*The Immortality of the Soul*

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It would seem that most American evangelicals believe in a doctrine called “the immortality of the soul.” However, when questioned, they tend to define this phrase in myriad and very inconsistent ways. This ambiguity and imprecision exists because of the wide range of beliefs the Church has held about these matters throughout its history, and the disagreements about them which continue to the present day. That being said, most Christians I have known believe humans were created by God as immortal souls destined to live forever in either heaven or hell.

Is greater clarity or precision on this topic possible? Some may doubt that it is, given the “other-worldly,” non-scientific nature of the issue. Some might consider the topic unimportant. However, I believe greater precision is both possible and important because the subject matter has to do with the essence of human persons and their eternal destiny. We should strive to understand as clearly as possible what God’s Word says about these subjects. What is the soul and how is it saved? What expectations should we have for life after death? What message do we have for non-Christians regarding these important topics? We need to do our best to “get it right.”

In this paper, I will show that the immortality of the soul is not a biblical concept, but one derived from Greek philosophy. The Bible teaches the resurrection of the body. I will demonstrate the clear connection between early church fathers and Greek philosophy and explain why Greek concepts of the soul were so easily accepted and incorporated into Christian theology. I will more precisely define the words soul and immortality, and look at what scripture says regarding the soul and the afterlife.

The immortality of the soul is a doctrine which is refuted rather than taught in scripture. Two passages make this crystal clear. The first is 1 Tim. 6:15, 16: “God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see.” The second scripture is found in 2 Tim. 1:9, 10: “This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.” (NIV)

In First Timothy, the word translated immortal is “athanasis” (literally deathless). In Second Timothy, the word translated immortality is “aftharsia,” from the root “afthartos,” meaning incorruptible.[[1]](#footnote-1) Both words make it very clear that only God is deathless or incorruptible in His very nature; human beings are not. Through Christ’s death on the cross, however, God has “destroyed” (NIV) or “abolished” (ESV) death, and brought to light a way by which humans *may* escape death and corruption. The *possibility* *of becoming* immortal does exist, but only by means of Christ and His gospel. The human soul is not immortal in and of itself. This being the clear teaching of scripture, where did Christians get the very prevalent contrary belief in the immortality of the soul?

The idea of a deathless soul clearly originated in Greek mythology and philosophy. It is not difficult to trace this. Souls were rather shadowy and ethereal in Homer’s poetry,[[2]](#footnote-2) but gradually, Greek concepts of the soul evolved until the soul came to be seen as an immortal aspect of man, of divine origin, which came from an eternal world of ideas existing beyond this world. Plato further consolidated and developed these beliefs into a whole new theology or cosmology.[[3]](#footnote-3) Though his own works tended to leave details “*in suspenso,*”[[4]](#footnote-4) he, more than anyone else, was responsible for developing the concept of the immortal soul we attribute to Greek philosophy today, an entity separate from the body, of divine origin, belonging to a different world, preexistent, and independent.[[5]](#footnote-5) Plato and other Greeks conceived of the body as the prison of the soul and death as liberation from that prison. Whereas Christians looked forward to the resurrection of the body, Greeks rejected this notion and hoped to one day escape the body.[[6]](#footnote-6) This is why Florovsky says “There is no compatibility between Platonism and Christianity.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

Despite this dissonance, Greek metaphysical notions began to be incorporated into the thinking of people of faith even before the New Testament era. The Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria (c. 20 B.C. E. – 40 C.E.) sought to synthesize Platonic philosophy and Judaism. For some, his thinking served to bridge Greek philosophy, Judaism, and Christianity.[[8]](#footnote-8) He taught the immortality of the soul, though only of the righteous.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Platonic thought was modified by Plotinus into the philosophical system known as Neoplatonism beginning in the early 3rd century. What is particularly relevant to this paper is that Plotinus studied under Ammonius Saccas in Alexandria, Egypt, the home of Philo and the place where Clement of Alexandria and Origen also studied. “Nowhere did Jewish, Greek and Christian ideas come into closer and more intensive contact than in Alexandria, Egypt.”[[10]](#footnote-10) As Christian Wilberg points out:

Evidence for the increasing Neoplatonization of Christianity is abundant: The brilliant Christian theologian Origen, some twenty years older than Plotinus, may also have been a pupil of Ammonius Saccas; the Cappadocian Fathers Basil and Gregory of Nazianzus spent their youth in philosophical study in Athens in the 4th century, where they most certainly were exposed to Neoplatonism, while Augustine of Hippo (354–430) was intimately familiar with the writings of Plotinus and Porphyry.[[11]](#footnote-11)

