

Life Only in Christ: A Conditionalist Faith

ABSTRACT

This essay offers an explanation and concise biblical defence of the Christian doctrine of conditional immortality and then draws out major implications of this doctrine for Christian theology as a whole. The present mortality of the whole human person is affirmed, in contrast to the immortality of God. An examination of Genesis 2:7 leads to an exploration of the meanings of various biblical anthropological terms and to an emphasis upon biblical holism. The biblical view of the state of the dead is examined, with the conclusion that human death is a state of complete cessation of conscious life. The conclusion is that hope beyond death is found only in resurrection through Christ at his return. The final fate of the wicked is also explored. The conclusion is that the lost will ultimately cease to exist, rather than persisting forever in torment. Conditionalism is presented as a recovery of a fully biblical and credible faith and implications are sketched for a range of theological, ethical and pastoral concerns.

‘Conditional Immortality’ may be defined as the doctrine that, on the one hand, human beings are wholly mortal by nature, but that, on the other hand, immortality is available as God’s gift to all, by resurrection, through Jesus Christ, on condition that they belong to him by faith. Accordingly, in contrast to the majority of the Christian Church, conditionalists maintain that there is no immortal personal human soul or spirit which continues in independent, conscious life after the death of the body. Immortality comes only by resurrection of the whole person by God. Conditionalists maintain, further, in contrast to the commonly held doctrine of everlasting torment, that the fate of those who are rejected by God at final judgment will be literal destruction. Since they deny the innate immortality of the soul,

conditionalists are free, theologically, to contemplate the final extinction of the entire person, and careful exegesis of Scripture convinces them that this is indeed what final judgment threatens, rather than never-ending suffering.

While it is true that doctrines such as the immortality of the human soul and everlasting torment are open to attack on philosophical and moral grounds, and have often been attacked in this way, conditionalists generally rely mainly upon the Bible itself in explaining and defending their views. While it is common today to question whether a consistent position on such matters is to be found in the Bible at all, conditionalists generally answer affirmatively and maintain that conditional immortality is, in fact, the only view that truly reflects the consistent teaching of the Christian Scriptures. That is largely the basis upon which I propose to proceed in this essay.

Amidst rising controversy, the Fifth Lateran Council (1512–1517 A.D.) declared that the immortality of the human soul is an essential doctrine of Christian faith. However, nowhere in the Bible is the human soul or spirit described as immortal, nor is there any explicit teaching anywhere in Scripture that there is a substantial or personal human element which survives beyond the death of the body.

There is no distinct word for immortality in the Hebrew Scriptures. In the Greek Scriptures, there are three words which correspond to this concept: *athanasia* ('immortality'), *aphtharsia* ('incorruptibility') and *aphthartos* ('incorruptible'). They occur a total of seventeen times, but never in connection with 'soul' or 'spirit'. In every case where they are applied directly or indirectly to humans, the reference is to a future state, not to a present condition (Rom 2:7; I Cor 15:42, 50, 52-54). On the other hand, it is declared expressly of God: 'It is he alone who has immortality' (I Tim 6:16- NRSV). As far as humanity is concerned, Paul argues in I Corinthians 15 that immortality is something which will be 'put on' only in the future, at Christ's 'coming' (15:23), 'at the last trumpet' (15:52), only by 'the resurrection of the dead' (15:42), or the supernatural transformation of the living (15:51), and only in the case of

‘those who belong to Christ’ (15:23). ‘Whereas Plato saw immortality as the natural property of all human souls, the New Testament regards it as a conditional as well as a future possession.’¹

It is frequently asserted, however, that immortality is ascribed solely to God only ‘in the most absolute sense’.² This distinction does not appear in the text. A distinction which does occur consistently in Scripture is that between the eternal nature of God and the merely mortal nature of human beings. For example, of God Psalm 90 affirms: ‘...from everlasting to everlasting you are God’; while of humanity it states: ‘You [God] turn us back to dust and say, ‘Turn back, you mortals.’ (Ps 90:3-4).

In fact, this contrast between the immortality of God and the mortality of human beings seems to be fundamental to Scripture. According to Genesis 2-3, the divine judgment against the first man and woman is precisely that they are deprived of the power to live forever, but rather must return in death to ‘dust’, in accordance with their actual created nature: ‘...you are dust, and to dust you shall return.’ (Gen 3:19, 22-24). In this respect, according to the consistent testimony of Scripture, human beings are no different from the animals: ‘For the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same; as one dies, so dies the other....All go to one place; all are from the dust and all return to dust again’ (Eccles 3:19-20).³

Furthermore, the contrast between God’s eternal nature and power on the one hand and human mortality on the other is at the heart of biblical religion, for it directs human worship and faith away from the human self and the world to God the Creator alone. Thus, according to Paul, the primal sin of humanity lies precisely in this, that ‘they exchanged the glory of the immortal

