

The Intermediate State

by Olin Alfred Curtis

The intermediate state is a time of adjustment and preparation for the new life in the resurrection, where the person's mental life is cleared up, and their moral meaning is revealed.

Scripture: Romans 14:12, 1 Corinthians 13:12, 2 Corinthians 5:8, Philippians 1:23, 1 Thessalonians 4:14

Topics: "Intermediate State", "Eternal Life"

Description

Olin Alfred Curtis preaches about the profound significance of the intermediate state between death and resurrection, emphasizing the deep spiritual life and subjective kingdom experienced by the departed souls. He discusses the importance of adjusting mental life to moral meaning, the formal adjustment to Jesus Christ, and the special case of infant salvation in the intermediate state. Curtis highlights the preparation in the intermediate state for the new race of the Redeemed, focusing on the features of revelation, perfect introspection, and companionship with Christ as essential aspects of this period.

Transcript

*Possunt etiam spiritus mortuorum aliqua quae hic agunter quae necessarium est eos nosse, et quos necessarium est ea nosse, non solum praeterita vel praesentia, verum etiam futura Spiritu Dei revelante cogroscere.

-- Saint Augustine, De Cura pro Mortuis gerenda, xv.

Sometimes I think that those we've lost,

Safe lying on th' Eternal Breast,

Can hear no sounds from earth that mar

The perfect sweetness of their rest;

But when one thought of holy love

Is stirred in hearts they love below,

Through some fine waves of ambient air,

They feel, they see it, and they know.

As rays unseen -- abysmal light -
Are caught by films of silver salt
When these are set to watch by night
The wheelings of the starry vault, -
So may the souls that live and dwell
In one great Soul, the Fount of all,
Feel faintest tremblings in the sphere
On which such footsteps gently fall.
No evil seen, no murmurs heard
No fear of sin, or coming loss,
They wait in light, imperfect yet,
The final triumphs of the Cross.
-- The Duke of Argyll, Our Dead -

Their kingdom is not one of works and deeds, for they no longer possess the conditions upon which works and deeds are possible. Nevertheless, they live a deep spiritual life; for the kingdom of the dead is a kingdom of subjectivity, a kingdom of calm thought and self-fathoming, a kingdom of remembrance in the full sense of the word, in such a sense, I mean, that the soul now enters into its own inmost recesses, resorts to that which is the very foundation of life, the true substratum and source of all existence.

-- Hans Lassen Martensen, Christian Dogmatics, p. 458.

Whatever one may think of the doctrine of the intermediate state from a merely religious standpoint, it has large Christian importance. For no one can see total Christianity, no one can grasp the philosophy of the Christian faith, until he has caught the peculiar significance of that personal experience between death and the resurrection. The systematic theologian is wont to consider the intermediate state as a doctrinal fragment of eschatology; but to me the profounder connection is soteriological; and I will, therefore, consider the intermediate state as a further stage in the progress of the realization of redemption in the new man.

Guiding Principles. Before we try to construct the doctrine, I wish to indicate the principles which should guide us in our very difficult task.

1. Not merely the surface teaching, but also the ethical spirit of the New Testament must be protected. Take, for example, the utterance of our Lord. Suppose we come to some word of his message, and there are two fair exegetical explanations possible; then, I contend, that we are bound to accept the explanation which has in it the greater moral outcry, the more serious warning for sinful men. If we do not do this we cannot be true to the severity of the moral insistence of the New Testament.

2. We should give to this earthly life a full philosophical significance. After reading certain books which teach that the intermediate state is a continued probation I have felt like saying: "Then, my dear man, this life is a waste. It would have been economical, to say the least, to have begun with the next life." Just as I would not expect a chrysalis inside its silken cell to do all over again the work of a silkworm, so I would not expect the probation of the years to be repeated. No, we must keep a separate Christian meaning for this period of temporal struggle.

3. In the same spirit of Christian economy we should give also to the intermediate state a full philosophical significance. We cannot allow any theologian to make out that the intermediate state is a useless pause on the way to glory. Something, in that state, must take place of everlasting value. To borrow John Wesley's beautiful phrase, the saints there "will be continually ripening for heaven."

4. The view of personality and individuality and bodily life, already gained, must be maintained watchfully. For example, we must resist, on the one side, the temptation "to put the person to sleep"; and, on the other side, the temptation to grant a social life to a bodiless person.

