

DOCTRINAL STATEMENTS AND THEOLOGICAL OPINIONS (DSTO)

VOLUME 1

I. DOCTRINAL ISSUES

Summary pastoral statement concerning the body-soul issue

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1. WHAT HAPPENS TO HUMAN BEINGS AFTER THEY DIE?

The purpose of Holy Scripture is to reveal to people God's gracious gift of repentance and faith in Jesus Christ so that they might live in fellowship with Him in this life and in death. To help Christians live confidently and purposefully, God also has revealed truths in Scripture concerning their being and destiny.

Various questions regarding Body-Soul and the interim state between death and the resurrection have been debated down through the centuries. For us, the basis for all teaching, belief, and statements in this area of concern must always be the Scriptures alone.

2. NOW WE KNOW IN PART!

At all times we should acknowledge with humility that in dealing with the nature of man and the time between death and the resurrection, we are to walk by faith in the revelation of God and not by sight (1 Cor 13:9).

We are moving in an area where we have been given only a glimpse of the reality of the whole, and so should limit ourselves to that which is revealed by God for our present good in sacred Scripture. Instead of trying to explain the exact nature of such words as 'soul', 'time', and 'sleep' in our own terms, we should accept them in faith as used in the Bible for our comfort and hope.

3. MAN – BODY AND SOUL

Scripture speaks of man as a being of body and soul (Matt 10:28). Other aspects of man are also revealed which in no way alter this truth. The person can exist either in the body or out of the body (2 Cor 12:2,3). The Scripture often speaks of the person without his material body as 'soul'.

4. IMMORTALITY – ANNIHILATION

Only God is immortal (1 Tim 6:16). Man is immortal only because God chooses to give immortality to him.

Man was not created for annihilation. Scripture does not speak of the person as ceasing to exist at physical death (1 Sam 28:3–20). A term commonly used in English to describe the continued existence of man beyond physical death is 'soul'. The teaching of annihilation at death robs the believer of comfort which God offers those who wait patiently for the Day of the Lord (Rev 6:9).

5. TOTAL CORRUPTION – DEATH

Man, in body and soul, in his totality, has been corrupted through the fall into sin (Psalm 51:1–5).

The wages of sin is death (Rom 6:23). Death is an existence apart from and in opposition to God. Physical or temporal death is a result of spiritual death, just as sickness or other infirmities in this present life. Physical death is a separation of the person, the 'soul', from its material, physical tent, the 'body'. The Scripture clearly speaks of the body returning to the dust, and of the person, the soul, continuing before its Creator (Psalm 139:8). While physical death marks the end of the Day of Grace for all, for the believer it is also the end of Satan's attacks, and ensures that those who are in Christ will for ever be with the Lord (Rev 14:13).

6. THE 'SLEEP' OF THE BELIEVER

This phrase is used in Scripture as one way of expressing the condition of the believer between physical death and the resurrection, the 'Interim State', as it is sometimes called (Matt 9:24). It views the believer from this present life with its cares and concerns, from which those who are 'asleep in Christ' are free. However, the believer is described equally clearly in this interim state as being in blissful awareness with Christ (Phil 1:23). The 'sleep' of the believer must not be made to mean that the person has ceased to be as a real person or as existing only in the memory of God. The person who dies in Christ rests (body and soul) in the care and keeping of God his Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier as he awaits in peace the resurrection of his body (1 Thess 4:13–17).

7. INTERIM STATE

Scripture says little about the 'time' between death and the resurrection. From our human point of view, it is clear that those who have died must wait for the resurrection. While time as it exists for us is quite a different dimension with God (2 Pet 3:8), we should be careful, in our explanation of what 'time' might mean for God and for the interim state, not to go further than Scripture. We wait with those whom God has already called to Himself for the Day which will end all waiting. Let us find comfort in the simple truth that He who has promised is faithful; we can trust His Word, and not seek security in trying to explain what

we do not know. For example, to speak of man as experiencing the Resurrection Day at the time of physical death is speculation about time and eternity rather than a teaching based on clear scriptural passages.

