

If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied.

1 Corinthians 15:19

“The consummation of all things includes the visible, personal, physical, future and glorious return of Jesus Christ, the resurrection of the dead and the translation of those alive in Christ, the judgment of the just and the unjust, and the fulfillment of Christ’s kingdom in the New Heavens and the New Earth. In the consummation, Satan with his hosts and all those outside Christ are finally separated from the benevolent presence of God, enduring eternal punishment, but the righteous, in glorious bodies, shall live and reign with Him forever, serving Him and giving Him unending praise and glory. Then shall the eager expectation of creation be fulfilled and the whole earth shall proclaim the glory of God who makes all things new.”¹

Eschatology is the study of the last things. It is primarily concerned with the coming of the Lord and the events surrounding such an appearing. Although many today do not appear to do so, the Bible expects and encourages believers to look toward His coming with anticipation.² Since Christ Himself is our great hope (1 Timothy 1:1), eschatology is really a study in Christ,³ a study in hope, the hope of glory, the hope of His presence.

Many who truly love the Lord and await His return with eager anticipation possess different perspectives in dealing with the chronology and meaning of a number of the events which surround His coming. At the same time, there are key requisite beliefs which are not debated among evangelicals and are quite clear from the pages of sacred Scripture.

The intention of this chapter is to outline the essentials as far as the leadership of The Village Church is concerned. It is for these that we are willing to contend and we therefore cling to them for the sake of our joy, the joy of our flock, and the glory of Christ. As these are seen to be integral to Christian belief and practice, we hold to them with a closed hand. At the same time, we hope to provide a primer in discussing the various debated issues, which we do not see as being of utmost importance

in light of our understandings thereof. This distinction is not intended to bifurcate revelation or to assert that those doctrines which we have labeled as “of lesser clarity” are less weighty, but rather is intended to guard against the dilution of that which is abundantly clear in Scripture. It seems to us that if you cling to all beliefs with an equal amount of zeal and vehemence then you run the danger of someone using a hole in a more minor and less clear doctrine as a rejection of your overall theology. Why not instead cling tightly (“closed hand”) to those things for which you are willing to fight and die (deity of Christ, trinity, inerrancy of Scripture, etc.) while holding doctrines which are less clearly attested and less central to the basic call toward gospel repentance and belief with an “open hand”?

That which is essential in a study of eschatology:

1. The Return of Christ
2. Resurrection of Believers and Unbelievers
3. Judgment of Believers and Unbelievers
4. Eternal Destinies

That which is left open for various views within the body of The Village:

1. The nature of the millennium
2. The nature of the great tribulation
3. The timing of the rapture

The Return of Christ

Behold, He is coming with clouds, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him; and all the tribes of the earth will mourn over Him. So it is to be. Amen.

Revelation 1:7

Christ will surely return. This is one of the most foundational of evangelical beliefs and is the determinant for all subsequent discussion of eschatology. It is the starting point from which all consequent conversation must begin.

Christ’s return will be a physical and visible return which will shine forth throughout the earth like lightning in the sky and will usher in the end of our present age. This is called His parousia, His return, His appearing, His coming.

As was discussed in the introduction, we believers should eagerly long for the return of our Lord. We should cry out “Maranatha” (“Our Lord, come!” 1 Corinthians 16:22) as we participate in

¹ From The Village Church Statement of Faith

² 2 Peter 3:12 *looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God...*

³ Revelation 19:10 *...For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.*

those deeds of which we would not be ashamed in His presence. Those who do not so long for the return of the Lord evidence a fundamental gap in their understanding of the Christian desire, the hope of glory, the joy of His presence.

Although there are signs of His coming, the fact remains that no one ultimately knows when He will return and we are therefore commanded to be vigilant.⁴ Though there is some debate as to the definite meaning of the imminence of His coming, the Bible clearly states that He is coming soon.⁵

Resurrection of Believers and Unbelievers

Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs will hear His voice, and will come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment.

