



Writings of W. Burney Overton

Burney's Papers

1992 Series, No. 4

Under a Sentence of Death

December 5, 1992

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With great fervor, the TV evangelist shouted, “You are under a sentence of death – physical death and spiritual death.”

I am intrigued with that statement. I wonder. Is it true? Not true? Partially true? What do I choose to understand and to believe about the issue of death – and life?

“The mortality rate for living is 100%.” So says Bernie Segal, the noted oncology surgeon and author. And I expect many others have said it both before and after Segal.

It would appear, then, that, in a manner of speaking, human beings are under a sentence of physical death. Sooner or later, all life dies. That is the cycle of life. A life comes into being. It lives according to its nature and its response to the environment in which it lives. In due season, the life span is completed, and the life comes to an end. It dies.

Like it or not. Accept it or not. I am under a sentence of physical death. That sounds pretty grim, doesn't it?

Actually, it doesn't need to sound grim. My intent is, in that graphic way, to point to the reality of the normal cycle of life. It is a cycle. My physical life must have a beginning, and it must end. It is the way of life.

Whatever the reasons for it, it appears that we human beings tend to see death, inevitable thought it may be, as the enemy against which we are to fight until our dying breath.

When Bernie Segal – along with many others – faces the reality of the 100% mortality rate for life, he offers the thought that it is wise to give attention to “living until you die,” instead of focusing upon the issue of dying. Dying is not the tragedy. Failing to “live until you die” is.

So I accept that, sooner or later, my body will die. In that sense, I am under a sentence of physical death.

I'm not so sure that I am, or anyone is, under a sentence of spiritual death. If I am, then I would have to interpret that the mortality rate for spiritual life is also 100%. In that case, it would appear that I start out spiritually alive, or that, inevitably, the end result is my spiritual death.

However, I simply do not believe that I am under a sentence of spiritual death – or that anyone is. It just might be considerably more accurate, when it comes to the spiritual, to say, “I am under a sentence of life.” Maybe, when it comes to the spiritual, I am dead first, and then alive.

Neither do I believe that it is inevitable that I become alive spiritually. However, it certainly appears to me that I start out from a position of not being alive spiritually – or,

at least, not being aware that I am – until I discover that I am. I do believe that it is God's desire and God's intent that all God's children awaken to the awareness of being alive spiritually, and live accordingly. Under a sentence of life, if you will.

Maybe the title of this paper should be, "Under a Sentence of Life."

Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus one night in the dead of night is one of the more familiar stories in the Bible. You remember, in the story, Jesus said to Nicodemus, "No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

And when Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Jesus told him, "No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit." (John 3: 3-6, NRSV)

Maybe it isn't quite accurate to think in terms of being spiritually dead, but it certainly seems accurate to think in terms of being born spiritually (realizing that I am spiritually alive) even as I am born physically, and come to realize that reality.

I know a little about obtaining physical life. Under the right combination of circumstances, it just happens. Insofar as I can tell, the person who is born makes no decision about whether or not to be born, and has very little to do with how and when it happens. Willy-nilly, a baby is cast into the stream of life, lives some kind of life and, eventually, dies.

Obtaining spiritual life doesn't appear to be quite that controlled, nor that routine. Nor is it something that "just happens." Whether or not I obtain spiritual life – or recognize and accept that I am spiritually alive – depends upon me. People and events make their contribution, but I come to the realization that I am spiritually alive. It ends up being my doing – and God's.

When I realize that I am spiritually alive, I am under a sentence of life.

I don't mean that some external force imposes a sentence upon me, but I do mean that I can't be dead when I am spiritually alive. And being spiritually alive leads me to a particular outlook on life, and a particular way of life. It is an outlook and a way that I want, not one that is imposed or required.

What needs to happen for me to realize that I am spiritually alive? And what is that particular outlook and way of life to which being spiritually alive leads me?

How can I be born again? And, I have to ask, so what if I am?

I suppose the answer most commonly given to these questions is that it is all God's doing. Like physical birth, I don't really have a lot to do with it, although I can resist accepting that God has given me spiritual life.

While it may be all God's doing, I believe it is also my doing. That sounds pretty contradictory, doesn't it? So I invite you to think about it with me.

I am a human being. When I was born, I was not finished. I was given all my equipment, and my life lay before me. I was to grow and develop – to be and to become – to search and to put into practice – to try, make errors, and try again – to keep moving toward trying to be all that I had the resources to be. It was – and is – up to me to decide on the process.

In other words, life is a progression from birth to whatever I become. All kinds of factors bear upon my becoming. Each step of the way is both a becoming, and an expression of what I have become. In this life, the task of becoming is never completed. It appears, then, that my life is a process – a process that I choose. A main factor in that choosing is whatever I have come to believe.

