

Notes on

The End

**Five talks by Revd John Richardson
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1. The Importance of Eschatology

Introduction

The plan for these five sessions is to look at ‘The End’ — the end of the world, and what Christianity has to say about it.

However, I want to emphasise straight away that we’re going to spend our time not so much on the ‘how’s’ of the end as the why’s and the wherefore’s. And in this first chapter we’re going to look at why it is so important.

Eschatology

The technical term for this subject is ‘eschatology’, which is from a Greek word meaning ‘The End’, and since it’s a word we’re going to use a lot, we ought to get used to it.

But it’s not a word we use very often — not like atonement or sanctification or propitiation, which are also technical terms, but words we’re perhaps more used to hearing. And this, I think, reflects our nervousness about the subject — we’ve rather abandoned the field to the nutters and the Americans.

Yet actually it is fundamentally important, and you can tell that when you read the New Testament, because the New Testament is *full* of eschatology. Similarly, the thinking of the medieval church was dominated by eschatology.

Eschatology and Mission

But why does it matter? The answer is that it matters because — and here we have another technical term — *eschatology directs missiology*. That is

to say, our understanding of and attitude towards *mission* flows directly out of our understanding of and attitude towards *eschatology* — the end towards which the world is moving.

Whether we realize it or not, the agenda of the Church at every level, from the local congregation, through to the diocese and on up to the national institution, is being set by the view it has of eschatology, whether expressed or unexpressed. Take, for example, a recent e-mail I had from the diocesan stewardship adviser in the Chichester diocese who wanted to know more about our Giving As Partners proposals.

He said: “At the moment Bishops generally allocate stipendiary clergy to the benefices with greatest mission and ministry needs.” But what are the mission and ministry needs that the bishop recognizes and which therefore dictate his placement of clergy? I have to say I simply don’t know, but whatever they are, they will be a reflection of his eschatology.

If he thinks that the world will end with Christ’s return, with the judgment, with the separation of the sheep from the goats, with the inauguration of the Kingdom and the banishment of the impenitent into outer darkness, then he will see ‘need’ very differently from a bishop who doesn’t think in terms of a “New Creation” coming in to replace this world.

Eschatology and Life

But eschatology matters to more than just mission, because there is a close connection between our thinking about

the end of the world and *all* our actions in the present.

I've just finished the latest *Explore* notes for Ecclesiastes, and of course Ecclesiastes takes a very 'downbeat' view of life: "It is an unhappy business," says the Preacher talking about life in 1:13b, "that God has given to the children of man to be busy with."

But one of the issues in Ecclesiastes is the eschatological perspective — the question of whether you've arrived at the end of the journey or not. The Israelites *thought* that the end-goal towards which everything was moving was security in the Promised Land. But although they found security under Solomon, they didn't find satisfaction, which is why the Preacher in Ecclesiastes is so negative.

"If this is 'it'", he seems to be saying, "I don't think much of it!" And so everything is thrown into question. If life in the Promised Land under Solomon's rule is a burdensome cycle of birth and death, without anything to look forward to and without any final justice then what *is* the point?

Ecclesiastes therefore concludes that although everything will *somehow* be brought to judgment, the most you can do is make the best of life.

Eschatology and Hope

And oddly enough, in our own day there is probably a similar attitude amongst most people, especially as traditional notions of the end of the world have faded.

Even Christians seem to think of the world as a kind of conveyor belt for the

afterlife. Individuals drop off the end of the belt into some vaguely benign future, but the belt itself keeps going round and round.

The end of the world is an afterthought in most theology, and an irrelevance in most people's lives. The only difference *in this regard* between the Christian and the unbeliever is that the unbeliever doesn't see judgment as an issue because it has no concept of punishment by God, only forgiveness. And that is a very slight difference if you don't have a clearcut eschatology, because it means from a *practical* point of view, Christians and unbelievers share the same out look on life.

Christians don't worry about judgment because they believe they are saved. Unbelievers don't worry because they don't think it is going to happen. And without a clear view of the end, both groups wind up focussing on the immediate present, which is how we can deal with the evils and sufferings of *this* life.

Past, Present and Future

This is even *more* so when there is, as at present, a loss of confidence in progress. In *Hope against Hope: Christian Eschatology at the Turn of the Millennium*, Richard Bauckham and Trevor Hart write thus:

It is arguable that, whereas pre-modern (traditional) societies gave priority to the past and modern (progressive) society gave priority to the future, with the decline of the idea of progress a postmodern society is emerging in which priority is given to the present.

Traditional societies focus on the past: the ancestors who gave us our identity

and told us how to live. Modernist societies focus on the future — ‘things can only get better’. Postmodern societies reject the past, doubt the future and focus on the present.

A postmodern Church then — even an Evangelical postmodern Church — may lack any real concern about anything except the present.

Orthodoxy

However, orthodox eschatology emphasises both the past *and* the future.

The *past* — specifically the incarnation, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ — determinates the *future* — namely the coming kingdom and judgement. And this ‘past and future’ connectedness determines the church’s mission in the *present*.

So in Acts 17:30-31 at the Areopagus in Athens, Paul concludes his speech with these words:

The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he 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 by raising him from the dead.

Here we see the impact of orthodox eschatology: the *past resurrection* of Jesus guarantees *future judgement* and controls *present preaching* of salvation.

Progress

But although we see here in Acts a fully-developed eschatology, the seeds of eschatological thinking are planted early in the Old Testament. We get the first inklings in Genesis 3, where God says to the serpent:

I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.

Immediately, therefore, there is an interest in future developments. Specifically, there is a future *hope* and so the birth of Cain is regarded *hopefully*: “I have gotten a man,” says Eve in 4:1, “*eth-yahweh*.”

And when it turns out that Cain is not the one to crush the serpent’s head the hope is simply carried forward, as we see when Noah is born (Gen 5:28-29):

When Lamech had lived 122 years, he fathered a son and called his name Noah, saying, “Out of the ground that the Lord has cursed this one shall bring us relief from our work and from the painful toil of our hands.”

So in the Old Testament, time is moving forward into the future, not going round in circles.

Purpose

However, the shape of this future takes a long while to emerge. The call of Abraham, for example, is in the most general terms In Genesis 12:1 and following:

Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.”

There is instruction, but not much by way of direction. It is almost as if Abraham is told “Keep going until I tell you to stop.” Nevertheless, the going of Abraham means that biblical history has a goal. That is to say, biblical history is *teleological* — it has a *telos* or ‘end point’ or ‘telos’.

The word ‘telos’ however, doesn’t mean ‘coming to a stop’ but ‘coming to fulfilment’, which means there is a reason or a purpose behind biblical history. A teleological explanation is based on the *purpose* of a thing — we have incisor teeth *so that* we can eat meat.

