

**A LOOK AT THE POSSIBILITY THAT CHRISTIAN
TEACHINGS HAVE ERRED ON HUMAN DESTINY.**

FORWARD: The following argument was presented by Edward White in his classic book, *Life In Christ*, Chapter 7, pages 65–70; published in 1878 AD, 3rd Edition, by Elliot Stock, London, England. This 559 page book is now in the Public Domain In reproducing White’s argument, and making it more palatable to read, I have taken the liberty to substitute a few words to bring it more in-line to our American English understanding. I believe it worthy of consideration to anyone who desires to learn a little history of the growth of Christianity before 1878 AD. Any comment I may add will be located in [brackets]. This being said, let’s now look at the argument.

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LIFE IN CHRIST: A Study of the Scripture Doctrine on the Nature of Man, the Object of the Divine Incarnation and the Conditions of Human Immortality. By Edward White, 1846 AD.

Chapter VII

On the Possibility That Christendom Has Erred on the Doctrine of Human Destiny

‘The history of the Christian Church for the greater portion of its existence has been so little in consistent practical accordance with any Idea or Principle that is obviously divine, that the merely being opposed to such a majority as it presents need not be to any spiritual mind a very distressing or a very dangerous position.’ Frederic Myers, *‘Catholic Thoughts’*, page 15.

It cannot be denied that the frightful doctrines on the future of humanity, described in the preceding chapter, though supported by the general authority of nearly all Christendom for at least fourteen centuries, are regarded with contemptuous skepticism by the bulk of the existing male population of Europe, who assign these articles of ‘the faith’ as the chief reason for their ever-extending and fierce revolt against Christianity. The external evidence of ancient miracle and prophecy, and even the stronger moral evidence of the Gospel, do not suffice to overpower the antagonistic conviction of the masses of educated and uneducated men in civilized Europe, that the ‘Catholic Religion’ cannot be of divine origin. The people who dwell in the interior of churches have in general but a slight acquaintance with the ideas of those who are outside. If by any remarkable awakening the Christian people could be made to understand the world of modern thought which surrounds them, they would discover from one side of Europe to the other that faith in the supposed divine revelation has almost faded away from the classes who are alienated from traditional religion. And the chief cause of such decaying faith is found beyond question in the views of the future [destiny of man] which has been set forth in the preceding pages.

Men hold that such conceptions of moral government cannot possibly be in accord with the thoughts of God, ‘whose tender mercies are over all His works.’ This disbelief is not, indeed, a sufficient reason for rejecting Catholic Christianity; but it is a

sufficient reason for subjecting it to a resolute re-examination. That which practically works so ill certainly cannot claim to be exempt from fresh scrutiny: especially since the disorder of latent skepticism has eaten like a cancer into the breast of the Church itself. Christians on all sides, exactly in proportion to their knowledge and culture, are tormented in our time with agonizing doubts as to the truth of the whole system of Divine Revelation, inconsequence of the doctrine imputed to it on the destination of mankind.

The positive declarations sometimes made, on the final salvation of all men, as the result of the present or future terms of probation, seems to rest on no solid foundation. They contradict the ordinary language of the Bible. The fact of general ungodliness remains; and the Scripture record also remains, which consigns *all* persistently unrepentant men to death. If *death* signifies endless misery, there seems no escape from the established dogma; but this dogma shakes the Christian faith even of its most devoted adherents. Richard Baxter himself describes the inward and dangerous struggle which he often experienced in the effort to submit his mind to these supposed doctrines of 'revelation'. [Editor's Note: Richard Baxter (1615–1691) was the most prolific writer of his time. His total literary output would be equivalent to 60 octavo volumes or some 30-40 thousand closely printed pages.]

There is especially one class whose case deserves attention, that of unwilling infidels. For it is right to add that infidelity is of two kinds, malignant and involuntary; and that there is a description of unbelief widely spread which does not take the form of virulent attack upon the Scriptures, but rather stands aloof in the dim intermediate territory between friendship and hostility. This is the infidelity of persons who, although not denying the apparent existence of some strong evidence for the divine mission of Christ, are yet so much confounded at the character of what they have been led to suppose are His doctrines as to pass their lives in a state of equilibrium or indifference; never breaking out into open skepticism, but never seeing their way to a clear persuasion and a bold avowal of the truth of the gospel revelation. They have been taught that the doctrine of Christ is, that in Adam all fell directly or indirectly under the curse of everlasting misery, and that a certain number are to be saved from this dreadful doom in consequence of a divine decree in their favor from eternity past; all the rest departing to endless suffering for the glory of the justice of God. This, which is the common and popular belief, staggers them; their minds become confused, and finding no relief from the believers in Christianity, who maintain their 'faith' in such doctrines mostly by a decided habit of not thinking upon them, they vibrate between the twilight of a half unbelief, and the thick darkness of a gloomy atheism. There are hundreds of thousands of minds of the class now described, souls surely as valuable as the souls of the inhabitants of the South Sea islands, on whose behalf all zeal is accounted praiseworthy. It is conceivable that a fresh examination of our theology under another hypothesis might bring to light for such minds a 'hope full of immortality'.

