

Forgiveness in the Age to Come (1)

In His untraceable wisdom, the inspiring Spirit of God chose to express many great and significant truths in the Bible in aspects that are twofold and sometimes even manifold. This twofoldness of divine truth is found in particular in the complementary revelations of God's predestination and man's decision, grace and works, salvation and rewards, and forgiveness and chastisement. To be sure, the divine intention in composing the Bible in this way was to lead the Lord's seekers into a rich, many faceted, and full understanding of the truth. For this cause the apostle Paul prayed that the Father would grant us a spirit of wisdom and revelation, the eyes of our heart having been enlightened (Eph. 1:17-18). However, beginning from a remarkably early point in the history of the church, the enlightenment of the truth concerning the believers' salvation became dim. Salvation became confused with sanctification after salvation, grace became muddled with reward, and perdition became confounded with discipline and chastisement. As seeing "in a mirror obscurely" (1 Cor. 13:12) degraded over the centuries into almost total blindness, errors were compounded until Roman Catholicism formalized a system of "last things"—heaven, hell, and purgatory—as perhaps the grandest and most fantastical systematized error in the history of the church. In response, the Protestant Reformation escaped the greater heresies but in the process fled to the refuge of a partial, one-sided truth that affirms *sola gratia* and *sola fide* while almost altogether denying the word of righteousness (Heb. 5:13), the teaching concerning the accountability and future judgment of the believers for reward or punishment.

Two Great Testimonies of the Scriptures concerning the Believers' Accountability

That a man is saved freely by grace, through faith, because of the Lord's great work of judicial redemption is the good news of the gospel and our glorious heritage of the truth. However, the New Testament also teaches that after a believer is saved, he becomes accountable for his life and work in his lifetime in the church age. When the Lord returns, we, the believers, will all stand before the judgment seat of Christ to give an account to Him (2 Cor. 5:10; Rom. 14:10), based upon which each one will receive either a reward or a rebuke from the Lord. At that time those whose life and works are approved by the

Lord will enter into the millennial kingdom as a reward to feast with Him and reign with Him as His co-kings. However, the immature, sinful, and unfaithful believers—though elect through predestination, redeemed by the eternal efficacy of Christ's blood, born again to be indwelt by the transforming Christ, and secure in their eternal salvation—will be excluded from the millennial kingdom. Moreover, they will be disciplined in the next age for their perfection so that they will be prepared to participate in the Triune God as His kings and priests in the New Jerusalem for eternity. This judgment and discipline can be seen in numerous passages in the New Testament. Here we will consider two in particular.

First, to pass through the judgment seat of Christ with a negative result is to be "saved, yet so as through fire." First Corinthians 3:11-15 says,

For another foundation no one is able to lay besides that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. But if anyone builds upon the foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, grass, stubble, the work of each will become manifest; for the day will declare it, because it is revealed by fire, and the fire itself will prove each one's work, of what sort it is. If anyone's work which he has built upon the foundation remains, he will receive a reward; if anyone's work is consumed, he will suffer loss, but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.

That this passage refers to true believers is manifestly evident. Earlier, Paul addressed the recipients of this Epistle as "God's cultivated land, God's building" (v. 9), and the Corinthians' building work was on the one foundation of Jesus Christ. All the teachers of the ancient time interpreted this passage in this way. Thus, the teaching of the apostles was that a believer, a genuine member of and worker in God's house, could nonetheless build with the worthless materials of the natural man, the fallen man, and the work and living that issue from an earthen source. Such a one will definitely and irrevocably be saved, yet so as through a certain judgment signified by "fire."

Watchman Nee points out that this passage speaks clearly about what a Christian cannot lose and what he can lose (29:411). A believer may fail to build at all on the

foundation of the Christ whom he has received, or he may build in an unapproved way, but he will be saved nonetheless. This proves that even the wicked and unprofitable slave cannot lose the salvation he received by his initial act of faith. However, this passage also clearly differentiates between those who will receive a reward and those who will suffer judgment and discipline. This proves just as strongly that a Christian can lose his reward. Thus, we have in a single passage of Scripture the sure proclamation that a believer cannot lose his eternal salvation, but he can lose his reward and come under a certain discipline. This passage does not tell us in particular what this discipline will be. It simply uses the simile “so as through fire,” invoking and applying the most consistent, universal, and recognizable biblical figure of God’s judgment. As we shall see, the truth of “saved, yet so as through fire” suffered the two great evils that are the larger subject of this article: In the hands of darkened ancient and medieval teachers it was transmuted into the teaching of purgatory, and in the hands of the Reformation it was neglected and cast out altogether.

The second passage we will consider is the Lord’s rebuke to the rebuking Pharisees in Matthew 12. In verses 31 and 32 He said,

Therefore I say to you, Every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him, neither in this age nor in the one to come.

Many teachers have commented well on the meaning of blasphemy against the Spirit, but this is not our main burden here. Rather, we must note that the Lord spoke of forgiveness in two ages, in “this age” (τούτω τῷ αἰῶνι) and in “the one to come” (τῷ μέλλοντι). In the Bible “this age” is also known as “the age” (Matt. 13:22), “the present age” (1 Tim. 6:17; 2 Tim. 4:10; Titus 2:12), “the present evil age” (Gal. 1:4), and “the age of this world” (Eph. 2:2). It is the present section of time in which God is operating to save sinners, cause the believers to grow in life, and build up the churches as the practical expressions of His Body on the earth, while at the same time Satan is operating in the world to usurp and occupy people and keep them away from God and His purpose by means of his world system. In contrast to this age, the next age is known as “that age” (Luke 20:35), “the coming age” (Mark 10:30; Luke 18:30), and “the age to come” (Heb. 6:5). It is the age of the manifestation of the kingdom of the heavens in the

millennium (Rev. 20:4-6), which will commence at the second coming of the Lord Jesus, in which He will celebrate His wedding feast, establish His rule on the earth, restore all things, reward His faithful saints, deal with the final remaining negative items in the universe, and complete the operation of God’s economy in time, prior to ushering in the eternal age in the new heaven and new earth.

In Matthew 12:32 the Lord told the Pharisees that for the sin of blaspheming the Holy Spirit there will not be forgiveness in this age, and there will not be forgiveness in the next age. This indicates that some sins are forgiven in this age, while others are forgiven in the next. Augustine expresses this simple logic very clearly: “It could not truthfully be said of some people that they will be forgiven neither in this age nor in the age to come, unless there were some who receive forgiveness in the age to come though not in this age” (*City* 1003).

