

Reclaiming the Gospel

by Pastor Warren Prestidge

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Part One: The Human Condition

"Reclaiming the Gospel". I hope you groaned a bit when you saw the title of this address. I hope you felt some resistance to it. There are far too many people these days claiming to have rediscovered the "real" Gospel or the "full" Gospel. Ever since the Reformation, all sorts of people have been saying that somehow, since New Testament times, true Christianity has been lost, and claiming that now they have recovered the reality for these last days. Usually claims like this do more harm than good, sowing discord and spreading confusion and spiritual pride. Sometimes they are downright cultic, as in the case of the Mormons.

Well, I am certainly not claiming today that only Conditional Immortalists have real Christianity and I am certainly not calling upon people to form conditionalist-only churches and label others "apostate". In fact, I have always advocated otherwise. I believe in Christian unity, provided there is a recognisably Christ-centred base. And believe in setting priorities of faith in Christ and love for one another clearly above other issues. Nor do I believe that conditionalists have access to any higher realm of spirituality than others!

However, I do believe non-conditionalists need to seriously rethink. The doctrines of natural human immortality and eternal torment have disastrously obscured the Gospel over the centuries and seriously undermined its communication and reception. They still do. Conditional immortality restores clarity and cutting edge to the Gospel, and confidence in it. It restores the Gospel's **truth, credibility and power**.

First, truth. Conditional Immortality clarifies the issues at stake and the Gospel's answer. Second, credibility. Conditional immortality frees the Gospel from alien, baseless and contradictory influences, to stand firmly on its own feet. Third, power. Conditional immortality reveals without compromise the full necessity of the Gospel, as well as the full scope of the salvation it proclaims. Results: we hold the Gospel more firmly, and we proclaim it more clearly and confidently, more urgently and more effectively. That is what I mean by "reclaiming the Gospel". That is what conditional immortality can do for the Church and the cause of Christ today. And that, surely, is what we need.

Maybe all this seems a bit preposterous. After all, conditionalism is precisely one of those doctrines singled out over the centuries as heresies and even as marks of a false cult. The medieval poet Dante, in his great poem on hell (in the traditional sense!), placed all mortalist right down there, in Circle VII. At the Fifth Lateran Council in 1513, Pope Leo X specifically condemned mortalism and insisted that only those who believe in the immortality of the human soul are true Christians! Martin Luther clearly did believe in soul sleep, as we do, but John Calvin wrote so passionately against the whole idea (*Psychopannychia*, 1534) that this aspect of the recovery of the Biblical Gospel during the Reformation was driven underground. As a result,

even though there is not a single reference to it in the whole of scripture, the doctrine of the immortality of the human soul, and also necessarily, therefore the doctrine of eternal torment, have become part and parcel of most Protestant Christianity, as well as Roman Catholic.

Yet today, among Bible scholars and many other Christians, there is a growing body of conditionalist opinion. Unfortunately there's a "backlash" too. What are we to do? We are to fellowship and work with other Christians, as far as they will let us, making faith in Christ and observable love for one another our clear priorities. On the other hand, as we have opportunity, in love, we are to do what we can to help the Church recover the full truth, credibility and power of the Gospel – and that includes conditional immortality!

I want to point to four vital areas of Christian belief, understanding and application where conditionalism makes a huge difference.

First, the human condition in relation to God. Who and what are we in relation to God? Who and what is God in relation to us? The Christian Gospel is about reconciliation to God, the recovery and fulfillment of true relationship between God and humanity. But the full relevance of the Gospel will be seen clearly, only if our fundamental situation is seen clearly. Yet today there is enormous confusion over this very point and, tragically, the Christian Church must carry some of the blame for that. Why? Over the centuries we have taught people that they have immortal souls and, in so doing, we have provided a foothold for the view that humanity itself is somehow by nature, divine.

What a tragedy! Some twentieth century theologians have recognised this. One is the great American Reinhold Niebuhr. In *Beyond Tragedy*, 1937, he wrote: "Man is mortal. That is his fate. Man pretends not to be mortal. That is his sin." It's immortalism that is the real heresy says Niebuhr. Not only that, he says, it is the great heresy, the root sin of all!

Is Niebuhr right? Not exactly. Yet his dictum does highlight the seriousness of the issue. The reality, I think, is this: "Man is a creature before God. That is his nature. Man pretends to be God. That is his sin." And part of man's strategy in making himself out to be divine, to deny the reality of death, is the doctrine of the immortality of the soul. The fact is, that death is real and is part of God's strategy for reminding us that we are only human – and sinners at that. The great theologian and preacher Helmut Thielicke, a Lutheran like Niebuhr, has got it exactly right: "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" (Living with Death).

