

The Intermediate State:

Sanctification through Fire and Salvation from Judgment

D. Gene Williams Jr., PhD

Defend the Word Ministries

NorthPointe Church

ABSTRACT

This paper delves into the intermediate state—the period between physical death and resurrection—analyzing Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox perspectives on sanctification, purification, and judgment. It challenges the Protestant view that believers are perfected at justification, proposing instead that sanctification continues beyond death. The bema seat of Christ is explored as a moment of purification, refining believers, while the Great White Throne Judgment provides both vindication for the faithful and condemnation for the rebellious. Integrating philosophical reflections on the nature of time, this paper argues that sanctification operates in the intermediate state, preparing believers for glorification. Ultimately, it affirms that salvation encompasses justification, sanctification, and glorification, showing how the intermediate state reflects God’s justice, mercy, and love, drawing believers into eternal joy and communion with Him.

I. INTRODUCTION

The intermediate state refers to the condition of the soul between physical death and the final resurrection.¹ Throughout Christian history, diverse traditions—Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox—have developed distinct interpretations of what takes place during this period, addressing themes such as purification, judgment, and preparation for eternal life.² Protestant theology tends to emphasize justification through Christ’s atoning work, often viewing sanctification as complete at the moment of death.³ In contrast, Catholic and Orthodox teachings maintain that spiritual growth and sanctification continue beyond death, with postmortem purification playing a vital role in preparing the soul for its final destiny.⁴

This paper contends that sanctification is not limited to earthly life but extends beyond death, as God’s refining work continues until the believer is fully conformed to

¹ Barry Kowald, *Death and the Intermediate State: Comparison of the Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant Doctrinal Views* (Academia.edu, 2014), 2.

² Douglas Woolley, “Salvation: The Roman Catholic View and the Orthodox Protestant View,” *Theology Corner*, accessed November 26, 2024, https://douglaswoolley.com/essays-seminary/ch17_salvation_catholic_protestant.htm.

³ Sam Storms, *Individual Eschatology: Death, the Intermediate State, Resurrection*, accessed October 28, 2024, <https://www.samstorms.org>.

⁴ Craig Truglia, “The ‘Sanctification Process’ and the Importance of Theosis,” *Orthodox Christian Theology*, March 28, 2017, <https://orthodoxchristiantheology.com/2017/03/28/the-sanctification-process-as-you-know-it-does-not-exist-the-importance-of-theosis/>.

Christ's image.⁵ The bema seat judgment, often understood as merely symbolic, is argued here to function as a moment of divine purification, burning away all that is unworthy.⁶

Moreover, the Orthodox tradition emphasizes salvation's communal nature, where the prayers of the living intercede for the dead, aiding their spiritual journey toward union with God.⁷ By integrating theological reflection with philosophical insights on time and justice, this paper proposes a coherent model of the intermediate state.⁸ It seeks to demonstrate that this state reflects God's redemptive plan—balancing justice, mercy, and love—and serves as a sanctifying process that prepares believers for glorification and eternal communion with Him.⁹

II. TERMINOLOGICAL CLARIFICATIONS: SANCTIFICATION, THEOSIS, AND JUSTIFICATION ACROSS TRADITIONS

Given the theological diversity within Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox traditions, this section provides a clear overview of key concepts—sanctification, theosis, and justification—as understood in each framework. These distinctions help contextualize the arguments in this paper, ensuring precision and clarity.

⁵ Catholic Answers Staff. "Catholic and Protestant Views on Justification and Sanctification." *Catholic Answers*, accessed November 26, 2024. <https://www.catholic.com/qa/difference-between-catholic-and-protestant-views-on-justification-and-sanctification>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ "The Intermediate State in the New Testament: Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox Doctrines." *Academia.edu*. Accessed November 26, 2024. https://www.academia.edu/117428085/The_Intermediate_State_in_the_New_Testament.

⁸ Barry Kowald, *Death and the Intermediate State*, 6.

⁹ Sam Storms, *Individual Eschatology*, 4.

