

Conditional Immortality:

Does It Matter?

Should I Care?

Conference 2006

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Conditional Immortality: Does It Matter? Should I Care?

David Burge, Conference 2006



People often ask me, “What difference does it make? Why is Conditional Immortality important?” Actually, the difference is fundamental. It affects every area of Christian doctrine. What follows is a brief comparison of some of the areas of difference between **Conditional Immortality (CI)** and what I will call **Natural**

Immortality (NI). If you are not yet sure what Conditional Immortality is, I will not take the time to define it yet. It will all be made clear as we make our way through the presentation.

ASSUMPTIONS

In approaching the question this evening I am making three assumptions about you, my audience:

1. That you are Christians (followers of our Lord Jesus Christ);
2. That you believe that doctrine is established by examining the Scriptures; and (though this third assumption may be something that you have thought about less than the other two)

3. That you think that truth and "consistency" is something we should strive for in any theological enterprise. That is to say, we should not hold, together at the same time, a series of self contradictory beliefs, but should seek to hold only those beliefs which are harmonious with one another. To believe otherwise is to abandon the search for truth in favour of an "anything goes" or "if it feels good, believe it" philosophy.

If any of these assumptions about you is incorrect, you may still at the end of this evening believe that Conditional Immortality is not important - at least not to you. If I am correct in the assumptions I have made about you then, I hope, by the end of this evening you will be convinced that Conditional Immortality is an important doctrine!

AS TO SCRIPTURE

A friend once challenged me to explain some "difficult" Scriptures. I did (I thought) an adequate job. She challenged me, however, saying "I think God would have made the Bible so it could be understood by simple folk." I agree. Actually, every position has its "difficult verses", but on the whole it is CI which says that the Bible can be understood as is



— death means death, life means life and so on. It is NI that says the Bible must be interpreted by an “insider” — death means life in endless torment, life means heavenly bliss, etc. This affects such things as our understanding of the Atonement and of sin and its penalty. What are the wages of sin? (Rom. 6:23). Did God threaten Adam with death or eternal torment? (Gen. 2:17). And so on.

We believe God wants to be understood. We do not want our theological theories to obscure the clear teaching of Scripture. CI makes it easier to take the Bible at face value. It means what it says and it says what it means.

AS TO HUMAN NATURE

According to Scripture “the Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being [soul].” (Gen. 2:7). A living being or soul is NOT an immortal soul! If the English language has any meaning at all, then whatever else may be said of immortal souls, this much is clear: they CANNOT DIE! Yet, only ten verses later, the first man is told, “You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die” (Gen. 2:17). Adam must not have been immortal!



What it means to “die” is clearly described in the next chapter: “Dust YOU are [‘You’ not just ‘your body’] and to dust YOU shall return.” (Gen. 3:19). Through the prophet Ezekiel God made it abundantly clear that the “soul” is not immortal when he said, “the soul that sins shall die” (Ezk. 18:4, 20).

NI says we have an immortal soul, an eternal spirit, some “spark of divinity” within us. NI not only goes against the plain meaning of Scripture, rendering impossible any truly Biblical doctrine of human nature, it panders to human pride and self confidence.

CI says we are mortal creatures of dust, totally dependent on God. It urges us to trust God alone for salvation.

AS TO DEATH

As already noted Scripture and CI teach that death is a return to the ground: “Dust YOU are and to dust YOU shall return” (Gen. 3:19). Death is real. It is an enemy, the “last enemy” (1Cor. 15:26). It will be defeated but only when Christ comes again. Meanwhile, CI sets us free to grieve as Christ did (John 11:35) and as Paul says we should - though not without hope (1Thess. 4:13)



NI on the other hand denies the reality of death. It says death is a doorway to the spirit world, a "promotion to glory," even a friend to be welcomed. If this were true it would be selfish to grieve. Such a view, taken to its logical conclusion, is damaging, both psychologically and physically.

NI actually accepts the devil's lie: "You shall not surely die" (Gen. 3:4). Should we not strive for an understanding of Scripture that reflects God's truth rather than the Devil's lie?



