

Immortality and the Gospel

The Drew Lecture, 1981
The Revd Dr Bruce Milne
Spurgeon's College, London

I begin with a text which takes us immediately to the theme of our lecture. "Our Saviour Jesus Christ has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel" (2 Timothy 1:10). Here immortality (*aphtharsia*) is linked in the closest way to the gospel (*evangelion*) which Paul immediately asserts to be the message of which he was appointed a herald, apostle and teacher (verse 11). The "good news" or *kerygma*, that revealed message which has been committed like a priceless treasure to Timothy and his historic successors right down to ourselves today (verse 14) is a message which has the effect of "bringing immortality to light"; the verb is *photizo* and something of its force comes across in another N.T. usage, 1 Corinthians 4:5 "Judge nothing until the Lord comes; he will bring to light what is hidden and will expose the motives of men's hearts". Thus the gospel has the effect of bringing right into the blaze of open vision the previously sometimes shadowy and hidden fact of man's immortality. It belongs therefore to the glory of Christian faith born and rooted in the revealed gospel that death has been destroyed and assurance of life after death held out to all who believe. Immortality, in general terms the continuation of personal self-consciousness in some new order beyond death, is therefore a real and central element in the Christian gospel as a consultation of other major N.T. kerygmatic formulae, such as 1 Cor. 15:3f; Acts 3:18f; 10:38f; 1 Thes. 1:9f immediately confirms. The promise of immortality is fundamental to the gospel.

Now it is my purpose this evening to explore and reaffirm this union of immortality and gospel which God has clearly joined together in the holy wedlock of his redemption, and to do so against the background of a discernible and perhaps increasingly influential trend within modern theological reflection to divorce these partners and offer us a version of the gospel in which personal, conscious survival of death is either virtually absent or even explicitly eliminated. When John Drew founded this lectureship in 1903 he was able to assume that the opponents of immortality lay essentially outside the Church in the ranks of the sceptical scientific and rationalistic fraternity. Today, as I will indicate, the enemy is also within the gates, and it appears to me that at some point it is incumbent upon a lectureship dedicated to the defence of human immortality to take cognizance of this fact and address itself to it. To fail to do so will mean that we are in danger, if not of fighting the battles of yesterday, at least of failing to defend our position on flanks at which it is presently under direct assault.

In his book, *Death in the Secular City*, published in 1972, Russel Aldwinckle looking out over the bleak landscape bequeathed by the radical theologies of the 1960's noted the surprising fact of the degree to which "thinkers who claim to be Christian seek to interpret the gospel in purely this-worldly terms" (p. 19f).

The decade or so since these words were penned has happily not lacked evidences of a significant recovery of supernaturalist and eternal, other-worldly perspectives within the convictions and experience of many individual Christians and congregations, but on the whole the theologians remain largely impervious, and indeed are in some cases in danger of moving from a neglect of immortality to a positive antipathy. Let me justify that from two highly influential writers. First the German

theologians Jurgen Moltmann in a passage from his *The Crucified God* —

"The symbol of 'resurrection from the dead' means a qualitatively new life which no longer knows death and therefore cannot be a continuation of this mortal life . . . (hence) 'resurrection of the dead' excludes any idea of a 'life after death' of which many religions speak, whether in the idea of the immortality of the soul or in the idea of the transmigration of souls. Resurrection life is not a further life after death, whether in the soul or the spirit, in children or in reputation; it means the annihilation of death in the victory of the new, eternal life . . . The expression 'resurrection of the dead' does not deny the fatality of death whether this death is the death of Jesus on the cross or death in general, with the help of ideas of a life after death in some shape or form." (p. 169-170).

Now I imagine that like myself and others who have commented on this paragraph you find it rather puzzling at first blush. There are certainly things here which appear valid enough. Eternal life of which the New Testament speaks as the gift of God through Jesus Christ our Lord (Romans 6:23) is certainly more than a mere second instalment of our present biological existence in space and time. Eternal life is an eschatological reality, the life of the new age begun now in the Holy Spirit. However Moltmann "appears", and one can only use such a term since clarity of concept is not one of this writer's theological virtues, to wish to exclude any real individual future reference at all; and one is left with the clear impression that for all the stress in his theology in the dimension of hope, that "hope" is merely a symbol for the triumph of God's purpose in some general sense, rather than the prospect, as in traditional interpretations, of the Parousia as the invasion of our historical continuum at a dateable point in the future and the inauguration from that moment of a new order, where some at least of the self-conscious agents who have lived and moved and had their being in this temporal scene will experience a new and extended order of life in sequential continuity to their historical existence here. And if Moltmann means to deny that, and along with other more competent interpreters of his theology I judge that he very probably does, then he stands in manifest contradiction to mainstream Biblical Christianity. The important question however is why Moltmann appears to emit such antipathy to traditional notions of immortality. But before pursuing that question we turn to a second contemporary writer, Gustavo Gutierrez, and his book, *A Theology of Liberation*.

