

How Important Is “Conditional Immortality”?

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Introduction

In discussing any topic (theological or otherwise) in a presentation of this sort, and of this length, certain assumptions must be made. (Were this a paper in the field of mathematics, these assumptions might be called “postulates” -- in the field of jurisprudence, they are known as “stipulations”.)

I’m going to assume, for the purposes of this presentation:

1. That I’m addressing a group of Christians (believers in Jesus);
2. That you believe that doctrine is established by examining Biblical Scriptures;

and (though this assumption might be less valid than the other two)

3. That you hold the doctrine I’m calling “Conditional Immortality.”

My purpose, then, is to discuss with you the question of HOW IMPORTANT this doctrine is. Is it true, but relatively unimportant? or is it not only true, but also extremely important? (You will quickly see that I hold the latter position!)

Definition of Terms

In such a discussion, terms used must also be clearly defined -- otherwise, I may speak eloquently, but you will not understand what I’m saying. Or (worse yet, in my opinion), you will THINK you’re understanding what I’m saying, but what you’re thinking isn’t what I intend to be saying!

1. By “Christians” (believers in Jesus), I mean individuals who meet the qualification for salvation spelled out in Romans 10:9 – “That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved.” (Of course, if you don’t believe Jesus DIED, then how can you believe that God RAISED him FROM the dead? – But I’m getting ahead of myself!)

2. By “Biblical Scriptures” I mean the written texts of the 66 Books in the canonical collection that goes from Genesis to Revelation. (This isn’t the presentation in which I discuss such “details” as whether the Byzantine or Alexandrian text of the New Testament, or the Massoretic or Septuagint text of the Old, is correct. For today’s purposes, I’ll just use the 1769 edition of the King James Version, and another time we can discuss whether any of my points are invalidated by some other textual tradition.)

3. By “Conditional Immortality” I mean the doctrine – well established, I believe, by an honest study of the entire text and context of those 66 Books – that human beings are in no sense “immortal by nature”, nor are they (nor do they possess) “immortal souls”, but they are fully and completely “mortal” and can achieve immortality only by meeting the “condition” God has established for that achievement in such verses as 1 John 5:11-12, where I read, “...God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life.” This doctrine is the direct opposite of the perennially and internationally popular idea that “all human beings are destined to live forever somewhere” (you’ve probably seen billboards asking, “Where will you spend eternity?” – a question that assumes you will have an “eternity” to “spend” somewhere).

Procedure

I intend to demonstrate my thesis – that Conditional Immortality is not only the true teaching of the Bible (you will recall that I’m assuming you agree with that), but that it is also “extremely important” (as I suggested a few minutes ago) – by surveying various aspects of Biblical Theology to see what, if any, impact, Conditional Immortality (or its opposite) has on our attempt to construct each such aspect. I’ll begin with an aspect nearly all of us will agree is an “extremely important” branch of theology: namely, what is called by theologians “Theology Proper” (that is, our understanding of the nature and attributes of God).

Theology Proper

This Conference devotes much time and effort to the construction of Theology Proper. Most of the papers presented here will probably relate to that discipline to a great extent. Some of you may already be aware that I hold a different position on the question of Divine Nature than is held by the majority here. I’m not going to get into a discussion of the differences between my position and yours, or of the reasons for those differences. I simply want to ask, not only you, but anyone who holds any position at all on the nature of God: how can your position on the nature of God be Biblical if you reject the plain teaching of 1 Timothy 6:15-16, which clearly state that “the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords . . . ONLY hath immortality”? To assert that any other being in the universe, besides that Potentate, now possesses immortality, is simply to make a liar of the author of 1 Timothy! To assert that the author of 1 Timothy 6:15-16 was lying is to guarantee that your Theology Proper – whatever form it takes – will not be Biblical. Belief in Conditional Immortality is essential for the construction of any Biblical doctrine of Theology Proper.

