

FAITH REFORMED BAPTIST CHURCH

SUNDAY SCHOOL

CURRICULUM PROJECT ©

**** Grades 9-12, Year IV ****

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ECCLESIOLOGY AND ESCHATOLOGY

by Robert C. Walton

**Grades 9-12
Year 4
Quarter 1**

WHAT IS THE CHURCH?

Lesson Aim

To give students a basic understanding of what the Church is in preparation for the study of it in the first seven weeks of this quarter.

Memory Verse

Ephesians 2:20 - “. . . built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.”

Lesson Background

We now are ready to begin the last of our four units on doctrine in the high school course of study. This final unit deals with ecclesiology, the doctrine of the Church, and eschatology, the doctrine of last things. Needless to say, both of these doctrinal areas are the subjects of considerable controversy among Christians today and have been for many years. It will be my policy in covering this material to emphasize the basics upon which all Christians agree, while presenting several positions held by believers in areas where many differ.

Our first task in this unit will be to define the Church. Even here controversy exists, especially in attempting to set forth the relationship of the New Testament Church to Old Testament Israel (positions range from total identification to total separation), and that of the local church to the Universal Church (some would even deny that the latter exists). The main purpose for looking at these various distinctions is to help the students understand better the different ways in which the word “church” is used, both in Scripture and in common parlance.

Though this lesson is largely introductory in nature, there is some application to be brought before your students in presenting it. A vision of the vast scope of the Church that goes beyond a single place and a single time is important for any Christian to have. You must impress upon your students the fact that Christians today are part of a great multitude of believers, past, present, and future, that make up the body of Christ.

Lesson Procedure

Start today's session by asking your students to define the word "church." You will probably get many different answers, ranging anywhere from the building in which you are meeting to the Body of Christ, with many other ideas in between. Because of this variety in the uses of the word, we must begin our study of the Church by trying to set forth in some orderly fashion what the word actually means and how it legitimately may be used.

1. The Definition of the Word "Church"

The Greek word translated "church" is *ekklesia*, which refers to something that has been "called out." The word *ekklesia* is not restricted in its use to the Church alone, but is also used to refer to the unruly mob in Ephesus (Acts 19:39-41). A similar term, the Hebrew word *qahal*, is used to describe Israel in the Old Testament (it is as a translation of *qahal* that Israel is called an *ekklesia* in Acts 7:38).

Why is the Church referred to as a called-out assembly? Two things should be noted. The first is that God has called His people out of darkness and into light, out of the world and into His kingdom. When we talked last year about sanctification, we noted that God was in the process of separating His people. But the Church is not just called out, it is also an assembly. These people who have been separated by God have been called together, so that they are not separate entities, but a single body. Thus the idea of the Church carries with it both separation and unity; separation from the world and union with Christ and with one another.

2. Distinctions in the Use of the Word "Church"

As we saw at the beginning of the lesson, the word "church" can be used in many different ways. We now turn to a discussion of some of those different uses in order to understand better what the Church really is.

A. The Church as a Building

While this is the most common usage of the term in American society, it is not at all biblical. The Christians in the New Testament did not have church buildings as we know them today, of course, but they did meet in houses. The Bible never uses the word to refer to a building (except in the metaphorical sense of Ephesians 2:21-22). This usage is damaging because it turns people's attention away from the true meaning of the word, which refers to a body of people.

B. The Church and Israel

The relationship here is a matter of considerable debate and controversy. Some Christians teach that Israel and the Church are totally separate entities, even going so far (in extreme cases) as to maintain that the two look forward to separate eternal destinies. Others see the two terms as virtual synonyms, insisting

that the Church began with the faith of the first true believer in God, and that Christians today are the true Israel. The implications of these differences are many and far-reaching, especially in the areas under consideration in this unit (to give but one example, it is on the basis of the identification of the Church with Israel that those who support infant baptism identify baptism with the ritual of circumcision in the Old Testament).

Personally, I think either extreme distorts the teaching of Scripture on the subject. To separate Israel and the Church completely is to deny the unity of God's purpose in history, and more radically, to deny the unity of the plan of salvation. We must unequivocally assert that all who are saved are saved through faith in Christ, whether they lived before or after the earthly ministry of the Savior. The people of God make up one body, not two.

On the other hand, a radical union of Israel and the Church fails to acknowledge the physical nature of the covenant and the promises given to Abraham and his seed. Though there can be no question that not all who were part of ethnic Israel were part of the people of God, we must also see that those who belonged to ethnic Israel were under the covenant and were expected to abide by its terms. Israel was a physical people, membership in which was signified by a physical sign (circumcision). The church is a spiritual people, membership in which is signified by a spiritual sign (the seal of the Holy Spirit). Note also that the discussion of Romans 11 from a few weeks ago is pertinent here.

C. The Visible Church and the Invisible Church

We all recognize that not all those who profess to be part of the people of God are truly saved. The "visible church" is a term used to describe those who profess to be Christians, without in any way knowing their true spiritual conditions. When Paul writes letters to the churches, he is writing to groups of people not all of whom are saved, but all of whom profess to be Christians. One important conclusion to be drawn from this distinction is the impossibility of using church membership as a basis for one's confidence about salvation.

Another point to be noted is that it is this very distinction that the Roman Catholic Church denies. By asserting that it is through the sacraments that one obtains the grace of God, they are for all practical purposes claiming that all who belong to the visible church (meaning, of course, the Roman Catholic Church), also belong to the people of God.

