A Statement on
Death, Resurrection and Immortality
A Position Paper

A Report of the
Commission on Theology and Church Relations
of the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod

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INTRODUCTION

In 1962 the Cleveland convention of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod received some expressions of doctrinal concern regarding certain theological speculations in the area of eschatology ("the last things"), especially as these touched questions of death, the soul, resurrection, and immortality (Reports and Memorials, 1962, p. 161). The convention sketched the general framework within which these questions should be answered (Proceedings, 1962, p. 106) and further resolved to refer these specific questions together with others "to the Commission on Theology and Church Relations, to pastoral conferences, and to congregations for further study." (Res. 3-16B, Proceedings, 1962, p. 105)

The commission now offers the following position paper to the members of the Synod in a fraternal effort to meet the concerns reflected in the questions addressed to the Synod. While several scholarly essays were presented to the commission on these

topics, the commission believes that the needs of the Synod will be best served by a concise treatment. This study addresses itself most specifically to the following concerns: Does the Bible teach that man has an immortal soul, which Christ died to save, and that, when a Christian dies, his soul goes to a blessed life with God? and: Does the Bible teach a physical resurrection of our flesh? (Reports and Memorials, 1962, p.161)

I
THE BIBLICAL WITNESS

A. The Concept "Soul"

The Biblical language concerning man's soul does not provide the basis for constructing a clear picture of the nature of man's being. Thus Scripture speaks of man as consisting of body and soul (Is. 10: 18; Matt 10: 28); of flesh and spirit (1 Cor. 5: 5); of mind and flesh (Rom. 7:25); of spirit, soul, and body (1 Thess. 5: 23; see Heb. 4: 12); while in other passages it speaks of him as a unitary being (Gen.2:7), to use a contemporary expression. The Old Testament frequently uses "soul" (nephesh) as a synonym for the total person. (Gen. 12: 5; 34: 3; Ex. 1: 5; Lev. 4: 2; Joshua 11: 11; and so forth)

B. Death

Scripture teaches that death is the penalty for sin (Gen.3:14-19) and that this penalty affects all men in their bodies and souls (Matt. 10: 28; 1 Cor. 15:42-50) Many passages in the Old Testament stress the dreadful character of death by speaking of it as eternal destruction and by using other metaphors of finality (Ps. 92: 7; Prov. 10:25; Is. 26:14; and so forth). At death the soul is not annihilated, but neither does it possess immortality by virtue of any natural or inherent qualities Man's eternal existence, either in the state which Scripture calls life or else in the state which it calls death, is determined by his relationship to Jesus Christ, crucified and risen.

C. Life After Death

1. The Old Testament

The Old Testament Scriptures contain many, references to the continuation of life after death. For example, the patriarchs believed that after their death they would be "gathered to their fathers in peace. "This expression did not imply interment in

a family grave, for it is used of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses, even though they were buried far from the land of their fathers (Gen. 25: 8-10; 35: 29; 49: 33; Num. 27: 13; Deut. 32: 50). The expression "he was gathered to his people" or "he slept with his people" shows the intense hope of the Israelite to be united with his ancestors, even in death. Our Lord summarized the Old Testament hope when He reminded the Sadducees that God was not the God of the dead but of the living. (Matt. 22: 32)

Sheol, despite its often grim and shadowy character, was a place of continued existence in some form (Job 26:5-6; Num. 16:30; 1 Sam. 2:6). Some passages describe sheol as a place of darkness (Job 10: 20-22); or a place to hide (Job 14: 13); or a place of hopelessness (Is. 28: 18) from which there is no return (Job 7: 9). Other passages contain a more positive affirmation about life after death and assure the pious Israelite that God will not abandon His saints in death but will abide with them, deliver them from sheol, and receive them to glory. (Ps. 16: 9-11; 49: 15; 73: 24)

2. The New Testament

Jesus knew that death could not annihilate Him but that He would arise and through His rising destroy the power of death (John 11:25 ff.; 14:6; Mark 9:30-32; see Acts 2: 22-28; Rom. 1: 4; Eph. 1: 20). St. Paul cherished this same confidence (Phil. 1: 23; 2 Cor. 5: 8). Other passages describe the departed faithful as being with God. (Matt. 22: 29-32; Rev. 6: 9-11)