Anthropology

In theological circles, the term “Anthropology” is used somewhat differently than in sociological circles. By “Anthropology” we refer to the complex of doctrines that define human beings in their relationship to God, our Creator. But how can your position on the nature of humanity be Biblical if you don’t pay attention to the clear statements of the Creation story in Genesis chapters 1 to 3? According to Genesis 2:7, “the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.” It DOESN’T say “an immortal soul”! If the English language has any meaning at all, then whatever else may be said of immortal souls, this much must be clear: they CANNOT DIE! Yet, only ten verses later, the first man is told, “of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.” Then he must not have been immortal! What it means to “die” is clearly described in the next chapter: “dust [not an immortal soul] THOU art, and unto dust shalt THOU [not merely the “bodily part” of thee] return.” (Genesis 3:19) The prophet Ezekiel makes it even plainer that souls are not immortal when he says, “the soul that sinneth, it shall die.” (Actually, he says it twice: in Ezekiel 18:4 and again in Ezekiel 18:20.) (Actually, Ezekiel didn’t say that at all: he merely quoted the Lord as saying it.) Belief in the Natural Immortality of human “souls” will shipwreck any attempt to build a Biblical doctrine of Anthropology.

Soteriology

Soteriology – a term built on the Greek word “soter”, which means “savior” – is that branch of theology which deals with humanity’s need for salvation, and how God meets that need

through providing a Savior, His Son Jesus Christ. But what is it that humanity needs to be “saved” from? Clearly the Biblical answer to that question is that, ultimately, human beings need to be rescued from being thrown into what Revelation 20:14 calls “the lake of fire” and defines as “the second death.” If, however, human beings are, by nature, immortal, how can they be subject to even a first death, let alone a second? Biblical Soteriology teaches us that Jesus is the Savior – the One Who can rescue sinners from that “second death” – precisely because He took the penalty of death on Himself when He died on the cross of Calvary. But, as I asked earlier, when I was getting ahead of myself, it’s now time to ask again, in a slightly different form: how can you believe that Jesus is your Savior – that His death on the cross paid the penalty for your sin – if you don’t believe He DIED at all, because you think His human soul was naturally immortal? You can’t have it both ways!: either He was NOT immortal, and therefore He could die for you, or He was immortal, and therefore He couldn’t. To put it another way: if Jesus were naturally immortal (like all other human beings), then He can’t be our Savior – and if HE can’t be our Savior, then who can? Furthermore, as I asked earlier, how can you believe that God RAISED Jesus from the DEAD if you don’t believe that He ever DIED? Yet Romans 10:9 makes it clear that without believing that God raised Jesus from the dead, you can’t be saved. Without a proper understanding of Conditional Immortality, you can’t construct a BIBLICAL soteriology!

Ecclesiology

Ecclesiology – based on the Greek word “ekklesia” – is that branch of theology that deals with our understanding of the Church. A Biblical ecclesiology will define the true Church of Jesus Christ as including all human beings who are finally to be saved. But, as we have just seen, we can’t even talk about what it means to be “saved” – at least, not if we wish to talk Biblically – unless we have a valid understanding of Conditional Immortality. If we lack that understanding, then, won’t our ecclesiology be just exactly as faulty as our soteriology? We’ll be describing the Church as consisting of people who have been “saved” from a penalty OTHER than the one the Bible declares awaits the “unsaved”! The Book of Acts describes the “birth” of the Church by speaking of “they that gladly received his word” being “added unto them” (Acts 2:41) and stating that “the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.” (Acts 2:47) So the Church consists of those who are SAVED, and the saved are sinners for whom Jesus DIED: then who will be in the Church if Jesus didn’t DIE, and if the penalty for the unsaved isn’t DEATH, as the Bible clearly says it is? The answer is: in that case, there wouldn’t be any Church, because there wouldn’t be any way anyone could be added to it, and besides, there wouldn’t be any need for one, since everyone would be living forever anyway! Without a proper understanding of Conditional Immortality, you can’t construct a Biblical ecclesiology – let alone build a Biblical “Church”!

