

Session Four: Christian Beliefs in the Church and Last Things

Part I: Christian Belief in the Church (Ecclesiology)

I. Introduction

The church can be seen as the **corporate dimension** of God's redeeming purpose in history, though this does not mean that every baptized person in the church is automatically being saved. Only those who are **truly in Christ** are the ones redemptively known by Christ. Study of the church and learning what it means to be a N.T. church is quite important for **three major reasons**: (1) because of Christ's relationship to it; **Christ established** the church; it is his institution bought with his blood (Acts 20:28) and represents his body: *And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way* (Eph. 1:22-23, NIV). (2) The church is indwelt by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit; Christ institutes the church and the **H.S. constitutes it**. (3) The church is **God's chief instrument to glorify himself** and evangelize and nurture peoples. The biblical stress on the church is that of a spiritual organism, made up of God-called and God-equipped people who have an ongoing covenant relationship with him. Church is not a building or necessarily even an organizational entity, rather it is God's people through the calling and dynamic of the Holy Spirit who are serving God on mission with him. We could call it a "family in Christ".

Yet we know the actual reality of the church is not always the perfect family. Someone said once the best comparison they could find to today's church was Noah's ark. You couldn't stand the *stink* on the inside if it weren't for the *storm* on the outside. But church is home for most if not all of us, and home "is the place when you go, they have to take you in," (Robert Frost) at least in most ecclesial traditions. Church in at least one way *is* like the domestic family. It is made up of people, too, messy problems and all the rest that goes with being people. Yet like our Bibles, God has seen fit to keep church around because it fits His divine purpose. Let's not disfigure, misconceive or malign His church because above all, it's the bride of Christ, warts and all. Even though it surely gets messy, burdensome at times, God is still proving He can write straight with a crooked stick, otherwise known as His church. Until the 20th century, there was no concept of "churchless Christians". Certainly no one in the N.T. would understand the popular separating of "spirituality" from a meaningful church relationship and participation like we see so often today.

II. The Nature and Purpose of the Church

The nature of the church flows out of its purpose. It is Christ Who decides what that purpose is. During the days of Nazi Germany, a mental health experiment was planned

in one of the concentration camps. Inmates were forced to haul garbage from one end of the camp to another for weeks without end. They did not know this was an experiment determining how important as sense of purpose is for survivability. Eventually many chose to commit suicide rather than bear such a burden of meaninglessness. The camp commander said at the rate of suicide, the gas ovens would probably not be needed. What is the purpose of Christ's church. Luke gives us a key example in **Acts 2:42-47**: *They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.*

1. The Church as God's Covenant People

The typical Baptist definition sees the church as "a local body of baptized believers". That seems to be the only part of the SB Faith & Message statement, most Southern Baptists can remember. But is this definition biblically and historically adequate? The confessional statement does go ahead to speak of this "local body associated by **covenant** in the faith and fellowship of the gospel." Thus, Christ's church offers far more than a collection of like-minded individuals. **Biblically, the church is the people of God in covenant with Him as gathered believers for the purpose of being on mission with God as He realizes His Kingdom in the world.** I especially like Stanley Grenz's definition of the church: "The church is a people standing in covenant, who are a sign of the divine reign and constitute a special community."

The N.T. church has an O.T. background. The congregation of the Lord consisted of God's people assembled before him to seek and do his will. This congregation was the "people gathered". We find this assembling of God's people in the N.T. as well. Just as Israel was called of God to be on mission with him, in the N.T. this world-wide mission takes on greatest clarity in Christ's commissioning of His church (Matt. 28:19-20). The word "ekklesia", which was the Greek idea of an assembly of citizens, was taken over by the N.T. writers and used for "church". The N.T. writers placed the focus on those "called out" by God. This term was utilized 114 times, and 93 of these references of "church" indicated a church local. All too often we visualize this local church as one on a street corner, rather than a church understood as called to be on mission with God.

The term "church" itself is not used much in the gospels but the **idea** of church is quite prevalent. We see it preliminarily in the calling of the 12 disciples, Christ's sending out his disciples on a Kingdom purpose, and our Lord's promise of sending the Holy Spirit to guide all of his followers in Christian worship and mission. As we noted in the segment on the Holy Spirit, one could say that Pentecost was the actual birthing of Christ's church by and through the Holy Spirit. I think it makes the most sense to see the church as clearly envisioned by Jesus taking shape gradually, beginning with the calling

of his disciples, with the actual birth of the church taking place at Pentecost. In this light we do well to sing:

*The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord;
She is his new creation, By Spirit and the Word:
From heav'n He came and sought her to be His holy bride,
With his own blood He bought her, and for her life He died.*

- The Church's One Foundation

In summary, the Greek term “ekklesia” which originally meant something political like the gathering of local citizens in a town-hall meeting was adapted by Jesus and his followers to characterize the N.T. church. A few references to “church” in the N.T. refer to Christians of all ages but by far the predominant usage is of the church local. Each local church is designed by God to be a community of Christ. But the overall significance of the church is that it is God's spiritual covenant community birthed by the Holy Spirit with a God-given agenda as the church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

2. Images of the Church in the N.T.

There are many graphic images descriptive of the church in the N.T. Three of the most important are trinitarian in reference: the church can be seen as the family of God, the body of Christ and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. (1) The church is the **nation or people of God** who stand in a covenant relationship with him as the Lord God responsible to carry out his Kingdom purposes on earth. It is in the church as the “people of God” that praying to our “heavenly Father” takes on enhanced significance. Paul referred to the church at Ephesus as no longer strangers and aliens but the “members of God's household (Eph. 2:19). The church is designed by God to be a sweet fellowship of love. Also foundational to this image of the church as God's people, is the concept of covenant. The new covenant with God and his people was established by the death of Christ on the cross. It was a covenant established by God's own initiative. In the O.T. God rescued his people from bondage in Egypt and captivity in Babylon. In the N.T. God liberates his people by means of the cross and resurrection and through the Holy Spirit draws them together in congregations.

(2) The church is also seen as the **body of Christ** with Christ as the head of His church. Notice this is not referenced as “a body of Christians” but the “body of Christ” himself. As Bruce Shelley points out: “Christians are members of the body; they represent the diversity. The body is Christ's; he creates the unity” (p. 142). The risen Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit constituted his church and gives it its purpose and mission. No wonder the gates of hell shall not prevail against it! (3) The church is the **temple or fellowship of the Holy Spirit**. Both Peter and Paul (Phil. 1:27; 2:1-4; 2 Cor. 3:1-3; 1 Cor. 12) were fond of this image of the church. *You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ* (1 Pet. 2:5). There is a strong hint here of the church as the spiritual fulfillment of the O.T. temple experience. The cornerstone of this God edifice is none other than Christ the Lord (Matt. 21:42; 1 Peter 2:6-8). Yet beyond

any type of building, this image of the church as the temple of the H.S. refers to God's people as his chosen sanctuary. All Christians are called to a holy priesthood in Christ.

Thus, Christians have always believed that the Church of Jesus Christ is far more than an institution. It makes up God's family, the body of Christ, indwelt and empowered by the Holy Spirit enabling God's people to worship him and be on mission in the power of the Spirit. Again, the N.T. knows absolutely nothing about Christians who are unattached to the church of Jesus Christ.

3. Characteristics of the N.T. Church (Marks)

The RCC has used the terms apostolic, catholic (meaning universal), holy and one to describe who and what the church is. By "apostolic" they mean a church's authority based on the stewardship of power given successively through the apostles and other church leaders to the present, by "catholic", they mean the church universal made up of all believers in Jesus Christ, by "holy", they mean a church set apart for service and mission, not a church that is perfect morally, by "one", they refer to a church united on the basis of its oneness in Jesus Christ, who is the chief cornerstone. All of these characteristics are found in the N.T. but as applied by the RCC through the centuries, the church became in and of itself more of an *ark of salvation* rather than a *lighthouse of the gospel*. Thus, by the 1500s, the RCC split asunder with the Protestant Reformation. Since Vatican II in the 1960s, the RCC has changed remarkably in its self-understanding.