Watchman Nee classifies at least five kinds of forgiveness of sins (20:180-189). Sins have different consequences, and the consequences of sin determine the kind of forgiveness involved. The chief consequence of sin, of course, is eternal perdition. Eternal forgiveness solves the problem of this consequence and issues in eternal salvation for all who believe in Christ. Besides this, however, sins committed after a person receives eternal salvation result in separation from God’s people, hindrance of fellowship with God, the need for disciplinary chastisement, and our position related to the coming kingdom. Thus, forgiveness is of various kinds and can be applied to the believers at different times and under different circumstances. As we shall see at the end of this article, one kind of forgiveness requires our confession, another requires our testimony, and yet another requires a period of chastisement under God’s government. Moreover, some sins will remain to be forgiven in the age to come, after a certain discipline, so that a late-repenting believer may enjoy the blessings of eternal redemption with the Lamb of God on the throne for eternity (Rev. 22:1). All forgiveness, of course, is based on the redemption of Christ through His efficacious and once-for-all offering to God by the shedding of His blood.

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Purging by Fire As Taught by the Church Fathers

After the time of the apostles, the second through fourth centuries saw the first great development of the interpretation of the New Testament teaching related to the judgment and discipline of the believers: forgiveness in

the age to come and “saved, yet so as through fire.” At times the complete soteriology of the early church teachers is unrecognizable to the modern evangelical. To be sure, all the orthodox teachers believed in the salvation of sinners by the unique merit of the redemption of Christ, according to the gospel of the New Testament. However, to the fathers, salvation was not merely forensic and objective, as it came to be thought of after Luther and Calvin. The central ideas of patristic theology, both in the Greek East and the Latin West, were deification and sonship, becoming “like Him” (1 John 3:2), the same as He is, to which all the aspects of salvation are related and in the light of which they must be understood (Lampe 149). Accordingly, the fathers believed that salvation comprises definite and evident manifestations in the lives of the saved ones. This feeling was so strong in the early understanding of the gospel that saving grace and the fruits of grace were spoken of almost synonymously, without confusion. In the early writings there is nothing akin to the “ticket-to-heaven” gospel that is found too often in many evangelical circles today, in which a born-again but sinful and unfaithful believer enters immediately into the joy of the Lord after death. Rather, the life of grace was one with the life of sanctification and purification, culminating in perfection and maturity. This process of perfection almost always involved one kind of suffering or another, and indeed, many of the church fathers believed that this suffering continued as necessary, temporarily and to various degrees, even after death. In one way or another they expressed this in their expositions of passages such as 1 Corinthians 3:15 and Matthew 12:32. Concerning these sufferings, Augustine refers to the latter passage:

As for temporal pains, some people suffer them in this life only, others after death, others both in this life and in the other; yet all this precedes that last and strictest judgement. However, not all men who endure temporal pains after death come into those eternal punishments, which are to come after that judgement. Some, in fact, will receive forgiveness in the world to come for what is not forgiven in this...so that they may not be punished with the eternal chastisement of the world to come. (*City* 990-991)

Although this statement seems complex, it can easily be parsed along three lines. First, temporal sufferings can be experienced in this life, in the next, or in both. Second, some who endure this suffering (i.e., the believers) will be spared eternal punishment. Third, these sufferings precede the eternal punishments of the unbelievers, which follow upon the final judgment of God at His great white throne (Rev. 20:11-12). Of the various scenarios Augustine pictures here, we can point out two for the sake of example. First, an unbeliever will suffer temporary punishment while waiting for the “resurrection of

judgment” at which point he will then be cast into the lake of fire as an eternal punishment (John 5:28-29; Rev. 20:15). Second, a sinning and unrepenting believer may be chastised both in his lifetime and in the coming age, but since his name is written in the book of life, he will definitely be saved from the “eternal chastisement” suffered by the unbelievers. Both of these eventualities are well warranted in the Scriptures.¹

The church fathers often spoke of the future judgment of unperfected or sinning believers in terms of a purging fire. Ambrose taught that after death all men would be subjected to a trial by fire in the principle of the baptism of fire mentioned in Matthew 3:11. The unsaved will perish in the fire, some will pass through the same fire not only unhurt but refreshed, while others will be painfully purged by it for their sanctification, as gold is burned to be purged of dross (Le Goff 59-60). Jerome also spoke of the need for trial and purgation by fire:

Just as we believe that the torments of the Devil, of all the deniers of God, of the ungodly who have said in their hearts, “there is no God,” will be eternal, so too do we believe that the judgment of Christian sinners, whose works will be tried and purged in fire will be moderate and mixed with clemency. (Le Goff 61)

In other words, just as there will be an eternal judgment for the devil and his followers, there will also be another kind of judgment, though clement, for “Christian sinners.” Such a one, “even if he die in sin, shall by his faith live forever,” although only after a certain period of disciplinary purification (61). Since Augustine is one of the richest sources on this subject, we will keep returning to him. He says similarly, “After the resurrection of the dead there will still be some on whom mercy will be bestowed, after punishment suffered by the souls of the dead, so that they will not be consigned to the eternal fire” (*City* 1003). The foregoing three citations represent the Latin Doctors. Le Goff provides a fuller list of witnesses with detailed analyses.

Since the teaching that centuries later would become confused as purgatory is a matter primarily of the Latin West, we are emphasizing the opinions of the Latin fathers. The Greek church did not follow the same development of doctrine as the West, and in medieval times this became an issue of contention that forced the Latin church to define and codify its own stand. This does not mean, however, that the East neglected the concept of the disciplinary perfection of the believers after death. “It was the common opinion of the Greek Fathers, that the fire of the day of judgment would cause severe suffering to some of those who would be finally saved” (Schaff 387). Gregory of Nyssa, for example, considers that even after the resurrection, “there is a wide interval [i.e., difference]

between those who have been purified, and those who still need purification”; if a man is still in need of purification at the time of his death, he will be resurrected, in the same condition in which he died, to be purified by the melting away of his vice in a “furnace” (504). Concerning such a one, Gregory says, “When he has quitted his body and the difference between virtue and vice is known he cannot approach God till the purging fire shall have cleansed the stains with which his soul was infested” (Hanna 577).

The above references indicate that the belief in a purging fire for believers after death was common among the church fathers of the second through fourth centuries. The teachers of this era generally taught along the same lines, although they differed in certain details. Above we have cited Ambrose’s teaching of painful purgation, Jerome’s “judgment of Christian sinners,” Augustine’s prophecy for those “on whom mercy will be bestowed, after punishment,” and Gregory of Nyssa’s “furnace” for “those who still need purification” after the resurrection. Taken as such, these teachings are honest attempts at understanding and expositing the word of righteousness in passages such as 1 Corinthians 3:11-15. Much later, the darkness and excesses of Roman Catholic teaching and practice in the Middle Ages forced the reactions of the Reformation, and Calvinism in particular engendered a deep suspicion of any teaching concerning accountability and judgment based on a believer’s works or condition. Eventually, Protestantism would almost altogether reject any belief in sufferings for believers after death. Without this prejudice, however, the early fathers attempted to keep to the spirit of the apostles’ word in this regard and freely accepted the New Testament’s usage of the image of judging fire.