D. The Universal Church and the Local Church

The vast majority of references to the church in the New Testament talk about a local body of believers (the church in Corinth, the church in Rome, the church in the house of Aquila and Priscilla, etc.). There is no question, however, that some of these local bodies were made up of other local bodies (the church in the home of Aquila and Priscilla was only one local body within the church in Rome, for instance). Furthermore, some references in the New Testament talk not about a single group of believers, but about all Christians at all times in all places (Matthew 16:18 and Colossians 1:18 are just two examples). It is this latter group that makes up the Universal Church.

Is it possible to be part of the Universal Church without being part of the local church? Of course it is, at least in a formal sense of the word. Many true Christians are not members of churches. Be sure your students understand, though, that it is not God's intention that His people exist independently of the church as a recognizable body. Though it is possible to be a Christian without belonging to a church, it is certainly not desirable. Hebrews 10:25 makes clear the importance that God places upon association with a local manifestation of the people of God.

E. The Church Militant and the Church Triumphant

These are not biblical terms, but are often used to distinguish those Christians who are still actively engaged in “fighting the good fight” from those who have passed on to their rest in the presence of God.

3. Illustrations Used to Picture the Church

There are three key illustrations used in Scripture to describe what the Church is. These are a body, a bride, and a building.

A. The Church as a Body

Familiar passages such as I Corinthians 12 present the church as the Body of Christ, with Christ Himself as the Head of that Body. This illustration shows both the utter dependence of the Church on Christ as well as the interdependence of Christians upon one another. No part of the body can live for long on its own; no Christian is intended to survive apart from operation within the context of the body of believers.

B. The Church as a Bride

The Bible also pictures the Church as the Bride of Christ. While the body image emphasized the Church’s dependence upon Christ, the bride image focuses on the love Christ has for the Church. A person who belongs to the Church is part of something that Christ loved so much that He gave His life for it. The image also points up the reciprocal nature of this love - the Church is to love Christ in return, and also to obey Him.

C. The Church as a Building

While the first two images picture the Church as an entity in existence, this final one sees the Church as in the process of becoming (the body image is also sometimes used this way, as when Paul speaks of growth in the body in Ephesians 4). The Church is being built by the Holy Spirit, and is therefore becoming more and more what God intends for it to be.

Conclusion

Conclude the lesson by reviewing for your students just what the Church is and reminding them that those who are Christians are a part of the greatest organization (or organism) on earth. The bond shared by believers the world over exists because God has been building His Church together into unity in Christ. All who believe in Him thus are part of the same family.

FORMS OF CHURCH GOVERNMENT

Lesson Aim

To give students an understanding of the three major forms of church government practiced in the Church today, as well as an appreciation for the form of government used in your church.

Memory Verse

I Timothy 3:1 - “Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task.”

Lesson Background

The Church throughout the centuries has operated under many different structures. The difficulty of maintaining consistency in this area may be traced to the exceptionally limited amount of information to be found on the subject in the New Testament. The New Testament Church was a church in embryonic form, just emerging in the years following Pentecost. The first attempts at organization were more or less of an ad hoc variety (e.g., the appointment of deacons to supervise food distribution in Jerusalem in Acts 6). By the time Paul wrote the pastoral epistles, church office had become more standardized, but of actual church government we know very little. Most of what we learn on the subject may be gained only by inference from the New Testament epistles, and this leaves room for considerable disagreement among Christians.

As a result, the three major forms of church government that have evolved over the centuries have done so by emphasizing different aspects of the New Testament’s teaching on the nature of the Church. Today we will be examining the episcopal, presbyterian, and congregational forms of church government, noting the peculiar emphases of each, along with their strengths and weaknesses. The latter part of the lesson will provide an opportunity to discuss with your students the form of government used in your congregation.

The discussion included in the lesson material will be based on the form of government followed by Reformed Baptist churches. If you are not part of that particular group, you will want to substitute information about your own form of church government.

Lesson Procedure

Begin the lesson by asking your students why different churches have different forms of church government. You will probably find that they know little if anything about the subject, and may even be rather ignorant concerning the government of their own church. Note that today's lesson will be divided into two parts; the first will deal with the subject of church government in general, while the second will look at the government of your congregation.

1. Types of Church Government

There are three major types of church government in the Church today, along with many variations on these basic types. We will look at the three basic types, as well as their origins and distinctives.

A. Episcopal

The form of church government that dominated the Church from the Roman Empire period up to the Reformation was the episcopal system. It began to develop after the deaths of the apostles and took shape during the first three centuries of church history. It is found today in the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Episcopal, and to some extent Methodist churches.

i. Officers

The New Testament speaks of two types of officers in the local church, the elder (also called an overseer, or bishop, and a pastor) and the deacon. At the beginning of the second century, a distinction was made between bishops and elders, the former being recognized as the leaders of the individual congregations. Later, leading bishops in each geographical area were recognized as having authority over all the churches in their area. By this time, the lesser bishops were being called "priests" (a form of the Greek word for elder). Episcopal churches today thus are supervised by bishops, who are in charge of geographically-delineated groups of churches (Catholics take this even farther, with the bishop of Rome being viewed as the head of the entire church; many episcopal churches also have archbishops, who supervise groups of bishops). Individual congregations are led by priests, who are assisted by deacons. The deacons in many cases are priests in training, men who have been educated for the ministry but are not yet ready to lead a church. Only bishops and priests are qualified to administer the sacraments.

ii. Key Principles

The leading principle in the episcopal form of church government is that of authority. The authority of Christ over His Church is reflected by the hierarchical structure of church government. The distinction between clergy and laity is firmly fixed, with only the former having the power to administer the sacraments, which are thought to be vehicles of the grace of God. Tied in with this is the teaching of Apostolic Succession. Those who believe in Apostolic Succession assert that there has been an unbroken line of leaders in the Church from the apostles to the present bishops and priests, and that this unbroken line not only assures the legitimacy of the church, it also carries on the authority of the apostles. Episcopalians and Catholics thus believe that their bishops and priests have the same authority as the apostles of Jesus. In the

Catholic Church in particular, this has led to enormous abuses through the role played by tradition in the church's teachings and practice.