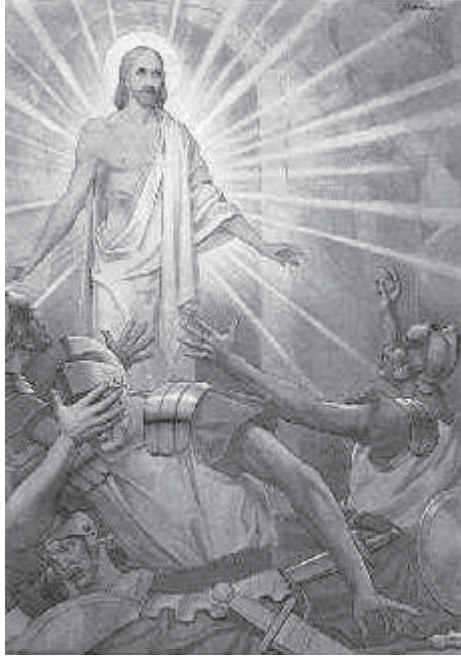
AS TO SALVATION

Christians believe that God has provided a Saviour in his Son Jesus Christ. But what is it that we need to be "saved" from? The Bible's answer to that question is that, ultimately, we need to be rescued from "the second death" in "the lake of fire" (Rev. 20:14). If, however, human beings are, by nature, immortal, how can we be subject to a first death, let alone a second? How can we say we believe Jesus' death on the cross paid the penalty for our sin – and at the same time say he didn't REALLY die at all, because his human soul was naturally immortal? How can we say we believe that God raised Jesus from the dead if he never REALLY died? Romans 10:9 makes it clear that believing that God raised Jesus from the dead is essential for salvation. CI makes for a clearer understanding of what it means to say, "I'm saved". That has to be a good thing!

AS TO RESURRECTION

CI says resurrection is recreation; we are "made alive again" (Rom. 8:11) by the breath of God. NI says resurrection is the immortal soul re-entering the body (this is reincarnation!) and almost irrelevant to what is today presented as our eternal hope ("Heaven" when we die). Only CI truths give both his and our resurrections the central place that resurrection has in Scripture. Some prominent Reformers seemed to have grasped this truth. "We shall all sleep until he comes and knocks on our little grave, saying, 'Dr. Martin, get up!' Then I shall rise up in a moment and I shall be eternally merry with him." So says Martin Luther. "If the souls of the righteous be in heaven, tell me why they be not in as good ease [condition] as the angels be. And then what cause is there of the resurrection?" asks Tyndale.

In essence Tyndale asks, Why bother with resurrection? Unfortunately the Reformation never answered that question. It stalled before coming to



Conditionalist convictions. Today we have another opportunity to put before the world the logic of the resurrection. Should we not grasp it with both hands? Is it not an important part of the Christian faith?

AS TO THE SECOND COMING

CI puts Christ's return at centre stage. Apart from his own resurrection and eventual return, the dead in Christ are lost. We who in this life have put our hope in Christ are to be pitied (1Cor. 15:18, 19). By contrast NI puts death at centre stage. But if the dead are enjoying their reward even now, the Second Coming is a matter of little or no consequence. No wonder much of the Church has lost its passion for Christ and his coming as king. The great hope to which the Bible — Old Testament and New — looks is now seen by many as irrelevant at best and divisive at worst. Perhaps we major on minors only because we are desperate to make the subject relevant. If only we would let the Bible be our guide! CI answers more than the preacher's problem, What to do with the Second Coming? CI will put the Second Coming in its rightful place, it will allow its importance to be seen by all, without our having to



develop sensational scenarios to peek peoples waning interest.

AS TO LIFE AND IMMORTALITY

CI accepts the ordinary, straight forward assertion of 1 Timothy: "God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords ... alone is immortal" (1Tim. 6:15-16). NI asserts that there are other beings in the universe, besides that blessed and only Ruler who now possess immortality. Let God be true and all theologians liars! CI says life in immortality will be given to mortal human beings BUT it is a gift to believers only, to be conferred when Christ comes again (See Rom. 2:7, 1Cor. 15:50-55).

NI makes immortality a natural endowment bestowed on all people. This strikes at the core of the Gospel: Now everyone must spend eternity somewhere. Yet according to the Bible the real issue is not, "Where will you spend eternity?" (Smoking or Non-Smoking) but "Will you spend eternity alive or dead?"

AS TO JUDGMENT DAY

CI says that on this climactic day all humanity will receive their just reward. It will be a day of vindication for some and of condemnation for others.

We are often told that the deceased have



“gone to their reward”. Jesus himself left no room for doubt. He says that the “reward” is not “theirs”, but HIS. It is not awaiting them at the end of their earthly pilgrimages, it is “with” HIM. He alone will “give” it to them when he “comes” and not before (Rev. 22:12).

NI says the opposite when it says humanity has received or will receive their reward at death. Is this justice, to receive one’s reward (especially one’s punishment) *before* one is judged? Surely not! This man made, concocted scheme makes the biblical judgment into something of an anticlimax at best and a perversion of justice at worst.

AS TO “HELL”

Nobody likes to talk about hell. At least not in polite company. But the doctrine of final punishment is one which must be faced. How can one say it makes no difference whether (as CI says) “hell” is the place of the final destruction of the wicked, and the end of all evil (Rev. 20:14, Mal. 4:3) or (as NI says) “hell” is the place of unending conscious torment for lost immortal souls.



Almost all of us have “unsaved” friends and relatives, while it pains us to know that many of those whom we love will not “inherit eternal life” (I don’t seek here to minimise the tragedy of any human being missing out on salvation!), our experience of grief in this life tells us we will come to terms with this reality.

If, however, “hell” is a place of unending conscious torment, tell me how we may ever enjoy the delights of “heaven” knowing that those we love are suffering so much. Worse, some would have us believe we will be able to observe the torments of the damned.