The influence of Platonism or Neoplatonism is clearly perceived in Augustine’s treatise on the soul, in which he reasons for both the existence and the immortality of the soul by discussing the world of ideals and how the soul must be immortal to conceive of and retain these ideals.[[12]](#footnote-12) W. R. Inge lists many other correlations between Augustine and Plotinus.[[13]](#footnote-13) Innumerable other scholars have testified to the impact of Plato and Plotinus upon the development of Christian theology. Orthodox theologian Georges Florovsky mentions the “Platonistic tendencies” of Clement of Alexandria, Athenagoras, and Augustine, and calls Platonism “the favorite philosophy of Christian wise men.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Jaeger mentions how easy it was for the early Church Fathers to accept some Platonistic concepts, noting they rejected the transmigration of the soul for example, but easily accepted its immortality. He adds, “The most important fact in the history of Christian doctrine, was that the father of Christian theology, Origen, was a Platonic philosopher at the school of Alexandria.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Moore mentions “the origins of Neo-Platonism in Alexandria…” and its chief proponents, Plotinus and Origen, adding that Plotinus had no doubts about the immortality of the soul.[[16]](#footnote-16) Joel Green writes of how the early church was, “influenced by Neoplatonism (and its forerunners)…” toward “…Platonic dualism rather than Hebrew holism.”[[17]](#footnote-17) Scores of others could be cited.[[18]](#footnote-18)

There were many different schools of thought in Greek philosophy, and not all Greek ideas by any means were accepted by the Church. The preexistence of the soul, for example, was accepted by Origen,[[19]](#footnote-19) but later officially rejected.[[20]](#footnote-20) Some concepts of the nature of God continue to influence Christian thinking in less than positive ways to this day.[[21]](#footnote-21) The concept of the soul as immaterial is widely accepted and not problematic, as will be shown below. But the doctrine of the immortality of the soul has been widely accepted by large numbers of Christians throughout the history of the Church, despite the fact that it came into Christian theology directly through pagan philosophy. It differs drastically from the Christian teaching of resurrection, but for reasons we will examine below, was wrongly seen as compatible with, and therefore easily incorporated into Christian thought.[[22]](#footnote-22) Unfortunately, this influence has “…caused utter confusion in modern thinking regarding death and immortality.”[[23]](#footnote-23)

The Church was born into a world of Greek thought, so it is understandable that early Christians interacted with that world and tried to express Christian teaching in that context. As Clark Pinnock has said, “All doctrinal formulations reflect to some extent historical and cultural conditions and have an incarnate or historical quality about them.”[[24]](#footnote-24) However, it is the task of theologians, preachers and teachers to constantly examine and reexamine Christian teaching so that errors are corrected and scriptural truth is accurately conveyed. We have established that the immortality of the soul is a doctrine that has come to us from a non-biblical, pagan source. This automatically makes it suspect. If it is also demonstrably contrary to scripture, it most certainly must be rejected. We have already mentioned passages in First and Second Timothy which indicate contradiction. We now turn to other relevant scriptures for further proof.

The earliest refutation of the soul’s immortality is found in Gen. 2:16, 17, where God told Adam and Eve that the day they ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they would die. While some might infer that Adam and Eve were immortal before eating of this tree, any such “immortality” was clearly conditioned upon their continued obedience and right relationship with God. This is further proven by the fact that, after their sin, when God drove them from the Garden, He did it to keep them from eating of the tree of life and living forever. (Gen. 3:22-24) Obviously, without being able to eat of that tree, they were destined to die. They clearly possessed no *natural* immortality apart from relationship with God, the Source of life.

Henry Wheeler Robinson mentions Augustine’s statement that Adam and Eve’s “posse non pecare,” (potential to not sin), meant they also had “posse non morti,” the potential to not die (thus, *potential* immortality), adding that the free will Adam possessed made it possible for him to do evil and lose this double potentiality. “His act was the abandonment of God; its inherent punishment was abandonment by God.”[[25]](#footnote-25)

In the New Testament (Jn. 15:5, 6), Jesus said He was the Vine and we were branches of that vine. Only by remaining connected to the vine (i.e. “abiding” in Christ), could we live. Failing to abide would cause us to be cut off, wither like a branch, and be thrown into the fire. Adam and Eve illustrate this perfectly. They separated themselves from the vine, so to speak, by not trusting God and obeying Him. Thus, the day they ate of the tree, they were severed from the source of life, and as contingent beings, began to die. Before their fall and as long as they remained “connected” to God, He sustained their existence. At no time were they immortal.

