
Living Under Vacant Skies

BY A . J . CONYERS

Losing a sense of heaven “over us” is more than a shift in cosmological theory; it has to do with the way we live. A world without a vision of the transcendent is a world of struggles without victory and of sacrifice without purpose. To understand this is to understand in a new way the meaning of “gospel” and the task of the church.

Occasionally someone calls attention to the incredible gap between what the church says it believes and what it actually proclaims with any passionate intensity. Early in the last century Scottish theologian John Baillie remarked upon the infrequency of preaching that “dwelt on the joys of the heavenly rest with anything like the old ardent love and impatient longing, or [spoke] of the world that now is as a place of sojourn or pilgrimage.”¹ More recently, an article on death in *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology*, matter-of-factly asserts, “neither the mediaeval emphasis on fear of death nor the confident hopes of the early Christians are much in evidence today.” The writer continues, “Though few . . . explicitly repudiate belief in a future life, the virtual absence of references to it in modern hymns, prayers, and popular apologetic indicates how little part it plays in the contemporary Christian consciousness.”²

ST. GEORGE’S CHURCHYARD—THEN AND NOW

Such a change of sentiment came home to me once as my family and I were enjoying a tour of Old Dorchester, a long-abandoned colonial village in South Carolina. We were there along with an assorted crowd of Brownies, Cub Scouts, visitors from out of state, and at least one public school teacher—a typical group of Americans—listening to the lecture of a young local historian.

As we walked among the antique remains of Old Dorchester, the histo-

rian “re-created” the town in our imaginations, taking us out onto the parade grounds and marketplace, where colonial militia met and drilled, and the merchants, buyers, and craftsmen mingled. The church at the center of town is now nothing more than a brick tower, forty feet high, in the midst of some woods—the ruins appearing much as they did when they were depicted on the cover of an 1875 issue of *Harpers*. We followed the historian down the grassy nave of the church, out into the churchyard, through the arched door still framed by the ancient brick tower. Outside we paused in a circle around a flat tombstone marking the grave of James Postell. The marble stone bore scars on its rounded edges, testimony of the time British soldiers used it as a chopping block while garrisoned there.

The historian pulled a bit of paper out of his pocket. “Imagine,” he said, “that we were there when James Postell was buried. As they lowered him into the ground, these are the words we would have heard from the 1768 *Book of Common Prayer*.” In grave tones, and with expansive gestures of mock seriousness, he began: “Man that is born of a woman, hath but a short time to live.” The young man adjusted his wire-rimmed glasses, cleared his throat and went on: “In the midst of life we are in death; of whom may we seek for succor, but of Thee, O Lord, who for our sins are justly displeased?” Waving a hand out to the crowd and holding up the bit of paper in the other, he went on, with thunder in his voice now: “Thou knowest, Lord, the secrets of our hearts; shut not thy merciful ears to our prayers; but spare us . . . suffer us not at our last hour for many pains of death to fall from thee.”

And then he winked.

Why did he wink? It was because he knew very well that he shared a secret with us—all of us, whether from Ohio or the Carolinas, or Timbuktu. James Postell (may he rest in peace) would never in this world understand, but we did. The secret that we shared is simply that we no longer take “otherworldly” sentiments seriously. The brevity of life, the just judgment of present sinful life, and the fears lest we jeopardize an eternal state in the enjoyment of a temporal existence—all these topics are simply not a part of common polite, serious conversation. We understand the wink and the mock seriousness because we sense the world differently than did the contemporaries of James Postell.

However, we also recognize that this passage from the 1768 *Book of Common Prayer* was a very strong statement; we are somewhat disconcerted by it, even if we don’t know why. Even if we have largely lost those expressions, we sense that the church once had brought something altogether new into the world with its attitude toward life, death, and resurrection. We are the ones who have turned back to older habits of thought, as old as humankind. It is these ancient habits of mind and imagination, not our modernity, which are offended. But the very fact that we

almost all agree to be offended (or more often, amused) by these older expressions of faith shows how far we have moved from that view of life even in the church.

WEDDED BLISS AND THE ETERNAL HOPE

Contemporary wedding ceremonies illustrate this change as well. Once a couple from San Antonio, Ben and Cheryl, stood before me to take vows of holy matrimony. Much earlier we had talked about the ceremony, the style and arrangements, and the *words*. Ben and Cheryl were convinced that the older ceremonies had much more of a “weighty” and important sound to them.

