

# Conditionalism and Other Doctrines

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Conditionalism has an impact upon, and is impacted by, most of the rest of the theological enterprise. An interrelationship exists between it and the major doctrines of the faith. It also correlates closely with the hermeneutical principles by which the interpretation of Scripture takes place. This initial statement is not particularly startling. Christian theology is a web of complex relationships, each doctrine tied to and affecting its fellow doctrines. Each is also significant to the conduct of our daily affairs. Theology is thus practical.

Here we will attempt to show the interdependence between conditional immortality and other doctrines, between conditional immortality and interpretive principles, and between conditional immortality and the way we think and live. We will take some pains not to overstate the case. Conditional immortality, after all, is not one of the fundamentals of the faith. Nevertheless it is a significant doctrine, the relationship of which to other cardinal truths is revealing.

We are at a good place to define just what we mean by conditional immortality, partly by contrast to the two alternatives, eternal conscious punishing and universal salvation. The alternatives both involve eternal life for everyone. Universalists maintain that sooner or later God forgives everyone, and they live forever with Him. The majority of evangelical Christians are convinced that God keeps everyone alive forever, believers in heaven, unbelievers in hell. Conditionalists maintain that all are raised from the dead, judged, and assigned the appropriate reward or punishment, eternal life or eternal destruction.

Our procedure: State the biblical doctrine as it is generally accepted by evangelical Christians; show how conditional immortality supports and is supported by the doctrine in question; point out discomforting aspects of the doctrine for eternal conscious punishment and in some cases for universalism.

## I. CONDITIONALISM AND THE CREATED ORDER

“God saw everything that He had made, and indeed, it was very good” (Gen. 1:31).<sup>1</sup>

This last verse of Genesis 1 is profound theology. The created order is good, and all God’s creatures are meant to enjoy it. Genesis 2 continues the attractive picture of God’s good creation: shaped from dust, “man became a living being” (7); he lived in a “garden” (8); it was filled with plants “pleasant to the sight and good for food” (9); Adam could “freely eat” the fruit therefrom (16); he and his mate lived without guilt (“were not ashamed,” 25). What was in the Promised Land, the good home to which the Lord was leading the Israelites through the wilderness after their Exodus from Egypt? Was it a state of philosophic contemplation and religious ecstasy? By no means!

For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron, and from whose hills you may mine copper. You shall eat your fill and bless the Lord your God for the good land He has given you (Deut. 8:7-10).

Beautiful!

Psalm 104 is an attractive nature hymn. The whole of the psalm is an exaltation of the sovereign Lord, particularly in connection with His creation. It talks about His making the earth, the springs gushing forth, the green grass growing, wine and oil for people, nests for birds, rocky mountains for goats, etc.

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<sup>1</sup>All Scripture quotations are from the NRSV unless otherwise indicated.

O Lord, how manifold are Thy works! In wisdom You have made them all; the earth is full of Your creatures. . . . May the glory of the Lord endure forever; may the Lord rejoice in His works (24, 31).

Peter Flamming might have been commenting on this chapter in the introduction to his book, *God and Creation*:

God is creative. He is the God who loves color, texture, beauty, variety, and relationships. He loves polar bears and ostriches, sapphires and rainbows, red oaks and rainbow trout, even uncles who snore and children who pout.<sup>2</sup>

In Ecclesiastes Solomon speaks wisely of simple everyday life:

There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God; for apart from Him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? (2:24-25).

Not so according to Plato. The material world should be escaped, not enjoyed. Plato is the Greek philosopher of the fourth century B.C. whose dualistic thought has been influential ever since. He set forth the view that the physical creation, if not evil, is at least inferior and undesirable. The words which he puts in the mouth of Socrates in the dialogue called *Phaedo* express in classic form the dualistic view of physical life.

Is it [death] not the separation of soul and body? And to be dead is the completion of this; when the soul exists in herself, and is released from the body and the body is released from the soul, what is this but death?

But for the Apostle Paul, it is not the material body vs. immaterial soul, but rather fallen and depraved mind and heart vs. mind and heart regenerated by the Holy Spirit. “Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity” (Rom. 1:24). “God gave them up to a base mind” (Rom. 1:28). “By your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself” (Rom. 2:5). “Be transformed by the renewal of your mind” (Rom. 12:2). Listen also to James, who asks the same question that Plato does: “What causes wars and what causes fightings among you?”