5. The doctrine must be so constructed as to protect the awful Christian emphasis upon death, and also the Christian note of triumph. In Christian thought the intermediate state is not like Homer's dreary world of the dead, where they flit about like shadows, and gibber like bats, and "follow vaguely and emptily the old pursuits." If we are thinking of the redeemed we are to think of their bodiless life as one of triumph and rich experience in Jesus Christ. But we are never so to regard the doctrine of the intermediate state that it even suggests heaven. The terrible stress upon death is yet lingering there, for no man is complete, no man can be complete until the resurrection.

The Construction of the Doctrine

1. The intermediate state is not an unconscious state. To a certain type of man there seems to be a fascination in the idea of "soul-sleep" between the grave and the final resurrection. The idea took hold of Isaac Taylor, and even Archbishop Whately had an evident fondness for it. The idea is supposed by some to have scriptural support in such passages as 1 Thess. 4.14: "For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also that are fallen asleep in Jesus will God bring with him." But even if such expressions as "fallen asleep" be taken for more than a poetic turn of speech, to suggest the quiet rest which the saint has after death, they could be fully protected by saying that the intermediate state is a condition in which all objective relations are broken. As a matter of fact, it has never been proved that our natural sleep is an unconscious state. I myself think that the argument to the contrary is much the stronger. What we know about natural sleep is that the person has retreated into isolation, has lost his social connections, has given up all objective relations. To get at him again you must wake him up. In his System of Biblical Psychology, in speaking of the "false doctrine of the soul's sleep," Professor Franz Delitzsch says: "Scripture calls death a sleep, so far as the disappearance of the soul of a dying person out of the body resembles the retreat of the soul of a person falling asleep out of corporeally evidenced external life; but it nowhere says that souls vanishing out of their bodies sleep."

But my deeper objections to this idea of "soul-sleep" are two: First, it passes beyond the real Christian emphasis upon the value of the body, and takes on the first tinge of materialism. Second, for the important personal task of the intermediate state self-consciousness is very essential.

2. The intermediate state is not a second probation. When we fairly study such a view of second probation as was given by the Andover teachers in their Progressive Orthodoxy, we see that the inner impulse of

the discussion is peculiar. It does not originate in the old spirit of universalism, nor in the new spirit of critical biblical investigation; but rather in a spirit of equity, in the moral sense of fair play. Rejecting the idea of coercion, they demand a fair, full probation for every responsible person, but they can discover no way to provide such a probation for every person in this life. Hence there must be a probation beyond the grave for those who do not have their opportunity of test here. Indeed, it is not too much to say that the spirit of Christianity itself created the inner impulse of the Andover discussion. And if we regard the discussion as a strong echo from Dr. Dorner, the case is much the same, for his own discussion is thoroughly Christian in motive.

While I am eager to grant so much, the work of the Andover teachers seems to me to result from a serious misunderstanding of Christianity. They condition personal salvation upon actual acceptance of the historical Christ. This sounds intensely Christian; but it is essentially false to Christianity, for it turns salvation from a moral thing into a mental thing. Finally the contention amounts to this: Whatever a man means morally, he will be lost forever if he holds an untrue opinion about Jesus Christ. As I understand the teaching of our Lord, and the teaching of his greatest apostle, precisely the opposite is the Christian principle: a man is not saved by opinion, nor lost by opinion; the ultimate test is in the person's moral meaning. Surely the historical Christ may, as a rule, be the immediate test, but this is so for a moral reason, namely, because the man has in conscience come to feel a moral obligation toward Jesus Christ.

Were the contention as to the historical Christ a sound one, the Andover teachers would need to widen greatly their practical application. For not only the heathen and idiots and insane people have no adequate mental probation in this life -- thousands upon thousands of people, typical in both mind and situation, have never for one hour mentally apprehended Christ, never for one hour seen him as he is. This precise division of men into two classes, those who have heard of Christ and those who have not heard of him, is so untrue to the facts. If any man of you imagines that every person who has read a Christian book or a Christian newspaper, or who has listened to an average Christian sermon, has heard of Christ, with any intellectual reality, such a man needs to make a larger study both of the obstinacy of human bias and of the impotence of human appeal. Why, there were a number of the finest souls and greatest minds New England ever produced, who lived for years almost within hailing distance of Andover Seminary itself, and yet they never accepted the historical Christ -- did they ever "hear of Jesus Christ"? If so, 'they are all lost, in spite of their nobility in moral purpose. No, no, the Andover distinction is artificial. Hearing of Christ is not a matter of catching in thought the phrases and idioms of Christianity. As Dr. Dorner himself says: "Even within the church there are periods and cycles when the gospel does not approach men as that which it is.