The heart of this writing lies in a section entitled "From the quantitative to the qualitative", in which Gutierrez argues for a redefinition, or reconception of the notion of salvation. The so-called "quantitative" understanding of salvation which we are to abandon is —

"the salvation of the pagans, the extensive aspect of salvation; it is the problem of the number of persons saved, the possibility of being saved and the role which the Church plays in this process . . . The notion of salvation implied in this view has two very well defined characteristics; it is a cure for sin in this life; and this cure is in virtue of a salvation to be obtained beyond this life." (p. 151).

In place of this Gutierrez proposes a so-called "qualitative" understanding of salvation —

"salvation is not something other-wordly, in regard to which the present life is merely a test. Salvation — the communion of men with God and the communion of men among themselves — is something which embraces all human reality, transforms it, and leads it to its fullness in Christ... To work, to transform this world, is to become a man and to build the human community; it is also to save." (p. 151, 159).

There is in these sentences the obvious imprint of their author's setting in Iberian colonialist Catholicism; but for our purpose it is sufficient to note in this highly influential contribution to the theology of liberation a similar revulsion from the notion of personal immortality, and the attempt to reconceptualise the gospel without reference to it.

It would be a great mistake of course to make a simple identification between Moltmann and Gutierrez, or even Moltmann and liberation theology in general; there are genuine differences. Nonetheless they are united in reflecting in the name of Christian theological construction a manifest unhappiness with the idea of personal immortality, or, in the terms of our Lecture title, a gospel without immortality; and, in this are representative of a wide and influential tendency within the thought and practices of the world Christian community today.

It is time now to ask the question why these and similarly orientated thinkers find personal immortality so uncongenial a notion. The straightforward, on-the-surface, answer is that they claim to detect in the concern for personal survival of death an evasion of immediate human reality and in particular the struggle for justice in face of injustice and for meaning in face of suffering. As Moltmann expressed it in his *Theology of Hope*, belief in a future life is to be questioned because it produces "a resigned attitude to life here", (p. 208) and Gutierrez speaks similarly in criticism of a "spiritual" interpretation of salvation which "devalues and even eliminates earthly realities" (p. 167). While such a claim may have a certain superficial attractiveness it does not in my judgement stand up to close examination. For one thing it is guilty of gross over-simplification. The springs of human action are complex and multifarious as any psychologist or psycho-analyst with any degree of analytical skill will document, to say nothing of the perceptive Christian pastor. The postulate that belief in personal immortality will, in general, produce social and moral quietism is, to say the least, an undemonstrated and I suspect in principle undemonstrable proposition. Which leads to the further difficulty, that in practice a belief in immortality has very commonly *not* had this effect. One need but glance across the history of Christian mission over the last hundred years to observe the manifest conjunction of active, sacrificial and compassionate response to human need and whole-hearted belief in the life to come; and we are all acquainted with a multitude of God's everyday saints who combine these factors with a cheerful naturalness which makes one wonder what kind of Christian company these thinkers move amongst to produce theories which are at such obvious variance with everyday congregational experience.

The truth is that this particular argument for the divorce of immortality from the gospel is largely a case of rationalisation, and we need to seek the real roots of this contemporary trend at a deeper level in three other contributory factors, and the full force of the case for this realignment of the gospel is not felt until they are uncovered.

(1) The first is the *spirit of modern secularism*. In his book, *What*

Kind of God? Heinz Zahrnt alludes to John A.T. Robinson's account of a conversation the former bishop had late one night in Chicago with a Jewish student in the course of which the student admitted "If I could really think, like our fathers, of this life as a mere few seconds preparation for eternity, it would make a lot of difference. But I can't. Can you?" Robinson admits "I had to agree. I couldn't", and, goes on Zahrnt, "for our part we must agree with the English bishop and admit that none of us can either, if we are true contemporaries". (p. 22). Now of course such an assertion has no logical force; it is simply subjective testimony. But as a contributory factor in modern theological disaffection with immortality it is highly significant. The process of secularisation, the gradual exclusion of explicit reference to God from area after area of human affairs and the corresponding extension of man's seeming mastery of, or at least manipulation of his environment and its natural powers — a process powerfully documented in some of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison* — has come to exercise a serious "drag" upon the Christian hope; and indeed in some thinkers has come to assume the proportions of a millstone.

