

CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY III
CLASS LECTURE NOTES
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Unit 1: The Doctrine of Ecclesiology 1

 Part A: The Nature of the Church 1

 Part B: The Church in History 14

 Part C: The Polity of the Church 24

 Part D: The Ministries of the Church 43

 Part E: The Ordinances of the Church 52

 Part F: Contemporary Issues 64

Unit 2: The Doctrine of Eschatology 80

 Part A: Personal Eschatology 80

 Death 81

 The Intermediate State 92

 The Resurrection of the Body 102

 Judgment 107

 Eternal Destinies: Heaven 114

 Eternal Destinies: Hell 124

 Part B: Cosmic Eschatology 140

 The Rapture/Return of Christ 141

 The Millennium 151

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CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY III UNIT 1: ECCLESIOLOGY

Are you a Baptist? If so, why?

For those who live and minister in a Baptist context, ecclesiology must receive special consideration, for Baptists are distinguished from other churches primarily by their ecclesiological convictions. And despite the anti-denominational attitude of many Christians today (I'm not a Baptist, I'm a Christian), it is impossible to actually do ministry without making some ecclesiological decisions that will align you more closely with some denominations, and exclude you from others. Denominationalism may be secondary, but it is inevitable, and not necessarily sinful.

Furthermore, ecclesiology deserves the serious study of all believers, for it is the church that Jesus loves and died for (Eph. 5:25); it is the building of the church that is Jesus' great goal (Matt. 16:18); and it is the church that shows God's wisdom in the heavenly realms (Eph. 3:10). Many talk about fulfilling the Great Commission without remembering that it specifically associates making disciples with "baptizing them," which most Christians throughout history have associated with entry into a local church. The fulfillment of the Great Commission requires churches. All those who love Christ and desire to make him known must love and value his body, the church.

Finally, it is the context for ministry for most of you. If you are ever going to lead a church to be what God calls it to be, you need to know what that is. Unfortunately, far too many churches are guided by the principle of pragmatism. Whatever draws a crowd, relates to the culture, or seems to "work" is what is adopted, without even asking the important ecclesiological questions of what God has called the church to be in Scripture. That will be the goal of our study--to see God's view of the church.

PART A. THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH OUTLINE

I. Old Testament Background.

A. Elements of continuity.

1. The same father.
2. Old Testament terminology.
3. Old Testament images.

B. Elements of discontinuity.

1. Christ himself.
2. The ministry of the Holy Spirit.

II. New Testament Teaching.

A. The word *ekklesia*.

B. Images of the church in the New Testament.

1. The family
 2. The people of God.
 3. The body of Christ.
 4. The temple of the Holy Spirit.
- C. What the church is not.
- D. Some preliminary conclusions.

We use the term “church” very casually and frequently in our conversations, but does our usage and our conception of church match what the Bible means by “church?” We begin by investigating biblical teaching on the nature of the church.

I. Old Testament Background.

We begin with a disputed question, that of the relationship of the people of God in the Old Testament to the church. Covenant theology emphasizes the unity of God’s plan and thus the continuity between his people on the Old Testament and the church. The church is the new Israel, or spiritual Israel. Dispensational theology has as perhaps its most important principle the separation of Israel and the church. They are two distinct peoples, representing two distinct eras (or dispensations) of God’s economy, with two distinct plans. Thus they emphasize the discontinuity between the church and Israel, and usually identify the origin of the church with Pentecost, and see it as entirely a New Testament phenomenon.

The approach taken here recognizes both continuity and discontinuity. A helpful analogy is that of the developmental stages of a child. The call of Abraham (Gen. 12:1) may be seen as the conception of the church, the rest of the Old Testament as the gestation, the gospels as the labor pains of the church, and Pentecost as the birth. We find elements of both continuity and discontinuity in Scripture.

A. Elements of continuity.

1. The same father. Abraham is repeatedly seen in the New Testament as the father of all believers, Jew and Gentile, Israel and church (Rom. 4:16-17, Gal. 3:6-9, 29) because he is the exemplar of faith. However, he seems to be especially associated with the church because, like the church, he is “called out” by God to a mission that will bring blessing to all the families of the church. Gen. 12:1-3 may even be seen as the first hint of the Great Commission, given to the one who is the first hint of the church, who shares the same “called out” nature and the same mission.

2. Old Testament terminology. As the people of God develop in the Old Testament, we find further elements that provide background for what will emerge in the New Testament as the church. For example, there are two major biblical terms for the congregation of God’s people in the Old Testament: *edah* (congregation) and *qahal* (assembly). It is interesting that when the translators of the Septuagint sought a Greek term for these words, they used *ekklesia* to translate *qahal* seventy-seven times, but never used *ekklesia* for *edah*. What does this say about the associations surrounding the word *ekklesia*? Scholars say that *qahal* indicates those who are in fact responding to God’s call, while *edah* refers more to a group in which one is born.

This association of *qahal* and *ekklesia* persists into the New Testament. In the two places where *ekklesia* is associated with a verse from the Old Testament, it is used to translate *qahal* (Acts 7:38 is associated with Deut. 18:16, though not an exact quotation; Heb. 2:12 quotes Ps. 22:22; both Old Testament texts contain the term *qahal*). The point is that when the New Testament writers used the word *ekklesia* to refer to the people of God, they were using a term that indicated a measure of continuity with Israel.

3. Old Testament images. Beyond the biblical terms used, there are also elements of continuity in various images used for the church. There are a few verses that give the implication that the church is spiritual Israel (Rom. 2:28-29, Rom. 9:6-8), including Gal. 6:16, which seems to refer to the church as “the Israel of God.” Though dispensational commentators dispute this interpretation, it seems much the most natural.

Another image that pictures the unity of the church and Israel is that of the olive tree. Israel is the original tree, but the church has been grafted in (Rom. 11:17-24). Though this image is only found in one text, it is extensively developed there.

The major image indicating continuity between Israel and the church is the phrase “the people of God.” This phrase is found in a promise that appears throughout the Bible and indicates God’s eternal purpose to call to himself a people. The first hint of this promise appears in Gen. 17. God is about to begin the process of producing a people from Abraham and Sarah, despite their age. To Abraham and his descendants, God promises to “be their God” (Gen. 17:8). It appears in fuller form on the eve of the Exodus, as God promises to redeem them: “I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God” (Ex. 6:7). After he brings the people out, he calls them “my treasured possession . . . a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex. 19:5-6). Though the people failed to be God’s covenant people, he did not give up on his purpose, but promised a New Covenant, which had as one of its purposes: “I will be their God, and they will be my people” (Jer. 31:33). Joseph was told of the baby to be born to Mary, “he will save his people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21).

It becomes apparent in the New Testament that the people for whom Christ died, the people who are included under the New Covenant, those who can be called the people of God, are no longer just Israelites, but also the church. In Acts 15, the church’s first theological controversy was over the inclusion of Gentiles, and was resolved by an appeal to Amos 9:11-12 as justification for God “taking from the Gentiles a people for himself” (Acts 15:14-18). Rom. 9:22-25, II Cor. 6:16, and I Pet. 2:9-10 all take the “people of God” language from the Old Testament and apply it to the church. Eph. 2:19 says more bluntly that those in the church “are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people.”

Yet even the church does not exhaust this promise of God, because part of God being God to his people is his dwelling among them. He did so symbolically in the tabernacle and temple, did so temporarily in Jesus, who “tabernacled among us” for a time (John 1:14), does so spiritually now in the indwelling Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:9-11), but will do so personally and permanently in the eschaton, when God’s eternal purpose will be fulfilled: “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God” (Rev. 21:3).

The point of all this for ecclesiology is to show there are significant elements of continuity that do not allow us to totally separate the church from Israel. The relationship seems to be more that of beginning and fulfillment than distinction. But there are also elements of discontinuity that show the church differs from Israel in a number of respects.

B. Elements of discontinuity.

1. The first obvious element of discontinuity is Jesus himself. As the foundation, center and builder of the church, Jesus gives the church its essential character, such that it can even be called his body. Jesus makes a huge difference ecclesiologically.

2. The second and equally important element of discontinuity has to do with the ministry of the Holy Spirit. The promise of the New Covenant (Jer. 31:31-34) and Paul's description of the true Israelite in Rom. 2:28-29 indicate that one of the differences under the New Covenant will be that God will deal with us internally rather than externally, that he will relate to us on the basis of our heart rather than heritage, and that he will deal with us spiritually rather than physically. That spiritual relationship has everything to do with the new level of type of ministry entrusted to the Holy Spirit. John 7:39 tells us that in some sense, the Holy Spirit was not given prior to Jesus' glorification. That giving of the Spirit may safely be identified with what happened in Acts 2. Once the Spirit was given, that which was necessary for the life of the church was given, and the church comes to life in Acts 2. This explains why the word *ekklesia* appears in only two passages prior to Acts 2, but appears more than a hundred times after. Some would say that the new creation referred to in II Cor. 5:17 is to be identified with what the Spirit is doing in human hearts in this post-Pentecost age. The work of the Spirit is also highlighted in the fact that Spirit baptism, rightly understood, is an initial work simultaneous with conversion and happens to all believers who are baptized by the Spirit into the body of Christ (I Cor. 12:13).

These elements of discontinuity alone justify phrases like "the New Testament church" and allow us to focus on the New Testament for more explicit and detailed teaching on the nature of the church.

II. New Testament Teaching.

A. The word *ekklesia*. We need to begin with the word for church, *ekklesia*, which is found 114 times in the New Testament. Study of these verses reveals a number of different uses for this word.

1. Twice it is used to refer to the Old Testament congregation.

2. Three times in one context it is used to refer to a secular assembly.

3. Six times it is used in a general, non-specific sense that does not neatly fit any of the other categories.

4. Thirteen times it is used to refer to what is called the universal church, composed of all the saved of all ages. This usage is especially prominent in Ephesians and Colossians.

5. Ninety times it is used for a local church or churches. Though the emphasis of many theologians writing on the church is the universal church, it is clearly the local church that is emphasized in the New Testament.

This emphasis led 19th century Landmark Baptists to claim that the New Testament uses the word *ekklesia* only for local assemblies. But in fact, there are a dozen or more references that unquestionably refer to the church as all the redeemed of all the ages, what is usually called the universal church. These two forms of the church are given different designations by different writers: local and universal is the most common pairing, visible and invisible is less fitting, congregation and Church by those who emphasize the latter sense.

How the two are related is another question. It seems that local churches are not just parts of the body of Christ. I Cor. 12:27 says that the local assembly is the body of Christ. And the visible/invisible distinction weakens the idea of actual assembly that is the normal idea behind *ekklesia*. I like Robert Banks' proposal: all Christians belong to a heavenly church which gathers around Christ; and all Christians should belong to local, tangible expressions of that heavenly church (see *Paul's Idea of Community*). And in the New Testament, the focus is on local expressions of the church.

One feature deserves special notice. The singular “church” is consistently used to refer to all the Christians in a city (“the church” in Jerusalem, Antioch, Cenchrea, Corinth, Thessalonica, etc.), while the plural “churches” is almost always used for Christians meeting in different groups across a region (“the churches” in Syria and Cilicia, Galatia, Asia, Macedonia, Judea; the sole exception is Acts 9:31, where the singular is used for “the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria”). What implications may we draw from this pattern of usage?

Excursus: Multiple Services, Multi-Site Churches

How many of you attend churches that have multiple services or multiples sites? Have you ever pondered any theological or ecclesiological issues or problems raised by these formats?

The fact that the most common meaning of *ekklesia* is that of a group of people who actually assemble raises questions about two recent practices. One that has been virtually unchallenged is found in churches that go to two or more worship services. This is seen as a cost effective way to provide for growing churches without building ever bigger buildings. However, is it in keeping with the biblical meaning of “church” to apply it to a group of people, even a group of Christians, who never all actually assemble together, and in fact intentionally do not do so? Should a church with multiple services be more properly regarded as churches, who happen to share the same building and leaders?

I think multiple services may damage the unity of a church and has the potential of making congregational government more problematic than ever, but it must also be

acknowledged that the church in Jerusalem numbered thousands and met in both large and small groups (Acts 2:46), yet it is spoken of as acting as one church and twice Luke emphasizes their unity by saying “the whole church” (Acts 5:11; 15:22). It seems unlikely that the whole group met together in anything but the most unusual of circumstances, and probably existed as a number of house congregations (see Roger Gehring, *House Church and Mission*), yet they were regarded as one church. Ideally, I think churches (assemblies) should assemble, and there is some NT warrant for it. The church at Antioch “gathered together” (Acts 14:23) and the church in Corinth “came together” for the Lord’s Supper (I Cor. 11:18) and for corporate edification (I Cor. 14:23). Yet the case does not seem strong enough to say that multiple services are necessarily wrong, especially if there are other aspects or services where those who attend different services still interact with each other (Sunday School classes, Sunday evening services, etc.). A church can still maintain an Acts 2 type of unity (see vv. 42-47) with multiple services.

Multi-site churches are an even more recent development and one that raises additional questions. The most common criticism of them is one that calls for careful qualification. It is the idea that a church, an assembly, must assemble—in one place, with all its members—to be a valid assembly, or church. As mentioned above, this could be raised as an objection to multiple service churches, but has been applied more to multi-site churches. However, this objection itself has two weaknesses.

First, it is extremely likely that the church in Jerusalem, Rome, Corinth, and other cities involved multiple house churches (the book by Roger Gehring mentioned above has convinced me on this). A house was the most common and often mentioned meeting place for churches, but once the church in cities grew to a decent number, houses would no longer hold them all. Yet in every case in the New Testament, whenever a church is linked to a city, it is given in the singular—the church in Jerusalem, Rome, etc. Apparently, there was some relational dynamic that allowed the writers to describe the network of house congregations as one church (for more on this, see my article “What Makes a Multi-Site Church One Church?” on Moodle or *Great Commission Research Journal* 4, no. 1 [Summer, 2012]: 95-107).

The second weakness is the simple fact that very few churches have a day when 100% of their members assemble; in most churches there are always a few absent. In fact, most of the bodies we call churches do not assemble **all** their members together; so should we try to specify a minimum percentage or recognize that what makes a church one church may be things that happen outside the weekly gathering? What makes a church one seems to be relational. Still, geographical proximity does seem to have some importance, for in all cases (with one exception), Christians scattered across an area wider than a city (a province, for example) are always described as churches (plural). They lacked something that allowed Christians in a city to be described as one church; they lacked the ability to maintain relational oneness. This should serve as a caution to multi-site churches that expand beyond the ability to maintain such oneness.

Beyond that qualified criticism, three other issues in multi-site churches are problematic. The first is the matter of governance. Historically, a distinctive of Baptists was their insistence on local church autonomy. They insisted that there could be no governmental or organizational level superior to that of the local congregation. Of course, in episcopal and presbyterian forms of church government, that was not the case. The local congregation was part of a larger “church,”

and government of the church was not located in each local congregation. One characteristic of multi-site churches, according to *The Multiple-Site Church Revolution* (G. Surratt, G. Ligon, and W. Bird, Zondervan, 2006), is that they operate under a unified board, with one senior pastor, who functions something like a bishop. This seems to lend itself more naturally to presbyterian or episcopal polity, and with separated congregations, congregational government would seem to be more complicated. However, there are some things multi-site churches could do to overcome such complications. The members of all the sites could meet together occasionally for a time of worship, baptisms, the Lord's Supper, receiving of members, and other congregational business. Such a church would seem to be consistent with the NT usage of *ekklesia* to refer to what were almost certainly multiple congregations in cities like Jerusalem, Antioch and Corinth, who nonetheless could be described as a single church, while maintaining congregational government.

A second issue raised by multi-site churches is the legitimacy of separating the functions of pastoral care and teaching. This is especially the case in the increasing number of churches where the one who teaches God's word to the congregation never appears there in person, but appears on tape or via video-cast. The congregation has a campus pastor, who provides pastoral care, but he is not the one who teaches them God's word. The biblical problem with this is that one of the main functions of the one who is called elder, overseer, or pastor is to teach God's word. That is an area of giftedness he is required to have (I Tim. 3:2), and the function of teaching is even paired with pastor in the one NT usage of that noun ("pastors and teachers," Eph. 4:11). Of course, one response that could be made by multi-site church advocates is that once a church grows much beyond a few hundred members, the one preaching will not be the one giving pastoral care to most of the members of the congregation, anyway, and in cases when a church has multiple elders, not all will be preaching each Sunday. I doubt that the average member in the church at Jerusalem had a lot of contact with James or others of the apostles. Still, I think it best when the functions of pastoring and teaching are joined in the same body of elders or the same person. In point of fact, I think that the video-cast mode is largely found in those churches with a "superstar-preacher" that everyone wants to hear, whether they ever meet him personally or not. Still, the separation of pastor and teacher is not required by the multi-site model. The church could be led jointly by a team of pastors, each of whom takes primary responsibility for teaching and caring for one congregation. So, this issue does not necessarily invalidate multi-site churches per se, but it does raise questions for certain forms, particularly those where the one preaching the word does not shepherd the flock.

A third issue I would want to raise is what I would call the integrity of each local congregation; that is, I believe that a church must provide all the ministries any Christian needs to grow to maturity. I think this is one of the distinguishing marks of a contemporary church from a parachurch. The latter are specialists; churches are generalists. If a multi-site's congregations are just essentially evangelistic outposts, such that those involved do not experience fellowship, teaching, and worship and do not serve one another and the world around them, such a group is better seen as a parachurch than as a component part of a church, and is doing those who attend a disservice. Of course, the local congregations of a multi-site church could be so led and structured that they did provide all the needed services. If they did so, then, it would raise a fourth and final question.

If geographically separated congregations each have their own pastoral leadership, and each provide the full range of services Christians need, why join together into one church, with all the resulting complications? Why not just use multiple sites as a temporary church planting strategy, with the goal being for each congregation to become eventually an independent church? Multi-sites may be more effective evangelistically (people know and trust the “brand name” of the church), and multi-sites are certainly economically preferable to growing churches building bigger and bigger buildings, but once a given site is up and growing, I think it is better to maintain fellowship with the other sites, but practice governance and ministry on its own. Maintaining fellowship does not require organizational unity. Indeed, such a desire was one of the factors behind the development of associations, but it must be acknowledged today that few function as centers of fellowship and encouragement.

Thus, while I see concerns raised by multi-site churches, the fact that the NT uses the singular *ekklesia* to refer to the church in cities where that church was almost certainly composed of multiple congregations leads me to accept the viability of at least some forms of multi-site church (for a positive argument for multi-sites, see Gregg Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 310-17).

End Excursus

6. Jesus and the Church. A further question is raised by the fact that the word *ekklesia* is found only twice in the gospels (Matt. 16:18 and Matt. 18:20; one universal usage and one local usage). Some have argued on this basis that Jesus never intended to found the church. We may make three responses. First is that there is no reason to doubt the genuineness of the two references in Matthew. Second, there are other indications that the church was Jesus' intention (see R. N. Flew, *Jesus and His Church*, who offers five lines of evidence, such as appointing 12 apostles, calling a new people into being, and numerous other factors). Third is that the lack of references to *ekklesia* reveals the importance of Pentecost, which we will soon consider.

The two verses in Matthew do deserve examination, for they have been important in the history of ecclesiology. The question raised by Matt. 16:18 has been the relation of Peter (*Petros*, a large detached rock) to the rock (*petra*, a rock ledge) on which the church is built. The traditional Roman Catholic understanding has been that Peter is the rock, that he has unique authority over the church, that his successors share that authority, and that his successors are the bishops of Rome. Other suggestions have been that the rock is Peter's confession of Christ as Messiah and Son of God or that the rock is Christ himself.

Not too much can be made of the two Greek words used. Jesus spoke in Aramaic, and it seems to be a simple play on words. The most natural interpretation seems to be that the rock is Peter, but not as pope, but as the leader of the apostles who gave the foundational teaching (Acts 2:42, Eph. 2:20), concerning Christ, who is the ultimate foundation and the chief cornerstone (I Cor. 3:11, Eph. 2:20). The problem with the Roman Catholic view is that there is no basis for believing (1) that Peter would have a successor, (2) that this successor would have the same function as Peter, or (3) that this successor would be the bishop of Rome.

The keys referred to in v. 19 must be the key to understanding God's purpose of salvation, which had been revealed by God to Peter, and was to be revealed by Peter to others (see the parallel in Luke 11:52). On the day of Pentecost, Peter was the first, but not the only one, to preach Christ. Again, though Peter served a foundational purpose, it was not passed to any successor, nor limited to him. Indeed, now all are called to use the keys passed on to us to open the doors of heaven, that others may go in. The promise to Peter does not enable him to coerce action in heaven; rather, in proclaiming the gospel he enacts heaven's purpose, for it is the gospel that draws some to Christ and excludes others (see the dual action in II Cor. 2:16).

Finally, Matt. 16:18 is the basis for belief in the ultimate indefectibility (but not infallibility) of the church. The gates of Hades will not prevail. Though human error and sin distorts the church, God's purpose through the church will ultimately prevail.

Matt. 18:17 has not been as controversial in church history, but does give us a basis for seeing church discipline as an important aspect of the church, as it has been in Anabaptist and Baptist life (at least prior to around 1880).

7. Summary. Thus, we see from the word *ekklesia* that the church is an assembly of persons. Normally in the New Testament, these are people "called out" by God to be His, and normally the assembly is local in nature. It may be small enough to meet in a house (I Cor. 16:19) or refer to a group of churches in an area (Acts 9:31). Less often, church refers to a heavenly assembly, united around Jesus Christ, and composed of all those who love him.

B. Images of the church in the New Testament. The word *ekklesia* does not exhaust New Testament teaching on the nature of the church. Indeed, it could be argued that the New Testament teaches us about the nature of the church primarily through metaphors. Paul Minear lists close to 100 in his book, *Images of the Church in the NT*. I believe most of the important aspects can be derived from three central metaphors which also give us a Trinitarian structure, but think a more obvious image is the most pervasive in the New Testament and deserves first mention.

What is your favorite image for the church? Why?

1. The family. Joseph Hellerman (*When the Church Was a Family*) tells us that in Paul's day, perhaps the closest relationship in all of society was that between siblings, yet that is the relationship Paul uses for fellow Christians—not just friends, but brothers and sisters. The words brother and sister are used for Christians dozens of times (50 for brother and six for sister, by my count), Timothy is explicitly told to related to fellow Christians as family members (I Tim. 5:1-2), and we are taught even more pervasively to relate to God as our heavenly father, to whom we belong by adoption. By this breadth of use, it is the most widespread and pervasive image for the church. Hellerman sees Paul's use of it to fall into four categories: "affective solidarity" (the emotional bond of love between fellow believers), "family unity" (or interpersonal harmony), "material solidarity" (the sharing of resources), and "family loyalty" (the commitment to God's family above all other loyalties).

We must also recognize family, not in the modern, western, individualistic sense, but in that of the culture of Paul's day, when family took precedence over the individual, such that decisions were made, more on the basis of what was best for the family than what was best for the individual. The depth of sharing of life in families of that day is difficult for churches today to approach, especially as they get larger. Fellowship must be more and more of a priority, if we are to capture something of the "one-another" life of New Testament Christianity (note the dozens of "one-another" commands in the NT).

2. The people of God. This metaphor reminds us that the church becomes the church by God's initiative. His purpose has always been to create a people, not just isolated individuals. We saw this as one of the key elements of continuity between Israel and the church; both are called the people of God.

This metaphor thus lies behind the description of the church as the elect (Rom. 8:33, I Pet. 1:2, 2:9), the called ones (I Cor. 1:24), those set apart by God (saints: I Cor. 1:2). Thus, the church consists of those chosen, called, and set apart by God. They have been claimed by him. For their part, they respond by trusting him, accepting his call, following his will. They are called to reflect God's nature, being holy as he is holy (Lev. 11:44; I Pet. 1:16), and loving as they had received love (Eph. 5:1-2).

New Testament enriches this image of the church by its fuller teaching on the nature of God as Triune. The church is the people of God **the Father**, and as just discussed, thus it may also be seen as a family. This also reinforces the idea that the church is properly composed only of Christians, for while all are creatures of God, being God's children comes through receiving Christ and being thus adopted into God's family (John 1:12). This is made obvious when we think of the church as the people of God **the Son**. The church is fundamentally gathered around Jesus. Thus, the church in Acts is referred to in Acts as believers in Christ, disciples of Christ, and Christians (Acts 2:44; 11:26). Paul calls the church "the faithful in Christ" (Eph. 1:1; Col. 1:1). Third, as the people of God **the Holy Spirit**, we highlight the importance of Pentecost and the transforming power that entered the church, producing as one of his distinctive effects the gift of fellowship. The word *koinonia* appears nowhere in Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John, but appears immediately after the coming of the Spirit as one of the characteristics of the early church (Acts 2:42).

Finally, the church as the people of God orients us to the missional nature of the church. If the church is the people of God, those belonging to him, the mission of the church must be rooted and grounded in God's mission. As Christopher Wright puts it, the mission of the church is "our committed participation, as God's people, at God's invitation and command, in God's own mission within the history of God's world for the redemption of God's creation" (*The Mission of God*, 22-23). We have no independent mission; we serve the mission of God, for the glory of God. Because we are the people of God, God's glory is our ultimate concern. We join in his mission for his glory, sent by him on mission (John 20:21).

3. The body of Christ. Most see this as the most basic metaphor (I think the family is more pervasive, but body is certainly important). This is unique to Paul, and has occasioned some debate as to how he came to it. Various Stoic and Gnostic parallels have been

suggested, as well as eating Christ's body in the Eucharist, but the likeliest source seems to be Paul's conversion experience, when Christ identified persecution of his people as persecution of Him. He may also have heard of how Jesus bound himself to his disciples (Matt. 10:40).

There is development of the concept within Paul's writings. In Romans and I Corinthians, the body is used to stress the essential unity despite diversity in gifts (Rom. 12:4-5, I Cor. 12:12-27), and the resulting mutuality of love and concern that should result. Little attention is given to the idea of Christ as head (I Cor. 12 mentions members as being eyes, ears, and nose). It is in Ephesians and Colossians that the headship of Christ is emphasized (Eph. 1:22, 4:15, 5:23; Col. 1:18, 2:9-10). In these two books, the connection between Christ and his body is highlighted. He is the final authority over all areas of the church's life (Eph. 1:22). Thus, the church's government must always seek to be a Christocracy, whatever human form it takes. Christ is the source of the body's unity and the goal of their growth (Eph. 4:15); He is her Savior and the source of her life (Eph. 5:23-29).

How literally are we meant to take this metaphor? Many Catholics take it very literally and speak of the Church as the continuation of the Incarnation (Barth leans this way). Even some evangelical missiologists call for the church to be incarnational in the work of missions. While there is a truth in the idea of being incarnational, we need to be careful about language that suggests the church is an extension or continuation of the incarnation, and careful about the use of the term. The incarnation is a unique, non-repeatable event in history, God taking on human flesh in a way far beyond anything a human could possibly do. Yet, Jesus' commission to us in John, "As the Father sent me, so I am sending you" (John 20:21), does make some comparison. The incarnation is the pattern for the church's call to identify with and serve the world in humility, but it does not identify the church's nature with that of Christ, for several reasons.

First, the body of Christ language in Paul looks internal, to the relationship members of the body have with each other (Romans and I Corinthians) and with the head (Ephesians and Colossians), not externally to the relationship the church has with the world. Second, Christ's explicit language tells us that he is the one who builds the church, and is the foundation of the church. But, that requires a distinction between the builder and that which is built. Third, the body is only one of many metaphors, and there is no reason to absolutize this one. A fourth problem is that Christ's body (resurrected and glorified) still exists in heaven at the right hand of God. Finally, a literal view gives too much importance to the church. She is still weak, and needs her head's guidance and sustenance. The body is a metaphor, and a very meaningful one, but just a metaphor. It points to Christ as the center of the church, the one around whom everything gathers. He is what holds the church together. And, this picture for the church suits admirably for reflecting the unity in diversity and mutuality of care that Christ desires for his body.

4. The temple of the Holy Spirit. The image of the temple points to the centrality of worship in the life of the church. Not only is one of the characteristic activities of a church gathering for corporate worship, members of churches are called to live their entire lives as acts of worship (Rom. 12:1-2). The fact that the church is the temple of the Spirit highlights the importance of Pentecost for the church. For the church to be a temple, it must be a place where God dwells. That was the purpose of the temple in the Old Testament. The Spirit indwells

believers individually, and so the New Testament can speak of individual believers as being temples of God (I Cor. 6:19), but there is also a corporate indwelling, such that Christ promises his presence in a special way when his people gather in his name (Matt. 18:20; see also I Cor. 5:4). But, for a corporate body to be a temple, the individual members need to be joined together. I think that joining is what happens when believers begin to experience fellowship, which is also strongly associated with the Spirit.

I think it is very significant that the gospel writers never use the word *koinonia*. It first appears in Acts 2 with the coming of the Spirit and is almost the first word used to characterize the first church (Acts 2:42). The Spirit is the creator of fellowship, for He is the one who unites all believers to Jesus, who baptizes all of us into the same body (I Cor. 12:13). He creates fellowship because he awakens us to all we have in common--most centrally, Christ. Thus, the Spirit serves as the cement in the church, making us a true temple rather than a disconnected pile of stones.

The church as the temple in which God is worshiped also relates to the mission of the church. John Piper has said, "Mission exists because worship doesn't." The church participates in God's mission first of all by being a worshipping community, and as it mediates the presence of God to others, it draws worship from them as well. Greg Beale has traced the relationship of the church as temple to the church's mission throughout Scripture and notes the ongoing nature of the temple's construction in Eph. 2:21-22: it is "being fitted together," it "is growing into a holy temple," and its members "are being built together." He concludes, "The temple will continue to expand to include more and more people until God's presence will pervade the entire earth at the end of the age" (see G. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission*, 263).

One final fact we should notice about these four metaphors--they are all corporate images. There are no one person families, no individuals of God, no independent parts of Christ's body, and no one who has fellowship with himself. This should warn us that the typical American emphasis on individualism is inconsistent with biblical ecclesiology.

Of these four images, which has been least important in your thinking about the church? How could more a more thorough incorporation of it in your thinking affect your relationship with your local church?

C. What the church is not. While Scripture gives us a variety of ways to think about the church, we should note that it does not encourage us to think about the church in a number of ways that are common among us.

1. The church is not a building, but people assembled. The earliest churches seem to have met in homes (Rom. 16:5, Col. 4:15); church buildings did not arrive until several centuries later (3rd-4th century). Early Baptists were thus more biblical when they referred to buildings, not as churches, but as "meeting houses."

2. The church is not determined by geographical or political lines, but by relationship to God and Christ. By this I intend to contrast the idea of the territorial church, which assumes that every member of the state is also a member of the church, and the idea of the

gathered church, which states that the church should be composed only of those who choose to follow Christ and are regenerate. The former idea was characteristic of the church from shortly after Constantine to the time of the Reformation. It crumbled then due to the insistence of Anabaptists and Baptists that (1) the church must be gathered and (2) that church and state should be separate, ideas for which they were violently persecuted when they began.

3. The church is not a denomination. Churches in the NT work together and share a sense of commonality, but there is no attempt or perceived need to organize in a formal way. This is not to deny the legitimacy of denominations. They are valid ways to express our belief in the larger body of Christ and our need to manifest our unity with that larger body. But while the denomination may be composed of churches, Baptists have almost always clearly differentiated the association or denomination from a church. They have different roles, responsibilities, and powers.

4. The church is not the kingdom. "Kingdom" refers primarily to God's kingly rule and only secondarily to the sphere in which that reign is exercised. The church is a fellowship of people; the kingdom is a divine activity. Thus, the kingdom cannot be equated with the church. G. E. Ladd (*Theology of the NT*) suggests four ways to relate church and kingdom: the kingdom creates the church (by calling for a response to the message of the kingdom); the church witnesses to the kingdom (by displaying the life of the age to come, and by proclaiming the kingdom of God itself); the church is the instrument of the kingdom (the works of the kingdom are done through it); the church is the custodian of the kingdom (it is given the keys to the kingdom, which I see as stewardship of the gospel). The two are inseparably related but distinguishable.

5. The church is not a parachurch organization. Though we have not yet mentioned it, we will show that the church has a certain structure (leaders), certain constituent purposes, and must have no age, race, or sex restrictions. These characteristics are sufficient to distinguish the church from a college fellowship group which exists for them only, or from a mission agency whose only purpose is missions, or from any of the other thousands of parachurch groups.

Sometimes small groups of independent Christians get tired of the old, dead institutional church and think they can be the body of Christ for themselves. But, if they do seek to be the church, they eventually find the need for a structure and leaders. And, if they seek to meet the needs of whole families, they will find themselves becoming quite like the churches they left. The reason why many parachurch groups seem more alive than churches is that they have the luxury of ministering to one type of person or focusing on one aspect of ministry. The church has to minister to all types on all levels. The wonder is that it does as well as it does. I think we should view the church as the general practitioner, and the parachurch as the specialist. Each has an important role, and they should work together, but which one is primary should be clear. An individual who has only a specialist will not be as healthy as an individual who has a general practitioner. The church is the primary spiritual physician; the parachurch can offer wonderful help in specialized situations.

D. Some preliminary conclusions. While there is still much more biblical teaching related to various aspects of the church, we may pause at this point to suggest some preliminary conclusions about the nature (or essence) of the church, based on our study thus far.

1. The church is primarily a local assembly. There are other usages of the word *ekklesia*, but the local meaning is primary in about 80% of the occurrences, and that is where we encounter the church in our experience. Thus, our point of departure in thinking about the church should be local expressions of church.

2. The church must be a gospel assembly. What does this mean? One of the distinctives that separates the church from Israel is its experience of Christ. That experience comes to the church through the message of the gospel. Thus, the gospel is essential to the very being of the church. Any church that loses the gospel ceases to be a church.

3. The church is a Spirit-empowered assembly. That is another one of the elements of discontinuity between the church and Israel. The Spirit is the enlivening power of the church, giving it life and binding it together in fellowship.

4. The church is by nature a living and growing assembly. I do not want to overemphasize numerical growth; that is already emphasized in our churches much more than in the New Testament. But the image of a church as a body and a people obviously implies life, and the Holy Spirit is everywhere associated with life. That life should produce growth, in Christlikeness and in people coming to Christ. But the goal we seek is not growth; it is life in Christ.

5. The church is God's organized, purposeful assembly. Here we anticipate discussion of two major issues in ecclesiology: church polity (how the church is organized) and the ministries of a church (its purposes). But already, the first and last words in this description are clear. The church is God's. We are not free to fashion it as we think best. And, the church is an assembly. It is not an individual matter but a corporate commitment to a group of people. God calls people out to join a church, and in doing so he calls them together. Several developments in church life threaten the type of commitment involved in being an assembly (megachurches, multiple services, multi-site churches); they deserve serious scrutiny. Perhaps they can be justified, but when we weaken the assembling of God's people, we may be in danger of undermining something that is key to the being (or at least the well being) of a church.

What have you learned thus far about the nature of the church that might be worth sharing with a friend?

PART B: THE CHURCH IN HISTORY OUTLINE

I. The Patristic Church.

A. Early (pre-Constantine) Developments.

1. The church's life.

- 2. Their worship.
- 3. The bishop.
- B. The Post-Constantine Church.
 - 1. The unity of the church.
 - 2. Holiness.
 - 3. Catholic.
 - 4. Apostolic.
- II. The Medieval Church (500-1500).
 - A. The Monastic Movement.
 - B. Sacramental Theology.
- III. The Church in the Reformation.
 - A. The Meaning of the Marks.
 - B. Disagreement Over the Marks.
- IV. The Post-Reformation Era: The Great Splintering.
- V. 20th Century Developments.
 - A. The Ecumenical Movement.
 - B. Vatican II.

In later sections of these notes, we will return to explore biblical teaching on issues like church polity and the ministries of the church, including the controversial topics of the ordinances. We will also look later on at contemporary developments, like seeker churches and emerging churches and the globalization of the church. But before we enter into these issues, it will be helpful for us to gain a larger historical perspective, for at least three reasons. First, if we believe the Holy Spirit has been active in illuminating the Scriptures for the people of God down the past twenty centuries, we have much to learn from history. Second, history serves as a warning and safeguard to us. We will see how powerfully churches in the past were shaped by their historical context, and be warned that we are not immune to the forces operating in our day. History can serve as a safeguard for us if we have the humility to consider that perhaps some of our interpretations of Scripture are historically conditioned and that history may have seen some issues with more clarity than we do. Third, history is the necessary background for understanding today, for all that is happening today grows out of the past. History never takes sharp turns. Even the claim that we are in a new post-modern age presupposes an understanding of modernity. So, we turn now to look at major developments in the church down through the eras of history.

I. The Patristic Church.

A. Early (pre-Constantine) Developments. It is somewhat striking that there is little theological reflection on ecclesiology in the early years of the church's history. The most thorough discussions, those of Cyprian and Augustine, developed out of controversies over Novatianism and Donatism. The nature of the church in these early years is seen more clearly in their living than in their writings.

1. The church's life. A second century letter to Diognetus described the life displayed in the church as being in the world but distinctively different from it: "They marry, like everyone else, and they beget children, but they do not cast out their offspring. They share their board with each other, but not their marriage bed. . . . They busy themselves on earth, but their citizenship is in heaven. . . . They love all men, and by all men are persecuted. . . . To put it simply: What the soul is in the body, Christians are in the world." This distinctively different quality of life was a powerful witness that drew many to faith in Christ, despite the risk of persecution associated with it.

One way that holiness of life was inculcated was through the catechumenate, the practice of training new believers in the faith prior to baptism. This training, which was widespread in the second and third centuries and continued into the fourth century, presupposes believer's baptism (as opposed to infant baptism) and began to decline as infant baptism became the norm in the post-Constantine age. It is worth noting that they took this training very seriously, some forms lasting as long as three years, and that along with teaching doctrine, they emphasized spiritual and moral formation, immersion in Scripture, and spiritual warfare. Clinton Arnold sees fascinating parallels between the catechumenate and the new member or new convert classes increasingly common in churches today (see article in *JETS*, 47, no. 1: 39-54).

How many of your churches have new member/new convert classes? What do such classes cover?

2. Their worship. An early description of Christian worship by Justin (c. 150), indicates baptism as the prerequisite for inclusion in the body and partaking of the Eucharist: "of which no one is allowed to partake except one believes that the things we teach are true, and has received the washing for forgiveness of sins and for rebirth, and who lives as Christ handed down to us." Already the centrality and special nature of the Eucharist is being recognized, with Justin saying that the elements are in some sense the flesh and blood of Jesus. Of their Sunday meetings Justin says, "the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read as long as time permits. When the reader has finished, the president in a discourse urges and invites [us] to the imitation of these noble things." This sounds a lot like the preaching of the Word. Justin also mentions congregational prayer, partaking of the Eucharist, and the taking of an offering as part of their worship.

3. The most notable development in the first three centuries of the church's history is the growing importance of the bishop. Ignatius, an early bishop of Antioch in the first decade of the second century, is the first to separate the office of bishop from that of presbyter (later, "priest") and advocate three offices in the church: bishop, priest, and deacon. He elevates the bishop as the key to the church's unity. Nothing, especially no sacraments, can go on without his supervision. He should be respected, regarded and followed as the Lord himself.

Irenaeus continues to support the importance of the bishops in the mid-second century. In his controversy with the Gnostics, he realizes they will appeal to Scripture just as he does. But he claims that we find the right interpretation of Scripture in the churches founded by the apostles, for they passed the right interpretation on to their successors, the bishops. He even gives a list for

the succession of bishops from Peter for the church in Rome (though he does not necessarily put the church in Rome or its bishops over other churches and bishops). The bishops in the apostolic churches guarantee unity in doctrine, as the possessors of the oral tradition from the apostles. It is worth noting that tradition here is not something separate from and in addition to Scripture, but simply the traditional (apostolic) interpretation of Scripture.

In the early church's context, it is not too difficult to understand the importance that began to be attached to the bishop. Though the canon and authority of the Old Testament was widely acknowledged, the canon of the New Testament was still taking final shape. Even if acknowledged, few average believers would have had access and the ability to read the Scriptures. Those who did may have faced persecution and were asked to hand over their copy of the holy books (as happened in the Donatist controversy). In such a context, what was the best guarantor of the church remaining united and orthodox? Follow the bishop.

The centrality of the bishop is clearly seen in Cyprian's important work, "On the Unity of the Church" (c. 250). The unity of the church was threatened by a controversy over how those who had succumbed to demands to sacrifice to idols during the persecution under the Roman emperor Decius should be treated when they sought restoration in the church. Some favored harsher treatment than others, feeling the danger of laxity creeping in. Both sides were otherwise orthodox in doctrine, so Cyprian could not base unity on agreed upon doctrine. Instead, he links unity to communion with the bishops. The bishops "locate" the true church for individuals. Early on, Cyprian seemed to give some sort of primacy to the bishop of Rome, but in the end, he advocated submission to the bishops as a whole as the key to a proper relationship to the church. He underscored the importance of a right relationship to the church in famous statements such as, "You cannot have God for your Father unless you have the Church for your Mother," and "there is no salvation outside the Church."

B. The Post-Constantine Church (312-450).

While the genuineness of Constantine's conversion is disputed, its effect upon the church is not. Immediately, there was a virtual stampede of candidates into the priesthood, not due to a new surge of piety, but due to the pursuit of political power, which accompanied the new prestige and imperial patronage Christianity received. As the union of church and state progressed, the church made it easier and easier to enter the church. Rodney Stark says, "the Church made it easy to become a Christian—so easy that actual conversion seldom occurred," (Stark, *For the Glory of God*, 40).

It was the church of this era that was described in the four classical marks, placed in the Nicene Creed more than fifty years after its initial development: "I believe . . . one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church." (Interestingly, the so called Apostles Creed omits the last mark, simply affirming belief in "the Holy Catholic Church"). I believe these marks emerged as the church struggled to distinguish itself from rivals in the patristic context; that is to say, I do not think they emerge naturally as key characteristics of the church as presented in the New Testament. However, since these four marks are the major legacy from this era of the church, and continue to shape much of contemporary thought about the church, it is important to see how they were understood and applied to the church for the next thousand years.

1. The unity of the church was a rarely questioned assumption from the days of Augustine. Theologically, it was associated with being in communion with the bishops, and as time went on, especially with the bishop of Rome. Initially, the bishop of Rome was one of a number of bishops, but the claim to having Peter and Paul as the founders of the church in Rome, along with the natural prominence of the church in the capital of the Empire, along with a questionable understanding of Matt. 16:18, led to the increasing dominance of the bishop of Rome. The oneness of the church was seen as institutional, visible, actual terms, and for centuries there was only one form of the church anywhere in the world.

But in time, the growing claims of the bishops of Rome were challenged by the bishops in the Eastern churches, who increasingly accepted the honorary primacy of the Patriarch of Constantinople, the ancient eastern capital of the Empire. There were political as well as theological elements of their disagreements, but the culmination came in 1054, when the bishop of Rome and the patriarch of Constantinople mutually excommunicated one another, and the church was divided into *Roman Catholic* and *Eastern Orthodox*. To this day, one non-negotiable condition of Roman Catholics for reunion with other branches of the church is acceptance of what they call “the Petrine ministry,” the role of the Pope as symbolizing and promoting the unity of the Church. In the Reformation era, unity was redefined as pertaining only to the invisible church, in which all believers have a spiritual unity.

What are some helpful ways a local church can show that they believe that the body of Christ is larger than their local church and reflect their oneness with other Christians?

2. Holiness. The idea of the Church as a *corpus permixtum* made any affirmation of the church’s holiness problematic. Augustine argued that the holiness of the church was that of its head, Jesus Christ, and would be true of its members only eschatologically. In practice, the *corpus permixtum* was challenged by the rise of monasticism. Those in the monastic movement overwhelmingly saw themselves as loyal members of the one church. But they did feel compelled to pursue a deeper, more holy life, which they concluded was not possible as a normal member of the church of their day. Some would argue that what there was of genuine piety and holiness of life in the church from Constantine to the Reformation was found in the various monastic orders that developed.

3. Catholic. The word “catholic” is first applied to the church in the writings of Ignatius of Antioch (c. 112), who said, “where Jesus Christ is, there is the catholic church.” By the third century, catholic came to mean orthodox, as opposed to heretical or schismatic. Still later, it acquired the connotation of universal geographically. Cyril of Jerusalem, writing c. 350, said the church may be called catholic “because it extends all over the world” and is composed of all classes of people, as well as because it teaches orthodox doctrine. Yet when the churches in the East separated from those in the West over the primacy of the bishop of Rome, the church in Rome, somewhat arrogantly, continued to call itself “catholic,” though it was by no means universal or encompassing all Christians (then or at any time since).

4. Apostolic. Of the four classical marks, apostolicity was destined to have

the most far-reaching effect due to the claims made on the basis of supposed apostolic succession (the idea that the power and authority of the apostles is passed on to those ordained by their successors). The Reformers rightly returned to the view that apostolicity refers to the church's submission to the apostolic writings, found in the New Testament.

Many Protestants in the churches of the Reformation would continue to affirm their belief in the four classical marks, but would see the unity of the church in spiritual terms, rather than organizational or institutional, and bounded by the gospel (see the essays by Richard Phillips, Philip Ryken and Mark Dever, *The Church: One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic*). In fact, all four of these marks seem to turn us back to the importance of the gospel for the church. The church's **unity** extends to all who believe the gospel; the church's **holiness** is the gift we receive in the gospel; our **catholicity** is rooted in the fact that the gospel is destined to be preached in all the world before the end comes; and our **apostolicity** is found in retaining the apostolic gospel. This would seem to indicate that the gospel is more central to the church than these classical marks.

II. The Medieval Church (500-1500). The Middle Ages is sometimes referred to as the Dark Ages, as if no learning or progress occurred during this millennium. That is true to a degree of the first half, but from 1000 on there was significant development, as several important theologians emerged. Even in the earlier years, there were a few bright spots. We will mention two large movements, both having their roots in the patristic period but enjoying their greatest development during this period.

A. The Monastic Movement. During the medieval period and beyond, the source of most spirituality and devotion in the Catholic Church has been the various monastic orders. Rodney Stark (*For The Glory of God*) sees the conversion of Constantine as the catalyst for the development of two churches: the Church of Power represented by the official, institutional Church, and the Church of Piety represented by monasticism. The variety of movements under the umbrella of monasticism is not well understood by most Protestants, but it should be; monasticism was the primary source of most of what is of value from the medieval church, though it was not without its faults as well.

While there were a few early solitary monks, the more dominant form of monasticism has been communal, where monks live a common life together. In the West, the most important name in monastic history is that of Benedict of Nursia, whose Rule became incredibly influential, because, while strict by contemporary standards, it avoided some of the extreme asceticism found in some forms, and inculcated stability, spirituality, and monastic zeal. Most of the thousands of monks from 500-1200 were Benedictine, though from 900-1200, there were successive reform movements within monasticism, which was itself a reform movement. The problem was usually money. Monks were respected for their holiness, and people would often leave them money and lands in their wills. The church would have to get involved in worldly affairs, such as managing its lands, and it would lose its focus on spirituality. At their best, monks focused on prayer (seven hours a day), keeping learning alive (the copying on manuscripts of Scripture and other literature), and missionary efforts (sometimes accidental but sometimes intentional, as those from the monastery of Iona).

At the beginning of the 13th century, two orders developed along new lines. They did not own any property, either individually or corporately, and they sought not seclusion but service in the world. They lived in the developing towns and lived by the work of their hands or by begging (mendicants). These two orders were the Franciscans and the Dominicans. The former, under the leadership of Francis of Assisi (1181-1226), began with a strict commitment to poverty and involvement in ministries of teaching, preaching, caring for the sick, and one brief emphasis on missions. After Francis' death, the standards were relaxed and they gained control of vast tracts of land, with spirituality suffering. The Dominicans, under the Spaniard St. Dominic (1170-1221), focused specifically on the ministry of teaching and began to supply the growing universities with teachers, including the most famous of Dominicans, Thomas Aquinas. They, along with the Cistercians, were among the developers of the Rosary, in which meditation on the Fifteen Mysteries of the lives of Christ and his mother is accompanied by the numerous repetitions of the Ave Maria (Luke 1:28) and the Lord's Prayer.

B. Sacramental Theology. The other important ecclesiological idea to trace in the medieval church is the rise of sacramental theology, which continued up to the Reformation.

The very term sacrament is used very loosely in the early church. Substantive discussion of the meaning and nature of a sacrament begins with Augustine, who gave the famous definition of a sacrament as "a visible form of an invisible grace," or "a sign of a sacred thing," yet Augustine saw the creed, the Lord's Prayer and a number of other things as qualifying under his definition. Hugh of St. Victor and Peter of Lombard added other elements of definition, such as some indication of the authorization or institution of the sacrament, the use of a material element with some sort of likeness to that which is signified, and the power of a sacrament to communicate benefit to those who participate in it (and to do so in an automatic manner, called *ex opere operato*). Peter Lombard (c. 1150) was the first to insist on a list of seven sacraments: baptism, confirmation, eucharist, penance, extreme unction, ordination, and marriage. This list was officially ratified in 1215 at the Fourth Lateran Council. Protestants limited sacraments to those clearly instituted by Christ and directly related to the gospel. On these grounds, only baptism and the eucharist qualify. To a degree, this is a semantic battle, since, on the one hand, the New Testament does not use the word sacrament, nor give a definition for it, and, on the other hand, many Protestant churches practice confirmation, ordination, and marriage, and Luther saw penance, if properly practiced, as a great aid in a Christian's life. More important than the word itself is the meaning attached to the word and these practices. A number of problematic ideas became attached to these practices over the course of time, the most important being the idea that they automatically confer grace.

Baptism began as an event following fairly closely after faith in the New Testament, signifying identification with Christ and the body of believers. It became more and more delayed in the patristic era (partly to insure regenerate baptism and partly due to fear of post-baptismal sin not being forgiven), and then later became very early. Infant baptism was becoming the norm by the time of Augustine, and was supported by the idea that it washed away the stain of original sin, without which an infant could not enter heaven. Infant baptism inherently involves the idea of an automatic benefit, since the infant in no way actively participates in the act.