The Beginnings of a Heresy

On the other hand, unless we are able to discern the whole view of any of the ancient teachers on this subject, we should exercise caution when reading them. In general, the teaching of the fathers lacks the clarity of the teaching of the apostles in the New Testament, and in almost every testimony a careful reading will uncover at least a few errors in the details.² For some teachers, this troubling lack of clarity resulted in outright errors, which are exemplified best by Clement of Alexandria and Origen in the third century. Whether or not it is digging too deeply to say that these Alexandrians find their roots in Greek philosophical and religious traditions,

the influence of Hellenism on the Greek teachers should not be minimized. At least a shadow of the pagan Greek idea that all divine punishment was not merely punitive but contributed to a person’s salvation can be seen in the teachings of Clement and Origen. Clement believed that the pagan Greeks who were “righteous” under philosophy were more suited for salvation than the Old Testament Jews who were righteous under the law. Accordingly, he believed that after the apostles died, they preached the gospel to the Gentiles in Hades so that

all who believe shall be saved, although they may be of the Gentiles, on making their profession there [i.e., in Hades]; since God’s punishments are saving and disciplinary, leading to conversion, and choosing rather the repentance than the death of a sinner; and especially since souls, although darkened by passions, when released from their bodies, are able to perceive more clearly, because of their being no longer obstructed by the paltry flesh. (490-491)

Clement’s fanciful and unscriptural teaching is plain, not hidden, and he devotes the entire chapter of *Stromata* 6.6 to this subject, clearly teaching that after the time of the apostles the gospel was preached to “those of the heathen who were ready for conversion,” and that although they had already died, they “with all speed turned and believed” (491).³

Clement’s pupil, Origen, went to even further extremes. Origen believed that everyone tainted by sin would come to a baptism of fire which will affect him according to his condition. However, he felt that all punishments, in this age and in the next, whether effected on believers or unbelievers, are remedial and salutary. Even hell, to Origen, was a kind of purgation from which even the most wicked would eventually benefit when they are brought to repentance. He taught that purgation after death is the destiny of all sinners, not only of those who believed and were baptized. It was he who first clearly stated in this way that the soul can be purified after death, developing in full the theory of *catharsis*, which came to him from the Greek Platonic tradition (Trigg 115; Le Goff 54-55, 57). This false teaching is a great and heretical corruption of the Lord’s word concerning forgiveness in the age to come in Matthew 12 and the apostle’s teaching of “saved, yet so as through fire” in 1 Corinthians 3. Of the teachers of this error, Clement and Origen were the chief. Therefore, these two (although they were Alexandrians) are considered as the first two fathers of what eventually would become the Latin teaching of purgatory.

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Unclear Teachings and the Seeds of Error

We must pause here to consider the seeds of the system of error that were sown in the early centuries of the church. To be sure, the early fathers of the church believed that sinners are saved by the unique merit of the redemption of Christ through their faith in Him and His work. However, it was not until the time of the Reformation, in response to the growing darkness in the understanding of salvation, that Christian teachers began to more precisely identify the exact time and means of a believer's salvation. In the early times, salvation seems to have been viewed more as a process, although the time of baptism served as a reference point for a believer's entrance into the kingdom of God. The view of salvation as a process is allowable if we consider that the full salvation of God is of two great aspects: judicial redemption and organic salvation. Our judicial redemption is based on the work that Christ accomplished once for all in His flesh on the cross. When we believe in the Lord, we apply His accomplished work and receive forgiveness of sins (Luke 24:47), washing of sins (1 John 1:7), justification (Rom. 3:24-25), reconciliation (5:10), and positional sanctification (1 Cor. 1:2; Heb. 13:12). This aspect of salvation is eternal and secure, and it fully takes Christ's accomplished redemption as its unique cause.

On the other hand, the subjective and organic aspect of our full salvation comprises regeneration as the initial entrance into the kingdom of God (1 Pet. 1:23; John 3:3, 5), dispositional sanctification (Rom. 6:19, 22), renewing (12:2; Eph. 4:23), transformation (2 Cor. 3:18), conformation to the image of Christ (Rom. 8:29), and eventually the glorification of our body (v. 30; Phil. 3:21). This aspect of our full salvation after regeneration is ongoing and requires a process over time. Moreover, its completion requires the cooperation and exercise of the believers. The early fathers, however, may not have seen the need to carefully distinguish judicial redemption (with its eternal effects) from the ongoing organic experience of salvation (with its temporal and dispensational effects). Judicial redemption without the subsequent, ongoing stages of organic salvation is an abnormal condition, and without the pressures of the doctrinal errors that had built up by the time of the Reformation, the early fathers did not see the need to compose a careful theology to distinguish them. If this lack of clarity was not a shortcoming in itself, it certainly did not serve to build up a defense against the system of error that was soon to come in the form of the heresy of a salvation based on purgation and works. This is the first seed of error that was sown, unintentionally, in the early centuries.

Second, these unclear teachings introduced a new status of persons between the saved and the unsaved. Early

Jewish and Christian apocalyptic writings had already given birth to an imagined geography of the afterlife that provided a variety of regions to which persons were assigned according to their degrees of righteousness or unrighteousness. The church fathers themselves experimented with classification schemes involving a varying number of categories of persons and situations in the afterlife. Augustine divided men into four types: the thoroughly good, those who are not entirely good, those who are not entirely evil, and the thoroughly evil, assigning to each a different status in the afterlife ("Enchiridion" 272). All the types and categories of the dead were of necessity vague and confused, since the distinction between judicially saved and unsaved persons was not clearly elucidated. By the Middle Ages, the teaching of purgatory evolved toward its definitive position: that there are persons who are suited for eternal salvation but do not obtain it before the time of their death. Such persons would obtain salvation only by being completely purged in purgatory. The Scriptures absolutely deny such a distorted economy of eternal salvation.

A Perverse Soteriology of Suffering

The third great seed of error related to salvation and the believers' responsibility after salvation was the deformed teaching concerning the purpose and nature of sufferings. Origen in particular, perhaps more than any other teacher before medieval times, believed in the redemptive value of suffering. Concerning the future judgment of sinners, he says, "Certainly it is understood that the fury of God's vengeance is profitable for the purgation of souls....The punishment, also, which is said to be applied by fire, is understood to be applied with the object of healing" (296).⁴ Origen's idea, inherited from Greek philosophy, is an insidious error, a true foundation stone for the heretical teaching of purgatory that was later to develop. Although the excesses of Origen's teachings were later condemned, ancient and medieval belief was never thoroughly cleansed of their taint. Such a gross and dark error utterly denies God's grace and His economy in redemption and salvation. To be sure, chastisement is profitable for the sons of God (Heb. 12:5-11), but it can never save or transform those who have not been born of the Father through regeneration in their lifetime. Our suffering in itself has no redemptive value. Only the suffering, shedding of blood, and death of Christ the Savior are efficacious for our redemption. Discipline and chastisement are not for eternal salvation but for sanctification after salvation.