(2) The second contributory factor in the this-wordly reconceptualisations of the gospel is *the impact of Marxist criticism*. Marx's attack upon religion, and Christianity in particular, whatever that attack's theoretical inadequacies, gains its essential purchase from its exposure of the failings of Christian social principles in practice, and many influential Christian writers have found themselves unable to dismiss the force of a passage such as the following from a paper Marx published in 1847 —

"The social principles of Christianity have now had eighteen hundred years to develop, the social principles of Christianity justified the slavery of antiquity, glorified the serfdom of the middle ages, and equally know, when necessary, how to defend the oppression of the proletariat . . . the social principles of Christianity preach the necessity of a ruling and an oppressed class, and all they have for the latter is the pious wish that the former will be charitable. The social principles of Christianity transfer the bourgeois state's adjustments of all earthly infamies to heaven, and thus justify the further existence of these infamies on earth. The social principles of Christianity declare all vile acts of the oppressors against the oppressed to be either the just punishment of original sin and other sins, or trials that the Lord in his infinite wisdom imposes on those redeemed. The social principles of Christianity preach cowardice, self-contempt, abasement, submission, humility, whereas . . . the proletariat needs its courage, its self-esteem, its pride, and its sense of independence more than its bread. The social principles of Christianity are cringing, but the proletariat is revolutionary. So much for the social principles of Christianity."

One sometimes senses a certain loss of nerve among the theologians in face of this penetrating criticism, with the result that the Church's thinkers and spokes-men have become almost ashamed to refer to the transcendent dimension at all and try instead to play the game in terms of the rules and limits established by Marxist criticism, by devoting their energies to demonstrating, as effectively as they can, the profound social and political relevance of the Christian gospel and even its power as a revolutionary message which prompts revolutionary praxis.

While neither of the thinkers we took as our sounding board earlier could be accused of a simplistic sell-out to marxism both make frequent reference to Marx in their work, and marxism has certainly been one of the primary catalysts of the South American theology of liberation.

Nor can we lightly shrug our own shoulders and pass by unaffected on the other side, for the Church's record is not blameless, and it is still only too easy for the priest and levite to hurry past, busy about the Lord's service while the body of the oppressed and suffering lies broken and bleeding in the sun.

(3) We come now to the third contributory factor to the this-worldly realignment of the Gospel, and the one where perhaps the deepest influence is exercised and which therefore needs to be probed most fully, viz. the urgent contemporary preoccupation with the problem of evil and suffering. While of course this is closely linked with the two other factors we have noted it needs serious attention in its own right. This factor is reflected in the refocussing of recent theological discussion upon the question of theodicy (that is, the problem of evil, or the reconciling of the Christian understanding of God with the evil and suffering of his world.).

Although the centuries since the enlightenment have witnessed a damaging assault upon the great metaphysical arguments to which Christians of earlier generations frequently turned to verify their claims to a knowledge of God, theology over the last century has regularly continued to employ various residual forms of metaphysics to justify its claims about God, even if reduced at times to a phenomenology of religious faith and experience. This whole tradition even in its most attenuated forms was based upon the assumption of the fundamental rationality and orderliness of the world. The modern historical experience however stemming from the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution and the shattering impact of two world wars, the horror of Naziism and Auschwitz and all the lesser Auschwitzs of more recent years have, for many moderns, called into question that framework of meaning which underlay traditional accounts of God and his relationship to the world. Thus while these traditional expositions moved from the world to God that very movement today becomes the trigger of atheism. Moltmann puts it in a question in his essay "God and Resurrection" —

"how can we believe today in a supernatural event such as the resurrection of the dead when we no longer know, feel or fear the almightiness of God, without being dishonest to our intelligence and alienated from the suffering of our contemporaries?" (*Hope and Planning*, p. 31).

The primary text for this contemporary questioning is Dostoevsky's novel, *The Brothers Karamazov* where the story is told of a poor serf child who accidentally hit his master's hunting dog with a stone while he was playing. The master has him seized and the next morning he was taken out and torn to pieces by his master's hounds before his mother's eyes. Ivan Karamazov says

"In heaven I do not want the mother to embrace the torturer who had her child torn to pieces by his dogs. She has no right to forgive him, and if that is so, what becomes of the eternal harmony of the future? I don't want harmony. I don't want it out of love I bear to mankind. I want to remain with my suffering unavenged. Besides too high a price is paid for harmony. We cannot afford to pay so much for admission. And therefore I hasten to return my ticket of admission. And indeed, if I am an honest man, I'm bound to hand it back as soon as possible. This I am doing. It is not God that I do not accept, Alyosha. I merely most respectfully return him the ticket. I accept God, understand that, but I cannot accept the world he has made."

The real issue therefore becomes not the existence of God in

some abstract theoretical sense; in face of this kind of question the existence or non-existence of God is almost a secondary issue; the issue rather is that of the justification of God in face of the world. Or, as Ulrich Simon puts it in his deeply personal account, *A Theology of Auschwitz*, it is the question of God's accountability to man. For those who operate on the basis of this kind of question patently talk of personal immortality appears diversionary and even irrelevant. The only God who is credible and the only gospel which can be embraced is a God and gospel which vindicate themselves in face of the realities of present suffering in this world.