Sanctification

A Protestant View:

Sanctification is understood as both positional and progressive. Positional sanctification refers to the believer being set apart through union with Christ (1 Cor. 1:2), while progressive sanctification is a lifelong transformation into the image of Christ (Rom. 8:29).¹⁰ This process begins at conversion and culminates at glorification (1 Thess. 5:23). Protestant theology emphasizes that sanctification is the work of the Holy Spirit but requires believers' cooperation. The bema seat judgment serves as a moment of refinement beyond death, but most Protestants reject postmortem purification.¹¹

B Catholic View:

In Catholic theology, sanctification is intertwined with justification and continues through purgatory. It is aided by sacraments, especially the Eucharist, and prayers offered on behalf of the dead. Sanctification involves God's love progressively removing imperfections, leading to deeper holiness.¹² Catholic teaching emphasizes that righteousness is infused, not merely credited, and continues throughout life and after death.¹³

¹⁰ Craig Truglia, "Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant Soteriology Compared and Contrasted," *Orthodox Christian Theology*, February 9, 2017, <https://orthodoxchristiantheology.com/2017/02/09/orthodox-catholic-and-protestant-soteriology-compared-and-contrasted/>.

¹¹ Douglas Woolley, *Salvation: The Roman Catholic View and the Orthodox Protestant View*, accessed October 28, 2024, <https://douglaswoolley.com>.

¹² Catholic Answers Staff, "Catholic and Protestant Views on Justification and Sanctification," *Catholic Answers*, accessed October 28, 2024, <https://www.catholic.com>.

¹³ *Ibid.*

C Orthodox View (as Theosis):

In Orthodox theology, sanctification is part of theosis—the process of being united with God and participating in His divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4). This journey begins in earthly life and continues beyond death through prayer, fasting, and participation in the sacraments. The living and the departed are connected in a communal journey toward union with God, supported by intercessory prayer.¹⁴

Justification

A Protestant View:

Justification is viewed as a legal declaration by God, where the believer is pronounced righteous through faith alone (Rom. 5:1). Righteousness is imputed to the believer, meaning it is credited apart from works (Eph. 2:8-9).¹⁵ For Protestants, justification is instantaneous and serves as the foundation for sanctification. Postmortem purification is not required because justification is considered complete at conversion, reflecting the doctrine of *sola fide*.¹⁶

B Catholic View:

Catholic theology regards justification as both an initial declaration and a continuing process. It begins at baptism and requires cooperation with grace throughout life. Faith and good works contribute to growth in righteousness, and remaining imperfections are purified in purgatory.¹⁷ The process integrates both

¹⁴ “Orthodox Theology of Salvation: Synergy and Theosis,” *Spiritual Culture*, accessed October 28, 2024, <https://spiritualculture.org>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Woolley, *Salvation: The Roman Catholic View*.

¹⁷ Ibid.

justification and sanctification, emphasizing infused righteousness that transforms believers over time.¹⁸

C Orthodox View:

Orthodox theology views justification as part of the broader process of theosis. Rather than focusing on a forensic declaration, it emphasizes healing and restoration, leading the believer toward full communion with God.¹⁹ Justification is a dynamic process involving both faith and participation in the Church's life, aligning with the goal of sanctification and union with God.²⁰

Theosis

A Orthodox View:

Theosis, meaning "divinization" or "deification," is central to Orthodox soteriology. It is the process of participating in God's divine nature and achieving union with Him (2 Pet. 1:4). This journey is made possible through ascetic practices, sacraments, and divine grace.²¹

B Protestant and Catholic Views:

While theosis is not emphasized in Protestant or Catholic theology, both traditions recognize elements of transformative union with God. Protestants focus on

¹⁸ "Orthodox Theology of Salvation: Synergy and Theosis," *Spiritual Culture*, accessed October 28, 2024, <https://spiritualculture.org>.

¹⁹ Truglia, "Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant Soteriology Compared," *Orthodox Christian Theology*, 2017.

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ "Theosis and Salvation," *Spiritual Culture*, accessed October 28, 2024.

sanctification, emphasizing conformity to the image of Christ (Rom. 8:29), while Catholics highlight participation in God’s life through the sacraments and grace.²²

Summary and Integration

These distinct theological terms reflect varied understandings of salvation. Protestants emphasize justification by faith alone and the forensic nature of salvation, Catholics stress infused righteousness and the necessity of purification through life and purgatory, while Orthodox theology emphasizes theosis as a transformative union with God. Despite these differences, all traditions affirm that salvation is both a divine gift and a transformative journey, preparing believers for eternal communion with God.

