could partake of the rituals themselves. Tertullian disapproves of such baptisms which he felt should be postponed until the recipient could make a personal decision.

Tertullian, like other church leaders, believed that baptism “washes away sins.” He wrote: “Happy is the sacrament of water, in that, by washing away the sins of our early blindness, we are set free and admitted to eternal life.”<sup>38</sup> The belief that baptism washes away all sins, gave rise to the practice of delaying baptism, due to the assumption that post-baptismal sins were more difficult to forgive than pre-baptismal sins.<sup>39</sup> The Emperor Constantine, for example, was baptized on his death-bed.

The belief that baptism washes away personal sins was expanded later by first by Cyprian and later by Augustine into the cleansing also of the soul from the guilt of Adam’s sin. This important theological development set the stage for the Catholic doctrine of baptism that has dominated through the Middle Ages until our times.

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### The Theology of Baptism in the East

The theology of infant baptism developed in the fourth century differed in the East from that of the West. In the East, influential theologians such as John Chrysostom (347-407) and Gregory Nazianzus (330-390) interpreted infant baptism, not in terms of remission of sins, but in terms of union with Christ and all the benefits flowing from Him. They assumed that the innocence of newborn infants does not require remission of sin. Instead the child at baptism receives numerous blessings.

Chrysostom asserts that infants do not require the remission of sin through baptism because they are innocent. Instead, they receive numerous benefits through baptism: “You have seen how numerous are the gifts of baptism. Although many men think that the only gift is the remission of sins, we have counted its honors to the number of ten. It is on this account that we baptize even infants, although they are sinless, that they may be given the further gifts of sanctification, justice, filial adoption, and inheritance, that they may be brothers and members of Christ, and become dwelling places of the Spirit.”<sup>40</sup>

Thus, the eastern understanding of the innocence of newborn infants led to the development of a theology of baptism based on its spiritual benefits: membership in the body of Christ, the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, adoption, justice before God, and sanctification.

### The Theology of Baptism in the West

A different theology of infant baptism developed in the West, as exemplified in the writings of Cyprian (died 258) and Augustine (354-430). They developed a theology of baptism based almost exclusively on the character of baptism as the remission of sin. They taught that children were born into this world with both the guilt of Adam’s transgression and the tendency to sin. Cyprian explained that infant baptism removes the guilt of Adam’s sin because the child has committed no sin. He wrote: “The infant approaches that much more easily the reception of forgiveness of sin [in baptism] because the sins remitted are not his own, but that of another [Adam’s sin].”<sup>41</sup>

It was Augustine, however, who popularized the view that infant baptism was essential to remove from the soul the stain of the original sin. Contrary to his opponent Pelagius who denied that infants needed to be baptized for the remission of sins, Augustine argued that the baptism of infants is for the deliverance of the guilt of sin which is Adam’s sin transmitted as a stain in the soul.<sup>42</sup>

Augustine believed with Cyprian that everyone received at birth a soul tainted with the sin of Adam. A child received from his father not only his body, but also his soul. Since the soul of the father was tainted with Adam's sin, so was the child's. As the father needed baptism to remove the stain of the original sin, so did the child. And was not the church's practice to baptize infants evidence that the church's belief in original sin was right? Thus, the baptism of children was used to confirm the theology, rather than the other way around.

Augustine's doctrine of original sin became the official doctrine of the Catholic Church and was later adopted with modifications by Luther, Calvin, and the majority of Protestant leaders. Augustine took the argument of infant baptism to its logical conclusion by arguing that if baptized children were saved, then unbaptized children were doomed to hell. Somewhat more merciful in his thinking, Thomas Aquinas later suggested that the unbaptized would go, not to hell, but to limbo, though original sin would still prevent their entrance into heaven. Recent declarations by Pope Benedict XVI have denied the existence of limbo.<sup>43</sup>

### **Infant Baptism Dependant upon the Immortality of the Soul**

Central to the development of the western theology of infant baptism is the belief in the immortality of the soul. In earlier chapters we have shown that a host of unbiblical teachings popular today, such as life after death, Purgatory, Hell, the intercession of the saints, the mediation of Mary, and prayer for the dead, all derive from the belief in the immortality of the soul. Infant baptism is one of them.