It is this issue which I believe to be the real waterspring of the disinterest in, and even dismissal of, the question of personal immortality in recent theology; and any relevant apology for immortality must at some point address itself to it. And it is at this point that the more traditional apologetic for immortality does not really meet the need, whether as the philosophical case for man's essential dualism, or the empirical argument which appeals to the fact of *Extra-Sensory Perception* and alleged psychical telepathic communication through mediumship, or the historical approach in terms of the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus. While all these traditional arguments have their place and importance simply to go on restating them will not, in my judgment, be enough today to fulfil John Drew's intention of "removing doubt and strengthening faith upon the soul and its destiny in the interests of personal immortality". What then are we to say to those today, both inside and outside the Churches for whom the hope of life everlasting has become

A condition of life so degrading as to insult human dignity — and yet a condition of life so common as to be the lot of some 40% of the peoples of the developing countries.

a secondary, even irrelevant issue in face of the realities of human suffering in this world and this time?

We can begin our response, I believe, with two fairly obvious preliminary considerations.

First, these theologians and writers tend to have an unbalanced view of reality. While there are no doubt regrettable, even appalling, things in the world it is not all like that. There are also beautiful, joyous, and even god-like things happening and being experienced by men and women all over the world and every day. That they are largely unheralded in contrast to the avalanche of the sordid and violent which daily appears to pour through the international media is not because they are any less real a feature of our world or less significant as evidence to be weighed before man calls in question the righteousness of his Maker.

Second, the problem of suffering and the presence of evil are not recent phenomena but have been with us since the Fall.

It may be that the scale of suffering is greater today, though one wonders how that could ever be proved, except perhaps on the assumption that the balance of pain and pleasure in individual human experience tilts in the majority of lives towards pain, and therefore that the sheer increase in total human population implies a corresponding increase in total

suffering. But the vastness of the generalisations required in this kind of computation seriously undermine its validity. And further, the modern world has available to it, admittedly mainly in the developed world, the means of reducing and eliminating pain which our forefathers had no access to. One need but reflect, as C.S. Lewis suggests in one place, that Christianity emerged, grew and flourished in a world that, for example, knew nothing of cholera to recognise both that the problem of suffering can hardly claim to be a distinctly modern phenomenon, and also that Christianity has at very least a viable, working solution to it.

Now, while both these preliminary considerations are in my judgment pertinent ones, we need, in making them, to beware

For the man who suffers is the man who is already out of step with his Maker.

of simply reflecting the attitudes of the contented, well-fed, well-educated, multi-privileged world of the "North" to use the language of the Brandt Report. For those points to stick they need to be made to stick in face of the reality of the so-called "absolute poverty" of the "South", a condition of life defined by the President of the World Bank as "so limited as to prevent realisation of the potential of the genes with which one is born. A condition of life so degrading as to insult human dignity — and yet a condition of life so common as to be the lot of some 40% of the peoples of the developing countries."

Moving to the more formal level, one interesting response to the argument against immortality from human suffering is that made by John Hick. Hick's case which he describes as "The basic religious argument for immortality" is that we should go all the way with those who stress the present agony of man as being the primary datum for theological reflection, but to use precisely this fact as itself an argument for immortality. Hick draws attention to the teleological thrust of human existence, man moves forward towards the realisation of his human potential. In practice, however, this potential is realised to any extent in only a few lives. The actual situation is that captured in two sentences of Erich Fromm, "Living is a process of continuous birth. The tragedy in the life of most of us is that we die before we are fully born." Hence, argues Hick —

"if the human potential is to be fulfilled in the lives of individual men and women, those lives must be prolonged far beyond the limits of our present bodily existence. The self that is to be perfected must transcend the brief and insecure career of an animal organism. There must, in short, be some form of continued personal life after death." (*Death and Eternal Life*, p. 156)

The attraction of this argument is immediately apparent. It carries the battle into the opposing camp by claiming that precisely the issues raised by these opponents of personal immortality in fact point directly to it. Nor is this approach without some value — and no full theodicy would wish to ignore it, however, Hick's case is not without its difficulties which quickly persuade us that any attempt to rehabilitate the notion of immortality and to defend an immortality-affirming gospel needs to attempt a more radical criticism. For one thing Hick's case has not persuaded in practice. No amount of promise of a better and fuller realisation of the human

potential in another life will suffice for those for whom the present reality appears such a terrible denial of any kind of purpose, and of any notion that man was created for some form of self-realisation within a universal order, or effectively suppress the sentiments of Stendahl "the only excuse for God would be for him not to exist." Putting it another way, Hick's case appears to leave too much for the future. The promise of self-fulfilment however genuine is drowned out by the seemingly interminable rumble of the rail trucks into Auschwitz to disgorge their pathetic human freight before they are fed like rats in their millions to the gas ovens; it is obliterated from hearing by the wail of the oppressed and the starving from every corner of the globe.