<sup>2</sup> Peter Flamming, *God and Creation*, Nashville: Broadman, 1985, 9.

(4:1). But he gives a different answer. It is the person, not his body, whose desires are evil (4:2).

Note that life on the good earth is always oriented to more than just the material things. It includes fun and fellowship. Human fellowship may be rich, and the richest should be that of husband and wife (“helper,” Gen. 2:18, 23, 24). Richer still is the fellowship between the human creature and his Creator, in whose image he is made. This relationship is suggested in the attractive figure of “the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze” (Gen. 3:8). It has become a tragic picture because instead of the usual enjoyment of the divine presence, the creature is hiding in shame.

## II. CONDITIONALISM AND THE NATURE OF MAN

“Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear Him who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Mt. 10:28).

One aspect of man’s nature which is increasingly recognized is his unity. Whether made up of one, two, or three essential parts, he is a single integrated entity, a living, breathing, thinking, embodied human being. A highly respected orthodox theologian puts it well:

[T]he Bible teaches us to view the nature of man as a unity, and not as a duality, consisting of two different elements, each of which move [*sic*] along parallel lines but do not really unite to form a single organism. The idea of a mere parallelism between the two elements of human nature, found in Greek philosophy and also in the works of some later philosophers, is entirely foreign to Scripture.<sup>3</sup>

Scripture generally speaks, not of souls or bodies, but of the person as such. Man (*adam, anthropos*) is formed from the dust of the ground (Gen. 2:7). He—and she—is given responsibility over the creation. He (the person, not his body or soul) is responsible for his actions, and the person sins. He, the person, not his body, dies. He as a personal entity is redeemed from sin and death. The entire person, not just his soul, is assigned to eternal life or eternal death.

<sup>3</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941, 192.

Ephesians 2 serves well as an example of the common biblical treatment of man as a whole. You, Gentiles, strangers and sojourners, “were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived” (not your bodies or your souls but *you*). We were all “children of wrath.” But God loved *us* and raised *us* up. He saved *you*, brought *you* near, reconciled *us* together to Himself, gave *us* access to Him, made *us* fellow citizens, and built *us* into His household. In the coming age He will show “the immeasurable riches of His grace in kindness toward *us*.” He does all of these things, not to our souls or to our spirits, but to ourselves as integrated people.

Still, some terms used in Scripture might be taken to indicate a duality or a multiplicity in the person. Key NT words are flesh (*sarx*), body (*soma*), soul (*psuche*), and spirit (*pneuma*). Each of these terms is used in a variety of ways. We cannot look at them in detail now.<sup>4</sup> The question is, does the use of these terms subtract from the unity of the person which we have just asserted? The answer in sum is no. Each of them is used frequently to refer to the whole person from a particular perspective.

Flesh, particularly in the adverbial phrase “according to the flesh,” refers to the person as one who is oriented to the things of the created order rather than toward the Creator. The NIV translates the phrase appropriately as “according to the sinful nature” and “from a worldly point of view” (2 Cor. 5:16). It is not the material body but the entire person who operates from this fallen fleshly or worldly perspective. Note that it is not a question about what we are made of (we are material beings made of flesh) but about what direction our lives are headed.

*Soma* is apparently used on rare occasions to refer to a part of the person. Jesus’ reference in Matthew 10:28 is the most striking example: “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear Him who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (cf. Lk. 12:4-5). More frequently *soma* refers to the person as a whole. “Man does not have a *soma*; he is a *soma*.”<sup>5</sup> *Soma* is not “something he has. It is what he is. Indeed, *soma* is the nearest equivalent to our word ‘personality.’”<sup>6</sup> Romans 6:12-13 is sufficient for our purposes:

<sup>4</sup> See ch. 1 of Freeman Barton’s *Heaven, Hell, and Hades: A Historical and Theological Survey of Personal Eschatology*, 2nd ed., Lenox, MA: Henceforth Publications, 1990.

<sup>5</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. Kendrick Grobel, New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1954, 194.

