

CHRISTIANITY TODAY



||| A PRESBYTERIAN JOURNAL DEVOTED TO STATING, DEFENDING
AND FURTHERING THE GOSPEL IN THE MODERN WORLD |||

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Christianity and Immortality

FAITH in immortality seems to be on the wane. Otherwise it is difficult, if not impossible, to account for the increasing number of suicides. One can scarcely pick up a newspaper today without finding a report of persons—not infrequently persons of national or even international reputations—who have taken their own lives. Doubtless some of these suicides can be explained on the theory of temporary insanity and so on the ground of mental and moral irresponsibility; but as a whole it seems clear that they bear witness to a widespread disbelief in the continuance of life beyond the grave. On the assumption of a waning belief in immortality, there is nothing particularly strange about the growing number of suicides. When men believe that life is but a cry between two eternal silences, it is not surprising that they should judge that suicide offers a reasonable way of escape when the disadvantages of life appear to be hopelessly in excess of its advantages.

If the true explanation of the growing number of suicides is an increasing lack of faith in immortality, it would seem to follow that the only way to lower the number of suicides is a renewed faith in immortality on the part of men in general. We submit that this can be brought about in the twentieth century only as it was brought about in the first century, viz., by convincing men of the reality and the authenticity of that divine revelation in word and deed that is recorded in the Bible.

We would not be understood as

minimizing the value of the rational arguments for immortality, such as the historical and the teleological and the moral. We are far from supposing that Kant's criticisms emptied them of significance. At the best, however, we believe that they establish a strong presumption in favor of belief in immortality. If we are to believe not only in the probability but the certainty of immortality we must have evidence of immortality additional to that supplied by purely rational argumentation. Valid evidence of the kind required is found only in that revelation of life and immortality given us in the gospel. As a matter of fact it was not rational argumentation but historical evidence to the effect that CHRIST had risen from the dead and was the first fruits of them that are asleep that brought about that transformation in men's attitude toward immortality that marked the beginning

of the Christian era. Let mankind lose the conviction that CHRIST has been raised from the dead and that He spoke with authority concerning the life that is to come as well as the life that now is, and there is every reason to suppose that mankind will sink back into that spirit of hopelessness as regards a future life that characterized the ancient pagan world.

The reason why there can be no rational *demonstration* of immortality is often overlooked. It lies in the fact that immortality is an event that occurs, not a necessary truth; and that the appropriate evidence for establishing the occurrence of an event is personal experience or adequate testimony. This means that either we must wait until we die to discover whether we are immortal or some competent person or persons must offer trustworthy testimony as to the reality of life beyond the grave. For instance previous to 1492 many on the basis of rational considerations believed in the probability of the existence of a transatlantic continent but probability passed into certainty when Columbus and his men actually visited this transatlantic continent and bore trustworthy testimony to its existence as a matter of fact. So it is as regards the question whether we are immortal. Either we must wait until death to find out or we must be supplied with some adequate testimony as to the actuality of life beyond the grave.

A pound of testimony is worth more than a ton of rational argumentation when the problem of immortality is

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under consideration. From the nature of the soul as simple and indivisible, from the nature of its endowments, from the seeming incompleteness of its developments on earth, from the apparently disciplinary character of life as now lived, and similar considerations, we may rightly conclude that it is highly probable that we shall live after death. There must be considerations of a different sort, however, if we are to be certain that death does not end all. The following is much to the point: "One traveler beyond that bourne who returns: one voice from the other side of the grave: this would be evidence which, when accredited to the soul, would, once for all, by the proper proof, settle the matter of the occurrence of life after death. Of course, the question how many of those that die will live after death—whether the whole of mankind or a part—would require its own appropriate evidence to determine. But that would be an element of detail: the main point is whether 'death ends all' or whether the soul actually persists in living after the decay of the body."