The evolutionary explanation is that we happen to have incisor teeth which turn out to be useful for eating meat. Evolution is not a teleological explanation, because there is no *purpose* for any development — only a *usefulness* discovered after the event. But as soon as you introduce the idea of *purpose* in *theology*, you also introduce the idea of *plan*. If God has an end in view, then he has a plan.

Process

This, incidentally, is why we must dismiss the idea of Process Theology. In Process Theology, history is about what God is *becoming*, rather than what God has planned. God’s own vision unfolds as history unfolds.

Thus John Cobb, an exponent of this view, writes,

The character of the world is influenced by God, but it is not determined by him and the world in its turn contributes novelty and richness to the divine experience. (Cousins, Ewert ed. *Process Theology: Basic Writings*, New York: Newman Press, 1971, p 165)

Process Theology is very popular in a Postmodern world, but the God of the Bible is not a God of Process Theology, because things there are going to *plan*.

Deferment

However, the unfolding of God’s plan

in Scripture also involves constant deferment. Abraham’s journey never results in settlement. He is a ‘wandering Aramean’ for the whole of his life.

Again, the Pentateuch, which seems to be about the journey of the Israelites to this ‘Promised Land’, ends with the death of Moses *outside* the land.

Again, when the land is entered, there is a slow conquest, with many disappointments. And when peace is finally achieved under Solomon, the wise realize that nothing has really changed and life is still full of frustrations.

Then, as history moves on, the land is lost and so the ‘goal’ of biblical expectation becomes not the land, but the ‘Day of the LORD’ — a point at which God will act in power and judgement to restore and redeem his people.

Connected with that is the figure of the Messiah who will fulfil the promise of someone to sit on David’s throne forever, who will conquer Israel’s enemies, and who will usher in the reign of God, not only over Israel but over the world. But by the end of the Old Testament it still hasn’t happened! Israel is still waiting, and the Old Testament itself demands a sequel.

NT Expectations

Of course, we know that the New Testament contains the fulfilment of the Old Testament promises and hopes. But it is instructive to see how, at the outset of Jesus’ life and ministry, these hopes were thoroughly ‘Old Testament’.

In Luke 1:54-55, for example, Mary expresses a thoroughly traditional hope about what God is doing:

He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever.

Again, at the birth of John the Baptists, Zechariah looks forward to an entirely Israelite hope (Lk 1:68-70):

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us; to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

The Early Church

And even after the resurrection of Jesus, the hopes of the disciples still have an Old Covenant focus. So in Acts 1:6 they say to Jesus, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?”

So although there is no Process Theology of *God* in the Bible, but there is certainly a ‘process theology’ of his people. The picture unfolds for them, and their response to it develops. And at the very outset of the mission of the Church, they still haven’t got it.

It is only gradually that they realize that their own timetable is wrong, because their understanding of the ‘telos’, the end-fulfilment of God’s promises, is wrong. And a key part of this realization is the bringing in of the

Gentiles *as Gentiles*. Gradually it is realized that God’s plan is not to restore Israel *as the kingdom* but to bring about a kingdom made up of an unknown number of people from all nations in a new heavens and a new earth under the Lordship of Christ.

Conclusion

And it is *that* vision which dominates the mission of the New Testament: the utter replacement of what is old with what is new under Christ as its head.

Unfortunately, that vision is always in danger of being lost. the church regularly does one of two things.

One way this happens is when people lose sight of Jesus’ warning (Matt 24:36-38; Lk 17:26-27) that prior to his coming things will be ‘as they were in the days of Noah’ — in other words ‘business as usual’ — which means that it is fundamentally unpredictable. When people become obsessed with prediction or think they know the time of the end or the details about how it will happen, mission and ministry suffer.

But the more common problem is simply to write this biblical eschatology out of our thinking entirely. Life then becomes not just ‘business as usual’, but ‘business as usual indefinitely’. And again, biblical mission grinds to a halt.

To keep mission on track, we must have a clear and correct grasp of biblical eschatology. So that is where we will be going in our next session, looking at the ‘what, where and whens’ of the end.

2. The Content of Eschatology

Introduction

In our first session I emphasised two important things about eschatology. The first was that *eschatology*, our understanding of the future goal, shapes *missiology*, our understanding of present mission. The second thing was that *biblical eschatology* is always an understanding of the unfolding plan of God, which is perfectly known to him.

The plan unfolds

Because this plan unfolds in *history*, however, the way in which it is understood differs at the end of the Bible from at the beginning. At the beginning, it is rather vague. The people of faith look to a 'brighter future' and a 'better place'. But their expectations are as limited as their experience.

This limitation is recognized by the writer to the Hebrews. In Hebrews 11:13, after writing about the experiences of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Sarah, he says,

These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.

The New Testament writers are aware that they have a fuller picture than the saints of old. Peter puts it like this in 1 Peter 1:10-12:

Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ

and the subsequent glories. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look.

Again, Paul writes in Ephesians 3:4-5

When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.

What this means is that we will not see the whole picture in the Old Testament, any more than the Old Testament prophets themselves saw the whole picture.

Hence in the Old Testament, the eschatological future hope is expressed in terms of a physical, national and geographical kingdom of Israel, whose expectations reflect past history. In the New Testament, the Old Covenant still provides a starting point, but the expression and expectation of the eschatological hope has developed in the light of the coming of Christ. So today we're going to look at the content of that hope and also at some of the misconceptions we have to avoid.

Hope Deferred

The first thing to recognize is that the New Testament hope is once again a *deferred* hope. On the one hand, the ministry of Christ indeed brings the future kingdom of God into the present. In that sense, the hope of the Old Covenant was realized in the New. Hence healing the sick, raising the dead, stilling the storm, turning water into wine and so on, are not just

demonstrations of the *power* of the Son of God, but of the *character* of the Kingdom of God.

And so the Kingdom of God, manifested in the presence of the Son of God, really *is* about the things we *hope* it will be about. It embodies the vision of Revelation 21:3-4:

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

But, on the other hand, this is only temporary. Christ goes away, and with him goes much of the manifestation of the future kingdom in the present.

The Way of Christ

Yet this is not just because the kingdom has not yet fully arrived. Nor, crucially, is it because the Church lacks the faith to bring the kingdom into the present. Rather it is because the church must necessarily walk the way of its Lord, which entails the necessity of suffering as Christ suffered. So, for example, in Hebrews 2:10-11 the writer says this:

For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering. For he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one origin.

In Christian theology, suffering is not just something *from* which we are saved but something *through* which we are saved. It is part of the process of salvation and it achieves something

which nothing else can. So in Romans 5:3-4 Paul writes,

... we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope.

And James writes in 1:2-3:

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.

Perhaps most remarkably, in Colossians 1:24, Paul writes,

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church ...

The Kingdom is not fully manifested in the present, because we are still in the time of the suffering of Christ's body, of which we are a part.

The cross and eschatology

If we forget this, we run into the danger of what is called 'over-realized eschatology'. In plain English, we expect too much too soon.

