

## **IMMORTALITY IN THE EARLY CHURCH. R3382-3**

1. IT is not our practice to quote the "early fathers" on any subject, but all the more some of our readers may be interested in what Rev. J. Agar Beet, D.D., Professor in a Methodist college in England, has found on Immortality. We quote liberally, as follows:--

2. "In chapter 1 we saw that Plato taught that the soul of man is immortal, **i.e.**, that for good or ill, immortality is its inalienable attribute; in contrast, as we saw in chapter 2, to Christ and his apostles, who taught that incorruptibility--**i.e.**, a state without decay --and eternal life are the reward awaiting the righteous, whereas destruction awaits the wicked. We shall now consider what the early Christian writers, living in an intellectual environment greatly influenced by the teaching of Plato, said about the immortality of the soul and about the eternal life promised by Christ to the righteous.

3. "The earliest Christian writers reproduce the thought, and in large measure the language, of the New Testament, and say nothing about, or reject, the immortality of the soul. Clement of Rome, in his epistle to the Corinthians, chapter 35, speaks of 'life in immortality' as a gift of God to the righteous. So Ignatius to Polycarp, chapter 2: 'Be sober, as God's athlete; the prize is incorruptibility and life eternal.' He writes to the Magnesians, chapter 20, about 'the medicine of immortality, an antidote so as not to die, but to live eternally in Jesus

Christ always.'...

4. "Theophilus to Autolytus, book ii. 27, writes: 'But some will say to us, Was man by nature mortal? Certainly not. Was he then immortal? Neither do we affirm this. But one will say, Was he then nothing? Not even this hits the mark. He was by nature neither mortal nor immortal. For, if he had made him immortal from the beginning, he would have made him God. Again, if he had made him mortal, God would seem to be the cause of his death. Neither then immortal nor yet mortal did he make him, but, as we have said above, capable of both; so that if he should incline to the things of immortality, keeping the commandment of God, he should receive as reward from him immortality, and should become God; but if, on the other hand, he should turn to the things of death, disobeying God, he should himself be the cause of death to himself. For God made man free, with power over himself. That, then, which man brought upon himself through carelessness and disobedience, this now God bestows upon him as a gift, through his own kindness and pity when men obey him. For as man, disobeying, drew death upon himself, so, obeying the will of God, he who desires is able to gain for himself life eternal. For God has given us a law and holy commandments; and every one who keeps these can be saved, and, obtaining the resurrection, can inherit incorruptibility.'

5. "Somewhat later Irenaeus writes, in book ii, 34, 3, that 'the Father of all

imparts continuance forever and ever on those who are saved. For life does not arise from us nor from our own nature, but is bestowed according to the grace of God. And therefore he who shall preserve the life bestowed upon him and give thanks to him that imparted it, shall receive also length of days forever and ever. But he who shall reject it and prove himself ungrateful to his Maker, inasmuch as he has been created and has not recognized him who bestowed the gift upon him, deprives himself of the privilege of continuance forever and ever. And for this reason the Lord declared to those who showed themselves ungrateful to him, If ye have not been faithful in that which is little, who shall give you that which is great? indicating that those who, in this brief temporal life, have shown themselves ungrateful to him who bestowed it, shall justly not receive from him length of days forever and ever.'

6. "On the other hand, in book v.4.I (cf. ch.7.I), Irenaeus speaks of the soul as one of the things 'which are by nature immortal, and to which it belongs by their own nature to live.' This apparent contradiction reveals the influence of two contradictory lines of thought.

7. "At the close of the second century Clement of Alexandria writes: 'Let us observe God's commandments and follow his counsels: they are the short and direct way that leads to eternity,' **i.e.**, to eternal existence; and again, 'When baptized, we become enlightened; enlightened, we

become sons; as sons we become perfect and immortal.'

See **Paed.** I.3,6.

8. "Up to this time, so far as I know, except the passing references in Irenaeus just quoted, and two writers now to be mentioned, no Christian writer speaks of the soul of man as immortal, or as continuing in endless existence, or of immortality as other than a reward of righteousness.

9. "In the middle of the second century Tatian writes, in his 'Address to the Greeks,' ch. 13: 'The soul is not in itself immortal, O Greeks, but mortal. Yet it is possible for it not to die. If indeed it knows not the truth, it dies and is dissolved with the body, but rises again at last at the end of the world with the body, receiving death by punishment in immortality.' About the demons he says in chapter 14: 'That which is now their chief distinction, that they do not die like men, they will retain when about to suffer punishment: they will not partake of everlasting life so as to receive this, instead of death, in a blessed immortality. And as we, to whom it now easily happens to die, afterwards receive the immortal with enjoyment, or the painful with immortality, so the demons who abuse the present life to purposes of wrong doing, dying continually even while they live, will have hereafter the same immortality, like that which they had during the life they lived, but in its nature like that of men, who actually performed what the demons ascribed to them during their lifetime.' The phrases 'punishment with

immortality' and the 'painful with immortality' deviate from the phraseology of the New Testament. For there the terms immortality and its equivalents, incorruptibility and eternal life, are used only to describe a state of blessing. Thus Tatian approaches the language of Plato, with whose writings he was familiar...."

