Our conception of the departed

Theological Seminar
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Biblical foundations (1)

Immortality of the soul: “But the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and there shall no torment touch them. … For though they are punished in the sight of men, yet is their hope full of immortality” (Wisdom of Solomon 3: 1, 4).

The notion of the immortality of the soul is a prerequisite for the parable of the rich man and poor Lazarus in Luke 16: 19-30. There it states that souls can either find themselves in a place of salvation or in a place of suffering and remoteness from God.

From this parable we can derive the following:
- The human soul continues to live in the realm of the dead even after physical death. The person’s individuality remains intact in the process.
- In the realm of the dead there is a place of security and a place of torment, which are separated from one another.
- The place in which the soul of an individual human being will find itself depends upon how he conducted his life with regard to God’s will during his lifetime.
- The departed can become aware of their condition. Those who suffer anguish will hope for help.

In addition, this parable points to Jesus’ resurrection, and therefore also to His...
sacrificial death and the possibility of redemption founded upon it.
Our conception of the departed (2)

Biblical foundations (2)

- In the Old Testament, the notion of help for the departed is suggested in 2 Maccabees 12: 39 et seq.
- This passage tells of Jews who had served idols and fallen in battle. Intercession was made on behalf of these souls so that their sins might be erased, and money was collected in order to purchase sacrificial animals for an offering of atonement. This was done out of the conviction that the dead would one day resurrect.

Biblical foundations (2)

2 Maccabees 12: 40, 42, 43, 45: “Now under the coats of every one that was slain they found things consecrated to the idols of the Jamnites, which is forbidden the Jews by the law. Then every man saw that this was the cause wherefore they were slain. … [The men] betook themselves unto prayer, and besought Him [God] that the sin committed might wholly be put out of remembrance. … And when he [Judas Maccabeus] had made a gathering throughout the company to the sum of two thousand drachms of silver, he sent it to Jerusalem to offer a sin-offering, doing therein very well and honestly, in that he was mindful of the resurrection. … [For this reason] he made a reconciliation for the dead, that they might be delivered from sin.”
Biblical foundations (3)

Some Bible scholars assume that the act of baptising the dead—or vicarious baptism—was a Gnostic practice, in other words, the custom of a Christian sect. The New Testament scholar Klaus Berger rejects this negative assessment. For him this is a practice attested in Corinth, which is to be seen in the same theological context as the report of Christ’s descent into the realm of the dead. In his book, Theologiegeschichte des Urchristentums (“Theological history of early Christianity”) which was published in 1994, Berger explains: “The Christians in Corinth practised baptism for the dead. This was a kind of representative baptism which was performed on the living on behalf of the dead, and which can most likely be envisioned as baptism of the Spirit (with laying on of hands!) … (cf. 1 Corinthians 15: 29). On the basis of the analogy in 1 Peter 4: 6 one may suppose that this was a matter of imparting the life-creating Spirit of God upon the dead who had not previously received this Spirit […] Just how one is to envision the theological construct of this vicarious baptism is an interesting question. The fundamental thought behind it is that of ‘representation’ … the objective of any such representation is the assignment of salvific effect upon a person who is not performing the act. […] Even in Christendom, the representative act of Jesus has not remained the only one, since there is still such a thing as intercessory prayer.” According to Berger, the baptism for the dead referenced in 1 Corinthians was not baptism with water, but rather the baptism of the Spirit. Hands were laid on living members of the congregation in order to thereby impart the Holy Spirit to the departed.
Our conception of the departed (4)

Biblical foundations (4)

- The account in 1 Peter 3: 18-20 refers to the descent of Jesus Christ into the realm of the dead: after His sacrificial death He preached the gospel to the dead.

- This motif is once again taken up in 1 Peter 4: 6: “For this reason the gospel was preached also to those who are dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit.”

Biblical foundations (4)

1 Peter 3: 18-20: “By the Spirit, by whom also He [Christ] went and preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly were disobedient, when once the Divine longsuffering waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water.”
Biblical foundations (5)

The accounts in 1 Peter 3: 18-20 and 4: 6 constitute the foundation for the *Descensus Christi ad Inferos* doctrine, in other words, the teaching that Jesus descended into the realm of the dead.

This teaching is incorporated into the Apostolicum, which originated in the second century AD, as an object of profession (“descended into hell”).
The post-apostolic period (1)

- In the post-apostolic period, baptism of the dead was practised in some circles. In the process, the unbaptised departed—for example stillbirths—were baptised.
- The church forbade the practice of baptising the dead in the year AD 397 at the Third Synod of Carthage.

