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# Problems in Eschatology: The Nature of Death And the Intermediate State

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*This essay is part of a conference paper delivered by the writer before the Western Pastoral Conference of the Ontario District, Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, fall, 1964.*

## INTRODUCTION

RECENT YEARS have seen a remarkable revival of interest in eschatology. Perhaps one of the most convincing demonstrations of this fact was given when the Assembly of the World Council of Churches at Evanston in 1954 selected as its general theme: "Christ—the Hope of the World," a theme with an eschatological emphasis. This choice undoubtedly has influenced many theologians to give time and attention to this important subject.

It should be said at the outset that this emphasis is perhaps overdue in Christendom, since all too frequently in the past it has been customary to treat eschatology as the last and often the least of the *loci* of systematic theology. It is fortunate, therefore, that in recent decades a significant change has taken place in the "theological look, involving a new appreciation of eschatology." As the Swedish scholar, Folke Holmstrom, states: "In the last third of a century the eschatological aspect has pressed forward from the periphery to the center and now governs the whole field of systematic theology."<sup>1</sup>

In the theses on eschatology which were adopted by the Joint-Inter-synodical Committee in Australia about a decade and a half ago, the importance of this doctrine was underscored with the statement that "the faith of a Christian . . . is essentially eschatological; though he sojourns between the time of Christ's First and Second Advent, he is continually living in the Last Times."<sup>2</sup>

If the present interest continues, the twentieth century could go down in history as one which, more than any previous century, devoted itself to a concentrated study of this significant doctrine.

But with the increased interest and emphasis currently being placed on eschatology, there have also come repeated suggestions from theologians that the traditional views of Classic Protestantism be restudied critically and reevaluated, with particular attention being given to such subjects as the theology of death, the intermediate state, the nature of the resurrection body, etc. In these suggestions there is the implication, and in many instances, the clear suggestion that Classic Protestantism does not always reflect the position set forth in Scripture. Paul Althaus, one of more vocal exponents of

this view, contends that if the church is to arrive at a theology of death that is Biblical, it must distinguish its position not only from idealistic philosophy but also from the traditional views of the 17th and 18th century orthodox Lutheran theologians. Althaus takes issue particularly with the doctrines as expressed by John Gerhard, the great architect of Lutheran orthodoxy. At times it is said that Gerhard, in reality, led his church away from the correct position held by Luther and adopted that of Calvin.<sup>3</sup> The cry in many areas of the church today is therefore "back to Luther."

But what are the specific issues that have arisen out of the current theological study and discussion? Although there are numerous issues emerging on the contemporary scene, we shall limit our discussion to two of the basic questions which are being suggested especially by theologians of the Neo-Reformation or Neo-Orthodox school of thought:

1. What is the nature of death? Is it the separation of soul and body, according to which the body dies but the soul lives on? Or, is death "the unconditional end of the body-soul existence?" Is it correct according to Scripture to say that "the whole person, body and soul, is involved in death?"<sup>4</sup>

2. Is there an intermediate state between death and the resurrection, and if so, what is the condition of man during this period of time? Does man cease to exist? Does the soul sleep in an unconscious state? Or, is the soul consciously experiencing bliss in the presence of Christ?

In seeking an answer to these questions, Lutherans are inclined simply to search the Scriptures diligently until we find pertinent Bible passages which will clearly reveal to us the teaching and doctrine as God Himself has presented it to us in His holy Word. That has been the procedure followed by classic Protestantism since the time of the Reformation. Conservative Lutherans have always operated with the presuppositions that the Holy Scripture is God's inerrant revelation to mankind, that the Scriptures must always be allowed to interpret the Scriptures, that where there are passages which, to us, seem difficult and dark, they must be interpreted by those that are clear; finally, there are no contradictions in the Bible; therefore, all passages must be interpreted according to the analogy of faith.

However, it must be carefully noted at the outset that if we are to understand the discussion being carried on among contemporary theologians, we cannot take for granted that they are operating with the same presuppositions that we have been accustomed to use. It is most important, therefore, in discussing the eschatological problems facing Christendom today that we take a few moments in which to concern ourselves with the theological framework within which most modern scholars such as Oscar Cullmann, Paul Althaus, Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, etc. interpret Scripture. In other words, we must ask: "What are their theological presuppositions?"

1. To become even more specific, we must inquire concerning their attitude toward Scripture. This is most important because a theologian's view of Scripture will, to some extent, determine his methodology and his conclusions. "His evaluation of and subsequent posture toward Scripture is the watershed which ultimately divides right from wrong doctrine." Now, what is the opinion of most present-day Biblical scholars with regard to the Scripture? By far the majority of those who have Neo-Orthodox leanings begin with a so-called historical-critical assessment of Scripture. What does that imply? In answer I shall quote John Dillenberger who wrote in a recently-published book, *Protestant Christianity*, as follows:

The acceptance of Biblical criticism meant the abandonment of the belief that the Bible is an infallible record of divine revelation to men. There might be much in the Bible that is inspired, much that is divine, but there is also much that is human and even in error. The Bible is not a book delivered to men from on high and preserved from all error, so that men might trust it absolutely. It is instead a very human book, including widely differing understanding of God and of His will for men, and including not only valuable historical documents, contemporary with the events they recorded, but also legends and even fiction, which often contradict each other and known historical facts.<sup>5</sup>

2. A second presupposition commonly held by modern theologians is the so-called development of doctrine. This method of interpretation has its basis in the evolutionary theory. It applies the fundamental principles of evolution to the religion of God's people in the Old and New Testaments. The history of Israel is thought of as reflecting "the gradual evolving of the Hebrew consciousness, from the simple and the crude conceptions of the earliest writings to the exalted ethical monotheism of the prophets."<sup>6</sup> According to the historical-critical approach, the Old Testament becomes more and more a "developmental product of the Hebrew mind." Dillenberger expresses it thus: "Both in the interpretation of Christianity and in the general study of religions, increased emphasis is laid upon the influence of cultural environment in the development of religious thought and practice."<sup>7</sup>

But one may ask, what bearing has this on the subject of eschatology? Simply this, those who believe in the development of doctrine claim that the ancient Israelites such as Noah (if there was a Noah), Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, believed in neither heaven nor hell; for them life ended in a dismal Sheol. Furthermore, it is commonly assumed that the doctrine of the soul was not part of the Hebrew faith; it came into the religion of Israel only after the exile, having originated in Persia. It is basically Platonic dualism. What is more, the claim is also made that the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead had a similar beginning, entering the religion of Israel at a late date from one of the heathen neighbors.