The Augustinian view that infant baptism is essential to remove the stain of the original sin from the soul is based on what is known as the "traducian" doctrine that the souls of all human beings were already present within Adam's seed when he was expelled from the Garden. Augustine taught that every soul exists "in Adam" until it is cleansed and born again "in Christ."<sup>44</sup> When Adam was expelled from the Garden, the souls of all his descendants were present in his loins, and were expelled with him, carrying with them the guilt of his transgression.

This popular belief is foreign to Scripture. It derives, as shown in chapter 2, from the platonic, dualistic view of human nature, consisting of a mortal body and an immortal soul. In the Bible, the soul is the animating principle of the body, not a separate component that survives the body at death. The pagan belief in the immortality of the soul is at the root of a host of heresies that have done incalculable harm to the Christian faith.

It was Augustine who popularized the unbiblical notion that original guilt is a stain in the soul transmitted through sexual procreation to

every newborn baby. Consequently, infants need to be baptized soon after their birth to remove from their souls the stain of the original sin. This doctrine has dominated the Catholic church during the Middle Ages and up to the present.

The new *Catechism of the Catholic Church* clearly states: “By Baptism *all sins* are forgiven, original sin and personal sins, as well as the punishment for sin. . . . Nothing remains that would impede their entry into the Kingdom of God, neither Adam’s sin, not personal sin, nor the consequence of sin.”<sup>45</sup>

The Catholic belief in the “magical” power of baptism to eradicate sin and infuse sanctifying grace is clearly acknowledged by Ludwig Ott, a foremost defender of the Catholic faith. He writes: “Baptism, provided that the proper disposition (Faith and sorrow for sin) are present, effects: a) the eradication of sins, both original sin and, in the case of adults, also all personal moral and venial sins; b) inner sanctification by the infusion of sanctifying grace.”<sup>46</sup>

This sacramental view of baptism as a magical rite that eradicates both original and personal sins, besides infusing sanctifying grace, makes the mere act of baptism the automatic way to heaven. Catholic piety has encouraged this view. For example, the *Conquistadores* of central and South America sometimes baptized whole villages with a sort of ecclesiastical stirrup water pump that sprayed all the people with holy water.

This sacramental view of baptism runs contrary to the teachings of Scripture. We have seen that in the New Testament baptism is a conscious experience of repentance and acceptance by faith of Christ’s provision of salvation. In the final analysis, we are saved, not through the water of baptism, but through faith in Christ. This means that baptism presupposes a personal accountability to God in the matter of salvation. Infant baptism becomes a hindrance to a conscious decision for Christ at the age of maturity.

### Christian Sacralism

The view that all the citizens of a particular country or state should be bound together by loyalty to the same religion is known as “sacralism.” In such societies religious dissent becomes political subversion. In the Roman Empire the people were bound together in the worship of the emperor as *dominus et deus*, lord and god.

When Christianity became in the fourth century the official religion of the Roman Empire, Christian sacralism replaced pagan sacralism as the political and religious creed of Catholic Christianity. “Not surpris-

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ingly, this gave added support to the growing practice of infant baptism, because baptism into the church became almost the same as birth into the state. Sacralism survived the Reformation, not only in those nations and states which remained Roman Catholic, but also in Protestant areas which retained state churches a well."<sup>47</sup>

The result has been that during the Middle Ages and the time of the Reformation, those who rejected infant baptism and practiced believer's baptism, faced both religious and political intolerance. They cried for freedom from oppressive rulers who sought divine support for their tyranny; they cried for freedom from powerful religious leaders who used political force to impose their will upon dissenters.

