

# Martin Luther and William Tyndale on the State of the Dead

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On December 19, 1513, in connection with the eighth session of the fifth Lateran Council, Pope Leo X issued a Bull (*Apostolici regimisi*) declaring, "We do condemn and reprobate all who assert that the intelligent soul is mortal" (Damnamus et reprobamus omnes assertentes animam intellectivam mortalem esse). This was directed against the growing "heresy" of those who denied the natural immortality of the soul, and avowed the conditional immortality of man. The Bull also decreed that "all who adhere to the like erroneous assertions shall be shunned and punished as heretics." The decrees of this Council, it should be noted, were all issued in the form of Bulls or constitutions.<sup>1</sup>

## Pope LEO X 1513-1521; LATERAN COUNCIL V 1512-1517<sup>2</sup>

*"Since in our days (and we painfully bring this up) the sower of cockle, ancient enemy of the human race, has dared to disseminate and advance in the field of the Lord a number of pernicious errors, always rejected by the faithful, especially concerning the nature of the rational soul, namely, that it is mortal, or one in all men, and some rashly philosophizing affirmed that this is true at least according to philosophy, in our desire to offer suitable remedies against a plague of this kind, with the approval of this holy Council, we condemn and reject all who assert that the intellectual soul is mortal, or is one in all men, and those who cast doubt on these truths, since it [the soul] is not only truly in itself and essentially the form of the human body, as was defined in the canon of Pope CLEMENT V our predecessor of happy memory published in the (general) Council of VIENNE but it is also multiple according to the multitude of bodies into which it is infused, multiplied, and to be multiplied. And since truth never contradicts truth, we declare every assertion contrary to the truth of illumined faith to be altogether false; and, that it may not be permitted to dogmatize otherwise, we strictly forbid it, and we decree that all who adhere to errors of this kind are to be shunned and to be punished as detestable and abominable infidels who disseminate most damnable heresies and who weaken the Catholic faith."<sup>3</sup>*

In 1516, Pietro Pomponatius of Mantua, noted Italian professor and leader among the Averrorists (who denied the immortality of the soul), issued a book in opposition to this position called *Treatise on the Immortality of the Soul*. This was widely read, especially in the Italian universities. As a result, he was hauled before the Inquisition, and his book publicly burned in Venice.

Then, on October 31, 1517, Luther posted his famous [95] Theses on the church door in Wittenberg. In his 1520 published Defence of 41 of his propositions, Luther cited the pope's *immortality* declaration, as

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<sup>1</sup> H. J. Schroeder, *Disciplinary Decrees of the General Councils*, 1937, pp. 483, 487.

<sup>2</sup> Ecumenical XVIII (The Reform of the Church), The Human Soul (against the Neo-Aristotelians), Msi XXXII 842 A; Hrd IX 1719 C f.; BR(T) 5, 601 b f.; MBR 1, 542 a f.; Bar(Th) ad 1513 n. 92 (31, 40 a f.);cf. Hfl VIII 585 f. [From the Bull "Apostolici Regimisi" (Session VIII), Dec. 19, 1513].

<sup>3</sup> Source: *The Sources of Catholic Dogma*, Translated by Roy J. Deferrari, from the Thirtieth Edition of Henry Denzinger's *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, published by B. Herder Book Co., Copyright 1957, pages 237, 238.

among “those monstrous opinions to be found in the Roman dunghill of decretals” (proposition 27). In the twenty-seventh proposition of his Defence, Luther said:

*“However, I permit the Pope to establish articles of faith for himself and for his own faithful—such are: That the bread and wine are transubstantiated in the sacrament; that the essence of God neither generates nor is generated; that the soul is the substantial form of the human body; that he [the pope] is emperor of the world and king of heaven, and earthly god; **that the soul is immortal**; and all these endless monstrosities in the Roman dunghill of decretals—in order that such as his faith is, such may be his gospel, such also his faithful, and such his church, and that the lips may have suitable lettuce and the lid may be worthy of the dish.”*<sup>4</sup>

Archdeacon Francis Blackburne states in his *Short Historical View of the Controversy Concerning an Intermediate State*, of 1765:

*“Luther espoused the doctrine of the sleep of the soul, upon a Scripture foundation, and then he made use of it as a confutation of purgatory and saint worship, and continued in that belief to the last moment of his life.”*<sup>5</sup>

In support, Blackburne has an extended Appendix section dealing with Luther's teaching as set forth in his writings, and discusses the charges and countercharges.

The Lutheran scholar Dr. T. A. Kantonen (*The Christian Hope*, 1594, p. 37), likewise referred to Luther's position in these words:

*“Luther, with a greater emphasis on the resurrection, preferred to concentrate on the scriptural metaphor of sleep. For just as one who falls asleep and reaches morning unexpectedly when he awakes, without knowing what has happened to him, we shall suddenly rise on the last day without knowing how we have come into death and through death. ‘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 with him forever.”’*

Here follow certain of the leading witnesses of recent centuries, with Luther and Tyndale in some detail.