But one may be inclined to ask, what about the Bible passages in Genesis, in Isaiah, in Daniel which speak so clearly of resurrection and a life after death? Modern theologians will answer that these books, or at least the eschatological passages, were not written by Moses, by Isaiah, and by Daniel but by other authors and at a much later date.

3. A third presupposition commonly held by modern theologians concerns itself with the Biblical teaching regarding anthropology. It is simply assumed by many contemporary scholars that the Bible has no intention of giving us information and data on the composition of man. It has no interest in human anatomy. Of course, modern scholarship grants that the Scripture frequently speaks of man's body, his soul, his spirit, etc., but as Berkouwer says:

It is obviously not the intention of the divine revelation to give exact information about man in himself and thus to anticipate what later scientific research on man offers.<sup>8</sup>

In another place the same author states that while the Bible does employ such concrete terms as flesh, spirit, soul, mind, in describing man,

the decisive question is this, whether the intent of the Biblical witness is to reveal to us something of the composition of man, or whether it makes use of this composition as an anthropological given only incidentally in order to speak of man as a whole.<sup>9</sup>

It should be noted at this point that the above view is a very precarious and dangerous one, for any theologian who takes seriously the doctrine of verbal inspiration. Lutherans have always granted that the Bible does not claim to be a text-book on science, physiology, or anatomy, but at the same time we have consistently asserted that when Scripture touches on a scientific question, such as the composition of man, it always speaks truth. Here the very pertinent question confronting us is this: Is the Bible reliable also when it deals with scientific problems? If not, then verbal inspiration must of necessity suffer.

Finally, it should be noted that no less a scholar than Franz Delitsch states categorically that the Scriptures do give us data on the "composition" of man.<sup>10</sup>

4. A fourth presupposition generally embraced by modern scholarship concerns the relationship between religion and science. It is usually assumed by these men that the Bible represents an "outmoded world-view."<sup>11</sup> Therefore, it is also taken for granted that when a conflict arises between the views set forth in Scripture and those set forth by science, then science must be given preference. John Dillenberger describes the modern view in these words:

The Bible is not a book of science, but a book of religion. The 'science' of the Bible is the science of those who wrote it, and

we should not expect that the Biblical authors should have any more insight into the processes of nature than did their contemporaries. Indeed the Bible itself shows no interest in natural processes for their own sake. It affirms that nature as well as history is ordered by the purpose of God, but its primary concern is with the redeeming work of God in human history. Modern man cannot be satisfied with a simple view of the physical universe as men of former times, and this means that the task of relating the insights of faith to the 'secular' knowledge of the world becomes increasingly complex, but the witness of faith remains in substance the same.<sup>12</sup>

But, if we are prepared to grant this, we must realize at the outset that there are far-reaching doctrinal implications. We shall mention only three of them. 1) If we grant that science is *a priori* right and that the Bible represents an out-moded world view (incidentally, a claim that even science itself does not make), then it follows automatically that the Bible must basically be a human book; then its real author is not God but man—man who is bound by human limitations. That is a concession which our church and conservative Protestantism in general has never been willing to make. 2) If we grant that science is *a priori* right, we face a most frightening problem when we come to those passages in which Jesus Himself touches on matters where science is concerned; for example, His own incarnation, the resurrection, the ascension, His coming in the clouds for judgment. If we consider science to be *a priori* right, then we have this unthinkable alternative: either, a) Jesus did not know enough about science to realize that what he said was untenable, since he was, of course, a child of his time, or b) Jesus knew better but consciously went along with the so-called "out-moded world view of his day." If either of these two opinions is correct, then these basic doctrines of Christianity (the incarnation, the resurrection, Jesus coming in the clouds for judgment, etc.) may have to be reinterpreted, perhaps de-mythologized, as Rudolf Bultmann suggests. Again, this is a concession which conservative Protestantism has never been willing to make.

5. Permit me to mention yet one more of the presuppositions being embraced and also strongly urged by modern theologians. Modern critical scholars, particularly in Old Testament studies, claim to find a sharp difference between the Hebrew's view of man and the anthropology of the Greek or Hellenist world of Plato. It is often simply taken for granted today that the Old Testament regarded man as a unit. The claim is made that the Hebrew always spoke of the whole man, man in his entirety. Scholars will grant that the Bible indeed uses such terms as *basar*, *sarx*, *nephesh* and *psyche*, *pneuma* and *ruach*, which are translated in the English by such words as body, flesh, soul and spirit; but these men suggest that the Hebrew mind, in fact, never divided man up in his way, never used these words as we do today to indicate various parts of

man. The Hebrew thought of man in his entirety.

On the other hand, the Greeks under the influence of Plato made a very sharp distinction between the human body and the immortal soul. Plato taught a dualistic view, meaning that the body and the soul were actually antagonistic one to the other. The body was considered a prison for the soul. Redemption consisted in freeing the soul from the body.