But Hick's argument has another weakness, and it is at this point that we can begin to develop our case for the rehabilitation of personal immortality and the reaffirmation of the God-sealed union of immortality and the gospel. This weakness concerns Hick's willingness to accept the view of the world presented by these critics of immortality, and in particular his unwillingness to bring to bear a *moral* evaluation of the human condition. The problem of man by Hick's view is essentially that of a frustrated potential, and his death is simply a physiological fact, the point at which the psycho-physical nature of man reaches a condition in which its physical element (the body) can no longer maintain its precarious hold within its environment and collapses in death. But it is this whole a-moral framework of interpretation which has its roots back in enlightenment naturalism, which I believe needs to be called into question, and indeed until it is there is no possibility of launching an adequate apologetic for personal immortality in the face of this particular cultural and theological form of its denial.

We move then to the heart of this lecture, and from what has inevitably been the criticism and evaluation of other viewpoints, to the exposition of what I judge to be the essential Christian and Biblical case for immortality and its intrinsic place in the glorious gospel of the blessed God which is committed still to our trust. The essence of the case lies in the recognition of the *primacy of the moral dimension*. Only when reality is understood in fundamentally moral terms can we attain a true awareness of the meaning of existence and of death in particular.

Now in fact there is a clear pointer in this direction given in the very protest movement itself. For what sustains their protest is what can only be described as a moral indignation at the character of existence. Hence, for all that Dostoevsky's Ivan may dismiss any notion of an "order" in things, some vision or recognition of, and respect for, order, is the necessary assumption of the protest he lodges against a world where abominable wickedness is possible. Ulrich Simon admits the same in his discussion of the implication of Auschwitz. "The dust of Auschwitz (the dust that is of its innumerable nameless dead) posits the Law . . . the legacy of Auschwitz is a constant warning against relativity and tolerant judgments in matters of human conduct. It asserts the unpopular division into right and wrong, sheep and goats, actions to be approved and actions to be condemned". (p. 96) And Camus make a similar concession in some provocative words in *The Rebel* —

"From the moment that man subjects God to a moral judgment he kills him. But what becomes of the basis of morality then? Man denies God in the name of righteousness, but can he understand the idea of righteousness without the idea of God?"

Even Karl Marx's assault upon organised religion is, as Reinhold Niebuhr pointed out many years ago —

"sustained by a withering scorn which only the presupposition of moral responsibility could justify" (*An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p. 92).

All of which leads Moltmann to speak perceptively of a "piety of unbelief".

Thus the entire force of this protest against "otherworldliness" (for our purposes, personal immortality as a significant and legitimate religious concern) in the name of a concern for, and a solidarity with, the suffering of this present world, turns in the end on the fulcrum of the recognition of the sovereignty of the moral law. In other words, this whole modern philosophical and theological vogue is radically parasitic upon a vision of order and righteousness which has been substantially derived and nourished from the revelation of the God of righteousness and truth whom we meet in the pages of the Bible.

However, we cannot rest at this point, for the moment we admit the reality of the moral law as a reflection of the nature of existence, and of the God whose nature that law expresses, we are forced to rethink and revise our whole interpretation of the predicament of man. For man is not now merely the pitiable victim of his inhospitable environment, and his suffering is not an arbitrary brute fact which breaks uninvited into his dreaming innocence. For the man who suffers is the man who is already out of step with his Maker. According to Scripture God made man very good, to live before Him in righteousness and bliss; to find himself and his fulfilment in his obedience, worship and service of his God. But tragically, appallingly, man has refused to be cast in that role. He has risen up against God, and in his folly identified with the enemy of God in resistance of and opposition to God; all of which Genesis 2 and 3 makes unambiguously plain. But man is not merely thereby "out of step" with God, basically moving in the right direction though liable from time to time to put his foot in it, or at least in the wrong place. Rather he is in headlong flight in the opposite direction, swept willingly along on the tide of cosmic iniquity, a tide which must one day break and shatter upon the rock of God's unchangeable righteousness. That is the true character of the human predicament and the final context of all man's life, and not least his suffering. It is true of course, and Scripture itself freely concedes it, that individual suffering may at times, from the fragmentary perspective of this mortal life, seem to exceed the degree of culpability in the human objects of the

"It is appointed to all men once to die", no Biblical statement is more secure from challenge.

suffering; and conversely, from the fragmentary perspective of this mortal life, the perpetrators of suffering on occasion appear to evade proper judgment. But that there is an intrinsic link between our sin and our suffering, our pride and our pain, our antagonisms and our agonies, that for the Bible is beyond dispute. Putting this another way, Auschwitz speaks not merely of God's permission but of man's perversity; it is evidence every bit as much of the abomination of man as of any alleged absence of God. The recognition of this moral perspective also brings into the open the pride, the *hubris* which tries to mask itself behind the call upon God to justify himself and which speaks of God's accountability to man. "Let God be God and every man a liar". Here man stands exposed not as the innocent, righteous sufferer subjected to the fearful and

arbitrary assaults of an uncaring and even immoral heaven — rather he is seen for what he is, the rebel struggling against the claim of his Rightful Lord and Maker, and his purpose of love which summons man even in his rebellion and guilt to turn to Him and find in taking his place as God's free servant and loving worshipper, his own deepest fulfilment and surpassing bliss and joy.