<sup>6</sup> John A.T. Robinson, *The Body: A Study in Pauline Theology*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1952, 28.

Do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God.  
(*Note*: bodies = your members = yourselves.)

*Psuche* is “natural physical life.”<sup>7</sup> Earle Ellis points out that “‘life’ and ‘self’ are so closely parallel that to lose one’s life means virtually to lose one’s self.”<sup>8</sup> By extension *psuche* may be used of a living being. Concerning Pentecost Luke says, “about three thousand persons [KJV “souls”] were added” to the church (Ac. 2:41). As with *soma*, a person does not so much have a soul; he *is* a soul, a living being. *Psuche* is “the self as alive and active.”<sup>9</sup>

*Pneuma* (Heb. *ruach*), “spirit,” is the word for wind and breath. It may be “the breath of life” as with Jairus’ daughter. When Jesus spoke to her “her spirit returned,” that is she started breathing again (Lk. 8:55). It would be just as accurate and more meaningful to say, “Her breath returned.”

Both *psuche* and *pneuma* sometimes refer to the whole person—from a particular perspective. Both refer to “the self that lives in a man’s attitude, in the orientation of his will.”<sup>10</sup> Two examples of each:

Though Moses and Samuel stood before Me, yet My heart [*nephesh*; Grk. *psuche*] would not turn toward this people (Jer. 15:1).

[Slaves should be] slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart [*psuche*] (Eph. 6:6).

I meditate and search my spirit [*ruach*; Grk. *pneuma* = “me”] (Ps. 77:6).

Did we [Paul and Timothy] not conduct ourselves with the same spirit [*pneuma*] (2 Cor. 12:18).

One revealing passage uses both words:

<sup>7</sup> Georg Bertram, “Psyche, etc.,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964, Vol. IX, 637. See also George E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974, 460 and Bultmann, 203-204.

<sup>8</sup> Earle Ellis, “Life,” *The New Bible Dictionary*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962, 735.

<sup>9</sup> George E. Ladd, *The Pattern of New Testament Truth*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968, 103.

<sup>10</sup> Bultmann, 206.

Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent but hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit [*pneuma*], striving side by side with one mind [*psuche*] (Phil. 1:27).

It is difficult then to think of the person as a combination of immortal soul and mortal body, of souls going to heaven at death where they are alive and active and bodies going to the grave where they wait, of souls being reattached at the resurrection to mortal bodies in which they are tormented forever. In light of the biblical terminology, it is much easier to picture the believer as a psychosomatic unity, “this mortal,” who at the resurrection “puts on immortality” (1 Cor. 15:53). The unbeliever is irrelevant to Paul at this point since the permanent resurrection life is not given to him.

### III. CONDITIONALISM AND “THE FALL”

“ . . . in the day that you eat of it you shall die” (Gen. 2:17).

Adam and Eve from the beginning were faced with a condition: Leave the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil alone, and you may eat of the other trees, including the Tree of Life, thus continuing to live. Eat of the forbidden tree, and “you shall die.” They disobeyed, disrupting the good creation. This Genesis account, according to orthodox theology, is not a parable of what happens in every person’s life — Adam-everyman — although something like it does happen to us. It is a historical event which drastically affected the human race and the rest of creation. It is commonly called “The Fall.”

What did humanity fall from? From original righteousness? Yes; he became a sinner. From access to perfect knowledge? Yes; his mind was bent out of shape like the rest of creation. From fellowship with God to alienation from Him? Yes; Adam and Eve hid. But mankind’s fall was especially from life, potentially eternal life, into death. He began to die, as God had warned him that he would.

Conditionalism makes sense of the vocabulary, including the imagery of the trees. The pair (generic “man”; Heb. *adam*) was driven from Eden, and an angelic guard was placed at its entrance because “he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever” (Gen. 3:22). The repeated refrain in later chapters, “and he died,” reveals Satan as a liar who had promised, “You will not die” (Gen. 3:4). Man has

always been conditionally immortal. Eternal life was first conditioned on obedience, then on faith.

Natural immortalists and universalists should feel some discomfort with the accounts of “The Fall.” For both of them, nobody ever actually dies, whereas according to Scripture everyone does, unbelievers forever.