### **Baptism during the Middle Ages**

The Augustinian view of infant baptism as essential to remove both the guilt of the original sin as well as actual sin (*concupiscentia* – lust), dominated in the Catholic church during the Middle Ages. Through the influence of Augustine, infant baptism won the day, and adult baptism almost came to an end. The world was plunged into the Dark Ages, which endured for more than twelve centuries, until the Reformation.

Christians who shared the early church's conviction, exemplified by Tertullian that baptism should be a conscious experience of faith-commitment to Christ, were few in numbers. But, as we shall see, they protested against the nearly universal practice of the medieval church.

With the triumph of infant baptism, the baptismal schools, known as *catechetical schools*, which were established in early Christianity to prepare candidates for baptism, were replaced with instruction after baptism. That instruction became increasingly difficult to accept, because growing up baptized infants found it difficult to believe that they had been cleansed of Adam's original sin and of their own sins. Their position in the church became increasingly insecure.

To remedy the problem and provide the needed reassurance, the Catholic Church invented a vast system of salvation's aids: penances, pilgrimages, the intercession of the saints, the assistance of Mary, memorial masses, and indulgences. All of these were designed to continue and complete the cleansing of the souls initiated at baptism.

Looking back from the perspective of history, we can see the incalculable damage that the introduction of infant baptism has done to the Christian church. Eventually it radically changed the nature of the church from a community of faith, independent of secular society, into a religio-political organization coexistent with society.

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## Medieval Underground Movements

It is hard for us to imagine the immensity of power exercised by the Catholic Church during the Middle Ages. Supported by state governments, the Church became a massive and omnipotent organization that controlled both the political and religious destiny of the people. Yet, even under such an intolerant religious regime, there were voices of protest that could not be ignored. Those voices were called “heresy.”

Recent studies have shed new light on these dissenting movements. “At one time our only source of information about the ‘heretics’ were the accusation of their persecutors. Now there is a wealth of information available in the records of what they said in their own defense when on trial and what they taught before they were arrested. What emerges from these is a picture of the Middle Ages that is different from the one that both Catholics and Protestants have traditionally tended to imagine.”<sup>48</sup>

**The Waldenses or Waldensians.** The Waldenses are an example of an underground movement that rejected the sacraments as enforced by the Catholic Church. The movement generally traces its origin to Peter Waldo of Lyons in the twelfth century. Apparently their attitude toward baptism was not always consistent. One scholar maintains that among the Waldenses “Infant Baptism was widely regarded as desirable for salvation.”<sup>49</sup> But another scholar asserts that “The Baptism of believers by immersion was common to the Waldenses.”<sup>50</sup>

The truth seems to be that the Waldenses baptized their own children, but ‘rebaptized’ Catholic and Protestant who joined their movement. It was this policy that later irritated Martin Luther when he found out that they applied the same policy to Lutherans: “They baptize little ones . . . and rebaptize those who come from us.”<sup>51</sup> Here is an example of a respectable “Protestant” movement which practiced both infant and believers’ baptism.

**The Paulicians.** Somewhat different from the Waldenses are the Paulicians. They survived in the Eastern borders of Europe and had a similar relationship to the Orthodox Church to that of the Waldenses toward the Catholic Church. They endured merciless persecutions. Their origin went as far back as the sixth century in Asia Minor.

As late as 1828, a colony of their survivors settled in Armenia and brought with them an ancient doctrinal manual, translated into English as *The Key of Truth*. Its author teaches that God has proclaimed three mysteries: “First, repentance, second, baptism; third, holy communion. These three he gave to the adults and not to catechumens who had not

repented or are unbelieving.”<sup>52</sup> They rejected any form of infant baptism and some of them preferred to delay baptism until the age of thirty, so as to resemble Christ more fully.