John 5:28-29

The resurrection of Christ has surely purchased a resurrection for those who are in Him. The Bible tells us that He is “the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.”⁶ However, it is not only His bride, the church, who will share in such, but indeed all will partake in a literal and physical resurrection.⁷

Not much is known with certainty about the form of the body that we will receive at resurrection. We should definitely expect a physical body, but one that is distinct and more glorious from our current dwelling.⁸ These bodies will be set free from the curse of sin and death and will be imperishable. We are unaware of any distinction to be made between the resurrected bodies of believers and nonbelievers.

Judgment of Believers and Unbelievers

But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; and He will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on the left.

Matthew 25:31-33

At the time of Christ's coming, after the resurrection of the living and the dead, the Lord will judge all people for belief and

deeds.⁹ It is Jesus Himself and not the Father or the Spirit Who will exercise judgment.¹⁰

It is generally believed that judgment of the unbeliever includes degrees of punishment while judgment of the believer includes degrees of reward. Regardless, it is to be affirmed that there is no wrath or condemnation associated with the judgment of believers.¹¹

Eternal Destinies

These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.

Matthew 25:46

According to the final judgment rendered by Christ at His coming, both believers and unbelievers will be ushered into their respective eternal destinies. While there has historically been some level of debate as to the nature of the language of “heaven” in Scripture, it is best to assert that believers will go forth into the recreated earth to spend eternity in the presence of the resurrected Lord. Unbelievers will face the wrath of God, away from His presence, for eternity in hell.¹²

Important Ambiguities

The following doctrines are not, in our opinion, of as equal clarity in the pages of God's revelation as that which is expressed above and we therefore hold them with an open hand. Teaching and preaching upon such issues must be done with an understanding that a plethora of Bible-believing, God-fearing, passionate evangelical Christians have a wide array of beliefs on these issues. Humility is definitely demanded.

The Millennium

The doctrine of the millennium is birthed primarily from Revelation 20:1-7. There are basically three positions which have

⁹ I realize that various theological systems may interpret certain passages on judgment not together as one unified event, but rather as distinct judgments. For example, the dispensational view would hold to a judgment of the nations (Matthew 25:31-46), a judgment of believer's works (2 Corinthians 5:10), and a “great white throne judgment” (Revelation 20:11-15). Regardless, the principle of judgment is still upheld, which is the main thrust of this essential. Whether or not there are multiple judgments is really more peripheral and debated and a hard stance on such would therefore quite possibly dilute the overwhelming evidence for the non-obscured fact of judgment.

¹⁰ John 5:26-27; Acts 10:42; 2 Timothy 4:1

¹¹ John 5:24; Romans 8:1

¹² The error of annihilationism is to be most stringently opposed as it negates the clear biblical evidence for the eternal and lasting punishment of unbelievers. While annihilationists find objectionable the idea of eternal punishment for temporal sin, such a view takes very lightly the offense of even the “tiniest” of sins against an infinitely holy God.

⁴ Matthew 22:42-44, 25:13; Mark 13:32-37; Luke 12:40; 1 Thessalonians 5:2; 2 Peter 3:10

⁵ 1 Peter 4:7; Revelation 1:3, 22:7, 22:12, 22:20

⁶ 1 Corinthians 15:20

⁷ Acts 24:15

⁸ 1 Corinthians 15:42-49; 2 Corinthians 5:1-5

developed in understanding this period, although in the case of pre-millennialism, there are two subsets of comprehension.

Options:

- Pre-millennialism
- Post-millennialism
- Amillennialism

Pre-millennialism

Pre-millennialism is that understanding of the period which views the thousand years of Revelation 20 with the most chronological and literal interpretation. According to this view, Christ's return, or second coming, will follow a great period of tribulation. This return will usher in the millennial age in which Satan is bound from deceiving the nations and the Kingdom of God is fully manifested. At the end of the millennium, Satan is released from bondage and there is a large-scale revolt against the program of God upon the earth. Christ then finally and decisively destroys death and consigns Satan and His legions to the final place of torment. It is at this time that the new heavens and new earth appear and we enter into the eternal state.

