

Conditional Immortality and God's Character

By M. M. Campbell

Believers in *natural* immortality think humans will live *no matter what*. The words “death” and “perish”¹ have slipped the confines of their dictionary definition as “complete lack of life” to mean life continued in another dimension. Natural immortality opens the way for the eternally burning hell some evangelists use so effectively in “bringing sinners to Christ.”

Therefore, when we tell such believers that death means dead, that humans cannot live without God's life-giving power, what they hear is the hollow going of the wind in the trees. Their model has no place where they can reasonably fit in this philosophical “oddity” of *conditional* immortality.

How did Adventism come to believe this minority view?

Conditional Immortality Enters Adventism

As the church transitioned from the Great Disappointment toward a formal organization, it held a series of Bible conferences in New England from 1848 to 1850. During those meetings, George Storrs, a Methodist minister² led the drive to incorporate conditional immortality into the doctrinal ideology of the new movement. He opened the eyes of the pioneers to see and accept this view of the human condition in death. We have rejoiced in this truth ever since, knowing it wipes out that eternally burning hell. It clarifies the source of those apparitions claiming to return from the “other side” to communicate with humans. It explains the critical role of resurrection in redemption's plan—a point that baffles many believers in natural immortality. It helps us understand more fully the fate from which Jesus came to save us. It helps us see the depth of God's sacrifice at the Cross. It reveals a *better God* than we had before seen. How could the benefits of believing conditional immortality get any better?

Humanity Thinks About Eternity

Throughout the centuries and the ages, when men and women have thought of God, of eternity, of judgment, their reasoning powers were held captive to the delusion that even God Himself could not take away their life, that human life existed beyond His reach. Even when He “killed” them, a form of life lived on. The truth regarding the nature of man in death, that he passed the time between death and resurrection slumbering in sleep, opened a new (though old) door in Christian thought, allowing the paradigm to shift to reveal a more humane and appealing God. He exercises His omnipotence to sustain them. When He is not present to generate life, death happens. Death that meets the definition of dead—the complete lack of life.

¹ See John 3:16.

² Like William Miller, Storrs never became an official Seventh-day Adventist.

The new paradigm of conditional immortality saw God as the great life Generator. At the fall of our first parents, He gave all heaven in one Gift to keep the life current flowing Earth-ward. When humans abuse that untouchable gift of free will to continue in a course of sin, it blocks Him out of their lives. He is no longer on-site to protect them and give them life. Their life current fades, and they die—perhaps gradually, perhaps suddenly. But they do cease to exist. They have no protection from the myriads of dangers existing around them in the world, designed to take their happiness and their life. They have no continuing access to the breath of God.

“Built-in” Punishment of the Wicked

The next unfolding of this truth is that our gracious and beautiful gentleman God would not, could not, and need not abuse His creation, because when they “run Him off” by a life of sin—there goes their Protector, Life “Orderer,” Life Sustainer, and Life Giver.³ He need not bludgeon them with heavenly weaponry to discontinue their existence. They are already dead. He has been exercising His eternal Life-Force to *maintain* their lives. Could this picture of a totally benign God be the best benefit of understanding conditional immortality?

The paradigm shifted, first, to an understanding of the human condition in death; then, to seeing God’s role in eternal human loss. While the righteous are blessed with God’s presence on into eternity, the wicked suffer annihilation, because they have no life apart from God. This requires no decision on God’s part; this is a statement of their nature. They thought themselves naturally immortal but it is now clear their life was a conditional gift from their Creator. The universe can breathe a sigh of relief, because everything now makes sense. Sinners perished because they had no connection with the Life-giver. Except for one problem.

The Wrath of God

Scripture clearly depicts God as abusing, maiming, and killing. Yes, it does. It emphatically does. It unarguably does. Throughout Scripture, over and over, we encounter stories of God’s “fire-breathing” wrath and vengeful ways. Does He, after moving away from humans (correction: they move away from Him), come back then to slay them violently, when they possess no inherent life anyway? In light of conditional immortality, would not such actions be gratuitous? Humans are already dead in trespasses and sins. Nonexistence is the default. God must generate their life, if they are to live.