III. JUSTIFICATION, SANCTIFICATION, AND THE “ALREADY AND NOT YET” TENSION

Christian salvation encompasses justification, sanctification, and glorification—distinct yet interconnected stages. Justification, the declaration of righteousness, occurs at the moment of faith (Romans 5:1). Sanctification follows as a continuous process of becoming progressively conformed to the image of Christ (Romans 8:29).²³ The

²² Catholic Answers Staff, “Catholic and Protestant Views on Justification and Sanctification,” *Catholic Answers*, accessed October 28, 2024, <https://www.catholic.com>.

²³ “The Intermediate State in the New Testament: Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox Doctrines,” *Academia.edu*, accessed October 22, 2024, https://www.academia.edu/117428085/The_Intermediate_State_in_the_New_Testament.

culmination of salvation, glorification, happens at the resurrection, when believers receive glorified bodies (1 Cor. 15:42-44).²⁴

Hebrews 10:14 captures the dual nature of salvation: “For by a single offering He has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.” This verse reflects the “already and not yet” nature of Christian life—believers are already perfected in Christ yet still undergoing sanctification. This tension extends beyond death, suggesting that the sanctifying process continues during the intermediate state.²⁵ Sanctification thus prepares believers for the new creation, where they will experience perfect communion with God.²⁶

Philippians 1:6 assures believers of this ongoing transformation: “He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.” This implies that God’s sanctifying work persists throughout life—and beyond—culminating at Christ’s return.²⁷

Protestant View: The Bema Seat Judgment

In Protestant theology, the bema seat judgment is a pivotal moment when believers’ works are assessed, though salvation itself remains secured by faith in Christ.

²⁴ “Divine Blueprint for Spiritual Construction,” *Bible Outlines*, accessed October 28, 2024, <https://www.bibleoutlines.com>.

²⁵ “What is the Judgment Seat?” *Living Room Theology*, accessed October 28, 2024, <https://livingroomtheology.com>.

²⁶ Craig Truglia, “Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant Soteriology Compared,” *Orthodox Christian Theology*, 2017.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

This judgment evaluates the quality of each believer's works, symbolized by materials such as gold, silver, or straw, which are subjected to the refining fire of God's scrutiny (1 Corinthians 3:12-15).²⁸

2 Corinthians 5:10 underscores this process: "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil." Similarly, 1 Corinthians 3:12-15 emphasizes the purifying nature of this judgment: "If anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire".²⁹

The fire serves not as punishment but as sanctification, burning away anything incompatible with Christ's nature. Believers whose works are built on unstable foundations—represented by wood, hay, and straw—may suffer loss, but their salvation remains intact. The bema seat reflects God's refining work, which continues beyond death, ensuring that believers are fully conformed to Christ before entering His presence.³⁰ –

Protestants maintain that the bema seat is not punitive but purifying, aligning with God's sanctifying purpose. It assures that believers, though justified by faith, are

²⁸ "What Does the Judgment Seat of Christ Signify?" *BibleChat.ai*, accessed October 28, 2024, <https://biblechat.ai>.

²⁹ "1 Corinthians 3:10–15," *Bible Outlines*, accessed October 28, 2024, <https://www.bibleoutlines.com>.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

continually transformed by God’s refining love until they are fully prepared for eternal communion with Him.³¹

IV. THE EASTERN ORTHODOX VIEW: A JOURNEY TOWARD THEOSIS

In Orthodox theology, the soul embarks on the journey of theosis—union with God—immediately after death. This process emphasizes that salvation is communal, dynamic, and extends beyond earthly life. Upon death, the soul experiences a particular judgment, resulting in either joy in God’s presence or suffering in separation, as described in Luke 16:19-31.³²

A Prayers for the Dead and Ongoing Growth

Orthodox Christians believe that prayers offered by the living can benefit the souls of the departed, aiding their spiritual growth and offering comfort. This idea is supported by the story in 2 Maccabees 12:41-46, where Judas Maccabeus provides sacrifices for fallen soldiers, indicating that acts on behalf of the dead are honorable and efficacious.³³ Salvation is seen as a communal journey, where the living and the dead intercede for one another in Christ.

B The Soul’s Journey and Spiritual Testing

A distinctive feature of Orthodox theology is the teaching about aerial toll houses, which represent challenges the soul encounters on its path to God. These toll

³¹ Craig Truglia, *Orthodox Christian Theology*, 2017.

³² “Theology of Aerial Toll Houses and Particular Judgment,” *Catholic365*, accessed October 28, 2024, <https://catholic365.com>.

³³ *Ibid.*

houses symbolize the soul’s confrontation with sins and the need for purification.