### IV. CONDITIONALISM AND SUBSTITUTIONARY ATONEMENT

“Christ died for our sins, in accordance with the Scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3).

One of the most basic doctrines of the Christian faith is that Christ died to pay the penalty for our sins. The doctrine is called “substitutionary atonement.” Christ paid the penalty for the believer which the unbeliever will have to pay for himself. What penalty?

It would be helpful to have the doctrine expressed in the words of orthodox theologian Louis Berkhof. Concerning the death of Christ he says, “The position of the Church has always been that death in the full sense of the word, including physical death, is not only the consequence but the penalty of sin.”<sup>11</sup> He adds that the OT sacrifices were “expiatory and vicarious,” that is, they made payment in substitution for the sinner, and they were “typico-prophetic,” that is, they pointed forward to and were fulfilled in Christ.<sup>12</sup> Of the atonement he says,

The Bible certainly teaches that the sufferings and death of Christ were vicarious, and vicarious in the strict sense of the word that He took the place of sinners, and that their guilt was imputed, and their punishment transferred, to Him.<sup>13</sup>

Well and clearly expressed!

Conditionalist David A. Dean also deals with this subject in his helpful book, *The Gift from Above*:

Christ is our substitute. . . . This spotlights the New Testament picture of Christ’s death as a sacrifice. Jesus fulfills the Old Testament ritual of sacrifice in which innocent animals died in place of guilty sinners.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Berkhof, 260.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 364.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 377.

<sup>14</sup> David A. Dean, *The Gift from Above*, Charlotte, N.C.: Advent Christian General

Note the parallel between the penalty which Christ paid for the sins of believers and the penalty which presumably the unbeliever will have to pay for himself. The situation in sum is this:

1. The announced penalty for sin was death, the loss of “the quality or fact of animate existence”—ordinary physical death.
2. The OT sacrifices were symbols in which the animal was killed in place of the person who offered it.
3. Christ paid the penalty for believers, literal physical death, which was symbolized in the OT sacrifices; his was a penal substitutionary atonement (payment of penalty).
4. Unbelievers at the judgment will pay the same penalty which Christ paid for believers—literal physical death.

Conditionalism thus conforms perfectly with the orthodox doctrine of substitutionary atonement (despite objections to the contrary from Wells and Phillips, for example).<sup>15</sup> Basil F. C. Atkinson, longtime librarian at Cambridge University, puts the issue sharply:

It is sometimes forgotten that we have in history at the centre of our faith an open example and illustration of the punishment of sin. . . . The facts of the suffering and death of Christ Jesus prove conclusively that the punishment of sin is death in its natural sense.<sup>16</sup>

#### V. CONDITIONALISM AND THE RESURRECTION

“Then he said to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe’” (Jn. 20:27).

##### 1. The Nature and Necessity of the Resurrection Body

Again a paragraph from Berkhof well summarizes the orthodox view of the doctrine which we are considering:

Conference, 1989, 90.

<sup>15</sup> David F. Wells, “Everlasting Punishment,” *Christianity Today*, 20 Mar. 1987, 42. Timothy R. Phillips, “Hell: A Christological Reflection,” *Through No Fault of Their Own? The Fate of Those Who Have Never Heard*, ed. William V. Crockett and James G. Sigountos, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991, 53.

<sup>16</sup> *Life and Immortality: An Examination of the Nature and Meaning of Life and Death as They Are Revealed in the Scriptures*, No place: no publisher, no date, 103. See also James A. Nichols, Jr., *Christian Doctrines: A Presentation of Biblical Theology*, Nutley, N.J.: Craig Press, 1970, 142 and Curtis Dickinson: *What the Bible*

It is a PHYSICAL OR BODILY RESURRECTION. . . . The Bible is very explicit in teaching the resurrection of the body. Christ is called the “firstfruits of the resurrection” (I Cor. 15:20,23) and “the firstborn of the dead” (Col. 1:18; Rev. 1:5). This implies that the resurrection of the people of God will be like that of their heavenly Lord.<sup>17</sup>

Jesus was raised to literal physical life. He could be seen and touched. He moved about, ate, and slept.