The post-apostolic period (1)

The church of the post-apostolic period tended to reject the notion of representative dispensation of the sacraments upon the living for the dead. This early Christian practice was only performed in circles on the margins of the early church. The church finally forbade baptism of the dead—and thereby the dispensation of all the sacraments upon the departed—in the year AD 397 at the Third Synod of Carthage.

The custom of baptising the dead was practised among the Marcionists and Montanists—both of which were primarily based in Asia Minor.
Our conception of the departed (7)

- The post-apostolic period (2)
  - In the Orthodox Church and in Catholicism, various forms of intercession for the departed gradually developed.
  - Through prayer, these souls were to be liberated from punishment.
  - The practice of selling indulgences in the Catholic Church was also considered part of this liberation of departed souls from punishment for sins they had committed.
Our conception of the departed (8)

The Catholic Apostolic Church

- The Apostles of the Catholic Apostolic congregations took their direction from the tradition of the Catholic and Orthodox customs of interceding on behalf of the departed. These intercessions were especially brought to God on All Saints’ Day.
The New Apostolic Church – historical aspects (1)

“The words recorded in 1 Corinthians 15: 29 have finally been explained, and quite likely for the first time when Apostle Schwarz performed a sealing on one particular occasion. At that time, those who were able to see visions saw the departed beside the living, and when the Apostle laid his hands on these longing souls, some of the departed stood among them, and he passed over them, and so the departed received the same acts” (Niehaus in Hamborn-Neumühl on 26 March 1928, Circular 413).
Our conception of the departed (10)

The New Apostolic Church – historical aspects (2)

- At first the departed souls were baptised and sealed by name.
- The question of which departed souls were to be baptised or sealed was settled by visions and prophetic signs.
- By the end of the 1870s, Holy Communion was also dispensed to the departed.

The New Apostolic Church – historical aspects (2)

At first the departed were baptised and sealed by name. For example, Luther and other Reformers were baptised and sealed in 1874. The question of which departed souls were to be baptised or sealed was settled by visions and prophetic signs. By the end of the 1870s, Holy Communion was also dispensed to the departed.
The sacraments for the departed were at first dispensed upon a living person who had been chosen by prophecy.

Under Chief Apostle Niehaus, one woman (a “mother of faith”) and one man would each receive the sacraments for the departed.

The women would receive the sacraments on behalf of the female departed, while the men would receive them on behalf of the male departed.
Our conception of the departed (12)

- The New Apostolic Church – historical aspects (4)
  - As of the 1930s, two ministers have always received the sacraments on behalf of the departed.
  - For a long time, the sacraments were dispensed to the departed once each year on the second day of Christmas.
  - In the 1950s, Chief Apostle Bischoff introduced the practice of having three divine services for the departed each year.

The New Apostolic Church – historical aspects (4)

“There are two [who receive the sacraments on behalf of the departed] in the event that one of them does not have the necessary measure of compassion and mercy in his soul” (Das Entschlafenewesen [“Conception of the departed”], p. 93). 
Our conception of the departed (13)

The New Apostolic Church – historical aspects (5)

- It was in 1959 that the custom of having the Chief Apostle open up the realms ("prisons") of the beyond for 24 hours prior to the service for the departed—thus exercising his "authority of the keys"—was introduced.

- As of 1991 it was taught that Jesus Christ opens the prisons and that the Chief Apostle opens the kingdom of God for these souls.

The New Apostolic Church – historical aspects (5)

"Jesus has the keys of hell and of death (Revelation 1: 18). All power is given unto Him in heaven and on earth (Matthew 28: 18). Therefore it is He who opens the realms (=prisons) in the beyond for the souls who are waiting to be redeemed and leads them to the place of help established on earth in the Chief Apostle and the Apostles. By virtue of his ministry, the Chief Apostle opens the door to the kingdom of God. … To open the prisons is in the power of Jesus—to open the kingdom of God is incumbent on the Chief Apostle" (Word of Life, January 1991).
Our conception of the departed (14)

The New Apostolic Church – historical aspects (6)

- As of 2001 it was taught that the authority of the keys does not relate to our conception of the departed.
- The custom of having the Chief Apostle open up the realms of the beyond was discontinued.
- It is also because of this that there are no more prayers in the local congregations relating to the way in which the souls are to be led to the altar where the District Apostle dispenses the sacraments.

(The content is repeated with minor variations from the previous page.)

The New Apostolic Church – historical aspects (6)

“For the departed this means that the realms of the beyond have been opened by the once brought and eternally valid sacrifice of Jesus Christ. His sacrifice has opened the way to redemption for each and every soul longing for salvation.

There is no pressing need for access to the altar and the kingdom of God to be opened again through a special prayer of the Chief Apostle before a divine service for the departed.