The true Christian view, as I apprehend it, is essentially this: First, the entire possibility of personal salvation is based upon the atonement of Jesus Christ. Second, the actual Christian experience, in its definiteness and fullness, does involve the necessity of belief, a mental attitude toward both the work of our Lord and his person. Third, but final salvation is a matter of personal moral bearing, a bearing which is manifest in repentance and faith under a supreme moral ideal. Fourth, thus every person with a conscience has in this life a fair, full probation; for he has a fair, full test of moral intention. As I once wrote: "It is this test of personal moral intention which gives real significance to this life. In all the differences of climate, nationality, ancestry, environment, under all business, in all pleasure, with the stroke of sorrow or in the tumult of joy, there is just one thing being said: 'What do you mean? What do you mean?' For this, the sun shines and the winds blow; for this, all formal history is made; for this, dreadful accidents are allowed and more dreadful crimes are for now left unpunished. God is giving every moral person a chance

to settle it forever whether he will love righteousness or not."

3. A Work in Adjustment. If the intermediate state is not a second or continued probation, if it makes no change whatever in moral intention or bearing, what, then, is it for? First of all, and under all, its work is to adjust a person's mental life to his moral meaning. This world is planned merely or mainly for ethical test, and we all reach death holding all sorts of false or fragmentary opinions. These opinions do not determine our central intention, do not even influence our personal attitude toward our moral ideal; but they do confuse the expression of intention, they do prevent entire consistency at the point of judgment. Therefore, in the intermediate state, our relation to truth and reality is to be fully cleared up. No longer will a perfect purpose be held back by an imperfect judgment. No longer can any man's moral meaning be hidden under a false opinion.

This clearing up of the mental life may result in a new formal adjustment to Jesus Christ. If a man in his probation has really come to a spirit of repentance and faith; if he passes out of his probation longing for all Christ Jesus is, although he has never known him, then, in the intermediate state, the formal adjustment to his Saviour will be instant and complete. As Dr. Shedd once wrote: "For although the Redeemer has not been presented historically and personally to him, yet he has the cordial and longing disposition to believe in him." Said in one positive sentence: In the intermediate state every man must see Jesus Christ as he really is; and seeing him as he is, every man who is in harmony with Christ's nature will accept him; while every man who is not in harmony with Christ's nature will reject him. Thus the intermediate state merely turns the essential experience into the formal experience.

We have, though, another and a most difficult point in adjustment, namely, to adjust to Jesus Christ those children who die before they have any personal and moral bearing. I now remember only one Arminian theologian who seriously tries to say a consistent word concerning this difficult matter. Indeed, the usual Arminian procedure is to make the stoutest contention against Calvinism up to this point, then suddenly to borrow the very pith of the Calvinistic philosophy, disguising it under some such phrase as "unconditional regeneration," and so to coerce the children into salvation. Whatever failure we may have in our thinking, let us never do that! Never should we admit that any human being can be saved by omnipotence. Never, never, should we admit that any human being will be saved by pure divine favoritism worked out in a providential plan. I say it carefully, but I say it with every atom of manhood I have, that if one moral person can, anywhere, by any process whatsoever, be coerced into righteousness, then all our sense of God-given equity demands that all men shall be saved. Could I be a necessitarian for one swift instant, I would have to be a Universalist forever.

My own conclusions as to infant salvation are as follows: First, it is a fact of Christian consciousness that we all now believe that those children are saved who die before they reach personal responsibility. Our discussion, therefore, is not for the purpose of getting a belief; but merely for consistency, merely to harmonize with the fundamental principles of our theology a belief which we already have. Second, these children are persons. We cannot for one moment tolerate the teaching, however poetically couched, that these children, snatched from our homes, are nondescripts, more than thing, but less than person. There can be no such nondescript. In the intermediate state all these children come to full personal experience just as surely as our children do in this life. Third, these children are moral persons. Not only do they come to self-consciousness with all the motives originally intrinsic to created personality, but also they feel the urgency of these motives as persons under moral demand. Fourth, under moral demand and with this contrariety of motive, these children apprehend and freely accept their Saviour; and, in companionship with him, they achieve, in the intermediate state, the full equivalent of a perfect Christian experience.