The New Testament speaks of the departed faithful as existing in a conscious and blessed state which at the very least can be described as the persistence of the individual's identity before God. The faithful are described as being in the presence of God and of enjoying peace and rest with Him. They are also described as sleeping (1 Thess. 4:13 f.) or of being in the tombs (John 5:28 f.: Matt. 27: 51-53). The inspired writers speak of death variously as the separation of body and soul (Gen.35:18) or as the departure of the spirit (Acts 7: 59; Luke 23: 46) or as the passing of the "I," the total person (Phil. 1: 23), "to be with Christ." The New Testament also teaches the physical resurrection of the body in

several passages (John 5:28 f.; Rom. 8: 11;1 C or. 15: 51-54). Finally, the New Testament affirms that the physical bodies of the departed faithful will be glorified. (1 Cor. 15: 51-54; Phil. 3: 20-21)

II
THE CONCEPTS OF SOUL, DEATH, AND LIFE AFTER DEATH IN THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION

The whole Christian tradition expresses in its doctrinal treatises, its hymns, and its liturgies the conviction that believers continue to exist after physical death. Sometimes these expressions employ the body- soul language which is so characteristic of Christian piety today; sometimes one finds unitary language. Thus Clement of Rome (A.D. 95) uses Biblical unitary language when he says that Sts. Peter and Paul went immediately to the holy place after their death (1 Clem 6:1-7; see also 50:3). Irenaeus (ea. A.D. 175) employs the body-soul pattern of language and speaks of souls of Christians going to "invisible places designated for them by God," where, after the resurrection, they will receive bodies, "just as the Lord Himself." (Adversus Haereses 5: 31; see also Martyrdom of Polycarp 17: 1)

Martin Luther reflects the variety of Scriptural language when he speaks of death and of the condition of the departed faithful. In some passages he speaks of a distinction between body and soul (W. A. 36, 241), while in other passages he affirms the unitary nature of man also in the state between death and the resurrection (W. A., Tisehreden [Ser. 2, vol. V, No. 5534], 218 f.; 43, 218). Thus he can speak both of the whole Abraham being with God and of the "soul" of Abraham resting or serving God (W. A. 43, 480). He also repeatedly expresses his faith that the body will be raised on the last day. (W. A. 12, 268; 36, 605)

The Lutheran Confessions, the normative statement of Biblical doctrine for Lutherans, speaks, like Scriptures, of man as having a body and a soul (Formula of Concord, Epitome IX, 1: Large Catechism, Baptism 45; Smalcald Articles, Part III, Art. I, 11). But the references cited here clearly teach that man's body and soul are integrally united; both are corrupted by sin and subject to death (F. C., Epit. I, 4; S. D. I, 2. 46 f.; S. A., Part III, Art. I, 11). Together they constitute man's essence or nature (F. C., S. D., I, 2).

According to the Athanasian Creed the rational soul and the flesh are one man, as God and man are one Christ (35).

The Confessions agree with Scripture and the all but unanimous tradition of the church in assigning significant theological meanings to death. The Confessions rule out the contemporary view that death is a pleasant and painless transition into a perfect world. For the death is destruction: the destruction of the sinful flesh so that believers may arise completely renewed (Apology XII, 153; F. C., Epit. I, 10). Death is also the divine eternal judgment on body and soul-a horrible and frightening prospect to contemplate-except for those who live in Jesus Christ.