1 M. J. Harris, *Raised Immortal*, (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1985) p. 189.

2 L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1966) p. 672.

3 Compare Job 34:14; Ps 103:14, Ps 104:29.

God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles....they worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator...' (Rom 1:23, 25).⁴ Similarly, the prophet protests, 'Turn away from mortals, who have only breath in their nostrils...' (Is 2:22) and the Psalmist counsels, 'Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help. When their breath departs, they return to the earth....Happy are those...whose hope is in the LORD their God....' (Ps 146:3-5). 'Death in the biblical sense, is...our death as those who want to be divine and thus have to learn that we are only human,'⁵

A second common assumption, regarding Paul's teaching of conditional immortality in I Corinthians 15, is that only the body is in view and that, therefore, the possibility of an immortal soul or spirit is not excluded. Again, this distinction cannot be sustained. The distinction Paul actually makes is between 'the first man' as a whole, as a 'living being', who is 'the man of dust', and 'the last Adam', 'the man from heaven', that is, the risen Christ, whose 'image' we 'will also bear' at his coming (I Cor 15:45-49, 23). G. E. Ladd explains: '...for Paul the destiny of man requires the resurrection of the body, for human existence by definition is bodily existence. This completely differentiates Paul's anthropology from Greek dualism.'⁶ We conclude, therefore, that Paul explicitly teaches that the human person is wholly mortal and that immortality is to be gained solely as God's gift in Christ, through future resurrection.

By founding his argument for the necessity of resurrection, in part upon Genesis,⁷ Paul implicitly confirms that there is indeed a consistency in biblical anthropology and that the account in Genesis 2-3 has a normative value. Gen 2:7 presents

4 Compare the serpent's direct lie in Gen 3:4.

5 H. Thieliicke, *Living With Death*, (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, E.T. 1983) p. 127. Cf Gen 3:4-5.

6 G. E. Ladd, *The Pattern of New Testament Truth*, (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1968) p. 103.

7 In I Cor 15:45, Paul cites Gen 2:7.

the human person, not as a temporary conjunction of body and soul, as in Platonic and popular Christian dualism, but as an indivisible 'living soul' (KJV), or 'living being' (NRSV), animated by 'the breath of life'. Furthermore, nothing is said here concerning the way human beings are constituted that is not said also of other animals.⁸ Certainly, human beings are created 'in the image of God' (Gen 1:27), with the capacity to relate to God and to represent God in the world. However, they are in no sense divine. Rather, they are creatures, part of God's creation.

In Gen 2:7, the whole man is said to be formed 'of dust from the ground'. Secondly, it is said that the man lives in virtue of 'the breath of life'.⁹ This 'breath', or 'spirit' (KJV), is clearly not a distinct, personal (much less immortal) substance. It is common to all animals (Gen 6:17, 7:15, 7:22; Eccles 3:19). It is God's gift of life, but certainly not of immortality. Westermann observes: 'The breath of life, then, means simply being alive, and the breathing in of this breath, the giving of life to humans....And so there are no grounds for the opinion that God created humans immortal....'¹⁰ Accordingly, the Bible affirms that, at death, 'the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the breath (KJV 'spirit') returns to God who gave it' (Eccles 12:7). Contrary to common misinterpretation, there is no intimation here of the survival of a personal 'spirit'.¹¹ The text speaks simply of the return to God of the gift of life.¹²

8 Compare Gen 1:24, 1:30, 2:19, 6:17, 7:15, 7:22, etc.

9 In various places, Scripture uses different words for this 'breath of life'. Here, the term is *neshamah*. Elsewhere, *ruach* or *nephesh* are used in the Hebrew Scriptures, and *pneuma* or *psuche* in the Greek. For a fuller discussion, see Warren Prestidge, *Life, Death and Destiny*, (Auckland: Resurrection Publishing, 1998) chapter 2.

10 C. Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary*, (London: S.P.C.K., E.T. 1984) p.207.

11 Indeed, the context in Ecclesiastes is clearly pessimistic (verse 8).

12 The same is true of other comparable texts, often similarly misinterpreted, such as: Gen 35:1; I Kings 17:21-22; Job 27:8; Ps 31:5; Lk 23:46; Jn 19:30; Acts 7:60; Jas 2:26 etc.

Thirdly, Gen 2:7 describes the whole man, thus created and animated by God, as 'a living soul (*nephesh*)' (KJV; 'being' NRSV). Westermann observes: 'The person as a living being is to be understood as a whole and any idea that one is made up of body and soul is ruled out.'¹³ True, the Hebrew word *nephesh* and its New Testament counterpart *psuche* are used in a variety of senses in Scripture. Sometimes, like *ruach* and *pneuma*, they refer to psychological states, attitudes, dispositions or capacities: to the subjective personality. However, never in this sense are they said to survive death.¹⁴ Often, the meaning is 'breath', or 'life', or 'life principle', whether of humans or of animals.¹⁵ In this sense, the *nephesh* may be said to reside in the blood (Lev 17:11, 14) and be 'poured out' as a sin offering (Is 53:10, 12; cf Mk 10:45).