We looked at the words of the traditional English-language ceremony:

Dearly beloved: We are gathered together here in the sight of God and in the face of this company [for an event that is not to be taken lightly, but entered into] reverently, discreetly, advisedly, and in the fear of God.

We also looked at an “updated” version. The differences, at first, were subtle and hardly objectionable, except perhaps for the breezier tone:

Dear Friends, we are here assembled in the presence of God to unite A ___ (groom’s name) and B ___ (bride’s name) in marriage. The Bible teaches that it is to be a permanent relationship of one man and one woman freely and totally committed to each other as companions for life.

That last statement is perhaps not too bad, notwithstanding the fact that monogamy is actually difficult to establish on purely biblical grounds and that “total commitment” may imply a kind of idolatry that the Bible certainly does not counsel. Nonetheless, it calls for the exclusive human commitment of the marriage couple and, in that, it is faithful to the intention of the Bible.

What is missing is undoubtedly the spirit of ultimate gravity that surrounds the older version, the feeling that these proceedings are not simply for the moment but are anchored in eternity and that something or someone stands in judgment of every earthly event, especially this occasion. The wedding thereby, on the one hand, is lifted up above the common grind, or else, on the other hand, joins the clutter of our everyday existence, with neither much fear nor much joy to distinguish it.

We liked the sound of this next passage:

I require and charge you both, as ye will answer in the dreadful Day of Judgment, when the secrets of all hearts shall be disclosed, that if either of you knows any impediment why ye may not be lawfully joined together, ye do now confess it.

I have performed a hundred or so weddings in the course of nearly thirty years of ministry, and never once have these words ended the ceremony, even though that is what they clearly threaten. But there is something here very essential to everything that is going on in a wedding: it reminds us all that these words are not just for the moment, but that things spoken now are remembered at the Judgment Seat of God, and that human life and decisions loom greater than we ever thought. The fleeting moment is deceptive; these events are anchored in eternity.

Now, turning to our modern version, we read the parallel:

Marriage is a companionship which involves mutual commitment and responsibility. You will share alike in the responsibilities and the joys of life. When companions share a sorrow the sorrow is halved, and when they share a joy the joy is doubled.

The difference between these two statements is the difference between Mt. Sinai and Madison Avenue, or the difference between the “Ancient of Days” and “Days of Our Lives.” One speaks of immense ancient columns and steeples, and the other of numerous diplomas hung on the wall behind a psychiatrist’s couch.

Another more recent version runs as follows: “I require and charge you both, as you hope for joy and peace in the marriage state” The words, notice well, “as you hope for joy and peace in the marriage state” are precisely substituted in this ceremony for the words “as ye will answer in the dreadful Day of Judgment.” This parallel is extremely interesting. We would have to see almost immediately that whoever wrote this paraphrase found it either more tasteful or more convincing to refer to rewards in terms of this life and specifically excised the reference to final judgment.

Another difference between the older and the more contemporary versions of the wedding vows regards the relative practicability of the two. In the older version we find vows that are simple, few, and well defined: “Wilt thou have this woman to be thy wedded wife, to live together after God’s ordinance, in the holy estate of matrimony?” Turning to the requirements of the newer soul-care version, in contrast, we find them not only difficult to define, but probably utterly impossible to keep: “Will you commit yourself to her happiness and self-fulfillment as a person, and to her usefulness in God’s kingdom?” These last words help us to discover the real paradox of our situation. The more intently we focus on our present life (denying, by implication, the transcendent view of life) the more we set ourselves increasingly impossible tasks. A couple can, after all, live together if they have sworn to do so; and the more they feel their obligation, the more likely they will. But to commit oneself to the happiness and self-fulfillment of another (for all its this-worldly sound) is probably to set oneself a godlike agenda for life. One can be faithful to a spouse in terms

of sexual fidelity; millions of people have, in spite of the fact that, in this, many have failed. One can stand by a spouse in illness, disappointment, poverty, and grief; millions do it, many of them with admirable courage. And even with the high rate of divorce there are still many more who stay married “till death us do part.” All of these promises are well within the range of human possibility.