These episodes of God-caused destruction function as a great fire and smoke screen that blurs our view of His life-giving goodness. In order to see the simple facts described above, we must deal with Scripture’s repeated assertions that “God destroyed,” “God executes wrath,” “God’s vengeance.” What do we do with these pictures of God?

³ For discussion purposes, this model is reduced to its simplest terms. We live in a sinful world in which exist certain variables, as we ride this “big blue marble” together. Still the principles discussed herein form the cosmic foundation on which the universe rests.

Reconciling the Ambiguity

First we compare them with the character of Jesus. What picture of God does Jesus' character convey—that of the gentleman God or that of the “fire-breathing,” vengeful God? If we cannot find the “fire-breathing,” vengeful God in Him, yet if we insist that God destroys, would we not have to conclude that Jesus' character is flawed?

But no. His character is not flawed; rather, it is the baseline. Jesus came to reveal the Father. Why did that need exist? Had humans *mis-read* God's description in Scripture? Why did they crucify Him? Because they couldn't see the god of their expectations in Him? Could it happen again, perhaps today? Jesus showed us God. Period. Any argument out of harmony with the demonstration of God's character *He portrayed* is enormously suspect. We must not lightly pass over this fact. Had we lived when Jesus walked the Earth, faced with the question of whether or not to accept Him as Messiah and in light of the many Bible statements that God destroyed, etc., what would our decision have been?

Secondly, we consult our Scriptural definitions, taking as a precedent that we had to search out the Biblical definition of “forever” in order to achieve our advanced view of death and hell. (Christianity in general continues to stumble over this point. Until they use the *Biblical definition* over the dictionary definition, they cannot see conditional immortality. These Biblical definitions open the door to new information.) We found we can only use Webster dictionary definitions in those cases where Scripture has not provided its own definition of a word or concept. Where Scripture *does* provide its own definitions, heaven expects us to use them. And we have been amazed at what showed up, when we began using Bible definitions for God's “wrath,” “vengeance,” etc.

To Recap

Traditional Christendom teaches a model where God will burn humans endlessly if they cross Him. They use that powerful tool in their evangelistic work: Love Me or I'll burn you. Adventism found the Biblical definition of “forever” and changed the paradigm.⁴ We now see that God no longer burns humans eternally. He only burns them little while.

Today numerous Adventists⁵ are shifting the paradigm even further through intense study of the word, finding God's wrath, vengeance, and burning is what happens when our gracious, gentleman God, in an agony of sorrow, goes away in deference to human free will. Without our Protector and Life-giver it isn't long before our life no longer exists because that life

⁴ Although natural immortality continues to enjoy greater popularity than conditional immortality within mainstream Christian circles, conditionalism has always had its champions and is gaining influence today among Christian intellectuals and scholars. <http://www.edwardfudge.com/written/fire.html>, http://specialtyinterests.net/champions_of_conditional_immortality.html, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conditional_immortality.

⁵ And a growing number of non-Adventists are beginning to see both conditional immortality and the new picture of a solely benevolent God.

was *conditional*; it only existed in the presence of God. The new view of God as solely benign can best be seen through conditionalist eyes.

An Example⁶

As Adventists we understand something of the blessing of Sabbath observance. We have found the Sabbath of the Fourth Commandment⁷ a source of joy, a lovely oasis at the end of the week. We “call it a delight, holy of the Lord, honorable,” yet the majority of Earth’s inhabitants call it a yoke of bondage. Adventists and other Sabbath keepers have for generations attempted to introduce the world to its joys, but the majority of Earth’s inhabitants say No to the Fourth Commandment. We have not as yet asserted in a loud enough voice that by continuing to disdain the seventh-day Sabbath, they are cutting themselves off from the Life-giver. The rules of the great conflict of the ages demand that He soon, though reluctantly, release jurisdiction of those who continue to ignore the Fourth Commandment. We need not criticize and condemn those who ignore it. We need only reveal to them the new model of God’s character, which says it all.

