

The Role of the Church

The Functions of the Church

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The Heart of the Ministry of the Church: The Gospel

The Character of the Church

- Willingness to Serve
- Adaptability

We have voiced criticism of the position that the church is to be defined in terms of its functions, that is, that its form is to follow from its functions. Nonetheless, the functions of the church are very important topics, for the church was not brought into being by our Lord simply to exist as an end in itself. Rather, it was brought into being to **fulfil** the Lords intention for it. It is to carry on the Lords ministry in the **world**—to perpetuate what he did and to do what he would do were he still here. Our first consideration in this chapter will be the various functions which the church is charged with carrying out.¹ Then we will look at what is at

1. J. C. Hoekendijk, *The Church Inside Out* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966), part 1.

the heart of the ministry of the church and gives form to all that the church does, namely, the gospel. Finally, we will look at two qualities which it is particularly important for the church to display at the present time-willingness to serve and adaptability.

The Functions of the Church

Evangelism

The one topic emphasized in both accounts of Jesus' last words to his disciples is evangelism. In Matthew 28:19 he instructs them, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations." In Acts 1:8 he says, "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all **Judea** and **Samaria** and to the end of the earth." This was the final point Jesus made to his disciples. It appears that he regarded evangelism as the very reason for their being.

The call to evangelize is a command. Having accepted Jesus as Lord, the disciples had brought themselves under his rule and were obligated to do whatever he asked. For he had said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14: 15); "He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me" (v. 21a); and "You are my friends if you do what I command you" (John 15:14). If the disciples truly loved their Lord, they would carry out his call to evangelize. It was not an optional matter for them.

The disciples were not sent out merely in their own strength, however. Jesus prefaced his commission with the statement, "**All** authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matt. 28:18). Having all authority, he commissioned the disciples as his agents. Thus they had the right to go and evangelize all nations. Further, Jesus promised his disciples that the Holy Spirit would come upon them and that they would consequently receive power. So they were both authorized and enabled for the task. Moreover, they were assured that he was not sending them off on their own. Although he was to be taken from them bodily, he would nonetheless be with them spiritually to the very end of the age (Matt. 28:20).

Note also the extent of the commission: it is all-inclusive. In Matthew 28:19 Jesus speaks of "all nations," and in Acts 1:8 he gives a specific enumeration: "You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all **Judea** and **Samaria** and to the end of the earth." Differing issues are involved at the various levels of this command:*

2. **Michael Green**, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), vol. 1, pp. 117ff.

Jerusalem was, of course, the immediate vicinity. While it was not the home territory of the inner circle of disciples (they were Galileans), it was the site of Pentecost. Since the first converts would have many close contacts in Jerusalem, it was natural for the church to witness and grow there. Jerusalem was also the most difficult place to witness, however, for it was there that the scandal in connection with the events of Christ's last days, and especially his humiliating death by **crucifixion**, had occurred. There would be a natural distrust of and perhaps even revulsion against any presentation of the message of the Savior. On the other hand, one advantage of witnessing in Jerusalem was that the people lived close enough to each other to unite into one congregation if they chose to do so.

Beyond Jerusalem, the disciples were to be witnesses in "all **Judea**." This area was basically homogeneous in its thinking and customs, for its inhabitants were Jews, and **Judean** Jews at that. Yet most of them were too far removed from the center in Jerusalem to gather there. Consequently, **fulfilment** of this part of the commission would result in the establishment of additional congregations.

Perhaps the most distasteful part of the commission, at least as far as the disciples were concerned, was the third part—"in **Samaria**." This took them to the people whom they found most **difficult** to love, and who would probably be least receptive to their message in that it would be brought by Jews. The Jews and the Samaritans had been engaged in conflict for a long time. The friction dated back to the time of the Jews' return from the Babylonian captivity. Samaritans were half-breed Jews who represented the intermarriage of the Israelites left behind by the Assyrians and various foreign colonists whom the Assyrians then sent in to help repopulate the area. When the Jews returned from Babylon and began to rebuild the temple, the Samaritans offered to help, but their offer was spurned. From that time on, there was friction between the two groups. This is evident in the Gospel accounts of Jesus' ministry. When Jesus asked a Samaritan woman for a drink of water, she responded, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of **Samaria**?" John comments, "For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans" (John 4:9). This was an unusual encounter, for Jesus and his disciples did not ordinarily pass through **Samaria**, preferring rather to cross over the Jordan River and travel through Perea in their journeys between Galilee in the north and **Judea** in the south. Jesus lent additional force to his parable about loving one's neighbor by making the hero of it a Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37). The Jews meant to insult Jesus when they asked, "Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?" (John 8:48). It is likely that the former taunt (to which Jesus did not reply) was intended to be the more humiliating of the two. Surely the Samari-

tans were the people whom the Jews would have least liked to see included in the church with them, yet Jesus said, "You shall be my witnesses in. . . Samaria."

Finally, the disciples were to bear witness "to the end of the earth." There was no geographical restriction upon the commission. They were to take the gospel message everywhere, to all nations and every type of people. They could not, of course, accomplish this on their own. Rather, as they won converts, those converts would in turn evangelize yet others. Thus the message would spread in ever widening circles, and the task would eventually be completed.

Therefore, if the church is to be faithful to its Lord and bring joy to his heart, it must be engaged in bringing the gospel to all people. This involves going to people whom we like and people whom we may by nature tend to dislike. It extends to those who are unlike us. And it goes beyond our immediate sphere of contact and influence. In a very real sense, local evangelism, church extension or church planting, and world missions are all the same thing. The only difference lies in the length of the radius. The church must work in all of these areas. If it does not, it will become spiritually ill, for it will be attempting to function in a way its Lord never intended.

Edification

The second major function of the church is the edification of believers. Although Jesus laid greater emphasis upon evangelism, the edification of believers is logically prior. Paul repeatedly spoke of the edification of the body. In Ephesians 4: 12, for example, he indicates that God has given various gifts to the church "for the equipment of the saints, for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ." Believers are to grow up into Christ, "from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and **upbuilds** itself in love" (v. 16). The potential for edification is the criterion by which all activities, including our speech, are to be measured: "Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for **edifying**, as fits the occasion, that it may impart grace to those who hear" (v. 29).

Moreover, in Paul's discussion of certain controversial spiritual gifts, he brings **up** the matter of edification. He says, for example, in 1 Corinthians 14:4-5: "He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church. Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. He who prophesies is greater than he who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be edified." The importance of edifying others as one exercises

controversial gifts is mentioned again, in varying ways, in verses 12, 17, and 26. The last of these references sums up the matter: "Let all things be done for edification." Note that edification is mutual upbuilding by all the members of the body. It is not merely the minister or pastor who is to build up the other members.

There are several means by which members of the church are to be edified. One of them is fellowship.³ The New Testament speaks of *κοινωνία*, literally, a having or holding **all** things in common. And indeed, according to Acts 5, the members of the early church held even all their material possessions in common. Paul speaks of sharing one another's experiences: "If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together" (1 Cor. 12:26). While hurt is reduced, joy is increased by being shared. We are to encourage and sympathize with each other. Believers are to bear one another's burdens (Gal. 6:2). On occasion this may entail correction and rebuke, which should be administered lovingly. Jesus laid down a pattern for discipline in Matthew 18: 15-17. In severe cases, there may even be a need for excommunication from the group, as in the case of the immoral man mentioned in 1 Corinthians 5:1-2. The primary aim of such disciplinary action is not to rid the group of the erring member, however, but to restore such a person to righteous living and thus to fellowship with believers.

The church also edifies its members through instruction or teaching.⁴ This is part of the broad task of **discipling**. One of Jesus' commands in the Great Commission was to teach converts "to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:20). To this end, one of God's gifts to the churches is "pastors and teachers" (Eph. 4:11) to prepare and equip the people of God for service. The instruction need not always be given by the official pastor-teacher of a congregation, however, nor need it be given within a large group. A beautiful picture of this truth is seen in Acts 18. **Apollos**, a learned and eloquent Jew who had come to a knowledge of Jesus, was speaking powerfully in the synagogue of Ephesus. There Priscilla and Aquila heard him, whereupon they invited him to their home and "expounded to him the way of God more accurately" (v. 26). He then continued his ministry with even greater effectiveness.

Education may take many forms and occur on many levels. It is incumbent upon the church to utilize all legitimate means and technologies available today. First of all, there is Christian education in the local church, for example, through the Sunday school. Beyond that level the local church cooperates with other churches to carry on specific aspects

3. James E. Carter, *The Mission of the Church* (Nashville: Broadman, 1974), pp. 65-73.

4. Edmund Clowney, "Toward a Biblical Doctrine of the Church," *Westminster Theological Journal* 3 1, no. 1 (November 1968): 71-72.

of their instructional task. For example, theological seminaries and divinity schools equip pastor-teachers and others to instruct people in the Word. This is a fulfillment of Paul's command to Timothy: "And what you have heard from me before many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also" (2 Tim. 2:2).

Since the church has the task of teaching the truth of God as revealed in the Holy Scriptures, by implication it has the obligation to grow in its understanding of that revelation. Thus the task of biblical scholarship is incumbent upon the church. This task is carried out by specialists who possess gifts in such matters. But the church must study not merely God's special revelation, but also his general revelation and the relationships between the two. Christian liberal-arts colleges are one means by which the church can fulfil its responsibility to instruct. Christian day-schools and academies represent the same endeavor on a less advanced level. And mission schools, where basic literacy is taught, equip people to read the biblical message.

Preaching is another means of instruction that has been used by the Christian church from its very beginning.⁵ In 1 **Corinthians 14**, when Paul speaks of prophesying, he probably is referring to preaching. He comments that prophesying is of greater value than is speaking in tongues, because it edifies or builds up the church: "He who prophesies speaks to men for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church" (w. 3-4).

To the end of mutual edification God has equipped the church with various gifts apportioned and bestowed by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:11). As we noted earlier (p.876), the New Testament contains four significantly different lists of these gifts. Whenever virtues like faith, service, and giving, which, on biblical grounds, are to be expected of all believers, are represented as special gifts of the Spirit, it appears that the writer has in mind unusual or extraordinary dimensions or degrees of those virtues. The Holy Spirit in his wisdom has given just what is needed, so that the body as a whole may be properly built up and equipped.

Worship

Another activity of the church is worship. Whereas edification focuses upon the believers and benefits them, worship concentrates upon the Lord. The early church came together to worship on a regular schedule, a practice commanded and commended by the apostle Paul. His direc-

5. Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, trans. Douglas Horton (New York: Harper and Row, 1956), pp. 97-135.

tion to the Corinthians to set aside money on the first day of every week (1 Cor. 16:2) intimates that they regularly gathered for worship on that day. The writer to the Hebrews exhorts his readers not to neglect the assembling of themselves together, as was the habit of some (Heb. 10:25). Although worship emphasizes God, it is also intended to benefit the worshipers. This we infer from Paul's warning against prayers, songs, and thanksgivings which fail to edify because no one is present to interpret their meaning to those who do not understand (1 Cor. 14: 15-17).

Worship, the praise and exaltation of God, was a common Old Testament practice, as can be seen particularly in the Book of Psalms. And in the pictures of heaven in the Book of Revelation and elsewhere, the people of God are represented as recognizing and declaring his greatness. It is appropriate that the church, which belongs to God, praise and glorify him. In this aspect of its activity, the church centers its attention upon who and what God is, not upon itself. It aims at appropriately expressing who and what he is, not at satisfying its own feelings.⁶

It is important at this point to note the locus of the various functions of the church. In biblical times the church gathered for worship and instruction. Then it went out to evangelize. In worship, the members of the church focus upon God; in instruction and fellowship, they focus upon themselves and fellow Christians; in evangelism, they turn their attention to non-Christians. It is well for the church to keep some separation between these several activities. If this is not done, one or more may be crowded out. As a result the church will suffer, since all of these activities, like the various elements in a well-balanced diet, are essential to the spiritual health and well-being of the body. For example, worship of God will suffer if the gathering of the body becomes oriented primarily to the interaction among Christians, or if the service is aimed exclusively at evangelizing the unbelievers who happen to be present. This was not the pattern of the church in the Book of Acts. Rather, believers gathered to praise God and be edified; then they went forth to reach the lost in the world without.

Social Concern

Cutting across the various functions of the church which we have thus far examined is its responsibility to perform acts of Christian love and compassion for both believers and non-Christians. It is clear that Jesus cared about the problems of the needy and the suffering.⁷ He

6. Langdon Gilkey, *How the Church Can Minister to the World Without Losing Itself* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), pp. 104-17.

7. Sherwood Wirt, *The Social Conscience of the Evangelical* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), pp. 19-26.

healed the sick and even raised the dead on occasion. If the church is to carry on his ministry, it will be engaged in some form of ministry to the needy and the suffering. That Jesus has such an expectation of believers is evident in the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37). Jesus told this parable to the lawyer who, understanding that one can inherit eternal life by loving God with one's whole being and one's neighbor as oneself, asked who his neighbor was. In answering the question, Jesus also explained what it means to love one's neighbor as oneself. The good Samaritan, although he had nothing to do with the assault on the man going down to Jericho, took it upon himself to care for the victim's needs even at personal cost, inconvenience, and possible danger to himself. Since love of neighbor is closely linked by the law to love of God and involves actions like those of the good Samaritan, the Christian church must be concerned about hurt and need in the world. Indeed, Jesus suggests in Matthew 25:31–46 that the one sign by which true believers can be distinguished from those who make empty professions is acts of love which are done in Jesus' name and emulate his example. Concern for the fatherless, the widow, and the sojourner is appropriate for those who worship a God who himself displays such concern (Deut. 10: 17–19).

Emphasis on social concern carries over into the Epistles as well. James is particularly strong in stressing practical Christianity. Consider, for example, his definition of religion: "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world" (James 1:27). He speaks out sharply against showing favoritism to the rich, an evil which occurred even within the church (2:1–11). He excoriates verbal encouragement unaccompanied by action: "Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, 'Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead" (2: 15–17, *NIV*). John is equally pointed: "If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth" (1 John 3:17–18, *NIV*). The half-brother of Jesus and the beloved disciple had learned well what Jesus had taught to be the meaning of "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Social concern includes the condemning of unrighteousness as well. Amos and several other Old Testament prophets spoke out emphatically against the evil and corruption of their day. John the Baptist likewise condemned the sin of Herod, the ruler of his day, even though it cost him his liberty (Luke 3: 19–20) and eventually even his life (Mark 6:17–29).

The church is to show concern and take action wherever it sees need,

hurt, or wrong. There will be differences of opinion as to the strategies and tactics that should be employed. In some cases, the church will work simply to alleviate the hurt, that is, to treat the consequences of the problem. In others, it will act to change the circumstances that have produced the problem. There will be times when the church acting collectively will be able to accomplish more than will Christians acting individually; in other situations the reverse will be true.⁸

The church has a great deal to do by way of improving its record. Yet it occasionally fails to note just how much has already been accomplished. What percentage of the colleges and hospitals in England and the United States were founded in earlier years by Christian groups? Today many of the charitable and educational functions once carried out by the church are instead managed by the state and supported by taxes paid by both Christians and non-Christians. Consider also that the social needs in developed countries are not nearly as severe as they once were.

Many of the churches which minimize the need for regeneration claim that evangelicals have not participated sufficiently in the alleviation of human needs? When, however, one shifts the frame of reference from the American domestic scene to the world, the picture is quite different. For evangelicals, concentrating their medical, agricultural, and educational ministries in countries where the needs are most severe, have outstripped their counterparts in the mainline churches in worldwide mission endeavor. Indeed, on a per capita basis, evangelicals have done more than have the liberal churches, and certainly much more than has the general populace.¹⁰

The Heart of the Ministry of the Church: The Gospel

It is important for us now to look closely at the one factor which gives basic shape to everything the church does, the element which lies at the heart of all its functions, namely, the gospel, the good news. At the beginning of his ministry Jesus announced that he had been anointed

8. David O. Moberg, *Inasmuch Christian Social Responsibility in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), pp. 81–82.

9. Robert M. Price, "A Fundamentalist Social Gospel?" *Christian Century* 96, no. 39 (28 November 1979): 1183–86. Note readers' replies in vol. 97, no. 3 (23 January 1980): 78–79.

10. Harold Lindsell, "The Missionary Retreat," *Christianity Today*, 9 November 1971, pp. 26–27 (188–89); William Hordern, *New Directions in Theology Today*, vol. 1, *Introduction* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966), pp. 75–76. See also *Yearbook of American Churches*, ed. Herman C. Weber (New York: Round Table), 1933 ed., pp. 300–05; 1939 ed., pp. 6–17; 1941 ed., pp. 129–38.

specifically to preach the gospel; later he charged the apostles to continue his ministry by spreading the gospel. Without doubt, then, the gospel lies at the root of all that the church does.

Jesus entrusted to the believers the good news which had characterized his own teaching and preaching from the very beginning. It is significant that, in the Book of Mark, the first recorded activity of Jesus after his baptism and temptation is his preaching the gospel in Galilee: "Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel'" (Mark 1:14–15). Similarly, Luke records that Jesus inaugurated his ministry in Nazareth by reading from Isaiah 61:1–2 and applying the prophecy to himself: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord" (Luke 4:18–19). And when John the Baptist inquired whether Jesus was really the one who had been prophesied, Jesus' reply included as evidence the fact that "the poor have good news preached to them" (Luke 7:22). Matthew characterizes the ministry of Jesus as "teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every infirmity" (Matt. 9:35). Furthermore, Jesus linked fidelity to the gospel very closely with commitment to him: "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life" (Mark 10:29–30). He also declared that the good news must be preached to all nations or throughout the world before the end (Matt. 24:13; Mark 13:10).

The key Old Testament word with reference to the gospel is the verb בָּשַׂר (*basar*). It has the general sense of "proclaiming good news." An example is found in 1 Kings 1:42, where Adonijah says to Jonathan the son of Abiathar the priest, "Come in, for you are a worthy man and bring good news." David uses the verb in 2 Samuel 4:10: "When one told me, 'Behold, Saul is dead,' and thought he was bringing good news, I seized him and slew him at Ziklag, which was the reward I gave him for his news." A messenger coming from battle is thought to be bearing good tidings (2 Sam. 18:27). In Jeremiah 20:15 the verb is used of the glad tidings of the birth of a son.

In some cases, the verb בָּשַׂר is used of a message which is not favorable, as in 1 Samuel 4: 17, where a messenger announces the defeat of Israel, the loss of the ark, and the death of Eli's sons, Hophni and Phinehas, a combination of bad news that resulted in Eli's death—he fell backward

from his seat and broke his neck. In 1 Kings 1:42 and Isaiah 52:7, as well as 2 Samuel 18:27, the adjective טוֹב (*ton*, "good") is used in conjunction with בָּשַׂר. Consequently, some scholars have concluded that the verb by itself means simply "to deliver a message." That is, it is thought to be neutral as to whether the news is good or bad. Gerhard Friedrich rejects this conclusion, appealing to evidence from other Semitic languages:

This is not so. In all Semitic languages, in Accadian, Ethiopic and Arabic, the sense of "joy" is contained in the stem. The realistic conception of the "word" in Semitic languages is shown by the fact that they have a special stem for declaring something good, whereas Latin and modern languages do not, and Greek takes a middle course by constructing the composite εὐαγγέλιον, εὐαγγελίζεσθαι. The addition of טוֹב in the OT is simply a strengthening of something already present in the stem.¹¹

Similarly, the key New Testament words with reference to the gospel, εὐαγγελίζομαι and εὐαγγέλιον, by virtue of the element εὐ invariably denote good tidings.¹² In fact, Friedrich states categorically: "εὐαγγέλιον is a technical term for 'news of victory.'"¹³

It has been questioned whether Jesus used the term εὐαγγέλιον (or, more correctly, its Aramaic equivalent) in speaking of himself. The scope of this volume does not permit our considering all of the arguments which have been accumulated on the subject. It is sufficient to observe that Jesus thought of himself not only as declaring, but also as constituting the good news:

The really decisive question is not whether Jesus himself used the word *euangelion* but whether it is a word appropriate to the substance of his message. There is no doubt that Jesus saw his message of the coming kingdom of God (Mk. 1:14) which is already present in his word and action as good news. . . . Moreover, he appears not only as the messenger and author of the message, but at the same time as its subject, the one of whom the message tells. It is therefore quite consistent for the early Christian church to take up the term *euangelion* to describe the message of salvation connected with the coming of Jesus.¹⁴

11. Gerhard Friedrich, εὐαγγελίζομαι, in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–1976), vol. 2, p. 707.

12. Ibid., pp. 710–12, 721–25.

13. Ibid., p. 722.

14. Ulrich Becker, "Gospel, Evangelize, Evangelist," in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), vol. 2, p. 110.

Friedrich observes that whether Jesus used the word *εὐαγγέλιον* of himself is “a question of His Messianic consciousness. If He realised that He was the Son of God who must die and rise again, then He also realised that He was Himself the content of the message.. . What is given with His person constitutes the content of the Gospel.”¹⁵

Among New Testament writers it is Paul who makes the greatest use of the terms *εὐαγγέλιον* and *εὐαγγελίζομαι*. It is significant that on many occasions he uses the noun without any qualifier; that is, there is no adjective, phrase, or clause to define what he means by “the gospel” (Rom. 1:16; 10:16; 11:28; 1 Cor. 4:15; 9:14 [twice]; 9:23; 2 Cor. 8:18; Gal. 2:5, 14; Phil. 1:5, 7, 12, 16, 27; 2:22; 4:3, 15; 1 Thess. 2:4; 2 Tim. 1:8; Philem. 13). Obviously, *εὐαγγέλιον* had a meaning sufficiently standardized that Paul’s readers knew precisely what he meant by “the gospel.” The word has two basic senses: active proclamation of the message and the content proclaimed. Both senses occur in 1 Corinthians 9: 14: “those who proclaim the gospel [the content] should get their living by the gospel [the act of proclaiming it].”

It is apparent that when Paul uses *εὐαγγέλιον* as the direct object of a verb of speaking or hearing, he has in view a particular content, a particular body of facts. Among the verbs of speaking which are used in conjunction with *εὐαγγέλιον* are *εὐαγγελίζομαι* (1 Cor. 15:1; 2 Cor. 11:7; Gal. 1:11), *καταγγέλλω* (1 Cor. 9:14), *κηρύσσω* (Gal. 2:2; Col. 1:23; 1 Thess. 2:9), *λαλέω* (1 Thess. 2:2), *γνωρίζω* (1 Cor. 15:1; Eph. 6:19), *διδάσκω* (Gal. 1:12), and *ἀνατίθηναι* (Gal. 2:2). Verbs of hearing used with *εὐαγγέλιον* include *ἀκούω* (Col. 1:23), *προακούω* (Col. 1:5), *παραλαμβάνω* (1 Cor. 15:1; Gal. 1:12), and *δέχομαι* (2 Cor. 11:4).

The question arises, If Paul and his readers viewed the gospel as involving a certain content, what is that content? While Paul nowhere gives us a complete and detailed statement of the tenets of the gospel, some passages are indicative of what it includes. In **Romans** 1:3-4 he speaks of “the gospel concerning [God’s] Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and designated Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord.” In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul reminds his readers in what terms he had preached the gospel to them (v. 1): “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas . . . to the twelve . . . to more than five hundred brethren at one time. . . to James . . . also to me” (vv. 3-8). A briefer reference is Paul’s

15. Friedrich, *εὐαγγελίζομαι*, p. 728.

exhortation in 2 Timothy 2:8: “Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, descended from David, as preached in my gospel.”

To summarize: Paul viewed the gospel as centering upon Jesus Christ and what God has done through him. The essential points of the gospel are Jesus Christ’s status as the Son of God, his genuine humanity, his death for our sins, his burial, resurrection, subsequent appearances, and future coming in judgment. It may well be said that, in Paul’s view, Jesus Christ *is* the gospel. In fact, the apostle uses the expression “the gospel of Christ” on several occasions (Rom. 15: 19; 1 Cor. 9: 12; 2 Cor. 2: 12; 9: 13; 10:14; Gal. 1:7; Phil. 1:27; 1 Thess. 3:2). Friedrich contends that we should not attempt to determine whether the objective or subjective genitive is being used in these passages; Christ is to be understood as both the object and the author of the message.¹⁶ Paul sees the essential truths of this gospel message as **fulfillments** of Old Testament promises (Rom. 1:1-4; 16:25-26; 1 Cor. 15: 1-4). Even the fact of coming judgment is good news to the believer (Rom. 2:16), since Christ will be the agent of judgment. For the believer, the result of the judgment will be vindication, not condemnation.

Taking note of what Paul opposes or refutes is another way of determining some of the basic elements in the gospel. The occasion of his letter to the Galatians was their turning away from what he had preached, and the one in whom they had believed, to a different kind of gospel—which, in reality, was not a gospel at all (Gal. 1:6-9). Some of the Galatians had come to believe that righteousness, at least a degree of it, can be attained by works. The true gospel, on the other hand, argues Paul, categorically maintains that one is justified by faith in the gracious work of Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection.

In spite of all that has been said to this point, we must not think of the gospel as merely a recital of theological truths and **historical** events. Rather, it relates these truths and events to the situation of every individual believer. Thus, Jesus died. But he died “for our sins” (1 Cor. 15:3). Nor is the resurrection of Jesus an isolated event; it is the beginning of the general resurrection of all believers (1 Cor. 15:20 in conjunction with Rom. 1:3-4). Furthermore, the fact of coming judgment pertains to everyone. We **will** all be evaluated on the basis of our personal attitude toward and response to the gospel: “vengeance [will be inflicted] upon those who do not know God and upon those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus” (2 Thess. 1:8).

To Paul, the gospel is **as** important. He declares to the church in Rome that the gospel “is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Rom. 1:16). He reminds the

16. *Ibid.*, p. 731.

Corinthians: "By [the gospel] you are saved, if **you** hold it fast-unless you believed in vain" (1 Cor. 15:2). He explains to the Ephesians: "In [Christ] you also, who have heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and have believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit" (Eph. 1: 13). It is the means by which life is obtained. He writes to Timothy that God "now has manifested [grace] through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel" (2 Tim. 1:10). The gospel brings peace and hope to those who believe. Accordingly, Paul speaks of "the gospel of peace" (Eph. 6:15) and "the hope of the gospel" (Col. 1:23).

Convinced that only the gospel can bring salvation along with all its attendant blessings, Paul insists that the gospel is absolute and exclusive. Nothing is to be added to or taken from it, nor is there any alternate route to salvation. We have already alluded to the case of certain **Judaizers** who came to Galatia after Paul had preached there. Seeking to improve upon the gospel, they insisted that Gentile converts submit to circumcision, a rite which the Old Testament law had required of proselytes to Judaism. Paul was very vigorously opposed, since any reliance upon such works would constitute a partial loss of confidence in the efficacy of grace. He reminded the Galatians that those who rely upon the law are required to fulfil all of its points and hence are doomed to fail (Gal. 3:10). Those believers who have turned to this different gospel have deserted the one who called them (1:6). Paul is so categorically opposed to any effort to alter the gospel message that he declares, "Even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed" (v. 8). He reiterates this thought in the following verse: "If any one is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed" (v. 9). (The verb in the first statement is subjunctive ["should preach"], pointing to a hypothetical situation; the verb in the latter is indicative ["is preaching"], pointing to an actual situation.) Surely Paul would be this insistent only on a point of the utmost significance.

Knowing that the gospel is the only route to salvation, Paul is determined to defend it. He writes to the Philippians of his "defense and confirmation of the gospel" (Phil. 1:7). Those who preach Christ out of love know that Paul has been in prison for the defense of the gospel (v. 16). In both instances, the Greek word is *ἀπολογία*, a legal term signifying the case of someone who has been brought to trial. Paul was prepared to give a reasoned argument for the gospel. It is noteworthy that it is in his letter to the church at **Philippi** that Paul speaks of his defense of the gospel. There is every likelihood that the **jailor** who had responded to Paul's presentation of the gospel and become a new creature (Acts 16:25-34) was a member of that church. Having witnessed in

that very city an earthshaking demonstration of the power of God to salvation, could Paul ever have surrendered the gospel? Yet some people have contended that the gospel needs no defense, that it can stand on its own two feet. This reasoning, however, runs contrary to the pattern of Paul's own activity, for example, his speech in the middle of the **Areopagus** (Acts 17: 16-34).¹⁷ The objection to an apologetic approach rests upon a misconception of how God works, a failure to recognize that in creating belief the Holy Spirit makes use of human minds and reason.

But we must not characterize Paul's activity as simply a defense of the gospel. He went on the offensive as well. He was eager to proclaim the good news to all nations. He wanted to see it established everywhere. He wanted to preach it to the Romans (Rom. 1: 15). He had a sense of compulsion about his mission: "Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!" (1 Cor. 9: 16). It had been entrusted to his stewardship, and he had a sacred obligation to proclaim it.

This gospel not only cuts across all racial, social, economic, and educational barriers (Rom. 1:16; Gal. 3:28), but also spans the centuries of time. A message which does not become obsolete (Jude 3), it is the church's sacred trust today. In an age in which most ideas and systems of thought, as well as techniques and commodities, are of a throwaway variety, the church has an infallible and enduring resource—a message which is the only means of salvation. The church can display the same confidence in the gospel that Paul had, for it is still the same gospel; time has not eroded its effectiveness.

The church has good news to offer to the world, news which, as we observed earlier, brings hope. In this respect the message and ministry of the church are unique. For in our world today there is little hope. Of course, to varying degrees there has always been a lack of hope. Sophocles, in the golden age of Greece some five centuries before Christ, wrote: "Not to be born at all—that is by far the best fate. The second best is as soon as **one** is born with all speed to return thither whence one has come."¹⁸ In the twentieth century, however, hopelessness has reached new proportions. Existentialism has spawned literary works like Jean-Paul Sartre's *No Exit* and Albert Camus's "Myth of Sisyphus." There is little encouraging news, whether social, economic, or political, in the newspapers. In *Herzog* Saul Bellow has captured well the spirit of the entire age: "But what is the philosophy of this generation? Not God is dead, that period was passed long ago. Perhaps it should be stated death is God. This generation thinks—and this is its thought of thoughts—that

17. F.F. Bruce, *The Defence of the Gospel in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), pp. 37-48.

18. Sophocles *Oedipus at Colonus* 1224.

nothing faithful, vulnerable, fragile can be durable or have any true power. Death waits for these things as a cement floor waits for a dropping light bulb.”¹⁹ By contrast, the church says with Peter, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Peter 1:3). There is hope, and it comes to **fulfilment** when we believe and obey the gospel.

The gospel offers its blessings of peace, joy, and satisfaction in a way contrary to what we expect. (This is not surprising, since Jesus was not the kind of Messiah his contemporaries expected.) We do not obtain the benefits of the gospel by seeking them directly, for Jesus said, “Whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospels will save it” (Mark 8:35). It is only when we give up our own will, self-seeking, and pride, that peace, joy, and satisfaction emerge. The same point can be made regarding the matter of self-esteem. Those who seek to build up their self-esteem will fail. For genuine self-esteem is a by-product of exalting and esteeming God.

Because the gospel has been, is, and will always be the way of salvation, the only way, the church must preserve the gospel at all costs. When the gospel is modified, the vitality of the church is lost. The church dies. Kenneth Scott Latourette notes what resulted when rationalism ate away parts of the gospel message, and particularly the person of Christ:

Those forms [of the church] which conformed so much to the environment that they sacrificed this timeless and placeless identity died out with the passing of the age, the society, and the climate of opinion to which they had adjusted themselves. The central core of the uniqueness of Jesus, of fidelity to his birth, life, teachings, death, and resurrection as events in history, and of belief in God’s working through him for the revelation of Himself and the redemption of man proved essential to continuing life.²⁰

The truth of Latourette’s observations has been evident in **twentieth-century** Christianity. Groups which in the first half of the century abandoned the gospel of supernatural regeneration through faith in a supernatural, atoning Christ have not prospered. Indeed, they have declined, as spiritual momentum ebbed from them. Conservative evangelical groups, on the other hand, have grown. Those groups which have continued to preach the gospel Paul preached, which have offered an authentic

alternative to an unbelieving or secular world, have succeeded in winning non-Christians. This phenomenon has been examined in books like Dean Kelley’s *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*.²¹ The gospel is still the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, just as it was in the first century.

The Character of the Church

We must not limit our study of the role of the church to an investigation of what the church does, that is, its functions. The attitude or disposition with which the church performs its functions is also a matter of extreme importance. Since the church is, in its continuing existence, Christ’s body and bears his name, it should be characterized by the attributes Christ manifested during his physical incarnation on earth. Two of these attributes are crucial as the church operates in our rapidly changing world: willingness to serve and adaptability.

Willingness to Serve

Jesus stated that his purpose in coming was not to be served, but to serve (Matt. 20:28). In becoming incarnate he took upon himself the form of a servant (Phil. 2:7). “He humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross” (v. 8). The church must display a similar willingness to serve. It has been placed in the world to serve its Lord and the world, not to be exalted and have its own needs and desires satisfied. Although the church may attain great size, wealth, and prestige, it is not here for that purpose.

Jesus did not associate with people for what they could in turn do for him. If he had, he would never have gone to Zacchaeus’s home, or engaged the Samaritan woman in conversation, or allowed the sinful woman to wash his feet in the house of Simon the Pharisee. These were acts of which a modern campaign manager or public-relations expert would certainly have disapproved, for they were not helpful in gaining Jesus prestige or favorable publicity. But Jesus was not interested in exploiting people. Similarly, the church today will not determine its activity on the basis of what will enable it to prosper and grow. Rather, it will seek to follow its Lord’s example of service. It will be willing to go to the undesirables and helpless, those who cannot give anything in return to

19. Quoted in Sam Keen, “Death in a Posthuman Era,” in *New Theology* No. 5, ed. Martin E. Marty and Dean G. Peerman (New York: Macmillan, 1968), p. 79.

20. Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1945), vol. 7, p. 492.

21. Dean M. Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977).

the church. A true representative of the church will even be willing to give his or her life, if necessary, for the sake of its ministry.

Willingness to serve means that the church will not seek to dominate society for its own purposes. The question of the relationship of church and state has had a long and complex history. Scripture tells us that the state, like the church, is an institution created by God for a specific purpose (Rom. 13: 1-7; 1 Peter 2:13-17). Many models of church-state relationships have been devised and put into practice. Some of these models have involved such a close alliance between the two that the power of the state virtually compelled church membership and certain religious practices. But in such cases the church was acting as a master rather than a servant. The right goal was pursued, but in the wrong fashion (as would have been the case had Jesus succumbed to the temptation to fall down and -worship Satan in exchange for all the kingdoms of the world). This is not to say that the church should not receive the benefits which the state provides for all within its realm, or that the church should not address the state on issues regarding which legislation is to be enacted. But it will not seek to use political force to compel spiritual ends.

Adaptability

The church must also be versatile and flexible in adjusting its methods and procedures to the changing situations of the world in which it finds itself. It must go where needy persons are to be found, even if that means a geographical or cultural change. It must not cling to all its old ways. As the world to which it is trying to minister changes, the church will have to adapt its ministry accordingly, but without altering its basic direction.

As the church adapts, it will be emulating its Lord, who did not hesitate to come to earth to redeem humanity. In doing so, he took on the conditions of the human race (Phil. 2:5-8). In similar fashion, the body of Christ will preserve the basic message with which it has been entrusted, and continue to fulfil the major functions of its task, but will make all legitimate changes which are necessary in order to carry out its Lord's purposes. The stereotypical church—a rural congregation headed by but one minister and consisting of a group of nuclear families who meet at eleven o'clock on Sunday morning in a small white building with a steeple—still exists in some places. But it is the exception. Circumstances are now very different in most parts of the world. If the church has a sense of mission like that of its Lord, however, it will find ways to reach people wherever they are.

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The Government of the Church

Forms of Church Government

- Episcopal
- Presbyterian
- Congregational
- Nongovernment

Constructing a System of Church Government for Today

With the emphasis upon ecumenism, the question of the organization or government of the church has risen to special visibility in the twentieth century. For if there are to be close fellowship and cooperation, there must be some agreement upon the seat of authority. If, for example, a minister who belongs to one denomination is to preach and officiate at the Lord's Supper in another, there must be some agreement as to who is a duly ordained minister, which in turn presupposes agreement upon who has the power to ordain. For the question of church government is in the final analysis a question of where authority resides within the church and who is to exercise it. Actually, the advocates of the various forms of church government agree that God is (or has) the ultimate authority. Where they differ is in their conceptions of how or through whom he expresses or exercises it.

Forms of Church Government

Throughout the history of the church there have been several basic forms of church government. Our study will begin with the most highly structured and move on to the less structured. After we have carefully examined the basic forms, we will attempt to determine whether one is preferable.

Episcopal

In the episcopal form of church government, authority resides in the bishop (*ἐπίσκοπος*). There are varying degrees of episcopacy, that is to say, the number of levels of bishops varies. The simplest form of episcopal government is found in the Methodist church, which has only one level of bishops. Somewhat more developed is the governmental structure of the Anglican or Episcopal church, while the Roman Catholic Church has the most complete system of hierarchy, with authority **being** vested especially in the supreme pontiff, the bishop of Rome, the pope. The genius of the episcopal system is that authority is fixed in a particular office, that of the bishop.

Inherent in the episcopal structure is the idea of different levels of ministry or different degrees of ordination.¹ The first level is that of the ordinary minister or priest. In some churches there are steps or divisions within this first level, for example, deacon and elder. The clergy at this level are authorized to perform all of the basic duties associated with the ministry, that is, they preach and administer the sacraments. Beyond this level, however, there is a second level of ordination, which constitutes one a bishop and invests him with certain special powers.

The bishop is the key to the functioning of church government. Some would go as far as to say that the episcopacy is of the very essence of the church: the church cannot exist without it.* Indeed, a few would even assert that the episcopacy is the church. Those who claim that the episcopacy is necessary to the very being of the church include the Roman Catholics and Anglo-Catholics (or High-Church Anglicans). Others, such as Low-Church Anglicans, see the system of bishops as but one of a number of forms of church government with scriptural basis.³ They do, however, view episcopacy as the best system for doing the work of

the kingdom. It is desirable and perhaps even necessary for the well-being, but not the being, of the church. The church can exist without an episcopacy, but **will** not be at its best. Therefore, the powers of the bishop are considerable, if not absolute. Finally, there are churches which retain the office of bishop, but with considerably lessened powers. Throughout the history of the Methodist church, for example, the amount of power granted to the bishops has varied.⁴

The role of the bishops is to exercise the power of God which has been vested in them. Their authority transcends that of ordinary ministers. In particular, as Gods representatives and pastors they govern and care for a group of churches rather than merely one local congregation.⁵

One particular power of the bishop is ordination. He has the authority to ordain ministers or priests. In laying hands upon a candidate for ordination, the bishop vests in the candidate the powers which attach to the ministry. The bishop also has the authority of pastoral placement. In theory, he has absolute power to place a minister in a particular local parish. In practice, however, the episcopacy has tended toward a greater democratization in recent years; the bishop or his representative usually consults the local congregation regarding their wishes and sometimes even permits the congregation a considerable amount of initiative in the matter. This is much more characteristic of the Methodist than of the Roman Catholic Church. The bishop also has the responsibility of preserving **the** true faith and the proper order within a particular geographical area. He exercises discipline within his diocese or conference.

Viewed as the primary channel by which God expresses his authority upon earth, bishops have in times past exercised wide responsibilities in temporal affairs. In some forms of episcopacy, they are considered the princes of **the** church or even, as we have already suggested, the church itself. Certain communions regard the bishops as the successors to the apostles. By the laying on of hands in the ceremony of ordination, the authority of the apostles has been transmitted down through history to the bishops of today. According to this theory, which is known as the theory of apostolic succession, modern bishops have the authority which the apostles had, authority which the apostles had in turn received from Christ.⁶

There is, in this scheme, little distinction between the visible and the

4. Gerald F. Moede, *The Office of Bishop in Methodism: Its History and Development* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1964).

5. Leon Morris, "Church Government," in *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Everett F. Harrison (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1960), p. 126.

6. Kenneth E. Kirk, "The Apostolic Ministry," in *The Apostolic Ministry*, ed. Kenneth E. Kirk (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1946), p. 43.

1. Leon Morris, "Church, Nature and Government of (Episcopalian View)," in *Encyclopedia of Christianity*, ed. Gary G. Cohen (Marshalltown, Del.: National Foundation for Christian Education, 1968), vol. 2, p. 483.

2. A. G. Hebert, *The Form Of the Church* (London: Faber and Faber, 1944), pp. 109-23.

3. Morris, *Encyclopedia Of Christianity*, vol. 2, p. 485.

invisible church. The bishops define the church. They are not chosen from below, but from above. A bishop is a bishop because he has been chosen either by someone on a higher level (such as an archbishop) or by other bishops. Where those who are to rule or guide the church are selected by people at a lower level, it is questionable whether a bishopric really exists, even if the name is used.

The most highly developed episcopal form of government is that found within the Roman Catholic Church.⁷ Here the bishop of Rome emerged as the supreme bishop and came to be referred to as the pope or the father of the entire church. He governs through archbishops, who superintend large areas. Beneath them are the bishops, to whom the priests are responsible.

Until Vatican Council I (1869–1870), the pope was viewed as having supreme authority, but only when he acted in concert with the other bishops. At that council, however, it was decided that he has supreme and virtually unlimited authority in his own right. For Vatican I declared that when the pope speaks *ex cathedra* (in his official capacity) in matters of faith and practice, he is infallible.⁸ The exact character of this authority was never fully defined, however, for immediately after the decision was made, the France-Prussian War broke out, and the council had to adjourn before it could determine just what it meant by infallibility. In a sense, Vatican II (1962–1965) was an attempt to take up and complete the unfinished business of Vatican I.

There is considerable difference of opinion as to when the pope is speaking *ex cathedra*, and how many such statements there have been in the history of the church. The pope does not ordinarily preface a decree by stating, “I am about to make an *ex cathedra* pronouncement.” Being wise and careful leaders, the popes have been cautious about identifying their official declarations as *ex cathedra*, since once made, such rulings can never be reversed or altered.

In practice, the pope exercises his authority through the bishops. While they may act independently of him, the fact remains that they have received their powers from him. He is the absolute and ultimate source of authority within the church. Authority derives from above and flows downward. There is one check, however, upon the office and power of the pope. He cannot name his successor; the new pope is elected by the College of Cardinals. Yet it is the pope who has appointed the cardinals, and new popes are selected from among their number. Thus the popes do, in a sense, have a part in determining their successors.

7. Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, ed. James Canon Bastible (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1960), pp. 270–93.

8. Ibid., pp. 286–87.

Several arguments are advanced in support of the episcopal form of government. The case usually begins with a declaration that Christ is the founder of the church? He provided it with an authoritative governing structure. For immediately after asserting that all authority in heaven and on earth is his (Matt. 28:18), he sent forth the eleven apostles in that authority (w. 19–20; Acts 1:8). It is to be noted that, to the best of our knowledge, the apostles were the only officers Jesus appointed. It might be concluded that they were the only persons in the New Testament with the right to exercise ecclesiastical oversight or authority (*ἐξουσία*).⁹ We do find evidence, however, that they began to delegate some of their authority to others, notably Timothy and Titus. In addition, the apostles evidently appointed elders or rulers in the local churches. When Paul and Barnabas journeyed through Galatia, strengthening and encouraging the churches which they had earlier established, they “appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting, [and] committed them to the Lord in whom they believed” (Acts 14:23). Even where it is not clear that the process of selection rested with the apostles, it was they who did the ordaining. When the church in Jerusalem chose seven men “of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom,” to assist in the work, they were “set before the apostles, [who] prayed and laid their hands upon them” (Acts 6:3, 6).

A second argument is the position occupied by James within the church of Jerusalem. His authority was similar to that later held by bishops. Here then is precedent for the episcopal system.¹¹

Finally, there is the historical argument that there is a line of direct succession from the apostles to today’s bishops. It is maintained that through the ordination process the authority of the apostles has been passed down to modern-day bishops.¹²

There are also various objections to the episcopal form of church government. One is that the system is too formalized; there tends to be more emphasis on the office than on the person who holds it. In the New Testament, authority was given only to those who were spiritually qualified and sound in doctrine. Paul warned the Corinthians about certain people who claimed to work on the same terms he did: “Such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ” (2 Cor. 11:13). Paul also warned the Galatians about false teachers,

9. Edward J. Gratsch, “The Development of Ecclesiology,” in *Principles of Catholic Theology*, ed. Edward J. Gratsch (New York: Alba House, 1980), pp. 157–60.

