THE QUESTION

What did early Christians say the soul is and what it does?

Asked by a THF member on August 9, 2026 · published November 9, 2026 · 12 numbered quotations · the 27 early Christian passages and 62 Bible verses we kept are listed at the back, each with a link.

Read it online: thehistoricfaith.com/early-church-questions/what-did-early-christians-say-the-soul-is-and-what-it-does

The short answer *Interpretation: our reading of the passages, not their words*

Early Christian writers taught that the soul gives the body its life and that a human being is soul and body together. They described the soul as rational and free to choose, and said it needs God's Spirit to be complete. They did not all agree on whether the soul is immortal by its own nature.

LIBRARY ONLY	This study was written only from The Historic Faith's library of early-Christian writings and the Bible, never from the web. Every passage we kept from what the library gave is listed at the back, with a link to read it.
HOW IT WAS MADE	Compiled by machine learning from The Historic Faith's library of early-Christian writings and the Bible only. Every quotation was matched word for word against our stored text. Not yet reviewed by The Historic Faith.
SHARING WITH AN AI?	Every quotation here comes from The Historic Faith's library. If you paste this study into an AI, anything it adds beyond these pages comes from that AI, not from us.

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POINT 1 OF 7

The soul preserves the body it lives in

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

The Epistle to Diognetus compares the soul in the body to Christians in the world. The soul is spread through the whole body, is not of the body, and yet keeps the body alive, just as Christians help preserve the world.

1

"To sum up everything in one word—what the soul is in the body, that Christians are in the world."

later in the same passage

"The soul is imprisoned in the body, yet preserves that very body; and Christians are confined in the world as if in a prison, and yet they are the preservers of the world."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Mathetes,** *Epistle to Diognetus* (c. 80–200 AD) **Source 1, page 6** Read it in the library ›

THF's updated English

POINT 2 OF 7

The soul gives the body its life

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

Justin says the body cannot live without the soul and stops being a living body when the soul leaves. Tertullian makes the same point: the soul is what makes a body alive when present and lifeless when absent.

2

"For the spirit does not die; the soul is in the body, and without a soul the body cannot live. When the soul leaves it, the body ceases to be."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Justin Martyr,** *On the Resurrection, Fragments* (c. 130–165 AD) **Source 4, page 6** Read it in the library ›

THF's updated English

3

"The soul cannot be called either an animate body or an inanimate one, because it is the soul itself that makes the body animate when it is present in it, or inanimate when it is absent from it."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Tertullian,** *De Anima (On the Soul)* 6 (c. 196–220 AD) **Source 18, page 7** Read it in the library ›

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POINT 3 OF 7

A human being is soul and body together

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

Justin argues that neither the soul alone nor the body alone is the whole man. Athenagoras agrees that one living being is formed from both parts. Both use this to show that God will raise the body, not save the soul only.

4 "For what is man but a rational being made up of body and soul? Is the soul by itself man? No, it is the soul of a man."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Justin Martyr,** *On the Resurrection, Fragments* (c. 130–165 AD) **Source 2, page 6** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

5 "It unavoidably follows that, since one living being is formed from these two parts, and this one living being experiences whatever the soul experiences and whatever the body experiences, and does whatever requires the judgment of the senses or of reason, the whole course of these things must be directed to one end."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Athenagoras,** *Resurrection of the Dead* 15 (c. 170–190 AD) **Source 9, page 6** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

POINT 4 OF 7

Tertullian and Origen define the soul

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

Tertullian gives a long definition: the soul comes from God's breath, is rational and free in its choices. Origen gives a shorter definition shared with others: the soul is a substance that perceives and moves. Tertullian's claim that the soul has a body is his own view.

6 "Then we define the soul as sprung from the breath of God, immortal, having a body, having form, simple in its substance, intelligent by its own nature, expressing its power in various ways, free in its decisions, subject to accidental changes, changeable in its faculties, rational, supreme, endowed with an instinct of presentiment, and developed out of one original soul."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Tertullian,** *De Anima (On the Soul)* 22 (c. 196–220 AD) **Source 22, page 7** Read it in the library ›
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7 “For the soul is defined as a substance that is imaginative and impulsive, which may be translated into Latin, though not so properly, as sensible and movable.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Origen,** *De Principiis (On First Principles)* 8 (c. 215–254 AD) **Source 24, page 7** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

POINT 5 OF 7

The soul moves itself toward virtue

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

Clement says Adam was not made perfect but was made able to receive virtue. The soul's nature is to move itself, so people can freely grow toward goodness as God made them to.

8 “Our answer to them is that he was not perfect when he was created, but he was made able to receive virtue.”

later in the same passage

“This, then, is the nature of the soul: to move itself.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Clement of Alexandria,** *Stromata* 6.12 (c. 190–215 AD) **Source 14, page 7** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

POINT 6 OF 7

The soul needs God's Spirit to be whole

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

Tatian urges uniting the soul with the Holy Spirit, which was lost. Irenaeus says the complete person is soul and body together with the Spirit of the Father. Without the Spirit, he says, a person stays incomplete.