This seed of error in the early centuries matured in time to become a highly defined system of the necessity and purpose of sufferings under the theological heading of merit, demerit, mortal versus venial sins, atonement, expiation, obligation, satisfaction, punishment, and

ultimately purgatory. The Dominican father Garrigou-Lagrange summarizes the Roman teaching:

According to the doctrine of the Church, purgatory is the place of those souls that have died under obligation to suffer still some temporary pain, due to venial sins not yet forgiven, or to sins already forgiven but not yet expiated. They remain in purgatory until the debt which they owe to divine justice has been fully paid. They pay this debt progressively, not by merit and satisfaction, for the time of merit is gone by, but by satisfaction, that is, by enduring voluntarily the satisfactory suffering inflicted on them. (147)

This definition is very authoritative according to the Roman dogma. The concept of “satisfaction” (*satisfactio*) is central to Catholic soteriology. It represents the redemptive and expiatory value of the pains of suffering in purgatory (Pohle 203; Toner 656). There is no doubt that the apostles suffered much and exhorted the believers to share in the same, but the purpose of sufferings is made very clear in the New Testament. In Colossians 1:24 Paul says, “I now rejoice in my sufferings on your behalf and fill up on my part that which is lacking of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for His Body, which is the church.” The afflictions of Christ in His flesh were filled up and adequate for the accomplishment of redemption, and no one can add to these. However, Christ still needed to be lived out in the flesh of the apostles to carry out the yet incomplete work of the building up of the Body of Christ. Paul’s suffering, therefore, was not for redemption. Rather, it was for his labor and struggle to complete the word of God and to announce, admonish, teach, and present every man full-grown in Christ (vv. 25, 28-29). Peter also exhorted the persecuted believers to humble themselves under the hand of God for the proving of their faith by testing so that, already having been saved from eternal perdition through the Lord’s death, they may also be saved through the trials of God’s disciplinary judgment from the need for further discipline in the future when the world is judged (1 Pet. 1:6-7; 4:17-18).

It is a great heresy to say that our sufferings have redemptive value, that they are meritorious toward our redemption, or that they offer a satisfaction for sins that works toward our redemption. The Platonic notion of the expiation of sins through “pain alone” denies and annuls grace. However, this evil teaching was already present in the church by the end of the third century. Thus, concerning the believers’ salvation, the seeds of error sown

by the early Christian teachers were at least threefold: the failure to distinguish between judicial redemption and organic salvation, the intimation of a middle class of persons between the saved and unsaved, and the false belief in redemptive suffering.

The First Foundation of Purgatory: Prayers for the Dead

The teaching of purgatory that evolved in antiquity and the Middle Ages was based not firstly on the belief in afterlife purgation. The first foundation—both chronologically and in importance—was the ancient practice of praying for the dead who departed in the Lord. *The Catholic Encyclopedia* states,

The proofs for the Catholic position, both in Scripture and in Tradition, are bound up also with the practice of praying for the dead. For why pray for the dead, if there be no belief in the power of prayer to afford solace to those who as yet are excluded from the sight of God? So true is this position that prayers for the dead and the existence of a place of purgation are mentioned in conjunction in the oldest passages of the Fathers, who allege reasons for succouring departed souls. (Hanna 576)

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The origin of the practice of praying for the dead in the early churches is uncertain; the influence of pagan cultures around the Mediterranean is speculative though

credible. At any rate, the custom was already called ancient by Tertullian near the beginning of the third century. He prescribes in several places the custom of offering prayerful sacrifices for the dead on the anniversary of their death, though he readily admits that there is nothing in the Scriptures to justify it:

As often as the anniversary comes round, we make offerings for the dead as birthday honours....If, for these and other such rules, you insist upon having positive Scripture injunction, you will find none. Tradition will be held forth to you as the originator of them, custom as their strengthener, and faith as their observer. (“Chaplet” 94-95)

Funeral liturgies in early churches and inscriptions found on graves provide further practical evidences for the practice, although this evidence is more anecdotal than substantial. An early and very powerful witness to the practice of praying for the dead is “The Passion of the Holy Martyrs Perpetua and Felicitas,” of which some suppose Tertullian to be the editor. In this account of martyrdom around AD 203 or 204, Perpetua receives a

vision in prison of her brother Dinocrates, who had died at the age of seven. Dinocrates appears in the wretchedly diseased state in which he died, in a “gloomy place” and unable to drink from a tall fountain. After praying for him day and night, she sees him again in another vision, this time healed, in a bright place, and drinking from a never-empty goblet. Perpetua concludes, “Then I understood that he was translated from the place of punishment” (“Passion” 701-702). This landmark tale of martyrdom is hailed by both critics and supporters of the doctrine of purgatory, for though it lacks most of the canonical elements of purgatory, it is obviously a testimony to the practice and alleged efficacy of prayer for the suffering dead.

Augustine’s “On Care to Be Had for the Dead” is a tactful treatise on what actions performed by the living do and do not benefit the dead. His conclusion is that nothing truly avails for the departed spirits except offerings, including prayers, especially those made by friends and relatives:

Let us not think that to the dead for whom we have a care, any thing reaches save what by sacrifices either of the altar, or of prayers, or of alms, we solemnly supplicate....More diligently however doth each man these things for his own near and dear friends, in order that they may be likewise done unto him by his. (550)

If a man lacks such close relatives to pray for him after death, he is equally well served by “a general commemoration” of the church, “the one pious mother which is common to all” (542). Admitting, as all the fathers did, that the Scriptures give little evidence for such a practice, he states in the same tract that the authority of the church is sufficient to define the custom:

Even if it were no where at all read in the Old Scriptures, not small is the authority...of the whole Church, namely, that in the prayers of the priest which are offered to the Lord God at His altar, the commendation of the dead hath also its place. (540)

He demonstrates this feeling very eloquently in his prayer for his own mother, recorded in the ninth book of his *Confessions*. This and other similar teachings later earned Augustine the title of the third “father” of purgatory. The offering of the three elements for the dead—prayer, the sacrifice “of the altar” (the mass, Eucharist), and alms—has remained the formula of the Roman Church until the present time.

Gregory the Great, the architect of the medieval papacy, is the fourth and final of the ancient fathers of the teaching of purgatory, appearing at the end of the sixth century. In his evangelistic zeal, he sought to popularize Christian

teachings through the use of anecdotes and visions, which he called *exempla*. Book Four of his *Dialogues* is a compendium of *exempla* that recounts horror stories, marvels, miracles, dreams, visitations, and visions of departed souls. In these stories the dead often appear as “a spirit disguised as a man” to beg to have masses offered for them or to plead, “Make intercession for me” or, “I beg you, pray for me to the Lord” (250, 266-267). At the conclusion of the stories, the soul might appear once again to inform his friend or relative that he had been released from the place of punishment, as the deceased Justus told his brother after the mass was offered for him, “Up to this moment I was in misery,...but now I am well, because this morning I was admitted to communion” (269). Such tales prove, as Gregory says, that the souls of the dead receive great benefit from the offerings made for them. The importance of Gregory’s *exempla* was that, for the common people at least, they filled the place of authentic testimony and added credibility to the growing teaching of salvation through purgatorial punishments and the efficacy of offerings for the dead. As such, they were to become a principal support for the doctrine of purgatory in later medieval times, and Gregory’s writings were to be considered “the chief fountain of the devotion to the Holy Souls,” the dead in purgatory (Faber 63).