A number of dubious beliefs became attached to the eucharist during this period. The idea that the elements are the real, physical body and blood of Christ was one that developed slowly and intermittently over the course of church history. There are phrases that appear early on that speak of the body and blood in ways that could be literal, or could be poetic or symbolic. Augustine at one point speaks of the need to distinguish between the sign and the thing signified. There were scholarly debates in the ninth and eleventh centuries over the idea of real presence, and the idea of transubstantiation was not formally approved until 1215. Other ideas that crept in with little discussion were the ideas that transubstantiation was effected by the pronouncement of a priest, that it involves a bloodless sacrifice of Christ, and that it conveys grace automatically to the recipient.

III. The Church in the Reformation.

Timothy George, in *Theology of the Reformers*, notes that the years leading up to the Reformation saw “an explosion of interest in ecclesiology.” Perhaps it was the Avignon Captivity, or the Great Schism, or the abuses and corruption common among the clergy, or the general air of anxiety of the time, but whatever the cause, there was a quest for the true church from the fourteenth century onward. The Reformation discussed the quest for the true church under the idea of the marks of a true church.

A. The meaning of the marks. Europeans in the era of the Reformation faced a new and troubling question: where do I find the true church? While, as we noted above, it had been the subject of discussion for decades, now there were viable, competing churches in their midst. How was one to find a true church, especially if he believed, as had been taught for centuries, that there is no salvation outside the church?

There was general agreement among the Reformers that where there was the true preaching of the Word and the right administration of the sacraments, there was a true church. Some added discipline as a third mark, and at one point, Luther offered seven marks. Then, he said they all boil down to the one mark of the Word. But, a question not often discussed is where they got these two marks. I can find no place in Scripture that suggests them, nor do they seem clearly implied by biblical teaching on the church. These facts raise a further question. Are the Reformation marks adequate?

I think they are of great value if we understand them in their context. For the Reformers, the preaching of the Word was virtually equivalent to the preaching of the gospel. Luther loved to cite Romans 10:17 and believed that faith was born in people when they heard the preaching of the Word. Similarly, the emphasis on the right administration of the sacraments was necessary due to the fact that the Catholic practice of the sacraments obscured the gospel. These two marks serve to safeguard the gospel, and the gospel is a non-negotiable essential for a true church. Without the gospel, a group may be a religious society or a moral club, but they are not a Christian church, because without the gospel they are not Christian.

The Reformation marks were helpful in their context because they safeguarded the gospel, which, as Paul Avis rightly sees, forms the center of the church (see his *The Church in the Theology of the Reformers*). But these marks are not easily transferred to other contexts. For

example, Landmark Baptists in the 19th century reasoned that they could not call Methodist and Presbyterian groups churches because they did not practice baptism and the Supper as Jesus had prescribed. They did not rightly administer the sacraments (which Baptists preferred calling ordinances); thus, they failed to meet the Reformation doctrine of a true church. But I think to apply the Reformation marks in the 19th century context, a second question needed to be asked: is the error in the administration of the sacraments such that the gospel is obscured or threatened? If not, the church may be an imperfect (or irregular) church, but a true church nonetheless. In fact, if any error in the administration of the sacraments makes a church no longer a true church, then any Baptist church which mistakenly baptizes someone who is not genuinely regenerate forfeits their status as a church. Moreover, in our context the Reformation marks may not be enough.

The gospel was the meaning behind the Reformation marks. The gospel is the center of any true church. And, the gospel was the crucial need for their day. But other contexts may require new formulations of the marks of a true church to meet new challenges.

B. Disagreements over the marks. While there was general agreement over the two marks themselves, there was widespread disagreement over the application of the marks to a given group. Early on, Luther and Zwingli could not agree on the right understanding of the Supper. The Anabaptists raised a challenge over the issue of the proper subjects of baptism. Later on, discussions and differences arose over various forms of church government and church officers. These disagreements led to the development of Lutheran churches, Reformed churches (of various types in Switzerland, Germany, France, Holland, England and Scotland), and varieties of Anabaptist, Mennonite, and Baptist churches. In fact, this disagreement, along with a variety of other factors, led to ever increasing divisions within Protestantism, which characterizes the post-Reformation history of Protestantism.

IV. The Post-Reformation Era.

While the Great Awakenings had tremendous importance for the vitality and spread of the church, ecclesologically there was little change in the centuries following the Reformation. Churches continued to split and denominations proliferate, mostly along the lines of traditionally controverted issues (church government, sacraments, ordinances, etc.) We may trace this proliferation in several stages.

The churches of the Reformation, Lutheran and Reformed, further subdivided, with most of the splintering coming among those with Reformed roots. England, once loosed from Rome, produced Anglicans, Presbyterians and Baptists, mostly over differences in polity and the ordinances). The Anglicans, via John Wesley, produced Methodism, as Anglicans opposed the “new birth” preaching of Wesley. Disputes over sanctification within Methodism led to dozens of holiness churches, which formed the seedbed for Pentecostalism, once the distinctive of tongue speaking was added.

Further fracturing occurred in the early twentieth century as a result of the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy. When conservatives in many denominations saw their seminaries and institutions controlled by liberals, they revolted. Many formed new

denominations; others formed independent churches, a relatively new development. The drive for theological purity has continued to be a factor in church and denominational splits.

This long process of denominational proliferation can be summarized in a few curt phrases.

Splits over the gospel: Catholics and Protestants

Splits over the Lord's Supper: Catholics vs. Lutherans vs. Reformed vs. Baptists

Splits over baptism: Everyone else (paedobaptists) vs. Anabaptists/Baptists

Splits over polity: Catholics/Anglicans/Methodists vs. Presbyterians vs. Cong/Baptists

Splits over tongues: Everyone else, including holiness churches vs. Pentecostals

Splits over the Bible: Fundamentalists vs. Modernists

Which of these are important enough to split over? Which require local churches to make a choice? What about you? Could you be a member of a church that practiced infant baptism? That was ruled by elders? That practiced speaking in tongues? That doubted the Bible's authority?

V. 20th Century Developments.

A. The ecumenical movement. Perhaps in reaction to the explosion of differing denominations, the 20th century saw the development of a strong ecumenical movement, with emphasis on Jesus' statement in John 17:23 that the world would know the Father sent the Son by the unity shown by those who believe in Christ. Indeed, the modern ecumenical movement grew out of the 1910 Edinburgh Missionary Conference, in which the divisions of the church were viewed as one of the barriers to the spread of the church. Over the years, however, the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy brought most mainline Protestant churches to a more liberal theology, and by the time the World Council of Churches was formed (1948), the most the member churches could agree on as a statement of faith was a bare confession of Jesus Christ. Moreover, most of the member denominations, especially those from the U.S., had lost much of their missionary zeal. Some of the support they did lend to supposed missionary efforts was misguided at best. For example, the WCC and NCC angered many supporters for their financial support of Marxist groups in Latin America who claimed to be liberators of the poor, but in a number of cases, fomented violent revolutions.

Among evangelicals, there have been a number of parachurch organizations that gave some visible expression to evangelical unity, but it was a unity that developed out of common doctrinal convictions, especially concerning the gospel. Evangelicals have generally seen the unity Jesus prayed for as involving more spiritual unity than organizational or institutional. For the most part, they have been less attracted by the benefits of establishing full communion across denominational lines than they have been fearful of the dangers of doctrinal compromise that

would be involved in the establishing of formal relationships. Yet, evangelicals maintain a remarkable network of organizations that do allow for something of an evangelical ecumenism.

In the post-modern context, there is not so much an active interest in ecumenism as there is apathy toward denominationalism and denominational distinctives and an acceptance of diversity in the areas that have traditionally divided denominations (the ordinances/sacraments and polity). To be sure, denominational distinctives are what we may call second order doctrines and are not as important as first order doctrines, which involve the doctrines essential and central to being a Christian. However, we would echo the words of the 19th century Baptist, John Dagg: “Church order and the ceremonials of religion are less important than a new heart; and in the view of some, any laborious investigation of questions respecting them may appear to be needless and unprofitable. But we know, from the Holy Scriptures, that Christ gave commands on these subjects, and we cannot refuse to obey” (*Manual of Theology*, 12). Thus, while I gladly affirm unity in the gospel with many other groups of Christians, I also gladly affirm that my understanding of Scripture leads me to be a convinced Baptist on matters such as church order that are secondary but are matters that must be addressed by any church.

B. Vatican II. Over the twenty centuries of church history, there have been twenty-one councils recognized by the Catholic Church (from Nicaea in 325 to the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, to the Council of Trent from 1545-1563, to the first council held in Vatican City from 1869-1870, to Vatican II, held in four sessions stretching from 1962-1965). It was called by Pope John XXIII, who was elected at the age of 77 with the expectation that he would be a caretaker Pope until the College of Cardinals could come up with a more suitable candidate at his death. Pope John XXIII did live only five years as Pope, but they were five years filled with transforming activity for the Catholic Church. By far, the most important event of his papacy was the calling of a general church council, the first in eighty years, with the goals of updating the Church and promoting world peace and Christian unity.

Vatican II was by far the largest council in terms of delegates and representation of various nations and cultures (1089 bishops from Europe, 489 from South America, 404 from North America, 374 from Asia, 296 from Africa, 84 from Central America, and 75 from Oceania). It is hard to overstate the transforming impact of this council on the Catholic Church of the past forty years. The bishops debated almost every aspect of the Church’s life and issued sixteen documents, mandating significant changes in worship, religious liberty, relationships to other churches and world religions, and the world as a whole. Richard McBrien argues that all sixteen documents “are concerned, in one way or another, with the mystery of the Church,” (*Catholicism*, 668). In other words, the changes in practice which came out of Vatican II were rooted in a new ecclesiology. That ecclesiology is summarized in a helpful way by Richard McBrien (see *Catholicism*, 683-688).

PART C: THE POLITY OF THE CHURCH OUTLINE

I. Introduction: The Importance of Church Polity.

II. Major Forms of Church Government.

- A. Episcopalianism.
- B. Presbyterianism.
- C. Congregationalism.

III. Church Leaders.

- A. Pastors.
 - 1. Their functions.
 - 2. Their qualifications.
 - 3. Their selection.
 - 4. Their number and tenure.
- B. Deacons.
 - 1. Their origin.
 - 2. Their function or responsibilities.
 - 3. Their qualifications.
 - 4. Their selection.
 - 5. Their number and tenure.
 - 6. “Their wives” (I Tim. 3:11).

C. The Meaning of Ordination.

IV. Church Members.

- A. Biblical Basis for Church Members.
- B. Requirements for Church Membership.
 - 1. Faith.
 - 2. Baptism.
 - 3. Covenant Commitment.
- C. Practical Steps in Receiving Members.
- D. Privileges and Responsibilities of Membership.
 - 1. What members receive.
 - 2. What members give.
- E. Two Final Questions

I. Introduction: The Importance of Church Polity.

There are some who would object to devoting much time to the study of church polity, or how the church governs itself. Some would emphasize that the church is more an organism than an organization, and see institutionalism and bureaucracies as major hindrances to vitality and vibrancy in churches. Most biblical commentators note that the New Testament does not give a blueprint for church polity. There are differences in terminology and levels of development within the New Testament churches themselves. Indeed, there is some evidence that the major forms of church government owe as much to the political contexts in which they developed as they do to Scripture. And some would say that the issue of polity must not matter much to God since he has blessed and used churches that operate under a variety of polities.

While there is a measure of truth in all these objections, they are not the whole truth. True, the church is an organism, but there is ample evidence that this organism did adopt an organizational framework with recognized leadership (Acts 13:1, 14:23, 20:17, Phil. 1:1, I Tim. 3, Titus 1), enough of an idea of membership to recognize those within and without (I Cor. 5:12-13), regular meetings (Acts 20:7, I Cor. 16:2), some means of enforcing order (Matt. 18:15-17, I Cor. 5:4-5, II Thess. 3:6-15), and making decisions (Acts 6:3, 14:23 implies election of elders). Practically, any time a number of people gather together to act as a corporate entity, there will be some means for making decisions. It is unavoidable.

As to the diversity within the New Testament and the lack of a blueprint, the diversity is to be expected in the beginning stages of the church. Our task is to take all the clues of the New Testament and seek to follow those clues as fully as possible. The lack of a detailed blueprint has been helpful in allowing the church to adapt to all the cultures of the world, but there are some important principles of polity in Scripture that seem most conducive to church health in all cultures.

As to the evident blessing of God on different polities, you could say the same about different soteriologies (Arminian vs. Calvinist) or different anthropologies (egalitarian vs. complementarian) or eschatologies (premillennial vs. post- or amillennial), yet no one says these are unimportant or not worthy of study. God blesses imperfect people and imperfect theologies, for that is all there are! But, that does not excuse theological laziness, any more than God's ability to use sinful people excuses a lack of zeal for holiness. At the same time, I think God's blessing on different polities may also indicate that the character of the leaders of churches is more important than the pattern of government they follow. Good leaders will bless the churches they lead under any system; poor leaders will have a negative effect under any system. But I believe following Scripture will maximize good leadership and minimize the effects of bad leadership.

II. Major types of church government (see Hammett, 139, 141, and 145 for a diagram of each form).

A. Episcopalianism: government by the bishop (Greek: *episkopos*, overseer). In this system, the ultimate power of government rests in the hands of the bishop(s). The basis for this power is the idea that the bishop was ordained by another bishop ordained by another bishop back to the apostles who were ordained by Christ. Thus, their power is based on ordination that goes back in succession to Christ. Bishops do not so much lead local churches as they oversee (the meaning of *episkopeo*) the leaders of local churches (called priests, rectors, ministers, or even deacons) in the area under their jurisdiction (a diocese or district).

This type of government is hierarchical and clerical, with a sharp lay/clergy distinction. It is found in the clearest form in Catholicism, in a milder form in Anglicanism and Episcopalianism, and in a modified form in Methodism.

Advocates of this position acknowledge that there is no clear example of their type of bishop in the NT, but argue that James in the church in Jerusalem was moving in this direction, and that Timothy and Titus acted in many ways similar to modern bishops. Their strongest

argument is from history. The early church has at least some evidence of this pattern early in the second century, and by the middle of the third century, the bishops were seen as the guarantors of the church's identity and unity. For almost all of the first sixteen centuries of the church's existence, episcopal government was the only form known to the church. Advocates argue that God would not have allowed error to continue so long and unchallenged in his church.

This historical argument has some weight, but Scripture ultimately trumps history, and the biblical objections against this form are substantial. First, the examples cited from Scripture of supposed examples of episcopal government are really not very supportive of the Episcopalian position. Second, the idea of apostolic succession is not a NT idea; indeed, Acts 1:21-22 and the foundational role of the apostles argues for the unique non-transmittable nature of their authority and office. Third, the separation of the offices of bishop, as that of administrative oversight, and elder/presbyter/pastor, as the leader of a local congregation, cannot be sustained exegetically. Fourth, the priesthood of all believers argues against the understanding of ordination as conferring a special power and against the whole idea of clergy and laity. In short, this system has very little Scriptural basis and involves some serious theological problems.

B. Presbyterianism: government by elders (Greek: *presbuteros*). This involves a succession of bodies. The local church is governed by a session (elders elected by the congregation, sometimes called ruling elders and teaching elders, with the latter being the pastor and, at times, other members of the ministerial staff); the sessions send representatives (usually ministers and one ruling or lay elder from each session) to the Presbytery of their district. Each Presbytery sends representatives to the Synod, which is over a larger area, and they send representatives to the General Assembly, usually a national body. Usually these bodies are divided between ministers and laity (teaching and ruling elders).

This form of government is most thoroughly practiced by Presbyterians, though many independent churches have elder rule on a local level. There is a trend among some Baptist churches of incorporating the local aspect of elder rule into their polity, though they do not have the levels of presbytery or synod.

There is some Scriptural support for the idea of elders. The Jewish synagogue was ruled by elders (see Lk. 7:3, among many references in the gospels), and the church originated out of an initially Jewish context. Acts 14:23 says Paul and Barnabas either appointed elders or had them elected (the Greek verb *cheirotoneo* can be translated "appoint" or "elect by raising hands;" see also II Cor. 8:9). Acts 20:17, Tit. 1:5, and James 5:14 speak specifically of church elders, and when it is recognized that bishops and elders are used interchangeably in Scripture (compare Acts 20:17, 28; Titus 1:5, 7), we may add verses like Phil. 1:1 and I Tim. 3:1-7. Some would say that verses like I Thess. 5:12-13 and Heb. 13:17 speak of the ministry of elders even though they do not use either *episkopos* or *presbuteros*.

The distinction between teaching and ruling elders is based on I Tim. 5:17, though they are regarded as equally elders, with no hierarchy above them. Extra-local church bodies such as presbyteries, synods, and general assemblies are justified by the precedent of the Jerusalem council (Acts 15:1-35), but it could be argued as well that they are to be valid manifestations of the truth that the body of Christ is larger than the local church.

The biggest problem congregationalists have with presbyterianism is the idea that elders rule, or govern the church. The key word here is *prohistemi*, which is used in connection with church leadership in I Tim. 5:17; Rom. 12:8; I Thess. 5:12; I Tim. 3:4, 5, 12; and Titus 3:8, 14. The word can carry either a strong, authoritative tone, or a more gentle, nurturing tone. What determines the issue for me is the role assigned to the church. It seems that ultimate governance is given to the congregation, while elders are to exercise leadership, but not governance.

C. Congregationalism: (government by congregation). In this form, all the members of the local congregation are the final human authority for the church. They may elect leaders who have certain responsibilities, based on divinely given gifts and callings, but their authority is that of servant-leaders, exercised under that of the congregation. These leaders are most often called pastors and deacons, though some congregations function with a board of elders under ultimate congregational authority.

This model also involves local church autonomy (also called non-connectional church government). There is no body higher than the local church that can interfere with its internal workings. Its cooperation with other larger associations and conventions, while theologically more important than modern Baptists realize, is voluntary and non-coercive.

The case for congregationalism consists of seven major texts, implications from a number of larger theological themes and ideas, plus historical and practical support.

1. Biblical bases for congregational government.

The seven major texts are Matt. 18:15-20 (the church as the final court in church discipline), Acts 6:3 (the congregation selecting the first “deacons”), Acts 13:2-3 (the church sending out the first missionaries), Acts 15:22 (the church’s role in the resolution of a question of doctrine), I Cor. 5:2, II Cor. 2:6, and I Tim. 5:19-20 (all dealing with the church’s authority to act in matters of discipline).

In addition, the dominant usage of *ekklesia* for local assemblies supports the idea of local autonomy, which congregationalism supports. The images for the church in the New Testament are all non-hierarchical and more like a family, which seems to be more fully reflected in congregational polity. Paul seems to have seen the church as ultimately responsible, for he addressed most of his letters to the churches, not their leaders, and reported back to the church that sent him after his first missionary trip (see Acts 14:26-28).

2. Theological themes.

a. A major emphasis in most arguments for congregationalism is the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers (I Pet. 2:9), in which all believers possess the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:17), and thus can receive the guidance of the Lord. In a world where all believers are fallen and fallible, advocates of congregationalism believe the likeliest way for a church to hear God's voice and follow His leading is for all the believer-priests of that church to seek the

Spirit's guidance and share what they hear from the Lord. From that process, a consensus should emerge that can enable the church to go forward in unity and confidence.

This, of course, presupposes a congregation of members who are all regenerate and in touch with the Holy Spirit. I believe part of the reason why some Baptist churches are turning toward elder rule is the failure to restrict church membership to those who show evidence of regeneration. This is why many pastors dread the idea of church business meetings. What should be a corporate seeking of the mind of the Spirit becomes an occasion for carnal bickering. Also, in many churches there is little interest among the members in self-government. In practice, they are pastor-governed or pastor and deacon governed. But I think, while such a practice may seem more peaceful and efficient, in the end it impoverishes and weakens the church. It virtually denies the priesthood of all believers, robs the church of any wisdom the Spirit may give members, encourages consumer members rather than committed members, and may weaken widespread “ownership” of the church’s vision and direction.

Thus, I believe the need of the moment is not stronger pastoral leadership, or elder rule, but reformed congregations, able to participate responsibly in governing themselves, under proper pastoral leadership. Later, we will, in some detail, address the importance of regenerate church membership, especially for Baptist churches, and suggest some practical steps to take toward developing congregations composed of members capable of responsible self-government (see the chapters by Hammett and Dever in *Restoring Integrity in Baptist Churches*, eds. T. White, J. Duesing, and M. Yarnell).

b. Still another Scriptural theme supporting the self-government of the local church is the Lordship of Jesus over the local church. Advocates of congregationalism believe that surrendering the ultimate government of the local church to a bishop, presbytery, or any other human body may restrict the capacity of the local church to follow the Lord's will for their church. Thus, they advocate cooperative relationships with other churches of like faith and order, but the closest they can go toward connectionalism is a voluntary, non-coercive connectionalism.

c. It could also be argued that the Great Commission indirectly supports congregationalism, for part of mature discipleship would surely be a concern for the direction and welfare of one’s local church. Indeed, how could a pastor lead his people to maturity but restrict their participation in the major decisions affecting the church?

3. Historical evidence. Beyond Scripture, there is some support for congregationalism historically. Mark Dever states, “Friends, the verdict of history is in. While it is clear that no certain polity prevents churches from error, from declension, and from sterility, the more centralized polities seem to have a worse track record than does congregationalism in maintaining a faithful, vital, evangelical witness.” He adds, “Could it be that the gospel itself is so simple and clear, and the relationship that we have with God by the Holy Spirit’s action in giving us the new birth is so real that the collection of those who believe the gospel and who know God are the best guardians of that gospel? Doesn’t that seem to be what we see in the Scriptures?” (*A Display of God’s Glory*, 38-39). The remarkable reversal of direction in the SBC

called the conservative resurgence would have been difficult if not impossible under a polity other than congregationalism.

4. Practical support. Finally, there is practical support for congregationalism. In the end, people will have their say. Either they will have a way to express their opinions and be heard, or they will vote with their feet and their pocketbook. Congregationalism, faithfully followed, has a much better chance of developing committed members who have a sense of ownership in the welfare of the church that keeps them involved and connected even when some decisions may not go the way they would have liked. At least they had a voice and a vote.

We may acknowledge that there is no blueprint laid down in the NT for church government. God has seen fit to bless churches using all three forms of government down through history. The key seems to be more the character of those exercising leadership than the framework in which they work. Still, I prefer working within a congregational framework. I think it best allows for a valid role for called and gifted leaders, while preserving the equality and priesthood of all believers within the body, and the liberty of the local body to follow the Lordship of Jesus in their congregational life.

How important is “having a say” in developing committed members? Is it easier for you to more strongly support a decision made after opportunity for input than decisions made unilaterally?

III. Church leaders. Here we will look at how church leaders are seen within a congregational framework. We should begin by emphasizing the fact that these leaders are not clergy, as opposed to laity. That distinction is a Catholic idea. It is non-Scriptural, and continues to be a curse to the church. Leaders are leaders because they have gifts that equip them to serve in those areas, just as encouragers encourage because they have that gift, and prayer warriors pray because they have that gift. Leadership must be gift-based, not status based, for we all have the same status: believer-priests.

Having said that, let me also say that leadership is also incredibly important, as your own observation and experience and every study of vibrant churches affirms. Baptists and most other congregationalists have generally recognized two types of official church leaders: pastors and deacons.

A. Pastors. We could use the term elder or even bishop for this office, since the three terms are used interchangeably. Some have recently argued that in the first century context, there could have been one overseer of a house church, and a council of elders over all the congregations in a city (see the works of Kevin Giles and Andrew Clarke), but the evidence from Scripture seems clearly to indicate otherwise (see the works of Ben Merkle). Acts 20 is the clearest example. In v. 17, he sends for the elders. In v. 28, he tells them the Holy Spirit has made them overseers (the word is bishop), and that their job is to pastor (be shepherds) God's church. Similar examples can be found by comparing Titus 1:5 and 7 or I Peter 5:1-2, where again, those called “elders” are told to “shepherd” the church and serve as “overseers.”

The noun "pastor" occurs only in Eph. 4:11, in conjunction with teacher. Baptists in the past used the more prevalent term "elder," but "pastor," which describes one of the functions of the office, is almost universal today. I have no problem with any of these three; I oppose using minister, for it implies that the other members of the congregation are not ministers, which is untrue.

1. Their functions. Gathering together all the verses that refer to elders/overseers/pastors, along with verses that refer to leaders without using any of these terms, we offer the following as a list of Scriptures relevant to the job of a pastor: Acts 20:28-31, Rom. 12:8, Eph. 4:11-16, I Thess. 5:12, I Tim. 3:1-7, I Tim. 5:17, Titus 1:5-9, Heb. 13:7, 17, I Pet. 5:1-4. From these, every prospective pastor would do well to construct his own job description. I see four primary responsibilities:

(a) Preaching and teaching the word of God. This is why all elders must be "able to teach" (I Tim. 3:2), why the gifts of pastor and teacher are joined in Eph. 4:11, why leaders are those "who spoke the word of God to you" (Heb. 13:7). Pastoral ministry must be the ministry of the word. Thus, every pastor should feel he has some gifts in the areas of communicating God's word (whether it is called preaching, teaching, prophecy, exhortation or anything else).

(b) Giving leadership to the church. This extends to every area: administrative leadership, leading in vision, in spirituality, and in overall ministry. I think this is what I Tim. 5:17 refers to as "directing the affairs of the church;" I think it is implied in the gift listed in Rom. 12:8; I think it is implied in the requirement that an elder be able to manage his own family well (I Tim. 3:4-5); it is implied in the very word overseer (*episkopos*, one who looks over).

Those who hold to elder rule believe this function of leadership involves governing or ruling, and cite I Thess. 5:12 and Heb. 13:17 as support. I think pastoral authority and church authority in general has been suppressed by American individualism, but I do not believe the verses cited can bear the weight of elder rule. Pastors should be respected, and their leadership followed, but never uncritically. The verse normally cited as justification for elder rule, I Tim. 5:17, is closely followed by instructions on how to handle the discipline of elders. Thus, I conclude that the authority of the congregation is ultimately above that of the pastor. At heart, his true authority is that earned by service, sacrifice, and example.

(c) Pastoring the flock of God. While this includes feeding them on the word and leading them, it also involves more personal ministry: individual counseling and training, ministry in times of grief and crisis, visitation for encouragement and admonition (Acts 20:28-31, I Thess. 5:12, I Pet. 5:2). While Heb. 13:17 is often cited as support for the authority of pastors, it should also be noted for its warning about the accountability of pastors. I wonder if pastors, especially pastors of megachurches or rapidly growing churches, often ponder the fact that they will have to "give an account" for those under their care (see the quotation from John Brown cited by Dever in *A Theology for the Church*, 797). Pastoral oversight is one of the unacknowledged problems in churches that grow to even a moderate size and is a major argument both for vital small groups and multiple elders.

(d) Being an example of Christian character. The list of qualifications in I Tim. 3 and Titus 1 are largely matters of character, and are qualities every Christian is commanded to seek. But leaders are to be those who have made some progress in these areas, who have a level of spiritual maturity. They will not be perfect, but they must be examples (I Pet. 5:3). This leads naturally into the next issue:

2. Their qualifications (I Tim. 3:1-7, Titus 1:5-9, perhaps II Tim. 2:24-26). There are five issues we need to surface here.

(a) Most of these verses deal with matters of character. As we just said, virtually all that is asked of a leader is asked of all Christians; he just has to be progressing in these areas. This is necessary if he is to be the example he is called to be, and as he will surely be expected to be.

(b) Marriage and family life. I think the perspective on character helps us interpret the difficult phrase, "husband of one wife." The phrase has been interpreted to mean not a polygamist, no divorce and/or remarriage ever for any reason, no more nor less than one wife (excluding singles and widowed), one woman unless biblically justified divorce and remarriage, and "a one woman kind of man." The last option, I interpret in keeping with the other examples of character: that he is able in this area, as others, to serve as an example to the flock. And as a single instance of contentiousness or getting drunk once in college does not automatically disqualify one from pastoral ministry, neither does a divorce in the past, if the individual has proven in the years since then to be a worthy example of what a Christian husband and father should be.

I realize in saying this I may be accused of being soft, liberal, or giving in to contemporary realities. In defense, I can say with all honesty before God that I simply believe this is the best interpretation in keeping with the whole tenor of the passage, and I have been encouraged to find others coming to the same conclusion. I think this also allows some room for single pastors (though I think such a pastor would be at an enormous disadvantage), and for married pastors who do not yet have children. A woodenly literal interpretation must exclude both categories. Neither do I accept the idea that if the divorce was pre-conversion, it is acceptable. Are sins committed before conversion more forgiven than sins committed after conversion? I think not.

However, I do not feel so certain in my interpretation that I am unwilling to consider other views, and could even be a submissive member of a church that took a different view. In Baptist ecclesiology, it is ultimately a local church's decision.

(c) Maturity (I Tim. 3:6). This is certainly a reference to spiritual maturity, rather than physical. At the same time, it has some wisdom to offer young pastors. It is not insignificant that one of the terms for church leaders is borrowed from the practice of Israel, "elder," which certainly carried with it the idea of age. One of the most valuable experiences a young pastor should seek is the chance to serve an apprenticeship with a more experienced pastor. It may be informal, while you are here in seminary. It may be serving on

the staff of a church. It may be a friendship with an older pastor after you leave and are pastoring. In any case, Scripture indicates that wisdom should come with years. It is not always so, but do not quickly dismiss wisdom gained from experience.

(d) Gifts of leadership and teaching. While most of the items on the list of qualifications are qualities that every Christian should seek, there are also two gifts that are given at the discretion of God: the ability to teach and the ability to manage. It may be argued that the second can be learned, but if so, it should be a skill already learned to some degree by the pastor.

(e) A call from God? This is in no list of qualifications in Scripture, but is on most seminary applications, and asked by most search and ordination committees. Is it a Scriptural idea? There is certainly the call to ministry, but that is given to every believer (I Pet. 4:10). There is certainly evidence of God's leadership and guidance in individual situations in Scripture (see Acts 8:26-29, 13:1-3), but there is little evidence of some special call.

I think the call to vocational ministry must be seen as one variety of the general call to ministry, in which one comes to believe, based on the gifts God has given and the impetus of the Spirit, that their response to the call to ministry involves devoting full time to ministry. I reiterate that the most objective basis for discerning such a call is that one has gifts that can best be utilized in full time vocational ministry. This evaluation of one's gifts should be confirmed by others in the body and by the guidance of the Spirit. The absence of an emotionally overwhelming experience of being called should not discourage one from vocational ministry if one meets the other qualifications listed above and desires to serve God as a vocation.

(f) The assumption in I Tim. 3 is that the office of elder is limited to males. This is an assumption that I believe is confirmed by the rest of Scripture, especially the immediately preceding verses, I Tim. 2:11-15. While women are called to use their gifts in ministry, serving as pastor or elder of a local church seems to be a role limited to males. What roles are open to women is a question that calls for further discussion (see below).

Which is more important for pastoral effectiveness: abilities or character? Which does Scripture emphasize? Why do you think that may be?

3. Their selection. Here, we return to the debate on Acts 14:23. Other examples in Acts 6 and 13 are not completely clear. I think the congregation must be involved in the process. Historically, Baptists have seen selection of pastors as part of the authority given by Christ to every church. Scripture at least hints at it, and it is in keeping with the priesthood of all believers.

4. Their number and tenure. I join these two because I think they are interrelated. I mention the first issue, the number of pastors or elders, because the assumption in the NT is that there will be a plurality of elders in churches (see Acts 20:17, Phil. 1:1, I Thess. 5:12, I Tim. 5:17, Heb. 13:7, 17). In fact, I can find no clear instance in Scripture of someone serving as a sole elder/overseer/pastor. Our preference for one pastor may be more patterned after business (the CEO model) than Scripture, and is certainly not the only pattern seen in Baptist history.

Some accept that Scripture seems to point to multiple elders but want to retain a special role for one elder, who by reason of training and giftedness may be seen as the primary elder and be recognized as the pastor of the church. Other churches with multiple staffs may see some (but not all) members of the staff as elders, but I think there are good reasons for churches to have multiple elders. They need not share all the elder duties equally; if one is especially gifted at teaching, he may do virtually all the preaching. But multiple elders seem indicated both by biblical example and practical wisdom. However, no number is commanded in Scripture, so I cannot mandate multiple elders as required. But if I were a pastor, I would seek to move my church toward it, with two reservations: I would not split a church over it, and I would not move toward it unless there were men qualified to serve as elders.

In practice, I believe something like a plurality of elders often happens despite our structure. As God gifts someone, and he leads by example and involvement, and teaches in the same informal way, he exercises some of the functions of an elder. And he should, for pastoring a church is more than one man can handle. It is good neither for him nor the church.

I think churches instinctively realize this. The problem is that many address the problem by trying to make deacons into boards of elders. Even this can work if one has the right deacons; most churches don't. In any case, it leaves the gap of what the deacons should be doing. Sometimes, a wise pastor recognizes the few deacons who are spiritually mature, who are true leaders, and utilizes them as elders without the name.

This leads me back to my original question: how many and for how long? There should be as many elders in a church as the Spirit equips and allows the church to recognize. I think it would be well for a church to formally have such a board and annually solicit nominations, if any member thinks someone in the congregation truly meets the qualifications. Then let the congregation decide. There is certainly no term limit in Scripture, and things like character and leading by example continue regardless, but it might be well to have a rotation of active elders, to avoid the temptation to concentrate power in the hands of a few.

As to the one called "the pastor," he needs others to help him, whether they are formally recognized or not, whether they are called deacons or elders or nothing. Find them, and utilize them as they are willing and as the church will accept it. As to the pastor's tenure, I am in favor of long tenures, and see no Scriptural reason for dismissing an elder except for a serious matter of sin. Part of the reason for the rash of forced terminations among pastors may be failure to train, educate, and ordain suitably. But, certainly part of the problem is the modern view of pastors as CEO's, to be evaluated based on the bottom line rather than as pastors, to be appreciated and followed.

For a model of how to transition a church from a traditional Baptist model to a plurality of elders, see Phil Newton and Matt Schmucker, Elders in the Life of the Church. He advocates a 3 to 5 year process.

B. Deacons.

1. Their origin. Most look to Acts 6. The word *diakonos* is not found there, but the verb *diakoneo* and noun *diakonia* are, and we are probably justified in seeing this passage as the origin. If not, we are left with an office that found widespread acceptance without any account of its origin.

2. Their functions or responsibilities. In Acts 6, it was to assist those responsible for leadership and the ministry of the Word. In that situation, it was the apostles. Today, those who lead and preach are the pastors or elders. In the absence of any clearer indication in Scripture, that example along with the fact that *diakonos* simply means servant, should point us to the idea that deacons serve the pastors/elders by taking on responsibilities that would otherwise consume their time. Often, it involves benevolences, grounds and property, and anything else delegated to them by the pastor or elders. Scripture seems to leave it flexible, to meet the needs of the individual church and pastor.

3. Their qualifications (I Tim. 3:8-13). They are to be similarly men of exemplary character, including their marriage and family life. They too should have some skill in management, but no gift of teaching or leadership is required, for none are needed to fulfill the deacon's responsibilities. It would seem that the requirement that they "must first be tested" parallels the requirement for pastors that they not be recent converts.

4. Their selection. Acts 6 seems to give the clearest guidance here, and that guidance seems to point to congregational choice. Again, this is rendered difficult today because we have so many unregenerate or woefully immature church members.

5. Their number and tenure. There are no guidelines spelled out in Scripture, but most churches make major mistakes here in two ways. Most churches have constitutions or by-laws that prescribe a certain number of deacons that the church must have. This raises a real problem when the number of those qualified and willing to serve does not match the number prescribed by the by-laws. Often this results in unqualified people serving, with disastrous results. Only slightly less harmful is the situation where there are a larger number of those qualified and willing than that prescribed by the by-laws. Then churches may have a vote such as, "choose 4 of these 6 to serve as deacons." This results in a vote that is more like a popularity contest than a church seeking God's guidance. Let the church vote for all they feel are qualified and willing. I think there will be few churches where there are an overabundance of qualified and willing servants, especially if the qualifications and duties are biblically taught, and having "too many" is better than dishonoring and discouraging some of those who are qualified and willing, with the risk of feelings being hurt on the part of those not voted in and their supporters. It would be far better to let the number of deacons be determined by the number the church can recognize as qualified and willing.

While Scripture says nothing about tenure, it is certainly not prohibited by Scripture, and seems a wise measure. I think the rationale for a limited tenure for deacons would not be avoiding a concentration of power in the hands of a few, for the office of deacon would not involve authority, as would the office of elder. Rather, the rationale would be the good of the individual and his need for a respite.

6. "Their wives" (I Tim. 3:11). What are we to make of this verse in the midst of descriptions of the two offices of church leaders? Is this a third office, that of deaconess, or is the reference to the wives of deacons? It is a difficult exegetical and theological question, with numerous arguments on both sides (see Hammett, 199-200, for five arguments for deaconesses and five for deacons' wives). It seems to me that context gives the clearest clue, and the context here points to the word *gune* as referring to deacon's wives. I have been in one church that elected deacons and their wives as couples, recognizing that she too must be Scripturally qualified, for she will inevitably be involved in his ministry as a deacon. In fact, one could say that having a wife like the one described in v. 11 is another qualification for a deacon. Some would say it also applies to the wives of elders, but that is more distant in the context of I Tim. 3, and it seems likely that the wife of an elder would be less directly involved in his ministry than the wife of a deacon.

As to the larger question of women in ministry, the answer one gets depends largely on one's presuppositions. If one begins from the premise that Gal. 3:28 must govern our thinking about the roles women may take in the local church, one will arrive at the egalitarian position. If one believes that Gal. 3:28 must be seen as referring to soteriology rather than service, and that I Cor. 11:2-16, I Cor. 14:33-40, I Tim. 2:8-15 and the theme of husbandly headship in the home reflected in Eph. 5:22-32, Col. 3:18-19, I Pet. 3:1-7 and hinted at in Gen. 2:18 must be determinative, one will likely arrive at the position that men and women are fully equal with complementary roles in home and church. Exactly what limitations are placed on women in the passages cited above is a matter of debate among biblical scholars, with differences even among those within the complementarian camp.

I Cor. 11 presupposes that women may pray and prophesy; the issue is the manner, and is governed, I think, by cultural considerations. I Cor. 14 should then not be seen as an absolute prohibition against women speaking. Rather the context of the passage is concerned with order, and the contrast to speaking in v. 34 is being in submission. Thus, again it seems that women are allowed to speak but in a way that recognizes the differentiation of roles. The I Tim. 2 passage in my opinion rules out women serving as elders in a congregation; I do not see it as necessarily involving any other restrictions. From I Tim. 3:8-13, I believe that it is best for husbands and wives to serve as deacon teams. This would relieve, I hope, some of the controversy over deacons and deaconesses.

For the best source I know of to get both sides of the complementarian/egalitarian debate, see James Beck, ed., *Two Views on Women in Ministry*.

C. The meaning of ordination. There is very little evidence of any service of ordination for church leaders in Scripture, but there is some mention of a service involving the laying on of hands. Apart from Acts and a few sketchy references in the Pastoral Epistles, we have little to build on for a theology of ordination for positions of leadership.

In Acts 6:6 and 13:3, laying on of hands is involved in a separation of some to special ministries. In Acts 6, it was the ministry of being a deacon; in Acts 13, it was missionary service. Also, while Acts 6:6 specifically mentions the apostles as those who laid hands on them, Acts 13:3 could refer to the leaders or the whole church.

I Tim. 4:14 is the closest we have in the NT to our idea of ordination. Here a body of elders lays hands on Timothy, and in some way, that act is linked to his reception of a gift (possibly the gift of the Spirit himself as a special enablement for ministry). But even this cannot be exactly equated with ordination, for we don't know exactly what Timothy's ministry was.

What is not found in these verses is: any basis for a distinction of lay and clergy in anything more than a purely functional sense, any basis for ordination as conferring special powers, that it has anything to do with succession, or that it is in any sense required for church leaders.

It seems best to insist on little in the area of ordination. Some Baptists have totally rejected it (Spurgeon: it is the "placing of idle hands on empty heads"); most have practiced it, but few are clear as to what it means. I believe ordination can serve four positive purposes in Baptist life. First, if ordination councils take their jobs seriously, it can protect churches from heretical or unprepared pastors. Unfortunately, most councils, both associational and local church, serve as rubber stamps only. Second, it can affirm and confirm the leading of the Spirit in one's life. His belief that he has been called to ministry has been verified by his brothers and sisters. God's call to the individual is internal and secret; ordination is the public confirmation provided by the church. Third, ordination allows the church to set apart (Acts 13:3) those called to ministries of leadership. It gives them no power, does not elevate their status, but acknowledges the importance of their ministry, and commits them to it, with the prayers of the people behind them. Fourth, there are certain legal requirements in some states that require ordination for funerals and weddings. And it does provide some nice tax advantages.

Thus, I believe it should be preserved, but I would like to alter the way we do it. I would like to make it more wide-spread. If ordination is simply affirming one in his gifts and setting one apart to an area of ministry, then it could be used for those entering into special ministries other than pastoral (Chaplaincy, youth workers, etc.). Further, the actual laying on of hands should not be restricted to those already ordained, but all who want to come and lay hands on him and pray for him should be allowed to participate. This is after all, a church ordinance and we have the precedent of Num. 8:10 and a possible example from Acts 13:3. Any other practice perpetuates a false idea of a clerical ordained caste, above the common lay people.

IV. Church Members. For congregationalists, any discussion of church polity should include the role played by church members. Here we will broaden the discussion beyond polity *per se* to other aspects of church membership. (For more on this topic, see Jonathan Leeman's two books [*Church Membership* and *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love*] and John Hammett and Ben Merkle, eds., *Those Who Must Give an Account: A Study of Church Membership and Church Discipline*).

A. Biblical Basis. Some have thought ideas of membership and church roles are a modern invention and should be unnecessary. While there may not have been written lists, the early church certainly knew those who were in the church and those in the world, those subject to the church's discipline and those the object of the church's evangelism (see I Cor. 5:9-12). Similarly, Luke in the book of Acts seems to have been the first to keep church statistics (Acts 2:41; 4:4). I

know of one church that thinks the term “member” has been devalued by being applied to clubs and such, and uses the term “owner” for those committed to it, but member does have some biblical basis, in the comparison of the church to the one body of Christ composed of many members (Rom. 12:4-5), but the term used is secondary to the meaning attached to it.

B. Requirements for membership.

1. Faith. Acts 2:41 and virtually every text dealing with the church assumes that all church members are believers. It is implicit in congregational government, in church discipline, and in the duties assigned to church members in Scripture (the dozens of “one-another” commands). In the early church, the lengthy catechetical process assured that those who were baptized into church membership were genuine believers. But with the end of persecution, and the widespread adoption of infant baptism, this idea of regenerate church membership was lost for more than a thousand years until recovered by Anabaptists and Baptists. We will discuss this issue at length below because I think regenerate church membership may justly be called the Baptist mark of the church, but it is in danger of being lost today.

2. Baptism. The occasion for confessing one’s faith in the New Testament was baptism, and thus virtually all denominations have made baptism part of the requirements for church membership. Indeed, it is the rite or door through which one enters officially into church membership in most denominations. The biblical evidence for this is more implicit than explicit. Acts 2:41 has the sequence (1) “accepted his message,” (2) “were baptized,” and (3) “were added,” but in most cases the third element is assumed more than mentioned. The sequence of belief before baptism is clear, and baptism is not seen as optional for Christians in the New Testament. So, the implication is that all church members will be believers, and as such, they will be obedient to Christ’s command to be baptized.

Baptists agreed with virtually all other denominations that baptism is the ordinance by which one confesses faith and enters into the membership of the local church (I think there is a parallel in that one enters the universal church by Spirit baptism, and a local church by water baptism, and see the two as aspects of the “one baptism” of Eph. 4:5). Where they disagreed was over what constitutes a valid baptism. Infant baptism they saw as no baptism at all, and so have required those baptized as infants to undergo believer’s baptism as part of the requirements of joining a Baptist church. Though John Piper has recently questioned this practice, most Baptists have seen baptism, not as an item of theology on which we may disagree (like positions on the millennium, or election), but as a command of Christ that we cannot in good conscience treat as an indifferent matter.

Where even Baptists have disagreed has been on what else is required for a valid baptism. Must it be by immersion? Must it be in a Baptist church (the so called “alien immersion” question)? Must it be performed by an ordained person? In my own understanding, the essential elements are the proper subject (a genuine believer), with the proper understanding (that this is a matter of obedience, not another requirement for salvation), and the proper mode (though I would allow something other than immersion in extraordinary circumstances).

How would you respond if a godly individual or family wanted to join your church, but had been baptized as infants, and was convinced that their baptism was valid? Would you insist that they receive believer's baptism? What if they had been baptized as believers but by sprinkling?

3. A covenant commitment to walking in fellowship. While not explicit in Scripture, I think the practice of church discipline implies that a further requirement for continuing in membership was walking in fellowship with the body. Thus, to be persistently absent from the body (contra Heb. 10:24-25), to live in a way that brought reproach on the body (I Cor. 5:1-2), or to do damage to the unity of the body (Eph. 4:3-6) led to a biblical pattern of discipline (Matt. 18:15-17). The hoped for result of the process was restoration (II Cor. 2:5-8; Gal. 6:1).

For most of their history, Baptists formalized this commitment to walking together via a church covenant (see Charles Deweese, *Baptist Church Covenants*). This is a practice with biblical precedent, though in Israel rather than the church (see II Chron. 34:29-32; Neh.9:38-10:39), but happily, a number of Baptist churches are returning to this practice today (see Hammett, 117-120 and 127-29 for examples).

C. Practical steps in receiving members. Most Baptist churches conclude with an invitation to place faith in Christ and to join the church. The difficulty is in being able to ascertain immediately if a person responding to the invitation does in fact meet the requirements for membership. Too many churches attempt to do so, and will conclude their services by a call to vote on receiving those who responded to the invitation, either to receive them as candidates for baptism, or to receive them as members (via "transfer of letter" or "statement of faith"). The call for a vote is a meaningless relic of a time past when members took receiving a new member as a serious matter, carrying with it covenantal responsibilities for the spiritual welfare of the one joining. But with the loss of emphasis on regenerate church membership, welcoming new members became a rubber stamp. Little was expected of new church members, and there was little sense of responsibility to or for them on the part of existing church members. What would be a better process?

1. Welcome them warmly. There can and should continue to be a way to warmly welcome those who indicate a desire to join your church. But it should be understood up front that coming forward during the invitation is not the end of the process, but the beginning. Thus, the meaningless vote is not necessary. Simply state something like, "Please come forward after the service and welcome these who will be beginning the process toward church membership."

2. New member/convert class. The first step in the process should be a required class. The first topic should be a review of what it means to savingly trust Christ. This should involve all applicants for membership, for some who seek to come via transfer of letter may come from churches where the gospel was not clearly taught. So important is this first step that some churches include a personal conversation with a pastor or deacon, to insure that every new member is a genuine believer.

For those who are new believers, the class may be a bit longer, involving preparation for baptism. But all could profit from instruction on the basic disciplines of the Christian life, and all would need instruction the specifics of the church's beliefs and practices. Finally, all should be acquainted with the church's covenant, and asked if they can commit to walking in fellowship with the body.

3. Formal presentation. Following the completion of the class, prospective new members would be presented to the church body (during a normal business meeting would be the most appropriate time). For new converts, the one who led the class could recommend that the church vote to baptize the candidate, stating that the candidate had made a credible profession of faith and understood what it means to be a follower of Christ. On the basis of this type of recommendation, the church could make a responsible vote. Following baptism and the signing of the church covenant, the candidate would become a full member of the church. For those previously baptized and transferring their membership from another church, there would again be a recommendation from one who could vouch for the authenticity of the candidate's faith. As the candidate signed the covenant, the church would vote to receive them. Such a vote is not like votes in a political election, but more like saying "I do" in a wedding ceremony.

D. Privileges and responsibilities of members. Prospective members should be told up front what they can expect to receive as members and what will be expected of them as members, and both should be reflected in the church's covenant.

1. What members receive (there should be some things limited to members only).

a. The blessings of the ministry of the body. The church takes responsibility to love and care for its members. This includes pastoral care from the church's leaders, but also includes the one-another ministry of members, for Eph. 4:16 indicates that believers grow to maturity only through the ministry of the whole body. We are to love all we can (regular attenders, visitors, and members), but members have a priority (Gal. 6:10).

b. The blessings of corporate worship. While personal worship should be a part of every believer's life, Christ pledges to meet with his people in a special way when they gather in his name (Matt. 18:20; I Cor. 5:4). The teaching of gifted pastors, the observance of corporate ordinances, the edification from praying and singing together, and the pleasure of fellowship should all be part of what happens when the body gathers. These blessings fall to some degree on all who attend, but some would argue that observance of the ordinances should be limited to members only. We will discuss this point further below.

c. The blessing of corporate confirmation. One ministry I think the body is designed to provide but most do not seek is corporate confirmation of individual guidance (see Acts 13:1-3 for one example). One area most Christians struggle with at some time in their life is finding God's will for a particular situation. I believe that if relationships in the body are what they should be, there should be some who can seek to understand God's guidance on behalf of a brother and confirm (or not) his sense of guidance. But this will only be possible if there is the type of covenant commitment that should characterize membership.

d. The blessing of corporate accountability. Not only are pastors charged to watch over their flocks (see the awesome responsibility in Heb. 13:17), but members of the body are also to watch over one another. Heb. 12:15 calls on believers to “see to it” that none of them fall prey to bitterness, and in the end, it is the church which takes the final responsibility for discipline. It is possible for churches to become harsh and judgmental, but the greater danger in our day is the opposite extreme. Jesus did say, “first remove the plank out of your own eye” before you criticize another, but his point was that “then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye” (Matt. 7:3-5). We too often take Jesus’ words as an excuse to leave the plank in our own eye and the speck in our brother’s eye. Giving others the right to hold you accountable is part of the covenant commitment made in membership.

