

© Protected by Common Law Copyright.
This may be copied for personal use only.

Christianity and the Spirit World

by William P. Wilson, M.D.

The title of this essay suggests that there is such a thing as a spirit world. The secular world denies its existence. They believe that there is nothing beyond the physical universe. In contrast the Bible makes it plain that there are probably other worlds that are unseen. Rather interestingly, the mathematicians and physicists state that there are 11 levels of existence. We live in four of these and there are seven that are supernatural. Do spirits exist there? Jesus said that they do and so did Paul. The Bible has many references to supernatural beings and clearly says that when we die extinction is not our fate. Is it possible to contact the spirits of the dead? These and other questions are answered in the Bible if we accept the existence of supernatural levels of existence.

Throughout the Old Testament, God warns against necromancy (Lev. 19:31, 20:6, 20:27, Deut. 18:11, 1 Sam. 28:3 & 9, 2 Kings 21:6, 23:24, 2 Chron. 33:6, Isa. 8:19 & 20, Isa. 19:23). Necromancy is communication with the spirits of the dead, and its practitioners are wizards and mediums. That such communication was possible is documented in the story of Saul who asked the Witch of Endor to call up the spirit of Samuel (1 Sam. 28:7-20). Communication with the spirits of the dead has been practiced throughout all of history. Because of its reality, God gave man laws that specifically forbade it (Deut. 18:11). Necromancy is to be differentiated from trafficking with familiar spirits. It is not clear as to whether familiar spirits are demons or disembodied spirits, but they are considered evil. The lack of definition is a result of the use of two words ob or "control" and sed or "devil". Ob was usually translated as familiar spirit, but in the A.V. it was translated as wizard. Whether a familiar spirit was an evil spirit or not was not clear.

Samuel was called back by the Witch (medium) of Endor from the resting place of the dead – presumably Sheol. It was believed to be a place of silence or darkness, but the Bible is not clear on this. There are scriptures, for instance, that imply that it has two divisions - one in which there was everlasting fire and another called paradise (Luke 16: 19-31). These two divisions of Sheol were separated by a gulf across which communication was possible. The qualities of Sheol were described in the following scriptures: Psalms 88:12, 94:17, Proverbs 15:24, Job 10:22, Isa. 14: 9 & 10.

In the Old Testament, it was possible for a man to go directly into the presence of God and escape Sheol. Enoch and Elijah are two who did (Gen. 5:24, 2 Kings 2:1-15).

The New Testament is somewhat confusing about the fate of the dead. In most instances it suggests that the dead sleep (Matt. 27:52, Thess. 4:13), and that final salvation apart from the body does not occur (2 Cor. 5:3). In a few instances there is an intimation that believers are with Christ after their death, but where is not made clear. Jesus' promise to the thief on the cross that, "This day you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43) could be interpreted to mean the Old Testament paradise, a division of Sheol. Paradise in this instance could also be one of Paul's three levels of heaven (2 Cor. 12:2), but not the final state of perfection in the presence of God.

One other bit of evidence in the Bible may cause us to think that an immediate or prejudgement occurs at the time of death. This is the statement of our Lord that our entry into heaven is to be a one-time event. It does not seem logical that punishment will occur before the final judgement, yet Jesus' parable of the unfaithful servant (Luke 12:43-45) strongly suggests that some kind of punishment is in store even for the faithful. When it will occur is not clear.

There is, then, no definitive statement as to the whereabouts or the state of existence of the dead. It may be that the dead do indeed sleep awaiting the resurrection. What is clear is that they do not cease to exist.

Another major issue in the destiny of a man's inner being is the meaning of the burial service. It is quite clear that since the beginning of the Christian church the dead have been committed to God with a formal burial service. There is no teaching by Jesus about this except his statement, "Let the dead bury their dead" (Matt. 8:22), so we do not know whether a formal commitment to God is necessary. Obviously, funerals were a part of the religious life of the people of all times including the Hebrews, but the Bible only says that the dead were mourned and buried. It is not clear whether funerals and burials were adopted from pagan cultures. There is no mention that our Lord was formally committed to God. It is true that he was executed as a criminal and may have been denied a funeral for that reason.