Post-millennialism

Post-millennialism is that understanding of the period which is marked by an overwhelming belief in the power of Christ working in the church toward justice and reform. At the start of the millennium,¹³ there will be a tremendous expansion of God's program in the church in which peace and prosperity increase upon the earth. Indeed it represents a great Christianization of the world, although it does not teach a universalist perspective. For the post-millennialist, this program will continue for a literal or figurative thousand years until the time of apostasy. This apostasy will finally and decisively be overthrown by the return of Christ which immediately ushers in resurrection, judgment and the eternal state.

Amillennialism

Amillennialism is that understanding of the period which views the current Church age as the millennium which is referenced in Revelation 20. It views the binding of Satan as having taken place at Christ's death and/or resurrection and uses Matthew 12:28-29 as evidence of such. It therefore sees the kingdom as having already begun with Christ reigning upon His throne in heaven at the right hand of God. Within this understanding, Christ is currently reigning in heaven until such time as His return, which will follow the release of Satan and a time of apostasy. At this appearing will come a general resurrection and final judgment which will then usher in the eternal state.

The Tribulation

The tribulation has various perspectives which depend upon the conceived millennial position and an overall understanding of the program of eschatology. This tribulation represents the Day of the Lord doctrine in which the wrath of God is poured out upon the earth in response to the advancement of Satan and the third great apostasy. It is often argued from Daniel 9 that the tribulation will be a literal seven year period, although that is certainly of some debate within evangelicalism. The main question as far as the tribulation period is concerned is the timing of the Day of the Lord. Is it past, present or future?

Options:

- Preterist
- Futurist
- Complex

Preterist

The preterist understanding of the Day of the Lord and tribulation is that the writings of the apostles on the time of apostasy were primarily and directly concerned with the historical events which transpired in the persecution of Christians within the Roman Empire.

While it is possible to hold to and teach a soft version of this understanding, full preterism¹⁴ is to be clearly rejected.

Futurist

The futurist position understands the Day of the Lord to be entirely future in nature and to refer to a literal apostasy which will take place at the end of the current age.

Complex

It is probably best to see the prophecy of the tribulation in a similar manner to those Old Testament prophecies which had a literal fulfillment in history, but which represented a type of that which was to come. In the same way, it could be said that while the preterist position is correct in ascribing a literal fulfillment of some events to some degree in the past, the futurists are also correct in looking for a final and ultimate fulfillment in God's program.

¹³ There is debate among post-millennialists as to what marks the beginning of the millennium. Some believe that it has already begun while others think that it will begin at: the conversion of Israel, the binding of Satan or the defeat of the antichrist.

¹⁴ The belief which states that all of the prophecies regarding the end times have already been fulfilled, including the return of Christ.

The Rapture

The Rapture in its simplest form is merely the time in which the church will meet the Lord upon His return. It is derived from the Latin *rapio* which means to “carry away, seize, snatch”¹⁵ and is primarily concerned with the language of 1 Thessalonians 4:17. The debate surrounding this doctrine involves the timing of the rapture.

Options:¹⁶

- Pre-tribulation
- Post-tribulation

Pre-tribulation

The pre-tribulation perspective understands the rapture to occur prior to the tribulation period. It therefore understands the rapture to be a time in which the church will meet the Lord in the clouds, although this is not the time of His coming, which is to occur at the end of the apostasy period. The main arguments advanced in support of this position are as follows:

1. God's wrath will be poured out upon the entire earth and therefore any present on earth will be subject to such wrath. Since believers are not appointed to suffer wrath, they should therefore not be expected to be present during this period.
2. *Because you have kept my word about patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell on the earth.*
Revelation 3:10
3. From a premillennial perspective – the need to populate the millennial period
4. The language of imminence regarding the return of Christ – that the rapture marks the beginning of the tribulation period negates any necessary signs to occur prior to this day.
5. The trend of God's program of removing His people and delivering them from His wrath – Lot from Sodom, Noah, etc.