One question, however, of discouraging aspect confronts the earliest movements of the mind towards such re-examination of Christianity, in dim hope of discovering a more benignant yet tenable interpretation of its records: Is it possible that God can have permitted a conception of His own character, so false as this must be, if false at all, to prevail during nearly the whole Christian era? *Must we not regard the fact of the general acceptance of these doctrines, as articles of faith, as a sufficient evidence of their truth?* And, further, can it be for a moment believed that instructed churchmen [popes, bishops,

scholars, translators, priests, preachers, pastors, teachers, commentators, etc.], who are to be counted by the hundreds of thousands, belonging to all Churches, in every successive century of Christianity, can have erred so egregiously, as they must have erred who have mistaken the sense of the Divine Revelation, supposing these doctrines to be not in the Bible, and to have formed no part of original Christianity? This is a question which suffices at the outset to quell and suppress the rising spirit of inquiry, by an appeal to the conscious insignificance of the individual. And it might well prohibit a single step in advance, were it not that the continuous history of Christendom, both in science and religion, bids us take courage, and compels us, as the first of all duties, to fling aside resolutely the delusive fear imposed by paralyzing appeals to authority. [The Hierarchy.]

For when it is asked whether it be possible or conceivable that Providence can have allowed any doctrine grievously misrepresenting the Divine Majesty to have taken root on earth, or in Christendom, the answer is obvious and direct, that the Almighty Creator has allowed every imaginable error respecting His attributes, physical, intellectual, and moral, to prevail among men, age after age, since the beginning of the world. One-half the world today is still idolatrous, or devoted to Buddhistic atheism. And the Apostles departed from life (however wonderful this may be), declaring *with one voice* that ‘strong delusion’ awaited the subsequent generation of Christendom.

When further it is naturally asked whether it be possible that so many millions of learned and pious prelates and their followers in former ages can have erred *in so great a matter* as this, the answer must be, — assuredly it is possible. The Reformation is expressly founded on the fact that all Europe had erred on the most important doctrine of Christianity for more than a thousand years, during the darkness of the middle age, even on the central doctrine of our justification. There is not Church or Church party in Christendom which does not hold it for certain that it is quite possible for whole councils of the most respectable prelates, notwithstanding their learning, and millions of the common people, to misunderstand important doctrines of revelation. Both Roman Catholics and Protestants believe that after the learned rabbis of Judaism have studied the Old Testament for eighteen hundred years, since the fall of Jerusalem, they are still wrong in regarding our Lord Jesus Christ as an impostor. The Protestants believe that all the learned and pious men of Romanism err in religion fundamentally. The Roman Catholics, in turn, believe that all the learned men of Protestant countries, and all their followers, ‘have erred’ on the foundation truths of Christianity. In the same manner all the Calvinistic prelates of Europe believe that all the Arminian prelates misunderstand two important doctrines of revelation; and the Arminians think the same of the Calvinists.

Thus also the popular opinion, maintained by the large majority of Protestant prelates is in favor of the doctrine of Christ’s second advent, after the millennium. But multitudes of learned Christians in each century have maintained that the right doctrine clearly is that Christ will return from the heavens before that epoch, and they therefore regard the doctrine of the majority as erroneous. In the same manner the majority of Englishmen profess to believe that the Book of Common Prayer ‘contains nothing which cannot be proved by warrant of holy Scripture;’ and to all is known how many thousands of learned men, occupants of the benefices of the English Church, have upheld that position for nearly three hundred and fifty years. But all the learned Scottish prelates, and all the English Nonconformists, many of whom have been the equals of their opponents in literature and ability, while fully sensible of the many excellences of the Prayer Book,

maintain that the New Testament manifestly contains no warrant for Prelacy, Ecclesiastical Courts, baptismal regeneration, or the compulsory support of religion. Thus, finally, the opinion of Christendom, generally, is in favor of infant baptism, and the doctrine of baptismal regeneration; yet this does not hinder a minority, scattered through Europe and America but earnest, learned, and able, from maintaining, with Neander, that the practice of the Apostles obviously was to baptize only intelligent believers of Christ, and that infant baptism, notwithstanding its universality and antiquity, is a pernicious error.

On these grounds, then, we conclude that it is within the limits of parallel experience for Christendom to have erred even on matters so grave as those which now occupy our attention. The history of opinion shows nothing more clearly than the immense influence of ancient traditions on learned criticism, and the gross ignorance or perverseness of many of the expositors who in ancient times pitched the tune which has been diligently followed in later ages.

Let any one remember the critical processes by which modern Roman prelates of the highest level operate upon the Scriptures for the support of their ecclesiastical and doctrinal system; and think also of the armies of great names adduced in support even of the most audacious pretensions of that system; — and he will thenceforth learn to admit that other leading ideas in Christendom may be false and falsifying; so that even solid masses of Protestant authority may be found buttressing interpretations having a deceptive show of argument, while rotten at their very foundations. And it is not improbable that the errors which have proved more dangerous and pervasive than any others may be found lurking in those psychological assumptions, which, unquestioned in Europe, as in Asia, underlie in both continents the fabric of strictly theological doctrine. In Europe the doctrine of the Immortality of the Soul is the source whence has sprung the mighty determining tide of past thought on the destiny of man; and if that source has been a well-spring of delusion, its influence has extended over both time and eternity.

The general object of this book is to show that here, in the popular doctrine of the soul's immortality, is the *fons et origo* [the source and origin] of a system of theological error; that in its denial we return at once to scientific truth and to sacred Scripture; at the same time clearing the way for the right understanding of the object of the Incarnation, of the nature and issue of redemption in the Life Eternal, and of the true doctrine of divine judgment on the unsaved.



As is said in Latin, “Carpe diem, carpe hunc librum” — Seize the day, seize this book!

Edward White's book, LIFE IN CHRIST, is a classic that examines the nature of man and his destiny after the resurrection and judgment. He is bold and yet fair in what he brings forth for anyone to consider. His grasp on Biblical exegesis is outstanding, as well as his knowledge of history and the growth of Christianity since its formation in the first century. He is well acquainted with the early writers and later writers who are considered “church fathers”. My copy of this book is old, but a reprint of it is available from Kessinger Publishing's® Legacy Reprints. [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) has this book: Use the ISBN #0548321728 to access it.