This moral dimension and its implications for interpretation is focussed most sharply however when we turn again directly to the fact which supremely concerns us in this Lectureship, the fact of death, this indubitable universal reality. "It is appointed to all men once to die", no Biblical statement is more secure from challenge. But what is death? Paul puts it succinctly, "Death is the wages paid by sin". That is the first thing which must be said; that is where we need to begin. In other words death is an essentially *moral* reality. It is never a merely physiological event, it is value-laden. In death man does not merely encounter his physical limitations or the threatening forces of his environment. In death he encounters God. In death the fundamental moral situation of man is exposed and laid bare. In death man is seen for what he is "Man *coram Deo*", man before God.

For Scripture, and the New Testament in particular, death is never a neutral, a-moral phenomenon, a natural even relatively friendly fate. Such a view is not only conspicuous by its absence

It is the witness to the claim upon man made by God and man's resistance of that claim. In his death man's sin becomes open and naked as the truth of his life.

but basically alien. The New Testament establishes an unambiguous association of death with sin and guilt. "Death is the wages paid by sin" (Rom. 6:23), "sin leads to death" (Rom. 6:26), "sin results in death" (6:21), it is the inevitable result of "living according to the sinful nature" (8:13). Sin is "the sting of death" (1 Cor. 15:56); death is the fruit produced by sin (7:5). Sin is, in James' vivid picture, the womb in which death is conceived and from which it emerges to haunt and finally slay man (Jas. 1:15). This line of teaching of course simply carries forward the prophetic witness of Jeremiah and Ezekiel "that everyone will die for his own sin", and reaches behind that to the beginning in Genesis 2 and 3 where God's prohibition of Adam (2:17) carried the fatal warning "when you eat of it you will surely die". Thus "sin entered the world and death through sin", and in this way death came to all men because all sinned. (Rom. 5:12). Hence death came through a man (1 Cor. 15:25), and "sin reigned in death" (Rom. 6:21; cf. Heb. 2:14; Luke 1:79; Rom 7:29; 8:24; 1 John 2:9). And this is in essential harmony with the teaching of Jesus in the Fourth gospel, where to believe in Him is also to pass from death to life (5:24; 8:51; 11:25), and with Jesus' observation recorded in Matthew 8:22 "let the dead bury their dead". It is not accidental that the Father of the prodigal can affirm "this my son was dead".

For the Bible then, death is a profoundly moral reality. It is the

witness to the claim upon man made by God and man's resistance of that claim. In his death man's sin becomes open and naked as the truth of his life. Death is therefore to use Karl Rahner's vivid phrase, "guilt made visible", or in James Denney's words, "the sacrament of sin".

And the terror of death is disclosed here, for in death we see ourselves as we are before God — as those who have lived throughout our allotted time in rebellion against him and in guilt before him, in rejection of his claim upon us and in repeated disobedience to his good will. Here in our death all the illusions are stripped away, all the pathetic rags and tatters with which we seek in life to cover ourselves from our exposure to that awful gaze, all are here torn aside and blown away, the sham religiosity, the so-called Christian service, the frantic philanthropic activity, the prayers and cheery smiles, the devotions and sacrifices, the public displays and the private gestures . . . all fall away, swept aside and scattered to the winds by the tempest of divine judgment that falls upon us in death, "the soul that sins . . . it must die".

For this is the meaning of death — the judgment of God; and any other description is the merest tinkering with externals. Death is not a natural phenomenon in man which allows us to shrug our shoulders and mutter our "ah well, we can't last for ever", for in truth man was created to do just that, he was destined for immortality, and as immortals made in the divine image we shall and must last forever. And in this light we see death for what it is, as the enemy, the intruder, the tumbrel of the evil one bearing us away. But even in this the deepest and darkest thing is not said; for the true terror of death is not that in it we escape from God, but precisely that in it we meet Him.

"Death", says Karl Barth, "as it meets us, can only be understood as a sign of God's judgment. For when it meets us, as it undoubtedly does, it meets us as sinful and guilty men with whom God cannot finally do anything but whom he can only regret having made. For man has failed as his creature. He has not used the freedom in which he was privileged to exist before God. He has squandered it away in the most incredible manner. He can hope for nothing better than to be hewn down and cast into the fire." (*Church Dogmatics*, III/2, 597).