2. What members give.

a. They give themselves in covenant commitment. They promise to love and care for these people who will be loving and caring for them. It will involve faithfulness in attendance, praying and caring for others, and caring for the church’s welfare as a whole (which in turn involves informed participation in the church’s business). It should also include explicit acceptance of the church’s right and responsibility to discipline them should they stray (a sad but necessary legal protection in our society today).

b. They discover and begin to use their spiritual gifts for the good of the body. One of the ministries of the body is to help individuals discover their areas of giftedness (by advising, teaching, giving feedback and opportunities), but this does not exhaust all aspects of service.

c. In addition to using their spiritual gifts, believers are also called to serve the body in some of the common duties of the Christian life. Everyone is called to pray, love, serve, teach, forgive, and teach one another. Everyone is called to witness and serve in the ministries of the church (I personally think every member should be part of the nursery rotation).

d. They practice stewardship of time, energy, and money. The time and energy involve a commitment to faithful attendance (though I am not a strict Sabbatarian) and service as mentioned above. The commitment to financial stewardship I see as proportionate giving. I think tithing is a good place to start, but believe the New Testament standard is proportionate giving, and encourage the practice of graduated tithing as God blesses us financially (see I Cor. 16:2 and David Croteau, ed., *Perspectives on Tithing*; Craig Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches*). Moreover, while the church is first in my giving, I do not believe in what is sometimes called “storehouse tithing.” Faithful stewardship may also involve support of other ministries.

e. Voting? A traditional part of church membership in congregational polity has been a member’s privilege and responsibility to vote on matters affecting the church’s life and health. Such matters have usually included voting on who is to be baptized and admitted into church membership, who is to be disciplined, who is to be recognized as leaders (calling and ordination), and usually decisions with major financial consequences (budgets, buildings, etc.).

There are both biblical and pragmatic reasons to desire such congregational input (see II Cor. 2:6-8, “the majority”). The tendency in some churches to see “business meetings” as boring and things to be avoided betrays our weak understanding of church membership and our lack of commitment to meaningful membership. The business of the church should be boring to those who have no concern beyond getting their own needs met at church, and business meetings are things to be avoided if they involve gatherings of members who show no signs of being regenerate. But those who love Christ and are in a covenant relationship with a local body should be eager to gather, pray, seek God’s face together, and vote to seek God’s guidance for the body. Pastors and leaders should train their people to be able to handle such a responsibility in a competent and godly manner, and the participation of members should benefit the leaders, in giving confirmation to what they have felt was the Lord’s will, or giving them a check, to rethink what they thought. As well, participation should benefit the members, as it is one means of both living out their covenant commitment and strengthening their sense of personal ownership in the life and health of the body.

One consequence of the ever lowering age of baptism has been to raise the question of an age limitation for voting members. Historically, the assumption has been that if we baptize only believers, they will be indwelt by the Spirit and thus able to help the congregation find God’s will, and should be voting members. An unspoken assumption was that baptism was such a serious matter that it would not be given to those too young to responsibly participate in the business decisions of the church. Those churches who continue to baptize pre-teens and younger may have to define voting members of the church as not only baptized members, but baptized members of a certain age (some churches use 16 as the minimum age). Perhaps a better way would be to delay baptism until children have sufficient maturity to assure that they are making a credible profession of faith; children of such age should be able to understand the issues before the church and begin to learn to seek God’s face with the body and begin to take on the full responsibilities of membership.

E. Two final questions.

1. When is it right to leave a church? With the serious type of covenant commitment I see involved in church membership, what would be proper grounds for breaking such a commitment? It must be more than mere convenience or a minor disagreement. I think there would be one of three reasons in most cases: (1) geographical move (our membership should be where we live); (2) call to minister (we may leave one church when we believe God calls us to minister elsewhere; (3) such a serious problem in one’s present church that one cannot be an effective agent for change, but can only be damaged by the situation (moral failures, doctrinal problems, toxic spiritual atmosphere). A good test question to assess the seriousness of a problem is to ask if you could in good conscience bring a new Christian or a non-Christian to your church. If the answer is no, you probably shouldn’t bring yourself or your family.

2. How about non-believers? What can they do? In the post-modern context, we are told that many want to belong before they believe, because they are more convinced of the reality of Christ by the genuineness of our fellowship than by our rational apologetics. We would certainly want non-believing friends to attend worship, hear God’s word, and experience fellowship with believers. They may even serve in some aspects of a church’s ministry (but care

would be needed here). They should not be asked to do anything that makes them an official representative of the church or that involves them in Christian instruction. And, while we want to be welcoming, we would need to ask them to refrain from participating in some things that are members only (voting and communion particularly), and graciously explain why. Otherwise, we devalue both the privileges and responsibilities of membership.

What from our study of polity will make a difference in your life, either as a church member or leader? Is there anything of value you would want to share with a friend?

PART D: THE MINISTRIES OF THE CHURCH OUTLINE

I. Teaching.

- A. The Emphasis on Teaching.
- B. Contexts for Teaching.
- C. The Content of Teaching.

II. Fellowship.

- A. The Relationship of Fellowship and the Spirit.
- B. The Centrality of Fellowship in the Life of the Church.
- C. Contexts for Fellowship.
- D. Obstacles to Fellowship.
- E. Fellowship and Evangelism.

III. Worship.

- A. Dimensions of Worship.
- B. The Elements of Worship.
- C. The Regulative Principle versus the Normative Principle.
- D. Two Keynotes of Authentic Worship.

IV. Service.

- A. The Church and Social Ministry.
- B. Social Ministry and Gospel Ministry.

V. Evangelism/Missions.

- A. New Testament Teaching.
- B. Evangelistic Programs or Evangelistic Relationships?
- C. What is Evangelism?
- D. Extending Evangelism to the Ends of the Earth.

VI. Intentional Assessment.

My concern here could be worded in different ways (the functions of the church, the mission of the church, the purposes of the church). They all express the same idea: what do

churches do? In fact, what must churches do in order to be a valid church? I think a fullness of ministries to all types of believers is a mark distinguishing churches from parachurch groups.

This can be addressed on several levels. Supremely, the purpose of all that exists in the universe is to glorify God (exaltation). The church is specifically charged with doing so by evangelization of the world (Matt. 28:18-20) and edification of believers (Eph. 4:11-16). The church accomplishes those two primary objectives via 5 ministries, all outlined in Acts 2:42-47, which is intentionally written to give us a picture of the life of the first church.

I. Teaching (or discipleship, instruction).

A. The emphasis on teaching. The importance of teaching for the life and health of the church may be seen in the fact that it is mentioned in all three major lists of spiritual gifts, it is specifically linked with the gift of pastor (Eph. 4:11), it is listed after apostle and prophet as gifts of importance (I Cor. 12:28), it is related to several other gifts (prophecy, encouragement, possible messages of knowledge and wisdom, discernment), and it is one of the two gifts required of church leaders (I Tim. 3:2, Titus 1:9; see also I Tim. 5:18).

B. Contexts for teaching. Teaching begins with the pastoral ministry, but cannot end there. There must be individual and group discipleship and training, beginning with new member classes, and taking as many forms and shapes as necessary for the congregation's health. With the growth of megachurches, small groups are vital for many purposes, including teaching. One on one casual conversation should also be edifying and thus fulfill the command to “teach and admonish one another” (Col. 3:16).

C. The content of teaching. Of course, the content of our teaching should be the whole of Scripture, the whole “counsel of God” (Acts 20:27). But I see two weaknesses in the teaching ministry of many churches. Often, teaching is directed only to the mind, but the Great Commission commands us to teach believers “to obey.” How do we teach in a way that produces life transformation and not just transmission of information?

A second weakness is in the haphazard approach to teaching in most churches. A variety of courses on a variety of topics is offered, often dealing with the latest fad. Even Sunday School classes which follow Lifeway curriculum will deal with different sections of the Bible over time, but seem to follow no overall plan beyond just covering the Bible. Two exceptions to this pattern are found in the diamond diagram used by Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California and a similar process developed by Capitol Hill Baptist in Washington, DC. Both take believers through a carefully thought out sequence of courses designed to move them toward maturity in Christ, teaching both knowledge and skills (see Hammett, 230-31).

II. Fellowship.

A. The relationship of fellowship and the Spirit. For fellowship to develop, there must be contexts in which people get to know each other and have a chance to share their needs and lives deeply. The root meaning of fellowship is to have things in common with others. It is the Spirit who makes us aware of how much we have in common with another believer, but we must be in

tune with the Spirit for friendship to be genuine fellowship. As I John 1:7 teaches, fellowship with God is prerequisite to fellowship with one another.

B. The centrality of fellowship in the life of the church. The New Testament includes at least 31 specific “one-another” commands. They can be obeyed only when there is fellowship. Also, the other ministries of the church are all related to fellowship. For example, fellowship is inseparable from the teaching ministry, for many things in the Christian life are more caught by contact with growing believers than taught in the classroom. In the area of worship, one of the purposes of the Lord’s Supper is to celebrate our communion, or fellowship, with one another (I Cor. 10:16-17). Service can be a powerful way of developing fellowship. Groups that go on a mission trip together, work as a team in a ministry, or even serve on a committee together tend to grow closer. Fellow-work develops fellowship. Even evangelism seems to be related to fellowship, especially for post-moderns, who we are told will want to walk with us for a while before making a decision to follow Christ openly.

C. Contexts for fellowship. Where can such giving and receiving happen? It should not happen in the large group meeting, for the purpose there is worship, and the focus is vertical (our relationship with God), not horizontal (relating to each other). The most common context in which fellowship can develop is small groups. Sunday School usually is too short, unless classes are somewhat extended. Relationships can also develop in choirs, among those who serve together in some area of the church, in intentional small group Bible study and prayer groups. Some pastors oppose the development of small groups, fearing cliques and even heretical teaching. The solution is training lay leaders, and keeping groups time-limited, and intentionally outreach oriented. But there must be contexts for relationships to develop, or there will be little growth in quality of Christian life or quantity of believers. Surprisingly, mega-churches, in which size would seem to inhibit fellowship, do a better job than most churches in providing avenues for fellowship, because they extensively use small groups. There is also a praise-worthy emphasis on community and fellowship in many emerging churches, and they do better than most traditional churches in providing community for those coming from a radically non-Christian context. To be blunt, they do a better job at loving people different than themselves.

D. The obstacles to fellowship. As churches grow larger, the attention given to fellowship must grow as well, or it may become weaker. Even with good efforts, the consumer society of America, the inbred individualism, the decline of commitment to membership, and simply the pace of life all militate against the maintenance of robust fellowship. Yet it is central to the life and health of a church.

E. Fellowship and evangelism. Church planters and evangelists are discovering that many post-modern nonbelievers are not moved very much by rational apologetics, but are open to relational apologetics. The message is that they want to belong before they believe. For them, the strongest proof of a message’s truthfulness is its relational impact. If it produces community, then they will listen. To a degree, there are some aspects of the church’s life to which they cannot belong before they believe; faith is a requirement for membership. But they can walk alongside us, attend our worship and small groups, and even be involved in limited ways in some service projects. But as they do so, what will they see? Is the corporate witness of the church

strong? Is fellowship genuine? This is where prior attention to securing regenerate membership begins to pay dividends.

III. Worship.

A. Dimensions of worship. One scholar (David Peterson, *Engaging With God*) has recently claimed that in the New Testament worship is all of life (Rom. 12:1) and the gathering of the church is for edification (I Cor. 14:26). However, this seems to too neatly separate worship and edification. It ignores the fact that if worship is all of life, then when the church gathers, it has to gather for corporate worship. In regards to worship, I take the approach of appreciating its various dimensions rather than through a single definition.

1. The doxological dimension. This dimension seems to me to capture the heart of worship, ascribing worth or glory to God. We do so through songs that exalt God, through remembering his work for us through the Supper, through reading his word, through prayers that not only seek his blessing but also praise his being, and through giving of our offerings. Obedience in giving glorifies God, and giving symbolizes our ascribing of worth to him.

2. The didactic dimension. This comes especially in the reading and preaching of the word, but songs can also teach, for we sing “to one another” (Eph. 5:19) as well as to the Lord.

3. The hortatory or edifying aspect of worship is a component of almost every aspect of worship, as all contribute to strengthening our walk with Christ. Even the offerings we give enable the church to serve and build up others in very tangible ways.

4. The evangelistic dimension does not require that every week’s sermon focus on the proclamation of the gospel (a problem in some Southern Baptist churches). But, the Lord’s Supper itself is a proclamation of the gospel, and the gospel undergirds all that the church is and does. Moreover, one major reason for giving is to strengthen the spread of the gospel.

The multiple dimensions of worship lead me to two conclusions: (1) While worship is primarily God-centered, Christ-focused, and Spirit-empowered, it is also secondarily directed to people, both believers and non-believers, and (2) creating well rounded worship services week-in and week-out will be a demanding task.

B. The elements of worship. In the providence of God, there is no set order of worship given in the New Testament. That has allowed for variety in different times and places. At the same time, there have been regularly recurring features.

1. Historical background. The early church drew from the patterns of Judaism and included in their worship corporate praise, prayers, and readings from the Law and prophets. Early on, they added the reading of “the memoirs of the apostles” (see Justin Martyr’s description of early worship). All these have continued, though there is room for improvement in all three in most churches. Corporate praise is threatened by songs that are shallow theologically or composed for solo performance rather than for corporate singing; prayers are often offered

with little to no thoughtful preparation, and the reading of Scripture is haphazard, at best. Here is one area where a lectionary of prescribed Old and New Testament readings could be an improvement over typical Baptist practice.

2. Christian distinctives. One new element which transformed an element of Jewish worship was the Lord's Supper. It became increasingly central in the church's worship up to the time of the Reformation when preaching of the Word took center stage, which is still the place given to preaching in most Baptist and evangelical circles. Still, the Lord's Supper is the only act of worship for which we are given specific instructions (see I Cor. 11:23-32), and it, along with baptism, should be practiced as an act of worship. How to appropriately practice these distinctive rites has been a source of controversy and division among denominations, and thus requires more thorough discussion (see below).

3. The issue of music. Singing was debated among Protestants for a time after the Reformation, but the early Baptist, Benjamin Keach, argued strongly for its propriety and it has become central in worship for centuries. Today it is a major issue in contemporary worship wars. The history of Christian worship shows that a variety of musical styles have been employed over time; thus, the issue of style is not central. I like the use of Phil. 4:8 as an initial checklist of criteria for musical style, and I add the need to note what associations the musical style would have for the minds of the hearers.

How important is the style of music to your experience of worship? How large a role does it play in your choice of a church home? How might it impact a church's evangelistic effectiveness?

4. Three areas of need. In my experience, there are three areas of Baptist worship that could use considerable attention.

The first is the public reading of Scripture. The demise of a common version of Scripture has made this somewhat problematic, but can be addressed by providing a pew Bible so that everyone can follow along from the same version, or placing the verses from the version to be read on a screen, visible to all. The non-optional nature of this element is indicated by Paul's command to Timothy, as the one overseeing the worship of God's people: "devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture" (I Tim. 4:13). Terry Johnson and Ligon Duncan give numerous helpful suggestions on how to incorporate the public reading of Scripture into worship services (*Give Praise to God*, 141-48), including having a systematic plan to read through whole chapters or even books of the Bible over a number of Sundays, coordinating readings to draw from Old Testament as well as New, and preparing readers to read Scripture well with meaning and expression.

The second area is public prayer. While pastors are encouraged to spend hours in sermon preparation, we seem to think extemporaneous prayer, where we "wing it," is somehow more spiritual. Again, Johnson and Duncan (*Give Praise to God*, 156-69) are helpful, in encouraging pastors to plan their prayers to cover all the matters the congregation needs to lift up together (missionaries the church knows by name, other area churches, those with special needs), and in reminding us that there are different types of prayers beyond simple prayers of supplication.

They recommend five times of prayer in a worship service: invocation, confession, intercession, illumination, and a final prayer of blessing. While all of these may not be mandatory in every worship service, they merit thoughtful consideration. Right now, I think very little thought is given to when or why or what or how we pray in worship.

A third area of needed improvement is in our worship through baptism and the Lord's Supper, but since we will devote a later unit of study to these two acts of worship, we will consider how we may improve on our worship through them below.

C. The regulative principle versus the normative principle. Recent use of skits, drama and video clips have drawn criticism from some on the basis of the regulative principle. This is the idea, originally formulated in the Westminster Confession and passed on to Baptists in the Second London/Philadelphia Confession, that God should not be worshiped in any way "not prescribed in the Holy Scriptures." Therefore, Mark Dever (*The Deliberate Church*, 81-86) recommends adoption of the following elements of worship: read the Bible, preach the Bible, pray the Bible, sing the Bible, and see the Bible (via the ordinances). He does not mean we should only pray or sing the words of the Bible, but that public prayer and congregational music should be shaped and guided by biblical principles.

My problem with the regulative principle is that there are so many issues not addressed by Scripture that even the most fervent followers of the regulative principle make way for some freedom. For example, should we worship on Sunday morning and/or Sunday evening? In what order should the elements of worship be placed? Difficulties like these have led many to what is sometimes called the normative principle: whatever is not expressly prohibited is acceptable. We are called to use godly wisdom and pastoral judgment on many issues.

D. In Acts 2, I see two keynotes of authentic worship: awed reverence before the holy God (v. 43, and joyful praise to the loving God (vv. 46-47). This leads to several questions. What can we do in worship to cultivate both of these keynotes? Is casual dress a hindrance to awed reverence? Is formal worship stifling to joyful praise? Planning music and prayers and Scripture readings to cultivate both these keynotes is a challenging task that demands the most thoughtful worship leadership possible.

IV. Service.

A. The Church and Social Ministry. Acts 2 and 4 record the radical way the early church served the needy, among their own members and in the surrounding community. Some have sought on the basis of these examples to build Christian communities with a common purse, but none have endured. Generosity is encouraged, but not required or imposed (Acts 5:4; II Cor. 9:7). Social ministry was one expression of obedience to the command "to do good and to share with others" (Heb. 13:17), as Jesus had done (Acts 10:38, "doing good"). Christians, sent out into the world as the Father had sent Jesus (John 20:21), did as Jesus had done, as an expression of the love of Jesus to the world.

Historically (especially prior to the development of the welfare state), churches have seen care for the poor, sick, and needy as part of their ministry. Even today, Christians continue to

provide the majority of volunteer and financial support for most of the social service work done in this country. Faithful evangelical church attenders give more to their churches than do merely nominal members (or members of more liberal and mainline churches), but they also give more to “secular” charities than non-believers. They are also more likely to volunteer time and even give more blood. A study by two University of Pennsylvania sociologists of all the congregations in Philadelphia found that 88% of the congregations they were able to contact were involved in at least one social ministry. After carefully evaluating all that the churches were doing, they concluded, “Conservatively, the financial replacement value of all congregational social services in Philadelphia is \$246,901,440 annually,” (Ram A. Cnaan and Stephanie C. Boddie, “Philadelphia Census of Congregations and Their Involvement in Social Service Delivery,” *Social Service Review*, 75, no. 4 (December, 2001): 559-580).

B. Social Ministry and Gospel Ministry. Some evangelicals are hesitant to affirm the value of social ministry, fearing repetition of the error some liberal Christians have made of substituting social ministry for the preaching of the gospel (what some in the early 20th century called “the social gospel”). But, social ministry and gospel ministry are not an either/or choice, but a both/and partnership. Both are equally valid expressions of Christ’s love, and both are part of the mission Christ sends his church into the world to perform. And, while reception of the church’s social ministry should never be made conditional upon reception of the gospel ministry of the church, in reality, social ministry often does open up bridges into a community over which the gospel can travel. The reality of Christ’s love has been demonstrated in ways a non-believer can see and appreciate. An increasingly prominent mark of “missional churches” is a desire to engage their communities in ways that show a genuine desire to serve.

V. Evangelism/Missions.

A. New Testament teaching. It is a curiosity of the New Testament that evangelism occurs or is reflected on almost every page, but there is only a small handful of verses that command Christians to be involved in evangelizing. Even in the key passage of Act 2, it was the Lord that was adding new believers to the church, not the members. It seems the implication is that if all the other ministries of the church are functioning properly, people’s lives will be changing in dramatic ways, and the witness will speak for itself. I think that is true, but evangelism still needs to be intentional. There are some commands to evangelize because the love of Christ compels us to speak to others and because actions rarely speak for themselves, but need an explanation. Still, the explanation will be hollow if there is no real changed life. Moreover, why would God add new believers to a church that was not healthy and could not effectively minister to them? Developing a healthy church is primary; intentional evangelism can then be effective.

B. Evangelistic Programs or Evangelistic Relationships? Evangelism thus needs to be intentional, but what type of evangelism program should the church adopt? Most programs focus on memorizing a gospel presentation and then presenting it to people in their homes. I believe it is valuable to train people to conceptually understand the gospel and how it fits together. Knocking on the doors of strangers works in some cases, but converts from such conversations do not last unless meaningful relationships with church members are soon formed. The

approaches that are being developed for today typically focus on developing evangelistic relationships rather than utilizing evangelistic programs.

C. This is related to another change needed in our view of what evangelism is. For a while I have been troubled by the fact that the underlying view in most tracts, gospel presentations and evangelism programs is that evangelism as a matter of information transmission. This assumes that the barrier between the lost person and God is a lack of proper information, which I believe is often not the case. This can also mistakenly convey the idea that faith is accepting the truthfulness of the information, which is tragically mistaken. This problem seems to be accentuated when seeking to reach those impacted by postmodern culture, in which knowledge is accessed not by passively receiving information, but by experiential participation. Ed Stetzer says, “With few exceptions, people come to Christ after they have journeyed with other Christians—examining them and considering their claims,” (Stetzer and Putnam, *Breaking the Missional Code*, 124). He distinguishes between the community, in which nonbelievers can and should participate, and the church, which should be composed of believers alone. How the church is marked off from the community is a more ticklish subject. This approach emphasizes that evangelism really is a ministry of the church—all of its members have a part in furthering the evangelistic journey of seekers, by the quality of the members’ lives and the reality of their love in community (see the suggestions of Stetzer and Putnam, 144-152).

D. Extending Evangelism to the Ends of the Earth. I pair missions with evangelism, not because evangelism is the whole of the task of missions. In fact, some would say that missions should not be conceived of as one of the church’s ministries, but the essence of the very nature of the church, and “missional” is the latest buzz-word in church circles. Indeed, one could argue that every ministry of the church should be missional. Still, I put missions here because the ministry of the church to the nations must ultimately center in the evangelistic task. Until people are won to faith, there can be no ministry of teaching, or fellowship, or worship.

1. The biblical basis of mission is well known, from the Old Testament promise to Abram that all the families of earth would be blessed through his seed (Gen. 12:3), to the various versions of the Great Commission in the gospels and Acts (Matt. 28:19-20; Lk. 24:46-49; John 20:21-23, Acts 1:8), to the climax of God’s great drama around the throne where the Lamb is praised by those from every tribe and language and people and nation (Rev. 5:9). Such texts should be regularly taught in churches, such that the call to missions is heard, and the necessity of being a “goer” or an active sender is made clear. Non-involvement is not an option.

2. Means of involvement. Of course, the most obvious means of involvement in missions is going. That should be coupled with fervent prayer as well. And churches should develop means to expose their members to the call to go, and enlist their members in prayer partnerships with specific missionaries. But there is a third means, whose importance should not be overlooked.

While some missionaries may go as “tent-makers,” in most situations missionary service requires financial support. In Southern Baptist life, the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering, the Annie Armstrong Easter Offering, and Cooperative Program giving have provided strong financial support allowing Southern Baptist missionaries the privilege of serving without having

to spend their first two years and a portion of subsequent furlough years in deputation (support raising). However, support for these offerings and especially support for Cooperative Program giving is weakening among younger Southern Baptists, sometimes being replaced by more direct involvement either in churches sending out their own missionaries or by individuals using their money to fund short term mission trips. While I applaud the desire to be directly involved in missions, I have reservations about both of these means of involvement.

Churches may certainly send their own missionaries; large churches will often have the means to do so. But there are a number of reasons why using the IMB seems a wise choice. They do have expertise that most churches do not, and are able to provide support services, orientation, and guidance that churches cannot. Also, even large churches may experience budget difficulties, but someone supported by 40,000 churches has a more secure support base. As part of a larger team, the missionary can know he or she is not alone in the work, and others may be able to help and provide some continuity if they have to be away for a while. I think a church is wise to channel their missions support through the IMB.

Short- term mission trips have been used by God to radically change the hearts and lives of literally thousands of Southern Baptists, and I affirm the value of such trips. But, I sometimes question the stewardship. Plane trips are costly, and the cost of sending a sizable team for a week could often fund a missionary for an entire year. Which would be the wisest use of such funds? Of course, one problem is that often someone will spend a good deal of money to send himself on a short term trip, but would not give that money to an anonymous offering, or an amorphous program. One result of short term trips should be increased giving to mission offerings and programs. If that is not happening, are our short term trips evidence of our commitment to missions, or just our commitment to exotic Christian vacations? I think every church should model giving for their members by making it a point to devote 10% of the financial resources God provides for them to missions, and I think it is wise to devote the bulk of that support to Southern Baptist mission causes.

VI. Intentional Assessment.

I think almost every church could be helped by a very intentional assessment of their efforts in each of these ministries.

Take a hard look at the teaching ministry: is there any coordination such that any member of the church over a number of years receives teaching, not just in haphazard books of the Bible, but in all the major areas of the Christian life? Is the teaching focused on just learning the facts, or is it teaching to do all Christ commanded? Is teaching just done by the church staff, or are members encouraging one another with the word? Is there mentoring of the younger by the more mature?

In terms of fellowship, look at the church from the perspective of a new attendee or member. Where are the places where one could get connected to community? How easy or difficult would it be? Is the attitude of most members turned in or turned out? Do members get together outside the walls and on times other than Sunday mornings?

Get someone to sit in the worship service and carefully note everything that is done in the worship service: how much time is devoted to singing, reading Scripture (what passage is read), praying (what things are prayed for), preaching, and any other elements. Look carefully at the results and consider if there needs to be some adjustments made. Consider also what happens in celebrations of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Do people, especially visitors, know what is happening? Are the ordinances explained such that their meaning and purpose are clear? Do we celebrate them as acts of worship, such that we expect God's presence as he draws near to receive our worship?

What are we doing corporately to serve the community? Survey church members and you may find more service going on than you imagine informally, as church members tutor, volunteer, work with Meals on Wheels, visit in nursing homes, coach kids' teams, or serve in dozens of ways. Make time for some of these to share their experiences, to encourage and inform others of ways they can serve.

Look at what is happening in your church evangelistically. Do only the pastors share the gospel? Healthy Christians should feel a desire to share their faith; what does the church do to help them know how to do so? Is the church's corporate witness strong, such that people want to invite their friends and family members to attend while knowing they will hear the message and see it lived out in covenant fellowship? Beyond the local body, is there wise support, both in terms of prayers and finances, for the spread of the gospel globally?

All these are areas in which churches must provide ministry to be churches. Most do so, but few intentionally assess what they are doing, seeking to always improve.

Now after assessing your church's ministries, assess your involvement in them. How are you involved in giving and receiving teaching in your church? Who are you connected to and accountable to in fellowship? Are you faithfully involved in worship, serving, and evangelism? What is your area of greatest strength and biggest need? How could you grow as a minister in your church?

PART E: THE ORDINANCES OF THE CHURCH OUTLINE

I. Introductory Issues.

- A. The Problem of Terminology.
- B. The Number of Ordinances.
- C. Defining the Ordinances.
- D. The Purpose of the Ordinances.
- E. The Proper Setting for the Ordinances.

II. Baptism.

- A. The Proper Meaning of Baptism.
 - 1. Identification with Christ.
 - 2. Identification with Christ's body.

- 3. Not regeneration.
- B. The Proper Subjects of Baptism.
- C. The Proper Time for Baptism.
- D. The Proper Mode of Baptism.
- E. The Proper Administrator of Baptism.

III. The Lord's Supper.

- A. Terms Used for this Rite.
- B. The Institution of the Lord's Supper.
 - 1. Literal (transubstantiation).
 - 2. Literal (consubstantiation).
 - 3. Spiritual presence.
 - 4. Memorial.
- C. The Meaning of the Supper.
 - 1. Look back in remembrance.
 - 2. Look around in fellowship.
 - 3. Look ahead in anticipation.
 - 4. Look within in self-examination.
 - 5. Look up in expectation.
- D. The Proper Participants.
 - 1. Believers.
 - 2. Baptized believers?
 - 3. Self-examined believers.
- E. The Proper Meaning.
- F. The Proper Elements.
- G. The Proper Administrator.
- H. Frequency.

IV. Areas for improvement.

Technically, a discussion of the ordinances is part of the ministry of worship, since both ordinances are acts of worship, with the Lord's Supper being the center of corporate worship for much of the church's history. But since the ordinances have been a source of division among churches and have occasioned much discussion, we will treat them separately here.

I. Introductory Issues.

A. The problem of terminology. "Sacrament" is the word used by most churches, but Baptists and many others have rejected it because they associate it with a Catholic view (though, many Protestants use it without such an understanding). The word originally referred to the oath a Roman soldier made to be loyal to his commander unto death, but it was defined by Augustine as "the visible form of an invisible grace." It was interpreted by him as conferring grace on the recipient automatically (*ex opere operato*). "Ordinance" refers to something ordained or commanded, but neither it nor "sacrament" are biblical terms for these ceremonies. "Traditions"

is the only biblical word (I Cor. 11:23: "what I passed on to you"), but that too has problematic connotations. So, Baptists have generally stuck with "ordinances."

B. The number of ordinances. Catholics since Lombard and Aquinas have affirmed seven sacraments: baptism, confirmation, the eucharist, penance, last rites (now called "anointing of the sick), matrimony, and holy order (or ordination). Protestants have accepted only two, for reasons given in the next paragraph. Some have added foot-washing as a third ordinance, but it has never been widely accepted.

C. Defining the ordinances. There is no explicit definition given in Scripture, so the definition often depends on how many ordinances/sacraments one accepts and how one interprets them. In Scripture, however, baptism and the Lord's Supper naturally stand out from the other suggested ordinances. So, scholars have looked at what they have in common that distinguishes them from the others. Both are instituted directly by Christ (Matt. 28:19, I Cor. 11:23), both are related to the central facts of the gospel, and both are for all believers. The other suggested sacraments do not meet these criteria.

D. The purpose of the ordinances. For the Catholics, sacraments infuse grace, and are thus indispensable for salvation. Baptism places the infant on the road to salvation, cleanses her from original sin and gives her grace to keep her until she is old enough to partake of other sacraments and receive more grace to empower her to apply herself to the things that lead to salvation.

Most Protestants view the sacraments as "means of grace," but only when received with faith. They encourage, sustain, and bless believers because God has ordained them as signs and seals of his grace. We see his promises enacted and are encouraged; we sense Christ's presence in a special way and are nourished.

Baptists have tended to view these ceremonies more as something **we do** to testify to grace already received, rather than as something **God does** in or for us. In baptism, we profess our faith; at the Supper, we proclaim the Lord's death and do it in remembrance of Him. This seems to be the biggest difference between Baptists and others. Others believe God acts and does something for us when we celebrate the ordinances. We usually see them as what we do, in response to what God has already done in the cross and resurrection of Christ. We celebrate the ordinances, not in order to receive grace, but because we have already received grace.

At the same time, I think we may have reacted too much. If Christ has commanded us to be baptized, and to observe the Supper, we may expect him to be pleased when we obey him. I think we may regard the ordinances as places where God pledges to meet faithful hearts in a special way. God always blesses obedience; Christ loves to meet with his people. Why should we not expect a response from God when we celebrate what he has commanded us to do? Calvin included both in his definition of a sacrament: "it is an outward sign by which the Lord seals on our consciences the promises of his good will toward us in order to sustain the weakness of our faith; and we in turn attest our piety toward him in the presence of the Lord and of his angels and before men" (Inst., 4.14.1). It may well be that many Baptists experience less from these

ordinances than they should because we simply expect no more, and take these ceremonies as no more than dry, empty rituals.

E. The proper setting of the ordinances. Some weddings include a celebration of the Lord's Supper, and some youth groups have observed baptism in the context of a retreat. Today, some churches with small groups allow (or even encourage) small groups to celebrate the Lord's Supper together. While I do not regard such practices as sinful, they seem contrary to the meaning of the ordinances. Since one aspect of baptism is initiation into the body of Christ, it seems most appropriate to celebrate it in the presence of the local body administering it. In fact, I think it is best for a local church, or at least its leaders, to authorize the baptism of a believer, for in so doing they certify their belief that the person's profession of faith is credible. One important element of the Lord's Supper is as the occasion where we reaffirm our unity as one body in Christ (1 Cor. 10:16-17; 11:29). Thus, celebrating it as a small group or as a couple getting married misses the point. This is why they are called by some church ordinances rather than just Christian ordinances.

II. Baptism.

A. The proper meaning of baptism. The background of baptism lies in the washings of Judaism, especially for proselytes, and the baptism of John, but Christian baptism takes on a new meaning in the light of Christ and the New Testament teaching. There are two principal ideas involved.

1. The central idea is that of identification with Christ, because we are baptized into Christ (Rom. 6:3, Gal. 3:27), and become identified with his death, burial and resurrection (Rom. 6:4). This implies that baptism is for those who choose to follow Christ. Further study confirms this. The NT indicates that baptism should follow profession of faith. In the Great Commission, baptism falls between the preaching of the gospel (making disciples) and the growth of believers (teaching them to observe all). Acts 2:41 is even clearer. The sequence is: receiving the Word, baptism, and being added to the church. Thus we affirm that the proper subjects for baptism are believers, those who can affirm faith in Christ.

2. As they identify with Christ, they also identify with his church. Acts 2:41 indicates that baptism led to church membership. As Spirit baptism places one in the universal church, water baptism identifies one with a local church. Thus, Baptists, in keeping with almost all Christian denominations, have regarded baptism as the door to church membership. It is true that there is at least one instance where baptism was not connected to local church membership (Acts 8:36-38, the Ethiopian eunuch), but it seems to be an exception, not the rule. The difference with Baptists has been in who they baptized. Regarding baptism as valid only when performed on a believer, traditionally Baptists have required those who join their churches from denominations that practice infant baptism to receive believer's baptism as a requirement for membership. At times, Baptists have required not just believer's baptism, but baptism by immersion, and in a few cases, baptism by immersion in a Baptist church (this is sometimes called the issue of alien immersion). Today, some are re-examining this requirement.

Two individuals who are very good friends have found themselves at odds on this issue. John Piper believes that to exclude from church membership a godly paedobaptist like Ligon Duncan or Sinclair Ferguson is a more serious imperfection than the imperfection of infant baptism. He sees exclusion as “virtually the same as excommunication.” But Wayne Grudem says that he and virtually all major denominations throughout history have assumed that baptism is required for church membership. For a Baptist church to admit someone into church membership who has not been baptized upon profession of faith, but has only experienced infant baptism, “is really giving up one’s view on the proper nature of baptism. It is saying that infant baptism really is valid baptism.” It is like saying, “We require baptism for membership, unless you disagree with our view of baptism.” To be consistent with Baptist theology, such a church would have to say, “We don’t believe you have been baptized, but you can become a member because we allow some unbaptized persons to become members,” (see the exchange on www.desiringgod.org/Blog?757 and 758).

One group of Baptists that have gone where Piper wants to go is British Baptists. Among them, open membership (open even to professing believers who have not received believer’s baptism) is common, as is open communion (as we will discuss later).

This issue raises a number of questions. Is the failure to receive baptism as a believer a matter of disobedience to a clear command of Christ or just a different interpretation of Scripture? If we say it is the latter, how far should we go in allowing different interpretations of Scripture within a local church? How do we balance a generous spirit toward others with following our own conscience and conviction concerning Christ’s command? Is it intolerant to not recognize other’s views on baptism or is it intolerant to ask Baptists to sacrifice their convictions on baptism to be more inclusive?

3. Believer’s baptism means we deny all ideas of baptismal regeneration. It has no power to accomplish anything; it is rather a testimony to what has happened. The NT everywhere assumes believers will be baptized, but not in order to be saved. The thief on the cross is sufficient to show that baptism is not necessary for salvation. Some Baptist churches would require baptism of a prospective new member, even if he had been previously baptized as a believer and by immersion, but with the understanding that it was necessary for salvation, or that it produced regeneration.

B. The proper subjects of baptism. We affirm that baptism, by its nature, can only be appropriate for those who have made a personal faith commitment to Christ. This leads us into conflict with those who believe in infant baptism.

The Catholic belief in infant baptism was linked with their idea of original sin, and the power of sacraments to work apart from faith. Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli saw the necessity of faith in baptism, but did not want to surrender infant baptism. All three believed God acted in baptism. Luther believed that in baptism God laid claim to the infant; he gave the infant a basis for hope. He came close to affirming baptismal regeneration, though he pointed more to the Word spoken in baptism than to the water. Calvin and Zwingli pointed more to the faith of the parents and the church. Children were accepted as members of the covenant community on the

basis of the faith of others, and regarded as presumptively headed for salvation, though they must personally confirm the decision made for them in baptism.

In reality, a strong reason why the magisterial Reformers held on to infant baptism was fear of the anarchy and chaos that would result from the dismantling of the unity that existed between church and state on the basis of infant baptism.

They also postulated other justifications for infant baptism: the parallel of baptism with circumcision and the household baptisms in the book of Acts. To the first we may respond that the NT looks to the replacement of circumcision, but not by another external sign, but by an inward spiritual reality (Rom. 2:28-29; Col. 2:11). And if the parallel was true, it would hold only for male children. Rather, the sign of circumcision is replaced in the NT by the reality of faith. This is still the major argument made by evangelical paedobaptists, but is still vulnerable to the critiques given long ago by the Anabaptist Balthasar Hubmaier (*On the Christian Baptism of Believers*) and recently by Paul Jewett (*Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace*).

To the example of the household baptisms (Acts 16:31-34; 18:8), we reply that all were baptized because all believed, as the wording of the texts indicate. Believers are the proper subjects of baptism. In all honesty, more and more paedobaptists are acknowledging that their support is extremely weak. Some acknowledge that there are no clear examples of infant baptism in the New Testament, but claim there are no examples in the New Testament of baptizing the children of Christian parents later in life (after conversion) either. They claim the New Testament portrays a pioneer situation, but not long after there were Christian families having children, infant baptism began to appear. There is some evidence from history that infant baptism began perhaps as early as the second century, but Scripture points unmistakably toward believer's baptism (as even K. Barth has affirmed).

C. The proper time for baptism. While the time for baptism in the book of Acts was normally immediately after conversion (Acts 2:38-41, 8:36-38), such practice is not commanded nor always followed (Acts 4:4). I count twenty conversion texts in the book of Acts. In those, baptism was immediate in 5 cases and relatively soon in four others, but in more than half of the cases, there is no mention of immediate baptism. Moreover, the examples in the New Testament are almost all adult baptisms, and the recommendation for delaying baptism usually comes in concerning the baptism of children.

Since faith is clearly required for baptism, I advocate waiting for a period of weeks or longer after profession of faith to allow the convert to confirm his decision, understand more fully the meaning of baptism and show evidence of his conversion. In many countries, a new convert's class or new member's class is required before baptism. I especially think a waiting period is appropriate for children to give them time to come to understand the significance of baptism before being baptized.

Therefore, it does not seem improper to me, when necessary, to delay baptism some time to ascertain the reality of faith. Certainly, in Acts baptism was usually immediate, but not always. There is no consistent pattern, and nothing like a command concerning timing. It does not seem to have been an important issue, and in any case, all these cases deal with adult

conversions. While there is no biblical command about the timing of baptism, the necessity of faith is paramount, and so I think taking some time to discern faith is appropriate. We will examine in more detail the question of the age at which a church may affirm that a profession of faith is valid in a later section of these notes.

D. The proper mode of baptism. While sprinkling and affusion are practiced in some communions, there are three reasons to affirm immersion: (1) the word *baptizo* means immerse, (2) the NT descriptions of those baptized as “coming up out of the water” (Mk. 1:10, Acts 8:39) fit immersion, (3) and the symbolic meaning of baptism is portrayed only in immersion. Furthermore, if sprinkling had been meant, there was a perfectly fine NT word that could have been used (*rantizo*).

E. The proper administrator of baptism. While baptism has normally been assigned to pastors, there is no biblical reason for limiting it to them. Ordination is certainly not required. And, since baptism is baptism into Christ and his church, the local church should be seen as the baptizing agent, and free to assign anyone they choose to perform the baptism.

On a scale of 1 (a meaningless ritual) to 10 (red-letter day!), how meaningful was your baptism? What could have made it more meaningful?

III. The Lord's Supper. Baptism is a one time initiatory rite; the Lord's Supper is a continuing rite, signifying and deepening our fellowship with the Lord and his body. It is the only act of worship for which we are given specific instructions, and thus should be given more attention than Baptists usually give.

A. Terms used for this rite: the Lord's Table (I Cor. 10:21), Communion (I Cor. 10:16), the Lord's Supper (I Cor. 11:20; the word used is for a real meal), the breaking of bread (Acts 2:42), the thanksgiving or Eucharist (I Cor. 11:24), the blessing (I Cor. 10:16).

The Catholic term "mass" is not found in Scripture but is derived from the Latin verb *mittere*, "to send." It was used for the Supper as early as Ambrose (late 4th century), but many post-Vatican II Catholics are returning to the biblical term, eucharist.

B. The institution (Matt. 26:17-30, Mk. 14:12-26, Lk. 22:7-30, I Cor. 11:17-34; see also Acts 2:42, 20:7, I Cor. 10:14-22; but not John 6:32-59). Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper in the midst of his observance of Passover with his disciples. Thus, we should probably see it as a covenant meal (Lk. 22:20: "This cup is the new covenant"), and note that there is no record of the disciples observing Passover after this, for Christ is now "our paschal lamb" (I Cor. 5:7).

The words of institution, "This is my body," have occasioned as much controversy as any in Scripture. We should note four interpretations of this phrase.

1. Literal (Catholic view of transubstantiation). This view developed gradually. While Augustine distinguished between the sign and the thing signified, others were less careful. Bit by bit, the ideas of grace infused through the sacraments (*ex opere operato*), the power of the ordained clergy, the Aristotelian distinction between substance and accident, and a desire for

virtual magic in religion led to the official adoption of transubstantiation by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215.

According to this view, when a properly ordained priest lifts the host (the elements) and repeats the words of institution (*hoc est corpus meum*, in Latin), a miracle occurs. While the accidents remain the same, the substance of the elements is transformed (transubstantiated) into Christ. He is wholly present in each wafer, in each drop of wine. The celebration of the mass thus involves a re-creation of Christ. This sacrifice effects forgiveness of venial sins, an increase of grace, preservation from mortal sin, and gives us hope of salvation.

This position is defective philosophically (uses Aristotelian categories foreign to Scriptural thought), defective exegetically (the literal interpretation is forced and unnatural, for it overlooks the difficulty of Jesus distributing his own body), defective theologically (contradicts the once-for-all-ness of Christ's sacrifice, limits its effect to venial sins, and confers grace automatically, rather than through faith), and defective ecclesiological (it bases the effectiveness of the Supper on the power conferred on the priest in ordination, rather than on Christ blessing those who partake in faith). Thus, it was opposed by all the Reformers as blasphemous and one of the chief errors of the Roman Catholic Church.

2. Literal (Lutheran view of consubstantiation). While Luther denied the sacrificial nature of the mass, and the sacerdotal power that effects transformation, and held that faith was necessary for the recipient to be blessed, he did affirm the real, bodily presence of Christ "in, with, and under" the elements. It is as if Christ comes to us wearing the elements as a set of clothes. There is no change effected by the priest's words and acts, but a presence effected by Christ's power in accordance with his promise.

This still involves philosophical conceptions foreign to Scripture, but the major problem is exegetical. Luther simply could not accept an interpretation of the words of institution that was less than literal. I frankly think it was a part of his Catholic heritage that was so dear to him he could not divorce himself from it completely. To the criticism that Christ's physical body could not be present in simultaneous, widely scattered celebrations of the Supper, Luther argues for the view that Christ's human body could partake of the divine attribute of omnipresence (*communicatio idiomatum*). At the colloquy with Zwingli in 1529, he could hardly bring himself to listen to Zwingli's explanation of how "is" means "signifies" in many places in Scripture.

3. Spiritual (Reformed view). "This is my body" is interpreted to mean that Christ promises his spiritual presence at the Supper, but not his bodily presence in the elements. The elements are important in that they are God's ordained sign, but they are to be distinguished from what they signify. There is also the idea of the Supper as a seal. We may quote the formulation of this view given in the Westminster Confession (1643-46):

Worthy receivers, outwardly partaking of the visible elements in this sacrament, do then also inwardly by faith, really and indeed, yet not carnally and corporally, but spiritually, receive and feed upon Christ crucified, and all benefits of his death; the body and blood of Christ being then not corporally or carnally in, with, or under the bread and wine; yet

as really, but spiritually, present to the faith of believers in that ordinance, as the elements themselves are, to their outward senses.

Calvin himself seemed to emphasize the reality of the presence. Spiritual presence for him meant the Holy Spirit makes Christ present to us. He did agree with Zwingli that Christ's physical body is in heaven, but also appealed to the power of the Spirit to still somehow mediate Christ's real presence to us, appealing to mystery. Keith Mathison says the Reformed tradition's view of spiritual presence has moved from Calvin toward Zwingli, but Calvin's view is difficult to grasp (see Keith Mathison, *Given For You: Reclaiming Calvin's Doctrine of the Lord's Supper*).

4. Memorial (Zwinglian view, characteristic of most Baptists). The words of institution are understood simply as "this signifies my body." While Zwingli believed Christ was spiritually present with believers when they gather in his name, some who followed Zwingli were so concerned to deny bodily presence they left little room for spiritual presence. It rightly emphasizes the memorial aspect ("in remembrance") but neglects the present communion aspect. I blend some of the last two views in my interpretation of the meaning of the Supper.

C. The meaning. Though often overshadowed by the debate over the meaning of "This is my body," I think the larger question the meaning of the Lord's Supper is more important. I think we should see at least five aspects of significance in the Lord's Supper.

1. Look back in remembrance. Commemorate is, I think, too weak a word. Biblical remembrance is calling to mind the past in such a dynamic way that the past becomes a present reality, affecting present experience. The Supper proclaims the Lord's death in a vivid, visual way. We look back with thanksgiving (eucharist), humility, and awe.

2. Look around in fellowship. The Lord's Table is for the Lord's body, the church. In it we symbolize and reaffirm our unity (I Cor. 10:17) and communion (I Cor. 10:16), and are to recognize the body of the Lord (i.e., the church) as we partake (I Cor. 11:29; compare with I Cor. 11:27). As our Passover, it is the occasion for renewing the covenant vows which bind us to the Lord and to one another (Baptist churches in the past often used to recite their church covenant prior to partaking of the Supper). Paul's horror at the way the Corinthians observed the Supper was based on the fact that it revealed their divisions and lack of concern for each other, when it should bind us together.

Thus, the Supper should not be observed by individuals or families or loosely formed groups, but by the body of Christ, as an expression of their unity and their commitment to be the body of Christ in their relationship to one another. It is supremely the time when the church "comes together" (the Greek verb *sunerchomai* is found five times in I Cor. 11). For this reason, the exercise of church discipline usually involved restriction of the Supper from those out of fellowship with the church.

3. Look ahead in anticipation. The Lord's Supper is a kind of rehearsal and foretaste of the Messianic banquet to come at the marriage feast of the Lamb (Lk. 14:15-24, Rev.

19:9). There is a time limitation on the Supper: "until he comes." Then faith will become sight, and remembrance will become reality. Until then, we live faithfully and expectantly.

4. Look within in self-examination (I Cor. 11:28). This is one of the most often ignored commands in the Bible, despite the stern warnings associated with disobedience to it. It is so important to a proper understanding and practice of the Supper that it calls for further comment (see below).

5. Look up in thanksgiving (*eucharistia*) and worship. I fear we have been so anxious to deny the bodily presence of Christ that we have, in effect, practiced the real absence of Christ! We seem to have the idea that wherever else Christ may be, don't expect him to show up at communion. But God always blesses obedience, and thousands of generations of Christians have found the Supper to be a source of spiritual nourishment. We should expect that when we properly observe the Supper, God will be there to bless.

D. The proper participants. Proper observance of the Supper requires proper participants. Who should partake?

1. Believers. Certainly, the meaning of the Lord's Supper restricts it to believers. Every instance in the book of Acts and I Corinthians has only believers in view.

2. Baptized believers? This has been a question in Baptist history. The normal pattern among virtually all churches has been that baptism precedes church membership and participation in the Lord's Supper. But, the Baptist understanding of valid baptism excludes those from paedobaptist churches. If they are believers, and are in attendance at a Baptist observance of the Lord's Supper, should they be allowed to participate? There have been two major positions in Baptist life, but the first has been the minority view for most of history, though that is no longer be the case.

a. Open communion, the view that all believers should be allowed to partake, has been advocated by Baptists as far back as John Bunyan, and supported by Baptists as famous as C. H. Spurgeon. However, most Baptist confessions of faith, except for Free Will Baptist confessions, have not supported this view. There have been three major arguments offered in support of open communion. First, the Lord's Supper is the Lord's, not the church's. Therefore, it should be offered to all who belong to the Lord. Second, the Lord's Supper is the sacrament of unity, not the place to draw lines of division. Third, to deny it to fellow believers has seemed to many people to be unloving and unnecessarily intolerant. How can we refuse those the Lord has accepted?

b. Closed communion (or strict communion) was held by most Baptists until recent times, and is the view in the Baptist Faith and Message 1925, 1963 and 2000 (see for example, the discussion in J.L. Dagg, *Manual of Church Order*, where he considers and rejects 10 arguments for open communion). The major support of this view is the Baptist view of baptism. Almost all agree that the proper order is baptism first (as the rite of incorporation and initiation) and then the Lord's Supper (as the rite of continuation). If that is so, then the only question is what type of baptism is a proper baptism. Historically, Baptists have emphasized that

a valid baptism must have a proper subject (a believer), a proper mode (immersion), and a proper understanding (not baptismal regeneration or necessary for salvation). So they have seen those baptized as infants as non-baptized persons, in need of obeying Christ's command to be baptized before requesting communion.