The Protestant Reformers in the 16th century based their insistence for theological reformation of the Catholic Church on two questions: (1) How can we find a gracious God? (2) Where can we find a true church? They believed a true church could be found wherever "The Word of God is rightly preached" and "The sacraments are rightly observed." The Free Church tradition, begun by Anabaptists insisted on believer's baptism and a gathered church of voluntary believers as well as the separation of church and state. As Baptists we are deeply indebted to this tradition which sought to develop a balanced congregationalism. Anabaptists recognized that the heart of N.T. teaching about the church is essentially the people who make up the body of the church. The church consists of those called by the Holy Spirit to join voluntarily a company of believers who covenant together interdependently to be faithful to God and one another in a vibrant fellowship of mutual love and devotion.

Thus, we can specifically define the nature of a church in light of its purpose. A "church" is a visible fellowship of Christians under the Lordship of Christ in a specific location. It consists of those being saved, "called-out" and empowered by the Holy Spirit to walk together in Christ and under his authority to fulfill God's mission.

4. The Relationship of the Church to God's Kingdom

How is the church related to God's Kingdom? The Kingdom of God was a major focus of theological study in the 20th century. There were those in Christian history like Augustine who equated the Kingdom of God and the church as some still do today. But I

think they are closely related yet to be seen as separate. Church and Kingdom of God are not synonymous. The church has a very important function as the sign and herald of God's Kingdom but the Kingdom is broader and larger than the church. Thus, as important as the church is in God's purposes, the Kingdom is the larger perspective. It consists of God's complete reign in every kind of way in heaven and on earth. It includes the church but also the entire created universe. It is the Kingdom which produces the church and the church is to be God's chief instrument for His Kingdom purposes.

III. The Mission of the N.T. Church

We have seen that the nature of the church is to flow out of its purpose. The church is God's idea and plan. Its basic nature consists of a covenant relationship with God, that it is the sign of God's Kingdom and is made up of God's redeemed community. It is a living organism made up of people on mission with God. An early church father put it this way, "it is not a place that is called church, not a house of stones and earth...It is the holy assembly of those who live in righteousness" (cited in Grenz, 464). *But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light* (1 Pet. 2:9). Peter describes succinctly the mission of the church—bring praises to God. The church exists to glorify God. All of the vision, plans, and actions of a given church should be devoted to one purpose: exclusively that of glorifying God. When that is done, the church will be a healthy church that honours Christ, the head of the church.

The mission of the N.T. church is to glorify God through its worship, the ways it builds up and edifies the body of Christ, and how it reaches out to the world in evangelism, ministry and missions. Clarity in vision begins in worship and is sustained by worship. Without genuine worship, the church becomes merely a social organization without any spiritual dynamic, vision or reason for being.

1. The Importance of Worship

We speak of the "worship hour" when we gather as a local community in Christ. We know the place we gather is not the only place we could or should worship God nor is the given hour the only time. Jesus told the woman of Samaria, we are to *worship the Father in spirit and in truth* (John 4:23). Jesus tells us just WHO it is that is to be on our minds as we come together. It is the triune God who has exclusive rights to our attention and praise. The term "worship" means ascribing worth to the one who is worthy. Rev. 4:11, *Our Lord and God, you are worthy to receive glory and honor and power, because you have created all things, and because of your will they exist and were created* (HCSB). This verse reminds us that we worship God because He is God, but also because of what He has done and does. Besides His creation, God has provided redemption in and through His Son, the slain Lamb who is also worthy of our praise: *You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals; because you were slaughtered, and you redeemed for God by your blood from every tribe and language and people and nation. You made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they will reign on earth* (Rev. 5:9-10, HCSB).

James Emery White has recently written a helpful book, *Rethinking the Church*. He is a devoted pastor and churchman who believes that our familiar ways of doing church, especially worship are way overdue for some rethinking. A good question to ask ourselves is not: “how can we do this better?” but “Why do we do this at all?” He has found that many churches operate with two basic assumptions (1) worship must always be traditional; (2) worship should be planned to engage only Christians because it is utterly irrelevant to non-Christians. Thus, all the activities such as music and preaching apply only to the membership. He thinks traditionalism may give a congregation a sense of comforting familiarity but it can also be a deterrent to its growth and vitality. He tells the story of a church who realized how far down it had gone and was looking for the right pastor to get them back on track. They searched for a young man who was bright, articulate, deeply spiritual and aware of what was going on in the world. They were sure they’d found him. As they listened to his qualifications and vision, he summed up his stirring presentation with the exclamation, “With God’s help, I intend to lead this church forward into the 20th century!” Startled, the chairman of the search committee leaned over and whispered loudly, “you mean the 21st century, don’t you?” The young man replied, “we’re going to take this church one century at a time!”

It is a good question for any congregation to ask itself: “which century do we find our church?” Are our forms of worship culturally sensitive to our own people and the ones we are trying to reach? If we’re not careful, White says, we may be offering “a King James Version of worship in a cyberspace world.” Churches bold enough to survey their own membership of how effective the worship is have been rewarded with some surprises. One older member wrote on his evaluation, “I felt stoned to death by the rock of ages!” Personally, I love “Rock of Ages”, but then, “Rock of Ages” and I grew up together.

Praise is offered to God in worship through music, biblical proclamation, prayer, and the symbolic acts of the ordinances and through giving. All of these elements of worship are biblical. The contemporary form they may take in their expression may depend greatly upon the given culture or context in which a particular congregation may find itself or the specific vision of type or style of church they believe God has chosen for them. The “emerging church”, for lack of a better term, may incorporate these elements in ways quite different than those preferring far more traditional styles of “doing” church. The same is true for “house” or “cell” churches all of whom are just as valid as N.T. congregations as one that meets in a multi-million dollar facility.

Music is especially central to worshiping God because it gives us the privilege of opening our soul before Almighty God expressing our emotions as well as our words. It is a sacred means of expressing our joy as people being redeemed. As the Psalmist said, *Sing to the Lord a new song, His praise in the assembly of the godly* (Ps. 149:1, HCSB). How important is a chosen style of music for the purpose of praising God? James White tells about the time he was speaking in Florida about contemporary music and the need for churches to be sensitive to those *outside* the church in their selection of music styles. An elderly lady came up to talk to him. She said, “Young man, I want to have a word

with you about what you said this evening.” White said he knew he was in trouble. She continued, “Are you trying to tell us that churches should use contemporary music to reach people today?” White said he hedged a bit, and said “well, maybe it might help,” then asked her, “Tell me, what do you think?” She said she still personally preferred Lawrence Welk and Benny Goodman type of music. Then she took her cane, pointed it squarely in his face and said, “I’ll say this, if rock and roll is what it is going to take to get lost people to come to worship, all I’ve got to say is...let’s boogie!” Then she also said, “it’s not my preferred style of music, but if it will help people come to Jesus, I’ll learn to like it. I know the church does not exist to meet my needs and personal desires. It exists to win this world to Christ.” And that’s the point, says White, about rethinking the way we worship, particularly the music we sing. As long as we are culturally sensitive **without changing the unchanging gospel**, whatever type of music that helps a church in its outreach in its local community is appropriate.

Worship also takes place as the gospel is proclaimed in Christian preaching. It should centre in the reading of Holy Scripture and proclamation of God’s message to the people present. Stanley Grenz says, “As the church gathers to hear the sermon, they are celebrating the divine provision of instruction in the present as the Spirit speaks through the Scriptures.”

Corporate worship occurs too when God’s people pray. It is through prayer that the community of Christ communicates directly with God. We honour God as we adore his perfect character and faithfulness, as we confess our human failure and receive his gracious forgiveness, and as we express our gratitude to him in thanksgiving and petition his throne of grace with our requests.