More important for our purposes is the reason for the resurrection. It relates closely to the good creation and the nature of man examined above. Man as originally made, a psychosomatic unity, was good. The physical body was an essential part of the person. He does not keep on living as a disembodied soul throughout eternity. He cannot even function without the essential physical organs. The resurrection is an indispensable step on the way to the restored Eden, the new heavens and the new earth, and to the most intimate fellowship with the Creator enjoyed by Adam and Eve before the fall.

From the conditionalist perspective the resurrection makes perfectly good sense. Natural immortalists also believe it. They must because Scripture clearly teaches it. But what place does it have in their doctrinal scheme? Those raised will have already been in heaven or hell, some of them for hundreds or thousands of years. They have been functioning fully as disembodied immortal souls. Why resurrection bodies? The implicit answer is clear in William G. T. Shedd’s summary:

The substance of the Reformed view, then, is that the intermediate state for the saved is Heaven without the body, and the final state is Heaven with the body; that the intermediate state for the lost is Hell without the body, and the final state for the lost is Hell with the body.<sup>18</sup>

The resurrection means practically nothing, but we tack it on because Scripture insists on it. Most natural immortalists are happily inconsistent and stress the importance of the resurrection, even though they have little need for it in their theological structure.

*Teaches About Immortality and Future Punishment*, Alamagordo, N.M.: By the author, 1984, 16.

<sup>17</sup> Berkhof, 722.

<sup>18</sup> William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1953, II, 594.

## 2. Who/What Is Raised and Given Immortality?

According to the predominant evangelical view, soulless bodies are raised, and no one is given immortality because they all already have it. According to Scripture *people* are raised, and believers are given the gift of immortality. According to the NT, it was not Jesus' body but Jesus himself who was raised: "he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures"; "in fact Christ has been raised from the dead" (1 Cor. 15:4, 20). The reverse of the death which he died is the resurrection which he experienced—a full personal return to life as "the first fruit of those who sleep."

Likewise the passages which speak of the resurrection of believers refer not just to bodies but to people: "the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality" (1 Cor. 15:52-53 NIV). The NRSV does its readers a serious disservice here by presenting a dualistic interpretive translation: "This mortal body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality." The Greek has simply *phthartos* and *thnetos*, perishable and mortal—people, not bodies or souls. Similarly Paul speaks of "the dead in Christ" and "we who are still alive" (1 Thess. 4:16-17). Dead people (not just their bodies) are raised and join living people to meet Christ.

## VI. CONDITIONALISM AND THE NEW HEAVENS-EARTH

"We wait for new heavens and a new earth" (2 Pt. 3:13).

The classical systematic theologians (Hodge, Strong, Berkhof, etc.) do not feature down-to-earth life in the new creation. The tenor of their "heaven" is rather spiritualistic, fuzzy—cloudy. Increasingly, however, evangelical interpreters are taking more literally scriptural expressions concerning the eternal kingdom. Anthony Hoekema, longtime teacher at Calvin Theological Seminary, is an outstanding representative of this trend. In his chapter, "The New Earth," he notes that "to leave the new earth out of consideration when we think of the final state of believers is greatly to impoverish biblical teaching about the life to come."<sup>19</sup> He cites a beautiful summary from German theologian, Edward Thurneysen:

<sup>19</sup> Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979, 274.

The world into which we shall enter in the Parousia of Jesus Christ is therefore not another world; it is this world, this heaven, this earth; both, however, passed away and renewed. It is these forests, these fields, these cities, these streets, these people, that will be the scene of redemption. At present they are battlefields, full of the strife and sorrow of the not yet accomplished consummation; then they will be fields of victory, fields of harvest, where out of seed that was sown with tears the everlasting sheaves will be reaped and brought home.<sup>20</sup>

This perspective is distinctly anti-Platonic. It revels in the restoration of the creation to the goodness with which God made it. It exults in the fact that God "will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more. . . . 'See, I am making all things new'" (Rev. 21:4-5).

Probably never before in human history has the stark reality of human cruelty and suffering been brought home to the majority of the human race as it has in the past year in connection with the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the effect of gang warfare in Somalia, portrayed in living color on the nightly news. A person with any sensitivity moves from tears to rage and back to tears at the magnitude of human misery and the lack of will and impotence of those who might be expected to stop it. It behooves believers everywhere to work to relieve misery as much as possible. Certainly it heightens the believer's hope for Christ's return and the establishment of his kingdom on the new earth.