10. A. M. Farrer, “The Ministry in the New Testament,” in *The Apostolic Ministry*, pp. 113–82.

11. Ibid., p. 181.

12. Ott, *Catholic Dogma*, pp. 282–85.

pronouncing an anathema upon any, even angels, who might preach a gospel different from what he had preached to them (Gal. 1:8-9). What a person is, does, believes, and says is of far more importance than any position he might hold. Indeed, the latter is to be determined by the former, not the former by the latter.¹³

Exception is also taken to the theory of apostolic succession. The historical record seems weak and ambiguous at best. Further, there is no express evidence of anyone's conveying the power to ordain, although various persons are reported to have laid their hands upon others. Nor is there any description in the Scriptures of any very highly developed government, or any report of a command to preserve or perpetuate a particular form of government. In addition, there is scant indication of any difference in authority between bishops and elders. For example, while Acts 6:6 speaks of the apostles' laying their hands on the seven at Jerusalem, Timothy received his gift when the elders laid hands upon him (1 Tim. 4: 14). The biblical data here are simply not as clear or unequivocal as we would desire.¹⁴

Further, advocates of the episcopal form of church government give insufficient attention to Christ's direct exercise of lordship over the church. He installed Paul without any intermediary; no other apostle was involved. Paul makes much of this point in justifying his apostleship (Gal. 1:15-17). Now if Paul received his office directly from God, might not others as well? In other words, in at least this one case apostolic authority does not seem to rest upon previous apostolic authority.¹⁵

Presbyterian

The presbyterian system of church government places primary authority in a particular office as well, but there is less emphasis upon the individual office and officeholder than upon a series of representative bodies which exercise that authority. The key officer in the presbyterian structure is the elder;¹⁶ a position which harks back to the Jewish synagogue. In Old Testament times the elders were persons who had ruling or governing roles and capacities. They held their authority by reason of their age and experience. Elders are also found in the New Testament church. In Acts 11:30 we read of the presence of elders in the Jerusalem

13. Hebert, *Form Of the Church*, p. 110.

14. S. L. Greenslade, "The Ministry in the Early Church," in *The Ministry of the Church* (London: Canterbury, 1947), pp. 55-61.

15. Morris, "Church Government," pp. 126-27.

16. R. Laird Harris, "Church, Nature and Government of (Presbyterian View)," in *Encyclopedia of Christianity* vol. 2, pp. 490-92.

congregation: the brethren in Antioch provided relief to the believers in Jerusalem, "sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul." We have already observed that Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in all the churches (Acts 14:23). Paul summoned the elders of Ephesus to Miletus and addressed them (Acts 20: 17). The pastoral Epistles also make mention of elders. Some of those who advocate the presbyterian form of government maintain that the terms *elder* and *bishop* are interchangeable, and thus the term *ἐπίσκοπος* in passages like 1 Timothy 3:1-2 and Titus 1:7 is to be understood as referring to elders. It should be noted, however, that the term elder (*πρεσβύτερος*) usually occurs in the plural, suggesting that the authority of the elders is collective rather than individual.

It seems that in New Testament times the people chose their elders, men whom they assessed to be particularly qualified to rule the church. This practice appears to be consistent with the filling of other offices. The whole congregation put forward Barsabbas and Matthias as candidates to replace Judas among the apostles, the final choice being made by the casting of lots (Acts 1:23-26). The group asked in their prayer that God use the casting of lots to reveal the man whom he had already selected. Similarly, the whole body of believers at Jerusalem picked the seven men "of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom," to assist the apostles (Acts 6:3). In this respect, the New Testament procedure was quite different from the selection of elders in the synagogue, which was basically a matter of seniority.

In selecting elders to rule the church, the people were conscious of confirming, by their external act, what the Lord had already done. The church was exercising on Christ's behalf the power or authority which he had delegated to it. That God chooses the leaders of his church is indicated in several places in the New Testament. In Acts 20:28 Paul urges the elders of Ephesus: "Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you guardians [*ἐπίσκοποι*], to feed the church of the Lord which he obtained with his own blood." He writes to the Corinthians, "And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, then healers, helpers, administrators, speakers in various kinds of tongues" (1 Cor. 12:28). We assume that the offices of bishop and elder are implicit in this list. Other indications that God chooses the officers of his church include Matthew 16: 19; John 20:22-23; and Ephesians 4:11-12.

The authority of Christ is to be understood as dispensed to individual believers and delegated by them to the elders who represent them. Once elected or appointed, the elders function on behalf of or in the place of

the individual believers. It is therefore at the level of the elders that divine authority actually functions within the church.¹⁷

This authority is exercised in a series of governing assemblies. At the level of the local church the session (**Presbyterian**)¹⁸ or consistory (**Reformed**)¹⁹ is the decision-making group. All the churches in one area are governed by the presbytery (Presbyterian) or **classis** (Reformed), which is made up of one lay elder and one minister from each consistory (Reformed), or one lay elder from each session and all the ministers in the area (Presbyterian). The next grouping is the synod, made up of an equal number of lay elders and clergy chosen by each presbytery or classis. At the highest level the Presbyterian church also has a General Assembly, composed again of lay and clergy representatives from the presbyteries. Note that the synods are bypassed in this process; they do not choose the representatives to the General Assembly. Rather, the presbyteries select the representatives to both the synods and the General Assembly.²⁰ Decisions are made by the governing body at each level. These decisions are subject to review and revision by the next highest body. This process does not so much originate or legislate action, as it, particularly in conservative settings, interprets and applies the explicit teachings of Christ and guidelines of the church.

The prerogatives of each of the governing bodies are spelled out in the constitution of the denomination. For example, the session of each local church chooses its own pastor. The presbytery must confirm this choice, however. The presbytery also holds title to the property utilized by the local congregation, although this policy is being modified somewhat by recent court cases. No group has any authority over the other groups on its level. For example, no presbytery has authority over another presbytery. Appeal for action may be made to the synod, however, if both presbyteries in a dispute belong to the same synod; if not, an appeal may be made to the General Assembly. Similarly, a session that is displeased with another within its presbytery may appeal its case to the presbytery.

The presbyterian system differs from the episcopal in that there is only one level of clergy.²¹ There is only the teaching elder or pastor. No higher levels, such as bishop, exist. Of course, certain persons are elected

17. *The Constitution of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* (Philadelphia: Office of the General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, 1967), vol. 2, *Book of Order*, chapter 9.

18. *Ibid.*, chapter 11.

19. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), pp. 588-89.

20. Park Hays Miller, *Why I Am a Presbyterian* (New York: Thomas Nelson, 1956), pp. 77H.

21. Charles Hodge, *The Church and Its Polity* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1879), p. 119.

to administrative posts within the ruling assemblies. They are selected (from below) to preside or supervise, and generally bear a title such as stated clerk of the presbytery. They are not bishops, there being no special ordination to such office. There is no special authority attached to the office. The only power these officers have is an executive power to carry out the decisions of the group which elected them. Thus, the authority belongs to the electing body, not to the office or its occupant. Moreover, there is a limited term of service, so that occupancy of the office is dependent upon the continued intention and will of the body.

In the presbyterian system, there is a deliberate coordinating of clergy and laity. Both groups are included in all of the various governing assemblies. Neither has special powers or rights which the other does not have. A distinction is drawn, however, between ruling elders (laity) and teaching elders (clergy). This distinction was not so clear-cut in biblical times. For while much of the teaching (the work of the clergy) was done by the apostles, prophets, and evangelists, some of it was done by the ruling elders, as is indicated in **1 Timothy 5: 17**: "Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching." While this verse indicates that ruling elders engaged in teaching, it also suggests that some specialization was already taking place. As the apostles gradually passed from the scene, and as heretical interpretation arose, the need for authoritative teaching grew. Thus, the office of teaching elder came into being. Certain men were released from other activities in order to give full-time attention and energy to rightly interpreting and teaching the meaning of the Word.

A vigorous case is made by the advocates of the presbyterian form of church government. Their argument begins with the observation that the Jewish synagogue was ruled by a group of elders, and the Christian church, at least initially, functioned within the synagogue. Its people evangelized there and evidently organized their assemblies in a similar fashion. There was apparently some sort of governing council or committee. Paul beseeches the Thessalonians "to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you" (**1 Thess. 5: 12**). The writer to the Hebrews exhorts his readers, "Obey your leaders and submit to them; for they are keeping watch over your souls, as men who will have to give account" (**Heb. 13: 17**). The decision of the Jerusalem council (**Acts 15**) is an example of this type of church government in action.**

Furthermore, the presbyterian system of government preserves several essential New Testament principles of polity. One of these is the lordship of Christ. In the presbyterian system, his will and his Word are

22. Harris, *Encyclopedia of Christianity*, vol. 2, p. 492.

the ultimate standards by which the church determines its actions. Second, the principle of participation by the people is preserved. They have direct access to God and the right to express their personal opinions. Third, the presbyterian system maintains the concept of corporateness: each individual is seen as part of the body. Finally, the power of the local church resides in a group, the elders, not in just one minister or elder who derives his authority from a **bishop**.²³

Critical objections come especially from those who advocate a more individualistic or congregational type of church government. They object that the presbyterian system is rooted in a hierarchy of governing bodies for which little or no support is found within **Scripture**.²⁴ Further, they object that the presbyterian polity does not give each and every believer an adequate part in church government. While the presbytery and the session are in theory servants and representatives of the individual believers, they may well come to assume a ruling role. Many decisions which could be referred to the church membership as a whole are not. Thus, although intended to represent and carry out the authority of individual believers, the presbyterian structure of church government has on occasion usurped that **authority**.²⁵

Congregational

A third form of church government stresses the role of the individual Christian and makes the local congregation the seat of authority. Two concepts are basic to the congregational scheme: autonomy and democracy. By autonomy we mean that the local congregation is independent and self-governing.²⁶ There is no external power which can dictate 'courses of action to the local church. By democracy we mean that every member of the local congregation has a voice in its affairs. It is the individual members of the congregation who possess and exercise authority. Authority is not the prerogative of a lone individual or select group. Neither a monarchical (episcopal) nor oligarchical (presbyterian) structure is to take the place of the individual. A secondary sense of the principle of democracy in the congregational system is that decisions within interchurch associations are made on a representative basis. Among the major denominations which practice the congregational form of government are the Baptists, Congregationalists, and most Lutheran groups.

23. Ibid., p. 495; Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 581-84.

24. Franz Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1953). vol. 3, p. 421.

25. Ibid., p. 431.

26. Ibid., p. 475.

It is necessary to examine the principles of autonomy and democracy more closely. The principle of autonomy is believed to reflect the basic New Testament position on church government. In Acts and the Epistles the primary focus is upon the local church. There is no reference to any structure above or beyond it. There is no command to form interchurch unions of any type.²⁷ We find no instance of control over a local church by outside organizations or individuals. The apostles made recommendations and gave advice, but exercised no real ruler-ship or control. Even Paul had to argue for his apostolic authority and beseech his readers to follow his **teachings** (Gal. 1:11-24).

The principle of autonomy means that each local church is **self-governing**. Each congregation calls its own pastor and determines its own budget. It purchases and owns property independently of any outside authorities.²⁸ While it may seek advice from other churches and denominational officials, it is not bound to follow that advice, and its decisions do not require outside ratification or approval.

A congregation may enter into cooperative affiliations, but these are strictly voluntary in nature. Such affiliations are, in general, desirable for several reasons. First, **they** display in visible form the unity present within the universal or invisible church. Second, they provide and promote Christian fellowship on a wider basis than is possible within a single congregation. Further, they enable service and ministry in a more effective fashion than does **the** local church alone. Missions, the establishment of new congregations, and youth activities (e.g., camping) are among a number of undertakings which are more feasible on a large scale. The reasons for such affiliations, then, are primarily pragmatic. Joining such groups and adhering to their decisions are voluntary on the part of the local church. Moreover, the relationship may be terminated by the individual congregation whenever it chooses. The associations, conventions, or conferences formed by local churches must themselves operate on a democratic basis. No one church, group of churches, or individual may dominate, control, or dictate to the others. Voting is on a representative basis, usually in proportion to **the** size of **the** individual churches involved. As in the presbyterian **form** of government, any leaders engaged are *servants*, not masters, of the churches and their members. They serve by the will of the membership of the local congregations and for specified limited periods. They bear titles like executive secretary, but are in no sense bishops.

There is one point at which the autonomy of the local congregation

27. Ibid., p. 421.

28. Edward T. Hiscox, *The New Directory for Baptist Churches* (Philadelphia: Judson, 1894), pp. 153-59.

must be qualified. When a congregation is accepting financial subsidization from a larger fellowship of churches, the association or convention will want to be fully informed of the actions of the local body, and may even proceed to lay down some guidelines and restrictions which the latter must follow. (This is not surprising, for accepting a loan or mortgage from a bank entails assuming certain obligations and restrictions.) It should be borne in mind, however, that the restrictions are voluntarily assumed; the congregation has not been compelled to accept assistance.

The concept of democracy means that authority within the local congregation rests with the individual members. Much is made here of the priesthood of all believers. It is felt that this principle would be surrendered if bishops or elders were given the decision-making prerogative. The work of Christ has made such rulers unnecessary, for now every believer has access to the Holy of Holies and may directly approach God. Moreover, as Paul has reminded us, each member or part of the body has a valuable contribution to make to the welfare of the whole.²⁹

There are some elements of representative democracy within the congregational form of church government. Certain persons are elected by a free choice of the members of the body to serve in special ways.³⁰ They are representatives and servants of the church. They are answerable to those who have chosen them. They are not to exercise their authority independently of or contrary to the wishes of the people. If they do, they may be removed from office. All major decisions, however, such as the calling of a pastor and the purchase or sale of property, are made by the church as a whole. This power is reserved to the entire membership by the constitution of the church. In these and all other matters of congregational decision, every member of voting age, regardless of social or economic status, has one vote.

In the congregational form of government, as in the presbyterian, there is only one level of clergy. The titles of bishop, elder, and pastor are believed to be different names for the same office; it has been suggested that they designate different functions or different aspects of the ministry.³¹ It is noteworthy that when addressing the elders of Ephesus (Acts 20:17) Paul advised, "Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you guardians [ἐπίσκοποι, bishops], to feed [ποιμαίνειν, to shepherd or pastor] the church of the Lord which he

29. William Roy McNutt, *Polity and Practice in Baptist Churches* (Philadelphia: Judson, 1935), pp. 21-26.

30. James M. Bulman, "Church, Nature and Government of (Autonomous View)," in *Encyclopedia of Christianity*, vol. 2, p. 478.

31. Augustus H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Westwood, N.J.: Revell, 1907), pp. 914-15.

obtained with his own blood" (v. 28). It is argued that the use of all three terms in connection with the same group indicates equivalency. The only other office is a lay office, that of the deacon (literally, "the one who serves").

Several arguments are advanced for making the congregational system the normative form of church government. In the earliest days of the church, which are recounted by the Book of Acts, the congregation as a whole chose persons for office and determined policy.³² They chose Judas's successor (Acts 1). They selected the first deacons (Acts 6). While there is no explicit statement that the congregation as a whole was involved in appointing Paul and Barnabas to their work (Acts 13: 1-3), we do draw that conclusion from the fact that when they returned to Antioch, they made their report to the whole church (Acts 14:27). And it was the whole church that sent Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem to help settle the question of circumcision (Acts 15:2-3). Similarly, the whole church of Jerusalem sent the reply: "Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren" (v. 22). What of the apparent appointing of elders by the apostles (Acts 14:23)? One possible interpretation is that they may not actually have been chosen by the apostles. Perhaps the apostles suggested the idea and presided at the ordination, but the choice was made by the people. This is in fact the pattern in Acts 6.

Further, Jesus' teaching would seem to be opposed to the special leadership positions found within the episcopal and presbyterian schemes of government. He censured those who sought rank above other persons. When his disciples disputed which of them was the greatest, Jesus said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. For which is the greater, one who sits at table, or one who serves? Is it not the one who sits at table? But I am among you as one who serves" (Luke 22:25-27). A leader, then, is actually to be the servant of all. A proper sense of servanthood will result if leaders keep in mind that they have been chosen by those whom they serve and are answerable to them. Jesus also taught that we are not to seek special distinctions and titles: "But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brethren" (Matt. 23:8). These teachings of Jesus would seem to favor a democratic structure within the Christian church.

32. Ibid., p. 906.

Another consideration is that both Jesus and Paul taught that the authority to discipline belongs to the group as a whole, not some individual or set of leaders. In Jesus' discussion of the treatment of a brother who has sinned, the final agent of discipline is the church. If the offending brother refuses to listen to the church, he is to be treated like a pagan or a tax collector (Matt. 18: 15-17). Paul instructed the Corinthian congregation as a whole (1 Cor. 1:2), not merely the elders, to put out of their fellowship the man who was living immorally with his father's wife (1 Cor. 5).³³

Finally, it is observed that the letters of Paul were addressed to the churches as a whole rather than to a bishop or a group of elders. The letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon were written to them as individuals, not as leaders of a particular church.³⁴

But there are several objections to the congregational form of church government, just as there were to the episcopal and presbyterian forms. The first objection to the congregational scheme is that it disregards the biblical evidence for apostolic (and hence episcopal) authority. For example, Paul did appoint elders (Acts 14:23) and instructed Titus to do the same (Titus 1:5). In addition, on many of the occasions when Paul spoke or wrote to the churches, he was not simply offering advice or counsel. He virtually commanded them to do what he said.³⁵

Second, it is noted that there was a separation of the offices of bishop, elder, and deacon rather early in church history. The bishops were accorded a special status and authority. If we maintain that this trend was not already present within the body of Christ in New Testament days, we are making the rather large assumption that the church very quickly departed from its New Testament foundations.³⁶

Finally, while it is true that the letters of Paul are addressed to whole congregations rather than their leaders, what of Revelation 2-3, John's letters to the seven churches? These letters were addressed to the "angel" or "messenger" of the respective congregations, presumably the ruling elder in each case.

Nongovernment

A final view needs to be considered briefly. Actually, those who hold it do not advocate a particular form of church government as much as they advocate what might best be termed nongovernment. Certain

33. Ibid. pp.905-06.

34. Hiscox, *New Directory*, pp. 155ff.

35. Harris, *Encyclopedia of Christianity*, vol. 2, p. 490.

36. Morris, *Encyclopedia of Christianity*, vol. 2, p. 484.

groups, such as the Quakers (Friends) and the Plymouth Brethren, deny that the church has a need for a concrete or visible form. Accordingly, they have **virtually** eliminated all governmental structure. They stress instead the inner working of the Holy Spirit; he exerts his influence upon and guides individual believers in a direct fashion rather than through organizations or institutions.

Quakers emphasize the concept of "inner light." Since church membership has strictly minimal significance, there are no explicit rules for joining. In the local groups there may be elders or overseers who have certain responsibilities. Meetings are held to determine courses of action. However, no votes are ever taken. Instead, the decisions are made by a mutual agreement produced by the Holy Spirit.³⁷

The Plymouth Brethren virtually eliminate the visible church. They hold that the church exists on earth primarily in its invisible form, which is made up of all true believers. Thus, there is no need for an organization involving **specific** officeholders as such. The presidency of the Holy Spirit is the ruling force.³⁸

In each of these groups there is a concerted effort to eliminate as much structural organization as possible. They rely upon the Holy Spirit to work in a direct fashion, to lead them to conviction of what he wants done. Those who hold this position are to be commended for accentuating the role of the Holy Spirit and the need to rely upon him. However, their assumption of a universal direct working of the Spirit is not justified by the biblical evidence. Moreover, the degree of sanctification and sensitivity to the Holy Spirit which they posit of the members of a congregation is an unrealistic ideal. The main issue here is whether we regard the Bible or some more direct communication by the Holy Spirit as God's primary guide for our lives. In keeping with the principle that has marked the whole of our study thus far, we consider Scripture to be the most important means of revelation.

Constructing a System of Church Government for Today

Attempts to develop a structure of church government which adheres to the authority of the Bible encounter difficulty at two points. The first is the lack of didactic material. There is no prescriptive exposition of

37. Rufus M. Jones, *The Faith and Practice of the Quakers*, 3rd ed. (London: Methuen, 1928), pp. 54-69.

38. Clarence B. Bass, *The Doctrine of the Church in the Theology of J.A. Darby with Special Reference to Its Contribution to the Plymouth Brethren Movement* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University Microfilms, 1952), p. 116.

what the government of the church is to be like. There simply is nothing comparable to, say, Paul's elucidation of the doctrines of human sinfulness and justification by faith. The churches are not commanded to adopt a particular form of church order. The only didactic passages on church government are Paul's enumerations of basic qualifications for offices which already existed (1 Tim. 3: 1-13; Titus 1:5-9). Although it is preferable to build on the basis of didactic or prescriptive rather than narrative or descriptive passages, in this case we have little choice.

When we turn to examine the descriptive passages, we find³⁹ a second problem: there is no unitary pattern. On the one hand, there are strongly democratic elements, a fact pointed out by the advocates of the congregational form. There also are strongly monarchical elements, particularly the apostles' appointing and ordaining officers and instructing the churches. These passages are highlighted by those who favor the episcopal approach. From still other passages we conclude that the elders had a strong role.

It is probably safe to say that the evidence from the New Testament is inconclusive; nowhere in the New Testament do we find a picture closely resembling any of the fully developed systems of today. It is likely that in those days church government was not very highly developed, indeed, that local congregations were rather loosely knit groups. There may well have been rather wide varieties of governmental arrangements. Each church adopted a pattern which fit its individual situation.

It should be borne in mind that at this point the church was just coming into being; it was not as yet sharply distinguished from Judaism. The pragmatic needs in a period of establishment are, naturally, quite different from those in a later stage of development. Anyone who has served as the first pastor of a church, particularly one made up of new Christians, knows that there are occasions when delegation and committee work simply are not practical.

Most of the churches in the New Testament were established by itinerant missionaries. Thus, there was no fixed and permanent ministry. Given these circumstances, it was natural for the apostles to exercise immense and unilateral authority. It later became possible and necessary, however, to establish a permanent and resident ministry. In one sense, this should not have been necessary. Ideally, the universal priesthood of all believers should have obviated the need for offices of authority. The ideal was not at this point practical, however.

Initially, as we would expect, the pattern of the synagogue, that is, a system of elders, was adopted. This pattern did not become universal, however. In the Greek settings, the office of bishop tended to predominate. In addition, there were some modifying factors already at work producing a more democratic pattern.

Even if it were clear that there is one exclusive pattern of organization in the New Testament, that pattern would not necessarily be normative for us today. It would be merely the pattern which was, not the pattern which must be. But as matters stand, there is so much variation in the descriptions of the New Testament churches that we cannot discover an authoritative pattern. We must therefore turn to the principles which we find in the New Testament, and attempt to construct our governmental system upon them.

We must ask two questions if we are to construct our system in this fashion. First, in what direction was church government moving within the New Testament period? Is there anything which would indicate the ultimate outcome? We can discern in the New Testament the beginnings of a movement to ameliorate the situation of women and slaves. Is there a similar movement to improve church government? If so, we might be able to infer the ideal at which the movement was aiming, although we might have difficulty ascertaining just how far it was intended to progress. Here unfortunately we have little to go on. We know that the church originally took over the pattern of the Jewish synagogue: a group of elders served as rulers. We also know that while the church was in its infancy, the apostle Paul sometimes had to take a directive approach. Other than that we know little. There is no indication that the church was moving toward a specific form of church government.

The second question we must ask is, What are the reasons for church government? What values is it intended to promote and preserve? As has been our approach all along, we will look to the Bible for authoritative answers. Once we have determined what Scripture has to say on the matter, we will be able, in accordance with our guidelines for *contemporizing* the biblical message,³⁹ to construct a model of church government suitable for today.

One principle that is evident in the New Testament, and particularly in 1 Corinthians, is the value of order. The situation at Corinth, where total individuality tended to take over, was not very desirable. At its worst it was downright destructive. It was necessary, then, to have some control over the highly individualized ways in which spirituality was being expressed (1 Cor. 14:40). It was also desirable to have certain persons responsible for specific ministries. We are reminded here of the situation in Acts 6, where we are told that seven men were appointed to be in charge of the ministry to widows.

Another principle is the priesthood of all believers.⁴⁰ Each person is

39. See chap. 5.

40. Cyril Eastwood, *The Priesthood Of All Believers* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1962), pp. 238-57.

capable of relating to God directly. Several texts teach this truth either explicitly or implicitly (Rom. 5: 1-5; 1 Tim. 2:5; Heb. 4: 14-16). There is no need of any special intermediary. All have redemptive access to the Lord. And what is true of the initiation of the Christian life is also true of its continuation. Each believer can know God's will directly.

Finally, the idea that each person is important to the whole body is implicit throughout the New Testament and explicit in passages like Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12. The multiplicity of gifts suggests that the input into decision making should be broadly based. The Book of Acts stresses group consensus (Acts 4:32; 15:22). There is a special sense of fellowship whenever all the members of a community feel that they have played a significant part in determining what is to be done.

It is my judgment that the congregational form of church government most nearly fulfils the principles which have been laid down. It takes seriously the principle of the priesthood and spiritual competency of all believers. It also takes seriously the promise that the indwelling Spirit will guide all believers.

At the same time, the need for orderliness suggests that a degree of representative government is necessary. In some situations leaders must be chosen to act on behalf of the group. Those chosen should always be conscious of their answerability to those whom they represent; and where possible, major issues should be brought to the membership as a whole to decide.

We may think of the episcopal system as a structuring of the church along monarchical or imperial lines. The presbyterian form is like a representative democracy, the congregational a direct democracy. It is not surprising that the episcopal system developed and thrived during the days of monarchies. Monarchy was the system of government to which people were accustomed and with which they were probably most comfortable. In a day of widespread education and political interest, however, people will function best within a presbyterian or congregational system.

It might be concluded that, since most national democracies today are representative democracies, the presbyterian system would be the most suitable form of church government. But local churches are less like national governments than like local governments which hold open hearings and town meetings. The value of direct involvement by well-informed people is considerable. And the principle that decisions are best made by those who will be most affected likewise argues for the congregational pattern of local autonomy.

Two situations call for some qualification of our conclusion. (1) In a very large church many members may not have sufficient knowledge of the issues and candidates for office to make well-informed decisions, and

large congregational meetings may be impractical. Here a greater use of the representative approach will probably be necessary. Even in this situation, however, the elected servants must be ever mindful that they are responsible to the whole body. (2) In a group of immature Christians where there is an absence of trained and competent lay leadership, a pastor may need to take more initiative than is ordinarily the case. But he should also constantly work at instructing and building up the congregation so that they might become increasingly involved in the affairs of the church.

The Initiatory Rite of the Church: Baptism

The Basic Views of Baptism

Baptism as a Means of Saving Grace

Baptism as a Sign and Seal of the Covenant

Baptism as a Token of Salvation

Resolving the Issues

The Meaning of Baptism

The Subjects of Baptism

The Mode of Baptism

Virtually all Christian churches practice the rite of baptism. They do so in large part because Jesus in his final commission commanded the apostles and the church to “go ... and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (**Matt. 28:19**). It is almost universally agreed that baptism is in some way connected with the beginning of the Christian life; it is one’s initiation into the universal, invisible church as well as the local, visible church. Yet there is also considerable disagreement regarding baptism.

Three basic questions about baptism have sparked great controversy among Christians: (1) What is the meaning of baptism? What does it actually accomplish? (2) Who are the proper subjects of baptism? Is it to be restricted to those who are capable of exercising conscious faith in Jesus Christ, or may it also be administered to children and even infants; and if so, on what basis? (3) What is the proper mode of baptism? Must it be by dipping (immersion), or are other methods (pouring, sprinkling) acceptable? It could be said that these questions have been arranged in decreasing order of significance, since our conclusion as to the meaning and value of the act of baptism will go far toward determining our conclusions on the other issues.

The Basic Views of Baptism

Baptism as a Means of Saving Grace

Before we attempt to resolve these issues, it will be wise for us to sketch the various ways in which Christians interpret baptism. Some groups believe that the act of baptism in water actually conveys grace to the person baptized. Those who espouse this view speak of baptismal regeneration: baptism actually effects a transformation bringing a person from spiritual death to life. The most extreme form of this view is to be found in traditional Catholicism. We will, however, focus on a classic Lutheran position which shares many features with Catholicism.

Baptism, according to the **sacramentalists**, is a means by which God imparts saving grace; it results in the remission of **sins**.¹ By either awakening or strengthening faith, baptism effects the washing of regeneration. In the Lutheran understanding, the sacrament is ineffectual unless faith is already present. In this respect, the Lutheran position differs from the Catholic position, which holds that baptism confers grace *ex opere operato*, that is, the sacrament works of itself. The Lutheran view, in other words, emphasizes that faith is a prerequisite, while the Catholic doctrine stresses that the sacrament is self-sufficient. The sacrament, it should be emphasized, is not a physical infusion of some spiritual substance into the soul of the person baptized.

A comparison is often drawn between the sacrament of baptism and the preaching of the Word. Preaching awakens faith by entering the ear to strike the heart. Baptism, on the other hand, reaches and moves the heart via the eye.

The sacrament, it must be understood, is God's doing. It is not a work

1. Franz Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1953), vol. 3, p. 264.

offered to God by the **person** being baptized. Nor is it a work performed by the minister or priest. That is to say, the baptizer does not pour some form of grace into the person being baptized. Rather, baptism is the Holy Spirit's work of initiating people into the church: "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit" (1 Cor. 12: 13).²

Romans 6: 1-11 is crucial to the sacramental & view of baptism. In their interpretation of this passage baptism is not simply a picture of our being united with Christ in his death and resurrection. Rather, it actually unites us with Christ. When Paul says, "All of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death" (v. 3), he means that baptism actually unites us with Christ's death. And it will also unite us with him in his resurrection (v. 5).³

In addition to one's being objectively united with Christ once and for all by baptism, the sacrament also has a subjective effect on the believer. This effect will last throughout life, even though baptism is administered only once. Believers will often be reminded of it. This, in fact, is what Paul is doing in Romans 6:3-5 as well as in Galatians 3:26-27. The knowledge that one has been baptized and therefore is united with Christ in his death and resurrection will be a constant source of encouragement and inspiration to the **believer**.⁴

The subjects of baptism, according to Lutheranism, fall into two general groups. First, there are adults who have come to faith in Christ. Explicit examples are found in Acts 2:41 and 8:36-38. Second, children and even infants were also baptized in New Testament times. Evidence is seen in the fact that children were brought to Jesus to be touched (Mark 10: 13-16). In addition, we read in Acts that whole households were baptized (Acts 11:14 [see 10:48]; 16:15, 31-34; 18:8). It is reasonable to assume that most of these households were not composed exclusively of adults. Children are part of the people of God, just as surely as, in the Old Testament, they were part of the nation of Israel.⁵

That children were baptized in the New Testament is precedent for the practice today. Moreover, the baptism of children is necessary. For all persons are born into this world with original sin, which is sufficient grounds for condemnation. The taint of this sin must be removed. Since children are not capable of exercising the faith needed for regeneration, it is essential that they receive the cleansing wrought by baptism.

In Roman Catholic theology, unbaptized infants who die cannot enter

2. Ibid., p. 270.

3. Ibid., p. 268.

4. Ibid., p. 275.

5. Ibid., p. 277.

into heaven. They are consigned to a place called *limbus infantium*. There they do not suffer the pains and deprivation of hell, but neither do they enjoy the benefits of the blessedness of heaven.⁶ The Lutheran theologian, on the other hand, is not so sure about the status of unbaptized infants. There is a possibility that God has a means, not fully revealed to us, of producing faith in the unbaptized children of Christians. We are reminded that girls in the Old Testament, though they were not circumcised, were somehow able to enjoy the benefits of the covenant. There is no similar proposal regarding the children of unbelievers, however. Nor is there any dogmatism about any of these matters, since they have not been revealed to us, but are among the unsearchable things of God.⁷ There is, the Lutheran observes, a long history of the practice of infant baptism. As a matter of fact, it can be traced back in extrabiblical sources at least to the second century A.D. There is thus good precedent for the practice. Since we do not know the details of God's dealing with unbaptized children and infants, it is advisable for Christians to baptize their offspring.

The Lutheran theologian is aware of the charge of inconsistency between the practice of infant baptism and the insistence upon justification by faith alone. This apparent dilemma is generally dealt with in one of two ways. One is the suggestion that infants who are baptized may possess an unconscious faith. Faith, it is maintained, does not necessarily require reasoning power and self-consciousness. Luther observed that faith does not cease when we are asleep, preoccupied, or engaged in strenuous work. Jesus teaches that children can have implicit faith. Evidence is found in Matthew 18:6 ("one of these little ones who believe in me"); 19: 14; Mark 10:14; and Luke 18:16–17. Another proof is the prophecy that John the Baptist "will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb" (Luke 1:15). Finally, we have John's words, "I write to you, children, because you know the Father" (1 John 2: 13).⁸ The other means of dealing with the apparent inconsistency is to maintain that it is the faith of the parents that is involved when a child is baptized. Some would even say that the church has faith on behalf of the child. Infant baptism, then, rests on vicarious faith?

In Roman Catholicism, this dilemma does not occur. For according to Catholic doctrine, baptism takes effect *ex opere operato*. Faith is not really necessary. The only requisites are that someone present the child and a priest administer the sacrament properly.¹⁰

6. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, part 3, supplement, question 69, articles 4-7.

7. Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 3, p. 278.

8. Ibid., vol. 2, pp. 448-49.

9. Ibid., vol. 3, p. 285.

10. Ibid., p. 256.

In the Lutheran view, the mode of baptism is not of great importance. It must of course involve water, but that is the only crucial factor. To be sure, the primary meaning of the word βαπτίζω is "to dip." There are other meanings of the word, however. Consequently we are uncertain what method was used in biblical times, or even whether there was only one method. Since there is no essential, indispensable symbolism in the mode, baptism is not tied to one form.

Baptism as a Sign and Seal of the Covenant

The position held by traditional Reformed and Presbyterian theologians is tied closely to the concept of the covenant. They regard the sacraments, of which baptism is one, as signs and seals of God's grace. Sacraments are not means of grace *ex opere operato* or in virtue of some inherent content of the rite itself. Rather, as the Belgic Confession says, they are "visible signs and seals of an inward and invisible thing, by means whereof God works in us by the power of the Holy Spirit."¹¹ In particular, they are signs and seals of God's working out the covenant which he has established with the human race. Like circumcision in the Old Testament, baptism makes us sure of God's promises.

The significance of the sacrament of baptism is not quite as clear-cut to the Reformed and Presbyterian as to the sacramentalist. The covenant, God's promise of grace, is the basis, the source, of justification and salvation; baptism is the act of faith by which we are brought into that covenant and hence experience its benefits. The act of baptism is both the means of initiation into the covenant and a sign of salvation. Charles Hodge puts it this way: "God, on his part, promises to grant the benefits signified in baptism to all adults who receive that sacrament in the exercise of faith, and to all infants who, when they arrive at maturity, remain faithful to the vows made in their name when they were baptized."¹² In the case of adults, these benefits are absolute, while the salvation of infants is conditional upon future continuance in the vows made.

The subjects of baptism are in many ways the same as in the sacramentalists' view. On the one hand, all believing adults are to be baptized. They have already come to faith. Examples in Scripture are those who responded to Peter's invitation at Pentecost, believed, and were baptized (Acts 2:41) and the Philippian jailor (Acts 16:31-33).¹³ On the other hand,

11. Belgic Confession 33.

12. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), vol. 3, p. 582.

13. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), pp. 631-32.

the children of believing parents are also to be baptized. While the baptism of children is not explicitly commanded in Scripture, it is nonetheless implicitly taught. God made a spiritual covenant with Abraham *and with his seed* (Gen. 17:7). This covenant has continued to this day. In the Old Testament it is always referred to in the singular (e.g., Exod. 2:24; Lev. 26:42). There is only one mediator of the covenant (Acts 4: 12; 10:43). New Testament converts are participants in or heirs to the covenant (Acts 2:39; Rom. 4:13–18; Gal. 3:13–18; Heb. 6:13–18). Thus, the situation of believers both in the New Testament and today is to be understood in terms of the covenant made with Abraham.¹⁴

Since the Old Testament covenant remains in force, its provisions still apply. If children were included in the covenant then, they are also to be included today. We have already observed that the covenant was not only to Abraham, but to his seed as well. Also of significance is the all-embracing character of the Old Testament conception of Israel. Children were present when the covenant was renewed (Deut. 29:10–13). Joshua read the writings of Moses in the hearing of the entire congregation—“all the assembly of Israel, and the women, and the little ones” (Josh. 8:35). When the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jabez, and he spoke the Lord’s word of promise to all Israel, the children were present (2 Chron. 20: 13). All of the congregation, including even nursing infants (Joel 2:16), heard Joel’s promise of the outpouring of the Spirit upon their sons and daughters (v. 28).

A key step in the argument now occurs: as circumcision was the sign of the covenant in the Old Testament, baptism is the sign in the New Testament. Baptism has been substituted for circumcision.¹⁵ It is clear that circumcision has been put away; it no longer avails (Acts 15:1–2; 21:21; Gal. 2:3–5; 5:2–6; 6: 12–13, 15). Baptism has taken the place of circumcision as the initiatory rite into the covenant. It was Christ who made this substitution. He commissioned his disciples to go and evangelize *and baptize* (Matt. 28:19). Just as circumcision was required of proselytes converting to Judaism, so baptism is required of those converting to Christianity. It is their mark of entrance into the covenant. The two rites clearly have the same meaning. That circumcision pointed to a cutting away of sin and a change of heart is seen in numerous Old Testament references to circumcision of the heart, that is, spiritual circumcision as opposed to physical circumcision (Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Jer. 4:4; 9:25–26; Ezek. 44:7, 9). Baptism is similarly pictured as a washing away of sin. In Acts 2:38 Peter instructs his hearers, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your

14. Ibid., pp. 632–33.

15. Ibid., p. 634.

sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” In 1 Peter 3:21 he writes, “Baptism ... now saves you.” Paul refers to “the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5) and also links baptism with spiritual revival (Rom. 6:4). Conclusive evidence for the supplanting of circumcision by baptism is found in Colossians 2: 1–12: “In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of flesh in the circumcision of Christ; and you were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead.” Certainly this passage indicates that baptism now suffices as the sign of the covenant.

Two additional observations need to be made here. First, those who hold that baptism is essentially a sign and seal of the covenant claim that it is not legitimate to impose upon a child the requirements incumbent upon an adult. Second, those who hold this view emphasize the objective aspect of the sacrament. What really matters is not one’s subjective reaction, but one’s objective initiation into the covenant with its promise of salvation.¹⁶

In the Reformed and Presbyterian approach to baptism, the mode is a relatively inconsequential consideration. The verb βαπτίζω is ambiguous. What was important in New Testament times was the fact and results of baptism, not the manner in which it was administered.¹⁷

There are indications that the means used in New Testament times was not, indeed, could not have been, exclusively immersion. For example, would John have been physically capable of immersing all those who came to him? Did the Philippian jailor leave his post in the prison to go where there was sufficient water for immersion? Was water brought to Cornelius’s house in sufficient quantities for immersion? When Paul was baptized, did he leave the place where Ananias found him? These are questions which suggest that immersion may not have been practiced in every case.¹⁸

Moreover, immersion is not required for preservation of the symbolism of baptism. It is not primarily death and resurrection which are being set forth in the rite of baptism. Rather, the central concept depicted is purification. Any of the various Old Testament means of ablution—immersion, pouring, sprinkling—will picture purification. They are the διαφόροις βαπτισμοῖς referred to in Hebrews 9:10. In light of all of these considerations, we are free to use whatever means is appropriate and available.¹⁹

16. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 552–55.

17. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 630.

18. Ibid.

19. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 533–34.

Baptism as a Token of Salvation

The third view we will examine sees baptism as a token, an outward symbol or indication of the inward change which has been effected in the believer.²⁰ It serves as a public testimony of one's faith in Jesus Christ. It is an initiatory *rite*—we are baptized *into the name* of Christ.²¹

The act of baptism was commanded by Christ (Matt. 28:19–20). Since it was *ordained* by him, it is properly understood as an *ordinance* rather than a sacrament. It does not produce any spiritual change in the one baptized. We continue to practice baptism simply because Christ commanded it and because it serves as a form of proclamation. It confirms the fact of one's salvation to oneself and affirms it to others.

The act of baptism conveys no direct spiritual benefit or blessing. In particular, we are not regenerated through baptism, for baptism *presupposes* faith and the salvation to which faith leads. It is, then, a testimony that one has already been regenerated. If there is a spiritual benefit, it is the fact that baptism brings us into membership or participation in the local church.²²

In the view of those who regard baptism as basically an outward symbol, the question of the proper subjects of baptism is of great importance. Candidates for baptism will already have experienced the new birth on the basis of faith. They will have exhibited credible evidence of regeneration. While it is not the place of the church or the person administering baptism to sit in judgment upon the candidate, there is an obligation to determine at least that the candidate understands the meaning of the ceremony. This can be determined by requiring the candidate to give an oral testimony or answer certain questions. Precedent for such caution before administering baptism can be found in John the Baptist's words to the Pharisees and **Sadducees** who came to him for baptism: 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit that befits repentance' (Matt. 3:7–8).²³

The baptism of which we are speaking is *believers'* baptism. Note that this is not necessarily *adult* baptism. It is baptism of those who have met the conditions for salvation (i.e., repentance and active faith). Evidence for this position can be found in the New Testament. First, there is a

negative argument or an argument from silence. The only people whom the New Testament specifically identifies by name as having been baptized were adults at the time of their **baptism**.²⁴ The arguments that "there must surely have been children involved when whole households were baptized," and "'we cannot say for sure that no children were baptized,'" do not carry much weight with those who hold to believers' baptism; and, indeed, such arguments seem flimsy at best. Further, Scripture makes it clear that personal, conscious faith in Christ is prerequisite to baptism. In the Great Commission, the command to baptize follows the command to disciple (Matt. 28:19). John the Baptist required repentance and confession of sin (Matt. 3:2, 6). In the conclusion of his Pentecost sermon, Peter called for repentance, then baptism (Acts 2:37–41). Belief followed by baptism is the pattern in Acts 8:12; 18:8; and 19:1–7.²⁵ All these considerations lead to the conclusion that responsible believers are the only people who are to be baptized.

Regarding the mode of baptism, there is some variation. Certain groups, particularly the Mennonites, practice believers' baptism, but by modes other than immersion.²⁶ Probably the majority of those who hold to believers' baptism utilize immersion exclusively, however, and are generally identified as Baptists. Where baptism is understood as a symbol and testimony of the salvation which has occurred in the life of the individual, it is not surprising that immersion is the predominant mode, since it best pictures the believer's resurrection from spiritual death.²⁷

Resolving the Issues

We now come to the issues which we raised at the beginning of this chapter. We must ask ourselves which of the positions we have sketched is the most tenable in the light of all of the relevant evidence. The question of the nature and meaning of baptism must precede all others.

The Meaning of Baptism

Is baptism a means of regeneration, an essential to salvation? A number of texts seem to support such a position. On closer examination,

24. Ibid., p. 95 1.

25. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, "Baptism, Believers'," in *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Everett F. Harrison (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1960), p. 86.

26. John C. Wenger, *Introduction to Theology* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald, 1954), pp. 237–40.

27. Paul King Jewett, "Baptism (Baptist View)," in *Encyclopedia of Christianity* ed. Edwin H. Palmer (Marshalltown, Del.: National Foundation for Christian Education, 1964), vol. 1, p. 520.

20. H. E. Dana, *A Manual Of Ecclesiology* (Kansas City, Kans.: Central Seminary, 1944), pp. 281–82.

21. Edward T. Hiscox, *The New Directory for Baptist Churches* (Philadelphia: Judson, 1894), p. 121.

22. Augustus H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Westwood, N.J.: Revell, 1907), p. 945.

23. Ibid.

however, the persuasiveness of this position becomes less telling. In Mark 16: 16 we read, "He who believes and is baptized will be saved"; note, however, that the second half of the verse does not mention baptism at all: 'but he who does not believe will be condemned.' It is simply absence of belief, not of baptism, which is correlated with condemnation. According to the canons of inductive logic, if a phenomenon (e.g., salvation) occurs on one occasion but not on another, the one circumstance in which they differ is the cause of the phenomenon. **Thus**, while Mark 16: 16 is a forceful argument that belief is necessary for salvation, it is not so clear on the matter of baptism. An additional consideration is the fact that the entire verse (and indeed the whole passage, verses 9-20) is not found in the best texts.