But why is this distinction considered so important by modern scholars today—so important that they speak and write constantly on this subject? The answer is quite apparent. Modern theology, of course, draws from these views the far-reaching conclusion that when classic Protestantism, when conservative Lutheranism, describes man as a being consisting of body and soul, it is actually teaching Platonism; it is claimed that we are teaching and consoling our people with a heathen philosophy rather than the anthropology of the Bible. That is a very serious charge. Is it true? In reply, there are two points that need consideration:

1. There is the question, "Has the church down the centuries been teaching Platonism?" The answer becomes very clear when we perform the simple task of comparing the classic Protestant view of the soul with the view set forth by Plato. We are too limited in time to make this comparison now, but anyone willing to spend a few hours making such a study will find it most revealing. At this time we shall merely note a few of the conclusions of R. H. Charles, a scholar who has made a life-long study of the doctrine of a future life in Judaism, Hellenism and Christianity. He is not a Lutheran; in fact, he has been classified as a liberal theologian. But he writes as follows:

It is obvious that an immeasurable gulf divides it (Plato's doctrine of immortality) from Jewish no less than Christian doctrine. We do not refer to such obvious differences as appear in his doctrine of the soul's transmigrations, its eternal pre-existence, and its antagonism to the body, but to the two following points: (i) it is not a human soul that Plato's final teaching deals with, but a pure intelligence; (ii) his doctrine, as set over against the Jewish and Christian, is the glorification of an unbridled individualism. The individual soul owes no duty practically but to itself . . .<sup>13</sup>

A more complete reading of this book will reveal that R. H. Charles, after a life-long study of these matters, finds that Christianity and Platonism have very little in common.

But another question arises in this connection. 2) Is it accurate, is it true scholarship to insist, as some theologians do today, that the Old Testament always thinks of man as a unit, that the Hebrew writers always spoke and wrote of the whole man, man in his entirety, even when they mentioned man's *nephesh*, his *ruach*, and his *basar* (i.e. his soul, his spirit, and his flesh)? Can it safely be assumed, yes, can it be proven that the Hebrew mind never used

these words as we do today to indicate various parts of man? In reply, I should like to call your attention to a book by James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language*. In it the author questions the validity of the position taken by modern theology in this regard in the past few years.<sup>14</sup> Nor is he alone. Today there are indications that modern theology itself is beginning to take a second look at some of the things that have been written. James Burtness, assistant professor of systematic theology at Luther Theological Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota, grants that "the present tendency is to point up the danger of past attempts to draw too strong a line of demarcation between Greek and Hebrew thought."<sup>15</sup> The extreme position of a few years ago is going out of vogue. It is very important, in view of these developments, that our Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod does not now begin to get on the band wagon of modern theology at a time when others are beginning to get off. Let us not be so easily panicked into turning our backs upon our Lutheran heritage and adopt a view that is at most uncertain.

This in part is the framework within which many modern scholars speak and write on eschatology. I have listed these points for the reason that it is highly important for us to keep these pre-suppositions in mind if we are to understand the views held by modern theology and evaluate them correctly.

Now, against this background let us discuss the doctrines in question individually.

## II. THE INTERMEDIATE STATE

As was stated earlier, one of the principle issues confronting the church today is the question concerning the nature of death. More specifically: Is death the separation of soul and body, according to which the body dies but the soul lives on? Or, is death "the unconditional end of the body-soul existence?" In other words, is it correct according to Scripture to say that "the whole person, body and soul, is involved in death?"<sup>16</sup>

A. The view of modern theology. Many modern theologians answer this latter question in the affirmative, asserting that nothing in man escapes the grave. Since both body and soul have sinned, both body and soul die. Paul Althaus expresses his view in these words:

Death is more than a departure of the soul from the body. The person, body and soul, is involved in death. . . . The Christian faith knows nothing about an immortality of the personality. . . . It knows only an awakening from real death through the power of God. There is existence after death only by an awakening, resurrection. There is no immortality of the soul, but a resurrection of the whole person, body and soul, after death.<sup>17</sup>

Karl Heim, who is in substantial agreement with Althaus, explains his views regarding death as follows:



When we die, we really die, we pass into nothingness. There is nothing in man that is capable of resisting the destructive power of death. The Christian hope is, however, that we do not fall into nothingness but into the hands of God. It is only when we are annihilated that we can be truly resurrected. The Bible does not distinguish between man and beast on the ground that man has an immortal soul while the beasts do not. Men, beasts, even plants are alike in death. . . . The whole matter of death and life after death is simplified when our only concern is faith in God who can destroy and who can resurrect.<sup>18</sup>

John A. T. Robinson, in his recent publication entitled "*The Body*," puts it this way: "The soul does not survive a man—it simply goes out, draining away with the blood."<sup>19</sup>

Taito Kantonen, in his monograph *Life after Death*, makes this pointed statement:

The Christian view (of death) is in full accord with the view of natural science so far as the latter goes. When we die we are really dead. Our hopes and desires cannot change this fact. Man does not differ from the rest of creation by having a soul that cannot die."<sup>20</sup>

Other scholars, however, apparently feel constrained to soften this view somewhat. In an attempt to follow a more moderate line of reasoning and avoid the extreme of picturing death as bordering on annihilation, scholars such as Otto Procksch of the University at Erlangen have gone on record as favoring the opinion that, according to the Old Testament way of thinking, the dead exist but they do not live. Procksch asserts that "existence and life are evidently distinguished" by the ancient Israelite. The difference consists in that where there is life there is also "development, something which is possible only when one is in communion with God and man." In death, however, "existence is isolated, it is a dull vegetation (Job 14:22), without change, without fellowship one with another" (Job 3:13ff).<sup>21</sup>

But this view is actually inconsistent with the presupposition that man is a unit; i.e. when he dies, nothing escapes the grave. Logic would dictate the conclusion that, if man is an indivisible unit, if he dies in his entirety, then as his body returns to the dust, he truly ceases to exist. Thus modern theology's theory concerning the unity of man actually proves too much.

But at this point one is inclined to ask in all seriousness: On what does modern theology base its assumption that man is a unit?

