

“Immortality”

[A Letter from Robert W. Bertram to Richard Jungkuntz, Jan. 5, 1969]

January 5, 1969

Dr. Richard Jungkuntz
Lutheran Building
210 North Broadway
St. Louis, Missouri 53102

Dear Dick:

That fact that I've spent all day – from breakfast yesterday until the wee hours now of Sunday morning – on the CTCT “immortality” materials proves not only how slowly I work but how well you do. Expecting, when I first began, to confine myself to pp. 2 and 3 of your paper and to the corresponding pages in JAOP's paper – in other words, to just the pertinent material from the Confessions – I quickly found myself reading over and over again not only the whole of both essays but their documentation as well in the biblical and *Bekanntnisschriften* originals. One of my objectives was to come up with at least something, some original contribution of my own, to add to what you'd put together in your own essay, so as to justify in a small way my having sat upon this assignment so long. Now I have to confess that, even though the long day's toil did produce six pages of notes, there is really nothing substantive I can add. Your paper is a marvel of brevity. Everything that needs to be said, you've said, with not a wasted word or a single superfluous quote thrown in for ostentation. How exasperating that is to a wordy guy like me.

If I were to add anything at all, it would not be so much an addition to your own argument as a retort to JAOP. In fact, I could think of a dozen or more points to score against him (them), and all of the points right from within Luther and the Confessions. I'll confine myself to two observations.

First, it seems awfully essential to JAOP – just why, I'm not quite sure, except perhaps for the dubious reason that “the Reformers said so” – to insist that “only the body succumbs to physical death” and the soul does not. Now if it were up to me, I might just let JAOP have this point. He does seem to have some documentation from Luther and the *Bekanntnisschriften* which, with not too much inferential help from himself, does say as much. The Reformers don't seem to have thought of the “soul” as dying, at least not the soul of a Christian. And the non-Christian's death, both of body and soul, being “ewiglich,” probably was thought to begin only after the Last Judgment. But the prior question in all this, which by JAOP gets roundly begged, is this: What in this context did the Reformers mean by “soul” and “death”?

JAOP says that only the body, not the soul, dies a “physical” death. Meaning what? Does “physical” here refer to the very nature (the physis) of the body – i.e., to its being and essence – so that at death the body is thought to be altogether annihilated? So that all that

it is, is no more? Is that what “physical” death means? If so, then I’m sure the Reformers would not have attributed such a death to the soul; on that we’re agreed. (That’s what Luther, in his Babylonian Captivity, was repudiating in Aristotle’s De Anima.) For the Reformers the soul itself did seem in some way to persist beyond death. Its own physis (the personal identity, the autobiographical continuity of a man) was not destroyed – in the case of Christians, never, and in the case of non-Christians, at least not prior to the Last Judgment.

But if that’s what we mean by “physical” – namely, that essential characteristic of a thing which gives it its very being and identity – then in that sense the Reformers would not say that even the body dies “physically.” At least, I don’t think they would or could, considering how intent they were to maintain (in FC I) that the resurrected body (for all of its changes) would be numerically identical with, substantially continuous with, its “dead” predecessor. So in that sense of “physical” death (JAOP’s term), in the sense of an all-out extermination, not only not the soul but not even the body can be said to die “physically.”

On the other hand, perhaps all that JAOP means by “physical” is corporeal, bodily, material. I think that’s what he does mean. But then look, all he’s asserting is a tautology. He’s saying merely that when the bodily part of a man dies, that is a bodily death. Mirabile dictu! Is it any great insight to see that what is not bodily about a man – namely, his “soul,” his Seele, his anima – does not die a death that is bodily? Obviously, it can’t, by definition. But then the reply may come back, Ah, but the Reformers don’t say that the soul “dies” in any sense of the word “die,” whether in the sense of physical dying or of any other kind of dying. To which we would have to answer, there is no “other kind of dying,” in the Reformers’ glossary. As you yourself, JAOP, have said, they don’t ever speak of a “soul death” (except of course, in the case of the damned, of an “eternal” death). I would go farther than that. I would say they don’t even conceive of a “soul death.” Death – i.e. – in the undertaker’s sense of that word – is for them a physical (namely a bodily) thing by definition. Death is so conceived, so stipulated, as to be confined from the outset to such other bodily things as Staub and Grab. Souls by definition don’t turn to dust. Souls by definition don’t lie in graves. For the Reformers to speak of the soul as “dying” (at least prior to the Last Judgment) would be to assert not only an untruth but a contradiction, a logical absurdity – like a square circle. No wonder souls are not said to “die.” They can’t, and still be souls.

But now let us ask: granted that souls don’t “die,” are they nevertheless “subject to death” (morti obnoxium)? Here the Reformers’ answer is a clear Yes. Oh, I know that JAOP argues that, since souls don’t die, then neither are they “subject to death.” But he can argue like that only because he’s got his mind made up in advance that all there is to death, even in a theological sense, is dying – dying the way bodies die, bodily decomposition or discontinuation or something of the sort. What JAOP completely overlooks is that there might be something a lot more terrible than what the dying body goes through: namely, what the soul goes through in having to stand by and watch its body die out from under it. How would you like to be without your body and the whole wonderful bodily world it relates you to? Actually, JAOP can come up with no reference

at all from Luther and the Confessions which even remotely suggests that only the body and not the soul suffers death as a punishment – or as you, Dick, put it, as an “affliction.” Of course, the soul does. The whole man does, body and soul. As much of a man suffers the divine judgment of death as is sinful in him, namely all of him.