Moreover, Baptists think they have convincing answers to the case for open communion. They agree that the Supper is the Lord's, but they claim he gave it to the church, not to individual Christians as a private devotional practice. The church setting is inherent in the classic 1 Corinthians 11 text, where the church is described five times as "coming together" for this observance, and stern warnings are attached to the need to recognize "the body of the Lord," (v. 29), referring to the church, which is constituted of those properly baptized. Second, they agree that unity is a theme in the Lord's Supper, but it is the unity of the church, not that of all Christians. In other words, it is the unity of a local church, not that of the individual church, that is in view in 1 Cor. 10:16-17 and throughout 1 Cor. 11:17-34. The boundary for Christian unity is the gospel, not the Lord's Supper, for we simply have not been able to reach unity on what the Supper means. Third, they agree that all Christians should love other Christians, but they think there are many ways they can show love to other Christians without sacrificing their convictions on the importance of baptism. In fact, some may say it is unloving and intolerant to ask a fellow Christian to sacrifice their convictions in the name of being more inclusive.

Some go even further, and restrict the Lord's Supper not just to validly baptized believers but to members of one particular local church, arguing that the aspect of unity and fellowship which the Supper symbolizes (1 Cor. 10: 16-17) can be realized only when the participants are committed to each other in a local body. While I have some sympathy with this view since the idea unity and true communion does seem to apply more fully to a local body, most have been willing to allow participation by those present from a church "of like faith and order" as not requiring a sacrifice of convictions concerning the importance of baptism. This view is sometimes called transient communion, or closed, with the previous view being called close, but I think the clearest term for it is local-church-only.

c. Evaluation. This is really not a question contemplated in the New Testament, as there were no non-baptized Christians then. I see strengths and weaknesses in both views. The trend today is toward open communion, with more than half of SBC churches practicing it, including many who affirm the *Baptist Faith and Message* as their statement of faith. I see some dangers in this movement. First, I think it does reflect a poor understanding of baptism. It is commanded. It is the initiatory rite, is practiced as such by virtually all denominations, and thus should precede partaking of communion. More importantly to me, open communion seems to overlook the horizontal dimension of the Supper, and overly individualize its meaning to just the communion of the individual believer with Christ. How can those who do not know each other and are not committed to each other meaningfully affirm their unity and communion (1 Cor. 10:16-17)? Open communion at best seems imperfect and incomplete communion. A third danger is that it seems to lead to open membership, which similarly devalues baptism and can further undermine regenerate church membership.

3. Self-examined believers (1 Cor. 11:28). Individuals are to examine themselves before they participate. For this reason, some churches say communion should be open to church

members, but only those in good standing, and certainly one consequence of church discipline should be that such persons are not allowed to partake of the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 5:9-11). But, the exhortation here is to self-examination, which is a different matter than church discipline. What might such examination involve?

I like the conditions laid down by Anglicans in their liturgy for participation in the Lord's Supper. First, believers are called to hear God's word and in its light confess their sins, repent of them, and intend by God's grace to live in obedience. Then, on the basis of the gospel promises, believers are to renew their faith in Christ as their only hope for forgiveness and life. Third, believers are called to reconciliation and renewal of their love for one another. I have structured observance of the Lord's Supper around these three conditions and have found it very helpful.

Whatever method we use, we must make time in our observance for self-examination. A sinless state of perfection is not required, but a recognition of sinfulness, a grateful recognition of the Lord's body broken for you, and reconciliation with members of the Lord's body (the church) does seem to be involved. Unbelievers and those too young to understand the significance of the Supper, those walking in direct disobedience, and those out of fellowship with members of the local body should refrain. To participate unworthily is to court judgment, including the possibility of sickness and even death (I Cor. 11:30).

E. The proper understanding. Traditional Catholics and some Missouri-Synod Lutherans also practice closed communion, because they believe (rightly, I think) that persons celebrating communion together should have something close to a common understanding of what this rite means. We are simply too far from the Catholic and Luther view, and thus, I would counsel non-participation among those with sharply divergent views of what the Lord's Supper means.

F. The proper elements. Bread and wine cannot be absolutely required, for in some cultures they are not available. Nor are the elements important in and of themselves. They should convey the idea of nourishment, and should visually represent being broken and being poured out. Any common food and drink that can be broken and poured out is thus acceptable. I personally find the little, square, prefabricated wafers an abomination, and prefer real bread that can be broken in the presence of the congregation. I have no problem with grape juice, and feel using real wine would cause more problems than it would be worth. In any case, the focus should not be on the elements, but on what they signify.

G. The proper administrator. In Catholic theology, an ordained priest, who has special power by virtue of his ordination, is required to perform transubstantiation. But for Protestants, who believe we are all believer-priests, and that ordination confers no special power, insistence that the Supper can only be celebrated by ordained pastors lacks a biblical or theological basis and can only be justified as an unconscious retention of Catholic ideas. Since this is an ordinance of the church, the church can designate who leads in its celebration. Pastors are certainly appropriate leaders, but are not by any means the only legitimate administrators.

H. Frequency. There is no command here, though there is some evidence in Scripture and early church history of weekly observance (Acts 20:7, *Didache* 14:1). Calvin, Wesley and Spurgeon all preferred weekly observance. Most Baptists observe it only quarterly, claiming that

more frequent observance would make it a meaningless ritual (but we preach and sing and take up an offering every week!). I prefer a monthly observance, alternating between morning and evening services (to allow those who serve during the morning service to be able to participate), and observing it carefully and reverently, rather than tacking it to the end of an unrelated service.

IV. Areas of improvement. Baptists have traditionally been accused of sacramental poverty, the result of excessive reaction against Catholic sacramentalism. But, there is renewed interest these days in the sacraments among Baptists (and other evangelicals as well), and there is room for reconsidering how we may better celebrate them.

A. For baptism, we must do a better job insuring that we baptize believers, and thus, stop the rash of “rebaptisms” among us. One way to do so is to carefully reconsider the wisdom of baptizing young children before we have reason to conclude their decision is credible. A second would be to include some actual verbal confession of faith by the one being baptized, either while in the water or via an earlier taped statement (for churches with the technological capabilities).

B. In the area of the Lord’s Supper, I think we need a renewed sense of anticipation of the Lord’s blessing on believing participation, coupled with a greater sense of the need for significant preparation via self-examination. That self-examination should especially include our unity with the other members of the local body, making the Lord’s Supper the time when we renew our covenant commitment one to another. The fact that the Lord’s Supper consists of common food and drink should symbolize God’s desire to nourish us as we observe this ordinance, but the casual and mechanical way we observe it stands in the way. Along with that, a more frequent observance, if observed rightly, would be a blessing to the people of God.

For more, see John S. Hammett, *40 Questions on Baptism and the Lord’s Supper*, hopefully coming soon.

What have you heard that may challenge or change the way you have viewed baptism or the way you have practiced the Lord’s Supper?

PART F: CONTEMPORARY ISSUES OUTLINE

I. Recovering the Baptist Mark of the Church.

- A. Why is this the Baptist mark of the church?
 1. The idea of the pure church.
 2. Baptist confessions of faith.
 3. Emphasis on church discipline.
- B. Why does it need recovering?
- C. How can regenerate church membership be recovered?
 1. Build the theological foundation.
 2. Take some practical steps.

II. Assessing New Approaches to Doing Church.

A. Seeker Churches.

1. Their distinctive characteristics.
2. Causes for concern.

B. Megachurches and Microchurches.

1. Megachurches.
2. Microchurches.
3. In between churches.

C. The Emerging/Missional Church.

D. Historic Churches.

E. Globally Contextualized Churches.

I. Recovering the Baptist Mark of the Church.

While there are many new approaches to doing church in our era that merit discussion, the most pressing concern to me in contemporary ecclesiology is the recovery of something old, but largely lost in Baptist life today, the Baptist mark of regenerate church membership.

Most Baptist distinctives are found in our ecclesiology. Believer's baptism, congregational government, local church autonomy, and the priesthood of all believers are a few examples. But, all of these are linked to a more fundamental idea of what the church should be, a body of regenerate believers. The early church gave us the four classical marks (one, holy, catholic and apostolic); the Reformers gave us the marks that recovered the center of the church for their day (the preaching of the word and the right administration of the sacraments). The Baptist contribution has been to a proper understanding of the circumference of the church, the boundary established by regenerate church membership.

A. Why is this the Baptist mark of the church? It is there in our history, in terms of origins, confessions and practice.

1. Leon McBeth says, "Perhaps the origin of Baptists is best explained as a search for a pure church" (*The Baptist Heritage*, p. 75). I believe McBeth is right, and that the idea of a pure church explains not only the origin of Baptists but is the center for our ecclesiological distinctives. For example, believer's baptism is important for Baptists because believer's baptism is the way that we ensure that the church remains pure. Congregational government is possible because the church is pure, composed of only regenerate believers. Closed communion reflects and preserves the importance of a regenerate church. Regenerate church membership is a prerequisite for effective church discipline, for only such a church will have the courage and

compassion to discipline. Church discipline also helps protect the purity of the church by removing those whose lives show they are not regenerate.

The idea of the pure church, therefore, leads to the Baptist mark of the church, regenerate church membership. In 1905 at the first Baptist World Congress in London, J.D. Freeman said, “the principle of regenerate church membership more than anything else, marks our distinctiveness in the world today.”

2. It may also be called the Baptist mark of the church because it is reflected in Baptist confessions of faith. These documents consistently show concern that those baptized and received as church members are genuine believers, or as they often call it, “visible saints,” living a separated life, different from the world, giving evidence of the faith they profess.

For example the Somerset Confession of 1656 states their belief and practice of church membership in these words: “In admitting of members into the church of Christ, it is the duty of the church, and ministers whom it concerns, in faithfulness to God, that they be careful they receive none but such as make evident demonstration of the new birth, and the work of faith with power.” The very influential Second London Confession says in a similar way: “The members of these churches are saints by calling, visibly manifesting and evidencing (in and by their profession and walking) their obedience unto that call of Christ.” In addition to the Second London Confession, Charleston Baptists in 1773 adopted three further areas of qualifications or prerequisites for church membership. First, they required conversion or “an entire change of nature.” Secondly, they required that new members should have some competent knowledge of divine and spiritual things. Thirdly, they required that members’ lives not contradict their profession of faith.

3. Their zeal for regenerate church membership can also be seen in their emphasis on church discipline. From the early Anabaptists through most Baptists of the 19th century, church discipline was prominently practiced among Baptists. The underlying basis for this practice was not meanness or a judgmental spirit but a concern that the church be the Church, people who live like followers of Christ.

A recent study has confirmed the seriousness of conversion among Baptists and other evangelicals in the 18th and 19th centuries (see Christine L. Heryman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt*). In the wake of the Great Awakening, conversion was seen to be so radical, so counter-cultural, so demanding, that many Southerners were hesitant to commit to church membership, for which conversion was mandatory. It was typical for Baptist churches to have 2 or 3 adult adherents for every member; non active members were unheard of and would have been a matter for church discipline. As late as 1810, no more than 20% of Southerners were members of any evangelical church. About this time (1810-1830), Southern evangelicals, including Baptists, began to change their teachings and practices to be more accommodating to the culture and present less obstacles to church membership, and membership began to rise, leading to what became in later years the Bible Belt.

B. Why Does It Need Recovering? The answer is simple: because by any measure we are light years from even approximating this mark in most Baptist churches. Modern day Southern

Baptist life makes a mockery of the principle of regenerate church membership. In 2012, out of a total of 15, 872,404 Southern Baptists, average Sunday morning worship attendance was 5,966,735, about 37.6 percent. In round numbers, this means that in a church of about 400 members, about 150 are present on any given Sunday morning. For our denomination as a whole, this means that about 10 million of our supposedly regenerate members did not take the trouble to attend their church's major worship service. Many churches have large numbers of members whose whereabouts are unknown, or even whether they are alive or dead.

In such a situation, the traditional Baptist mark of regenerate church membership is obviously missing in Southern Baptist life, with disastrous consequences. To be a member of a Southern Baptist church means nothing, and our corporate witness does not distinguish us very much from the world. Even the practice of congregational government becomes difficult when unregenerate church members are a significant part of the church. Most important, we may have millions of church members trusting in their church membership to get them into heaven who are, by all appearances, unregenerate. To recover the mark of regenerate church membership, both theological and practical renewal will be imperative.

Do you know what percentage of your church's members attend on any given week? Are there any practices in place to insure that all the members of the church are regenerate ?

D. How Regenerate Church Membership May Be Recovered.

1. Build the theological foundation. As prerequisites to recovering meaningful church membership in Baptist life, I see two theological issues that must be confronted.

a. Recovery of what the church is called to be. Since the time of Augustine, the ideal of a pure church had been abandoned in favor of a *corpus permixtum*. Reference was often made to the parable of the wheat and the tares (Matt. 13,) and later to God's secret work of predestination in the heart of the elect. The conclusion drawn was that one cannot infallibly distinguish those who are genuinely saved and those that are not; therefore, the best solution was a state church, in which all the members of an area were also members of the church. They all came together and heard the word of God, and in that context genuine faith would be born in the hearts of those with whom God was working.

The New Testament teaching on the church clearly pictures the church as a body of redeemed believers. They are to be God's people, Christ's pure bride, living stones bound together by the Holy Spirit. Despite whatever difficulties there may be in distinguishing who are and are not genuine believers, this clearly is the ideal toward which we should reach.

b. Recovery of the sense of church competence. While E.Y. Mullins and Southern Baptists in the 20th century highlighted soul competence, historically earlier Baptists emphasized more the doctrine of church competence. For example, the Second London Confession stated the following: "To each of these churches thus gathered according to His mind declared in His word, He (Christ) hath given all that power and authority, which is in anyway needful, for their carrying on that order in worship and discipline, which he hath instituted for

them to observe, with commands and rules for the due and right exerting and executing of that power.”

Baptists have seen such church competence as the basis for local autonomy, with congregations choosing their own pastors, accepting and disciplining their own members, and governing themselves in all matters. But we have in recent years retreated from this high view of church competence especially in the area of church membership. Who are we, we say, to question the sincerity or genuineness of someone requesting baptism or church membership? Who are we to judge others as needing church discipline? We must answer, we are the church of Christ, given competence and responsibility by Him to act in such matters, under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, manifested in the consensus of a congregation of regenerate believers.

2. Take some practical steps. What can a church or a pastor do practically to begin the process of recovering regenerate church membership? I see three ways to approach the problem (for a complete “twelve step recovery plan” program, see Mark Dever, “Regaining Meaningful Church Membership,” in *Restoring Integrity in Baptist Churches*).

a. I believe churches need to start by reinstating the practice of organizing around a church covenant that states clearly the expectations the church has of its members. It is not a new requirement beyond faith for salvation, it is rather the goal we honestly aim toward and the commitment we make as members of one another (see the example of Saddleback Church in Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, that of Mark Dever in *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*; see 16 historic examples in Timothy and Denise George, *Baptist Confessions of Faith, Covenants and Catechisms*, and dozens in Charles Deweese, *Baptist Church Covenants*). Such a covenant needs to be reaffirmed annually, to reflect those who remain committed to the body. There seems to be something of a biblical precedent for this in the way the people in Nehemiah’s day reaffirmed their covenant with God (see Nehemiah 9:38-10:39).

I believe this is the best way to start because it enables churches to deal with the biggest problem in reinstating regenerate church membership, the backlog of accumulated inactive church members. Rather than having to take action against existing church members, this method allows these inactive church members to opt out on their own. They choose to exclude themselves by not coming and signing the church covenant. Those formerly on the church rolls who do not come and sign the church covenant should become the “missing members” list for follow up. They should be contacted and their status discovered. They should be urged to come and sign the church covenant as soon as possible. If they still do not come, effort should be made to determine why they have not come. This should be the time when restoration is the emphasis, and in many cases evangelism may be the true need. The tone should not be threatening, but gentle, yet firm, insisting that to be a Christian means to be a follower of Christ, and it means participation in His body. After a time of patient work, it may then be time for the shock treatment of discipline in which the church body votes to regard this person’s membership as “suspended,” or as a member “not in fellowship.” It should be stated that this does not affect their salvation, nor does it mean we should shun them. Rather it is a call for special attention to be given to loving and praying for them, and it is a way of saying that being a church member in this church means something; it means a committed participating life.

b. A further practical step will have to be taken in the area of baptism. I believe we need to return to the practice of a period of training and examination before baptism, as practiced by Baptists here 100 years ago and as still practiced by Baptists in many parts of the world today.

One troubling area is what to do with young children making professions of faith and requesting baptism and church membership. Pastors and churches need to carefully consider this issue and develop coherent policies.

As late as the early 19th century, during Richard Furman's tenure as pastor of FBC, Charleston, while young children were carefully taught the church's catechism, "the greatest care was exercised in guarding against premature professions of piety." Indeed, among earlier Baptists, the supposed conversion of someone younger than 16 or 18 would have been regarded as highly unusual. Believer's baptism was seen as virtually synonymous with adult baptism. Mark Dever gives numerous examples of Baptist leaders in the past, who, although raised in strong Christian homes, were not baptized until their teen-age years (see *Theology for the Church*, 848-49, n. 171). Even today, Baptist churches in Romania, Ukraine, Brazil, France and almost everywhere except the United States expect to baptize their young people no earlier than at 14 years of age, and baptism of children is rare among Baptists around the world; the United States is the exception.

But in contemporary Southern Baptist churches, while we still do not practice infant baptism, some are concerned that we are beginning to practice what may be called "toddler baptism." Between 1966 and 1993, the number of baptisms of children under 6 years of age tripled, and a recent survey found the only age group among Southern Baptists that showed an increase in baptisms is the preschool group, a statistic that wasn't even kept until 1966. Certainly, some of these children were converted, the great majority I hope, but I think many of you know from personal experience friends that joined the church and were baptized as young kids but have never evidenced a redeemed life.

In fact, a 1993 survey by the then Home Mission Board (now NAMB) found a disturbing statistic. Of those baptized as adults (18 years of age or older) in SBC churches, six of ten had been previously baptized. Some were of course coming from other traditions and had been baptized as infants or by some form other than immersion, but 36% of all adults baptized in Southern Baptist churches in 1993 had previously been baptized in Southern Baptist churches. Of these previously baptized Southern Baptists, more than a third said they came seeking rebaptism because they had just experienced conversion. Are we guilty of prematurely baptizing people, especially children, without insuring that they understand the gospel and are responding to Jesus Christ? It seems evident that we are.

While it seems impossible to state a minimum age at which a child may be truly saved, the gospel does involve some cognitive information which I think is beyond preschoolers. Art Murphy, Children's Pastor at FBC, Orlando, states, "we have found that most children who make that decision under the age of 7 tend to need to make another decision later" and points to the rash of rebaptisms as evidence. Others would see a number of factors pointing to the importance

of the age of 12. That seems to be the age at which Jesus began to manifest a sense of spiritual responsibility (Luke 2:49); it seems to be the age at which Paul saw one as spiritually accountable (see Rom. 7:9 and the age for *bar mitvah* and confirmation in many paedobaptist denominations); it was overwhelmingly the age mentioned as the age of conversion in a survey of Southern Baptists (more mentioned the age of 12 than 11 and 13 combined; overall, 67% were converted between the ages of 7 and 16); and many developmental psychologists see significant cognitive abilities blossoming around that time. For these reasons, as well as the danger they see of giving premature assurance, John MacArthur's church is reluctant to baptize anyone under the age of twelve. I do see these lines of evidence as significant, but they do not amount to a biblical command for 12 as the definite minimum age for baptism.

How then can we deal with children as young as 4 or 5 who come forward, who have asked Jesus into their hearts, and who are requesting baptism and church membership?

First, I like the practice of FBC, Dallas in which young children making professions of faith are received, and their decisions made a cause for celebration, but there is no necessary conclusion that conversion has occurred nor that baptism should be imminent. Rather, the attitude taken is that the child has taken an important step in their relationship with Jesus. The nature of that step will be determined in a longer counseling appointment later that week, with the child, parents and pastor (or staff member). That takes the pressure off of trying to determine what happened in the child's life during the invitation.

Second, everyone should be clear that salvation and baptism are separate issues. Salvation is God's business and he can save whoever he wants whenever he wants. Baptism is the action of the church, and needs to be undertaken only when the church has reason to believe that the one to be baptized has experienced regeneration. Baptism is in no way necessary to complete salvation. Thus, there is no necessity to rush to baptism. The child's commitment can be given time to take root and grow, and for the church to see evidence of regeneration.

Finally, baptism can be made contingent on completion of a new Christian's class. At FBC, Orlando, this is a four-week class limited to those in the second grade and above. Younger children are encouraged to grow and enroll in the class when they reach second grade.

Of course, this means in effect that some children who come making professions of faith at an early age may wait a while before being baptized. That is true, and I think proper. I was baptized at 7, but it would have been much more meaningful had I waited till I was a few years older and understood more fully what I was doing. This is not to question the genuineness of any child's conversion, but to suggest that delaying baptism until a certain level of understanding may be advisable. At any rate, Baptists do not believe that baptism washes away original sin or is in any case necessary for salvation. Rather it is an act of obedience and testimony. Therefore, it does not seem to me unreasonable to expect candidates for baptism to understand why baptism is obedience to Jesus and to be able to give testimony to their experience of conversion.

Some churches have opted to separate baptism and church membership, continuing to baptize children, but adding other requirements for church membership, such as reaching a certain age (16 or 18 usually), or affirming the church's covenant. Such requirements limit

church membership to those who are at least well into the teen years. With Baptist polity giving an equal voice and vote to every member, a requirement such as these seems wise and necessary. I don't think asking very young children to help decide fairly complex issues makes sense. At the same time, the necessity of such restrictions may point to the fact that earlier Baptists in their advocacy of congregational government did not contemplate the baptism and granting of church membership to young children.

It is not that we should try to exclude people, or have a rigid set of requirements. We should warmly welcome all those who come. But, at the same time, the church must take seriously its responsibility as the baptizing body. When a church baptizes someone, they are saying that the one baptized has given a credible profession of faith and should be regarded as a genuine follower of Christ, and the reality is that separating pleasing parents and following Jesus is difficult for a young child, even sincere and sensitive children. The church needs to have reason to believe the candidate for baptism is genuinely a believer. If they are to make an intelligent vote on admitting this person to membership, surely they need some basis.

Thus, I think we should make completion of a new Christian's class, a profession of faith to the congregation, and an affirmation of the church's covenant mandatory for all candidates for baptism and church membership, to be completed prior to baptism. The new Christian's class can be advocated for several reasons: getting follow-up going, solidifying the decision to follow Christ, and most importantly, allowing the church the time necessary to talk with the new convert, check his or her understanding of what it means to receive Christ, and confirm, as far as possible, the genuineness of their decision to follow Christ.

Even for those coming to join on transfer of letter, I would urge churches to require at least a new member's class, reviewing the basics of the Christian life, in case the member's previous church did not, and I would require affirmation of the church's covenant, giving the expectations and responsibilities of membership in that particular church.

How do you think churches should handle childhood professions of faith? Do you have friends who were baptized at an early age and have since been "rebaptized" out of a conviction that their first baptism was not believer's baptism? At what age can a profession of faith be certified as credible?

c. We will also need the courage to recover the practice of church discipline. Reforming our baptism and church membership policies should greatly reduce the need for church discipline, for I am convinced that many church members are unregenerate and therefore cannot maintain the standards of Christian conduct the church should uphold. But, even with revised practices on baptism and church membership, there will still be a need for church discipline, for almost every pastor will inherit a church where discipline has been neglected for decades, and every church will eventually have members who stumble.

There is an abundant biblical basis for church discipline. Matt. 18:15-18 and I Cor. 5:1-12 are the classic examples, but the subject is also raised in Gal. 6:1, II Cor. 2:5-11, II Thess. 3:6, I Tim. 1:20, and Titus 3:10.

In church history, the Catholic Church lost the practice, but some of the Reformers asserted it as one of the marks of the true church. Anabaptists were characterized by very strict discipline, including the practice of the ban, or shunning. Among early Baptists, shunning was generally not practiced, but discipline was common for both moral violations and doctrinal deviation. However, Stephen Haines (see "Southern Baptist Church Discipline: 1880-1939") in *Baptist History and Heritage* 20 (1985), 14-27), notes a variety of changes in society and in the churches that led to the decline of church discipline among Southern Baptists in the late 19th-early 20th centuries. Several factors may be noted: (1) the growing individualism in American society, which eroded the authority of the church, (2) the decline of Calvinistic theology, with its theology of depravity replaced by a more optimistic view of human nature as not needing discipline, (3) a general secularizing of values, as churches made peace with the culture and adopted the methods of business, including an emphasis on the bottom line of numerical growth, and (4) a revulsion toward church discipline that was found to be harsh, legalistic, punitive and unredemptive, when it was practiced.

Greg Wills has calculated that between 1845 and 1900 Southern Baptist churches disciplined about 1.3 million members and expelled about 650,000, but the practice virtually disappeared by 1950. Along the way, there were some who noted and lamented this loss and tried to recall Baptists to their old ways. Wills says of church discipline, "No one urged its neglect. All seemed to agree that it should be restored. But they failed to see that they had embraced new commitments incompatible with church discipline." He specifies three such commitments: (1) basing church practices on what seemed effective in gaining new members rather than on "an apostolic pattern," (2) redefining Baptist identity to focus on individual freedom and undermining the authority of the church "to judge belief and behavior," and (3) modifying the church's mission "to include curing social ills, which diminished their sense of separation from the world and secularized the churches." He sees 1880 to 1930 as the period when these commitments were embraced, and made discipline impossible (see Wills, "Southern Baptists and Church Discipline," in *Restoring Integrity in Baptist Churches*, 185). In the end, they simply grew tired of holding each other accountable, not realizing this as a failure to love each other with holy love.

By the beginning of the 20th century, discipline in Baptist churches in America had become uncommon; today it is very rare. The pastor seeking to renew a biblical practice of church discipline should proceed slowly and carefully, building a foundation of theological and biblical understanding through his preaching, demonstrating the historic Baptist practice of church discipline, the contemporary need, and most important, teaching carefully the purpose of discipline (restoration, not punishment). Only then should he lead the church in considering some of the following suggestions.

1. The church may want to approve and insert in its by-laws a brief statement describing its understanding of church discipline. Such a statement should emphasize that the purpose of church discipline is not punitive, but restorative (for the individual) and protective (of the church and its purity and witness), and that what calls for church discipline is not sin, even grave sin, but sin that the sinner refuses to admit and repent of. Discipline is not for the weak one who falls, but for the rebellious one who denies that he has sinned or refuses to repent.

Further it should be emphasized that discipline is a last option, only exercised after there have been repeated attempts to win the offender, and after prayer for him and love to him have been extended. Discipline should never be entered into hastily, but only after the pattern of Matt. 18 has been exhausted, and should never be pronounced as final, but always open and hopeful that repentance will come, and the offender can be welcomed back.

2. Discipline for sins of commission is more difficult. Which sins should be a matter for church discipline? The only guideline in Scripture is sin that one refuses to acknowledge as sin. I believe it would be wise to further limit church discipline to matters that affect the church, either its reputation in the community (sins that are a matter of public knowledge) or its unity (sins that have disrupted fellowship between two or more members of the church) or its doctrine (a member teaching or advocating unscriptural doctrine). And again, the matter need come to church discipline only when repeated attempts to resolve the situation in other ways have failed.

Perhaps divorce will be the most common situation. When one spouse has left the other, the church's responsibility is to support the partner deserted, and to seek the one who left, and urge them to seek reconciliation. If the party persists and pursues divorce without a sufficient reason (unfaithfulness, severe abuse), suspension or exclusion may be necessary, and that status should be reflected if the church is asked to grant a letter to another church.

In general, while it may not be wise or possible to develop a list of specific sins for discipline, sins that damage the church's witness and flout central Christian moral or theological standards are the sort of sin that merit church discipline, in my opinion.

Renewing church discipline will be very difficult, and should not be undertaken by a new pastor. A high level of trust and a foundation of biblical teaching and preaching should precede opening this subject. It has been abused in the past and could be abused in the present. It could expose the church even to suits and legal problems, as happened not too many years ago. Is it worth the difficulties? Every pastor and leader will have to answer that question for himself or herself, but in terms of Baptist heritage, the answer is clear: it was the quest for a pure church that brought Baptists into existence.

Have you ever seen church discipline practiced in what you would see as a biblical manner? Have you seen churches where a failure to practice church discipline has led to bigger problems?

II. Assessing New Approaches to Doing Church. The past twenty-five years have seen an explosion of new forms and approaches to doing church that have become an important part of North American Christianity, especially evangelical Christianity. These new approaches call for ecclesiological assessment, not just pragmatic evaluation.

A. Seeker churches. Pioneered by Bill Hybels and Rick Warren and followed by thousands, seeker churches have become a major force, with the Willow Creek Association becoming larger than many denominations, conferences offered by Hybels and Warren being attended by thousands, and millions reading Warren's books. Though the popularity of the movement may have crested, its influence is still strongly with us.

1. What are the distinctive characteristics of seeker churches?

a. Seeker orientation. What makes seeker churches a new approach is their orientation. They approach all they do, not with the objective of exalting God (though they certainly desire to do that), nor with the primary goal of edifying believers (though they hope to accomplish that too); the goal is to attract “seekers,” those outside the church. They try to look at what they do through the eyes of a typical non-churched person in their area and adjust their building, music, dress, and messages to be attractive to seekers. However, this is built on the questionable assumption that non-believers are seeking God (Rom. 3:10ff). The good news is that God is seeking them (Luke 19:10; John 4:23).

b. Varying degrees of seeker orientation. One reason for the proliferation of churches that fall under this category is the variety of approaches, from seeker-aware to seeker-sensitive to seeker-friendly to seeker-oriented to seeker-driven.

c. Generally evangelical in their theology. One of the major motivations for seeker churches is a passion for reaching people for Christ. Thus it is not surprising that these churches are largely evangelical (and more Baptist than anything else). In view of the claim that these churches water down the gospel, the strongly conservative nature of the theology of pastors in the Willow Creek Association is striking and may be surprising to some. According to Kimon Sargeant’s survey of such pastors, 98% describe themselves as evangelical, 99% affirm the true and inspired nature of the Bible, 99.6 affirm Christ’s deity and humanity, and 86% believe someone must hear and believe the gospel to be saved (the rest have some doubts about those who never hear).

d. Growing much more than the average church. One reason why so many have taken this approach is that it seems to be working. While 80% of churches in North America are stagnant or declining, 75% of the thousands of churches in the Willow Creek Association are growing (see K. Sargeant, *Seeker Churches*, 22-23).

2. Causes for concern. While some seeker churches are certainly healthier than others (for example, I see a lot more positives in Saddleback than Willow Creek), the approach lends itself to some common concerns.

a. The needs of believers. While the Sunday morning services are designed for seekers, most of the attendees are, in fact, Christians. This need is addressed by the growing number of seeker churches with believer services during the week, while continuing seeker services on Sunday morning. But will members be able to make it to a second meeting? Moreover, if it is radically different, will those saved in the seeker service be able to make the transition? Does a seeker service give a false picture of Christianity by emphasizing only the positive aspects?

b. A major concern for many is the inevitable distortion they think a marketing approach introduces, especially looking upon people as consumers and the church’s goals as satisfying the needs of the consumer. These pressures can lead to unintentional

distortions of the gospel, taking the sharp edges off, portraying the gospel as the means to personal fulfillment, and telling people what they want to hear. Some question if these churches are producing genuine followers of Christ or simply satisfied consumers.

c. A third area of concern is that seeker churches are trying to adapt to American culture without any thorough critique of that culture from a biblical worldview. Putting it simply, they don't think theologically and critically, but pragmatically.

B. Megachurches and Microchurches.

1. Megachurches. The official definition of a megachurch is a church that has 2000 or more attendees at their major weekly services. While most are evangelical (with 25% Pentecostal), and many are held up as models to which others should aspire, there are dangers inherent in megachurches.

a. Congregational government becomes more difficult, but it can be preserved if valued and taught. The problem is that in most megachurches, congregational government is not valued, but seen as a hindrance to growth.

b. Some question the almost universal practice of multiple services, and the growing trend to multiple sites. If a group of people never meet together, are they really a church? Is it viable for a church to receive pastoral teaching via video, from someone they never see? Can we so easily separate the functions of teaching from pastoring? Are local church autonomy and congregational government incompatible with multiple site churches?

c. Even more difficult for a megachurch is the challenge of functioning as a genuine New Testament church. Can a group of 2000 enjoy intimate fellowship, effective nurturing, and pastoral oversight? Many megachurches thus see the development of small groups as crucial to their ministries. But, is the small group then the church? Are Sunday School teachers being asked to serve as pastors? Do pastors really want to give an account to God (Heb. 13:17) for thousands of members they do not know?

2. Microchurches. Cell churches and house churches are the most common forms of microchurches; small groups in large churches may function as a church, but usually do not think of themselves as a church.

a. Cell churches seem to be more common overseas than in the U.S., though cell churches may be growing here today. Some see the cell as the heart of the church, but add some association with larger groups on some occasions for worship, teaching, or evangelism (calling such larger groups congregation or celebration).

b. House churches are clearly portrayed in the New Testament and are growing in popularity, especially among some segments of the emerging church movement and in countries where there is persecution of believers. In the latter situation, house churches make a lot of sense and even in overseas situations where there is no persecution, house churches avoid a

lot of money problems that churches often encounter when they try to build a building. In the U.S., however, a church building still signifies permanence and attracts people.

I have several concerns regarding microchurches, especially those with no connection to a larger group. The first is leadership. With such a small pool of members, will every house church have members qualified and willing to take on the role of elder? Second, while microchurches do a great job in developing intense fellowship, sometimes the very intensity tends to make them insular. How can house churches maintain an openness to outsiders and continue to grow? Once they get too large for a house, the only option is for some to leave and form a new house church, but there is a natural human aversion to leaving close friends. A third concern is the tendency on the part of some in the house church movement to see any other model as wrong (Wolfgang Simson). The New Testament church in Jerusalem was quite large and seems to have had a combination of small group and large group meetings (Acts 2:46; 5:12; 8:3). Both are legitimate expressions of church; each has advantages and disadvantages.

3. In between churches. Most churches are neither extreme, but many more are closer to the micro than mega. Here are some recent statistics for U.S. Protestant churches.

Fifty-nine percent of churches have 99 attenders or fewer. Another 31% have fewer than 350 attenders. But only 50% of churchgoers attend these 90% of the churches. Half of the people are in the largest 10% of churches. Of those, 4% have from 350 to 500 attenders; close to another 4% have from 500 to 999 attenders. The number of churches with more than 1000 attenders is only 2%, and the number of megachurches (over 2000 attenders) is less than one-half of one percent (0.4%). Yet I think most seminary students expectations of church ministry is set within the picture of the relatively small number of large churches; who will serve all the small churches?

C. The Emerging/Missional Church.

The emerging church began around 2000 exploded in evangelical circles around 2005, with the publication of D. A. Carson's sharply critical book, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*. Despite the work of people like Ed Stetzer, who gave a helpful analysis of the breadth of the types of churches under the umbrella of emerging (relevant, reconstructionists, and revisionists), the most liberal wing of the emerging movement got the most press, and those with sounder theology began to call themselves missional. Today, there is a surprising lack of discussion of the emerging church. Their chief concern, though, that churches are stuck in modernity and not connecting well with those moving into post-modernity, still needs to be addressed. The need is careful, theologically grounded contextualization, with the goal being churches that are biblically faithful and culturally relevant. Fortunately, this is the task international missionaries have been working at for years. What is needed now is a missional approach to church life here.

While missional has become the latest buzzword, theological reflection has not developed as rapidly. John Stott was ahead of his time in encouraging evangelicals to consider the Johannine version of the Great Commission in formulating our ideas of our mission (see his 1975 work, *Christian Mission in the Modern World*, 22ff). In John 20:21, Jesus sends us into the

world, in the same manner as the Father had sent the Son; not to do the same thing (we cannot redeem the world); nor to be the same person he was (the incarnation is a unique historical miracle). But, “in the same manner” means that the church’s mission must include both evangelism and social action. Stott has been followed to a significant degree by missional churches, with many churches seeking to meet all types of needs in their communities and the world as a whole, and is reflected in books like Christopher Wright, *The Mission of God*, and his shorter work, *The Mission of God’s People*. While Stott and Wright have been challenged by Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, (*What is the Mission of the Church?*), I think part of the problem has been that Gilbert and DeYoung are thinking about the mission of the church when it gathers. At those times, they are right to urge the priority of preaching the gospel and making disciples, in a fairly narrow sense. But, the church exists outside the gathered meeting, and in smaller groups and in their individual lives, the members of the church are properly to see themselves engaged in the mission of God’s people as they address all the areas of need their time, abilities and circles of influence allow them to touch. This too may be included as part of the mission of the church.

Missional churches will keep the church with a proper balance of coming together for worship, proclamation and disciple making, in terms of spiritual formation, but adding an important element of being sent forth into the world, to minister as widely as Christ did, since we are sent as he was sent.

D. Historic Churches.

1. Can one be “new” and “historic”? It seems oxymoronic to place “historic churches” in a discussion of new approaches, but in a culture seeking what is new and cutting edge, going back in time to find one’s way is a new occurrence. There really is no organized movement of churches in this direction; what I am calling attention to here is a wide variety of churches that for a variety of reasons are finding themselves drawn to practices that were characteristic of Baptist churches of the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, practices that have been largely forgotten in the past century. Churches from many different perspectives have adopted new member classes as a way of cultivating meaningful (regenerate) membership. Some have begun to recover the practice of church discipline and gather churches around a commitment to a covenant.

2. What is fueling this change? The source for the movement to these historic practices is varied. Many have no idea that these practices are historic; they would say they found them in the Bible or saw them work in another church. But, I believe there are several tributaries that flow into this small stream. One would be the Founders Movement. This movement has called Baptists to recover their Calvinistic theological roots, but in so doing, Baptists could hardly miss seeing their ecclesiological roots as well and noticing that they were distinctively different. Examples are abundant in the historic texts reprinted in the volume entitled *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life*.

The editor of *Polity*, Mark Dever, has also been a major source for this movement, both by his books (particularly *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*) and by making his church a living laboratory to which interested observers can come and see a church embodying historic

practices. (Dever describes his church's worship as blended, a blend of the best of the 17th and 18th centuries). He, along with John Piper, have also extended their influence through active web sites (IX Marks Ministries and Desiring God Ministries).

A final possible contributing factor is postmodern culture itself. Distrusting reason and logic, postmoderns have shown some attraction to what is older, particularly practices that predate the distorting influences of modernity.

E. Globally Contextualized Churches.

As missionaries have worked in what have traditionally been Hindu, Buddhist, and especially Muslim contexts, they have struggled with how far various aspects of church life, practice, and structure may be legitimately adapted to the varying cultural contexts. Most discussion has been with the Muslim background in mind, but many of the principles would seem to be the same for other contexts. Since the work of John Travis (*Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, 34, no. 4, 1988: 407-8), missiologists have used a scale of C-1 to C-6 to describe different degrees of contextualization (C for "Christ-centered communities").

1. C-1 is described as "traditional church using outsider language." This would be a church in Brazil, or Indonesia, or Korea, worshiping in English, singing American hymns, and using American forms (pews, etc.). This is essentially no contextualization, and seems contrary to the precedent of Acts 15, that becoming a Christian does not require a new cultural identity.

2. C-2 is "traditional church using insider language." Here the approach is the same as C-1 with the exception of using the local language. While language is a large part of one's cultural identity, it is not the whole of it, so this is a very incomplete contextualization.

3. C-3 involves using "insider language and religiously neutral cultural forms." This approach recognizes that some aspects of one's cultural identity may be religiously neutral and retained by a follower of Christ (music, dress, art forms) while other aspects may be inherently attached to the dominant religion of the area (Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism). For example, keeping the fast of Ramadan is not only a part of Muslim culture, but also Muslim religion, and should not be done by Christians.

4. C-4 goes further to include "insider language and biblically permissible cultural forms." They allow expression of all aspects of a culture except things specifically biblically forbidden. Thus, in an Islamic context, they would fast during Ramadan, and avoid pork and alcohol, and call themselves "followers of Isa" rather than "Christians." They may adapt other cultural aspects of Islam (the time and type of place of worship, the use of a stand for the Bible, praying face down).

5. C-5 refers to Messianic Muslims who have accepted Jesus as Savior and Lord, who belong to Christ-centered communities, and yet retain their Muslim identity, call themselves Muslims, and are regarded by their communities as Muslims. They are able to do so by quietly rejecting or reinterpreting aspects of Islam that are clearly incompatible with biblical faith.

6. C-6 is used for “small Christ-centered communities of secret/underground believers.” This category is for believers living in contexts where an open confession of Christ would almost certainly lead to suffering, imprisonment, and/or death.

Most agree that C-1 and C-2 are insufficiently contextualized, that C-3 and C-4 are better, and that C-6 is a model that those of us who live in safety are unqualified to evaluate. Thus most debate has centered around C-5.

Timothy Tennent (chap. 8, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity*) critiques C-5 for a deficient ecclesiology, arguing that one cannot accept Christ without adopting a new religious identity that cannot be lived out in the mosque, but only in connection with a church. He says, “To encourage Muslim believers to retain their self-identity as Muslim reveals a view of the church that is clearly sub-Christian” (215). Moreover, he sees C-5 as a self-defeating strategy: “If these new believers are not encouraged to unite their fledging faith with the faith of the church, then it is unlikely that these new believers will be able to properly reproduce the faith, which is the whole reason the C-5 strategy exists” (214).

I think Tennent is right. While proper contextualization is an imperative for missions contexts (and there are many aspects that may be adapted), the so called strategy of “churchless Christianity” is inherently theologically contradictory, ethically suspect, and strategically counter-productive.

CONCLUSION

I want to leave you all with one major impression: the centrality of the church in God's plan. Amazing as it seems, God loves the church; Christ died for it; and the Holy Spirit works through it. It is where the Christian life is begun and nurtured. It is what Christ has promised to build. It is where every believer belongs. In a world where parachurch organizations are proliferating, where churches are becoming nasty places to work, where trained individuals can find other contexts for ministry, I still encourage you to center your ministry around a local church. Whether you are a pastor or not, it must be a big part of your life and a major context for ministry and the nurturing of your own spiritual life. It has a high and holy calling from God, to be his new society. Therefore, all who love Christ, must also love Christ's church.

From all our discussion of ecclesiology, what will most affect your life as a church member and your ministry as a church leader?

CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY III
UNIT 2: ESCHATOLOGY
PART A: PERSONAL ESCHATOLOGY

Introduction

Immanuel Kant, perhaps the most important philosopher of the Enlightenment, said in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, “All the interests of my reason, speculative as well as practical, combine in the three following questions: (1) What can I know? (2) What ought I to do? (3) What may I hope?” The contemporary philosopher Peter Kreeft says the three cardinal Christian virtues of faith, love, and hope correspond to these questions (see *Heaven: The Heart’s Deepest Longing*, 11). Faith in God’s word answers the epistemological question. Love to God and neighbor sums up our duty. The doctrine of eschatology describes our hope.

Eschatology, or the study of “last things,” is one of the most fascinating and wide-ranging areas of theology, but one that few students study in depth. No doubt this is due in part to the fact that eschatology is traditionally the last topic treated in standard systematic theology courses, and so is often covered in a rushed, cursory fashion. Perhaps it is also partly due to the difficulty of the material. Eschatology deals with issues that lie at the end of life and ordinary human history and thus lie beyond our personal experience. Full understanding of some of our topics no doubt lies beyond our ability to comprehend (I Cor. 2:9), and is part of the reason for the diversity of views on a number of eschatological issues.

Yet we cannot afford to pass over eschatology too quickly. For the theologian, eschatology is intertwined with virtually every other doctrine. For example, God is described in the Old Testament as the first and the last (Is. 44:6; 48:12). Any study of “last things” must deal with God. In the New Testament Christ is called “the last Adam,” and “the First and the Last” (*eschatos*, I Cor. 15:45 and Rev. 1:17). His coming is the center of our “blessed hope” (Titus 2:13), and He himself is the focal point of all eschatology. While we normally think of salvation in terms of a past experience, the biblical doctrine of soteriology includes glorification and the resurrection of the body, both topics of eschatology. In terms of anthropology or ecclesiology, we cannot understand human life now apart from its ultimate, eschatological destiny. Without eschatology, our theology unravels.

It also has great value for the Christian life. Paul tells us that if we have hope in Christ only for this life, “we are to be pitied more than all men” (I Cor. 15:19), because Jesus promises us tribulation in this world, and reward only eschatologically (John 16:33; Matt. 5:12). The hope of heaven is not “pie in the sky by and by when we die” but a light that shines on our path now, even and especially in the darkest times. Moreover, meditation on last things is not morbid, but spiritually healthy. In the most widely read devotional book of all time, *The Imitation of Christ*, Thomas a Kempis recommends meditation on death: “Blessed is he that always hath the hour of his death before his eyes, and daily prepareth himself to die.” The unbeliever is enslaved by the fear of death, but Christ frees us so that we can look at death unafraid (Heb. 2:14-15, I Cor. 15:54-57).

Eschatology is also crucial for contemporary ministry. The terrorist attacks of 9-11 have made North Americans freshly aware of what we try to avoid or ignore; namely, the uncertainty of life and the certainty of death. Such awareness opens doors for ministry. Eschatology is also an area in which many Christians need guidance. In the last 150 years, eschatology has been more studied than at any prior period in church history, and has been the material for a series of best-selling books in recent years. While there is much good material that has been produced, eschatology has also often been the subject for speculative and sensational treatments that have led some into unwarranted fanaticism. Knowledge of eschatology helps a pastor or leader keep others from such extremes. Moreover, for the pastor or counselor, dealing with death, funerals, and the bereaved demands a firm grasp of heaven, hell and associated questions. Eschatology is vital to ministry.

Finally, eschatology is important for all Great Commission Christians because there is a link between eschatology and the completion of the Great Commission. There are verses that hint that one reason why Christ hasn't returned is that he is waiting for all to hear (Matt. 24:14; II Pet. 3:9). Eschatology has been a motivation for missions, both in the past and today (see the fascinating chapter 9 in T. Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity*).

Part A of this unit will deal with the issues normally called personal eschatology, the "last things" that happen to each individual. Here we will emphasize the topics of death, and heaven and hell, and touch more briefly on the intermediate state, resurrection and judgment. Part B will then focus on what I call cosmic eschatology, centering on the return of Christ and including a number of related issues and events that affect the entire cosmos.

DEATH Outline

I. A Biblical Understanding of Death

A. Death in the Old Testament.

1. A definition of death.
2. The origin of death.
3. Ambiguity toward death.
4. The universality and uniqueness of death.
5. Attitudes toward death.
6. Hope beyond death.

B. Death in the New Testament.

1. Clarification.
2. Victory.

II. Contemporary Questions about Death.

- A. The study of death.
- B. Near-death Experiences.

III. Personal Application.

- A. Issues in Ministry.
- B. Personal Preparation.

Introduction

For most people and most of human history, death has been a mystery, a puzzle, a grief. It casts its shadow over all of life as the inescapable end to which every life must eventually come, and raises a question as to the meaningfulness of life. Still today, it is an awkward topic, one that makes most people feel uncomfortable and even fearful. It is one of the few taboo subjects for conversation in polite American society. Indeed, Scripture says the devil uses the fear of death as an instrument of enslavement (Heb. 2:14-15), and contemporary American society reflects clearly our desperate attempts to ward death off and pretend it isn't coming, that we aren't getting older. Yet, despite the discomfort death occasions for many, it should hold no fear for Christians. Rather, careful understanding of death is important to us for a variety of reasons.

First, death as the inevitable storm that will eventually come can cause people to look to their foundation and ask if it is rock or sand (Matt. 7:24-27). Can it stand the storm of death? The inescapable reality of death can lead one to a search for life, and thus be used by God to lead one toward salvation. Also, passing through death is required of every believer as well, and preparation for that can spark profound areas of personal growth. Also, as we mentioned earlier, death is an important time for ministry. Both counseling bereaved persons and leading funerals are important aspects of ministry, and may be for some people the only time they will be open to hearing the message of life. Fourth, death is important for evangelism, for an important part of the gospel appeal, far more reliable, in my opinion, than many so-called felt needs, is the need to prepare for death (see John 3:16, Rom. 6:23 and the diagnostic Evangelism Explosion questions). Finally, death has been the subject of a number of recent controversies that raise important theological, ethical and practical concerns. A proper understanding of death will give us a basis from which to address these controversial issues. As Russell Moore aptly states, "At a funeral the church is perhaps at its most theological" (*Theology for the Church*, 858).

Therefore, death demands our theological attention. We start, as always, with Scripture.

I. A Biblical Understanding of Death.

A. Death in the Old Testament.

1. A definition of death. A biblical definition of death is needed, because whereas modern medicine is increasingly viewing humans solely in physical terms, the Bible views humans more holistically. While the Bible has a surprisingly high view of the body, it does not view the body as possessing life in itself. Life and death are more than merely bodily phenomena.

Gen. 2:7 is a pivotal verse for defining life. The body is viewed here as inert, apart from a special gift of God that imparts life. Only after God breathes life into the body is man viewed as “a living being.” The word for living being, *nephesh*, is often translated soul. While this term bears several senses in the Old and New Testament, the most distinctive and important sense is the seat of life. That which makes a human living, as opposed to dead, is the presence of *nephesh*, which is a non-physical reality (though Lev. 17:11 associates life with blood, which is medically accurate). But this life is not distinctive to humans. Gen. 1:21 uses the same word to describe the creatures of the sea; they too are living souls. The word soul used here does not indicate an eternal destiny for fish; it simply affirms that they have received from God the gift of life. What is distinctive about human life is its association with something called spirit (*ruah*).