Perhaps the simplest and most satisfactory answer is they base their view in this matter at least in part on a study of the Hebrew words such as *nephesh* and *ruach*, together with the Greek equivalents *psyche* and *pneuma*—words which are ordinarily translated by the English terms "soul" and "spirit." It is their claim and contention that the words *nephesh* and *ruach* do not really mean what

the English "soul" and "spirit" suggest to the 20th century man. Instead it is asserted that *nephesh* means simply "life" or at times "personality." And in the great majority of cases it means nothing more or less than the personal pronoun: "I", "you", "he", etc. For example, the passage, "My soul doth magnify the Lord," means in prose "I magnify the Lord." Thus *nephesh* signifies a person in his totality, not just a part of him, but man in his entirety.

Prof. A. Nicholainen of Helsinki in his recent book, *Man in the Light of the Gospels*, summarizes modern thinking in these words:

Man is an indivisible whole. Seen from different points of view, he is in turn body, flesh and blood, soul, spirit and heart. Each of these portrays a specific characteristic, but they are not parts into which man may be divided. Body is man as a concrete being; flesh and blood is man as a creature distinguished from the Creator; soul is the living human individual; spirit is man as having his source in God; heart is man as a whole in action.<sup>22</sup>

How shall we evaluate these conclusions? Is such a line of reasoning accurate? Does this definition for *nephesh* do justice to this Old Testament word? Even a hasty glance at the *Theologisches Woerterbuch* edited by Kittel, will show us at a glance that when the word *nephesh* is defined in this manner, it is an oversimplification. Even an ordinary Hebrew dictionary will indicate that *nephesh* is in reality a most complex word, one that is used in the Old Testament in many different ways. Certainly at times it may "stand for people, an individual, I, thou, she, as in the case of Josh. 10:28; 11:11; Gen. 46:18; Gen. 12:5; 27:25; Is. 1:14."<sup>23</sup> But we must by all means avoid giving the impression that *nephesh* has this meaning only and that it cannot indicate a part of man but must always mean man in his entirety. Ludwig Koehler, a highly respected lexicographer in Europe and an Old Testament scholar, warns against such oversimplification when he says: "In the Psalter the word (*nephesh*) occurs 144 times, 105 times in the form of 'my soul.' But one may not simply replace it with the 'I.'" A few lines thereafter he adds: "The soul is not the I, it is something added to it." In support of this statement he calls attention to passages such as Job 14:22; Psalm 42:5-6; 131:2, and Job 30:16, where the Biblical writers speak of "my soul" as something within me.<sup>24</sup>

In the light of these facts, it seems rather hazardous for anyone to say dogmatically, as some have done, that a study of the Hebrew word *nephesh* and the Greek equivalent *psyche* leads one inevitably to the conclusion that these words never refer to a part of man, such as the soul, but must always mean man in his entirety. A much more detailed discussion of these Hebrew and Greek terms could be presented; and there can be no doubt that a deeper study of the individual words would prove profitable and enlightening. But time will not permit. It is my conviction, however, that modern

theology has not offered sufficient evidence to prove its contention that man is an indivisible unit. It seems rather dangerous to make a statement such as this "when a man dies, he is dead—in his entirety, the whole man, nothing escapes the grave", and to base this claim on a study of words as complex as *nephesh*, *psyche*, *ruach* and *pneuma*.

This will become even clearer to all of us when we now direct our attention to those passages of Holy Scripture which set forth the Biblical view of the nature of death.

B. The Nature of Death as presented in Scripture. When we search the Bible carefully and diligently for a description of death, we find that it offers us an abundant amount of information—what is more, it sets forth this information in clear statements that need little or no interpretation. Also in respect to this doctrine the Bible is a clear book.

1. Scripture describes death as decomposition and decay, a return to the elements from which man was originally made. In Genesis 3:19, when the Lord God pronounced sentence upon Adam after he had disobeyed God's command, the Lord said: "In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for . . . you are dust and to dust you shall return." The same point is also set forth in John 11:39, in the episode of the raising of Lazarus from the dead. When Jesus asked the men standing by to remove the stone from Lazarus' sepulchre, Martha suggested: "Lord, by this time there will be an odor." Even experience teaches us that death brings about decay, disintegration, decomposition, and corruption.

2. According to passages such as Matt. 2:20, Mark 3:4, Luke 6:9 and 14:26, death is clearly described by the holy writers as the termination of one's physical life. We need not offer interpretation of these passages since there is no difficulty at this point.

3. The Scripture, however, makes it clear in other passages that it is not the entire man that descends into the dust, decomposes and sees corruption. According to Eccl. 12:7, there occurs at the time of death a separation of the spirit from the body; the holy writer, thinking probably of the story of the creation of man, asserts: When a man dies, the "dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit (*ruach*) returns to God who gave it." Likewise the apostle James, speaking by inspiration of the Holy Ghost, undoubtedly has the same view of death, for he writes: "The body away from the spirit is dead." (2:26). Thus death results when the spirit or the soul separates from the body. This is the manner in which dying is frequently spoken of also in other parts of the Old Testament. For instance, in Gen. 35:18, when the holy writer reports the death of Rachel, who died in child-birth, he describes it thus: "As her soul was departing (for she died) she called the name of her son Benoni." Again in 1 Kings 17:21f, when the Lord related the

story of Elijah restoring the widow's son to life, He says: "Then Elijah stretched himself upon the child three times and cried to the Lord, O Lord my God, let this child's *nephesh* (soul) come unto him again. And the Lord harkened to the voice of Elijah, and the *nephesh* of the child came into him again, and he revived." Thus death results when the *nephesh* departs from the body, and a body revives when the *nephesh* reenters. This is a natural understanding of these passages unless the exegete approaches these statements of Scripture bound by the uncertain presupposition that man is not a being composed of body and soul.