However, most commonly both words clearly refer to the human person as a whole and there is no doubt that the 'soul' in this sense can and does die: 'The person (*nephesh*) who sins shall die.'¹⁶ Even without qualification, *nephesh* can mean 'dead person', or 'dead animal'.¹⁷ Often, both *nephesh* and *psuche* occur merely as a solemn version of the personal or reflexive pronoun. This is the sense of the expression 'my soul' in both Psalm 16:10 and the pivotal New Testament citation of this text, Acts 2:27. Indeed, in Acts 2:27 it is translated simply as 'me' in both NIV and TEV. What Peter's whole argument here in Acts 2 presupposes, is that it is the whole human person that dies, even in David's case, and that only through a resurrection such as that of Jesus is there any prospect of

13 C. Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, p.207.

14 Heb 12:22-23, speaking of 'the spirit of the righteous made perfect', does not necessarily refer to current, conscious experience at all, but apparently refers, rather, to a future prospect guaranteed in Christ, like the 'city' (compare Heb 11:16, 13:14).

15 E.g. II Sam 4:; II Chr 1:11 (NRSV 'life'); Rev 8:9 (NRSV 'living').

16 Ezek 18:4, 20. Compare, e.g., Deut 19:6; Josh 10:28; Ps 78:50; Hag 2:13, etc.

17 Lev 19:28, 21:1; Num 5:2, 6:11 (NRSV 'corpse').

deliverance from death. The same is true in I Corinthians 15, where the 'first man' as a whole, as 'a living being' (*psuche*, citing Gen 2:7), is described by Paul as 'a man of dust' (I Cor 15:45, 47). It is these twin contentions, the inseparable wholeness of the human person (body and 'soul') and the mortality of that person apart from resurrection through Jesus Christ, that constitute the nub of conditionalist anthropology.

Sheol is a Hebrew word which occurs some sixty-five times in Scripture with reference to the place or state of the dead. The New Testament equivalent is *hades* (e.g. Acts 2:24-28). Often misleadingly translated 'hell', 'Sheol' is never once depicted in the Hebrew Scriptures as a place or state of suffering. In fact, the righteous and the wicked, human and animal, alike go there (Job 3:13-19, 30:23; Ps 89:48, 49:12-14). Such passages as Isaiah 14:3-20 and Ezekiel 32:17-32, as E. E. Ellis explains, 'are obviously poetic symbolism'.¹⁸ 'Sheol is 'in the dust' (Job 17:13ff.) and is probably best understood generically as 'the grave'.... It is a state of sleep, rest, darkness, silence, without thought or memory (Job 3:16-17, 17:13ff.; Ps.6: 5; Eccles. 9:5, 10).

In the New Testament, just one passage depicts *hades* as a place of consciousness and, for the wicked, suffering. This is Christ's parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31). However, it is demonstrable that here Jesus is making ironical use of popular and Pharisaic lore, without endorsing it: '...he does not intend here to give a preview of life after death. On this almost all commentators agree.'¹⁹ In fact, nowhere does the Bible actually endorse the idea that anyone suffers consciously

18 E. E. Ellis, 'Life', in J. D. Douglas (Ed), *The New Bible Dictionary*, (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 3rd ed. 1996) p. 688.

19 E. E. Ellis, *The Gospel of Luke*, (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1981) p. 157. Cf G. E. Ladd: 'Probably...a parable which made use of current Jewish thinking and is not intended to teach anything about the state of the dead' ('Eschatology', *The New Bible Dictionary*, [1st ed. 1965] p. 388). See also G. B. Caird, *Saint Luke*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd, 1968); E. Schweizer, *The Good News According to Luke*, (London: S.P.C.K., E.T. 1984).

in any post-mortem state, whether in 'purgatory' or in 'hell', prior to resurrection and final judgment. The consistent biblical teaching is that death is death of the whole person: 'Life is given to man as a psycho-somatic unity.... It is the 'I' which lives – and which dies....'²⁰

In the Hebrew Scriptures, dying is referred to frequently as lying down in sleep and the dead are said to be asleep.²¹ The metaphor clearly signifies utter inactivity, helplessness and unconsciousness, without hope of further existence unless God 'remembers' and 'awakens' us (Job 14:7-15). According to Daniel 12:2, this is exactly what God will do, at least for some, at the day of resurrection.