The trials are not punitive but opportunities for growth, where the soul sheds imperfections and progresses toward deeper communion with God.³⁴

V. CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE: PURGATORY AS PURIFICATION

The Catholic Church teaches that **purgatory** is a temporary state where souls undergo purification to prepare for heaven. The belief that “nothing unclean will enter heaven” (Rev. 21:27) supports the need for this process. Purgatory is not a second chance at salvation but a continuation of sanctification for those who die in God’s grace but still carry imperfections.³⁵

1 Corinthians 3:15 illustrates this concept: “He will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.” Prayers and Masses offered by the living can hasten the purification process, emphasizing the interconnectedness of the Church—both living and deceased.³⁶

VI. THE GREAT WHITE THRONE JUDGMENT: VINDICATION AND CONDEMNATION

The Great White Throne Judgment, described in Revelation 20:11-15, marks the final judgment for all humanity. At this point, believers are vindicated through Christ’s

³⁴ “Aerial Toll-Houses and the Soul’s Journey,” *OrthodoxWiki*, accessed October 28, 2024, <https://orthodoxwiki.org>.

³⁵ “Purgatory vs. Toll Houses: Orthodox and Catholic Perspectives,” *Orthodox Christian Theology*, accessed October 28, 2024, <https://orthodoxchristiantheology.com>.

³⁶ “The Role of Prayers and Masses for the Dead,” *Catholic Answers*, accessed October 28, 2024, <https://www.catholic.com>.

atonement, while those who reject God are condemned. This dual outcome reflects the balance between God’s justice and mercy. John 5:28-29 highlights the separation of destinies: “Those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment”.³⁷

VII. A SCRIPTURALLY AND PHILOSOPHICALLY ROBUST MODEL FOR THE INTERMEDIATE STATE

Developing a coherent theological and philosophical model of the intermediate state requires fidelity to Scripture while integrating insights from logic, metaphysics, and theology. This section synthesizes Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox views into a unified framework, acknowledging the contributions of each tradition while maintaining biblical integrity.

The Nature of Time and the Intermediate State

- A** A key challenge in understanding the intermediate state is grappling with the concept of time beyond death. Scripture suggests that God exists beyond time’s constraints (2 Peter 3:8), indicating that the soul’s experience in the intermediate state might not follow the linear progression familiar to earthly existence.³⁸
- B** Ecclesiastes 12:7 states: “And the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.” This verse suggests the soul’s immediate return to

³⁷ “Great White Throne Judgment in Orthodox Thought,” *Ancient Faith Blogs*, accessed October 28, 2024, <https://blogs.ancientfaith.com>.

³⁸ “The Intermediate State,” *Tabletalk Magazine*, accessed October 28, 2024, <https://tabletalkmagazine.com>.

God's presence upon death, pointing both to the immediacy of Christ's presence (Philippians 1:23) and the awaiting of bodily resurrection.³⁹

- C Luke 23:43: Jesus' promise to the thief— "Today you will be with me in paradise"—affirms that the soul experiences joy in Christ's presence before the resurrection occurs.⁴⁰

Sanctification as Conformity to Christ

- A Sanctification involves more than moral improvement—it is about conforming to the likeness of Christ (Romans 8:29). This process enables believers to experience deeper communion with God.
- B Hebrews 12:10: "He disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness." This verse highlights that sanctification is part of God's loving discipline and continues until believers are fully conformed to His holiness.⁴¹

The Bema Seat Judgment: Purifying, Not Punitive

- C The bema seat judgment (2 Corinthians 5:10) evaluates believers' works, subjecting them to God's scrutiny. This judgment is not about punishment but about refining through spiritual fire.
- D Corinthians 3:12-15 emphasizes this refining process, where works are "tested by fire." Though believers may suffer loss if their works are unworthy, their

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ "What is the Judgment Seat of Christ?" *GotQuestions.org*, accessed October 28, 2024, <https://gotquestions.org>.

salvation remains secure, underscoring the bema seat as part of sanctification, not condemnation.⁴²

God’s Justice, Mercy, and the Great White Throne Judgment

A The Great White Throne Judgment (Revelation 20:11-15) distinguishes between believers who are vindicated through Christ’s atonement and the rebellious who face condemnation.