We could not see this with clarity without God’s progressively moving the paradigm, first, to an understanding of the human condition in death, then to a comprehension of His role in human destruction. Life comes to us as a gift from Him whose life is original, unborrowed, underived. Continuing our illustration, when humans say, “It would be a terrible inconvenience to me to observe a day out of harmony with the world. I will just observe Sunday [or Friday or nothing] and, God, you will have to be satisfied with that,” then the eternal principles, the enemy’s strident claims, and God’s own courteous nature require Him to move aside. Humans have chosen to continue in a course outside His expressed will. Satan moves in with his claims on their souls. God honors the free will of all, moves aside, and death and chaos reign on Planet Earth.

We could not see these principles clearly until God began to teach us about His gentlemanly character of love.

Two Columns

This new paradigm sets out two basic columns, one titled “God Likes” and one titled “God Doesn’t Like.” The first column might include: He likes being respected and acknowledged. He likes loyalty. He likes us to respect our families, others, the Earth. He likes us to be chaste. He likes us to keep our bodies healthy and to help others. He likes us to honor and observe, in Him, His Ten Commandments. If we intend to walk with Him, wouldn’t that companionship change us to agree with Him in character?

Due to social engineering by the god of this world, humans have come to applaud activities offensive to heaven. Therefore, the other column includes such things as: He doesn’t

⁶ Murder, child abuse, or any one of a number of gross sins could have been cited; however, Sunday observance was chosen because it symbolizes rebellion *within the church*, whose mission is to speak out against sin. Would not a disregard of one of God’s commandments tend to compromise the church’s moral authority to condemn sin in the world?

⁷ Scripture knows but one Sabbath. Therefore, any effort to manipulate the Fourth Commandment to support observance of another day fails.

like idolatry, greed, false pride, immorality, breaking the Ten Commandments, etc. Collectively, these ways are called “sin.” No human invented the lists; they simply reflect God’s character and preferences. *Can we not see the wisdom of putting sin away in order to stay close to the One who generates our life?*

While the new paradigm fosters true conversion and living by faith, these two columns of works are helpful in teaching us how to be, because God doesn’t change. Scripture informs us which lifestyle practices, which ways of thinking, to assign to the respective columns. We always knew that our heavenly Father patiently woos us to bring us to full surrender to and union with Him. Conversely, we also know that when the cup of iniquity finally overflows, He is obliged to “let it flow.” When humans make an unchangeable commitment to ignore His ways and continue with sin in their lives, they are, as it were, “committing suicide,” because they have pushed the Life God away from them, and without His presence we have no life. The result is exposure to destruction.

Scripture offers story after story of exactly this picture. Sodom and Gomorrah. Noah’s flood. It’s even worse in our day, though, because we again face this model on a worldwide scale. Next time it will render the entire world uninhabitable for a thousand years.

Final Connection

Both the physical life of humans and the order of their surroundings, the order of the universe, absolutely rely upon God’s presence to sustain them. Satan, the accuser and destroyer, stands ready with his claims of ownership of the souls of sinners. They have chosen his ways, he intones; ergo, they are his possession. Humans—senseless to the ongoing conflict—float along oblivious that Satan is playing the game for the gold-medal prize held out to humans—their chance to live. Humans can say, “Get lost God” one time too often, and He will have no choice but to comply.

Thus does the moving paradigm rely upon an understanding of conditional human immortality. The only difference between traditional Adventist belief here is the shock we feel, when we see that God doesn’t have to actively kill us, when we’ve been bad. All He has to do is comply with our orders that He remove Himself from our environs.

The new paradigm allows no “wriggle room” to accommodate sin. No one gets away with anything. It is fail-safe, the strongest anti-sin message ever to come to planet Earth. Sin is the great separator between humans and their life-giving, life sustaining Creator. Without His presence there is no life and no order in the universe. Would that all humans could see this model! What a difference for good it would make in our world. The only thing that finally solves the sin problem in human lives and brings the eternal life of God into human souls is when all rebellion is gone, and they are finally “at-one” with their Creator.