Choices Made in This Life

The second appendix of the *Summa Theologica* of Thomas Aquinas, from the mid-thirteenth century, addresses the question of whether or not there is a purgatory. The answer first cites Gregory of Nyssa (with emphasis) and then draws the conclusion:

This we preach, holding to the teaching of truth, and this is our belief; this the universal Church holds, by praying for the dead that they may be loosed from sins. This cannot be understood except as referring to Purgatory: and whosoever resists the authority of the Church, incurs the note of heresy. (3010)

The logic of this answer is simple: The church asserts its belief in a purgatory simply by praying for the dead. That is, we pray for the dead; therefore, the dead must be in need of our prayers, and thus there is a purgatory. Rightly did Thomas put the horse before the cart, for the practice of praying for the dead anteceded the doctrine of purgatory by many centuries. The ancient custom of praying for the departed in Christ, whatever its source was, was a simple movement of misguided piety, an unscriptural practice (as Tertullian reminds us) that was in vogue among early Christians. To be sure, however, no one who held such a custom could ever have dreamed of the abominable excesses that this practice would one day lead to, and to retrofit the heretical doctrine of purgatory to a simple, unscriptural act of piety is unjustifiable.

The most serious error related to praying for the dead is the false hope embodied in this practice that a person who has not obtained eternal salvation in this life can complete this salvation in the next by arriving, only after death, at the point that God is satisfied by the payment made for his sins. The Word of God plainly and forcefully tells us, "It is reserved for men to die once, and after this comes judgment" (Heb. 9:27). Second Corinthians 6:2 testifies, "For He says, 'In an acceptable time I listened to you, and in the day of salvation I helped you.' Behold, now is the well-acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation." In His economy of salvation, God has given man a "now," the days of his life in the flesh, to hear the gospel, believe Him, and receive Him for salvation by Christ's full and thorough judicial redemption. Then a man dies, "and after this comes judgment." Our ultimate salvation depends entirely on the choice we make in this life. The Scriptures plainly tell us that there is no further opportunity to appropriate our eternal salvation after our death. The more accurate and orthodox of the early church fathers were of one accord in this understanding. In refuting the Platonists, the pagan Greeks who taught that all punishment is correctional, Augustine insists that those who do not respond to the grace of God in this age will suffer punitive and eternal punishment in the future (*City* 1002-1003). Tertullian, Cyprian, and Chrysostom speak likewise:

There is not a soul that can at all procure salvation, except it believe whilst it is in the flesh, so true is it that the flesh is the very condition on which salvation hinges. (Tertullian, "Resurrection" 551).

When you have once departed thither, there is no longer any place for repentance, and no possibility of making satisfaction. Here life is either lost or saved; here eternal safety is provided for by the worship of God and the fruits of faith. Nor let anyone be restrained either by his sins or by his years from coming to obtain salvation. To him who still remains in this world no repentance is too late. (Cyprian 465)

For though thou shouldest have father or son or friend or any soever who hath confidence towards God, none of these shall ever deliver thee, thine own works having destroyed thee....And these things I say, not to grieve you nor to throw you into despair, but lest nourished by vain and cold hopes, and placing confidence in this person or that, we should neglect our own proper goodness. For if we be slothful, there will be neither righteous man nor prophet nor apostle nor any one to stand by us. (Chrysostom 258)

The second error in praying for the dead is related to the eschatology, the "time and place," of God's disciplinary dealings with the unfaithful believers, those who truly receive eternal salvation in their lifetime but whose life and works are not worthy of the dispensational reward of the millennial kingdom. We will speak more about the eschatology of reward and punishment in the next installment of this article. It is sufficient for now to say that the dead in Christ are currently in "Abraham's bosom," in the pleasant portion of Hades (Luke 16:22), where there is no purging or discipline. It will be at the time of the Lord's return that the believers will rise to stand before His judgment seat. Therefore, the discipline of unfaithful believers will transpire in the coming millennial age. The proper scriptural eschatology does not allow that believers are already undergoing discipline after death while others are still running the race in this age.

The governing principle of rewards or punishments in the future is found simply and eloquently in Galatians 6:7-8: "Do not be deceived: God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. For he who sows unto his own flesh will reap corruption of the flesh, but he who sows unto the Spirit will of the Spirit reap eternal life."

All men, including genuine believers, are governed by the decisions they make in their lifetime. The present age is first of all the time to apply through faith Christ's unique offering made for sin and thus obtain eternal salvation. More-

over, it is also the time for believers to grow in life, give up the world, deal with the self, love the Lord above all, and count all things loss for Christ that they may have the filling of the Holy Spirit and be transformed in their entire being. This age is also the time to exercise our faith and be positive and aggressive to use the gift the Lord has given us to the fullest extent and be active in His work to gain a positive result for Him. If we fail and fall short of this, we will have to give an account to the Lord at His judgment seat, and our works will be tested with fire. Those who are found lacking will be disciplined by the Lord, not immediately after their death, but in the coming age. Concerning this discipline, the uncontested Scriptures offer no teaching or example that enjoins the living believers to pray for the dead.⁵ Rather, the time for redemption, shepherding, exhorting, supplying, perfecting, and building up one another is today, in this age.

From Necrologies to Necromancy

In early centuries, the alleged bond between the living and the dead was perpetuated by offering the mass at the

Scriptures offer no teaching that enjoins living believers to pray for the dead. Rather, this is the time for redemption, shepherding, exhorting, supplying, perfecting, and building up one another.

gravesites of martyrs. This later gave way to the custom of building altars over their tombs or placing their relics above the altars. By the early Middle Ages, a memento for the dead was regularly included in the mass, and monasteries began to maintain necrologies and obituaries, registers of the names of the dead, as reminders of individual anniversary services to be celebrated for them. In the eleventh century the influential Benedictine Abby of Cluny, France began to celebrate a general “Day of the Dead” for souls not listed in the registers. This is still celebrated today as All Souls’ Day on November 2, the day after All Saints’ Day.⁶

In Catholic dogma, all of the above falls under the heading of “the communion of the saints.” *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* states, “At the present time some of [Christ’s] disciples are pilgrims on earth. Others have died and are being purified, while still others are in glory” (249). Following the formula first developed by Innocent III, these three kinds of disciples are called the Church Militant, the Church Suffering (or Expectant), and the Church Victorious, respectively. Under the section heading “Communion with the dead” the Catechism quotes from *Lumen Gentium*,

“In full consciousness of this communion of the whole Mystical Body of Jesus Christ, the Church in its pilgrim members, from the very earliest days of the Christian religion, has honored with great respect the memory of the dead; and ‘because it is a holy and a wholesome thought to pray for the dead that they may be loosed from their sins’ she offers her suffrages for them.” Our prayer for them is capable not only of helping them, but also of making their intercession for us effective. (250)

