

A Tradition Examined

By

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Of all the religious traditions which stand in the way of understanding the teachings of Jesus and the apostles is the one which substitutes the Platonic concept of the soul for the truth of Scripture.

Plato's concepts began to dominate Greek culture in the fourth century BC, and are still popular today. In most any university library you will find many more books on Plato than you will on Jesus. Plato held that "souls" are a part of the invisible and permanent realm and are not affected by the change and decay of the visible world; therefore they are immortal. He taught that this immortality is the natural attribute of an incorporeal substance that extend into the past as well as into the future.¹

While the idea of immortality had existed in pagan religions, especially among the Egyptians, it was Plato and his followers who made it a major part of Greek thought which has had a big role in Western culture. According to the *Jewish Encyclopedia* the concept of the immortal soul "came to the Jews from contact with Greek thought and chiefly through the philosophy of Plato." In the third century AD the school of Neoplatonism was firmly established by Saccas and Plotinus and the immortality of the soul was incorporated into Christian thought. Tertullian, Bishop of Carthage, boldly proclaimed the immortality of the soul as a Christian doctrine, but he claimed no Biblical basis for it, plainly admitting, "I may use the opinion of Plato, when he declares: 'Every soul is immortal'."²

It was Augustine, an avid fan of Plato, who finally formulated what has become the traditional doctrine of the immortality of the soul, a doctrine based on Plato, not the Bible. It was at the Latern Council of AD 1513 that Pope Leo X issued a decree condemning anyone who rejected the doctrine of the immortality of the soul. His decree was aimed at Martin Luther, who denied this Platonic doctrine.³

The traditional doctrine of immortality holds that every person is given, at birth, an eternal "soul," which survives death, to live somewhere forever. The trouble is that this doctrine is diametrically opposed to the Biblical teaching that eternal life is the gift of God, and immortality is given only on the condition of one's faith in Jesus⁴ (hence called "conditional immortality"). In this brief study we will simply ask: (1) what is the "soul," and (2) is it immortal?

The word "soul" comes from the Hebrew word *nephesh* in the Old Testament and from the Greek word *psyche* in the New. Its first appearance is in Genesis 2:7. "And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul." This is not a description of putting a "soul" into the man but of how man himself became a living soul. Neither is the soul something that is detachable, an entity that can live either in or out of the man. Rather it is simply the "living being," a term applied in scripture to both man and animal.

Here we apply the "law of first reference"—the way a term is used in its first appearance in scripture is the way it should generally be interpreted in scriptures following. Note how it is used in Genesis 12:5, when Abraham and Lot took "the souls

that they had gotten in Haran, and went forth into the land of Canaan.” Other versions more correctly say “the people,” a this is obviously the meaning. It is said of Jacob that his offspring numbered “seventy souls.”⁵ The priests were commanded to share any “soul” they purchased with their own money, that all in the house might eat of it, obviously referring to an animal.⁶ Scripture speaks of souls as eating, speaking, fasting, being beheaded, and many other things that are done only by people in their physical lives.

In the new Testament, the word *psyche* occurs over 100 times. It is sometimes translated *life* and sometimes *soul*, leaving room for confusion. For example, Jesus asked, “What shall it profit a man if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own life, or what shall a man give in exchange for his life?”⁷ But some versions render it “what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?”, leaving many to think that the “soul” is something they possess, which can be kept or lost or bartered away!

Whether in the Old Testament or the New, the “soul” is the principle of life, that which animates man or animal. Luke writes of “two hundred three score and sixty souls” in the ship of Paul,⁸ referring to the people aboard. When Paul prayed, “I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ,”⁹ he was praying for the spirit, life and body—for the entire person. The common idea that man “has a soul” which can live apart from the body is not known or taught in scripture.

In the words of Howard Hayes, “The prevalent notion that the ‘soul’ is a mysterious, ineffable, immortal something which man **has** or **possesses** rather than something which he **is** has corrupted Christian thought and speech...there is no account or record that Jesus came to save anything other than people, and in no instance did he commission his disciples to ‘save souls’ apart from persons.”¹⁰

Since man is all one, all of man is mortal, for if he were partly mortal and partly immortal then he must be two beings, and his body should be no more a part of him than a tree is part of a house. Yet this is the traditional doctrine of “immortal soul,” that when a man’s body is killed, the real man is unaffected. It is the outgrowth of the first lie man believed. God had warned Adam and Eve that if they ate of the forbidden tree they would “surely die,”¹¹ But Satan said it would be all right: “You will not surely die.”¹² By adopting the Platonic concept, man can believe that death only affects him physically, while his “soul” lives on. It is hard to tell how much damage this concept has done to the understanding of Christ’s death to meet the penalty for sin.

The term “immortal” occurs only once in the King James Version in I Timothy 1:17 and is a mistranslation of *aphthartos* which means “incorruptible.” “Immortality,” from *athanasian*, is used three times in the New Testament. In I Timothy 6:16 Paul affirms that only God has immortality. In I Corinthians 15:53–54, Paul speaks of the resurrection, when this mortal shall put on immortality.” This clearly teaches that in this life we are mortal and will not become immortal until the day of resurrection.

One of the best known commentaries states: “Nowhere is the immortality of the soul distinct from the body taught; a notion which may erroneously have been derived from heathen philosophers. Scripture does not contemplate an anomalous state brought about by death as the consummation to be earnestly looked for, but the resurrection.”¹³

The “Golden Text” of the Bible tells us that God gave His Son that “whosoever believes on him should not perish but have eternal life.”¹⁴ The issue of life and death is

set before us throughout the Bible. Jesus said that the hour would come when He would raise all the dead, some to eternal life and some to judgment.¹⁵ It is already revealed what the judgment will be: death. “The souls that sins shall die.”¹⁶ “The wages of sin is death,” Paul tells, “but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”¹⁷

We do not have an innate immortality, but we do have the offer of immortality to be conferred as a gift, by the grace of God, upon those who are in Christ at His coming. It is through faith in Christ that the Christian has assurance that he—not just a part of him called “soul”—will be raised from death and made immortal in the image of God.

If one is ever to attain immortality, it must be by the gift of God at the resurrection. It is to be real people, changed and made immortal, that will inhabit the “new heavens and the new earth, wherein dwells righteousness.”¹⁸

“Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”¹⁹ “Who has abolished death and has brought LIFE and IMMORTALITY to light through the gospel.”²⁰

References

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3. *Conditional Immortality*, Miles Grant.
See also *The Conditionalist Faith of Our Fathers* By Leroy Froom.
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5. Exodus 1:5
6. Leviticus 22:11
7. Matthew 16:26
8. Acts 27:37
9. I Thessalonians 5:23
10. *Questioning a Tradition*, Howard Hayes (out of print)
11. Genesis 2:17
12. Genesis 3:4
13. *Jamieson, Faucett and Brown’s Commentary*
14. John 3:16
15. John 5:28–29
16. Ezekiel 18:20
17. Romans 6:23
18. II Peter 3:13
19. I Corinthians 15:57
20. II Timothy 1:10

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