We have pursued the important point that by his death Christ paid the penalty for believers which unbelievers will have to pay for themselves. An equally important and more attractive point is that the life of the resurrected Christ is the life which his people will experience in the new earth. Here is the argument in sum:

1. The announced reward for obedience (vicarious) is eternal life.
2. Christ rose from death with the result that his people may live also.
3. Christ's resurrection was a return to literal physical life, reversing the process begun with Adam.
4. Like Christ's our resurrection life will be literal physical life lived out on the new earth.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 281.

We can best picture this new life by returning to Eden before the fall. Strategically, in dealing with non-conditionalists, we might do better to emphasize the positive. The glorious future of the believer is a good starting point. It is much easier to demonstrate to most evangelicals that our future life is this-worldly (in the best sense) than to convince them of something crudely referred to as annihilation. Life on the new earth, like life in Eden, will be perfect.

Once the new heavens and the new earth are described in scriptural terms, however, another question is inevitable. What do we do with Gehenna? It is, as Roger Nicole of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary noted in class years ago, an embarrassment. It is an unnecessary embarrassment because Scripture does not teach that it lasts forever. Gehenna and death itself are destroyed. "Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire" (Rev. 20:14).

#### VII. CONDITIONALISM AND THE INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE

"... rightly explaining the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15).

A basic principle, insisted upon by practically every opponent of conditionalism, is that Scripture should be interpreted literally. In more sophisticated terms, modern interpreters favor the grammaticohistorical approach to interpretation. An attempt is made to determine the original intention of the author and to develop theology on the basis of that interpretation. The interpreter is not free to spiritualize or allegorize. Note the literal meanings of a few key words as defined by Webster and by Scripture:

#### 1. Webster

*life*: "the quality or fact of animate existence"

*death*: "the cessation of all vital functions without capability of resuscitation"

*perish*: "to be destroyed or ruined; to come to an end, esp. an untimely end; to pass away completely, as by disintegration, deterioration, loss, or the like; as *racas that have perished from the earth*"

*destroy*: "to bring to naught by putting out of existence; specif.: (a) to take the life of; to kill; as *the plague destroyed men by the*

*thousands* (b) to annihilate; to cause to vanish; to abolish; to undo the work of"

#### 2. Scripture

When Scripture speaks of "life" and "death," "destruction" and "perishing," is it using the words in their literal sense (assuming that they are properly translated from Hebrew and Greek), or do they have some special kind of sacred symbolism in the Bible? When Paul says, "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 6:23), does he use the words "life" and "death" in literal or spiritualized meanings? What "perishing" and what "life" does Jesus refer to when he states, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (Jn. 3:16)? Are these words used in contexts which indicate clearly whether they should be understood literally or figuratively? Blessedly the answer is yes.

From the beginning the penalty for sin was literal death. "In the day that you eat of it you shall die" (Heb. *muth*; Gen. 2:17). *Muth* is the common everyday Hebrew verb "to die." Ishmael "breathed his last and died, and was gathered to his people" (Gen. 25:17). "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die" (Is. 22:13, quoting the ungodly). If any doubt remains that the penalty is physical death, God's words to the newly fallen Adam dispels it:

By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return (Gen. 3:19).

Paul quotes the Isaiah passage about eating and drinking, using the Greek word *apothnesko*, to die. If there were no resurrection, the first death would be the end. But Paul also uses this common verb in connection with eternal destiny: "for if you live according to the flesh, you will die" (Rom. 8:13). In the most familiar summary concerning eternal destiny Paul uses the equivalent noun, *thanatos* and the opposite, *zoe*:

For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 6:23).

He refers to the literal physical opposites, life and death.

*Apollumi* is a Greek verb often meaning "to destroy." Joseph was warned to flee to Egypt because Herod wanted to destroy, that is to kill,

Jesus (Mt. 2:13). Thirty years later Jewish leaders kept looking for a way to destroy, that is kill, Jesus (Lk. 19:47). The reference in both cases is to physical death. The same meaning is intended when Jesus encourages his disciples by stating:

Do not fear those who kill [*apokteino*] the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear Him who can destroy [*apollumi*] both soul and body in hell [*Gehenna*] (Mt. 10:28).