Finally, corporate worship gives the church body the opportunity to express symbolic acts such as baptism and the Lord’s Supper (which we will discuss more later in this hour), but also a friendly handshake and smiling face are important facets of our worship. Encircling the sanctuary and joining hands before departing the service can be a powerful reminder of the unity of the body and a praise to the Holy Spirit who seeks to foster a oneness in the body. Receiving the offering is both an individual and communal response to God’s graciousness. As the offerings are laid on the altar, it symbolizes the giving of ourselves to the Lord. These traditional elements easily translate into new forms and styles of expression.

2. Spiritual edification

Spiritual edification in a local church by which individual members seek to minister to each other is an important component of a healthy church. We’re familiar with the expression, “It takes a community to raise a child.” That is as true if not more so for the local church. As fellow Christians we are “priests to each other” providing mutual encouragement and challenge to be faithful followers of Christ as a body and as individuals. Learning to “rejoice with those who rejoice” and “weep with those who weep” is at the heart of our being “priests to each other” in the congregation. Members who edify each other share other’s burdens in times of difficulty, challenge and lovingly

confront each other when one strays, and nurtures faithfully those who are new Christians or are having times of weakness (Gal. 6:1-6). We pray for one another knowing we all share a common story and journey. There is a story of some guys out on a big boat. Someone exclaimed, “hey, we’ve got a leak over in our corner.” The guys on the other end said to one another, “Not to worry, it’s not in our end of the boat.” Mutual edification means understanding we are all on the same boat in Christ’s congregation.

3. Evangelism, missions and ministry

If a congregation is true to its God-given nature and assignment, it will not be content to expend all its resources and energies tending to its own needs. Rather, it will by the grace and power of God seek to reach the lost with the gospel through evangelism missions and ministry. I see these three as interdependent. All too often we can easily isolate them from each other. But as I study the ministry of our Lord, he kept these three tightly interwoven. As he announced his ministry (Luke 4:18-19) he responded to the spiritual and physical needs of people. He sent out his disciples on various missions with clear instructions of healing, evangelism and even exorcism of evil spirits (Luke 9:3-6; 10:1-12, 17). Finally, he commissioned disciples of all time to go and “make disciples” (Matt. 28:19-20).

As we are faithful to glorify God by means of worship, mutual edification and reaching out with the gospel of love, we demonstrate that we are a people on mission with God. We deal now with those aspects of church which build up the body of Christ, namely, our participation in a local church by the calling and empowering of the Holy Spirit. We will specifically look at N.T. teaching about membership, the ordinances and church organization.

IV. Participation in a N.T. Church

1. Membership

Increasingly these days in Canada, when people are invited to join a local church, they ask “Why?” Is membership in a church necessary? More importantly, is it biblical? It is true that Luke says in Acts 2:41, 47, that the Lord “added to their number.” Later he even spoke of the numbers of new Christians as multiplying. This indicates for some that membership in N.T. churches was likely not as formalized as in ours today. But at the same time we should not think membership was non-existent. Apparently, early Christians did utilize a type of formality which are called “letters of commendation” and may indeed be similar to our letters of transfer between churches today (1 Cor. 16:3; 2 Cor. 3:1; 3 John 5-9).

As noted earlier, a churchless Christian IS non-existent in the N.T. Christians in the first century would have had little patience with the notion of a self-sufficient, independent believer who refused to be a member of a congregation. Instead the fellowship was a bond of Christian togetherness so much so that exclusion for gross, unrepentant sin was a serious reality. It seems to have had the gravity of being expelled

from Christ himself (Matt. 18:17; 1 Cor. 5:13). Thus, membership in a N.T. church had its privileges and responsibilities; it had the marks of a social grouping but also with clear boundaries to guard spiritual discipline.

Most Christian traditions believe that membership incorporation begins with the act of baptism. But there is a variety of understanding about the connection of baptism with becoming a member. Baptists are among those who stress “believer’s baptism”, that is, the only biblical candidate for baptism is a person who clearly testifies of a life-changing conversion experience. This view is based on the “regenerate church membership” understanding required by English Puritans in the late 16th century which sees the church as a covenant people who give evidence of the saving power of the gospel and bond together in a regenerated body made up of devoted Christian disciples. Other Christian churches practice infant baptism thus including the children of adult members. Later these children undergo some rite of personal confirmation acknowledging their own individual faith in Christ and accountability to the church. Those who baptize infants usually acknowledge there is no specific text of Scripture which authorizes such practice. It usually is done based on a covenant concept involving children of those parents who are already members of a congregation.

When we studied the Christian belief of the church, I emphasized at that time the importance of the church community to our walk with Christ. I strongly believe that joining a local church fellowship is the **final step of our initial response to Christ**. It is by the act of baptism following a personal profession of faith and the joining of a local church where we join our lives with others on a shared spiritual journey that begins our obedience to Christ as his disciples. Again, it is the combining of these three things: our personal confession of faith in Christ involving repentance and faith, baptism which is the public expression of that faith and repentance, and receiving membership in a local church fellowship.

2. The Ordinances

There are two specific symbolic acts which the N.T. teaches us to observe: baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Both symbolize the saving, gracious work of our Lord and both were “ordained” by Him but neither are a means of salvation. Baptists generally refer to these two acts as “ordinances” because Jesus ordained or commanded they be observed by his church as a public means of declaring our loyalty to Him. Both are best understood as acts of Christian commitment. All too often, Baptists for fear of claiming too much for them, claim too little, seeing them ONLY as “mere” symbols. Participation in these acts **does not save a person**, rather they are acts persons being saved are to do to commemorate what only Christ can do. However, faithfully observing their full biblical content can spiritually enrich an individual Christian’s life and build up the spirituality of the church. When properly respected they offer powerful visual reenactments of the death and resurrection of our Lord. Both remind us in the present what God has done in Christ in the past and will do in the future. Not only do we recall the death and resurrection of Jesus but we anticipate his triumphant return when he consummates

history. Stanley Grenz says “They provide a symbolic reminder that our true identity lies in God’s future: *we are what we will be*” (*Created for Community*, 236).

(1) Baptism

Baptists and many other groups see baptism as the immersion of a new believer in Christ in water which symbolizes that Christian’s new identity in the Christ who commanded that new believers be baptized in the triune name of God (Matt. 28:19). Jesus chose to be baptized himself as an example to us, and I think as a means of affirming the faithful work of his forerunner, John the Baptist. Grenz summarizes several important reasons that baptism should be considered as having spiritual value since it symbolizes our new life in Christ. **First**, it signifies our **union with Christ**. Rom. 6:3-8 beautifully expresses this meaning, how we have died to our old self, have been buried with Christ, raised to walk in our new life in him. The Holy Spirit cleanses us of our sin and grants us hope in our own future resurrection. **Second**, baptism indicates we have transferred **our loyalty** to a new Master, Christ as Lord. Henceforth, we are to live under his new management. **Third**, baptism can also be seen as a **seal of the new covenant** relationship we have with God as we publicly pledge ourselves as followers of the Way. Baptism, said Peter in 1 Pet. 3:21 is *the pledge of a good conscience toward God* (HCSB). **Fourth**, it connects us with a **fellowship** of God’s people and we “become a part of that community which is defined and ruled by the story of Christ, especially his life, death, and resurrection” (238). Baptism also points us beyond this present local community to our eternal home and our final salvation in Christ when all of God’s saved people will gather around his throne.

Baptism is significant because of the impact it makes upon the candidate, the church, and any non-Christian who may be present. For the one baptized, it should be an unforgettable experience and a continuing reminder to be faithful as Christ’s disciple. Whenever Martin Luther, the reformer, would be taunted by the Devil, he would blurt out, “don’t bother me sweet Devil, for I have been baptized!” Baptism reminds us that our strength is in the Lord himself. A baptismal service edifies the church as well. It reminds the church of its responsibility to nurture that new believer and reach others with the gospel. Nothing conveys the death, burial and the resurrection of our Lord like the act of baptism. Thus, it challenges the unsaved persons present to profess their faith, repent of their sins and experience personal conversion so they too can be baptized.