How does this help us in understanding death? First of all, it helps us understand the basic meaning of death in the Old Testament. Death occurs when that which animates the physical body departs. That non-material reality can be called the soul (*nephesh*) or the spirit (*ruah*), and we see both associated with death in the OT. In Gen. 35:18, what is translated as “she breathed her last,” is literally “her soul was going forth.” The same idea is seen in I Kings 17:21-22, where *nephesh* is translated as “life,” and death is seen as *nephesh* departing and life is *nephesh* returning. But elsewhere death is seen as separating spirit (*ruah*) and body (Eccles. 12:7). That which had animated the body had departed, something termed soul or spirit. The body is dead. What about the destiny of that non-material part? What is spiritual death?

There are hints in the Old Testament that death has implications beyond the physical. For example, God warns Adam in Gen. 2:17 that he will surely die the day he eats of the tree. Some argue that “the day” is simply a way of emphasizing the certainty of death (and so the TNIV simply translates it as “when”). But I think it is possible that Adam died spiritually the very day he ate of the tree. That is, the spirit as the capacity for relationship with God died. It remains within human nature, but as a capacity needing a new birth. The reality of spiritual death is hinted at here, but made explicit in the New Testament. Not only does the NT clarify the distinction between spiritual and physical death (Rom. 6:23; Eph. 2:1), it adds the terrifying prospect of eternal death, or “the second death” (Rev. 20:14-15).

2. The origin of death. The first mention we find of death in the OT is Gen. 2:16-17, where it is seen as the certain consequence of sin. As mentioned above, Adam did not die physically on the day he ate of the fruit, and so some have said that the penalty of sin was spiritual death, and that Adam was mortal and would have eventually died physically anyway. But this seems very unlikely to me. Physical death was associated with the curse following the fall (Gen. 3:19), and while I think it is likely that spiritual death was the immediate result of the fall, I also think physical mortality began at the fall, though physical death came years later.

A more difficult question is that of the origin of all death, animal and plant as well as human. Was there animal and plant death before the fall?

Arguments for denying any pre-fall death would include (1) the absence of any explicit mention of the death of animals or plants prior to Gen. 3, (2) the idea that death would not fit

with the description of creation as "very good," and (3) the statement of Rom. 5:12 that death entered the world through sin.

Arguments for affirming the death of animals and plants prior to the fall would include (1) the fact that God seems to have created many carnivorous animals who live by killing and eating plants and animals, (2) the fact that Adam seems to have understood the meaning of the word "death" in Gen.2:17, and (3) the fact that while the serpent, the woman, the man and the ground are included in the curse following the fall, there is no mention of a curse on the plant and animal kingdom. Under this view, the death mentioned in Rom. 5:12 as originating with sin would be seen as human death only.

It is a difficult question, with no verse that answers it explicitly. I tend to agree with Anthony Hoekema: "It seems quite likely that there must have been death in the animal and vegetable worlds before man fell into sin" (*The Bible and the Future*, 79). The only argument against pre-fall death that gives me pause is the second argument, for some have seen moral problems in the "survival of the fittest" that seems to characterize nature today. However, it seems entirely possible that God may have created animals fitted for the way the world would become, for there is no mention of a curse on animals resulting from the fall. The description of creation and nature as "very good" in Gen. 1:31 may very well not be an ethical or moral description (as "not good" in Gen. 2:18 does not indicate something immoral), but simply indicating that creation was suited to God's purposes. William Dembski even speculates that as Christ's death was applied retroactively to save the OT people of God, so Adam's sin was applied retroactively to bring death into the world (see *The End of Christianity*). Either way, the focal point of Gen. 2 and 3 is that for humans, the origin of death is as God's judgment on sin.

This need not mean that Adam and Eve were created immortal. Scripture predicates immortality of God alone (I Tim. 6:16), but it is possible that part of being created *imago dei* was the gift of immortality. There are a number of questions raised by this possibility. Was immortality limited to the soul or were Adam and Eve created physically immortal too? If so, did they lose any or all aspects of immortality at the fall?

I think the likeliest answer is that Adam and Eve were created in a flexible state. Had Adam remained upright and passed the test, he would have been confirmed in righteousness and immortality. But due to the fall, he and his descendants became physically mortal, subject to corruption and death. I Corinthians 15:51-54 teaches that we put on immortality "at the last trumpet," but that takes us beyond OT teaching. Whether we were granted immortality of the soul, and whether it was lost in the fall, are questions not explicitly answered by Scripture, but are related to and affected by the issues of the intermediate state and the resurrection, and so will be considered further under those points.

The importance of the teaching that the origin of human death came through sin is that death is not natural for human beings. Because of sin, it is inevitable, and due to the corruption of the body, can even be welcomed as the end of pain and suffering. But it is always unnatural.

3. Ambiguity toward death. Even to an untrained reader, there is a significant difference between the attitude toward death in the Old and New Testament. This is not due to

any error in the OT, but due to the historical nature of progressive revelation and the centrality of Christ and his resurrection victory over death. It was given to Christ to bring "life and immortality to light through the gospel" (II Tim. 1:10). Thus, the OT teaching on death and especially what lies beyond death is shadowy and vague. As we will see, the hope of an afterlife is there, but it is not made clear.

Have you ever come across texts in the Old Testament where it seemed like they weren't that sure about eternal life, like Ps. 88:10-12? What have you made of such texts?

As a result, most of the OT reflects the idea that God's blessings come to His people in this life. The hope and confidence of the Psalmist was that he would "see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living" (Ps. 27:13); the promise to those who honor their father and mother is long life, not eternal life (Ex. 20:12). There is a stronger emphasis on earthly prosperity, as opposed to spiritual riches in heaven. Calvin describes the difference in this way:

the Lord of old willed that his people direct and elevate their minds to the heavenly heritage; yet, to nourish them better in this hope, he displayed it for them to see and, so to speak, taste, under earthly benefits. But now that the gospel has more plainly and clearly revealed the grace of the future life, the Lord leads our minds to meditate upon it directly, laying aside the lower mode of training that he used with the Israelites. (*Institutes*, II. xii. 1.)

The key point to remember is that God did not give clear teaching on the afterlife to OT believers; that fact gives the OT an ambiguous attitude toward death. C. S. Lewis thinks that the average OT believer did not know they were going to heaven when they died, and he thinks that was a good thing. It shows us that God is worth worshiping just because he's God, apart from the gift of eternal life (*Reflections on the Psalms*, 39-42).

4. The universality and uniqueness of death. By the first word we mean that death comes to all. Josh. 23:14 describes death as going "the way of all the earth." It is not that God does not have power over death; Enoch and Elijah are sufficient to show that. But from Gen. 3:22 onward, it was clear that God did not intend for humans to live forever in our present fallen condition. That death was the transition point into a newer and fuller life was a truth brought to full light later. But for now, death comes to all.

This should encourage those who work as pastors and counselors not to be in awe of doctors. Despite all our medical advances and technology, the death rate is still the same: 100%. So when the doctors have done all they can, we ask them to step aside and allow us to tell their patients about the One who has overcome the power of death.

By uniqueness, we mean that death comes once and once only. Death was seen as final in the OT. The hope of survival in any form at all was dim, and the idea of reincarnation was absent. II Sam. 14:14 compares death to water being spilled on the ground, "which cannot be recovered." This should give us pause in evaluating the experiences of those who "died" and were then resuscitated. Did they truly "die"? We will examine this area in more detail later.

Both these points, universality and uniqueness, are more explicitly taught in the NT (Rom. 5:12, Heb. 9:27), but they are clearly implied in OT teaching as well.

5. Attitudes toward death. We have already alluded to the ambiguity in the OT concerning any hope for life beyond death. For most of the OT, death, while an occasion of sadness, was often accepted. Death was at times seen as not too bad, if one died old and full of years, and left behind a godly legacy (Gen. 25:8). There could be a good death, the death of the righteous (Num. 23:10). Death is part of life, for which there is an appropriate time (Eccles. 3:2).

But there were other circumstances in which death was seen much more negatively. Sometimes death, especially premature or untimely death, was the punishment for sin. Thus, to be "cut off" sometimes seems to refer to excommunication from the people of God (possibly Lev. 17:9, 10) but can also refer definitely to physical death as the punishment for sin (Lev. 20:1-5). Similarly, long life (Ps. 91:16) or restoration to health (Ps. 6:4-5, Is. 38:16-17, 20) could be seen as salvation and forgiveness.

Another negative aspect of death, especially an untimely death, was that it cut one off from Yahweh and ended one's opportunity to praise Him (Ps. 88:5, 10, Is. 38:10-11, 18).

6. Hope beyond death. But alongside this negative, pessimistic attitude toward death and what lies beyond, there was also a developing idea, shadowy but definitely present, that death was not the absolute end of existence. Some see *Sheol* as the world of the dead, in which both the righteous and unrighteous continue in a shadowy, dreary existence. We will examine the exact nature of *Sheol* under the issue of the intermediate state, but the idea we want to examine now is much more positive, involving deliverance from *Sheol*. This idea seems to me to have been fueled by two convictions.

One was that the fellowship a believer enjoys with God is so strong that not even death can destroy it. This is seen most often in Psalms (see 16:10-11, 23:6; 49:15). Alongside this was the conviction that God is just. But that justice is not always vindicated in this world. This bothered the writer of Ecclesiastes (see 8:14, 9:1-2) and the psalmist (73:2-3). The former saw the obvious injustices of life "under the sun" but also warned his readers of a coming judgment (3:17, 11:9, 12:14). But if that judgment does not occur in this world, and yet must be carried out to vindicate God's justice, a future life is necessary. The writer of Ecclesiastes seems to want to affirm that, but has no clarity (see 3:19-21, 12:6-7). The psalmist talks of final destiny (73:17), and is more confident in affirming a continuation of his fellowship with God (73:23-24).

Passages such as those cited above, along with a few clear passages on resurrection (Dan. 12:2, Is. 26:19), and the idea brought out by Jesus that God is the God of the living (Mt. 22:23-32) seem to me to be a firm basis for the belief, embraced by the Pharisees but not the Sadducees, in the resurrection of the dead.

B. Death in the New Testament. I think two main words summarize what the NT adds to our understanding of death. They are clarification and victory.

1. Clarification. The NT clarifies much that was implied or ambiguous in the OT. Jesus, along with the Pharisees, believed that the OT affirmed a belief in resurrection and an

afterlife (Matt. 22:23, 31-32), but the clearest proof of an afterlife was his own resurrection. For Paul, the reality of Christ's resurrection was the key to hope beyond the grave (I Cor. 15:14, 20-24). And since we are united with Christ, our true life is already hidden with God in him, and we will be with him, even beyond the grave (John 14:3, Phil. 1:23, Col. 3:3).

The NT also clarifies that death is the separation of the spirit (or soul; Rev. 6:9) from the body (Luke 8:55; 23:46), and that death takes both physical and spiritual forms. And if physical death may be defined as the separation of spirit and body, I think spiritual death may be defined as separation of the whole person from God. This separation is not a physical matter, for God is omnipresent. Rather, it is a separation from a right relationship with God. Rather than being beloved children of God, those who are spiritually dead are “children of wrath” (Eph. 2:3). Whether we are born spiritually dead or not is an issue that needs consideration. Reformed theology, looking to Rom. 5:19, has seen original sin as constituting us sinners. This was the explanation for why mortality could extend even to children, who had not sinned in their bodies and yet sometimes died. But does the mortality that comes from original sin leave individuals spiritually dead from birth, and if so, how can infants who die in infancy be saved?

Most theologians found a way. Some Reformed theologians concluded that all infants who died in infancy were automatically elect. Just as they had been made sinners by Adam's sin apart from any action on their part, so they were saved by Christ as a result of God's electing choice, apart from any action on their part. A better rationale, offered recently by Ronald Nash, suggests that God saves infants who die in infancy because, while physical mortality may be the result of original sin, eternal judgment is based on sins committed in the body (II Cor. 5:10), which those who die in infancy cannot commit. Drs. Akin and Mohler, in an article readily available online, offer six lines of evidence

Other rationales usually rely on some notion of an age of accountability. Millard Erickson suggests that just as being saved is the result of God's electing activity, but involves the human response, so becoming a sinner is due to Adam's sin but involves a human ratification. The age at which we reach an age at which it is possible to recognize our sinfulness and ratify it is the age of accountability. I think the clearest indication of an age of accountability is Rom. 7:9. Thus, while we are born physically mortal and with spiritual corruption due to Adam's sin, we do not become spiritually dead and guilty in God's sight until we recognize a moral law (either external or internal) and disobey it, ratifying the desires of our corrupt nature.

A final area of clarification in the NT concerns the universality and uniqueness of death. I sometimes think God included Heb. 9:27 in the Bible specifically to refute the idea of reincarnation.

2. But the newest note in the NT is that of victory. Death is no longer accepted, but viewed as an enemy because it is a reminder and consequence of sin (I Cor. 15:56). Yet it is an enemy whose sting has been removed and an enemy that can and will be ultimately defeated (I Cor. 15:26). Jesus is identified as the one who holds the keys of death (Rev. 1:18) and liberates those held in bondage by their fear of death (Heb. 2:14-15). For a time now, it still has the power to hurt. At Lazarus' grave, Jesus did not just weep; he was moved with anger (John 11:33, 38: the verb *embrimaomai* connotes anger) at the ravages of this invader. But while we grieve, we do not grieve as those who have no hope (I Thess. 4:13), for we know that nothing, not even death, can separate us from Christ, and in him we too have victory over death (Rom. 8:37-39).

II. Contemporary Questions About Death. In the second half of the 20th century, a variety of cultural, intellectual, medical, and even political forces converged to raise a variety of difficult questions about death that are still the subject of debate.

A. The study of death. For most of history, death has occurred within the home, with family around a loved one. Interestingly, there is a significant literature narrating visions of heaven that faithful saints of God often had in their last moments, visions they shared as powerful witnesses to family members present with them. But with the advent of modern medicine, the picture began to change. Death began to occur more often in hospitals. This change presented both difficulties and opportunities. The difficulty was that such an environment was often felt to be lonely and impersonal for the patients. They were tended to, but not listened to, when often they needed to talk about the death they knew was coming.

This situation also presented an opportunity for researchers to talk to a number of dying individuals and study their experience of approaching death. They found most patients willing and some even eager to talk with them.

That opportunity was taken by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, and her findings presented in a best-selling book published in 1969, *On Death and Dying*. In that book, Dr. Kubler-Ross calls for a more thoughtful, attentive, human response to the dying, that includes inviting and listening to them talk about what they are feeling. The book consists largely of interviews with dying patients and presents a by now classic analysis of the stages people go through in facing death and dying: denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. She found that patients go through these stages with remarkable consistency, but reach acceptance most quickly and completely when helped by someone who listens non-judgmentally as they talk their way through the stages.

There is much of value here for those who work with the dying, and for counselors especially. Theologically, it is problematic in a number of areas. First, though she is more descriptive than prescriptive, I find some of her recommendations strange. For example, she says "Once the patient dies, I find it cruel and inappropriate to speak of the love of God" (156). Rather, she advises, let family members express their anger and grief. I would say this is a both/and situation. We can accept them unconditionally and listen to whatever they say, and still helpfully and sensitively bring the love and presence of God into the situation.

Second, our concern as believers is not primarily to help people come to an acceptance of death, but an acceptance of the One who can take them through death to life. In this light, I am not sure if what Kubler-Ross offers people is not, in the end, to their detriment. Perhaps death should be scary; perhaps God intended it to be so to move us to seek Him. I find it interesting that Kubler-Ross's shortest chapter is on bargaining, for the bargaining is most often with God, and here she notes that the bargaining stage seems to bring in chaplains more often than the other stages.

Of course, Kubler-Ross seeks to be objective and takes a tolerant, non-evaluative stance towards religion at most points. As such, she contributes toward the growing pluralistic view of modern America. However, she does offer one interesting assessment:

We can say here, however, that we found very few truly religious people with an intrinsic faith. Those few have been helped by their faith and are best comparable with those few patients who were true atheists. The majority of patients were in between, with some form of religious belief but not enough to relieve them of conflict and fear. (237).

I mention the work of Kubler-Ross for several reasons. First, it is a classic and has some value and insights. Second, it began the scientific study of death that developed into the second area we will discuss, the study of after-death, near-death, etc. experiences. Third, it is an excellent example of the modern attempt to apply therapeutic, psychological solutions to spiritual problems. Such studies seem to ignore the really important questions (Is there an eternal destiny beyond death? Am I going to heaven or hell?) and focus on interesting but really less important ones (What are the stages people go through in approaching death? How can we help them come to a "healthy" [psychologically speaking] resolution?). The assumption seems to be that there is no accessible truth on the big questions, so all we can do in the area of religion is to evaluate its effect on the patient's earthly life, and offer no opinion on the ultimate truthfulness of the religion's claims.

B. Near-death experiences. While there are some accounts of those thought to be dead who were revived from the 19th and early 20th century, the study of those judged to be dead by some medical standard and later revived has been largely the result of advances in medical technology in the latter parts of the 20th and now into the 21st century. Most often, the "death" has been a cessation of the heart-beat, with revival or resuscitation coming through a variety of CPR measures.

The reports of these have become so common that there is now an international association and a website devoted to the study of them (International Association for Near-Death Studies). They date the origin of such studies to the 1975 work of Raymond A. Moody, *Life After Life*. In it he draws from research on those who have had such experiences and gives a number of elements common to many, but not all, of the accounts. Some of the most striking elements of such accounts are the experience of being out of the body, the encounter with a being of light, and the sensation of reviewing their lives, before being called back to this life. One nearly universal effect of such an experience, according to Moody, is that "almost every person has expressed to me the thought that he is no longer afraid of death" (68). The reason for this lack of fear, Moody concludes, is "that after his experience a person no longer entertains any doubt about his survival of bodily death" (69).

More recently, there have been books by Christians narrating such experiences as trips to heaven, where they met loved ones and can now testify to the reality of heaven (Don Piper, *90 Minutes in Heaven*, Colton Burpo, *Heaven is For Real*). Less well known are accounts of what are called "distressing nde's." Maurice Rawlings (*Beyond Death's Door*) is an evangelical Christian as well as a surgeon. He reports patients who had near-death experiences that were scary and involved seeing hell, entering hell, or being pulled down by demons. He notes that such experiences were reported immediately after resuscitation, while the fear was still fresh, and were later not remembered by the patient. He suggests that one reason why the reports of Moody and others are so uniformly positive is that the negative experiences are either not remembered or not reported. Don Piper, who has spoken to many people as a result of his book, has heard many similar stories, reports of people who smelled sulphur, saw demons, and heard people in torment.

The overwhelming majority of people who have had such experiences describe them as some of the most profound and important experiences of their lives. Obvious questions jump to mind upon reading such accounts. Are such individuals hallucinating, lying, or dreaming? What are we to make of their experience? Did they die?

As to the last question, it depends on one's definition of death. Their heartbeat stopped, they lacked detectable vital signs, but in light of Heb. 9:27, I hesitate to call their experience death. What about the accounts of those raised from death in the Bible? How could they die and be resurrected if we die only once? I think here there may be a distinction between what we observe as death and death in the plan of God. I take the accounts of Lazarus and others as I do the accounts of Enoch and Elijah, exceptions that show God's sovereignty over death, not as disproving Heb. 9:27. Moody acknowledges that some would define death as the irreversible loss of vital functions, and thus by definition, a dead person could not be revived. This is one reason why the preferred term is near-death experiences.

Second, are the experiences described genuine out of body experiences? The evidence seems to be fairly strong for this. Patients report seeing their body and have afterwards reported what various doctors did while they were clinically unconscious. I see no theological impossibility of such an experience. In fact, Paul seems regard such an experience as a possibility (II Cor.12:1-6). Christian theology has long maintained that there is an immaterial aspect as well as a material aspect in humanity. Normally the two (we may call them body and soul) exist as a unity, but we affirm that they can exist apart in the unnatural state of death. Perhaps the unity can be temporarily interrupted in one of the experiences we are describing.

The most important question is of course how we are to explain and evaluate them. From my reading, it seems that the most common response among evangelical leaders who have commented is to view such experiences as largely Satanic. Moody strongly objects:

It seems to me that the best way of distinguishing between God-directed and Satan-directed experiences would be to see what the person involved does and says after his experience. God, I suppose, would try to get those to whom he appears to be loving and forgiving. Satan would presumably tell his servants to follow a course of hate and destruction. Manifestly, my subjects have come back with a renewed commitment to follow the former course and to disavow the latter. (107-108)

But Moody does not understand the nature of the biblical tempter, who masquerades as "an angel of light" and his servants, who masquerade as "servants of righteousness" (II Cor. 11:14-15). For my own part, I am struck by the lack of any use of the word "holy" to describe the being met in any of the reports. If these individuals got to the outskirts of heaven, and met a being who was God or even was sent by God, holiness surely should have been a major impression. The descriptions Rawlings gathered from those who had the negative and scary experiences seem more compatible with biblical teaching.

Rawlings believes some may have traveled to an intermediate destination, where judgment would have later occurred. This is possible, but on the whole, the mainstream of this movement and the experiences chronicled smell demonic to me. They contribute to the ease and lack of fear of death and hell, which, for the lost, may be their only hope. They encourage universalistic beliefs, which is surely one of Satan's main strategies in this time.

What of the reports of Christians who claim to have visited heaven? As I said, none of the accounts I have read seem to reflect the holiness of God, but I am willing to allow the possibility that God granted them some genuine preview of heaven. What I am concerned about is allowing such narratives to replace the teaching of Scripture, or even seeing such accounts as necessary to “prove” the Bible. We have already been given clear teaching about what lies beyond death by Jesus. What need do we have to hear from others who may be prone to err or be deceived?

III. Personal Application.

Since death is universal and the certain end for all, it is an issue for personal application for all, and especially for Christian leaders.

A. Issues in ministry. There are a number of practical ways to help people prepare for death. Providing help on issues like wills and funeral arrangements can save family members both grief and money, and if there are lawyers or those involved in a funeral home in your congregation, you could ask them to offer a workshop to allow people to think through these practical issues rather than leaving them to grieving family members to decide later. For example, will you choose cremation or burial? If cremation, what will be done with the ashes? If burial, have you purchased a burial plot? How much will you spend on a casket? What about a marker? These are questions better asked prior to the need for an immediate decision.

Also, of course, thinking about such practical issues can also open doors for talking about the ultimate issue and helping people make sure that they are ready spiritually. Call their attention to the numerous verses in hymns that speak of death and our victory over it; use illustrations from the famous home-goings of saints of old or illustrations from literature (Christian crossing the river in *Pilgrim's Progress*). In all these ways, you can help your people face death, and allow its reality to prod all of us into making sure of our preparation.

After death, your goal is to minister to the grieving. Scripture does not say we should not grieve, but that we should not grieve like those who have no hope (I Thess. 4:13). Sometimes we may need to gently help people to grieve, by reminding them of special occasions or endearing qualities of those who have died. Mentioning such things may bring tears, but grieving is necessary and not incompatible with the reality of our hope and comfort in Christ.

The more difficult case is, of course, with those who die without making a profession of faith in Christ. There are two dangers to avoid here. One is to give false hope, especially in an age where creeping universalism abounds in the culture. The other is to be an insensitive clod, and so close off any possibility for ministry to those still living. Explain the gospel, point to Christ's willingness to accept all who come to him, and let them draw their own conclusions about the destiny of the departed. That's fixed and is in God's hands. Your concern now is to minister to those still living. So present the gospel in funeral messages, but do so with sensitivity to those grieving.

B. Personal preparation. But in order to most effectively minister in death situations, you need to confront your own personal mortality. It may be frightening, but it is spiritually healthy and in the end, part of every Christian's birthright is liberty from the fear of death. So face questions like, how old do you want to be when you die? Of what do you want to die?

Take care of practical necessities like your own will (for parents, who do you want to raise your children if you die). Having clear power of attorney provisions should you become disabled, and instructions in a living will concerning medical treatment you do or do not want can be of great help to your family should they face such difficult situations. Choosing between cremation and burial, and if the latter, purchasing your burial plot, headstone and even casket in advance can save your loved ones difficult and expensive decisions, even if it seems morbid at the present. We can face death without fear because we know the Lord of life and death. We may love life, and want to live a long time, but we need not fear death. For the believer, this enemy will simply be the door into real life.

How old do you want to be when you die? What do you want to die of? What do you think God wants to accomplish through you before you die?

THE INTERMEDIATE STATE

Outline

I. Preliminary Assumptions.

II. Biblical Foundations.

- A. Old Testament Teaching.
 1. *Sheol* as the world of the dead.
 2. *Sheol* as two compartments.
 3. *Sheol* as the grave.
 4. *Sheol* as a poetic way to refer to death.
- B. New Testament Teaching.
 1. Hades.
 2. Paradise.
 3. Three key texts.
- C. Three Biblical Questions.
 1. The immortality of the soul.
 2. The immediacy of eternal destinies.
 3. The timing of glorification.

III. Historical Developments.

- A. Soul-sleep.
- B. Purgatory.
- C. Contact with the spirits of the dead.

IV. Theological Summary.

- A. The intermediate state of the just: happiness in Christ's presence.
- B. The intermediate state of the unjust: torment.

V. Practical Applications.

I. Preliminary Assumptions.

A. The topic of the intermediate state assumes some type of continuing existence beyond death. As we have discussed, the full knowledge of eternal life was not given to Old Testament believers, but they shared the view common to most peoples in most times that death is not the absolute end (perhaps the reflection of a God implanted instinct; see Eccles. 3:11). Burying various items with loved ones for their use in the after life is found among many cultures. Israel shared such a belief, but it was vague and shadowy.

B. This topic also assumes the continuation of time even in the realm of the dead. Some have argued that there is no intermediate state, believing that upon death we leave time and enter eternity, where there is no question of intermediate time, for all moments of time are equally present. Thus, immediately after death we experience the resurrection of the body. They argue that though that event is later to us who live in a temporal framework, it is immediate, not intermediate, to those who dwell in eternity. However, I find this idea dubious for three reasons.

First, the Bible seems to teach that time continues until the eschaton. The martyrs described in Revelation seem to exist in a temporal framework, as they ask how long it will be till they are avenged, to which they are told it will be a little longer (Rev. 6:10-11). It seems the angels as well learn things not in one eternal now, but as they unfold in history (I Pet. 1:12; Eph. 3:10).

Second, the biblical view of history is organized around four focal points: creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. We live now in an intermediate time, between redemption and consummation; when we die, we live with expectancy in the intermediate state, looking for the consummation of God's purposes.

Third, there are a number of verses that seem to teach directly and clearly concerning the intermediate state. It is not a focal point of biblical teaching; interest in the intermediate state is overshadowed by a much greater certainty in and concern about the final state. It remains an underdeveloped doctrine. Yet where the Bible speaks, our task is to understand as much as possible.

II. Biblical Foundations.

A. Old Testament teaching. The most important word for the intermediate state in the OT is *Sheol* (found 65 times, 46 times in poetic literature; always without an article, almost like a proper noun). It is variously translated as grave, pit, hell, world of the dead. Not surprisingly, there are various interpretations of its significance.

1. The most well-known idea is that *Sheol* is simply the world of the dead, the place where both just and unjust go upon death (Gen. 37:35 for Jacob and Is. 14:9 for the king of Babylon). It is described as a dark place, where there is no memory, no knowledge, no praise of

God and only a very shadowy existence (Ps. 88:10-12; Is. 38:18-19). G. E. Ladd says, "Sheol is the Old Testament manner of asserting that death does not terminate human existence" (*Theology of the New Testament*, 194). Perhaps, but the type of existence one has in Sheol is not seen as desirable. Real life was seen by the Jews as bodily life, but they knew that death ends bodily life; dead bodies decay. With the knowledge of resurrection not yet given, existence in Sheol could not be very appealing. Furthermore, it was not yet revealed that this disembodied existence is in fact intermediate, and not final.

The difficulty with this interpretation is the idea that the just and unjust dwell together after death. It seems to us axiomatic that there should be a distinction between the just and unjust, and the OT seems to affirm the same (Mal. 3:17-18). As we discussed earlier under death, there are some verses that express hope for redemption from Sheol (Ps. 16:10, 49:15). Others look to a continuation of their fellowship with God beyond death (see Ps. 23:6 and 73:24). The interpretation of Sheol as the abode of the souls of all the dead doesn't fit well with these verses. Such considerations led to a second view of Sheol in the history of interpretation.

2. The second view is that Sheol has two compartments, one for the just and one for the wicked. Accompanying this view of Sheol was often the idea that in the time between His death and resurrection, Christ descended to *hades* (the NT equivalent of Sheol) and took those in the upper story (called the *limbus patrum* in medieval theology) to heaven.

The problem with this view is that there is no OT evidence for two parts of Sheol, and the verses that are cited for the idea of the descent of Christ into hell or Sheol (Eph. 4:8-9, I Pet. 3:18-22), while difficult, do not truly support such a conclusion. As well, the objection against the first view holds as well, that this position gives no satisfactory explanation of those verses that imply that communion with God is not destroyed by death. I believe the OT saints continued to enjoy communion with God immediately after death, and not just after Christ's death and resurrection.

3. A third interpretation, offered by R. Laird Harris (see *Theological Wordbook of the OT*, vol. 2, 892-893), suggests that *Sheol* "does not describe the place where the souls of men go, but the place where their bodies go, the grave."

In support, Harris can point to the fact that many translations of the OT do translate *Sheol* as the grave in numerous places. And the grave is certainly the meaning in verses such as Ps. 88:3-5 and Ezek. 32:21-23, where *Sheol* is found in parallel to words such as pit and grave. Harris says,

If this interpretation of *she'ol* is correct, its usage does not give us a picture of the state of the dead in gloom, darkness, chaos, or silence, unremembered, unable to praise God, knowing nothing. Such a view verges on unscriptural soul sleep. Rather, this view gives us a picture of a typical Palestinian tomb. . . . All the souls of men do not go to one place.

But all people go to the grave. As to the destiny of the souls of men in the intermediate state, the OT says little. (893)

I think this view seems to fit for many of the places where *Sheol* is found. It allows for a reconciliation between the hope expressed in numerous verses and the picture of *Sheol* as a sad and shadowy place. One criticism of it is that it separates body and soul, which the OT keeps together. But it may be that the union of body and soul (material and non-material) is dissolved at death, for death is an unnatural situation. The non-material part of the just person (the soul or spirit) continues in communion with God (Eccles. 12:7), but his body goes into the grave until the time of reunion, at the return of Christ and the resurrection of the body (Is. 26:19, Dan. 12:2).

4. Allan Moseley suggests that *Sheol* is used with two slightly different meanings in the OT. First, in about 45 of the 65 occurrences, Moseley sees *Sheol* simply as a poetic way to refer to death. He sees this indicated in the fact that almost all of the appearances of *Sheol* are in poetic literature, that all the occurrences are without a preceding article (thus showing that it is used almost as a proper name for death personified), and by the fact that it appears in poetic parallelism paired with death 17 times (see Ps. 6:5 for an example). Moseley sees the second usage (20 times) as the destiny of the unrighteous after death, claiming that only the wicked are seen in *Sheol*. Here he may go beyond the exegetical evidence. It seems that the prospect of *Sheol* did trouble some of the righteous, and Moseley would have to place all those usages as poetic references to death. In one of the few books on *Sheol*, Philip Johnston (*Shades of Sheol*) argues, “The righteous only envisage Sheol when they face unhappy and untimely death, which they interpret as divine punishment. By contrast, when they face a contented death at the end of a full and happy life, or where this is narrated, there is no mention of Sheol.” Perhaps, but some of the righteous do suffer untimely deaths, and there is no indication that their expectation was wrong, and the absence of the word in other accounts is an argument from silence.

On the whole, I think Harris’ view and the first meaning of Moseley (poetic way to refer to death) seem to best fit the most facts. It seems to fit the great majority of times the word *Sheol* appears, and it allows for a reconciliation between the hope expressed in numerous verses and the picture of *Sheol* as a sad and shadowy place. The union of body and soul (material and non-material) is dissolved at death, for death is an unnatural situation. The non-material part of the just person (the soul) continues in communion with God (Eccles. 12:7), but his body goes into the grave until the time of reunion, at the return of Christ and the resurrection of the body (Is. 26:19, Dan. 12:2). To be sure, the destiny of the souls, especially the souls of the wicked, is not always as clear as we might wish, for the dominant assumption in the OT of life is that it is bodily life. For more information on the destiny of souls after death, we need the further light of the NT.

B. New Testament Teaching.

1. *Hades*. It seems that the NT confirms the idea that the souls of the just and unjust do not go to the same place after death, for the closest NT equivalent to *Sheol*, *Hades*, is never used for the destination of the just after death, but only the unjust. Dale Moody sees the

New Testament as fulfilling the hope of the Old Testament: “The Old Testament belief that the saint (*chaside*) would not be abandoned to *Sheol* has borne fruit, and *Hades* is left only to the wicked” (*The Hope of Glory*, 58).

This is the word used to describe the destiny of the rich man in Lk.16:19-31, the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (I think it is most likely a parable, not a recounting of an actual event, because of close parallels in Egyptian literature). We should note that it is a description of the intermediate state and not hell (v. 23: *hades* is not the word normally used for hell, despite the NIV translation; NAS is better on this verse). The principal theme is the reality of judgment in the world to come and the need to prepare for it now by believing God's word. The difficulty comes in understanding some of the details.

For example, what is the bosom of Abraham, and where is it? We find this phrase only in this passage. It appears to be a place of honor and happiness, but we have little to go on. Even more difficult are the references to fingers, eyes, and tongue in vv. 23-24. The bodies of both Lazarus and the rich man are decaying in the grave. Where do these body parts come from? Possibly Jesus is using figurative language (it is, after all, a parable); possibly the only way to communicate the story is to use material images, though the reality is non-material. But traditionally, the intermediate state has been seen as that of disembodied spirits, for the Bible refers to humans after death as "souls" (Rev. 6:9) or "spirits" (Eccles. 12:7, Heb. 12:23). There is little basis for the idea of an intermediate body, though it has been occasionally suggested. Either way, the main point is clear: the intermediate state involves happiness for the just, punishment for the unjust, and the two are permanently separated.

2. Paradise. This is the word used in Jesus' promise to the thief on the cross (Lk. 23:43). It is where Jesus was after his bodily death. (This alone would seem to deny the interpretation of Eph. 4:8-9 and I Pet. 3:18-19 as teaching a pre-resurrection visitation of Jesus to the spirits in hell). Being the location of the Son of God, paradise would seem to be in some sense, heaven (what Randy Alcorn calls “Present heaven,” or better, intermediate heaven), since one meaning of heaven is the dwelling place of God (II Chron. 6:21: “Hear from heaven, your dwelling place”). This would also accord with Paul's experience of being caught up “to the third heaven,” which he also calls “paradise” (II Cor. 12:1-4). Paradise is also associated with the tree of life in Rev. 2:7, which in turn is associated with the garden of Eden in Gen. 2:8-9 and with the new heavens and new earth in Rev. 22:1-2. Thus, paradise might be an accurate term to describe our original state in Eden (“Paradise Lost”), our eternal state in the new creation (“Paradise Perfected,” or Eternal Heaven), and our intermediate state in Christ's presence now (“Intermediate Paradise”). This would strongly imply that the bosom of Abraham is simply another term for paradise, heaven, or the presence of God.

3. Three key texts. There are three texts that form the clearest basis for the intermediate state of believers. One we have already mentioned, Luke 23:43. The thief's faith is seen in his regarding Jesus as a king, though he was hanging on a cross. He clearly claimed nothing of merit, but simply asked for mercy, as one would ask of a king. Jesus' promise emphasizes that the favor sought would be granted, not at some distant future date, but that very day, and that the favor would be to be in Jesus' presence in paradise. This would seem to exclude

any idea of soul sleep, for paradise would be a conscious experience of joy and would include awareness of being in Christ's presence.

The second key text is Phil. 1:21-23. Paul links departing (death) and being with Christ with a single article, indicating that he regards them as one experience (*to analysai kai sun Christo einai*). He sees such a prospect as far better than the continuation of earthly life. Contrary to some commercials and the unspoken assumption we seem to often operate with, it does get much better than this. The "better" involves better, closer fellowship with Christ.

The third and most complex text is II Cor. 5:1-10. The key phrase is from verse 8: "away from the body and at home with the Lord." However, much scholarly discussion has been concerned with the reference to "an eternal house in heaven" in verse 1. Paul contrasts this house with the earthly tent (our present body) which is destroyed in death. Paul speaks of the longing to be clothed with this "heavenly dwelling," and thus not to be found "naked" (v. 2-3). Some have argued that Paul sees a disembodied life as undesirable and have seen this chapter as teaching an intermediate body for the intermediate state, but v. 1 seems to rule that out by calling our heavenly dwelling "eternal," not intermediate. Thus it would seem natural to identify this eternal, heavenly dwelling with the resurrected body, which every believer will receive at the return of Christ (Phil. 3:20-21). The difficulty is that some see Paul expecting this heavenly dwelling at the moment of death, not the return of Christ. They note that v. 1 uses the present tense ("we have") and claim that the heavenly dwelling is an immediate possession of the believer at death. Calvin suggested, in his commentary on II Corinthians, that "the blessed condition of the soul after death is the commencement of this building, and the glory of the final resurrection is the consummation of it." While this is a possible interpretation, it may be that too much is being made of the present tense. It is also possible that Paul is using the present tense to underscore the certainty of our future possession. Verse 4 still looks to a future event. For example, the phrase "what is mortal may be swallowed up by life," calls to mind Paul's earlier words in I Cor. 15:54, which clearly look to the resurrection as a future, eschatological event. The blessing we receive in the intermediate state is to no longer walk by faith, but by sight, for we will be "at home with the Lord," in an intimate, face to face relationship with the Lord (v. 8: *pros ton kyrion*). The fuller blessing of receiving our heavenly dwelling is reserved for the consummation.

C. Three biblical questions. The biblical teaching we have examined provides some data to apply to three questions that we have thus far skirted; now we approach them directly.

1. Does the Bible teach the immortality of the soul? The immortality of the soul is a widespread belief found in many cultures, particularly in Greek philosophy, and has been an article of faith in much Christian theology. Aquinas argued that it was one of the elements of natural theology, demonstrable by reason alone. In recent years, however, it has become common to see Greek philosophy as having exercised a distorting influence on the development of Christian theology. And while that argument should be used with care (the early church fathers loved and studied Scripture above all), in this area Greek philosophy does seem to have affected theology.

The continued existence of the soul is assumed by the very idea of an intermediate state, for that which exists in that state is not the body. In Rev. 6:9 and 20:4, the souls of martyrs are affirmed as still alive in some sense. At the same time, I Tim. 6:16 states that God alone is immortal. Thus, if the soul is immortal, it is not due to the nature of soul, as Plato argued, but due to a gift of God. Some argue that part of creating humanity in God's image involved such a grant of immortality. That is possible, but nowhere taught. The central passage relating to our question in I Cor. 15:53-54, which speaks of the mortal clothing itself with immortality. Hoekema notes three aspects of the immortality spoken of in this text: (1) it is granted only to believers, (2) it is future, and (3) it involves the total human, not just the soul (*The Bible and the Future*, 88). One could possibly argue that this verse only refers to the granting of immortality to that which is perishable, and that the soul, if immortal, would not be in view, but there is no other text that links the soul with immortality. The immortality of the soul is an assumption without a clear biblical basis.

Moreover, the immortality of the soul is not a distinctively Christian idea. It is a possibility; but what is taught and is distinctive is the resurrection of the body. At the resurrection, all that is mortal and perishable in believers is swallowed up in that which is immortal. Non-believers are also raised (John 5:29) but are nowhere said to be granted immortality. This has encouraged some to move to the position of the eventual annihilation of the wicked, but their punishment is said in many places and ways to be eternal (more on this later). I would surmise that the reason the Bible does not speak of immortality with regard to unbelievers is that immortality is associated with life; the existence granted to nonbelievers is better characterized as eternal death.

2. At death, do we go straight to heaven or hell? Quite often, we preach and teach as if we do, and the emphasis in the Bible is on our eternal destiny. But the reality of the intermediate state requires some finer distinctions.

For unbelievers, death ushers them into a place of torment, called *hades* (Luke 16:23). Bad as that state is, it is intermediate. Hell is an eternal state (Matt. 25:41, 46), entered into after final judgment (Rev. 20:11-15). At that occasion, *hades* will give up its occupants, and *hades* itself, along with its occupants, will be cast into the lake of fire, which is called "the second death."

For believers, as we noted above, death ushers them into presence of God, in a place called paradise. But this paradise may be called heaven (Present heaven, or intermediate heaven), for that is the biblical word for God's dwelling place. However, it is not their final destination. That too awaits the final eschatological judgment. Following the judgment of Rev. 20, there is the new creation of Rev. 21, which will be our eternal home (Eternal heaven). But this distinction between the blessings of the intermediate state and the blessings of our final state leads to a third question.

3. Does glorification happen at death or at the return of Christ? The glorification of the believer is seen as the culmination of salvation. It is so certain that Paul can speak of it as

completed though it lies in the future. Romans 8:30 is the classic text: “those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.”

To answer this question, we must ask a further question: of what does the believer’s glorification consist? In a number of places, it is associated with the resurrection of the body. Phil. 3:20-21 and I Cor. 15:42-44 speak of the glory of the resurrected body: “it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory” (I Cor. 15:43). It is also associated with moral and spiritual perfection. Sin is falling short “of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23); salvation is restoration of that glory. It is promised to us in justification (via union with Christ); it is imparted to us progressively in sanctification (through the indwelling Spirit), it is completed in us in glorification. Jude 24 praises God our Savior for being the one who is “able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy.” A number of texts speak of our future state as being blameless and holy before God (Col. 1:22, I Cor. 1:8, Eph. 1:4).

Most evangelicals see this moral and spiritual perfection happening at death, and being the first stage of glorification, the glorification of the soul. The glorification of the body comes at the return of Christ, with the resurrection of the body. I tend to agree. It is hard to imagine entering into God’s presence before being cleansed of all the remnants of sin, but I have been struck by the fact that numerous passages seem to associate even that moral and spiritual perfection with Christ’s appearing. I John 3:2 says that we will be made like Christ “when he appears,” language that does not refer to our seeing Christ in heaven, but his coming to earth. I Cor. 13:9-12 links our fullness of knowledge to “when perfection comes,” which again is more a reference to Christ’s return than our death. For these reasons, some would answer the question with which we began by saying that glorification is fully reserved until the return of Christ. I appreciate the support for this position more fully than before I examined this question, but since the intermediate state does include being in God’s presence, and being in God’s presence would require total cleansing from sin, I affirm that at least part of glorification is completed at death. Heb. 12:23 is the clinching verse for me, for it refers to those now in God’s presence as the “spirits of righteous men made perfect.” However, I am more impressed than ever by the fully intermediate nature of the intermediate state, and would not rule out some further degree of perfection, for soul as well as body, at the return of Christ.

III. Historical Developments. There are three further issues that have been discussed in history concerning the intermediate state. Two are erroneous interpretations of the intermediate state, and one is a more difficult and debated question.

A. The first is the idea of soul-sleep. This is the idea that the soul upon death sleeps until the resurrection of the body. This view, held by Martin Luther, some early Anabaptists, along with Seventh Day Adventists and Jehovah’s Witnesses, draws from the biblical language of sleep as a metaphor for death (John 11:11-14, I Thess. 4:13), and insists that soul and body belong together.

We agree that humans are by nature a body-soul unity, but as we mentioned above, death is an unnatural state. In any case, if the souls sleep, they still do that separate from the body, for

the body eventually decays. Moreover, the verses that speak of death as sleep are obviously using sleep as a figure of speech. Finally, the Bible does in fact speak of the existence of the non-material part of humanity as existing separate from the material part after death in several verses (see above, Lk. 23:43, Phil. 1:23, II Cor. 5:8). So while soul-sleep is not as serious as some heresies that threaten the heart of the gospel, it is contrary to biblical teaching.

B. The second departure from biblical teaching concerning the intermediate state is that of purgatory. It was initially based on a distinction between the eternal guilt of sin, which Christ's atonement covers, and the temporal penalty of sin, which remains despite the cross, and which the believer pays as part of confession. As developed in the church in the Middle Ages and leading up to the Reformation, the sacrament of confession involved contrition of heart, confession by mouth, and satisfaction (or penance) by works. Only with such works could the priest pronounce absolution. Such practice was both reflected and supported by the Latin translation of "repent" (in Matt. 4:17 and elsewhere) as "do penance."

But what if the satisfaction for sins could not be completed in one's lifetime? Purgatory allowed one to complete the process in the intermediate state. The belief also developed, loosely based on the idea of the communion of saints, that believers alive on earth could assist those in purgatory, by prayers, masses, and eventually, by indulgences.

Indulgences were a late development, appearing around the eleventh century. As the name indicates, they are a partial or full remission of the temporal punishment for sin. They are administered by the Church, and are based on the idea of a treasury of merit, which the Church can apply to justly cancel out such punishment. Initially, indulgences were not all that common or pervasive, but in the period preceding the Reformation they were sold by popes (to raise money to build St. Peter's Basilica) or by bishops and archbishops (to buy higher offices in the Church). One could buy an indulgence for oneself or for a dead relative in purgatory. Luther was especially incensed by the jingle of a papal indulgence-seller in his area, Johann Tetzel, whose sales pitch was: "When the coin in the coffer clings, the soul from purgatory springs."

Even the Council of Trent recognized these problems and condemned the abuses involved with indulgences, but not the idea itself. Indulgences are still officially affirmed today and were offered by Pope John Paul II as part of the Catholic Church's celebration of the new millennium. As far as purgatory, the traditional idea of purgatory as a place of punishment has been largely replaced by the idea of purgatory as purification and preparation for entering the presence of God. Indeed, in the East, Orthodox theology had always viewed purgatory as more part of the process of maturation and growth than punishment. In this sense, Christians as sound as C. S. Lewis have accepted purgatory. Lewis says it always seemed to him that the transition from earthly life to the presence of God was too abrupt. He compared purgatory to an anteroom where one straightens one's clothes and prepares to enter the house. Were it not for the part of glorification that happens at death, I would agree with Lewis. This shows the importance of understanding doctrines such as glorification, secondary though they may be.

There are numerous problems with the idea of purgatory. Modern Catholics such as Richard McBrien acknowledge, "There is, for all practical purposes, no biblical basis for the

doctrine of purgatory" (*Catholicism*, 1166). Some have claimed that I Cor. 3:12-15 refers to a purgatorial fire in an intermediate state, but that is a dubious interpretation. The classic text used by Catholics to affirm that the living can, via prayer and sacrifices, affect the spiritual status of the dead is II Maccabees 12:38-46, but even this text gives no explicit basis for purgatory, is pre-cross and thus superseded by Christ's atonement, not to mention that it is apocryphal and not part of the traditional canon.

Theologically, purgatory calls into question the finality and sufficiency of Christ's atonement, the centrality of grace in all of salvation, and the doctrine of glorification (I Jo. 3:2-3, I Cor. 15:51-52). While sin does have temporal consequences, we believe Jesus paid for sin completely. He bore the penalty of sin and thus removed the guilt. There is nothing we must do to add to his work or make ourselves worthy of salvation; it is all of grace. And while it may seem inappropriate to just move from our present sinful existence, straight into God's presence without being purged of our remaining sinfulness, that is what the purifying grace of glorification is all about. Purgatory, even in its modern, milder version, contains some serious distortions of biblical truth.

C. We may raise one further question: is it possible for the living to contact the spirits of the dead? The Bible says clearly that we should not (Deut. 18:10-11, Is. 8:19), but what should we think of mediums and those who claim to have had contact with the dead?

I Sam. 28:8-16 is cited by some as evidence that such contacts, while not recommended by God, are possible. There are two possibilities here. The first is that Saul and the others were deceived by Satan, who appeared disguised as Samuel. This view denies that God would let the soul of Samuel actually appear, since he had already expressed his opposition to the whole practice. The second view says that God allowed Samuel to be raised, in order to pronounce judgment on Saul for his sin. The advocates of this position say it is the most natural interpretation and that Satan would not pronounce judgment on sin. I think the second interpretation is more likely, but this clearly was an exceptional situation and not one we should seek. In general, I think mediums are either frauds or in contact with evil spirits.

A related question often asked is whether or not the departed can see what we are doing, and be involved in our world. In other words, is there a basis for the many ghost stories in cultures around the world, not to mention the claims of many, Christian and non-Christian, of appearances of their departed ones? Heb. 12:1 uses imagery that suggests they are cheering us on, but it may be just that, imagery that refers to their examples as cheering us on, rather than their spirits.

What do you think? Can a departed loved one be sent back to earth by God on a mission of mercy or comfort? What are we to make of the prevalence of ghost stories in virtually all cultures? Is it accurate to describe our loved ones in heaven as watching over us?

I think the spirits of the blessed probably have more interesting things to do than watch the goings on down here, but I cannot conclusively rule out the possibility that God would send a blessed spirit to encourage and minister to a grieving loved one. That is, however, the ministry

assigned to angels. Peter Kreeft thinks the pervasive existence of ghost stories around the world plus the accounts of otherwise reliable Christians of appearances to them (C. S. Lewis and Sheldon Vanauken both claimed their departed spouses appeared to them) is very convincing evidence for the activity of what we call "ghosts." I am less convinced, and fear demonic deception and more evil than good coming from an excessive interest in this topic. Isaiah 8:19-20 see consulting the dead on behalf of the living as reflective of a lack of trust in God, and as a path to darkness rather than light.