9 “But further, it now becomes us to seek what we once had but have lost, to unite the soul with the Holy Spirit, and to strive after union with God.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Tatian,** *Address to the Greeks* 15 (c. 150–180 AD) **Source 6, page 6** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

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10 “Although the soul and spirit are part of a human, they do not make up the entire person; the complete human is the union of the soul receiving the Spirit of the Father and the blending of that physical nature formed in God's image.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Irenaeus,** *Against Heresies: Book V* (c. 175–202 AD) **Source 11, page 6** **Read it in the library ›**
THF's updated English

POINT 7 OF 7

Writers differed on the soul's immortality

Our note · compiled by machine learning · Interpretation: our reading of the passages, not their words

Tatian and a fragment of Clement say the soul is not immortal by its own nature but can live forever through God's grace. Others, like Tertullian and Origen, call the soul immortal. All agree the soul's future depends on God.

11 “The soul is not in itself immortal, O Greeks, but mortal. Yet it is possible for it not to die.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Tatian,** *Address to the Greeks* 13 (c. 150–180 AD) **Source 5, page 6** **Read it in the library ›**
THF's updated English

12 “Therefore it appears that the soul is not naturally immortal, but is made immortal by the grace of God, through faith and righteousness, and by knowledge.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Clement of Alexandria,** *Fragments* 1 (c. 190–215 AD) **Source 15, page 7** **Read it in the library ›**
THF's updated English

THE LIMITS

What these passages don’t tell us

- These writers did not all agree on whether the soul is immortal by nature or has a kind of body.
- The passages do not settle exactly how each soul begins or what its essence is made of.
- A word-for-word match shows that a quotation really is in our text. It does not show that our reading of it is right, or who wrote each work.

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WHERE EVERY QUOTE CAME FROM

The Sources

The 27 early Christian passages and 62 Bible verses we kept for this question (repeats and weak or off-topic search hits were left out): early Christian passages first (sources 1–27, grouped by writer, earliest first), then Bible verses in The Faith Once Delivered Bible (sources 28–29, in Bible order), then 60 more verses THF links to these passages, by reference. **Quote 1, page 2** beside a source shows where the study quotes it. Passages are in THF's updated English unless marked "1885 English" (the Roberts–Donaldson translation, public domain). "… [continues online]" marks a passage the library gave only in part. **On paper?** At **thehistoricfaith.com**, Bible verses are in the **Audio Bible** and early Christian writings in the **Library** (search for the title).

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITERS *27 passages from 9 writers*

Mathetes, *c. 80–200 AD · source 1*

1 *Epistle to Diognetus* (1885 English) **Quote 1, page 2** "immortal soul dwells in a mortal tabernacle… [continues online] **read ›**

Justin Martyr, *c. 130–165 AD · sources 2–4*

2 *On the Resurrection, Fragments* **Quote 4, page 3** "gives the promise to the flesh as well. For what is man but a rational being made up of body and soul? Is the soul by itself man? No, it… [continues online] **read ›**

3 *Hortatory Address to the Greeks* (1885 English; on point 7) "Plato loudly maintains that "the whole soul is immortal." But Aristotle, naming it "the actuality," would have it to be mortal, not immortal… [continues online] **read ›**

4 *On the Resurrection, Fragments* **Quote 2, page 2** "The body is the house of the soul… [continues online] **read ›**

Tatian, *c. 150–180 AD · sources 5–6*

5 *Address to the Greeks* 13 **Quote 11, page 5** "soul is not in itself immortal, O Greeks, but mortal… [continues online] **read ›**

6 *Address to the Greeks* 15 **Quote 9, page 4** "human soul consists of many parts and is not simple… [continues online] **read ›**

Theophilus of Antioch, *c. 169–183 AD · sources 7–8*

7 *To Autolycus* 19 (1885 English; on point 7) "also by most persons the soul is called immortal… [continues online] **read ›**

8 *To Autolycus* 7 (1885 English; on point 3) "God will raise your flesh immortal with your soul… [continues online] **read ›**

Athenagoras, *c. 170–190 AD · source 9*

9 *Resurrection of the Dead* 15 **Quote 5, page 3** the arguments that come from each of the truths drawn from the first truth. And first of all, the nature of the human beings who were created leads us to… [continues online] **read ›**

Irenaeus, *c. 175–202 AD · sources 10–12*

10 *Against Heresies: Book V* (1885 English; on point 7) "the soul is not mortal, neither is the spirit… [continues online] **read ›**

11 *Against Heresies: Book V* **Quote 10, page 5** "and the Holy Spirit, humans, not just a part of humans, were made in God's likeness. Although the soul and spirit are part of a human, they do not… [continues online] **read ›**

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12 *Against Heresies: Book V* (1885 English; on point 7) “when they say of things which it is manifest to all do remain immortal, such as the spirit and the soul, and such other things, that they are quickened by… [continues online] **read ›**