B. Presbyterian

The presbyterian form of church government was developed in the early years of the Protestant Reformation. The first state church to use it was the Church of Scotland in the time of John Knox (late sixteenth century).

i. Officers

The presbyterian churches recognize the two officers designated by the New Testament, but again make a small refinement in their understanding of the office of elder. Presbyterians recognize two kinds of elders, teaching elders, who preach and generally supervise individual congregations, and ruling elders, who serve as a sort of board to oversee the spiritual life of the congregation. The teaching elders in a given region also make up the presbytery, a body that has the authority to ordain men to the ministry and oversee member churches. Presbyterian and Reformed churches today have this form of government.

ii. Key Principles

The two key principles of presbyterianism are interdependence of congregations and the plurality of eldership. Presbyterians believe that individual congregations should not be isolated entities, but should work together to demonstrate the larger unity of the Body of Christ. Thus the presbytery ties together all the congregations in a given region under one ruling body. The plurality of eldership is found throughout the New Testament, where a church is never said to have only one elder. The only verse in the New Testament that seems to point to the possibility of a distinction among ruling and teaching elders is I Timothy 5:17.

C. Congregational

Congregational churches also developed early in the Reformation period. They are represented today by Congregational, Baptist, and most independent churches.

i. Officers

Congregational churches generally have three levels of officers, the pastor, a board of deacons, and a board of men often called trustees. The pastor is the sole elder of the congregation and is responsible for the spiritual welfare of the church. The deacons assist him, while the trustees handle material and financial matters. As the congregational name implies, the congregation itself plays a large role in decision-making and policy-setting.

ii. Key Principles

The basic principles governing congregationalism are the priesthood of all believers and the autonomy of the local church. Congregationalists believe that all Christians are equally authoritative in submission to Christ, the Head of the Church. While this is a biblical concept, in practice it often leads to one of two extremes - either the chaos of impotent leadership or the dictatorship of a strong pastor. The autonomy of the local church is held up as the best way to safeguard the church against heresy from without. In support of this, it cannot be denied that in the history of the American Church in particular,

denominational hierarchies often went liberal long before local congregations, and forced obnoxious and heretical policies on the unwilling local congregations.

2. Government in Your Church

Begin this section by asking your students which pattern most closely fits your own church's form of government. If you are not a Reformed Baptist, you are on your own at this point. If you are, you should recognize that your church government is really a combination of the presbyterian and congregational forms.

A. Reformed Baptist Officers

Reformed Baptists recognize two officers, those designated in the New Testament. Elders are responsible for the spiritual oversight of the congregation, while deacons oversee its material welfare. Like presbyterians, we believe in plurality of eldership, but unlike them we do not recognize the distinction between teaching and ruling elders.

B. Key Principles of Reformed Baptist Church Government

From the presbyterians we borrow the plurality of eldership, adding a concept of the parity of elders that allows us to exercise true group leadership, where no elder is recognized as head over the others. From congregationalists we borrow the autonomy of the local church. While Reformed Baptists fellowship with one another in various associations, these have no binding authority over the member churches. These principles are not, of course, really "borrowed" from others as much as they are derived from Scripture. It is our desire to govern ourselves according to the New Testament model (we should recognize, of course, that others would claim the same thing for their forms of government).

Conclusion

Close the lesson by emphasizing the importance of submitting to and praying for the leaders that God has placed over the congregation.

FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

FORMS OF CHURCH GOVERNMENT

1. What are the major church offices in the episcopal, presbyterian, and congregational forms of church government? How does each differ from that set forth in the New Testament?
2. Identify the following terms: Apostolic Succession, plurality of elders, priesthood of all believers. With which form of church government does each belong?
3. Describe the form of government of your own church. Which pattern does it fit most closely?
4. To what extent do you think it is important for a local church to have a form of government like that of the New Testament church?

CHURCH OFFICE

Lesson Aim

To help students understand the roles of elders and deacons in the church, so that they can pray for them more intelligently and submit to them more willingly.

Memory Verse

Hebrews 13:17 - “Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.”

Lesson Background

Last week, we talked about the major forms of church government found in the Church today. We noted that all three contain variations on the officers designated by the New Testament. Today we will be looking more carefully at those officers, their qualifications, and their duties. While our main source of information will be I Timothy 3, we will also take notice of other passages that speak of the responsibilities of elders and deacons. Again, if your church government differs significantly from that discussed in the lesson material, you will want to adjust the content of the lesson accordingly. The general descriptions of elders and deacons should have applicability in most church situations, however.