(2) Lord’s Supper

As the public seal of our identity in Christ and our initiation into his church, baptism is necessary only once. The Lord’s Supper allows us to reaffirm our identity in Christ and his church again and again. Some Baptists use the name “communion” but most follow the designation preferred by the Protestant reformers, “the Lord’s Supper”. It has a three-dimensional perspective. **First**, as we observe it, we look to the **past** as we celebrate a meal commemorates what Christ has done for our salvation. “Do this in remembrance of me”, he said. As we eat the bread and drink the cup together as a church family we symbolically are there with his disciples in that Upper Room; we stand at the foot of the cross, and we renew our commitment to his Lordship. As we observe the Lord’s Supper

we also emphasize the necessity of the cross. He poured out his life's blood to form a new covenant between God and his people. Thus, we personalize that Christ died for each one of us. **Second**, in this act we also celebrate the **future**. Jesus said in that Upper Room, *I tell you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father's kingdom* (Matt. 26:29). **Third**, this act also focuses on the **present**. It powerfully reminds us of our fellowship with Christ, now. It is His table. It is His cross. Thus, we joyfully signal our loyalty and devotion to him. By eating and drinking together as his body, we reaffirm our unity as a church is based on our communion union with Christ.

Thus, even though neither ordinance saves us, far from being a meaningless or repetitive ritual, the Lord's Supper along with baptism become a joyous celebration of the present Christ who is none other than the risen Lord who is coming again. Through both acts we reaffirm our faith, and God reaffirms us with his strengthening grace. Both baptism and the Lord's Supper vividly remind us that only God is God and only Christ is Lord and allows the Spirit to bind us together in love and mutual caring as the church of Jesus Christ.

3. Organization of the Church

In this last segment on the church we turn our attention to the organizational structure of the church, specifically how decisions are made by the church body and what the Bible teaches about church leaders.

(1) Making **decisions in the local church**. The church is a local community and the way it makes decisions should reflect its life as a community. A key biblical teaching in this regard is a privilege and responsibility we choose to call "the priesthood of all believers". Several passages in the Bible clearly teach that all believers are individual priests before God and are to be priests to each other (1 Pet. 2:5; Rev. 1:6; 5:10; 20:6). These priestly functions for each member mean we approach God through Christ, offer our spiritual worship to God and also intercede for each other. Sometimes, however, this teaching is misconstrued that individual members of the church are free to decide and do whatever he or she may choose is best for them. But this distorts the N.T. teaching which ties this idea to the health of the congregation. We find that the N.T. church made crucial decisions together like replacing Judas (Acts 1:15-26) and holding the Jerusalem Conference (Acts 15). Most of the N.T. letters were written to entire congregations again stressing the importance of the body of the church as a whole. Church leaders are crucial but Paul insists their function is to equip the entire church by personal example and the willingness to train each member to share the responsibilities held by the entire membership (Eph. 4:11-13).

(2) **Interdependence** of local churches. The N.T. teaches both congregational autonomy or independency AND what is called the "associational principle", that is, the necessary relationship churches have to each other. These two ideas need to be kept in balance. N.T. examples of local autonomy are evidenced by the commissioning of Paul and Barnabas as missionaries by the church at Antioch (Acts

13:1-4) and the necessity of the church at Corinth to deal with its internal problems (1 Cor. 1: 10; 5:4-5, 12-13). Thus, each church receives its own members, authorizes the transfer of membership, and is responsible for maintaining church discipline. As a counterbalance to this autonomy, the N.T. also demonstrates the need for interdependence among churches. A glowing example of this is the offering taken up among the Gentile churches for the poor in Jerusalem (1 Cor. 16:1-4; 2 Cor. 8-9).

(3) **Church leadership.** We know that church leaders are important. What does the N.T. teach about the crucial role of leadership in local churches? There is a variety of names of church **leadership functions** (not “office”; there is no Greek word for “office”) in the N.T. and sometimes the key terms are used interchangeably. But what seems to be safe to say is that there were two major types of leaders who are called “bishops” and “deacons” (Phil. 1:1). Bishops were also sometimes called “elders” (Acts 20:17; 1 Tim. 5:17-19; Tit. 1:5; Jas. 5:14, 1 Pet.5:1ff) who were responsible for supervision or administration (Acts 20:28; 1 Tim. 3:1-2; Tit. 1:7). They were to give administrative leadership to local congregations and coordinate church ministries. They were also to preach, teach, admonish, and protect the church from heretics (Tit. 1:9). The other group, called “deacons” had a supportive role to the bishops, worked with them and sometimes assumed some of the pastoral and administrative responsibilities. Pastors are mentioned in a group of leaders such as apostles, prophets, evangelists. Pastors at times taught; mainly, they seemed to have the shepherding responsibility of the congregation or congregations. Eph. 4:12 focuses a major responsibility of pastors as encouraging the growth of the body of the church so that all the membership engages in personal Christian ministry.

Paul’s relationship to Timothy gives us invaluable insight as to how church leaders should be chosen and recognized. A specific calling and enabling by the Holy Spirit to leadership ministry is foremost. The second requirement is recognition and confirmation by the local congregation of the person’s qualifications to lead (1 Tim. 1:18; 4:14; cf. Acts 13:2-3). “Ordination” is the name given to the act of public confirmation of one’s personal call to leadership ministry. No one should be ordained who is not spiritually qualified or who does not give clear evidence of being called by the Holy Spirit. Its purpose is not to honour an individual but recognize in a public ceremony the consensus belief that the Spirit has gifted, called and enabled a given individual in some form of pastoral ministry (1 Tim. 4:14; 2 Tim. 1:6-7). Servant leadership is the style of ministry stipulated in the N.T. and is most greatly exemplified by our Lord. Elton Trueblood, years ago, said the most effective pastors are those who understand they are “player-coaches” in church leadership. They lead by example and pour their lives into their people and God’s vision for His church. These are the leaders of whom Peter speaks as “examples to the flock” (1 Pet. 5:3). Christ himself is the model and the means for this kind of leadership so desperately needed in our churches (Phil. 2:6-8).

Local churches are to be communities of Christ embodying his presence in the power of the Holy Spirit so that they glorify God. We turn next to the challenging topic of last things.

Part II: The Christian Belief in Last Things (Eschatology)

The final Christian belief we consider in this series is at last -- last things, perhaps better expressed as **Christian hope**. The heavy-duty theological term is “eschatology”. But remember this belief is about “Christian Hope”. I’m convinced we don’t give enough attention to hope as it is expressed in Scripture. You could say that our entire life pilgrimage is “hope seeking understanding” (Moltmann). Daniel Migliore brings out clearly the importance of Christian hope for every other belief we have studied:

A doctrine of revelation would be flawed if it did not acknowledge that we now see through a glass darkly and not yet face to face; a doctrine of God would be deficient if it did not recognize the inexhaustible mystery of the triune God whose love is extended to the world in creation, redemption, and consummation; a doctrine of creation would be incomplete if it failed to emphasize that the creation still groans for its liberation and completion; a Christology would be misleading if it did not stress that the Lord is simply not a memory or a present experience but the One who is coming; our doctrines of the church and its sacraments would be pathetically inadequate if they succumbed to triumphalism and showed no passion for the completion of God’s reign of justice, freedom and peace throughout the creation. Not only at the end but from the very beginning, Christian faith and theology are oriented to the coming glory of God and the fulfillment of the promise of God contained in the gospel of Jesus Christ (*Faith Seeking Understanding*, 1991, 231-32).

Thus, we move now to talk about something that Christians in the Bible and in Christian history have learned to cherish: the hope we have now **and** in the future because Jesus lives and promises to return triumphantly to this earth!