The medieval underground movements are a complex phenomenon which must be approached with caution because some of them espoused heretical teachings. A common denominator of the underground movements was their critical attitude toward the state religion. They saw infant baptism as a representative sacrament of a superstitious, worldly religion. By contrast, they saw adult baptism as representative of salvation by faith, and a form of protest against the corrupt churches.

### **The Radical Reformers**

The Reformers deserve credit for rediscovering the Gospel and preaching with immense effect to the conversion of many. They had the courage to withstand powerful adversaries and to challenge centuries old traditional Catholic teachings. Their noble accomplishments must not obscure the limitation of their reformation. They were not prepared to complete their reformation by returning to the teachings and practices of apostolic Christianity. In their reform they brought with them two major Roman Catholic errors: 1) the union of church and state, and 2) infant baptism. Moreover, when they consolidated their power, because of the union of church and state, they themselves became little popes, persecuting in their territories those who would not conform to their ways.

The most tragic example is the conflict that developed between main-line Protestants and the Anabaptists. In this conflict baptism became a major issue. The Anabaptists, which means “re-baptizers,” condemned the Reformation as half-hearted and incomplete. They rejected infant baptism, and baptized or rebaptized only those who were prepared to make a conscious commitment to accept Christ. For them infant baptism stood for an unbiblical practice that served to consolidate the sacramental power of the Catholic Church as well as the corruption of Protestant state churches.

It is interesting to note that baptism became the visible and verbal center of the controversy. But as it often happens, the visible sign of baptism came to represent the deeper and wider issues that have divided Christian churches. This is still evident today as divisions about baptism often translate in differences in other major doctrinal areas.

Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli, each in his own way opposed the adult baptism promoted by the Anabaptists, largely because of political considerations. The Reformers had the support of local princes or rulers who, for a mixture of religious, political, and personal motives, supported

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their conflict with Rome and permitted them to influence the churches that came under their control. This meant that to abandon infant baptism meant to undermine the whole political and religious organization that supported their reforms.

Luther's friend, Melancthon said: "Consider what disruption would ensue if there should develop among us two categories, the baptized and the unbaptized. If [infant] baptism were to be discontinued for most people, an openly pagan way of life would come about."<sup>53</sup> This was the problem facing the Reformers. The baptism of only consciously committed Christians would have disrupted the process of establishing Christian nations, since uncommitted people would be pagan, whether they lived in Germany or China.

Thus, the leading Reformers adopted a position of compromise. On the one hand, they rejected the Catholic tradition of linking infant baptism with the removal of the original sin, but on the other hand they continued to espouse the doctrine of original guilt, and promoted baptism as a "means of grace" through which God creates and strengthen "saving faith" whether infant or adults.

Calvin denounced the Anabaptists' emphasis on the personal experience of Christ before baptism. He built his case for infant baptism on his predestinarian view of the priority of grace. He taught that what precedes baptism is not the subjective faith of the believer, but the free manifestation of God's electing grace. "Instead of attempting to give a law to God, let us hold that he sanctifies whom he pleases, in the way in which he sanctified John, seeing that his power is not impaired."<sup>54</sup> In other words, since for Calvin God has pre-ordained to whom He will give His grace, an infant can receive divine grace at baptism without making any conscious decision.

## Conclusion

In many ways, the history of the origin and development of infant baptism is a revealing story of how the gradual abandonment of a clear biblical teaching has had both religious and political consequences. It has fostered a superstitious faith in the magical power of the "sacramental" rite of infant baptism and justified the suppression of dissenters by the political rulers.

During the Middle Ages, infant baptism stood for Catholicism and adult baptism for evangelical "heresy." During the Lutheran Reformation, infant baptism represented state Christianity while adult baptism symbolized evangelical movements eager to return to the beliefs and practices of the Apostolic Church. Through Calvin's teachings, infant baptism came to

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represent a predestinarian view of the gospel while adult baptism reflected a strong emphasis on the freedom of the human will. Within a century Calvin's teachings became widely accepted by numerous churches that followed the Reformed tradition.

