

WCF 32 OF THE STATE OF MEN AFTER DEATH, AND OF THE RESURRECTION OF THE DEAD

The last two chapters of our Confession are dedicated to eschatology, which is the study of last things. This locus of theology usually covers what happens to man at the point of death (personal eschatology) as well as what happens when Christ returns again (general eschatology). It is sometimes thought that the doctrine of last things is only found in the last book of the Bible. This is a fallacy. The reality is that the doctrine of last things is actually taught throughout the Scriptures, and indeed it is by comparing Scripture with Scripture and systematising the biblical data that the student of eschatology can get a biblical balanced doctrine. This is the approach of the writers of our Confession.

Although these two chapters present a biblical doctrine of eschatology in a positive rather than polemical or negative way, it is clear that in so far as personal eschatology is concerned that such aberrant doctrines as soul sleep (of the Seventh Day Adventism) or Purgatory (of Roman Catholicism) cannot be reconciled with the doctrine herein propounded. Likewise in terms of General Eschatology is concerned, it is clear that Premillennialism, especially Dispensational Premillennialism cannot be reconciled with our Confessional doctrine presented here and in the Catechism.

On the State of Man after Death

32.1 The bodies of men, after death, return to dust, and see corruption:¹ but their souls, which neither die nor sleep, having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God who gave them:² the souls of the righteous, being then made perfect in holiness, are received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God, in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies.³ And the souls of the wicked are cast into hell, where they remain in torments and utter darkness, reserved to the judgment of the great day.⁴ Beside these two places, for souls separated from their bodies, the Scripture acknowledgeth none.

¹ Gen 3:19; Acts 13:36; ² Lk 23:43; Eccl 12:7; ³ Heb 12:23; 2 Cor 5:1, 6, 8; Phil. 1:23; Acts 3:21; Eph 4:10; ⁴ Lk 16:23–24; Acts 1:25; Jude 6–7; 1 Pet 3:19.

- a. Death entered into the world and passed upon all men because of the fall of Adam (Gen 3:19; Rom 5:12). Since then, death is the universal experience of all men (with the extraordinary exception of two: Enoch and Elijah). The psalmist declares: “What man is he that liveth, and shall not see death? shall he deliver his soul from the hand of the grave?” (Ps 89:48). The author of Hebrews refers to death as an immutable appointment: “And as it is appointed unto men once to die” (Heb 9:27a).

But man is a two-part being with an immortal soul. Therefore death cannot be the end of man’s existence. Death must, rather, refer to the separation of the body and soul of the person. The body being constituted of corruptible material will decompose and return unto the ground. The soul, on the other hand, returns “unto God who gave it” (Ecc 12:7).

- b. What happens when the soul meet with God? It immediately faces a preliminary judgement of God. “And as it is appointed unto men once to die, *but after this the judgment*” (Heb 9:27; cf. 12:23). Then those who die in Christ are confirmed in

righteousness and “received into highest heavens, where they behold the face of God in light and glory.” This is often known as the beatific vision.

That this is the case is the clear teaching of Scripture. The Lord told the penitent thief on the cross: “Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise” (Lk 23:43). The apostle Paul speaks about his desire to be in the presence of the Lord and suggests that the moment he leaves the mortal body, he will behold the face of God:

- “For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.... Therefore we are always confident, knowing that, whilst we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord:... We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord” (2 Cor 5:1, 6, 8).
- “For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better” (Phil 1:23).

In addition, the author of Hebrews speaks of the saints in heaven as “the spirits of just men made perfect” (Heb 12:23).