I. Introduction

In 1981 the Winnipeg *Free Press* filed a report about 50 families in North America who sold all their possessions in preparation for the rapture which their leader Bill Maupin had promised would occur that June 28. Maupin also assured his group they would be among those who would return with a triumphant Christ to set up his millennial kingdom May 14, 1988. Unfortunately, this sort of thing is what most Christians think of when they hear about last things, or eschatology. Many Christians today are enthralled over speculation over end time events. Some Christian publishing houses have capitalized on this interest and are greatly enhancing their profits. Erickson calls this “eschatomania”, that is, there are those Christians who simply cannot get enough information or ideas about the end times. Most of their waking hours and money are spent on the next sensational offering. Others are completely uninterested and turned off by it. Erickson calls this attitude “eschatophobia”. Perhaps you are among them. If so, I hope to persuade you of the important significance of the Christian belief of last things. As with all Christian beliefs, we seek a biblical balance, neither believing less than biblical teaching nor more than what is taught. The purpose of eschatological teachings in the Bible is that we remain faithful to Christ and receive spiritual comfort and assurance

rather than satisfying our curiosity about the future. I hardly think Christ needs our sometimes fanciful or speculative interpretations of the Bible to determine what He will do when He returns.

There are many other aspects to this belief than trying to guess when Christ will return and wise is the Christian who hopes in his triumphant return to consummate history. There are questions like: (1) Where are *we* going? Does history have a goal and purpose? What is the meaning of history? (corporate eschatology); (2) Where am *I* going? Does my life have a goal and purpose? Does death have the final say? (individual eschatology); (3) Where is creation going? (future new heaven and new earth). We start with the question of our individual future and treat in turn the major aspects of our belief in last things. **First, do our individual lives have a goal and thus meaning?** Or is life nothing but meaninglessness to be relieved by death?

Novelists like Saul Bellow in his novel *Herzog*, written in the 1960s echoes for many how the certainty of death casts its foreboding shadow over life: “This generation thinks—and this is its thought of thoughts—that 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.” But a precious part of Christian belief in last things is that death does *not* have the final say about life, a resurrected Lord does. Thus, Christian hope rooted in Christ’s resurrection and His promised return brings meaning to our lives. We know the One we will be with when we die.

Tragically, there are many without Christian hope for whom death by suicide is seen as the best remedy due to the meaninglessness that envelops them. Suicide is the leading cause of death of youth in North America. Canadians were shocked in 1994 when three 18 year old men drove across Canada to Vancouver where they rented a mini storage space, drove into the empty space, pulled the door down with the motor still running, and took their lives together. They met their death to the sounds of Kurt Cobain’s group Nirvana playing on the cassette player in their vehicle. They left a lengthy journal entitled, “The Last Trip” with the final words, “We have lived our lives and this life is not for us—good bye” (Grenz, *What Christians Really Believe and Why*, 139). There appears to be a rampant fixation with death in our culture, a telling sign of the urgent need for a sense of hope found in the Christian gospel.

I. Personal Eschatology

Christians believe that it is God who has the right to determine human destiny. The Bible teaches us that what we call “the end” takes place in two ways: our personal death and when God draws the curtain at the end of history. In our hearts we humans know we are mortal but we like to use euphemisms we hope blunt the reality of death. We speak of the dead as “passed away” and are put to rest in “perpetual family plots”, and we pay mortuaries to make our deceased loved ones appear as natural as possible. The writer of Ecclesiastes talked about the universal reality of death, *Everything is the same for everyone: there is one fate for the righteous and the wicked, for the good and the bad, for the clean and the unclean, for the one who sacrifices and the one who does not*

sacrifice. As it is for the good, so it is for the sinner....There is one fate for everyone....they go to the dead (9:2-3, HCSB). What is it that awaits us after death? There is a variety of viewpoint.

1. Competing Views of Life after Death

The Bible speaks of death as an “enemy” because it appears so final and unchangeable. Perhaps this is why the world over we see a universal longing for some type of life beyond personal death. Sigmund Freud called this yearning for life beyond as humanity’s most insistent hope. Freud said it represents “the oldest, strongest and most persistent wish of mankind.” This hope that there is more to life than death also takes many forms non-Christian forms. Eastern religions like Hinduism and New Age philosophies offer the concept of **monism**. At death we lose our individuality and merge into the all-encompassing unity of the universe. We become like a drop of water in the ocean losing all personal human distinctions. There are several problems with this view. If you believe that personal human life is an illusion, and devalue the personal nature of human life, you wind up discounting God’s personal character. It wipes out any reason for human interaction with each other or God. It totally destroys the concept of community.

But what if instead of merging with the universe, we come back to earth in another physical form with another crack at life? This is the belief in **reincarnation**, once thought to be only the interest of Hinduism and other eastern religions, but now it is espoused by the likes of Shirley MacLaine of Hollywood, and Laurel Phelan who lives in Vancouver. Phelan insists her over 50 previous lives go back to the ancestors in caves. The concept of reincarnation can be found as far back as the ancient Greeks and relates to the idea of soul migration. Plato, for example, taught that the soul appears in successive embodiments enroute to its destined eternal bliss. A huge failing of the notion of reincarnation is its refusal to give serious appreciation for physical, earthly human life. The biblical story of creation highlights flesh and blood reality on this earth and in no way depreciates bodily existence. Reincarnation fails to accept the eternal significance of a given human being. Instead its focus is on a migrating soul always seeking its eternal rest on its own.

Immortality of the soul is another common non-Christian belief about life after death. This long-held view rooted in Platonic Greek philosophy that soul immortality is innately a part of human existence is quite subtle in its attractiveness. In fact, many Christians would insist that this idea is a biblical teaching. It isn’t. The Bible teaches that only God possesses immortality, soul immortality is not an innate dimension of human existence. Rather, immortality is God’s gift to those who respond to the Christian gospel. Paul said it was Jesus who *brought life and immortality to light through the gospel* (2 Tim. 1:10; 1 Tim. 6:16). The dualism of body and soul, where at death the body dies but the soul survives to live on in some kind of murky existence is really a paganistic view. The N.T. response to all these views of life after death is the hope of bodily resurrection.

2. The Christian Hope of Bodily Resurrection

The Christian's hope of life after death is squarely based on Christ's bodily resurrection from the dead and his promise to all who trust him that this too will be their destiny after personal death. This word of hope is grounded in the One who is Lord of life, death, and eternity. When Jesus finally got to Bethany to comfort Lazarus' grieving sisters, he declared, *I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies* (John 11:25). Then he proceeded to resuscitate Lazarus. Because of the reality of the resurrection, Christians believe physical death is transitional to a much greater reality.

The N.T. scholar A. M. Hunter has a touching story in one of his books about the difference resurrection hope makes. A physician who was a Christian believer was attending a young man who was dying. He knew the doctor was a Christian and so was he, yet he still wanted some assurance. "What will it be like after death, doc?" he asked. As the physician thought how to answer, he heard his dog which he'd left downstairs scratching at the door. "Do you hear that noise? It's my dog. He was worried about where I'd gone, heard my voice and came upstairs. He knows I'm behind this door, that I am here. He really has no knowledge of what lies beyond this door except that I'm here. That is the same way it is with us. We do not really yet know what lies beyond death's door, but we have the assurance from the One who has conquered death, that He is there." It is this same assurance that bolstered the apostle John exiled and lonely on the isle of Patmos. It came in a vision from the resurrected Lord, *When I saw him, I fell at His feet like a dead man. He laid his right hand on me, and said, 'Don't be afraid! I am the First and the Last and the Living One. I was dead, but look—I am alive forever and ever, and I hold the keys of death and the grave* (Rev. 1:17-18). Because Jesus Christ the living Lord holds in his trustworthy hands the keys to the grave, we who trust in Him fear not death. In his own resurrection Jesus has gutted death of its sting (1 Cor. 15:55)..