What then are we to believe about the dead? Where do they go? In what state do they exist? Are funeral rites necessary for transition to another world? What happens if a person is not committed to God?

There are a few clues in the Bible that suggest possible directions. In 1 Peter 3:19 and 4:6, as well as in Hebrews 11:39 & 40, we are told that Jesus preached to the dead who had lived at the time of Jonah as well as others who came after him. This corroborates Jesus' statement that the dead would hear his voice in the three days from his death until his resurrection (John 5:24-29). We are told that the dead did hear his voice and received the opportunity to repent and be saved. These statements obviously took care of those who went before, but what about those who died after his ascension into Glory? Is there reason to commit them to God? Do those who are not committed remain in some kind of limbo until they are committed to God? What is our responsibility to them?

The fate of the dead has always been a very live one for the church. As soon as the first churches were established, many persons had themselves baptized as proxies for

the dead (1 Cor. 15:29). This seemed to be accepted by Paul. But the church was just being organized so it does not seem that Paul thought that this was going to be a standard practice of the church, as he only mentioned it in passing. Nevertheless, there continued to be a desire on the part of the living to intervene for the dead both in the early church and then throughout the centuries. The Requiem Mass in the Catholic Church and the funeral in the Protestant church are designed to meet this need.

In the light of the persistence of the living for the dead, is there then a spiritual significance to this commitment of the dead to God? Is man's spiritual destiny fixed at death as the story of Lazarus and Dives suggests? Or, is it possible that in certain circumstances Christian interventions can alter the relationship of the deceased to God? The statement on binding and loosening suggests that there might be a possibility (Matt. 16:19, 18:18 & 19).

As we contemplate the problem, we are faced with a number of scriptures that suggest that man's eternal destiny is fixed at death (Ezek. 18:20, Acts 10:4, Heb. 9:27 and others) and a person is responsible for his own sins. He/she cannot share in another's righteousness, although Paul does make it appear that a husband or wife and children can share in the righteousness of a Christian spouse or parent (1 Cor. 7:14). There is no evidence that righteousness can be shared outside of these intimate relationships nor can it be retrogressively applied to previous generations.

But, what about the sins of our forefathers? Are we as blood-washed children of God responsible for the sins of our ancestors? Ezekiel 18 clearly states that the promise of punishment of sin from one generation to another was canceled. Do we then have any reason to try to rectify the mistakes of our forefathers? There is no evidence that God has called us to any responsibility for those who have not heeded his message (Heb. 3 and 4). But, what about our collective guilt as a nation or church, are we responsible for

sins collectively committed? We can site an example of the failure of the church to condemn slavery for 1800 years, but we have no answer!

Finally, there remains a problem that is unique to our time. What are the living to do about the thousands of medically aborted fetuses that are killed every day, or those who spontaneously abort? In answer we can say that we believe that God has a reason for committing the dead to Himself even though we do not know what it is. Therefore, we should also commit to Him all aborted persons. This commitment is worthwhile because it will also help to bring about the resolution of guilt and sorrow that arises from participation in the death of the fetus, and/or the sorrow of their loss. This sorrow arises out of the inherent love that a parent always has for any conceived child.

In summary we can then say that the dead do not cease to exist when they die. Their non-corporeal being continues to exist in another world (the Kingdom of God). Before Jesus' resurrection, it seems clear that the dead apparently had two divisions in which to dwell – Hades and Paradise. Two persons though, Enoch and Elijah, were said to have gone directly into the presence of God. After our Lord's death and resurrection the dead were preached to, but what happened to their souls is not clear. We do not know whether heaven's doors were immediately opened to all who believed or whether the dead had to remain where they were assigned in Sheol until the Day of Judgment.

Funerals are a part of man's existence, and in all instances they commit the dead to their final destiny. We do not know whether this affects in any way their afterlife or whether their case rests and that all they can do is to await the verdict at the final judgment. When the veil in the temple was rent at Jesus' death, access to God in the Holy of Holies was then possible.

We believe, though, that God must have a reason for desiring that we commit the dead to him; we do, therefore, believe that every person in a Christian culture should be

committed. This includes aborted fetuses and persons who did not have a Christian burial. There is also a good psychological reason for commitment and it is that guilt and/or sorrow are assuaged and grieving is facilitated.