You see it in the Bible, in the church at Corinth. But you also see it in Church history and in the present day, in movements which overemphasize miracles. But you also see it in the lives of Christians who simply expect to be comfortable! When we demand that God bless our mortgage and our marriage we are really demonstrating an over-realized eschatology and all the Christian immaturity that goes with it.

This is what Luther called a 'theology of glory' — it can only see God where there is victory and triumph, not defeat and doubt. But Luther rightly said that

God is most perfectly revealed on the *cross*, and therefore it is the person who knows that the way of the cross is *God's* way who truly deserves to be called a Christian. And for us to be experiencing the way of the cross, we must *not* be experiencing the Kingdom of Glory. Hence we find ourselves living in the *hope* of the coming kingdom but with the Christ-like experience of present suffering, so that we may become like Christ.

Coming Again

However, the biblical hope is in a *returning* Christ. And this should shape both our mission and our morals, because the return of Christ not only brings the end of this world and ushers in the world to come, but brings the final judgment. Hence the gospel is preached in order that people will be saved. On the day of Pentecost in Acts 2:40 Peter appeals, "Save yourselves from this crooked generation." And Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 9:22 "I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some."

But this also means the *saved* are called to live lives consistent with salvation from coming judgement. Hence Peter writes in 1 Peter 1:17,

... if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one's deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile ..

Mission and Morality.

Of course, if we are not clear about this, we will not be clear either about mission or morality.

The Church of England report titled *The Mystery of Salvation* typically leaves it

as a complete mystery what salvation saves us *from*, which perhaps explains why the Church is so unclear about morality.

By contrast, in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 Paul warns against the deceptive idea that you can be immoral and enter the kingdom of God.

The whole underlying assumption of biblical mission and ministry is that Christ's coming will bring the day of wrath — a word which repeatedly occurs in relation to God's future activity. So in Romans 2:5-8 Paul gives this warning:

But because of 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. He will render to each one according to his works ...

And then he explains what those works are:

to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honour and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury.

Timetable

We'll look further at *judgment* in a later session, but I want to finish this session by considering the question of the *timetable* of Christ's return.

The Bible is quite clear that we are living in what it calls the 'last days' — but we have been in them since Christ's ascension. In Acts 2:17 Peter describes what has just happened in terms of the last days:

And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on

all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams ...

The Bible is also clear that no one can know in advance the day or the hour of Christ's return. Jesus said that very clearly and specifically, in Matthew 24:36, 24:50, 25:13 and so on.

In this sense, Christ's return will be a surprise. He will come 'like a thief in the night' (1 Thess 5:2), 'at an hour when you least expect him' (Lk 12:40). And so the message to the church is to be ready at all times so that you *won't* be taken by surprise.

Recognition and prediction

However, at the same time there is some significant biblical testimony that arrival of the end can be recognized even though it cannot be predicted. In 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12 Paul writes about this at some length:

¹ Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers, ² not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. ³ Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, ⁴ who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God. ⁵ Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things? ⁶ And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time. ⁷ For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work. Only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the

way. ⁸ And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of his coming. ⁹ The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, ¹⁰ and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. ¹¹ Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, ¹² in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

Paul is undoubtedly saying here that Christ's return unarguably could not have taken place because certain *other* things you were taught would be associated with it have clearly not yet taken place. Specifically, the restraining hand currently placed on evil and on Satanic deception has not yet been released, the lawless one has not yet been revealed, the powerful deceptions have not yet taken place.

And although this doesn't allow us to *predict* the end, it does suggest a broader 'timetable' to the end which means Christ isn't going to come before I finish this talk. Moreover, this broader 'timetable' can be detected in Revelation at several points, for example in 20:7-8, where it says this,

And when the thousand years are ended, Satan will be released from his prison and will come out to deceive the nations that are at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them for battle; their number is like the sand of the sea.

Here again we see restraint removed, Satanic power released and the nations deceived. And it does seem that the Apostolic church indeed had a

‘timetable’ in view which would in some sense give a recognizable ‘run up’ to Christ’s return.

Prediction

The obvious problem with this suggestion is that we are not supposed to be able to predict the time of Christ’s return! Take, for example, Mark 13:5-8:

See that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name, saying, “I am he!” and they will lead many astray. And when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. This must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. These are but the beginning of the birth pains.

Yet even here we detect a change of tempo in v 14:

But when you see the abomination of desolation standing where it ought not to be (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.

There is unchanging continuity — wars and rumours of wars — and yet also change as the end nears. And yet it is possible to say something is unpredictable and yet that you will know when it is about to happen.

I may say to you that I will leave the room when I take off my glasses. So until I take my glasses off, you know I am not about to leave the room — just as the Thessalonians knew Christ had not come. And you know that when my glasses come off, I’m leaving — just as Jesus told the people of Judea to flee to the hills when they saw the abomination of desolation. But you still have no useful way of predicting when I will

leave the room! By the time you know it’s going to happen, it will already be happening.

So in the same way, there are things which will accompany the return of Christ which will tell us it is happening, and until they begin we know it is *not* happening. But when they start to happen, it will be like the old ‘four-minute warning’ — enough to tell you you’re in trouble, but not enough to enable you to do anything about it that you shouldn’t have done a long while ago!

Conclusion

Saying this, however, brings up the controversial area of the Rapture and the Millennium. Are the ‘Left Behind’ books right? I am going to argue basically that they are not. I’m also going to argue there is no coming Rapture and that we are living in the millennium right now.

But all that will have to wait for the next session!

3. Whatever Next?

Introduction

One of the most important and helpful principle to keep in mind in studying the Bible is to interpret complicated things in the light of straightforward things, not the other way round. And this is particularly true when dealing with the 'end times', where there have been all sorts of exotic ideas — some of them appearing in Christian best-sellers.

The most straightforward teaching of all is simply that Christ is coming again and that when he does it will be the occasion of final judgement. This is, as it were, the backbone of the biblical teaching. So, for example, in Revelation 6:15-17 we have this description of the end:

Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?"

But notice, this day of God's wrath, which is also the day of the Lamb, is *one single day*, one combined event.

Problems

The problems arise when we try to say more about when, and more specifically how, that might happen.

In this connection there are three important words we need to know, which are: Millennium, Tribulation and Rapture.

Millennialism

A Millennium is simply a period of a thousand years. Millennialism, however, refers to a particular view of the period of a thousand years mentioned in Revelation 20:4,

Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom the authority to judge was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of 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 for a thousand years.

Because the Greek word for a thousand is *chilia*, Millennialism is sometimes also called Chiliasm, and is also known as Millenniumism and Millenarianism. But what it comes down to is that this thousand-year period in Revelation 20 is a mathematical precise period of time during which Christ will reign over the earth.

Pre- and Post-

However, the picture is complicated by the question of *when* Christ will return to the earth. Will it be before the Millennium or after?