IV. Theological Summary.

A. We may say that the state of the just after death is happiness in the presence of Christ. Moreover, at death the spirit or soul is glorified or made perfect (Heb. 12:23). However, there is still the desire and expectation for the final act, the return of Christ, when they will be re clothed (II Cor. 5:1-4) at the resurrection of the body. This will be the completion of the believer's glorification.

B. Concerning the unjust, we have little definite information, but Lk. 16 paints a very dark and sad picture of their torment. The bodies of all go to Sheol, the grave, but the souls of the wicked continue to exist in Hades, enduring punishment while awaiting judgment and condemnation (II Pet. 2:9). There is no evidence of a second chance for a change in one's spiritual condition after death. Death seems to fix one's choice.

V. Practical Applications. Beyond rejoicing in what awaits us immediately after death, and knowing that it is more than sleep, and certainly does not involve self-purging, the doctrine of the intermediate state is a practical necessity in ministering to the grieving. What do we say to those who have lost a loved one and ask where he is now? We tell them that believers are rejoicing in the presence of Jesus, in peace and happiness. In the case of those who were not believers, we respond as we suggested before, with the gospel and ministry to the living.

THE RESURRECTION OF THE BODY

Outline

I. Biblical Foundations.

A. Old Testament Evidence.

1. Continued communion with God.
2. Two clear statements.
3. The interpretation of the Pharisees.

B. New Testament Teaching.

1. The guarantee and pattern of our resurrection.
2. The time of our resurrection.
3. The nature of the resurrection body.
4. The subjects of resurrection.

II. The Theological Importance of the Resurrection of the Body.

- A. The unity of human nature.
- B. The redemption of the body.
- C. Resurrection and glorification.
- D. Resurrection and judgment.

We should note that the resurrection of the body is one of the doctrines that distinguishes Christianity from other religions. Only Christianity has a continuing value for the body after death. Some teach the annihilation of the body, that the body becomes a ghost, that the body decays and the soul is immortal, that the body is reincarnated in another form, or that it dissolves into the cosmic consciousness. Christianity is insistent that God did not make a mistake in creating us with bodies, and that his final plan for us includes embodied existence. For the present, the gradual corruption of the body is a reminder of the horrible destructiveness of sin, but can also be used by God to wean us from this world. As this body decays, this world loses its hold on us and we long for heaven, and the body fit to inhabit it.

I. Biblical Foundations.

A. Old Testament evidence. You may occasionally encounter the contention of some that the OT does not teach the resurrection of the body, and really has little doctrine of an afterlife. We have already noted that the clear revelation of these doctrines was left to the coming of Christ, but there were some hints. There are three lines of evidence to which we may appeal.

1. Verses like Ps. 16:10-11 and 49:15, which we mentioned in our discussion of the intermediate state, imply that communion with God continues beyond death. Both also imply some type of deliverance for the body. Ps. 16:9 mentions the body directly and Ps. 49:15 contrasts those who are redeemed with those whose bodies decay (v. 14).

2. Is. 26:19 and Dan. 12:2 are at least two clear statements of a belief in the resurrection of the body. Isaiah mentions bodies specifically, and Daniel refers to those who will awaken from the dust, which is where the body goes at death.

3. The Pharisees interpreted the OT as teaching the resurrection of the body. While we have no record of their rationale, two factors seem possible: (1) the Old Testament teaching that the body was created by God and originally, part of his “very good” creation (Gen. 1:31), and (2) the nature of God’s relationship with his people. This was the point made by Jesus in Mk. 12:18-27. The dead have to be raised because God is still their God.

B. New Testament teaching. The NT brings the doctrine of resurrection into full light, especially through the resurrection of Christ. We may accent four points of teaching concerning the resurrection of the body from the NT:

1. The guarantee and pattern of our resurrection is the resurrection of Christ (I Cor. 15:20-22, Phil. 3:20-21). Our resurrection body is to be like his resurrected and glorified

body. This is our clearest clue to the meaning of the "spiritual body" which we shall receive at the resurrection of the body (see the discussion below). Though some (M. Erickson) make a distinction between Christ's resurrected body and glorified body, I can find no indication of such a distinction in Scripture. It seems to rest, rather, on preconceived assumptions of what is and is not possible for a spiritual body.

2. The time of the resurrection of believers is the return of Christ (John 6:40, I Thess. 4:16-17, I Cor. 15:52), and will include the transformation of those still living at that time. Rev. 20:4-6 and 20:11-15 seem relatively clear that there is a second resurrection that will include the wicked and perhaps some who are saved during the millennium. Of course, those who see no literal millennium (amillennialists) affirm only one resurrection, the general resurrection of all at Christ's return. Thus, they see the first resurrection of Rev. 20:5 as a "spiritual" resurrection, either referring to regeneration or to the believer's death and "resurrection" into heaven. The problem is that the word *ezesan* is used for both resurrections in the space of two verses. It is difficult to see it meaning one thing in one verse and something different in the next verse.

In their defense, the amillennialists claim that the only verse that teaches two resurrections is in the last book of the Bible, nearly the last chapter, in an obscure and much debated passage. They think the clear implication of John 5:28-29 is that all are resurrected at the same time. In the absence of any clear teaching that separates the resurrection of the wicked and righteous, they say, we should interpret the obscure by the clear. But others would say that John 5:28-29 does not require only one resurrection, while Rev. 20 does require two. Interpreting the obscure by the clear, they think, would lead to the conclusion that there are two resurrections.

They also argue that the dead are raised "on the last day," (John 6:40), which is when the wicked are judged (John 12:48), but some premillennialists argue that the "last day" is a comprehensive term that can include the millennium, just as the "last days" began in Acts 2 (see v. 17) and have been going on 2000 years. Another amillennial argument is that the two resurrections should be different because physical death and spiritual death are different. But the response is that we have no hint of that in Revelation 20.

It's a difficult question, and I go back and forth between amillennial and premillennial (one resurrection and two resurrections). On balance, it seems that Rev. 20 is the clearer passage. The other passages (John 5:28-29, Dan. 12:2) do not speak clearly to the issue of time at all. And one other passage may hint at a distinction in the timing of the resurrection. I Cor. 15:23-24 seem to hint at three stages in resurrection: Christ, then his own when he returns, then the end. It does not explicitly say the wicked at the end, but it seems the natural implication. Thus, I hold, with premillennialists, that the just will be raised at Christ's return (the first resurrection), but the wicked will be raised after the millennium, at the last judgment. But I do so with some reluctance, as the amillennial view is so much simpler.

Some dispensational premillennialists go beyond these two resurrections to affirm as many as four. At the time of the rapture, all the members of the true church (but not Old Testament saints) are resurrected or transformed, and rise to meet Christ in the air (I Thess. 4:16-

17). This is the basis for the *Left Behind* books and many popular bumper stickers. They remain in heaven with Christ during the seven year Great Tribulation. Then Christ returns to earth and those who were saved and then martyred during the Tribulation are resurrected, along with Old Testament saints (second resurrection). Jews who turned to Christ at his return and Gentiles who pass the judgment of Matt. 25:31-46 enter the thousand year millennial kingdom in unresurrected bodies. They will thus be able to marry, reproduce and die during that period. The third resurrection will be near the end of the kingdom period, and will consist of all believers who died during the millennium (third resurrection). The final resurrection will be of all the unbelievers of history, as recorded in Rev. 20.

There seems much less evidence for a second and third than for the first and last. They seem largely to be byproducts of the dispensational insistence on the separation of Israel and the church, and the separation of the one event of the rapture/return of Christ into the two events of the rapture and return. Thus, one's evaluation of the second and third resurrection will flow from one's evaluation of the soundness of dispensational premises.

3. The nature of this resurrection will be bodily, yet the resurrected body will be spiritual and thus definitely different (I Cor. 15:35-49). Even Paul finds it difficult to describe the nature of this body. He compares our present body to a seed, and that body to the full grown plant. Thus there will be continuity with our present identity, which is linked to a physical form, and discontinuity, for that physical form will be of a different nature. Anthony Hoekema notes that the term "spiritual," as used in the New Testament, is not necessarily opposed to physical. For example, in I Cor. 2:15 he refers to someone who is a "spiritual man," not at all meaning someone who has no body, but someone who walks in the power of the Holy Spirit (*The Bible and the Future*, 250). Thus the spiritual body we receive at the resurrection is not necessarily non-physical, but controlled by the Spirit.

Peter Kreeft has noted that the disciples recognized Jesus after the resurrection by his words and actions more than by his appearance. His actions perfectly reflected his identity. Soul and body were unified. Since our body will be like his (Phil. 3:20-21), we may assume that we will no longer experience frustration and corruption from our body. Rather, it will perfectly work with the soul, and provide a way of expression and a means of meeting.

Murray Harris has done perhaps as thorough a study of the doctrine of the resurrection as anyone (see his books *Raised Immortal: Resurrection and Immortality in the New Testament* and *From Grave to Glory: Resurrection in the New Testament*). Drawing from the resurrection appearances of Jesus in the gospels, and the teaching in I Cor. 15 and II Cor. 5, he gives eight characteristics of the resurrection body. This body is:

1. of divine origin,
2. spiritual (*pneumatikos*, meaning "animated and guided by the spirit," thus "a body enlivened by and responsive to" the redeemed human spirit, which will in turn be empowered and guided by the Holy Spirit),
3. imperishable (and thus not susceptible to decay, disease or death),
4. glorious,

5. powerful (because energized by the Spirit),
6. heavenly (as heaven is both its place of origin and its natural habitat),
7. angel-like (see Matt. 22:30, not sexless, but without procreative powers), and
8. adaptable.

If this is the type of body we will have in heaven, what types of things will we be able to do there that we cannot do here? Is there anything our bodies can do now, that our resurrected bodies will not be able to do?

By this last characteristic, adaptable, Harris affirms that since the resurrection body is suited for heaven, its appearance on earth would necessitate some adaptation. He believes the spiritual body is normally imperceptible to physical senses, but has the ability to take on a material mode for earthly appearance. Harris based this idea on his study of the resurrection appearances of Jesus and his conclusion that, during the forty days of appearances, Jesus, in his spiritual body, was normally invisible, but appeared to his disciples when and as he desired.

Another question sometimes raised by the issue of the resurrection body is the issue of cremation. Is it somehow morally or theologically suspect? David Jones ("To Bury or Burn? Toward an Ethic of Cremation," *JETS* 53, no. 2 [June 2020]: 335-347) notes that the weight of church history is against cremation, citing its largely pagan roots, and believes that Scripture's view of the dignity and future resurrection of the body should lead us to approach this issue with caution. At the same time he acknowledges that there is nothing explicit on the practice in Scripture and thus concludes that it must be ruled an *adiaphora* (something neither commanded nor prohibited). I think he is right. I see little specific evidence in Scripture to condone or condemn cremation. It certainly cannot be maintained that the resurrection of the body requires molecular continuity. In terms of molecules, humans presently construct new cells every seven years. So even now, our continuity with ourselves is not molecular. For those who die and whose bodies decay and become food for plants, who are then eaten by persons, or for those eaten by animals who are then eaten by persons, the problems become obvious. At the resurrection, whose molecules shall they be? The solution is to realize that our continuity, now and then, is personal, not material.

It is also interesting to note the role of the Spirit in insuring continuity. The Spirit is now the down payment on our future total redemption, and we have the "firstfruits of the Spirit" now in the gift of sonship. But the same Spirit that indwells us now in a partial but progressively growing way, and is renewing our human spirit now (Eph. 3:16), is the Spirit by whose power we will be raised (Rom. 8:2, 10-11) and from whom we will reap a harvest of life (Gal. 6:8). In II Cor. 5:5, the role and work of the Spirit in being our down payment and indwelling and renewing us now is described as preparation for the final transformation. Thus, another link of continuity for believers between our pre- and post-resurrection state is the possession and activity of the Holy Spirit in the human spirit. As he is the bond of love between Father and Son in the Trinity, and the bond between the believer and Christ, so he is the bond insuring the continuity of our personal identity.

4. The subjects of the resurrection will be everyone. There is more emphasis given to the resurrection of the just, but the unjust will be raised too, to face judgment (Dan. 12:2, John 5:28-29, Acts 24:14-15). Is it cruel of God, to raise the unjust, in order to judge and punish them? No, it is God the just judge, being just. It prevents the wicked from committing suicide to escape judgment and punishment.

III. The Theological Importance of the Resurrection of the Body.

A. It confirms our understanding of human nature as essentially a unity. We are created as embodied spirits, and though the nature of the body we will possess in heaven will be different than the body we possess now, we will eternally be embodied spirits.

B. Every thing created by God is good and capable of being redeemed. The body is not a cesspool of iniquity, neither is it an illusion. It is part of God's good creation, and a new body seems almost necessary for our full enjoyment of a new creation. Some would even say being embodied is necessary to fulfill at least one of our responsibilities as the image bearers of God, to be the visible representatives of God to his creation.

C. Our redemption is incomplete apart from the resurrection (Rom. 8:20-23), for the resurrection is the completion of our glorification. As Gregory Nazianzus taught, all that Christ assumed, he healed, including the body. Some healing may happen in this life, but the ultimate healing will come when we see Him and the curse placed upon us at the fall is removed, with the resurrection and marvelous transformation of the body (Rev. 22:3, Phil. 3:21).

D. Finally, resurrection, especially for unbelievers, is the necessary prelude to judgment (John 5:29). Those who live an evil life and enjoy wicked pleasures do not escape God's judgment by death; they will be raised to face judgment.

JUDGMENT Outline

I. Divine and Human Judging.

II. Last Judgment or Judgments.

- A. The judgment seat of Christ.
- B. The judgment of Israel.
- C. The judgment of the nations.
- D. The Great White Throne judgment.
- E. Judgment or Judgments: An Evaluation.

III. The Basis of Judgment.

IV. The Importance of Judgment.

While we prefer to talk about the mercy and grace of God, they are not inconsistent with the justice and judgment of God. In Scripture, we know God as Judge (Gen. 3:14-24; 4:10-11; 6:7; 18:25) long before we know him as Father. In fact, a curious fact about the words for justice and judgment in the Bible is the consistent company they keep with words like mercy and righteousness (see Jer. 9:23, Micah 6:8, Zech. 7:9). Because God is the holy judge of sin, He must either judge and punish sinners or find a way to justly forgive sinners. That he does the latter shows that his justice is not harsh but merciful. That's why the cross is the sign of judgment as well as mercy.

One of the first and most fundamental activities of God in Scripture is judging (Gen. 3:14-19; 18:25). The words for judgment and justice (*shafat* and *mishpat* in the OT; *krino*, *krima*, and *krisis* in the NT) appear hundreds of times. Surprisingly, there is a slightly higher concentration of judgment language in the NT than the OT.

The major noun and verb for judging appear in the OT 607 times; there are two important nouns and one verb in the NT. They appear 190 times. But if one factors in the longer length of the OT, the ratio of judgment terms per page is slightly higher in the NT. At any rate, one cannot say that God changes from Judge in the OT to Father in the NT. Fatherhood is a new emphasis, but he does not cease to be judge.

Judging is one of the ways God shows his Lordship. 64 times in the book of Ezekiel God prophesies acts of judgment and concludes, "then they will know that I am the Lord" (see Ezek. 28-30, especially 28:22, 23, 24, 26; 29:6, 9, 16, 21, and 30:8, 19, 25, 26). It is a central biblical theme. We will consider four aspects, especially as they relate to eschatology.

I. Divine and Human Judging. God is recognized as Judge of all the earth in both OT and NT (Gen. 18:25, II Tim. 4:8, Heb. 12:23). That God will judge the earth was axiomatic for Paul, required by the demands of His own just nature (Rom. 3:3-6). The French skeptic Voltaire reportedly once said, "God will forgive. That's his job." God may in grace forgive, but judging is God's job.

Within the Trinity, the Father has given judgment to the Son (John 5:22, Acts 10:42, II Cor. 5:10), and it appears that the saints will be involved in judging angels (presumably fallen ones: I Cor. 6:2-3). As co-heirs with Christ, it appears that judging is part of our inheritance (Matt. 19:28, Rev. 20:4).

In fact, there are a surprising number of texts that speak of Christians judging. In addition to the eschatological texts mentioned above (I Cor. 6, Rev. 20), I Cor. 2:15 says that the spiritual person judges all things; I Cor. 5:12 refers to church discipline as judging those inside the body; I Cor. 11:31 commends self-judgment to those coming to the Lord's Table; and I Cor. 14:24 speaks of how corporate worship can cause unbelievers to be judged by all. Beyond these, texts that speak of discerning right from wrong, of telling the difference between false prophets and true prophets, of forgiving those who sin against us--all presuppose some type of judging.

How do we reconcile these texts with others that command us not to judge, but to leave judging to God (Matt. 7:7, for example)? I think it has to do with different shades of meaning the word *krino* and its cognates have. They include judge, consider, decide, investigate, examine, separate, compare, interpret and condemn. Some type of judging is required for forgiveness, for we can only forgive when we judge someone else to have sinned against us. Other types of judging are necessary to be wise. Only the last, condemning, is the type of judging that is prohibited, along with the spirit that loves to judge to place oneself above the one judged (Gal. 6:4). Such a distinction needs to be made clear in an age where tolerance is expanded to exclude proper discerning judgment, and claims Christian support for its position. We are to be discerning, without being condemning.

II. The Last Judgment or Judgments. According to Leon Morris (*The Biblical Doctrine of Judgment*), judgment in the Bible is the process through which someone distinguishes between right and wrong and acts on the basis of that distinction. God, whose own nature is the basis for what is right, is the one who acts to uphold and vindicate what is right.

Judgment begins now, in the present. We see temporal judgment often in the OT. God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart was a judicial act, judging Pharaoh for hardening his own heart. Initially, in Ex. 7:13-14, 8:15, 8:32 Pharaoh hardens his own heart; in 9:12, 10:20, and 10:27 God judges him by completing the hardening. Later, God used Assyria and then Babylon to judge his people (Ezek. 23:9, 24).

In the NT, judgment in the form of abandonment fell on those who turned away from God (Rom. 1:24, 26, 28; see also II Thess. 2:11-12). Physical illness or even death is seen as God's judgment on some in the church at Corinth who participated unworthily in the Lord's Supper (I Cor. 11:30-32). It seems that some sort of temporal judgment is implied in I Cor. 5:5 and I Tim. 1:20, but these references are too brief to give a basis for a dogmatic answer. The most decisive judgment in the NT is that inflicted on Satan at the cross (John 12:31, 16:11). Though the full effects are not yet seen, the cross was the decisive act. Satan has been convicted, but the sentence has not yet been executed.

Does God judge people today? Can tornadoes, floods, other disasters be acts of God's judgment? Does God judge nations today? What would be signs of judgment? Does Luke 13:1-5 shed any light on this question?

Thoughtful individuals in both the OT and NT realized that justice is not always served in this world (Ps. 73:1-12, Eccles. 8:14, 9:11). Therefore, they looked to a final, future judgment (Ps. 73:17, Eccles. 12:14), sometimes called the "day of the Lord" (Is. 2:12-21). The NT amplifies on that future judgment and mentions it in several contexts (Matt. 25:31-46, II Cor. 5:10, Rev. 20:11-15), but historically, Christian theology, until about 150 years ago, tended to view all these differing contexts as referring to one great last judgment, following the return of Christ and the resurrection of the dead. At that one, great, final judgment, all would appear: believers, unbelievers, and angels. In the language of the early creeds, Christ will return to judge the quick (the living) and the dead.

However, with J. N. Darby and the development of a school of thought called dispensationalism, these different contexts in Scripture began to be viewed as referring to discrete, separate instances of judgment. Usually four judgments were distinguished, at separate times, for separate groups, upon different bases, and with different results.

A. The judgment seat (*bema*) of Christ (II Cor. 5:10) is seen as the first instance of judgment. It is for all believers who compose the church, and takes place immediately following the rapture. At that time, believers are judged, not for salvation, but for rewards, based upon their deeds. Were their deeds praiseworthy, done in the power of the Spirit, for Christ's glory? Then they will be rewarded. Other deeds may not be necessarily morally evil, but spiritually worthless. The word used for "bad" in II Cor. 5:10 (*phaulos*), has the connotation of worthless or useless, whereas words like *kakos* or *poneros* are used more for moral evil. In the words of I Cor. 3:12, such deeds prove to be wood, hay, and stubble, which are burned in the testing fire of judgment, resulting in loss rather than reward, but not loss of salvation (I Cor. 3:15).

B. The judgment of Israel. Dispensationalists see this judgment as coming following the Tribulation (which is itself a series of judgments upon the whole earth; see the seals, trumpets and bowls of Rev. 6-16), the Second Advent of Christ and the gathering of the elect of Israel (Matt. 24:31). They see this instance of judgment reflected in a number of places in the OT (Ezek. 20:37-38, Mal. 3:2-5) and in the NT (Matt. 25:1-30).

It will be a judgment of who is saved and lost of Israel, based on their faith as revealed in their actions. The lost will be "cut off" or cast into darkness; the saved will be taken into the millennial kingdom, where all the promises and covenants made to Israel will be fulfilled. J. Dwight Pentecost sees this as the fulfillment of Rom. 11:26-27, the salvation of "all Israel."

By way of evaluation, this seems to me the least supported of all four of the judgments postulated by the dispensationalists. Matt. 25:1-30 is a series of parables and is unlike the other major judgment passages in the NT; the OT passages cited could be seen as fulfilled in a number of other ways. I think the real motivating factor here is the perceived necessity of separating the judgment of Israel from that of the church (believers), on one hand, and that of the nations, on the other hand.

C. Judgment of the nations (or Gentiles). This is seen most clearly in the judgment of the sheep and goats in Matt 25:31-46, though Pentecost sees it also in Joel 3:1-2. Again, this is following the return of Christ and the judgment of Israel, but prior to the establishment of the millennial kingdom. It is of the living individuals of "all the nations" (Matt. 25:32), and thus does not include the dead, as in the Great White Throne Judgment of Rev. 20.

This judgment is based on the treatment of those called "my brethren." Dwight Pentecost sees this as referring to the 144,000 Jews sealed in Rev. 7 during the Tribulation. They are seen as being witnesses to the gospel of the kingdom (Matt. 24:14) during that time. Those who had accepted the messengers are assumed to have accepted the message. Thus, those who are judged "righteous" here are not judged so on the basis of works, for that would be contrary to the overall biblical message. Rather, their actions showed their faith. They are received into the millennial

kingdom, which, though primarily for Jews, is to include believing Gentiles, and, ultimately, they receive eternal life. The wicked, shown so by their neglect and rejection of the messengers, are sent away to eternal punishment.

Some have tried to see in Matt. 25 a basis for seeing nations judged for how they treat Israel, but even Pentecost rejects that idea, seeing the judgment and rewards as clearly indicating individuals. More questionable for me is the identification of "my brethren" with the 144,000 of Revelation 7. I see very little indication of such an identification in Matt. 25 or Rev. 7.

D. The Great White Throne Judgment (Rev. 20:11-15). The culminating, most far-reaching and most dramatic description of judgment is called the "great white throne" judgment, drawing on the description in Rev. 20:11. I think this is the image most people have in mind when they think of the last judgment. This is the judgment for those who reject the dispensational scheme of multiple judgments. It is seen as subsuming the other three judgments considered above. It seems to be immediately preceded by the judgment of Satan (Rev. 20:10). The judgment of the fallen angels is said to be "on the great Day" (Jude 6). But whether that "great Day" (and the OT "day of the Lord") is the day of the *parousia* (Dale Moody), or the day of final judgment (Hoekema) or the whole period of judgment, from the rapture to the end of the millennium (Pentecost) is a matter of debate. At any rate, the judgment of fallen angels must be fitted in, and I think it is best associated with this final judgment.

The key issue surrounding this judgment is the question of its universality. Many (amillennialists and some others) would see this judgment as affecting every human who has ever lived, along with fallen angels. Dispensationalists (and some others) note that the emphasis in Rev. 20:11-15 is on the judgment of the dead. Believing that there is a first resurrection of believers (I Thess. 4:16, Rev. 20:4-6), they assume that these must have already been judged, certainly before they entered the millennial kingdom. The judgment of Israel and the nations would take care of those living immediately prior to this last judgment. Thus, they see this judgment as pertaining to the dead; to be specific, the lost dead. If they had been believers, they would already have been resurrected. Furthermore, they note that only the dead are explicitly mentioned in Rev. 20:11-15.

E. Judgment or Judgments: Evaluation. It is apparent that the decision of whether to see Rev. 20 as subsuming all the other judgments seen by dispensationalists is far from a purely exegetical decision. One's interpretation of these verses is affected by other theological positions. For amillennialists, who have no millennial kingdom and only one resurrection of all prior to judgment, I can see the simplicity and clarity of their view. And nothing in Rev. 20 explicitly says it is not universal. I find this view attractive.

But if there is a millennial kingdom intervening between the resurrection of believers and unbelievers, a prior judgment of believers makes very good sense, and fits better with the language of Rev. 20, which seems to refer only to lost persons. At the same time, I have to acknowledge that nothing in Matt. 25 or I Cor. 3 or II Cor. 5 nails down a time for other judgments such as to exclude the possibility that they do not coincide with it. I Cor. 3 only mentions "the Day," II Cor. 5:10 gives no time reference, and Matt. 25:31 says that the judgment

of sheep and goats will take place "when the Son of Man comes in his glory," but may not mean immediately when He comes, but could mean anytime after He comes. It's a tough question.

Amillennialists would object that, in their scheme, Christ's return is immediately prior to the Great White Throne Judgment. They could also point to the fact that in Matt. 25, Jesus is pictured as seated on a "throne in heavenly glory," not earthly, as he would be during an earthly millennium. Some may even argue that Matt. 25 is not meant to be seen as a literal judgment scene. After all, the word "judge" nowhere appears. Christ may simply be doing what he did in Matt. 7:21-23--giving an illustration of what it means in terms of real life to live a righteous life, though the opening verses seem to point pretty clearly to an eschatological event.

While I see most dispensational accounts of multiple judgments as going beyond the evidence and motivated by theological concerns I do not share, it does seem that there are at least two acts of judgment. One act is associated with Christ's return (Matt. 25:31), when believers are resurrected (I Thess. 4:16), and presumably judged (I Cor. 3:12-15, II Cor. 5:10, II Tim. 4:8), though in Matt. 25, some unbelievers, perhaps those living at the time of Christ's return, are also judged. Rev. 20:11-15 seems a later and final act of judgment. While it has no specific statement as to whether it was for the lost only or not, the language explicitly mentions lost only, and thus is probably not a universal judgment.

III. Basis of Judgment. The basis for judgment seems to me to be on two levels. One is reflected by the idea of the book of life (Rev. 20:15). Having one's name written in the book of life assures that one escapes eternal punishment in the lake of fire, and seems to be a blessing enjoyed by all true believers (Phil. 4:3).

But far more frequently, it is asserted that the basis for judgment of a believer or non-believer is "according to what he has done" (Matt. 16:27, John 5:29, II Cor. 5:10). Matt. 25 specifies that it is our compassion and service to "the least of these my brethren" (which I believe is far broader than 144,000 Jewish evangelists during the Tribulation); Matt. 12:36 mentions judgment for every careless word. I think the idea behind all these is that judgment includes one's whole life, all deeds done, words said, even the secrets of one's heart (Rom. 2:16).

The importance of these deeds is two-fold. On the one hand, they demonstrate the reality of saving faith, and thus testify that they have in fact had their names written in the book of life. But I think we also have an instinctive sense that it is not right that all believers receive exactly the same reward (or all sinners the same punishment). The parable of the workers in the vineyard (Matt. 20:1-15) teaches God's generosity and the fact that He loves all His children equally, but there can be an equal gift of salvation and still be rewards beyond salvation. That is what I Cor. 3:12-15 seems to indicate.

It is possible to be saved, perhaps late in life, or dying shortly after salvation, or living with a low level of devotion. Such persons may be truly saved, but be left with little reward, because the fire of judgment will reveal the poor quality of their accomplishments. Others, who build on the foundation of salvation by grace with a life of faithful service, will receive a reward.

This will surely be a case where many judged first in the judgment of the world will be last in the judgment of God, while the last will be first.

As to what rewards believers will receive, there is no explicit statement in Scripture. Dwight Pentecost notes that several types of crowns are mentioned:

- an incorruptible crown for mastery over sin (I Cor. 9:25);
- a crown of rejoicing for winning others (I Thess. 2:19);
- a crown of life for enduring trials (James 1:12);
- a crown of righteousness for loving his appearing (II Tim. 4:8);
- a crown of glory for willingly feeding the flock (I Pet. 5:4).

These may be the crowns we lay before the throne (Rev. 4:10). Beyond that, I think the best idea of the reward for serving Christ is a greater capacity to enjoy heaven. Everyone there will be filled with joy; but some will have a greater capacity, and that capacity is developed in walking with Christ and serving Him here. I have no text that says that, but it seems fitting.

It appears that a further basis of judgment, especially for unbelievers, is the amount of revelation, or "light" that one receives during life. The Gentiles, who did not have the law of Moses, will be judged based on the moral law all people have written on their hearts (Rom. 2:14-15; possibly Lk. 12:47-48 as well). Jesus specifically said some cities would receive stricter judgment than others because of the revelatory miracles he performed in them (Matt. 11:20-24). And teachers will be judged more strictly too (James 3:1); presumably, God grants some understanding of divine things to them, and with that privilege comes the responsibility for rightly using it.

IV. The Importance of Judgment. This doctrine is by no means inconsequential or inessential. It is necessary for two reasons.

First, it gives dignity to our actions. Someone is watching, noticing, evaluating, and will judge. This Judge sees us as morally responsible creatures, not determined by genes, or parents, or environment. Every deed of kindness is noticed by God, and has eternal consequences. The Christian view of life is not that of a fairy tale, but that of a high, holy, serious, even terrifying thing (see Heb. 10:26-31).

Second, judgment manifests God's justice and satisfies our instinctive desire for fair play. It is not right that monstrous evil should go unpunished. The doctrine of judgment assures us that it will not. In the end, the God of justice will execute justice, upholding what is right and punishing what is wrong.

ETERNAL DESTINIES: HEAVEN

Outline

I. Biblical Foundations.

- A. The word “heaven.”
- B. Images of Heaven.
 1. The tabernacle.
 2. The city.
 3. Our true homeland.
 4. A wedding feast.
 5. The kingdom.
 6. A garden.
 7. A family reunion.
 8. Where there is nothing bad.

II. Historical Illumination.

III. Theological Response: Four Important Questions.

- A. What will we do in heaven?
- B. What is eternity?
- C. What of earthly life will be in heaven?
- D. How can we rejoice in heaven if we know that some are in hell?

Introduction

It is becoming increasingly noticeable that our culture and the church have lost any significant vision of heaven. Peter Kreeft (*Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Heaven But Never Dreamed of Asking*) compares us to the medieval church and concludes that we have little faith, hope and desire for heaven because we have lost sight of the wonder and glory of heaven, and can imagine little better than our life here. Our view of heaven is joyless. He continues that the glory of heaven never touches our hearts, and so doesn't create a burning desire for heaven, or even an interest in heaven. Yet heaven should be either the most fascinating reality in the world, or the most fascinating falsehood in the world. We see neither, and live earth-bound lives, like kids surrounded by toys but bored to death. The medievals, by comparison, had nothing, but lived in a world full of reason for gratitude, wonder, and praise.

Randy Alcorn (*Heaven*) suspects Satan must be behind our lack of appreciation for heaven but also believes a major factor is the belief that heaven is so different from earth that we can know very little of it. Alcorn agrees with C. S. Lewis that while reason is the organ of truth, imagination is the faculty that helps us grasp meaning, especially the meaning of transcendent realities like heaven. So he advocates the use of imagination, but thinks the fact that heaven is ultimately to become the new creation (“the new heavens and new earth”) allows us to start to imagine heaven from the realities of earth, minus the effects of sin.

A. J. Conyers (*The Eclipse of Heaven*) sees the loss of a vision of heaven as part of a larger loss of transcendence which is having a disastrous ripple effect in multiple areas of theology and life. Both underscore the need for a recovery of a living, heart-shaking doctrine of heaven.

To do so, we need to see heaven a bit more clearly, and look for things here that can lift our hearts and eyes to look above. In doing so, we will focus upon the teachings of Scripture, but we will also use holy imagination to answer some of the speculative questions that curiosity naturally raises, questions that can become barriers to a heart for heaven. John Lennon has urged people to imagine there's no heaven. More recently, a better song has affirmed that we can only imagine what heaven will be like. On the basis of Scripture, and supported by the widespread sense that humans are made for more than just this life, reflected in the varied beliefs in an afterlife shared by many cultures, we affirm our belief in heaven. But understanding heaven stretches the limits of our minds. The writer of Revelation found that describing it taxed the limits of language. So we need in this study, not only the illumination of our minds, but of our imaginations as well.

From 1 (almost never) to 10 (every day), how often do you seriously long for heaven? What obstacles may prevent believers from longing for heaven? Have you found anything that fuels a healthy longing for heaven?

I. Biblical Foundations.

A. The word "heaven." We find the word heaven used in four senses in Scripture.

1. As part of the universe: "God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). Conyers says this phrase should not be passed over too quickly. It sets up transcendence and immanence in the very structure of things. There is always more out there that should cause us to look beyond what is down here. But the eclipse of heaven means we have little sense of something beyond us, no sense that life here on this planet is incomplete in and of itself. We can scientifically analyze what is out there, but we miss the foreignness of it and what it should awaken in us.

2. As a synonym for God: "I have sinned against heaven" (Lk. 15:21). It can be used in this way because of the more common, third sense.

3. As the habitation of God. Jesus described God as "the Father in heaven" (14 times in Matthew alone), and all the Bible agrees (II Chron. 7:14, Psalm 2:4, Eccles. 5:2). Jesus descended from heaven and returned to heaven (John 3:13, Acts 1:11), and is now at the right hand of the Father.

Does this mean then that we are committed, as Bultmann claims, to a mythological three story universe, in which hell is located somewhere within the earth and heaven is out there if we

go far enough? Or do we reject that and say heaven is just a state of mind? Neither alternative is necessary or viable.

We must remember that when we say heaven is the habitation of God, that God is a spirit, and omnipresent, not located at or limited to any one physical place. Thus, while we affirm that heaven is a place (John 14:2-3, Heb. 9:24), we should conclude that it is a special place, a spiritual place, the logical dwelling for spiritual beings.

We may even say that Scripture gives us hints that it does not belong to our dimensions. Heb. 9:11 and 24 tell us that the true tabernacle, the dwelling place of God, is "not man-made...not a part of this creation." It exists, but as a spiritual place in another dimension. Thus, getting to it is not a matter of traveling far enough within our dimensions; we must leave this creation.

Because the Bible was written in pre-scientific times to address all peoples, it uses mostly phenomenological language (the language of appearance) to communicate with us (thus it speaks of Jesus descending from heaven and ascending upon his return). But it does not require a woodenly literal, this-worldly understanding of heaven, and hints that we should think of it as not located within the bounds or dimensions of this created universe.

4. As our final and eternal home. In the Bible, the heaven that exists now is not final. All of creation is awaiting God's final act, the return of Christ, and with it, the end of ordinary history, and the preparation of the "new heavens and new earth" that will be our eternal home (Is. 65:17, 66:22, II Pet. 3:13, Rev. 21:1; see also Rom. 8:19-23). Randy Alcorn differentiates between what he calls Present Heaven (the place where believers go now when they die, the presence of God) and Eternal Heaven (the new creation). Everything now is intermediate, awaiting the final consummation. The dead in Christ are with him in heaven now (the heaven that is God's present habitation), but they too are awaiting their final home, where God's true, complete and permanent habitation with us will be fulfilled (Rev. 21:3).

There is some divergence of opinion concerning whether this new heaven and earth will be a totally new creation, or a purification and restoration of this creation. The language of II Pet. 3:10-12 would seem to point to a total destruction of this creation and require a totally new one. Further, some might see the pollution of this planet as putting it beyond repair. However, I see four reasons for seeing the language of II Pet. 3 as referring only to destruction of all that is stained and evil in this world, and thus preparatory for a restoration and renewal of this creation.

First is the fact that the word for "new" in II Pet. 3:13 and Rev. 21:1 is *kainos* (new in kind), as opposed to *neos* (new in time). If the new creation was new in time, that would indicate that it did not previously exist and thus it could not be a renewal of a previously existing creation. Second is the promise of freedom from corruption given to nature in Rom. 8:19-23. One could say that it is to be fulfilled in the millennium but the language seems to fit total restoration better. A third argument is the goodness of God's creation. Here the analogy with the resurrection body helps. Just as God's creation of us as embodied creatures is validated by the

resurrection of the body, so God's choice to place us in a creation, and the essential rightness and goodness of that creation, is vindicated by its ultimate restoration. Finally, if the creation is in the end destroyed, does that not give Satan a victory? (For a strong argument for this position, see Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 279-281). These points seem convincing to me, but some still think the language of II Pet. 3:10-12 requires annihilation of this creation and a new *creatio ex nihilo*.

At any rate, we should not think of our eternal home as in the clouds, but in a creation something like this, but freed from all the corrupting effects of sin. What some call a "new creation" theology of heaven is one of the most important and helpful ways of thinking about heaven that I think most Christians need to adopt.

B. Images of heaven. Heaven may be beyond our full capacity to comprehend. I Cor. 2:9 says "no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him," but v. 10 adds, "but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit." But the revelation of these things in Scripture is often given in images, which call for the use of imagination. And since heaven is great and glorious, there are numerous images for us to ponder and draw from, and upon which we should exercise a sanctified imagination. We will consider eight; perhaps you can find more.

1. The tabernacle. We find the background for this image in the OT worship setting. The tabernacle was the place where God met with the Israelites (Ex. 29:44-45, where it is called the Tent of Meeting). The image was enriched by the coming of Jesus. John 1:14 says he "tabernacled" with us. But these tabernacles were shadows and temporary. They were easily dismantled, and appropriate for a nomadic people. But one day we will roam no more. The final, true tabernacle will be set up in heaven (Rev. 21:3; Revelation is truly the book of heaven, for "heaven" occurs 52 times in the book). This tabernacle is not man-made, but is the true tabernacle (Heb. 9:11), and will never need to be dismantled or moved.

With this tabernacle, the eternal purpose of God is fulfilled. His motive throughout Scripture was to create a people whose God He could be and with whom He could dwell. Adam had run and hid from God, but God's purpose had persisted. Through Abraham (Gen. 17:7-8), down through the children of Israel (Ex. 6:7), down to the making of a new covenant (Jer. 31:33), God's purpose remained firm. Now it is fulfilled. God will dwell ("tabernacle") among his people, personally and permanently.

From this image, we can draw two implications about heaven. First, heaven is the reality behind all the earthly shadows and symbols. It is more real, more substantial than anything we have ever experienced.

Second, heaven is the place where we will experience the presence of God in such a way that the merest hint of it now blows us away. Indeed, I think that what is most attractive to the believer is not the place of heaven, but the Person we meet there. Verses like Jn. 14:3, Col. 3:4, I Thess. 4:16-17 and I John 3:2 underscore that what will make heaven heaven is being with our Lord.

Augustine helps clarify this with an experiment he suggested. He said, "Imagine God offered you a deal. If God offered you power, wealth, whatever you wanted, along with a good conscience, peace of mind, and a life that would never end and never experience boredom, but said there would be one limitation--you shall never see my face--would you take it?" He believed that we would instinctively recoil, because what we want more than anything else is to be intimately in the presence of God. That too is what God wants and has been working for throughout Scripture.

2. The city. For us, the image of city may not be too attractive. We think of traffic and crime and pollution. But in NT times, a city was more attractive. Moreover, while the Bible begins in a garden, it ends in a city, the New Jerusalem. The image of city can lead us to see heaven as:

a. a permanent place (Heb. 11:9-10, 13:14). A city is a place with foundations, which indicate stability or permanence. Moreover, if the foundation for this city is the same as the foundation of the church (Jesus Christ; see I Cor. 3:11) this too indicates its permanence, for Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever (Heb. 13:8). For those who had been wandering nomads, this was a blessing almost too good to imagine.

b. a place of plenty, for the city was where all the vendors in the ancient world brought their wares to sell. In the desert, you had to make do with what you could find and carry, but in the city there was plenty. Rev. 21:24 and 26 give the application to the heavenly city: everything truly good on earth will be found there. I think this is the clearest clue we have to the multitude of questions as to what of earthly life will be found in heaven (sports, food, pets, etc). Whatever is truly good is preserved and brought into the city.

c. a place of glory and splendor. I think this is the implication behind the precious stones and streets of gold. Whether the streets are literally gold or John is using figurative language, the reality behind the language must be incredibly glorious.

d. a place of safety. This is the importance of the city's walls (Rev. 21:17). A tent did not give much protection against marauders, but a wall did. In heaven there will be no fear, no worry, no anxiety, but perfect peace, safety, and security. It will be the first place we will ever live where we can fully relax.

e. a place of service (Rev. 22:3). A city requires a lot of people working together. Heaven will be more than an eternal day off; we take with us into heaven the capacities God has given us to serve and bless others. I see no reason why we should not continue to use those capacities in the new heaven and new earth.

3. Our true homeland (Heb. 11:13-16, Phil. 3:20-21). Sometimes we want to feel at home here, but God has placed eternity in our hearts, and we long for something more than earth provides. Thus we remain strangers and pilgrims here. When Christians feel at home and

fit in on earth, it is not a good sign. In fact, one of the positive by-products of the decay in American culture is that genuine Christians will begin to appear more and more alien and strange.

Heaven will be the place where we will finally and eternally fit in and feel at home. Until then, we are to be about "purging worldliness from our hearts" and "learning to wean ourselves from the preoccupations of this life" (John MacArthur, *The Glory of Heaven*, p. 63). Such an attitude toward the things of the world is commended to us in passages such as I Cor. 7:29-31, II Cor. 4:17-18 and I John 2:15-17 and illustrated in the attitude of Ignatius of Loyola. Loyola, founder of the Jesuits, was once asked what he would do if the pope disbanded his order. He replied, "Half an hour's prayer and I would think about it no more." We need to hold to the things of this world with a very loose hand.

4. A wedding feast (Rev. 19:9, 21:2, 9-14; Eph. 5:27). This image implies that heaven is a place of celebration, joy, and love that is submissive and sacrificial.

Some are troubled that Jesus says in Matt. 22:30 that earthly marriage relationships no longer apply in heaven. The verse doesn't exactly say that, nor that we will be genderless in heaven. It says that we will not marry nor be given in marriage, for one of the purposes of marriage (procreation of children) has ended, and the other purposes (relationships, learning to love, intimate companionship, mirroring the Trinity) have been transcended. I think we will always have a special relationship with people who have been special to us here, but again, we must realize that earthly marriage, as all earthly relationships, are the shadow. Earthly life, and earthly marriage as a part of that life, is God's school to teach us how to love, and how to be the bride of Christ. Our relationship with our earthly spouse will not be less in heaven; it will be more and be extended to Christ and others. Special earthly relationships are given to us as schools where we learn to love. School may end, but the love goes on, only broader and wider and deeper.

Moreover, as Randy Alcorn notes, there will be one marriage in heaven, that of Christ and his bride, the church. This is the real marriage, of which earthly marriages were only a shadow. Even the sexual union in marriage is a foreshadowing and illustration of the powerful and passionate love of God for his people, and is often used of God's love for Israel in the Old Testament (see Ezekiel 16, Hosea 1-2 and Jer. 31:31-32 for a few of many examples).

5. The kingdom. Again, we live under democratic governments and so may not feel the force of this image. I think it should lead us to think of power and glory, and to realize that all true power and glory will be preserved in that kingdom (Rev. 21:24, 26). Some would say the full establishment of God's kingdom is the best single phrase to sum up God's ultimate purpose in human history.

6. A garden (Rev. 22:1-3). The word garden does not appear in Revelation 22, but Rev. 2:7 says the tree of life is in the paradise of God, and Rev. 22:2 places the tree of life in the middle of the city, and the tree of life was originally in a garden (Gen. 2:9). After the fall of

man, it isn't the tree that is removed from the garden, but man. I think we are meant to picture a park in the middle of the city, a park that resembles the garden of Eden. Even that garden is not lost, but preserved. The difference is that now we are told to eat freely of the tree of life, and that its leaves will cure all pains and all types of ills. Every result of sin and evil will be undone. All the scars of mind, body, and soul will be healed. There will be no more regret, no more fear, no unmet longing. The curse and all its ill effects will be undone. We will be whole.

7. A family reunion (John 14:1-2). We're going to our Father's house; to the place our Elder Brother has been preparing for us. All the folks there will be brothers and sisters, and there will be great joy in being together. Heaven is about perfected relationships.

8. Negative images (Rev. 7:16-17; 21:1, 4, 27). John finally gives up trying to say what heaven is and tells us what it doesn't have. There are no tears, no pain, nor crying nor death. Try to imagine a world like that, and you'll be imagining heaven.

Do any of these images make heaven more real and appealing to you? If so, which one and why? Can you think of any other biblical images for heaven?

II. Historical Illumination. There have not been a lot of books on heaven in the history of theology (Richard Baxter's *The Saints' Everlasting Rest* is one of the few classics), so it is of some interest that there are three recent books that deal with the history of heaven.

A. The first two, one by Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang, entitled, *Heaven: A History*, and the second, by Jeffrey Russell, *A History of Heaven: The Singing Silence*, approach the study of heaven in much the same way. Both books trace two models of heaven running side by side in Christian theology. The first is what they call the theocentric model. It sees heaven as exclusively focused on God as the One whose presence brings joy. The second model they call anthropocentric. In this model, heaven's joys also involve human love and human relationships. Those two have alternated down through church history, and thus should prompt us to realize that perhaps both are involved.

B. The third book is called *A Brief History of Heaven*, by Alister McGrath. It differs from the previous two in looking at the ways Western literature and art have portrayed heaven. He shows how many of the biblical images were picked up by writers, poets and artists. In a similar but more popular way, the book simply entitled *Heaven*, by W. A. Criswell and Paige Patterson, concludes with a lengthy section containing dozens of hymns and poems about heaven. The prominence of heaven in art, poetry and music perhaps emphasizes that imagination is the best way to approach heaven's glories. Finally, Randy Alcorn's book, *Heaven*, though not focusing on historical understandings of heaven, is so well researched that it does introduce the reader to most of the major works on heaven down through the centuries.

III. Theological Response: Four Important Questions.

I usually try to discourage us from spending much time on speculative questions, but our souls have become earthbound, and imagining what heaven is like can stretch us heavenward, and perhaps light the flame of joy and desire and expectation in our hearts. As long as heaven remains just a bright blur, it will be difficult to find it taking a hold on our hearts. We must remember that our responses here are speculative, but where they are wrong, they will err in being too small and unworthy; the reality will always be better.

A. What will we do in heaven? From the book of Revelation, we can affirm that we will rest (14:13), we will worship (15:2-4), and we will serve (I think this includes the use of all our capacities to glorify God and serve others; see 22:3). While serve could be a very broad category and include many activities, I think acknowledging other possibilities may be helpful in giving us a fuller, more active vision of what heavenly life might include.

1. Randy Alcorn draws numerous implications from the idea that heaven will ultimately be the new creation. Why might there not be exploration of that new universe, use of the resources of that creation in technology, building, the production of works of art, even sports. Could it be that as we were given stewardship over the first creation, we will also be given stewardship over the new creation? Could that be part of the rule we are given? If this is so, and we consider all the developments that have occurred down through history, even in a fallen context, could we not expect far more exciting developments resulting from a holy stewardship of a new creation, and full obedience to a new cultural imperative?

2. But Peter Kreeft has suggested other stimulating possibilities. He says the first step into heaven will involve seeing all of our own life from heaven's perspective. This will mean seeing exactly how Rom. 8:28 was true in everything in our lives. We will have the answer to every nagging "Why?" we ever murmured. As a Catholic, Kreeft suggests this is a fitting idea of purgatory, a preparation for heavenly life. But I see no reason why we may not appropriate it as the first event, or lesson, of heavenly life.

Second, Kreeft says, we will be able to enter into communion with others in such a way that we see their lives as we saw our own. We will be able to walk back with them through all the events of their lives, and praise God with them for all He did that we never guessed. This he lists under the idea of the communion of saints. We will understand others as we know ourselves. Thus our communion will be real. We have affirmed our belief in it; now we will experience it.

Finally, Kreeft says that we will begin a never-ending journey into the knowledge of God. In Catholic language, this is the highest of all blessings, the beatific vision. For us, it implies that the perfection of heaven is not static, but permits growth, unending growth in the knowledge of an inexhaustible God.

B. What is eternity? This is the most unnerving question of heaven. Every experience we have ever had has been bounded by time, a beginning and end. To try to imagine something unending is profoundly disturbing and frightening, at least to me.

I think part of the problem may be our ideas of eternity. If eternity is just a line of time, like we experience, except with no end, then it is hard to imagine how we will avoid not getting eventually bored. In fact, it is hard to imagine heaven at all. Kreeft suggests that instead of an infinite line of time, eternity should be thought of as a point containing all other points of time in itself, as all the moments in a novel are present at once to the mind of the author. He goes further and speculates that perhaps we will be able to travel to different moments in time, to have adventures exploring all possible moments in time. I am not sure I agree, but I do think our idea of eternity may be faulty.

C. Will there be animals, music, food, sports, etc. in heaven? In short, what of earthly life will be present in heaven? Will there be anything truly good here on earth that is lost in heaven? I think Rev. 21:24-27 provides the clearest hint. Nothing truly good is lost. Why should there not be these things? If God created them as part of the first heavens and earth, why should they not be a part of the new heavens and earth? One of the maxims of Catholic theology is that grace perfects nature, rather than destroying it. While I cannot accept all their applications of that maxim, I think it might be appropriate in this instance.

D. Most difficult of all, how can we ever rejoice in heaven if we know that anyone is in torment in hell? This is a question every sensitive heart must take seriously, but I think there are some helpful suggestions we can offer.

