

False doctrines enter the church

A BRIEF HISTORY OF HOW THE DOCTRINES OF ETERNAL TORMENT AND THE IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL ENTERED THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH.

Some have wondered how the doctrine of the natural immortality of the soul (the belief that when a man dies he goes immediately to heaven) and the doctrine of the eternal torment of the wicked (that the fires of hell never go out) ever became a part of the Christian Church, especially in view of all that the Bible teaches concerning the sleep of the dead, and the utter destruction of the wicked. Again, let it be repeated that the testimony of Scripture is clear, convincing, and complete. We now wish to trace the history of how the Christian Church apostatized from the truth on this doctrine.

The doctrine of man's natural immortality had its origin, not as a revelation from God, but in a revelation to man by the old serpent among the beautiful trees of the Garden of Eden. There the tempter suggested to Eve: "Ye shall not surely die" (Genesis 3:4). Thus, the testimony of Scripture is clear as to who is the originator of this doctrine of man's natural immortality. It is none other than that great Deceiver, the devil himself. This alone ought to make us very cautious about accepting a doctrine originated by the devil.

It can further be traced as it arises out of the Oriental religions of the past, with its pantheism, pre-existence of the soul, and reincarnation. Next, it was revealed in the Egyptian version of the immortality of the soul, and then in the terrible delusion of the Persian dualism (eternal existence of good and evil-neither good nor evil could defeat each other; thus both must always exist). From there it entered into the pagan Greek religions.

It found its greatest period of acceptance and expansion during the fourth century BC under the pagan Greek philosopher Plato. During these years the Bible record stood almost alone in presenting man as a candidate for immortality, but not possessing it naturally. Then the Old Testament canon closed with the book of Malachi about 425 BC. It was during this period between the writing of the Old and New Testament, that Judaism became penetrated by the pagan teaching of the immortality of the soul. During this time two schools of thought developed in Judaism: (1) Palestinian Judaism, a group that continued to hold to the Old Testament picture of man as a candidate for immortality who rested in the grave until the resurrection; and (2) Hellenistic Judaism, a new group arising around 150 BC who introduced the Platonic philosophy of the immortality of the soul into the Jewish church.

Therefore, Judaism stood divided on this issue when Jesus came and reaffirmed the Old Testament teaching that death is a sleep and man will receive immortality at the second coming. This was amplified and expanded by most of the New Testament writers, so that the early Christian Church was brought back to the original teaching of the Old Testament before the writing of the New Testament ceased. Thus we find the early Christian Church for over 150 years holding to the true Biblical picture of death as a sleep and the annihilation of the wicked. Notice the testimony of Justin Martyr who died in AD 165 and was one of the leaders of the Christian Church in the early centuries:

"If you have fallen in with some who are called Christians, but who do not admit this (truth) (of the resurrection), and venture to blaspheme the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob; who say there is no resurrection of the dead and that their souls, when they die, are taken to heaven; do not imagine that they are Christians." Justin Martyr, Dialogue with Trypho, Chapter 80, in Ante Nicene Fathers, Vol. 1, p. 294.

So strong was the feeling of the early church that they would not even call a person a Christian who believed that the soul went to heaven at death.

Strange as it may seem, it was shortly after Justin Martyr that the pagan concept of the immortality of the soul was first introduced into the Christian Church. Remember there were two different teachings regarding death:

(1) The immortality of the soul-pagan in origin, stemming from Plato, and incorporating elements of Persian dualism to form a doctrine of eternal torment. Again, Persian dualism taught that good and evil

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were both eternal and could never be destroyed. Hence the evil power must always exist somewhere, and since it could not be found in heaven, the pagans devised a place of torment for all evil, since even God could not destroy it.

(2) The Biblical picture of death, as a sleep, and the wicked as eternally destroyed and annihilated.

These two different theories existed side by side through the centuries: one held by the pagans, the second held by those who believed in the one true God. Then, one of the greatest tragedies of Christianity occurred when this pagan concept was introduced into the Christian Church.

It was Athenagoras, about 188 AD, who became the first Christian Father to use the term "immortal soul." He contended that the soul is immortal and imperishable. Thus, within 25 years of the death of Justin Martyr, who would not even regard a person as a Christian who believed in an immortal soul, we find another church father making the bold pagan suggestion that the soul of man is immortal and cannot die.

A few years later, Tertullian, who died in AD 240, further, developed the doctrine of the immortality of the soul into a system, adding the dreadful corollary of eternal torment. His argument was that since all souls are immortal, the punishment of the wicked must be eternal. He stressed a sacred fire that never consumes, but renews as it burns, eternally killing, but never terminating. This is simply the old pagan doctrine of Persian dualism, stated now in Christian terminology, but still with the inevitable conclusion that even God cannot put an end to sin and sinners. He must consign them to a place of eternal burning to be punished because they are indestructible. Thus, the God of the Christians became no better than the pagan gods of Greece and Rome. Before this, the uniqueness of Christianity stood on the fact that their God could conquer evil; He could make an utter end; He could do what the pagan gods were unable to do-He could put an utter end to sin and sinners. Now Tertullian had brought Christianity down to a par with paganism-God couldn't conquer evil. He must consign sinners to an eternal hell.

The doctrine of natural immortality and eternal torment was further popularised by Jerome and Augustine. In fact, Augustine added such great prestige to the doctrine that it became the predominant faith of the church for over 1.000 years.

When the Reformation began, some of the Reformers, such as Martin Luther, recognised the origin of the teaching of natural immortality, but through the influence of John Calvin and others, the bulk of the Protestant reformers continued to hold to the pagan teaching of the immortality of the soul and eternal torment of the wicked.

In summation, let us quote from the Methodist-Congregationalist clergyman, Amos Phelps (1805-1874):

"This doctrine [of natural immortality] can be traced through the muddy channels of a corrupted Christianity, a perverted Judaism, and pagan philosophy, and a superstitious idolatry, to the great instigator of mischief in the garden of Eden. The Protestants borrowed it from the Catholics, the Catholics from the Pharisees, the Pharisees from the pagans, and the pagans from the old serpent who first preached the doctrine amid the lowly bowels of Paradise to an audience all too willing to hear and heed the new and fascinating theology: 'Ye shall not surely die.'"

Much of the material here presented has been gleaned from the two-volume work: The Conditionalist Faith of Our Fathers by LeRoy E. Froom. Review and Herald publishing association Washington D.C. 1966.

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