## **MARTIN LUTHER (1493-1546), German Reformer and Bible translator**

*“The immediate cause of Luther's stand on the sleep of the soul was the issue of purgatory, with its postulate of the conscious torment of anguished souls. While Luther is not always consistent, the predominant note running all through his writings is that souls sleep in peace, without consciousness or*

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<sup>4</sup> Martin Luther, *Assertio Omnium Articulorum M. Lutheri per Bullam Leonis X. Novissimam Damnatorum* (Assertion of all the articles of M. Luther condemned by the latest Bull of Leo X), article 27, Weimar edition of Luther's Works, vol. 7, pp. 131, 132 (a point-by-point exposition of his position, written Dec. 1, 1520, in response to requests for a fuller treatment than that given in his *Adversus execrabilem Antichristi Bullam*, and *Wider die Bulle des Endchris*).

<sup>5</sup> Archdeacon Francis Blackburne, *Short Historical View of the Controversy Concerning an Intermediate State*, 1765; p. 14.

*pain. The Christian dead are not aware of anything—see not, feel not, understand not, and are not conscious of passing events. Luther held and periodically stated that in the sleep of death, as in normal physical sleep, there is complete unconsciousness and unawareness of the condition of death or the passage of time.<sup>6</sup> Death is a deep, sound, sweet sleep.<sup>7</sup> And the dead will remain asleep until the day of resurrection, which resurrection embraces both body and soul, when both will come together again.”*

Here are sample Luther citations. In the quaint 1573 English translation we read:

*“Salomon judgeth that the dead are a sleepe, and feele nothing at all. For the dead lye there accompting neyther dayes nor yeares, but when are awaked, they shall seeme to have slept scarce one minute.”<sup>8</sup>*

*“But we Christians, who have been redeemed from all this through the precious blood of God’s Son, should train and accustom ourselves in faith to despise death and regard it as a deep, strong, sweet sleep; to consider the coffin as nothing other than our Lord Jesus’ bosom or Paradise, the grave as nothing other than a soft couch of ease or rest. As verily, before God, it truly is just this; for he testifies, John 11:11; Lazarus, our friend sleeps; Matthew 9:24: The maiden is not dead, she sleeps. Thus, too, St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 15, removes from sight all hateful aspects of death as related to our mortal body and brings forward nothing but charming and joyful aspects of the promised life. He says there [vv. 42ff]: It is sown in corruption and will rise in incorruption; it is sown in dishonor (that is, a hateful, shameful form) and will rise in glory; it is sown in weakness and will rise in strength; it is sown in natural body and will rise a spiritual body.”<sup>9</sup>*

*“Thus after death the soul goes to its bedchamber and to its peace, and while it is sleeping it does not realize its sleep, and God preserves indeed the awakening soul. God is able to awake Elijah, Moses, and others, and so control them, so that they will live. But how can that be? That we do not know; we satisfy ourselves with the example of bodily sleep, and with what God says: it is a sleep, a rest, and a peace. He who sleeps naturally knows nothing of that which happens in his neighbor’s house; and nevertheless, he still is living, even though, contrary to the nature of life, he is unconscious in his sleep. Exactly the same will happen also in that life, but in another and a better way.”<sup>10</sup>*

Here is another sample:

*“We should learn to view our death in the right light, so that we need not become alarmed on account of it, as unbelief does; because in Christ it is indeed not death, but a fine, sweet and brief sleep, which brings us release from this vale of tears, from sin and from the fear and extremity of real death and from all the*

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<sup>6</sup> See "Auslegung des ersten Buches Mose" (1544), in *Schriften*, vol. 1, col. 1756; "Kirchen-Postille" (1528), in *Schriften*, vol. 11, col. 1143; *Schriften*, vol. 2, col. 1069; *Deutsche Schriften* (Erlangen ed.), vol. 11, p. 142ff.; vol. 41 (1525), p. 373.

<sup>7</sup> Catechetische Schriften" (1542), in *Schriften*, vol. 11, pp. 287, 288.

<sup>8</sup> *An Exposition of Salomon’s Booke, called Ecclesiastes or the Preacher*, 1553, folio 151v.

<sup>9</sup> Christian Song Latin and German, for Use at Funerals," 1542, in *Works of Luther* (1932), vol. 6, pp. 287, 288.

<sup>10</sup> Auslegungen uber die Psalmen [3]" in 1533 in *Schriften*, vol. 4, pp. 323, 324. †"Am Zweiten Sonntage nach Trinitatis," "Haus-Postille." in *Schriften*, vol. 13, col. 2153; "Predigt uber 1 Cor. 15: (54-57)," (1533), "Auslegung des neuen Testament," in *Schriften*, vol. 8, col. 1340. Auslegung des ersten Buches Mose, in *Schriften*, vol. 1, cols. 1759, 1760.