The Confessions affirm the persistence of personal identity beyond death. For example, the Smalcald Articles refer to the saints "in their graves and in heaven." (Part II, Art. II, 28; II, III, 26; see also F. C.,S. D. I, 37; Apology XXI, 9)

The Lutheran Confessions permit the use of the expression which is so deeply embedded in Christian piety: "The soul of the departed has gone to heaven to be with its Maker." But they require that this phrase be used in a context which includes a true, Scripture-based understanding of the meaning of death, of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and of the nature of man's eternal existence

Concerning the resurrection of the flesh, the Confessions are crystal-clear. The Formula of Concord speaks of our flesh rising (F. C., S. D. I, 46). The Large Catechism affirms that "our flesh will be put to death will be buried... and will come forth gloriously and arise." (Creed, 57)

The Orthodox Lutheran dogmaticians of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries follow the general lead of the Confessions on these topics They also stress the once-for-all character of Christ's resurrection and the full enjoyment of bliss which awaits the believer at the Last Day. Leonard Hutter (1563-1616) writes that the essential blessedness will not be achieved until the resurrection in Jesus Christ. He asserts that "the souls of....the believers in Christ are in the hands of God, awaiting there the glorious resurrection of the body and the full enjoyment of the eternal blessedness" (Compendium Locorum Theologicorum [Leipzig: C. L. Jacob, 1747], p. 644). Martin

Chemnitz likewise confesses his faith in eternal life through Jesus Christ. (De Duabus Naturis [Leipzig, 1600], p. 176)

Francis Pieper writes in a similar vein: "Holy Writ reveals but little of the state of the souls between death and the resurrection. In speaking of the List things, it directs our gaze primarily to Judgment Day and the events clustering around it." (Christian Dogmatics, trans. Walter W. F. Albrecht III [St. Louis, 1953], p.511)

Reflecting Dr. Pieper's position, John Theodore Mueller declares: "The Christian hope of eternal life (John 17, 3) must... not be confounded With the pagan doctrine of the immortality of the soul." (Christian Dogmatics [St. Louis, 1934], p. 639)

III
SUMMARY OBSERVATIONS

1. The Scriptures describe man's being in a variety of ways. For example, they describe him as consisting of body and soul, of spirit, soul, and body; and as a unitary being. Since all these insights are Scriptural, they need to be affirmed and defended, as they have been throughout the history of the church.

2. The Scriptures declare that sin is the cause of death - temporal, spiritual, and eternal. Natural man is corrupted by sin in body and soul and is completely subject to death. Death is the destruction of the flesh (natural man), and it is this destruction which makes it possible for the believer to rise completely renewed.

3. In some Scripture passages death is described as the departure of the spirit or the return of the spirit to its Maker; in others it is pictured as the passing of the "I," the total person, to the eternal realm.

4. The Scriptures affirm the continued existence of all men with their personal identity intact between death and the resurrection, and thereafter. They teach that upon death believers are in the hands of God and that they are with Christ. Those who have rejected Christ will be condemned by the judgment of His Word. (John 12: 48)

5. The Scriptures teach concerning the resurrection that "all who are in the tombs will hear His voice and come forth, those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment" (John 5: 28-29).

Believers therefore "await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly body to be like His glorious body."(Phil. 3: 20-21)

6. The Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions compel us:

a. To reject the teaching that death terminates the existence of man so as to preclude the possibility of the persistence beyond death of his personal identity before God.

b. To reject the teaching that at death man is annihilated in such a way as to preclude even for the grace and power of God the possibility of his physical resurrection, or of his final and eternal judgment.

c. To reject the teaching that the "last things, "namely, the eschatological acts of divine judgment and salvation, are fully realized and consummated only within the realm of earthly history, so as to preclude a life or death to come.

d. To reject the teaching that the resurrection should be conceived in such a way as to exclude the body (in effect the Gnostic heresy that matter is essentially evil and that only the "spirit" is capable of being saved).

e. To reject the teaching that the soul is by nature and by virtue of an inherent quality immortal, as the pagans thought and as is taught in a number of fraternal orders today. This concept denies the Christian Gospel of the resurrection of our Lord and of the resurrection of the believers through Him alone.

f. To reject the teaching that the soul "sleeps" between death and the resurrection in such a way that it is not conscious of bliss.

7. When Scripture talks about death, the condition of the believer between death and the resurrection, and the resurrection itself, its primary purpose is to proclaim to the Christian what great things God has done for him through Jesus Christ. Through this witness, God offers to believers the sure hope of everlasting life with Jesus Christ. Thus the Holy Spirit creates in the believer joy and hope in the face of the last enemy, death. This is our Gospel hope.