

The Doctrine of Immortality and the Apostolic Fathers

The Doctrine of Immortality in the Apostolic Fathers

The doctrine of conditional immortality is an important one among Bible Students, and a center of increasing debate among evangelicals. The purpose of this paper is to investigate what the apostolic fathers wrote about immortality since their perceptions may reflect what was commonly believed in the early church. We can't be certain of one particular position because there are variations among the apostolic fathers, and proponents of both conditional immortality and innate immortality find support in these writings. Perhaps we can glean some ideas from the variations themselves.

First Clement (A.D. 95-96)

At first glance, the letter of the Romans to the Corinthians known as First Clement might seem to indicate that those who die are immediately taken up to be with God. The author says that Peter "went to his appointed place of glory" (5:4), and Paul "departed from the world and went to the holy place" (5:7), and that others who suffered, "reached the goal in the race of faith, and received a noble reward" (6:2). However, based on comments later in the letter, I would submit that the author is not here talking about eternal life but about the glory associated with being faithful to the point of martyrdom.

The remainder of the letter indicates fairly clearly that immortality is a gift of God to be received after a future resurrection. "The Creator of the universe shall bring about the resurrection of those who have served him in holiness" (26:1). "His breath is in us, and when he so desires, he will take it away" (21:9). And "How blessed and marvelous are the gifts of God, dear friends! Life in immortality... Let us therefore make every effort to be found in the number of those who patiently wait for him, so that we may share in his promised gifts" (35:1-3).

The author makes a distinction between mortal men who do not know God and those who receive immortality as the gift of God: "For what can a mortal do? ... Shall a mortal be clean in the presence of the Lord? ... Because they could not help themselves, they perished" (39:2-5).

Perhaps the most telling statement is,

All the generations from Adam to this day have passed away, but those who by God's grace were perfected in love have a place among the godly, who will be revealed when the kingdom of Christ visits us. For it is written: "Enter into the innermost rooms for a very little while, until my anger and wrath shall pass away, and I will remember a good day and will raise you from your graves" (50:3-4; see Isaiah 26:20, Ezek. 37:12).

It seems clear that the author of First Clement is looking forward to a future resurrection when the children of God will receive the gift of immortality through Christ. It seems likely that the earlier references refer to those who have endured suffering receiving honor for their patient endurance and martyrdom, but not yet receiving eternal life or dwelling with God (see also 45:8).

Second Clement (A.D. 98-100)

The ancient sermon known as Second Clement is clearer in its statements on immortality than many of the other writings of the apostolic fathers. It frequently quotes Isaiah and Malachi, as well as New Testament sources, referring to the coming judgment and the punishment of the apostate in "unquenchable fire."¹

¹ Edwad Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes*, p. 318

In addition, most of the references to eternal life and resurrection are in the future tense, with no indication that those who die immediately go to live with God in heaven. In the fifth chapter, the author urges the audience “not to be afraid to depart from this world” (1), and encourages them that “the promise of Christ is great and marvelous: rest in the coming kingdom and eternal life!” (5).

The author also specifies that we will be raised in the flesh, not just in spirit: “For just as you were called in the flesh, so you will come in the flesh” (9:4). This is an important distinction considering the prevalence of teaching that we will be disembodied spirits for eternity, despite Paul’s teaching to the contrary in 1 Corinthians 15.

Perhaps one of the most compelling statements in Second Clement is in chapter 20:

We... are being trained by the present life in order that we may be crowned in the life to come. None of the righteous ever received his reward quickly, but waits for it... [God] sent forth to us the Savior and Founder of immortality, through whom he also revealed to us the truth and heavenly life, to him be the glory forever and ever (2-3, 5).

The author of Second Clement explicitly states that immortality is a gift of God to his children, not something which we inherently possess whether we are Christians or not. “So great is the life and immortality which this flesh is able to receive, if the Holy Spirit is closely joined with it” (14:5). It seems evident that some of these early writers were strong proponents of conditional immortality.

Letters of Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch (ca. A.D. 110)

The letters of Ignatius are not as easily categorized in terms of his references to immortality and eternal life. He speaks often of desiring “that I might reach God” through his impending martyrdom; however, he also states that, “two things together lie before us, death and life, and everyone will go to his own place” (Mag. 5:1). This and other references imply that immortality is granted only to those who follow Christ and is not inherent to all mankind. In his letter to Polycarp, he encourages him, “Be sober, as God’s athlete; the prize is incorruptibility and eternal life” (2:3).

