

The Origin of the Soul in the Human Being

by David Wietzke

Straddling the border of theology and philosophy lies this unresolved question: What is the origin of the human soul? It is a question not commonly raised today, not because the church has reached a consensus on the issue, but because the church's attention has turned to more pressing and practical issues. However, the issue was once hotly debated by church fathers during the Pelagian controversy and again during the Reformation. This issue is not just about the origin of the soul because conclusions reached by theologians regarding the soul's origin reveal and affect positions on other vital issues, i.e. original sin, baptism, and the will of God.

Three main solutions to the question of the soul's origin have been proposed by Christians, specifically preexistence, creationism, and traducianism. In his book, *Man*, Lyle Luchterhand adds a fourth, emanationism. This is the belief that souls are emanations from the ultimate Being, God. Man's soul is thus a part of God. While this idea has numerous parallels in pagan philosophy—notably Gnosticism—it is clearly contradicted by Scripture. Man is a creation of God, not a part of him. This idea also either denies evil in man or ascribes it to God, terminuses absolutely foreign to God's Word. Mary Preus states that "the Christian insistence on the created status of the soul and consequent distinction from God is perhaps the place where Christian theology runs most irreconcilably head-on into an opposing Greek belief."¹ For these reasons, emanationism was never seriously considered by the church fathers, and will not be discussed as one of the competing theories in this paper.

I. Three competing theories

¹ M. Preus, *Eloquence and Ignorance in Augustine's On the Nature and Origin of the Soul*, 51.

Preexistence is the belief that God created all human souls on the sixth day of creation. Whenever a child is conceived, or shortly thereafter, God assigns or links one of these preexisting souls to the body. This belief did not originate in the Christian church. Platonists, as well as the Jewish mystics known as the Kabbalists, both spoke about the existence of souls before birth.² Preexistence also appears to have seeds in the reincarnation beliefs of Hinduism. In the early days of the church this belief was linked to the Alexandrian school, particularly Origen and his followers. In later years Scotus Erigena also was a proponent of this theory.³

Although preexistence would preserve the belief that God rested on the seventh day and ceased his work of creating, it can claim little other Scriptural support for its proposal. Often it is used to help explain away an apparent contradiction of Scripture, especially regarding original sin. Origen, for example, believed that souls fell in their pre-bodily state and were imprisoned into flesh as a punishment.⁴ This is similar to the view of Julius Mueller in his discussion of original sin.⁵

Preexistence, however, suffers from a number of serious flaws. Not only is there a lack of evidence in Scripture supporting the existence of souls prior to their bodily union, a whole host of serious theological problems surface as well (pointed out by Berkhof in his *Systematic Theology*). If the soul was created and existed long before the body, then the body is almost accidental to a human being. Man would become similar to an angel, and there would be no real kinship between members of the human race. Death, which sunders body and soul, could hardly be considered unnatural or abhorrent, since it would only return the soul to its "natural" state. Furthermore, as noted above, preexistence is usually linked to unscriptural rationalization about

² A. Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics* II, 152.

³ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 197.

⁴ M. Preus, 56.

⁵ Berkhof, 197; Hoenecke II, 152.

sin and its origin. For all of these reasons Lutheran theologians are fully justified in their skeptical attitude toward this theory.

Creationism is the belief that God directly creates a new soul for each new child that is conceived, either at the moment of conception or shortly thereafter (the idea that the soul is created and joined to the body on the fortieth day after conception is called *Animation*⁶). Historically, it was the dominant view in the Eastern Church and was also held by Jerome and the Pelagians. Later scholastic theologians, such as Lombard and Aquinas, also favored this theory. Today it is the view held by the majority of Catholic and Reformed theologians.

Unlike preexistence, creationists can adduce a number of Bible passages to support their theory. These include Ecc 12:7 ("the spirit returns to God who gave it"), Zech 12:1 ("the LORD...forms the spirit of man within him"), and Heb 12:9 where God is called "the Father of our spirits." Berkhof, who leans toward creationism, believes that creationism fits better with a non-corporeal idea of the soul than traducianism does. It also avoids the weaknesses of traducianism soon to be discussed.

Creationism, however, does have a number of weaknesses. The most glaring of these is that God seems to be creating a sinful soul, or at least one that is inevitably doomed to sin. In this way God is made the author of human evil. Furthermore, how can God be said to have rested on the seventh day if he continues to create new souls *ex nihilo* for each new human conception? (Gn 2:2; Ex 20:11). Human parents, according to this theory, would be reproducing only a portion of themselves. Thus "parenthood suffers at the hand of any teaching other than Traducianism. This blessed institution is depreciated, being deprived of its chief honor."⁷

⁶ R. Hoenecke, *In Our Image*, 103.

⁷ R. Hoenecke, 104.

The final theory, and the most widely accepted by orthodox Lutheran dogmaticians, is Traducianism. This is the belief that a person's soul is somehow derived from the souls of his parents. This view was widespread in the early centuries of the Western church, notably held by Tertullian and Gregory of Nyssa. Martin Luther favored traducianism and, to some extent, it is endorsed by the Formula of Concord.⁸

Traducianism's advocates point to God's command to reproduce and multiply, both before and after the flood, as proof of their position (Gn. 1:28; 9:1). How can this command be viewed as only referring to part of the person, namely, the body? Since God did not breathe into Eve as he did Adam, traducianists claim that her soul was derived from his (1 Cor 11:8). There is no difficulty with creation continuing after the six days if souls are no longer being created at all, and this theory protects God from being the author of human evil. There are also two unusual passages which are cited - Genesis 46:26 and Hebrews 7:10. Genesis 46:26 speaks of Jacob's descendants "who came out from his loins" (NASB, footnote) and uses the Hebrew *nephesh* to refer to these persons. Hebrews 7:10 says that Levi was "still in the body" of his great-grandfather Abraham when he met Melchizedek. Finally, Paul says in his sermon at Athens that "from one man he [God] made every nation of men" (Ac 17:26).