The desire to turn to God in prayer, which results from the authority of the keys entrusted to him, causes the Chief Apostle to pray specifically for these souls every time the Spirit moves him to do this. This may also occur at a festival event preceding a divine service for the departed” (“Authority of the keys” in Word of Life, Special Edition 3/ March 2001).
Our conception of the departed – theological aspects (1)

- The foundation for the dispensation of the sacraments to the departed is God’s universal will to save (cf. 1 Timothy 2: 4-6; John 3: 16).
- The descent of Jesus into the realm of the dead and the fact that He preached the gospel there is the theological basis for New Apostolic practice (cf. 1 Peter 3: 19-20; 4: 6).
- A further basis is the practice referenced in 1 Corinthians 15: 29.

Our conception of the departed – theological aspects (2)

1 Timothy 2: 4: “[God] desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”

John 3: 16: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”
**Our conception of the departed (16)**

- Our conception of the departed – theological aspects (2)
  - Since the sacrifice of Christ it has been possible for the condition of the souls in the beyond to change for the better.
  - Salvation can therefore also be attained even after physical death.
  - The Apostles follow the example of Christ, and it is through them that the works referenced in 1 Peter 3 and 4 are continued.

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The Apostles follow the example of Christ, and it is through them that the works referenced in 1 Peter 3 and 4 are continued.
Our conception of the departed – theological aspects (3)

- The condition of the souls in the beyond is a direct expression of their proximity to, or remoteness from, God. Death has not effected any changes upon these souls. Their condition remains the same as it was during their lifetime.

- Souls in the beyond who have never heard of the gospel, never had their sins forgiven, and never received a sacrament find themselves in a condition of remoteness from God.

Our conception of the departed – theological aspects (3)

The condition of the souls in the beyond is a direct expression of their proximity to, or remoteness from God, and is thus very different from one to the next. Death has not effected any changes upon these souls. Rather, their condition remains the same as it was during their lifetime.

Souls in the beyond who have never heard of the gospel, never had their sins forgiven, and never received a sacrament find themselves in a condition of remoteness from God. This can only be overcome by believing in Jesus Christ, accepting His merit, and receiving the sacraments.
Our conception of the departed (18)

- Our conception of the departed – theological aspects (4)
  - The living are to intercede on behalf of the unredeemed departed: they are to ask the Lord to help those souls who have entered into the beyond in an unredeemed state.
  - Salvation is imparted through the sermon, the forgiveness of sins, and the sacraments. All of these are also intended for the departed.

Our conception of the departed – theological aspects (4)

Salvation is imparted through the sermon, the forgiveness of sins, and the sacraments. All of these are also intended for the departed. For them as for the living, belief in Jesus Christ is indispensable for attaining salvation. Redemption can only occur through Jesus Christ.
Our conception of the departed – theological aspects (5)

- The Apostles fulfil Jesus’ commission to proclaim the gospel, forgive sins, and dispense the sacraments upon both the living and the dead.
- Just as Jesus Christ brought His sacrifice on earth, so too the Apostles impart salvation on this earth.

Our conception of the departed – theological aspects (5)

“The Apostles fulfil the commission of Jesus—namely to proclaim the gospel, to forgive sins, and to administer the sacraments—upon both the living and the dead. They act in Christ’s stead and in His name. Just as Jesus Christ brought His sacrifice on earth, salvation is also imparted through the Apostles on earth.” (CNAC 9.6.3)

This notion was already implied by Chief Apostle Niehaus when he said: “I have pointed out that the earthly realm and the kingdom of heaven must work together. We are those who comprise the earthly realm. The earthly realm is the place where we live and from which we take our nourishment, and all those who desire to live must take their nourishment from the earth. So it is that the departed must also seek their nourishment here on earth, where the seat of grace stands.” (Niehaus: divine service on 26 March 1928 in Hamborn-Neumühl. Circular 413).
Our conception of the departed – theological aspects (6)

- Since sacraments always have a visible component, they can also only be performed in the visible realm.
- The effect of the sacraments as essential elements in imparting salvation is the same for both the living and the dead.

“Our conception of the departed – theological aspects (6)

“Since sacraments always have a visible component, they can also only be performed in the visible realm. The effect of the sacraments as essential elements in imparting salvation is the same for both the living and the dead.” (CNAC 9.6.3)
Imparting the sacraments to the departed and belief in the resurrection

Belief in the resurrection is attested in both the Old and New Testaments. It is the pivotal element of hope for the future (cf. Isaiah 26: 19; 1 Corinthians 15).
Conclusion

Along with the Apostle ministry and the hope in the imminent return of Christ, the dispensation of the sacraments to the departed is among the distinguishing features of the New Apostolic Church. Thus it is necessary to express this subject matter in a theologically sound manner.