Jesus' words in Luke 13 make explicit just what it means to be destroyed at the judgment. Onlookers raised the issue of Pilate who had killed innocent Galilean pilgrims while they were offering sacrifices in Jerusalem. The reply: "unless you repent you will all perish as they did" (Lk. 13:3). And he repeated the words concerning the eighteen killed when the tower of Siloam fell (13:5). According to Paul, for the "enemies of the cross" their "end is destruction" (*apoleia*, the noun counterpart to the verb *apollumi*; Phil. 3:19). The disobedient "will suffer the penalty of eternal destruction [*olethros*, a less common noun] separated from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might" (2 Thess. 1:9). The penalty is literal physical death.

Life in all these cases is "the quality or fact of animate existence," and death is the opposite. We have no need to give artificial figurative meanings to these everyday words just when they deal with human destiny. To say that life means the union of the soul and the body and that death means the separation of the soul from the body; to say that eternal life means union with God and eternal death means eternal separation from God is to invent meanings to fit preconceived theological views.

#### VIII. CONDITIONALISM AND THE DOCTRINE OF GOD

"God is love" (1 Jn. 4:8).

Who is God and what is He like? God is the Creator, bringing into existence from nothing everything which exists. He is a God of life, fellowship, laughter, play, love of the good and the beautiful. He is a God of hatred toward sin, aggression, injustice, suffering, pain, evil. How is God described in Scripture?

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, His mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness (Lam. 3:22, 23).

[Concerning the Israelites who wanted to go back into Egypt:] But You are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and You did not forsake them (Neh. 9:17b).

The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The Lord is good to all, and His compassion is over all that He has made (Ps. 145:8-9).

... the God of love and peace will be with you (2 Cor. 13:11).

... not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance (2 Pt. 3:9).

What implications does the fact that God is love have for the eternal destiny of those who do not believe? The majority of evangelical Christians are convinced that God keeps everyone alive forever, believers in heaven, unbelievers in hell. For them the punishment for unbelief is not death but pain, physical or psychological, or both. They thus posit a God who torments multitudes of His human creatures forever. Conditionalists, on the other hand, taking scriptural imagery quite literally, contend that believers are given the gift of life forever, unbelievers are deprived of life forever.

It would be easy to fall into rationalism at this point. Leon Morris, writing on another subject, warns against any sentence that begins, "Surely God . . ." <sup>21</sup> Those who believe in eternal torment or in universalism sometimes use this rationalistic approach: "Surely God would not totally destroy anything that He has made." We conditionalists have all too often fallen into the same trap: "Surely a loving God would not torment a human being forever." How do we know what God would surely do, apart from the source of information about God, the Scriptures?

Nevertheless we can supplement our conclusions based on careful interpretation of passages about eternal destiny, by what we know of the nature of the Father. We can appeal both to the Scriptures we have quoted, and to the natural reactions of human beings (part of general revelation). God is loving and patient, even toward those who disobey and reject Him.

<sup>21</sup> Leon Morris, *I Believe in Revelation*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976, 119.



We would not expect this God to limitlessly torment limited beings who have committed limited sins. In fact the natural reaction of normal human beings is abhorrence of this kind of cruelty.

How do we react when we read about and see the atrocities that Serbs (Eastern Orthodox “Christians”) and Croats (Roman Catholic “Christians”) are committing against the mostly Muslim population of Bosnia? We choke up and are frequently angry that these horrors are allowed. Our reaction is the same when the Bosnians occasionally turn the tables and commit atrocities against their persecutors. Torture in either case offends. Is God less merciful than we?

Again we do not want to take this line of reasoning too far. We have to go to the specific teachings of Scripture for definitive conclusions. Meantime we should keep in mind the other side of the picture, God’s wrath against sin.

The Lord is the true God; He is the living God and the everlasting King; at his wrath the earth quakes, and the nations cannot endure His indignation (Jer. 10:10).

