

The Reformation Faith

Do you know what role the teaching of the "immortal soul" played in Martin Luther's Reformation? The Reformation endeavored to reclaim the Biblical doctrines and practices that the church of the establishment had discarded or corrupted. The 16th Century Reformation primarily dealt with the most serious errors and misguided practices of the Roman Church, such as, indulgences, purgatory, the Mass, prayers to the saints, forbidding to marry, antichrist and the infallibility of the Pope. The deflection from "the faith once delivered unto the saints" (Jude 2) intensified over many centuries. The Reformation from these errors would also require centuries. The recovery from the errors of church-state union, eternal torment, the trinity, etc., would be the Reformation work of the 17th-19th centuries.

Remember the Apostles predicted a great "apostasy" or deflection from the Truth (II Thessalonians 2:2,3; 1 Timothy 4:1-6; 2 Peter 2:1-22). By the time Jude wrote the book that bears his name, some of the apostles had already died in the Lord. Jude 3 and 4 warns that just as predicted, "certain men crept in unawares" and were teaching error. Then he devoted the rest of his epistle to warning against the dire consequences of their doctrine. The deflection from pure doctrine that continued in the following centuries was incredible.

Salvation By Money

By the 16th Century, the corruption of doctrine and practice degenerated to the selling of indulgences-the salvation of souls could be purchased by money. This nefarious practice was fine-tuned by the Dominican monk Tetzel. With the authority of Rome, he said: Come and I will give you letters, all properly sealed, by which even the sins that you intend to commit may be pardoned. I would not change my privileges for those of St. Peter in heaven; for I have saved more souls by my indulgences than the apostle by his sermons. There is no sin so great, that an indulgence cannot remit... .

Priest! noble! merchant! wife! youth! maiden! do you not hear your parents and your other friends who are dead, and who cry from the bottom of the abyss: We are suffering horrible torments! a trifling alms would deliver us; you can give it, and you will not!...at the very instant," continued Tetzel, "that the money rattles at the bottom of the chest, the soul escapes from purgatory, and flies liberated to heaven. O stupid and brutish people, who do not understand the grace so richly offered! Now heaven is every where opened!"¹

The Reformation Begins

On October 31, 1517 a Franciscan Monk, seething with righteous indignation at this diabolical affront to the grace of God in Christ Jesus, nailed 95 Theses to the church door at Wittenberg, Germany. The blow of Martin Luther's hammer resounded throughout Europe. The Reformation began! The 95 Theses dealt primarily with true repentance

versus indulgences. In this context, Luther's 27th proposition strikes out against the doctrine of the immortality of the soul as this quote demonstrates.

. . . that he [the pope] is emperor of the world and king of heaven, and earthly god; that the soul is immortal, and all these endless monstrous fictions [portenta] in the Roman rubbish heap of decretals."²

If Luther didn't believe in the immortality of the soul, what happened at death? Luther said:

"For just as a man who falls asleep and sleeps soundly until morning does not know what has happened to him when he wakes up, so we shall suddenly rise on the Last Day, and we shall know neither what death has been like or how we have come through it. We are to sleep until he comes and knocks on the grave and says, 'Dr. Martin, get up.' Then I will arise in a moment and will be eternally happy with him."³

Luther's logic was simple yet devastating to the errors of purgatory, indulgences and the worship of saints. If the soul was "asleep" and not suffering in purgatory there would be no need of indulgences. This also provided Luther with an effective argument against saint-worship. How can you pray to saints who are asleep?

The Resurrection Hope

Note well that Luther's hope of eternal life was not based on an immortal soul that survives death, but on the resurrection in the "last day" when all believers would be awarded eternal life. He reclaimed the long discarded Biblical teaching on death and the resurrection of the dead.

The main point of the Apostle Paul's discussion on the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15) is that Jesus' death and resurrection guarantees that "as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive" (1 Corinthians 15:22). In Acts 24:15 Paul also speaks of the resurrection of the just and the unjust. After the death of the Apostles, history records that the main Christian teachers of the second century did not believe in the immortality of the soul.