Of course, the counter question is now bound to arise, If the soul does not die (the way its body does), how can it be said to be “subject to death”? Answer: if in no other way, than already in the fact that (as JAOP and the Reformers believe) it is separated from the body. That, contrary to the impression JAOP gives, is no trivial tribulation. To name but one inconvenience of a bodiless soul, it is now removed from all opportunity any longer to repent and be saved, (the Roman claims for purgatory to the contrary notwithstanding) seeing how the soul is separated from “bodily” existence – i.e., from human history, from that space-time sector in which the Word bring men to faith. (As for Christ’s preaching to the souls in hell, the Formula of Concord prudently followed Luther in not trying too hard to understand that.) “It is given unto man once to die, after that the judgment.” In fact, if a sinner’s being “subject to death” does include his soul’s being dispossessed of its body, and if this is to be a judgment upon him, then I suppose it would be essential that at least enough of him survived (call it his “soul,” his self) to be able to experience his loss of his body as the horrible judgment it is.

That should be enough to indicate that for a soul to survive the death of its body is by itself hardly a blessing, or even an advantage, but is rather a curse. Remember, the sort of beatific pleasures which Luther’s Genesis commentary assigns to Abraham and the other faithful departed, or his locating (in SA) the departed “saints” not only in “graves” but also comfortably in “heaven,” or St. Paul’s telling his Philippians that “to depart and be with Christ...is far better” – none of these circumstances accrues to its beneficiaries simply and automatically as a consequence of his dying, much less as a consequence of his having a death-surviving soul. No, this intermediate blessedness – which, at that, is still no match at all for life in a resurrected body – accrues always and only as a consequence of Christ’s victory in our behalf over the divine judgment. These picturesque depictions are but nether-side efforts at saying of dead Christians (and then more for our reassurance than for theirs) that they are not only dead and not only “subject to death” and not only under judgment, but in the meantime are also safe and secure in Christ.

Of all of this JAOP has very little to say. Somehow he seems to sense that if he concedes too much about the soul’s being under judgment for its sin, then, since he does concede that death is divine judgment, he may soon have to concede that the soul, too, is “subject to death” – morti obnoxium. How insecure, how lacking in evangelical assurances, is such reluctance! As though the best way to console in the face of death is to show that, after all, the soul doesn’t die – which by itself is no consolation at all but only a wretched, inconsolable curse. As though the best and only consolation – most of all for a “soul” which is about to be sundered from its “body” – is not the safe-keeping in the hands of Jesus our Lord. The greatest hazard in JAOP’s approach is one which Luther knew how to diagnose: “so ist Christus vergeblich gestorben.” (SA III, 1,11)

The pity is that JAOP, once having made out the intermediate state of the departed souls to be the practical equivalent of their final blessedness, can now show small reason why they ought also to enjoy the resurrection of their bodies – not to mention a final judgment (which the believers in the N.T. actually looked forward to) or even the Parousia of Christ. All JAOP can do with these is to assert them because it is his biblical and confessional duty to do so. But otherwise they add little or nothing to his eschatology. His first fatal misstep was in insisting, out of all proportion to his documentation, that the Confessions teach that body and soul “must be distinguished carefully from one another.” (p. 27) The truth is, that is not why the Confessions emphasize both body and soul, namely, to underscore the distinction between them. (See how he distorts the body-soul analogy in the Athanasian Creed.) Rather than a distinction, the concern here is with inclusiveness, with wholeness and entirety: to make sure that the whole of a man, all that he is, “body and soul,” has been included in this or that description of him: nothing less than his whole being, “body and soul,” is what God creates, is what sin ruins, is what Christ dies for. But JAOP easily gives the impression that a man, if he had to, could get on quite well without a body, as though his bodiless soul is all that is essentially required to make him “him,” as though the resurrection is little more than a handy bonus, as though in the meantime his “body” and “soul” reside in two different localities (the former in its “grave,” the latter in “heaven”) like two geographically separated, biographically separable people. But the worst thing about this whole treatment of the “immortality of the soul” is, as I said, that it quickly makes Christ to have died in vain.

My second observation, and this I can make very short, deals with the cauterizing, sin-expunging benefits which the Reformers believed death to have in the case of the Christian dead. For the Christian, death is radical but wholesome surgery. And it is that only because death is divine judgment. It is the same way, already in this life, with all the divine judgments a Christian is under because of his sin: he can turn them to advantage, to crucify his flesh. But (and this is the point) this judgment, death, extends its cauterizing benefits to as much of a Christian’s being as needs them – that is, to as much of his being as is infected by sin; that is, all of him, “body and soul.” Consequently, not only is the dead Christian’s “soul” “subject to death” (even though it itself may not “die”), but also it can exploit its very subjection to death for its own advantage and subsequent liberation. “This will take place wholly by way of death in the resurrection.” (FC, Epitome, I, 10) Whether the N.T. gives to death’s cauterizing function as much prominence as the Lutheran confessions do, may be a fair question. For the Confessions, at any rate, this opportune side which the judgment of death affords to the Christian dead is a recurrent theme, in Luther (LC II, 57) and Melancthon (Apology XII, 152f.) and in the Formula of Concord (Epitome I, 6,8,10). (See your footnotes 2 through 4).

Best regards.

Cordially,

Robert W. Bertram, Chairman
Department of Systematic Theology