It is but to repeat from a more religious or theological point of view what has just been said to say that a rational *demonstration* of immortality is impossible because this is a matter that depends on the purpose of God. The soul is not self-existent. It owes its existence to the creative activity of God. What is more it is dependent on God for its continuance in existence. He who made the soul can also unmake it, should such be His pleasure. What God's pleasure is in this matter we can know only as He reveals it to us. This revelation may be given in part in the nature of the soul He has created, in the powers with which He has endowed it, in the longing and desires He has put within it, in the manner in which He deals with it; but if to such suggestions or intimations there is added an explicit word through the prophets which culminates in the testimony of His own Son there will be no room for doubt as to His purpose as regards this matter.

It will be obvious to the reader that we agree with the "Spiritualists" to a certain extent—they are in search of evidence of the sort that would really prove the reality of life beyond the

grave. If the communications with the dead they profess to have received are authentic, it is altogether certain that death does not end all. We do not think there is any good reason to regard their alleged communications with the dead as authentic; but they at least direct our attention to the kind of evidence which, if genuine, would prove the reality of life after death.

We trust it is now abundantly clear to our readers why we hold that it is only by again convincing men of the reality and truthfulness of that divine revelation in word and deed recorded in the Bible that we can function effectively in the way of re-establishing a vital faith in immortality. It is in this divine revelation in word and deed that we have the only valid evidence of the sort that really proves the reality of life after death. Doubtless apart from that revelation of life and immortality made to us in JESUS CHRIST, we may cherish a well-grounded hope of immortality; but it is only in and through this revelation that we can be fully assured of it. Many will demur on the ground that there is no adequate evidence for believing in the reality and trustworthiness of such a divine revelation as we posit. We cannot argue the matter in this connection. Suffice it to say that we believe there is abundant warrant for saying not only that the evidence for the trustworthiness of the Bible as a revelation from God (including the evidence for the resurrection of JESUS as an historic fact) is enormously more cogent than the evidence for immortality to be found in the rational arguments but that it is sufficient to establish beyond a reasonable doubt that in the Bible we have a veritable revelation from God concerning human immortality. In this connection we may add that as a matter of fact few of those who have lost faith in CHRIST as risen—or in the Bible as containing a historical revelation from God—have maintained a vital faith in immortality. The facts being what they are, we may be sure that the question whether mankind will retain a faith in immortality that will be a determining influence in their lives hinges on the question whether they continue to believe in that revelation in word and deed recorded in

the Bible, more particularly whether they continue to believe in life and immortality as revealed in JESUS CHRIST.

It should not be overlooked that the evidence for immortality offered by CHRIST and the Bible is for the immortality of the whole man—that is to say of the body as well as the soul. The doctrine of the immortality of the soul is of itself a purely heathen doctrine. What Christianity teaches is an immortality of the whole man. The evidence for immortality offered by CHRIST's resurrection—the most direct we have—is evidence for the immortality not of the soul merely but of the whole man. The resurrection of the body is an essential part of the Christian doctrine of immortality. It is perhaps needless to add that according to the Christian doctrine of immortality the life to come stands in moral and organic relation to the life that now is. The here determines the hereafter. We are moving on toward the judgment seat of God which will be a broad and comprehensive test to decide to what extent we have lived our lives for the glory of God and for the good of our fellows. Only as we live our lives in the light of eternity can we realize their value or the significance of our choices from day to day.

It is not too much to say that Christianity stands or falls with its doctrine of immortality. Eliminate this doctrine and it collapses both as a system of thought and a way of life. The shibboleth of Christianity is not separation from the world but from that which is evil in the world. Yet unquestionably it finds its center of gravity in the world to come, so that it is impossible to vindicate the reasonableness of either its world or its life view apart from that eternity in which alone they find their proper setting. Naturalism may get along without a doctrine of the future life; Christianity cannot. On the assumption that the present economy is but a short span of life between two eternities of death, it is altogether certain that Christianity indicates neither the right way of thinking nor the right way of living. The doctrine of one world at a time has no standing ground whatever in Christian discussion.