Premillennialists believe it will be before — hence *pre* — the Millennium, and that Christ will return, the dead will be raised and he and the Church will rule the world before the final rebellion described, it is thought, in Revelation 20:7-9.

Postmillennialism, as the name suggests, believe Christ will return physically only *after* the Millennium. The 'first resurrection' then, referred to

in vv 4 and 5 is a spiritual event, related to conversion or sometimes baptism.

In a moment we'll look at a third alternative, but first we need to deal with the terms Tribulation and Rapture.

Tribulation

'Tribulation' has taken on a technical meaning in thinking about the end, referring to a dramatically increased period of persecution and suffering before the final end of this world.

However, the word itself is common in the Bible and simply means suffering, which is depicted as something which applies in every era. Thus at the Last Supper Jesus says to the disciples in John 16:33, "In the world you will have tribulation." Again, in Romans 5:3 Paul says "We rejoice in our tribulation." And again in Acts 14:22 Paul says to the disciples we must literally go through many *tribulations* to enter the kingdom of God.

Tribulation is therefore the *present* experience of the Church and the Christian. This is not to deny that things could get worse, but the difference the Bible suggests is essentially one of degree, not kind. Tribulation is the lot of the Christian, and our task is to deal with that tribulation *now*, not project it into the future where it is of no relevance to us today.

Rapture

The third term we have to deal with is the Rapture, which is the idea that prior to Christ's return, true believers will be removed from the world. This is basically derived from an over-literalist reading of 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 (and

only really dates back to the nineteenth century and JN Darby):

For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, 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, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.

The idea is often linked to Dispensationalism, a doctrine which views salvation as working through different structures in different human periods — there are periods of Conscience, of Law and of Grace leading up to the Millennium.

Of course, we should have no difficulty with accepting these verses as describing *something* that will happen. But Dispensationalists build it into a scenario whereby Christians are actually removed from the world before Christ physically returns — bringing those same Christians with him — to begin the Millennial kingdom of a thousand years.

And this Rapture occurs somewhere either before or during an equally mathematically reckoned seven-year period of persecution called *the* Tribulation. So you can see, these concepts are interlinked, though in various combinations.

Amillennialism

If you're having trouble following them, however, don't worry too much, because I want to say we can dispense with all of them in favour of a view which is generally called 'Amillennialism', which has in any case

generally been the dominant view in mainstream churches over the centuries.

Calling it Amillennialism is unhelpful, because you're still left trying to work out where the Millennium fits in. But Amillennialism is basically the view that Christ will return not to set up a temporary reign, but to wind up this present world order, that this will be accompanied by the physical resurrection and the judgment, and that what will follow will be the *permanent* establishment of the kingdom of God in the new heavens and the new earth.

It is, if I can put it like this, the 'common sense' reading of the major passages of Scripture which deal with the Second Coming, and uses them to control our reading of other texts, not the other way round. To take just one example, look at 1 Corinthians 15:22-24:

For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, 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.

Here, Christ is the victor who surrenders his kingdom to the Father, not the failure whom the Father rescues. Or again, take Matthew 25:31-34:

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come,

you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.'

Here the coming of Christ terminates this world order, initiates the judgment and is followed by the establishment of the eternal kingdom.

By contrast, all the Premillennial, Tribulationist and Rapturist schemes, whilst appearing to be rigorously faithful to some Scriptures, actually create more problems than they solve. The greatest of these is Christ does *not* establish the kingdom when he returns, but rather sets up a kind of interim administration, whilst the establishment of the Kingdom requires a further act of divine intervention to overthrow Satan's final rebellion and, indeed, to rescue both Christ *and* his administration.

Dispensing with Dispensationalism

I would suggest, then, that we dispense with the Millennium as the controlling concept in our understanding of the end. Specifically, Revelation 20:4 needs to be read in the light of Ephesians 2:5-6:

Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God, and who had not worshipped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life [literally, "lived"] and reigned with Christ for a thousand years.

... even when we were dead in our trespasses, [God] made us alive together with Christ ... and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus ...

Nevertheless, Christ will come again. So when he does come, what will happen? Broadly there are four things we need to be aware of.

Reunion

First, the Bible promises the reuniting of heaven and earth, and therefore the restoration of the *presence* of God in his world. We see this presence of God in a remarkable way in Genesis 3:8:

[Adam and Eve] heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden.

By comparison, Revelation 22:3-4 describes the New Jerusalem thus:

No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. *They will see his face*, and his name will be on their foreheads.

The great Christian hope, then, is not that we will be going to heaven when we die, but that heaven and earth will be reunited when Christ returns.

Resurrection

Secondly, the return of Christ will mean the resurrection of the body.

Christians often speak, and importantly they often sing, as if the great hope was that on death the soul will go to heaven. But as the Bible makes abundantly clear, the real hope is the resurrection of our bodies, following the pattern of Christ's resurrection.

Now of course there are questions we naturally ask: what happens *between* death and the resurrection? What about those bodies — actually the majority — which have been virtually destroyed, and so on? But the point to bear in mind is that we *will* be restored bodily in the world to come, and although there is continuity between what we will be and

what we now are, there is also a discontinuity.

We see this in Christ's own resurrection. In some respects, his body is quite *unlike* what it was. He is able to enter and leave a locked room. He is not immediately recognizable to the disciples on the road to Emmaus. But in other respects, it is the same body. Thus it can still show the wounds of his crucifixion; and therefore this is clearly the body that was laid in the tomb and hence is *truly* Jesus in the fullest sense.

The resurrection of *Jesus* body should then inform our own thinking about our future. As John puts it in 1 John 3:2:

Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we will be like him, because we shall see him as he is.

Renewal

The third key aspect of Christ's return is *renewal*. Corresponding to the resurrected body, is a new creation replacing the old order. 2 Peter 3:10 reads:

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.

And Revelation 21:1 says:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.

Plausibility

However, talk of resurrection and a new heavens and earth raises the question of plausibility. Many would feel that our

scientific understanding makes it hard to believe that this Universe could pass away and a new one take its place. But these are not new questions. Peter faces this question in 2 Peter 3:3-4:

... scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires. They will say, "Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation."

Yet ironically, contemporary science depicts a world which is much *less* 'solid' and permanent than people in Peter's day would have thought. Only fifty years ago, astronomers like Fred Hoyle were arguing seriously for a 'steady state' universe — a universe the same yesterday, today and forever. Today, almost all astronomers agree that the Universe had a finite beginning. But then the Universe must have either had a cause *beyond itself* or it must have been created, for as the philosopher CEM Joad pointed out, if uncaused and uncreated can just happen it demolishes the basic assumptions on which science proceeds.

A *new creation*, therefore, should seem more or a scientific possibility today than in biblical times.

