by Dr. John H. Roller

The Doctrine of Immortality in the Early Church

Introduction

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Note to the Reader:

This book is a "work in progress." It began as my Ph.D. thesis when I was a student at Bethany Theological Seminary, in Dothan, Alabama. Later, it was revised and expanded while I was working as Resource Center Coordinator for the Advent Christian General Conference, in Charlotte, North Carolina. In AD 2005, it became the textbook for an "intensive" course that I taught at Atlanta Bible College, in Morrow, Georgia. Some of the students who took that course wrote papers that were so good that I asked them for permission to include their work in future editions. Two of those were Becky Onyango, whose paper on Justin of Samaria included references to books that I hadn't yet read by then, and Dustin Smith, whose paper on Justin of Samaria steered me to several references in Justin's writings that I hadn't previously noticed. Anne Mbeke's paper on Clement of Alexandria was so good that I helped her publish it and made several references to it in the
later editions of my chapter on that author. Brian Wright wrote a paper on the "Odes of Solomon" that became an entire chapter (see pages 15-21). The present "edition" was most recently updated on May 24, 2008.

If you have any comments on this material, or suggestions for improvement, please contact me, and I will gladly consider your comments or suggestions for possible inclusion in future editions. Should any of your ideas be implemented, I will gladly exchange this copy for a copy of the new version, at no additional cost to you. You can reach me as follows:

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It is my prayer that reading this book will stimulate you to further, and more extensive, study on this interesting and important topic.

INTRODUCTION

Most modern evangelical Christians believe that every human being has within him (or her) a naturally immortal soul which, being separated from the body at the moment of physical death, continues to exist forever, either in the enjoyment of God's presence or in the everlasting torment of hell-fire —in the latter case, in particular, consciously experiencing the pain of burning, but never actually being burnt up.

This position is well stated by the popular evangelist, Dr. Billy Graham, in his book, Peace With God, chapter 6, paragraph 25, where he says, "The Bible teaches that you are an immortal soul. Your soul is eternal and will live forever. In other words, the real you —the part of you that thinks, feels, dreams, aspires; the ego, the personality —will never die. The Bible teaches that your soul will live forever in one of two places —heaven or hell."

In the same chapter, in paragraph 28, he adds, "The Bible teaches that whether we are saved or lost, there is conscious and everlasting existence of the soul and personality."

This belief is actually written into the Statements of Faith of many Protestant denominations —for example, the Southern Baptist Convention, the Assemblies of God, the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches, the American Baptist Association, the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, and the Evangelical Free Church of America (to name just a few). Thus it is held to be both Biblically supportable and doctrinally essential by those churches that so include it.
On the other hand, a small but vocal minority, who refer to themselves as "Conditionalists," believe that the soul (by which term they mean, the "whole personality") is naturally mortal, not immortal, and consequently cannot, and will not, live forever (in any condition) unless immortality is granted to the individual by God —and that God only grants immortality to those who trust in Jesus Christ as their personal Savior and follow Him as their Lord.

This position is well stated by Dr. David A. Dean, of Berkshire Christian College, in his book, Resurrection Hope, on page 83, where he says, "Nothing in the Bible teaches that the wicked are immortal. Such expressions as 'to live forever', 'to exist forever', 'never to die', 'to be immortal', nor any equivalent expressions, are ever applied to the nature of the soul, or the destiny of the lost. They are only applied to the destiny of the righteous. Death is the inevitable wages for sin. Eternal life is God's gift to only those who believe in Jesus Christ."

In the same book, on page 84, he adds, "The second death destroys the whole person completely and irreversibly. Jesus said, 'Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell' (Matt. 10:28). In the second death there is a complete and never-ending destruction of the total personality (or personhood) of the sinner. One's life is taken away and eternal life is withheld."

This doctrine is called, by those who hold it, "Conditional Immortality," and those who believe it have often been driven to form churches and denominations of their own —for example, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the Advent Christian General Conference of America, the Christadelphian Church, the Church of God of the Abrahamic Faith (and others) --because they feel unable honestly to sign the Statements of Faith of other churches, such as those previously mentioned.

In my opinion, however, the beliefs of present-day churches are no valid standard by which to judge the truth or falsehood of any doctrine. We are now almost as far removed in the stream of time from Christ and the Apostles as Abraham was before God spoke to him in Mesopotamia —and God has not spoken to anyone, by way of inspired Revelation, in over nineteen centuries! On the question of human immortality, as on every other subject of spiritual interest, we should not ask, "What do modern churches teach?" but rather, "What does the Bible say?" and "How did the early Christians interpret its statements?"