That is the meaning of death — of your death and mine. It is God's act of judgment which I have brought down upon my own ears by my identification in the whole tenor of my life as well as in countless myriads of specific acts with that foul malignant dimension of resistance and antipathy to God which Scripture refers to as the demonic, the anti-kingdom of bottomless iniquity.

Nor however is death the exhausting of the judgment. It is rather its foretaste and prelude. "It is appointed unto all men once to die, and after this comes judgment (Heb. 9 vs. 28). Our present death is the foretaste of the terrors of the second death (Revelation 21), for every one must appear before the judgment seat of Christ to give account; that judgment seat where books are to be opened and secrets uncovered and the thoughts of every heart revealed. (2 Cor. 5 vs. 10; Rev. 20 vs. 12; Rom. 14 vs. 12).

And no view of death which ignores or obscures this further dimension, which fails that is, to see it as judgment in anticipation of final judgment, can be accommodated to the teaching of Scripture as a whole, to say nothing of the plain teaching of Jesus himself. Such interpretation is moreover out of step with the character of the God whom both written and incarnate Words make manifest. For there is that in God which

not only takes account of our sinning but which resists it and which moves in awful wrath against its foul momentum, a wrath which our death anticipates but does not exhaust. "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God".

From this Biblical perspective therefore, to deny human survival is in effect to dismiss the whole revelation of Godhead given in Scripture and revealed in Jesus, and to replace it with an inevitably mythical, idolatrous projection born and conceived out of our fallen and fragmented desires.

But further, here we see why the hope of a blessed immortality is so basic and necessary an element in the Christian gospel, for the truest and deepest problem of man is the problem of God, the true God, the living God, whose "wrath is revealed from heaven against all the ungodliness and unrighteousness of men", a wrath encountered and manifest in human mortality. And this problem dwarfs and drowns all others and renders the problems of his suffering, whether physical, emotional, political or social for all their reality and significance as essentially secondary. And therefore no message can even begin to be genuine "good news", true "gospel" except as it conveys an answer and declares a solution to this most fearful of predicaments. And it is here where Moltmann and Gutierrez and all their variously related contemporary cousins stand exposed in their inadequacy. For the human need which they address, real enough as it is, is as nothing compared with the need of man in guilt before God. They are silent and tongue-tied just at the point where silence is betrayal. They have no word of hope just at the point where hope must be given if there is to be any ultimate hope at all. "Good news" can only be good news if it can sustain its claim to be such in face of God's holy wrath against our sin; and since that wrath is manifest in our death for a gospel to be such it must hold out to us as a central and basic element of its message the overcoming of death and the promise of immortality.

Only therefore when we hear of the destroying of death and only when we hear of the bringing of immortality to light, then and only then do we hear true gospel, genuine, solid, and authentic "good news" . . . but blessed be God, that we have heard, from the lips of God himself into whose hands we fall helpless in our dying . . . and we hear it still, over the mountains of our guilt and shame, across the dark, dread valleys of our sin . . . the voice, the Word of God, the great glad tidings of mercy, hope and life immortal gathered in a name, Emmanuel, God with us, Jesus Christ the Lord. "For unto us a boy is born, unto us a Son is given . . . glory, glory to God in the highest." It breaks upon us again in all its wonder, the eternal love and everlasting grace of the Almighty — Jesus has come, come to live among us, to share our life under the shadow of judgment, to face our temptations in all their malignance, to acknowledge the good claim of the law, to enter into solidarity with us in all our suffering and pain . . . but all in order that he might at the last seize our cursed and suffering existence under judgment and raise it again to that life of holiness and joy from which it tumbled down at the beginning. And that meant death. It meant bearing in our place the divine punishment due us for our disobedience (Rom. 5 vs. 9); it meant taking upon his holy heart the divine wrath which burns against our unholiness (Rom. 3 vs. 25; Gal 3 vs. 13); it meant grappling to the death with all the enslaving powers of wickedness which hold us in bondage (Col. 2 vs. 12; Heb 4 vs. 12).

There in the darkness of Calvary shut in with the Father, God with God, he screamed out in his agony "My God, my God why hast thou forsaken me" and that which had lain upon the heart of God from all eternity became real in the darkness of Golgotha. And the judgment of Godhead upon our sin and its implications was borne in his own being as the knife of

judgment was plunged deep into his own holy heart . . . and he died . . . our death . . . in our place, for us, "He died, the just for the unjust". "He made him to be sin for us, he who knew no sin", "The Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me." Oh the wonder of it —

"Well might the sun in darkness hide
And shut its glories in
When God the mighty Maker died
For man, the creature's sin".