- c. The souls of the wicked, i.e., those who die in unbelief, on the other hand, are confirmed in unrighteousness and “cast into hell, where they remain in torments and utter darkness, reserved to the judgment of the great day.” This again is a biblical doctrine. In the parable of Lazarus and the rich man, the rich man, being an unbeliever, was incarcerated in hell, where we are told he suffers the torment of the flame (Lk 16:23–24). In Jude 7, we are told that the wicked men of Sodom and Gomorrha are “suffering the vengeance of eternal fire.” And the Apostle Peter calls those who died in the deluge “the spirits in prison” (1 Pet 3:19). There is a very vast difference between the death of the righteous and the death of the wicked. For the righteous, death translates him to glory, for the wicked death confirms him in unrighteousness. For the righteous, death is great gain, for the wicked, death is ultimate loss.
- d. Although the doctrine stated in this paragraph appears so straight forward, there have been in the church numerous different erroneous teachings on the subject. Thus our Confession concludes the paragraph with the statement: “Beside these two places for souls separated from their bodies, the Scripture acknowledgeth none.” Briefly, some of the errors with regards to the state of men after death are:
 - i. *Purgatory*. This error of Rome stems from an erroneous understanding of justification and teaches that those who are not completely cleansed of the guilt of venial sins must undergo a process of purification in purgatory where they have to suffer for their sins. This period can be shortened by prayers, sacrifice of the Mass, indulgences, etc. This gross error is largely based on the apocryphal 2 Maccabees 12:41–45¹, but has no support in Scripture.

¹ “⁴¹All men therefore praising the Lord, the righteous Judge, who had opened the things that were hid, ⁴²Betook themselves unto prayer, and besought him that the sin committed might wholly be put out of remembrance. Besides, that noble Judas exhorted the people to keep themselves from sin, forso much as they saw before their eyes the things that came to pass for the sins of those that were slain. ⁴³And when he had made a gathering throughout the company to the sum of two thousand drachms of silver, he sent it to Jerusalem to offer a sin offering, doing therein very well and honestly, in that he was mindful of the resurrection: ⁴⁴For if he had not hoped that they that were slain should have risen again, it had been superfluous and vain to pray for the dead. ⁴⁵And also in that he perceived that there was great favour laid up for those that died godly, it was an holy and good thought. Whereupon he made a reconciliation for the dead, that they might be delivered from sin.”

- ii. *Limbus Patrum*. This is another Romish error that teaches that the Old Testament saints were detained in the state of expectation (limbo) in a part of hades until the Lord at His death went down to release them and carried them to heaven. This again has no scriptural support. The Lord did not descend into hades. He said: “*Today* shalt thou be with me in paradise” (Lk 23:43).
- iii. *Limbus Infantum*. Another error of Romish invention. Since salvation is by faith and works, it is impossible for infants who were not baptised to enter heaven. But yet they are not accounted guilty, so they are held in a state of eternal limbo.
- iv. *Soul Sleep*. This is held by Russellites (Jehovah’s Witnesses). Basing their theory on the passages that represent death as a sleep (e.g., Mt 9:24; Acts 7:60, etc), they teach that the soul goes into an unconscious existence after death until the resurrection. But the Scripture teaches that believers enjoy a conscious life in communion with God and Christ immediately after death (e.g., Lk 16:19–31; Phil 1:23, etc).
- v. *Intermediate Place: Sheol and Hades*. This doctrine, popular among some dispensationalists, is that the souls of both believers and unbelievers go into an intermediate place of weakened consciousness until the resurrection and judgement. This is based on a misinterpretation of the words *sheol* (Hebrew) and *hades* (Greek). This two words frequently refer to the state of death (e.g., Job 14:13; Acts 2:27; 1 Cor 15:55); and sometimes it refers to the grave (e.g., Gen 42:38). But there is strong evidence that the two words often refer to hell as translated in the KJV (e.g., Job 21:13; Ps 9:17; Lk 16:23). The meaning of these two words must be derived from the context. Assuming a lexicographical meaning of a word and then imposing it on the text can lead to errors.
- vi. *Annihilation and Conditional Immortality*. This is the doctrine of the JW’s and Seventh Day Adventists and is popular among some modern ‘evangelicals,’ such as Clark Pinnock and John Stott. The idea in this view is that the soul of the wicked does not experience eternal torment, but will either be positively annihilated or will simply cease to exist. But the Bible teaches that the soul of sinners as well as saints will continue to exist forever: “And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal” (Mt 25:46; Rev 14:11, 20:10). Also the Scripture speaks about degrees of punishment for the wicked (Lk 12:47–48; Mt 11:20–24). Annihilation not only makes these passages meaningless, but makes punishment for sin altogether meaningless: Why worry if you will ultimately cease existence altogether?