This mutually effective intercession practiced by the living for the dead, and the dead for the living, is seen as “an exchange of spiritual goods” which reinforces the union of the “wayfarers” with the “brethren who sleep in the peace of Christ” (249). Referring to Ambrose’s “Funeral Oration on His Brother, Satyrus,” *The Modern Catholic Encyclopedia* says,

Not even death can sever the “communion of saints,” for its bond uniting persons in God continues and immeasurably deepens after death....Those who have died do not leave their loved ones but are even more intimately with them, giving them the uninterrupted enjoyment of their presence which they could not give them before. (Fatula 188)

Michael J. Taylor, a Jesuit, tells us that after medieval times, “Remembrance of the spiritual needs of the dead became an essential mark of Catholic devotion and spirituality” (37-38). He speaks of the “truly reciprocal” spiritual exchange in this way:

Souls in final transition to God [i.e., in purgatory] can give of themselves in prayer and works for the needs of others. And, of course, these souls are joined spiritually to members of the body of Christ still making the earthly pilgrimage. These members need the prayers and support of fellow Christians as they learn how to live the gospel. Souls in purgatory can be of spiritual help to them. As the living can help and support the dead by prayers and good works, so the dead can assist the living. (64)

Father F. W. Faber, who studied under Cardinal Newman and is considered a master theologian of the spiritual life, eloquently exhorts his readers to pray for the departed souls in purgatory. He cites Thomas Aquinas: “Prayer for the dead is more acceptable than for the living, for the dead are in the greatest need of it and cannot help themselves, as the living can” (9). He fervently charges the living to offer “vicarious penance” for the dead, to offer indulgences and sacrifices for them by any vein or channel possible—by “liturgy, commemoration, incense, holy water,” or most of all the mass—because “to possess such powers, and not to use them, would be the height of irreverence toward God, as well as of want of charity to men” (44-45). We are set to this work, he says, by God Himself, by Mary, the “Queen of Purgatory,” and by “St. Michael, as Prince of Purgatory” (49-50).⁷

Faber celebrates the notion of the intimate presence of the dead by means of the lives of monastics such as Josefa de Santa Inez, Augustinian of Beniganim, Marie Denise de Martignat, and Francesca of Pampeluna, all of whom are said to have had continual communications with the dead, their monastery cells often being filled with their spirits (63-64). Marie Denise recounts that on her journey to the convent at Annecy she was accompanied by a multitude of the “Holy Souls,” whose presence was sensible to her and who disclosed secrets to her on the way. So continual was the presence of the departed troop that “she found more profit for her soul in conversation with them than with the living” (65-66). The alleged liberation of many souls from purgatory is accounted to her, and she died at the end of a nine-year struggle on behalf of a certain prince who had died in a duel, whose sufferings in purgatory she had claimed to witness in visions (67-68). Francesca, a Theresian nun, was said to have been witness to hundreds of souls in purgatory, who accounted to her the number of years they had suffered there.

“An Abomination to Jehovah”

Faber justifies, even exalts, the communication with the dead in this way: “Men have a feeling of safety in not meddling with the supernatural; but the truth is, we cannot stand aloof on one side and be safe” (45). However, the feeling of safety in not “meddling with the supernatural” is very warranted from the Scriptures. The

Scriptures give us only one case of communication with the dead, in the Old Testament, and one alleged case (as we shall see) in the New Testament. In 1 Samuel 28:7-15 Saul, forsaken by Jehovah, consulted the medium (in Hebrew, “a woman, a mistress of necromancy”) at En-dor and commanded her to bring up the spirit of Samuel out of Sheol. In doing this, Saul knew that he was committing the same sin he formerly had banished from the land. The medium also knew that this was an abomination and accused Saul of laying a snare for her. Likewise, even Samuel rebuked Saul. Earlier, Samuel had warned Saul that his rebellion was like the sin of divination (15:23). In calling up Samuel from the dead, Saul practiced divination, which involves contact with evil spirits and is worse than idol worship. Deuteronomy 18:10-12 says,

There shall not be found among you anyone...who performs divination, practices soothsaying, or interprets omens;...anyone who consults a spirit of the dead or a familiar spirit or inquires of the dead; for everyone who does these things is an abomination to Jehovah.

Similarly, 2 Chronicles 33:6 says that Manasseh “practiced soothsaying and enchantments and sorcery, and appointed mediums and spiritists,” doing what was evil in the sight of Jehovah beyond measure, provoking Him to anger.

In the New Testament, the Lord told the story of Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16:19-31). Lazarus died and went to be in “Abraham’s bosom” in the pleasant part of Hades, while the rich man died and was in torment. On learning that his torment was unquenchable, the rich man in Hades made a peculiar request of Abraham, asking that Lazarus would be sent back from the dead to speak to the living:

Then I ask you, Father, to send him to the house of my father—for I have five brothers—so that he may solemnly testify to them, lest they also come to this place of torment. But Abraham said, They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them. But he said, No, Father Abraham; but if someone risen from the dead would go to them, they will repent. But he said to him, If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead. (vv. 27-31)

That someone would come up from the dead to testify to the living is one of the characteristics of the heretical teaching of purgatory. However, to use this passage in Luke to support such a belief is a gross misappropriation, since the rich man’s request was absolutely denied. A

crossover between the living and the dead is unheard of and has no place at all in God’s economical dealings. The Scriptures have definite words for communication with the dead: *abomination* and *evil*. Thus, a simple and misguided practice of piety in the early centuries of the church devolved into the abomination of necromancy by the Middle Ages. This reveals the true nature of the doctrine of purgatory, which makes it one of the abominations and unclean things in the cup of the great harlot (Rev. 17:4-5).

Reflections on the Church Fathers

We must stop to reflect on the role and intent of the church fathers in the eventual development of the doctrine of purgatory. All Christians share the instinct for finding the origins, the beginnings, the first things, related to beliefs and practices. The major, influential teachers of the second through sixth centuries, however, are not the true fathers of the truth of the faith. Our origins are always to be found in the words of the Lord and the teaching of the apostles in the holy Scriptures. History tells us that while the basic items of the faith

were preserved, by the Lord’s sovereign grace, through the centuries following the passing of the apostles, the time of the fathers also saw the introduction and development of a number of unscriptural teachings and practices.

The gradual development of the doctrine of purgatory exemplifies the continuum of degradation suffered with respect to the understanding of the truth. First, the truth of the full salvation of God and the accountability of the believers was obscured, not being interpreted and communicated in “all the riches of the full assurance of understanding” (Col. 2:2) with which it was delivered by the Lord and the New Testament apostles. Second, partial truths were taught in place of the whole, multifaceted truth. Following this, some of the fathers exhibited a tendency toward actual error in their teachings. Finally, as we have seen, some of the fathers promulgated outright and grievous errors. As a result, the truth of the accountability of the believers devolved into the elaborate and evil doctrine of purgatory. However, the official doctrine of purgatory was not fully developed until the Middle Ages. It was not received in its present form before the twelfth century and not canonized until the thirteenth. Therefore, no teaching of the fathers or practice of the early church can rightly be classified as belonging to the actual doctrine of purgatory prior to this time. It is crucial that we understand this.