8. SOUL – BEING

Scripture certainly uses the term 'soul' when speaking of a person both in regard to his present life in this material existence (Ezek 18:4) and in regard to his continued existence after death (Rev 20:4). As Luther emphasizes, it is not for us to speculate as to the nature of this continued existence, but to accept and believe the revelation of God. God has inspired the writers of Scripture to speak of man's continued existence beyond death in terms which are intended to be understandable for us. Such revelations should not be pressed further than their purpose intends. This purpose is not to supply man with detailed knowledge of life beyond the grave, but to assure him in human terms of God's comfort and care also in this condition.

9. RESURRECTION

On the great Day of Resurrection, the soul will again be 'clothed' with a body, and its time of waiting will have ended. For the believer, the Day of Resurrection is the time when his salvation will be experienced in its full glory. (Phil 3:20,21; 1 Cor 15:42–44, 54–56).

10. A RIGHT RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

Throughout the Old and New Testaments, man's future is seen as dependent on the relationship he has with God (John 3:18). Where a right relationship exists with God, there hope and optimism for the future, also beyond temporal death, should exist. The everlasting arms of the eternal God can be relied on to give full deliverance in life and death (Deut 33:27).

To this end, we are to teach all that God has revealed to us in Scripture so that people might know Jesus Christ as their Saviour and Lord, and look forward to the day of Resurrection when the full glory of salvation will be revealed to all people.

We might conclude this study with the following thoughts:

11. GOD – THE LORD OF LIFE AND DEATH

While Scripture describes variously the condition of human beings in death, and of his existence in the realm of the dead, especially to apocalyptic sections where the state of those who have died and yet await the resurrection is often described in language difficult for human beings to comprehend, their chief aim is to reveal that God remains the Lord of life and death, and there is no 'realm' that does not come under His rulership and control (cf, e.g. Daniel, Revelation). The Psalms (cf Psalm 73:25) concentrate the confidence and hope for the righteous in death and beyond death on God, the Lord Himself.

12. THE FOCUS ON THE NEW TESTAMENT

With the coming of Christ, who is 'the resurrection and the life' (John 11:25), there is an increasing focus on the resurrection of the body and life everlasting with God through His own death and resurrection. Believers are comforted by God's revealed truth that through Holy Baptism (Rom 6:4) they are incorporated into His Body, nourished by the Word and the Eucharist during their life, and that by daily repentance the Old Adam is drowned and

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the New Man arises to live in God's presence for ever (cf *Small Catechism*, Baptism, Part 4).

On the basis of those New Testament passages which proclaim an existence after death for all who have died, the great hymn writers have composed their 'death and resurrection' hymns, and the liturgies of the Church have been written, bringing comfort and joy to the dying and bereaved.

13. THE WORD OF GOD OUR ONLY BASIS

In speaking about the interim state, pastors and teachers in the Church must always base their teaching only on the Word of God, and not on psychology, para-psychology, spiritism, or metaphysical speculation. Above all, they should be careful not to introduce needlessly such speculation which may well undermine the scriptural belief of their members concerning the state after death of their members.

Pastors and teachers should teach clearly and simply what Scripture says, and so avoid useless and harmful prying into such matters which will finally be revealed in their fullness on the Day of the Lord.

14. OUR PURPOSE IN TEACHING

As we walk by faith, trusting God's revelation to us in these matters as recorded in the sacred Scriptures, let us joyfully and confidently confess that those who have departed in faith have that blessed communion with God which the saints and martyrs have as they praise Him before the throne of the Lamb (Rev 7:9–12).

Those who have despised Him and His Word are in this life separated from Him, and will continue so beyond the grave in what the Scriptures say is eternal death.

Pastors and teachers in the Church are called, not to bring doubt or uncertainty to those who are in Christ, but to comfort those who mourn and sorrow with the words of Scripture and with the liturgies and hymns of the Church.