On the Resurrection of the Dead

32.2 *At the last day, such as are found alive shall not die, but be changed:¹ and all the dead shall be raised up, with the self-same bodies, and none other (although with different qualities), which shall be united again to their souls forever.²*

¹ 1 Thes 4:17; 1 Cor 15:51–52; ² Job 19:26–27; 1 Cor 15:42–44.

32.3 *The bodies of the unjust shall, by the power of Christ, be raised to dishonour: the bodies of the just, by His Spirit, unto honour; and be made conformable to His own glorious body.¹*

¹ Acts 24:15; Jn 5:28–29; 1 Cor 15:43; Phil. 3:21.

- a. The “last days” in the history of redemption begun with the incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ. We are in the “last days” (Acts 2:17; 2 Tim 3:1; Heb 1:2; 2 Pet 3:3), or the final *period* in redemptive history (1 Cor 10:11). But the “last day” refers the final *event* in redemptive history. The rest of our Confession relates to this last day.
- b. In §32.1, we note that though believers “are received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God in light and glory,” there is a sense in which they are still not complete, as they await “the full redemption of their bodies.” Men, unlike angels, are created with a soul and a body. Though a Christian has perfect joy suited to a spiritual existence when he leaves his mortal body, he is not complete until his body is reunited to his soul. Thus, the Scripture speaks about a future resurrection when all the dead shall be raised up, i.e., the bodies will be resurrected and reunited with the souls. This resurrection involves the same body that was laid in the grave, though it is reconstituted with different qualities and it involves not just the believers, but unbelievers as well:
- “And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt” (Dan 12:2).
 - “Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, And shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation” (Jn 5:28–29).
- c. The bodies of the unjust shall, by the power of Christ, be raised to dishonour or “to shame and everlasting contempt” (Dan 12:2). They are said to be raised by the power or authority of Christ because Christ said that “all that are in the graves shall hear his voice.”
- On the other hand, the bodies of the just will be raised by His Spirit, unto honour; and be made conformable to His own glorious body:

“... the Lord Jesus Christ... shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself” (Phil 3:20–21).
 - It was with this confidence that Job exclaimed:

“Though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God: Whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not another; though my reins be consumed within me” (Job 19:26–27).
 - The resurrected body of the believer will have similar, if not the same, qualities as the resurrected body of Christ. It shall be incorruptible and will never face death again:

“For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory” (1 Cor 15:53–54).
- d. What about those who are found alive on that last day? Our Confession makes no explicit mention about the reprobate in that day. Though they appear to be included in §32.2, the Scripture references cited suggest that the divines had believers in mind. The Scripture is not explicit about what will happen to the living reprobate,

but the sight of the coming King of glory and the knowledge of His wrath against sin would surely kill them (cf. Rev 6:15–17). If so, they will, with the rest of the dead, face the resurrection of damnation with a body adapted to judgement and corruption. Those who are in Christ, on the other hand, will clearly not die, but be changed in a moment:

“Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed” (1 Cor 15:51–52).

e. The order of event is given by the Apostle Paul:

“For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord” (1 Th 4:16–17).

Though Paul’s emphasis is on the fact that the saints will from thence forever be with the Lord, he uses a very interesting word to describe the meeting of the saints with the Lord. This word, translated ‘meet,’ is the Greek *apantêsis* (*ajpavnthsi~*) which describes the citizens of a city going out to meet a visiting dignitary and then returning with him. Thus when the brethren at Rome heard that Paul was on the way, they came up as far as Appii forum to *apantêsis* (meet) him and then went with him back to Rome (Acts 28:15–16). This word is also used to describe the practice of Roman citizens going out to meet a victorious army and marching back with them. Thus, the Living Saints at the Second Coming are transformed and glorified suddenly (1 Cor 15:51–52) and, together with believers raised from the dead, are caught up to meet the Lord in the air (1 Th 4:17), and then usher Him together with His mighty angels to earth in His return as the glorious and triumphant Judge (Rev 19:14; Jude 14). This spectacle will be witnessed by the whole world at the same time (cf. Rev 6:15–17).

Comment [LJJ1]: Sentence restructured. Second meaning given separately.

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