

The Development of the Doctrine of Immortality from the Apostolic Fathers to Augustine

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In tracing the Christian development of the doctrine of the nature of the soul, one soon finds that "very few Fathers attempt lengthy rational proofs for immortality." The pressing apologetic needs of the church's early centuries necessitated that attention largely be devoted to other subjects. Yet more than ample material exists from which to evaluate the thinking of the great writers of the early church on this matter. Citing selected quotations from that era, this paper will endeavor to illustrate what that thinking was and what trends were evident.

It is readily discovered that the theologians of the primitive age disagreed regarding the soul's immortality. Several of them "were persuaded that the soul was mortal by nature but could become immortal by good works, or, as others preferred to stress, by union with the Spirit of God, a teaching they thought to find in St. Paul" (Brady, p. 465). Specifically the teaching of innate immortality is absent from the Apostolic Fathers, those Christian writers who lived nearest to or whose lives partly paralleled the last of the apostles. The trend toward the view of inherent immortality, it will be shown, developed with the subsequent Ante-Nicene Fathers.

Before presenting the evidence, however, a few things must be kept in mind in the interest of accuracy:

Indeed we have scarce anything remaining of what was written in the first century, and little of what was written in the second. And besides, the writings of these and after times have been so interpolated, and so many spurious pieces have been ascribed to the writers of these ages, that it has been difficult to know their true and real sentiments.

Likewise it should be mentioned that it was generally common with the patristic writers to go to the other extreme when they set themselves against a particular doctrine (ibid., p. 265).

Earliest of the allegedly authentic writings of the Apostolic Fathers is an epistle by **Clement** of Rome. Though facts surrounding his life are obscure, he is identified by some third century writers as Paul's companion spoken of in Philippians 4:3. His date of death was around A.D. 100.

Characteristic of 1 Clement is the statement that "*life in immortality*" is the gift of God to Christians: "*how blessed and wonderful, beloved, are the gifts of God! Life in immortality, splendour in righteousness, truth in perfect confidence . . .*" Man, he says, is but a "*mortal creature, consisting only of dust and ashes*" (chs. 38, 39, 17). Never does Clement speak of the natural immortality of the soul.

Next chronologically among the Apostolic Fathers is **Ignatius** (died ca. 107), bishop of Antioch. Like Clement his life also is surrounded by obscurity, though it is known that he suffered martyrdom during Trajan's reign by being thrown to wild beasts.

Ignatius declared that our Lord was anointed "*that He might breath immortality into His Church*" (Eph. 17). His belief in the natural mortality of the soul is made in the unequivocal statement, "*For were he to reward us according to our works, we should cease to be*" (Mag. 10). He is also silent in his epistles in regard to the concept of innate immortality of the soul.

The Epistle of **Barnabas** is seldom if ever ascribed to the apostle Barnabas, St. Paul's friend and companion. Nevertheless it dates to the time of the Apostolic Fathers. This unknown Barnabas echoes the theme of other writers of this era, stating typically:

It is well, therefore, that he who has learned the judgments of the Lord, as many as have been written, should walk in them. For he who keeps these shall be glorified in the kingdom of God; but he who chooses other things shall be destroyed with his works (ch. 21).

Such was the conditional immortality voiced by Barnabas.

One scholar, having exhaustively reviewed the Apostolic Fathers, came to this sweeping conclusion:

From beginning to end of them there is not one word said of that immortality of the soul which is so prominent in the writings of the later fathers. Immortality is asserted by them to be peculiar to the redeemed. The punishment of the wicked is by them emphatically declared to be everlasting. Not one stray expression of theirs can be interpreted as giving any countenance to the theory of restoration after purgatorial suffering. The fire of hell is with them, as with us, an unquenchable one; but its issue is, with them as with Scripture, "destruction," "death," "loss of life" (Constable, p. 167).

Belief in the mortality of the soul was by no means confined to the aforementioned era, however. Several of the Ante - Nicene Fathers (ca. 150-325) also maintained this position.