Traducianism does have its weak points, however, as Berkhof is quick to point out. The most serious is in the area of Christology. If Christ's human soul was derived from Mary's, then how was it truly without sin? Conversely, if God had to create a special human soul for Christ, but not for anyone else, then can Christ be said to be truly human? He would be a member of a different human race than we are. Also, traducianism seems to view the soul as a physical entity

⁸ Tappert, *Book of Concord*, 512-513.

rather than spirit. Berkhof questions whether the soul should even be regarded as capable of division.⁹

II. Weighing the Evidence

By now it should be clear that the Bible does not give a definitive statement on the question. We can only speculate about why this might be. Perhaps the answer lies beyond the capabilities of our human understanding. We do know that our salvation does not rest on our knowledge of the soul's origin. We should, however, take care that whatever conclusions we reach do not violate another scriptural teaching.

A traducianist needs to be able to respond to biblical "proofs" cited by creationists, such as those mentioned above. When we look at the Hebrews 12 passage, where God is called the "Father of our spirits," we must be careful not to read more into the words than what is stated. A traducianist can be comfortable with this kind of language because God can rightly be called the creator of us all, both soul and body. "No one denies that God makes the soul; the argument is over how He makes it."¹⁰ Franz Pieper explains, "We received our soul and body with all their members from our parents as *causae secundae*, and at the same time we know that God is our creator and Father...[quoting Luther] He who made a man out of the ground also creates men to this day from the blood of the parents."¹¹ It is interesting that in his extensive dogmatics text Pieper never directly addresses the question about the soul's origin, but merely remarks in his Prolegomena that the matter should be regarded as an open question.¹²

⁹ Berkhof, 198.

¹⁰ M. Preus, 88.

¹¹ Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* I, 488.

¹² Pieper I, 94.

No Lutheran dogmatician offers an explanation for Berkhof's objection in the area of Christology. We do know that Christ "shared in the humanity" of the human race and yet was without sin (Heb 2:14; 4:15). The conception of Christ is a miracle that far transcends our minds and our understanding. We need not be compelled to logically explain every detail of this event, but can simply trust in the plain words of Scripture. As to Berkhof's suggestion that traducianism fails to regard the soul as a purely spiritual substance, we again plead our ignorance in these matters and simply say, "Special care must be taken to avoid any materialistic conception of the soul."¹³

Creationists need to answer the charge that creationism makes God the author of evil or denies original sin. This was the main problem Augustine had with this point of view.¹⁴ Roman Catholics respond by referring to trichotomy and their understanding of the fall as a relatively minor defect. The fact that God no longer creates souls with a *donum superadditum* does not make him a source of evil. For the Reformed the answer is not so easy. Berkhof concedes that this is a "serious difficulty."¹⁵ He first explains that the creationist sees original sin as imputed, not inherited. As a result of this imputation, God withholds original righteousness and "the pollution of sin naturally follows." This seems to suggest that man is created morally neutral by God. Thus, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that God is indirectly at fault. To Berkhof, however, the problems associated with traducianism are even greater. When confronted with passages like Heb 7:10 or Gn 46:26, a creationist probably would say that the author is simply speaking metaphorically.

How is the soul propagated? Again, we have no answer. Gerhard provides the helpful analogy of lighting a flame with another flame, where the whole generates the whole. In the end

¹³ WLS Dogmatics notes, I, 106.

¹⁴ WLS Dogmatics notes, I, 106.

he concludes, "As for us, we leave the philosophers to investigate the manner of the soul's propagation, for we see in the Scriptures no explanation concerning this matter...although the manner of propagation is not clear, it does not follow that the propagation itself should be denied."¹⁶

III. Certainty of our Belief

Before Lutherans are quick to establish traducianism as the clear doctrine of the Bible, they should ponder the example of Luther himself. While Luther did favor traducianism, he also, according to Chemnitz, said "that the Papists must be censured for their audacity and presumptuousness in creating an article of faith in an obscure matter, without one clear testimony of Scripture."¹⁷ Chemnitz himself considered the matter an open question.

Along with these two men let us remember St. Augustine. He originally seems to have favored creationism but was unable to reconcile this view with mankind's sinfulness and God's goodness. In his *De natura et origine animae* he reproves a young man named Vicentius Victor who disapproved of Augustine's inability to choose between competing theories, thinking the latter ought to favor creationism.¹⁸

The example of these men seems to be, in my opinion, a good one to follow. Orthodox Lutheran Christians should be cautious in expressing their views on this issue. On the one hand, we are fully justified in pointing out the dangers and errors in both preexistence and in creationism. Adherents of both of these theories invariably use them to support other beliefs that run contrary to the clear words of Scripture. Unless we are given an adequate reason how

¹⁵ Berkhof, 200.

¹⁶ Preus, H. and Smits, *The Doctrine of Man in Classical Lutheran Theology*, 60.

¹⁷ Pieper I, 94.

¹⁸ Schaff, *Nicene & Post-Nicene Fathers* V, 311.

creationism can be reconciled with the Scriptural doctrine of original sin, it is impossible for us to accept it in view of what God says.

On the other hand, we cannot be too dogmatic about traducianism. The scriptural passages used to support it are hardly conclusive and the theory does present its own set of difficulties. Perhaps the precise answer to the question, "*What is the origin of the human soul?*", is simply beyond our comprehension. For all of these reasons, this author feels that a very cautious endorsement of traducianism is warranted.

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