AS TO GOD’S CHARACTER

Following on from this, CI says “eternal torment” distorts the biblical view of justice. Can any sin committed by a finite human being over a finite period of time merit an eternity of unending, unrelenting pain? This makes God out to be a monster, worse than any human sadist. It makes a nonsense of the Christian message to say that God loves you so much ... but if you don’t accept his benevolent rule he will torture you for eternity. CI allows God to be loving and merciful at the same time as he is just. This is a an important difference!



AS TO EVANGELISM

The charge is often made that if we abandon the traditional understanding of hell we will lose the ability to scare people into heaven.

The famous atheist, Bertrand Russell alleged “a very serious defect” in “Christ’s moral character”. That is, that “He believed in hell”

(“Why I Am Not A Christian”, 1957, p17).

The professor declared that “any person who is really profoundly humane” could not believe in everlasting punishment. Hell, he asserted, is a doctrine of “cruelty” (1957, 18).

Since he acknowledged that the punishment of criminals is necessary for the welfare of society

(1957, 72), he must obviously have thought only in terms of the traditional understanding of eternal conscious torment. Consequently, the doctrine was a stumbling block to him. For how many others has this false doctrine become an insurmountable problem?

Dare we say that this is not an important issue?

When I tell my children, “Eat your vegetables or I will send you to your bedrooms until you’re 21”, they laugh at me. They do not take me seriously. My threat is not a credible threat.



If I say, "Eat your vegetables or I will not give you any pudding", this is a believable threat and a powerful motivating factor for my children.

CI says "eternal torment" is not credible — it puts more people off Christianity than it "scares into heaven." The Biblical threat of death to all who persist in rebellion against their legitimate sovereign is however a credible threat and therefore a powerful motivating force.

AS TO CHRISTIAN MISSION

At a heart level many Christians are beginning to understand the need for a holistic approach to mission, one that cares about the body and the practical needs of people as well as the so-called "soul" and spiritual needs.



NI promotes the idea that the soul is "spiritual" and the body isn't. It implies to many that Creation itself is "unspiritual". The Greeks spoke of the body as the prison house of the soul. This only encourages us to neglect the "body" in favour of the "soul" and to neglect the "world" in favour of "heaven".

CI , on the other hand, encourages us to minister to whole persons body and soul, whatever the need. CI encourages us to see this material world as good and glorious. It affirms that, in spite of everything, God

prizes his Creation enough to make a revised version of all things. It encourages us to see all we do in this world in light of our calling to care for the world as good stewards under God (Gen. 1:26-29).

AS TO THE HOPE OF "HEAVEN WHEN WE DIE"

CI goes hand in hand with an understanding of the Biblical hope (one which is gaining wide spread acceptance) as a resurrection to eternal life in immortality as

"royal sons and daughters" ruling in the Kingdom of God on earth (Dan. 7:13, 14, 27, 1Cor. 6:1-3, 2Tim. 2:12).



NI only perpetuates the unbiblical notion that our reward is to go to the Kingdom of Heaven, which is supposedly in Heaven, when we die.

AS TO GOD'S FINAL VICTORY

CI alone says that there will be an end to evil. There will come a time when evil is finally defeated. God will be "all in all" (1Cor. 15:28). This is the Bible's solution to the problem of evil.

NI, on the other hand, says that there will always be a corner of the universe that exists in rebellion against God and his will. Despite Revelation 21:4 there will

always be mourning and crying and pain for the old order of things can never, ever completely pass away.

Is this not a vitally important difference between the two views!

AS TO WHO CHRIST IS

CI says Christ is “the resurrection and the life” (John 11:25) — the source of life itself — and that this is proven by his own resurrection from the dead.

CI paints a much grander picture of Christ and his work. We await a literal, personal, visible return of Christ in power and glory to resurrect the sleeping dead, to destroy evil and evildoers, and to reign forever on a renewed heaven and earth (!) not a mere umpire of souls, sorting out eternal lodgings for already immortal beings.

CONCLUSION

I do not question the sincerity of those who hold to the NI view. I do not question that there are many fine men and women of God and many eminent scholars among them. However I believe that there are fundamental differences between what the Bible teaches and what goes for Christianity today. I also believe that the doctrines known as Life Only in



Christ or Conditional Immortality are an essential part of a fully biblical theology of life, death and human destiny. Lastly, I also believe that these doctrines impact almost every area of Christian theology. I therefore commend them to you as worthy of further study.

David Burge

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Feel free to contact John as below:

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Conditional Immortality offers a consistent, Biblical understanding:

- **Of Scripture**
- **Of human nature;**
- **Of death;**
- **Of salvation;**
- **Of resurrection;**
- **Of the second coming;**
- **Of life and immortality;**
- **Of judgment day;**
- **Of "hell";**
- **Of God's character;**
- **Of evangelism;**
- **Of our hope;**
- **Of God's final victory;**
- **Of Christ.**

Whatever else a Christian may say about the doctrines known as Conditional Immortality, no Christian should say, "It doesn't make any difference."

It does make a difference. It does matter. You should care!