

# DEATH, RESURRECTION, AND THE TIME IN BETWEEN

## A CALVINIST PERSPECTIVE

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In 1534 John Calvin, still in his mid-twenties and fairly new to the arena of theological polemics, wrote a treatise in which he passionately attacked some Christian thinkers with whom he disagreed on what he considered a key theological topic. Calvin had only recently left the Catholic Church for the emerging Protestant Reformation movement, but this early tract was directed not against Catholic theologians but against leaders associated with the Anabaptist subgroup within Protestantism. The lengthy title he gave to his essay identifies both the source of his theological concern and the depth of his passion on the subject he is addressing: *Psychopannychia, or, a Refutation of the Error Entertained by Some Unskilful Persons, Who Ignorantly Imagine That in the Interval between Death and the Judgment the Soul Sleeps. Together with an Explanation of the Condition and Life of the Soul after This Present Life.*

Calvin notes that the deniers of a conscious intermediate state between an individual's death and the general resurrection divide into two groups. Some, he says, admit to the reality of a nonphysical human soul but "imagine that it sleeps in *a state of insensibility* from Death to The Judgment-day, when it will awake from its sleep." There are others, he reports, who "will sooner admit anything than its real existence, maintaining that it is merely a vital power which is derived from arterial spirit on the action of the lungs, and being *unable to exist* without body, perishes along with the body, and vanishes away and becomes evanescent till the period when the whole man shall be raised again." Against these denials, Calvin insists "both that it [the soul] is a substance, and after the death of the body [it] truly lives, being endued both with *sense and understanding*."<sup>1</sup> In making his case, he amasses many biblical passages, offering extensive commentaries upon them.

Twenty-five years later, when Calvin published the final edition of his classic *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, his treatment of that subject was more subdued. Perhaps he tempered his rhetoric upon becoming aware in the intervening decades that Martin Luther—certainly not numbered among the "unskilful persons" who had earlier so provoked Calvin—had endorsed the soul-sleep position. The German reformer had proclaimed in a sermon: "We shall suddenly rise on the last day, without knowing how we have come into death and through death. We shall sleep, until He comes and knocks on the little grave and says, 'Doctor Martin, get up! Then I shall rise in a moment, and be with him forever.'"<sup>2</sup>

Whatever caused Calvin to modify his tone on the subject, he now focused in his discussion of the afterlife much more on the resurrection of the body. All who want to "receive the fruits of Christ's benefits," he said, must "raise their minds to the resurrection."<sup>3</sup> And given that as our primary focus, he argued, "it is neither lawful nor expedient to inquire too curiously concerning our souls' intermediate state" since "it is foolish and rash to inquire concerning unknown matters more deeply than God permits us to know. Scripture goes no further than to say that Christ is present with them, and receives them into paradise that they may obtain

consolation, while the souls of the reprobate suffer such torments as they deserve.”<sup>4</sup>

Calvin’s comments may be more muted here than they were twenty-five years earlier, but he had not backed off from his affirmation that the intermediate state is one of a continuing consciousness. In that state the redeemed experience “consolation,” while the unredeemed are in a condition of suffering.

### CONTINUED CONSCIOUSNESS

The question of continued consciousness in the intermediate state is much debated these days by theologians and Christian philosophers. One important factor in this present interest in the topic is a strong reaction that has been taking place against Platonistic metaphysics in theological circles during the past half century. Much of this has been stimulated by the emphases associated with the biblical theology movement that emerged in Europe during the years following World War II, where a new critical attention was given to the philosophical assumptions that had long been influential in Christian theology. Similar sensitivities were at work in the *aggiornamento*, the theological updating that occurred as a result of the Catholic Church’s Second Vatican Council.

A prominent feature of this critical attention has been the attempt to “de-Platonize” Christian theology, especially regarding the theological understanding of the nature and calling of humans. Much damage had been done, it has been argued, by the Greek dualism wherein a human being was seen to be a composite of two different kinds of substances: a rational-spiritual soul and a physical body, with the nonphysical component of our shared nature being higher—closer to God—than the corporeal aspects of our nature. At its worst, Christian theology had borrowed heavily from the Platonistic notion that the body is the prison house of the soul and that death is a release of human souls from their present state of bondage.