Human dependence upon God for the continuance of life is seen throughout scripture. Sadler mentions how, in Gen. 6:3, God says His spirit shall not abide in mortals forever, for they are flesh.[[26]](#footnote-26) By combining this verse with Job 34:14, 15, where we are told that if God should gather His breath or take back His Spirit, all flesh would perish together and all mortals return to dust, the case is made that God maintains human life by His Spirit. Apart from His sustaining presence, human life ceases entirely.[[27]](#footnote-27)

But if no aspect of human life is inherently immortal, what is to be made of passages in which people continue to exist after death or which promise everlasting life? Three passages in particular seem of greatest relevance here; Luke 16:19-31, Luke 23:43, and 2 Cor. 5:1-8.

The Luke 16 passage is often called a parable. However, John Calvin, in his tract *Psychopannychia*, says Ambrose, Tertullian, Origen, Irenaeus, Cyprian, and Jerome all believed the passage to be a real history which proves that some aspect of human life continues after death.[[28]](#footnote-28) Even if we grant that the story *is* a parable, since a parable is a device used to more memorably communicate truth, what is the central lesson or truth this “parable” teaches? It seems unavoidably obvious that it teaches people live beyond death in some conscious form, the condition of which will be determined according to things done during their lives on earth. The soul is not immortal, but obviously God can permit the immaterial aspect of human persons to exist after physical death.

Luke 23:43 also communicates this reality very clearly. As they both hung dying on crosses, a thief asked Jesus to remember him when He came into His Kingdom. Jesus said, “Today you will be with me in Paradise.” Comparing the four gospels, we find that both men died that same day, that is, their bodies died upon their respective crosses. Yet Jesus had promised they would be in Paradise. The only way this can be understood is that as individuals, these two men continued to exist after their bodies died, in a location or a state which Jesus called Paradise. Where that place or state was located, we cannot now know. Obviously, it was not visible to the living who were left behind. Yet since Jesus is the Son of God who always spoke the truth, we can be assured His words were fulfilled in both His own life and the life of this thief beside Him. This proves (to people of faith at least) that the immaterial aspect of human life can continue after physical death.

In 2 Cor. 5:1-8, Paul uses three metaphorical contrasts to communicate similar truth: a tent versus a building, being clothed versus being naked, and being in the body and away from the Lord versus being away from the body and with the Lord. Most would agree that being in the body means living in our current physical state of embodiment. Because we are living in these physical bodies, we are not immediately aware of God’s presence. We seem to be absent from Him. Someday however, we will be absent from these physical bodies. When that happens, “we” will be present with the Lord in some form or fashion beyond our current understanding. The fact that “we” can be absent from our bodies indicates that “we” are more than *just* our bodies, and human life has an immaterial aspect to it.

In the same letter (2 Cor. 12:2-4), Paul speaks of a man who was caught up to Paradise, but says he is not sure whether or not this man took such a “trip” in his physical body or without it. This implies either that the man “traveled” in a disembodied state or that he only saw a vision of Paradise. If the former, it would be another indication that some aspect of a person (the soul) is immaterial.

Various other passages of scripture[[29]](#footnote-29) make it clear that when Paul spoke of “this tent” versus a “building” in the heavens, he was speaking of his earthly mortal body in contrast with a new resurrection body he would one day receive. The same is true of the contrast between being clothed and being naked, the first referring to having a resurrected body and the second referring to some sort of disembodied state. The point here is that, though our existence in this current world is mortal or temporary, God promises us that some immaterial aspect of us as individuals will survive physical death.

These passages shed light upon both the nature and existence of the soul. In his *Systematic Theology*, Wayne Grudem explains the common evangelical idea of the soul as “the immaterial part of man that lives on after death.”[[30]](#footnote-30) In each of these passages, physical death is not the end of human life, because, while the body dies, the person lives on. The rich man and Lazarus, Christ and the thief, and the person who is separated from his/her body and joined to the Lord all continue to exist in some form. It seems unavoidably obvious that, as Paul Badham says, “rational belief in a future life depends upon the validity of the concept of the soul.”[[31]](#footnote-31) John Cooper agrees, “If the Bible teaches that human persons exist between physical death and resurrection,” (which the above passages all indicate), “then a sufficient body-soul or body-person duality is necessary to make this possible.”[[32]](#footnote-32) Descartes argued the same point, “This *I*, that is to say, the mind, by which I am what I am, is entirely distinct from the body.”[[33]](#footnote-33) So the soul is the immaterial person or personality (the person’s *essence*), and though this soul at present is intricately and inexplicably connected with the body, it is also somehow distinct from it.[[34]](#footnote-34)