Some wonder about the connection between immortality and eternal life. Are they identical, and how are they related to the resurrection? In the gospel of John, eternal life is understood as a present reality for Christian believers (John 5:24) though it also has a futuristic aspect as well (John 12:25). Some interpreters understand "eternal life" in a qualitative sense and immortality in a quantitative sense. Paul makes it clear in the great resurrection chapter of 1 Cor. 15, that Christians are given immortality at death (v. 53, *this mortal must be clothed with immortality*). Paul answers the question often raised that if humans do not innately have immortality, how do we receive it? This is not meant to suggest that at death, unbelievers are simply annihilated. Rather, the Bible speaks of "eternal death" for those who reject the Christian gospel; whatever that means, I do not think it involves the final extinction of the person who suffers eternally in hell.

Murray Harris offers the following as a way of understanding the relationship of eternal life, immortality and resurrection. He believes "eternal life" can be seen as primarily qualitative and secondarily as quantitative, whereas, "immortality primarily is quantitative and secondarily qualitative." In other words, resurrection hope says there is a personal side to immortality and that eternal life says resurrection life continues without end as a transformed reality enabled by God's power. God will resurrect the bodies of

Christians who have died and transform those who are alive at Christ's return and enable all of his redeemed people to live in eternal community. The God of resurrection will change our weak physical bodies and transform them into immortal, incorruptible bodies. Thus, God himself will give a defiant "NO" to the greatest of human fears, death itself (I Cor. 15:26).

Many other questions beg for attention. One of the more common is the question: "What happens to us when we die?" Some think of death as doorway to eternal life, that when we die we immediately enter God's eternal community. But this raises issues about the return of Christ and final judgment. Others think we experience what is called a "soul" sleep, a kind of unconscious existence until God's final closure of history. But there are biblical references like the story Jesus told about the rich man and the beggar Lazarus who were in some state of consciousness awareness after death. Yet another related question is: where do we go at death? Do Christians immediately experience heaven and unbelievers the reality of an awful hell? The term that describes the background of these questions is called "the intermediate state". Roman Catholics hold to the belief of purgatory where those who need further cleansing of sin can prepare through suffering to be fitted for heaven.

What does the Bible teach? In the first place, death is not the end of personal life because the Bible makes it clear every person will be at the final judgment (Rom. 14:10; 2 Cor. 5:10; 2 Pet. 2:9). Thus, Christian hope is based on nothing else but promise of resurrection for those who trust in Christ. This means at least 3 things: (1) Whatever may happen to us and where we may be after death, we will not experience the fullness of God's eternal community until after the final consummation. But this does not mean we will not be united with the resurrected Lord at his return. Even in death we are secure in his hands even though we do not know exactly how time and eternity relate in this matter. We do know that even in death, God's love fully comprehends our situation (Rom. 8:35-39). (2) We are also assured as in Rev. 14:13, that the redeemed who have died *rest from their labour*. I believe when we die we are safe in God's trustworthy hands. We are kept by God with him until resurrection occurs. Even so the *unrighteous* are kept by this same God until the final day of judgment. Are the dead aware of present events on earth? We can only conjecture. I think they may be aware but they probably see events in terms of their "unity and interconnectedness" (Grenz) at least in some sense.

Above all, what we can say with the greatest assurance is that the "irreducible gospel" of the cross and resurrection of our Lord is good news to proclaim to all! The psalmist shares the best of wisdom in his prayer: *Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom* (Ps. 90:10, 12).

II. Where Is History Going? (corporate eschatology)

We move now to think about what the Bible teaches regarding the ending of human history as we now know it. We call this "corporate eschatology" and it is interested in the questions about the meaning of history and how it will end. The Christian belief in last things is centred in the conviction that an Almighty God is directing history toward

HIS intended goal. No matter how often and stark seems the reality that God is not in control and in charge of what does or does not happen, Christians remain convinced that history really is HIS story. Our human story on this earth is not without hope.

1. Competing Alternatives (Heresies)

The biblical view of history is that it is **linear**, that is, it has a beginning, a continuing and will have a climactic finish. It clearly portrays a sovereign Lord who acts in history pursuing his goal for it. Two non-Christian views deny the truth of this belief.

One is the **cyclical understanding** of history that denies history making any sense. Life is only repetitive and goes in a never-ending circle. This is talked about in the Bible as the view of Israel's neighbours, some of whom celebrated the cycles of nature as they worshiped fertility gods. The other view is called "**secularism**" and sees history as linear but only from the standpoint of **human progress**. Thus, history is not God's story but ours. Invariably pessimism accompanies this view. On the contrary the biblical understanding of history is that it is headed neither for despair nor for utopia but God's intended goal as God himself will realize his divine purposes for all creation. That goal is often repeated in Scripture as God's redeemed humanity living in community with him and each other; at peace with God, one another and all creation. Because of what sin has done to God's plans for creation, God himself must bring about his goal of a renewed creation where we can enjoy eternal fellowship with the triune God.

2. How History Will End

The Bible teaches that the key event which climaxes history is the triumphant return of our living Lord. The Bible also speaks of various aspects or a series of events which mark the transition from history to eternity. The three main ones are: (1) the general resurrection of all humans, (2) the final judgment and (3) the beginning of eternity. That Jesus Christ will return is fully agreed upon by Christians, but what kind of chronology of end time events will take place? It is at precisely this question where Christians interpret the same Scriptures differently. At the heart of these interpretations is how one chooses to understand the meaning of the 1000 years mentioned 6 times in Rev. 20:1-8. In other words, does the resurrection, final judgment and the beginning of eternity occur exactly when Christ returns OR are these events separated by Christ ruling on this earth for a 1000 years?

(1) Millennial views

Christians have struggled since the 2nd century for a clear understanding of what the 1000 years mean in Rev. 20:1-8 (mentioned 6 times in this passage – the only place thus mentioned in the Bible). How should this term be interpreted in light of the entire Bible? The most detailed and literal understanding goes by the name "**premillennialism**", meaning Christ returns just prior to the establishment of his physical 1000 year reign on earth after which God begins eternity. Premillennialists believe our present era will experience great tribulation due to the AntiChrist until he is bound by Christ who will then reign for a 1000 years of peace and righteousness. Following the millennium, Satan

will be released and a great war will be fought between his forces and those of Christ, with the Lord as victorious. After that comes the final resurrection, judgment and eternity. There are differences of interpretation regarding the tribulation. Those who call themselves “**historic premillennialists**” see more engagement with the church during the earthly millennium. “**Dispensationalists**” connect the millennium and tribulation with Israel more so than the church and are very strong on the concept of the rapture, where Christ at the end of the church age, takes his followers to heaven for the “marriage supper of the Lamb”. This is the substance and interest of the “Left Behind” series of Jerry Jenkins and Tim LaHaye. Basically, the premillennial interpretation, while quite literal, is also very pessimistic. It clearly believes that the only hope in history is in God not human effort. The weakness of the premillennial view is that those who hold this view often find elements of Christ’s return almost on every page of the Bible.

Interpreters who hold that the return of Christ occurs at the end of a 1000 years of an earthly “golden age” is called “**postmillennialism**”. A simpler view, during the church age the gospel is spread and evil is overcome by good works. Nations live in peace because Satan is bound. When this thousand years ends, the devil and forces of evil are released but will be vanquished as Jesus returns in triumph. Afterwards the general resurrection, final judgment and eternity all occur. A strength of this view is its optimism and its view of the church militant AND triumphant. God’s power is seen at work in His people, thus Christians are to be ever vigilant and active in the power of the Holy Spirit. Its weakness is it is often overly optimistic.

The final basic interpretation is called **amillennialism**, which stands for “no millennium”, rather the term those who hold this view say the term should be taken symbolically. This is not a denial of Christ’s second coming but an alternative way to interpret the term “millennium”. This view believes that when Christ returns there will be no literal 1000 years of an earthly reign of the Lord. Rather, between his first coming and his return, good and evil continue on this earth. Toward the time of his return, evil will intensify, Christ will return triumphantly to consummate history, then follows the general resurrection, final judgment and eternity. Amillennialists encourage Christians to active engagement now in the power of the Holy Spirit until Christ’s final return. The strength of this view is its realistic understanding that Christians are to engage in redemptive activity in the world. Some would say its weakness is that it does not give enough attention to a more literal interpretation of Scripture.

