

IMMORTALITY?

Ekkehardt Mueller

“Is death necessary?“, asked biologist G. R. Taylor and stated that in 1968 in the USA alone more than a thousand teams of scientists were working on the issue of growing old and the problem of death. Some people are frozen at their death. They want to be revived as soon as a cure for their disease or the aging process has been found. Most of humanity seems to have the desire to live forever. Many people claim that although their body is mortal, their soul is not. Therefore the question must be asked: Is there a natural immortality of humans or their soul?

I. *The Immortal Soul and Scripture*

1. *Scripture and Immortality*

There are only two biblical passages using the word “immortality”:

- (1) 1 Tim 6:14-16 - God alone possesses immortality.
- (2) 1 Cor 15:51-54 - Only at their resurrection, when Jesus comes again, will believers receive immortality.

Eternal life is always dependent on Jesus. Without Him there is no everlasting life, not on earth, nor in heaven, nor in hell - Rom 6:23; John 3:36; 5:24; 1 John 5:11, 12.

2. *Scripture and Soul*

The Hebrew and Greek terms translated “soul” can be rendered in different ways. They stand for “life” (Gen 9:4; Matt 2:20), “heart” (Eph 6:6), “emotions” (Song 1:7; Mark 14:34), and frequently for “person”:

- (1) Humans do not have a “soul” but are a “soul” - 1 Cor 15:45; Gen 2:7.
- (2) Even animals are “souls” - Gen 1:20; 9:10; Rev 16:3.
- (3) The “soul” can weep - Jer 13:17.
- (4) “Souls” can be taken captive - Jer 52:28-30.
- (5) “Souls” can be baptized - Acts 2:41.
- (6) The “soul” can die - Eze 18:4; Jas 5:20; Rev 20:4; Ps 89:48; Job 36:14; Lev 19:8; 21:1, 11.

Result: Very often the term “soul” designates the entire human being. It is not used in connection with immortality. The concept of an immortal soul is not found in the Bible.

II. *The Idea of Immortality in History*

1. *Support for the Natural Immortality of the Soul*

- (1) Satan - Gen 3:4 (in contrast to Gen 2:17)
- (2) Pagans - The doctrine of the immortal soul has been called a characteristic of paganism and has led to ancestor cult, human sacrifices, building of the pyramids, etc.
- (3) The Greeks - Plato called the body the prison of the soul and understood death as the liberation of the soul. Aristotle shared similar views.
- (4) Churches - Probably during the 3rd century AD the platonic doctrine of the natural immortality of the soul had already permeated the Christian church. Representatives were Athenagoras, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Augustin. It was fully developed by Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century. In December 1513 the dogma of the natural immortality of the soul was proclaimed by the Roman Catholic Church. Most Protestant Churches have also accepted this doctrine.

2. *Opposition to the Natural Immortality of the Soul*

- (1) God - Eccl 9:5, 6, 10
- (2) Israel - Dan 12:13
- (3) Jesus Christ - John 6:40. Jesus did not experience his death as the liberation of his soul from the prison of his body which he, therefore, should have desired and accepted happily. He suffered.
- (4) Christians - Early church fathers such as Justin the Martyr, Tatian, Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, and Polycarp rejected this doctrine. Luther was ambivalent. A number of well-known modern

Protestant theologians such as Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, and Oscar Cullmann also believe that it has no foundation in Scripture.

III. Consequences

1. Teachings which Are Not Found in Scripture Are Grounded on the Idea of the Natural Immortality of the Soul

These doctrines include (1) purgatory, (2) indulgences, (3) prayer, alms, and masses for the dead, (4) the constantly burning hell, (5) veneration of Mary and the saints (cf. 1 Tim 2:5 and Exod 20:4), (6) reincarnation, and (7) spiritualism - Deut 18:10-12; 2 Cor 11, 14.

2. Biblical Teachings Are Darkened

(1) *The Second Coming of Christ.* During church history the second coming of Jesus lost its importance in the Catholic Church and in many Protestant churches.

(2) *Resurrection of the Dead.* The resurrection is the divine antithesis to the pagan doctrine of the immortality of the soul.

(3) *Judgment at the End of the World.* Such a judgment would be superfluous if the souls were already in heaven, purgatory, or hell.

3. God's Character Is Darkened

(1) God would appear to be a liar who cannot be trusted (cf. Gen 2:17).

(2) God would be without compassion allowing people who supposedly had made it to heaven to watch the pain and suffering of their loved ones still living on earth without being able to intervene.

(3) God would be an unjust tyrant who punishes people in hell forever, although they have sinned for a limited time only.

The doctrine of the natural immortality of the soul creates a cruel picture of God and distorts Scripture. However, Scripture teaches that God is love and cares for us (1 John 4:8-9; Mal 1:2). We have to make the decision whom to trust.

