Behold, It Was Very Good

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Introduction

The term "conditional immortality" is essentially a double negative. "Conditional" is a limiting term — it sets limits and the limits have to be met for the beneficial results to occur. "Im-" is a negative prefix like "a-": impotent, immaterial, imposter, impossible. We conditionalists risk being seen as those who deny something — eternal torment — rather than as those who affirm life. In fact conditionalists do have the great advantage of affirming life — ordinary, everyday, normal, physical life.

I. The Very Good Creation

The last verse of Genesis 1 is profound theology: "And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good." Our first object is to survey quickly the biblical world view that the entire created order, including the material, is good. Dr. Goldstein in a lecture at the University of Iowa pointed out that "Judaism is a this-worldly religion." She was mistakenly comparing Judaism and Christianity. Or was she mistaken? Christianity has frequently been otherworldly in a nonbiblical way.

1. The Anti-material Alternative

Look first at the alternative to the idea that the material creation is good.

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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, was at least inferior and undesirable. The words which he puts in the mouth of Socrates in the dialogue called *Phaedo* are often quoted by Resurrection theologians.

> 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?[1]

> Ought the philosopher care about the pleasures — if they are to be called pleasures — of eating and drinking? Certainly not, answered Simias. And what about the pleasures of love — should he care for them? By no means. Would you not say that he is entirely concerned with the soul and not with the body? He would like, as far as he can, to get away from the body and to turn to the soul. Quite true.[2]

> "Have we not found," they [philosophers] will say, "that while we are in the body, and while the soul is infected with the evils of the body, our desire will not be satisfied? and our desire is of the truth. For the body is a source of endless trouble to us by reason of the mere requirement of food; and is liable also to diseases which overtake and impede us in the search after true being: it fills us full of loves, and lusts, and fears, and fancies of all kinds, and endless foolery, and in fact, as men say, takes away from us the power of thinking at all. Whence come wars, and fightings, and factions? whence but from the body and the lusts of the body?[3]

Good souls at death, according to Plato, leave the realm of the human to go to the realm of the gods; impure souls contaminated by the body sink back into the material world. Because of their former evil life, "they are imprisoned finally in another body" (human or otherwise).[4]

Plato's concern about the things of the flesh was legitimate. His list of vices sounds quite biblical: "gluttony, and wantonness, and drunkenness," "fleshly lusts," "lovers of money," "lovers of power."[5] Paul talks about worldliness and about flesh vs. Spirit. But for Paul it is not material body vs. immaterial soul but rather fallen depraved mind and heart vs. mind and

[1] Plato, *Phaedo*, 64.
[2] *Ibid.*
[3] *Ibid.*, 66.
[4] *Ibid.*, 81.
[5] *Ibid.*, 81-82.

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).

In our attempt to show the goodness of God's material creation, we need to ask what Paul means when he contrasts flesh and Spirit. Note first the capital "S." He is talking about the Holy Spirit. And he is not talking about living in the flesh but about living according to the flesh. A couple of quotations are almost definitions: "For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit" (Rom. 8:5). "God gave them up . . . because they . . . worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator" (Rom. 1:24-25). The problem is not the creation but the deification of creation, not the flesh but the preoccupation with the flesh.

James asks the same question that Plato does: "What causes wars and what causes fightings among you?" (4:1). But he gives a different answer: It is the person, not his body, whose desires are evil (4:2).

Platonism was an influential philosophy during the early years of the Christian Church. Clement of Alexandria and Origen regarded philosophy as the forerunner of Christianity. "Origen regarded Plato and philosophy as Christianity's most powerful allies."[6] The impact on Christian thinking, especially from A.D. 200, was profound. World-denying asceticism, monasticism, and the idealization of celibacy were among the results. The Platonic contempt for the body and exaltation of the soul became predominant views. Buddhist and Hindu views, including those in the contemporary New Age movements, have notable parallels.