Another verse cited in support of the concept of baptismal regeneration, the idea that baptism is a means of saving grace, is John 3:5: "Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." But there is no clear indication that baptism is in view here. We must ask what being "born of water" would have meant to Nicodemus, and our conclusion, while not unequivocal, seems to favor the idea of cleansing or **purification**, not baptism.²⁸ Note that the emphasis throughout the passage is upon the Spirit and that there is no further reference to water. The key factor is the contrast between the **supernatural** (Spirit) and the **natural** (flesh): "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (v. 6). Jesus explains that to be born anew is to be born of the Spirit. This working of the Spirit, like the blowing of the wind, is not fully comprehensible (w. 7-8). In view of the overall context, it appears that being born of water is synonymous with being born of the Spirit. The *καί* in verse 5, then, is an instance of the ascensive use of the conjunction, and the verse should be translated, "Unless a man is born of water, even the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God."

A third passage which needs to be taken into account is 1 Peter 3:21: "Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a clear conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ." Note that this verse is actually a denial that the rite of baptism has any effect in itself. It saves only in

28. Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), pp. 2 15-16. An Anglican, Morris comments on the suggestion that Jesus is referring to Christian baptism: "The weak point is that Nicodemus could not possibly have perceived an allusion to an as yet non-existent sacrament. It is difficult to think that Jesus would have spoken in such a way that His meaning could not possibly be grasped. His purpose was not to mystify but to enlighten. In any case the whole thrust of the passage is to put the emphasis on the activity of the Spirit, not on any rite of the church." See also D. W. B. Robinson, "Born of Water and Spirit: Does John 3:5 Refer to Baptism?" *Reformed Theological Review* 25, no. 1 (January-April 1966): 15-23.

that it is "an appeal to God," an act of faith acknowledging dependence upon him. The real basis of our salvation is Christ's resurrection.

Then there are the passages in the Book of Acts where repentance and baptism are linked together. Probably the most crucial is Peter's response on Pentecost to the question, "Brethren, what shall we do?" (Acts 2:37). He replied, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (v. 38). The emphasis in the remainder of the narrative, however, is that three thousand received his word-then they were baptized. In Peter's next recorded sermon (3:17-26), the emphasis is upon repentance, conversion, and acceptance of Christ; there is no mention of baptism. The key verse (v. 19, which is parallel to 2:38 except for the significant fact that there is no command to be baptized) reads: "Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord." The kerygma in chapter 4 centers upon the cruciality of belief in Jesus; once again there is no mention of baptism (w. 8-12). And when the Philippian jailor asked, "What must I do to be saved?" (Acts 16:30), Paul answered simply, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household" (v. 3 1). He did not mention baptism. (We should not, however, pass over the fact that the whole household was baptized shortly thereafter.) While there is a close and important connection between repentance and conversion on the one hand, and baptism on the other, these passages in Acts seem to indicate that the connection is not inseparable or absolute. Thus, unlike repentance and conversion, baptism is not indispensable to salvation. It seems, rather, that baptism may be an expression or a consequence of conversion.

Finally, we must examine Titus 3:5. Here Paul writes that God "saved us, not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit." If this is an allusion to baptism, it is vague. It seems, rather, that "the washing of regeneration" refers to a cleansing and forgiveness of sins. Baptism is simply a symbolic portrayal, not the means, of this forgiveness. We conclude that there is little biblical evidence to support the idea that baptism is a means of regeneration or a channel of grace essential to salvation.

Moreover, certain specific difficulties attach to the concept of baptismal regeneration. When all the implications are spelled out, this concept contradicts the principle of salvation by grace, which is so clearly taught in the New Testament. The insistence that baptism is necessary for salvation is something of a parallel to the insistence of the Judaizers that circumcision was necessary for salvation, a contention which Paul vigorously rejected in Galatians 5:1-12. Further, with the exception of the

Great Commission, Jesus did not include the topic of baptism in his preaching and teaching about the kingdom. Indeed, the thief on the cross was not, and could not have been, baptized. Yet he was assured by Jesus, "Today you will be with me in Paradise." It should also be noted that the attempts to reconcile the concept of baptismal regeneration with the biblical principle of salvation by faith alone have proved inadequate. Neither the argument that infants who are baptized possess an unconscious faith nor the argument that the faith of the parents (or the church) avails is very forceful. On a variety of grounds, then, the view that baptism is a means of salvific grace is untenable.

What of the view that baptism is a continuation or a supplanting of the Old Testament rite of circumcision as a mark of one's entrance into the covenant? It is significant here that the New Testament tends to depreciate the external act of circumcision. It argues that circumcision is to be replaced, not by another external act (e.g., baptism), but by an internal act of the heart. Paul points out that Old Testament circumcision was an outward formality denoting Jewishness, but the true Jew is one who is a Jew inwardly: "He is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart, spiritual and not literal. His praise is not from men but from God" (Rom. 2:29). Paul is asserting not merely that circumcision has passed, but that the whole framework of which circumcision was a part has been replaced. Whereas Oscar Cullmann²⁹ and others have argued vigorously that baptism is the New Testament equivalent of circumcision, George Beasley-Murray has pointed out that baptism actually "did away with the need of circumcision because it signified the union of the believer with Christ, and in union with Him the old nature was sloughed off. A lesser circumcision has been replaced by a greater; the spiritual circumcision promised under the old covenant has become a reality under the new through baptism."³⁰ If anything has taken the place of external circumcision, then, it is not baptism but internal circumcision. Yet there is, as Paul suggests in Colossians 2:11-12, a close relationship between spiritual circumcision and baptism.

What, then, is the meaning of baptism? To answer this question, we note, first, that there is a strong connection between baptism and our being united with Christ in his death and resurrection. Paul emphasizes this point in Romans 6:1-11. The use of the aorist tense suggests that at some specific moment the believer actually becomes linked to Christ's death and resurrection: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried

²⁹ Oscar Cullmann, *Baptism in the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1950), pp. 56-70.

³⁰ George R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (London: Macmillan, 1962), p. 315.

therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life" (w. 3-4). We note, second, that the Book of Acts often ties belief and baptism together. Baptism ordinarily follows upon or virtually coincides with belief. Paul at the time of his conversion was struck blind. When Ananias at God's behest went to the house in the street called Straight, spoke to Paul, and laid hands upon him, something like scales fell from Paul's eyes and he regained his sight. Then he rose, was baptized, and took food (Acts 9:18-19). Many years later, in recounting this event to a mob in Jerusalem, Paul quoted Ananias's words to him: "And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on his name" (Acts 22:16). Ananias's words suggest that in baptism one is calling upon the name of the Lord. Baptism is itself, then, an act of faith and commitment. While faith is possible without baptism (i.e., salvation does not depend upon one's being baptized), baptism is a natural accompaniment and the completion of faith.

Baptism is, then, an act of faith and a testimony that one has been united with Christ in his death and resurrection, that one has experienced spiritual circumcision. It is a public indication of one's commitment to Christ. Karl Barth makes a straightforward presentation of this point in the very first words of his remarkable little book *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism*: "*Christian* baptism is in essence the representation [*Abbild*] of a man's renewal through his participation by means of the power of the Holy Spirit in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and therewith the representation of man's association with Christ, with the covenant of grace which is concluded and realized in Him, and with the fellowship of His Church."³¹

Baptism is a powerful form of proclamation. It is a setting forth of the truth of what Christ has done; it is a "word in water" testifying to the believers participation in the death and resurrection of Christ (Rom. 6:3-5). It is a symbol rather than merely a sign, for it is a graphic picture of the truth it conveys. There is no inherent connection between a sign and what it represents. It is only by convention, for example, that green traffic lights tell us to go rather than to stop. By contrast, the sign at a railroad crossing is more than a sign; it is also a symbol, for it is a rough picture of what it is intended to indicate, the crossing of a road and a railroad track. Baptism is a symbol, not a mere sign, for it actually pictures the believer's death and resurrection with Christ.

³¹ Karl Barth, *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism*, trans. Ernest A. Payne (London: SCM, 1948), p. 9.

The Subjects of Baptism

We turn next to the question of the proper subjects of baptism. The issue here is whether to hold to infant baptism or believers' baptism (i.e., the position that baptism should be restricted to those who have confessed faith in Christ's atoning work). Note that our dichotomy is not between infant and adult baptism, for those who reject infant baptism stipulate that candidates for baptism must actually have exercised faith. We contend that believers' baptism is the correct position.

One of the most significant considerations is the lack of any positive New Testament indication that infants were baptized. An impressive admission was made in *Baptism and Confirmation Today*, a report of the Joint Committees on Baptism, Confirmation, and Holy Communion of the Church of England:

It is clear that the recipients of Baptism were normally adults and not infants; and it must be admitted that there is no conclusive evidence in the New Testament for the Baptism of infants. All we can say is that it is possible that the "households" said to have been baptized *may* have included children (Acts 16:15, 33; 1 Cor. 1:16). But at any rate it is clear that the *doctrine* of Baptism in the New Testament is stated in relation to the Baptism of adults, as was also the case (with two or three exceptions) in the writers of the first three centuries. . . . In every recorded case of Baptism in the New Testament, the Gospel has been heard and accepted, and the condition of faith (and presumably of repentance) has been consciously fulfilled prior to the reception of the **Sacrament**.³²

A large number of New Testament scholars now concede this point. They make no assertion stronger than that it is possible that the baptisms of whole households included infants.

Some scholars take a more vigorous approach, however. Among them is Joachim Jeremias, who has argued that there must have been infants in the households which were baptized. With regard to Acts 11:14 (see 10:48); 16:15; 16:31-34; 18:8; and 1 Corinthians 1:16, he states, "In **all** five cases the linguistic evidence forbids us to restrict the concept of the 'house' to the adult members of the family. On the contrary it shows plainly that it is *the complete family including all its members* which receives baptism."³³ Beasley-Murray points out, however, that this line of argument, while it seems reasonable, leads to conclusions beyond what Jeremias intends, for the households in question experienced more than

32. *Baptism and Confirmation Today* (London: SCM, 1955), p. 34.

33. Joachim Jeremias, *The Origins of Infant Baptism: A Further Study in Reply to Kurt Aland*, trans. Dorothea M. Barton (London: SCM, 1965), p. 25.

baptism. Beasley-Murray maintains, for example, that "on Jeremias' principle no doubt is to be entertained concerning the meaning of [Acts 10:44-48]: *all* the house of Cornelius heard the word, *all* received the Spirit, *all* spoke with tongues, *all* were baptized; the infants present also heard the word, received the Spirit, spoke with tongues and so were baptized. To this *no* exception is **permissible!**"³⁴ There is, of course, another interpretation of this passage and others like it. It is possible that *all* of the members of these households met the conditions for baptism: they believed and repented. In that case, of course, all of the individuals involved had reached an age of understanding and responsibility.

Another argument used in support of infant baptism is that the children who were brought to Jesus that he might lay his hands on them (Matt. 19:13-15; Mark 10:13-16; Luke 18:15-17) were actually being brought to be baptized. The Special Commission on Baptism of the Church of Scotland contended in its 1955 interim report that Jesus' expression "little ones who believe in me" (Matt. 18:6) signifies that they had been "baptized into Christ" (Gal. 3:27).³⁵ The report further sought to demonstrate that Matthew 18:3; Mark 10:15; and Luke 18:17 are parallel to John 3:3 and 3:5, and that all have reference to baptism.³⁶ This is an elaboration of Jeremias's argument. Beasley-Murray comments on this section of the report: "Some of that exegesis appears to me to be so improbable, I cannot understand how a responsible body of mid-twentieth century theologians could permit it to be published in their **name**."³⁷

Both Jeremias and Cullmann see Mark 10:13-16 and the parallel passages in terms of the *Sitz im Leben*, the situation of the early church. They believe that these narratives were included in the Gospels to justify the church's practice of infant baptism.³⁸ While analysis and evaluation of this issue go beyond the scope of our *treatise*,³⁹ it is important to observe that the passages in question do not mention baptism. Surely, if the purpose of including them in the Gospels was to justify infant baptism, there would be an explicit reference to baptism somewhere in the immediate context. When Jesus said that whoever would enter the kingdom of heaven must become like a child, he was making a point about the necessity of simple trust, not about baptism.

Finally, we note that the case for baptism of infants rests upon either

34. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism*, p. 315.

35. The Church of Scotland, "Interim Report of the Special Commission on Baptism," May 1955, p. 23.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

37. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism*, p. 311, n. 27.

38. Joachim Jeremias, *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries*, trans. David Cairns (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), p. 51; Cullmann, *Baptism*, pp. 72-78.

39. See Beasley-Murray, *Baptism*, pp. 322ff.

the view that baptism is a means of saving grace or the view that baptism, like Old Testament circumcision, is a sign and seal of entrance into the covenant. Since both of those views were found to be inadequate, we must conclude that infant baptism is untenable. The meaning of baptism requires us to hold to the position of believers' baptism, as does the fact that the New Testament nowhere offers a clear case of an individual being baptized before exercising faith.

The Mode of Baptism

It is not possible to resolve the issue of the proper mode of baptism on the basis of linguistic data. We should note, however, that the predominant meaning of βαπτίζω is "to dip or to plunge under water."⁴⁰ Even Martin Luther and John Calvin acknowledged immersion to be the basic meaning of the term and the original form of baptism practiced by the early church.⁴¹ There are several considerations which argue that immersion was the biblical procedure. John baptized at Aenon "because there was much water there" (John 3:23). When baptized by John, Jesus "came up out of the water" (Mark 1:10). Upon hearing the good news, the Ethiopian eunuch said to Philip, "See, here is water! What is to prevent my being baptized?" (Acts 8:36). Then they both went down into the water, Philip baptized him, and they came up out of the water (vv. 38-39).

But is the fact that immersion was the mode originally employed more than historically authoritative for us? That is, is it also normatively authoritative for us? There is no doubt that the procedure followed in New Testament times was immersion. But does that mean we must practice immersion today? Or are there other possibilities? Those to whom the mode does not seem crucial maintain that there is no essential link between the meaning of baptism and the way in which it is administered. But if, as we stated in our discussion of the meaning, baptism is truly a symbol, and not merely an arbitrary sign, we are not free to change the mode.

In Romans 6:3-5 Paul appears to be contending that there is a significant connection between how baptism is administered (one is lowered into the water and then raised out of it) and what it symbolizes (death to sin and new life in Christ-and beyond that, baptism symbolizes the basis of the believer's death to sin and new life: the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ). Beasley-Murray says:

40. Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1951), vol. 1, pp. 305-06.

41. *What Luther Says*, comp. Ewald M. Plass (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959), vol. 1, pp. 57-58; John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, book 4, chapter 16, section 13.

Despite the frequent denials of exegetes, it is surely reasonable to believe that the reason for Paul's stating that the baptized is *buried* as dead, rather than that he *died* (as in v. 6), is the nature of baptism as immersion. The symbolism of immersion as representing burial is striking, and if baptism is at all to be compared with prophetic symbolism, the parallelism of act and event symbolized is not unimportant. Admittedly such a statement as that of C. H. Dodd, "Immersion is a sort of burial... emergence a sort of **resurrection**," can be made only because the kerygma gives this significance to baptism; its whole meaning is derived from Christ and His redemption-it is the kerygma *in action*, and if the action suitably bodies forth the content of the kerygma, so much the clearer is its speech. But we repeat, the "with Him" of baptism is due to the gospel, not to the *mimesis*. It is "to *His* death": Christ and His dying, Christ and His rising give the rite all its meaning. As one of the earliest of British Baptists put it, to be baptized is to be "dipped for dead in the water."⁴²

One might contend that Beasley-Murray, as a Baptist, is prejudiced on this matter. The same cannot be said, however, of the Reformed scholar Karl Barth, who wrote:

The Greek word βαπτίζω and the German word *taufen* (from *Tiefe*, depth) originally and properly describe the process by which a man or an object is completely immersed in water and then withdrawn from it again. Primitive baptism carried out in this manner had its mode, exactly like the circumcision of the Old Testament, the character of a direct threat to life, succeeded immediately by the corresponding deliverance and preservation, the raising from baptism. One can hardly deny that baptism carried out as immersion-as it was in the West until well on into the Middle Ages-showed what was represented in far more expressive fashion than did the affusion which later became customary, especially when this affusion was reduced from a real wetting to a sprinkling and eventually in practice to a mere moistening with as little water as possible. ... Is the last word on the matter to be, that facility of administration, health, and propriety are important reasons for doing otherwise [i.e., for administering baptism in other than its original form]?⁴³

In light of these considerations, immersionism seems the most adequate of the several positions. While it may not be the only valid form of baptism, it is the form which most fully preserves and accomplishes the meaning of baptism.

Whatever mode be adopted, baptism is not a matter to be taken lightly. It is of great importance, for it is both a sign of the believer's union with Christ and, as a confession of that union, an additional act of faith which serves to cement the more firmly that relationship.

42. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism*, p. 133.

43. Barth, *Teaching*, pp. 9-10.

The Continuing Rite of the Church: The Lord's Supper

Points of Agreement

- Establishment by Christ
- The Necessity of Repetition
- A Form of Proclamation
- A Spiritual Benefit to the Partaker
- Restriction to Followers of Christ
- The Horizontal Dimension

Points of Disagreement

- The Presence of Christ
- The Efficacy of the Rite
- The Proper Administrator
- The Appropriate Recipients
- The Elements to Be Used

Major Views

- The Traditional Roman Catholic View
- The Lutheran View
- The Reformed View
- The Zwinglian View

Dealing with the Issues

- The Presence of Christ
- The Efficacy of the Rite
- The Proper Administrator
- The Appropriate Recipients
- The Elements to Be Used
- The Frequency of Observance

While baptism is the initiatory rite, the Lords Supper is the continuing rite of the visible church. It may be defined, in preliminary fashion, as a rite which Christ himself established for the church to practice as a commemoration of his death.

We immediately encounter a curious fact about the Lord's Supper. Virtually every branch of Christianity practices it. It is a common factor uniting almost all segments of Christianity. Yet on the other hand, there are many different interpretations. Historically, it has actually kept various Christian groups apart. It has that effect at the present time as well. So it is at once a factor which unites and divides Christendom.

Philosophical presuppositions have played a large role in shaping the major views of the Lords Supper. Some of these presuppositions reflect debates and disputes which occurred in medieval times. In many cases, the philosophical positions underlying the presuppositions have been altered or even abandoned. And what is more, today there is far less of an orientation to philosophical issues. Yet, curiously, the theological consequences of medieval philosophical issues linger on. Therefore, it will be important to isolate the presuppositions upon which the differing views of the Lord's Supper rest.

In some cases the subject of the spiritual or practical value of the Lord's Supper has become lost in the dispute over theoretical issues. The theoretical questions are important (they affect the spiritual considerations), and so they ought not to be too quickly dismissed. If, however, we bog down in the technical issues, and do not move on to deal with the practical meaning, we will have missed the whole point of Christ's having established the Supper. It is not sufficient to comprehend what it means. We must also experience what it means.

Points of Agreement

It is well to begin our examination of the Lord's Supper with those matters on which the several traditions or denominational groups agree. It should be emphasized that these points of agreement are broad and highly significant. When we have properly examined them, we will identify the areas of disagreement.

Establishment by Christ

For a long period of time, there was no question that Jesus himself established the Lords Supper. It was simply assumed by all students of the New Testament that the rite goes back to him. The first to call this point seriously into question was H. E. G. Paulus in his commentary on the New Testament (1800-1804) and his life of Jesus (1828). David Strauss likewise denied it in the first edition of his life of Jesus (1835), but admitted its possibility in the later popular edition (1864), when he questioned merely the details.¹ Some form critics in our time also dispute the authenticity of Jesus' statements establishing the Lord's Supper. W. D. Davies, for example, speaks of "the precipitate of those words percolated through the mind of a Rabbi."²

For the most part, however, there is agreement that the establishment of the Lords Supper goes back to Jesus himself. The evidence includes the fact that the three Synoptic Gospels agree in attributing to him the words inaugurating the practice (Matt. 26:26-28; Mark 14:22-24; Luke 22:19-20). Although there are some variations in the details, the common core in the Synoptics argues for an early inclusion in the oral tradition.³ In addition, Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:23-29 gives a similar account of the instituting of the Lords Supper. He states that he received from the Lord (παράλαμβάνω) what he now passes on (παράδιδωμι) to his readers. While Paul does not state whether the facts in his letter were directly revealed to him by the Lord, or had been transmitted to him by others, the verb παράλαμβάνω suggests that the account had been passed on by others, and his giving it to the Corinthian church is a continuation of the process of transmission.⁴ Paul probably heard the account from eyewitnesses, that is, the apostles. In any event, Paul's inclusion of the narrative indicates that the tradition existed several years before the writing of the first of the Gospels, which was likely Mark.⁵ We conclude that while we may not be able to determine the precise words spoken by Jesus, we do know that he instituted the practice which bears his name: the Lord's Supper.

1. "Lord's Supper," in *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, ed. Samuel Macauley Jackson (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1908), vol. 7, p. 24.

2. W. D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* (London: S.P.C.K., 1948), pp. 246-50 (the quote is from p. 249).

3. Joachim Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1955), pp. 68-71.

4. Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity, 1981), p. 758.

5. Jeremias, *Eucharistic Words*, pp. 27-35.

The Necessity of Repetition

Some theologians maintain that Jesus himself established the Lord's Supper, but did not issue a command to repeat it. This conclusion is based upon the fact that Matthew and Mark do not include "Do this in remembrance of me" in their accounts.⁶ Some redaction critics assume that Luke added this command, editing it into the text, although it was not in the tradition which he received. But absence from Matthew and Mark does not prove that the command is not authentic. Luke may well have had independent sources. In any event, since Luke wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, his letter in its entirety is the Word of God and, consequently, on this particular point is authoritative and binding upon us. In addition, Paul's account includes the command, "Do this in remembrance of me" (1 Cor. 11:24-25), and continues, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (v. 26). We must add to these considerations the practice of the church. Evidently believers celebrated the Lord's Supper from a very early time. Certainly it was already being observed by the church at the time of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (c. A.D. 55). This was easily within the lifetime of the eyewitnesses, who would have been a check upon the authenticity of Paul's report of Jesus' words. It would seem, then, that the command to repeat the sacrament goes back to Jesus.

We also need to ask what the point of the Last Supper would have been had there been no command to repeat it. In that case, the bread and wine would have had significance only for the group that was present. The elements would have constituted some sort of private object lesson for the Eleven. And the report of the Last Supper would have been incorporated in the Gospels only for the sake of the historical record. We know, however, that by the time of the writing of Mark (c. A.D. 60-62) there was no longer a pressing need for a historical account of the Last Supper (unlike most of the other events of Jesus' ministry). Paul's detailed historical and didactic account was already in circulation. That Mark and the other Synoptists nevertheless saw fit to include a report of the Last Supper strongly suggests that they regarded it as substantially more than a historical event. It is reasonable to infer that they included the Lord's Supper in their Gospels because Jesus intended it to be a continuing practice for future generations. In that case, the inclusion of the Lord's Supper in the narratives of Matthew and Mark is evidence that the rite is to be regularly repeated, even though those two writers record no command to that effect.

6. Ibid., p. 110.

A Form of Proclamation

While there is a difference of opinion as to whether the bread and wine are more than mere emblems, there is a general agreement among all communions that the Lord's Supper is at least a representational setting forth of the fact and meaning of Christ's death. Paul specifically indicated that the Lord's Supper is a form of proclamation: "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor. 11:26). The act of taking the bread and the cup is a dramatization of the gospel, a graphic display of what Christ's death has accomplished. It points backward to his death as the basis of our salvation. More than that, however, it also declares a present truth—the vitalness of a proper frame of mind and heart. Communicants are to examine themselves before eating the bread and drinking the cup; anyone who participates "without discerning the [Lord's] body eats and drinks judgment upon himself" (w. 28-29). To eat the bread or drink the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner is to be guilty of sinning against the Lord's body and blood (v. 27). While one might interpret Paul's reference to "discerning the body" (v. 29) as signifying that the church was not being properly recognized, the expression "the body and blood of the Lord" (v. 27) is evidence that Paul was actually thinking of Jesus' death. In addition to having a correct understanding of what Christ has accomplished and a vital relationship with him, communicants must get along with one another. Paul noted with chagrin that there were divisions within the Corinthian church (v. 18). Some of the members in partaking of the elements were not really eating the Lord's Supper (v. 20), for they simply went ahead without waiting for the others (v. 21). Disregard for fellow Christians and for the church is a contradiction of the Lord's Supper. So the Lord's Supper is as much a symbol of the present vital fellowship of believers with the Lord and with one another as it is a symbol of the past death of Jesus. It is also a proclamation of a future fact; it looks forward to the Lord's second coming. Paul wrote, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death *until he come-s*" (v. 26, italics added).

A Spiritual Benefit to the Partaker

All Christians who participate in the Lord's Supper see it as conferring a spiritual benefit upon them. In this sense, all agree that the Lord's Supper is *sacramental*. It can be a means, or at least an occasion, of spiritual growth in the Lord. There are different understandings of the nature of the benefit conferred by taking of the Lord's Supper. There also are different understandings of the requisite conditions for receiving

this spiritual benefit. All are in agreement, however, that we do not take the elements merely because the Lord's command obligates us to do so. Participation actually has a beneficial effect upon the communicant. It leads or contributes to salvation or growth therein.

Restriction to Followers of Christ

All denominations are agreed that the Lord's Supper is not to be administered indiscriminately to all persons. It is in some fashion a token of the discipleship involved in the relationship between the individual believer and the Lord. Accordingly, it must not be administered to someone who is not a disciple of the Lord.

This restriction is based upon the fact that the Lord's Supper was originally administered to the inner circle of disciples. It was not shared with the crowds of persons who came to Jesus, some of whom were merely curious or desirous of some personal benefit from him. Rather, the Last Supper was shared within the intimate gathering of those most fully committed to Christ. Further, remember that the group had to be purified. Judas, who was to betray Jesus, left the group apparently in the midst of the meal.

Restriction of the Lord's Supper to believers is also borne out by Paul's statement about self-examination, which we noted earlier. It is necessary for a person to examine himself, so that he may eat and drink in a worthy manner. One must be not only a believer, but a practicing believer, to take of the elements. Anything less is sin (1 Cor. 11:27-34).

The Horizontal Dimension

The Lord's Supper is, or represents, the Lord's body. It is also *for the* body, that is, the church. In 1 Corinthians 10:15-17 Paul argues that since all partake of one loaf, which is Christ's body, they are all one body. This is the background to Paul's statements in 1 Corinthians 11:17-22. For members of the church to be divided into factions and to despise others who partake with them of the one loaf is an abuse and contradiction of the sacrament. The Lord's Supper is an ordinance of the church. It cannot be appropriately practiced by separate individuals in isolation. It is the property of the functioning *body* of Christ.

Points of Disagreement

The Presence of Christ

Of the disputed matters regarding the Lord's Supper, the nature of Christ's presence has probably been the most prominent point of discus-

sion. Even Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli, who **agreed upon other** matters, including the efficacy and value of the **rite, could not reach** agreement upon this point. The issue pertains to whether, and in what sense, the body and blood of Christ are actually present in the elements employed. That is, how literally are we to interpret the statements "This is my body" and "This is my blood"? Several answers have been given to this question:

1. The bread and wine are the physical body and blood of Christ.⁷
2. The bread and wine *contain the* physical body and blood.⁸
3. The bread and wine *contain spiritually the body* and blood?⁹
4. They *represent the body* and blood.¹⁰

The Efficacy of the Rite

What is the value of the Lord's Supper? What does it actually accomplish for (and in) the participants? One position is that it actually conveys grace to the communicant. The rite has within it the power to effect spiritual changes that would not otherwise occur. A second position is that the Lord's Supper serves to bring the participants into contact with the living Christ. He is present spiritually, and we benefit from thus encountering him. It is the encounter, however, not the rite itself, which is the source of the benefit. The rite is merely an instrument to foster our relationship with him. It does not constitute the relationship nor convey the attendant blessing. Yet a third option holds that the Lord's Supper serves merely as a reminder of the truth that the Lord is present and available. Its potential for spiritual benefit is much the same as that of a sermon. The content of a sermon may be believed and accepted; and, as a consequence, the individual will benefit spiritually. Or it may be disbelieved and rejected; in that case there will be no spiritual benefit. The effect depends completely upon the response. It is quite possible to partake of the Lord's Supper and be unaffected by the experience.

The Proper Administrator

Who may preside when the Lord's Supper is observed? Is it necessary to have a priest or minister? Is an ordained person a necessity for the rite to be valid? And if so, what constitutes proper ordination?

7. Joseph Pohle, *The Sacraments: A Dogmatic Treatise*, ed. Arthur Preuss (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1942), vol. 2, p. 25.

8. Franz Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1953), vol. 3, p. 345.

9. Lewis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), pp. 653-54.

10. Augustus H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Westwood, N.J.: Revell, 1907), pp. 538-43.

We are dealing here with the issue of sacerdotalism, which is closely linked to sacramentalism. **Sacramentalism** is the doctrine that the sacraments in and of themselves convey grace and can even accomplish the individuals salvation. Sacerdotalism is the correlative doctrine that only certain persons are qualified to administer the sacraments. For example, in classic Roman Catholic dogma, only a Catholic priest ordained into the apostolic succession can administer the Eucharist. If any other person should take the same physical elements and pronounce the same words over them, they would remain bread and wine. Those who receive the elements would be partaking not of the Eucharist, but simply a meal.

In some very nonliturgical Christian groups, there is no special limitation upon who may administer the Lords Supper. Any Christian who possesses the spiritual qualifications for partaking of the Lord's Supper may also administer it. If a lay person follows the established form and has the proper intention, the sacrament is valid.

A subsidiary issue here is the relative emphases upon the church and the clergy. Some fellowships which spell out precise qualifications for the administrant nonetheless put greater emphasis on the church. The clergy is an institution of the church; the clergyman is simply its designated representative. Other fellowships lay greater stress upon the priesthood per se and proper ordination into it. In their view, the priest actually possesses the power to effect what the Lord's Supper accomplishes.

The Appropriate Recipients

We have noted that all churches require that those who partake of the Lord's Supper be Christians. There may be additional stipulations as well. Some groups insist that the participant have been properly baptized. Some local congregations distribute the elements only to their own members. Others specify a minimum age. A particular state of spiritual readiness is often required, at least tacitly or informally. Virtually all groups deny the Lord's Supper to people known to be living in serious sin. It may be necessary to go to confession or to fast before taking of the elements.

A specific issue of historical interest is whether the laity are proper recipients of both elements of the Lord's Supper. One of Luther's great criticisms of the Catholic church was that it withheld the cup from the laity. They were permitted to take only the bread. The clergy took the cup on behalf of the laity. This practice constituted what Luther labeled one of the "Babylonian captivities" of the church.¹¹

11. Martin Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church, in Three Treatises* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1943), pp. 127-36.

The Elements to Be Used

Finally, we turn to an issue which does not divide denominations from one another as much as it causes disputes within intramural groups: Must the elements be the same as those used at the first observance of the Supper? Must the bread be unleavened, as was the case in the Passover meal? Or can we interpret Paul's reference to "one loaf" (1 Cor. 10: 17, **NIV**) as signifying that other breads are acceptable? Must we use wine, or will grape juice serve equally well? If wine, what alcoholic content would equal that in the wine used by Jesus and the disciples? And must there be one common cup, or will individual cups do equally well? Is the congregation at liberty to make changes in the procedure for sanitary purposes? While these questions may seem relatively inconsequential to some, they have at times been the basis of rather severe debate, even virtually rending congregations apart.

Sometimes this issue arises out of a desire for cross-cultural adaptation of the Christian message. May elements quite dissimilar from those originally used be employed if bread and wine are not available, or would not carry the meaning which they conveyed to the people who lived in the New Testament world? For example, might an Eskimo culture substitute water and fish for wine and bread?

Sometimes the issue arises from a desire for variety or novelty. Young people may feel that they can put freshness into their religious experience by varying the symbols. Would it be valid to substitute potato chips and cola when bread and wine or grape juice are available?

Major Views

The Traditional Roman Catholic View

The official Roman Catholic position on the Lord's Supper was spelled out at the Council of Trent (1545-1563). While many Catholics, especially in Western countries, have now abandoned some of the features of this view, it is still the basis of the faith of large numbers. Let us note its major tenets.

Transubstantiation is the doctrine that as the administering priest consecrates the elements, an actual metaphysical change takes place. The substance of the bread and wine-what they actually are-is changed into Christ's flesh and blood respectively. Note that what is changed is the substance, not the accidents. Thus the bread retains the shape, texture, and taste of bread. A chemical analysis would tell us that

it is still bread. But what it essentially is has been changed.¹² The whole of Christ is fully present within each of the particles of the host.¹³ All who participate in the Lord's Supper, or the Holy Eucharist as it is termed, literally take the physical body and blood of Christ into themselves.

To modern persons who are not given to thinking in metaphysical terms, transubstantiation seems strange, if not absurd. It is, however, based upon Aristotle's distinction between substance and accidents, which was adopted by Thomas Aquinas and thus found its way into the official theology of the Roman Catholic Church. From that philosophical perspective, transubstantiation makes perfectly good sense.

A second major tenet of the Catholic view is that the Lord's Supper involves a sacrificial act. In the mass a real sacrifice is again offered by Christ in behalf of the worshipers. It is a sacrifice in the same sense as was the crucifixion.¹⁴ It is to be understood as a propitiatory sacrifice satisfying the demands of God. It serves to atone for venial sins. The sacrament of the Eucharist is greatly profaned, however, if someone bearing unforgiven mortal sins participates. Thus, one should seriously examine oneself beforehand, just as Paul instructed his readers to do.

A third tenet of the Catholic view is sacerdotalism, the idea that a properly ordained priest must be present to consecrate the host. Without such a priest to officiate, the elements remain merely bread and wine. When, however, a qualified clergyman follows the proper formula, the elements are completely and permanently changed into Christ's body and blood.¹⁵

In the traditional administration of the sacrament, the cup was withheld from the laity, being taken only by the clergy. The major reason was the danger that the blood might be *spilt*.¹⁶ For the blood of Jesus to be trampled underfoot would be a desecration. In addition, there were two arguments to the effect that it is unnecessary for the laity to take the cup. First, the clergy act representatively for the laity; they take the cup on behalf of the people. Second, nothing would be gained by the laity's taking the cup. The sacrament is complete without it, for every particle of both the bread and wine contains fully the body, soul, and divinity of Christ.¹⁷

12. Pohle, *Sacraments*, pp. 103-27.

13. Ibid., p. 99.

14. Ibid., part 3.

15. Ibid., pp. 256-60.

16. Ibid., p. 252.

17. Ibid., pp. 246-54.

The Lutheran View

The Lutheran view differs from the Roman Catholic view at many but not all points. Luther did not reject *in toto* the traditional view. In contrast to the Reformed churches and *Zwingli*, Luther retained the Catholic conception that Christ's body and blood are physically present in the elements. In his dialogue with *Zwingli* (*the Mar-burg Colloquy*), Luther is reputed to have repeatedly stressed the words "This is my body."¹⁸ He took the words of Jesus quite literally at this point. The body and blood are actually, not merely figuratively, present in the elements.

What Luther denied was the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation. The molecules are not changed into flesh and blood; they remain bread and wine. But the body and blood of Christ are present "in, with, and under" the bread and wine. It is not that the bread and wine have become Christ's body and blood, but that we now have the body and blood in addition to the bread and wine. The body and blood are there, but not exclusively so, that is, not in a way which would exclude the presence of the bread and wine. While some have used the term *consubstantiation* to denote Luther's concept that body and bread are concurrently present, that blood and wine coexist, it was not Luther's term. Thinking in terms of one substance interpenetrating another, he used as an analogy an iron bar which is heated in fire. The substance of the iron does not cease to exist when the substance of fire interpenetrates it, heating it to a high temperature.¹⁹

Luther rejected other facets of the Catholic conception of the mass. In particular, he rejected the idea that the mass is a sacrifice. Since Christ died and atoned for sin once and for all, and since the believer is justified by faith on the basis of that one-time sacrifice, there is no need for repeated sacrifices.²⁰

Luther also rejected sacerdotalism. The presence of Christ's body and blood is not a result of the priest's actions. It is instead a consequence of the power of Jesus Christ. Whereas Catholicism holds that the bread and wine are transformed at the moment the priest pronounces the words, Lutheranism does not speculate as to when the body and blood first appear. While a properly ordained minister ought to administer the

18. *Great Debates of the Reformation*, ed. Donald J. Ziegler (New York: Random House, 1969), pp. 75, 78, 80. An account of the continuation of the Reformed-Lutheran debate will be found in *Marburg Revisited*, ed. Paul C. Empie and James I. McCord (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1966).

19. Luther, *Babylonian Captivity*, p. 140.

20. Ibid., pp. 161-68.

sacrament, the presence of the body and blood is not to be attributed to him or to anything that he does.²¹

Despite denials of various facets of the Catholic position, Luther insisted upon the concept of **manducation**. There is a real eating of Jesus' body. Luther interpreted "Take, eat; this is my body" (Matt. 26:26) literally. In his view these words do not have reference to some spiritual reception of Christ or of his body, but to a real taking of Christ into our **body**.²² Indeed, Jesus had said on another occasion: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him" (John 6:53–56). The plain sense of these words fits well with Jesus' statement at the Last Supper. We must take these statements literally if we are to be faithful to the text and consistent in our interpretation.

What of the benefit of the sacrament? Here Luther's statements are not as clear as we might wish. He insists that by partaking of the sacrament one experiences a real benefit-forgiveness of sin and confirmation of faith. This benefit is due, however, not to the elements in the sacrament, but to one's reception of the Word by **faith**.²³ At this point Luther sounds almost as if he regards the sacrament as simply a means of proclamation to which one responds as to a sermon. If the sacrament is merely a form of proclamation, however, what is the point of the physical presence of Christ's body and blood? At other times Luther appears to have held that the benefit comes from actually eating the body of Christ. What is clear from Luther's disparate statements is that he certainly regarded the Lord's Supper as a sacrament. By virtue of taking the elements believers receive a spiritual benefit which they otherwise would not experience. The Christian ought therefore to take advantage of the opportunity for grace afforded by the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

The Reformed View

The third major view of the Lord's Supper is the Calvinistic or Reformed view. While the term **Calvinism** *usually* stirs up images of a specific view of salvation and of God's initiative in it, his choosing and decreeing that certain persons shall believe and be saved, that is not what

21. Ibid., pp. 158–59.

22. Ibid., pp. 129–32.

23. Ibid., p. 147.

we have in mind here. Rather, we are referring to Calvin's view of the Lord's Supper.

There is some disagreement as to just what the respective views of Calvin and Zwingli were. In one interpretation, Calvin's emphasis on the dynamic or influential presence of Christ is not far different from Luther's view.²⁴ **Zwingli**, on the other hand, taught that Christ is merely spiritually present. If this interpretation is correct, then it was Zwingli's view, not Calvin's, which prevailed in Reformed circles. According to another interpretation, Calvin held that Christ is spiritually present in the elements, and Zwingli maintained that the elements are mere symbols of Christ; he is neither physically nor spiritually present.²⁵ If this interpretation of their respective positions is correct, it was Calvin's view that was accepted by the Reformed churches. Whose view eventually became the standard of the Reformed churches is not as important, however, as is what the Reformed position entails. And on that we can be quite clear. Therefore, it is best to label the position we are discussing "Reformed" rather than "Calvinistic."

The Reformed view holds that Christ is present in the Lord's Supper, but not physically or bodily. Rather, his presence in the sacrament is spiritual or dynamic. Using the sun as an illustration, Calvin asserted that Christ is present influentially. The sun remains in the heavens, yet its warmth and light are present on earth. So the radiance of the Spirit conveys to us the communion of Christ's flesh and blood.²⁶ According to Romans 8:9–11, it is by the Spirit and only by the Spirit that Christ dwells in us. The notion that we actually eat Christ's body and drink his blood is absurd. Rather, true **communicants** are spiritually nourished by partaking of the bread and the wine. The Holy Spirit brings them into closer connection with the person of Christ, the living head of the church and the source of spiritual vitality.

In the Reformed view, the elements of the sacrament are not arbitrary or separable from what they signify—the death of Christ, the value of his death, the believer's participation in the crucified Christ, and the union of believers with one another.²⁷ And while the elements signify or represent the body and blood of Christ, they do more than that. They also seal. Louis Berkhof suggests that the Lord's Supper seals the love of Christ to believers, giving them the assurance that all the promises of the covenant and the riches of the gospel are theirs by a divine donation. In exchange

24. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), vol. 3, pp. 626–31.

25. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), p. 646.

26. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, **book 4**, chapter 17, section 12.

27. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 650.

for a personal claim on and actual possession of all this wealth, believers express faith in Christ as Savior and pledge obedience to him as Lord and King.²⁸

There is, then, a genuine objective benefit of the sacrament. It is not generated by the participant; rather, it is brought to the sacrament by Christ himself. By taking the elements the participant actually receives anew and continually the vitality of Christ. This should not be thought of as unique, however, in the sense that the participant experiences in the sacrament something experienced nowhere else. Indeed, even the Old Testament believers experienced something of the same nature. Calvin says, "The water gushing from the rock in the desert was to the Israelites a badge and sign of the *same* thing that is figured to us in the Supper by wine."²⁹ Nor should the benefit of the Lord's Supper be thought of as automatic. The effect of the sacrament depends in large part upon the faith and receptivity of the participant.

The Zwinglian View

The final position we will examine is the view that the Lord's Supper is merely a commemoration. This view is usually associated with **Zwingli**, although some would argue that Zwingli's conception went further. It is likely that Zwingli embraced more than one stance on this matter, and that he may have altered his position toward the end of his life. Charles Hodge maintains that there is very little difference between the views of Zwingli and Calvin.³⁰

What is prominent in Zwingli's view is his strong emphasis upon the role of the sacrament in bringing to mind the death of Christ and its efficacy in behalf of the believer. Thus, the Lord's Supper is essentially a commemoration of Christ's death.³¹ While **Zwingli** spoke of a spiritual presence of Christ, some who in many respects adopted his position (e.g., the **Anabaptists**) denied the concept of a physical or bodily presence so energetically as to leave little room for any type of special presence. They pointed out that Jesus is spiritually present everywhere. His presence in the elements is no more intense than his presence elsewhere.

The value of the sacrament, according to this view, lies simply in receiving by faith the benefits of Christ's death. The Lord's Supper is but one of the ways in which we can receive these benefits by faith, for the effect of the Lord's Supper is no different in nature from, say, that of a

28. Ibid., p. 65 1.

29. Calvin, *Institutes*, book 4, chapter 17, sections 1, 5.

30. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 626-27.

31. Ibid., pp. 627-28.

sermon. Both are types of proclamation.³² The Lord's Supper differs from sermons only in that it involves a visible means of proclamation. In both cases, as with all proclamation, there is the absolute essential of faith if there is to be any benefit. Christ is not present with the nonbelieving person. We might say, then, that it is not so much that the sacrament brings Christ to the communicant as that the believer's faith brings Christ to the sacrament.

Dealing with the Issues

The Presence of Christ

We must now come to grips with the issues which we posed earlier in this chapter and seek to arrive at some resolution. The first issue is the question of Christ's presence in the sacrament. Are the body and blood of Christ somehow specially present, and if so, in what sense? The most natural and straightforward way to render Jesus' words, "This is my body," and "This is my blood," is to interpret them literally. Since it is our general practice to interpret Scripture literally, we must be prepared to offer justification if we interpret these words in any other way. In this particular case it so happens that there are certain considerations which do in fact argue against literal interpretation.

First, if we take "This is my body" and "This is my blood" literally, an absurdity results. If Jesus meant that the bread and wine were at that moment in the upper room actually his body and his blood, he was asserting that his flesh and blood were in two places simultaneously, since his corporeal form was right there beside the elements. To believe that Jesus was in two places at once is something of a denial of the incarnation, which limited his physical human nature to one location.

Second, there are conceptual difficulties for those who declare that Christ has been bodily present in the subsequent occurrences of the Lord's Supper. While the preceding paragraph introduced the problem of how Christ's flesh and blood could have been in two places simultaneously, here we face the problem of how two substances (e.g., flesh and bread) can be in the same place simultaneously (the Lutheran conception) or of how a particular substance (e.g., blood) can exist without any of its customary characteristics (the Catholic view). While those who hold to a physical presence offer explanations of their view, their cases rest upon a type of metaphysic which seems very strange to twentieth-century minds, and indeed appears to us to be untenable.

32. Strong, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 541-43.

These difficulties in themselves are not enough to determine our interpretation. They do, however, suggest that Jesus' words are not to be taken literally. We must now look for clues as to what Jesus actually meant when he said, "This is my body," and "This is my blood."