B John 5:29 captures this dual outcome: “Those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.” This judgment reflects God’s justice and mercy, restoring the righteous to eternal life and confronting evil.⁴³

The Intermediate State as Preparation for Glorification

Glorification—the final transformation—occurs when the body and soul are reunited at the resurrection in perfect harmony. As 1 John 3:2 states: “We shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.” This verse encapsulates the goal of sanctification: preparing believers for full communion with Christ in glorified bodies.⁴⁴

The intermediate state serves as a period of purification, regardless of whether it is viewed through the lens of the bema seat judgment (Protestant), purgatory (Catholic),

⁴² David Jeremiah, “Side-by-Side Comparison: Great White Throne & Judgment Seat,” accessed October 28, 2024, <https://davidjeremiah.org>.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ “The Intermediate State,” *Tabletalk Magazine*, accessed October 28, 2024, <https://tabletalkmagazine.com>.

or theosis (Orthodox). Despite theological differences, the shared purpose is to prepare the soul for eternal joy with God.⁴⁵

Unified Scriptural Model of the Intermediate State

This model reflects the following stages based on Scripture:

- A** Immediate Presence with Christ: Believers enter paradise at death (Luke 23:43; Philippians 1:23).
- B** Sanctification through Refinement: The bema seat judgment purifies believers' works (1 Corinthians 3:12-15).
- C** Prayers and Communal Growth: Intercession for the dead aligns with the communal nature of salvation (Romans 14:7-9).
- D** Vindication and Final Judgment: The Great White Throne Judgment confirms the righteous and condemns the rebellious (Revelation 20:11-15).
- E** Glorification at the Resurrection: Body and soul are reunited, fully conforming believers to Christ's image (1 John 3:2).

IV. CONCLUSION

This paper demonstrates that the intermediate state is not merely a waiting period but a time of purification, sanctification, and preparation for eternal life. Through the bema seat judgment, believers are refined, and the Great White Throne Judgment brings vindication for the righteous and condemnation for the rebellious. Sanctification

⁴⁵ "What is the Judgment Seat of Christ?" *GotQuestions.org*, accessed October 28, 2024, <https://gotquestions.org>.

continues beyond death, reflecting God's justice, mercy, and love. Ultimately, salvation is not just a legal declaration but a transformative journey toward perfect union with God.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Source

The Holy Bible. *English Standard Version*. Wheaton: Crossway Bibles, 2001.

Secondary Source

Ancient Faith. "Great White Throne Judgment in Orthodox Thought." Accessed October 28, 2024. <https://blogs.ancientfaith.com>.

Barry Kowald. *Death and the Intermediate State: Comparison of the Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant Doctrinal Views*. Academia.edu, 2014.

BibleChat.ai. "What Does the Judgment Seat of Christ Signify?" Accessed October 28, 2024. <https://biblechat.ai>.

Bible Outlines. "Divine Blueprint for Spiritual Construction." 1 Corinthians 3:10–15. Accessed October 28, 2024. <https://www.bibleoutlines.com>.

Catholic Answers Staff. "Catholic and Protestant Views on Justification and Sanctification." *Catholic Answers*. Accessed October 28, 2024. <https://www.catholic.com>.

Catholic365. "Theology of Aerial Toll Houses and Particular Judgment." Accessed October 28, 2024. <https://catholic365.com>.

David Jeremiah. "Side-by-Side Comparison: Great White Throne & Judgment Seat." Accessed October 28, 2024. <https://davidjeremiah.org>.

Douglas Woolley. *Salvation: The Roman Catholic View and the Orthodox Protestant View*. Accessed October 28, 2024. <https://douglaswoolley.com>.

GotQuestions.org. "What is the Judgment Seat of Christ?" Accessed October 28, 2024. <https://gotquestions.org>.

Living Room Theology. "What is the Judgment Seat?" *Living Room Theology*. Accessed October 28, 2024. <https://livingroomtheology.com>.

OrthodoxWiki. "Aerial Toll-Houses and the Soul's Journey." Accessed October 28, 2024. <https://orthodoxwiki.org>.

Sam Storms. *Individual Eschatology: Death, the Intermediate State, Resurrection*. Accessed October 28, 2024. <https://samstorms.org>.

Spiritual Culture. "Orthodox Theology of Salvation: Synergy and Theosis." Accessed October 28, 2024. <https://spiritualculture.org>.

Tabletalk Magazine. "The Intermediate State." *Tabletalk Magazine*. Accessed October 28, 2024. <https://tabletalkmagazine.com>.

Truglia, Craig. "Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant Soteriology Compared." *Orthodox Christian Theology*, 2017.