In the New Testament, the sleep metaphor is used for death some nineteen times.²² Following Jesus' own example (e.g. Matt 9:24), the term is used now with connotations of temporariness and reassurance. However, as John 11:11-14 makes clear, this is not because the reality of death is denied, but because of the hope of resurrection. Sometimes it is argued that the intention is merely to liken the act of dying to falling asleep, rather than to liken the death state to the sleep state of unconsciousness and inactivity. However, this argument cannot be sustained. In Matt 9:24, I Thess 4:13, I Thess 5:10 and I Cor 11:30, the present continuous tense is used: the dead 'is' or 'are sleeping'. Furthermore, references such as John 11:11, Acts 13:46 and Rev 14:13 show that the argued distinction is illusory. As Cullmann observes, 'The expression in the New Testament signifies...the *condition*...of the dead.'²³ In I Thessalonians 4:13-14, the question is precisely what comfort may be offered to Christians who 'have fallen asleep in Jesus' (verse 14) and

20 E. E. Ellis, 'Life', p.687.

21 E.g. in Deut 31:16 and over thirty other instances, the word *shachabh* is used; other words are: *yashen* (Job 3:13; Dan 12:2, etc.); *shenah* (Job 14:12).

22 E.g. Matt 9:24, I Thess 5:10 (*katheudo*); Acts 7:60; I Cor 15:6 and 18 (*koimasthai*).

23 O. Cullmann, *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?*, (London: Epworth Press, E.T. 1958) p. 51, note 6.

'are sleeping' (verse 13).²⁴ The comfort offered is not that they are already in conscious fellowship with Jesus but that they certainly will be raised in a resurrection like his, at his return.

So then, the conditionalist holds that in death the whole person ceases to function and that any future conscious existence is wholly dependent upon the special intervention of God in resurrection power. Those who are dead 'sleep in the dust of the earth'.²⁵

This is definitely not to say that all conditionalists are philosophical 'materialists', that is, that conditionalism necessarily entails the belief that there is no immaterial part of the human person. All that is entailed is the view that no part of the person survives the death of the body actively or consciously. By the same token, conditionalism does not require an absolutely monistic anthropology. Certainly, some conditionalists do hold that whatever immaterial 'soul' there may be, if any, ceases to exist when the body dies and requires re-creation with the body at resurrection.²⁶ Many others, however, hold that an immaterial 'soul' or 'spirit' does continue to exist after the death of the body, but that it ceases to be operative, until re-embodied at resurrection. For example, this latter view is held by the conditionalist Freeman Barton, who refers to this as the 'unconscious view', as compared to the 'materialistic' view, and argues that it does greater justice to the metaphor of sleep.²⁷ Matthew 10:28 is a text that is often held, even by conditionalists, to imply the survival, albeit in 'sleep', of an immaterial personal 'soul'. However, it can also be argued that here, as in Matt 10:39, the word *psyche* once again means simply 'life' and that what is meant is that no one except God can destroy life in the *ultimate* sense.

24 The word in verse 13 is *koimomenon* – present continuous. Why is it rarely correctly translated?

25 Dan 12:2, etc.; and *shenah* – Job 14:12, etc.

26 This view is sometimes referred to as 'thnetopsychism'!

27 Freeman Barton, *Heaven, Hell and Hades*, (Charlotte NC: Advent Christian General Conference, 1981) pp. 30, 36, 66.

In any case, the conditionalist understanding of Scripture is that in death the whole person ceases to function and that 'life after death' and immortality are available only by resurrection through Jesus Christ. Thus conditionalism insists upon a consistently holistic understanding of both the human person and salvation. The conditionalist view of death is not wedded to a speculative and outmoded Platonic philosophical tradition, but is realistic, in keeping not only with the weight of biblical testimony, but also with most modern anthropology and with common sense. Moreover, in denying that there is any power within the human person to escape or defeat death, conditionalism safeguards an understanding of salvation that is consistently centred in the grace and power of God in Christ: 'life only in Christ'.

Conditionalists typically refer all hope of post-mortem life and fellowship with God to the resurrection at Christ's return 'on the last day' (Jn 6:40). However, some who deny natural immortality nevertheless also hold that those who are saved enter into everlasting fellowship with Christ immediately at death. Some argue that Christian souls, though naturally mortal, become immortalised by union with the Holy Spirit of God, either at regeneration through faith and baptism, or at death.²⁸ Most conditionalists would consider this view unwarranted, in that it undermines biblical holism and the biblical emphasis upon resurrection at Christ's coming. Others, while denying natural immortality and conserving many advantages of the conditionalist view, suggest that the resurrection itself may occur at death.²⁹ However, one might well question whether it is biblically or theologically sound so to divorce salvation from the final judgment and triumph of God's Kingdom in Christ,³⁰ or the