Ignatius also points to the resurrection as a future event in his letter to the Trallians, chapter 9: “[Jesus] really was raised from the dead when his Father raised him up, who—his Father, that is—in the same way will likewise also raise us up in Christ Jesus who believe in him, apart from whom we have no true life” (2). So our resurrection will be like that of Jesus Christ. Some might take this passage to imply that only those who are in Christ will be resurrected, and the apostate will not be raised at all.

A verse that could become a favorite among Advent Christians is in Ignatius’ Letter to the Romans 4:2: “Leave nothing of my body behind, lest I become a burden to someone once I have fallen asleep.” His reference to death as sleep seems to indicate that there will be a period of unconsciousness prior to the resurrection of the dead. The Shepherd of Hermas (ca. 95-100A.D.) also refers several times to death as sleep (13:1; 19:3; 92:6; 93:3, 5-7), which lends historical support to the Advent Christian doctrinal position.²

Letter of Polycarp to the Philippians (A.D. 110)

Polycarp is less clear on the issue of immortality, primarily because we have so little of his writing to study. He does say that, “If we please him in this present world, we will receive the world to come as well, inasmuch as he promised to raise us from the dead” (5:2). However, he also states, “be assured that

² Freeman Barton, *Heaven Hell and Hades*, p. 35.

all these 'did not run in vain' but in faith and righteousness, and that they are now in the place due them with the Lord, with whom they also suffered together" (9:2). From that statement it would seem that he believes the dead are raised immediately to eternal life with Christ, though the former quote implies that the apostate are not resurrected. It is difficult to make any definitive statement of what Polycarp believes.

The Martyrdom of Polycarp (A.D. 155-160)

Since Polycarp was Bishop of Smyrna, and the church at Smyrna wrote this account of his martyrdom, this might reveal more about what he believed and taught than the previous letter did. The writer recounts Polycarp telling his captors, "you are ignorant of the fire of the coming judgment and eternal punishment, which is reserved for the ungodly" (11:2). Polycarp also reportedly hoped, "that I might receive a place among the number of the martyrs in the cup of your Christ, to the resurrection to eternal life, both of soul and of body, in the incorruptibility of the Holy Spirit. May I be received among them in your presence today" (14:2). Again, it seems that he believes in an immediate resurrection to eternal life.

His church apparently shares his belief since the writer reports, "he was now crowned with the crown of immortality" (17:1) and "now he rejoices with the apostles and all the righteous" (19:2).

The Didache (ca. A.D. 70)

The so-called Teaching of the Twelve-Apostles doesn't have a lot to say about immortality, but what it does say is significant. Its primary thesis is that "There are two ways, one of life and one of death" (1:1), and it goes on to explain the difference between the two ways. The very terms 'life' and 'death' imply that the way of life is the way of immortality and the way of death is the way of mortality. In the fourth chapter it describes the way of life by saying, "if you are sharers in what is imperishable, how much more so in perishable things!" (8).

A significant passage appears in the sixteenth chapter:

Then all humankind will come to the fiery test, and "many will fall away" and perish; but "those who endure" in their faith "will be saved"... And "then there will appear the signs" of the truth: first the sign of an opening in heaven, then the sign of the sound of a trumpet, and third, the resurrection of the dead—but not of all; rather, as it has been said, "The Lord will come, and all his saints with him" (5-7).

The author states fairly bluntly that not everyone will be raised from the dead, but only those chosen of the Lord. Theologian Edward Fudge comments on verse 5, "There is not mention of unending conscious torment. There are no indications that 'perish' means continued existence."³

The Epistle of Barnabas (A.D. 70-135)

The unknown writer Barnabas makes several significant statements regarding immortality and the destiny of man. In the nineteenth chapter he writes, "you shall glorify him who redeemed you from death... You shall not associate with those who walk in the way of death" (2). And later he adds that the way of darkness "is a way of eternal death and punishment, in which lie things that destroy men's souls" (20:1). It is evident that he believes those who are apart from Christ are not immortal, but receive "eternal death." Again he writes, "For the one who [obeys God's commandments] will be glorified in the kingdom of God;

³ Fudge, p. 316

the one who chooses their opposites will perish together with his works" (21:1). There is no possibility of immortality for those who refuse to follow God.