The Psalmist presents a healthy balance. The faithful is rewarded (“In all that he does, he prospers”) and the unbeliever is “like the chaff which the wind drives away. . . . The way of the wicked will perish” (Ps. 1). It would appear that God neither torments people forever nor frees them from the consequences of their own decisions and actions. In sum: natural immortality seems to make God cruel; universalism seems to make Him wishy-washy; conditionalism presents an attractive middle ground—which just may be truer to the nature of God and to the teaching of Scripture.

## IX. CONDITIONALISM AND DAILY LIFE

Pragmatism is not a good test of doctrine. One cannot decide what is true by asking, What effect would this view have? The issue has to be determined by a careful interpretation of Scripture. Nevertheless doctrine has practical implications, and one should test exegetical conclusions by asking practical questions.

### 1. Evangelism

Traditionalists have generally argued that hell, that is, eternal con-

scious punishing, must be preached to get people to repent and to deter sin. J. I. Packer, for a current example, expresses concern about the “very weakening effect on Christian witness” of universalism and of conditionalism.<sup>22</sup> The conditionalist, he says, cannot tell “the unconverted that their prospects without Christ are as bad as they could possibly be—for on the conditionalist view they aren’t!”<sup>23</sup> It makes “the question of salvation . . . less agonizing.”<sup>24</sup>

Universalism, of course, undercuts the urgency of proclaiming the good news. But is Packer right about the pragmatic effect of conditionalism? Interestingly most of the same people who promote the doctrine of eternal torment also advocate capital punishment as a more appropriate penalty and a more effective deterrent to serious crime than imprisonment. If life is really of ultimate value, why would not the threat of final loss of life be as effective as the threat of life in prison, so to speak? It could be readily argued that the flames of the conditionalist hell are hotter and more fearsome than J. I. Packer’s!

### 2. Abortion

Conditionalism certainly has other practical implications. How do you deal, for example, with the value of human life? Christians believe that life has great value. Concerning abortion evangelicals share a strong pro-life consensus. Life as God originally intended it, “abundant life,” is the greatest natural blessing. We are concerned that no one be deprived of natural life unjustly. We are desperate ordinarily to maintain it at almost any price, even when it involves suffering. Life in any form is of more value than no life. The value of life is elevated more, therefore, by maintaining that unbelievers pay the supreme penalty, the loss of life, rather than by maintaining that they have it forever in Gehenna. As Eric Lewis puts it, unbelievers are condemned “not to an endless life of loss, but to a loss of endless life.”<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup>“The Problem of Eternal Punishment,” *Crux: A Quarterly Journal of Christian Thought and Opinion*, 26:3, Sept. 1990, 22.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>24</sup>James I. Packer, “Evangelicals and the Way of Salvation: New Challenges to the Gospel: Universalism and Justification by Faith,” *Evangelical Affirmations*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990, 124.

<sup>25</sup>Eric Lewis, *Life and Immortality*, Boston: Warren Press, 1949 [Preface dated 1924], 163.

### **3. Comfort**

How do you deal with the bereaved? The traditionalist pastor must have a terrible time providing honest comfort to those who have lost unbelieving loved ones. According to the pastor's theology, they are already in the torments of hell, where they will remain forever. The conditionalist can at least assure the survivors that the fate of the deceased awaits the judgment, that God is both just and merciful, and that if worst comes to worst, they will not spend eternity knowing that the loved one is in extreme misery.

### **4. Suffering**

How do you deal with the problems of greed, cruelty, hatred, pain, sorrow, injustice, and poverty? The traditionalist, against abundant biblical evidence to the contrary, affirms that these terrible consequences of the Fall continue forever. Not so!

### **5. Alienation**

How do you deal with existential loneliness? We sense as fallen human beings that things are out of kilter. Even with the best of family situations, which many lack, we often sense that we are alone. The problem is indicated for those of us of advancing years by an occasional nostalgia for the innocent happiness of early youth. Take cheer! It is possible to "go home again." The fellowship with God of which we have a foretaste now will be complete when we again walk with Him "in the garden in the cool of the day" (Gen. 3:8).

In a number of cases, it is more satisfying, as well as truer to Scripture, to deal with practical issues from a conditionalist perspective.