But in that death, our need is met, our sin dealt with, God's wrath is borne, and our estrangement healed. And in that death our death is transformed. Not as by an act of sheer power expressed in the resurrection. That would be to revert once again to a merely non-moral and purely phenomenal understanding of our situation and our death. Death we recall is not the expression of human finitude but of human folly; not of our weakness but of our wickedness; it is sin's wages, sin's offspring, sin's sting. Our need is not an act of power but an act of propitiation, not the overwhelming of death but its overcoming by an act which meets the moral conditions under which death has won its power over us. The resurrection of Jesus is therefore not, as so many of the main New Testament passages make clear, the true basis of our hope of a glorious immortality. In itself the resurrection as an event does no more than demonstrate the possibility of life after death in some form. The true epi-centre of that glorious hope, which has swung wide forever the gates of everlasting life to all believers, is the cross, where sin was overcome and with it the divine judgment which is the reason for our dying. The resurrection is therefore in essence the declaration, the public proclamation of the victory of Calvary, the manifestation that Christ has triumphed gloriously in the hell of Golgotha, that sin's reign is broken, its condemnation borne away, and so death's power is forevermore destroyed.

And this is precisely the insight expressed in the great New Testament doctrine of our union with Christ. "I have been crucified with Christ", "we died with him", made one with him in his death". Hence for all who believe, who have in the surrender of faith identified with Christ in his death, an identification which baptism focusses (Rom. 6), death has already been met and mastered and the grave lies behind us. And so are fulfilled the staggering words of Jesus "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die

That is of course why immortality belongs so fundamentally to the gospel and why a message which ignores or rejects it is in fact no gospel at all.

yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die" (Jn. 11:35). And if there is still dying to be done, if our sin appears still to extort that final payment from us — it is no longer death in the terrible sense of divine judgment, the death in sin — It is rather the moment in which the child of God moves from one experienced level of his relationship to his Heavenly Father to another; a transition point in the ongoing existence of those who have died with Christ and are now one with him in his endless and indestructible life. A truth surely rarely better expressed than in the exultant words of Kohlbrugge —

"When I die — I do not die anymore, however — and someone finds my skull, let this skull still preach to him and say; 'I have no eyes, nevertheless I see Him; I have neither brain nor mind nevertheless I comprehend Him; though I have no lips, I kiss Him; I have no tongue yet I sing praise to Him with all who call upon His name. I am a hard skull, yet I am wholly softened and melted in His love; I lie here exposed on God's acre, yet I am there in paradise! All suffering is forgotten! His great love has done this for us, when for us He carried His cross and went out to Golgotha'."

And it is here, I judge, that we confront the supreme argument for our personal immortality, and the argument for it which more than any other has sustained the people of God across the centuries, the recognition of the moral reality of death as the judgment of God, and the fact of Christ's dealing with that judgment by making it his own on the cross, and thereby opening the gates of eternal life to all believers.

That is of course why immortality belongs so fundamentally to the gospel and why a message which ignores or rejects it is in fact no gospel at all. Because it is in dealing with death that Christ gives token to his conquering of sin and his bearing of that divine judgment which is our greatest threat and the expression of our profoundest human predicament. And finally, — to believe such things does not render us oblivious to the cry of the wretched, or the plight of the suffering — how could it? — for it is precisely *this gospel* of immortality which is the supreme demonstration conceivable of the justice and holiness of God, of his everlasting passion for righteousness, and therefore the most massive confirmation of the validity of the struggle for a freer, juster, more compassionate, God-reflecting, and therefore God-honouring human society. And further, it is just this union of immortality and gospel which is the deepest vindication of the dignity and significance of man within God's world, and hence of the supreme value of the least privileged and most exploited man or woman or child on God's earth — as well as that of the most debased and evil exploiter . . . and which is creative, as nothing else could be, of that spirit of uncalculating, daring, self-sacrifice without which the pain and suffering of this broken world can never begin to be faced, let alone healed.

And now finally, it is impossible merely to lecture on Immortality; for in handling such a theme I am faced inescapably with Richard Baxter's conviction, that I am myself a dying man addressing dying men and women. And so I need to ask as I close, what does all this mean for me, or for you, on the day we come to die — whether death meets us in a sudden, paralysing blaze of pain or in a long, slow dying into a drug-hazed unconsciousness — what does it mean when for you, for me, when the moment comes, as it surely must, when the dearly loved faces recede and the sights and sounds of the world which has been our life through all our years grow finally dim, and we fall helpless into the hands of God . . . what does it mean for then? It means this — that

"On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross
The emblem of suffering and shame;
And I love that old Cross where the dearest and best
For a world of lost sinners was slain.

So I'll cherish the old rugged Cross,
Till my trophies at last I lay down;
I will cling to the old rugged Cross,
And exchange it some day for a crown."

Blessed be God, who has "brought life and immortality to light through the gospel!"