2. The Scriptural Picture

Genesis 2 presents an attractive picture of the good creation. A person is a living being, a material body into which God has breathed the breath of life (v.7; "of the earth, earthly," Jn. 3:31). Adam and Eve lived in a garden (v. 8), the trees of which produced fruit "pleasant to the sight and good for food" (v. 9). They could "freely eat" (v. 16). They were guilt-free, "naked" but "not ashamed" (v. 25).

[6] Mary T. Clark, "Neoplatonism," *Encyclopedia of Religion*, New York: Macmillan, 1987, Vol. 10, 365.

What was in the Promised Land, the good home to which the Lord was leading the Israelites through the wilderness? Was it a state of philosophic contemplation and religious ecstasy?

> For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, flowing forth 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 in which you will eat bread without scarcity, in which you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills you can dig copper. And you shall eat and be full, and you shall 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. It exalts 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.

> O Lord, how manifold are thy works! In wisdom hast thou made them all; the earth is full of thy creatures. . . .
>
> These all look to thee, to give them their food in due season. When thou givest to them, they gather it up; when thou openest thy hand, they are filled with good things. When thou hidest thy face, they are dismayed; when thou takest away their breath, they die and return to their dust. When thou sendest forth thy Spirit, they are created; and thou renewest the face of the ground.
>
> May the glory of the Lord endure forever, may the Lord rejoice in his works (vv. 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."[7]

Proverbs describes the results of Wisdom in terms of everyday life: "Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor. Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her" (3:16-18).

[7] Peter James Flamming, *God and Creation*, in The Layman's Library of Christian Doctrine, Nashville: Broadman, 1985, 9.

On a lighter note a writer of Proverbs exclaims, "Three things are too wonderful for me; four I do not understand: the way of an eagle in the sky, the way of a serpent on a rock, the way of a ship on the high seas, and the way of a man with a maiden" (30:18-19).

Solomon speaks wisely of simple everyday life:

> I have seen the business that God has given to the sons of men to be busy with. He has made everything beautiful in its time; also he has put eternity into man's mind, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. I know that there is nothing for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; also that it is God's gift to man that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil (Ecc. 3:10-13).

3. "Personal Interest Stories"

We will look a little later at the prophets. We could also go into the New Testament and find the same ideas, if not the same charmingly picturesque language. Instead let's pause to think of experiences in our own time which illustrate the truth of the biblical affirmation of life which we have just sampled.

The library at Warner Southern College is the second story of a building, the first floor of which is a women's residence. When you leave the library you look out over the flat roof of the one-story administration building next door. One Sunday morning it had rained considerably. By the time to leave for church, however, the rain had stopped and some sun was breaking through. The roof next door was covered with small birds singing and frolicking in the shallow pools. They were not drinking and bathing in a business-like way. They were playing. It was a striking display which lifted the mood and stuck in the mind.

We have all experienced pleasure at seeing a colt kicking up its heels in spring, or wild ducks swimming. One daybreak in Iowa a mother duck and her seven ducklings made a straight line across the parsonage lawn. It was a beautiful sight which my sleeping mate did not mind being awakened to see. These examples could be multiplied indefinitely.

Robert Johnston in the preface to *The Christian at Play* uses as examples the two featured runners in the movie *Chariots of Fire*. Harold Abrahams is the Jewish man who feels compelled to prove himself, to overcome anti-Semitism by spectacular success. Eric Liddell "runs for the sheer pleasure of it." His sober sister did not approve. "Jenny, Jenny, you've got to understand it. I believe that God made me for a purpose — for China. But

he also made me fast. And when I run I feel his pleasure. . . . it's not just fun. To win is to honor him."[8]

4. "More Abundantly" (Jn. 10:10)

Life on the good earth is always more than just materially oriented. It includes fun *and* fellowship. Human fellowship may be rich, and the richest should be that of husband and wife ("helper," Gen. 2:23-24). 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 in the cool of the day" (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. This rich relationship is well featured in the first article of the Westminster Shorter Catechism.