With this principle in mind, then, the topic for this book is defined as follows: What can we learn from the writings of the early Church Fathers as to the position(s) held in their times on the subject of human immortality? Specifically, we will want to see whether the Apostolic, Sub-Apostolic, and Ante-Nicene Fathers of the first, second and third centuries held a view similar to the popular modern view, or one more similar to the Conditionalist view.
Proponents of the view I am referring to as the doctrine of "Natural Immortality," or "Naturalism," usually hold either a dichotomist or trichotomist view of the nature of man. Let me define these two terms.

Dichotomism is the view that a human being consists of two separable parts, the "material" and the "immaterial." In this view, the "material part" consists of everything that can be observed and analyzed chemically: in other words, the "body." The "immaterial part" consists of everything that cannot be so observed and analyzed: the "mind," the "emotions," the "personality," and the "soul," or "spirit" (most dichotomists use the latter two terms almost interchangeably).

Trichotomism, on the other hand, is the view that a human being consists of three separable parts, the "body," the "soul," and the "spirit." In this view, the "body" consists of everything that can be observed and analyzed chemically, and the "soul" and the "spirit" are distinguished, not only from the "body," but also from each other. The "soul" is usually viewed as that "part" of man which is immaterial, but is also possessed by animals (the "mind," the "emotions," etc.), while the "spirit" is that "part" of man which is both immaterial and uniquely human (the "will," the "personality," the ability to make moral choices, the ability to have a relationship with God, etc.).

Both dichotomists and trichotomists believe that at death, the "parts" are separated and experience different destinies. Dichotomists and trichotomists agree that the "material part," or "body," disintegrates unless chemically or miraculously preserved; dichotomists believe that the "immaterial part" survives, remains conscious, and goes directly to its eternal destiny, while trichotomists believe that the "soul" and the "spirit" are separated, not only from the "body," but also from each other, and may experience separate, and different, destinies.

For the purposes of this book, I will not attempt to distinguish between dichotomists and trichotomists, but will lump into one group all those who believe that a human being consists of separable parts, if they hold in common the idea that some "part" of man survives the death of the "body" and is destined before Creation to continue to exist forever. These people I will conveniently designate as "Naturalists," meaning that they hold to the view I am referring to as the doctrine of "Natural Immortality," or "Naturalism." (The terms "Naturalist" and "Naturalism," as used in this context, should not be confused with the terms "Naturalist" and "Naturalism" as used in the context of people enjoying outdoor activities, organically grown foods, nudity, and so on.)
"Conditionalism," usually hold a monistic, or "unitary," view of the nature of man. Here is another term to define.

In this view, "body," "soul," "spirit," and so on, are not separable "parts," but merely different ways of describing the same individual person. The "body" is the person viewed from a physical standpoint; the "mind" is the person viewed from an intellectual standpoint; the "will" is the person viewed in his or her capacity to make moral choices; and so on.

Adherents to this doctrine see the term "soul" as equivalent to the "total personality," pointing to the many references in Scripture where the expression "my soul" is used to mean "I"; " his soul," "he"; etc. And, for many who hold this view, the "spirit" is not seen as an aspect of the human being at all, but as the "living force" which "energizes" the person and makes him (or her) "alive" (as opposed to "dead").

It should seem logical to you, as it does to me, that anyone holding such a view of the nature of man will not view death as any kind of "separation" of the human being into "parts" with differing destinies. This definition of man's nature requires that every aspect of his total personality experience the same fate. Since the fate of at least one aspect —the "body"—is well known to be disintegration (and eventual nonexistence), it should be obvious that the fate of all the other aspects would be the same, and that there would be no hope for a person's continued existence, in any form, after his (or her) death, unless God were to intervene with a miracle.

That is, indeed, what most Conditionalists believe, based on their understanding of the nature of human beings. The idea of "Conditional Immortality" is then introduced as the solution to the problem thus created. According to this view, God will raise whole persons from a state of death to a state of immortality, providing that, in this life, the "condition" (faith in Christ as Lord and Savior) has been met. Those who have not believed in Christ will be punished with the "second," or final, death: complete destruction of the entire person, or "soul," with no hope of another opportunity for repentance and salvation. Though many Conditionalists dislike the word "annihilation," it accurately describes what they believe will be the ultimate fate of those who do not repent of their sins—in this life—and receive God's forgiveness.

In this book, I will conveniently designate as "Conditionalists" those writers who hold to the view I am referring to as the doctrine of "Conditional Immortality," or "Conditionalism."

THE ANCIENT SOURCES

As mentioned in the Introduction (see pp. 4-5), our primary source of data on the understanding of human immortality that prevailed in the Early Church will be the writings of the Apostolic, Sub-Apostolic, and Ante-Nicene Fathers of the first, second, and third
centuries AD. These are defined as follows:

1) The Apostolic Fathers are those writers whose lifetimes overlapped with those of the Apostles, and who may therefore be supposed to have had personal knowledge of the Apostles' teachings.