As far as application to your students is concerned, there are several areas that may be emphasized. Firstly, of course, students should benefit from a better understanding of the jobs being done by the officers of the church by being able to support and pray for them more effectively and intelligently. Secondly, your students should recognize that the qualifications for church office are for the most part characteristics that

should be found in all Christians, but must be found consistently in church leaders. This should motivate your students to more faithful obedience in their own lives. The third benefit that students may gain from this study involves reinforcement of the knowledge that leaders in the church are not supposed to be doing all of the church's work, but rather managing that work. Every Christian should be participating in the work of the church under the leadership of their elders and deacons.

Lesson Procedure

Start the lesson by reviewing briefly the lesson on church government from last week. Then ask the students in your class to define in one sentence the responsibility of an elder, then a deacon. The answers they give should reveal something of their understanding of what you are about to discuss. Tell them that the study we will be doing today is important, not only to help them understand their leaders better, but also to help them participate more fully in the work of the church. We will be looking at the two officers designated in the New Testament under two major headings, their qualifications and their duties.

1. Qualifications of Church Officers

The key passage in the New Testament dealing with the qualifications for church officers is I Timothy 3. We will be spending the first half of our time today in that chapter.

A. Elders (I Timothy 3:1-7)

Paul begins this passage by stating that the task of an elder ("overseer" is a synonym for "elder" in the New Testament) is a noble one, and anyone who desires to do it entertains a worthwhile ambition (he does not say, of course, that anyone who wants the job is suited for it). He then lists a series of qualifications that a man must have in order to be an elder. The best way to approach this passage is to go through the qualifications one at a time.

i. "Above reproach"

This does not mean that the elder must be sinless, of course, but it does say something about his public reputation in the church. He must be one at whom no one may legitimately point an accusing finger.

ii. "The husband of but one wife"

This does not mean that an elder must be married (Paul himself was not), but that he must be a faithful husband if he is. This would rule out, not only adulterers and bigamists, but also those who had been through illegitimate (unbiblical) divorces. It does imply, of course, that an elder must be a man. A woman cannot possibly fulfill this qualification.

iii. "Temperate"

The elder should not be one marked by extreme behavior (outbursts of anger, uncontrolled fits of depression, etc.). Someone with an extreme personality will not be able to get along sufficiently well with the members of the congregation to be able to provide suitable leadership.

iv. “Self-controlled”

The elder cannot afford to speak first and think later. He cannot be one whose tongue gets him in trouble constantly. What are some other areas of self-control that are important for church leaders?

v. “Respectable”

The elder must be one who has earned the respect of the other members of the congregation. This is the positive side of the first requirement, which ruled out any negative marks against the candidate.

vi. “Hospitable”

The elder must be unselfish in his use of his own home, willing to open it to others in order to minister to them.

vii. “Able to teach”

This is really the only qualification in the list that sets the elder apart from the rest of the congregation. Anyone can (and should) manifest the other qualities Paul lists here, but not everyone can be a teacher. The elder, however, must be a capable teacher if he is to minister effectively in the congregation.

viii. “Not given to much wine”

This does not require that the elder be a total abstainer, but does demand that he not be one who allows himself to be “under the influence.” This is really one aspect of the requirement that the elder be self-controlled.

ix. “Not violent but gentle”

In dealing with other people, he must not only be able to keep his temper, but also handle gently those who lose theirs.

x. “Not quarrelsome”

An elder has many opportunities to argue with those who would criticize his work. He must be able to give a soft answer to those who would speak against him and not return insult for insult.

xi. “Not a lover of money”

Needless to say, one who is in the professional ministry is not likely to get rich through his work (unless he is a television evangelist or traveling faith healer), so an elder must have values that transcend the mere material. Even those who have little can allow their lives to be dominated by money, however, and the elder must not fall into this temptation. Those elders who are not in the work of the ministry as a profession, but support their families by some other form of work, should also be careful to be good examples to the members of the congregation of the proper attitude toward material things.

xii. “He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect”

The family is the primary responsibility of any husband and father, and the elder should be an example in this as well. He cannot manage the church if he does not manage his own family. Too many elders have ruined their ministries by neglecting their own families in order to do the work of God.

xiii. “He must not be a recent convert”

Paul explains this one himself, noting that a recent convert could easily be tempted by the sin of pride (not that older Christians cannot be). Experience in the daily walk of the Christian is essential for church leadership.

xiv. “He must also have a good reputation with outsiders”

The elder’s reputation must be sound both inside and outside the church. He cannot be one who lives a double life, respected among his Christian friends but known as a shirker, liar, or profane person among his worldly associates. The reputation of the entire church could be damaged by appointing as a leader one who has a bad reputation among non-Christians.

B. Deacons (I Timothy 3:8-13)

Do not spend time going through the qualifications of the deacons individually, since they are virtually the same as those of the elders. This is remarkable in itself, of course, since elders are often thought of as “spiritual” while deacons must be “practical.” Those who minister to the material welfare of God’s people must be no less spiritual than those who oversee the spiritual condition of the people (verse 9). Otherwise, they will surely lead the church and its people astray in their handling of the money, buildings, and material needs of the congregation.

2. Duties of Church Officers

The key passages here are Acts 6:1-7 and Acts 20:25-31. Though other passages, particularly in the Pastoral Epistles, also speak of the responsibilities of elders, the basic ideas can be found in these two sections of the book of Acts.

