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IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL OR RESURRECTION OF THE DEAD ?

A Book Review

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NO OTHER publication of mine has provoked such enthusiasm or such violent hostility." With these words Professor Oscar Cullmann, renowned Biblical authority of the Universities of Paris and Basel, opens his book entitled *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?* (London: The Epworth Press, 1958. Sixty pages. Delivered as the Ingersoll Lecture on the Immortality of Man for the academic year 1954-1955 at Harvard University.) When an internationally famous theologian speaks thus of one of his works, theological history is being made. Such an author and such a book deserve close attention.

The Author

Cullmann is notable among theologians today in that he bridges both national and confessional boundaries as few others do. Born in Strasbourg in the days when that city was a part of Germany, he became a Frenchman at the end of World War I with the transfer of his native province of Alsace to France. This dual national background has shown itself clearly in his intellectual career. Equally at home in the German and French languages, he has

continued to remain a part of the theological life and thought of both nations.

Upon completing his studies at the University of Strasbourg, Cullmann was invited to join its faculty. In the middle thirties he was called to the chair of New Testament and early church history on the celebrated theological faculty of the German-Swiss University of Basel. After World War II he added to his responsibilities by accepting a concurrent appointment to the faculty of the Sorbonne in Paris. There, as the only Protestant professor of religion in the university, he has come into intimate contact with leading Roman Catholic theologians of France. For many years he also has lectured annually at the Waldensian Theological Seminary in Rome, and at the University of Rome. In 1955 and again in 1959 his lectures in numerous theological centers in the United States received wide publicity. Author of several major books and many monographs, Cullmann has been honored by the French government with knighthood in the Legion of Honor.

Immortality or Resurrection?

Cullmann's basic question in the book we are reviewing is this: Does the New Testament teach that man is innately immortal, or does it base the hope in a life beyond on the resurrection of the dead? Above all else, Cullmann is an interpreter of the Bible, and in discussing this question he rests his argument squarely on the teaching

of the New Testament. While recognizing the importance of systematic theology and philosophy for Christian thought, his concern is to show what the apostles thought on this question; hence he confines himself to our one primary source for their teaching, the New Testament. As he sees it, the teaching of the apostles remains the standard of Christian faith.

The Last Enemy: Death

His first chapter is entitled "The Last Enemy: Death." He opens with a dramatic contrast between the deaths of Socrates and Jesus. The famous account of Socrates' dialogue with his disciples just before his death, as recounted in Plato's *Phaedo*, is a classic expression of the Greek philosophical attitude toward death. Socrates declares that the body is simply an outer garment which we shed in death and so liberate the immortal spirit. Hence, in the Greek view, death is good; for the body, from which it frees us, is essentially base. With such a philosophy, the famous Greek philosopher was able to drink the fatal hemlock with complete composure.

But note how different is Jesus' attitude toward His death. Repeatedly the Gospel writers tell us that He faced it with trembling and that He died in agony. (Mark 14:33, 36, 37; 15:34, 37; Hebrews 5:7.) These passages can only be understood as meaning that Jesus took death seriously as the great enemy whose power it was His purpose

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to overcome. He was keenly conscious of its horror. Only by undergoing it Himself—not simply a death of the body, but a death of the whole man—could He come forth victor.

For the Greek philosopher, there would be no object in the conquest of death; it was rather the body which he was concerned to overcome. But when we realize that it is death that Christ has conquered, the joy of the early Christians at the thought of the resurrection becomes understandable. The idea of *immortality* is essentially negative: it simply says that we do not die; but *resurrection* is thoroughly positive. (1 Corinthians 15:54, 55.)

The Wages of Sin: Death

In his second chapter, Cullmann goes on to the theme, "The Wages of Sin: Death." Whereas for the Greek, death was the natural consequence of the base nature of the body, for the Christian it is the result of sin and can be conquered therefore only by the removal of sin. (Romans 6:23.) Sickness is the onset of death. This helps to explain why Jesus' healings were accompanied by the forgiveness of sins, for in pushing back the onrush of death, He was frustrating the power of sin. "Every healing is a partial resurrection, a partial victory of life over death." (Page 29.)

This shows that in the Christian view, the body is in no sense bad. Both body and soul are the gift of God. The body is not the prison of the soul, as the Greeks would have had it, but rather the temple of the Holy Spirit. (1 Corinthians 6:19.) It follows then that the Christian has responsibilities toward his body. On the other hand, when sin and death overtake a man, they embrace the whole man, both body and soul.

A problem has arisen for many in understanding the New Testament at this point, because its writers used Greek terminology to convey their essentially non-Greek ideas. They spoke of body and soul, of the inner and the outer man, and of flesh and spirit. Cullmann points out that we must make a sharp distinction between body and flesh, and between soul and spirit. In the thinking of the New Testament, and particularly of Paul, body and soul go together to constitute the man as a creature of God, which essentially was good. Genuine life exists only when the two are united.

But flesh and spirit are "two *transcendent* powers which can enter into man from without; but *neither is given with human existence as such.*" (Page 33.) Flesh is the power of sin and death, and attacks both body and soul together. Spirit is the power of creation and likewise seizes the whole man. With His resurrection Christ has broken the power of sin and death (the flesh), and the Spirit is now at work in the world. To the extent that this has happened, we are already in possession of eternal life—but not of immortality of soul. "Here, therefore, deliverance consists not in a release of soul from body but in a release of both from flesh. We are not released from the body; rather the body itself is set free." (Page 36.)