1. The first is from Kreeft. He believes God will wash our minds and memories of these people. They will no longer come to our minds and consideration. Some say the fate of the lost may be one of the "former things [that] will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind" in God's new heavens and new earth (Is. 65:17). Kreeft goes further and says, in so doing God is in fact recognizing the truth about the condemned, for they are becoming less and less real, more and more shadow. They are no longer fully human; they are only what remains after humanity has been abused and trashed. After wood has been burned, ashes remain. When a human being chooses life apart from God, he loses all the good that he experienced as a result of common grace, and become "remains," no longer what we remember as human.

Randy Alcorn goes further, and says that perhaps we will not feel toward them what we did earlier, because they will be radically changed. What we loved about them was something derived from some aspect of God's image, some spark of God's creation still alive in them. But after death and judgment, that is all gone. They are no longer bearers of God's image; they have rejected that status.

2. A second suggestion comes from Kreeft's model and mentor, C. S. Lewis, in his book, *The Great Divorce*, chapters 12-13. In these chapters, the inhabitants of heaven come down the mountains to talk to a group who have made a bus ride from hell to the outskirts of heaven. One of the blessed spirits is a woman whose husband meets her. He is disappointed that she is not sad that he went to hell, rather than heaven. He tries to use her compassion for him to mar her blessedness in heaven. She tells him it won't work:

'No, Frank, not here,' said the Lady. 'Listen to reason. Did you think joy was created to live always under that threat? Always defenceless against those who would rather be miserable than have their self-will crossed? For it was real misery. I know that now. You made yourself really wretched. That you can still do. But you can no longer communicate your wretchedness. Everything becomes more and more itself. Here is joy that cannot be shaken. Our light can swallow up your darkness; but your darkness cannot now infect our light. . . . Can you really have thought that love and joy would always be at the mercy of frowns and sighs? Did you not know that they were stronger than their opposites?' (118).

To read the whole book is very worthwhile, but the central point here is that it is not just, it is not right, that the condemned, who freely and deliberately reject joy, should forever retain the power to veto the joy of others. Lewis says that those who live in perfect joy can no longer fall from that joy; it is too strong, and it is right that they should not be saddened by the condemned. I believe Lewis is right; it would not be just for the condemned to retain such power. I don't know exactly how God will break that power, but I can see that it is fair and just and necessary for God to do so.

In fact, hell might be the kindest gift God can give to those for whom his presence would be torture. N.D. Wilson speaks of those who hate God, "Hell is for you because God is kind and reserves a place for those who loathe Him to the end, an eternal exile, a joyless haven for those who would eternally add to their guilt, a place where blasphemy will be new every morning. A place less painful and less terrible than the alternative." (*Notes From the Tilt-a-Whirl*).

3. A third suggestion is that part of our difficulty may be that we are not yet fully sanctified and do not sufficiently understand the justice and goodness of God's justice. Certainly the diminution of God in contemporary secular thought could make hell seem more problematic. Some think we need to revise our traditional ideas of hell because of the difficulties they feel, and thus are moving toward annihilationism or much more inclusivistic views of salvation. But it is at least equally possible that contemporary cultural assumptions have prevented us from seeing and understanding rationales for hell that previous generations found at least somewhat cogent (the idea that eternal punishment is right because sin is against an infinite God, or because sinners keep on sinning in hell, or because God wills to manifest both wrath and mercy eternally). J. I. Packer concludes that the biblical teaching on hell says "God will judge justly, and all angels, saints, and martyrs will praise him for it. So it seems inescapable that we shall, with them, approve the judgment of persons—rebels—whom we have known and loved." He acknowledges, "this sounds to us more like hard-heartedness than Christlikeness, yet Christlikeness is precisely what it will be." The difference is that "in heaven, our minds, hearts, motives and feelings will be sanctified, so that we are fully conformed to the character and outlook of Jesus our Lord" (see Packer, "Hell's Final Enigma," *Christianity Today*, April 22, 2002); 84). Our task now is to examine biblical teaching and contemporary objections to the ominous subject of hell and see what response we may give.

ETERNAL DESTINIES: HELL Outline

I. Why Does Anyone Go to Hell?

- A. God allows us to choose it.
- B. Arguments for a more active role for God.

II. Who Will Go to Hell?

- A. Spectrum of Views.
 - 1. Exclusivism.
 - 2. Modified Exclusivist Views.
 - a. Progressive light views.
 - b. Post-mortem evangelization.
 - c. Eventual universalism.
 - 3. Middle Knowledge Views.
 - 4. Reverent Agnosticism.
 - 5. Inclusivist Views.
 - a. Private inclusivism.
 - b. Corporate inclusivism.
 - c. A Calvinist inclusivist view.
 - 6. Pluralism.
- B. Evaluation.

III. What is the Nature of Hell?

- A. The Traditional View.
 - 1. Darkness and separation.
 - 2. Fire.
 - 3. Weeping and gnashing of teeth.
 - 4. Punishment.
 - 5. Death and destruction.
- B. The Conditionalist View.
 - 1. “Destruction” and “Perish” imply an end to existence.
 - 2. Fire destroys.
 - 3. Justice demands less than eternal punishment.
 - 4. The victory of God demands an end to the wicked.
- C. The Crux of the Debate: Eternal.

As just mentioned, one area of turmoil in contemporary evangelical theology is the doctrine of hell. Traditional formulations have been challenged both as to the nature of hell (eternal punishment vs. conditional immortality) and the occupants of hell (the challenges of universalism, pluralism and inclusivism). This reexamination has been part of what one has

called a new paradigm that much of evangelical theology has quietly adopted (see the article by Robert Brow, "Evangelical Megashift," *Christianity Today*, Feb. 19, 1990, 12-17).

Alongside that development there have been creeping doubts about the depth of human depravity, the authority of Scripture, and the validity of other religions. We may address these concerns by means of three questions about hell: Why does anyone go to hell? Who will go to hell? What is the nature of hell?

Have you ever heard a sermon specifically focusing on the biblical teaching on hell? Why is it so hard to speak seriously about hell?

I. Why Does Anyone Go to Hell?

The question here concerns the role of God in condemnation. How does God feel about lost people? Does God sadly and regretfully allow some to reject him and choose condemnation? Or is God more actively involved in condemning the wicked as a manifestation of his justice? Or is God too loving to send anyone to hell or powerful enough to save all? Why should anyone have to go to hell?

A. The most common idea in contemporary evangelical theology is that hell is the inevitable result of genuine human freedom. God, who chose to give us the awesome gift of freedom, allows us to use it, even to our eternal ruin, and respects it. In such a view, God's role in condemnation is seen as passive.

For example, in *The Problem of Pain*, C. S. Lewis considers several objections to the doctrine of hell, and makes several responses, but he emphasizes that God has already done all that is possible to save people; if they are condemned, it is their choice. He writes: "If the happiness of a creature lies in self-surrender, no one can make that surrender but himself. . . and he may refuse" (118). Or, "forgiveness needs to be accepted as well as offered if it is to be complete: and a man who admits no guilt can accept no forgiveness" (122). Or, "I willingly believe that the damned are, in one sense, successful, rebels to the end; that the doors of hell are locked on the inside" (127). No one is in hell who truly wants to be in heaven. He concludes:

'What are you asking God to do?' To wipe out their past sins and, at all costs, to give them a fresh start, smoothing every difficulty and offering every miraculous help? But He has done so, on Calvary. To forgive them? They will not be forgiven. To leave them alone? Alas, I am afraid that is what He does (128).

Millard Erickson, in a widely used theology text, follows Lewis's lead: "We should also observe that God does not send anyone to hell. . . . It is man's choice to experience the agony of hell. . . . It is God's leaving man to himself, as man has chosen" (1240).

N.D. Wilson, when asked by a non-Christian friend, if he thought she was going to hell, replied, "I don't know. Don't you want to?" When his friend questioned why she would want to

go to hell, Wilson reminded her that God is who he is, and that heaven would mean being with him, in his very presence, every day for ever (*Notes From the Tilt-a-Whirl*). Do non-believers really desire to be in God's presence?

B. Arguments for a More Active Role for God. As much as I like the arguments of Lewis and Erickson, and as much as I think Wilson is right to point out that we too easily assume non-believers would prefer heaven to hell, it seems to me they have left something out that Scripture retains, and that is a more active, judging, punishing role for God. He rejects some as those he never knew (Matt. 7:23). Others are spoken of as cast or thrown outside, into darkness (Matt. 8:11-12, Matt. 25:30), or thrown into hell (Mk. 9:42-48). In Matt. 13, angels, who are God's servants, cast the wicked into a fiery furnace (Matt. 13:40-43, 49-50). Matt. 25:31-46 has Jesus judging the nations, and sending one group to hell. II Thess. 1:5-10 describes hell as God paying back and punishing evildoers. The book of Revelation sees the wrath of God in action against sinners, actively involving punishment (Rev. 6:15-17, 11:18, 14:9-10, 19:1-3).

It is possible that these are simply descriptions of what happens when God leaves a man to himself, and I do think that much of what Lewis and Erickson say is correct, but the language of Scripture suggests hell is not just being left alone by God. There is a measure of retributive punishment. I fear that in trying to give rationales for hell that are acceptable to our culture, we may be omitting an inescapable element of biblical teaching. Part of the answer to the question, "Why does anyone go to hell?" is that God in justice sends them there. We feel no qualms of conscience when an earthly judge sentences a murderer to death; why do we feel squeamish about God, the only righteous Judge, sentencing anyone to hell? I think the problem must be that we don't feel that anyone truly deserves it.

Behind this question lies the question of who is finally responsible for salvation and condemnation. Lewis lays great emphasis on the responsibility of truly free creatures to accept what God offers. God has already done all He can; now it is up to the human choice.

I agree in part. We do have liberty to refuse God's grace, to sin and rebel. And if we reject God's love we have no one to blame but ourselves. Scripture does treat us like responsible creatures. But if God did nothing more than offer salvation, no one would be saved. He does more. He works inwardly in election, predestination, conviction, calling, and regeneration to save us. But God does not work in these ways equally in all people; not all are saved. In a mass of equally undeserving humanity, God works to save some but not all, and those saved did nothing more to merit salvation than those who are lost.

The question must then be raised, why doesn't he save everyone? For Lewis, the answer is straightforward: everyone is not saved because not everyone accepts salvation, and human choice is the final determinative factor. But that doesn't really get God off the hook, for he knew in advance which would grow up to reject him, and could have had them all die in infancy, before they reached an age of moral accountability. Perhaps Lewis would say that free choice isn't really free if God rigs the game so no one loses, but eternal destiny seems far more serious than a game. For Calvin, the answer is similarly straightforward: the will of God. God decided to

save some and condemn others, and we can find no deeper reason than the inscrutable will of God (Rom. 11:33-36). Luther said frankly that he did not understand why God did not save all. He used an illustration of three lights. Some things that were inexplicable in the *light of nature* (how God could be just and yet justify the ungodly; how God could be three and one; how God could become incarnate) became clear in the *light of Scripture*. Still other things that were still unclear in the *light of Scripture* might become clear in the *light of glory* (when we know fully, even as we are fully known). Why God does not save all was for Luther a mystery he hoped to understand in the light of glory. Until then he trusted in the love and goodness of the God he knew.

I accept a position of paradox and mystery as well, for it seems to me that the Bible attributes salvation to God alone and condemnation to human responsibility. The power of God's grace and the greatness of God's love would be grounds for belief in universalism (as Karl Barth hopes and others affirm) were it not for the strong and clear statements that some (even many, according to Matt. 7:13) will be lost. Why God would save some by transforming their evil hearts and leave others to exercise their freedom to their ruin is a mystery. It does not lead me to question God's justice, for it is just for God to condemn them for their rejection of the gospel. But the mercy He shows to the saved is beyond what is just, and thus should cause us to glorify God for His mercy to us, but also to fear and reverence and glorify Him for His holy justice exercised in judgment, and it should cause us to recognize and ponder the awful seriousness of being a human being.

II. Who Will Go To Hell?

I raise this because of the increasing presence of pluralistic and inclusivistic ideas of salvation in mainline Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox and even some evangelical circles. One 2007 survey of evangelical Protestants found 54% agreeing with the statement, "People not of my faith, including non-Christians, can go to heaven." Such ideas have a multiplicity of sources, but at least one source is the perceived difficulty of consigning huge segments of humanity to hell, especially segments which have had little exposure to Christianity but, according to some, have worshipped God as best they knew in their cultural context. In response to such ideas, the 2000 *Baptist Faith and Message* added a statement to clarify the position espoused by Southern Baptists: "There is no salvation apart from personal faith in Jesus Christ as Lord."

Recent books have tended to categorize views as restrictivist, exclusivist, inclusivist, etc., but the number of sub-groupings under these headings have tended to blur the lines and have made these categories less helpful. Perhaps the best approach is to see the various views on a spectrum, from those that see the way to heaven as narrow indeed, to those who see the way as wider. Or, to respond to the question above, some views see more as headed for hell, and some see hell as less populated. Some have been around for centuries; others are of relatively recent vintage.

Views seem to part over two major questions. The first and most recurring question in church history has been the fate of the unevangelized. Can those who never hear the gospel, at

least not from any human messenger, be saved? As we shall see, various answers have been proposed. The second question, and the one more discussed in the last generation, is the question of other world religions. Can a sincere follower of another religion somehow be saved? A third question, often overlooked in these discussions, is the fate of children and the severely retarded. Must they affirm faith in Christ to be saved or is there some way for the grace of God to reach them? Almost all theologians make a provision for such individuals within the grace of God, but often without a clear theological rationale. The different answers given to these questions produce different responses to our question, who will go to hell?

A. The Spectrum of Views.

The traditional view has been what many call exclusivism or restrictivism, and what I call evangel-ism. It affirms that one must hear the evangel (the gospel) and respond for salvation. This means that all those who never hear the gospel are lost, not because they never heard the gospel, but because they never responded to what they did hear. It should also logically mean that children who die in infancy are lost, but almost all make an exception for them (most via the idea of an age of accountability).

A close relative to exclusivism are views that insist that salvation requires faith in Christ, but see different paths by which one arrives at that faith (progressive light view [Acts 10:4; 11:14], post-mortem evangelization, even eventual universal repentance). The first option amounts to the traditional view, but holds out some hope for those who live beyond the reach of missionaries. The latter two do not take seriously enough the biblical teaching on hell and human responsibility.

Middle knowledge views seek to soften the insistence on a response to the gospel but postulating God's sovereign arrangement of circumstances such that all who would respond to the gospel do in fact hear the gospel (William Lane Craig). The difficulty is that it turns out that those who would have responded tend to be geographically concentrated in areas where the gospel did reach, and there were apparently none who would have responded in large areas over centuries of time. It is possible, but seems unlikely to me. A more radical view says God knows who would have believed if they had heard, and judges them as if they had heard and believed. But if God knows they would have believed, which can only be as the result of his Spirit working in them, why didn't he complete the process and find some way to get the gospel to them? This view seems to diminish the importance of genuine faith; a hypothetical faith suffices.

Inclusivism has become very popular recently, even among evangelicals. It insists that Christ alone is Savior, but that salvation may be possible apart from hearing and responding to the gospel. This allows for the salvation of those who never hear by a positive response to the light they did have (the most common version); some versions even allow for the salvation of those in other religions if they somehow followed the Spirit, who is universally present, even amidst a false religion (Clark Pinnock), or if they responded to the stirrings of grace within (Karl Rahner). These views usually emphasize God's universal salvific will, universal accessibility to

Christ, and the universal working of the Spirit. There is even one Calvinist version of inclusivism (T. Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved?*) Some versions of inclusivism have some basis in parallels to how God saved Old Testament saints and infants who die prior to hearing and responding to the gospel. Those are examples of salvation apart from hearing the gospel. But on the whole, I find little in Scripture that gives me warrant or encouragement to affirm inclusivism. Whether I like it or not, it was Christ himself who described the path of salvation as a narrow way found by few (Matt. 7:14).

Finally, a very few Christians (in liberal circles, not evangelical) have moved all the way to pluralism, the idea that there are multiple ways to God found within all the cultures and religions of the world. While John Hick has made some challenging arguments for pluralism (God doesn't play geographical favorites; all religions have produced great saints), it faces insoluble exegetical problems in Christ's uniqueness and his own statements about one way and a narrow way (John 14:6, Matt. 7:14).

Even fewer have adopted the position of Alister McGrath and seemingly, also J. I. Packer, that of reverent agnosticism. This view argues that the Bible does not explicitly address the question of what happens to those who never hear (possibly a deliberate oversight on the part of the Spirit), and that thus, in the absence of data, Christians should insist upon no particular position.

B. Evaluation. I have offered some critique of some of these views along the way, but some further overall remarks need to be made as well.

1. One factor sparking the development of diversity in this doctrine is the increasing difficulty felt in consigning millions to hell, especially those in other religions, and those who haven't heard of Christ. It signals the need for more thorough consideration and defense of the uniqueness of Christ, and more commitment to the task of making him known, but it also raises a question: why is this increasing difficulty felt, especially why is it felt now? The world has been largely lost throughout history, and, in fact, missions has increasingly made inroads into that lostness, especially in the last 200 years. The proportion of those who have never heard is far smaller than it has ever been, far more so than in the first century, when all those outside the Roman Empire were beyond the reach of the gospel.

No doubt part of the answer is the increasing contact with peoples of other religions, and recognition of the extent of the unreached world. Yet theologians in earlier ages were not ignorant of the existence and prevalence of other religions. Indeed, throughout the Bible God's people are a small minority, set among other religions that are not viewed positively at all. Have we somehow become more compassionate or more clear-sighted than our predecessors, or are there other factors at work?

I think there are certain cultural assumptions that are driving us toward increasingly inclusivistic or pluralistic views. One is the assumption of the basic goodness of human beings, and our ability to seek God and the good. We assume that among the millions of Hindus,

Muslims, Buddhists and unreached of this world there must be many who are sincere seekers of God.

But this assumption runs contrary to the biblical teaching on depravity, that there are none who voluntarily, on their own, "seek God" (Rom. 3:10-11, 8:6-8). This teaching is supported by the experience of many missionaries among the established world religions, where the response to the preaching of the gospel has been discouragingly small.

2. Another factor I see behind many of these views is the idea that somehow or other God owes everyone more of an equal opportunity. Everyone doesn't hear the gospel; not all who do hear are in a setting conducive to following. Some churches or pastors lead people astray. None of us do all we could or should to get the message out. The unspoken idea is that God should do something more to make things fair, and see that everyone gets equal treatment. Since God loves everyone (John 3:16) and God wants all saved (II Pet. 3:9), God will make salvation accessible to all. He will do something. He will give further light, or a post-mortem chance, or encounter people in the religions of the world, or accept their response to general revelation.

In some way, the question posed by these different views is that posed by Abraham long ago: "Far be it from you to do such a thing--to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?"

God will do what is right. But there may not be nearly as many righteous as we think. Indeed, I think there will be none outside heaven begging to come in, because apart from God's convicting and saving work, people don't love righteousness and don't want to be in "the home of righteousness" (II Pet. 3:13). And if God convicts and draws them to faith, I believe he will get the message of salvation to them, in whatever way he sees fit.

God will be fair, but there are inescapable inequalities in the world. A child raised in a loving Christian home and a child raised in a militantly Muslim home will inevitably have much different chances of becoming followers of Christ, and I don't see how all the inequalities in the world can be erased. Yet inequality does not mean injustice. God may be fair to all and yet gracious to some. This seems to be the point of the parable in Matt. 20:1-16. That is also the essence of the doctrine of election, which draws similar objections today. God does not have to treat all equally. According to my understanding, if He did so, we'd all be lost. If He chooses graciously to save some, He does not do injustice to those He does not save.

Yet I acknowledge that the fate of the followers of world religions, along with the untold generations of those who never heard is a difficult issue. I do make exceptions for the salvation of those in the Old Testament and for children who die prior to the age of accountability. I think that it is possible that God may save some beyond where humans have spread the gospel, for he can also speak by angels or visions, but if He does so, we should be clear that the basis is the freedom of God to act as He chooses, and not the necessity of meeting our idea of equal opportunity for all.

Further, there is a biblical basis for seeing differing standards for judgment (based on differing levels of knowledge, Lk. 12:47-48) and correspondingly differing levels of punishment (Matt. 11:20-24), and thus I am glad that it is the God who perfectly knows the hearts of all who judges and not me. With His perfect knowledge of the obstacles and opportunities faced by each individual, He may equalize some of the inequalities we see. But, in the end, we must, as Abraham, trust in the justice of God and remember, as C. S. Lewis said, that it is not God who is "in the dock" (the place of the accused in an English court); we are.

If I were free to choose the position I like, I would probably be some sort of inclusivist. But I am not free to think as I like; I am a disciple of Christ and have chosen to follow his teaching. While I find inclusivism to be a very comforting and attractive position, I simply find no biblical warrant to support it, and five reasons to oppose it. In view of the inroads inclusivism is making among evangelicals, I think reasons to oppose it need to be clearly stated.

3. Five Reasons Why I Am Not An Inclusivist.

a. A Biblical Reason. The Bible presents an array of verses that point toward the traditional view (a position we may call evangel-ism; the idea that one must hear the evangel, or gospel message). The religions of other nations in the Old Testament were regarded as idolatrous, not salvific (Ps. 96:5; 97:7); even Jews after the coming of Christ could not be saved within Judaism (Rom. 10:1-3); salvation comes by placing faith in the gospel message (Eph. 1:13); that message centers on Christ (John 14:6; Acts 4:12).

b. A Theological Reason. Inclusivism seems fueled by the idea that the problem between God and humanity is a lack of information, but the barrier seems moral rather than mental. Revelational light is universally available, but normally suppressed (Rom. 1:18-23). In the one biblical example where an individual responded to the limited revelation he had, God did not regard that response as sufficient for salvation, but supplied further revelation (Acts 10:4; 11:13-14). God is not obligated to make the gospel message accessible to those who are suppressing the truth they do know (see reason 3).

c. An Anthropological Reason. Inclusivism assumes that many individuals are honestly and sincerely seeking God. It would not be just for them to be lost, simply due to the fact that they were born in an area unreached by the gospel (especially when that fact is due to the failure of Christians to get the gospel out). But the teaching of the Bible, though hard for humans to accept, is that "no one . . . seeks God" (Rom. 3:11); that "men loved the darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil" (John 3:19). Apart from the Spirit's ministry of conviction and illumination, we do not seek God, and the Spirit's ministry is normally through the preaching of the word (I Thess. 1:4-5; I Cor. 2:1-5).

In fact, in view of the fact that heaven is the place where God will be fully present, and the home of righteousness, it is fair to ask if heaven is a place a non-believer would want to be. Might hell be a kinder place to send someone who hates God and loves wickedness?

d. A Missiological Reason. While the New Testament motivation for evangelism is for the glory of God as well as the need of the lost, the command to go and preach the gospel to all does not fit well with the idea that salvation is available apart from the preaching of the gospel. In fact, if salvation is already universally available, such that God judges those who haven't heard based on what they did know of God, we shouldn't go and preach the gospel to them, for we will simply heighten their accountability. Despite the disclaimers, inclusivism does seem to undercut missions.

e. A Practical Reason. If the inclusivist is right and I am wrong, I will be overjoyed to find heaven much more populated than I think. But if the inclusivist is wrong and I am right, he may have been guilty of encouraging some to trust in a message that did not save, and guilty of encouraging a view that weakened support for the preaching of the gospel, the one message that we know will save those who embrace it.

Is it really possible to believe millions are going to hell and live consistently with that belief? I mean, if so many are heading for hell, how can we justify taking time to go out for a meal, or watch a ballgame, or do anything that does not address the awful predicament of a lost world?

We have spent a lot of time on the issue of who will go to hell because traditionally hell has been seen as an eternal destiny. However, some of the same pressures that have led some to reconsider who goes to hell have also led to controversy around our third question, the nature of hell.

III. What Is the Nature of Hell?

In particular, what is the nature of the punishment those in hell suffer? We want to consider the two major alternatives being debated today.

A. The Traditional View. The traditional idea is that hell involves conscious eternal torment. It is the overwhelming view of theologians and Christians down through the centuries, from Tertullian and Augustine to Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Wesley, and Edwards to contemporaries like J. I. Packer, Millard Erickson, and D. A. Carson.

In earlier times, the traditional view was also strongly supported by a widespread belief in the immortality of the soul. However, this was a belief shared by Greek philosophy, and annihilationists today often claim that the traditional view of hell was adopted due to an improper acceptance of this Greek idea. Immortality, they note, is attributed only to God in the Bible (1 Tim. 6:16). However, immortality of the soul may be part of the gift of being created in the image of God, or may be granted at the resurrection, which is described as resurrection to eternal destinies (Dan. 12:2). At any rate, today the supporters of the traditional view rarely mention the immortality of the soul. They support their view primarily from Scripture.

Biblically, the traditional position has claimed extensive support. Robert Peterson (*Two Views of Hell*) lists ten foundational biblical texts that he sees as teaching conscious eternal torment: Isaiah 66:22-24; Daniel 12:1-2; Matt. 18:6-9; Matt. 25:31-46; Mark 9:42-48; II Thess. 1:5-10; Jude 7; Jude 13; Rev. 14:9-11; and Rev. 20:10-15. All use terms like **everlasting**, **eternal** or **for ever and ever**.

Peterson also notes that there are five major biblical images of hell; all either support the traditional view or at least are consistent with it. They are:

1. **Darkness and separation.** Jesus refers to the darkness into which the wicked are to be thrown on numerous occasions (Matt. 8:12, 22:13, 25:30), a darkness that is also a continuation and intensification of the darkness they chose on earth (John 3:19-20). Darkness is also the inevitable result of separation from the God who is light (I John 1:5) and the Father of lights (James 1:17). Separation from him involves separation from all that is good, for He is the source of every good and perfect gift (James 1:17). It is sin that separates God from humans (Is. 59:2); that is why the essence of salvation is the removal of the barrier of sin leading to union with Christ (Eph. 2:12-13). Ontologically, as omnipresent, God is present to every point in space; but relationally, he is separated from those in hell.

There is no hint of an idea that the darkness will ever end, or that their exclusion from God and His light will end. Such exclusion from the Lord's presence is part of their punishment (II Thess. 1:9) and the darkness reserved for them is for "forever" (Jude 13).

2. **Fire.** Fire is perhaps the best known image of hell. It is certainly pervasive in the teaching of Jesus (Matt. 13:40-42, 49-50, 18:8-9, 25:41, Mk. 9:48) and in the book of Revelation (14:10-11, 20:15; 21:8). Advocates of the traditional view differ among themselves as to whether the fire is literal or figurative. According to Peterson, the majority of scholars today follow Calvin and others who have thought we should see the fire as figurative, because of the difficulty of reconciling literal fire with the other images of darkness or being cut into pieces (Matt. 24:51).

I do not think it makes much difference in the end. Either way, the image of fire is associated with torment (Rev. 14:10-11) and, most important for the contemporary debate, it is said in several places to be "eternal" (Matt. 18:8, 25:41, Mk. 9:48, Rev. 14:11).

3. **Weeping and gnashing of teeth.** This expression is found seven times in the gospels (Matt. 8:12, 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30, Lk. 13:28). Twice it is linked with being thrown "into the fiery furnace"; four times it is associated with being thrown into darkness. Clearly it expresses sorrow and suffering, though not repentance.

4. **Punishment.** We find this idea in Matt. 25:46, II Thess. 1:5-9, Jude 7, and Rev. 14:10-11. It is punishment administered as a result of judgment. Indeed, John 5:28-29 implies that the reason the wicked dead are raised is so that they may be judged, condemned and

punished. Significantly, each of the passages above contains the word "eternal" as describing some aspect of the punishment.

5. Death and destruction. There are a number of passages that speak of death, destruction, and perishing as the destiny of the ungodly (Matt. 10:28, John 3:16, Rom. 2:12, Rom. 6:23, Rev. 20:15). Taken alone, these verses could lead one toward the idea of annihilation, and Edward Fudge claims that the overwhelming biblical term to use for the destiny of unbelievers is death, which in his view implies a definite end. However, the adjective everlasting can be attached to the term "destruction" (see II Thess. 1:9), and the beast of Revelation is spoken of as both going to "destruction" (Rev. 17:8) and as suffering torment in the lake of fire "day and night for ever and ever" (Rev. 20:10). Apparently, the destruction of the ungodly does not require annihilation. In fact, the pervasive teaching of the eternal nature of hell and its punishments decisively tilts interpretation of these words (death, destruction, perish) as indicating the demise of all that was meaningful life in these people, the ruin of what was formerly a human, but not the total annihilation of their being. Perhaps part of the punishment of hell is the loss of the *imago dei*. It would seem a fitting punishment for those who refused to take advantage of their capacity for relationship with God.

As we noted above, advocates of the traditional view differ on how literally these images should be taken, but agree that any valid interpretation must conclude that the biblical teaching on hell is one of horrendous and unending suffering.

Tertullian, Aquinas, and Jonathan Edwards even taught that the sight of the wicked being punished will be one of the blessings of the redeemed. While that may be possible, and while we are given a description of angels applauding the judgment of God (Rev. 16:5-7), Scripture does not explicitly teach that we are to rejoice at the punishment of the wicked, and most today would see Scriptural teaching on the necessity of compassion for others as making it very unlikely. Instead, most believers today feel some difficulty in reconciling hell and a loving God, and theologians have suggested a couple of ways of seeing the punishment that soften the horror of hell and respond to some of the objections raised against hell.

For example, a number would affirm that Scripture teaches varying degrees of punishment (see Lk. 12:47-48 and Matt. 11:20-24), based on the "light," or revelation, one received. God will not punish all equally, for that would not be just, and God is just.

A second idea suggested by C. S. Lewis is that the emphasis in Scriptural teaching about hell is not on the punishment, but on the result of punishment; that is, destruction, or having perished. What ends up in hell is something vastly different than our thoughts of a human; it is what is left of someone who has perished (John 3:16), who is under everlasting destruction (II Thess. 1:8-9). For such a creature, who is no more than the "leavings" of a former human, our ideas of pleasure and pain no longer apply. Randy Alcorn would even say that the lost no longer bear the image of God in hell, and that the words "destruction" and "perish" may at least partially refer to the loss of the *imago dei*. For those who, like myself, define the image of God as the capacity of human beings to have a relationship with God, the possibility for entering into

a relationship with God ends with final judgment, and it may well be that God's judgment includes the withdrawal of the capacity as well.

The motivation for these suggestions is to continue to affirm the horror and reality of hell, while responding to objections that hell is unfair, inconsistent with the joy of the blessed in heaven, makes God a cruel sadist, etc. Others say these suggestions do not really help, and thus want to offer an alternative to the traditional view. The problems with the traditional view of hell, they say, are insuperable and so they opt for a position called Conditional Immortality or Annihilationism.

B. The Conditionalist View. This is a position held by Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh Day Adventists in the past, but more recently has been embraced, at least as a possible interpretation of hell, by primarily British evangelicals such as John Wenham, Philip Hughes, and John Stott. It affirms that hell means the full, final and complete destruction of the wicked. They do not deny that the wicked will be punished, but they do believe the punishment will end when justice has been satisfied, and will end with the annihilation or dissolution of the wicked. They will cease to exist.

Stott admits that the position of conscious eternal punishment has been the historic position of the church from the patristic era, through the Middle Ages, the time of the Reformers, and down to most evangelicals today. While he does not regard that support lightly, he nevertheless rejects the traditional view: "emotionally, I find the idea intolerable and do not understand how people can live with it without either cauterizing their feelings or cracking under the strain." He sounds here like his emotions are guiding his exegesis, a danger he acknowledges as a possibility, but denies that it applies in his case, for he believes there are good reasons for questioning the traditional view. He offers four arguments in favor of his view.

Is Stott right? Is that why we hear so few sermons on hell—that we can't really think about it? Then we would have to ask why it is that Jesus is the one who teaches the most about hell? Do we secretly think there is something morally questionable about God sending anyone to hell? If so, does annihilation really make hell that more acceptable?

1. The first is based on the fact that Scripture associates the words "destruction" and "perish" with hell. Matt. 10:28 talks of the destruction of soul and body; Matt. 7:13 speaks of the road to destruction. Other verses describe the lost as those who perish (John 3:16, I Cor. 1:18, II Thess. 2:10). Stott says, "it would seem strange, then, if people who are said to suffer destruction are in fact not destroyed; and it is difficult to imagine a perpetually inconclusive process of perishing."

To those who say the soul is immortal and cannot be destroyed, Stott argues that we have accepted a Greek philosophical idea of the natural immortality of the soul that is not biblical. In fact, C. S. Lewis seems to draw back from the idea of annihilationism, at least in part, because of his belief in the immortality of the soul. But as we already noted, it is equally possible to base the immortality of the soul on creation in God's image, or to deny the immortality of the soul, but

affirm a resurrection of the wicked to judgment. Either way the influence of Greek philosophy cannot be a determining factor in the discussion.

As to the words "destruction" and "perish" themselves, we acknowledged above that if the bare words were all we had, annihilation could be possible, but even then, unlikely. There are many places in Scripture where something is described as "destroyed," yet still exists (see II Pet. 3:6-7: the destruction of the earth of Noah's day and the "destruction of ungodly men"). Even more, when destruction is described as "eternal" and involves being shut out from the Lord's presence (II Thess. 1:8-9), annihilation is difficult to fit with the context. Furthermore, the ideas of separation, weeping, and punishment require that someone exist to suffer the separation, do the weeping, and undergo the punishment. The argument that these pictures describe the punishment that precedes final destruction is answered simply by noting that such an idea is nowhere indicated in the text.

2. The second argument Stott offers is the image of fire. He says that its principal function is not to cause pain, but to destroy. Thus the fires of hell may be eternal, but what is thrown into hell is consumed and destroyed. And, for verses like Matt. 25:46, which speak of eternal destruction, he believes it may be possible to see such destruction as eternal in its effect, not in its duration. But such, I believe, is a very unnatural interpretation of eternal. In fact, since I believe that "eternal" is the key word in this debate, I will defer discussion of it to the end.

But, in fact, the Scriptural use of fire in reference to hell does seem to center around the causing of pain. In Rev. 14:11, "the smoke of their torment" comes from fire. In Rev. 20:10, the devil was tormented in the lake of burning sulfur. Luke 16 speaks of the intermediate state rather than hell, but the rich man there was tormented, not annihilated, by fire. Moreover, if Stott is right, and the fuel of the fire is consumed, how can the fire continue to be eternal?

3. Stott's third argument is the biblical idea of the justice of God. Eternal punishment for temporal sin seems unfair and purposeless. Stott does acknowledge the argument of some that the sin of the wicked continues eternally, and therefore a just punishment of their sin must continue forever, but he dismisses this argument without a real answer. But I think it has some weight. Moreover, I think there is at least the implication in Ps. 49:7-9 that an infinite payment is required to save even one person, and that implies that each person owes an infinite debt. That fits with the most common answer to this objection. Since the time of Aquinas, Christian theologians have argued that sin against God is sin against an infinite person, and thus merits infinite punishment. Calvin acknowledged the objection against eternal punishment but dealt with it summarily:

Even a blind man can see what stupid nonsense these people talk who are afraid of attributing excessive cruelty to God if the wicked be consigned to eternal punishment! If the Lord deprives of his Kingdom those who through their ungratefulness have rendered themselves unworthy of it—that, forsooth, will be too unjust! Yet their sins, they say, are temporal. Granted. But God's majesty, and also his justice, which they have violated by

sinning, are eternal. Therefore it is right that the memory of their iniquity does not perish. Yet thus the punishment will not exceed the measure of the transgression. This blasphemy is not to be borne, when God's majesty is so little esteemed, when the concept of it is valued less than the loss of one soul. But let us pass over these triflers, lest, contrary to what we have previously said, we seem to judge their ravings worth refuting. (*Institutes*, III. xxv.5.)

I think this is really the central issue for most annihilationists, but it is also the point at which they are at most danger of being shaped by contemporary culture. The diminution of God's greatness and transcendence, the exaltation of the goodness of humans, even the idea of punishment as remedial rather than retributive, all contribute to the idea that hell as traditionally seen is, in Stott's words, emotionally "intolerable." But for Calvin, what was intolerable was that God's majesty would be so little esteemed. His point could be put in this way: what is of more value: God's majesty, or one human soul? The answer today is not clear as it seemed to Calvin.

But are we then to think that people over the last twenty centuries were somehow less sensitive and loving than we are today (reflecting the modern assumption is that newer is better)? I don't think so. But if not, why didn't they have similar problems and misgivings about the traditional teaching on hell? Perhaps they had a different mindset about the nature of God and humans and punishment, one that was more biblical than today's.

4. Fourth, Stott thinks the biblical vision of the final victory of God (I Cor. 15:28) is incomplete if there are still some within the universe, continuing to exist in rebellion. But the rebellious are still present as late as Rev. 22:15, and it doesn't seem to have marred the joy and blessedness of those who have already had every tear wiped from their eyes and entered into eternal joy in the presence of God. But Rev. 22 is the end; it concludes the biblical description of God's victory. There is no Rev. 23 that goes further and totally erases the wicked. And if God can live with that (perhaps as a reminder of his holiness, or as a reminder of the grace shown to us), surely we have no right to tell him it is not fitting.

Stott concludes:

I do not dogmatize about the position to which I have come. I hold it tentatively. But I do plead for frank dialogue among evangelicals on the basis of Scripture. I also believe that the ultimate annihilation of the wicked should at least be accepted as a legitimate, biblically founded alternative to their eternal conscious torment. ("John Stott on Hell," *World Christian*, May, 1989, p. 34).

I admire John Stott and have benefited greatly from his life and ministry. But the very tentativeness with which he presents his view betrays its weaknesses. He, like Clark Pinnock, is arguing more from emotions than the Scriptures.

I do believe it is possible to see the punishment of the wicked as largely consisting in the complete withdrawal of God and all good. But there also seems to be a further and more active

retributive punishment of God. Such punishment should be governed by the biblical vision of a just and holy God, who is not a sadistic torturer. Whatever punishment is given will be fair. It may be that words like destruction and perishing imply that what is left to be punished is less than human, simply remains, and that part of the punishment of hell is being left with the small, mean soul one developed on earth. But in the end, the key factor is that the major descriptions of fire, punishment, destruction, and torment include the word "eternal." Therefore, the final key to evaluating the traditionalist-conditionalist debate must be the meaning of this word.

C. The Crux of the Debate: Eternal. The fullest discussion I have found of the meaning of the word "eternal" from a non-traditional perspective is that of Edward Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes*, 37-50. He writes with an admirable tone of reverence and humility, seeking to make his case on the basis of Scripture, and acknowledging places where the traditional view presents problems for his argument. At the same time, he believes that the conditionalists have a strong argument concerning the meaning of "eternal" that has been dismissed but not answered by traditionalists. Therefore, we will seek to consider his case and answer it.

What is the conditionalist argument concerning "eternal"? Fudge points out that there are various things spoken of in Scripture as eternal or everlasting that clearly do not endure forever. For example, the Aaronic priesthood (Ex. 29:9), Solomon's temple (I Kings 8:12-13) and even a servant's term of service (Deut. 15:17; NIV translation of "for life" is literally "forever") were described as eternal, or as forever (the same Hebrew root is translated both ways). Fudge says therefore, that eternal can mean a long or indeterminate duration but not always unending duration. The key seems to be the nature of what is being described: "When God is said to be 'eternal,' that is truly 'forever.' When the mountains are said to be 'everlasting,' that means that they last ever so long--so long as they can last" (40).

In the NT, the key word, *aionios*, is also used in a qualitative sense, reflecting the Jewish idea of the division of time into the Present Age and the Age to Come. Things that are *aionios* partake of that Age to Come and thus have a different quality. Thus, when the NT speaks of eternal life, it is speaking of the life of the Age to Come, and has more to do with a different quality of life than a different quantity of life. The conditionalists do not deny that eternal life is unending; that is assured by statements like I Thess. 4:17, that we will "always be with the Lord," or Rom. 8:38-39, that nothing, even things to come, can separate us from the love of Christ. Their point is that unending is not required simply by the word "eternal." It can mean either quality or quantity, either character or duration.

Which then is the case when "eternal" modifies punishment? Fudge notes that the NT speaks of "eternal salvation" (Heb. 5:9), "eternal redemption" (Heb. 9:12) and "eternal judgment" (Heb. 6:2) as well as "eternal destruction" (II Thess. 1:9) and "eternal punishment" (Matt. 25:46). All these belong to the Age to Come, and thus have a different quality. Fudge also acknowledges that there is some temporal referent as well: "They belong to that Age to Come which is not bound by time and which will never end" (p. 44). But though the salvation, redemption and judgment have ongoing, everlasting consequences or results, the activities themselves do not continue forever. In the same way, Fudge argues, the act of destroying results

in a destruction "that will never end or be reversed" but not a destruction that continues forever. Likewise, the act of punishing "happens in a fixed period of time but is followed by a result that lasts forever" (p. 48). The punishing eventually ends; the punishment (the result) is eternal.

What is our response? I am willing to concede that "eternal" can have a qualitative sense, referring to the Age to Come. But Fudge himself said that the meaning of eternal seems to be determined by the nature of the thing described, and things in the Age to Come are determined chiefly by the presence of the God who is eternal in both qualitative and quantitative senses.

The "eternal life" and "eternal punishment" of Matt. 25:46 both pertain to the Age to Come. The punishment there is eternal (quantitatively) not just because of the word "eternal" but precisely because it belongs to the Age to Come.

But what of the distinction between "punishing" (which is limited) and "punishment" (as an eternal result)? I believe it fails to convince for four reasons.

First, the parallels with eternal salvation, eternal redemption and eternal judgment do not fit, for in each case the action produces a state of being and experience which never ends. The saved experience salvation unendingly; the redeemed experience the joy of redemption unendingly. But for the conditionalist the lost do not experience the result of being punished unendingly; they do not enter a state of being punished; they cease to experience anything because, according to Fudge, they cease to exist. But in II Thess. 1:9, those who suffer "everlasting destruction" are also "shut out from the presence of the Lord." How can they be shut out if they no longer exist? The Bible uses eternal and everlasting with respect to the lost in ways that assume their continuing existence.

Second, while I may be somewhat speculative here, I do not think this distinction corresponds with how we normally speak of punishment or destruction. According to the conditionalist view, any punishment could be eternal. If I punish my child by grounding her for a week, the punishing ends at the end of the week, but the result is eternal. She will never be ungrounded for that week, forever. But that, I do not think, is what Matt 25:46 means by eternal punishment. In the same way, conditionalists argue that the use of the word "destruction" alone argues for their idea that the wicked cease to exist. They are destroyed, which means extinction. But if the word "destruction" alone implies an irreversible result, what does "eternal" add? I would say that when we normally use the word "destruction," we have in mind a permanent result. "Eternal" destruction must add something; an unending process as well as result.

Third, the rest of Scripture unmistakably points to an unending experience of punishment. The ten foundational texts cited by Peterson do have a cumulative weight that Fudge does not really address. Particularly, I find the conditionalist attempts to explain Rev. 14:9-11 very weak. As well, the statement of the nature of the torment of Satan seems unmistakably clear (Rev. 20:10). And while Rev. 20:10 does not speak of humans, Rev. 20:15 and Matt 25:41 put the lost in the same place as the devil, and the natural implication to draw is that the punishment of the lost in that place is likewise, that of unending torment or punishment.

Fourth, the great majority of theologians have accepted the traditional view that sees "eternal" as involving a quantitative sense when it speaks of eternal destinies. While tradition is not infallible, a strong and clear case should be required to overturn a view that has had such long and widespread support. The conditionalists say that the reason for the support given to the traditional view was the assumption of the immortality of the soul, which they see as much more Greek than biblical. But there are problems with their argument on this point as well. The support for the traditional view is not just from the patristic age, when Greek influence was strong, but down through church history. Second, the immortality of the soul could be argued to be based on the *imago dei*, rather than Greek philosophy. Finally, if there is historical and cultural conditioning going on, I suspect it is the history and culture of today that is much more powerfully shaping the conditionalists than Greek philosophy has shaped the tradition of the last twenty centuries.

D. Conclusion. No Christian I know of today enjoys speaking about, teaching on, or even contemplating hell. We shouldn't consider it; Scripture tell us to flee it. Certainly we should be careful to not convey the idea that God is a sadistic torturer, or that we are looking forward to seeing the evil get punished. We can note that hell is mostly the choice of the rebellious, and affirm that God will judge fairly, based on the light one has, and will apportion responsibility accordingly. We can rationally explain why evil should not be allowed a veto on the happiness of the righteous (as C.S. Lewis argues). We can discuss the idea that what suffers in hell is "remains" and not full humans (as Lewis and Randy Alcorn note). We can even speculate that hell may be preferable for those who hate God and righteousness to heaven, and that God in grace sends them there (N.D. Wilson).

Yet when we have made all the allowances we can, hell must still be a terrifying reality. It should not be softened too much; I do not think that was Christ's intention in teaching about it. The full horror of it may be beyond our comprehension, but the idea of eternal punishment cannot be excised from hell any more than eternal life and joy can be excised from heaven. It affirms the final seriousness of being a human being.

How would you respond to a friend who said, "I just can't believe in a God who sends millions of people into eternal torment?" Have you heard anything in class that would help you answer such a friend?

PART B: COSMIC ESCHATOLOGY

We turn now to the second half of eschatology, those events that pertain to humanity as a whole and will be experienced by humanity as a whole. Since these events encompass all the world, they are sometimes considered, as here, under the rubric of cosmic eschatology. We begin with the most important event in cosmic eschatology, the return of Christ. I include rapture along with this because many believe the rapture and the return of Christ happen at the same

time; others believe they are two stages of one complex event. We will address this question at length in the course of our discussion.

THE RAPTURE/RETURN OF CHRIST

Outline

I. The Nature of Christ's Return.

- A. It will be a future event.
- B. It will be at an unexpected, unknown time.
- C. It will be a personal, visible return.
- D. One event or two.

II. The Time of Christ's Return.

- A. The Complexity of the Question.
- B. Interpretation of the Three Themes.
 - A. The unknown time.
 - B. The signs.
 - C. Our expectation.
- C. The Time of the Rapture.
 - 1. What is the tribulation?
 - 2. What is the rapture?
 - 3. The major views.
 - a. The pre-tribulation view.
 - b. The mid-tribulation view.
 - c. The post-tribulation view.
- D. Conclusion.

III. The Purposes of Christ's Return.

- A. To consummate our salvation.
- B. To reveal Christ.
- C. To judge the world.
- D. To inaugurate the millennial kingdom.

IV. What Should We Do?

- A. Rejoice in our sure hope.
- B. Speed the coming of that day.

Christ's return is the most prophesied event in the NT (more than 250 times), and has been standard in the great historic creeds of the Church since the beginning. The reality of his return has not been an issue of controversy among orthodox theologians, though certain details regarding his return have been and continue to be closely studied. I think we may best survey this doctrine by asking four questions: What is the return of Christ (the nature of this event)? When will he return? Why will he return? What should be our response?

I. The Nature of Christ's Return.

A. It will be a future event. Some have tried to suggest that Christ's return was the resurrection, or Pentecost, but that cannot be, for it is still prophesied after these events. It was prophesied throughout the NT, by Jesus himself before his death (Matt. 24:30, 25:31, John 14:3), by angels after his ascension (Acts 1:11), by Paul as our "blessed hope" (Titus 2:13) and as our comfort in the face of death (I Cor. 15:51-52, I Thess. 4:16-17), by Peter in the face of doubters (II Pet. 3:4, 10), and by John as the last prophecy of Scripture (Rev. 22:20). If we take the traditional dating of Revelation, this last reference would also rule out the idea of some preterists, that the return of Christ was his return in judgment, occurring in 70 AD, with the destruction of Jerusalem. While that event does figure in some of Christ's eschatological teaching (Matt. 24:1-2), it is not his return.

B. It will be at an unexpected, unknown time (Mk. 13:32-37; the parables of Matt. 25, especially vv. 13 and 19; Acts 1:7; I Thess. 5:1-2; II Pet. 3:10). The difficulty is how to reconcile these verses with others that state or imply that his return will be preceded by signs, or will be very soon, a difficulty that we will consider in detail shortly.

C. It will be a personal, visible return, in "the same manner" as his Ascension (Acts 1:11; I Thess. 4:16: "the Lord himself"). We need to state this clearly, for some advocates of realized eschatology view the return of Christ as his coming into the heart of a believer. But the three terms commonly used for the return of Christ (*parousia*, *epiphaneia*, and *apokalupsis* all have this personal, visible idea, and Acts 1:11 requires it.

It is important to balance this affirmation of the future coming of Christ with the belief in his presence in the world today (Matt. 28:20), through means such as the Word, the Spirit, and the body of believers. And while some very conservative folks may overemphasize the future coming of Christ, surely the greater danger among most believers is neglecting or even denying the return of Christ. For example, the Catholic Church has historically emphasized the presence of Christ now, in the Eucharist and in his body, the Church. But the Catholic Church has also historically had a very weak emphasis on eschatology and the return of Christ.

Among modern liberal theologians, the tendency has been to dismiss it entirely. For Bultmann, it is another one of the myths of the NT that must be demythologized and recast in terms of existential philosophy to be relevant to modern people. We may acknowledge with G. C. Berkouwer, in his excellent work, *The Return of Christ*, that some aspects of Christ's return are difficult to conceptualize. For example, when Matt. 24:30 says he will come "on the clouds," is that a literal description, or symbolic (for clouds have often been symbols of God's presence in Scripture)? When Rev. 1:7 says every eye will see him, how is that to be accomplished? When I Thess. 4:15-17 says we will rise to meet the Lord in the air, how will millions and millions of believers all get close enough to really be with Him? Yet, despite these questions, most believers have steadfastly accepted the NT's ringing promise that he will return. Then we will see how we should have understood such matters.

D. A final issue that further complicates the nature of Christ's return is that of the rapture. I included it with the return of Christ as the title of this section. Some separate the rapture from the return by seven or a lesser length of time. Thus, there is a return for the church and return with the church. But are there two second comings or one? Even if some want to insist on two aspects of one second coming, are there two events or one?