As Jesus spoke the words inaugurating the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, he focused attention on the relationship between individual believers and their Lord. It is noteworthy that on many of the other occasions when he addressed this topic, he used metaphors to characterize himself: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life"; "I am the vine, you are the branches"; "I am the good shepherd"; "I am the bread of life." At the Last Supper he used similar metaphors, reversing the subject and predicate noun: "This [bread] is my body"; "This [wine] is my blood." In keeping with the figurative language, we might render Jesus' statements, "This represents [or signifies] my body," and "This represents [or signifies] my blood." This approach spares us from the type of difficulties incurred by the view that Christ is physically present in the elements.

But what of the idea that Christ is spiritually present? This view arose from two historical sources. One was the desire of certain theologians to retain something of the traditional belief in the presence of Christ even as they sought to change it. Their approach to reformation of the faith leaned more toward retaining whatever is not explicitly rejected by Scripture than toward starting from scratch, preserving only those tenets of the faith which are explicitly taught in Scripture. Instead of totally rejecting tradition and constructing a completely new understanding, they chose to modify the old belief. The other source of the view that Christ is spiritually present was a disposition toward mysticism. Some believers, having felt a profound experience of encounter with Christ as they observed the Lord's Supper, concluded that Christ must have been spiritually present. The doctrine served as an explanation of the experience.

As we evaluate this view, it is important to remember that Jesus promised to be with his disciples everywhere and through all time (Matt. 28:20; John 14:23; 15:4-7). So he is everywhere present, and yet he has also promised to be with us especially when we gather as believers (Matt. 18:20). The Lord's Supper, as an act of worship, is therefore a particularly fruitful opportunity for meeting with him. It is likely that Christ's special presence in the sacrament is influential rather than metaphysical in nature. In this regard it is significant that Paul's account of the Lord's Supper says nothing about the presence of Christ. Instead, it simply says, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor. 11:26). This verse suggests that the rite is basically commemorative.

We need to be particularly careful to avoid the negativism which has

sometimes characterized this view that the Lord's Supper is essentially a memorial. Out of a zeal to avoid the conception that Jesus is present in some sort of magical way, certain Baptists among others have sometimes gone to such extremes as to give the impression that the one place where Jesus most assuredly is not to be found is the Lord's Supper. This is what one Baptist leader termed "the doctrine of the real absence" of Jesus Christ.

How, then, should we regard the Lord's Supper? We should look forward to the Lord's Supper as a time of relationship and communion with Christ. We should come to each observance of it with the confidence that we will therein meet with him, for he has promised to meet with us. We should think of the sacrament not so much in terms of Christ's presence as in terms of his promise and the potential for a closer relationship with him. We also need to be careful to avoid the neoorthodox conception that for the true communicant the Lord's Supper is a subjective encounter with Christ. He is objectively present. The Spirit is capable of making him real in our experience and has promised to do so. The Lord's Supper, then, is a time when we are drawn close to Christ, and thus come to know him better and love him more.

The Efficacy of the Rite

What has been said about the presence of Christ has also intimated a great deal about the nature of the benefit conferred by the Lord's Supper. It should be apparent from Paul's statements in 1 Corinthians 11:27-32 that there is nothing automatic about this benefit. Many at Corinth who participated in the Lord's Supper, instead of being spiritually edified, had become weak and ill; some had even died (v. 30). The value intended by the Lord was not being realized in their cases. It is evident that the effect of the Lord's Supper must be dependent upon or proportional to the faith of the believer and his or her response to what is presented in the rite. The Corinthians who became ill or died had not recognized or judged correctly (*διακρίνω*) the body of Christ. A correct understanding of the meaning of the Lord's Supper and an appropriate response in faith are necessary for the rite to be effective.³³

It is therefore important to review what the Lord's Supper symbolizes. It is in particular a reminder of the death of Christ and its sacrificial and propitiatory character as an offering to the Father in our behalf. It further symbolizes our dependence upon and vital connection with the Lord, and points forward to his second coming. In addition, it symbolizes the

33. G. H. Clayton, "Eucharist," in *Dictionary of the Apostolic Church*, ed. James Hastings (New York: Scribner, 1916), vol. 1, p. 374.

unity of believers within the church and their love and concern for each other. The Lords Supper reflects the fact that the body is one body.

It is appropriate to explain the meaning of the Lords Supper at each observance. And there should also be a rigorous self-examination by each participant. Every individual should **carefully** ascertain his or her own understanding and spiritual condition (1 Cor. 11:27–28). The Lords Supper will then be an occasion of recommitment of oneself to the Lord.

The Proper Administrator

Scripture gives very little guidance on the matter of who should administer the Lords Supper. Except for the original celebration of the sacrament, when Jesus himself administered the elements, we are not told who presided or what they did. Nor does Scripture stipulate any special qualifications for those who lead or for those who assist in the rite. For that matter, very little is said in the New Testament about ordination.

What does appear in the Gospel accounts and in Paul's discussion is that the Lords Supper has been entrusted to, and is presumably to be administered by, the church. It would therefore seem to be in order for the persons who have been chosen and empowered by the church to supervise and conduct its services of worship to superintend the Lords Supper as well. Thus, at least some of the duly chosen leaders of the church should assist in the observance of the sacrament; the pastor should take the leading role. In the absence of such officers, others who meet the qualifications might serve in their place. In general, those who assist should meet the qualifications which Paul laid down for deacons; those who lead should meet his set of qualifications for bishops (1 Tim. 3).

The Appropriate Recipients

Nowhere in Scripture do we find an extensive statement of prerequisites for receiving the Lord's Supper. Those which we do have we infer from Paul's discourse in 1 Corinthians 11 and from our understanding of the meaning of the sacrament. If the Lord's Supper signifies, at least in part, a spiritual relationship between the individual believer and the Lord, then it follows that a personal relationship with God is a prerequisite. In other words, those who participate should be genuine believers in Christ. And while no age qualifications can be spelled out in hard and fast fashion, the communicant should be mature enough to be able to discern the body (1 Cor. 11:29).

We infer another prerequisite from the fact that there were some

people whose sin was so grave that Paul urged the church to remove them from the body (1 Cor. 5:1–5). Certainly, the church, to which the Lord's Supper has been committed, should, as a first step in discipline, withhold the bread and cup from one known to be living in flagrant sin. In other cases, however, since we do not know what the requirements for membership in the New Testament churches were, it is probably best, once we have explained what the sacrament means and on what basis one should partake, to leave the decision as to whether to participate to the individuals themselves.

The Elements to Be Used

What elements we decide to use in celebrating the Lord's Supper will depend, at least in part, upon whether our chief concern is to duplicate the original conditions as closely as possible or to capture the symbolism of the sacrament. If our chief concern is duplication, we will use the unleavened bread of the traditional Passover meal. If, however, our concern is the symbolism, we might use a loaf of leavened bread. The oneness of the loaf would symbolize the unity of the church; breaking the loaf would signify the breaking of Christ's body. With respect to the cup, duplication of the original event would call for wine, probably diluted with anywhere from one to twenty parts of water for every part of wine.³⁴ If, on the other hand, representation of the blood of Christ is the primary consideration, then grape juice will suffice equally well.

Where the traditional elements are unavailable, substitutes which retain the symbolism may be employed. Indeed, fish might well be a more suitable symbol than bread. The use of bizarre substitutes simply for variety should be avoided. Potato chips and cola, for example, bear little resemblance to the original. A balance should be sought between, on the one hand, repeating the act with so little variation that we participate routinely without awareness of its meaning, and, on the other, changing the procedures so severely that we focus our attention upon the mechanics instead of Christ's atoning work.

What we are commemorating in the Lords Supper is not the precise circumstances of its initiation, but what it represented to Jesus and the disciples in the upper room. That being the case, suitability to convey the meaning, not similarity to the original circumstances, is what is important as far as the elements are concerned. A similar consideration holds with respect to the time of observance. To celebrate the sacrament on Maundy Thursday rather than Good Friday may be more an attempt to duplicate the Last Supper than a commemoration of the Lord's death.

³⁴ Robert H. Stein, "Wine-Drinking in New Testament Times," *Christianity Today*, 20 June 1975, pp. 9–11 (923–25).

As to whether it is necessary to use one loaf of bread and one cup, there is some latitude. Paul does speak of the “one bread” of which all partake (1 Cor. 10:17), but this does not necessarily dictate a whole loaf. There is no parallel statement about “one cup,” so the use of individual cups does not compromise the symbolism. Sanitary concerns may well lead the church to utilize individual containers rather than one common cup. Moreover, in large gatherings this may be the only practical means of celebrating the Supper.

The Frequency of Observance

How often we should observe the Lord’s Supper is another matter concerning which we have no explicit didactic statements in Scripture. We do not even have a precise indication of what the practice was in the early church, although it may well have been weekly, that is, every time the church assembled. In view of the lack of specific information, we will make our decision on the basis of biblical principles and practical considerations.

The tendency of our beliefs to slip from the conscious to the preconscious level was one of the reasons Christ instituted the Lord’s Supper. Sigmund Freud recognized that the human personality has at least three levels of awareness: the conscious (or, as Freud termed it, the perceptual conscious), the preconscious, and the unconscious. The conscious is what we are actually aware of at any given moment. In the unconscious lie those experiences and ideas of ours which we cannot volitionally recall into consciousness (although some psychologists and psychiatrists claim that no experience is ever lost; every idea can be brought back into consciousness through psychoanalysis, hypnosis, or certain types of drugs). The preconscious contains those experiences and ideas which, although one is not currently aware of them, can readily be recalled to consciousness by an act of will. Most of our doctrinal beliefs hover at this intermediate level. The Lord’s Supper has the effect of bringing preconscious beliefs into consciousness. It should therefore be observed often enough to prevent long gaps between times of reflection upon the truths which it signifies, but not so frequently as to make it seem trivial or so commonplace that we go through the motions without really thinking about the meaning. Perhaps it would be good for the church to make the Lord’s Supper available on a frequent basis, allowing the individual believer to determine how often to partake. Knowing that we can partake of the Lord’s Supper when we feel the need and desire, but that we are not required to participate at every available opportunity, will prevent the sacrament from becoming routinized.

Should it be as easy as possible for one to partake, or should it be

more difficult? There is something to be said for making the sacrament sufficiently unavailable as to require a definite intention and decision to partake. If the Lord’s Supper is appended to another worship service, many people will remain and participate simply because they happen to be there. On the other hand, if the Lord’s Supper is a separate service, its importance will be highlighted. All the participants will have made a specific decision to receive the elements and to concentrate on their meaning.

The Lord’s Supper, properly administered, is a means of inspiring the faith and love of the believer as he or she reflects again upon the wonder of the Lord’s death and the fact that those who believe in him will live everlastingly.

And can it be that I should gain
An interest in the Savior’s blood?
Died He for me, who caused His pain?
For me, who Him to death pursued?
Amazing love! how can it be
That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

(Charles Wesley, 1738)

The Unity of the Church

Arguments for Unity of the Church

- Biblical Teachings Regarding the Unity of Believers
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Conceptions of the Nature of Unity

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Guidelines for Action

A topic which has come up for discussion at various periods in history is the unity of the church. The definition of church unity and the degree of urgency in the discussion have varied throughout the

centuries. At times church unity has been a subject of considerable controversy. In the twentieth century, disagreements over the nature of church unity have, ironically, caused a great deal of disunity. Yet the topic is such that it cannot be avoided.

Arguments for Unity of the Church

Biblical Teachings Regarding the Unity of Believers

Among the reasons why the church must strive for unity are didactic passages in the New Testament which specifically teach that the church ought to be, actually is, or will be one. Probably the most persuasive is the so-called high-priestly prayer of Jesus: "I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. The glory which thou hast given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and thou in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that thou hast sent me and hast loved them even as thou hast loved me" (John 17:20–23). It is significant that, as our Lord strongly expresses concern for the welfare of his followers, he speaks of the unity between the Father and the Son as a model for the unity of believers with one another. The unity of believers with each other and with God will testify to the world the fact that the Father has sent the Son. Little is said about the nature of this unity, however.

A second major passage is Paul's exhortation in Ephesians 4. After begging his readers to lead a life worthy of their calling (v. 1), he urges them to be "eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (v. 3). He follows up this appeal with a list of fundamentals which unite believers: "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all" (w. 4-6). Since all believers confess the same body, Spirit, hope, Lord, faith, baptism, God and Father, they ought to display a unity of the Spirit. As Paul concludes his case, he urges his readers to grow up into Christ, "from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love" (v. 16). When the church unites under Christ as its head, there is a maturing Christian experience. Yet as concerned as Paul is about building a unity of the Spirit, he does not really specify just what this unity consists in. Nor does he make it

clear that this unity is to extend beyond the local church to which he is writing. It is important for us to keep in mind here, however, that Ephesians was likely an encyclical letter. It was not restricted to one congregation of believers.' Thus Paul's appeal for unity undoubtedly circulated over a large area.

Paul makes a somewhat similar appeal in Philippians 2:2, where he urges his readers to be "in full accord and of one mind." The key to developing this attitude is humility and concern for others (w. 3-4). And the perfect model is the self-emptying action of Christ (w. 5-8). Following his example will lead to true unity among the members of the congregation.

General Theological Considerations

In addition to these specific teachings of Scripture, there are more general theological considerations which argue for unity among believers. These considerations include the oneness of ancient Israel and the oneness of God, on which Israel's nationhood was based. Israel was to be one nation because the God she worshiped was one. That God is one is most clearly expressed in passages like Deuteronomy 6:4. Because God is one, the people of Israel were expected to worship him with all their heart (v. 5). Moreover, because God is one, the universe is truly one. All of it has been created by God, as Genesis 1 teaches; the entire world, being a unity, conforms to the will of its Creator. Since everything, including man, has a common origin and one Lord, it is altogether fitting, indeed it is imperative, that believers unite.²

The unity of Old Testament Israel is symbolized in two institutions, the temple and the law. In Deuteronomy 12 it is made clear that all other places and forms of worship are to be eliminated, because there is only one true God. The temple is the place of God's abode; all the people of Israel are to center their worship therein. Similarly, the law is a unifying factor. All persons, regardless of their tribe and social class, are to obey it.³

Various New Testament images make it clear that the church, as the successor to Israel, is to follow her lead in manifesting unity. Like Israel, believers in Christ constitute one race, one nation: "you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people" (1 Peter 2:9).

1. Stig Hanson, *The Unity of the Church in the New Testament: Colossians and Ephesians* (Lexington, Ky.: American Theological Library Association, 1963), pp. 107-08.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

3. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *The Unity and Disunity of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), pp. 9-10.

But the New Testament goes beyond the concept of race, for there is a variety of peoples within the new community of God. The unity is more intense; Paul refers to the church as a household: "So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God" (Eph. 2:19). Here Paul introduces the image of the temple to stress the idea of unity: "Built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, ... the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit" (w. 20-22). Peter similarly speaks of 'the church as a spiritual house: "And like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:5).⁴

The image of the church as the bride of Christ likewise argues for unity among believers. From the very beginning, marriage was intended to be monogamous: "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh" (Gen. 2:24). There is no suggestion here of anything other than one man and one woman. Jesus quotes this verse in arguing for the permanence of marriage (Matt. 19:5), and Paul quotes it in a passage which compares the marital relationship to the relationship between Christ and the church (Eph. 5:31). If the church is the bride of Christ, it must be one body, not many.⁵

The image of the church as the body of Christ is another powerful argument for unity. As Paul discusses the multiplicity of members and functions within the church, he says explicitly: "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body-Jews or Greeks, slaves or free-and all were made to drink of one Spirit" (1 Cor. 12: 12-13).

Paul's most profound theological argumentation for the **unity** of believers is probably to be found in Ephesians and Colossians. In Colossians 1:13-23, a passage which begins on a soteriological note and then switches to God's work of creation, Paul declares that Christ has created all things (vv. 15-16) and in him all things hold together (v. 17). This means that he is the head of the body, the church (v. 18). A climax is reached in verses 19-20: "For in him all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross." Christ's aim is to reconcile all things to himself. All things, including the church, will unite in him. Paul has this end in view when he pleads in 3:14-15: "And

above all these put **on love**, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one **body**."⁶

Unity of the church is a theme sounded throughout the Book of Ephesians. The first chapter concludes with the image of Christ as "the head over all things for the church, which is his body" (Eph. 1:22-23). In the next chapter the emphasis is upon the **unity** of Jew and Gentile: "For he is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby bringing the hostility to an end" (2:14-16). The chapter concludes with a passage we noted earlier-Jew and Gentile joined together into a holy temple in the Lord (vv. 20-22). In chapter 4 Paul compiles a list of the grounds on which the church is to be thought of as one (4:4-6). Stig Hanson comments on the passage: "One Body refers to the Church as the Body of Christ, the opinion of most expositors. This Body must be one since Christ is one, and Christ cannot be divided." Later in the chapter (w. 11-14) Paul develops the idea of the ministry, which has the purpose of building up the church in the one faith (v. 5). This guarantees the unity initiated by the one Christ.

Practical Considerations: A Common Witness and Efficiency

There are also some practical considerations which argue for Christian unity. One of them is the common witness which a closely knit group can present. We mentioned earlier that Jesus prayed for the unity of believers so that their concerted testimony might influence the world (John 17:21). The early believers were characterized by a oneness of purpose, and they were highly effective in their testimony. Perhaps there is a logical cause-and-effect relationship between the two: "Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common. And with great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all" (Acts 4:32-33).

The company of believers tends to grow when their witness is united, whereas there may well be a negative or canceling effect when they compete with or even criticize one another. This truth is evident enough in the United States, where quarrels within a denomination discourage

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11

5. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

6. Hanson, *Unity Of the Church*, pp. 109-11.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 152.

people from becoming associated with the Christian faith. The problem is aggravated, however, in non-Christian lands, where the native, confronted by a multiplicity of missionary efforts, must decide not only whether to become a Christian, but also what type of Christian to become: Presbyterian, Baptist, Lutheran, or whatever.⁸ In some cases, there may even be representatives of two or more varieties of the same denomination. It would not be surprising if potential converts were to throw up their hands in dismay, unable to choose among options which appear basically the same. Certainly the gospel witness is not reinforced by the existence of competitive groups.

Another practical consideration is the matter of efficiency. Where there is a lack of unity among Christians, there is a great reduplication of efforts. Every local congregation feels that it must have certain structural and procedural components, just as do every mission board and every Christian college and seminary. The result is a great waste of resources of the kingdom of God. Consider as an extreme example a town square in the Midwest. On each side of the square stands a church building. All four of the buildings are old, inefficient to heat, and in need of repair. The size and budget of all four congregations are modest. The pastoral salaries are small. Consequently, the congregations are habitually served by either young, inexperienced pastors or older men well past their peaks. Mediocre programs in such areas as Christian education are the norm. But what is most distressing is that the services, messages, and programs of the four congregations are virtually the same! A visitor would not find any significant difference among them.

An efficiency expert would regard this situation as a gross misuse of resources. Instead of four small struggling churches, it would make better sense to merge them into one congregation. The four properties could be sold and the new congregation relocated to an efficient structure. A staff of competent specialists could be engaged at appropriate compensations, and missionary giving could be increased as a result of the reduced overhead. What we are advocating on the local level would be highly desirable on broader levels as well. While some people may regard this suggestion as an application of the General Motors mentality to the work of the church, it is in fact a matter of practicing good stewardship of the resources with which we Christians have been entrusted.

8. Martin H. Cressy, "Organic Unity and Church Unions," *The Reformed World* 35, no. 3 (September 1978):103; Martin Marty, *Church Unity and Church Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), pp. 40-41.

Conceptions of the Nature of Unity

Despite the considerable amount of agreement about the desirability of unity, there is little agreement about its nature, the form which it is to take. There are basically four different ideas about unity. To some extent they can be correlated with conceptions of the nature of the church. The list which follows moves from a view emphasizing the invisible church to a view emphasizing the visible church. In general, the greater the concentration upon the visible church, the greater will be the concern that unity be manifested in actual organic union.

Spiritual Unity

The first view of church **unity** emphasizes that all Christians are one by virtue of being committed to and serving the same Lord. They are joined together in the invisible church, of which Christ is the head. One day there will be an actual gathering of this body in visible form. In the meantime, the **unity** of the church consists in the fact that there is no hostility among believers. All believers love other believers, even those with whom they have no actual contact or interaction. The existence of separate organizations of the visible church, even in the same area, does not constitute a challenge to this unity. Christians who regard church unity as essentially spiritual in nature usually emphasize purity of doctrinal belief and lifestyle as criteria for membership.⁹

Mutual Recognition and Fellowship

The second view involves more than a mere ideological acceptance of unity. Unity is implemented on a practical level. Each congregation recognizes others as legitimate parts of the family of God. Thus believers can readily transfer their membership from one congregation to another. There may be pulpit exchanges as well, a practice which entails recognition of ordination by other groups. In addition, members of different churches have fellowship with one another, and congregations with similar commitments and ideals work together when possible. For example, they may cooperate in conducting mass evangelistic crusades. Essentially, however, cooperation is on an ad hoc basis; it is not expressed in any form of official, permanent organization.¹⁰

9. J. Marcellus Kik, *Ecumenism and the Evangelical* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1958), pp. 48-53.

10. James DeForest Murch, *Cooperation Without Compromise* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956).

Conciliar Unity

Yet there are occasions when churches do enter into organizational alliance in order to accomplish their common purposes. They band together into what is called a council or association of churches. This is essentially a cooperative fellowship of denominations, each of which retains its own identity. It is a combined endeavor of, say, Methodists, Lutherans, and Episcopalians, all of whom continue their own unique traditions. There is emphasis upon both fellowship and action, since the unity is visible as well as spiritual.

Organic Unity

Finally, there is the view that church unity means the actual creation of one organization in which separate identities are surrendered. Membership and ordination are joint. When denominations unite in this fashion, there is often a merging of local congregations as well. A prime example is the United Church of Canada, a single denomination formed in 1925 by the uniting of Methodists, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists. Another example is the Church of South India. In the early 1960s the Consultation on Church Union (COCU) began to plan the merger of several denominations into what they decided to call the Church of Christ Uniting. The ultimate goal is the combination of all Christian churches, Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant, into one common church. In practice the aim of the National Council of the Churches of Christ has seemed to alternate between conciliar unity and organic unity.

It is important that we look more closely at conciliar and organic unity, since they are the areas where disagreement and controversy tend to occur. Before we do so, however, we must point out that the term "organic unity" is understood in several different ways:

1. The usual sense of "organic unity" is what we referred to above, namely, the merging of differing denominations. Here there is an agreement to allow diversity of practice or to base the union upon some lowest common denominator. We have noted that rather major mergers of this type have occurred in Canada and India. More limited mergers which have taken place in the United States are those of the Congregational Church and the Evangelical and Reformed Church to form the United Church of Christ, and of the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Evangelical United Brethren to form the United Methodist Church.

2. "Organic unity" also has reference to the combining of fellowships which are basically of the same confessional standard. Here we have in mind, for example, the series of mergers which have taken place among various Lutheran groups in the United States. Similar mergers have also

occurred among Reformed groups, notably the Presbyterians. Those groups which incline toward congregationalism and a more independent orientation, such as the Baptists, have shown less tendency to combine or, in cases of onetime union and subsequent separation, to recombine.

3. "Organic unity" relates not only to establishing unity, but to retaining or preserving it as well. We are here referring to the issue of whether dissatisfied Christians remain within the denomination of which they are a part or separate from it. This is an issue which frequently has faced conservatives within a denomination which has become predominantly liberal. In a few cases, it is the less conservative element that must make such a decision. An example is the formation of Evangelical Lutherans in Mission (ELIM) by members of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. On this particular level, "organic unity" may refer either to remaining within a denomination instead of separating or to separating from a denomination to form another group of basically similar tradition and liturgy (e.g., separating from one Baptist group to form another Baptist fellowship of churches).

4. Finally, "organic unity" may relate to a local congregation. Here we refer to the question of whether an individual or group remains within a congregation or separates from it. An individual can simply leave the fellowship; but if a group withdraws, it is a matter of actual schism. More people face the issue of organic unity at this level than at any of the others.

The History and Present Status of Ecumenism

Ecumenism can be traced back a long way. Indeed, one history of ecumenism traces it from 1517 onward.¹¹ In a sense, however, the modern ecumenical movement began in 1910 as a cooperative missionary endeavor. Kenneth Scott Latourette says, "The ecumenical movement was in large part the outgrowth of the missionary movement."¹² For the historical background we look to the revivals which swept Europe and North America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Participants in those revivals found that they had a common theology and experience which transcended denominational lines. Most important, they had a common task and purpose which bound them together: world evangelism.

11. *A History of the Ecumenical Movement, 1517-1948*, ed. Ruth Rouse and Stephen Charles Neill, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968).

12. Kenneth Scott Latourette, "Ecumenical Bearings of the Missionary Movement and the International Missionary Council," in *Ecumenical Movement*, p. 353.

zation.¹³ The revival movements gave birth to a number of organizations: the Young Men's Christian Association (1844), the Evangelical Alliance (1846), the Young Women's Christian Association (1855), and the Worlds Student Christian Association (1895). While these organizations were not truly ecumenical in their own right, they "were later to provide favourable ground for the propagation of ecumenical ideas."¹⁴

Missionaries were the first to sense that the divisions among the churches constituted an obstacle to the work of evangelization. International conferences for the advancement of missions were held, those in London in 1878 and 1888 and in New York in 1900 being particularly significant. The last of these, in fact, was officially designated the Ecumenical Missionary Conference. Attendance became progressively larger. The crucial event was the 1910 World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh, which is usually regarded as the beginning of the modern ecumenical movement. The two major leaders were John R. Mott and Joseph H. Oldham.¹⁵ The purpose was to plan the next steps in evangelizing the world.¹⁶

At one of the sessions a delegate from the Far East decried the detrimental effect which denominational divisions among missionaries had in his country. Neither his name nor his exact words have been preserved, but we do have a firsthand recollection of the substance of his remarks:

You have sent us your missionaries, who have introduced us to Jesus Christ, and for that we are grateful. But you have also brought us your distinctions and divisions: some preach Methodism, others Lutheranism, Congregationalism or Episcopalianism. We ask you to preach the Gospel to us, and to let Jesus Christ himself raise from among our peoples, by the action of his Holy Spirit, a Church conforming to his requirements and also to the genius of our race. This Church will be the Church of Christ in Japan, the Church of Christ in China, the Church of Christ in India; it will free us from all the *isms* with which you colour the preaching of the Gospel among us.¹⁷

Maurice Villain reports that this speech had a powerful effect upon many of the delegates. They determined to use "every possible means ... to remove this scandal[.] That day the ecumenical movement

was born."¹⁸ One of the delegates, Bishop Charles Brent of the Protestant Episcopal Church, in October 1910 proposed to his denomination the calling of a conference to study matters relating to "faith and order." Other Christian groups from around the world would be invited to join in this endeavor.¹⁹ Virtually simultaneously, similar action was being taken by two other American denominations, the Disciples of Christ and the National Council of Congregational Churches.²⁰ As a result, widespread support developed for a World Conference on Faith and Order? Before the conference could be held, however, the First World War broke out.

When peace was restored, plans were resumed for the world conference. It convened in **Lausanne**, Switzerland, in 1927. Two years earlier, Bishop Nathan **Söderblom** of Sweden had convened in Stockholm a Universal Christian Council for Life and Work. Although Söderblom was a pragmatist who attempted to dismiss questions of a doctrinal nature, it became evident that there had to be a clear understanding of the church if there was to be cooperative endeavor.²² In 1937, the Faith and Order movement met in Edinburgh and the Life and Work movement met in Oxford. Out of those meetings came the establishment of a provisional committee to unite the work of the two movements into what would come to be called the World Council of Churches. Again, however, war interrupted the plans. The actual formation of the World Council did not take place until 1948 in Amsterdam, at which time 147 denominational groups became members.²³ Later assemblies of the World Council of Churches were held in Evanston, Illinois (1954), New Delhi (1961), **Uppsala** (1968), Nairobi (1975), and Vancouver (1983).

The original statement of the theological basis of the World Council was brief and simple: "The World Council of Churches is a fellowship of churches which accept our Lord Jesus Christ as Lord and **Savior**."²⁴ This statement was criticized as not covering the full range of Christian beliefs, and so in 1961 an expanded version was adopted: "The World Council of Churches is a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus as God and Saviour according to the Scriptures and therefore seek to fulfill together their common calling to the glory of the one God,

18. Ibid.p.30.

19. **Tissington Tatlow**, "The World Conference on Faith and Order," *Ecumenical Movement*, p. 407.

20. Ibid.pp407-08.

21. Ibid.pp408-13.

22. Villain, *Unity*p.32.

23. Norman **Goodall**, *The Ecumenical Movement: What It Is and What It Does*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University, 1964), pp. 63-68.

24. Ibid.p.68.

13. Ibid.

14. Maurice Villain, *Unity: A History and Some Reflections*, trans. J. R. Foster from the 3rd rev. ed. (Baltimore: Helicon, 1961).

15. Latourette, "Ecumenical Bearings," p. 356.

16. Ibid., pp. 357-58.

17. Villain, *Unity*, p. 29.

Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”²⁵ Also in 1961, the International Missionary Council, another movement spawned from the 1910 conference at Edinburgh, merged with the World Council.²⁶ Another significant development was occurring at the same time. On Christmas Day 1961, Pope John XXIII issued a call convoking the Second Vatican Council. The new openness to non-Catholic Christianity displayed by this council was soon to make Protestant-Catholic dialogue a reality.

The World Council of Churches and its affiliate in the United States, the National Council of the Churches of Christ, are not the only inter-church movements of note. In 1941 the American Council of Christian Churches was organized; its global equivalent, the International Council of Christian Churches, was established somewhat later. On the surface these groups might appear to be conservative counterparts to the National and World Councils, attempting to achieve the same goals but from within a conservative theological framework. Upon closer scrutiny, however, it becomes obvious that the American and International Councils exist for the purpose of opposing the aims and positions of the National and World Councils.²⁷

From the beginning the major moving force in the American Council of Christian Churches has been Carl McIntire. He was a leader in the separation of the Bible Presbyterians from the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, the founding of Faith Theological Seminary, and the transformation of the National Bible Institute into Shelton College. He has also been the speaker on the “Twentieth Century Reformation Hour” radio program.

The activities of the American Council include lobbying in Washington concerning government policy affecting the chaplaincy, foreign missions, and radio broadcasting.²⁸ It is opposition to the National and World Councils, however, which constitutes the *raison d'être* of this group. One of its tactics is to hold a simultaneous rally in the very city where the World Council or one of its agencies is meeting. McIntire's book, *Twentieth Century Reformation*, is an extensive, vigorous, and pointed attack upon the liberalism of the ecumenical group. It is not only theology which is at stake, for matters of political and economic policy and practice also come up for controversial discussion.

25. Ibid., p. 69.

26. Norman Goodall, *Ecumenical Progress: A Decade of Change in the Ecumenical Movement, 1961-1971* (New York: Oxford University, 1972), p. 139.

27. Carl McIntire, *Twentieth Century Reformation*, 2nd and rev. ed. (Collingswood, N.J.: Christian Beacon, 1945).

28. Paul Woolley, “American Council of Christian Churches,” in *Twentieth Century Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, ed. Lefferts A. Loetscher (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1955), vol. 1, p. 30.

The activities of the American Council and its member churches have led to some very negative results. The tendency to schism which began when the Bible Presbyterian Church and Faith Seminary came into existence as splits, respectively, from the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and Westminster Seminary has continued. A case in point is the founding of Covenant College and Seminary and the allied denomination.²⁹ Further, the American Council has opposed not merely those of a liberal persuasion, but also inconsistent evangelicals who, although thoroughly orthodox, have not completely broken off ties with the National Council. Indeed, no voting member of the American Council may sustain any connection with the National Council.³⁰

One year after the origin of the American Council of Christian Churches, yet another interchurch association came into existence. A group of evangelicals had in 1929 organized the New England Fellowship, which involved Bible conferences, camps, and radio broadcasting. Some of the leaders, having a vision of a nationwide fellowship, issued invitations to evangelicals across the country to attend a session in St. Louis in April 1942. Out of this session came the National Association of Evangelicals for United Action; the name was later shortened to National Association of Evangelicals.³¹

Two facts regarding the beginning of the National Association of Evangelicals reflect its distinctive nature and purposes. First, the original name points to its orientation to practical action; in this respect the association resembles the Edinburgh conference of 1910. Second, the leaders of the evangelicals, having taken note of the formation of the American Council the previous year, chose not to join because of its negative orientation. Instead, the primary aim of the new group was constructive cooperative action. We might call it an ecumenical action group:

One thing became clear. Thousands had come to the conclusion that they could no longer cooperate with the Federal [National] Council of Churches. [But the evangelicals] were not interested in drawing up indictments and in spending their time in war-like strategy to reform or to destroy the Council. They believed that too much time and energy, money and talent had already been lost in such endeavors. They desired a constructive, aggressive, dynamic, and unified program of evangelical action in the fields of evangelism, missions, Christian education and every other sphere of Christian faith. They wanted a sound doctrinal basis for

29. Carl Henry, “The Perils of Independency,” *Christianity Today*, 12 November 1956, p. 21.

30. Woolley, “American Council,” p. 30.

31. Murch, *Cooperation*, pp. 48-61.

such action. They sought leadership in these realms. They believed that the time had come to demonstrate the validity of their faith and the ability of evangelicals to work together and build together in a great constructive program.³²

The National Association of Evangelicals functions through several commissions. Its journal, *Action* (formerly *United Evangelical Action*), gives expression to the views of its members.

Issues Raised by Evangelicals

When ecumenism is discussed, several issues are of particular concern to evangelicals. Evangelicals have always insisted that fellowship is impossible without agreement on certain basic truths. This insistence stems from belief in an objective God to whom humans relate in faith. We are able to relate to him because he has revealed himself to us. Since this revelation is at least partially in propositional form, faith is a matter of personal trust in God and acceptance of the truths he has revealed. Consequently, similar emotional experiences and cooperative endeavors are insufficient foundations for union. There must also be agreement upon at least the most basic items of belief.

This position of evangelicals might be interpreted as a natural or logical barrier to ecumenism. Actually, as John Warwick Montgomery has pointed out, it has functioned in the opposite way; it has encouraged interdenominational activity. Because of their concern for truth, evangelicals have been inclined to cooperate with and to feel themselves at one with those who hold the same basic beliefs which they do.³³ Indeed, fundamentalism began historically with a series of Bible conferences attended by people who shared a set of distinctive beliefs termed "fundamentals of the faith." Many participants discovered that they had more in common theologically and spiritually with some Christians bearing different denominational labels than they did with some members of their own denomination. Thus the very fact of doctrinal diversity within the larger denominations has been a stimulus to ecumenism.

Evangelicals have, however, in light of their concern for truth, been somewhat cautious about the degree to which they are willing to engage in ecumenism. A number of issues perpetually arise when evangelicals discuss ecumenism. William Estep has conveniently grouped them into

32. Ibid., p. 62.

33. John Warwick Montgomery, *Ecumenicity, Evangelicals, and Rome* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1969), p. 18.

categories. Although he wrote particularly from the perspective of Baptists and ecumenism, we will, with some adaptations, use his outline here.³⁴

The Theological Issue

When one considers the various types of reservations which have been expressed regarding the ecumenical movement, theology is the field which comes immediately to mind. For disagreement on theological matters is what created separate denominations in the first place. Evangelicals will not consider union with any group which fails to subscribe to certain basic doctrines: the supreme authority of the Bible as the source of faith and Christian practice; the deity of Jesus Christ, including his miracles, atoning death, and bodily resurrection; salvation as a supernatural work of regeneration and justification by grace through faith; the second coming of Christ. It appears to the evangelical that, with regard to the theological basis for fellowship, the ecumenical movement has often settled for the lowest common denominator. As a result, the evangelical suspects that some of the members of the fellowship may not be genuine Christians. There is also the question of what doctrinal standards (i.e., confessions or creeds), if any, are to be followed, and what their status or authority is to be.³⁵

The Ecclesiological Issue

In a sense, the ecclesiological issue is merely a subdivision of the theological issue. Evangelicals will not consider union with groups that do not share their doctrine of the church. And yet, somewhat broader questions are also at stake here. Evangelicals insist that there be basic agreement on what makes a church a church. Indeed, does the church make Christians Christian, or do Christians make the church the church? Here in a sense we have the question of the very nature of Christianity. Then, too, there is the matter of the meaning of the term *church*. Does it apply primarily to a local congregation of believers, to a denomination, or to a federation of denominations? There must also be a consensus on the structure of church government and on the form and function of the ministry. A merger of convinced Episcopalians and doctrinaire Congregationalists is not likely to be accomplished without some measure of strain regarding the organization and administration of church government, the significance and criteria of ordination, and allied subjects.

34. William R. Estep, *Baptists and Christian Unity* (Nashville: Broadman, 1966), p. 170.

35. Montgomery, *Ecumenicity* p. 17, n. 6; Estep, *Baptists*, p. 170.

Attention must also be given to such matters as the purpose and strategy of the church, the appropriateness and degree of social and political activism, and the relationship between state and church.

It is significant that the areas we have just mentioned and related questions concerning the sacraments are causing the ecumenical movement its most severe tensions and difficulties, just as they did in the sixteenth century, when Martin Luther and **Ulrich Zwingli** were unable to unite their wings of the Reformation, and negotiations broke down over the question of the nature of Christ's presence in the **Lord's Supper**. The reason is readily apparent. With respect to other areas of belief, it is possible to allow individuals to have their own private views. But the church and the sacraments are outward, observable components of Christianity. Hence a greater degree of agreement is necessary concerning them.

The Methodological Issue

Since a major reason for founding the ecumenical movement was to overcome the drawbacks of a divided witness, there is real pertinence to a pragmatic question raised by evangelicals: Just how effective is the ecumenical movement in carrying out the task of evangelizing the world? Harold Lindsell has pointed out that the United Church of Canada was characterized by declining membership and a reduction of missionaries at a time when other denominations were showing growth and progress in these areas.³⁶

In light of the origin of the ecumenical movement, its failure in the area of world missions is particularly **significant**. **Evangelicals** have frequently criticized the World Council of Churches on this score. W. A. Visser 't Hooft, the first general secretary of the World Council, attempted to respond to the criticism:

Perhaps the most relevant question raised by the conservative **Evangelicals** has been whether the ecumenical movement has concentrated its energies too much on social and international problems and neglected the primary task of mission and evangelism. The question is all the more relevant since a comparison between the W.C.C. Churches and the evangelical bodies shows that the latter are spending a much greater proportion of their resources of men and money on evangelism and foreign missions. But the great question arises: What is evangelism? Is the Church evangelistic only if it preaches the gospel to individuals? Or is it also evangelistic if it throws the light of the gospel on the great human prob-

36. Harold Lindsell, "What Are the Results? Ecumenical Merger and Mission," *Christianity Today*, 30 March 1962, p. 5.

lems of our time? The debate continues and both partners in the conversation have to learn from each other.³⁷

The Teleological Issue

The final issue which evangelicals raise when they appraise ecumenism is what Estep calls the teleological issue.³⁸ What is the ultimate goal of the ecumenical movement? Is it organic merger of all denominations into one super-church? The leaders of the World Council have repeatedly and emphatically declared that this is not their goal; individual denominations will persist and maintain their integrity. Nonetheless, Estep has compiled an impressive list of statements by other leaders of the ecumenical movement to the effect that organic union of all churches is to be sought and attained. E. Roberts-Thomson distinguishes between the specific function of the World Council and the ultimate goal of the ecumenical movement. The Council itself is prohibited by its own constitution from becoming more than a council. It is expected, however, that the consciences of the members of the World Council will become so sensitized to the sin of separateness that they will seek a merger which goes beyond the activities of the **Council**.³⁹

Should a complete merger take place, certain unfortunate results would occur. Church membership would become meaningless. Robert Handy has observed that "the drive for total organizational unity inevitably forces anew the question of who is a heretic. In the effort to escape the harsher aspects of that question, while pressing for total organizational unity, standards of membership would be lowered and the nature of the church would, in effect, be presented in minimal terms."⁴⁰ An additional problem with such a superchurch is that it would be regarded as the exclusive trustee, so to speak, of Christianity. Believers would be made to feel that one cannot be a Christian outside of the visible church. But what then becomes of the dissenter or nonconformist? Where could such a person go? A monolithic structure would preclude the system of checks and balances which is as necessary in the church as in secular politics.

37. W. A. Visser 't Hooft, "The General Ecumenical Development Since 1948," in *The Ecumenical Advance: A History of the Ecumenical Movement*, vol. 2, 1948-1968, ed. Harold E. Fey (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), p. 19.

38. Estep, *Baptists*, p. 185.

39. E. Roberts-Thomson, *With Hands Outstretched* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1962), p. 39.

40. Robert Handy, "The Ecumenical Task Today," *Foundations* 4, no. 2 (April 1961): 105-06.

Guidelines for Action

In view of Christ's prayer for the unity of his followers, what should our stance be? We conclude our chapter on church unity with several guidelines.

1. We need to realize that the church of Jesus Christ *is* one church. All who are related to the one Savior and Lord are indeed part of the same spiritual body (1 Cor. 12: 13).

2. The spiritual unity of believers should show itself or come to expression in goodwill, fellowship, and love for one another. We should employ every legitimate way of affirming that we are one with Christians who are organically separated from us.

3. Christians of all types should work together whenever possible. If no essential point of doctrine or practice is compromised, they should join forces. In other words, it is important that there be occasions on which Christians lay aside their differences. Cooperation among Christians gives a common witness to the world and is faithful stewardship of the resources entrusted to us.

4. It is important to delineate carefully the doctrinal basis and objectives of fellowship. The original goal of the 1910 World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh has been, by Visser 't Hooft's own admission, largely supplanted by other concerns. Yet the execution of Christ's commission is still the major task of the church. Consequently, it is difficult to justify committing time, personnel, and finances to activities that do not contribute, at least indirectly, to evangelization. In other words, a return to the original goals of the ecumenical movement should be our aim, for not every one who says, "Lord, Lord," is really one of his.

5. We must guard against any union that would sap the spiritual vitality of the church. It is conservative churches that are growing; evangelicals have the momentum. Alliances that would dilute their vitality must be very carefully evaluated and probably avoided.

6. Christians should not be too quick to leave their parent denomination. As long as there is a reasonable possibility of redeeming the denomination, the conservative witness should not be abandoned. For that matter, if conservatives withdraw from ecumenical circles, their position will not be represented therein.

7. It is important that Christians make sure that divisions and separation are due to genuine convictions and principles, and not to personality conflicts or individual ambition. It is a discredit to the cause of Christ when Christians who hold the same beliefs and goals separate.

8. Where Christians do disagree, whether as individuals, churches, or denominations, it is essential that they do so in a spirit of love, seeking to correct others and persuade them of the truth, rather than refute them or expose them to ridicule. Truth will ever be linked to love.

PART -TWELVE

The Last Things

55. Introduction to Eschatology

56. Individual Eschatology

57. The Second Coming and Its Consequents

58. Millennial and Tribulational Views

59. Final States

Introduction to Eschatology

The Status of Eschatology

The Classification of Eschatologies

Modern Treatments of Eschatology

The Liberal Approach: Modernized Eschatology

Albert Schweitzer: Demodernized Eschatology

C. H. Dodd: Realized Eschatology

Rudolf Bultmann: Existentialized Eschatology

Jürgen Moltmann: Politicized Eschatology

Dispensationalism: Systematized Eschatology

Conclusions Regarding Eschatology

The Status of Eschatology

As the derivation of the word indicates, eschatology has traditionally meant the study of the last things. Accordingly, it has dealt with questions concerning the consummation of history, the completion of God's working in the world. In many cases it has also been literally the last thing in the study of theology, the last topic considered, the last chapter in the textbook.

Eschatology has had varying fortunes during the history of Christian-

ity. Because theology is usually defined and refined in response to challenges and controversies, and the number of major debates over eschatology has been few, it has remained relatively undeveloped in comparison to such doctrines as the nature of the sacraments and the person and work of Christ. These latter doctrines, being more central to the Christian faith and experience, were extensively treated at an earlier point. James Orr observed that as church history advanced, different doctrines predominated. The usual order of theological studies reflects the order in which the various doctrines attained prominence. Orr suggested that, in keeping with this sequence, eschatology would be the dominant matter on the modern theological agenda.¹ Whether it has been the supreme topic might be disputed, for in our century a great amount of attention has been given to revelation and the work of the Holy Spirit. Yet it is certainly true that in the late nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century, eschatology has received closer examination than it ever had before.