The fascination and tragedy of the Reformation from the viewpoint of baptism lies in the fact that equally earnest Christians gradually moved to two positions hopelessly opposed. They began discussing baptism over their Bibles, and they finished by literally killing each other.

#### PART 4 PROBLEMS WITH INFANT BAPTISM

In closing our biblical and historical study of infant baptism, we wish to reflect on some of the challenges and problems posed by the baptism of infants.

#### **Infant Baptism Is Challenged by Catholic and Protestant Scholars**

In recent times infant baptism has come under fire by both Catholic and Protestant church leaders. *Time* magazine reports that "350 Evangelical (Lutheran) churchmen have petitioned the Rhineland synod to abandon the rubric requiring infant baptism and let the parents decide when their children should undergo the ceremony."<sup>55</sup>

The most formidable challenge was made by the famous Swiss theologian, Karl Barth, who argues that there is no Biblical basis for infant baptism and that the ritual is not an act of God's grace but a human response to it—which means that the individual must be mature enough to understand the meaning of such a decision. The traditional understanding of the sacrament, he says, is simply "an old error of the church."<sup>56</sup>

The modern challenge to infant baptism stems from several different considerations. First, a growing number of Catholic and Protestant leaders have come to accept the fact that newborn infants cannot fulfill the New Testament conditions of baptism, namely, instruction, repentance, acceptance of Christ as their personal Savior, and conversion by dying to a life of sin and being risen to a newness of life.

Second, several Catholic and Protestant thinkers have come to view "original sin as the universal weakness of man rather than a damning individual fault—which cuts the ground out completely from the need for infant baptism."<sup>57</sup> In other words, the Bible speaks of the sinful condition of mankind as a result of Adam's sin, not of the transmission of his sin as a stain in the soul through sexual procreation (Rom 5:12).

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Third, some Catholic and Protestant clergymen object to the “magical” implications of the infant baptism ceremony, namely, the claim that a cleansing of the original and personal sins is effected through the physical act of pouring a few drops of water on the infant’s head. *Time* notes that “Many clerics argue that baptism has in effect been made a mockery by unchurched parents who want their child baptized as a matter of form but have no intention whatsoever of raising the infant as a Christian.”<sup>58</sup>

“Instead of automatically baptizing children in infancy, Jesuit Theologian Joseph Powers of California’s Alma College would postpone the ceremony until the age of ten or twelve. ‘The whole meaning of baptism,’ he says, ‘is not to make a Christian out of a child but to incorporate the individual, at some time in life, into the community of the church.’ Thus he believes it makes more sense for a child raised in a Christian home to undergo baptism at an age when he can really start believing in the church. This procedure would effectively answer the objection of one Anglican priest who complains that ‘infant baptism is producing little conscripts for the Christian army when God really wants volunteers.’”<sup>59</sup>

### **Infant Baptism Tends to Ritualize Christianity**

Infant baptism attributes greater efficacy to the sacraments and to the priestly office, than to the understanding and acceptance of Biblical teachings. Infant baptism encourages a religion of rites and forms that affect the senses, rather than the acceptance of biblical truths that appeal to the conscience.

The result has been that in the Catholic, Orthodox, and some Protestant churches, Christianity has become a ritual religion. Its sanctifying and saving efficacy is believed to be found, not in the clear presentation and intelligent acceptance of biblical truths, but in the administration of the sacraments. Infant baptism has played an important role in this extensive corruption of Christianity.

### **Infant Baptism Tends to Secularize the Church**

By equating infant baptism with circumcision, Catholic and Protestant teachings have made baptism the sign of allegiance to national churches rather than the symbol of the distinction between the godly and the ungodly. When the whole community is baptized, the distinction between the church and the world is obliterated. Simply stated, Infant Baptism tends to secularize the church by making it also the sign of allegiance to national churches.