Eschatology

Now we come to the most important part of our study of all. Eschatology is the study of “the last things” – the coming of Christ, the Day of Judgment, the rewards and punishments, the final destinies of the saved and the unsaved, and the opening up of the incredible thing the Bible calls “eternity” (in Isaiah 57:15 – the only place where that word appears in the entire King James Version of the Bible). How will we construct a Biblical eschatology if we don’t understand Conditional Immortality? Well, of course, as you might have guessed, the answer to that question is, we will miserably fail if we make any such attempt. Believing that human beings are

(or possess) naturally immortal “souls”, we will think that the coming of Christ is irrelevant at best, because those “souls” will have already received their eternal rewards (or punishments), in some cases, thousands of years before His coming, when they shed their mortal coils. We will make a farce of the Day of Judgment, since there will be nothing left to judge, everyone (righteous or wicked) already having been judged (and rewarded or punished) when they died, or, rather, when they didn’t die, as you often hear preached at supposedly Christian funerals. There we are told that the deceased have “gone to their reward” although Revelation 22:12 – in red letters, in my Bible, meaning that Jesus Himself spoke them – clearly says that the “reward” is NOT “theirs”, but HIS, and that it is NOT awaiting them at the end of their earthly pilgrimages, but is “with” HIM, and that He, and He alone, will “give” it to them when He “comes”, and not a minute sooner, and that it’s something they won’t possess until He “gives” it to them (1 John 5:11-12, which I quoted earlier). We will think the final destinies of the saved have already begun, in their experience, long before the “last day”, and we will make of the final destinies of the unsaved a ghastly horror, whereby their naturally immortal souls must continue to exist for all eternity, enduring unspeakable tortures from which there is no hope of deliverance, and this, within plain view and earshot of the glorified saints who are trying to enjoy God forever, but really can’t do it because their ears are full of the never-ending screams of the damned – some of whom, in this life, were their dearest friend and relatives. Do I paint the picture too garishly? I think not. To what other conclusion can the unbiblical theory of the natural immortality of the soul lead us? No, we can ONLY construct a BIBLICAL eschatology if we correctly understanding CONDITIONAL Immortality!

Conclusion

Perhaps there are other major branches of theology besides Theology Proper, Anthropology, Soteriology, Ecclesiology, and Eschatology, but these five will certainly do for a vivid illustration of my thesis: that Conditional Immortality is not only the true teaching of the Bible, but that it is also “extremely important” – so important, in fact, that we have found that denying it would lead us into irremediable error no matter what other branch of Biblical study we attempted to engage in while doing so. If, therefore, this doctrine is that important, I must ask another question: why is it that so little emphasis is placed on it even by those few in the professing Christian Church who hold it? Why do we who call ourselves “Conditionalists” spend so much time arguing with each other over other, lesser, matters, and so little sharing this vital message – I say “vital” because, after all, it’s LITERALLY “a matter of life and death”, isn’t it? – with those who have either never heard it, or, having heard it, have rejected it because the other view is popular, or comforting, or traditional? I’ve been told by deeply sincere theologians, who hold to Conditional Immortality, that it’s only a “minor” doctrine; that the differences between us who hold it, and those who don’t, are so “unimportant” as not to hinder fellowship, not to prevent us from cooperative evangelism, not worthy of our time and attention, which should be devoted to “weightier” matters such as – well, such as Theology Proper, or Anthropology, or Soteriology, or Ecclesiology, or Eschatology. Hmmm. Maybe they’re right. But I have a hard time believing so. I just can’t get out of my head the fact that the Bible clearly tells us Who, in the beginning, originated Conditional Immortality, when He said “thou shalt surely die” and who, a few verses later, originated Natural Immortality, when he said “Ye shall not surely die” (Genesis 3:3). Does it matter what we believe about immortality? Does it matter WHOM we believe – God or Satan? I have to say, I think it does matter.