## OSCAR CULLMANN'S PERSPECTIVE

The contrast between the Platonistic viewpoint and biblical teaching was sketched out compellingly by the Swiss theologian Oscar Cullmann, one of the leaders of the biblical theology movement. Cullmann began his influential essay on the themes of immortality and resurrection by comparing the deaths of Socrates and Jesus.<sup>5</sup> Having been sentenced to death, Socrates engages in a calm philosophical discussion with friends who are visiting him in his prison cell. When the conversation is over, Socrates sips the poisonous hemlock, expressing cheerful anticipation of the separation of his soul from his body. Jesus, on the other hand, sweats drops of blood in the Garden of Gethsemane as he pleads with the Father to allow the cup of suffering to pass from him. Later, as he hangs dying on the cross at Calvary, he cries out in agony over his experience of abandonment.<sup>6</sup>

What is clearly on display here, says Cullmann, is the contrast between two radically differing conceptions of the meaning of death. For Socrates, death is the welcome release of the spiritual from the physical. For Jesus, death is an enemy that destroys and threatens the destruction of the whole person. Cullmann explores the underlying theological issues here by giving careful attention to anthropological data of the New Testament. In doing so, he allows for a kind of duality that the biblical writers attribute to human beings, albeit not that of a radically separable soul and body. While the words "soul" and "body" do appear frequently in the Bible, he argues, the real contrast for Paul and others is between "the inner" and "the outer" person. Our inner and outer lives need each other, since "both are created by God." Our inner lives require a home in a body. While this inner life "can, to be sure, somehow lead a shady existence without the body, like the dead in Sheol according to the Old Testament," this shadowy existence is not really "a *genuine life*."<sup>7</sup>

Having offered this portrayal, Cullmann celebrates the doctrine of the resurrection of the body as the central teaching regarding post-mortem survival. But he does not hold back from offering a nuanced account regarding the nature of the intermediate state. He observes that

in 2 Corinthians 5:1–10 the Apostle Paul expresses anxiety over the “nakedness” of an interim condition when he is no longer in the body but not yet resurrected. But in this same passage, having expressed his “natural anxiety” over the very real threat posed by the destruction of the body, Paul also voices much confidence that he will experience “Christ’s proximity, *even in this interim state*.” The inner person is not abandoned by the Holy Spirit when the outer person disappears.<sup>8</sup> Cullmann is willing to live with the metaphysical implications of his insistence on a continuing consciousness of the disembodied inner person. He strongly criticizes Barth, for example, for using the sleep metaphor as grounds for insisting that a person does not experience the passage of time between death and resurrection. Those who are “dead in Christ” do experience some sort of state of consciousness prior to the resurrection, Cullmann argues. They “are still in time; they, too, are waiting. ‘How long, oh Lord?’ cry the martyrs who are sleeping under the altar in John’s Apocalypse ([Revelation] 6:11).”<sup>9</sup>

In a helpful way, Cullmann speaks directly to the metaphysical implications of what he is allowing for here. It is fair to ask, he says, “whether in this fashion we have not been led again, in the last analysis, to the Greek doctrine of immortality.” And the fact is, he continues,

There is a sense in which a kind of *approximation* to the Greek teaching does actually take place, to the extent that the inner man, who has already been transformed by the Spirit (Romans 6:3ff) and consequently made alive, continues to live with Christ in this transformed state, in the condition of sleep. . . . Here we observe at least a certain analogy to the “immortality of the soul,” but the distinction remains nonetheless radical.