3. Summary

All of the above interpretations are based on the same Bible. I think our attention should be directed to the basic truth underlying all this variety of understanding. It is the Triune God who will bring about that eternal community that He promises to His redeemed people. He does have a final goal for history. History is in his hands. What He has begun in Jesus Christ, his life, death and resurrection, will be consummated in his own good time and way. In the meantime, God has not chosen to give us all the details which we may desire to satisfy our curiosity. But wise is anyone who realizes we are living in the “last days”! I have a book in my library: *The Last Days Are Here Again*. The title

pokes fun at the habit some have of trying to guess the time of Christ's return. The serious aspect of the title is that since Jesus first talked about them, **the "last days" have never left**. I like the way Roger Olson puts it, "the Christian does not live in despair over "what the world is coming to" but in hope because of "who is coming to this world".

III. What Will Happen in the Final Judgment? (cosmic eschatology)

We have emphasized that God that God has an end purpose in mind for his creation, that he is in the process of completing His final goal. We have mentioned the transitional event of God's judgment which will bring the final realities we call "heaven" and "hell". What does the Bible teach about this Creator God who is also Judge? The Bible has much to say about divine judgment.

1. The Relationship of Time to Eternity

As we consider this final segment of eschatology, it might be helpful to realize that our strongest challenge for understanding the Bible in this belief is our limited ability to understand the connection between time and eternity. I think we can at least say God has chosen to anchor his redemptive work within history. At Christ's return I think "time shall be no more" as we now know it, and God will enable us to experience eternity. We will no longer be bound by our space-time-biochemical condition. We must readily acknowledge this is something we do not yet know. God knows what it is like as an eternal God to participate in time, but we presently time-bound creatures do not yet know what it is like to participate in eternity except as John puts it, eternal life begins with a relationship with the saving Lord. Grenz warns against totally separating time and eternity yet he does not think eternity is endless time. It is death that marks the transition for us between our earthly and heavenly experience of "time". In heaven it is likely that we will understand earthly time from the perspective of a "unified whole" as God Himself knows it (see Grenz, 597-98).

2. The Purpose of Final Judgment by God

Not only will Christ's return bring about resurrection, it will mark the end of history in terms of God's final judgment. We tend to think of that judgment only as the final assigning of persons to heaven or hell, but the Bible has a larger picture. God will finally judge the cosmic powers which he has already judged through the cross (Col. 2:15) and our "ancient foe" and all his cohorts will be banished from God's eternal community (Rev. 20:10). But God's judgment also will involve His creation. God will cleanse all the decay and corruption caused by human rebellion (2 Pet. 3:10). Will God burn up this present decaying creation and create a new earth or will he renew and transform this earth? The relevant Scriptures can be translated either way (compare Rev. 21:1-3 with 2 Peter 3:12). I think He will renew and transform this earth into a suitable "heaven". This fits best I think with the trajectory throughout Scripture, and that is, that God is at work within history to create a redeemed community to dwell in an eternal relationship with the triune God. What we do not apparently have in Scripture, as I'll discuss later, are references that clearly specify a heaven beyond this earth as the eternal abiding place of

the redeemed. You may not agree, but I believe he will renew this earth as a suitable eternal home for Himself and all of His redeemed.

Anthony Hoekema finds four key reasons for seeing a renewed earth as heaven over against a destroyed earth replaced by a totally new one. (1) Both 2 Pet. 3:13 and Rev. 21:1 use language that indicates a “gloriously renewed” earth that stands in some continuity with the present one. (2) Paul in Rom. 8:21-21 speaks of the longing of the creation to be liberated from its bondage of decay, and that this liberation will take place in the end, not in some “totally different creation”. (3) By analogy the resurrection body of believers will have some degree of continuity with our present body. Thus, it is likely that the new earth will resemble the old though it will be radically transformed. (4) Finally, if God did choose to totally annihilate this present universe, then it appears Satan has won after all by so corrupting this earth, it would have to be destroyed. Instead, says Hoekema, “God will reveal the full dimensions of that defeat (of Satan) when he shall renew this very earth on which Satan has deceived humanity and finally brush from it all the results of Satan’s evil machinations” (See Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*. 280-81).

I also believe that God will complete the judgment against the cosmic powers, a judgment begun in the cross of Christ. I also believe he will judge the corrupted creation as well as all human beings, including Christians. All things hidden will come to light ((Luke 8:17). I do not believe that Christians will be judged as to our salvation but the Bible does make clear we will be required to give a final accounting of our walk with Christ. I’ll have more to say about heaven in a few moments.

What about the possibility of rewards at God’s judgment? The simple answer is “Yes” according to Jesus (Matt. 25:14-30) and Paul (1 Cor. 3:10-15). However, if the only reason we serve God is to receive his blessings now or eternal rewards in the future, we need to go back and restudy the message of Job who was tested as to his real motive for worshiping and serving God. For sure, what we need to remember is that God’s standards are not ours, and most likely the final judgment day will be filled with many surprises. If Jesus’ example and teachings mean anything, they tell us that humility and sacrificial service are the earmarks of those who enter and thrive in God’s kingdom. Thus, in summary, God’s final judgment marks the transitional point heading into eternity. It will be public, cosmic and entirely based on the truth of God. It will not determine anyone’s relationship to God, it will reveal it. For some it will be a time of joyfulness but for others a time of anguish and despair. Above all, we need to remember God has given us our present lifetime to prepare for it. There are no second chances after death or when Jesus returns.

3. The Dark Side of Judgment (hell)

Does judgment mean that those who have not trusted in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour will be excluded from God’s eternal community? Jesus had much to say about the reality of hell, which it is often called the dark side of God’s judgment or the “eternal tragedy”

(Matt. 22:13; Luke 13:25-29; Rom 6:21; Phil. 1:28; 3:19; 1 Thess. 5:3; 2 Thess. 1:8-9, and especially parts of the book of Revelation). The answer is a resounding YES.

But not all Christians agree. Some think that in the end God will save everyone. We call this “universalism”, not to be confused with a “universal gospel” by which God desires all to come to faith and repentance (2 Pet. 3:9). Universalism confuses the concept of a loving God with human accountability. Christ did die for all but only those who respond to the Holy Spirit’s working in their lives in faith and repentance are being saved. Another misunderstanding is the belief called “annihilationism”. This is the idea that when an unsaved person dies they simply go out of existence; in other words, hell does not involve eternal suffering. Some see hell as repugnant and totally uncharacteristic of a loving God. If the victory of Christ over sin, death and hell are to be final, and all things are to be reconciled in Him, where does this leave room for a place called hell? Annihilationists are good at quoting Scripture such as Ps. 37:2; Mal 4:1-3; Matt. 3:10, plus many others, insisting that the Bible teaches that eternal destruction means just that, a person no longer exists. In other words, they stress the permanent RESULT of judgment, not the continuing of the punishment. Yet the very word “everlasting” used in the Bible to describe the eternal blessedness of the righteous is exactly the same word used in describing the eternal punishment of the lost. Plus, there is a sense of injustice in this concept of annihilation. Do the grandmothers who never got around to accepting Christ deserve the same fate as the likes of an Adolph Hitler? No. I think there are varying degrees of punishment in hell (Matt. 10:15; 11:20-24; Lu. 12:47-48). God is a just God. However, I do not think his justice which demanded the cross, will excuse any for whom the cross does not matter.

