



WEEK 3—ORIGIN OF THE SOUL

Handout 3-3: The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia on Creationism and Traducianism

A new question arises at this point, viz. Is the soul a special creation? Is it derived from the parents? Opinions are and have been divided on this point. Many have supported the theory of Creationism, by which is meant that in every instance where a new individual comes into being a soul is specially created by God, *de nihilo*, to inhabit the new-formed body. This view of the soul's birth found great favor in the early church. It was dominant in the East and was advocated in the West. "Jerome asserts that God *quotidie fabricatur animas*, and cites Scripture in proof" (Shedd, op. cit., II, 11). Scholastic theologians in the Middle Ages, Roman Catholic divines, Reformed orthodoxy upheld the theory. Though finding little support in Scripture, they appealed to such texts as the following: "He fashioneth their hearts alike" (Ps 33:15 AV); Jeh "formeth the spirit of man within him" (Zec 12:1); "The spirit returneth unto God who gave it" (Eccl 12:7: cf Nu 16:22; He 12:9); "God, the God of the spirits of all flesh" (Nu 27:16)—of which Delitzsch declared: "There can hardly be a more classical proof-text for creationism" (*Bibl. Psych.*, 137).

Traducianism again has found equal support in the Christian church. It declared that the parents were responsible, not merely for the bodies, but also for the souls of their offspring—*per traducem vel per propaginem* (i. e. by direct derivation, in the ordinary way of propagation). Tertullian was a strong supporter of this view: "The soul of man, like the shoot of a tree, is drawn out (*deducta*) into a physical progeny from Adam, the parent stock" (Shedd, *Hist of Doctrine*, II, 14). Jerome remarked that in his day it was adopted by *maxima pars occidentalium* ("the large majority of western theologians"). Leo the Great (d. 461) asserted that "the Catholic faith teaches that every man with reference to the substance of his soul as well as of his body is formed in the womb" (Shedd). Augustine, however, though doctrinally inclined to support the claims of Traducianists, kept an open mind on the subject: "You may blame, if you will, my hesitation," he wrote, "because I do not venture to affirm or deny that of which I am ignorant." And, perhaps, this is the safest attitude to assume; for there is little Scriptural warrant for either theory. Birth is a mystery which

baffles investigation, and Scripture throws no light upon that mystery. Yet some who have discussed this subject have tried actually to calculate the very day on which the soul is created or infused into the body, as it is being formed in the mother's womb—in boys on the 40th day after pregnancy and in girls on the 80th. This indeed is the *reductio ad absurdum* of Creationism.

Whichever theory we accept, the difficulties are great either way. For if God *creates* a soul, that soul must be pure and sinless and stainless at birth. How then can it be said that man is “conceived” as well as “born in sin”? If the impure, sin-stained body contaminates the pure, unstained soul by contact, why cannot the stainless soul disinfect the contaminated body? And again, if every individual soul is a special creation by direct interposition of the Almighty, what becomes of the unity and solidarity of the race? Is its connection with Adam then purely one of physical or corporeal generation? Creationism cannot account for the birth of the soul. Nor can Traducianism. For it can account neither for the origin, nor for the hereditary taint of the soul. It lands us in a hopeless dilemma. In the one case we fall back upon Creationism with its difficulties; in the other, we plunge into a materialism which is equally fatal to the theory (cf Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmaliek*, II, 626). Perhaps the words of Petrus Lomhardus, though frequently misunderstood and misapplied, throw most light on the subject—a light, however, which is little more than “darkness visible”—*creando infundit eas Deus. et infundendo creat* (“in creating God infused [the soul]; and in infusing He creates”). The problem is and remains insoluble.

Passing allusion may be made to another very curious theory, to which reference is made by Martensen (*Christliche Ethik*, I, 107). It bears upon human individuality, as impressed not only upon the soul, but also upon the body. The soul and the body are represented as arising at the same moment, but the latter (not in regard to its physico-chemical composition, but in other respects) is the resultant of soul-influences, whatever these may be. The soul therefore exercises a formative influence upon the body, with which it is united. This theory is attributed by Martensen to G. E. Stahl, who died in Berlin in 1734, as physician to the royal family. We are here in a region where the way is barred—“a palpable obscure” without the light of day.¹

¹ J. I. Marais, “[Psychology](#),” ed. James Orr et al., *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* (Chicago: The Howard-Severance Company, 1915), 2495–2496.