To be sure, Cullmann insists, some key differences between the biblical and the Greek views remain. Death is indeed an enemy for the Christian. The fact of a residual consciousness for the human person after dying is not due to anything about “the natural essence of the soul.” The interim state is, for the believer, a “waiting for the resurrection.”<sup>10</sup>

It is important to note explicitly here that all that Cullmann says on this subject applies exclusively to the Christian believer. He tells us nothing about the postmortem prospects of human beings in general. Indeed, he even stipulates that the Christian who has died enters into this sleep state through “a divine intervention from outside, through the Holy Spirit, who must already have quickened the inner man in earthly life by His miraculous power.”<sup>11</sup> This too reinforces his insistence that there is considerable distance between the New Testament perspective and the Greek doctrine of immortality. Of course, it could be that God performs a somewhat different kind of miracle for those who die without having been transformed in their inner beings by the Spirit, perhaps sustaining in them a *fearful* waiting for the resurrection. But that is not a topic that Cullman discusses.

## N. T. WRIGHT’S POSITION

More recently, N. T. Wright does address the postmortem condition of both believer and unbeliever in his own nuanced discussion of these same issues. Wright speaks to that specific area of concern only after elaborating at length on the need for hope—or, to borrow a phrase from the subtitle of his best-selling book on resurrection, “rethinking heaven.” In looking at what requires this rethinking, Wright continues the theological campaign against Hellenistic philosophical influences, with Plato playing a villain role of sorts. In contrast to the Pauline teaching that our *bodies* will “put on immortality” (1 Corinthians 15:53), past theologians have too often taught, says Wright, that we can look forward to a “*disembodied* immortality,” a perspective heavily influenced by the Platonistic insistence that “all human beings have an immortal element within them, normally referred to as soul.”<sup>12</sup>

Like Cullmann, however, Wright does not deny a conscious state of “being with Christ” between a person’s death and the final resurrection. This state is, he says, one “in which the dead are held firmly within the

conscious love of God and the conscious presence of Jesus Christ while they await that day.”<sup>13</sup> What Wright wants us to be clear about in all of this, however, “is that heaven and hell are not, so to speak, what the whole game is about. . . . The major, central, framing question is that of God’s purpose of rescue and recreation for the whole world, the entire cosmos. The destiny of the individual human beings must be understood within that context.”<sup>14</sup>

Having given some attention to the condition of those who, having died, enter into a conscious state of “being with the Lord,” Wright also directly addresses the state of the unredeemed after their individual deaths and prior to the general resurrection. Wright is no universalist. other “I find it quite impossible . . . to suppose that there will be no ultimate condemnation, no final loss, no human beings to whom, as C. S. Lewis put it, God will eventually say, ‘*Thy* will be done.’” Those who have openly rejected God’s redeeming purposes will have, Wright says, so dehumanized themselves so as to fatally damage the image of God in which they were created. Thus, “with the death of the body in which they inhabited God’s good world, in which the flickering flame of goodness had not been completely snuffed out, they pass simultaneously not only beyond hope but also beyond pity,” as they “still exist in an ex-human state, no longer reflecting their maker in any meaningful sense.”<sup>15</sup>

## HIGHER/LOWER DUALISM

Given that my overall purpose here is to discuss John Calvin’s views on the afterlife, why go into these details of the cases made by both Cullmann and Wright regarding a conscious intermediate state? Full disclosure in answering this question: as one who identifies with the Calvinist tradition, I have a strong interest in presenting Calvin’s general perspective on theological matters and his views on “last things” in particular in the most favorable manner that I can manage. And this is out of respect not only for the convictions Calvin expressed in his sixteenth-century

context but also for the ways those convictions provide help for addressing contemporary concerns.

Anyone who wants to highlight the strengths of Calvin's views for contemporary theological exploration, however, must at the same time admit some weaknesses in his theology. And there is at least one weakness in the way in which a regrettable influence of Plato seems to be at work in Calvin's view of human nature.