Clement of Alexandria, *c. 190–215 AD · sources 13–16*

13 *Stromata* 6.8 (1885 English; on point 4) “both are powers of the soul, both knowledge and impulse… [continues online] **read ›**

14 *Stromata* 6.12 (1885 English) **Quote 8, page 4** “then, is the nature of the soul, to move of itself… [continues online] **read ›**

15 *Fragments* 1 **Quote 12, page 5** “it appears that the soul is not naturally immortal… [continues online] **read ›**

16 *Stromata* 5.3 (on point 4) “the essence of the soul, being colorless, formless, and intangible, is visible only to God, its guide… [continues online] **read ›**

Tertullian, *c. 196–220 AD · sources 17–22*

17 *De Anima (On the Soul)* 9 (1885 English; on point 7) “the soul is immortal; and being immortal, it is therefore indissoluble… [continues online] **read ›**

18 *De Anima (On the Soul)* 6 **Quote 3, page 2** “motion from outside itself. If it has an animate nature, it receives motion from within itself. Now, they say, the soul receives motion neither from outside nor from within. Not… [continues online] **read ›**

19 *De Anima (On the Soul)* 18 (on point 4) the intellect itself in pure calm when he thinks deeply in order to gain a pure insight into the nature of things. He separates himself as much as possible from… [continues online] **read ›**

20 *De Anima (On the Soul)* 24 (1885 English; on point 4) “then adds that the soul is immortal, incorruptible, incorporeal — since he believed God to be the same — invisible, incapable of delineation, uniform, supreme, rational, and intellectual… [continues online] **read ›**

21 *De Anima (On the Soul)* 32 to use ridicule and laughter instead of serious instruction. Now this is our position: the human soul cannot in any way at all be transferred to beasts, even when they… [continues online] **read ›**

22 *De Anima (On the Soul)* 22 (1885 English) **Quote 6, page 3** “soul, then, we define to be sprung from the breath of God, immortal, possessing body, having form, simple in its substance, intelligent in its own nature, developing its power in… [continues online] **read ›**

Origen, *c. 215–254 AD · sources 23–27*

23 *De Principiis (On First Principles)* 4 let us first discuss the one maintained by some: that there is in us a good and heavenly soul, and another earthly and lower one. They say that the better… [continues online] **read ›**

24 *De Principiis (On First Principles)* 8 (1885 English) **Quote 7, page 4** “soul is defined as follows: a substance φανταστική and ὁρμητική, which may be rendered into Latin, although not so appropriately, sensibilis et mobilis… [continues online] **read ›**

25 *De Principiis (On First Principles)* 4 (on point 7) if we briefly restate our views about the immortality of rational natures. Everyone who shares in anything is unquestionably of one essence and nature with anyone else who shares in… [continues online] **read ›**

26 *Against Celsus* 60 (1885 English) “the phantoms which exist about the soul of the dead are produced by some substance, and this substance is in the soul, which exists apart in a body said to… [continues online] **read ›**

27 *Against Celsus* 61 (on point 7) also claims that nothing made from matter is immortal. In reply to this, it can be said that if nothing made from matter is immortal, then either the whole world… [continues online] **read ›**

THE BIBLE *2 verses, The Faith Once Delivered Bible (Old Testament from the Septuagint), in Bible order*

28 **2 Corinthians 5:1** For we know that if our earthly tent dwelling is taken down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. **read ›**

29 **1 Peter 2:11** Beloved, I beg you as foreigners and pilgrims to abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul. **read ›**

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ALSO LINKED BY THF TO THESE PASSAGES *60 verses, by reference*

Partly machine-linked: related to the passages, not always quoted in them. Each reference links to the verse in our audio Bible.

Genesis 2:4

Exodus 25:11

Proverbs 3:19

Isaiah 12:2

Daniel 12:2

Malachi 1:11

Matthew 5:21 · 5:22 · 6:24 · 7:7 · 9:29 · 10:20 · 11:12 · 16:6 · 18:10 · 19:30 · 20:16 · 22:13 · 22:14 · 22:21 · 26:38 · 27:46

Mark 13:32

Luke 1:46 · 2:36 · 3:11 · 6:46 · 7:35 · 15:22 · 18:18 · 19:5

John 1:14 · 5:30 · 6:11 · 14:6 · 15:15 · 15:26 · 17:11

Acts 2:37 · 8:9

Romans 7:23 · 8:6

1 Corinthians 1:26 · 2:6 · 3:3 · 6:20 · 11:10 · 15:53 · 15:54

2 Corinthians 5:4

Galatians 2:8 · 5:17 · 5:19

Ephesians 4:5 · 4:6

1 Thessalonians 5:23

2 Thessalonians 1:9

1 Peter 2:23 · 3:20

Revelation 5:8

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Searched: Ante-Nicene Fathers volumes 1–9 and the Bible, including the Septuagint.

ABOUT THIS STUDY

A THF member asked “What did early Christians say the soul is and what it does?” on August 9, 2026. The Historic Faith answered it as a public study on November 9, 2026.

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THE END OF THIS STUDY