But when husbands and wives set for themselves the goal of making each other happy, or when one demands of the other that he or she be made happy by this marriage, then disappointment, resentment, frustration, and anger are almost inevitable. It follows that if one is not happy, he or she might well suspect that something is wrong with the marriage. After all, when marriage vows are stripped of their connection with an “eternal destiny” that has become difficult for modern sentiment to embrace, then it becomes a *quid pro quo* contract, a vow given now in view of the happiness promised in the course of time. Marriage is therefore no longer a promise, the issue of which is really decided in eternity. Instead, it is instituted for the purpose of making us happy, loved, fulfilled, and significant human beings in this present life.

HEAVEN AND THE MODERN CHURCH

If the church’s transcendent vision is weakened and diluted, as these examples indicate, then what we are seeing here is more than a doctrinal miscalculation or a temporary neglect that now needs to be addressed. Instead, it is a failure that points toward an essential resistance within the church to the very heart of its message.

In two fundamental teachings of Christianity, the teaching on creation and the doctrine of reconciliation, we can see why a transcendent vision, a certain longing for heaven, is essential to the life of the church.

Creation is a good gift. In much of pagan mythology creation is something wrested out of a primal chaos. The resulting order was sometimes good and sometimes tainted with a curse, the curse being experienced in the various problems attendant to liv-

ing in the world. For instance, in early Greek myths about creation, sexuality is seen as a curse; it is a mythic explanation of the problems arising because there are two different sexes in humanity. Zeus blighted human beings by dividing them in two, thus weakening their threat to the gods. In other words, the evil that occurs in the world is “in the system.”

In the biblical story of creation, God created all things “very good”

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(Genesis 1:31). Evil is not explained by creation itself, but by the misuse and disorder of creation in the fall of Adam and Eve. Therefore, everything that has come from God is very good, just as God himself is good and has every good intention toward his creation. The Fall never entirely destroys that good; for it is clear that life still centers in that which is given by God.

Now this brings us to the dualism of biblical cosmology. The Bible usually depicts creation as “the heavens and the earth” or “heaven and earth.”

The Bible depicts creation as “heaven and earth.” “Heaven” refers to the natural appearance of the heavens, but bears more than this literal meaning. It is that part of creation in which God alone exercises dominion, and which we do not know intimately until we are at last fully reconciled to God.

In part this refers to the natural appearance of the heavens (or the sun, moon, and stars—all that is above us) and the earth (all that is below us). But these expressions bear more than this literal and direct meaning.

“Earth” is that part of creation that is within our power and under human dominion. “Heaven” is that part of creation in which God alone exercises

dominion, and which we do not know intimately until we are at last fully reconciled to God. Therefore, heaven is the part of creation that we can only receive, as opposed to that which we partially control, employ, and manipulate. It is the realm of grace, for it comes entirely as God’s gift and represents the fullness of all gifts. Among other things, heaven represents an aspect of reality that we can only know and respond to in terms of adoration; we can in no sense possess it. Therefore our response to things of this earth is properly thanksgiving, and our response to the matters of heaven, praise.

This dualism of heaven and earth tells us two important things about the way we relate to creation. The first is that human action is response to creation, and it does not constitute reality. (We cannot really “become as gods.”) We might imagine that the whole cosmos responds to our wills, but in saner hours we know that is not the case.

Even if we affect a small part of the earth, our actions are fraught with all kinds of ambiguity. Our intentional efforts to do a good thing, for instance, always invite the possibility of unintended evil. We work hard to enrich human life and, destroying the environment, threaten the possibility of life itself. We give to the poor and undermine their self-reliance. We make a better product and destroy our neighbors’ livelihood. We are

everywhere faced with the sobering realization that we cannot create the world, or even re-create it; we can only respond to what God has given.

Biblical cosmology relates that fact to us on a cosmic scale. If even the visible creation stands always somewhat aloof from our exertions to make it bend to our wills, then how much more does that part of creation which lies beyond our senses. Creation includes that which responds to the will of God alone. And that is called "heaven."

The second important insight that comes from this realization of heaven is that the world does not find its purpose in itself. It is, in Jürgen Moltmann's term, "eccentric" because it centers outside of itself; it centers in God and thus finds reality in *relationship*. This insight applies to more than cosmology. It applies to everything; all things find their reality in God, not because they are illusory, but because they are created in relationship. In God "we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). Reality is relationship. John said it this way: "God is love" (1 John 4:8).

Salvation comes by grace. Now we can see that a world closed in upon itself and dependent on nothing outside itself (which is, in short, a non-transcendent world), must understand existence altogether differently from a world believing strongly in a transcendent order. For a world that is open to the mystery of heaven is, first of all, a world that believes in the possibility of grace. It is true that the confidence of a non-transcendent world comes from its self-reliance, but so does its despair. Curiously, a world that believes it is always subject to the mystery of heaven has less to say about self-reliance but shows decidedly more confidence. It is a world predisposed to expect help.