28 E.g. J. A. Baird, *The Justice of God in the Teaching of Jesus*, (London: S.C.M. Press, 1963).

29 E.g. Emil Brunner, Karl Barth and Wolfhart Pannenberg all appear to hold this view.

30 See I Cor 15:23-28.

salvation of the individual from that of the whole Church,³¹ or individual resurrection from the renewal of creation as a whole.³² Suggestions that at death we enter another kind of time also seem to entirely miss the point, that biblical salvation is not about the abandonment of this space-time world but its redemption.³³

To some extent, alternative views of this kind appear to spring from what most conditionalists would regard as misinterpretations of passages such as Luke 23:43, II Cor 4:13–5:10, or Phil 1:23. In fact, even in these passages the focus would seem to be firmly upon Christ's coming in his 'kingdom' (Luke 23:42) and upon final resurrection (II Cor 4:14; Phil 3:11, 14, 20–21). Paul's use of the terms 'outer nature' and 'inner nature', in II Cor 4:16, most likely 'does not imply...that Paul is thinking of the body as a material...integument or envelope enclosing the soul', but refers 'to the man of this age and the man of the age to come'.³⁴ The language of II Cor 5:2–5 closely matches that of I Cor 15:53–54 and Rom 8:18–26, where the expectation is clearly of bodily resurrection. Further, the 'judgment seat of Christ' (II Cor 5:10) is associated clearly with Christ's return elsewhere in the Pauline literature.³⁵ It is at Christ's return, by resurrection, that we shall be 'with the Lord' (I Thess 4:13–17). However, when occasion beckons, Paul is able to juxtapose the present mortal state and the future immortal state without hint of any 'intermediate' state, precisely because 'in the consciousness of the departed believer there is no interval between dissolution [i.e. death] and investiture [i.e.

31 See I Thess 4:7; I Cor 15:51–52.

32 See Rom 8:19–25.

33 Texts such as I Thess 4:16–17 and I Cor 15:51–52 clearly presuppose that Christ's return and the resurrection occur on the plane of historical time rather than within a different time.

34 C. K. Barrett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, (London: A. & C. Black, 1990) p. 146.

35 Rom 2:16; I Cor 3:13; II Tim 4:1–8.

resurrection]'.³⁶

Now, a further and very significant, consequence of the conditionalist denial of the natural immortality of the human person, is that this removes any *a priori* reason for supposing that those who are lost must endure forever in a state of conscious suffering. The ground is clear to approach the question of the final fate of the lost purely on biblical grounds and, according to an increasing number of inquirers, it is in fact the plain and consistent teaching of Scripture that the final consequence of rejecting Christ is not everlasting torment of any kind but personal annihilation. Sometimes, the term 'conditional immortality' is used to refer merely to this view.

Although there are conditionalists who hold that the lost simply perish forever at death, this is not typical and the Bible itself seems perfectly clear, that every human being will be raised for final judgment, either for everlasting life, or for condemnation.³⁷ However attractive universalism may appear, conditionalists firmly reject this doctrine on the grounds, amongst others, that salvation, however potentially universal, is always indeed conditional in Scripture.³⁸ God will not override our choice, but he will judge. God's Kingdom will be universal in scope, but will ultimately destroy all that remains opposed to it (I Cor 15:24-28, Eph 5:5-6). On the other hand, it is certainly true that Scripture does contain texts which depict a final state in which God is 'all in all' and 'all things' are gathered up in Christ,³⁹ and it may well be asked how this is conceivable, if unrepentant sinners, not to mention the devil, remain alive and unreconciled in hell forever. 'When Christ fills all in all and God is everything to everyone..., how is it conceivable that

36 F. F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Corinthians*, (London: Oliphants, 1971) p. 204. There is no space here to discuss the sense in which 'eternal life' may be said to be a present experience. See W. Prestidge, *Life, Death and Destiny*, pp. 47-49.

37 E.g. Matt 13:36-43, 25:31-46; Acts 17:30-31, 24:15; Rom 2:6-16, 14:9-12; II Tim 4:1; I Pet 4:5; Rev 20:11-15.

38 E.g. Rom 11:19-22; I Cor 15:23; Col 1:21-23.

39 E.g. I Cor 15:28; Eph 1:10.

there can be a section or realm of creation that does not belong to this fullness and by its very nature contradicts it?'⁴⁰ For such reasons, but more especially because of the overwhelming weight of biblical testimony in favour of 'annihilationism', conditionalists equally firmly reject the majority traditional Christian view, that the lost suffer eternal torment.