What can we say about hell as taught by Holy Scripture? This is not meant as flippancy, but the Bible makes it clear that hell is not a happy place. What is it that gives hell its reality? The atheistic existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre in his play *No Exit* has three major characters who are together in the afterlife. In their interactions with each other it becomes clear their only interest in each other is finding ways of self-justification or having the others pity them. All three are deeply characterized by bitterness and resentment. As the story moves along, the reader slowly sees that these three are destined to be confined together throughout all eternity. Finally, at the end of the drama, they sum up their utter frustration in two terrifying observations: “We shall be together for ever! Hell is other people!” I think Sartre got it wrong. Hell is not hell because of other people who inhabit it. Hell is hell because of a holy, loving God.

We have a tendency to separate God’s love and wrath as polar opposites. The opposite of love is apathy, indifference. My theology professor in seminary used to say that the “fire that warms is also the fire that burns”. In other words, “the underside of God’s love is his wrath.” Those who in this life set themselves in opposition to God and reject his love will eternally experience his holy love as his eternal wrath. Grenz calls hell “the eternal human failure” (p. 286). Some who believe in the reality of hell take the references about fire literally; others see them symbolically but no less real or less eternal. I’ve always believed that a symbol is something that represents something else

without ever exhausting the significance of it. In other words, not to see hell as a literal fire does not mean one does not affirm its eternal, actual, horrible reality.

The Bible often speaks of hell as “eternal death” – to me this is even more graphic than a literal fire. Hell is eternal isolation and estrangement from God, and the greatest tragedy of all, because it is so unnecessary; it represents one’s **self-exclusion** from God’s eternal community of the redeemed. Boyd Hunt put it strikingly, “What the doctrine of hell emphasizes is that God’s holy love cannot merely overlook the injustices inflicted by sin and still remain love. Any love that condones sin, ignoring that sin destroys all that is highest and best for persons, is not the love of God.” (p. 328). We must keep the belief in hell in the context of the seriousness of human sinfulness. Hell is the experiencing of God’s love in the form of His wrath because of the destruction that sin causes to a covenantal love relationship offered by God; thus, hell is God’s love experienced as eternal wrath.

It is important to keep in mind that it was Jesus Himself who says the most about hell in the gospels. It is also important to acknowledge that most (if not all) his references to hell were addressed to the religious leadership, primarily the scribes and Pharisees. Hunt gives us a sobering reminder: “The way to damnation leads past the cross of Christ. Persons are lost in spite of all that God does to win their trust and submission. C. S. Lewis said, ‘In the end there are only two kinds of people, those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says, ‘Thy will be done’” (Hunt, 339). “The most damning, self-destructive force in the universe is spurned love” (see Rev. 6:16, Hunt), 323.

4. The New Creation as the Final Home of Christians (heaven)

Earlier I mentioned the Bible does not specifically teach of a heaven located somewhere beyond the earth in a celestial hemisphere. What the Bible does teach is the hope and promise of a “new creation,” a “new heaven and earth” that God will provide as a home for his people for eternity. In **Rev. 21:3**, John promises that the everlasting Father will make a renewed earth and will himself dwell eternally as the triune God in his new creation. What will God’s renewal of the cosmos look like? We do not exactly know. Like a lot of our similar questions, would we have the brain to comprehend what Paul describes as “having not entered into our thoughts” at this point of our existence? Isaiah prophesied, *behold I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind* (Isa. 65:17); John was also given a similar vision: *Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away* (Rev. 21:1).

Stanley Grenz insists that our typical spiritual view of a *celestial* heaven misses the biblical focus on heaven as a physical place. He finds several elements of **discontinuity** between the present and future renewed earth: (1) the eternal realm will be totally sin-free and all elements of human fallenness wiped away; no more disease, decay or death, thus no sorrow, no tears. (2) There will be no need for anxiety or worry because the abundant life begun on earth in Christ will reach eternal fruition. There will

be no quest for life's necessities as we now experience them. All that and more will be provided by a gracious God.

Then there will also be some **continuities**: (1) God has promised to make all things new as a renewed creation. This probably means he will not start again from "scratch" so to speak (though some think 2 Pet. 3:10-13 teaches it). Paul talks about the creation as being liberated and renewed in Rom. 8:20-22. Plus, Rev. 21:1-3 strongly suggests it is this earth that is to be totally transformed and made into a suitable eternal dwelling place for God and his people. (2) Will it be a place of "glorified inactivity"? Those who carry a frenetic pace of life now might wish it so, but God's kind of perfection for us seems to always involve our growth in some way though we know that Christ will be glorified in us. If earthly life in Christ holds so much newness here, how much more might the eternal life to come be new. (3) Even though it will mean the end of separation of humans from God, and we shall see him face to face, God will still be God, not us, and He will remain distinct in His transcendence. (4) It will be a place of continuing, ceaseless praise to God (Rev. 4) and endless exaltation of our Saviour Jesus Christ (Rev. 5).

We have an understandable, insistent tendency to picture heaven like it will be some ethereal place. One of our hymns has the line that we'll adore Jesus there but it will be in a celestial environment of "mansions in glory and endless delight". Does this suggest we'll spend an eternity off in some celestial hemisphere dressed in white robes and wearing a titling halo plucking on harps and floating from one cloud to another? Such ideas do not come near to doing justice to biblical eschatology. When Jesus talked about "many mansions", I don't think he was referring to luxurious real estate. Rather, I think he was reminding us there's room in heaven for all who are willing to accept His gospel of grace. He's fortunately the one who knows the kind of heaven we need, and I think we can totally depend on him to make it so. Rest assured, it will be no less heaven because it is a renewed, totally transformed earth designed by the heavenly architect (See Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 274).

What will our heavenly, glorified, resurrection body be like? Grenz says it might help to think about **Jesus' resurrection body**. Eventually, the disciples did recognize that the resurrected Lord was indeed and in person Jesus of Nazareth. Yet his transformed body had some distinguishable differences from his former human body. I think there will be a continuity of personality and recognition in heaven. We are promised that our physical bodies will be "transformed and perfected" so that we will be in the likeness of the resurrected Jesus (Phil. 3:21). Luke mentions that Jesus as resurrected Lord even ate fish in front of his disciples. *Touch me and see, because a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you can see I have. Having said this, He showed them His hands and feet. But while they still could not believe because of their joy and were amazed, He asked them, 'Do you have anything to eat? So they gave him a piece of a broiled fish, and He took it and ate in their presence* (Luke 24:39-43). I think Jesus did this to help convince his disciples it was really him, the same Jesus of Nazareth, not necessarily that we will worry about what we will or will not eat in heaven.

What difference really does this all make about what heaven will be like? All too often we Christians disparage our physical bodies, even the creation itself. Sin abounds all around. The idea of a soul urging to be released from a sinful body is difficult to shed. The Bible urges us to see things more in God's plans for our final reality in an embodied existence. He made us for resurrection not separation of soul and body at our death. Similarly, says Grenz, God created a material universe, not for destruction, but as a place for his redeemed family on a **transformed** earth totally redesigned by Him. For sure, it will have some differences as we said earlier from what we now know.

We have assurances in Scripture that heaven as the new creation will be a glorious eternal order designed and made by God Himself in which "all creation will reflect its divinely intended form" (Grenz). I like the way Boyd Hunt summarized the meaning of heaven: "heaven is where God is, what Christ is exalted, and where God's redemptive purposes are perfectly fulfilled. These are really three aspects of one idea, namely, the belief that heaven is a place of light and joy where the redeemer is freely glorified forever by his creatures" (346-47). Thus, the Bible begins the history of creation with the story of what happens in a luscious garden in Gen. 3, continues with what God does to redeem us unto Himself and concludes with His invitation to a new garden in which we may live eternally with Him the fulfillment of that abundant life made possible through Jesus Christ (Rev. 21).

Charles Wesley said it well "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling":

"Finish then thy new creation,
 Pure and spotless let us be;
 Let us see thy great salvation
 Perfectly restored in thee!
 Changed from glory into glory,
 Till in heav'n we take our place,
 Till we cast our crowns before thee, Lost in wonder, love and praise!"