Q: What is the chief end of man?

A: The chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.

5. Man's Place Within Creation

What we have looked at so far is in the indicative. Note also the imperative. God's intention for Adam was not idleness. It was not fun and games — all the time. Adam was to enjoy the great satisfaction of meaningful activity.

> The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it (Gen. 2:15). And God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth" (Gen. 1:28).

II. And It Was Very Bad — The Consequences of the Fall

Whoa! We do not live within that good world as God created it. Are we really still in a position to enjoy it?

At the end of Genesis 3 it might have been said, "And God saw all that he had made, and behold, it was very bad." As a result of human sin, the world had become disorganized, chaotic, even demonic. John Steinbeck's title is descriptive of human life — *East of Eden*. We cannot read just the first two and the last two chapters of the Bible.

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[8] Robert K. Johnston, *The Christian at Play*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983, viii.

Our own experience tells us all too clearly that the world in which we live is not as God intended it. If we needed more proof today's *Boston Globe* (June 4, 1994), or any other major daily would be more than sufficient: a killer earthquake/tidal wave in Indonesia, the North Korean nuclear threat, memories aroused by the fiftieth anniversary of D-Day, African attempts to halt the human slaughter in Rwanda, and the daily potpourri of crime and corruption (nothing for a change about human depravity in Bosnia). Again the illustrations could be multiplied *ad nauseum*.

Is the world now totally different in intent and structure from the original? By no means. It is within this fallen world that we get glimpses of the goodness of creation as God made it — of birds playing in the water. The April 9, 1989 *New York Times Book Review* has a good example. Bill Henderson reviews Garrison Keillor's *We Are Still Married*. Henderson quotes from a chapter entitled "Laying on Our Backs Looking at the Stars":

> Indoors, the news is second-hand, mostly bad, and even good people are drawn into dreadful fascination with doom and demise. . . . But here under heaven our spirits are immense, we are so blessed. The stars in the sky, my friends in the grass, my son asleep on my chest, his hands clutching my shirt.[9]

In "The Meaning of Life" Keillor says:

> To know and to serve God, of course, is why we're here, a clear truth that, like the nose on your face, is near at hand and easily discernible but can make you dizzy if you try to focus on it hard. . . . Gentleness is everywhere in daily life, a sign that faith rules through ordinary things: through cooking, and small talk, through storytelling, making love, fishing.[10]

It is not surprising to hear these words from Keillor. It is startling to see them quoted movingly in *The New York Times Book Review*.

In this good but broken world we still have the responsibility to subdue it and to have dominion over it, to till it and to keep it. The created order was given to man for his use — responsible use. Environmental concerns are mentioned a few times in David A. Dean's *The Gift from Above*. As he says, "Alcohol, tobacco, air pollutants, and acid rain shorten lives and

[9] Bill Henderson, review of *We Are Still Married*, by Garrison Keillor, *New York Times Book Review*, 9 Apr. 1989, 13.

[10] *Ibid.*

destroy the health of our population. Christians ought to throw their energies against such attacks on human life."[11]

Even in a fallen world we discern clearly the goodness that God built into it, as well as the chaos and suffering resulting from human disobedience. But the end is not yet . . .

III. The Age To Come

1. Intermediate State

Concerning the period between death and resurrection, it need only be said that it is far different from and far less than that which God promises His people. William G. T. Shedd says that "the intermediate state for the saved is Heaven without the body, and the final state is Heaven with the body," with no significant difference between them (a frequent view in the popular mind, at least).[12] He is about as negative concerning creation as is Plato. Theologians of all ages have recognized that the intermediate state is transitory, and that resurrection theology is necessary.