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The fathers unwaveringly believed that sanctification must accompany salvation, and almost universally they believed that the process of sanctification must be completed in a believer before he enters eternity with the Lord. They taught that genuine Christians, the elect recipients of the Lord's grace, would be tested by the fire of the Lord's judgment, and that those who are found lacking would be saved, yet so as through the fire of His discipline. Moreover, many expressly believed that the time for this discipline may extend into the period after death, and that certain sins—those not confessed, forsaken, and dealt with—would be forgiven only in the age to come. In teaching this, they honestly and without prejudice relied on and interpreted key passages from the Scriptures, such as 1 Corinthians 3:11-15 and Matthew 12:32. This much we can say to affirm and defend the stance of the early fathers in the light of the Scriptures.

However, the churches in their day instinctively practiced, and many of the fathers prescribed, prayers for the dead in Christ (not the unbelieving dead). Although they recognized that this practice had no ground in the proper canon of Scripture, they were willing to yield to tradition and custom as authoritative, as Tertullian so eloquently states. Moreover, their discernment of the canon of Scripture was not clear, and they found themselves looking to apocryphal writings to vindicate their practice—a method against which Jerome explicitly warned.⁸ In this sense, the church fathers themselves built with a certain amount of wood, grass, and stubble (1 Cor. 3:12) upon the foundation of Christ and the teaching of the apostles. In this matter they sowed to the flesh (Gal. 6:7-8), and the church reaped a growing, ponderous corruption for many centuries to come. A proverbial “journey of a thousand miles” was put forever off course by their missteps at the beginning. As such, some of the fathers of the church are considered “fathers of purgatory.” Nevertheless, it is not entirely fair to call them fathers of a child they never knew, for they certainly could not have been able to foresee the great and abominable heresy that much later would be born of their unclear and often misleading teachings.

Five Categories of Forgiveness

The Scriptures teach us that the work of Christ on the cross in the shedding of His blood is eternally effective for our redemption. The worthy and pleasing sacrifice of the Lamb of God has procured our forgiveness—His blood is sufficient. However, the New Testament speaks of forgiveness from at least five different directions, each of which requires a careful understanding and correct application. First, eternal forgiveness is related to our eternal salvation. Matthew 26:28 says, “For this is My blood of the covenant, which is being poured out for many for forgiveness of sins.” This is the greatest forgiveness, yet it is

the simplest, for we receive it once for all by believing in the Lord. It is a heresy to confuse this forgiveness and its issue of eternal salvation with the forgiveness in Matthew 12:32 and the salvation through fire in 1 Corinthians 3:15, but this is precisely the falsehood contained in the teaching of purgatory.

John 20:23 speaks of a second kind of forgiveness. This verse says, “Whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven them; and whose sins you retain, they are retained.” Here the Lord gave the disciples the authority to declare and proclaim that a person has been forgiven, receiving that person into the fellowship and communion of the church. According to the discernment of the disciples, however, a person's salvation may not be clear and manifest, and they may not be willing to accept him into fellowship. A person's eternal salvation is still and always will be in the hands of the Lord, but his acceptance into the fellowship of the church is subject to the authority of the disciples, by the breathing and indwelling of the Spirit (v. 22), either to “forgive” or to “retain” his sins. This kind of forgiveness is a matter of fellowship, not eternal salvation.

First John 1:7 and 9 say,

But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from every sin....If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Here the daily confessing of our sins does not issue in our eternal salvation; that was procured once for all when we first believed. Rather, these verses refer to forgiveness for the restoration of broken fellowship with the Father. Although we have obtained eternal forgiveness for eternal salvation, and although the church has received us into communion with the fellow believers, we are still in need of a further, practical category of forgiveness—the forgiveness of our daily and hourly sins for the restoration of fellowship with God. This is a third category of forgiveness.

A fourth category of forgiveness is related to God's governmental dealing with His children. Galatians 6:7 and 8 tell us plainly that every sin has its consequence. Although we may immediately confess a sin and be restored to fellowship with God, the sin may still bear a painful consequence. The record of sins can be remitted before God, but suffering their consequence cannot be avoided. God is wise, and He knows the best way to deal with us according to what we are. Sometimes the consequence of a sin will come in the form of a governmental dealing from God, for “whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives” (Heb. 12:6). When David sinned against Uriah and took

his wife to himself, the Lord sent Nathan to rebuke him. Because David had a soft and responsive heart toward the Lord, he repented: "And David said to Nathan, I have sinned against Jehovah"; Nathan responded, "Jehovah has also put away your sin; you will not die" (2 Sam. 12:13). This is the word of grace. However, Nathan's next word was, "Nevertheless" (v. 14). David's sins were put away; "nevertheless," he had given the enemies of Jehovah much occasion to blaspheme Him, and he still needed to suffer under God's governmental dealing (vv. 10-12, 14).

The fifth category of forgiveness is similar to the fourth, but its effect is longer lasting. In Matthew 18:23-34 the Lord told His disciples a parable concerning a slave who owed a great debt to his master. The master forgave his debt, but when he saw that the forgiven slave dealt without mercy to his own debtor, the master became angry and cast the unforgiving slave into prison. The Lord concluded, "So also will My heavenly Father do to you if each of you does not forgive his brother from your hearts" (v. 35). This parable is a picture of forgiveness in the kingdom age. If the disciples are not merciful and forgiving toward their brothers, the Lord will deal with them in strictness and severity, rather than in mercy, as James 2:13 says: "For the judgment is without mercy to him who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment." This kind of mercy and forgiveness is a matter not of eternal salvation but of God's governmental dealing with unmerciful believers, which may extend—temporarily and dispensationally—into the kingdom age.

The issue of eternal forgiveness is eternal salvation, and the way to obtain it is by believing in the Lord. The issue of the church's recognition of our salvation is our fellowship and communion with the believers, and the way to obtain it is through the Spirit-inspired discernment of the church. The issue of the daily forgiveness of our sins is fellowship with the Father, and the way to obtain it is by confessing. The issue of the forgiveness of God's governmental discipline is release from His chastisement, and the way to obtain it is to be humbled under the mighty hand of God (1 Pet. 5:6) until He sees that the time of chastening is fulfilled. Lastly, the issue of the forgiveness of the kingdom is to be judged with mercy by Him at His judgment seat, and the way to obtain it is to forgive our brothers and deal with them in mercy.

The first and second category of forgiveness should accompany each other; all who have received eternal forgiveness will be recognized by the church and received

into fellowship. However, it is daily evident to all seeking believers that those who are eternally forgiven still may have an abeyance of fellowship with the Father and be in need of another kind of forgiveness. Likewise, it is also possible that a particular or grievous sin may result in God's governmental dealing in which an eternally and instantly forgiven believer will suffer for a while. Where in the Scriptures do we find a time limit for the term of God's governmental chastisement? We find none. The duration of the dealing is up to the wisdom and economy of the Lord. In this principle, a believer may also suffer chastisement under God's government in the coming millennial age, the age of the kingdom. To be found in need of this fifth category of forgiveness is what the Lord referred to in Matthew 12:32 as forgiveness not in this age but "in the one to come." It is also the forgiveness to be experienced in the next age for the salvation "through fire" as spoken of in 1 Corinthians 3:15.