But some of the very clearest passages dealing with the nature of death are those which report the death of Jesus Himself. As we view this event through the eyes of Luke, who incidentally was a physician, we are told that death came to Jesus when he commended His spirit (*pneuma*) into the hands of the Father. It was then that he expired. What is the significance of the Lord's words: "Father into thy hands I entrust my *pneuma*"? It cannot mean simply this that Jesus was here asking the Father in heaven to watch over His remains that nothing might desecrate them. This is evident from other statements concerning the death of Jesus where it is said that Jesus yielded up his *pneuma*. (Matt. 27:50). His *pneuma* was not his remains, his body or his entire self, but it was something that he in death was yielding up. It was something that was being separated from his remains, from his body. Nor did it mean simply His last breathe. For this *pneuma* was something precious, even to Jesus, since Luke says "He entrusted it to the Father." *Paratitheemi* is the Greek word used—a word which implies something valuable, something precious. Thus it is quite evident that both the Old Testament and the New Testament picture death as a separation of the *pneuma* (*ruach*) from the body.

It should be noted that modern theology has gone to great lengths in an attempt to reinterpret these passages in a way that would conform to their line of reasoning, but actually these passages pose no particular difficulty unless one approaches them with the uncertain presupposition that a man is a unit in the sense that when he dies, he dies in his entirety, body and soul.

4. Scripture also speaks of the body (*soma*) of man as subject to death at the hand of man while soul (*psyche*) is not. The classic passage quoted by conservative theologians in support of this truth is Matthew 10:28, where Jesus is comforting the twelve apostles as He sends them out to preach the Gospel. He warns them that they will face difficult times; they will be persecuted even as Jesus was; at times they will even be in danger of losing their lives. But he encourages them by telling them: do not fear these persecutors; while they may kill your body, they cannot kill your *psyche* (your soul). Here the clear implication is that the *soma* (body) is of such a nature that it can be killed by man; the soul, however, is not perishable in that same sense of the word. When man takes a life, he cannot thereby kill the soul and send it too

into the grave. Then the holy writer adds the comment: Of course, God can bring hurt to the soul by destroying it in hell. This is different, however, from physical death.

Again, it should be noted that modern theology has gone to great lengths in an effort to discredit this passage, but here again this statement of Scripture presents no problems unless one approaches it with the assumption that man is a unit and not a being composed of body and soul.

5. Scripture describes death also as a putting off of the body. An example of this manner of speaking occurs in the second epistle of Peter, the first chapter, the fourteenth verse, where the apostle makes reference to his own death, anticipating that it would occur soon. We note with interest the manner in which he describes his departure; he states "I think it is right, as long as I am *in this body*, to arouse you by way of reminder, since I know that the *putting off of my body* will be soon, as our Lord Jesus Christ showed me. And I will see to it that after my departure you may be able at any time to recall these things." In this passage Peter describes life as an existence in the body, while death is the putting off of the body. The apostle Paul spoke of death in a similar fashion. In 2 Cor. 5, —one of his great chapters on eschatology—he wrote: "For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. Here indeed we groan and long to put on our heavenly dwelling, so that by putting it on we may not be found naked. For while we are still in this tent, we sigh with anxiety, not that we would be unclothed but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. . . ." In this passage Paul speaks of life here on earth, as *living in this tent*; and he refers to death by means of two word pictures: a) it is the laying aside of this tent; b) it is being unclothed. In each of these cases he is apparently referring to the mortal body which we have in this life, but which we put aside in death.

6. At this point a question may arise. Is it possible for a person to live without a body? Can a man *exist* without flesh and blood and bones? We ask this question only because modern theology categorically denies that a *nephesh* (soul) can exist without a body. It is claimed that neither the body nor the soul has independent existence. Neither can exist without the other for they are completely dependent upon one another. It is true, Scripture specifically states that "the body away from the spirit is dead," (James 2:26), but nowhere does Scripture say that the spirit away from the body is dead. In fact, there are passages which clearly indicate that man can live without the body. In the familiar Epistle for Sexagesima, we read: "I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out

of the body I do not know—and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter” (2 Cor. 12:2-4). Here Paul grants the possibility that without his body, he had experienced heaven and had seen wonderful things. How man can see without eyes and hear without ears we cannot fully comprehend, but that it is true there can be no doubt. St. Paul states something similar in 2 Cor. 5:8. Even in the face of death, he exults “we are of good courage we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord.” The apostle evidently believed that in death, while away from the body, he would still enjoy the blessedness of Christ’s presence. Thus the soul is not dependent for its life upon the body.

7. Finally, the Bible describes death in still another manner. In passages such as Dan. 12:2; Matt. 9:24, and 1 Thess. 4:13 it is called a sleep. However, it is not our purpose at this time to enter upon a discussion of this important subject, since a fuller treatment of death as a sleep will be presented in part III.

For the moment we shall concern ourselves with the definition of death as it has been set forth by classic Protestantism. On the basis of the passages of Scripture considered above, conservative Lutheran theologians of the past have defined it in the following manner:

Temporal death is nothing less than a tearing asunder of men, the separation of the soul from the body, the unnatural disruption of the union of soul and body which has been created by God to be one.<sup>25</sup>

According to the Law, death is a terrifying experience; it is an expression of divine wrath (Ps. 90:7,11); a divine judgment because of transgression (Gen. 2:17); an unnatural putting off of the temple of this body (2 Peter 1:14); a putting aside of this tabernacle (2 Cor. 5:1); it is a termination of our physical life (Luke 6:9); a returning to the dust (Gen. 3:19); the decomposition of our earthly body (John 11:29). But according to the Gospel, death has lost its sting (1 Cor. 15:55-57). For the Christian it is not a punishment, not a mark of God’s wrath; it is not a state in which we need fear that God will abandon us. Instead it is a gathering to one’s people (Gen. 25:8), a departure in peace (Luke 2:29), a return of our spirit to God (Eccl. 12:7; Acts 7:59) whence it came. But this now leads us into the third part of our discussion, in which we shall deal with a number of important questions relative to the state of death itself.

### III. THE STATE OF DEATH

It has been said that there are two indisputable realities in eschatology, the fact of death and the fact of the resurrection. But between these two events there is, from the human point of view, an interval of time, a period of waiting. This in turn has given rise to the question: “What is the nature of this so-called interme-

diate state?" As most pastors know from personal experience, there is among our people a considerable amount of interest in this subject. Many paper-back books are being published, bought and read, with the hope that they may give answers to at least some of the gnawing questions. Also in our own Synod there is considerable interest and discussion revolving around this matter.