What have I come to believe? I can't answer that question in its entirety. I can touch dimensions of it, and express some of my more fundamental beliefs.

At this point in the writing of this paper, it would be easy to repeat those beliefs in the form that I have so often expressed them. I think it is indicated that I not take the easier way this time – even while I am expressing the same basic beliefs.

What do I believe about what it means to be spiritually alive? I consider, first, who I see me to be, and what I want.

I am a person who is hungry and thirsty. I want excitement in my life. I also want comfort, security, and safety. I want to believe that I am valuable and worthwhile. I want to be successful – whatever that happens to mean. I want to see that I have made some kind of contribution that makes my having lived of some importance to somebody.

I want not to feel anxious and afraid. I want not to suffer. I want not to be bored. I want not to beat on myself. I want not to feel angry, and bitter, and victimized.

I want to have fun. I want people to care about me. In reality, I see it that I want to care about other people. I worry that people might not care about me. I fear that I may have said or done something to cause them to dislike me – or that I might in the future.

My life is a huge mix of both positive and negative things. Sometimes, I feel on top of the world. Life is very good. It can hardly be any better. And then I often do not know why) I feel so down and depressed. Nothing is going right, and nothing I do makes it go right.

I am both elated and discouraged – pleased with myself and condemning of me. I feel powerful and weak. I love me and hate me. I don't need anybody to do anything for me, and I am desperate for somebody to care enough to “be there” for me.

I am both very sure about what I believe and why, and very lost and confused about what to believe. My life goes together beautifully for me, and then it falls apart so that I feel desperate and useless. When it is this way, I don't feel very alive spiritually.

Am I under a sentence of life?

“Under a sentence...” I see a picture. The court sessions have been held. The evidence has been presented. The jury has decided. I have been found guilty, and I will have to pay for my sins and errors. It is time for the judge to pass sentence. When he does so, I will have to live under that sentence. All my decisions and actions will be influenced by it. Everything that happens will, in some way, be affected by it.

If God is the judge, and my case has been heard, what has God decided about me? What is God's sentence?

I suggest that God's sentence for God's people is always a sentence of life – to the fullness of spiritual life. I suggest that, along with the sentence of life, God forgives and does not demand payment for sins and errors, nor impose punishment. True enough, all behavior has its consequences, whether that behavior is positive and constructive, or negative and destructive. God forgives and does not demand, but God also does not set aside the outcome of behavior, whatever it may be.

I'm back to my question. What needs to happen for me to realize that I am spiritually alive, and what is that particular outlook and way of life to which being spiritually alive leads me? I don't believe that I can respond adequately to the question without using the old, familiar terms that I use so often.

What needs to happen for me to realize that I am spiritually alive?

I need to decide to believe some things about me and about God.

I learn from the Bible that God is the creator of all things; that God created me in God's image, having breathed into me the very breath – spirit – of God; that God saw me – and all creation – as good; that God is devoted to God's creation with a consuming, unconditional love; that God expresses that love by disclosing inclusive and comprehensive guidelines that enable putting into practice what it means to live in the image of God; that, in Jesus, God lived among us as all of us can live.

Do I dare to believe these things about me and about God? If I do, then I realize that I am spiritually alive. Amid all the negative beliefs and feelings about myself, I decide to accept who I am because of who God made me to be. I don't have to achieve being spiritually alive. All I need to do is to accept that I am – to really accept and believe that I am. Given my life conditioning that has so many negatives in it about who I am, I really wrestle with this, and tend to deny that it can possibly be true.

If I allow myself to believe that I am spiritually alive, what, then, is my outlook on life and my way of life?

There are all those guidelines in the Bible to be learned and applied, and there is Jesus. He was spiritually alive. He was under a sentence of life. His outlook on life was both to see himself as a living image of God, to see all God's children as loved, and to see his role to be loving as God is loving. His way of life was to exemplify this outlook in his attitude and behavior toward himself and all the people with whom he had contact.

Jesus summed it all up when he quoted one of the guidelines. "Love God..., and your neighbor as yourself." (see Matthew 22: 37-40 NRSV for the complete quote)

It occurs to me that, if I allow that I am spiritually alive, the focus of my life is to love God, me and my neighbor – unconditionally.

With great fervor, the TV evangelist shouted, "You are under a sentence of death – physical death and spiritual death."

I am not under a sentence of death. My physical life is temporal. Sooner or later, I will die. In the meantime, I want to live as fully and completely as possible. To that end, I am under a sentence of life. God has conferred upon me God's own spirit so that I am spiritually alive, and has extended to me the invitation to "Love God..., and my neighbor as myself" in all the dimensions and aspects of my life. In so doing, I will experience what it means to be spiritually alive.

I am under a sentence of life, not a sentence of death. I am spiritually alive. I ask myself, "Will I allow myself to decide to believe that this is true?"

My life depends upon my decision.