"Justin, Tatian and Theophilus, on various grounds, supposed that the soul, though mortal in itself, or at least indifferent in relation to mortality or immortality, either acquires immortality as a promised reward, by its union with the spirit and the right use of its liberty, or, in the opposite case, perishes with the body."⁴

Christians were a minority in a hostile heathen world. Grecian philosophers came into the Christian Church and brought with them Plato's doctrine of the immortality of the soul. To make Christianity more palatable to the heathen, Christians accepted Plato's error and heathens poured into the church. Christians now believed that at death the soul lives on. Then they distorted the resurrection to mean that at some future point the soul will again be confined to a human body for the balance of eternity. No wonder Luther whimsically

remarked, "It would take a foolish soul to desire its body when it already was in heaven!"⁵

What Is The Soul?

The error of all heathen religions is that we have a soul; whereas, the Bible plainly states we are a soul. Genesis 2:7 states, "God formed man out of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and man became a living soul." God didn't put a soul in man. Rather the combination of the body and breath (power) of life made man a living soul, a sentient being. Take away the power or energy of life and you have a dead soul. As stated in Ezekiel 18:20, "The soul that sinneth, it shall die." Yes, souls can die. Psalms 146:4 reveals what happens to all at death: "His breath goeth forth, he returneth to his earth; in that very day his thoughts perish." Since all sentient beings (living souls) die, the Christian hope is in the resurrection of the dead.

The Hebrew word translated soul is NEPHASH (Strong # 5315). In Leviticus 5:1, 2, 4 (KJV) a "soul" or "nephash" can see, hear, touch and speak with lips. Why? Because in verse 4 "soul" is interchangeable with "man." ". . . or if a soul swear, pronouncing with his lips to do evil, or to do good, whatsoever it be, that man shall pronounce with an oath." Further, souls can eat and be cut off or destroyed (Leviticus 7:20, 25, 27). Souls can also be torn to pieces by lions (Psalms 7:2) and can be utterly destroyed by the sword (Joshua 11:11). This is further proof that man does not possess a soul but man is a soul. Consequently the NAS and NIV both translate NEPHASH in these scriptures "person."

Immortal Soul Not In The Bible

Nowhere do the terms immortal soul or immortality of the soul appear in the Bible. The words immortal and immortality only appear five times in the whole Bible (1 Timothy 1:17; Romans 2:7; 1 Corinthians 15:53, 54; 1 Timothy 6:16; 2 Timothy 1:10) and refer once to God, once to the risen Christ, and three times immortal life is held out as a reward in the resurrection for Christ's faithful followers.

The Scriptures speak of death as a sleep (Daniel 12:2; John 11:11; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14) because in death there is no conscious thought (Psalms 146:4; Ecclesiastes 9:10). But at the resurrection all shall be awakened from the sleep of death. Jesus said (John 5:28, 29) "the hour is coming in which all that are in their graves shall... come forth, they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life (faithful Christians are given immortality in the resurrection - 1 Corinthians 15:53, 54) and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of judgment (Greek Krisis)." The majority of mankind died without hearing the name of Jesus (Acts 4:12), which is the only means of salvation. Many scriptures show that their crisis or trial time will be in the resurrection. Martin Luther was right-the soul is not immortal. At death the soul sleeps until the resurrection in the last day.

Endnotes

1. J. H. Merle D'Aubigne', D.D., HISTORY OF THE REFORMATION (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1976), 86, 87.
2. Martin Luther, ASSERTION OF ALL THE ARTICLES OF M. LUTHER CONDEMNED BY THE NEWEST BULL OF LEO X, Nov. 29, 1520, Art. 27, in his Works, Vol. 7 (Weimar: Hermann Bohlhaus Nachfolger, 1897), pp. 131, 132.
3. Paul Althaus, THE THEOLOGY OF MARTIN LUTHER (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 414, 415.
4. Rev. John McClintock D.D. and Dr. James Strong STD, CYCLOPAEDIA OF THEOLOGICAL AND ECCLESIASTICAL LITERATURE, Vol. IV (New York: HARPER & BROTHERS PUBLISHERS, 1872), 517.
5. Paul Althaus, THE THEOLOGY OF MARTIN.