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**Infant Baptism Obscures the Teaching of Scripture**

Our study has shown that the New Testament's conditions for baptism include instruction, repentance, acceptance of Christ as the personal Savior, and conversion by dying to a life of sin and being risen to a newness of life. These conditions cannot be fulfilled by innocent infants, because they are unaware of sinful tendencies in their lives; consequently, they cannot be expected to repent of sins and to accept by faith Christ as their personal Savior. Thus, ultimately infant baptism obscures the biblical meaning of baptism and deprives countless people of the opportunity to make a conscious commitment to Christ.

**Infant Baptism Fosters a False Security of Salvation**

The Catholic teaching that infant baptism cleanses the soul from both original and personal sins, as well as the Protestant teachings that baptism is a means of grace through which God effects the washing of regeneration, tends to foster a false security of salvation. The reason is self-evident. When children become adult, they soon became aware of the fact that the magic cleansing power of their infant baptism is absent in their lives. Consequently, when they come to believe in Christ, they sense a strong desire to repent and confess their faith by being re-baptized. Thus their infant baptism proves to be a source of insecurity of their eternal salvation.

**CONCLUSION**

Our long journey is all but complete. We have attempted to examine the biblical teachings on baptism, to evaluate the common arguments used to defend infant baptism, and to trace historically the origin and development of infant baptism. By way of conclusion we have mentioned a few problems posed by infant baptism.

Biblically, we have found that infant baptism is unknown in the New Testament simple because at a tender age infants cannot fulfill the conditions of baptism, namely, instruction, repentance, acceptance of Christ as their personal Savior. Furthermore, the profound theological meaning of baptism as identification with Christ's death and resurrection by dying to a life of sin and being risen to a newness of life (Rom 6:4-6), is obviously incomprehensible to an infant.

Exegetically, we have found that none of the texts commonly used to defend infant baptism, mention or even suggest infant baptism. It is a futile effort to search the New Testament writings for allusions to infant baptism because such practice was unknown in the Apostolic Church.

Historically, recent investigation conducted by paedobaptist scholars has shown that infant baptism gradually developed in the third century in North Africa and became well established by the fifth century when the church and the state became reconciled into a unified body controlled by the Bishop of Rome.

The Catholic reason for infant baptism that dominated the Middle Ages and has continued up to the present was the Augustinian teaching that baptism removes from the soul the stain of the original sin and, consequently, it must be given to infants as soon as they are born. Such teaching is foreign to the Bible where Adam's sin is not transmitted as stained souls through sexual procreation, but is experienced by mankind as a sinful condition (Rom 5:12).

From a historical perspective, the introduction of infant baptism has done incalculable damage to the Christian Church. It eventually changed radically the nature of the church from a community of faith, independent of secular society, into a religio-political organization coexistent with society. This led to the formation of a Christian empire and Christian nations. Christianity became a matter of heredity, not decision.

Infant baptism has done untold harm to the Christian faith. It has ritualized religion, secularized the church, obscured the New Testament's view of baptism, and it has created a false sense of security in the "magic" power of a few drops of waters sprinkled on the head of an infant.

Our challenge today is to help millions of sincere Christians who have been deceived by the false claims made about infant baptism to experience the "new birth" typified by baptism, by repenting of past sins, burying them in the watery grave of the baptismal fountain, and by being raised into a newness of life through Christ's saving grace.

### NOTES TO CHAPTER 10

1. G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in The New Testament*, 1962, p. 393.
2. G. H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, 1962, p. 31.
3. Leonard Verduin, *The Reformers and their Stepchildren*, 1964, p. 74.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 205.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 217. Verduin and Williams have gathered a mass of documentation about the Anabaptist movement which has led to a drastic re-evaluation of their beliefs and practices.
6. Donald Bridge and David Phypers, *A Survey of the Doctrine of Baptism. The Water that Divides*, 1998, p. 75.