*misfortunes of this life, and we shall be secure and without care, rest sweetly and gently for a brief moment, as on a sofa, until the time when he shall call and awaken us together with all his dear children to his eternal glory and joy. For since we call it a sleep, we know that we shall not remain in it, but be again awakened and live, and that the time during which we sleep, shall seem no longer than if we had just fallen asleep. Hence, we shall censure ourselves that we were surprised or alarmed at such a sleep in the hour of death, and suddenly come alive out of the grave and from decomposition, and entirely well, fresh, with a pure, clear, glorified life, meet our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ in the clouds ...*

*“Scripture everywhere affords such consolation, which speaks of the death of the saints, as if they fell asleep and were gathered to their fathers, that is, had overcome death through this faith and comfort in Christ, and awaited the resurrection, together with the saints who preceded them in death.”<sup>11 12</sup>*

### **WILLIAM TYNDALE (1484-1536), English Bible Translator and Martyr**

In Britain, William Tyndale, translator of the Bible into English, came to the defense of the revived teaching of conditional immortality. This, as well as other teachings, brought him into direct conflict with the papal champion, Sir Thomas More, likewise of England. In 1529 More had strongly objected to the “pestilential sect” represented by Tyndale and Luther, because they held that “*all souls lie and sleep till doomsday.*” In 1530 Tyndale responded vigorously, declaring:

*“And ye, in putting them [the departed souls] in heaven, hell, and purgatory, destroy the arguments wherewith Christ and Paul prove the resurrection. ... And again, if the souls be in heaven, tell me why they be not in as good case as the angels be? And then what cause is there of the resurrection?”<sup>13</sup>*

Tyndale went to the heart of the issue in pointing out the papacy’s draft upon the teachings of “heathen philosophers” in seeking to establish its contention of innate immortality. Thus:

*“The true faith putteth [setteth forth] the resurrection, which we be warned to look for every hour. The heathen philosophers, denying that, did put [set forth] that the souls did ever live. And the pope joineth the spiritual doctrine of Christ and the fleshly doctrine of philosophers together; things so contrary that they cannot agree, no more than the Spirit and the flesh do in a Christian man. And because the fleshly-minded pope consenteth unto heathen doctrine, therefore he corrupteth the Scripture to stablish it.”<sup>14</sup>*

In yet another section of the same treatise, dealing with the “invocation of saints,” Tyndale uses the same reasoning, pointing out that the doctrine of departed saints being in heaven had not yet been introduced in Christ’s day:

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<sup>11</sup> *A Compend of Luther’s Theology*, edited by Hugh Thomson Ker, Jr., p. 242.

<sup>12</sup> In his Master of Arts thesis (1946), “*A Study of Martin Luther’s Teaching Concerning the State of the Dead*,” T. N. Ketola, tabulating Luther’s references to death as a sleep—as found in Luther’s *Sammliche Schriften*, Walsh’s Concordia, 1904 ed.—lists 125 specific Luther references to death as a sleep. Ketola cites another smaller group of references showing Luther believed in the periodic consciousness of some. But the main point is that, while the dead live, they are unconscious—which is stated some seven times.

<sup>13</sup> William Tyndale, *An Answer to Sir Thomas More’s Dialogue* (Parker’s 1850 reprint), bk. 4, ch. 4, pp. 180, 181.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 180.

*“And when he [More] proveth that the saints be in heaven in glory with Christ already, saying, ‘If God be their God, they be in heaven, for he is not the God of the dead;’ there he stealeth away Christ’s argument, wherewith he proveth the resurrection: that Abraham and all saints should rise again, and not that their souls were in heaven; which doctrine was not yet in the world. And with that doctrine he taketh away the resurrection quite, and maketh Christ’s argument of none effect.”<sup>15</sup>*

Tyndale presses his contention still further by showing the conflict of papal teaching with St. Paul, as he says in slightly sarcastic vein:

*“Nay, Paul, thou art unlearned; go to Master More, and learn a new way. ‘We be not most miserable, though we rise not again; for our souls go to heaven as soon as we be dead, and are there in as great joy as Christ that is risen again.’ And I marvel that Paul had not comforted the Thessalonians with that doctrine, if he had wist [known] it, that the souls of their dead had been in joy; as he did with the resurrection, that their dead should rise again. If the souls be in heaven, in as great glory as the angels, after your doctrine, shew me what cause should be of the resurrection.”<sup>16</sup>*

#### **JOHN FRITH (1503-33), Associate of Tyndale and Fellow-Martyr**

*“Notwithstanding, let me grant it him that some are already in hell and some in heaven, which thing he shall never be able to prove by the Scriptures, yea, and which plainly destroy the resurrection, and taketh away the arguments wherewith Christ and Paul do prove that we shall rise;... and as touching this point where they rest, I dare be bold to say that they are in the hand of God.”<sup>17</sup>*

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 118.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

<sup>17</sup>A *Disputacyon of Purgatorie ... divided into three Bokes*, c. 1530, *An Answer to John Fisher, Bishop of Rochester*, Source: *Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine*, copyright 1957 by the Review and Herald Publishing Association, pages 569-575.