Need

However, there is not just a scientific justification but more importantly a *theological need* for a new creation, since the Bible suggests that the Universe which now exists reflects an underlying reality of *sin*. In Romans 8:19-21 we read this:

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not

willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

In other words, the Universe is the way it is for now because of the intimate link between the physical and moral realms. But by the same token, when the underlying reality changes, the Universe will be changed to correspond to that. So vv 22-23 continue,

For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

So when *our* redemption is fully experienced, expressed the resurrection of our bodies, there will be a *universal* redemption, which is the abolition of what *now is* and its replacement by what is to come.

Final Judgment

This brings us to the fourth critical aspect of Christ's return, which is the final judgment.

One of our problems with this, however, is that we've tended to treat it in isolation; as a kind of 'Finals Exam' for individuals, which centres only on their individual actions or personal faith.

We need to see the final judgment, however, as the climax to a *cosmic* process involving the whole of reality, both physical *and* spiritual, of which we are just a part, albeit a crucial part. The final judgment is not just an assessment of individuals, but is the answer to all

our questions about good and evil, and consequently about the very nature of creation.

Protest

It was Voltaire's *Candide* who asked, "If this is the best of all possible worlds, what can the rest be?" But he wasn't the first or the last to be disillusioned by the reality around us. More recently, Chris Rea's song, "Tell me there's a heaven" is a passionate protest against the nature of the world in which we live and the Christian justification that eternal life provides the answer.

And it takes a certain boldness to answer his challenge, "Yes, every wrong done *is* a game plan to that great and glorious day", and we can only do this if we have a very bold picture of what that game plan is.

Good and Evil

And to see that, we have to understand that the coming of Christ is not just a step in history. It is the end of one thing and the beginning of another.

The second coming is, therefore, the final vindication of all that has gone before and hence, in this respect, the final justification of God — the final demonstration that he is indeed righteous. Paul indicates this in Romans 3:5-6:

But if our unrighteousness serves to show the righteousness of God, what shall we say? That God is unrighteous to inflict wrath on us? (I speak in a human way.) By no means! For then how could God judge the world?

Abraham similarly picks this up in his dialogue with God before the

destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 18:23-25:

²³ Then Abraham drew near and said, "Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? ²⁴ Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city. Will you then sweep away the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous who are in it? ²⁵ Far be it from you to do such a thing, to put the righteous to death with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?"

Hence God's final judgement of the world must not only be just, but must justify *him*. It must be the point at which God is shown to be *good*. And it will help our thinking if we realize that by the same token it is the point at which that which is opposed to God is finally shown to be evil.

This, however, will be our topic in the next session.

4. Last and First Things

Introduction

Look at from our perspective, the return of Christ is usually thought of as marking the *end* of the world. But of course from a biblical perspective it is really just “The End of the Beginning.”

The world as we know it, and the present relationship between heaven and earth, is a precursor to the new heavens and the new earth we read about in Revelation 22:3-5, where the New Jerusalem is described thus:

No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will [serve] him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.

In the world to come, however, the servants of God not be lounging around on clouds, nor will they be gazing on the face of God in mystic contemplation, nor even ‘worshipping’ him in the sense that word is generally used. They will be serving him and reigning — in other words, they will have a job to do. We don’t know what that job is, so there is no point in speculating about it, but we know it awaits us.

Hell

Not everyone, however, will be engaged in this service and reign. In Revelation 20:11-15 we read this:

Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was

found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

The Bible clearly teaches, here and elsewhere, an eternal and terrible judgement on sin and sinners.

Hell

However, in modern society, Hell is regarded as an intrinsically immoral concept, therefore those who believe what the Bible says on this are regarded as themselves immoral.

And to make matters worse, of course, the same outlook is deeply entrenched in the Church, where in some circles a belief in Hell renders you unworthy of the name ‘Christian’, despite the fact that the historic Creeds affirm that Christ “shall come again with glory to judge both the quick and the dead”.

The problem is that this attitude arises from a properly compassionate outlook. No-one in their right mind likes to see anyone suffer, and so the idea of people suffering eternally seems too horrible to accept. And yet eternal judgment and punishment is clearly there in the Bible, *especially* in the words of Jesus himself. So unless we are going to rewrite the Bible, or like the Apostle Peter, try to

put Jesus right on a few things, we have to come to terms with it and try to work out *why* the Hell that the Bible talks about exists.

Viewpoint

The difficulty we have with judgement and Hell comes, I want to suggest, from our viewpoint which gives us a seriously limited perspective on good and evil.

Our problem is that we normally see evil and good in the same situations and in the same individuals. By contrast, we rarely if ever experience a radical disjunction between good and evil. In Romans 8:28, for example, Paul writes, ... we know that for those who love God *all things* work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

Or again, take King Ahab. This is what the Bible says about him in 1 Kings 21:25-26:

There was none who sold himself to do what was evil in the sight of the Lord like Ahab, whom Jezebel his wife incited. He acted very abominably in going after idols, as the Amorites had done, whom the Lord cast out before the people of Israel.

Ahab is an Olympic-standard sinner. Yet the very next verses say this:

And when Ahab heard those words, he tore his clothes and put sackcloth on his flesh and fasted and lay in sackcloth and went about dejectedly. And the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, "Have you seen how Ahab has humbled himself before me? Because he has humbled himself before me, I will not bring the disaster in his days; but in his son's days I will bring the disaster upon his house."

Ahab the sinner becomes Ahab the penitent — and God forgives him!

And this is our problem, we find good in evil circumstances and we see good in evil people. But this is only a temporary situation — a feature of this world, not the world to come. And from the perspective of the world to come, things look quite different.

Separation

The book of Revelation uses the image of the Lake of Fire to emphasise the absolute final separation between God and that all that is opposed to him. Just as Death and Hades are thrown into the lake of fire, so in Revelation 20:10 we read:

... the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.

Bearing in mind this is a vision, not a video, it is nevertheless telling us there is a final separation between evil and good.

However, if you *deny* the image of the Lake of Fire, for whatever reason, you must inevitably deny the need for this separation. And so instead of the biblical image of light and darkness, you are left with shades of gray. And instead of evil being treated as 'evil' it must be treated as a darker shade of good!

Of course, as I pointed out a moment ago, shades of gray are *all* we experience in this life, but we mustn't project this onto our view of eternity or of God. 1 John 1:5 says,

This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is *no darkness at all*.

Meaning, “In him there is no evil.” Therefore God is not a ‘shade of gray’, but absolute light and absolute, unmingled, good. And Heaven and Hell need to be seen not so much as places but as situations.

Responsibility

A crucial part of the biblical view of evil, then, is that it is a quality which is *not* to be found in God. By the same token, God’s own goodness is not a matter of difference of degrees but of total separation. And it is this separation which is encompassed by the word ‘holiness’. God’s holiness is ultimately his ‘otherness’, and his otherness is that evil is nowhere to be found in him.

However, evil *is* to be found elsewhere, and specifically it is found in that which God has *created*. So in Isaiah 45:6-7 we read this:

I am the LORD, and there is no other. I form light and create darkness, I make well-being and create calamity, I am the LORD, who does all these things.