Watchman Nee says very wisely, "If we cannot differentiate between the various kinds of forgiveness in reading the Scripture, we will encounter difficulties" (20:189). This statement may be considered as a simple,

The deformed teachings of heaven with its material mansions and a purgatory of expiatory sufferings are the products of the most imaginative, fantastical, and unscriptural speculations.

practical summary of the history of the unclear and misshapen teachings concerning forgiveness in the age to come and "saved, yet so as through fire" in the early centuries of the church. As a result of the devolution of the understanding of these truths, temporal and practical forgiveness gradually became

mistaken for eternal forgiveness, salvation became confused with sanctification after salvation, grace became confounded with reward, and perdition became muddled with discipline and chastisement. Eventually, the heretical doctrine of purgatory was developed, in which departed souls were thought to suffer for the obtaining of their eternal salvation. Moreover, upon this heretical foundation, an evil and demonic system flourished in which prayers and indulgences are offered for the suffering dead, and the living at times even communicate with the dead. We deplore these evil teachings and declare them to be the abominations and unclean things in the golden cup of Babylon the Great (Rev. 17:4-5).

The deformed teachings of the "last things"—heaven with its material mansions, a Dantesque hell of many layers, and a purgatory of expiatory sufferings—are the products of the grandest and most imaginative, fantastical, and unscriptural speculations in the history of the church. They are a great overstretching of the simple facts in the Bible, a great deviation from the pure teachings of the Bible, and a great distraction from the central

line of the Bible—God’s eternal economy to build Himself into man, and man into Himself, to build up the Body of Christ in this age and to consummate the New Jerusalem in the next age and in eternity. In the next installment of this department, we will consider further errors in the conception of purgatory, the formalization of the false doctrine in medieval times, its popularization through mythopoeia and mysticism, and the Protestant backlash that resulted in the denial and loss of the scriptural teachings concerning the judgment and accountability of the believers. We will also delve deeper into the meaning of forgiveness as revealed in the Scriptures. May the Lord grant us a very necessary revival of the truth.

by John Campbell

Notes

¹To find support in Augustine does not in the least imply that we agree with him in all points. Rarely can a single authority be trusted in every matter related to the truth. We reserve the right to discern the writings in our Christian heritage according to the light we have received from the Lord. Thus, as is necessary, we will treat the truths and errors in the teachings of Augustine, and of almost all authorities, like the white and black squares of a chessboard, carefully moving between them in our search for the truth. In the matter cited here, Augustine is correct according to the Scriptures. Later we will examine some of his errors.

²Among others, these errors involve the time and place of the believers’ discipline after death. We will examine these in the next installment of this department.

³Clement believed that Plato had learned the principles of divine judgment from Moses and thus was a credible first witness to the truth. The Platonic idea is brought forth into Latin culture in Virgil’s *Aeneid*. In the sixth book, Aeneas descends into the infernal regions where he sees souls in torment. Anchises instructs him:

Souls are ceaselessly schooled by retribution, and pay in punishment for their old offences. Some are hung, stretched and helpless, for the winds to blow on them. From others the pervasive wickedness is washed away deep in an enormous gulf, or it is burnt out of them by fire. Each of us finds the world of death fitted to himself. Then afterwards we are released to go free about wide Elysium. (6.739-744)

That the unbelieving, even pre-Christian, dead can be “schooled by retribution,” or “trained by punishment” (*exercetur poenis*), and afterward enter into “Elysium” is a pagan concept that became a great heresy in the teaching of purgatory. It is no wonder that Dante purposely chose Virgil as his own guide through hell and purgatory. In doing so, he gave due credit to the pagan legacy found in the traditional teachings of the “last things.”

⁴Here again we may see the barely mitigated Hellenism inherited by the Greek fathers. Father Garrigou-Lagrange lauds the classical Greek idea of redemptive suffering after death, citing Plato as a pre-Christian witness for purgatory (156). In *Gorgias* Plato says,

All things are distinctly manifest in the soul after it is divested of body....When, therefore, they come to the judge,...[and] he sees nothing sound in the soul...he forthwith sends it ignominiously to prison, where on its arrival it will undergo the punishment it deserves.... Their benefit however, both here and in Hades, accrues to them through means of pain and torments; for it is not possible to be freed from injustice in any other way. (229-230)

Garrigou-Lagrange translates the latter phrase as, “Pain alone delivers them from injustice” (156). The idea of expiation of sins after death by “pain alone” is very suitable to the Catholic doctrine.

⁵We are not unaware of 2 Maccabees 12:40-45, the primary support text for purgatory in the Roman Catholic dogma. We will save our discussion of the Apocrypha for the next installment of this department. The Roman teaching calls upon another, very weak support in the New Testament. In 2 Timothy 1 Paul commends Onesiphorus and adds, “May the Lord grant him to find mercy from the Lord in that day” (v. 18). Then in 4:19 he sends greetings to the house of Onesiphorus, but not to him directly. This has led some to infer that Onesiphorus was dead and that this text proves the lawfulness of prayers for the dead. The inference is not at all clear. This weak conjecture can hardly be taken as support for a practice as far-reaching and abominable as the Roman practice of prayers for the dead. As J. P. Lange says, “The case here was altogether special, and cannot, without great wilfulness, be applied as the foundation of a general rule for all the dead.” Then he adds that even if one’s heart impels him (apart from Scripture!) to pray for one departed, “It is well to distinguish between the Christian idea which lies at the foundation of such inward needs, and the form of later church rite, and practice” (90).

⁶The reader will immediately recognize that the celebration of All Hallows’ E’en, the evening before All Saints’ (“All Hallows’”) Day, became the celebration of Halloween, another day devoted to the remembrance of the dead.

⁷Father Faber’s eloquent zeal—and abominable superstition—is almost unbounded. He effuses,

There are revelations, too, which tell of multitudes [of the dead] who are in no local prison, but abide their purification in the air, or by their graves, or near altars where the Blessed Sacrament is, or in the rooms of those who pray for them, or amid the scenes of their former vanity and frivolity. If silent suffering, sweetly, gracefully endured, is a thing so venerable on the earth, what must this region of the Church be like? Compared with earth, its trials, doubts, exciting and depressing risks,

how much more beautiful—and how much more desirable—that still, calm, patient realm over which Mary is crowned as Queen and Michael is the perpetual ambassador of her mercy. (20-21)

⁸We will examine this issue in detail, including Jerome's proscription, in the next installment.

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These deformed teachings
are a great deviation from God's
economy to build Himself
into man, and man into Himself,
to build up the Body of Christ
and the New Jerusalem.