A. Elders

According to Acts 20:28, elders are to be shepherds (pastors) who watch over the spiritual condition of God’s people. Acts 6:2-4, though it is talking about the apostles, at least implies that overseers are to devote themselves to the ministry of the Word and to prayer. Ephesians 4:12 tells us that the elders are responsible for building up God’s people so that they (the people) can be involved in the service of God. Their work must therefore be summed up as one of spiritual oversight of the congregation. As teachers, they are ultimately accountable for the flock over which God has placed them (James 3:1).

B. Deacons

Though some would dispute that the men chosen in Acts 6 were actually deacons in the sense in which the term is used in I Timothy, the role they played seems nonetheless to be a good model for what

deacons are to do. The seven men chosen by the people were to relieve the apostles of the burden of looking after the material welfare of the church. Thus deacons today are to handle the financial, physical, and benevolent responsibilities of their congregation, under the oversight of the elders.

Conclusion

Conclude the lesson by drawing out the applications mentioned in the Lesson Background, noting that your students should pray for and submit to their elders; that they should seek themselves to live up to the qualifications for church office, not out of ambition, but out of a desire to live consistent Christian lives; and that they should seek to make the jobs of their leaders easier by actively participating in the ministry of the church as much as they are able to do so.

FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

CHURCH OFFICE

1. What are the two church offices defined in the New Testament?
2. What is the relationship between a church leader's handling of his family and his managing of the church?
3. Why are church officers required to have good reputations among unbelievers?
4. Why are young Christians not permitted to hold church office?
5. Why is it important that deacons be spiritual men?
6. What can we learn from the fact that most of the qualifications for church office are things required of all Christians?

FUNCTIONS AND MARKS OF THE CHURCH

Lesson Aim

To help students understand what the church is to do and what it is to be so that they may be able to recognize a true church when they see it and participate actively in its work.

Memory Verse

Hebrews 10:25 - "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another - and all the more as you see the Day approaching."

Lesson Background

After an introductory lesson in which we tried to define the church by examining the word itself in the context of its various uses, we then spent two weeks looking at the church by defining its structure. We are now ready to turn to the church's function. Obviously, it is entirely possible for a church to have a biblical structure and yet not be a good church. Proper officers and government do not guarantee a church that is alive and doing the work of God. We cannot deny that proper structure enhances the functioning of a church, but we should not mistake one for the other.

Our study of the function of the church will also require two weeks. This week, we will be looking at the major tasks of the church as well as relating these to the distinguishing marks of a true church. Next week, we will look at the role played by the gifts of the Spirit in the functioning of the church. As we saw in our study of Romans 12 last quarter, the church operates in three directions - upward, inward, and outward. The three major functions corresponding to these are worship, edification, and witness. As we will see, all three of these major functions are both individual and corporate in nature and require the people of God to

gather and be in unity with one another in order for them to be carried out. But is every group of people who profess faith in Christ a church? Is it legitimate to say that anywhere two or three Christians are gathered, there the church exists? How are we to judge the many heretical or liberal groups that claim to be churches? By what standard are such decisions to be made? In order to answer these questions, the second part of our study today will deal with the marks of the church, three characteristics that theologians have distinguished that set the true manifestations of the Church apart from others. Hopefully, our study will help students discern what churches that they may encounter in the future truly deserve the name and which are to be shunned as false professors.

Lesson Procedure

Start the lesson by asking your students if every church that has a biblical form of government is a good church. They should readily realize that this is not the case. Then ask them to define what it is that makes a good church. This, as they will soon see, is a much more difficult task. Tell them that today we will look at two groups of characteristics that should help them to answer the question you have just discussed - the functions and the marks of the church.

1. The Functions of the Church

Ask if anyone recalls the discussion of Romans 12 from seven weeks ago. Remind them of the divisions under which we had studied the chapter - the categories of worship, edification, and witness. Note that the first is directed toward God, the second toward the church itself, and the third toward the world. These are the major functions of the church, in which every true church should be engaged.

A. Worship - The Church Looks Upward

The primary responsibility of the church is to worship and glorify God. As we saw in our study of Romans 12, the other functions of the church are really just the outworkings of this one. We glorify God in many ways, including building up one another and spreading the Gospel in the world.

The meaning of the word “worship” is “to ascribe worth.” Thus one who worships God tells Him He is worthy. This can be done in many ways. Ask your students to suggest some. Obviously the ways in which God can be worshiped include prayer and singing. To these may be added words of testimony and the reading of Scripture as an act of praise (Do we always read Scripture for instruction? Can it not also be read so that its words become our own words of praise addressed to God?).

John 4:24 tells us that we are to worship God in Spirit and in truth. It is the Holy Spirit who gives us the tongues to utter praise and the hearts that desire to speak it, and the words we speak are to be true, and should be spoken according to the pattern laid down in Scripture.

We should also note that worship is both an individual and a corporate activity. Christians are to worship God on their own, and they are also to gather together in order to give praise to Him (cf. Hebrews 10:25). Neither should be neglected. Ask your students how a Christian is hurting himself spiritually if he neglects either the individual or group aspects of worship.

B. Edification - The Church Looks Inward

See if your students remember what “edification” means. This is the inward activity of the church, the way in which the church ministers to itself. “Building up” is something that can be done in many ways. What are some of them? Preaching and teaching clearly fit in here, along with counseling, both official and unofficial. What of someone who cannot preach, teach, or counsel? Is he incapable of edifying others? Help your students to see that acts of kindness and encouragement, quiet service in the background, generosity, and hospitality also contribute to the work of edification. This leads very naturally into a discussion of spiritual gifts, which is our topic for next week.