Thus, they are saved under a personal and moral test, but not in a formal probation. Fifth, the reason these children are treated in this special manner, the reason for their being taken out of this life and granted an essential test in place of a formal test, is, I conjecture, this: They are exceptional persons who have no need of a prolonged probation to fix their moral destiny; and their death is so entangled with the probation, or with the development, of other persons as to be of more providential worth than is their continued life in this world. That is, they die not to get advantage but to give service. And yet they are peculiarly honored. To be so selected by our Lord, to be taken at once into his profound life, to get their entire Christian education, so to speak, directly from him, should be regarded as a glory beyond our largest estimate in speech.

If to any one of you this view of infant salvation seems to be, either practically or philosophically, the same thing as to open up the intermediate state, as a formal contingent process in probation, to persons who in this life come to a clear realization of the difference between right and wrong, I can only say: "I am totally unable to look at the matter in your way, and totally unable to sanction any sort of coercion."

4. Getting Ready for the New Race. But the quiet, rich wonder of the intermediate state does not become manifest until we relate it to the final social organism of the Redeemed. When at the resurrection all the saints take up their full membership in that new race of which Christ Jesus is both the dynamic and the formal center, they are to serve each other, and to fit into each other, in the most absolute fashion. This does not mean that personality will be weakened, or that individuality will be given up; but it does mean that every member of the new race will be made free from all that is untrue or unreal. I am not now thinking of the wasteful clashing in polemics. Certainly there could be no Christian organism were polemics to last over into eternity. But polemics will not last over, for the development of the Christian consciousness itself will do away with every phase of polemics long before the ultimate church begins her splendid history in this world. No, I am thinking of completeness in supplemental fellowship and service. Perfectly to enter the life of his fellow men, perfectly to serve them, perfectly to augment their being with his own, the saint needs to be at his best. And he cannot be at his normal best if he thinks that which is untrue or believes that which is unreal. It is not now a matter entirely of personal motive and moral character; it is also a matter of sound judgment, and integrity in the make-up of the total manhood. I claim that service is injured anywhere by every particle of error held by a man; and not even two men can have absolute companionship, if either one of them has an iota of untruth clinging to his mind. Moral love and reality are both required for the organism of the new race. Moral love is gained in this life. Reality is gained in the intermediate state.

5. The Question of Method. In the method of the intermediate state there are three features: First, revelation. It is not necessary to hold that all truth and all reality will be given in the intermediate state. We cannot be sure that all truth and all reality can ever be communicated to finite creatures. But they can have enough so that they will live altogether in the vitalities of truth and reality. And, then, perhaps, there will be a larger and yet larger revelation forever. Second, perfect introspection. Many times I have made reference to a man's substructure of individuality, that vast mystery of being which is the basis of personal manhood. From an ethical standpoint this individuality is mastered when it no longer antagonizes the moral ideal in a self-consciousness filled with love for God and man. And yet this moral mastery is in a sense superficial, for by it no man comes thoroughly to fathom himself, to know what he is. Indeed, he cannot in this earthly life know what he is, for his self-consciousness is too feeble, too flashing, too fleeting. But in the unbroken quiet of the intermediate state, with no body, no objective demand, no social distraction, the man can enter the recesses of his individuality and can find out precisely what he is, and

so can finish his great task of self-personalization. Thus, we have in the intermediate state, the last triumph of personality in the completed personal individual. Third, companionship with Christ. I will startle you with a thought which you have never had before: In all his Christian history, from his conversion on through the long reaches of eternity, the intermediate state is the only period when the redeemed man is altogether alone with his Saviour. Saint Paul calls it being "at home with the Lord." Do you remember his inspiring words? "We are of good courage, I say, and are willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be at home with the Lord." And this thought of companionship with Christ is to lend its inspiration to our consideration of the entire purpose and method of the intermediate state. The revelation is from Christ. The introspection is with the presence and help of Christ. The minute preparation for the coming social life in the new race is under the constant teaching of Christ. His own people, whom he hath redeemed, he prepares, now alone and personally, for their glorious destiny.

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