To begin with, Scripture consistently and repeatedly uses certain terms in relation to the final fate of the wicked which denote complete cessation of life or existence, without any indication that these are not to be taken literally and often with clear contextual indication that they are to be taken so. The primary term in both Testaments is 'death'. 'The person who sins shall die.'⁴¹ 'For the wages of sin is death.'⁴² 'It would be hard to imagine a concept more confusing than that of death which means existing endlessly without the power of dying.'⁴³

In addition to the term 'death', both Testaments frequently use other words, equally conclusive or more so, to denote the final 'destruction' of the wicked. In Hebrew, such terms include *kalah* (Is 1:28; Ps 59:13; Zeph 1:18), *tamam* (Ps 104:35), *machah* (Ps 9:5-6), *shamadh* (Ps 92:7) and *nathats* (Ps 52:5). All of these terms imply cessation of being, in normal usage.⁴⁴ Most common of all is '*abhadh*', which is used some forty times for ordinary killing and often for the final end of the ungodly. The vivid associated similes in Job 20:7-8, Ps 37:20 and Ps 68:2 leave no doubt what is meant. It is amazing how often the claim is made, that Scripture never refers to the annihilation of the wicked. Quite to the contrary, Is 41:11-12 says that God's enemies 'shall perish (*'abhadh*)', that is, 'shall be as nothing at all'. Other equally emphatic statements are to be found in Ps

40 P. E. Hughes, *The True Image*, (Leicester: IVP., 1989) p.406.

41 Ezek 18:20; cf Gen 2:7; Deut 30:15.

42 Rom 6:23; cf Rom 1:32; Rev 2:11, 20:6.

43 P. E. Hughes, *The True Image*, p. 403.

44 See entries in W. L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971).

37:10, Ps 59:13, Ps 104:35, Prov 10:25 and Ob 16: 'they...shall be as though they had never been'.

In this matter, as in all others, the New Testament builds directly upon the foundation of the Old Testament.⁴⁵ Frequent use is made of the term *apoleia* ('annihilation, both complete and in process') and its corresponding verbal form, *apollumi* ('ruin, destroy, kill, put to death; perish, die, be lost, pass away').⁴⁶ According to Plato (*Phaedo* 14, 24, 36), the human *psuche* cannot be 'destroyed': according to Jesus (Matt 10:28), the *psuche* can indeed be 'destroyed' and 'hell' is the place and means of its destruction. Accordingly Clark Pinnock remarks, 'Our Lord spoke plainly of God's judgment as the annihilation of the wicked....'⁴⁷

Another important word is *olethros* ('destruction, ruin, death'). In a particularly graphic passage, Paul refers to 'eternal destruction...from the presence of the Lord'.⁴⁸ As F. F. Bruce explains, 'eternal destruction' here means, 'the destruction which belongs to the age to come, with the decisive implication of finality'.⁴⁹ Similarly, Edward Fudge has shown that the word *aionios* ('eternal'), in New testament usage, has both a qualitative aspect (pertaining to God and his Kingdom) and a temporal aspect, but that 'when the word *aionios* modifies words which name acts or processes as distinct from persons or

45 This is a cardinal insight of conditionalist hermeneutics, the truth of which can be demonstrated time and again, in detailed exegesis of texts which have regularly been interpreted erroneously in the past against a background of pagan or philosophical Greek usage.

46 The definitions are from W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, F. W. Danker, W. Bauer (Eds), *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2nd rev. ed. 1979).

47 C. H. Pinnock, 'The Conditionalist View', in W. Crockett (Ed), *Four Views of Hell*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) p.146.

48 II Thess 1:9. The idea of separation, imported in NRSV and some other translations, is not actually expressed in the Greek.

49 F. F. Bruce, '1 and 2 Thessalonians', in D. Guthrie and J. A. Motyer (Eds), *The New Bible Commentary*, (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 3rd rev. ed. 1977) p. 1162.

things, the adjective usually describes the issue or result of the action rather than the action itself.⁵⁰ Fudge cites Heb 5:9, 6:2, 9:12 and Mk 3:29 as clear instances of this and, although he writes 'usually', in fact there are no clear exceptions whatever to this very significant observation. The immediate point is, that in II Thess 1:9, 'eternal destruction' does not mean 'an everlasting process of destroying' (a highly paradoxical notion at best!), but 'ultimate destruction, with everlasting effect'. This interpretation is strikingly confirmed by directly comparable Old Testament usage (Ps 92:7; Job 20:7).

Similarly, the expression 'eternal punishment' in Matt 25:46, may well be understood, not as a process of everlasting punishing but as punishment which is ultimate in nature and everlasting in its effect. The effect of this punishment, as Matt 10:28 has already indicated, would be destruction.