The indwelling of the Spirit means, then, that the Christian may enjoy eternal life today; he may participate spiritually in the resurrection even now. At the same time, Paul declares that the whole creation awaits a renewal. (Romans 8:19-28.) This suggests that in an ultimate sense the resurrection of the body does not take place immediately at death, but that it, like the rest of creation, awaits a transformation at the consummation of all things. This, of course, has already taken place in Jesus Christ, and thus He is

The First-born From the Dead.

With this title Cullmann opens his third chapter. He raises the question of what the early Christians really meant by these words. They continued to die. But they died in faith that *one* Man had already risen. For them, dying was no longer an indication of the lordship of death; rather it meant only that death was still contending for a lost dominion. "Death cannot put an end to the great fact that there is *one* risen Body." (Page 41.) The fact that Christians still die simply demonstrates the characteristic tension of the period in the history of salvation between the resurrection and the end: salvation is already fulfilled, but not yet consummated. This point of view is basic to all of Cullmann's theology, and has been set forth particularly in his book *Christ and Time* (London: SCM Press, 1951).

If this understanding is correct, it means that faith in the resurrection "becomes the cardinal point of all Christian belief." (Page 43.) The power of the Spirit, already at work among us, is a foretaste of the resurrection in

two ways. First, the inner man is already being renewed from day to day. (2 Corinthians 4:16; Ephesians 3:16.) Second, the body also is already under the influence of the Spirit, though the flesh is still within and the warfare of the Christian life still goes on. "To the despairing cry in Romans 7:24, 'Who shall deliver me from this body of death?' the whole New Testament answers: The Holy Spirit!" (Page 44.)

Cullmann points out how this foretaste of the resurrection is to be seen particularly in the early Christian understanding of the Lord's Supper, for there the Christian community is called "the body of Christ" because His spiritual body was present. (1 Corinthians 10:16.) He also notes that the time-honored words of the Apostles' Creed, "I believe in the resurrection of the flesh," are not in accord with the usage of Paul. The apostle would have declared rather his belief in the resurrection of the *body*. The confusion doubtless arose when the terms *body* and *flesh* came to be understood by Christians in their traditional Greek senses.

The Holy Spirit and the Intermediate State of the Dead

With this title Cullmann introduces his last main chapter. As he had already suggested in chapter 2, the resurrection of the body takes place, not immediately at death, but at the end. Cullmann understands this in a literal, temporal sense. It follows then that there must be an "interim condition" of the dead. If there is a time lapse in history between the point of death and the point of resurrection, the question of the state of the dead during that period becomes a legitimate one. It is to this question that Cullmann leads us in the present chapter.

Our author points out that the New Testament understands the dead still from the standpoint of human time, and refers to the way in which their waiting for the resurrection is related to the passage of time in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 and Revelation 6:11. Furthermore, in 1 Corinthians 15:26 death is referred to as the *last* enemy to be destroyed, and in Revelation 20:14 the destruction of death is placed at the end. As pointed out in the previous chapter, the continuance of death among Christians is simply an indication of the fact that while the decisive battle with sin and death has been won

at the cross, the war continues until the consummation of all things. Only then will creation be fully renewed and the resurrection of the body take place.

Against the background of the position just outlined, Cullmann next considers several passages in the New Testament that seem to indicate a continuance of consciousness immediately after death. These are the story of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:22-31), Jesus' promise to the thief on the cross (Luke 23:43), Paul's desire "to depart, and to be with Christ" (Philippians 1:23), and the cry of the souls of the martyrs under the heavenly altar (Revelation 6:9-11). Cullmann understands all these passages as referring to the interim condition of the soul between death and resurrection, and not to the postresurrection body.

They all are figurative, and Cullmann is careful to emphasize that we must not conjecture from them any specific details regarding the state of the dead. He declares, "All these images express simply a special proximity to Christ, in which those dying in Christ before the End find themselves. . . . All these are simply various images of special nearness to God. . . . Any sort of speculation upon the state of the dead in this interim period is lacking here [that is, in the New Testament]." (Page 51.) At the same time, he emphasizes that for Paul the most usual figure of speech to describe the state of the dead is that "they are asleep." All that the New Testament teaches about this interim condition is that it exists, and that it already signifies union with Christ through the Holy Spirit.

Such an interim "condition" in no way implies the immortality of the soul. Whatever this condition may be, it is solely by virtue of the fact that the Christian is *in Christ*, who already has risen from the dead. Even for the dead, then, something decisive took place on Christ's resurrection morning; and in this sense, already "death is swallowed up in victory." (1 Corinthians 15:54.) The Christian, after all, has this in common with Socrates: he no longer fears death; but how different is the basis of his courage, for it is grounded on a victory already won. (2 Corinthians 5:1-10.)

Conclusion

We believe that Cullmann has understood correctly the New Testament

teaching in regard to the nature of man. Whether or not such highly figurative passages as those concerning the rich man and Lazarus and the souls under the altar are intended to say anything at all regarding this problem may be debated, but these are only details. Cullmann has clearly demonstrated that the apostles understood man *not*

to be innately immortal, and he has shown the importance of this view for Christian theology. Newness of life now and life beyond death both are made possible by the victory of Christ over sin and death in His resurrection. He is the one who has already risen, and in this lies the promise of eternal life.

★★★

Prayer Is to Be Used

Thomas A. Edison wrote in 1921: "We don't know the millionth part of one per cent about anything. We don't know what water is. We don't know what light is. We don't know what gravitation is. We don't know what enables us to keep on our feet when we stand up. We don't know what electricity is. We don't know what heat is. We don't know anything about magnetism. We have a lot of hypotheses about these things, but that is all. But we do not let our ignorance about these things deprive us of their use."

And we do not know just what prayer is, or how it works. But let us be as wise as was Edison. Let us use it, though we do not fully understand it!

—MARCUS E. LINDSAY.

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