Children instinctively expect grace; so children's stories often center on the gift that makes the ugly duckling a swan, the unwanted stepdaughter a princess, and the department-store Santa turn out to be real. Near disasters turn inside out and prove the triumph of good over evil. J. R. R. Tolkien called that fictional device "eucatastrophe," a good catastrophe. Grace in a child's story and grace in the real-life triumph over disaster, call forth the same sentiment, that life is overshadowed by a benevolent mystery.

As adults grow in their strength over the world, they lose that sense of grace that is so keenly felt by children. Children at first earn nothing and are given everything. Gradually they learn that their environment must be mastered, that elements of life must be earned; at some point it will be called "making a living." It's important for them to learn that lesson, for that is being "responsible." It is a *response* to the gift of life.

At the same time it is natural that they should eventually lose sight of how much they are dependent on what is simply given, on what they can in no sense earn. They focus on "making a living" and forget that the object of making a living is life and that life is never earned; it is only given.

Jesus said "Unless you change and become like little children, you will

never enter the kingdom of heaven.” The meaning of these words becomes clear when we see that our immediate (childlike) perception of life as grace is, at every turn, submerged by our growing power over the world. As children we receive the world; as adults our focus narrows to that which we have constructed by our own effort. The huge gift is forgotten, while our minuscule response becomes a source of obsession, pride, anxiety, envy, guilt, and fear.

Our experience of the world moves us toward one or the other of opposing attitudes. Either life is a gift or it is a product of my will. The more we move toward that latter expression of life, the more the absolute necessity of grace eludes us. The world shrinks and becomes only a complex of responses to ourselves. We necessarily live between these polar attitudes, with always the distinct danger that we will lose sight of the former in pursuit of the latter.

THE EARTH'S "DARKLING PLAIN"

Here we can begin to see why the loss of a sense of heaven “over us” is more than a shift in cosmological theory, or in the way we picture the world in our minds.⁴ Instead it has to do with the way we live in the light of heaven. During a solar eclipse, which I have witnessed twice, the earliest noticeable effect, long before total eclipse, is that the whole atmosphere is shrouded in an eerily dimming light. I think we witness a similar effect in the loss of a sense of transcendence, though our souls, like our eyes, accommodate the darkness at first too easily.

Long before the present stage of eclipse, the nineteenth-century poet Matthew Arnold thought of the retreating realm of faith as he listened to the ebb and flow of waves upon Dover Beach. There was a time, his verse suggests, when the “sea of Faith” was at high tide casting a bright mantle over all existence; but now one only hears “its melancholy, long withdrawing roar” and the shores of the earth are left “naked shingles.” The result is the loss of moral confidence in a world ruled by ultimate good and illuminated by grace:

And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.⁵

Arnold intuitively caught the essence of a world left without a vision of the transcendent: a world of struggles without victory and of sacrifice without purpose. To understand this is also to understand in a new way the meaning of *gospel*, and the task of the church.⁶

NOTES

1 John Baillie, *And the Life Everlasting* (Oxford University Press, 1936), 15.

2 Paul Badham, "Death," in *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology*, edited by Alan Richardson and John Bowden (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1983), 146.

3 This passage, originally from the *Alabama Book of Legal Forms*, is used widely because of its inclusion in J. R. Hobbs, *The Pastor's Manual* (Broadman Press, 1934), one of the most popular Baptist manuals in this century, having gone through thirty-six printings by 1970 and today still in print.

4 I hope it is apparent that the term "over us" is not intended in any astrophysical sense. I may as well say "outside," or "inside," if spatial relation were the only important point conveyed in the idea of a heaven over us. But if we mean by heaven a reality that supersedes and is exalted above every temporal thing, that creates a hierarchy of value in the world that is more than a succession to this life (else "outside" would do as well), and that is also something different from the world (else "inside" would be preferable), then the traditional language is not easily replaced. It is a reality "over us" in that it is the greater reality, the ultimate value, the final purpose, and the consummation of all things.

5 Matthew Arnold, *Dover Beach*.

6 This article is borrowed, in somewhat altered form, from my book, *The Eclipse of Heaven* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine Press, 1999). I thank the publisher for permission to use this material.



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