10. After referring to Athenagoras, a philosopher of Athens who accepted Christianity, to Tertullian and to Origen as advocates of the Platonic teaching concerning the immortality of the soul, Dr. Beet says:--

11. "To sum up: The phrase, **the soul immortal**, so frequent and conspicuous in the writings of Plato, we have not found in pre-Christian literature outside the influence of Greek philosophy; nor have we found it in Christian literature until the latter part of the second century. We have noticed that all the earliest Christian writers who use this phrase were familiar with the teaching of Plato; that one of these, Tertullian, expressly refers both phrase and doctrine to him; and that the early Christian writers never support this doctrine by appeals to the Bible, but only by arguments similar to those of Plato. We have learnt that by this phrase Plato and the earliest Christian writers who use it asserted the endless and essential permanence of all human souls, and appealed to this doctrine in proof of retribution beyond the grave. But we have failed to find any trace of this doctrine in the Bible. On the other hand, Christ and his apostles teach clearly and frequently retribution

beyond death, and eternal life with God for all who put faith in Christ. The hope of immortality, however, rests in the New Testament, not on the nature of the soul, but on the 'promise of life in Christ Jesus.'

12. "The doctrine of the immortality of the soul differs further from the immortality promised in the New Testament in that this last is not for the body only, as Plato taught, but for the whole man, body and soul.

13. "Doubtless the doctrine before us was welcome in the early Church, as in a still earlier day to some devout Jews, because of the support it renders to the all-important doctrine of retribution beyond the grave. But, as we have seen, it is altogether alien, both in phrase and thought, to the teaching of Christ and his apostles."

#### **EPISCOPALIAN TESTIMONY.**

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14. It is sometimes argued that the immortality of the soul is a truth so generally accepted that any direct statement of it in Holy Scripture was unnecessary; and a parallel to this silence is thought to have been found in the fact that none of the sacred writers have felt obliged explicitly to state the proposition. There is a God.

15. But notice the wide difference between these two cases. The existence of a God, even if it be not distinctly asserted, is yet on almost every page of Scripture as plainly implied as it possibly can be.

Everywhere the Almighty confronts us. Take his name and presence out of the Bible and the book shrivels into nothingness in a moment. Can any such thing be said of the doctrine of the natural immortality of the soul? Where is it taken for granted? In what single sentence is it necessarily implied?--**W. R. Huntington, D.D. Sermon, "The Hypothesis of Conditional Immortality."**

#### **NEW VIEWS OF THE AUTHOR OF "IN HIS STEPS."**

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16. I have come to believe myself in the probable **annihilation** of those who never respond to God's offer of forgiveness, those who never believe in Christ and take him as their Savior. It seems probable that the Bible teaches that the word "death," as applied to the soul that always refuses to repent, is a death that means total extinction. I cannot interpret the use of such a text as we have today, to mean anything less than that "the wages of sin is death." What do these words mean, if not plainly what they say?--the extinction of life, the utter going out of the flame that was meant to ascend higher and brighter and purer on the altar of man's worship of his Creator and Redeemer.--**Chas. M. Sheldon, in Sermon reported in "The Christian Herald."**

#### **HENRY WARD BEECHER'S VIEWS.**

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17. He that lives to the flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption--**shall**. It is sure to come. What shall it be? Future torment? No, I do not mean that; I mean that he that cultivates his lower nature, mere animal nature, with the animal perishes...It is to my mind a relief that if a man never rises any higher than the animal life, the universe will never see a God enthroned that looks down upon the infinite and prolonged torments of an unconceived number of men shut up simply for the purpose of suffering. If there be anything more infidel than that I do not know what it is, or anything which more effectually blots out the possibility of respecting and loving any God than this--continuing to create men with some foresight of their perpetual suffering.--**From Sermon on `Gal. 6:7-9`.**

#### **FROM DR. LEONARD BACON.**

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18. "Let it be fairly understood, on all hands, that the doctrine of future existence as conditional upon the act of God, is not incompatible with any of the theories of the future life current in modern Christendom --with Universalism, Restorationism, with the opinions called orthodox, or even with the wretched despair of those who know no life to come at all. The one thesis to which, if I were a disputant on the subject, I should try to stick and to compel all my diverse antagonists to stick, until it was decided one way or the other, is this: That whatever future existence men shall have after death, be it blissful or

miserable, be it unending or transient,  
be it the lot of all souls or only of a  
part, they will have it as being  
conferred by the act of God who raises  
from the dead, and not by the soul's  
intrinsic tenacity of life."