

## I. Introduction to the Doctrine of Angels

- A. This topic is a victim of both neglect and preoccupation.
1. Our knowledge of angels in the Bible is gathered “indirectly.”
  2. It is easier to avoid the doctrine, as most other teachings of the Bible are not affected.
  3. It is easy to speculate and “fill in the gaps” with logic, preconceptions and ideas widely held in the culture at large.
  4. *Discussion*: How has the topic of “angels” become a preoccupation today?

## II. The Doctrine of Angels in History

### A. Early Church (100-500 A.D.)

1. From the beginning, the church affirmed the reality of the invisible, spiritual world.

This was witnessed in Jesus’ ministry and the apostles’ ministry

Jewish roots: (Old Testament witness)

2. The church wrestled with limited knowledge, but did draw conclusions.

Origen (c.185-254) – “The teaching of the church has laid down that these beings exist indeed; but that what they are, or how they exist, it has not explained with sufficient clearness.” (*First Principles*; Allison, 299).

Athenagoras (c.133-190) – “We recognize also a multitude of ministering angels, whom God the maker and framer of the world distributed and appointed to their various posts by his Word” (*A Plea for the Christians*).

3. The early church added imagination to biblically based knowledge.

Tertullian (c.155-240) – “Every spirit possesses wings. This is a common property of both angels and demons. So they are everywhere in a single moment; the whole world is as one place to them (*Apology*).

4. The early church prohibited angel worship or praying to them.

Origen – Christians are “never commanded to honor and worship them in place of God.... For every prayer, petition, intercession, and thanksgiving is to be sent up to the supreme God through the High Priest—the living Word of God, who is above all angels (*Against Celsus*, 5.4).

5. The early church’s theology of the angelic realm addressed questions we have today:

What do angels do? What are their particular responsibilities?

What role do they play in God’s salvation plan?

What influence do they wield over individuals and nations?

- What is their substance, what are they made of?
- What was the anatomy of their sin and fall from heaven?
- What really happened in Genesis 6?
- What is the nature of spiritual battles, and what is a guardian angel?

## B. The Medieval Church (476 (last Emperor in Rome) to 1517 (Luther's 95 theses))

1. In the 5<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> century Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite wrote a major work speculating on the hierarchy, organization and nature of the angelic realm. He assumed the identity of a figure Paul converted in Acts 17:34. His work contained many non-Biblical elements that "exerted an ill-founded yet significant influence over key leaders of the church in the following centuries.

- a. Dionysius took biblical terms and created 9 ranking of angels:  
*thrones, cherubim, seraphim, authorities, dominions, powers, angels, archangels and principalities*
- b. He asserted that God modeled the church hierarchy after the angelic: bishop, priest, deacon, etc.

2. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) a.k.a "The Angel Doctor," was steeped in Aristotelian philosophy, relying on it and Biblical teaching to form doctrine.

- a. Perfection is found in pure intellect and will, therefore, Angels, like God, lack any physical nature.
- b. Perfection of physical things is found in their immense size, therefore perfection of nonphysical things are found in their immense number. So, there are many angels.
- c. He relied on Dionysius' work on angels to further his own theology.
  - 1.) He believed church hierarchy mirror's angelic structure.
  - 2.) Laypeople must obey church leaders as angel's obey their leaders.
- d. Believers will one day become part of the angelic hierarchy.
- e. Each believer has a guardian angel
- f. Demons were punished in hell where they torment human souls, or they were sent to earth where they lurk, tempting humans.
- g. Aquinas' theology became standard for the Catholic Church for centuries.

3. Popular beliefs

- a. People thought demons tempted individuals to "yield" their soul to Satan, even on the deathbed, in trade for comfort, even in the dying moment.
- b. Angels combatted demons by reminding people of Jesus, Mary and various Saints.
- c. Purgatory and hell became fodder for stories, speculation and caricatures.

### C. The Reformation (1517-1750)

1. Martin Luther – (1483-1546) – “An angel is a spiritual creature, a personal being without a body, appointed for the service of the divine [heavenly] church.”

- a. Avoided speculating on angels, as the Bible had little to say on the matter.
- b. Prepared for spiritual battles with meditation on the Bible and prayer.
- c. Believed spiritual battles were sign of a fruitful theologian.
- d. “A Mighty Fortress is our God” reveals his theology.
- e. Warned believers to beware of Satan’s camouflage and counterfeits and to rebuke him with the power of Christ.

“The devil is always the imitator of our Lord God, forever poses as divine and creates the impression that he is God.”

“If [the devil] cannot prevent it nor hinder God’s Word by force, he opposes it with an illusion of godliness, takes the very words which God has spoken, and so twists them as to peddle his lies and poison under their name.”

2. John Calvin (1509-1564) –

- a. Saw the error the Catholic Church, especially Thomas Aquinas, had made in its teaching about angels.
- b. The Bible was to be the sole and central source for formulating doctrine.
  - a. Calvin focused on the “why” God chose to use angels, as God certainly did not need to.
  - b. Focusing on angels can draw one’s attention away from Jesus.

### D. The Modern Period (1750-present)

1. Liberal Christianity and the “Higher Criticism” movement, developed a bias against supernatural matters, resulting in bias neglect of the supernatural or contempt.

- a. Regarding the value of the doctrine of angels:

“It can, therefore, continue to have its place in Christian language without laying on us the duty of arriving at any conclusion with regard to its truth.” And, “Christ and the apostles might have said all these things [about angels] without having had any real conviction of the existence of such beings or any desire to communicate it” – *Friedrich Schleiermacher*, German theologian (1768-1834)

- b. Regarding the doctrine of the devil’s existence: “we cannot expect anyone to be convinced of its truth” (*Schleiermacher*)

- c. This was the thought pattern of the Enlightenment and it spread through the western world, into America. Thomas Jefferson, who removed any reference to the supernatural from his own New Testament is a prime example.

2. A renewed attention to the doctrine of Angels has influenced the Protestant Church.
  - a. Karl Barth (1886-1968) rejected Higher Criticism, seeking to steer clear of ignoring scripture on one extreme and speculation on the other extreme
  - b. C.S. Lewis issues a warning about two extremes: “One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them.”

#### **E. The Post Modern Age (New Medieval)**

What characterizes the study of Angels in today’s world?

Movies

Literature

Church as a whole

Evangelical Theology – demonic power seen in every bad habit, territorial spirits

### **III. Angels are a reality throughout the Bible.**

*“The Bible reflects God’s knowledge of the universe rather than man’s; therefore in the Scriptures the angels, concerning whom man of himself could know nothing, are introduced with perfect freedom”—Lewis Sperry Chafer*

A. Angels (good and bad) are in the Old Testament

1.) Torah

2.) History

3.) Prophets

4.) Poetic Books

B. Angels (good and bad) are in the New Testament

1.) Gospels

2.) The Acts of the Apostles

3.) Epistles

4.) Revelation