In assessing Plato's dualistic understanding of the human person, it is important to keep a distinction in mind between his dualistic understanding of the basic composition of a human being, on the one hand, and what we might think of as Plato's ranking in making his distinction between soul and body on the other. When Cullmann says that the Apostle Paul's affirmations regarding the intermediate state can be rightly seen "as a kind of *approximation* to the Greek teaching," Cullmann is implicitly endorsing a metaphysical view concerning the *composition* of the human person. We are the kinds of beings whose full natures cannot be understood in purely physical terms. We are more than mere bodies. There is something in us that can continue to be conscious when the body goes into the grave. Calvin would agree with that. If someone wants to see that as compatible with at least a modest version of Plato's compositional dualism, so be it.

But this compositional account in Plato's thought was intimately linked to a higher/lower dualism. The soul, in Platonism, is intrinsically immortal, belonging to the unchanging realm of noncorporeal Forms. The body is of a lower reality, and it inhibits the soul from focusing on eternal things. And the influence of this ranking element in Plato's thought does show up in Calvin's writings, as when he insists that "when Christ commended his spirit to the Father and Stephen to his Christ, they meant only that when the spirit is freed from the prison house of the body, God is its perpetual guardian" and that "we journey away from God so long as we dwell in the flesh, but that we enjoy his presence outside the flesh."<sup>16</sup>

This is where we have much to learn from the insistence by many recent theologians that this biblical viewpoint leads to a very different



understanding of our present lives as believers. The distinction between spiritual and physical activities and dispositions is to be understood not in terms of two different substances but rather as pointing to the basic patterns with which we direct our lives. To put it in blunt terms, marital physical intimacy can for believing couples be spiritual, whereas a prideful praying for God to curse those with whom one disagrees can be fleshly.

It is significant that when Calvin gives expression to this higher/lower dualism, he typically does not make any reference in that context to the resurrected state. But when he does emphasize the resurrection as the glorious hope for which the souls of the departed Saints are yearning, his views comport quite clearly with the sort of perspective on the Christian life set forth by, say, an N. T. Wright.

## THE INFLUENCE OF SCIENTIFIC ADVANCES

The composition question in relationship to the afterlife is getting much attention these days, in good part because of groundbreaking work done in recent decades in the scientific study of the brain and its role in affecting behaviors, thoughts, and emotions. The issues raised by these scientific advances have stimulated much philosophical discussion about what the relationship is between brain states and what we ordinarily classify as states of consciousness. What is the relationship between a thought I am having about a slice of pepperoni pizza and the neural processes occurring in my brain when I am having that thought. Does the brain event *accompany* the mental event? Or is the mental event in some important sense *identical with* the brain event? Is our ordinary talk about brain and mind as two separate things really about only one thing: using two modes of discourse, consciousness talk and brain talk, that in fact refer to one “stuff”?

Those are big and complex metaphysical topics, and I do not intend to address them here. But I do want at least to acknowledge that the

recent theological debates about the afterlife have occurred in a broader intellectual climate in which new scientific concerns have created some of the sense of urgency in the debates and fostered a spirit of theological caution in moving too quickly from the biblical data compositional affirmations. The Dutch Reformed theologian Berkouwer addressed this issue in observing that that any attempt to single out specific biblical terms for human parts (spirit, flesh, body, or heart) in exploring compositional issues will inevitably run into much messiness. The biblical writers, he says, use such terms “in very concrete and extremely varied ways.” The Bible’s overall intent, then, is not so much “to reveal to us something of the composition of man” but rather “to speak of man as a whole.”<sup>17</sup>

This not to say, though, that the biblical references are simply irrelevant to questions of composition. There is still room for looking for at least some biblical guidance on the composition topic. Berkouwer himself admits as much. He notes that divine “revelation directs our glance toward man in his totality, in his relation to God.” Berkouwer does allow for the fact that while the Bible’s intent is not “to reveal to us something of the composition of man,”<sup>18</sup> it does “incidentally” point to certain compositional realities along the way.<sup>19</sup>

I find this suggestion helpful, in that it gives us permission to explore, albeit with due caution, questions of this sort: What kind of metaphysical entity must a human person *be* to be capable of the kinds of things the Bible says about us? Given that we cannot get a lot of metaphysical mileage from the Bible’s unsystematic references to spirit or heart or soul, can we at least discern what kinds of beings we must be, in metaphysical terms, for the Bible to say what it means to say when using these terms?