II. The Time of Christ's Return. When will Christ return?

A. The Complexity of the Question. This question becomes difficult because the NT affirms, simultaneously and equally, three seemingly inconsistent facts:

1. The time of Christ's return is unknown, even by Christ (Mk. 13:32), and will be unexpected (Mt. 24:44, 25:13; Lk. 12:45-46; I Thess. 5:2-3; II Pet. 3:10), like the coming of a thief at night.

2. On the other hand, there will be signs, so that believers will not be surprised, deceived, or caught unprepared (Matt. 24:3-8, 14, 21-25, 29-33; I Thess. 5:4-6 and II Thess. 2:1-4).

3. Despite the fact that these signs must happen before his return (and some have not), the NT has a very expectant attitude, as if the return of Christ may happen very soon (Matt. 10:23, 16:28, 24:34; Rom. 13:12; I Thess. 4:15, Rev. 22:20).

The tension is tightest between the need for signs to be fulfilled and the idea of an imminent return. Can we say that Christ could return, this very day, or are there still signs that must be fulfilled? Amillennialists speculate that perhaps all the signs have already been fulfilled; historic premillennialists redefine imminent as "any generation," rather than "any moment." Dispensational premillennialists think they can affirm both real, unfulfilled signs and any moment imminence by separating the return of Christ into two events; the rapture and the return. Each option seems to stretch to cover all these aspects of the Bible's teaching. So, how are we to put these three themes together? We must do so very carefully.

B. Interpretation of the Three Themes.

1. The unknown time. Mk. 13:32 is quite clear. Apparently, part of Christ's emptying of himself involved accepting not knowing the time of his return. Some have said that though we may not know the day or hour, we may know the generation by paying close attention to the fulfillment of the signs. Many groups of Christians have thought they had it figured out, but of course each has been wrong and brought ridicule upon themselves and, to some, the idea of Christ's return, through their actions. I think the purpose behind Christ's statement was to teach us to avoid trying to calculate the date of Christ's return. Perhaps the purpose of the signs is somehow different.

The teaching that the time of the return will be unexpected is a little different, for it should be unexpected only for unbelievers, not for believers (see I Thess. 5:4ff). How can believers be expecting the return of Christ, if we do not know the time of his return? The only answer seems to be by expecting it all the time, by living in a constant, continual state of readiness. We can know that the Lord is near, at the door (Matt. 24:33), but it appears that this

has been the case since the time of Paul (Phil. 4:5 uses the same word as Matt. 24:33, *eggus*). So the only way to avoid being found unprepared is to watch always, and be always prepared. Moreover, Matt. 25:1-13 seems to regard such watchful readiness as characteristic of those truly known by Christ.

2. The Signs. If all this is correct, what then is the purpose of the signs? If they do not allow us to calculate the date of the return of Christ, why are they given? I think we may see two reasons.

The first is to prevent us from being deceived or made anxious by claims that Christ has already returned. In II Thess. 2:1-4, Paul calms the fears of those who feared they had missed Christ's return by pointing out that at least one important preceding event had not happened. Matt. 24:6-8 prepares the disciples for a delay, for though many ominous events occur, these are just "the beginning of birth pains." So alongside the eager expectation of a soon return there is acknowledgement that there may be a delay, that certain things have to happen first. Therefore, believers should not be worried that they have somehow missed his return, or be deceived by frauds who claim to be him.

I think we may relate this to the interesting fact noted by Berkouwer, that the effect of the hope of Christ's return in the NT is not fanaticism, but sobriety and watchfulness (I Pet. 1:13, 4:7). One function of the signs is to calm overanxious believers.

A second function the signs serve is as a call to action. If we see some of the signs very evidently being fulfilled around us today, should we sell our belongings and go up on a mountainside to await Christ? No, we should be filled with an urgency to be about doing his will for us, whatever it is. We do not know how much more time we will have to do his will, to complete the ministry he has given us. Our watching is thus directed, not to the signs, but to the Lord, and while we watch, we work, that we may fulfill his calling in our lives.

But if some signs that must be fulfilled before Christ's return have not yet been fulfilled, can we say that Christ could return now, at this moment? This leads us to our third theme.

3. Our expectation. It is clear that the NT rings with a vibrant and joyful expectation of Christ's return. But two questions are not so clear. First, does the NT teach that Jesus would return very soon, in fact, within the first generation of those living after the resurrection? If we say yes, then we must see error in the NT. If we say no, we must find an explanation for Matt. 24:34 and the attitude of expectancy regarding the nearness of Christ's return that pervades the NT. Second, does the NT teach that Jesus could return at any moment, this very moment, or does the eager expectation of his soon coming not rule out the prior fulfillment of certain signs?

Answering these questions requires consideration of two issues that have been the subject of much discussion in the last hundred years.

a. The crisis of the delay of the *parousia*. Many scholars believe that the NT teaches that Christ would return within a generation or so of his Ascension. The apostles seemed to expect it, and three key passages from Jesus are said to teach it. The problem, of course, is that it is now 2000 years later, and He hasn't returned. Some, like C. H. Dodd, believe

therefore that the idea of Christ's return is a myth. Other simply see it as evidence of the Bible's fallibility. How do we answer such charges?

The short answer is simply that the NT writers did not see the delay as a crisis. II Pet. 3:3-10 records the same complaint of delay, but does not see the Lord as being slow, but patient. Rev. 22:20 was written, according to most scholars, much more than a generation after Christ and still affirms that he is coming soon. And the statement by Christ that the time was unknown would mean that no one could know the return would be within any given time span. Therefore, since Christ said he did not know the time of his return, any verse that seems to teach that Christ would return within a generation would be an obvious contradiction. If there is a possible exegesis that offers a way to harmonize such verses with the unknown time of the return, such an exegesis would be preferable, unless we believe the NT writers were oblivious to patent contradictions in their writings.

What of the verses that are said to teach an almost immediate return? Are there alternative interpretations? Matt. 10:23 is one of three texts commonly used, but there are a number of possible solutions. Berkouwer suggests that the text is not limited to the original disciples, but teaches believers that they will always face persecution and will find no final home before the Son of Man comes, but I think this broadens the context from Israel to the world too easily. Carson suggests that the coming referred to is a coming in judgment, to happen in 70 AD, when Israel would be judged and dispersed. The disciples had a relatively short time in which to reach as many of the cities of Israel as possible, before judgment fell.

Mark 9:1 (and parallels, Matt. 16:28 and Lk. 9:27) could refer to the transfiguration, resurrection, *parousia*, or, as Barth said, all three. The immediate link of this saying in each gospel with the Transfiguration has led most evangelical scholars that I have read to see that event as fulfilling the coming of the kingdom or Son of man in power, but I think it refers to the whole complex of events surrounding the cross, resurrection and ascension. The Transfiguration seems too close in time to make sense of the reference to some not tasting death before it happens, and the second coming seems unlikely because none of the key terms for it (*parousia*, *epiphaneia* or *apokalupsis*) appear in these texts.

The third text used to support an almost immediate *parousia* is Matt. 24:34, found in what is called the Olivet Discourse. (see also Mk. 13:30, Lk. 21:32). The key here is to note that the discourse begins with two questions from the disciples, one referring to the destruction of the temple and one to the end of the age. Part of the problem in interpreting the Discourse is that the answers to these two questions are intertwined. The temple was in fact destroyed within a generation (70 AD). Therefore, I think the "all these things" Jesus is referring to that must happen within a generation refer to the things associated with the destruction of Jerusalem. This is the position argued by Carson in his commentary on Matthew, and independently by David Wenham. They argue that vv. 4-28 refer to the whole period between the first and second comings as a period of tribulation. Within that time of distress there is a time of great distress (vv. 15-21), which they see as the destruction of Jerusalem. Vv. 29-31 then refer to the second coming as happening after the whole period of distress, not after the great distress of vv. 15-21. But vv. 32-35 go back to 70 AD, signaled by the phrase "all these things," (see vv. 2 and 33). In these verse, he is responding to the first of the disciples' questions; "these things" are the things associated with the destruction of the temple. Jesus is not saying he would return before that

generation passed away, but that “all these things” (famines, earthquakes, and the destruction of Jerusalem) would happen within a generation, as it did, in 70 AD.

In chart form, Carson’s view is something like this:

Vv. 4-28: All the time between 1st and 2nd comings; a time of tribulation

Vv. 5-8, 15-21: Within the time of tribulation, there is a great tribulation (v. 21), the destruction of Jerusalem (70 AD)

Vv. 29-31: After the whole time of tribulation, the 2nd coming

Vv. 32-34: The time when the temple will be destroyed (the original question in v. 3). It will be within one generation after you see “all these things” (vv. 33 and 34), referring back to v. 8 (“all these things”), the things associated with the destruction of Jerusalem in vv. 5-8.

So while the NT does have a vibrant expectancy, there is no basis for saying there was clear teaching that Christ would return within a generation. How could there be when Christ had said clearly that no one knew the time of his return? Some of the apostles may have harbored a hope or even expectation that they would live till His return; that may be a model for the way all believers should live. But there is no teaching in Scripture that he would return within a generation.

b. The relationship of the signs to imminence. The second question raised by the eager expectant attitude of the NT is the imminence of Christ's return. Should we expect Christ's return at any moment, or are there signs that must precede His coming?

Amillennialists like Anthony Hoekema and Ben Merkle believe the signs may already be fulfilled, or at least we cannot know that they haven’t been fulfilled. But that seems unlikely for at least two of the signs (Matt. 24:14; II Thess. 2:5-12). Historic premillennialists believe the existence of unfulfilled signs means that imminence must be understood in an “any generation” sense rather than an “any moment” sense. A creative solution that wants to hold on to both unfulfilled signs and “any moment” imminence is associated with dispensational thought and began around the middle of the 19th century. It is the idea of a two-stage return of Christ. There will be an imminent coming of Christ called the rapture. It will precede the tribulation, during which the scriptural signs of the second coming or second advent will be fulfilled, leading to the second coming after the tribulation.

While this pre-tribulational rapture has been very popular in conservative circles in the last 100 years, in the last 50 it has been sharply challenged by two other views. Since the arguments and issues involved in this issue are extensive and remain controversial in evangelical circles, we will pause now to consider this issue at length.

C. The Time of the Rapture. The issue here is when the rapture occurs in relationship to the tribulation.

1. What is the tribulation? In at least one place, some have argued that the “great tribulation” of Matt. 24:21 is the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. Some amillennialists and postmillennialists interpret all the texts on the tribulation in this way.

Dispensationalists and many others see the tribulation as a seven year period of judgment and the outpouring of God’s wrath on the earth, described in Dan. 9:24-27 and Rev. 4-19. The seven year time frame comes from it being the seventieth “week” of Daniel 9:26-7, and various time references in Revelation (11:11; 12:6; 12:14; 13:5).

Others look very carefully at the descriptions of the seven years, and interpret the verses as indicating that only part of the seven years will be years of tribulation; normally that part is seen as being the last three and one-half years (Dan. 9:27; Rev. 11:2-3; 12:6; 13:5). Others see the time of tribulation as consisting of some time that precedes the outpouring of God’s wrath, and sometime after, with the rapture occurring “pre-wrath.”

Many who interpret Daniel and Revelation in at least partially a preterist manner would deny the seven year time period, but would accept at least the possibility of an end-time tribulation based on II Thess. 2, and the man of lawlessness. This would be the case with some amillennialists and postmillennialists, who interpret Dan. 9:24-27 and much of Rev. 4-19 in preterist or cyclical terms. Historic premillennialists are divided; some see the tribulation much as dispensationalists; some incorporate preterist or symbolic interpretations of Daniel and Revelation and would not insist that it has to be seven years; some are moving to see the entire interadvent period as the time of tribulation, described in Matt. 24:4-28. But most do see some definite time of intense tribulation, and associate it at least with the sign described in II Thess. 2, the rise of the man of lawlessness.

For amillennialists, the tribulation is not that important to their eschatology. They all see Christ's return and rapture as one and the same event. If there is some rebellion characterizing the tribulation (II Thess. 2, Rev. 20:7-10), it is quickly ended by Christ’s return. Postmillennialists, to the degree that they see a future tribulation, generally have a similar view. Thus, they are all post-tribulationists. The only real debate over the rapture and its relationship to the tribulation is among fellow premillennialists.

2. What is the event of the rapture? The word "rapture" does not occur in Scripture, but is taken from the Latin translation of the word for being "caught up" in I Thess. 4:17 (*rapiemur*; the noun form is *raptum*). It refers to the event of believers being caught up in the skies to meet the Lord in the air. There are two intertwined questions concerning this rapture: is it a separate event from the second coming? and, is it before, during, or after the tribulation? Since all acknowledge that some passages describing the second coming are after the tribulation, those who hold to a pre- or mid-tribulational position see the rapture as distinct from the second coming; the post-tribulation position sees the two as the same event.

3. The major views.

a. The Pre-Tribulation View. While there are many arguments for the pre-tribulation view on the popular level (Rev. 4:1; the absence of the church from the end of Rev. 3 to Rev. 22), scholars have been more restrained. Craig Blaising (in A. Hultberg, ed. *Three Views on the Rapture*) offers a three point argument in support of the pre-tribulation position. They are:

(1) I Thess. 4-5 teach us that we are raptured from the wrath of God that will be poured out on the “day of the Lord”; (2) that “day” is the seven year tribulation of Dan. 9:25-27; (3) thus the rapture is before the tribulation.

Most pre-tribbers do seem to cite I Thess. 5:9 as the proof that we will be delivered from wrath, and see the proximity of I Thess. 4:13-18 as suggesting that the rapture is the way we are delivered. But the last half of I Thess. 5:9 contrasts suffering wrath with receiving salvation, not with being raptured. The wrath from which we are saved may not be at all a temporal wrath, but the wrath of God that would put us in hell, had we not received salvation through Christ.

Some go further and cite Rev. 3:10 as evidence that we are not just delivered from wrath; we are delivered from the time of wrath. But I am not sure that is hermeneutically sound to apply the letter to the first century church at Philadelphia to the church at the time of the tribulation and not to churches down through the ages. Moreover, if it were valid, it would still seem strange to refer to the seven year tribulation as an “hour of trial.” Finally, even if the hour of trial does refer to the tribulation, the deliverance promised seems to be protection while within, rather than removal from (parallel to the protection of Israel from the plagues on the Egyptians, even while residing in the same land).

b. The Mid-tribulation View. This view is the least popular of the three major views. In fact, the mid-tribulation view has become so unpopular that a recent book comparing the three views replaced it with the similar but significantly different “Pre-Wrath View.” As argued by Alan Hultberg, it consists of two major points. First, the church will enter the last half of Daniel’s 70th week (Dan. 9:25-27), and may even experience persecution from the Antichrist. In this way, they differ from the pre-tribulation view. But the church will be raptured prior to the outpouring of God’s wrath during the latter part of the tribulation. The exact time of that outpouring is left undetermined, but God certainly knows and will rapture his church prior to it. So it seems the key point for both the pre-trib and pre-wrath is the exemption the church has from the outpouring of God’s wrath on the earth. In both cases, the church must be raptured out.

By way of response, it should be noted that both the pre-trib and pre-wrath views assume interpretations that include: (1) the tribulation will be a future, seven-year period, (2) that it will involve at some point a special outpouring of God’s wrath, and (3) that the church must be raptured to escape it. All three assumptions are questionable, at best.

3. The Post-Tribulation View.

a. Moo begins his presentation of the post-tribulation view with two preliminary points, one negative and one positive.

Negatively, he argues that there is nothing that would prevent the church from remaining on earth during the tribulation. He states that all the passages dealing with the tribulation point to Satanic agents as the source of distress for believers; God’s wrath falls selectively on unbelievers (see Is. 26:20-21, Rev. 9:4, 16:2). The tribulation is not a time of the wrath of God upon His people. The tribulation that believers may suffer during that time will be from their enemies, and may differ in degree but not in kind from the tribulation believers in many parts of the world suffer today.

Positively, there is good reason to presume a post-tribulational rapture apart from clear evidence otherwise. All three terms used for Christ's clearly post-tribulational return (*parousia*- II Thess. 2:8; Matt. 24:3, *apokalupsis*- II Thess. 1:7; *epiphaneia*- II Thess. 2:8) are also stated as the object of our hope (respectively I Thess. 2:19, I Cor. 1:7, and Tit. 2:13). *Parousia* is also the word used for the Lord's Coming in I Thess. 4:15, the central rapture passage. There is no basis in the terms used or the expectancy expressed for a two-stage return.

b. But the heart of Moo's argument is an exegesis of the major disputed passages. First, he looks at the passages that most pre-tribulation advocates see as pointing to a pre-tribulational rapture: John 14:1-3, I Cor. 15:51-52, and most importantly, I Thess. 4:13-18.

As for that classic passage for the rapture, Moo sees four pointers in it to the post-tribulation position: (1) he lists numerous parallels between I Thess. 4 and the Olivet Discourse, which is commonly agreed to describe the post-tribulation return of Christ, (2) the trumpet imagery points to Israel's inclusion, as in I Cor. 15, (3) there are numerous parallels to Dan. 12:1-2, a clearly post-tribulation text, and (4) the word *apantesis* suggests that when we meet the Lord in the air we will escort him back to earth to establish his kingdom (see the parallel use in Acts 28:15).

Thus he sees no convincing evidence for a pre-tribulation rapture in these passages claimed to portray it.

Next he turns to three other passages that are generally agreed to be post-tribulational. Moo argues that they make sense only if there is no pre-tribulation rapture. The strongest of these is II Thess. 2. In fact, in my opinion, it is the strongest evidence for a post-tribulation return, and, indeed, for the tribulation itself. Perhaps the descriptions in Daniel and Revelation could be interpreted in a preterist manner or symbolically, but not II Thess. 2. It is not the same genre as Daniel and Revelation, and the picture in II Thess. 2:4 seems to go beyond anything Nero did, and associates Jesus' return with the arrival of this tribulation-era evil one.

Here I think the link with I Thess. 4 becomes important. If I Thess. 4 teaches a pre-tribulation rapture, the teaching in II Thess. 2 becomes meaningless. They will never see the man of lawlessness, because his evil nature only becomes apparent halfway through the tribulation period. So why would Paul bring it up? But if the rapture described in I Thess. 4 is post-tribulational, the passages fit together and make sense. They could not have missed the rapture because it will only come after the man of lawlessness is revealed.

Finally, Moo draws parallels between Matt. 24, I Thess. 4-5 and II Thess. 1-2. The parallels imply that the rapture described in I Thess. 4 is the same event as the return described in Matt. 24, and that the same group (the church) is addressed in I, II Thess., and Matt. 24. Feinberg thinks that the similarities prove little. It is only natural that there be some similarities; both deal with Christ returning in some way. But I think the similarities are striking, and that Moo makes a good point here, with substantial exegetical work.

4. Conclusion. There are further arguments and counter-arguments that could be raised for all three positions (for example, we haven't even used the strong historical evidence that shows the pre-tribulation rapture position to be unknown prior to the nineteenth century), but these suffice to give an overall idea of the different views. I will only add that I am a post-

tribulationist because I do not see any evidence in the NT itself that the return of Christ was ever thought of in two phases. One sees such evidence only if one looks at the text with presuppositions that require a two phase return, and there are passages (II Thess. 2, especially) that make sense only in light of a post-tribulation return.

Further, I suspect that the popularity of the pre-tribulation position is also linked to an ungodly desire or even expectation that we should not have to suffer persecution or tribulation. This is a strange position for those who follow the Crucified One, and is even insulting to the martyrs down through the ages and many of our brothers and sisters who live in difficult places today. Tribulation was promised by Christ to us as long as we live in this world (John 16:33). I understand that the pre-tribulation position is that there is a difference between the tribulation we receive and should expect from enemies in this world, and the wrath of God poured out in the Great Tribulation from which we should expect exemption, but I think that distinction is often lost on the popular level.

At this point, what position do you, even if only tentatively, adopt? What do you see as the strongest and weakest points of the amillennial view (Christ could return at any moment, because the signs may already be fulfilled), the historic post-tribulation, premillennial view (Christ could return in any generation, but only after certain signs have been fulfilled), and the pre-wrath and pre-tribulation premillennial view (both which have the rapture separate from the second coming)?

III. The Purposes of Christ's Return. We can offer at least four reasons why Christ will return.

A. To consummate our salvation (see Heb. 9:28). While the atonement and resurrection inaugurated our experience of salvation, there is more we will experience at the consummation:

1. We will be saved completely from the power of sin in glorification (I John 3:2). I believe when we see Jesus, the final crucifixion of the old nature will occur, and it will be gone forever.

2. We will be saved from the corruption and mortality of this body, and resurrected in a body fit for eternity.

3. We will be saved from the presence of sin, for our new home is the place "where righteousness dwells" (II Pet. 3:13).

B. To reveal Christ. He will return as King, to be acknowledged as such by everyone (Phil. 2:10-11, II Thess. 1:10). This is why the word *apokalupsis* is a fit term for the return of Christ. It will involve a revelation of his true nature. *Parousia* is fitting, for the one coming is a king. And *epiphaneia* is appropriate, for the one who comes to us is Emmanuel, God with us.

C. To judge the world. That function is entrusted to the Son and must be done to show that, in the end, justice prevails (I Cor. 4:5; II Cor. 5:10; Rev. 20:11-15).

D. To inaugurate the millennial kingdom. The nature and time of this kingdom will be the topic for our next lecture.

IV. What Should we Do? The NT places such emphasis on the return of Christ that we know it is important, but how should it affect our lives now?

A. We should rejoice in our sure and certain hope. In all situations and circumstances, we can rejoice in the sure knowledge that he will return for us (I Pet. 1:8, I Thess. 4:18), and that in heaven we will see those whose lives we touched for the kingdom (I Thess. 2:19).

B. We should live in such a way that we speed the coming of that day. II Pet. 3:12 links the living of holy and godly lives with speeding the coming of the day of the Lord (see also I Thess. 3:13, 5:23-24). Thus, the effect of thinking on Christ's return would not be giddiness or fanaticism, but looking wholly to him to empower us to live sober, obedient lives (I Pet. 1:13-14).

It would also seem that supporting the mission of the church to all nations should be part of speeding the coming of that day. I think Matt. 24:14 is not yet fulfilled, and at least one reason why God may be waiting is to grant us more time to fulfill our task and more time for more people to come to repentance (II Pet. 3:9). As the angels said to the disciples long ago, "why do you stand here looking into the sky?" He will return soon enough. We must be about his business until he does.

THE MILLENNIUM Outline

I. Biblical Foundations.

- A. OT Prophecy.
- B. Rev. 20:1-6.
- C. The biblical view of history, with Christ's return as the climactic event.

II. Historical Development.

- A. Historical Overview.
- B. The Rise of Dispensationalism.

III. Theological Formulation.

- A. Postmillennialism.
- B. Amillennialism.
- C. Premillennialism.

III. Practical Applications.

- A. The danger in postmillennialism.
- B. The danger in amillennialism.
- C. The dangers in premillennialism.
- D. Conclusion.

I must confess that the millennium is my least favorite area of eschatology. It has a sparse biblical basis, the verses that are involved are difficult to interpret, and it has little practical relevance to the Christian life. The return of Christ is central; the millennial reign of Christ is less important, but since it is one of the disputed issues of theology, you need to understand the issues involved.

I. Biblical Foundations. There are basically three interpretative issues which determine one's millennial position.

A. The first is the interpretation of OT prophecy (such as Is. 11, 65; Ezek. 40-48, Jer. 31). There are a host of prophecies that look to a glorious future time of peace and prosperity with manifold blessings. But how are we to see them?

Post-millennialists have seen these prophecies as fulfilled in the victory of the church through the preaching of the gospel as it conquers the world and produces radical change in the world. They say other views have too little faith in the power of the gospel to change the world.

Amillennialists have tended to see the prophecies either as already fulfilled in the spiritual blessings the church enjoys now, or as promises to be fulfilled in the new heavens and new earth, our final home. They have claimed that this is how the apostles viewed the prophecies. The New Covenant, promised to Israel, is inherited by the church. The prophecies of a new heavens and new earth lead us to the New Jerusalem in the NT, not back to the Jerusalem on earth. The physical promises in the OT are seen as fulfilled spiritually in the New Testament. In my own reading of Scripture, it does seem that many of the physical aspects of the Old Covenant are replaced by spiritual counterparts under the New Covenant; do the prophecies of the future fall into this category?

Premillennialists have differed among themselves. Some have insisted that, since the promises were made to Israel, they must be fulfilled to Israel. Progressive dispensationalists might allow that there is some initial fulfillment of the blessings of the Abrahamic, Davidic, and New Covenants in the church today, but they see such fulfillment as legitimized by additional revelation in the NT. They insist that legitimate interpretation of the texts must see the ultimate fulfillment as including Israel. And since some of those promises contain earthly blessings, they will be fulfilled on earth. The millennial kingdom is seen as the natural place for such fulfillment. Dispensational premillennialists acknowledge that Rev. 20 gives us certain details about the kingdom we have nowhere else, but they see Revelation 20 as harmonizing nicely with the OT prophecies.

Other premillennialists are sometimes called covenant premillennialists, or, more often, historic premillennialists. Such persons believe there will be an earthly millennial kingdom, but vary in terms of how much OT fulfillment they see in it. They tend to base their premillennialism more on Rev. 20, with some seeing Rev. 20 as the only basis for a millennium.

Most who do so take a view of Old Testament prophecy close to that of the amillennialists; that is, that the NT teaches us to see it fulfilled in the church or in the eternal state.

At times, the question can be very difficult. For example, consider Is. 65:17-25. Verses 17-19 appear to be a description of the eternal state in the new creation of God, and is cited in Rev. 21 as such, but vv. 20-23 speak of death and the birth of children, which cannot happen in heaven. Do these verses refer to life in heaven, or the millennium or the church now? It is hard to say.

B. The interpretation of Rev. 20:1-6. By common consent this is the *crux interpretum* for millennialism. Historic premillennialists and amillennialists can agree on many issues, but they part company over the interpretation of these verses. Interpreting Rev. 20 involves many decisions. One must decide first how to approach the overall structure of the book of Revelation.

Postmillennialists take a generally preterist view, seeing the 42 months and beast and false prophet (as well as the events of Matt. 24 and II Thess. 2) as all referring to historical events surrounding the Neronian persecution and the destruction of Jerusalem. Thus, chapter 19 concludes with the destruction of the temple system. Following the destruction of the temple we have the church age, in which Satan is increasingly bound by the preaching of the gospel, and the saints are raised from spiritual death to spiritual life, and come to reign as the gospel gradually conquers opposition and ushers in a golden age. Rev. 20:7-9 refers to a brief rebellion, but Christ returns to quash the rebellion, leading to the general resurrection, final judgment and the eternal state.

Amillennialists see the theme of recapitulation, or what Hoekema calls “progressive parallelism” in Revelation. The various sections of Revelation are not intended to be seen in chronological progression; rather, each covers the same ground, depicting the church and the world from the time of Christ’s first coming to his return, but with each retelling additional details are added. Thus, the battles recorded in Rev. 16, 19 and 20 are simply three records of the same, climactic battle, but with more detail in the later accounts. If that is so, then what follows Rev. 19 is not the next event sequentially, but a new narrative of the same events previously described. The angel comes down and binds Satan in Christ's first advent (see Mk. 3:27); the thousand year reign is the entire interadvent age (the time between the two comings of Christ), as saints are raised (referring either to regeneration or life in Christ's presence after death) and reign with him now. Rev. 20:7-9 brings us to the true final battle, at which Christ returns, raises all to face judgment and go to their eternal destinies.

Premillennialists see Rev. 20 as following sequentially after Rev. 19. That seems the most natural way to see the text, in view of the “and” (*kai*) that introduces the chapter (see 20:1). It leads to affirming the events of Rev. 20 as following the events of Rev. 19 and before, including a great conflict at the end of a period of tribulation and judgment. The binding of Satan, they say, must refer to something more than we experience now, for now Satan is able to roam and seek those he may devour (I Pet. 5:8) and is able to deceive at least some (II Cor. 4:4). Moreover, the resurrection referred to in v. 4 must be a literal resurrection. The word “came to

life" (*ezesan*) is only used for physical resurrection and is used that way clearly in v. 5. It can't refer to going from spiritual death to spiritual life, for those who had testified for Jesus and resisted the beast were already spiritually alive. They were physically dead because they had been martyred for being faithful as spiritually alive people. Verse 4 must then refer to a physical resurrection. And, since the NT clearly associates resurrection with Christ's return, we conclude that Christ has returned, and now reigns on earth in a millennial kingdom with these resurrected believers. Vv. 7-9 mention the final rebellion, after which we move to the second resurrection, final judgment and the eternal state.

We should note that no position insists that the millennium must be exactly 1000 years long, though some premillennialists seem to assume that it will be. Of course, the amillennialists see the whole thing as symbolic, but even premillennialists and postmillennialists recognize that Rev. 20 is the only passage that mentions 1000 years, and the book of Revelation is full of symbolic numbers. Blaising suggests that perhaps the point of 1000 is to contrast the greatness of God's reign (1000 years) with the brevity of time allotted to evil (variously referred to as 1260 days, 42 months, or 3 1/2 years). The main point is not the length, but the fact of an intermediate earthly kingdom between the *parousia* and the eternal state.

Premillennialists acknowledge that Rev. 20 is the only place that uses the term "millennium" or develops the idea of two resurrections, but they see it as consistent with OT prophecies and/or clear enough in itself to warrant a premillennial view. Those with other views disagree. Amillennialists believe that the gospel of John teaches there can be only one resurrection (John 5:28-29), which happens at the last day (John 6:44). On the basis of this clearer teaching of one resurrection in John, they think we should take Rev. 20 as the less clear text and reinterpret the language of two resurrections as being one spiritual and one physical. After all, they say, we all accept that the Bible speaks of death as both spiritual and physical; why should resurrection language not be the same? They also see a third interpretive key as pointing in their favor.

C. The biblical view of history. Amillennialists, especially, and some postmillennialists, point out that in Scripture, history is thought of as moving toward its climax in the return of Christ. Everywhere in Scripture, Christ's return is associated with the whole complex of last events: the general resurrection of all, one final judgment, and transformation of this earth into the new heavens and new earth. Now, on the basis of one obscure passage in the most symbolic and difficult book to interpret, they say, we are asked to overturn the overall position of Scripture.

Premillennialists respond that the concept of progressive revelation is found elsewhere in Scripture and accepted. The OT prophesied one who would be both King and Suffering Servant. Only in the NT do we see how the two can be reconciled. The NT doesn't explicitly teach only one resurrection (though Hoekema claims John 5:28-29 supports one resurrection of all) or only one judgment or the immediate transition into the eternal state at Christ's return. At best, one might say it was implied. And despite the difficulties, Rev. 20 is clear enough to see it as progressive revelation, clarifying an issue that wasn't explicitly explained earlier in Scripture.

OT prophecy, Rev. 20, and a view of biblical history--these are the issues upon which views of the millennium are built. Numerous other factors are often discussed, such as I Cor. 15:23-24, the salvation of "all Israel" (Rom. 11:26), and the difficulty of imagining the conditions of millennial life, but all these issues are strictly secondary. In fact, some amillennialists and postmillennialists agree with premillennialists in looking for a large scale conversion of Jews in the endtimes, or in the expectation of an actual antichrist figure and a final conflict with the forces of evil. The positions differ on one or more of the three key issues listed above.

II. Historical Developments.

A. Historical overview. While the issue of the millennium did not receive great attention until the last 150 years, there have been some positions taken over the years. Chiliasm (premillennialism) has some support among the very early church fathers, but Origen and Augustine turned interpretation very much in the amillennial direction, making many of the interpretations of OT prophecy and Rev. 20 still held by amillennialists today. Luther and Calvin generally followed Augustine, though they did not discuss these issues at length. For example, Calvin devoted only one chapter in the *Institutes* to eschatology, and in that chapter focused on the doctrine of the resurrection of the body. However, he did call the chiliast view "childish," though his discussion does not show an accurate understanding of the view as understood today. Following Calvin, however, the Reformed tradition has been generally committed to amillennialism, though many in the 18th and 19th centuries were postmillennialists.

The foundations for the postmillennial view were laid in the 17th century by a preacher named Daniel Whitby (1638-1726), who gave a spiritual interpretation of the resurrection in Rev. 20:4 as a resurrection of each individual upon death to heaven, and his teaching of the millennium as the period of the church's glorious power. He was followed by Jonathan Edwards, perhaps the most famous advocate of postmillennialism, who was followed in turn by Charles Hodge and A. H. Strong. Since Strong, postmillennialism has been very much a minority position, though it has enjoyed a small resurgence in recent years, being adopted by some Christian Reconstructionists or "theonomic postmillennialists."

Since the middle of the 19th century, another current has begun to flow. Premillennial eschatology is usually associated with John Nelson Darby (first to assert the idea of the "secret rapture"), and later popularized by C. I. Scofield in his study Bible and by the Niagara Bible Conference. It became especially identified with the school of theology called dispensationalism, which has been an important movement in evangelicalism for the past 150 years.

B. The Rise of Dispensationalism.

Perhaps one of the best known definitions of dispensationalism has been that supplied by Charles Ryrie, in his 1965 work, *Dispensationalism Today*. He gives a three-fold *sine qua non* for dispensationalism: (1) a clear and consistent distinction between Israel and the church, (2) a literal or normal or plain hermeneutic, especially applied to OT prophecy, (3) a view that God's purpose in all his dealing with people is to bring glory to himself. I would say that many would

question the third as being distinctive of dispensationalism, but I think the other two describe two key distinctives. From those two characteristics have emerged other characteristic beliefs like the pre-tribulation rapture of the church, the Jewish character of the millennial kingdom, and the fulfillment of the covenants.

But the more recent emergence of progressive dispensationalism has cast doubt even on these distinctives. For example, Robert Saucy has said that the basic distinction between dispensationalists and non-dispensationalists is differing understandings of "God's purpose and plan in biblical history" (19). It is not that non-dispensationalists use a non-literal or spiritualizing hermeneutic (as Dwight Pentecost charged). Rather, because they think the NT teaches them to see the church as the new Israel or the new people of God, the natural or normal or plain interpretation of the OT is to interpret it in light of NT teaching. For non-dispensationalists, the unity of the people of God in God's plan prohibits any separation of Israel and the church as two people with two plans.

Traditional dispensationalists, on the other hand, have seen the literal character of the OT prophecies as requiring a literal fulfillment, requiring two peoples and two plans after the emergence of the church. They do not so much interpret the OT in light of the NT as vice versa.

Progressive dispensationalists have believed that both sides have some support in Scripture and have thus sought a mediating position that could incorporate all of Scripture. They maintain a significant future role for Israel, in keeping with the OT promises, but they recognize a unified program of God within history, and do not insist on a radical distinction of Israel and the church. They allow for a partial fulfillment of the covenants in the present age. The church is not a parenthesis or interruption, but an "integrated phase" (Saucy's words) in the one purpose and plan of God to establish His kingdom on the earth. But God's ultimate kingdom comes through the mediation of the Son and his mediatorial kingdom. The church has a role within the development of that mediatorial kingdom, but not the same role as Israel. The church may experience the beginning of the fulfillment of the eschatological promises, but not the ultimate or complete fulfillment.

Evaluation of dispensationalism involves one's view of NT teaching, the NT use of the OT, a consideration of hermeneutics, an overall view of what God is doing in the world, an assessment of the relationship of Israel to the church, the degree of continuity and/or discontinuity between OT and NT, as well as specific interpretations of many key passages. Thus a full evaluation of dispensationalism lies beyond the bounds of this class, especially in view of the changing nature of dispensationalism. Evaluations and critiques given by amillennialists in the past (such as that of Hoekema, in *The Bible and the Future*, who lists eight objections) often do not apply to progressive dispensationalism.

The chief factor that makes me a non-dispensationalist is the sense that the NT is a real fulfillment of the OT, not an interruption (traditional dispensationalism), nor even a phase of the mediatorial kingdom (as in progressive dispensationalism). I also simply think that most dispensational schemes are too complicated and complex and were not what the biblical writers had in mind. For instance, the detailed programs and models developed from Daniel 9, Matt. 24-

25, and Revelation seem to be building a mountain on a small and uncertain foundation. These are highly debatable passages and I simply am unwilling to erect a huge edifice on them.

On the other hand, I think there is no doubt that dispensationalism has done more than most other schools of thought to maintain belief in doctrines like the return of Christ and to stimulate study of prophecy. The point I want to draw from the emergence of progressive dispensationalism is the recognition by its adherents that the issue really is not as simple as who literally believes the Bible. Their willingness to accept that other views did and do have a point should serve as a model for humility in eschatological studies for all of us. After an entire semester of study, we may still say with Daniel, "I heard, but I did not understand" (Dan. 12:8), at least not some of the details. But I hope we do emerge understanding the central and clearly taught truths of Scripture, and understanding why and where we disagree with others on the less clearly taught issues, and willing to treat with charity and respect brothers and sisters who do disagree with us. I suspect that in the end, we may all have to revise our charts and formulations at his coming. But the important thing is that He will come. Even so, come Lord Jesus!

As mentioned above, this view dominated most of evangelical Christianity in the 20th century (with the exception of Reformed amillennialists and a few diehard postmillennialists) until the 1960's, when G. E. Ladd and later Robert Gundry and others began to espouse what is today called historic premillennialism, claiming that the early chiliast church fathers were not dispensationalists, but were more properly seen as their antecedents (thus, they are historic premillennialists).

III. Theological Formulation.

While some books list four views of the millennium (R. Clouse, ed., *The Meaning of the Millennium*), there are technically only three major positions: pre-, post-, and amillennialism (as D. Bock, ed., *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*). However, the differences between dispensational and non-dispensational ("historic" or "covenant") premillennialists are so substantial that they have to be considered separately on some points, but these two groups do agree on the basic points of the premillennial view.

A. Postmillennialism is the least popular position today, though it was the most popular view in the 18th-19th centuries and has made a minor comeback recently.

It believes that Christ bound Satan in his first advent (Mark 3:27), or that he is being progressively bound today. It goes further to assert that through the preaching of the gospel and the power of the Spirit operating in the world and through the church, the world as a whole will eventually respond to the gospel, and we will reach a golden age of peace, prosperity, and widespread adherence to the gospel. The victory will not come by "catastrophic imposition" (the premillennial view) nor "apocalyptic conclusion" (amillennialism) but by "gradual conversion."

This view has a very positive affirmation of the power of the gospel and the Spirit operating through the church, but has been questioned as lacking sufficient biblical basis. For example, in his response to Loraine Boettner's exposition of postmillennial thought, G. E. Ladd

comments that there is so little appeal to Scripture that he has little to criticize, and Boettner does appeal to world conditions and the growth of the church to show the progress of the gospel.

Kenneth Gentry does a better job of seeking to give a biblical foundation for postmillennialism, claiming that there are many passages that speak of the victory of the gospel: Ps. 2, Is. 2:2-4, Matt. 13, Matt. 28:18-20, I Cor. 15:20-28, and Rev. 20:1-10. But upon closer examination, none of these really support the idea of a gradual conversion of the world to the gospel, leading to a golden age within history. Beyond the lack of biblical basis, there seems to be counter-evidence in the course of history. The postmillennial view expects consistent upward progress in the expansion of the gospel. But clear evidence of that is hard to find. In some parts of the world, the gospel does not seem to be expanding, and there are places in Scripture that seem to expect decline before the end (II Tim. 3:1-5). Postmillennialism does not seem to be making a lot of converts and will probably remain the least held position among evangelicals.

B. Amillennialism sees Christ's millennial reign as occurring now, in heaven, through the church, and thus some think it could be more accurately called "realized millennialism," for the millennium mentioned in Rev. 20 is being realized now. In his first advent, Christ bound the devil, so that now the church can win people to Christ. The thousand years of Rev. 20 is figurative language for the whole age between the first and second advents. The first resurrection is regeneration (or the transition to heaven) and the second resurrection is the resurrection of all prior to the final judgment. There may be a great ingathering of Jews just prior to the end; there may be an Antichrist who leads a rebellion against God; but we are not to look for an earthly, intermediate kingdom. Rather, the kingdom expectation of the Bible is of an eternal kingdom. When the Bible speaks of it in earthly terms, it is speaking of the fact that it will exist in the new heavens and new earth, our final eschatological home.

Amillennialist Robert Strimple offers two major arguments in support of his view. First is the way that the NT teaches us to regard OT prophecy. The NT sees types and prophecies in the OT (Heb. 12:22, Acts 15:20-21) that are spiritually fulfilled in the NT; it sees promises made to Israel fulfilled to the church. The premillennial view calls us to go backwards from fulfillment back to the shadow. It further justifies applying OT prophecies concerning Israel to the church because Christ is the theme of the prophecies; indeed, Christ is the true Israel. And, since we are in Christ, we are Israel, the true Israel of God (Gal. 6:16) and the inheritors of the promises.

The second major argument offered by Strimple is the NT teaching on events accompanying Christ's second coming. It is the climactic event; anything following it would be anticlimactic and inappropriate. He points to resurrection (John 5:28-29), judgment (II Thess. 1:5-10), the redemption of nature (Rom. 8:17-23) and the transformation of this earth (II Pet. 3:13-14) as events connected to Christ's return. There is simply no place for a millennial, earthly kingdom. The climactic event should be followed by the end, not by a 1000 year wait.

As to the two key passages often claimed by premillennialists (Rom. 11 and Rev. 20), Strimple says that there could be an end-time salvation of "all Israel" under any of the three millennial views. But, in fact, he thinks Rom. 11 speaks of the salvation of Jews and Gentiles

now and down through history. The salvation of "all Israel" does not seem an appropriate description if it only includes the last generation. Rather, Strimple sees "all Israel" in Rom. 11:26 to refer to all God's elect. When they all have come to faith, then all Israel will be saved. It certainly does not support or require a premillennial view.

The fullest defense of the amillennial view of Rev. 20 is that given by Anthony Hoekema (*The Bible and the Future*). It rests chiefly on the recapitulation or progressive parallelism view of the book of Revelation as a whole. On specific points, such as the binding of Satan and the first resurrection, he struggles to make his interpretation fit the text. Thus he states that the Satan is bound during this age only in the sense that he cannot prevent the spread of the gospel; he can still do some harm. But does that do justice to the idea of being bound? Likewise, he knows that his interpretation of *ezesan* in v. 4 as "transition from physical death to life in heaven with Christ" is, as he says, "an unusual use of the word" but one he claims is nonetheless justified in the context. He and Strimple agree that the NT sees Christ's victory over Satan as occurring in two stages, the cross and His return. The premillennial interpretation of Rev. 20 inserts a third stage, the millennium, before the final victory. Such a stage is simply contrary to the overall NT picture.

C. Premillennialism. This is the view that the binding of Satan is a future event that will occur at Christ's return, that Christ will return before (pre) the millennium, that the millennium will be an earthly reign of Christ, in which at least some dead believers will be raised and rule with Christ. During this time human history will continue, but it will be a period of unprecedented peace and prosperity. After the millennium, Satan will be released, will lead unregenerate humans in a final rebellion, which Christ will crush and which will lead to the final judgment.

How do premillennialists support their view? As Blaising and G. E. Ladd both note, Rev. 20 is central. Some do not see OT prophecies as supporting an intermediate kingdom and rely on Rev. 20 alone as their basis. They acknowledge that it is the only explicit text that teaches a millennium, but maintain that it is consonant with other biblical teaching and it difficult to interpret in a non-premillennial way.

The two varieties of premillennialism, covenant or historic and dispensational, differ most in how much OT prophecy they apply to the millennial kingdom, resulting in differing pictures of the nature of millennial life. G. E. Ladd bases his case for premillennialism almost entirely on Rev. 20, agreeing with amillennialists that much of OT prophecy is applied by the NT to the church, and saying very little about the nature of life in the millennial kingdom. Others see more relevance for the OT prophecies. Even if there is a partial, initial fulfillment in the church, that does not mean it is the only fulfillment. Numerous OT prophecies are seen as having multiple referents. Prophecies of the kingdom, it is claimed, may refer both to the church or heaven, and an earthly millennium. More traditional dispensationalists incorporate more OT prophecy as applying to the kingdom, emphasizing the Jewish character of the kingdom. One controversial point has been the interpretation of the temple described in Ezekiel 40-48. Many dispensationalists look for a literal fulfillment of these chapters in a rebuilt temple, with animal sacrifices offered, not for the forgiveness of sins, but as memorial sacrifices. Other

premillennialists see such thinking as overlooking the end of the OT system, seen in passages such as Heb. 8:5-13.

The critiques raised by non-premillennialists generally repeat claims already made: that it is not valid to base a view on one passage from Revelation that introduces something that is new and, they claim, inconsistent with overall Scriptural teaching. I think there is some force in the claim that Christ's return is seen as the consummation, and the millennial kingdom delays that consummation. There are further difficulties in conceiving the conditions of millennial life. How could there be resurrected, glorified saints living alongside normal human beings? How could Christ reign visibly and there still be unbelievers? Questions like these are often raised by amillennialists, and are not easy to answer.

Another difficulty I have that others did not mention as clearly is the difficulty of seeing the point. What do we gain by an earthly reign of Christ? Why is it part of God's plan? After all, Christ will reign eternally over a new heavens and new earth, and we will reign with him. Why delay that kingdom by a lesser, earthly kingdom? Ladd acknowledges that there is no specific biblical teaching on the need for the millennial kingdom. He speculates that perhaps God desires Christ's kingdom to be disclosed, not just in eternity, but in history. More importantly, he argues that the rebellion after the millennial kingdom will vindicate the justice of God, for it will show that sin is not due to a bad environment or the evil influences of society. Even after a millennial kingdom of righteousness presided over personally by Christ, humans willingly follow Satan.

Dispensationalists say the millennial kingdom is needed to fulfill the promises God made to Israel, but that simply pushes the question back one step. Why did God make promises to Israel, when he knew that Israel would reject the Messiah and that Jesus would institute the church? Further, the claim that the OT requires an earthly fulfillment of many promises is answered by Hoekema's reminder that our eternal destiny includes a new earth along with a new heavens. I simply don't see that we gain a lot theologically from the millennium.

Further, it is troubling that only Rev. 20:1-6 teaches the millennium clearly. I think it may help explain Is. 65:20 and is consistent with I Cor. 15:23-24, but I doubt there would have been any idea of millennialism apart from Rev. 20. I like the simplicity of the amillennial position, and agree with them that the New Testament often gives spiritual fulfillment to Old Testament physical counterparts. On the other hand, the premillennial interpretation of Rev. 20 does seem to me clearly superior, and so I am a premillennialist—at least, most of the time! But it is just one passage, and it is from Revelation, which is the book I least understand. So I hold this position tentatively.

If you were given a choice of going straight into the New Creation immediately after Christ's return, or waiting until after Christ had reigned over a renewed planet earth for 1000 years, which would you choose? Why?

IV. Practical Applications. What is the importance of this doctrine and how does it apply to daily life? To be honest, I don't think it is vital to faith and life. That's why we have been able to agree to disagree about it. I see more importance in recognizing some of the dangers possible in each position.

A. Postmillennialism has at times seemed to believe that we can bring in the kingdom of God on earth. Nineteenth century liberal thought adopted postmillennialism, but watered the idea of the kingdom of God down to the advancement of love and brotherhood. Albrecht Ritschl saw the kingdom of God as simply living the values of Jesus in this world. Adolf Harnack, in a widely influential book called *What Is Christianity?* called the kingdom of God the essence of Jesus' message, a kingdom defined by the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, the command to love, and the value of the soul. In fact, the association of postmillennialism with liberal thought may be one of the reasons why it became such a minority view among evangelicals in the 20th century.

Thus, the dominant idea of the kingdom in the late 19th century came to be that of an ideal society, which would arrive gradually as believers worked together. This postmillennial optimism was reflected in evangelical hymns like "We've a Story to Tell" (1896):

We've a story to tell to the nations,
That shall turn their hearts to the right,
A story of truth and mercy,
A story of peace and light,
A story of peace and light.
For the darkness shall turn to dawning,
And the dawning to noon-day bright,
And Christ's great kingdom
shall come on earth,
The kingdom of love and light.

Richard Niebuhr later described the theology of Ritschl and Harnack in these words: "A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross." To be sure, a careful formulation of postmillennialism credits Christ for binding Satan and the Spirit for empowering the proclamation of the gospel, and recognizes a degree of ongoing spiritual warfare, but postmillennial thought can be overly optimistic concerning what can be accomplished in this world.

B. Amillennialism seems to overestimate the boundness of Satan in this present age. Though careful theologians like Hoekema try to limit the application of Rev. 20:1-3 to a binding that allows for the spread of the gospel, the very idea that Satan is bound, and that we are reigning with Christ now, can be hard to square with the reality in which we live. Satan is still wandering around, seeking those whom he may devour (I Pet. 5:8). And though we may be reigning with Christ in heaven, in this world we still have tribulations (John 16:33).

C. There are two charges that may be leveled against premillennialism. One applies to the dispensational version alone, and is more of a theological criticism. It is that dispensational premillennialism does not do justice to the basic unity of the Bible, and does not properly see the Old Testament, because it does not see it in the light of the New Testament fulfillment. That criticism would be of course be denied by dispensationalists, but at any rate, it does not apply to all premillennialists. The second criticism, addressed to premillennialism as a whole, has been that it inherently fosters a negative, pessimistic, escapist attitude toward society and social action

by its view of the endtime tribulation. Some say premillennialists have the attitude, "It's just going to get worse. Why fight it? Just get ready for the rapture." And while there may be some truth to that criticism, it is not a necessary implication of that position. We are called to be salt and light out of faithfulness to Christ, not out of expectation of great success. And in fact, love of Christ and others has caused many premillennialists to be active in caring for the poor and needy around the world

D. Conclusion. It seems unlikely that evangelicals will reach a consensus on eschatology in the foreseeable future. In fact, all eschatological positions may require revision when we look back upon them in the new heavens and new earth. In the meantime, the most important application is to keep the main thing the main thing. In this area of eschatology, the main thing is: Christ will return! Be ready for him, at all times.