In both II Thess 1:8 and Matt 25:41, and very frequently throughout the Bible, the imagery of fire is employed in connection with God's judgment. In the Hebrew Scriptures, judgment by fire is continually associated, quite naturally, with literal destruction.⁵¹ In Mal 4:1-3, for example, the point is unequivocal: the wicked will be 'burned' to 'ashes' like 'stubble' in a furnace. In the Greek Scriptures, both John the Baptist and Jesus take up this imagery directly (Matt 3:12, 13:40-42, 13:50). The modification 'unquenchable', which sometimes appears (e.g. Mk 9:43, 48), implies, not that the burning is endlessly prolonged, but that it is unstoppable and irreversible.⁵² Three passages refer to 'eternal fire' (Matt 18:8, 25:41; Jude 7). Yet the context in Jude explicates the expression in terms of what befell Sodom and Gomorrah, the destruction of which functions regularly in Scripture as a type of final punishment, and there, of course, while the effect was

50 E. W. Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes*, (Houston: Providential Press, 1982) p. 49. See also W. Prestidge, *Life, Death and Destiny*, pp. 74-76, 79.

51 E.g. Ps 21:9, 68:2; Is 33:10-14, 66:15-17; Zeph 1:18, 3:8.

52 Here, again, the Old Testament background is decisive: e.g. Is 1:3; Jer 4:4, 7:20, 17:27; Ezek 20:45-48; Am 5:6.

permanent (Gen 19:14; Zeph 2:9), the process was rapid (Lam 4:6). According to II Pet 2:6, these cities were condemned to 'extinction' and *as such* serve as an example of what awaits the ungodly.

On a conditionalist reading, the biblical 'hell' is not a place of ongoing misery forever at all, but stands for final rejection by God and final, literal, destruction, with or without varying degrees of suffering. Of those words which are sometimes translated 'hell', the only word which actually refers to the final fate of the wicked is *ge-enna*, the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew *ge hinnom*, the Valley of Hinnom. The historical valley became notorious as a place of human sacrifice (condemned as such by the prophets) and then as a place for the dumping and burning of unburied, disgraced corpses. As such it became a type of final judgment even in the Old Testament (Is 30:33, 66:24). According to Matt 10:28, then, it is in *ge-enna* that 'both soul and body' are 'destroyed'. As Stott has written, '...hell would seem to be the deprivation of both physical and spiritual life, that is, an extinction of being.'⁵³ Reference to the undying worm and the unquenched fire, in Mk 9:48 and elsewhere, does not shake this conclusion, since these terms simply refer back to Is 66:16 and 24, where both 'worm' and 'fire' are consuming 'dead bodies' which have been 'slain' by God.

Finally, there is the symbolism of the Book of Revelation. In Rev 14:8-11, the symbols are all drawn from the Hebrew Scriptures, where they are all associated clearly with final destruction. In Ob 15-16 (compare Rev 18:6), the 'cup' results in annihilation. 'Fire and sulfur' and rising 'smoke' derive from the disaster of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19:24, 28). The phrase 'no rest day and night' indicates that the suffering is inescapable, not that it is everlasting. In the end, Babylon 'will be found no more' (Rev 18:21). The 'lake of fire', referred to in Rev 19:19-21, 20:7-15 and 21:8, is defined as 'the second death'. Even death is destroyed there (Rev 20:4, 14), a clear

53 D. L. Edwards and J. R. W. Stott, *Essentials*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1988) p. 316.

indication that 'death' is not conceived of here as an everlasting conscious experience! The 'second death' is 'extinction and total oblivion'.⁵⁴ Michael Green is one prominent example among many today who conclude: 'Christians, therefore, should reject the doctrine of conscious unending torment...just as firmly as they reject universalism.'⁵⁵

The term 'conditionalism' is really a misnomer, for it implies adherence to a specialised, even deviant form of Christian faith. To the contrary, what is contended here is that the original Christian faith itself is intrinsically 'conditionalist' and that it is high time to recover this faith in all its original consistency, truth and power. The enterprise of biblical theology and faith is constantly hijacked by claims that, even on such fundamental matters as those which 'conditionalism' addresses, the Bible itself presents no consistent witness. My contention is that it does, and that the perception of significant inconsistencies, amounting to contradictory tendencies, is the result of the preconceived assumptions or loyalties of inquirers. To this extent, therefore, one very significant feature of 'conditionalism' is that it amounts to a recovery and vindication of the full authority of the biblical witness in relation to matters central to Christian faith.⁵⁶

In the sixteenth century, many Italian Evangelicals, many Anabaptists, Tyndale and Luther himself, recognised that the doctrine of the immortality of the soul is both irrelevant and alien to Christian faith.⁵⁷ In the New Testament itself, Paul is

54 G. B. Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St John the Divine*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1966) p. 187.

55 M. Green, *Evangelism Through the Local Church*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1990) p. 70.

56 See, for example, Carl Josephson, *The Intermediate State in Paul: Seeking Consistency in Paul's Understanding of Death and Resurrection*, (Unpublished M.Th. Thesis, University of Auckland, 1998).