And this, of course, is one of the great problems for us. The absolute sovereignty of God over all things means ultimately the absolute responsibility of God for all things.

And this means we cannot explain evil away via the ‘free will’ argument, by saying that God creates something which he cannot or will not control, and which he can therefore disown as not his responsibility. The biblical picture is that God *creates* that which is evil, and

yet is not himself evil. So how does that work?

Creation and Redemption

The most helpful thing for us is to remember that God is not only the Creator but the Redeemer, and we need to keep this twofold activity of God in view if we are to stand a chance of understanding good and evil.

As Creator, God has done a most extraordinary thing — in fact we often overlook how extraordinary it is. God has brought into being that which is *not* God, and which therefore inevitably has qualities *other* than those which we find in God. To give the most obvious example, creation is physical and God is not.

Mankind

We see an even more dramatic contrast, however, in human nature itself.

The Bible makes the extraordinary statement in Genesis 1:26 that we are made in, or rather *as*, God’s image, ruling over creation with a divine mandate as God’s representative beings. And, despite the Fall, it continues this theme throughout Scripture. And this gives us an equally extraordinary place in the divine plan of *redemption*. So in Ephesians 1:3-10 we read this about our redemption:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has

blessed us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

And then, from v 19, Paul is praying that they may know:

... what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

So the outcome of redemption is that we who are the Church constitute with Christ *one complete body* of which he is the head and which rules over all other things.

That is what we are redeemed *in* Christ. But outside of this redemption we are still beings ‘in the image of God’, and yet we are *evil*, and this has equally long-term consequences if we remain unredeemed.

The Nature of Evil

Our problem is that we literally don’t see what this means. Indeed, because we are sinners, we actually need to be told what it means to be sinners rather than being able to see it for ourselves. We are like the goldfish in the bowl. We cannot tell what it means to be

‘wet’ because we have never been dry. So passages like Romans 3:9-18 spell out to us *as sinners* what it really means to be sinners:

... we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin, as it is written: “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.” “Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive.” “The venom of asps is under their lips.” “Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.” “Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known.” “There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

We are *told* this is true — and yet, of course, we don’t experience such unrelieved wickedness in ourselves or other people. The text functions to strip away our rose-tinted spectacles, like the description of debased human society in Romans 1:28-31:

And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

Of course people and societies aren’t ‘really’ that bad — not from our viewpoint. But that is, of course, what they *become* like when good diminishes and evil increases.

Change and Decay

Of course, it can work the other way. In 2 Corinthians 3:18 we read this:

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.

The ‘image’ here is the image of Christ who is the *perfect* image of God, where the fallen human race is the failed and flawed image-bearer. But the point is that one of two processes must inevitably triumph — we are, finally, being “changed from glory into glory” or going in the other direction. And we have a helpful reminder of this in the impact on our bodies. In 2 Corinthians 4:16, Paul writes this:

So we do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day.

In our bodies we see coming true the warning of God given to Adam about eating the fruit in Eden: “In the day that you eat of it, you shall surely die” (Gen 2:17). And we can watch it happening with our own eyes. This *outward* flesh, which is wasting away and dying, is the place in which we are still bound to the principle of the ‘spiritual’ flesh which causes us to sin. And the lesson we should learn is that the outward decay of our bodies reflects a spiritual reality which, if we are not in Christ, means our inward nature is also wasting away.

Death and Judgement

This also highlights the importance of the moment of death for the individual. We are probably familiar with the words of Hebrews 9:27 “it is appointed for man to die once, and after that

comes judgment”. But the moment of judgement is followed by transformation. Romans 6:5-11 describes the difference death makes:

For if we have been united with him [Christ] in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin. Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Christ’s own death is a death to death *and* a death to sin. Neither death *nor* sin have any more dominion over him because in death he faces the final judgement and triumphs in the final temptation.

Temptation

Whilst Christ was without sin in his *nature*, the Bible tells us very specifically that shared our *temptations* — indeed if he had not, he could not have been our High Priest according to Hebrews 2:17-18.

But is Christ *still* subject to temptation? The answer must surely be “No”. Having faced the temptation and withstood the test, Christ has passed through judgement to vindication, illustrated by his being seated at the right hand of God. And this vindication is final because it is more than forensic — it is not just a verdict on his behaviour — it is relational. His

obedience means that nothing can challenge or break his relationship with the Father.

But the good news of the gospel is that at the point of our own death, the same will become true of those how are in Christ. They will also find that their relationship with God is established beyond question, and in union with him they will find their own ties to this flesh broken with its temptations from without and within are also broken.

However ...

The bad news, I would suggest, is that the converse is true for those who are *not* in Christ. For them, the moment of death marks the loss of that which preserves in them any conformity to God's character.

The image the Bible uses is of going into darkness, for example in Matthew 8:12:

... the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Given what the Bible says about God's own being as 'light', this 'darkness' must be interpreted symbolically as the diametric opposite of God. Hell is God's 'sending away' from himself, as we see implied in Paul's threefold repetition in Romans 1 that after people had rejected the truth about him, he 'gave them over' to the lie and its consequences.

However, the outward decay of our bodies in this life is, I suggest, a visible demonstration of the spiritual significance of moving away from God and his goodness into the 'outer darkness' where — just as there is no

evil in God who is light — there is no 'good' in darkness at all.

Annihilation

Thus, I suggest, what John says in 1 John 3:2 also works in reverse:

Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we will be like him ...

So for those who are *not* God's children now, what *they* will be has also not yet appeared. But when Christ appears, *then* they will be *unlike* him — darkness in which there is no light at all.

Conclusion

The crucial point is that eternity is a very long time and this is where we are heading. The time will come when this world will be the shadow, and we will know the truth of what Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 4:17-18:

For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

5. The Marriage of the Lamb

Introduction

In this last session, I want to look at a theological model that gives us a comprehensive picture of the process and purpose of redemption from the first creation to Christ' return. The model is used consistently throughout Scripture, but is often overlooked. Yet it gives us an amazing insight into the nature of God's plans and purposes.

The model is that of marriage. Of course we find marriage, in the sense of marital relationships, throughout the Bible. Indeed, Genesis 2:22 where Eve is brought by God to Adam, has the feel of a marriage.

But marriage is more than a 'fact of life' in the Bible, it is a theological description of the relationship between God and his redeemed people.

Old Testament

In the Old Testament, there are a number of illustrations of this, for example Jeremiah 31:32, where God talks himself as the maker of the New Covenant:

It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the LORD.

The word translated 'husband' here could be *baal*, or master, as footnotes and some translations indicate, but this is by no means the only passage where the relationship between God and his people is depicted in husband-wife terms.

In Ezekiel 16:1-14, dating from around the same period, there is a longer and explicit account of God's marriage relationship with Israel.