2) The Sub-Apostolic Fathers are those writers whose lifetimes overlapped with those of the Apostolic Fathers, and who may therefore be supposed to have had personal knowledge of the Apostolic Fathers' understanding of the Apostles' teachings.

3) The Ante-Nicene Fathers are all other Christian writers whose work was completed before the Council of Nicaea, which took place in AD 325.

Since the Apostle John died in AD 102?, I will classify as Apostolic Fathers only those writers born before that date. Of this group, those who wrote on the subject of immortality were:

Clement of Rome (AD 30-97)
The writer(s) of the *Odes of Solomon* (approximately AD 100)
Ignatius of Antioch (AD 35-107)
Polycarp of Smyrna (AD 69-155)
Papias of Hierapolis (AD 70-163)
The writer(s) of the *Didache* (approximately AD 120)
Quadratus of Athens (approximately AD 126)
Mathetes (approximately AD 130)
Clement of Corinth (approximately AD 130)
Barnabas of Alexandria (approximately AD 135)
Aristides of Athens (approximately AD 140)
Hermas of Rome (AD 100-?)

Based on these dates, I will use AD 142 (a generation after the death of the Apostle John) as a convenient cut-off date to distinguish between the Sub-Apostolic Fathers and the Ante-Nicene Fathers; that is, writers born after AD 102 but before AD 142 will be classified as Sub-Apostolic. The Sub-Apostolic Fathers, then, who wrote on the subject of immortality, were:

Justin of Samaria (AD 106-165)
Tatian of Assyria (AD 110-180)
Theophilus of Antioch (AD 115-181)
Melito of Sardis (AD ?.190)
Athenagoras of Athens (AD 127-190)
Polycrates of Ephesus (AD 125-196)
Irenaeus of Lyons (AD 130-202)
And, by these definitions, the Ante-Nicene Fathers who wrote on the subject of immortality before the end of the third century AD were:

Clement of Alexandria (AD 153-213?)
Tertullian of Carthage (AD 145-220)
Hippolytus of Portus Romanus (AD 170-236)
The writer(s) of the Pseudo-Clementines (approximately AD 220)
Minucius Felix of Africa (AD 185-250)
Origen of Alexandria (AD 185-254)
Commodianus of Africa (AD 200-275)
Cyprian of Carthage (AD 200-258)
Novatian of Rome (AD 210-280)
Gregory Thaumaturgus of Neo-Caesarea (AD 213-270)
Arnobius of Sicca (AD 250-327)

This is not, of course, a complete list of all the Christian writers of the first three centuries AD; however, it is a complete list of all those writers of that period in whose works I was able to find any reference to the subject of human immortality. In any case, no major Christian writers of the first three centuries have been intentionally omitted from consideration in the compiling of this list. It cannot be said that I have begged the question to be discussed in this book by prejudiced selection of source materials.

THE ANCIENT SOURCES CONSULTED

The Biblical texts relating to the question of human immortality are far too numerous to list and evaluate in a book of this length; nor is it the purpose of this book to "prove" the correctness or incorrectness of the doctrines of Naturalism and Conditionalism by the traditional method of Scriptural proof-texting. It is, rather, the stated purpose of this book to determine which of the two positions was more prominent in the Christian Church during its first three centuries of existence. For this reason I will purposely avoid any attempts to analyze the writings of the Apostles themselves, or any other Scriptures, and restrict our attention to an examination of the teachings of the Apostolic, Sub-Apostolic, and Ante-Nicene Fathers. My procedure will be as follows:

In approximately chronological order, I will describe each writer in a brief biography; list his major works, together with their dates of publication, if known; then analyze some quotations from his writings, using bold face type to emphasize key words, with a view to determining if he should be classified as a Naturalist or a Conditionalist. Since only a few pages will be given to each Father, it should be obvious that this will not be a verse-by-verse study of all of the Patristic writings! But it will represent the conclusions drawn from careful, in-depth study of each Father and his works, and I will try my best to be unbiased in my attempts at
classification. It is my belief that the point to be made in the conclusion can best be established by this method.

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Testament of the doctrine of a future life, or personal immortality, is the general consensus of Biblical scholarship."[4] Some sections of the Old Testament appear to argue that no afterlife exists even for the good and just, with the Book of Ecclesiastes telling the faithful: "The dead know nothing. Four of them were Universalists, one taught "conditional immortality" and the last taught Eternal hell. [14] Many early church fathers have been quoted as either embracing or hoping for the ultimate reconciliation of God with His creation.