There are various conceptions of the relationship of eschatology to other doctrines. Some theologians have regarded it as merely an appendage to some other doctrine, the completion of another theological topic as it were. For instance, it has sometimes been considered as simply a part of the doctrine of salvation.² When viewed as essentially a study of the final steps in Christ's establishing his rule in the world, eschatology completes the doctrine of the work of Christ? It has also been attached to the doctrine of the church; we think, for example, of Augustine's discussion of the kingdom and the church.⁴ Other theologians have looked upon eschatology as an independent doctrine on a par with the other major doctrines.⁵ Still other theologians have insisted that eschatology is the supreme doctrine—it sums up all of the others and brings them to their fulfilment.⁶ Finally, a few have maintained that eschatology is the whole of theology or, more correctly, that the whole of theology is

1. James Orr, *The Progress of Dogma* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952 reprint), pp. 20-30.

2. Theodore Haering, *The Christian Faith: A System of Dogmatics* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1913), vol. 2, pp. 829-924; Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), p. 297.

3. Geerhardus Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University, 1930), p. 36.

4. Augustine *The City of God* 20.6-10, especially 9.

5. Augustus H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Westwood, N.J.: Revell, 1907), pp. 981-1056.

6. Joseph Pohle, *Eschatology; or, The Catholic Doctrine of the Last Things: A Dogmatic Treatise* (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1917), p. 1.

eschatology.⁷ There is, then, a wide range of views of the status of eschatology; it is variously regarded as an appendage to other doctrines, one of the major doctrines, the supreme doctrine, and the whole of theology.

There are a number of reasons for the current attention to eschatology. One is the rapid development of technology and consequent changes in our culture in general. To avoid obsolescence, it is necessary for corporations and public agencies to predict and prepare for the future. This has given rise to a whole new discipline—"futurism." Curiosity as to what homes, transportation, and communication will be like in the next decade or the next century gives rise to speculation and then research. There is a corresponding interest in the future in a broader sense, a cosmic sense. What does the future hold for the whole of reality?

A second major reason for the prominence of eschatology is the rise of the Third World. For those who live in the developed nations, the past is rich with meaning. Indeed, in the minds of some, the best which life will ever offer lies buried in the past, and all current economic and political trends are negative and discouraging. For the Third World nations, however, it is otherwise. The future holds great promise and potential. As Christianity continues its rapid growth in the Third World nations, indeed, more rapid there than anywhere else, their excitement and anticipation regarding the future stimulate greater interest in eschatology than in accomplished history.

Further, the strength of communism or dialectical materialism in our world has forced theologians to focus upon the future. Communism has a definite philosophy of history. It sees history as marching on to an ultimate goal. As the dialectic achieves its purposes, history keeps moving from one stage to the next. Ernst Bloch's *Das Prinzip Hoffnung (The Principle of Hope)*,⁸ which represents Marxism as the world's hope for a better future, has had great impact on various Christian theologians. They have felt challenged to set forth an alternative, superior basis for hope.

Certain schools of psychology have also begun to emphasize hope. Perhaps the most notable example is Viktor Frankl's logotherapy, a blend of existentialism and psychoanalysis. From his experiences in a concentration camp during World War II, Frankl concluded that humans need a purpose for living. One who has hope, who 'knows the 'why' for his

7. Karl Barth says, "If Christianity be not altogether thoroughgoing eschatology, there remains in it no relationship whatever with Christ"—*Epistle to the Romans*, 6th ed., trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (New York: Oxford University, 1968), p. 3 14.

8. Ernst Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1959).

existence. . . will be able to bear almost any 'how.'"⁹ In a very real sense, the why, the purpose, of existence is related to the future, to what one anticipates will occur.

Finally, the threat of destruction which hovers above the human race has stirred inquiry regarding the future. The possibility of a nuclear holocaust is a dark cloud over the whole world. And while the effect of the ecological crises we face is less rapid than nuclear war would be, they, too, jeopardize the future of the race. These facts make it clear that we cannot live merely in the present, preoccupied with what is now. We must think of the future.

When we examine what theologians and ministers are doing with eschatology, we find two contrasting trends. On the one hand, there is an intensive preoccupation with eschatology. Theological conservatives have shown great interest in the subject. Dispensationalism in particular has emphasized it in their preaching and teaching. One pastor is reported to have preached on the Book of Revelation every Sunday evening for nineteen years! Sometimes the teaching is augmented by large detailed charts of the last times. Current political and social events, especially those relating to the nation of Israel, are identified with prophecies in the Scripture. As a result, some preachers have been caricatured as having the Bible in one hand and the daily newspaper in the other. Hal Lindsey's *Late Great Planet Earth* is a noteworthy example of this type of "eschatomania."¹⁰

There is another variety of eschatomania, very different in orientation and content. This is the approach which makes eschatology the whole of theology.¹¹ The Christian faith is regarded as so thoroughly eschatological that "eschatological" is attached as an adjective to virtually every theological concept. Eschatology is seen "behind every bush" in the New Testament. In the view of those who follow this approach, however, the central subject of eschatology is not the future, but the idea that a new age has begun. Often the tension between the old and the new is emphasized; in fact, the phrase "already, but not yet" has become a sort of slogan.

The opposite of the two varieties of eschatomania might be called "eschatophobia"—a fear of or aversion to eschatology, or at least an avoidance of discussing it. In some cases, eschatophobia is a reaction against those who have a definite interpretation of all prophetic material in the Bible and identify every significant event in history with some biblical prediction. Not wanting to be equated with this rather sensation-

9. Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (New York: Washington Square, 1963), p. 127.

10. Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971).

11. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Theology of Hope* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967).

alistic approach to eschatology, some preachers and teachers avoid discussion of the subject altogether. As a result, in some conservative circles there is virtually no alternative to dispensationalism. Many lay persons, having heard no other view presented, have come to think of dispensationalism as the only legitimate approach to eschatology. Moreover, in situations where a rather minor point of eschatology has been made a test of orthodoxy, younger pastors tend to avoid the subject entirely, hoping thus to avert suspicion. And in settings where discussing eschatology has become an intramural sport, some pastors, hoping to avoid divisiveness, make little or no mention of the millennium and the great tribulation. In this respect, eschatological topics are not greatly unlike glossolalia.

Many of the issues of eschatology are obscure and difficult to deal with. Consequently, some teachers and preachers simply avoid the subject. Certain professors who teach courses in Christian doctrine always find themselves running behind schedule in their lecturing. Consequently, they never have time to deal with the millennium and the great tribulation. Similarly, professors of New Testament studies have difficulty finding time for the Book of Revelation, and even some professors of Old Testament studies have difficulty budgeting their schedule to allow much attention to the prophetic books. Perhaps this is just lack of organization and discipline, but more than one instructor has admitted that the lack of time is a convenience.

Somewhere between the two extremes of preoccupation with and avoidance of eschatology, we must take our stance. For eschatology is neither an unimportant and optional topic nor the sole subject of significance and interest to the Christian. We will find an appropriate mediating position if we keep in mind the true purpose of eschatology. At times eschatology has become a topic of debate, resulting in accusations and acrimony among Christians. This is not the purpose for which eschatological truths were revealed by God. Paul indicates in 1 Thessalonians 4 his reason for writing about the second coming. Some believers whose loved ones had died were experiencing a grief which was, at least to a degree, unhealthy and unnecessary. Paul did not want them to sorrow like unbelievers, who have no hope for their departed loved ones (v. 13). After describing the second coming and assuring his readers of its certainty, he counsels, "Therefore comfort one another with these words" (v. 18). It is sometimes easy to forget that the eschatological truths in God's Word, like the rest of his revelation, are intended to comfort and assure us.

The Classification of Eschatologies

There is a series of questions which can be posed to help us classify the various eschatological views held by Christians. In some cases, a

single question will serve to classify the view being considered, since it will be a key to the entire system. In other cases, several questions will have to be asked if we are to fully comprehend the nature of the view with which we are dealing:

1. Is eschatology thought of as pertaining primarily to the future or the present? Eschatology has traditionally been understood as dealing with the end times, matters to transpire at some future point. Some theologians, however, see eschatology as a description of events in the here and now. We are in a new age and experience a new quality of life. Still others view eschatology as a description of what has always been, is, and always will be true. In other words, eschatology has a timeless character.

At this point it will be helpful to note a system which is used to classify the various interpretations of prophetic or apocalyptic material in Scripture. While it is most often utilized as a means of classifying interpretations of the Book of **Revelation**¹² or, more generally, **all** such prophetic literature, the system can also be applied to distinguish views of eschatology:

1. The futuristic view holds that most of the events described are in the future. They will come to **fulfilment** at the close of the age, many of them probably clustered together.
2. The preterist view holds that the events described were taking place at the time of the writer. Since they were current for the writer, they are now in the past.
3. The historical view holds that the events described were in the future at the time of writing, but refer to matters destined to take place throughout the history of the church. Instead of looking solely to the future for their occurrence, we should also search for them within the pages of history and consider whether some of them may be coming to pass right now.
4. The symbolic or idealist view holds that the events described are not to be thought of in a time sequence at all. They refer to truths which are timeless in nature, not to singular historical occurrences.

2. Is the view of the future of life here on earth primarily optimistic or pessimistic? Some eschatologies anticipate an improvement in conditions. Others look for a general worsening of the circumstances of human existence. Many of them expect that, under human control, the situation will deteriorate until God intervenes and rectifies what is occurring.

12. Merrill C. Tenney, *The New Testament: An Historical and Analytic Survey* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), pp. 404-06.

3. Is divine activity or human effort thought to be the agent of eschatological events? If divine activity, these events will be regarded as supernaturally realized; if human effort, they will be viewed as the result of familiar and natural processes. The former perspective looks for genuinely transcendent working by **God**; the latter stresses Gods immanent activity in the world.

4. Is the focus of eschatological belief this-worldly or otherworldly? In other words, is it expected that the promises of God will largely come to pass upon this earth in a fundamental continuity with life as we now experience it, or is it expected that there will be a deliverance from the present scene and that his promises will be fulfilled in heaven or some place or situation radically different from what we now experience? Eschatologies of the former type pursue more secular hopes; those of the latter type are more spiritual in nature.

5. Does the particular view speak of hope for the church alone or for the human race in general? Do the benefits anticipated accrue only to those who are believers, or are the promises to all? If the latter, is the church the agent or vehicle of the good things coming to all?

6. Does the eschatology hold that we will come into the benefits of the new age individually, or that their bestowal will be cosmic in character? If the latter, it is likely that Gods promises will be fulfilled in one **all-inclusive** occurrence. Moreover, in that case the effects may not be limited to human beings, but may involve other segments of the creation; there may well be a transformation of the natural order.

7. Is there a special place for the Jewish people in the future **occurrences**? As Gods chosen and covenant people in the Old Testament, do they still have a unique status, or are they simply like the rest of the human race?

Modern Treatments of Eschatology

In many ways the history of eschatology has paralleled that of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. In both cases a formal position was worked out fairly early and became part of orthodoxy. In orthodox circles, consequently, eschatology and the Holy Spirit were only rarely of vital interest or major objects of concern. It was in the cults, or in radical fringe groups, that these doctrines were taken very seriously and given dynamic and aggressive expression. While they were part of traditional belief, they were not the subject of much debate or preaching. In the twentieth century, however, both doctrines have become matters of much broader interest and concern.

The Liberal Approach: Modernized Eschatology

The nineteenth century was a time of considerable intellectual ferment, and Christian theology felt its force. The Darwinian theory of evolution, the growth of natural sciences, and critical studies of the Bible all contributed to a new mood. In theology, liberalism attempted to retain the Christian faith while bringing the scientific approach to religious matters. There was confidence in the historical method as a means of gaining understanding of what had actually occurred in biblical times. Application of this method to study of the Gospels came to be known as the search for the historical Jesus. While there were variations in the conclusions, there were some general agreements. One was that Jesus was basically a human teacher whose message was primarily about the heavenly Father. He was the first Christian. As some put it, Jesus called us to believe with him rather than in him.

The message of Jesus was really quite simple, according to Adolf von Harnack, whose thought represented the culmination of nineteenth-century liberalism. Jesus emphasized the fatherhood of God, who has created all humans and who watches over and protects them, as he does all parts of his creation. The infinite value of a human soul was another major teaching of Jesus. God has made man the highest object of his creation and his love, so we should love our fellow humans.¹³

The kingdom of God was still another basic topic of Jesus' teaching. Whereas this kingdom had traditionally been understood as a future earthly reign of Christ which would be established by his dramatic second coming, liberals stressed the present character of the kingdom. They pointed out that Jesus had said to his disciples, "Whenever you enter a town and they receive you, eat what is set before you; heal the sick in it and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you'" (Luke 10:8-9). The kingdom, then, is not something far removed, either spatially or temporally. It is something near, something into which humans can enter. It is not something external imposed from without. It is simply the reign of God in human hearts wherever obedience to God is found. The role of Christians is to spread this kingdom, which, according to Albrecht Ritschl, is a realm of righteousness and ethical values.¹⁴

In the view of liberals, Jesus also taught some rather strange ideas. One of these ideas was the second coming, the conception that he would return bodily at the end of the age to establish his kingdom. Liberals found this an untenable carryover from a prescientific way of under-

13. Adolf von Harnack, *What Is Christianity?* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957), pp. 52-74.

14. Albrecht Ritschl, *The Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1900), pp. 30ff.

standing reality. Yet they also believed that the conception contains an important message. The teaching of the bodily second coming is merely the husk within which is contained the true message, the kernel. What must be done is to peel away the husk to get to the kernel.¹⁵ What is really being proclaimed by the teaching of the second coming is the victory of God's righteousness over evil in the world. This is the kernel; the second advent is merely the husk or wrapping. We need not retain the wrapping. No one in his right mind eats the husk with the corn—at least no human being does.

In the rejection of the idea of the second coming, we see the liberals' profound appreciation for the conclusions of modern learning, which, along with the historical method, was one of the basic components of their approach to the Bible. Prominent in the heyday of liberalism was the idea of progress. Advances were being made scientifically, politically, and economically. The Darwinian theory of evolution was being generalized to cover all of reality. Everything was seen as growing, developing, progressing. Not merely biological organisms, but human personality and institutions were supposedly advancing as well. The belief in the triumph of God over evil was blended with this doctrine of progress. It was presumed that a continuing Christianization of the social order, including economics, would be the current exemplification of the real meaning of the second coming.

Albert Schweitzer: Demodernized Eschatology

Some theologians, however, were uneasy with the interpretations of Jesus which they found in the liberals' writings. It was not merely conservatives who registered dissent; some who shared the liberals' basic approach to interpreting the Bible also objected. One of the first of this group was Johannes Weiss. His *Jesus' Proclamation of the Kingdom of God* proved to be a radical departure for those who applied the historical method to the Gospels. Instead of assuming that the kingdom of which Jesus spoke is a present ethical kingdom, Weiss theorized that Jesus was thoroughly eschatological, futuristic, and even apocalyptic in his outlook. According to Weiss, Jesus did not look for a gradual spread of the kingdom of God as an ethical rule in the hearts of men, but for a future kingdom to be introduced by a dramatic action of God. This hypothesis appeared to Weiss to fit the data of Jesus' life and teaching much better than did the conclusions of the standard lives of Jesus.¹⁶

15. Harnack, *What Is Christianity?* pp. 55-56.

16. Johannes Weiss, *Jesus' Proclamation of the Kingdom of God*, ed. and trans. Richard H. Hiers and David L. Holland (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971).

What Weiss had begun, Albert Schweitzer completed. He was sharply critical of the liberal interpretations and reconstructions of the life of Jesus. These half-historical, half-modern conceptions were the product of fruitful imaginations. He said of the liberal conception of Jesus as a preacher of an ethical kingdom: "He is a figure designed by rationalism, endowed with life by liberalism, and clothed by modern theology in an historical garb."¹⁷ Instead of a Jesus who had little to say about the future, Schweitzer found a Jesus whose thoughts and actions were permeated by a radical, thoroughgoing eschatology. Schweitzer used the phrase "consistent eschatology." A key factor in Jesus' message was his future coming (Schweitzer preferred this term to "second coming"). Not only was this eschatological preaching basic and central to Jesus' ministry; it was also the original plan. While some theologians see the eschatological element in Jesus' teaching as an afterthought adopted when he failed to establish an earthly kingdom, Schweitzer believed that a future heavenly kingdom was at the base of Jesus' preaching even from the beginning of his first Galilean ministry.¹⁸

Jesus preached a future kingdom which would be radically supernatural, sudden in its coming, and discontinuous from human society as previously experienced. It would be introduced through a cosmic catastrophe. One should prepare for it by repenting. This is what Jesus really believed, according to Schweitzer; but, of course, Jesus was mistaken! Failing in his attempt to introduce his contemporaries to this cosmic kingdom, Jesus was destroyed. He died a martyr's death.¹⁹ It is this true historical Jesus, not the modern Jesus, that we are to follow. For Jesus cannot be made to fit our conceptions. He will reveal himself to those who obey his commands and perform the tasks he has set them.²⁰ While Schweitzer did not specify just what this means or how this revelation is to take place, his mission work in Lamberéné was evidently his personal attempt to fulfil Christ's commands.

C. H. Dodd: Realized Eschatology

C. H. Dodd gave eschatology its next major reorientation. His eschatology was similar to Schweitzer's in one major respect but diametrically opposed to it in another. In common with Schweitzer he held that

eschatology is a major theme permeating Scripture, particularly Jesus' teachings. Unlike Schweitzer, however, Dodd insisted that the content of Jesus' message was not a future coming and a future kingdom; rather, with the advent of Jesus the kingdom of God had already arrived. In terms of the four views of eschatology of which we spoke earlier, this is the preterist approach.

In formulating his eschatology, Dodd pays particular attention to the biblical references to the day of the Lord. He notes that whereas in the Old Testament the day of the Lord is viewed as a future matter, in the New Testament it is depicted as a present occurrence. The mythological concept of the day of the Lord has become a definite historical reality. Eschatology has been fulfilled or realized. Hence Dodd's view has come to be known as "realized eschatology." Instead of looking ahead for future fulfillments of prophecy, we should note the ways in which it has already been fulfilled. For example, the triumph of God was evident when Jesus saw Satan fall from heaven (Luke 10:18). With the coming of Christ, the judgment has already taken place (John 3:19). Eternal life is already our possession (John 5:24). In Dodd's mind, there is little doubt that the New Testament writers saw the end times as having already come. In drawing this conclusion, Dodd gives greater attention to Paul than do Schweitzer or the liberal lives of Jesus. Peter's witness at Pentecost is also of significance: "But this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: 'And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh'" (Acts 2:16-17). There really is no need to look ahead for the fulfillment of prophecies like Joel's. They have already been fulfilled.²¹

Rudolf Bultmann: Existentialized Eschatology

Still another approach to eschatology was put forward by Rudolf Bultmann. His handling of eschatology is simply part of his much larger program of demythologization. Because demythologization has been examined elsewhere in this treatise, we will not give a full-scale exposition here. In short, Bultmann insisted that much of the New Testament is in the form of mythology. The writers expressed their understanding of life in terms which were common in New Testament times. What they recorded is not to be taken as an objective account of what actually transpired or as a literal explanation of the cosmos. If taken in this fashion, the New Testament seems ludicrous. The ideas that Jesus ascended into heaven, for example, and that diseases are caused by demons inhabiting humans are simply untenable as well as unnecessary.

21. C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Development* (Chicago: Willett, Clark, 1937), pp. 142-49.

17. Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede* (New York: Macmillan, 1964), p. 396.

18. Albert Schweitzer, *The Mystery of the Kingdom of God: The Secret of Jesus' Messiahship and Passion*, trans. Walter Lowrie (London: Black, 1914), p. 87.

19. Schweitzer, *Quest of the Historical Jesus*, pp. 368-69.

20. Ibid., p. 401.

Instead, we must understand that the New Testament writers used myths drawn from Gnosticism, Judaism, and other sources, to give expression to what had happened to them **existentially**.²²

Bultmann brought to his interpretation of the New Testament the existentialism of Martin Heidegger. Since the message of the New Testament is existential rather than historical (i.e., it does not tell us what actually happened), does it not make good sense to interpret it by **using** existential philosophy? Bultmann considers **Heidegger's** thought to be a secularized, philosophical version of the New Testament view of human existence.²³

Since the historical element in the New Testament does not tell us primarily about specific occurrences but about the very nature of existence, we must regard it as essentially timeless. The same is true of eschatology. Just as biblical history does not **tell** us about literal events which occurred in the past, eschatology does not refer to literal events which will occur in the future. Paul in particular writes of current experience rather than future events. He thinks of salvation as bearing upon present existence: "If any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come" (2 Cor. 5: 17). Resurrection, too, is a present experience: "Death is swallowed up in victory" (1 Cor. 15:54). And from words spoken by Jesus the week of his crucifixion and recorded by John, we know that judgment is a present phenomenon as well: "Now is the judgment of this world, now shall the ruler of this world be cast out" (John 12:3 1). John likewise reports words of Jesus which represent eternal life and resurrection as current experiences rather than future events: "He who believes in the Son has eternal life; he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God rests upon him" (John 3:36); "Truly, truly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live" (525). Bultmann comments, "For John the resurrection of Jesus, Pentecost and the *parousia* of Jesus are one and the same event, and those who believe have already eternal life."²⁴ Even a purely eschatological event like the coming of the spirit of antichrist is existentially true at all times: "And every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God. This is the spirit of antichrist, of which you have heard that it was coming, and now it is in the world already" (1 John 4:3). The next verse declares that the children of God **have** overcome these spirits. Eschatological realities like resurrection, eternal life, and the coming of

22. Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ und Mythology* (New York: Scribner, 1958), p. 33.

23. Ibid., p. 45.

24. Ibid., p. 33.

the spirit of antichrist, then, do not depend upon whether a particular event has yet transpired, for they are true in a timeless, existential sense.

Jiirgen Moltmann: Politicized Eschatology

The theology of hope considers eschatology not simply one part of theology, or one doctrine of theology, but rather the whole of theology. To an unusual degree, the inspiration for this theology stems from the personal experiences of one man, **Jürgen Moltmann**. **Moltmann** was a prisoner of war in a British camp until 1948. He saw the collapse of his native Germany and all of its institutions. Like some other authors of prison-camp memoirs, he noted that, as a general rule, the prisoners with hope had the best chance of survival. When he returned to Germany and began to study theology, his views matured. In particular, exposure to the thought of the Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch intensified his interest in the theme of hope. He could not understand why Christian theology had allowed this theme, of which it was the rightful owner, to slip **away**.²⁵ As atheistic Marxism picked up and exploited the theme of hope, Christianity was becoming irrelevant. On the one hand, Christianity had a God but no future, and on the other, Marxism had a future but no God.²⁶ **Moltmann** called Christians to remember the "God of Hope" who is witnessed to in both the Old Testament and the New Testament; reclaiming the theme of hope, they should "begin to assume responsibility for the personal, social, and political problems of the **present**."²⁷

This quotation suggests the direction in which Moltmann's subsequent thought has gone. He has called upon the church to mediate the presence of Christ, who in turn will mediate the future of God. The Christian hope will not be brought about simply by passive waiting, however. For "we are construction workers and not only interpreters of the future whose power in **hope** as well as in fulfillment is God. This means that Christian hope is a creative and militant hope in history. The horizon of **eschatological** expectation produces here a horizon of ethical intuitions which, in turn, gives meaning to the concrete historical **initiatives**."²⁸

Aiming at realization of the Christian hope, **Moltmann** has developed a political theology to transform the world. We are not to passively await the arrival of the future, for what the future proves to be depends in

25. Jürgen Moltmann, "Politics and the Practice of Hope," *Christian Century*, 11 March 1970, p. 288.

26. Jürgen Moltmann, "Hope and History," *Theology Today* 25, no. 3 (October 1968): 370.

27. Ibid., p. 371.

28. Ibid., p. 384.

large part upon our efforts. Yet the future will not be achieved primarily by our work. It will be basically Gods doing. To attain that future (our hope) requires action, not theological explanation. In contrast to earlier theologies, which attempted to deal with the problem of evil in the world by offering a theodicy (a vindication of God's justice), the theology of hope, instead of asking why God does not do something about evil in the world, acts to transform that evil. So faith has become action, which in turn will help to bring about the object of that faith.

Dispensationalism: Systematized Eschatology

One additional school of eschatology needs to be looked at, for although it is relatively new as orthodox theologies go, it has exerted a considerable influence within conservative circles. This is the movement which has come to be known as **dispensationalism**. Dispensationalism is a unified interpretive scheme. That is to say, each **specific** part or tenet is vitally interconnected with the others. Thus, when we speak of the systematizing of eschatology, we have in mind not only that the data have been organized to facilitate understanding, but also that conclusions in some areas automatically follow from tenets in others. The developer of dispensationalism was John Nelson Darby (1800–1882). He was the organizing force in the Plymouth Brethren movement as well. Dispensationalism was popularized through the **Scofield** Reference Bible and through conferences on biblical prophecy which were led by pastors and lay persons who had studied at Bible institutes where dispensationalism was virtually the official position.²⁹

Dispensationalists tend to think of their system as being, first and foremost, a method of interpreting Scripture. At its core is the conviction that Scripture is to be interpreted literally. This does not mean that obviously metaphorical passages are to be taken literally, but that if the plain meaning makes sense, one must not look further.³⁰ Application of this principle leads to rejection of both allegorical interpretations and the liberal attempts to explain away the supernatural elements in Scripture, for example, the miracles. It also means that prophecy is interpreted very literally and often in considerable detail. Specifically, "Israel" is always understood as a reference to national or ethnic Israel, not the church. Despite the stress on literal interpretation, however, there is also a tendency toward a typological understanding of some narrative and poetical portions which at times approaches the old allegorizing method. An

example is the frequent explanation of the Song of Solomon as a picture of Christ's love for his church, in spite of the fact that the book says nothing about either Christ or the church.

Dispensationalism finds in God's Word evidence of a series of "dispensations" or economies under which he has managed the world. These dispensations are successive stages in God's revelation of his purposes. They do not entail different means of salvation, for the means of salvation has been the same at all periods of time, namely, by grace through faith. There is some disagreement as to the number of dispensations, the most common number being seven. Thus, man was first in the dispensation of innocence. Then came the dispensations of conscience (from the fall to the flood), human government (from the flood to the call of Abraham), promise, law, and grace. The seventh is yet to come. Many dispensationalists emphasize that recognizing to what dispensation a given passage of Scripture applies is crucial. We should not attempt to govern our lives by precepts laid down for the millennium, for example.³¹

Dispensationalists also put great stress on the distinction between Israel and the church. Some of them, in fact, regard this distinction as fundamental to understanding Scripture and organizing eschatology. In their view, God made an unconditional covenant with Israel; that is to say, his promises to them do not depend upon their fulfilling certain requirements. They will remain his special people and ultimately receive his blessing. Ethnic, national, political Israel is never to be confused with the church, nor are the promises given to Israel to be regarded as applying to and fulfilled in the church. They are two separate entities.³² God has, as it were, interrupted his special dealings with Israel, but will resume them at some point in the future. Unfulfilled prophecies regarding Israel will be fulfilled within the nation itself, not within the church. Indeed, the church is not mentioned in the Old Testament prophecies. It is virtually a parenthesis within God's overall plan of dealing with Israel. We must be careful, then, not to confuse the two divine kingdoms mentioned in Scripture. The kingdom of heaven is Jewish, Davidic, and messianic. When it was rejected by national Israel during Jesus' ministry, its appearance on earth was postponed. The kingdom of God, on the other hand, is more inclusive. It encompasses all moral intelligences obedient to the will of God—the angels and the saints from every period of time.³³

31. Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody, 1965), pp. 86–90.

32. *Ibid.*, pp. 132–55.

33. *The Scofield Reference Bible*, p. 996, n. 1; p. 1226, n. 3. Some later dispensationalists maintain that the distinction between the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God is not essential. To them the issue is whether the Davidic theocratic kingdom is present today in the form of the church or has simply been postponed. See Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, pp. 170–74.

29. Clarence B. Bass, *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism: Its Historical Genesis and Ecclesiastical Implications* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960).

30. John Walvoord, "Dispensational Premillennialism," *Christianity Today*, 15 September 1958, pp. 11–12.

Finally, the millennium takes on a special significance in dispensationalism. At that time God will resume his dealings with Israel, the church having been taken out of the world or “raptured” some time earlier (just prior to the great tribulation). The millennium consequently will have a markedly Jewish character. The **unfulfilled** prophecies regarding Israel will come to pass at that time. Here we see the organic nature of dispensationalism, the interconnectedness of its tenets. Proceeding on the principle of literal interpretation, dispensationalists put great stress on the distinction between Israel and the church. All of the prophecies regarding Israel are interpreted as applying to the nation; and, in turn, the millennium is regarded as having a Jewish character.³⁴

Conclusions Regarding Eschatology

1. Eschatology is a major topic in systematic theology. Consequently, we dare not neglect it as we construct our theology. On the other hand, it is but one doctrine among several, not the whole of theology. We must not convert our entire doctrinal system into eschatology, nor allow our theology to be distorted by an undue emphasis upon it.

2. The truths of eschatology deserve careful, intense, and thorough attention and study. At the same time, we must guard against exploring these matters merely out of curiosity. And when striving to understand the meaning of difficult and obscure portions of God’s Word, we must also avoid undue speculation and recognize that because the biblical sources vary in clarity, our conclusions will vary in degree of certainty.

3. We need to recognize that eschatology does not pertain exclusively to the future. Jesus did introduce a new age, and the victory over the powers of evil has already been won, even though the struggle is still to be enacted in history.

4. We must pair with this insight the truth that there are elements of predictive prophecy, even within Jesus’ ministry, which simply cannot be regarded as already fulfilled. We must live with an openness to and anticipation of the future.

5. The biblical passages regarding eschatological events are far more than existential descriptions of life. They do indeed have existential significance, but that significance is dependent upon, and an application of, the factuality of the events described. They really will come to pass.

6. We as humans have a responsibility to play a part in bringing about those eschatological events which are to transpire here upon earth and within history. Some see this responsibility in terms of evangelism; others

see it in terms of social action. As we carry out our role, however, **we** must also be mindful that eschatology pertains primarily to a new realm beyond space and time, a new heaven and a new earth. This kingdom will be ushered in by a supernatural work of God; it cannot be accomplished by human efforts.

7. The truths of eschatology should arouse in us watchfulness and alertness in expectation of the future. But preparation for what is going to happen will also entail diligence in the activities which our Lord has assigned to us. We must not become impatient nor prematurely abandon our tasks. We should study the Scripture intensively and watch developments in our world carefully, so that we may discern God’s working and not be misled. We must not become so brash, however, as to dogmatically identify specific historical occurrences with biblical prophecy or predict when certain eschatological events will take place.

8. As important as it is to have convictions regarding eschatological matters, it is good to bear in mind that they vary in significance. It is essential to have agreement on such basic matters as the second coming of Christ and the life hereafter. On the other hand, holding to a specific position on less central and less clearly expounded issues, such as the millennium or the tribulation, should not be made a test of orthodoxy or a condition of Christian fellowship and unity. Emphasis should be placed upon the points of agreement, not the points of disagreement.

9. When we study the doctrines of eschatology, we should stress their spiritual significance and practical application. They are incentives to purity of life, diligence in service, and hope for the future. They are to be regarded as resources for ministering, not topics for debate.

34. Walvoord, “Dispensational Premillennialism,” p. 13.

Individual Eschatology

Death

- The Reality of Death
- The Nature of Death
- Physical Death: Natural or Unnatural?
- The Effects of Death

The Intermediate State

- The Difficulty of the Doctrine
- Current Views of the Intermediate State
- Soul Sleep
- Purgatory
- Instantaneous Resurrection
- A Suggested Resolution

Implications of the Doctrines of Death and the Intermediate State

When we speak of eschatology, we must distinguish between individual eschatology and cosmic eschatology—those experiences which lie, on the one hand, in the future of the individual, and, on the other, in the future of the human race and indeed of the entire creation. The former will occur to each individual as he or she dies. The latter will occur to all persons simultaneously in connection with cosmic events, specifically, the second coming of Christ.

Death

An undeniable fact about the future of every person is the inevitability of death. There is a direct assertion of this fact in Hebrews 9:27: "It is appointed to men to die once, and after that comes judgment." The thought also runs through the whole of 1 Corinthians 15, where we read of the universality of death and the effect of Christ's resurrection. While death is said to have been defeated and its sting removed by his resurrection (vv. 54–56), there is no suggestion that we will not die. Paul certainly anticipated his own death (2 Cor. 5:1–10; Phil. 1:19–26).

The Reality of Death

Death is one facet of eschatology that almost all theologians and all believers and indeed all persons in general recognize. The only exception would seem to be the Christian Scientists, who question the reality both of sickness and of death. Yet even this group, after initial denials, eventually came to acknowledge that their founder, Mary Baker Eddy, had died.¹

Although everyone at least intellectually acknowledges the reality and the certainty of death, there nonetheless is often an unwillingness to face the inevitability of one's own death. So we see within our society numerous attempts to avoid thinking of death. At funeral homes, many people pay their formal respects and then seek to get as far away from the casket as possible. The embalmers' cosmetic art is highly developed, the aim apparently being to conceal the appearance of death. We employ a whole series of euphemisms to avoid acknowledging the reality of physical death. Persons do not die—they expire or pass away. We no longer have graveyards, but cemeteries and memorial parks. Even in the church, death is spoken of only during Passion Week and funerals. Many people have not made a will, some probably because of procrastination, but others because of an abhorrence of the thought of death.

To the existentialist, this unwillingness to come to grips with the reality of death is a prime example of "inauthentic existence." Death is one of the harsh realities of life: every individual is going to grow old, die, be taken to the cemetery and buried in the ground. That is our inevitable end. Life, if it is to be lived properly, must include acceptance of the fact

of death. Death is simply the end of the process, the final stage of life, and we must accept it.²

While disagreeing with the existentialist as to the meaning of death, the Christian agrees as to its reality and inescapability. Paul acknowledges that death is ever present in the world: "For while we live we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you" (2 Cor. 4:11–12). Death is not something that comes upon us suddenly. It is the end of the process of decay of our mortal, corruptible bodies. We reach our physical peak and then deterioration begins. In little ways we find our strength ebbing from us, until finally the organism can no longer function.

The Nature of Death

What is death, however? How are we to define it? Various passages in Scripture speak of physical death, that is, cessation of life in our physical body. In Matthew 10:28, for example, Jesus contrasts death of the body with death of both body and soul: "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell." The same idea appears in Luke 12:4–5: "I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has power to cast into hell; yes, I tell you, fear him!" Several other passages speak of loss of the *ψυχή* ("life"). An example is John 13:37–38: "Peter said to him, 'Lord, why cannot I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.' Jesus answered, 'Will you lay down your life for me?'" Other references of this type include Luke 6:9 and 14:26. Finally, death is referred to in Ecclesiastes 12:7 as separation of body and soul (or spirit): "And the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it." This passage is reminiscent of Genesis 2:7 (man originated when God breathed the breath of life into dust from the ground) and 3:19 (man shall return to dust). In the New Testament, James 2:26 also speaks of death as separation of body and spirit: "For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so faith apart from works is dead."

What we are dealing with here is cessation of life in its familiar bodily state. This is not the end of existence, however. Life and death, according to Scripture, are not to be thought of as existence and nonexistence, but as two different states of existence.³ Death is simply a transition to a different mode of existence; it is not, as some tend to think, extinction.

1. James Snowden, *The Truth About Christian Science* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1920), p. 154, n. 1; Ernest S. Bates and John V. Dittmore, *Mary Baker Eddy: The Truth and the Tradition* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1932), p. 451.

2. Karl Jasper-s, *The Way to Wisdom*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University, 1951), p. 53.

3. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), p. 668.

In addition to physical death, Scripture speaks of spiritual and eternal death. Physical death is the separation of the soul from the body; spiritual death is the separation of the person from God; eternal death is the finalizing of that state of separation—one is lost for all eternity in his or her sinful condition.⁴ Scripture clearly refers to a state of spiritual deadness, which is an inability to respond to spiritual matters or even a total loss of sensitivity to such stimuli. This is what Paul has in mind in Ephesians 2:1-2: “And you he made alive, when you were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once walked.” When the Book of Revelation refers to the “second death,” it is eternal death which is in view. An example is found in Revelation 21:8: “But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, as for murderers, fornicators, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their lot shall be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.” This second death is something separate from and subsequent to normal physical death. We know from Revelation 20:6 that the second death will not be experienced by believers: “Blessed and holy is he who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and they shall reign with him a thousand years.” The second death is an endless period of punishment and of separation from the presence of God, the finalization of the lost state of the individual who is spiritually dead at the time of physical death.

Physical Death: Natural or Unnatural?

There has been a great deal of debate as to whether man was born mortal or immortal, whether he would have died had he not sinned.⁵ It is our position that physical death was not an original part of man's condition. But death was always there as a threat should man sin, that is, eat of or touch the forbidden tree (Gen. 3:3). While the death which was threatened must have been at least in part spiritual death, it appears that physical death was also involved, since the man and woman had to be driven out of the Garden of Eden lest they also eat of the tree of life and live forever (Gen. 3:22-23).

It must be admitted that some of the Scripture passages which have been offered as evidence that physical death is the result of man's sin prove no such thing. A case in point is Ezekiel 18:4, 20: “the soul that sins shall die.” The reference here is to spiritual or eternal death, for the text

goes on to say that if the sinner turns from his wicked ways, he shall live and not die (w. 21-22). Since both believer and unbeliever experience physical death, the reference here cannot be to physical death. The same holds true of Romans 6:23: “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” That it is eternal life which is contrasted with death suggests that the result of sin in view here is eternal death, not physical death. In 1 Corinthians 15, however, Paul is clearly referring, at least in part, to physical death when he says, “As by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead” (v. 2 1). For physical death is one of the evils countered and overcome by Christ's resurrection. He was himself delivered from physical death. This verse, then, is proof that physical death came from man's sin; it was not part of God's original intention for humankind.

Since physical death is a result of sin, it seems probable that man was created with the possibility of living forever. He was not inherently immortal, however; that is, he would not by virtue of his nature have lived on forever. Rather, if he had not sinned, he could have partaken of the tree of life and thus have received everlasting life. He was mortal in the sense of being able to die; and when he sinned, that potential or possibility became a reality. We might say that he was created with contingent immortality. He could have lived forever, but it was not certain that he would. Upon sinning he lost that status.

Death, then, is not something natural to man. It is something foreign and hostile. Paul pictures it as an enemy (1 Cor. 15:26). And there is little doubt that God himself sees death as an evil and a frustration of his original plan. God is himself the giver of life; those who thwart his plan of life by shedding human blood must forfeit their own lives (Gen. 9:6). His sending death is an expression of his disapproval of human sin, our frustrating his intention for us. This was the case with the flood which God sent to do away with all flesh (Gen. 6:13), the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19), the punishment of Korah and those who rebelled with him (Num. 16), and the numerous other instances of the death penalty. In each case, those put to death had departed from God's intention for them. Death was the unnatural consequence which they had to pay for their sin. The psalmist vividly depicts death as an expression of God's anger: “Thou dost sweep men away; they are like a dream, like grass which is renewed in the morning: in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers. For we are consumed by thy anger; by thy wrath we are overwhelmed” (Ps. 90:5-7). Yet God is also compassionate. Jesus wept at the death of Lazarus (John 11:35), and on other occasions as well restored the dead to life.

4. Augustus H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Westwood, N.J.: Revell, 1907), p. 982.

5. E.g., Augustine, *Anti-Pelagian Writings*, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, vol. 5, ed. Philip Schaff (New York: Scribner, 1902).

The Effects of Death

For the unbeliever, death is a curse, a penalty, an enemy. For although death does not bring about extinction or the end of existence, it cuts one off from God and from any opportunity of obtaining eternal life. But for those who believe in Christ and so are righteous, death has a different character. The believer still undergoes physical death, but its curse is gone. Because Christ himself became a curse for us by dying on the cross (Gal. 3:13), believers, although still subject to physical death, do not experience its fearsome power, its curse. As Paul put it, "When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory.' 'O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?' The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 15:54-57).

Looking on death as indeed an enemy, the non-Christian sees nothing positive in it and recoils from it in fear. Paul, however, was able to take an entirely different attitude toward it. He saw death as a conquered enemy, an erstwhile foe which now is forced to do the Lord's will. So Paul regarded death as desirable, for it would bring him into the presence of his Lord. He wrote to the Philippians: "It is my eager expectation and hope that I shall not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. ... My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better" (Phil. 1:20-23). This was the Paul who, as Saul of Tarsus, had heard dying Stephen exclaim that he could see heaven and the Son of man standing at the right hand of God (Acts 7:56). Stephen had then prayed simply, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" (v. 59), and "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (v. 60). And Paul had undoubtedly been told the tradition of the Lord himself, who had said at the end of his life, "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit!" (Luke 23:46). For Paul, as for Stephen and Jesus, death was no longer an active enemy, but a conquered enemy who now serves not to condemn and destroy, but to free us from the dreadful conditions which sin has introduced.

The believer can thus face the prospect of death with the knowledge that its effects are not final, for death itself has been destroyed. Although the final execution of this judgment upon death is yet in the future, the judgment itself is already accomplished and assured. Even the Old Testament contained prophecies regarding the victory over death: "He will swallow up death forever, and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the

earth; for the LORD has spoken" (Isa. 25:8); "Shall I ransom them from the power of Sheol? Shall I redeem them from Death? O Death, where are your plagues? O Sheol, where is your destruction? Compassion is hid from my eyes" (Hos. 13:14). In 1 Corinthians 15:55 Paul cites the latter passage, and in Revelation 21:3-4 John picks up the former: "Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away." In the previous chapter John has written, "Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire" (Rev. 20:14a). Passages such as these make it clear that death has been defeated and will ultimately be destroyed.

Here the question arises as to why the believer is still required to experience death at all. If death, physical as well as spiritual and eternal, is the penalty for sin, then when we are delivered from sin and its ultimate consequence (eternal death), why should we not also be spared from the symbol of that condemnation, namely, physical death? If Enoch and Elijah were taken to be with the Lord without having to go through death, why should not such translation be the experience of all whose faith is placed in Christ? Is it not as if something of the curse for sin still remains on those who have been forgiven of sin?

Some theologians have attempted to show that death has certain beneficial results. One such attempt is that of Louis Berkhof.⁶ He argues that death is the culmination of the chastisements which God uses to sanctify his people. While acknowledging that death evidently is not indispensable to the accomplishment of sanctification, since Enoch and Elijah did not die, Berkhof nonetheless sees it as a means by which believers can identify with their Lord, who also went through sufferings and death on the way to his glory. Death frequently calls forth from believers unusual degrees of faith. Yet while this is true in many cases, there are other instances in which death (or suffering, for that matter) does not appear to sanctify or evoke unusual faith. That greater degrees of sanctification and faith are realized by some Christians at the time of death is hardly sufficient ground to justify the physical death of all believers. Berkhof's effort therefore appears to be a somewhat strained explanation. A better approach is simply to consider death one of the conditions of humanity as now constituted; in this respect, death is like birth.

It is necessary to distinguish here between the temporal and the eternal consequences of sin. We have noted that the eternal conse-

6. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 670-7 1.

quences of our own individual sins are nullified when we are forgiven, but the temporal consequences, or at least some of them, may linger on. This is not a denial of the fact of justification, but merely an evidence that God does not reverse the course of history. What is true of our individual sins is also true of God's treatment of Adam's sin or the sin of the race as well. All judgment upon and our guilt for original and individual sin are removed, so that spiritual and eternal death are canceled. We will not experience the second death. Nonetheless, we must experience physical death simply because it has become one of the conditions of human existence. It is now a part of life, as much so as are birth, growth, and suffering, which also ultimately takes its origin from sin. One day every consequence of sin will be removed, but that day is not yet. The Bible, in its realism, does not deny the fact of universal physical death, but insists that it has different significance for the believer and the unbeliever.

The Intermediate State

The *Difficulty of the Doctrine*

The doctrine of the intermediate state is an issue which is both very significant and yet also problematic. It therefore is doubly important that we examine carefully this somewhat strange doctrine. "Intermediate state" refers to the condition of humans between their death and the resurrection. The question is, 'What is the condition of the individual during this period of time?

It is vital that we have practical answers to this question at the **time** of bereavement. Many pastors and parents have been asked at a graveside, "Where is Grandma now? What is she doing? Is she with Jesus already? Are she and Grandpa back together? Does she know what we are doing?" These questions are not the product of idle speculation or curiosity; they are of crucial importance to the individual posing them. An opportunity to offer comfort and encouragement is available to the Christian who is informed on the matter. Unfortunately, many Christians do not seize this opportunity because they do not know of a helpful reply. This has been particularly true in recent years. Confusion and uncertainty have been the lot of many a pastor who finds himself unable to answer and to minister to the questioner.