There are also hints in other parts of the Bible, for example Isaiah 54:5:

For your Maker is your husband — the LORD Almighty is his name — the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer; he is called the God of all the earth.

Or again, Isaiah 62:5:

As a young man marries a maiden, so will your sons marry you; as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you.

Unfaithfulness

Again, Israel's unfaithfulness to God is frequently depicted in marital terms as adultery and God's judgement is a form of divorce, as we see in Jeremiah 3:6-10:

⁶ During the reign of King Josiah, the LORD said to me, "Have you seen what faithless Israel has done? She has gone up on every high hill and under every spreading tree and has committed adultery there. ⁷ I thought that after she had done all this she would return to me but she did not, and her unfaithful sister Judah saw it. ⁸ I gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away because of all her adulteries. Yet I saw that her unfaithful sister Judah had no fear; she also went out and committed adultery. ⁹ Because Israel's immorality mattered so little to her, she defiled the land and committed adultery with stone and wood. ¹⁰ In spite of all this, her unfaithful sister Judah did not return to me with all her heart, but only in pretense," declares the LORD.

Hosea

The clearest depiction of the marriage relationship between God and his

people, however, is found in Hosea — both the book and the life of the prophet.

Hosea is made to live out the relationship between God and Israel, by deliberately marrying an unfaithful partner. Then in Hosea 2:2, Hosea is to address Israel in marital terms. God says,

Rebuke your mother, rebuke her, for she is not my wife, and I am not her husband. Let her remove the adulterous look from her face and the unfaithfulness from between her breasts.

At the same time, the future restoration of Israel is depicted as the restoring of the pure marriage relationship between God and his people which existed in the desert at the time of the Exodus. So in 2:14-20, we read this:

“Therefore I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her. ¹⁵ There I will give her back her vineyards, and will make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. There she will sing as in the days of her youth, as in the day she came up out of Egypt. ¹⁶ “In that day,” declares the LORD, “you will call me ‘my husband’; you will no longer call me ‘my master.’ ¹⁷ I will remove the names of the Baals from her lips; no longer will their names be invoked. ¹⁸ In that day I will make a covenant for them with the beasts of the field and the birds of the air and the creatures that move along the ground. Bow and sword and battle I will abolish from the land, so that all may lie down in safety. ¹⁹ I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you in righteousness and justice, in love and compassion. ²⁰ I will betroth you in faithfulness, and you will acknowledge the LORD.

Here we can see also why the passage in Jeremiah *should* be translated as

“husband”, not just “master”. Theologically, God in the desert was Israel’s husband.

Gospels

This marital theme is carried over into the New Testament, where we find it applied to the relationship between Christ and the Church.

There are hints of this already in the words of John the Baptist in John 3:28-30:

²⁸ You yourselves can testify that I said, ‘I am not the Christ but am sent ahead of him.’ ²⁹ The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom’s voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. ³⁰ He must become greater; I must become less.

We also see it in the words of Christ in Mark 2:18-20:

¹⁸ Now John’s disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. Some people came and asked Jesus, “How is it that John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?” ¹⁹ Jesus answered, “How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them. ²⁰ But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast.

The same material is found in Matthew 9:14-15 and Luke 5:33:35.

Paul

But the fullest exposition of this model comes in Paul’s writings. Indeed, it is significant that Paul saw his work of evangelism in terms of marriage brokering. In 2 Corinthians 11:2 he writes this:

I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him.

But most famously he writes as follows in Ephesians 5:22-32

²² Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. ²³ For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour. ²⁴ Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. ²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her ²⁶ to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, ²⁷ and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. ²⁸ In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹ After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church — ³⁰ for we are members of his body. ³¹ “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” ³² This is a profound mystery — but I am talking about Christ and the church.

Here we see two crucial things converging. One is the relationship between Christ and his people depicted as a marriage. The other is the material in the opening chapters of Genesis.

Revelation

Then when we get to Revelation, the arrival of the age to come is also depicted as a marriage. In Revelation 19:7-9 we get this preliminary announcement:

Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself

ready. ⁸ Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear.” (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints.) ⁹ Then the angel said to me, “Write: ‘Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!’” And he added, “These are the true words of God.”

And in 21:2-3 we get this vision:

I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.

And then in 21:9-10 we get this final word:

⁹ One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, “Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.” ¹⁰ And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God.

Effectively, then, the Bible begins and ends with a marriage. And throughout, marriage is used as a theological model of the relationship between God and his people. And we notice, finally, that Ephesians 5 ties these themes together by relating Genesis to Jesus.

Image

There is a lot more here, however, beyond the fact that the relationship between God and his people is like a happy marriage.

If we go back to Genesis 1:26, we’re told there that mankind is made in God’s image. This is a controversial statement, not least because the word ‘image’ is used for the kind of idols that

the second commandment prohibits and the word ‘likeness’ is used of an outward resemblance. And then in v 27 we are told:

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

It is clear from the structure of the verse that ‘male and female’ relates somehow to the image of God but it is not clear how.

Genesis 2

In chapter 2, however, we are told much more about why and how male and female exist together, beginning with the statement in Genesis 2:18 that it is “not good” for the man to be alone.

This contrasts with all the things in chapter 1 that we’re repeatedly told were “good”. And we’re also told why it is “not good”, because God goes on to say, “I will make a helper suitable for him”.

The Hebrew word for “helper” is a word used almost invariably either of God or of the help that is supplied by an ally in time of war to those in desperate need. What the man needs, then, is not an assistant, but a be “strengthened”, which is why the animals are paraded in front of him. These are a natural source of strength, but none of them provides what he needs.

And then finally, through his eyes, we see that what he needs is provided by a woman. But we also need to notice several points about her:

First, she is not made from the dust of the ground, like the animals in v 19 or the man himself in v 7, but from him.

She originates from what is already there as a living being.

Secondly, she is separate from Adam.

But thirdly, she is *from* Adam: ‘bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh’ (2:23).

So much is she *from* Adam that she is called *ishshah*, just as he is called *ish*.

Fourthly, it is not just a *woman* that Adam needs but a *wife*. The relationship in which Adam experiences ‘strengthening’ is the marital relationship.

Fifthly, she (presumably!) provides the strengthening he needs, but she is not obviously stronger than him.

And finally, in the marital relationship Adam and Eve experience a reunification: v 24 reads,

For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.

Union with Christ

So how does this help us understand the notion of the ‘image of God’. We’ve already noted that Paul draws a straight line between Genesis 2 and the relationship between Christ and the Church. We should notice also, however, that this is related to the idea of union and ‘one flesh’. In Ephesians 2:28-30 he says that the wife is the husband’s own body, actually using the word *flesh* in v 29, and paralleling this with Christ and the Church.

The Christian is to Christ as the wife is to the husband, that is to say, *his very own flesh*. And this is true because of the *union* between Christ and the believer which parallels the union of

Genesis 2:24. So in 1 Corinthians 6:15-17 Paul writes this:

¹⁵ Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never! ¹⁶ Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, "The two will become one flesh."¹⁷ But he who unites himself with the Lord is one with him in spirit.