7. Roland H. Bainton, *Hunted Heretic: The Life and Death of Michael Servetus*, 1953, p. 141.
8. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Der christliche Glaube nach den Grundsätzen der Evangelischen Kirche im Zusammenhange dargestellt*, 1999: II, p.1.
9. See Albretch Opke, “Bapto, Batizo,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, 1964, Vol. 1, p. 529.
10. J. K. Howard, *Bew Testament Baptism* 1970, p. 48.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 69.
12. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. G. W. Bromiey, 1969, col. 4/4, p. 179.
13. G. R. Beasley-Murray (note 1), p. 392.
14. Richard L. Pratt, Jr., “Baptism as a Sacrament of the Covenant,” in *Understanding Four Views of Baptism*, ed. John H. Armstrong, 2007, p. 66.
15. My terminology of “Christianizing” and “Judaizing” is taken from Paul K. Jewett, *Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace*, 1978, pp. 91-39.
16. Donald Bridge and David Phipers (note 6), pp. 26-27.
17. Kurt Aland, *Did the Early Church Baptize Infants?* translated by G. R. Beasley-Murray, 1963, p. 89.
18. Paul K. Jewett (note 15), p. 50.
19. For a detailed analysis of 1 Corinthians 7:14, see the article by Stan Reeves at <http://www.eng.auburn.edu/~sjreeves/personal/1cor.html>.
20. *Ibid.*
21. Friedrich Schleiermacher (note 9), II, p. 1.
22. Hendrick F. Stander and Johannes P. Louw, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 2004, p. 186.
23. David Wright, *What Has Infant Baptism Done to Baptism?* 2005, p. 12.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 74.
25. Hendrick F. Stander and Johannes P. Louw (note 22), p. 182.
26. Hendrick F. Stander and Johannes P. Louw (note 22), p. 184.
27. *Didache* chapter 7.
28. H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 1961, p. 1488.
29. *The Didache* 9, 5.
30. *The Epistle of Barnabas* 11;1-2, 10-11.
31. Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 61.
32. *Ibid.*, 66.
33. See article on “Catechumen,” in the *Catholic Encyclopedia*.

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34. Hendrick F. Stander and Johannes P. Louw (note 22), pp. 49-50.
  35. Tertullian, *The Chaplet 3; The Shows 4; On the Soul 39*.
  36. Tertullian, *On Baptism 18*.
  37. Ibid.
  38. Tertullian, *On Baptism 1*.
  39. See, for example, John H. S. Burleigh, "St. Augustine on Baptism," *Reformed Theological Review* 15 (1956), pp. 70-71.
  40. John Chrysostom, *Baptismal Instruction 3:6*.
  41. Cyprian, *Letters 64:5*.
  42. See, Augustine, *Sermons 294*; also *Enchiridion 41-55*.
  43. See, "Limbo Consigned to History Books," *Times*, November 30, 2005.
  44. David Weaver, "From Paul to Augustine: Romans 5:12 in Early Christian Exegesis," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 27 (1983), p. 192.
  45. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1994, pp 321-322.
  46. Ludwig Ott, *Fundamental of Catholic Dogma*, 1955, p. 479.
  47. Donald Bridge and David Phipers (note 16), p. 65.
  48. Ibid., p. 68.
  49. G. H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, 1952, p. 526.
  50. E. H. Broadbent, *The Pilgrim Church*, 1935, p. 130.
  51. Leonard Verduin, *The Reformers and their Stepchildren*, 1964, p. 196.
  52. *The Keys of Truth*, p. 116f.
  53. Philip Melancthon, *Works*, Vol 20., cited by Donald Bridge and David Phipers (note 16), pp. 79-80.
  54. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1972, Vol. 2, book 4, chapter 16, p. 541.
  55. "What is Baptism," *Time*, May 31, 1968, p. 38.
  56. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol 4, part 4, as reported in *Time*, May 31, 1968.
  57. "What is Baptism," *Time*, May 31, 1968, p.38
  58. Ibid.
  59. Ibid.