The Epistle of Diognetus (A.D. 150-255)

Diognetus is another proponent of conditional immortality worthy of note. He describes Christians by saying, "they are put to death, yet they are brought to life" (5:12). And he says that, "to them he promised the kingdom in heaven, which he will give to those who have loved him" (10:2). He also says that the "real death" is the punishment of the eternal fire for those who are delivered to it (10:7). But perhaps his most interesting statement is his description of the soul in chapter 6:

The soul dwells in the body, but is not of the body; likewise Christians dwell in the world, but are not of the world. The soul, which is invisible, is confined in the body, which is visible... The soul, which is immortal, lives in a mortal dwelling; similarly Christians live as strangers amidst perishable things, while waiting for the imperishable in heaven.

In this brief passage he uses two different words which are commonly translated "immortal" in the New Testament and the apostolic fathers—..... and Dr. David A. Dean explains the difference:

The first word means simply "no death." Immortality is the condition or state when a person is not subject to death. An immortal person will live forever because he cannot die. In this respect, immortality and eternal life are the same. The second Greek word has the root meaning "no corruption, no decaying." In our world, sin and disease and decay and death and destruction follow one another. But for one who is immortal, life will continue because no corruption or decay will destroy that person. The immortality God gives is freedom from both death and from the process of decay and corruption that leads to death.⁴

It is apparent that Diognetus believes immortality will be conveyed following the resurrection from the dead of those who love Christ, and is not an innate characteristic of all human beings.

The Fragments of Papias

Papias was apparently controversial in his writings due to references to a millennium following the resurrection of the saints when Christ will set up his kingdom on earth. Eusebius, Jerome, and Maximus the Confessor differed with Papias' views of the end times (3:12; 7:1; 16:1). What is significant is that Papias pointed to a specific resurrection of the dead in the day of Christ, not a "progressive" resurrection of the dead immediately upon death.

Conclusion

As we began, we must reemphasize the fact that the apostolic fathers are a diverse group and hold a variety of beliefs regarding immortality and the destiny of man. Some clearly support conditional immortality, some do not, and others seem to change their beliefs in mid-letter. A few of the writers speak of death as sleep, others refer to a coming resurrection of the dead, and still others seem to believe the dead immediately are raised to eternal life. There seems to be little indication that the wicked will be immortal, and yet someone approaching the study from that position could probably find evidence. As

⁴ David Dean, *The Gift from Above*, p. 82.

Edward Fudge writes, "Anyone approaching the literature on final punishment in search of dogmatic statements or 'authorities' to quote in proof of a position can find plenty—on both sides!"⁵

I have found encouragement from this study that Advent Christians weren't the first to believe in conditional immortality. The doctrine seems to have been prevalent in many of the early writings of the church, even though it has been lost in many respects in the recent centuries of the church. The debate has been picked up again in recent years, and perhaps will awaken many believers to the truth of "life only in Christ" that Adventists have been preaching for the past 150 years.

--- D. C. Rutan, 2002

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⁵ Fudge, p. 314.

Appendix I

Partial list of references to immortality in the apostolic fathers

First Clement	9:2	21:1
5:4, 7		
6:2	To the Romans	The Shepherd of Hermas
11:1	2:2	13:1
21:9	4:2	19:3
24:2, 5	5:3	92:6
26:1, 3		93:3, 5-7
35:1-3	To the Smyrnaeans	
36:2	2:1	The Epistle to Diognetus
38:1	5:2-3	5:8-9, 12
39:2, 4-5		6:8
45:8	To Polycarp	9:2
50:3-4	2:2-3	10:2, 7
	6:2	
Second Clement	7:1	The Fragments of Papias
1:1		3:12 [Eusebius, Church History
5:1, 5	The Letter of Polycarp to	3.39]
6:3, 6-7	the Philippians	7:1 [Jerome, Famous Men 18]
8:4,6	2:1-2	16:1 [Maximus the Confessor,
9:1, 3-4	5:2	Scholia on Dionysius the
10:4	8:1	Areopagite, On the
11:7	9:2	Ecclesiastical Hierarchy, chap.
14:5	12:2	7]
17:1, 7		
19:3-4	The Martyrdom of	
20:23, 5	Polycarp	
	2:3	
Letter of Ignatius	11:2	
To the Ephesians	14:2	
1:1	17:1	
3:2	19:2	
11:1		
12:2	The Didache	
14:1	1:1	
16:2	4:8	
	16:6-7	
To the Magnesians		
1:2	The Epistle of Barnabas	
5:1-2	1:6	
9:2	4:13	
14:1	5:7	
	11:11	
	16:9	
To the Trallians	19:2, 8	
2:1	20:1	