Again, it is important to note that edification requires the body of Christ to be together. One cannot carry out the ministry of edification alone. Christians must be together in order to help one another, and any Christian who isolates himself from his fellow believers is depriving both himself and them of the blessings of edification. A church should be a group of people who are concerned about one another and are contributing to one another’s growth in the Lord.

C. Witness - The Church Looks Outward

The church is not a monastery. It is not a closed circle inside which the faithful can hide from the evil world. Instead, it is to be salt and light, a preserving and illuminating force in a dark and decaying world. It is through the church that God exercises some of His common grace in the world, preventing the free spread of evil and bringing the blessings of obedience even to those who hate Him.

The church witnesses to the world in two ways, as a prophet and as an evangelist. The prophet brings God’s Word to bear upon the evils in the world, denouncing wickedness and warning of the judgment to come. The evangelist tells the good news of Christ’s atoning work, promising forgiveness to all who would repent and believe. The dichotomy that is often established between the social and evangelical aspects of the mission of the church is a false one - the prophet without the Gospel offers no hope, while the evangelist without the prophetic word fails to stir people to repentance.

We should notice that witness, too, has both individual and corporate aspects. While individuals are God’s witnesses in the world, the church commissions and sends those individuals out to do their work (Acts 13:1-2). The church as a body can also be a witness through its testimony in the community.

2. The Marks of the Church

Not every group of people who call themselves a church deserve the name. There are cults who lead people astray into false doctrine, liberal churches that maintain the name of Christianity without any remnant of faithfulness to the Savior, and even evangelical churches who are so badly divided against one another that little evidence of the love of Christ can be seen. Before long many of your students may be away at college, moved to another town because of a job, or in a new place of residence as a result of marriage. How are they to succeed in finding a new church that will really help them in their Christian walk? These three marks of the church can be helpful indicators.

A. The Preaching of the Word

All churches have sermons, but not all churches preach the Word of God. One of the most visible manifestations of the character of a church is its preaching. This is the way in which most people judge a

church, and the basis upon which most decide whether or not to join a particular congregation. Good preaching is essentially, “Thus saith the Lord!” Beware of those places where the sermon consists of little more than, “Thus saith the preacher!” The Word should not only be preached truly and faithfully, but also in its entirety (Acts 20:27). Too many churches get sidetracked into distinctives which set them apart from others and rarely consider the foundational truths of the faith.

The true preaching of the Word does not just involve what comes from the pulpit, however. A church where the Word is truly preached will also be a place where it is believed and lived by the people. The sermon is not a ritual exercise, but something that affirms the common beliefs and behavioral goals of the people to whom it is being spoken.

B. The Administration of the Sacraments

No body of people can claim to be a manifestation of the church unless they practice those ordinances established by Christ for the church while He was on earth. Baptism and the Lord’s Supper have been established by God for the worship of His people and should be part of the practice of any church. We will not speak at length about these this week, but will consider them in much greater detail in the last two weeks of the unit on ecclesiology.

C. The Discipline of the Church

When a church moves away from the truth, the sacraments are usually the last to go. Ritual remains long after the meaning has been lost. While the departure of sound preaching is usually the most visible sign that a church is no longer faithful to God, the absence of church discipline is generally the first mark of the church to be jettisoned by a declining congregation.

We tend to think of church discipline in negative terms, thinking of things like public rebukes and excommunication. The horrors of such abuses as the Spanish Inquisition do not improve our picture any. Yet church discipline is pictured in the Bible as something overwhelmingly positive for the growth and strength of the church. The key passage here is Matthew 18:15-20, which sets forth the steps for discipline in the church. The entire process is intended to deal with conflicts quickly, on an individual basis, before they spread and contaminate the entire body. Excommunication is seen as a last resort, and even that has a restorative purpose (see I Corinthians 5). When a church excommunicates a person, it is done in order to motivate repentance, not to sever ties with the person and send him blithely to hell.

Why do so few churches administer church discipline today? Are they fearful of alienating people? Are they so eager to maintain a large membership that they don’t want to discourage anyone? Are they so tolerant that they don’t care what people believe or what they do? Are they afraid that the exercise of discipline will have an adverse effect on the offering? Do they really think that the way a person lives is none of the church’s business? Any church that refuses to administer discipline is a church that doesn’t care about its people, in the same way that a parent who does not discipline a child cares little for his welfare.

Conclusion

Conclude the lesson by reviewing the functions and marks of the church. Encourage your students to observe the worship of their own church to see how these things are incorporated in it. If these things are not to be found, they may legitimately ask why they are not. If they are not to be found in their own lives, they should examine their own relationship to the church, as well as to its Head.

GIFTS OF THE CHURCH

Lesson Aim

To help students understand the nature and use of spiritual gifts and enable Christian students in your class to discern the areas in which God may have gifted them.

Memory Verse

I Corinthians 12:12 - “The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body.”

Lesson Background

The corporate nature of the church was a truth upon which we focused in our lesson last week. We saw that the necessary functions of the church could only be carried out within the context of the group, that they could not be restricted to individuals. This is particularly true in the area of edification. In order to build one another up, believers must be together, spending time with one another, both formally and informally.