There are two major reasons why many Christians find themselves unable to minister effectively to the bereaved. The first is the relative scarcity of biblical references to the intermediate state. This doctrine is not the subject of any extended discourse in the way in which the

resurrection and the second coming are. Rather, it is treated somewhat incidentally. At least two explanations have been offered for the relative silence. One is that the early church expected the period between Jesus' departure and his return to be relatively brief; thus the period between any human being's death and resurrection would be relatively brief as **well**.⁷ The other is that, whatever its length, the intermediate state is merely temporary and, accordingly, did not concern the early believers as much as did the final states of heaven and hell.⁸ In view of the relatively little evidence upon which to construct the doctrine of the intermediate state, there is a tendency to think that the biblical writers did not consider it to be very important. In one sense, of course, it is not essential or indispensable, since one's salvation does not depend upon one's **conviction** regarding the intermediate state. Nonetheless, like other nonessential issues, for example, the form of church government, the doctrine of the intermediate state is, as we have already noted, of considerable practical importance.

The second reason why Christians fail to minister effectively to the bereaved is the theological controversy which has developed around the doctrine of the intermediate state. Prior to the twentieth century, orthodoxy had a fairly consistent doctrine worked out. Believing in some sort of dualism of body and soul (or spirit) in the human person, the orthodox maintained that a part of the human survives death. Death consists in the separation of the soul from the body. The immaterial soul lives on in a conscious personal existence while the body decomposes. At the second coming of Christ, there will be a resurrection of a renewed or transformed body which will be reunited with the soul. Thus, orthodoxy held to both the immortality of the soul and the resurrection of the body?

Liberalism, however, rejected the idea of the resurrection of the body. Harry Emerson Fosdick, for example, regarded this doctrine as grossly materialistic. In addition, many liberals considered it to be mythological and scientifically impossible. It is preposterous to think that a body which has decomposed, and perhaps even been cremated, its ashes being scattered, can be brought back to life. The liberal who wished to maintain some sort of continuing life after death replaced the idea of the resurrection of the body with the immortality of the soul. Although the body may die and decompose, the soul, being immortal, lives on. Since those who

7. C. Harris, "State of the Dead (Christian)," in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. James Hastings (New York: Scribner, 1955), vol. 10, p. 837.

8. Loraine Boettner, "The Intermediate State," in *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Everett F. Harrison (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1960), p. 291.

9. James Addison, *Life Beyond Death in the Beliefs of Mankind* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1931), p. 202.

held this view did not anticipate any future resurrection, they did not believe in a bodily second coming of Christ **either**.¹⁰

Neoorthodoxy took a quite different view of the matter. In the judgment of these theologians, the idea of the immortality of the soul was a Greek, not a biblical, concept. It stemmed from the notion that all matter, including the body, is inherently evil, and that salvation consists in deliverance of the good soul or spirit from the evil body. The neoorthodox hope for the future lay instead in an expectation of the resurrection of the body. While some were careful to distinguish this concept from resurrection of the *flesh*, some form of bodily resurrection was envisioned. Underlying this view was the monistic idea of the human person as a radical unity-existence means bodily existence; there is no separate spiritual entity to survive death and exist apart from the **body**.¹¹ So whereas liberalism held to immortality of the soul, neoorthodoxy held to resurrection of the body. Both schools were in agreement that their views were mutually exclusive. That is, it was a matter of either/or; they did not consider the possibility of both/and.

Current Views of the *Intermediate* State

Soul Sleep

We turn now to examine various current understandings of the intermediate state. One view which over the years has had considerable popularity is termed "soul sleep." This is the idea that the soul, during the period between death and resurrection, reposes in a state of unconsciousness. In the sixteenth century, many Anabaptists and Socinians apparently subscribed to this view that the soul of the dead person lies in a dreamless sleep. And today the Seventh-day Adventists list among their "Fundamental Beliefs" the concepts "that the condition of man in death is one of unconsciousness [and that] all men, good and evil alike, remain in the grave from death to the resurrection."¹² (The Jehovah's Witnesses, a group that originated from within Seventh-day Adventism, hold to a similar view.) In the case of the Adventists, however, the phrase "soul sleep" is somewhat misleading. Anthony Hoekema suggests instead "soul-extinction," since in the Adventist view one does not fall asleep at death, but actually becomes completely nonexistent, nothing surviving.¹³

10. Harry E. Fosdick, *The Modern Use of the Bible* (New York: Macmillan, 1933), pp. 98–104.

11. Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of the Church, Faith, and the Consummation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), pp. 383–85, 408–14.

12. *Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine* (Washington: Review and Herald, 1957), p. 13.

13. Anthony Hoekema, *The Four Major Cults* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), p. 345.

Hoekema's characterization of the Adventist position as soul-extinction is quite in order, as long as we understand that "soul" is here being used, as is often the case, as a synonym for "person."

The case for soul sleep rests in large measure on the fact that Scripture frequently uses the imagery of sleep to refer to death. Stephens death is described as sleep: "And when he had said this, he fell asleep" (Acts 7:60). Paul notes that "David, after he had served the counsel of God in his own generation, fell asleep" (Acts 13:36). Paul uses the same image four times in 1 Corinthians 15 (w. 6, 18, 20, 51) and three times in 1 Thessalonians 4:13–15. Jesus himself said of Lazarus, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awake him out of sleep" (John 11:11), and then indicated clearly that he was referring to death (v. 14). Literal understanding of this imagery has led to the concept of soul sleep.

Every view of the intermediate state is, of course, closely related to a specific anthropology or understanding of human nature. Those who subscribe to soul sleep maintain that the person is a unitary entity without components. Man does not consist of body and soul. Rather, man, body, and soul are one and the same entity. Thus, when the body ceases to function, the soul (i.e., the whole person) ceases to exist. Nothing survives physical death. There is no tension, then, between immortality of the soul and resurrection of the body. The simplicity of this view makes it quite appealing. Nevertheless, there are several problems.

One of the problems is that there are several biblical references to personal, conscious existence between death and resurrection. The most extended is the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31). While it was not Jesus' primary intent here to teach us about the nature of the intermediate state, it is unlikely that he would mislead us on this subject. Another reference is Jesus' words to the thief on the cross, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43). In addition, dying persons speak of giving up their spirits to God. Jesus himself said, "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit!" (Luke 23:46); and Stephen said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" (Acts 7:59). While one might argue that Stephen was not necessarily speaking under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and consequently may not have been expressing an infallible word from God on this point, certainly what Jesus said must be regarded as authoritative.

The second problem is whether it is legitimate to conclude that Scripture passages which refer to death as sleep are literal descriptions of the condition of the dead prior to the resurrection. It would seem, rather, that "sleep" should be understood simply as a euphemism for the cessation of life. Nothing more specific is implied about the character of the dead persons state. Jesus' use of the image of sleep in reference to Lazarus (John 11:11) and the explanation which follows (v. 14) support

this interpretation. If indeed “sleep” is more than a figure of speech, that needs to be substantiated.

Another problem for the theory of soul sleep is the conceptual difficulty attaching to the view that human nature is unitary. If indeed nothing of the person survives death, then what will be the basis of our identity? If the soul, the whole person, becomes extinct, what will come to life in the resurrection? On what basis can we maintain that what will come to life will be the person who died? It would seem that we will identify the postresurrection person with the predeath person on the basis of the body that is raised. Yet this in turn presents two further difficulties. How can the very same molecules come together to form the postresurrection person? The molecules constituting the predeath person may well have been destroyed, have formed new compounds, or even have been part of someone else’s body. In this connection, cremation presents a particularly difficult problem. But beyond that, to identify the predeath and postresurrection persons on the basis of the body raised is to hold that human nature is primarily material or physical. For all of the foregoing reasons, the theory of soul sleep must be rejected as inadequate.

Purgatory

Because the doctrine of purgatory is primarily a Roman Catholic teaching, it is necessary to see it in the context of Catholic dogma in general. We begin with the idea that immediately upon death, the individuals eternal status is determined. The soul becomes aware of God’s judgment upon it. This is not so much a formal sentence as it is a clear perception of whether one is guilty or innocent before God. The soul is then “moved of its own accord to hasten either to Heaven, or Hell, or Purgatory, according to its deserts.”¹⁴ The text on which this view rests is Hebrews 9:27: “it is appointed for men to die once, and after that comes judgment.” The juxtaposition of these two events is understood as an indication that immediately after death there is a judgment which determines the destination of each individual. Those who have died in a state of wickedness go directly to hell, where they immediately realize that they are irrevocably lost.¹⁵ Their punishment, eternal in nature, consists of both the sense of having lost the greatest of all goods and actual suffering. The suffering is in proportion to the individuals wickedness and will intensify after the resurrection.¹⁶ On the other hand, those who

14. Joseph Pohle, *Eschatology; or, The Catholic Doctrine of the Last Things: A Dogmatic Treatise* (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1917), p. 18.

15. Ibid., p. 70.

16. Ibid., pp. 52–61.

are in a perfect state of grace and penitence, who are completely purified at the time of death, go directly and immediately to heaven, which, while it is described as both a state and a place, should be thought of primarily as a state.¹⁷ Those who, although in a state of grace, are not yet spiritually perfect go to purgatory.

Two other features of the Catholic view of the intermediate state apply to rather limited groups. *Limbus patrum* was the abode of dead saints prior to the time of Christ. When Christ had accomplished his atoning work on the cross, he descended into Sheol, where the Old Testament believers had gone, and delivered them from their captivity. Since that time *limbus patrum* has been empty. *Limbus infantium* is for unbaptized infants. Because of original sin, which can be removed only by the sacrament of baptism, they may not go into the presence of the Lord. They suffer the punishment for original sin, which is the loss of the beatific vision or the presence of God. They do not, however, experience the punishment for actual sin, which is the suffering referred to above.

It is purgatory which constitutes the most unusual and most interesting feature of the traditional Roman Catholic teaching regarding the intermediate state. Joseph Pohle defines it as “a state of temporary punishment for those who, departing this life in the grace of God, are not entirely free from venial sins or have not yet fully paid the satisfaction due to their transgressions.”¹⁸ As we noted, those who leave this life in a state of spiritual perfection go directly to heaven. Those who have mortal sin upon their souls or are entirely outside the grace of the church are consigned to hell. But there is a large number who fall into neither of these two groups. Since nothing defiled can enter heaven, God cannot justly receive them into his immediate presence. On the other hand, he cannot justly consign them to hell, for they have done nothing warranting such severe punishment. Purgatory is a middle state, so to speak, where they may be cleansed of their venial sins.

Thomas Aquinas argued that the cleansing which takes place after death is through penal sufferings. In this life, we can be cleansed by performing works of satisfaction, but after death that is no longer possible. To the extent that we fail to attain complete purity through works on earth, we must be further cleansed in the life to come. “This is the reason,” said Thomas, “why we posit a purgatory or place of cleansing.”¹⁹ Thomas also suggested that purgatory, as a place of suffering, is connected with hell.²⁰ Pohle argues, instead, that it is connected with heaven,

17. Ibid., p. 28.

18. Ibid., p. 77.

19. Thomas Aquinas *Summa contra Gentiles* 4. 91.

20. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, Appendix, question 1, article 2.

since those in purgatory are children of God and will sooner or later be admitted to the abode of the blessed. Yet while their eventual departure from purgatory to heaven is sure and definite, the time of deliverance is uncertain and the rate of cleansing variable.

The forgiveness of venial sins can be accomplished in three different ways: by an unconditional forgiveness on God's part; by suffering and the performance of penitential works; and by contrition. Although God can forgive unconditionally, he has chosen to require contrition and works as conditions of forgiveness in this life; and so it seems likely that he does not forgive venial sins unconditionally in purgatory either? Since the soul in purgatory is not able to perform works of satisfaction, it can atone only by passive suffering. But there are also three means by which the souls in purgatory can be assisted in their progress toward heaven by the faithful still on earth—the mass, prayers, and good **works**.²² These three means reduce the period of time necessary for **purgatorial** suffering to have its full effect. When the soul arrives at spiritual perfection, no venial sin remaining, it is released and passes into heaven.

The Roman Catholic Church bases its belief in purgatory upon both tradition and Scripture. We find a clear statement of the doctrine in the Decree of Union adopted at the Council of Florence in 1439: "souls are cleansed by purgatorial pains after death, and in order that they may be rescued from these pains, they are benefitted by the suffrages of the living faith, viz.: the sacrifice of the Mass, prayers, alms, and other works of piety."²³ The Council of Trent reiterated the belief, pointing to various church fathers and synods as authorities for it. As we have noted, Thomas Aquinas wrote concerning purgatory, and there was an ancient tradition of praying, offering the mass, and giving alms for the benefit of the dead. Tertullian mentions anniversary masses for the dead, a practice which suggests belief in **purgatory**.²⁴

The primary biblical text appealed to is 2 Maccabees 12:43–45:

He [Judas Maccabaeus] also took up a collection, man by man, to the amount of two thousand drachmas of silver, and sent it to Jerusalem to provide for a sin offering. In doing this he acted very well and honorably, taking account of the resurrection. For if he were not expecting that those who had fallen would rise again, it would have been superfluous and foolish to pray for the dead. But if he was looking to the splendid reward that is laid up for those who fall asleep in godliness, it was a holy and

²¹ Pohle, *Eschatology*, pp. 89–9 1.

²² Ibid., p. 95.

²³ Ibid., p. 78.

²⁴ Tertullian *On Monogamy* 10.

pious thought. Therefore, he made atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sin.

The New Testament text most often cited is Matthew 12:32, where Jesus says, "But whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come." Roman Catholics contend that this verse implies that some sins (i.e., sins other than speaking against the Holy Spirit) will be forgiven in the world to come, an interpretation held by **Augustine**²⁵ and some other Fathers. Some Catholics also cite 1 Corinthians 3: 15: "If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire."

The major points in our rejection of the concept of purgatory are points which distinguish Catholicism and Protestantism in general. The major text appealed to is in the **Apocrypha**, which Protestants do not accept as canonical Scripture. And the inference from Matthew 12:32 is rather forced; the verse in no way indicates that some sins will be forgiven in the life to come. Further, the concept of purgatory implies a salvation by works. For humans are thought to atone, at least in part, for their sins. This idea, however, is contrary to many clear teachings of Scripture, including Galatians 3: 1–14 and Ephesians 2:8–9. To be sure, there is something quite appealing about the doctrine of purgatory. When one thinks about it, it simply does not seem right that we should be allowed to go freely into heaven. Each of us ought to suffer a bit for our sins. Here we have a clear indication of just how difficult it is for most of us to accept the idea of salvation by grace. But it is the teaching of Scripture that must prevail, not what appears to us to be logical and just; and on that basis, the concept of purgatory—and indeed any view which posits a period of probation and atonement following death—must be rejected.

Instantaneous Resurrection

A novel and creative conception that has been advanced in recent years is the idea of an instant resurrection or, more accurately, an instant reclothing. This is the belief that immediately upon death, the believer receives the resurrection body that has been promised. One of the most complete elaborations of this view is found in W. D. Davies's ***Paul and Rabbinic Judaism***. Davies holds that Paul had two different conceptions concerning our resurrection. In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul is thinking of a future resurrection of the body. In 2 Corinthians 5, however, we have his more advanced understanding of the subject. The initial stages of the age to come had already appeared in the resurrection of Jesus. Paul

²⁵ Augustine *Confessions* 9. 13.

realizes that, having died and risen with Christ, he is already being transformed and will receive his new or heavenly body at the moment of physical death. The fear of being unclothed, which he speaks of in verse 3, has been supplanted by the realization that on both this side and the other side of death, he will be clothed.²⁶

It was the position of rabbinic Judaism that we will be disembodied at death and will then have to wait for the general resurrection. Davies contends that Paul presents a different view in his later writings:

[The dead will], on the contrary, be embodied, and there is no room in Paul's theology for an intermediate state of the dead. It agrees with this that Paul in later passages of his Epistles speaks not of the resurrection of Christians but of their revelation. In Rom. 8:19 we read: "The earnest longing of the creation waiteth for the revelation of the sons of God"; and in Col. 3:4 we read: "When Christ who is our life shall be revealed then shall ye also be revealed with him in glory." There is no need to resurrect those who have already died and risen with Christ and received their heavenly body, but they may be revealed. The final consummation would merely be the manifestation of that which is already existent but "hidden" in the eternal order.²⁷

According to Davies, then, when Paul wrote 2 Corinthians, he no longer believed in an intermediate state. Rather, upon death there will be an immediate transition into the final state, an instantaneous reception of the heavenly body. This position supplanted his belief in a future bodily resurrection to take place in connection with the second advent. So if we build our eschatology upon Paul's most mature thinking, we presumably will not have a doctrine of an intermediate state either.

But has Davies solved the problem? He has attempted to resolve what he perceives to be an inherent contradiction between the Greek concept of immortality and the rabbinic concept of bodily resurrection. But laboring as he does under the presupposition that human nature is an essential and absolute unity, an idea perhaps derived from behaviorism, Davies has been led astray in his interpretation of Paul. The fact is that Paul's anthropology was such that he could hold to both a future resurrection and a disembodied survival. They are not contradictory ideas, but complementary parts of a whole. Nor is Davies's solution as biblical as he seems to think, for there are a number of passages in which Paul ties the transformation of our bodies to a *future* resurrection accompanying the second advent (e.g., Phil. 3:20–21; 1 Thess. 4:16–17). Paul also makes much of the second coming as an occasion of deliverance and

26. W. D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* (London: S.P.C.K., 1955), pp. 317–18.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 318.

glorification (e.g., Rom. 2:3–16; 1 Cor. 4:5; 2 Thess. 1:5–2:12; 2 Tim. 4:8). And Jesus himself laid emphasis upon a future time when the dead will be raised (John 5:25–29). We must conclude that Davies's solution to the problem which, as a result of a faulty presupposition, he has injected into the writings of Paul does little more than create additional problems.

A Suggested Resolution

Is there some way to resolve the numerous problems which attach to the issue of the intermediate state, some means of correlating the biblical testimony regarding resurrection of the body and conscious survival between death and resurrection? Several considerations must be kept in mind:

1. Joachim Jeremias has pointed out that the New Testament distinguishes between Gehenna and Hades. Hades receives the unrighteous for the period between death and resurrection, whereas Gehenna is the place of punishment assigned permanently at the last judgment. The torment of Gehenna is eternal (Mark 9:43, 48). Further, the souls of the ungodly are outside the body in Hades, whereas in Gehenna both body and soul, reunited at the resurrection, are destroyed by eternal fire (Mark 9:43–48; Matt. 10:28). This is a counter to the view of some of the early church fathers that all who die, righteous and unrighteous alike, descend to Sheol or Hades, a sort of gloomy, dreamy state where they await the coming of the Messiah.²⁸
2. There are indications that the righteous dead do not descend to Hades (Matt. 16:18–19; Acts 2:31 [quoting Ps. 16:10]).
3. Rather, the righteous, or at least their souls, are received into paradise (Luke 16:19–31; 23:43).
4. Paul equates being absent from the body with being present with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:1–10; Phil. 1:19–26).

On the basis of these biblical considerations, we conclude that upon death believers go immediately to a place and condition of blessedness, and unbelievers to an experience of misery, torment, and punishment. Although the evidence is not clear, it is likely that these are the very places to which believers and unbelievers will go after the great judgment, since the presence of the Lord (Luke 23:43; 2 Cor. 5:8; Phil. 1:23) would seem to be nothing other than heaven. Yet while the place of the

28. Joachim Jeremias, *γέεννα*, in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–1976), vol. 1, pp. 657–58.

intermediate and final states may be the same, the experiences of paradise and Hades are doubtlessly not as intense as what will ultimately be, since the person is in a somewhat incomplete condition.

Because we developed in chapter 24 a model of human nature which allows for disembodied personal existence, we will not go into detail here. We do need to note, however, that there is no inherent untenability about the concept of disembodied existence. The human being is capable of existing in either a materialized (bodily) or immaterialized condition. We may think of these two conditions in terms of a dualism in which the soul or spirit can exist independently of the body. Like a chemical compound, the body-soul, so to speak, can be broken down under certain conditions (specifically, at death), but otherwise is a definite unity. Or we may think in terms of different states of being. Just like matter and energy, the materialized and immaterialized conditions of the human are interconvertible. Both of these analogies are feasible. Paul Helm,²⁹ Richard Purtill,³⁰ and others have formulated conceptions of disembodied survival that are neither self-contradictory nor absurd. We conclude that the disembodied intermediate state set forth by the biblical teaching is philosophically tenable.

Implications of the Doctrines of Death and the Intermediate State

1. Death is to be expected by all, believer and unbeliever. Unless we are alive when the Lord returns, it will happen to us as well. It is important that we take this fact seriously and live accordingly.

2. Although death is an enemy (God did not originally intend for man to die), it has now been overcome and made captive to God. It therefore need not be feared, for its curse has been removed by the death and resurrection of Christ. It can be faced with peace, for we know that it now serves the Lord's purpose of taking to himself those who have faith in him.

3. There is between death and resurrection an intermediate state in which believers and unbelievers experience, respectively, the presence and absence of God. While these experiences are less intense than the final states, they are of the same qualitative nature.

4. In both this life and the life to come, the basis of the believer's relationship with God is grace, not works. There need be no fear, then, that our imperfections will require some type of postdeath purging before we can enter into the full presence of God.

29. Paul Helm, "A Theory of Disembodied Survival and Re-embodied Existence," *Religious Studies* 14, no. 1 (March 1978): 15-26.

30. Richard L. Purtill, "The Intelligibility of Disembodied Survival," *Christian Scholar's Review* 5, no. 1 (1975): 3-22.

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The Second Coming and Its Consequents

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Implications of the Second Coming and Its Consequents

Among the most important events of cosmic eschatology, as we have defined it in this work, are the second coming and its **consequences**: the resurrection and the final judgment. These events form the subject matter of this chapter.

The Second Coming

With the exception of the certainty of death, the one eschatological doctrine on which orthodox theologians most agree is the second coming of Christ. It is indispensable to eschatology. It is the basis of the Christian's hope, the one event which will mark the beginning of the completion of God's plan.

The Definiteness of the Event

Many Scriptures indicate clearly that Christ is to return. Jesus himself promises that he will come again. In his great discourse on the end times (Matt. 24-25) he says, "Then will appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory" (24:30). Several other times in this same speech he mentions the "coming of the Son of man" (w. 27, 37, 39, 42, 44). Toward the end of the discussion we read: "When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne" (25:31). All of the teachings in this speech, including the parables, presuppose the second coming. Indeed, Jesus delivered the discourse in response to his disciples' request, "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?" (Matt. 24:3). Later that week, in his hearing before Caiaphas, Jesus said, "But I tell you, hereafter you will see the Son of man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven" (Matt. 26:64). While Matthew records more than do the other Gospel writers, Mark, Luke, and John also include some of Jesus' comments on the second coming. We find in Mark 13:26 and Luke 21:27, for example, almost identical declarations that the people living in the last days will see the Son of man coming in clouds with power and glory. And John tells us that in the upper room Jesus promised his disciples, "And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also" (John 14:3).

In addition to Jesus' own words, there are numerous other direct statements in the New Testament regarding his return. At Jesus' ascension, two men in white robes, presumably angels, said to the disciples,

"Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11). The second coming was part of the apostolic kerygma: "Repent therefore ... that [God] may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus, whom heaven must receive until the time for establishing all that God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old" (Acts 3:19-21). Paul wrote of the second coming on several occasions. He assured the Philippians, "But our commonwealth is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power which enables him even to subject all things to himself" (Phil. 3:20-21). This passage in a book not explicitly eschatological is particularly significant in that it shows the practical effect which the second coming will have upon us. Probably Paul's clearest and most direct statement is in 1 Thessalonians 4: 1.5-1 6: "For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangels call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God." Other direct statements are found in 2 Thessalonians 1:7,10; and Titus 2: 13. In addition, we find in Paul many less elaborate references to the second coming: 1 Corinthians 1:7;15:23; 1 Thessalonians 2: 19; 3: 13; 5:23; 2 Thessalonians 2: 1, 8; 1 Timothy 6: 14; 2 Timothy 4:1, 8. Other authors also mention the second coming: Hebrews 9:28; James 5:7-8; 1 Peter 1:7, 13; 2 Peter 1: 16; 3:4, 12; 1 John 2:28. Certainly the second coming is one of the most widely taught doctrines in the New Testament.

The Indefiniteness of the Time

While the fact of the second coming is very emphatically and clearly asserted in Scripture, the time is not. Indeed, the Bible makes it clear that we do not know and cannot ascertain the exact time when Jesus will return. Although God has set a definite time, that time has not been revealed. Jesus indicated that neither he nor the angels knew the time of his return, and neither would his disciples: "But of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Take heed, watch; for you do not know when the time will come. ... Watch therefore-for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning" (Mark 13:32-33, 35; see also Matt. 24:36-44). Apparently the time of his return was one of the matters to which Jesus was referring when, just before his ascension, he responded to his disciples' question whether he would now restore the kingdom to Israel: "It is not for you to

know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority" (Acts 1:7). Instead of satisfying their curiosity, Jesus told the disciples that they were to be his witnesses worldwide. That the **time** of his return is not to be revealed explains Jesus' repeated emphasis upon its unexpectedness and the consequent need for watchfulness (Matt. 24:44, 50; 25:13; Mark 13:35).

The Character of the Coming

Personal

That Christ's second coming will be personal in character is not the subject of any extensive discussion. Rather, it is simply assumed throughout the references to his return. Jesus says, for example, "I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also" (John 14:3). Paul's statement that "the Lord himself will descend from heaven" (1 Thess. 4:16) leaves little doubt that the return will be personal in nature. The word of the angels at Jesus' ascension, "This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11), argues conclusively that his return will be just as personal as was his departure.

Nonetheless, some recent interpreters have given the Scriptures cited above a different interpretation. This is an attempt to resolve what they believe to be two contrasting and even conflicting emphases within Jesus' teaching.¹ On the one hand, there is the apocalyptic motif: the kingdom will be ushered in through a sudden and cataclysmic event, the personal return of Christ. On the other hand, there is the theme that the kingdom is immanent; it is already present within the world and will keep on growing in a gradual fashion. William Newton Clarke interprets the former in the light of the latter: "No visible return of Christ to the earth is to be expected, but rather the long and steady advance of his spiritual Kingdom. ... If our Lord will but complete the spiritual coming that he has begun, there will be no need of a visible advent to make perfect his glory on the earth."² Sometimes this approach has been adopted out of a conviction that Jesus believed in and taught (as did the early church) an impending return, probably within that very generation, but was obviously wrong.³ A careful exegesis of the pertinent passages will show,

however, that at no point does Jesus specifically teach that he will return quickly. Further, there is no essential reason why the kingdom cannot be both present and future, both immanent and cataclysmic.

Physical

There are those who claim that Jesus' promise to return was fulfilled on Pentecost through a spiritual coming. Jesus did, after all, say, "I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Matt. 28:20). He also said, "If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him" (John 14:23). And Paul spoke of the riches of this mystery, "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Col. 1:27). Some interpreters put a great deal of weight upon the use of the term *παρουσία* for the second coming. Pointing out that the word basically means "presence," they argue that its force in references to "the coming of the Lord" is that Jesus is present with us, not that he is coming at some future time.

Since Pentecost Christ has indeed been with and in each believer from the moment of new birth on. Several considerations, however, prevent our regarding this spiritual presence as the full meaning of the coming which he promised. While it is true that the basic meaning of *παρουσία* is "presence," it also means "coming," and this is the meaning which is most prominent in the New Testament, as can be determined by examining how the word is used in context. Further, there are several other New Testament terms, particularly *ἀποκάλυψις* and *ἐπιφάνεια*, which clearly do indicate "coming."⁴ And the statement in Acts 1:11 that Jesus will return in the same way as he departed implies that the return will be bodily. Perhaps the most persuasive argument, however, is that many of the promises of Jesus' second coming were made after Pentecost, in fact as much as sixty years later, and they still placed the coming in the future.

Visible

The Jehovah's Witnesses maintain that Christ began his reign over the earth on October 1, 1914. This was not a visible return to earth, however, for Jesus has not had a visible body since his ascension. Nor was it even a literal return, since it was in heaven that Christ ascended the throne. His presence, then, is in the nature of an invisible influence.⁵

It is difficult to reconcile the Witnesses' conception of the second coming with the biblical descriptions. Once again we point to Acts 1:11: Christ's return will be like his departure, which was certainly visible, for the disciples watched Jesus being taken into heaven (vv. 9-10). Other

1. L. Harold DeWolf, *A Theology of the Living Church* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), pp. 306-07.

2. William Newton Clarke, *An Outline Of Christian Theology* (New York: Scribner, 1901), p. 444.

3. E.g., Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede* (New York: Macmillan, 1964), pp. 368-69; Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (New York: Scribner, 1951), vol. 1, pp. 5-6.

4. George E. Ladd, *The Blessed Hope* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), pp. 65-70.

5. *Let God Be True* (Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1952), p. 141.

descriptions of the second coming make it clear that it will be quite conspicuous; for example, Matthew 24:30: "and they will see the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory."

Unexpected

Although the second coming will be preceded by several signs—the desolating sacrilege (Matt. 24:15), great tribulation (v. 21), darkening of the sun (v. 29), they will not indicate the exact time of Jesus' return. Consequently, there will be many for whom his return will be quite unexpected. It will be as in the days of Noah (Matt. 24:37). Although Noah spent some time in the construction of the ark, none of his contemporaries, except for his own family, prepared themselves for the flood. People will be feeling secure, but sudden destruction will come upon them (1 Thess. 5:2–3). Jesus' teachings suggest that because of a long delay before the second coming, some will be lulled into inattention (Matt. 25: 1–13; cf. 2 Peter 3:3–4). When the parousia finally occurs, however, it will happen so quickly that there will be no time to prepare (Matt. 25:8–10). As Louis Berkhof puts it, "The Bible intimates that the measure of surprise at the second coming of Christ will be in an inverse ratio to the measure of their watchfulness."⁶

Triumphant and Glorious

Various descriptions of the return of Christ indicate its glorious character, a sharp contrast to the lowly and humble circumstances of his first coming. The latter was the first stage of Christ's humiliation, the former will be the final stage of his exaltation. He will come on the clouds with great power and great glory (Matt. 24:30; Mark 13:26; Luke 21:27). He will be accompanied by his angels and heralded by the archangel (1 Thess. 4:16). He will sit upon his glorious throne and judge all the nations (Matt. 25:31–46). The irony of this situation is that he who was judged at the end of his stay on earth will be the judge over all at his second coming. Clearly, he will be the triumphant, glorious Lord of all.

The Unity of the Second Coming

A large and influential group of conservative Christians teaches that Christ's coming will actually take place in two stages. These stages are the rapture and the revelation, or the "coming for" the saints and the "coming with" the saints. These two events will be separated by the great tribulation, believed to be approximately seven years in duration. Those

6. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), p. 706.

who hold this view are termed pretribulationists, and most of them are dispensationalists.

The rapture or "coming for" will be secret; it will not be noticed by anyone except the church. Because it is to precede the tribulation, there is no prophecy which must yet be fulfilled before it can take place. Consequently, the rapture could occur at any moment or, in the usual terminology, it is imminent. It will deliver the church from the agony of the great tribulation. Then at the end of the seven years, the Lord will return again, bringing his church with him in a great triumphant arrival. This will be a conspicuous, glorious event universally recognized.⁷ Christ will then set up his earthly millennial kingdom.

In contrast to pretribulationism, the other views of Christ's second coming hold that it will be a single occurrence, a unified event. They refer all prophecies regarding the second coming to the one event, whereas the pretribulationist refers some of the prophecies to the rapture and others to the revelation.⁸

How are we to resolve this issue? Will the second coming be a single or a dual-stage occurrence? While numerous considerations which bear upon this issue will be examined in the following chapter, there is one crucial consideration which we will examine now. It relates to the vocabulary used to designate the second advent. The three major terms for the second coming are *παρουσία*, *ἀποκάλυψις*, and *ἐπιφάνεια*. The pretribulationist argues that *παρουσία* refers to the rapture, the first stage of the return, the believer's blessed hope of being delivered from this world before the tribulation begins. The other two terms refer to Christ's coming with the saints at the end of the tribulation.

When examined closely, however, the terms which designate the second coming do not support the distinction made by pretribulationists. In 1 Thessalonians 4:15–17, for example, the term *παρουσία* is used to denote an event which it is hard to conceive of as the rapture: "For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming [*παρουσία*] of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so shall we always be with the Lord." As George Ladd says, "It is very difficult to find a secret coming of Christ in

7. John F. Walvoord, *The Return of the Lord* (Findlay, Ohio: Dunham, 1955), pp. 52–53.

8. Ladd, *Blessed Hope*, p. 67.

these verses.”⁹ In addition, the term *παρουσία* is used in 2 Thessalonians 2:8, where we read that following the tribulation Christ by his coming will destroy the man of lawlessness, the Antichrist, in a public fashion. Further, Jesus said of the *παρουσία*: “For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of man” (Matt. 24:27).¹⁰

Nor do the other two terms fit the pretribulationists’ conception. Whereas it is supposedly the *παρουσία*, not the *ἀποκάλυψις* or *ἐπιφάνεια*, that is the blessed hope awaited by the church, Paul is thankful that his readers have been enriched in knowledge as they “wait for the revealing [ἀποκάλυψις] of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 1:7). He assures the Thessalonians that God will “repay with affliction those who afflict you, and [will] grant rest with us to you who are afflicted, when the Lord Jesus is revealed [ἀποκάλυψις] from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire” (2 Thess. 1:6–7). And Peter speaks of the believers’ joy and reward in connection with the *ἀποκάλυψις*: “But rejoice in so far as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed” (1 Peter 4:13). He had earlier written that his readers might have to suffer various trials, “so that the genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold which though perishable is tested by fire, may redound to praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1:7). Both of these references (and 1:13 as well) suggest that the believers to whom Peter is writing (who are part of the church) will receive their glory and honor at the *ἀποκάλυψις* of Christ. According to pretribulationism, however, the church should already have received its reward at the *παρουσία*.

Finally, Paul also speaks of the *ἐπιφάνεια* as the object of the believer’s hope. He writes to Titus that believers are to live godly lives, “awaiting [the] blessed hope, the appearing [ἐπιφάνεια] of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13). A similar use of *ἐπιφάνεια* can be found in 1 Timothy 6:14 and 2 Timothy 4:8. We conclude that the use of a variety of terms is not an indication that there will be two stages in the second coming. Rather, the interchangeableness of the terms clearly points to a single event.

The Imminence of the Second Coming

An additional question which we must deal with is whether the second coming is imminent. Could it occur at any time, or are there some prophecies which must first be fulfilled?

Some Christians, particularly those who hold to a pretribulation

coming for the saints by Christ, believe that the return could happen at any moment. In light of this, we must be prepared at all times for that possibility, lest we be caught unaware. Several arguments are used in support of this position:

1. Jesus urged his disciples to be ready for his coming, since they did not know when it would take place (Matt. 24–25). If there are other events which must take place before Christ returns, such as the great tribulation, it is difficult to understand why he spoke of the time as unknown, for we would know at least that the return will not occur until those other events have transpired.¹¹

2. There is a repeated emphasis that we are to wait eagerly, for the Lord’s coming is at hand. Many passages (e.g., Rom. 8:19–25; 1 Cor. 1:7; Phil. 4:5; Titus 2:13; James 5:8–9; Jude 21) indicate that the coming could be very soon and perhaps at any moment.¹²

3. Paul’s statement that we await our blessed hope (Titus 2:13) requires that the next event in God’s plan be the coming of the Lord. If the next step were instead to be the great tribulation, we could hardly have hope and anticipation. Instead, fear and apprehensiveness would be our reaction. Since the return of our Lord is the next event on God’s timetable, there is no reason why it could not happen at any time.¹³

When examined closely, however, these arguments are not fully persuasive. Do the commands of Christ to watch for his coming and the warnings that his return will occur at an unlikely time and without clear signs necessarily mean that it is imminent? There has already been an intervening period of almost two thousand years. While we do not know how long the delay will be nor, consequently, the precise time of Christ’s coming, we can still know that it is not yet. Not knowing when it will occur does not preclude knowing certain times when it will not occur.

Further, Jesus’ statements did not at the time they were expressed mean that the second coming was imminent. He indicated through at least three of his parables (the nobleman who went to a far country, Luke 19:11–27; the wise and foolish virgins, Matt. 25:5; and the talents, Matt. 25:19) that there was to be a delay. Similarly, the parable of the servants (Matt. 24:45–51) involves a period of time for the servants to prove their character. In addition, certain events had to transpire before the second coming; for example, Peter would grow old and infirm (John 21:18), the gospel would be preached to all nations (Matt. 24:14), and the temple would be destroyed (Matt. 24:2). If these events had to occur

11. J. Barton Payne, *The Imminent Appearing of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), p. 86.

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 95–103.

13. Walvoord, *Return of the Lord*, p. 51.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 63.

10. *Ibid.*

before Jesus would return, the second coming could not have happened immediately. His saying, "Watch!" and "You do not know the hour," is not inconsistent with a delay to allow certain events to happen.

This is not to say that it is inappropriate to speak of imminence. It is, however, the complex of events surrounding the second coming, rather than the single event itself, that is imminent. Perhaps we should speak of this complex as imminent and the second coming itself as "impending."

Resurrection

The major result of Christ's second coming, from the standpoint of individual eschatology, is the resurrection. This is the basis for the believer's hope in the face of death. Although death is inevitable, the believer anticipates being delivered from its power.

The Biblical Teaching

The Bible clearly promises resurrection of the believer. The Old Testament gives us several direct statements, the first being Isaiah 26:19: "Thy dead shall live, their bodies shall rise. O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For thy dew is a dew of light, and on the land of the shades thou wilt let it fall." Daniel 12:2 teaches resurrection of the believer and of the wicked as well: "And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt." The idea of resurrection is also asserted in Ezekiel 37: 12-14: "Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: Behold, I will open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you home into the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken, and I have done it, says the Lord."

In addition to direct statements, the Old Testament intimates that we can expect deliverance from death or Sheol. Psalm 49: 15 says, "But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me." While there is no statement about the body in this passage, there is an expectation that the incomplete existence in Sheol will not be our final condition. Psalm 17:15 speaks of awaking in the presence of God: "As for me, I shall behold thy face in righteousness; when I awake, I shall be satisfied with beholding thy form." Some expositors see similar intima-

tions in Psalm 73:24-25 and Proverbs 23:14,¹⁴ although the latter in particular is questionable.

While we must exercise care not to read too much of the New Testament revelation into the Old Testament, it is significant that Jesus and the New Testament writers maintained that the Old Testament teaches resurrection. When Jesus was questioned by the Sadducees, who denied the resurrection, he accused them of error due to lack of knowledge of the Scriptures and of the power of God (Mark 12:24), and then went on to argue for the resurrection on the basis of the Old Testament: "And as for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the passage about the bush, how God said to him, 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not God of the dead, but of the living; you are quite wrong" (w. 26-27). Peter (Acts 2:24-32) and Paul (Acts 13:32-37) saw Psalm 16: 10 as a prediction of the resurrection of Jesus. Hebrews 11:19 commends Abraham's belief in God's ability to raise persons from the dead: "He considered that God was able to raise men even from the dead; hence, figuratively speaking, he did receive [Isaac] back."

The New Testament, of course, teaches the resurrection much more clearly. We have already noted Jesus' rejoinder to the Sadducees, which is recorded in all three Synoptic Gospels (Matt. 22:29-32; Mark 12:24-27; Luke 20:34-38). And John reports several additional occasions when Jesus spoke of the resurrection. One of the clearest declarations is in John 5: "Truly, truly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.... Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come forth, those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment" (w. 25, 28-29). Other affirmations of the resurrection are found in John 6:39-40, 44, 54, and the narrative of the raising of Lazarus (John 11, especially w. 24-25).

The New Testament Epistles also give testimony to the resurrection. Paul clearly believed and taught that there is to be a future bodily resurrection. The classic passage is 1 Corinthians 15, where he discusses the resurrection at great length. The teaching is especially pointed in verses 51 and 52: "Lo! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed." The resurrection is also clearly taught in 1 Thessalonians 4: 13-16 and implied in 2 Corinthians 5: 1-10. And when Paul appeared before the council, he created dissension be-

tween the Pharisees and Sadducees by declaring, "Brethren, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees; with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead I am on trial" (Acts 23:6); he made a similar declaration before Felix (Acts 24:21). John also affirms the doctrine of resurrection (Rev. 20:4–6, 13).

A Work of the Triune God

All of the members of the Trinity are involved in the resurrection of believers. Paul informs us that the Father will raise believers through the Spirit: "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit which dwells in you" (Rom. 8:11). There is a special connection between the resurrection of Christ and the general resurrection, a point particularly emphasized by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15: 12-14: "Now if Christ is preached as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain." In Colossians 1: 18 Paul refers to Jesus as "the beginning, the first-born from the dead." In Revelation 1:5 John similarly refers to Jesus as the "first-born of the dead." This expression does not point so much to Jesus' being first in time within the group as to his supremacy over the group (cf. Col. 1:15, "the first-born of all creation"). The resurrection of Christ is the basis for the believer's hope and confidence. Paul writes, "For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep." And although the context does not explicitly mention the general resurrection, Peter at the beginning of his first epistle ties the new birth and the living hope of the believer to the resurrection of Christ and then looks to the second coming, when genuine faith will result in praise, glory, and honor (1 Peter 1:3-9).

Bodily in Nature

There are several passages in the New Testament which affirm that the body will be restored to life. One of them is Romans 8:11: "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit which dwells in you." In Philippians 3:20–21 Paul writes, "But our commonwealth is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power which enables him even to subject all things to

himself." In the resurrection chapter, 1 Corinthians 15, he says, "It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body" (v. 44). Paul also makes clear that the view that resurrection has already occurred, that is, in the form of a spiritual resurrection not incompatible with the fact that the bodies are still lying in their graves, is a heresy. He makes this point when he condemns the views of Hymenaeus and Philetus, "who have swerved from the truth by holding that the resurrection is past already. They are upsetting the faith of some" (2 Tim. 2: 18).

In addition, there are inferential or indirect evidences of the bodily nature of the resurrection. The redemption of the believer is spoken of as involving the body, not merely the soul: "We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies" (Rom. 8:22–23). In 1 Corinthians 6:12–20 Paul points out the spiritual significance of the body. This is in sharp contrast to the view of the Gnostics, who minimized the body. Whereas some Gnostics drew the conclusion that, the body being evil, a strict asceticism should be practiced, others concluded that what is done with the body is spiritually irrelevant, and hence engaged in licentious behavior. Paul, however, insists that the body is holy. Our bodies are members of Christ (v. 1.5). The body is a temple of the Holy Spirit (v. 19). "The body is not meant for immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body" (v. 13). In view of the emphasis on the body, the statement which immediately follows is obviously an argument for bodily resurrection: "And God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by his power" (v. 14). The conclusion of the entire passage is: "So glorify God in your body" (v. 20).

Another indirect argument for the bodily character of the resurrection is that Jesus' resurrection was bodily in nature. When Jesus appeared to his disciples, they were frightened, thinking that they were seeing a spirit. He reassured them by saying, "Why are you troubled, and why do questionings rise in your hearts? See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself; handle me, and see; for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have" (Luke 24:38–39). And when he later appeared to Thomas, who had expressed skepticism about the resurrection, Jesus said, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side; do not be faithless, but believing" (John 20:27). That Jesus was seen and heard and recognized by the disciples suggests that he had a body similar to the one he had possessed before. The fact that the tomb was empty and the body was never produced by the opponents of Christ is a further indication of the bodily nature of his resurrection. The special connection which, as we have already noted, exists between the resurrec-

tion of Christ and that of the believer argues that our resurrection will be bodily as well.

We now must face the question of just what it means to say that the resurrection involves the body. There are certain problems if we look upon the resurrection as merely a physical resuscitation. One is that the body would presumably be subject to dying again. Apparently Lazarus and the others restored to life by Jesus eventually died again and were buried. Yet Paul speaks of the new body as “imperishable,” in contrast to the “perishable” body that is buried (1 Cor. 15:42). A second problem is the contrast drawn between the “physical [soulish] body” that is sown and the “spiritual body” that is raised (v. 44). There is a significant difference between the two, but we do not know the precise nature of that difference. Further, there are explicit statements which exclude the possibility that the resurrection body will be purely physical. Paul says near the end of his discussion of the resurrection body, “Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable” (1 Cor. 15:50). Jesus’ retort to the Sadducees, “For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven” (Matt. 22:30), seems to carry the same implication. Finally, there is the problem of how one’s body can be reconstituted from molecules which may have become part of another person’s body.¹⁵ Cannibalism presents the most extreme example of this problem. Human bodies serving to fertilize fields where crops are grown and the scattering of human ashes over a river from which drinking water is drawn are other cases in point. A ludicrous parody of the Sadducees’ question, “In the resurrection whose wife will she be?” (Mark 12:23), arises; namely, “Whose molecules will they be in the resurrection?”