Biblically Adam and Eve seek to set themselves up "as gods" ([Gen. 3:5](#); or even, "as God"- the Hebrew is ambiguous). In response, God decrees death: " You are dust and to dust you shall return." God imposes death, to teach us our true nature as creatures before him, to deny our divinity and self sufficiency. [Gen. 3:21-24](#) specifically insists that God denied the first pair the power to live for ever, barring the way to the tree of life. And yet today most people still suppose we survive death! And the Christian church has aided and abetted this belief, providing the foothold for belief in our own divinity, thereby undermining her own Gospel! Man pretends to be God. That is his sin. God imposed death, to teach man he is not God and is in desperate need of God. Yet even most biblical Christians still hold to an immortal soul. Such is our power to

deceive ourselves. So our-centred are we. So fearful of our creatureliness and dependence upon our Creator. So deeply do we resent that God alone is God.

Never more so that today, when heresies and cults abound., openly proclaiming the divinity of the "real" human self! Although "New Age", this is not a new doctrine of course. It is actually an essential plank of the so-called *philosophia perennis*, the "perennial philosophy". It is there in the age-old philosophical Hindu doctrine that the human self, the *atman*, is one with the Absolute *brahma*. It is there in pre-Christian Plato and especially in the later Neoplatonic doctrine that the immortal soul is our share in divinity. It is there in the ancient Stoic doctrine that the human spirit is a seed of the divine *logos* (word). And it is there in the second century AD Gnostic doctrine that the human soul is the divine spark within us all, a heresy which is still often put forward by Christians as if it were orthodox Christianity.

But it is not there in the Bible. In fact, it is directly denied. According to Scripture, a human being is entirely a created being. God is Wholly Other. And it is a specific mark of God's otherness and sovereignty, his transcendence, that God "alone has immortality" ([1 Timothy 1:17; 6:15-16](#)) and that we are mortal ([Psalm 146:3-4](#)), "children of dust" ([Psalm 90:3](#)), whose breath is in our nostrils ([Isaiah 2:22](#)).

Yet through the ages Christians have taken even those very passages in Scripture which highlight our creatureliness and read into them the opposite! From early times, for example, theologians have been standing [Gen. 2:7](#) on its head. "God formed man from the dust of the ground", says Scripture, "and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and man became a living soul". NO essential difference at all is implied here between humans and the animals ([Gen. 2:19, 3:19, 7:21-23](#))! Yet here is the great fourth century theologian, Gregory of Nazianzus (*De Orationes* 45.6,9): " [God] took the body from already existing matter and put in it a breath taken from himself which the Word knows as the intelligent soul and the image of God. This man he set upon the earth as a kind of second world... earthly and heavenly, transient, yet immortal... in process of deification by reason of his natural tendency towards God".

What a tragedy it is that over the centuries the Christian Church has failed to teach clearly both our non-divinity and our mortality. For example, it has been common to read Paul's teaching about walking in the Spirit as though he met the human spirit, the supposedly higher, immortal, divine principle within human nature. Many Christians still do not grasp the difference between our "spirit" and God's Holy Spirit.

Today, new forms of Gnosticism are permeating society and even invading the Church, in the form of so-called New Age thinking, rooted in the *philosophia perennis*, as re-vamped for example in the teachings of Theosophy, founded early this century by Madame Blavatsky. It is fundamental to Theosophy that we are all "Gods in the Becoming," spiritually immortal, eternal and indestructible" (*Probing the Mysteries of Existence*, Theosophical Society NZ Auckland, 1988, pp9,8). Popular today even among Christians, are books like *A course in Miracles*, which rests upon the totally un-Christian premise that the only reality is spirit, that the human spirit, being a projection of God (the Neoplatonic, Gnostic emanationism) is eternal, and that "death is the central dream from which all illusions stem" (Penguin 1985, Vol 111, pg 63). And many Christians cannot even discern the difference between such teaching and Christianity!

On the contrary, according to Scripture it is the serpent who say there is no death: " You shall not surely die" ([Gen 3:4](#)). It is God who says, "You shall surely die" ([Gen 2:17](#)). And the truth of death must be faced in its full reality, in order that we may know we are not God and so begin to become truly wise. "Show me , O Lord, my life's end and the number of my days; let me know how fleeting is my life... Each man's life is but a breath... But now, Lord. What do I look for? My hope is in you. " That biblically is true wisdom.

In fact , it is also simply common sense and, what's more, good science! And today, notwithstanding all that I've just said about New Age fashions in the world of ideas, there are many, many people who are prepared to finally forget Plato , to face that common sense and good science and the Bible have been saying all along, and to let themselves know that death is death. And the Chirstian Church has nothing to say to such people, because we have been teaching them for centures that it is intrinsic to our faith to deny that death is real!