When we spoke about edification in our last lesson, we noted briefly that spiritual gifts play an important part in this function of the church. It is our task this week to examine the subject of spiritual gifts and see how they contribute to the edification of the church. The three most important passages in Scripture dealing with spiritual gifts are Romans 12, I Corinthians 12, and Ephesians 4. We looked last summer at Romans 12, and we will be covering I Corinthians 12 next summer in our study of that book. In order to avoid unnecessary repetition, we will not focus today on any single passage, but instead try to derive some basic principles regarding spiritual gifts from all three chapters.

The study of spiritual gifts was a bit of a fad in the 1970s. As we will see in this lesson, the study is an important one, but we also need to recognize the dangers of preoccupation with this particular area of church life. It is very easy for a person to become so concerned with discovering his gift or gifts that he spends all of his time focusing upon himself and does very little in the way of actual ministry. Another danger is that people who allegedly discover their gift will be unwilling to serve in any area of church life outside that one for which they are “gifted,” thus narrowing the scope of their ministry far beyond what Christ ever intended.

We will focus today on the positive aspects of spiritual gifts, however. Your Christian students need to know what they are, who has them, how they are to be used, and what their intended purpose is. They should also be told something about how to explore the nature of their own gifts. Be sure to encourage your Christian students to engage in ministry in the church now rather than waiting until they reach adulthood.

Lesson Procedure

Introduce today’s lesson by reminding your students about the discussion of edification we went through last week. Remind them that we saw that everyone in the church, whether or not he can preach or teach, is capable of edifying others. This week we will see some of the ways in which this can be done by examining the topic of spiritual gifts.

Begin by dividing your class up into three groups. Assign one of the major chapters on gifts (Romans 12, I Corinthians 12, and Ephesians 4) to each group and have the group spend a few minutes reading through their assigned chapter. For the duration of the class, that group will be the resident resource for the chapter to which they have been assigned. Then tell the students that we will study our subject by means of a series of questions, which they will answer from the passages assigned to them.

1. What is a spiritual gift?

This is difficult to answer directly from any of the passages assigned to the student groups. A spiritual gift is essentially a God-given capacity for service.

2. Who gives spiritual gifts?

Spiritual gifts are not called “spiritual” because they are non-material, but because they are given by the Holy Spirit (your Ephesians group should be able to find this out more easily than the others, though it is also clear in I Corinthians).

3. To whom are spiritual gifts given?

Spiritual gifts are given only to Christians, who are the only ones who have the Holy Spirit within them. While some debate the question of whether or not a person can have more than one spiritual gift (I think most people have several), it is clear that every Christian has at least one. There is no Christian who is unable to serve others within the Body.

4. What is the purpose of spiritual gifts?

Spiritual gifts are given for the purpose of edification. Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church, intends the members of the Body to serve one another. Everyone in the church is to be engaged in works of service

to other Christians. There is no excuse for anyone to be a sponge, soaking in the benefits of the church but never giving out in service to others.

5. What are the spiritual gifts?

Here your teams can really go to work. Romans 12 lists the following: prophesying, serving, teaching, encouraging, giving, governing, and showing mercy. I Corinthians 12 lists wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, discernment, tongues, interpretation of tongues, and administration. In Ephesians 4, we find apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers. Each passage is slightly different in its approach. Romans concentrates on the functions of the gifts, I Corinthians on the gifts themselves, and Ephesians on the offices of the men who have been given the gifts.

While the actual number of spiritual gifts has been debated, needless to say there is a considerable variety in the capabilities for service with which the Spirit has endowed God's people. Many have classified the gifts of the Spirit into three broad categories, sometimes called speaking gifts, serving gifts, and sign gifts. The first category includes such gifts as teaching and evangelism, while the second would incorporate giving, serving, and showing mercy, among others. The third is a matter of considerable controversy, particularly with regard to the question of whether or not those gifts (miracles, healing, tongues, and interpretation) still exist in the Church today (see unit on I Corinthians next summer).

6. Why are spiritual gifts important?

In all three of the chapters before us today, Paul uses the image of the body to show the importance of spiritual gifts. Have each of your groups go through their assigned chapter and point out verses that show why spiritual gifts are important to the life of the church. Their findings should include the following:

From Romans 12:

- verse 5 - we should recognize that we all belong to one another
- verse 6 - spiritual gifts are by grace, and are not deserved or earned

From I Corinthians 12:

- verse 7 - spiritual gifts are given for the benefit of others, not for my own advantage
- verse 11 - we do not choose our gifts, but they are given sovereignly by the Spirit
- verse 12 - spiritual gifts are a way of expressing the unity of the Body of Christ
- verse 15 - no one should depreciate the value of his or her own gift, since all are important
- verse 17 - diversity of gifts is important for the Body of Christ to function properly, just like the human body requires many different parts
- verse 21 - no person may derive pride from his gifts, nor may he look down on others whose gifts are less visible than his own
- verse 26 - the variety of gifts is to contribute to the unity of the Body, as all work together to help other members, contributing to the welfare of the Body as a whole

From Ephesians 4:

- verse 11 - gifted men have been given to the church by Christ
- verse 12 - these gifted men have the task, not of doing all the work of the church, but of equipping all the members of the Body to serve one another
- verse 13 - the end result of the proper use of spiritual gifts in the church will be maturity, both of the church and its members
- verse 14 - the resulting maturity will protect the church from false teaching
- verse 15 - all will become more like Christ as each ministers to the others

Conclusion

How, then, are we to conclude today's study? Be sure your students understand that the Body of Christ is to be an organism in which all parts fulfill their functions. Every Christian is to be actively engaged in serving others. This is not limited only to adults. Your students, if they are Christians, should be busy in the church serving in whatever ways they can. The fact that they are teenagers does not give them an excuse to soak up the benefits of the church without contributing anything to its welfare. Spend some time talking to them about ways in which they can serve in the church. They probably have little idea at this point about what gifts God may have given them, so encourage them to involve themselves in a variety of areas of service so that they may see more readily the types of ministry for which God has suited them. If your church does not provide opportunities for teenagers to serve in the work of the church, speak to the elders about developing some.