What we have, then, is something more than a postdeath survival by the spirit or soul; this something more is not simply a physical resuscitation, however. There is a utilization of the old body, but a transformation of it in the process. Some sort of metamorphosis occurs, so that a new body arises. This new body has some connection or point of identity with the old body, but is differently constituted. Paul speaks of it as a spiritual body (1 Cor. 15:44), but does not elaborate. He uses the analogy of a seed and the plant that springs from it (v. 37). What sprouts from the ground is not merely that which is planted. It issues from that original seed, however.¹⁶

15. See Augustus H. Strong’s question, “Who ate Roger Williams?” in *Systematic Theology* (Westwood, N.J.: Revell, 1907), p. 1019.

16. George E. Ladd points out that although Paul does not attempt to describe the nature of the resurrection body, he does mention some qualities in which it will differ from the physical body—A *Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), p. 564.

The philosophical problem here is the basis of identity. What is it that marks each of us as the same individual at birth, as an adult, and in the resurrection? Certainly not the cells of the body, for we know that there is a complete change of cells within a person’s body once every seven years. If biological cells were the basis of identity, adults would not be the persons they were at birth. There is evidently a continuity of identity, however, despite all of the changes. The adult is the same person as the child, even if substitutions have been made for every cell in the body. Similarly, despite the transformation which will occur at resurrection, we know from Paul that we will still be the same person.

It is sometimes assumed that our new bodies will be just like that of Jesus in the period immediately following his resurrection. His body apparently bore the physical marks of his crucifixion, and could be seen and touched (John 20:27). Although the Scripture does not explicitly say that Jesus ate, we draw that inference from Luke 24:28–31 and John 21:9–15. It should be borne in mind that there were more steps remaining in Jesus’ exaltation. The ascension, involving a transition from this space-time universe to the spiritual realm of heaven, may well have produced yet another transformation. The change which will occur in our bodies at the resurrection (or, in the case of those still alive, at the second coming) occurred in two stages in his case. Our resurrection body will be like Jesus’ present body, not like that body he had between his resurrection and ascension. We will not have those characteristics of Jesus’ postresurrection earthly body which appear inconsistent with the descriptions of our resurrection bodies (e.g., physical tangibility and the need to eat).

We conclude that there will be a bodily reality of some type in the resurrection. It will have some connection with and derive from our original body, and yet it will not be merely a resuscitation of our original body. Rather, there will be a transformation or metamorphosis. An analogy here is the petrification of a log or a stump. While the contour of the original object is retained, the composition is entirely different.¹⁷ We have difficulty in understanding because we do not know the exact nature of the resurrection body. It does appear, however, that it will retain and at the same time glorify the human form. We will be free of the imperfections and needs which we had on earth.

17. A number of theologians have held this or a similar position. Origen suggested that the two bodies have the same “seminal principle or form.” Thomas Aquinas posited that the resurrection body will have the same substance, but different accidents. M. E. Dahl speaks of somatic identity without material identity. John Hick refers to the resurrection body as a divine creation of an exact replica of the previous body. For a more complete account of these views, see Paul Badham, *Christian Beliefs About Life After Death* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), pp. 65–94.

Of Both the Righteous and the Unrighteous

Most of the references to the resurrection are to the resurrection of believers. Isaiah 26: 19 speaks of the resurrection in a fashion which indicates that it is a reward. Jesus speaks of the "resurrection of the just" (Luke 14: 14). In his statement to the **Sadducees** about the resurrection he declares that "those who are accounted worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage" (Luke 20:35). He affirms to Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die" (John 11:25–26). In Philippians 3: 11 Paul expresses his desire and hope "that if possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead." Neither the Synoptic Gospels nor Paul's writings make explicit reference to unbelievers being raised from the dead.

On the other hand, there are a number of passages which do indicate a resurrection of unbelievers. Daniel 12:2 says, "And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt." John reports a similar statement of Jesus: "Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come forth, those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment" (John 5:28–29). Paul, in his defense before Felix, said, "But this I admit to you, that according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the law or written in the prophets, having a hope in God which these themselves accept, that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust" (Acts 24:14–15). And since both believers and unbelievers will be present at and involved in the last judgment, we conclude that the resurrection of both is necessary. Whether they will be raised simultaneously or at two different times will be discussed in the following chapter.

The Final Judgment

The second coming will also issue in the great final judgment. This is for many people one of the most frightening prospects regarding the future, and well it might be for those who are apart from Christ and consequently will be judged to be among the unrighteous. For those who are in Christ, however, it is something to look forward to, for it will vindicate their lives. As we study the final judgment, we should keep in

mind that it is not intended to ascertain our spiritual condition or status, for that is already known to God. Rather, it will manifest or make our status public.¹⁸

A Future Event

The final judgment will occur in the future. Of course, God has in some cases already made his judgment manifest, as when he took righteous **Enoch** and Elijah to heaven to be with him, sent the destructive flood upon the earth (Gen. 6–7), and destroyed Korah and those who participated with him in the rebellion (Num. 16). A New Testament example is God's striking down Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5: 1–11). Friedrich **Schelling**, among others, maintained that the history of the world is the judgment of the world, that, in other words, the events that occur within history are in effect a judgment upon the world. Yet this is not the whole of what the Bible has to say about judgment. A definite event is to occur in the future. Jesus alluded to it in Matthew 11:24: "But I tell you that it shall be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you." On another occasion he spoke clearly of the judgment which he would execute in connection with the future resurrection (John 5:27–29). There is an extended picture of this judgment in Matthew 25:31–46. While preaching on the Areopagus Paul declared that God "has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all men by raising him from the dead" (Acts 17:31). Later Paul argued before Felix "about justice and self-control and future judgment" (Acts 24:25). He wrote to the **Romans**, "But by your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed" (Rom. 2:5). The author of the letter to the Hebrews put it clearly and directly: "It is appointed for men to die once, and after that comes judgment" (Heb. 9:27). Other clear references include Hebrews 10:27; 2 Peter 3:7; and Revelation 20:11–15.

Scripture specifies that the judgment will occur after the second coming. Jesus said, "For the Son of man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay every man for what he has done" (Matt. 16:27). This idea is also found in Matthew 13:37–43; 24:29–35; and 25:31–46. Similarly, Paul wrote, "Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light

18. Gottlob Schrenk, *δικαιοσύνη*, in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–1976), vol. 2, p. 207.

the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then every man will receive his commendation from God" (1 Cor. 4:5).

Jesus Christ the Judge

Jesus pictured himself as sitting on a glorious throne and judging all nations (Matt. 25:31–33). Although God is spoken of as the judge in Hebrews 12:23, it is clear from several other references that he delegates this authority to the Son. Jesus himself said, "The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son... and has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of man" (John 5:22, 27). Peter told the gathering in Cornelius's house, "[Jesus] commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify that he is the one ordained by God to be judge of the living and the dead" (Acts 10:42). Paul informed the Athenians that God "has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all men by raising him from the dead." And Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive good or evil, according to what he has done in the body" (2 Cor. 5:10). Second Timothy 4: 1 states that Christ is to judge the living and the dead.

It appears that believers will share in the judging. In Matthew 19:28 and Luke 22:28–30 Jesus suggests that the disciples will judge the twelve tribes of Israel. We are also told that believers will sit on thrones and judge the world (1 Cor. 6:2–3; Rev. 3:21; 20:4). While we are not told the exact details, Christ will apparently permit the saints to share in this work.

The Subjects of the Judgment

All humans will be judged (Matt. 25:32; 2 Cor. 5:10; Heb. 9:27). Paul warns that "we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God" (Rom. 14: 10). Every secret will be revealed; all that has ever occurred will be evaluated. Some have questioned whether the sins of believers will be included—that would seem to be unnecessary inasmuch as believers have been justified. But the statements concerning the review of sins are universal. Berkhof's perspective on this matter is probably correct: "Scripture leads us to believe that [the sins of believers] will be [revealed], though they will, of course, be revealed as **pardoned** sins."¹⁹

In addition, the evil angels will be judged at this time. Peter writes that

19. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 732.

"God did not spare the angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell [Tartarus] and committed them to pits of nether gloom to be kept until the judgment" (2 Peter 2:4). Jude 6 makes an almost identical statement. The good angels, on the other hand, will participate in the judgment by gathering together all who are to be judged (Matt. 13:41; 24:31).

The Basis of the Judgment

Those who appear will be judged in terms of their earthly lives.²⁰ Paul said that we will all appear at the judgment, "so that each one may receive good or evil, according to what he has done in the body" (2 Cor. 5:10). Jesus said that at the resurrection all will "come forth, those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment" (John 5:29). While one might infer from Matthew 25:31–46 that it is the doing of good deeds that makes the difference, Jesus indicated that some who claim and who even appear to have done good deeds will be told to depart (Matt. 7:21–23).

The standard on the basis of which the evaluation will be made is the revealed will of God. Jesus said, "He who rejects me and does not receive my sayings has a judge; the word that I have spoken will be his judge on the last day" (John 12:48). Even those who have not explicitly heard the law will be judged: "All who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law" (Rom. 2: 12).

The Finality of the Judgment

Once passed, the judgment will be permanent and irrevocable. The righteous and the ungodly will be sent away to their respective final places. There is no hint that the verdict can be changed. In concluding his teaching about the last judgment, Jesus said that those on his left hand "will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life" (Matt. 25:46).

Implications of the Second Coming and Its Consequences

1. History will not simply run its course, but under the guidance of God will come to a consummation. His purposes will be fulfilled in the end.

20. Floyd V. Filson, "The Second Epistle to the Corinthians," in *The Interpreter's Bible*, ed. George A. Buttrick (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978), vol. 10, p. 332.

2. We as believers should watch for and work in anticipation of the sure return of the Lord.

3. Our earthly bodies will be transformed into something far better. The imperfections which we now know will disappear; our everlasting bodies will know no pain, illness, or death.

4. A time is coming when justice will be dispensed. Evil will be punished, and faith and faithfulness rewarded.

5. In view of the certainty of the second coming and the finality of the judgment which will follow, it is imperative that we act in accordance with the will of God.

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Millennial and Tribulational Views

Millennial Views

Postmillennialism

Premillennialism

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Resolving the Issues

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Pretribulationism

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Mediating Positions

Resolving the Issues

Over the years there has been considerable discussion in Christian theology regarding the chronological relationship between Christ's second coming and certain other events. In particular, this discussion has involved two major questions. (1) Will there be a millennium, an earthly reign of Jesus Christ; and if so, will the second coming take place before or after that period? The view that there will be no earthly reign of Christ is termed amillennialism. The teaching that the return of Christ will inaugurate a millennium is termed premillennialism, while the belief that the second coming will conclude a millennium is postmillen-

nialism. (2) Will Christ come to remove the church from the world before the great tribulation (pretribulationism), or will he return only after the tribulation (posttribulationism)? This second question is found primarily in premillennialism. We shall examine in turn each of the millennial and then the tribulational views.

Millennial Views

Although all three millennial positions have been held virtually throughout church history, at different times one or another has dominated. We will examine them in the order of their major period of popularity.

Postmillennialism

Postmillennialism rests on the belief that the preaching of the gospel will be so successful that the world will be converted. The reign of Christ, the locus of which is human hearts, will be complete and universal. The petition, "Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven," will be actualized. Peace will prevail and evil will be virtually banished. Then, when the gospel has fully taken effect, Christ will return. Basically, then, postmillennialism is an optimistic view.

The first three centuries of the church were probably dominated by what we would today call premillennialism, but in the fourth century an African Donatist named Tyconius propounded a competitive view.¹ Although Augustine was an archopponent of the Donatists, he adopted Tyconius's view of the millennium. This interpretation was to dominate eschatological thinking throughout the Middle Ages. Augustine taught that the millennium does not lie in the future, but has already begun. We are in the millennium. The thousand years began with Christ's first coming. In support of this view, Augustine cited Mark 3:27: "But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man; then indeed he may plunder his house." In Augustine's understanding of this verse, the strong man is Satan and the plundered goods represent people who were formerly under his control but are now Christian. Satan was bound at the time of the first coming of Christ and will remain bound until the second coming. Since Satan is therefore unable to deceive the nations, the preaching of the gospel is highly successful. Christ reigns on earth. At the end of this millennial

1. Traugott Hahn, *Tyconius-Studien. Ein Beitrag zur Kirchen-und-Dogmengeschichte des 4. Jahrhunderts* (Leipzig: Dieterich, 1900; Aalen: Schilling, 1971 reprint).

period, however, Satan will be loosed for a short time before being finally subdued.²

As we look at current conditions in the world and the church, it may seem difficult to reconcile Augustine's view with what is actually going on. It is important to remember the context in which Augustine formulated and presented his view, however. Christianity had achieved unprecedented political success. A series of circumstances had led to the conversion of the emperor Constantine in 312. With that event, Christianity was granted tolerance within the empire and became virtually the official religion. The church was entering into its inheritance. Its major opposition, the Roman Empire, had virtually capitulated. While the progress of the church would be gradual rather than sudden, it would be sure. No dates were set for the completion of the millennium and the return of Christ, but it was assumed that they would come to pass about the year 1000.³

With the end of the first millennium of church history, it of course became necessary to revise somewhat the details of postmillennialism. The millennium was no longer viewed as a period of a thousand years, but as the whole of church history. Postmillennialism was most popular during periods in which the church appeared to be succeeding in its task of winning the world. It came to particular popularity in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Bear in mind that this was a period of great effectiveness in world missions as well as a time of concern about and progress in social conditions. Consequently, it seemed reasonable to assume that the world would soon be reached for Christ.

As we have suggested, the major tenet of postmillennialism is the successful spread of the gospel. This idea is based upon several passages of Scripture. In the Old Testament, Psalms 47, 72, and 100; Isaiah 45:22-25; and Hosea 2:23, for example, make it clear that all nations will come to know God. In addition, Jesus said on several occasions that the gospel would be preached universally prior to his second coming. A prime example of this teaching is found in Matthew 24: 14. Inasmuch as the Great Commission is to be carried out in his authority (Matt. 28:18-20), it is bound to succeed. Often the idea of the spread of the gospel includes the concomitants of the gospel-transforming effects upon social conditions will follow from the conversion of large numbers of hearers. In some cases, the belief in the spread of the kingdom has taken on a somewhat more secularized form, so that social transformation rather than individual conversions is considered the sign of the kingdom. For

2. Augustine *Sermon* 259.2.

3. Adolf von Harnack, "Millennium," in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 9th ed. (New York: Scribner, 1883), vol. 16, pp. 3 14-18.

example, the social-gospel movement in the late nineteenth century aimed at the Christianizing of the social order, culminating in a change of the economic structure. Discrimination, injustice, and conflict would then wither away, and wars would be a thing of the past. This form of postmillennialism was usually accompanied by a generalized concept of divine providence: God was seen as working outside the formal boundaries of the church. So on two occasions in the twentieth century, significant numbers of German Christians identified God's working in the world with political movements of their time: Kaiser Wilhelm's war policy in the teens, and then Hitler's Naziism in the 1930s.⁴ Emphasizing 'social transformation, liberals, insofar as they held a millennial view, were generally postmillennialists, but by no means were all postmillennial & liberal. Many of them envisioned an unprecedented number of conversions, with the human race becoming a collection of regenerated individuals.⁵

In postmillennial thought, the kingdom of God is viewed as a present reality, here and now, rather than a future heavenly realm. Jesus' parables in Matthew 13 give us an idea of the nature of this kingdom. It is like leaven, spreading gradually but surely throughout the whole. Its growth will be extensive (it will spread throughout the entire world) and intensive (it will become dominant). Its growth will be so gradual that the onset of the millennium may be scarcely noticed by some. The progress may not be uniform; indeed, the coming of the kingdom may well proceed by a series of crises. Postmillennialists are able to accept what appear to be setbacks, since they believe in the ultimate triumph of the gospel.⁶

In the postmillennial view, the millennium will be an extended period, but not necessarily a literal one thousand years. Indeed, the postmillennial view of the millennium is frequently based less upon Revelation 20, where the thousand-year period and the two resurrections are mentioned, than upon other passages of Scripture. The very gradualness of the coming of the kingdom makes the length of the millennium difficult to calculate. The point is that the millennium will be a prolonged period of time during which Christ, even though physically absent, will reign over the earth. One essential feature which distinguishes postmillennialism from the other millennial views is that it expects conditions to become better, rather than worse, prior to Christ's return. Thus it is a

basically optimistic view. Consequently, it has fared rather poorly in the twentieth century. The convinced postmillennialist regards the distressing conditions of the twentieth century as merely a temporary fluctuation in the growth of the kingdom. They indicate that we are not as near the second coming as we had thought. This argument, however, has not proved persuasive to large numbers of theologians, pastors, and lay persons.⁷

Premillennialism

Premillennialism is committed to the concept of an earthly reign by Jesus Christ of approximately one thousand years (or at least a substantial period of time). Unlike postmillennialism, premillennialism sees Christ as physically present during this time; it believes that he will return personally and bodily to commence the millennium. This being the case, the millennium must be seen as still in the future.

Premillennialism was probably the dominant millennial view during the early period of the church. Christians of the first three centuries had a strong expectation of an early return of Christ. Instead of holding to a gradual growth of the kingdom, they anticipated that the eschaton would be inaugurated by a cataclysmic event. Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and several other significant early theologians held to this view.⁸ Much of the millennialism of this period—often termed "**chiliasm**," from the Greek word for "thousand"—had a rather sensuous flavor. The millennium would be a time of great abundance and fertility, of a renewing of the earth and building of a glorified Jerusalem.⁹ This tended to repulse the Alexandrian school of Clement, Origen, and Dionysius. A major factor in the decline of chiliasm was Augustine's view of the millennium, which we discussed earlier. In the Middle Ages, premillennialism became quite rare. Often it was mystical sects which perpetuated it.

About the middle of the nineteenth century, premillennialism began to grow in popularity in conservative circles. This was partly due to the fact that liberals, insofar as they had a millennial view, were postmillennial & s, and some conservatives considered anything associated with liberalism to be suspect. The growing popularity of the dispensational system of interpretation and eschatology also lent impetus to premillennialism. It has considerable adherence among conservative Baptists, Pentecostal groups, and independent fundamentalist churches.

7. Ibid., pp. 132-33.

8. Justin Martyr *Dialogue with Trypho* 80. 1.

9. A. J. Visser, "A Bird's-Eye View of Ancient Christian Eschatology," *Numen* 14 (1967): 10-11.

4. Karl Barth, *How I Changed My Mind* (Richmond: John Knox, 1966), pp. 21, 45; *The Church and the Political Problem of Our Day* (New York: Scribner, 1939).

5. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), vol. 3, pp. 800-12.

6. Loraine Boettner, "Postmillennialism," in *The Meaning of the Millennium*, ed. Robert G. Clouse (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity, 1977), pp. 120-21.

The key passage for premillennialism is Revelation 20:4–6:

Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom judgment was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their testimony to Jesus and for the word of God, and who had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life, and reigned with Christ a thousand years. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is he who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and they shall reign with him a thousand years.

Premillennialists observe that here is evidence of a thousand-year period and two resurrections, one at the beginning and the other at the end. Premillennialists insist on a literal and consistent interpretation of this passage. Since the same verb—*ἐξῆσαν*—is used in reference to both resurrections, they must be of the same type. The **amillennialist**, or for that matter the postmillennialist, is usually forced to say that they are of different types. The usual explanation is that the first resurrection is a spiritual resurrection, that is, regeneration, while the second is a literal, physical, or bodily resurrection. Thus those who take part in the first resurrection will undergo the second as well. **Premillennialists**, however, reject this interpretation as untenable. George Beasley-Murray observes that it attributes confusion and chaotic thinking to the biblical author.¹⁰ Henry Alford a century ago contended that if one resurrection is a spiritual coming to life and the other a physical coming to life, “then there is an end of all **significance** in language, and Scripture is wiped out as a definite testimony to **anything**.”¹¹ George Ladd says that if *ἐξῆσαν* means bodily resurrection in verse 5, it must mean bodily resurrection in verse 4; if it does not, “we have lost control of **exegesis**.”¹²

All of these men are sensitive to the fact that context can alter the meanings of words. They note, however, that in this case the two usages of *ἐξῆσαν* occur together. And there is nothing in the context to suggest any shift in meaning. Consequently, what we have here are two resurrections of the same type which involve two different groups at an interval of a thousand years. It also appears from the context that those who

10. George R. Beasley-Murray, “The Revelation,” in *The New Bible Commentary Revised*, ed. Donald Guthrie and J. A. Motyer (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), p. 1306.

11. Henry Alford, *The New Testament for English Readers* (Chicago: Moody, n.d.), pp. 1928–29.

12. George E. Ladd, “Revelation 20 and the Millennium,” *Review and Expositor* 57, no. 2 (April 1960): 169.

participate in the first resurrection are not involved in the second. It is “the rest of the dead” (*οἱ λοιποὶ τῶν νεκρῶν*) who do not come to life until the end of the thousand years. Although it is not said that they will come to life at that point, the implication is that they will. There is an obvious contrast between those involved in the second resurrection and those in the first.

It is also important to observe the nature of the millennium. Whereas the postmillennialist thinks that the millennium is being introduced gradually, perhaps almost imperceptibly, the premillennialist envisions a sudden, cataclysmic event. In the premillennialist view, the rule of Jesus Christ will be complete from the very beginning of the millennium. Evil will have been virtually eliminated.

According to premillennialism, then, the millennium will not be an extension of trends already at work within the world. Instead, there will be a rather sharp break from conditions as we now find them. For example, there will be worldwide peace. This is a far cry from the present situation, where worldwide peace is a rare thing indeed, and the trend does not seem to be improving. The universal harmony will not be restricted to humans. Nature, which has been “groaning in travail,” awaiting its redemption, will be freed from the curse of the fall (Rom. 8:19–23). Even animals will live in harmony with one another (Isa. 11:6–7; 65:25), and the destructive forces of nature will be calmed. The saints will rule together with Christ in this millennium. Although the exact nature of their reign is not spelled out, they will, as a reward for their faithfulness, participate with him in the glory which is his.

All **premillennialists** also anticipate that Israel will have a special place in the millennium. They disagree, however, as to the nature of that special place. Dispensationalists hold to a continuing unconditional covenant of God with national Israel, so that when God has completed his dealings with the church, he will return to his relations with national Israel. Jesus will literally sit upon David’s throne and rule the world from Israel. All of the prophecies and promises regarding Israel will be fulfilled within the millennium, which will therefore have a markedly Jewish character. Nondispensationalists put much less emphasis upon national Israel, holding instead that Israel’s special place, being spiritual in nature, will be found within the church. Israel will be converted in large numbers during the **millennium**.¹³

Premillennialists also hold that the millennium will be a tremendous change from what immediately precedes it, namely, the great tribulation. The tribulation will be a time of unprecedented trouble and turmoil,

13. George E. Ladd, “Israel and the Church,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (October–December 1964): 206–13.

including cosmic disturbances, persecution, and great suffering. While premillennialists disagree as to whether the church will be present during the tribulation, they agree that the world situation will be at its very worst just before Christ comes to establish the **millennium**, which will be, by contrast, a period of peace and righteousness.

Amillennialism

Literally, amillennialism is the idea that there will be no millennium, no earthly reign of Christ. The great **final** judgment will immediately follow the second coming and issue directly in the final states of the righteous and the wicked. Amillennialism is a simpler view than either of the others that we have been considering. Its advocates maintain that it is built on a number of relatively clear eschatological passages, whereas premillennialism is based primarily upon a single passage, and an obscure one at that.

Despite the simplicity of amillennialism and the clarity of its central tenet, it is in many ways difficult to grasp. This is due in part to the fact that, its most notable feature being negative, its positive teachings are not always expounded. It has sometimes been distinguished more for its rejection of premillennialism than for its affirmations. Also, in dealing with the very troublesome passage of Revelation 20:4–6, amillennialists have come up with a rather wide variety of explanations. One wonders at times whether these explanations reflect the same basic view or quite different understandings of eschatological and apocalyptic literature. Finally, it has not always been possible to distinguish amillennialism from postmillennialism, since they share many common features. Indeed, various theologians who have not addressed the particular issues which serve to distinguish the two views from one another—among them are Augustine, John Calvin, and B. B. Warfield—have been claimed as ancestors by both camps. What the two views share is a belief that the “thousand years” of Revelation 20 is to be taken symbolically. Both often hold as well that the millennium is the church age. Where they differ is that the postmillennialist, unlike the amillennialist, holds that the millennium involves an earthly reign of Christ.

In light of the problems one encounters in trying to grasp amillennialism, its history is difficult to trace. Some historians of doctrine have found amillennialism in the Epistle of Barnabas,¹⁴ but this is disputed by others. It is clear that Augustine, whether or not he should be classified as an amillennialist, contributed to the formulation of the view by sug-

14. Diedrich Kromminga, *The Millennium in the Church: Studies in the History Of Christian Chiliasm* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1945), p. 40.

gesting that the figure of one thousand years is primarily symbolic rather than literal. It is likely that postmillennialism and amillennialism simply were not differentiated for much of the first nineteen centuries of the church. When postmillennialism began to fade in popularity in the twentieth century, amillennialism was generally substituted for it, since amillennialism is much closer to postmillennialism than is premillennialism. Consequently, amillennialism has enjoyed its greatest popularity in the period since World War I.

When amillennialists deal with Revelation 20, they usually have the whole book in view. They see the Book of Revelation as consisting of several sections, seven being the number most frequently mentioned. These several sections do not deal with successive periods of time; rather, they are recapitulations of the same period, the period between Christ's first and second comings.¹⁵ It is believed that in each of these sections the author picks up the same themes and elaborates them. If this is the case, Revelation 20 does not refer solely to the last period in the history of the church, but is a special perspective upon the entire history of the church.

Amillennialists also remind us that the Book of Revelation as a whole is very symbolic. They note that even the most rabid premillennialists do not take everything in the Book of Revelation literally. The bowls, seals, and trumpets, for example, are usually interpreted as symbols. By a simple extension of this principle amillennialists contend that the “thousand years” of Revelation 20 might not be literal either. In addition, they point out that the millennium is mentioned nowhere else in Scripture.¹⁶

The question arises, If the figure of a thousand years is to be taken symbolically rather than literally, of what is it a symbol? Many amillennialists utilize Warfield's interpretation: “The sacred number seven in combination with the equally sacred number three forms the number of holy perfection, ten, and when this ten is cubed into a thousand the seer has said all he could say to convey to our minds the idea of absolute completeness.”¹⁷ The references to a “thousand years” in Revelation 20, then, convey the idea of perfection or completeness. In verse 2 the figure represents the completeness of Christ's victory over Satan. In verse 4 it suggests the perfect glory and joy of the redeemed in heaven at the present time.¹⁸

15. Floyd Hamilton, *The Basis of Millennial Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1942), pp. 130–31.

16. William Hendriksen, *More than Conquerors* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1939), pp. 11–64; Anthony Hoekema, “Amillennialism,” in *Meaning of the Millennium*, pp. 156–59.

17. Benjamin B. Warfield, “The Millennium and the Apocalypse,” in *Biblical Doctrines* (New York: Oxford University, 1929), p. 654.

18. W. J. Grier, “Christian Hope and the Millennium,” *Christianity Today*, 13 October 1958, p. 19.

The major exegetical problem for amillennialism, however, is not the one thousand years, but the two resurrections. Among the variety of amillennial opinions about the two resurrections, the one common factor is a denial of the premillennial contention that John is speaking of two physical resurrections involving two different groups. The most common amillennial interpretation is that the first resurrection is spiritual and the second is bodily or physical. One who has argued this at some length is Ray Summers. From Revelation 20:6 ("Blessed and holy is he who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power") he concludes that the first resurrection is a victory over the second death. Since it is customary in eschatological discussions to consider the second death to be spiritual rather than physical, the first resurrection must be spiritual as well. The first death, which is not mentioned but implied, must surely be physical death. If it is to be correlated with the second resurrection as the second death is with the first resurrection, the second resurrection must be physical. The first resurrection, then, is the new birth; those who experience it will not come into condemnation. The second resurrection is the bodily or physical resurrection which we usually have in view when we use the word *resurrection*. All those who participate in the first resurrection also participate in the second resurrection, but not all of those experiencing the second resurrection will have partaken of the first.¹⁹

The most common premillennial criticism of the view that the first resurrection is spiritual and the second physical is that it is inconsistent in interpreting identical terms (*ἐξῆσαν*) in the same context. Some amillennialists have accepted this criticism and have sought to develop a position in which the two resurrections are of the same type. James Hughes has constructed such a view. He accepts the premillennialist point that the first and second resurrections must be understood in the same sense.²⁰ He suggests, however, a logical possibility which the premillennialists seem to have overlooked: *both* resurrections may be spiritual.

Hughes contends that Revelation 20:4–6 is a description of disembodied souls in the intermediate state. He cites as evidence the fact that those who are involved in the first resurrection are termed "souls" (v. 4). Further, he argues that *ἐξῆσαν* should be interpreted not as an ingressive aorist ("they came to life"), but as a constative aorist ("they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years"). He concludes that the first resurrection is the ascension of the just soul to heaven to reign with

19. Ray Summers, "Revelation 20: An Interpretation," *Review and Expositor* 57, no. 2 (April 1960): 176.

20. James A. Hughes, "Revelation 20:4–6 and the Question of the Millennium," *Westminster Theological Journal* 35 (1973): 300.

Christ; there is nothing here about the body coming to life. Those who participate in this resurrection are the "living" dead. The "dead" dead, by contrast, have no part in the first resurrection and will suffer the second (spiritual) death. Their souls survive the first (physical) death, but will never come to life. Though both groups are physically dead, the former are spiritually alive during the thousand years; the latter are not. While some commentators have inferred from verse 5 ("the rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended") that the "dead" dead will come to life at the end of the millennium, Hughes renders the clause in question, "They did not live during the thousand years, nor thereafter." And what, then, of the second resurrection? Hughes regards it as highly significant that the term "second resurrection," which pertains to the survival of just and unjust souls during the intermediate state, is not to be found in Revelation 20. Unlike the first resurrection, then, the second resurrection is virtually hypothetical. Like the first, however, it is spiritual in nature. Thus, Hughes has managed to interpret the two occurrences of *ἐξῆσαν* consistently.²¹

Another feature of amillennialism is a more general conception of prophecy, especially Old Testament prophecy, than is found in premillennialism. We have noted that premillennialists tend to interpret biblical prophecy quite literally. On the other hand, amillennialists frequently treat prophecies as historical or symbolic rather than futuristic. As a general rule, prophecy occupies a much less important place in amillennial than in premillennial thought.

Finally, we should observe that amillennialism usually does not display the optimism that is typically found in postmillennialism. There may be a belief that preaching of the gospel will be successful, but great success in this regard is not necessary to the amillennial scheme, since no literal reign of Christ, no coming of the kingdom before the coming of the King, is expected. This has made the amillennial view more credible than postmillennialism in the twentieth century. This is not to say that amillennialism is like premillennialism in expecting an extreme deterioration of conditions before the second coming. Yet there is nothing in amillennialism to preclude such a possibility. And because no millennium will precede the second coming, the Lord's return may be at hand. For the most part, however, amillennialists do not engage in the type of eager searching for signs of the second coming that characterizes much of premillennialism.

Resolving the Issues

We must now address the question of which millennial view to adopt. The issues are large and complex, but on close analysis can be reduced

21. Ibid., pp. 299–300.

to a comparative few. We have noted in the course of this treatise that theology, like other disciplines, is often unable to find one view which is conclusively supported by all of the data. What must be done in such situations is to find the view which has fewer difficulties than do the alternatives. That is the approach we will follow here.

The postmillennial view has much less support at the present time than it did in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This should not in itself persuade us to reject the position. We must, however, seek the reasons for the decline in postmillennialism, for they may be determinative of our conclusions. Here we should note that the optimism of postmillennialism regarding gospel proclamation seems somewhat unjustified. There has been a decline in evangelistic and missionary success. In parts of the world the percentage of the population actually practicing the Christian faith is very small. Further, many Communist and Muslim countries are now closed to Christian missionary endeavor of a conventional type. On the other hand, we must not be oblivious to the fact that in parts of the world, notably Africa and South America, Christianity is thriving, and is beginning to approach majority status. Who can tell what reversals of fortune lie in store for the preaching of the gospel?

There are also strong biblical grounds for rejecting postmillennialism. Jesus' teaching regarding great wickedness and a cooling off of the faith of many before his return seems to conflict quite sharply with postmillennial optimism. That a clear depiction of an earthly reign of Christ without his physical presence is nowhere found in Scripture seems to be another major weakness of this position.

This leaves us with a choice between amillennialism and premillennialism. The issue comes down to the biblical references to the millennium—are they sufficient grounds for adopting the more complicated premillennial view rather than the simpler amillennial conception? It is sometimes contended that the whole premillennial conception rests upon a single passage of Scripture, and that no doctrine should be based upon a single passage. But if one view can account for a specific reference better than can another, and both views explain the rest of Scripture about equally well, then the former view must certainly be judged more adequate than the latter.

We note here that there are no biblical passages with which premillennialism cannot cope, or which it cannot adequately explain. We have seen, on the other hand, that the reference to two resurrections (Rev. 20) gives amillennialists difficulty. Their explanations that we have here two different types of resurrection or two spiritual resurrections strain the usual principles of hermeneutics. The premillennialist case appears stronger at this point.

Nor is the premillennialist interpretation based upon only one passage in the Bible. Intimations of it are found in a number of places. For example, Paul writes, "For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power" (1 Cor. 15:22–24). Paul uses the adverbs *ἔπειτα* (v. 23) and *ἔτι* (v. 24), which indicate temporal sequence. He could have used the adverb *τότε* to indicate concurrent events, but he did not do so.²² It appears that just as the first coming and resurrection of Christ were distinct events separated by time, so will there be an interval between the second coming and the end.²³ We should also observe that while the two resurrections are spoken of explicitly only in Revelation 20, there are other passages which hint at either a resurrection of a select group (Luke 14:14; 20:35; 1 Cor. 15:23; Phil. 3:11; 1 Thess. 4:16) or a resurrection in two stages (Dan. 12:2; John 5:29). In Philippians 3:11, for example, Paul speaks of his hope of attaining "the resurrection from the dead." Literally, the phrase reads "the out-resurrection out from among the dead ones" (*τὴν ἐξανάστασιν τὴν ἐκ νεκρῶν*). Note in particular the prefixed preposition and the plural. These texts fit well with the concept of two resurrections. Accordingly, we judge the premillennial view to be more adequate than amillennialism.

Tribulational Views

We come now to the issue of the relationship of Christ's return to the complex of events known as the great tribulation. In theory, all premillennialists hold that there will be a great disturbance of seven years' duration (that figure need not be taken literally) prior to Christ's coming. The question is whether there will be a separate coming to remove the church from the world prior to the great tribulation or whether the church will go through the tribulation and be united with the Lord only afterward. The view that Christ will take the church to himself prior to the tribulation is called pretribulationism; the view that he will take the church after the tribulation is called posttribulationism. There are also certain mediating positions which we will mention briefly at the conclusion of the chapter. In practice, these distinctions are drawn only by premillen-

²² Joseph H. Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1955), pp. 188, 231, 629.

²³ George E. Ladd, *Crucial Questions About the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), p. 178.

nialists, who tend to devote more attention to the details of the end times than do the advocates of either postmillennialism or amillennialism.

Pretribulationism

There are several distinctive ideas held by **pretribulationists**. The first concerns the nature of the tribulation. It will indeed be a *great tribulation*. Whereas some other eschatologists emphasize the difficulties and persecutions experienced by the church throughout its history, **pretribulationists** stress the uniqueness of the tribulation. It will be quite unparalleled within history. It will be a period of transition concluding God's dealings with the Gentiles and preparing for the millennium and the events which will transpire therein. The tribulation is not to be understood as in any sense a time for disciplining believers or purifying the church.

A second major idea of pretribulationism is the rapture of the church. Christ will come at the beginning of the great tribulation (or just prior to it, actually) to remove the church from the world. This coming in a sense will be secret. No unbelieving eye will observe it. The rapture is pictured in 1 Thessalonians 4:17: "Then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with [the dead in Christ] in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord." Note that in the rapture Christ will not descend all the way to earth, as he will when he comes *with* the church at the end of the tribulation.²⁴

Pretribulationism, then, maintains that there will be two phases in Christ's coming, or one could even say two comings. There will also be three resurrections. The first will be the resurrection of the righteous dead at the rapture, for Paul teaches that believers who are alive at the time will not precede those who are dead. Then at the end of the tribulation there will be a resurrection of those saints who have died during the tribulation. Finally, at the end of the millennium, there **will** be a resurrection of unbelievers.²⁵

This all means that the church will be absent during the tribulation. That is the point of the rapture, to deliver the church from the tribulation. We can expect deliverance because Paul promised the Thessalonians that they would not experience the wrath which God will pour out upon unbelievers: "For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thess. 5:9); "Jesus ... delivers us from the wrath to come" (1 Thess. 1:10).

24. John F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question* (Findlay, Ohio: Dunham, 1957), pp. 101, 198.

25. Charles L. Feinberg, *Premillennialism or Amillennialism? The Premillennial and Amillennial Systems Of Interpretation Analyzed and Compared* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1936), p. 146.

But what of the references in Matthew 24 which indicate that some of the elect will be present during the tribulation? We must understand that the disciples' asking what would be the sign of Jesus' coming and of the end of the age (24:3; cf. Acts 1:6) occurred within a Jewish framework. And accordingly, Jesus' discussion here pertains primarily to the future of Israel. It is significant that the Gospel uses the general term *elect* rather than "**church**," "body of Christ," or any similar expression. It is elect Jews, not the church, who will be present during the tribulation. This distinction between Israel and the church is a determinative and crucial part of pretribulationism, which is closely allied with dispensationalism. The tribulation is viewed as being the transition from God's dealing primarily with the church to his reestablishing relationship with his original chosen people, national Israel.²⁶

There is, finally, within pretribulationism a strong emphasis that the Lord's return is **imminent**.²⁷ Since his return will precede the tribulation, nothing remains to be fulfilled prior to the rapture. Indeed, dispensationalism holds that all prophetic Scripture applying to the church was fulfilled in the first century. Moreover, some general antecedents of the eschaton can certainly be seen today: the faith of many is growing cold and wickedness is increasing. (In actuality, these are antecedents of Christ's coming at the end of the tribulation. That some of them are already in place suggests a later increase in these phenomena.) His coming for the church, then, could occur at any time, even within the next instant.

Jesus urged watchfulness upon his hearers, since they did not know the time of his return (Matt. 25: 13). The parable of the ten virgins conveys this message. Just as in the time of Noah, there will be no warning signs (Matt. 24:36-39). The wicked knew nothing until the flood came and took them away. The coming of the Lord will be like a thief in the night (Matt. 24:43). Or like the master who returns at an unexpected time (Matt. 24:45-51). There will be sudden separation. Two men will be working in the field; two women will be grinding at the mill. In each case, one will be taken and the other left. What clearer depiction of the rapture could there be? Since it can occur at any moment, watchfulness and diligent activity are very much in order.²⁸

There is another basis for the belief that Christ's return is imminent.

26. E. Schuyler English, *Re-thinking the Rapture: An Examination of What the Scriptures Teach as to the Time of the Translation of the Church in Relation to the Tribulation* (Neptune, N.J.: Loizeaux, 1954), pp. 100-O 1.

27. Walvoord, *Rapture Question*, pp. 75-82.

28. Gordon Lewis, "Biblical Evidence for Pretribulationism," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 125 (1968): 216-26.

The church can have a blessed hope (Titus 2:13) **only if** the next major event to transpire is the coming of Christ. If the Antichrist and the great tribulation were the next items on the eschatological agenda, Paul would have told the church to expect suffering, persecution, anguish. But instead he instructs the Thessalonians to comfort one another with the fact of Christ's second coming (1 Thess. 4:18). Since the next event, to which the church is to look forward with hopeful anticipation, is the coming of Christ for the church, there is nothing to prevent it from happening at any time.²⁹

Finally, pretribulationism maintains that there will be at least two judgments. The church will be judged at the time of the rapture. It is then that rewards for faithfulness will be handed out. The church will not be involved, however, in the separation of the sheep and goats at the end of the millennium. Its status will have already been determined.

Posttribulationism

Posttribulationists maintain that the coming of Christ for his church will not take place until the conclusion of the great tribulation. They avoid use of the term *rupture* because (1) it is not a biblical expression and (2) it suggests that the church will escape or be delivered from the tribulation, a notion which runs contrary to the essence of **posttribulationism**.

A first feature of posttribulationism is a less literal interpretation of the events of the last times than is found in **pretribulationism**.³⁰ For instance, while pretribulationists take the word שָׁבֻעַ (*shabua'*) in Daniel 9:27 to be an indication that the great tribulation will be literally seven years in duration, most posttribulationists hold merely that the tribulation will last a substantial period of time. Similarly, pretribulationists generally have a concrete conception of the millennium; in their view, many prophecies will be literally fulfilled within the thousand-year period. Indeed, it is to be inaugurated when Christ's feet literally stand upon the Mount of Olives (Zech. 14:4). The posttribulationist's understanding of the millennium is much more generalized in nature; for example, it will not necessarily be one thousand years in length.

According to posttribulationism, the church will be present during and experience the great tribulation. The term *elect* in Matthew 24 (after the tribulation, the angels will gather the elect-w. 29-31) should be understood in the light of its usage elsewhere in Scripture, where it means

"believers." Since Pentecost, the term *elect* has denoted the church. The Lord will preserve the church during, but not spare it from, the tribulation.

Postmillennialists draw a distinction between the wrath of God and the tribulation. The wrath (ὀργή) of God is spoken of in Scripture as coming upon the wicked—he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God rests upon him" (John 3:36); "the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth" (Rom. 1: 18; see also 2 Thess. 1:8; Rev. 6:16–17; 14:10; 16:19; 19:15). On the other hand, believers will not undergo the wrath of God—"we [shall] be saved by [Christ] from the wrath of God" (Rom. 5:9); "Jesus ... delivers us from the wrath to come" (1 Thess. 1: 10); "God has not destined us for wrath" (1 Thess. 5:9).³¹ Scripture makes it clear, however, that believers will experience tribulation. The overwhelming majority of the occurrences of the noun θλίψις and the corresponding verb θλίβω have reference to tribulation which saints endure. The noun is used to denote persecution of the saints in the last times (Matt. 24:9, 2 1, 29; Mark 13: 19, 24; Rev. 7: 14). This is not God's wrath, but the wrath of Satan, Antichrist, and the wicked against God's people.³²

Tribulation has been the experience of the church throughout the ages. Jesus said, "In the world you have tribulation" (John 16:33). Other significant references are Acts 14:22; Romans 5:3; 1 Thessalonians 3:3; 1 John 2: 18, 22; 4:3; and 2 John 7. While posttribulationists do not deny a distinction between tribulation in general and the great tribulation, they believe that the difference is one of degree only, not of kind. Since the church has experienced tribulation throughout its history, it would not be surprising if the church also experiences the great tribulation.

Posttribulationists acknowledge that Scripture speaks of believers who will escape or be kept from the impending trouble. In Luke 21:36, for example, Jesus tells his disciples, "But watch at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of man." The word here is ἐκφεύγω, which means "to escape out of the midst of." A similar reference is found in Revelation 3: 10: "Because you have kept my word of patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial which is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell upon the earth." The preposition translated "from" (ἐκ) actually means "out from the midst of." Posttribulationists argue, then, that the church will be kept from the midst of the tribulation, not that it

29. John F. Walvoord, *The Return Of the Lord* (Findlay, Ohio: Dunham, 1955), p. 51.

30. George E. Ladd, "Historic Premillennialism," in *Meaning of the Millennium*, pp. 18–27.

31. George E. Ladd, *The Blessed Hope* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), p. 122; Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), pp. 48–49.

32. Gundry, *Church and the Tribulation*, p. 49.

will be kept away from the tribulation, which would ordinarily require the preposition *ἀπό*.³³ In this respect, we are reminded of the experience of the Israelites during the plagues on Egypt.