The intermediate state topic is especially poignant in this regard. When the Apostle Paul celebrates the fact that when he is “absent from the body” he is “present with the Lord,” what compositional account of human nature best comports with his confident claim?

## A PERSONAL REFLECTION

During the seventeen years I served as a faculty member at Calvin College, I regularly taught introductory philosophy courses. When I moved in 1985 to Fuller Theological Seminary, a graduate-level school, that kind of teaching was no longer a part of my assignment. Every once in a while, though, I have occasion to look into my file of lecture notes for those introductory courses, and I have been reminded how I would exposit at length Socrates's view, as reported in Plato's *Phaedo*, of the afterlife as a state of being where the soul passively contemplates the eternal Forms, and then I would explain to my students what I took to be the biblical view. "The Bible depicts the future life as a resurrected state," I would tell my students. "And that means that we will actively reign with Christ in that glorious kingdom in which all things have been made new." To reinforce my point, I would say things like this: "Heaven for us will be *doing* things. We will continue to solve problems and take on challenges. And we will go about our active service of God without being plagued anymore by the realities of sin."

I think N. T. Wright would have been pleased with those lectures. They comported well with his advocacy for a robust conception of the resurrected life as active participation in the fullness of the kingdom of Christ, where all things will be renewed.

Though I continue to endorse that robust view of things theologically, I confess that while reading my earlier class notes and studying the views of Wright and others about the coming kingdom, the notion of such a busy Christian afterlife makes me tired. The idea of being active for all eternity is much less appealing to me now than it was in my younger days. I would even settle for a millennium or so of passively contemplating Platonic Forms!

This shift in my eschatological mood—if not my theological convictions—obviously has something to do with a change in my personal life situation. We should not be surprised that the sorts of eschatological expectations that attract us in our youth would differ from those that give us comfort in our later years.

The personal tension that I have just described corresponds to a distinction some scholars have set forth between anthropocentric and theocentric perspectives on the afterlife. As Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang have employed the distinction, in theocentric accounts the souls of the dead in heaven experience a beatific union with God, even to the point that their memories of previous experiences are lost; whereas in anthropocentric conceptions the sense of identity is an extension of the previous earthly existence, and the preoccupations of heaven are not unlike those that presently occupy us.<sup>20</sup>

Those perspectives, then, that focus on intrahuman relations and activities—reunion with loved ones, life in “the Peaceable Kingdom,” the perfect actualization of justice for the oppressed, and so on—stand in contrast to those that focus exclusively on, say, “being with Jesus,” or the *visio dei*.

But we do not have to see the two conceptions in either-or terms. Carol Zaleski has rightly insisted that rather than having to choose for one or the other, “a more adequate perspective would be theocentric and anthropocentric at once.” To illustrate, she cites an account of heaven she found in a story from tenth-century Ireland where the visionary “discovers that the saints who encircle the throne have acquired the power to face in all directions at once”—“a scene that captures the sociability of the beatific vision.”<sup>21</sup>

John Calvin certainly did not see the need to choose between the theocentric and the anthropocentric. He observes that while for the redeemed it is a blessed hope to know “that the kingdom of God will be fulfilled with splendor, joy, happiness, and glory,” it is even more blessed to know that when “that day comes . . . he will reveal to us his glory, that we may behold it face to face.”<sup>22</sup>

## BECOMING LIKE GOD?

Since I am offering these Calvinist comments about the afterlife at the invitation of a great intellectual center of the Latter-day Saints, I will not resist the temptation here to say something about the relevance of the theocentric-anthropocentric distinction for Latter-day Saint eschatology. Many members of other faiths see the Latter-day Saint understanding of the afterlife as dominated almost exclusively by anthropocentric themes, as in the vision of families living happily in a future paradise. Nor is that strong emphasis on the horizontal-relational dimensions of the Latter-day Saint conception of life in the celestial kingdom a mere expression of “folk Mormonism.” It flows naturally from the Latter-day Saint theological insistence, rooted in the acceptance of extrabiblical deliverances attributed to continuing revelations, of the eternity of family and marriage.