Post-tribulation

The post-tribulation perspective understands the rapture to be basically synonymous with the resurrection of the church. It therefore views the rapture to occur after the time of apostasy, at which point Christ will return to usher in the millennium or eternal state, depending upon the millennial position to which one holds. The main arguments advanced in support of a post-trib position are as follows:

1. Nowhere in the New Testament is a “rapture” clearly and explicitly taught as being a distinct occurrence from the resurrection.
2. In some sense the pre-trib position demands a secret coming of Christ which is distinct from His return. Nowhere is such a secret coming explicitly taught in Scripture and even the passage most often used to support the rapture doctrine, 1 Thessalonians 4, speak of a cry of command, an archangel's call and a trumpet sounding, none of which seem to teach a somewhat secret return.
3. The trend of God's program of delivering His people through times of persecution (without removing them from the environment of suffering, He protects them in the midst of it)– the fact that Noah remained on the earth, the persecution of all believers, etc.
4. The fact that Christ is said to be seated upon His throne until such time as His return (singular).

Outline of Relevant Passages of Scripture Dealing with Eschatological Issues

The Essentials:

I. The Return of Christ

- *For this reason you also must be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think He will.*
Matthew 24:44
- *If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also.*
John 14:3
- *They also said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven.*
Acts 1:11

¹⁵ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, page 1100

¹⁶ Some also hold to a mid-tribulation or pre-wrath perspective, although it does not represent a dominant eschatological theory in evangelicalism and will therefore not be herein discussed.

- *For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.*

Philippians 3:20

- *For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.*

1 Thessalonians 4:16

- *For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously, and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus...*

Titus 2:11-13

- *so Christ also, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time for salvation without reference to sin, to those who eagerly await Him.*

Hebrews 9:28

- *You too be patient; strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near.*

James 5:8

- *Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is.*

1 John 3:2

- *Behold, He is coming with clouds, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him; and all the tribes of the earth will mourn over Him. So it is to be. Amen.*

Revelation 1:7

II. Physical Resurrection

- *For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.*

Matthew 22:30

- *Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs will hear His voice, and will come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment.*

John 5:28-29

- *having a hope in God, which these men cherish themselves, that there shall certainly be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked.*

Acts 24:15

- *Now God has not only raised the Lord, but will also raise us up through His power.*

1 Corinthians 6:14

- *Now if Christ is preached, that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead.*

1 Corinthians 15:12

- *For since by a man came death, by a man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive.*

1 Corinthians 15:21-22

- *Behold, I tell you a mystery; we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.*

1 Corinthians 15:51-52

- *knowing that He who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and will present us with you.*

2 Corinthians 4:14

III. Judgment

- Punishment and Reward

• **Matthew 25:31-46**

- *Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead.*

Acts 17:30-31

- *For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.*

2 Corinthians 5:10

IV. Eternal Destinies

- New Heavens and New Earth

→ *For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former things will not be remembered or come to mind.*

Isaiah 65:17

→ *But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells.*

2 Peter 3:13

→ *Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea.*

Revelation 21:1

• Hell

→ *Then He will also say to those on His left, 'Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels...These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.*

Matthew 25:41, 46

→ *hell, where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched*

Mark 9:43b-48

→ *These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power*

2 Thessalonians 1:9

→ *...the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever; they have no rest day and night*

Revelation 14:9-11

Peripherally Debated Issues

I. The Millennium

→ **Revelation 20:2-7**

II. The Rapture

→ *Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord.*

1 Thessalonians 4:17

III. The Tribulation

→ *For then there will be a great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be.*

Matthew 24:21

→ **Daniel 9:24-27**

Other Passages:

→ **2 Thessalonians 2:1-17**

→ **Matthew 24-25**

→ *Because you have kept the word of My perseverance, I also will keep you from the hour of testing, that {hour} which is about to come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth.*

Revelation 3:10

→ **Luke 17:26-30**

→ *For it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God; and if it begins with us first, what {will be} the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? AND IF IT IS WITH DIFFICULTY THAT THE RIGHTEOUS IS SAVED, WHAT WILL BECOME OF THE GODLESS MAN AND THE SINNER? Therefore, those also who suffer according to the will of God shall entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right.*

1 Peter 4:17-19

→ *Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation.*

1 Peter 4:12-13

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