What is true for a husband and wife (which is also true of a man and a prostitute), is true ultimately of Christ and the believer — they are one as an organic whole. We see this again in Ephesians 1:22-23:

And God placed all things under [Christ's] 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)

The body language of the New Testament, then, originates not in the concept of diversity — though it is often used to illustrate that point — but in the idea of *marital union*. The Church is the *body* of Christ because she is the *bride* of Christ.

Significantly, the 'headship' language of the New Testament, which is actually rather rare, refers either to the male-female relationship (which is itself related to Genesis) or to the Christ-Church relationship.

Hence in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 we have a long discussion of male-female relationships with no less than nine references to the 'head'. And in Colossians 1:18 we read that Christ "is the head of the body, the church", in Colossians 2:9-10:

For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form,¹⁰ and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority.

Genesis Again

This does much more, however, than illustrate the relationship between Christ and the Church, as we can see if we go back to Genesis 1:26-27 and the question of how male and female 'image' God.

Now that we have reviewed the Scriptural material, we can say that this imaging is seen in the husband-to-wife relationship of marriage which reflects the relationship of Christ to the Church.

Exitus et reditus

But given the material in Genesis 2, which elaborates the picture of male and female given in Genesis 1, we can actually say much more about the relationship between Christ as Creator and Redeemer and the Church as redeemed creation.

Genesis 2 tells us that the woman who is to be Adam's is *not* him, and yet is *from* him. She is bone-in-her-own-right, but bone of his bones, and flesh-in-her-own-right, but flesh of his flesh.

Furthermore, because she is 'of him', the union of husband and wife in Genesis 2:24 is not the *new* creation of one flesh out of two, but the *reunification* of two 'fleshes' initially made out of one. It is the bringing back together of what started together. And it is *this* 'union as reunion' which Paul identifies with Christ and the Church in Ephesians 5:30-32:

... for we are members of his body.³¹ "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the

two will become one flesh.”³² This is a profound mystery — but I am talking about Christ and the church.

If we apply the initial insight of Genesis 2, then, to the relationship between Christ and the Church, we see it is what the older theologians called ‘*exitus et reditus*’ — proceeding from and returning to.

Plato

This idea goes back to Plato and was picked up by the medieval theologians, including Thomas Aquinas. For Plato, *everything* was about ‘*exitus et reditus*’.

However, Plato viewed this within a hierarchy of *worth*, so that as things were further from God in the scale of things, so they became progressively *worse* than God — the physical, for example, being *worse* than the spiritual.

This association with Plato and Aquinas has given the idea of ‘*exitus et reditus*’ a bad press, especially in Reformed circles where Thomas Aquinas is associated with a certain brand of Roman Catholicism. Moreover, in Scripture it may seem the idea is excluded. We have an unchanging, eternal God and a creation ‘*ex nihilo*’ — from nothing — and which is entirely separate from him. Creation is not an emanation of divine ‘*substance*’.

Yet we also find in Scripture that Creation exists *for* God — specifically for God the Son. So in Colossians 1:15-20 we read this:

¹⁵ He [Christ, the Son of God] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. ¹⁶ For *by him* all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things

were created *by him* and *for him* [Greek: “through him and to him”]. ¹⁷ He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. ¹⁹ For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, ²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself [ie to God] all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

Here we see if not an *exitus*, certainly a *reditus*. What happens on the cosmic scale is paralleled by what we see in Genesis 1 and 2 on the human scale: mankind is in the place of the firstborn over all creation. From Adam comes Eve, who is the “Mother of all Living”, so that the *filling* of creation begins at this point, and in the marriage union of Adam and Eve the two become reunited in a form of ‘reconciliation’.

Not Good

However, there is more, for we also get an insight into the motivation for Creation.

In Genesis 2:18 God says, “It is not good that the man should be alone.” This “not good” is not the same as “bad”. What we notice is that each earlier stage of creation is greeted with the phrase, “God saw that it was good.”, and that has yet to apply to the man. But if the relationship between Adam and Eve is analogous to the relationship between Christ and the Church, then this suggests that it is equally “not good” for Christ to be alone — it is not bad, but it is not the fullness of what is planned. Indeed, what reason would there be for creation other than to bring

about a situation which God would describe as “good”? Creation is therefore not a necessity in the sense that God *needed* anything from his creation, as Paul makes clear in his speech in Athens in Acts 17:24-25,

²⁴ “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. ²⁵ And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else.

Yet, nevertheless, for God the Creator *not* to create would be “*not good*”.

Risk

But Creation as we pointed out last week, entails risk. If the world was an emanation of God — an extension of his own ‘substance’ — it would still be in some sense ‘God’. But the world is a *creation* it is a ‘not God’ — that is what it means to be a *creature* in the sense of a created being. And because it is a ‘not God’ it is in *every* respect not like him. We see this most obviously in our own nature — we are flesh, he is Spirit, we are finite, he is infinite, we are mortal, he is immortal, and so on.

These differences are all real, and are immense, even though we can still be said to ‘image’ God despite them. But what is the most *different* from God something could be?

The answer is surely in *personal character*. That which is most ‘unlike’ God is evil. And when God makes that which is ‘not God’, it opens up not just the *possibility* of evil but, as we see from the world around us, the *inevitability* of evil. The inevitability of evil is shown by the sheer fact that we

have a God who is almighty *and* we have evil.

The risk for God, then, is this: what if he creates that which is *not* himself, yet which is able to become like himself “knowing good and evil” — able to function autonomously and make choices, but which because it is *not* God will inevitably at some stage make a choice which is *ungodly* and choose evil?

And the answer is, it must be possible to put this right. What he makes must be capable of being redeemed.

Union with Christ

And this brings us back again to the union of Christ with the believer, because *this* is the means by which redemption is achieved and therefore this determines God’s plans and purposes. From the very beginning, what is created is a *bride* for Christ, because it is in and through union with him that what is his becomes ours and what is ours becomes his.

What is ours, with respect to our redemption, is of course our sins, and so God makes him to be sin who knew no sin by laying on him *our* sins, which become his in our union with him. But by the same token, what is his which needs to become ours is a perfect sinless nature, and this, again, is made possible in union with him.

Eschatological Union

The full union between Christ and the believer is, however, an *eschatological* union — a union which is only finally achieved at Christ’s return when the marriage of the Lamb takes place.

At present we are united with him, but it is in *anticipation* rather than in experience. We are, in Paul's language, betrothed to Christ, and we have received the Holy Spirit as Ephesians 1:14 puts it as a token or pledge of what is to come — but what is yet to come is the best.

When that happens, we will see the completion of God's plan, which will be the reconciliation of Creation to himself, through the union of the Church with Christ, whereby those who were originally made to be like him as his image, but who became sinners, are made to be like him in his person.