Because of this intense interest it might be worthwhile from the outset to remind ourselves of something which Francis Pieper wrote as he dealt with this subject in his *Christian Dogmatics*. He begins his discussion by cautioning his readers that the Scripture "reveals but little concerning the state of the souls between death and the resurrection." He reminds us that, in speaking of the last things, the Bible directs our gaze primarily to the Day of Judgment and to the events clustering around it.<sup>26</sup> That was also Luther's emphasis in his many writings. It was the principle interest in the theological works of Chemnitz, Gerhard, and others among the 17th and 18th century Lutheran scholars. It should also be the chief emphasis in our preaching. In the words of the great apostle Paul: "We look for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall change our vile body that it may be fashioned like unto His glorious body." (Phil. 3:20-21).

But having this as our primary accent and emphasis does not mean that we should undervalue or even ignore the information which the Lord in His grace gives us on the pages of Scripture regarding that period of time when our bodies lie in the grave. It is a legitimate question when we ask: How does death affect the soul? Does man descend into the dust of the grave according to both body and soul and there sleep and repose in an unconscious state until the Lord awakens him on the last day? Or, does the soul, as it separates from the body at the time of death, go immediately into the presence of Jesus, there to experience consciously the joys of being with the Lord? Today theologians are generally agreed that man has some form of existence during the intermediate state, between death and the resurrection, but opinions differ sharply as to the nature of this existence. And since at least some of these views have had an influence on contemporary Protestant thinking, we shall begin our discussion by outlining briefly a few of the more popular opinions.

A. View of Modern Theology. First there is the view of Karl Barth, whose position is somewhat unique; yet it has its following. As I understand it, Barth does not believe that there is an interval of time between the death of a person and his resurrection. His method of reasoning is somewhat like this: At the moment of death man is projected into eternity; eternity is timelessness; timelessness means that everything that happens takes place in the present tense. Therefore on the day of his passing, a believer will experience both death and the resurrection. His mortal body will be transformed immediately into a glorified body. Thus there is no problem with regard to the question "What happens to the soul of the believer in

that interval between his death and resurrection?" There is no interval of time.

In evaluating this view, let us from the outset recognize that these are philosophical arguments, when we discuss such concepts as time and timelessness. In addition, let us keep in mind that, despite all that has been written on these subjects in recent years, we still do not actually know what is meant by the concept known as time. And much less do we understand timelessness. It seems to me that if Luther were here today, he would say that the concept of eternity is, in the final analysis, a part of the *Deus Absconditus*; that is to say, a part of that vast knowledge of God which He has not seen fit to reveal to us mortal men. Luther would advise us that since God has in His grace condescended to speak to us in the language of this world, since He has revealed himself and His mysteries in terms that are common on earth, we do well to think of these great truths in earthly terms, rather than to try to understand those mysteries which God in His wisdom has not revealed to us. To become more specific, when God in His Word describes to us such concepts as death, the resurrection, heaven, he couches them in earthly terms, so that, at least in a measure, we can grasp what he means to communicate to us. With this we ought to be content.

In the second place, it is evident that at the time of death, our bodies remain on earth; they are given burial being placed in the ground; thus they remain in time; one could conceivably dig up the remains years later. What is more, the Bible implies that they will remain in the earth until the Lord comes to raise them at the last day. But if Barth is right when he says that our resurrection takes place on the same day that we die, then one is inclined to ask: Does this mean that we will have two bodies, one in heaven and one resting in the grave? Barth would perhaps agree with this interpretation because it is his belief that this body of flesh which we now have and which will die, will never rise from the dust. With this interpretation we cannot agree. Yet his view makes that conclusion necessary.

In the third place, if Barth's view is correct, then the problem which troubled the Thessalonians in Paul's day would not make sense; and the apostle's first letter to the Thessalonians would be pointless. You will recall Paul's purpose for writing. The Thessalonians were fearful lest their friends and loved ones, who died before Jesus' return, would not share in the events of the Second Coming. Paul, however, calmed their fears by assuring them in chapter 4, verses 15 to 17:

This we declared to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive,



who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. . . .

This passage of Scripture makes no sense, if Barth is correct in saying that the dead have already risen and are in heaven according to both body and soul.

Another prominent view regarding the intermediate state is that held by men such as Oscar Cullmann, Taito Kantonen, and others who seem to favor the opinion that the dead spend the interval between death and the resurrection in a state of sleep. Strictly speaking, at least some of these men wish to take a mediating position. On the one hand, they want to avoid the classic doctrine of the immortality of the soul because they consider this view Platonic; and on the other hand, they wish also to escape the dangers associated with the more extreme position held by Althaus and Heim, whose teaching regarding the intermediate state is one that borders on annihilationism and extinction. You will recall that Karl Heim asserts: "When we die, we really die, we pass into nothingness. . . . It is only when we are annihilated that we can be truly resurrected." Taito Kantonen indicated clearly that he disagrees with this extreme position for he writes:

When we bear in mind the Scriptural view of man as an indivisible whole, and of man's incapacity to resist the destructive power of death, such a position as that of Althaus and Heim appears sound. It also provides an effective safeguard against natural curiosity, imagination, and wishful thinking which tend to run riot in these matters. Yet, in the course of the present study I have been led to revise my former adherence to this position in favor of recognizing that more than this can be said while remaining on the ground of Scripture. I find it necessary to agree with Walter Kuenneth that it is theologically impossible simply to dismiss the idea of the intermediate state. This state, as Kuenneth has insisted, being neither complete bliss nor complete damnation, reflects man's predicament as a fallen creature dependent upon God's eschatological plan of salvation. There is considerable Scriptural evidence of a double aspect of waiting for the final judgment (Phil. 1:23; Romans 14:8; Luke 23:43; 2 Cor. 5:4-10; Rev. 6:9; Matt. 18:35), a state which for the believer means a foretaste of heaven and for the unbeliever a foretaste of damnation.<sup>27</sup>