57 For a survey of the sixteenth century debate, see G. H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962).

found already contending for a truly and fully holistic account of human nature and of God's salvation in Christ, in opposition to those Christians at Corinth who, as a result of a radically dualistic understanding of human nature, divided body from soul to the point of either condoning immorality or condemning marriage, and furthermore questioned the need for resurrection. Paul advances a thoroughly holistic account of the human person, together with the insistence that the hope of bodily resurrection, founded upon the resurrection of Christ himself, is absolutely central to the Christian faith.⁵⁸ It is high time for Christians to take the Apostle's stance completely seriously.

Much traditional Christian eschatology, focused upon the survival of the 'soul', not only lacks scientific and philosophical credibility in the modern context, but also, more significantly still, lacks any grounding in the central events of the Christian faith itself, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In contrast, Paul directs our attention squarely to these events, as the only sound and proper basis for Christian hope (I Cor 15:3-4). Christian faith is grounded, not in outmoded rationalistic or mystical speculation of either a Cartesian or Platonic stamp, but in the historic event of Christ. Only 'conditionalism', with its eye firmly fixed upon resurrection through Christ by faith, remains firmly anchored where biblical faith rests, in the saving act of God and in the person of the Saviour.

Conditionalist faith alone defines the relationship between humanity and God clearly and correctly. As wholly mortal beings, we are entirely dependent upon God for our salvation. As William Temple, former Archbishop of Canterbury and thoroughly conditionalist in orientation, has observed: 'The great aim of all true religion is to transfer the centre of interest and concern from self to God.'⁵⁹ Whereas the hypothesis of the

58 I Cor 6, 7, 15. Paul's thesis is stated most succinctly in I Cor 6:13b-14.

59 W. Temple, 'The Idea of Immortality in Relation to Religion and Ethics,' (1931), C. S. Duthie (Ed.), *Resurrection and Immortality*,

survival of the human 'soul' directs attention to supposed innate human potentialities for salvation and even divinisation, 'conditionalism' directs faith where it belongs, solely to God in Christ. In this respect, the conditionalist doctrine of 'life only in Christ' constitutes an intrinsic element of the cardinal Christian doctrine of justification by grace through faith alone.⁶⁰ In the light of the persistent preoccupation with human self-transcendence in contemporary 'New Age' religious movements, a full recovery of biblical realism regarding human nature seems to be particularly pressing.

At the same time, conditionalist faith reinstates the true dignity of the human person as an integrated whole. Whereas a conditionalist faith is a thoroughly holistic faith, in our time the doctrine of the immortality of the soul has become a positive embarrassment. It is thoroughly at odds with the modern scientific and philosophical perception that the human person is a psychosomatic whole. It is also fundamentally at odds with the biblical Christian ethic, which places a high value upon the care, not only of the 'soul', but also of the body and, indeed, of the whole person in his or her full social and natural context. The splendid and distinctive Christian tradition of holistic ministry, derived from the example of Jesus Himself, lacks theological foundation apart from a conditionalist understanding of the human condition. While the salvation of God in Christ is spiritual in its essence, it has both immediate and ultimate implications for the whole of life and it is time to fully explore these implications in terms of a consistently conditionalist ethics, a conditionalist theology of worship, a conditionalist theology of culture and a conditionalist eschatology.⁶¹

(London: Samuel Bagster and Sons, 1979) p. 4.

60 Cf. Paul's definition of saving faith as faith 'in God, who raises the dead...' (Rom 4:17).

61 For a brief sketch of these issues, see W. Prestidge, *Life, Death and Destiny*, pp. 99-104.

Lastly, the conditionalist understanding of final judgment is the only view which gives a full, clear and consistent account of the whole range of biblical teaching on this subject and, by the same token, the only view which fully vindicates both the final seriousness of the Christian Gospel and the justice of the Christian God. It can scarcely be denied that the doctrine of eternal torment, whether physical, psychological or spiritual, so appalling and even absurd in its implications, has been a major deterrent to many who might otherwise have responded favourably to the Christian Gospel, as well as to many who might otherwise have found the courage and conviction to preach and teach a fully biblical doctrine of final judgment. It is possible that the doctrine of endless torment for the lost has done more to discredit Christianity in the eyes of the world than any other teaching. At the same time, it is doubtful that universalism would have gained the currency it enjoys today, if it were not for the still-prevalent misconception, that the only alternative is a doctrine of everlasting suffering. 'Conditionalism', however, fully upholds the doctrine of final judgment on the Bible's own terms, terms which also accord with human conscience, terms which therefore can be held, taught and preached with absolute conviction. Conditional immortality, therefore, if correct, is no small matter. This doctrine may fairly claim, both to restore full credibility to the Christian portrayal of God, as supremely just, and to restore full seriousness to the Christian Gospel, as a matter of absolute and eternal consequence. *'For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord'* (Rom 6:23).

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