The position of this paper is clearly stated by Cooper: “Although some traditional Christian thinkers have argued that the soul was created essentially immortal and indestructible, there is nothing in Scripture which implies that a part of humans is naturally impervious to death and disintegration.” (However) “…The fact that we exist beyond death... is clearly affirmed throughout Scripture.”[[35]](#footnote-35)

We obviously cannot expand upon this more than scripture itself does, nor can we, in this brief paper, explore the dualism versus monism debate.[[36]](#footnote-36) What we can safely conclude, however, is that human life, while not immortal in and of itself, can continue beyond the grave by the grace of God.[[37]](#footnote-37) In fact, the most commonly quoted verse of the New Testament promises, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” (Jn. 3:16 NIV). This is the great promise of the gospel to which we all cling. So while we refute the Greek concept of the immortality of the soul, we accept that it is immaterial and can exist beyond death. The compatibility of this concept with Greek philosophy explains early acceptance of other Greek ideas regarding the soul. Our goal in this paper, however, is to delineate more precisely what is Greek and what is biblical.

What then is the proper biblical expectation regarding the afterlife? Though we have seen evidence for an intermediate disembodied state in the above scriptures (concerning which, space does not permit further discussion), scripture also makes it plain that this is not our ultimate hope. Rather, we are to expect a physical resurrection, in which the aforementioned immaterial part of man will be permanently united with a new and immortal body. Paul Badham quotes a number of scholars who, “go out of their way to deny the adequacy of the soul’s immortality,”[[38]](#footnote-38) while at the same time insisting that, “eternal life requires possession of a body,” and that, “Resurrection of the Body is not only more biblical than Immortality of the Soul, it also makes better sense.”[[39]](#footnote-39) Millard Erickson, in his *Systematic Theology*, says that though, “Scripture indicates that there is an intermediate state involving personal conscious existence between death and resurrection”… “the normal state of man is as a materialized unitary being.”[[40]](#footnote-40) Oscar Cullman says, “The answer to the question, ‘Immortality of the soul or resurrection of the dead in the New Testament,’ is unequivocal. The teaching of the great philosophers Socrates and Plato can in no way be brought into consonance with that of the New Testament.”[[41]](#footnote-41) Bodily resurrection is the Christian’s hope.

If we want to know what the future holds for us, we need only look to the Author and Finisher, the “pioneer” (Heb. 11:2, NRSV) of our faith, the Lord Jesus Christ. His body truly died and was buried, but He must have briefly lived on in Paradise without it before His resurrection (Lu. 23:32). Then God raised Him bodily from death and the grave, and He was able to present His physical body to His disciples, such that they were able to recognize and touch it, and observe Jesus eating food (Lu. 24:38-43). He promised us that He Himself was the resurrection and the life, and if we believe in Him, even though we may physically die, we will live on. (Jn. 11:25)

How does such an understanding affect our witness as Christians? Rejecting the idea that our souls are immortal in and of themselves will clearly affect our witness in two specific ways. First, instead of just telling people they will find happiness if they accept Jesus, or that they are going to live forever no matter what they might do, we should proclaim that the only way to survive death and live forever is to accept Christ. This should help more people realize how much they need the Christian message. Secondly, as Pinnock has said, “hellenistic belief in the immortality of the soul has done more than anything else (specifically more than the Bible) to give credibility to the doctrine of the everlasting conscious punishment of the wicked.”[[42]](#footnote-42) Erasing this unbiblical concept of immortality erases the possibility of such eternal torment, making biblical faith easier to defend in a skeptical world.

In this paper, we have seen that no such concept as the immortality of the soul is taught in the Bible; it comes from Greek philosophy. It is therefore more biblical for us to emphasize and expect the resurrection of our physical bodies in a new and glorified state in which both soul and body are perfected and made suitable for eternal existence in the presence of God. We have seen evidence for the existence of the soul as the immaterial essence of our being (who we really are), and have seen that the Bible teaches us we can expect our personalities to exist beyond physical death if we believe in Christ’s resurrection and the promises of His gospel (Ro. 10:9, 10, 13). Though we will live temporarily in a disembodied state in the period between our physical death and the resurrection, our ultimate destiny is for body and soul to be united and dwell forever with God in new heavens and a new earth.

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34. In Matt. 10:28, Jesus shows this distinctness by telling His disciples not to fear men who can only destroy the body, but not the soul, and instead, to fear God who can destroy both. If they are not separate in some way, the verse becomes meaningless. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
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36. Dualism is the belief that the human soul is distinct from and may be separated from the body, whereas monism is the belief that human soul and body are an inseparable unity. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
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