At the same time, however, Kantonen wants to avoid being classified with conservative classic Protestantism which holds to the immortality of the soul. He claims that Protestant orthodoxy was inclined to ascribe too much positive content to the intermediate state. Apparently he sees death as a more neutral state, as a period of waiting for the day of judgment. In an attempt to support his view, he quotes two statements of Luther in which the great Reformer called death a sleep. The two statements are these:

Just as one who falls asleep and reaches morning unexpected when he awakes, without knowing what has happened to him, so shall we suddenly rise on the last day without knowing how we have come into death and through death.<sup>28</sup>

Again:

We shall sleep until He comes and knocks on the little grave and says, Doctor Martin, get up! Then I shall rise in a moment and be happy with Him forever.<sup>29</sup>

From these statements, Kantonen draws the conclusion that "already in Luther's view, so far as the dead person himself is concerned, the intermediate state is reduced to an unconscious moment."<sup>30</sup>

As a second argument in support of their view, those who favor the teaching of soul-sleep quote passages from Scripture such as 1 Kings 2:10; Dan. 12:2; Matt. 9:24; 1 Thess. 4:13ff, in which it is quite evident that Jesus and the holy writers speak of death as a sleep.

How shall we evaluate these arguments? First, let us look at the statements of Luther. To understand them we must take into consideration both the person of Luther and the times in which he lived. It is quite evident from his writings that in 1517 when the Reformation began, Luther was not completely certain regarding some doctrines. It was only later that he formulated a definite opinion on the basis of Scripture and then spoke out boldly. It also took some time for him to clarify his thinking regarding death. In a letter, under the date of January 13, 1522, Luther replied to certain questions that his friend Amsdorf had asked, and it is quite evident that at that time he hesitated to speak dogmatically concerning the precise status of the departed. It is simply not historically accurate, therefore, to quote statements which Luther made in those early years and then draw the conclusion: "This is the view of Luther; he believed in soul-sleep." If one is to describe Luther's point of view accurately with reference to soul-sleep, one must also quote from the writings of the mature Luther. We note, therefore, a few quotations taken from his Commentary on Genesis—a work which he completed about 1537 A.D., nine years before he died. In these statements he makes it quite clear that he does not think of the soul as unconscious while in the state of death, for he says:

It is certain that to this day Abraham is serving God, just as Adam, Abel, Noah are serving God. And this we should carefully note, for it is divine truth that Abraham is living, serving God and ruling with Him. But what sort of life that may be, whether he is asleep or awake, is another question. How the soul is resting we are not to know, but it is certain that it is living.<sup>31</sup>

The previous statement may sound rather cryptic, and we may wonder what kind of sleep would enable Abraham, while resting also

to be living and serving God, and even ruling with Him. Perhaps the next statement will offer some clarification. Commenting on Gen. 25:7-10, he remarks:

At this point another question arises. Since it is certain that the souls live in peace, what sort of life or rest may this be? . . . There is a difference between the sleep or rest of this life and that of the future life. For in this life a man, fatigued by the day's work, enters his bedroom at night in order there to sleep in peace and to enjoy rest during the night. Nor is he conscious of any evil that is happening, be it fire or murder. But the departed soul does not sleep in this manner; it is, more properly speaking, awake and has visions and conversations with the angels and God. Therefore, the sleep of the future life is deeper than that of this life, and yet the souls live before God. With this image, drawn from the sleep of a living man, I am satisfied, for peace and quiet dwells in such a man. He thinks that he has slept scarcely an hour or two, and yet he observes that the soul sleeps in a way that it is awake at the same time.<sup>32</sup>

Thus, throughout his life, Luther called death a sleep, following the terminology of the Bible. However, it is equally clear that the mature Luther distinguished sharply between what he terms "the sleep of this life" and "the sleep of the future life." It is especially significant that he explains wherein this difference consists. The difference, he says, lies in this that the sleep of this life is an unconscious state, while the sleep of the future life is one in which the departed soul is actually awake, and is alive but is resting—resting in the sense that its labors are at an end. It is my firm opinion that it would be very difficult to prove that the Reformer held the view that the souls of the departed are in an unconscious condition between the time of death and the resurrection.

But what shall we say concerning the numerous passages of Scripture which employ this figure of death as a sleep? Shall we not take these words literally? At this point perhaps we will do well to look more closely at a few of these pertinent passages. And as we do so, let us note carefully that they have one thing in common. By far the majority of them appear in a context which speaks of the resurrection. This furnishes the key to the correct interpretation. For example, Matt. 9:24 relates the story of Jesus entering the home of Jairus soon after his daughter had died. The Savior comforted the family and friends by telling them "The girl is not dead but sleeping." Someone could have asked Jesus: "How can you say that she is only sleeping when you know that she is dead?" And Jesus could have answered: "She is, as it were sleeping, because I am going to raise her from the dead." One thing is quite clear, Jesus did not intend here to teach those in Jairus' home the theological doctrine which is known as soul-sleep. The same is true of John 11:11, the story of the raising of Lazarus. After

Lazarus had died, Jesus told his disciples, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep." Again, he calls death a sleep. But why? Not to teach his disciples that the state of death is a state of unconsciousness. No, it is evident from the context that the Savior meant: "Lazarus is indeed dead, but it is just as if he were sleeping because I am going to awaken him." In 1 Cor. 15:51, St. Paul told the congregation at Corinth: "Lo, I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed." Obviously, the apostle is here describing death as a sleep. But in what sense? The context shows very clearly that Paul is not speaking here of soul-sleep, of being unconscious when one is dead. The entire 15th chapter of First Corinthians deals with the resurrection. In 1 Thess. 4:13, too, the dead are said to be asleep. Once more we ask: In what respect is death a sleep; and the context answers, verse 14: "Since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep." Death is called a sleep simply because there is a resurrection, an awakening. Finally, there is the Old Testament passage Daniel 12:2: "Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt." From this passage one concludes: "Death is a sleep even for the unbeliever; not because it renders him unconscious of what is going on, but because he too shall be raised up and face judgment."