2. The Final State

God's work in the world might be summarized as creation and re-creation. Three views undercut the significance of the re-creation. One is the common substitution, for all practical purposes, of *the intermediate state for the final state*. Note an expression of this substitution in a recent *Christianity Today*:

> Death is on one hand the great evil, the "last enemy" (1 Cor. 15:26), the mark and punishment of sin. Christ came to conquer it. Yet Christians have also viewed death as the door to eternal life, to heaven. It is the golden chariot sent by the Great King to fetch his Cinderella bride. "Thou hast made death glorious and triumphant," wrote Jean Pasquel and William Charles McFarland, "for through its portals we enter into the presence of the living God."[13]

That dematerialized perspective belongs to Plato's *Phaedo*, not to the NT.

[11] David A. Dean, *The Gift from Above*, Charlotte, N.C.: Advent Christian General Conference, 1989. 27.

[12] William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1888, Vol. 2, 594.

[13] Peter Kreeft, "Unraveling the Mystery of Weakness and Strength," *Christianity Today*, 21 Apr. 1989, 23.

The second view which undercuts re-creation is *eternal conscious punishment*. The more perceptive traditionalist theologians recognize the problem. Roger Nicole, professor of theology emeritus of Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary, admitted in class that this doctrine embarrasses him. And well it should. Where in the perfect new creation would one locate an everlasting hell?

A third view which diminishes the significance of re-creation is the one which pictures believers in *a passive ethereal state* forever enjoying the beatific vision of God. Calvin Linton deals with this problem in an article entitled, "What's So Great about Heaven?" He sets forth our meaningful activity in the kingdom in terms of our threefold function as kings, prophets, and priests, particularly the last. He speaks of "man's total aesthetic, creative, artistic dimension," of "fellowship, unstinted intellectual activity, aesthetic creativity, sensuous beauty, exploration, literature, music, art, love — or anything else we truly cherish and enjoy."[14]

Something is missing in Linton's article, however. A letter to the editor points out what:

> Calvin Linton's article is helpful in focusing one's vision of the future life. A major reason, however, for the prevalent "imaginative inability to think of anything interesting to do in heaven" is that the locus of the future life is misplaced. The New Testament clearly locates the Kingdom of God on the earth made new.[15]

The picture of the future presented in Scripture is thoroughly down-to-earth — not to this earth but to "the new heavens and the new earth." According to Isaiah 11:1-11 the anointed descendant of David rules the earth with sovereign righteousness. The righteous poor are given justice, the wicked are slain. Nature is restored to its pre-fall perfection. Wolf and lamb, leopard and little goat, calf and lion, cow and bear — all are led around by a child. "They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (v. 9).

The child leads the animals, and the Lord leads the nations.

> For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind. But be glad and rejoice for ever in that which I create; for behold, I create Jerusalem a rejoicing, and her people a joy. I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and be glad in my people (65:17-19a).

A few phrases from 65:21-25:

> They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit [note: in the new earth].
>
> They shall not labor in vain. . . . Before they call I will answer.
>
> The wolf and the lamb shall feed together. . . . They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain, says the Lord.

Micah 4:1-4 is a most attractive picture, at least for country bumpkins like me (we will come across another picture for the city slickers). Everyone spontaneously worships the Lord. He rules in peace. Weapons of war are made into agricultural implements — presumably to be used in the restored Garden. "They shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree, and none shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken."

Evangelicals tend either to make these OT passages temporary by placing them in the millennium or to spiritualize them. In light of the biblical view of creation and its restoration, why not just take them at face value as descriptive of the new world?

In the NT Paul continues in straightforward terms to affirm the restoration of the physical creation. The "creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God" (Rom. 8:21). This redemption of the earth and of "our bodies" requires resurrection theology.

John in Revelation has some country imagery ("tree of life," 2:7, etc.). He features, however, an urban utopia, New Jerusalem (ch. 21). It is an exclusively Christian city in which God dwells with His people in perfect harmony, with sorrow, pain, and death eliminated. Linton's priestly creativity fits well this urbane context.