First in this series is **Justin Martyr** (ca. 106-ca. 165), the foremost apologist of the second century. Says Justin:

Now the soul partakes of life, since God wills it to live. Thus, then, it will not even partake [of life] when God does not will it to live. For to live is not its attribute, as it is God's; but as a man does not live always, and the soul is not forever conjoined with the body, since, whenever this harmony must be broken up, the soul leaves the body, and the man exists no longer; even so, whenever the life is removed from it, and there is no more soul, but it goes back to the place from which it is taken (Dialogue, ch. 6).

Considered perhaps the "most orthodox of the Ante-Nicene fathers" was **Irenaeus** of Gaul (ca. 130-202). In an age in which Transition to innatism was taking place, he nonetheless wrote trusting that Christ would "*in the exercise of His grace, confer immortality on the righteous,*

and holy" (Against Heresies 10:1). Here immortality once again is not perceived as a natural endowment but rather that which must be conferred.

So in similar fashion did **Novatian** (210-280), presbyter of Rome, contend, declaring that *"the word of Christ affords immortality"* (On the Trinity, ch. 1). Again immortality is pictured as that which must be acquired.

Arnobius, who lived in northern Africa from the late third to early fourth centuries, would appear to be the last conditionalist spokesman among the Fathers (Fromm, I, 917). His definition of final punishment of the unsaved leaves no doubt as to his view of the soul's nature:

This is man's real death, this which leaves nothing behind. For that which is seen by the eyes is only a separation of soul from body, not the last end—annihilation: this, I say, is man's real death, when souls which know not God shall be consumed in long-protracted torment with raging fire (Against the Heathen 2:14).

Before moving to the rise of the immortal soul doctrine it should be mentioned that, in this area of thought, the pressing issue was that of ultimate reconciliation (the teaching that all mankind will eventually be saved) versus eternal torment of the unrighteous. Even this arena of conflict drew far less attention than the Christological controversies of the day. More precisely, the position taken by ultimate reconciliationists was that the punishments of the condemned are not eternal, but only remedial; the devil himself being capable of amelioration. Its leading spokesman was Origen (ca. 185-254) of Alexandria. It is noted that, while it is not essential to universalism, Origen affirmed innate immortality (Hagenbach, p. 221).

Athenagoras (ca. 127-190), however, appears to be the first Ante-Nicene ecclesiastic to assert innate immortality. Writing after the Apostolic Fathers, he states matter-of-factly that the soul is immortal (The Resurrection of the Dead, chs. 13, 20, 23, 24).

The better known **Tertullian** (ca. 160-240) of Carthage penned that *"the soul, then, we define to be sprung from the breath of God, immortal. ..."* He adds, *"Some things are known even by nature: the immortality of the soul, for instance, is held by many; the knowledge of God is possessed by all. I will use, therefore, the opinion of a Plato when asserting 'Every soul is immortal.'"* (On the Resurrection of the Flesh, ch. 3).

Such quotations as these express the rising trend of belief in natural immortality. With **Augustine** (354-430), bishop of Hippo and the most illustrious of the Latin Fathers, the die was cast. He was the first Christian philosopher in the West to write a formal treatise on the immortality of the soul.

Therefore, if the soul . . . is the subject in which reason is inseparably present, then, by the same logical necessity with which reason being in the soul is proved, reason is immortal; so the soul, since the soul can be only a living soul.

The influence of Augustinian theology through the next millennium cannot be overstressed. Its dominance was such that the medieval church was virtually a unit in holding the doctrine of inherent immortality. Complete annihilation of evil was rejected as heretical by the fifth century.

Many have asserted that the rise of immortal-soulism has its roots in the influence of pagan thought and Greek philosophy. That, however, is outside the scope of this paper.

In closing, we frame the entire discussion within this perspective:

The whole question, however, had more of a philosophical than Christian bearing, as the idea of immortality itself is abstract negative. On the other hand, the believer by faith lays hold of eternal life in Christ as something real and concrete. The Christian doctrine of immortality cannot therefore be considered apart from the person, work, and kingdom of Christ, and rests upon Christian views and promises (Hagenbach, p. 223).

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