Just as I do not want to purge my own Calvinist eschatological perspective of all anthropological elements, I also have no desire to urge that kind of purging for the Latter-day Saint vision of the afterlife. The theocentric is clearly a central emphasis in the view of our present pilgrimages as believers. Robert Millet makes that very clear in his insistence that for Latter-day Saint teaching at its best the path to deification is possible only “through the cleansing and transforming power of the blood of Jesus Christ.”<sup>23</sup> If the full realization of the process of becoming godlike has to be seen as the culmination of what is already occurring in our present lives, then the crucial theocentric dimensions of the way of holiness will certainly extend into eternity. Thus Millet’s appeal to the words of Joseph Smith on our never-ending reliance and dependence on divine favor: our goal of becoming “heirs of God, and joint heirs with Jesus Christ,” the prophet insisted, is possible only “through the love of the Father, the mediation of Jesus Christ, and the gift of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>24</sup>

Those affirmations are unqualifiedly theocentric in a way that evokes gratitude in my Calvinist heart. The distinctive emphasis of the Calvinist branch of Reformation thought is the way that God’s sovereign grace reaches into our deep places, bringing about a transforming spiritual

renewal that we could never achieve by our own efforts as sinners. And the terminology employed in Robert Millet's citation of Joseph Smith on our eternal destiny comports well, to my spiritual ears, with that Calvinist emphasis. We are everlastingly dependent on the realities of the Father's love, the Son's mediatorial redemptive work, and the gift of the Holy Spirit's sustaining power.

For my twenty-first century appropriation of Calvinist thought, these realities—the gracious operations of the three members of the Godhead—define the essential infrastructure of everlasting life. Whatever our understanding of the metaphysics of what we refer to as the human “soul,” our hope for the future, both in our present lives and in what will happen us after we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, is grounded firmly in the gracious promise—a biblical promise that I have heard my Latter-day Saint friends quote frequently—that while we are already sons and daughters of the living God: “it doth not yet appear what we shall be,” and when the Savior appears “we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2).

## NOTES

1. John Calvin, *Psychopannychia*, in *Tracts and Treatises in Defense of the Reformed Faith*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1958), 3:419–20.
2. Quoted by T. A. Kantonen, *The Christian Hope* (Philadelphia: United Lutheran Church in America, Board of Publication, 1954), 37.
3. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 3.25.2, 989.
4. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.25.6, 997.
5. I explore Cullmann's views on this subject, along with the more general relationship between philosophical conceptions of human nature and biblical thought, at greater length in my essay “Imago Dei and Philosophical Anthropology,” *Christian Scholar's Review* 40, no. 3 (Spring 2012): 253–66.

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6. Oscar Cullmann, "Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead: The Witness of the New Testament," reprinted in *Immortality*, ed. Terence Penelhum (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1973), 60–63.
7. Cullmann, "Immortality," 69.
8. Cullmann, "Immortality," 81.
9. Cullmann, "Immortality," 79.
10. Cullmann, "Immortality," 83.
11. Cullmann, "Immortality," 83.
12. N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: Harper One, 2008), 160.
13. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 172.
14. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 184.
15. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 182–83.
16. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.15.2, 184, 186.
17. G. C. Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics: Man: The Image of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1962), 199.
18. Berkouwer, *Image*, 199.
19. Berkouwer, *Image*, 203.
20. Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang, *Heaven: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).
21. Carol Zaleski, "Fear of Heaven," *Christian Century*, 14 March 2001.
22. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.25.10, 1004–5.
23. Robert L. Millet, *Modern Mormonism: Myths and Realities* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2010), 89.
24. Joseph Smith, *Lectures on Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 5:3, quoted in Millet, *Modern Mormonism*, 89.