A kind of resurrection theology is presented in a recent issue of *Newsweek*.[16] It reflects the extremes of modern rationalistic materialism and traditional anti-materialism — no resurrection vs. a dematerialized future. Kenneth Woodward points out that for a majority of "Christian" thinkers in our day, hell and resurrection are embarrassments. He asks whether heaven may not soon disappear also. Compared to the robust accounts of

[14] Calvin Linton, "What's So Great about Heaven?" *Christianity Today*, 20 Nov. 1970, 3.

[15] Freeman Barton, Letter, *Christianity Today*, 1 Jan. 1971, 31.

[16] Kenneth Woodward, "Heaven," *Newsweek*, 27 Mar. 1989, 52-55.

the life to come by earlier Christians, the "studied evasions" of the modern pulpit leave a void for laymen seeking some assurance that human life is more than transitory. "In rejecting heaven and hell, the rationalistic modern consciousness also rejects the awesome seriousness of moral and immoral behavior. But for those who take God seriously, human freedom means the capacity to make moral decisions which have radical and enduring consequences."

That kind of positive affirmation is as surprising in *Newsweek* as in *The New York Times Book Review*! But note a little anti-materialism mixed in with the traditional affirmation of the future:

> If most Americans imagine heaven as a family reunion, the reason, perhaps, is that is all we know of love. The hell of thinking about heaven is that we cannot imagine — or trust — a love that surpasses our own understanding.

Woodward makes an important point: people tend to think of what is in it for themselves without dwelling on the Creator. But what is wrong with imagining "heaven as a family reunion," God included? My favorite holiday by far is Independence Day when the Barton clan gets together in western New Hampshire. I am looking forward to much more of it in the kingdom.

Dr. Charles Carlston of Andover-Newton Theological Seminary, in an encouraging response to *Heaven*, *Hell*, *and Hades*,[17] set forth his picture of the future life:

> I would hope that we would praise God by singing, dancing (I never learned), making love, reading books, talking with people we love, and maybe now and then going to play tennis for three hours and then coming back to sit in the shade with a long drink of something cool (preferably carbonated).[18]

Well put!

IV. Conclusion

The biblical view that the creation is good has significant implications for resurrection theology. I remember, probably as a preteen, the first time I

[17] Freeman Barton, *Heaven*, *Hell*, *and Hades*, 2nd ed., Lenox, MA.: Henceforth Publications, 1991.

[18] Charles E. Carlston, letter, 21 Jan. 1922.

heard a phrase which summarizes popular thinking in our age. At White River Campmeeting in Vermont, Michael Haynes, well-known Massachusetts pastor and statesman, noted, "People are saying, 'Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you die.' They are right — 50%." It is the essence of worldliness to major in eating, drinking, and making merry — and nothing else. Within the context of faith and thanksgiving, however, merrymaking is quite appropriate. Jesus used the imagery approvingly.

> . . . the Son of Man came eating and drinking (Matt. 11:19).
>
> The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a marriage feast for his son (Matt. .22:2).
>
> I tell you I shall not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom (Matt. 26:29).

Note the reverse, the negative side of resurrection theology or conditional immortality. To be deprived of life, literal abundant life in God's kingdom, is the ultimate deprivation. It is a definite severe punishment. In his introduction to "Jesus Christ: The Divine Redeemer," Calvin Linton calls attention indirectly to the natural universal desire for everlasting life. Fallen man "finds the loneliness intolerable, and he fears the infinite void, the dark endlessness of non-being."[19] He speaks of "that which is inescapably doomed to nothingness" and "the fear of non-being." Although not a conditionalist Linton impresses on mind and heart the horror of ultimate destruction. Note the conclusion to Psalm 104, the nature psalm — "let the wicked be no more!" The good creation is not for them but for God's people.

[19] Calvin D. Linton, "Jesus Christ: The Divine Redeemer," *The Fundamentals of the Faith*, ed. Carl F. H. Henry, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1969, 121.