Of additional significance in Revelation 3:10 is the verb *τηρέω* ("keep"). When a situation of danger is in view, it means "to guard." It appears with the preposition *ἐκ* in only one other place in the New Testament, John 17: 15: "I do not pray that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil one." Here *τηρέω* is contrasted with *αἶρω*, which means "to lift, raise up, or remove." The latter verb very accurately pictures what the pretribulationist holds Jesus will do with the church at the time of the rapture. To be sure, Jesus here is talking about the situation of his followers in the period immediately following his departure from earth, not the tribulation. The point, however, is that if John had desired to teach in Revelation 3: 10 that Jesus would "rapture" the church, the verb *αἶρω* was certainly available. The apostle apparently had in mind here what he did in the latter half of John 17: 15, a guarding of believers from the present danger rather than a deliverance of them from the presence of such danger.³⁴

The posttribulationist also has a different understanding of Paul's reference in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 to our meeting the Lord in the air. The pretribulationist maintains that this event is the rapture; Christ will come secretly *for* the church, catching believers up with him in the clouds and taking them to heaven until the end of the tribulation. Posttribulationists like George Ladd, however, in light of the usage of the term *ἀπάντησις* ("to meet") elsewhere in Scripture, disagree. There are only two other undisputed occurrences of this word in the New Testament (Matt. 27:32 is textually suspect). One of these references is in the parable of the wise and foolish virgins, an explicitly eschatological parable. When the bridegroom comes, the announcement is made, "Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet [*ἀπάντησις*] him" (Matt. 25:6). What does the word signify in this situation? The virgins do not go out to meet the bridegroom and then depart with him. Rather, they go out to meet him and then accompany him back to the wedding banquet. The other occurrence of the word (Acts 28:15) is in a noneschatological historical narrative. Paul and his party were coming to Rome. A group of the believers in Rome, hearing of their approach, went out to the Forum of Appius and Three Taverns to meet (*ἀπάντησις*) them. This encouraged Paul, and the group then continued with him back to Rome. On the basis of these usages, Ladd argues that the word *ἀπάντησις* suggests a welcoming party that goes out to meet someone on the way and accompanies him back to

33. Ibid., p. 55.

34. Ibid., pp. 58-59.

where they came from. So our meeting the Lord in the air is not a case of being caught away, but of meeting him and then immediately coming with him to earth as part of his triumphant entourage. It is the church, not the Lord, that will turn around at the meeting.³⁵

Posttribulationists have a less complex understanding of the last things than do their pretribulational counterparts. For example, there is in posttribulationism only one second coming. Since there is no interlude between the coming of Christ for the church and the end of the tribulation, there is no need for an additional resurrection of believers. There are only two resurrections: (1) the resurrection of believers at the end of the tribulation and the beginning of the millennium, and (2) the resurrection of the ungodly at the end of the millennium.

Posttribulationists also see the complex of events at the end as having a basic unity. They believe that this complex of events is imminent, although they usually do not mean that the coming itself is imminent in the sense that it could occur at any moment. They prefer to speak of the second coming as *impending*.³⁶ Their blessed hope is not an expectation that believers will be removed from the earth before the great tribulation, but rather a confidence that the Lord will protect and keep believers regardless of what may come.³⁷

Mediating Positions

Because there are difficulties attaching to both pretribulationism and posttribulationism, a number of mediating positions have been created. Three major varieties may be noted. The most common is the *midtribulational* view. This holds that the church will go through the less severe part (usually the first half, or three-and-a-half years) of the tribulation, but then will be removed from the world.³⁸ In one formulation of this view, the church will experience tribulation but be removed before the wrath of God is poured out. A second type of mediating position is the *partial-rapture* view. This holds that there will be a series of raptures. Whenever a portion of believers are ready, they will be removed from earth.³⁹ The third mediating position is *imminent posttribulationism*.

35. Ladd, *Blessed Hope*, pp. 58-59.

36. Gundry, *Church and the Tribulation*, pp. 29-43.

37. Ladd, *Blessed Hope*, p. 13.

38. James Oliver Buswell, Jr., *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962-63); Norman B. Harrison, *The End Re-thinking the Revelation* (Minneapolis: Harrison, 1941), p. 118.

39. Robert Govett, *The Saints' Rapture to the Presence of the Lord Jesus* (London: Nisbet, 1852); George H. Lang, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ: Select Studies* (London: Oliphant, 1945).

While the return of Christ will not take place until after the tribulation, it can be expected at any moment, for the tribulation may already be occurring.⁴⁰ None of these mediating positions has had large numbers of proponents, particularly in recent years. Accordingly, we will not deal with them in detail.⁴¹

Resolving the Issues

When all considerations are evaluated, there are several reasons why the posttribulational position emerges as the more probable:

1. The pretribulational position involves several distinctions which seem rather artificial and lacking in biblical support. The division of the second coming into two stages, the postulation of three resurrections, and the sharp separation of national Israel and the church are difficult to sustain on biblical grounds. The pretribulational view that the prophecies concerning national Israel will be fulfilled apart from the church and that, accordingly, the millennium will have a decidedly Jewish character cannot be easily reconciled with the biblical depictions of the fundamental changes which have taken place with the introduction of the new covenant.

2. Several specifically eschatological passages are better interpreted on posttribulational grounds. These passages include the indications that elect individuals will be present during the tribulation (Matt. 24:29–31) but will be protected from its severity (Rev. 3:10), descriptions of the phenomena which will accompany the appearing of Christ, and the reference to the meeting in the air (1 Thess. 4:17).

3. The general tenor of biblical teaching fits better the posttribulational view. For example, the Bible is replete with warnings about trials and testings which believers will undergo. It does not promise removal from these adversities, but ability to endure and overcome them.

This is not to say that there are no difficulties with the posttribulational position. For example, there is in posttribulationism relatively little theological rationale for the millennium. It seems to be somewhat superfluous.⁴² But all in all, the preponderance of evidence favors posttribulationism.

40. J. Barton Payne, *The Imminent Appearing of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962).

41. The reader who wishes a more thorough examination of these positions is directed to Millard J. Erickson, *Contemporary Options in Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), pp. 163–81.

42. See, however, George E. Ladd, "The Revelation of Christ's Glory," *Christianity Today*, 1 September 1958, p. 14.

59

Final States

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When we speak of the final states, we are in a sense returning to the discussion of individual eschatology, for at the last judgment every individual will be consigned to the particular state which he or she will personally experience throughout all eternity. Yet the whole human race will enter these states simultaneously and collectively, so we are really dealing with questions of collective or cosmic eschatology as well. The subject of the future states is one on which there is a great deal of speculation and misinformation. Yet surprisingly there is relatively little

said in systematic-theology texts on these matters, particularly on the matter of heaven.¹

Final State of the Righteous

The Term "Heaven"

There are various ways of denoting the future condition of the righteous. The most common, of course, is "heaven." Yet the term itself needs to be examined, for שָׁמַיִם (*shamayim*) and οὐρανός are used in basically three different ways in the Bible. The first is cosmological.² The expression 'heaven and earth' (or "the heavens and the earth") is used to designate the entire universe. In the creation account we are told, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). Jesus said, "Till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law" (Matt. 5: 18; see also 24:35; Luke 16: 17). He referred to the Father as "Lord of heaven and earth" (Matt. 11:25). Heaven (οὐρανός) is the firmament in which the stars are set (Matt. 24:29), the air (Matt. 6:26), the place where lightning (Luke 17:24) and rain originate (Luke 4:25). Second, 'heaven' is a virtual synonym for God.³ Among examples are the prodigal son's confession to his father, "I have sinned against heaven and before you" (Luke 15:18, 2 1); Jesus' question to the Pharisees, "The baptism of John, whence was it? From heaven or from man?" (Matt. 2 1:25); and John the Baptist's declaration, "No one can receive anything except what is given him from heaven" (John 3:27). Most notable is Matthew's repeated use of the expression 'kingdom of heaven' where Luke in parallel passages has "kingdom of God." Writing to a Jewish audience, who would not pronounce the name *Yahweh*, Matthew used "heaven" as a synonym for God.

The third meaning of the word *heaven*, and the one most significant for our purposes, is the abode of God.⁴ Thus, Jesus taught his disciples to pray, "Our Father who art in heaven" (Matt. 6:9). He often spoke of "your Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 5:16, 45; 6: 1; 7:11; 18: 14) and "my Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 7:2 1; 10:32, 33; 12:50; 16: 17; 18: 10, 19). The

expression 'heavenly Father' conveys the same idea (Matt. 5:48; 6: 14, 26, 32; 15: 13; 18:35). Jesus is said to have come from heaven: "No one has ascended into heaven but he who descended from heaven, the Son of man" (John 3:13; see also 3:3 1; 6:42, 51).⁵ Angels come from heaven (Matt. 28:2; Luke 22:43) and return to heaven (Luke 2: 15). They dwell in heaven (Mark 13:32), where they behold God (Matt. 18:10) and carry out the Father's will perfectly (Matt. 6:10). They are even referred to as a heavenly host (Luke 2:13).

It is from heaven that Christ is to be revealed (1 Thess. 1: 10; 4: 16; 2 Thess. 1:7). He has gone away to heaven to prepare an eternal dwelling for believers. We do not know the precise nature of this activity, but it is apparent that he is readying a place where believers will fellowship with him: "In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also" (John 14:2-3).

As God's abode, heaven is obviously where believers will be for all eternity. For Paul said, "Then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with [the dead in Christ] in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord" (1 Thess. 4:17). We know that this Lord with whom we shall ever abide is in heaven, in the presence of the Father: "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God" (John 20:17; see also Acts 1:10-1 1). He is now there: "For Christ has entered, not into a sanctuary made with hands, a copy of the true one, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf" (Heb. 9:24). Consequently, to be with Christ is to be with the Father in heaven. The believer is to make preparation for heaven: "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal" (Matt. 6:19-20). Peter writes that believers have been born anew "to an inheritance which is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time" (1 Peter 1:4-5). Paul similarly speaks of "the hope laid up for you in heaven" (Col. 1:5) and of a future time when all things in heaven and on earth will unite in Christ: God has "a plan for the fulness of time, to unite all things in [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph. 1: 10).

5. Leon Morris, *The Lord from Heaven* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), pp. 26-29.

1. E.g., Louis Berkhof in his *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), a tome of 738 pages, devotes only one page to heaven and two pages to hell (pp. 735-37).

2. Helmut Traub, οὐρανός, in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964-1 976), vol. 5, pp. 5 14-20.

3. Ibid., pp. 52 1-22.

4. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (New York: Oxford University, 1955), p. 1030.

The Nature of Heaven

Heaven is, first and foremost, the presence of God. In Revelation 21:3 the new heaven is likened to the tabernacle, the tent where God had dwelt among Old Testament Israel: a great voice from the throne said, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them" (KJV). God's intention from the beginning, to have fellowship with man, led first to his creating the human race, then to his dwelling in the tabernacle and temple, then to his coming in the incarnation, and finally to his taking humans to be with him (heaven). Sometimes, especially in popular presentations, heaven is depicted as primarily a place of great physical pleasures, a place where everything we have most desired here on earth is fulfilled to the ultimate degree. Thus heaven seems to be merely earthly (and even worldly) conditions amplified. The correct perspective, however, is to see the basic nature of heaven as the presence of God; from his presence all of the blessings of heaven follow.

The presence of God means that we will have perfect knowledge. In this regard, the Catholic tradition has made much of the idea that in heaven we will have a beatific vision of God.⁶ While this concept may have been overemphasized, it does lay hold upon the important truth that for the first time we shall see and know God in a direct way. Paul makes the comment that at present "our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect; but when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away... For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood' (1 Cor. 13:9–12). John speaks of the effect which God's presence will have upon the believer: "Beloved, we are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2).

Heaven will also be characterized by the removal of all evils. In being with his people, God "will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away" (Rev. 21:4). Not only these afflictions, but also the very source of evil, the one who tempts us to sin, will be gone: "and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night for ever and ever" (Rev. 20:10). The presence of the perfectly holy God and the spotless Lamb means that there will be no sin or evil of any kind.

6. Joseph Pohle, *Eschatology; or, The Catholic Doctrine of the Last Things: A Dogmatic Treatise* (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1917), pp. 34–37.

Since glory is of the very nature of God, heaven will be a place of great glory.' The announcement of Jesus' birth was accompanied by the words: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased!" (Luke 2:14). Similar words were spoken at his triumphal entry into Jerusalem: "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" (Luke 19:38). The second coming of Christ will be in great glory (Matt. 24:30), and he will sit upon his glorious throne (Matt. 25:31). Jesus told the multitude that he would come "in the glory of his Father with the holy angels" (Mark 8:38). Images suggesting immense size or brilliant light depict heaven as a place of unimaginable splendor, greatness, excellence, and beauty. The new Jerusalem which will come down out of heaven from God is described as made of pure gold (even its streets are pure gold) and decorated with precious jewels (Rev. 21:18–21). It is likely that while John's vision employs as metaphors those items which we think of as being most valuable and beautiful, the actual splendor of heaven far exceeds anything that we have yet experienced. There will be no need of sun or moon to illumine the new Jerusalem, for "the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb" (Rev. 21:23; see also 22:5).

Our Life in Heaven: Rest, Worship, and Service

We are told relatively little about the activities of the redeemed in heaven, but there are a few glimpses of what our future existence is to be. One quality of our life in heaven will be rest.⁸ The writer of the letter to the Hebrews makes much of this concept. Rest, as the term is used in Hebrews, is not merely a cessation of activities, but the experience of reaching a goal of crucial importance. Thus, there are frequent references to the pilgrimage through the wilderness en route to the "rest" of the Promised Land (Heb. 3:11, 18). Attainment of the Promised Land was not the end of an ordinary labor, but the completion of an extremely difficult and toilsome endeavor. A similar rest awaits believers: "So then, there remains a sabbath rest for the people of God; for whoever enters God's rest also ceases from his labors as God did from his. Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, that no one fall by the same sort of disobedience" (Heb. 4:9–11). The people being addressed here are the 'holy brethren, who share in a heavenly call' (3:1). Heaven, then, will be

7. Bernard Ramm, *Them He Glorified A Systematic Study of the Doctrine of Glorification* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), pp. 104–15.

8. We are here assuming that our life in heaven will be the personal, conscious, individual existence which appears to be presupposed in all the biblical references. For the view that our future existence will be merely a living on in God's memory, see David L. Edwards, *The Last Things Now* (London: SCM, 1969), pp. 88–91.

the completion of the Christian's pilgrimage, the end of the struggle against the flesh, the world, and the devil. There will be work to do, but it will not involve fighting against opposing forces.

Another facet of life in heaven is worship? A vivid picture is found in Revelation 19:

After this I heard what seemed to be the mighty voice of a great multitude in heaven, crying, "Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for his judgments are true and just; he has judged the great harlot who corrupted the earth with her fornication, and he has avenged on her the blood of his servants." Once more they cried, "Hallelujah! The smoke from her goes up for ever and ever." And the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshiped God who is seated on the throne, saying, "Amen. Hallelujah!" [vv. 1-4]

Then a voice from the throne exhorted the multitude to praise God (v. 5), and they did so (vv. 6-8).

We find similar accounts elsewhere in Scripture. For example, Isaiah recounts a vision which he had of the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up. One seraph called to another, saying, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory" (Isa. 6:3). From these sketches of heaven it appears that its inhabitants regularly praise and worship God. Consequently, we may expect that the redeemed will be engaged in similar activity following the Lord's coming, the great judgment, and the establishment of his heavenly kingdom. In this sense, genuine believers will continue activity they engaged in while on earth. Our worship and praise here and now are preparation and practice for future employment of our hearts and voices.

There will evidently be an element of service in heaven as well.¹⁰ For when Jesus was in the region of Judea beyond the Jordan, he told his disciples that they would judge with him: "Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of man shall sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Matt. 19:28). Later, at the Last Supper, he said, "You are those who have continued with me in my trials; as my Father appointed a kingdom for me, so do I appoint for you that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Luke 22:28-30). It is not clear just what is involved in this judging, but apparently it is service or work done on behalf of the King. There may well be a parallel here to the dominion which man was originally

intended to exercise in the Garden of Eden. He was to serve as an underlord or vicegerent, carrying out God's work on his behalf. We are also reminded of the stewardship parable in Matthew 25:14-30, where the reward for work done faithfully is greater opportunity for work. Because that parable occurs in an eschatological setting, it may well be an indication that the reward for faithful work done here on earth will be work in heaven. Note also that Revelation 22:3 tells us that the Lamb will be worshiped by "his servants."

There is also a suggestion that in heaven there will be some type of community or fellowship among believers: "But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to a judge who is God of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks more graciously than the blood of Abel" (Heb. 12:22-24). Note also the reference to "the spirits of just men made perfect"-heaven is a place of perfected spirituality."

Issues Regarding Heaven

One of the disputed questions regarding heaven is whether it is a place or a state. On the one hand, it should be noted that the primary feature of heaven is closeness and communion with God, and that God is pure spirit (John 4:24). Since God does not occupy space, which is a feature of our universe, it would seem that heaven is a state, a spiritual condition, rather than a place.¹² On the other hand, there is the consideration that we will have bodies of some type (although they will be "spiritual bodies") and that Jesus presumably continues to have a glorified body as well. While placelessness may make sense when we are thinking of immortality of the soul, the resurrection of the body seems to require place. In addition, parallel references to heaven and earth suggest that, like earth, heaven must be a locale. The most familiar of these references is, "Our Father who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, On earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:9-10).¹³ We must be mindful, however, that heaven is another realm, another dimension of reality, so it is difficult to know what features of the world apply as well

11. J. A. Motyer, *After Death: A Sure and Certain Hope?* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1965). pp. 74-76.

12. W. H. Dyson, "Heaven," in *A Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels*, ed. James Hastings (New York: Scribner, 1924), vol. 1, p. 7 12.

13. Alan Richardson, *Religion in Contemporary Debate* (London: SCM, 1966). p. 72.

9. Ulrich Simon, *Heaven in the Christian Tradition* (New York: Harper, 1958), p. 236.

10. Morton Kelsey, *Afterlife: The Other Side of Dying* (New York: Paulist, 1979), pp. 182-83.

to the world to come, and what the term *place* means in relation to the eschaton. It is probably safest to say that while heaven is both a place and a state, it is primarily a state. The distinguishing mark of heaven will not be a particular location, but a condition of blessedness, sinlessness, joy, and peace.¹⁴ Life in heaven, accordingly, will be more real than our present existence.

A second issue concerns the question of physical pleasures. Jesus indicated that there will be in the resurrection, presumably the life hereafter, no marrying or giving in marriage (Matt. 22:30; Mark 12:25; Luke 20:35). Since sex is in this life to be restricted to marriage (1 Cor. 7:8–11), we have here an argument that there will be no sex in heaven. The high value Paul places upon virginity (1 Cor. 7:25–35) suggests the same conclusion.¹⁵ What of eating and drinking? Revelation 19:9 refers to the “marriage supper of the Lamb.” And Jesus said to his disciples at the Last Supper, “I tell you I shall not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom” (Matt. 26:29). In view of the fact that the references to Christ and the church as bridegroom and bride are symbolic, the marriage supper of the Lamb is presumably symbolic as well. Although Jesus ate with his resurrection body (Luke 24:43; cf. John 21:9–14), it should be borne in mind that he was resurrected but not yet ascended, so that the transformation of his body was probably not yet completed. The question arises, If there is to be no eating nor sex, will there be any pleasure in heaven? It should be understood that the experiences of heaven will far surpass anything experienced here. Paul said, “‘What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him,’ God has revealed to us through the Spirit” (1 Cor. 2:9–10). It is likely that heaven’s experiences should be thought of as, for example, suprasexual, transcending the experience of sexual union with the special individual with whom one has chosen to make a permanent and exclusive commitment.¹⁶

A third issue relates to the question of perfection. Within this life we gain satisfaction from growth, progress, development. Will not, then, our state of perfection in heaven be a rather boring and unsatisfying situation? Must there not be growth if heaven is really to be heaven? This assumption rests on process thought, the conception that change is of the essence of reality. A heaven without change is impossible or incred-

14. Austin Farrer, *Saving Belief* (London: Hodder, Stoughton, 1967), p. 144.

15. Simon, *Heaven*, p. 217.

16. C. S. Lewis, *Miracles* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), pp. 165–66. Lewis uses the term *trans-sexual* with much the same meaning as we have here attached to “suprasexual.”

17. Alfred, Lord Tennyson, “Wages.”

ible. Some also argue that since children go to heaven, there must be growth in heaven so that they can attain maturity.¹⁸

While there is an existential force to the contention that we cannot be satisfied unless we grow, this is an extrapolation from life as now constituted. But this extrapolation is illegitimate. Frustration and boredom occur within this life whenever there is an arresting of development at a finite point, whenever one has stopped short of perfection. If, however, one were to fully achieve, if there were no feeling of inadequacy or incompleteness, there would probably be no frustration. The stable situation in heaven is not a fixed state short of one’s goal, but a state of completion beyond which there can be no advance. The satisfaction which comes from progress occurs precisely because we know we are closer to the desired goal. Reaching the goal will bring total satisfaction. Therefore, we will not grow in heaven. We will, however, continue to exercise the perfect character which we will have received from God. John Baillie speaks of “development *in* fruition” as opposed to “development *towards* fruition.”¹⁹

There also is the question of how much the redeemed in heaven will know or remember. Will we recognize those close to us in this life? Much of the popular interest in heaven stems from expectation of reunion with loved ones. Will we be aware of the absence of relatives and close friends? Will there be an awareness of sinful actions taken and godly deeds omitted in this life? If so, will not all of this lead to regret and sorrow? With regard to these questions we must necessarily plead a certain amount of ignorance. It does not appear, from Jesus’ response to the Sadducees’ question about the woman who had outlived seven husbands, all of them brothers (Luke 20:27–40), that there will be family units as such. On the other hand, the disciples were evidently able to recognize Moses and Elijah at the transfiguration (Matt. 17:1–8; Mark 9:2–8; Luke 9:28–36). This fact suggests that there will be some indicators of personal identity by which we will be able to recognize one another.²⁰ But we may infer that we will not recollect past failures and sins and missing loved ones, since that would introduce a sadness incompatible with “he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away” (Rev. 21:4).

A fifth question is whether there will be varying rewards in heaven. That there apparently will be degrees of reward is evident in, for example,

18. Edmund G. Kaufman, *Basic Christian Convictions* (North Newton, Kans.: Bethel College, 1972), p. 289.

19. John Baillie, *And the Life Everlasting* (New York: Scribner, 1933), p. 281.

20. Motyer, *After Death*, p. 87.

the parable of the pounds (Luke 19:11–27).²¹ Ten servants were each given one pound by their master. Eventually they returned differing amounts to him and were rewarded in proportion to their faithfulness. Supporting passages include Daniel 12:3 (“And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever”) and 1 Corinthians 3:14–15 (“If the work which any man has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If any man’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire”).

The differing rewards or differing degrees of satisfaction in heaven are usually pictured in terms of objective circumstances. For instance, we might suppose that a very faithful Christian will be given a large room in the Father’s house; a less faithful believer will receive a smaller room. But if this is the case, would not the joy of heaven be reduced by one’s awareness of the differences and the constant reminder that one might have been more faithful? In addition, the few pictures which we do have of life in heaven evidence no real difference: all are worshiping, judging, serving. A bit of speculation may be in order at this point. As we pointed out in chapter 3, speculation is a legitimate theological activity, as long as we are aware that we are speculating. May it not be that the difference in the rewards lies not in the external or objective circumstances, but in the subjective awareness or appreciation of those circumstances? Thus, all would engage in the same activity, for example, worship, but some would enjoy it much more than others. Perhaps those who have enjoyed worship more in this life will find greater satisfaction in it in the life beyond than will others. An analogy here is the varying degrees of pleasure which different people derive from a concert. The same sound waves fall on everyone’s ears, but the reactions may range from boredom (or worse) to ecstasy. A similar situation may well hold with respect to the joys of heaven, although the range of reactions will presumably be narrower. No one will be aware of the differences in range of enjoyment, and thus there will be no dimming of the perfection of heaven by regret over wasted opportunities.

Final State of the Wicked

Just as in the past, the question of the future state of the wicked has created a considerable amount of controversy in our day. The doctrine of an everlasting punishment appears to some to be an outmoded or

sub-Christian view.²² It, together with angels and demons, is often one of the first topics of Christian belief to be demythologized. Part of the problem stems from what appears to be a tension between the love of God, a cardinal characteristic of God’s nature, and his judgment. Yet, however we regard the doctrine of everlasting punishment, it is clearly taught in Scripture.

The Bible employs several images to depict the future state of the unrighteous. Jesus said, “Then [the King] will say to those at his left hand, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels’” (Matt. 25:41). He likewise described their state as “outer darkness”: “the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth” (Matt. 8:12). The final condition of the wicked is also spoken of as eternal punishment (Matt. 25:46), torment (Rev. 14:10–11), the bottomless pit (Rev. 9:1–2, 11), the wrath of God (Rom. 2:5), second death (Rev. 21:8), eternal destruction and exclusion from the face of the Lord (2 Thess. 1:9).

If there is one basic characteristic of hell, it is, in contrast to heaven, the absence of God or banishment from his presence. It is an experience of intense anguish, whether it involve physical suffering or mental distress or both.²³ There are other aspects of the situation of the lost individual which contribute to its misery. One is a sense of loneliness, of having seen the glory and greatness of God, of having realized that he is the Lord of all, and then of being cut off. There is the realization that this separation is permanent. Similarly, the condition of one’s moral and spiritual self is permanent. Whatever one is at the end of life will continue for all eternity. There is no basis for expecting change for the better. Thus, hopelessness comes over the individual.

The Finality of the Future Judgment

It is important to recognize the finality of the coming judgment. When the verdict is rendered at the last judgment, the wicked will be assigned to their *find* state.²⁴ Nothing in Scripture indicates that there will be opportunity for belief after a preliminary period of punishment.

To some the finality of the judgment seems contrary to reason, and even perhaps to Scripture. Indeed, there are some passages of Scripture

22. Nels Ferré, *The Christian Understanding of God* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951), pp. 233–34.

23. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), vol. 3, p. 868.

24. J. A. Motyer, “The Final State: Heaven and Hell,” in *Basic Christian Doctrines*, ed. Carl F. H. Henry (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962), p. 292.

21. S. D. F. Salmond, “Heaven,” in *A Dictionary Of the Bible*, ed. James Hastings (New York: Scribner, 1919), vol. 2, p. 324.

which seem to indicate that all will be saved. Paul, for example, wrote, "For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fulness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph. 1:9-10). And speaking of the future, he declared "that at the name of Jesus every knee [shall] bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2:10-11). On the basis of such references, it is contended that those who in this life reject the offer of salvation will, after their death and Christ's second coming, be sobered by their situation and will therefore be reconciled to Christ.²⁵

Unfortunately, however, as appealing as **this** view is, it cannot be maintained. For one thing, the passages cited do not really teach what the universalist claims they teach. The reconciliation, the uniting of all things, is not a restoration of fallen humanity to fellowship with God, but a restoration of harmony within the creation by, among other actions, putting sin into subjection to the Lord. It is not a matter of humans' accepting God, but of his quelling their rebellion. And while it is indeed true that every knee will bow and every tongue confess Christ as Lord, we must picture the wicked not as eagerly joining forces with the Lord, but as surrendering to a conquering army, so to speak. There will be an acquiescence in defeat, not a joyful commitment.

Furthermore, Scripture nowhere gives indication of a second chance. Surely, if there is to be an opportunity for belief after the judgment, it would be clearly set forth in God's Word.

Beyond these considerations, there are definite statements to the contrary. A finality attaches to the biblical depictions of the sentence rendered at the judgment; for example, "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matt. 25:41). The parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16: 19-31), although it relates to the intermediate rather than the final state, makes it clear that there is an absoluteness about their condition. It is not even possible to travel between the different states: "And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us" (v. 26). We must therefore conclude that restorationism, the idea of a second chance, must be rejected.²⁶

25. Origen *De principiis* 1. 6. 2; 3. 6. 3. For a contemporary statement of universalism, see John A. T. Robinson, *In the End, God* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), pp. 119-33.

26. Leon Morris, *The Biblical Doctrine of Judgment* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), p. 66.

The Eternality of Future Punishment

Not only is the future judgment of unbelievers irreversible, but their punishment is eternal. We do not reject merely the idea that all will be saved; we also reject the contention that none will be eternally punished. The school of thought known as annihilationism, on the other hand, maintains that although not everyone will be saved, there is only one class of future existence. Those who are saved will have an unending life; those who are not saved will be eliminated or annihilated. They will simply cease to exist. While granting that not everyone deserves to be saved, to receive everlasting bliss, this position maintains that no one deserves endless suffering.

B. B. Warfield maintained that there are three different forms of **annihilationism**: pure mortalism, conditional immortality, and **annihilationism proper**.²⁷ Pure mortalism holds that the human life is so closely tied to the physical organism that when the body dies, the person as an entity ceases to exist. This is primarily a materialistic view, although it also is found at times in pantheistic forms.²⁸ Pure mortalism has not been popular in Christian circles, since, in contradiction to the biblical doctrine of man's creation in the image of God, it makes man little more than an animal.

The second form of annihilationism, conditional immortality, maintains that the human being is by nature mortal. Death is the end. In the case of those who believe, however, God gives immortality or eternal life, so that they survive death or are restored to life. In some understandings of conditional immortality, God simply allows the unbeliever to pass out of existence.²⁹ Others hold that all will participate in the resurrection, but that God then will simply allow the unrighteous to pass out of existence again. Eternal death is for them just that. Their second death will last forever.

The third form of annihilationism is most deserving of the title. It sees the extinction of the evil person at death as a direct result of sin. Man is by nature immortal and would have everlasting life but for the effects of sin. There are two subtypes of annihilationism proper. The first sees annihilation as a natural result of sin. Sin has such a detrimental effect that the personality of the individual gradually dies out. Thus, "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23) is taken quite literally. Sin is self-destruction.

27. Benjamin B. Warfield, "Annihilationism," in *Studies in Theology* (New York: Oxford University, 1932), pp. 447-50.

28. *Ibid.*, pp. 447-48.

29. Edward White, *Life in Christ: A Study of the Scripture Doctrine of the Nature of Man, the Object of the Divine Incur-nation, and the Conditions of Human Immortality*, 3rd ed. rev. (London: Elliot Stock, 1878).

After a certain length of time, perhaps proportionate to the sinfulness of the individual, those who are not redeemed wear out as it were. The other type of pure annihilationism is the idea that God cannot and will not allow the sinful person to have eternal life. There is punishment for sin. The punishment need not be infinite, however. After a sufficient amount of punishment has been endured, God will simply destroy the individual self. It should be noted that in both subtypes of **annihilationism** proper, the soul or self would be immortal but for **sin**.³⁰

The problem with all of the forms of annihilationism is that they contradict the teaching of the Bible. Several passages assert the endlessness of the punishment of the wicked. Both the Old and New Testaments refer to unending or unquenchable fire. Isaiah **66:24**, for example, says, "And they shall go forth and look on the dead bodies of the men that have rebelled against me; for their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh." Jesus uses the same images to describe the punishment of sinners: "And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched" (Mark **9:43–48**). These passages make it clear that the punishment is unending. It does not consume the one upon whom it is inflicted and thus simply come to an end.

In addition, there are several instances where words like "everlasting," "eternal," and "forever" are applied to nouns designating the future state of the wicked: fire or burning (Isa. **33:14**; Jer. **17:4**; Matt. **18:8**; **25:4** 1; Jude **7**), contempt (Dan. **12:2**), destruction (2 Thess. **1:9**), chains (Jude **6**), torment (Rev. **14:11**; **20:10**), and punishment (Matt. **25:46**). To be sure, the adjective *αἰώνιος* may on a few occasions have reference to an age, that is, a very long period of time, rather than to eternity. Usually, however, in the absence of a contrary indication in the context, the most common meaning of a word is the one in view. In the cases we have cited, nothing in the contexts justifies our understanding *αἰώνιος* as meaning anything other than "eternal." The parallelism found in Matthew **25:46** is particularly noteworthy: "And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." If the one (life) is of unending duration, then the other (punishment) must be also. Nothing in the context gives us

30. *Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine* (Washington: Review and Herald, 1957), p. 14.

warrant to interpret the word *αἰώνιος* differently in the two clauses. John A. T. Robinson comments:

The genuine universalist will base nothing on the fact (which is a fact) that the New Testament word for eternal (*aionios*) does not necessarily mean everlasting, but enduring only for an indefinitely long period. For he can apply this signification to "eternal punishment" in Matt. **25:46** only if he is willing to give exactly the same sense to "eternal life" in the same verse. As F. D. Maurice said many years ago now, writing to F. J. A. Hort: "I did not see how *aionios* could mean one thing when it was joined with *kolasis* and another when it was joined with *zoe*" (quoted, J. O. F. Murray, *The Goodness and the Severity of God*, p. **195**). To admit that the two phrases are not parallel is at once to treat them with unequal seriousness. And that a true universalism must refuse to do.³¹

A problem arises from the fact that Scripture speaks not merely of eternal death (which one might interpret as meaning that the wicked will not be resurrected), but of eternal fire, eternal punishment, and eternal torment as well. What kind of God is it who is not satisfied by a finite punishment, but makes humans suffer for ever and ever? This seems to be beyond the demands of justice; it appears to involve a tremendous degree of vindictiveness on the part of God. The punishment seems to be out of all proportion to the sin, for, presumably, all sins are finite acts against God. How does one square belief in a good, just, and loving God with eternal punishment? The question must not be dismissed lightly, for it concerns the very essence of God's nature. The fact that hell, as often understood, seems to be incompatible with God's love, as revealed in Scripture, may be an indication that we have misunderstood hell.

We should note, first, that whenever we sin, an infinite factor is invariably involved. All sin is an offense against God, the raising of a finite will against the will of an infinite being. It is failure to carry out one's obligation to him to whom everything is due. Consequently, one cannot consider sin to be merely a finite act deserving finite punishment.

Further, if God is to accomplish his goals in this world, he may not have been free to make man unsusceptible to endless punishment. God's omnipotence does not mean that he is capable of every conceivable action. He is not capable of doing the logically contradictory or absurd, for example. He cannot make a triangle with four corners.³² And it may well be that those creatures that God intended to live forever in fellowship with him had to be fashioned in such a way that they would experience eternal anguish if they chose to live apart from their Maker.

31. Robinson, *In the End, God*, p. 131, n. **8**.

32. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), p. 28.

Man was designed to live eternally with God; if man perverts this his destiny, he will experience eternally the consequences of that act.

We should also observe that God does not send anyone to hell. He desires that none should perish (2 Peter 3:9). God created man to have fellowship with him **and** provided the means by which man can have that fellowship. It is man's choice to experience the agony of hell His sin sends him there, and his rejection of the benefits of Christ's death prevents his escaping. As C. S. Lewis has put it, sin is man's saying to God throughout life, "Go away and leave me alone." Hell is Gods finally saying to man, "You may have your wish." It is God's leaving man to himself, as man has chosen.³³

Degrees of Punishment

We should observe, finally, that Jesus' teaching suggests that there are degrees of punishment in hell. He upbraided those cities which had witnessed his miracles but failed to repent: "Woe to you, Chorazin! woe to you, Bethsaida! ... For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I tell you that it shall be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you" (Matt. 11:21-24). There is a similar hint in the parable of the faithful and faithless stewards: "**And** that servant who knew his masters will, but did not make ready or act according to his will, shall receive a severe beating. But he who did not know, and did what deserved a beating, shall receive a light beating. Every one to whom much is given, of him will much be required; and of him to whom men commit much they will demand the more" (Luke 12:47-48).

The principle here seems to be, the greater our knowledge, the greater is our responsibility, and the greater will be our punishment if we fail in our responsibility. It may well be that the different degrees of punishment in hell are not so much a matter of objective circumstances as of subjective awareness of the pain of separation from God. This is parallel to our conception of the varying degrees of reward in heaven (p. 1234). To some extent, the different degrees of punishment reflect the fact that hell is God's leaving sinful man with the particular character that he fashioned for himself in this life. The misery one will experience from having to live with one's wicked self eternally will be proportionate to his degree of awareness of precisely what he was doing when he chose evil.

Implications of the Doctrine of the Final States

1. The decisions which we make in this life will govern our future condition not merely for a period of time, but for all eternity. So we should exercise extraordinary care and diligence as we make them.

2. The conditions of this life, as Paul put it, are transitory. They fade into relative insignificance when compared with the eternity to come.

3. The nature of the future states is far more intense than anything known in this life. The images used to depict them are quite inadequate to fully convey what lies ahead. Heaven, for example, will far transcend any joy that we have known here.

4. The bliss of heaven ought not to be thought of as simply an intensification of the pleasures of this life. The primary dimension of heaven is the presence of the believer with the Lord.

5. Hell is not so much a place of physical suffering as it is the awful loneliness of total and final separation from the Lord.

6. Hell should not be thought of primarily as punishment visited upon unbelievers by a vindictive God, but as the natural consequences of the sinful life chosen by those who reject Christ.

7. It appears that although all humans will be consigned either to heaven or to hell, there will be degrees of reward and punishment.

33. *Ibid.*, pp. 127-28.

Concluding Thoughts

We have come to the end of a lengthy examination of ideas. Not only have we looked at many different topics, we have also noted a variety of conceptions on these different topics. It may be well to conclude our study of systematic theology by putting such an endeavor into a proper context. Are ideas really that important? With some persons, a concern for immediate experience or a desire for instant application may tend to overshadow theoretical considerations. As a result, the value of a writing such as this may appear doubtful. To be sure, the reader who has come this far may well be assumed not to share such an estimation of the value of ideas. Yet a quick review of the role which concepts play may be in order.

To a large extent, our world is what it is because of ideas which have been conceived, evaluated, and verified. The concept of instantaneously transmitting pictures over long distances, considered fantastic a century ago, has become a reality, and the nature of culture and society has been altered as a consequence. The idea of the equality of the various human races and the need for justice among them has greatly influenced the course of the last half of the twentieth century. The idea of the dialectic which Karl Marx borrowed from Georg Hegel and modified into his own scheme of dialectical materialism may have seemed abstract and irrelevant to many people when he first propounded it. Nevertheless, it has

greatly affected not only the understanding but also the experience of countless numbers of persons throughout the world. And who could have foreseen the influence which Charles Darwin's strange conception of the origin of species would have upon the world? Adolf Hitler's idea of the super race and of Aryan supremacy led to the death of approximately six million Jews.

More significant than the impact of these ideas is that of the concepts which form the central basis of Christianity. The idea that God entered the world in human form, was crucified, and rose from the dead seems incredible to many. Yet the world is a far different place from what it would be if there had not been millions who believed and proclaimed this message. How many hospitals, how many institutions of higher education have come into being because of the driving force of those who went forth in the name of the one they believed to be God Incarnate! The impact which Christianity had upon the first-century world and the subsequent development of history is directly related to the revolutionary ideas which it presented about who Jesus Christ is and what the meaning of life is.

The issue of correct belief is ever so important in our time. We find numerous shadings of religious ideas. And we also encounter myriad conceptions of Christian lifestyle, which are rooted in differing doctrinal conceptions. Our particular understanding of basic concepts, for example, the relationship between grace and works, has a profound influence upon what we do in our Christian lives and the spirit in which we do it. Hence right belief is imperative.

Yet even if our beliefs are pure and correct, that is not enough in itself. For correct belief and theological mastery are of no value in and of themselves in the sight of the Lord. Imagine, if you will, a group of theological students and practicing theologians appearing before the Lord on the day of judgment and, in echo of Matthew 7:22, pleading, "Have we not studied **Christian Theology in your** name? Have we not expounded the fundamental doctrines of Christianity in your name?" The Lord will reply, "I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers." Doctrine is important, but its importance lies in the contribution which it makes to our relationship with God. Without that, the finest theology, most eloquently enunciated, is merely "tinkling brass and clanging cymbals." The point being made here is that our beliefs (our official theology, based upon objective teachings of Scripture) must be put into practice (which is, so to speak, our unofficial theology). If we are to bring our actual practice into conformity with our beliefs, we will have to reflect and even meditate upon those beliefs. Perhaps this is part of what Paul meant when he spoke of being "transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Rom. 12:2).

There are certain dangers associated with the study of theology. There are certain theological diseases to which one is exposed and which one may contract as a result of this endeavor. Helmut Thielicke has described several of them quite vividly in his *Little Exercise for Young Theologians*. One of the most common and most serious is the sin of pride. When we have acquired a considerable sophistication in matters of theology, there is a danger that we will regard that knowledge as something of a badge of virtue, something that sets us apart as superior to others. We may use that knowledge, and particularly the jargon which we have acquired, to intimidate others who are less informed. We may take advantage of our superior skills, becoming intellectual bullies.¹ Or our knowledge of theology may lead us to a type of theological gamesmanship, in which the arguing of one theory against another becomes our whole purpose in life. But this is to convert what should be the most serious of matters into a sport.

In this connection we should remember the words of Jesus that we are to become like little children; God has hidden his truth from the wise of this world and revealed it to babes (Matt. 11:25). We should not underestimate the theological acumen and sensitivity of those who have not engaged in theological studies in a formal sense. There is what Thielicke calls "the spiritual instinct of the children of God."² Many lay persons, although unskilled in the official theological sciences, nonetheless have experience in the Christian life which sometimes gives them insight far surpassing that of many professional theologians. When Jesus spoke of sending the Holy Spirit, who would guide believers into all truth (John 16:13), he did not restrict his promise to seminary graduates.

We should not conclude from this last point, however, that theology is not an intellectual endeavor. It calls for rigorously logical thinking. To construct a systematic theology, we must think systematically. That is to say, we cannot proceed in an eclectic fashion. Although we will draw upon insights wherever they may be found, we will always seek to think in a coherent fashion. We will not knowingly incorporate into our system ideas which rest upon presuppositions which are contradictory to each other. There will, of course, be mysteries which we do not fully comprehend. But the systematic theologian, not readily accepting of opacity, will endeavor to plumb them.

Beyond the logical or rational character of theology, there is also its aesthetic character. There is the potential, as we survey the whole of God's truth, of grasping its artistic nature. There is a beauty to the great

1. Helmut Thielicke, *A Little Exercise for Young Theologians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), pp. 13-20.

2. Ibid., pp. 25-26.

compass and the inter-relatedness of the doctrines. The organic character of theology, its balanced depiction of the whole of reality and of human nature, should bring a sense of satisfaction to the human capacity to appreciate beauty in the form of symmetry, comprehensiveness, and coherence.

Theology is not simply to be learned, understood, and appreciated, however. There is the additional issue of communication of the message. What we have given in these three volumes is the basic content of the Christian world-and-life view, and thus of the message that all human beings are called upon to accept. That content will need to be continually reexpressed, however. In attempting to walk the tightrope between the timeless essence of the doctrines and a particular contemporary expression of them, we have leaned toward the former when a choice had to be made. This approach has left a need for restatement of the doctrines in ways that will make them accessible to more people. This need results in part from the fact that the author is an educated, middle-class, North American white male. Although he has ministered in a pastoral role to blacks, Hispanics, and the lower economic classes, the basic orientation of these writings is to the type of students who currently enroll in American evangelical seminaries. Much work needs to be done in tailoring the content of the theology to Third-World audiences. There is also a need for adaptation of this theology vertically. For it is written primarily for seminary students. It is encouraging to find lay persons studying these volumes. Yet real theology is capable of being expressed even to children.

In part the communication of theology will be aided by the realization that theology need not always be expressed in discursive or didactic form. Sometimes a story communicates it better. Jesus demonstrated this repeatedly through his use of parables. In the twentieth century, C. S. Lewis has shown that theology can be placed in the form of winsome stories, even children's stories. Narrative theology has communicated profound truth with dynamic effect.³ Yet we need to bear in mind the difference between theological reflection and the communication of the content of doctrine. The more precise categories of reflective discursive thought are still essential for the actual formulation of theology.

The author is convinced that real theology, good theology, will enhance the reader's awareness of the greatness and grandeur of God. When Moses met God in the burning bush (Exod. 3), he was filled with a

3. See Millard J. Erickson, "Narrative Theology in Translation or Transformation?" in *Festschrift: A Tribute to William Horder-n*, ed. Walter Freitag (Saskatoon: University of Saskatchewan, 1985).

sense of his own unworthiness, his own sinfulness. Peter, too, when he realized that he was in the presence of a perfect and powerful Lord, was struck with awe (Luke 5:8). If we have genuinely grasped the significance of the truths which we have studied, we will have a similar reaction. Certain of the topics covered point us more directly and effectively to what God is like and what he does, but all have that effect to some degree. The purpose of the author in writing will have been achieved only if the reader has come to love the Lord more and is better able to communicate that love to others.

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