But someone may say: "What of those passages, particularly in the Old Testament, which seem to say rather clearly that the dead are unconscious, passages such as, Psalm 6:5: "In death there is no remembrance of thee, in sheol who can give the praise?" Or, Psalm 30:9: "What profit is there in my death, if I go down to the pit? Will the dust praise thee? Will it tell of thy faithfulness?" Or, Psalm 115:17: "The dead do not praise the Lord, nor do any that go down into silence." Or, Psalm 146:3-4: "Put not your trust in princes, in a son of man, in whom there is no help. When his breath departs he returns to his earth; on that very day his plans perish." What is the meaning of these passages? If one examines the context, it becomes quite clear that the intent of these passages is not to teach that the soul of man is unconscious when he dies. Instead is it not possible that these passages are intended to stress the fact that in the state of death man can no longer take part in the activities of this present world? His relationship to this life is past. The preacher can no longer enter his pulpit and tell of God's faithfulness; the layman cannot enter the church as he is accustomed to do and sing God's praise; the prince can no longer give help to his people. All earthly plans are at an end. The thought expressed in these passages is similar to that set forth in Job 14:21. Man dies and thereafter "his sons come to honor and he does not know it; they are brought low and he perceives it not." Why? The context shows that it is not because he is unconscious, but because the dead do not return to this earth nor are they aware of what is happening where they once lived.

But it would seem that the strongest argument against soul-sleep are those passages which state in a positive way that immediately after death, prior to judgment and the resurrection, the believer is in close communion with God and with Christ. Lazarus died and was carried into Abraham's bosom; Dives died and went to the place of torment. Does this, perhaps, occur after the resurrection? Hardly, because Dives still had brothers living in his father's house on earth (Luke 16:19-31). The malefactor, dying on the cross beside Jesus, was told by the Savior, "Today, thou shalt be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). But one may ask: "Where is paradise?" Some modern theologians have answered: "Paradise is simply another word for the realm of death or Hades." St. Paul, however, conceived of paradise in a different light. In 2 Cor. 12:2-4 the apostle states his view of paradise thus: "I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. And I know that this man was caught up into paradise. . . . And he heard things that cannot be told." Thus Paul equated paradise with heaven. Again Stephen was stoned to death because of his testimony to Christ. Before he died he saw the heaven open and Jesus standing at the right hand of the Father, and as he breathed out his final breath, he prayed: "Lord Jesus receive my *pneuma* (spirit)" (Acts 7:59). Could it have been that Stephen was merely asking His Lord to watch over his ashes as he slept? No, it is quite obvious that he expected to be in Christ's presence after his death; and as the Bible itself informs us: "In thy presence is fullness of joy, and at thy right hand are pleasures forevermore." (Ps. 16:11). Similarly, in Phil. 1:23, as Paul was languishing in prison, expecting soon to be beheaded by the Romans, he expressed the desire to depart and "be with Christ, which is far better." Hardly can it be said that he expected death to be a state of unconsciousness. He looked forward rather to being present with the Lord, where as we have seen, there is fullness of joy. He states this clearly in 2 Cor. 5:8 where he exults: "We are of good cheer, and we would rather be away from the body and home with the Lord." But, again one might ask: "Does this passage not speak of life after the resurrection? And if so, how can one employ it to indicate what conditions are like in the intermediate state? At the beginning of this chapter Paul is indeed speaking of the time when he will have a glorified body. He longs for that time and wishes that it might come immediately, so that he need not pass through the experience of death; but if he must face the nakedness of being away from his body, he is still of good courage for then he will be at home with the Lord. Thus the last verses deal directly with the intermediate state, not with life after the resurrection, for he describes a time when he will be away from his body. What is more, it is clear that Paul does not regard the state of death as a time when his soul shall be unconscious.

Even the wicked in the *status medius* will not have the peace and rest of an unconscious state. In the Old Testament, the prophet Isaiah describes the wicked as existing in sheol after death. In chapter 14, verses 9 to 15, Isaiah describes the King of Babylon descending into sheol, where he is met and taunted by other spirits. After reading these verses one does not get the impression that sheol is a place where the spirits are unconscious. Similarly, Dives in Hades was not unconscious, but was suffering pain (Luke 16:23). Finally, when Jesus on the day of his resurrection, descended into hell, into the *phylake*, the prison, he found there the spirits of the wicked who had died in the flood, and he preached to them. (1 Peter 3:19-20). It seems evident to this essayist that these passages as well as others of a similar nature, present convincing proof that the intermediate state cannot be one of unconscious existence, a mere neutral state, in which there is neither bliss nor suffering but only a waiting in suspense for the second coming of our Lord in order to hear finally from his lips the verdict of salvation or damnation. It is much more in keeping with the clear passages of Scripture to conceive of the intermediate state as one of torment for the damned and, by the grace of God, one of blessedness for the believer.

At this point the question is frequently asked: "If this were true, then would it not render meaningless such important eschatological teachings as the second coming of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, and the final judgment?" The implication, of course, is this: "If a person upon death goes directly into the presence of Jesus or unto the place of torment, why have a resurrection and a judgment? This poses a problem only if one clings to the philosophical presupposition that man is an indivisible unit, that when he dies, he dies in his entirety, and that there is no immortality of the soul. The Christian Church, as it proceeded down the centuries, found no difficulty in accepting both the continued life of the soul after death and the resurrection of the body, together with the return of Christ for judgment. While believing in the existence of the soul after death, the church also confessed: "Christ shall come again with glory to judge both the quick and the dead," and "I look for the resurrection of the dead." It was only with the rise of Rationalism and Liberalism that these basic doctrines were called into question.

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