ORDINANCES OF THE CHURCH - BAPTISM

Lesson Aim

To give students an understanding of the significance of baptism as an outward expression of identification with the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ.

Memory Verse

Romans 6:3-4 - “Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.”

Lesson Background

As we saw two weeks ago, one of the marks of a true church is the proper administration of the sacraments (or ordinances). The Roman Catholic Church recognizes seven sacraments, which they believe communicate the grace of God to the recipient. Thus the sacraments play a major role in the Catholic understanding of salvation. Protestants recognize only two, baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Some Protestants refer to these as ordinances, maintaining that they have no objective spiritual value (i.e., they confer no grace upon the recipient), but are instead purely symbolic. Others retain the term “sacrament,” insisting that baptism and communion do communicate the grace of God, though not in the same mechanical way that Catholics think they do. It is our task in the next two weeks to look at these two practices introduced into the Church by Jesus Himself.

Baptism has long been a matter of controversy in the church. As early as the second century, differences arose about how baptism was to be administered. Later changes in not only the mode, but also

the subjects of baptism, introduced disagreement about the very meaning of the practice. It is the meaning, of course, that is crucial. From the meaning of baptism flow the conclusions concerning its mode and proper recipients. We will thus begin our discussion today by examining the meaning of baptism. We will then talk about its necessity, the proper mode of baptism, and its proper recipients. Such a study can not only help your students to understand some of the traditional differences that exist among churches, but also to see what type of commitment is required of one who would profess publicly that he is a Christian.

Lesson Procedure

Begin the class by finding out if any of your students have been baptized, and under what circumstances (it is possible that some in your class may have been baptized as infants). Ask them why they were baptized and what it meant. For those in your class who have not been baptized, ask them why not. Note that if they are not Christians, they have no reason to be baptized, but if they are, they should give serious attention to what is to be covered today.

1. The Meaning of Baptism

Have the students look up Romans 6:3-4, Galatians 3:27, and Colossians 2:12. What do these verses tell us about the meaning of baptism? According to these verses, the primary meaning of baptism is identification with Christ, particularly in His death, burial, and resurrection. One who is baptized is symbolically being buried and raised again. As we saw in our study of the book of Romans, one who is a Christian has died to sin and has been raised to a new life in Christ.

Not all see this as the primary meaning of baptism, however. Some see baptism as a symbol of cleansing from sin, and some go even further, maintaining that baptism actually washes away a person's sins. Sometimes such a conclusion is drawn from a misunderstanding of verses such as Acts 2:38 and I Peter 3:21. It is often also based on a mistaken identification of Christian baptism with the baptism of repentance carried out by John the Baptist. John's baptism was related to the cleansing rituals of the Old Testament and lacked the redemptive significance of Christian baptism.

Others see the meaning of baptism as being an initiation into the covenant people of God. This meaning is based on an identification of baptism and circumcision, taken largely from Colossians 2. Since this meaning is often ascribed to baptism by those who baptize infants (after all, infants were circumcised), it leads to the concept of the covenant family, in which the children of believers are thought to be in some special way a part of the covenant with God, although they themselves are not yet converted (those who accept the concept of the covenant family believe that they will be eventually). Though this is not quite as serious as the baptismal regeneration that can be concluded from the idea that baptism washes away sins, it is nonetheless a significant problem because it can tend to generate presumption - it is very easy for one who is already part of the covenant community to assume that he is saved, even though his life may show no fruit whatsoever.

2. The Necessity of Baptism

Though baptism is commanded in the New Testament (Acts 2:38; Matthew 28:18-20), it is not seen as a prerequisite to salvation. It is necessary as a matter of obedience, and may legitimately be required of those who seek church membership (Why would anyone who is a Christian not want to be baptized?). It should be noted that the New Testament writers always assumed that the believers to whom they were writing had been baptized.

That baptism neither saves nor is necessary for salvation may be seen from several passages in Scripture. The repentant thief on the cross was saved according to the word of Christ Himself, yet clearly had no opportunity to be baptized. Paul, in I Corinthians 1:17, makes a sharp distinction between bringing people to salvation and baptizing them. The fact that baptism does not save is evident from the case of Simon Magus in Acts 8, who was baptized, yet was clearly unregenerate.

3. The Mode of Baptism

Three basic modes of baptism are practiced among Christians today - immersion, effusion (pouring), and aspersion (sprinkling). Even most of those who practice the last two forms will agree that immersion was the mode of baptism practiced in the New Testament and in the days of the Early Church. *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, a book written early in the second century, indicates that by then immersion was still considered the preferable mode of baptism, but that pouring was acceptable if the circumstances required it (circumstances that would militate against immersion included things like persecution, which made it dangerous for groups of Christians to gather in public; old age or poor health that would make immersion unsafe; or weather - ice on the river). Baptism by sprinkling grew more popular as infant baptism became more prevalent (we will discuss this issue in a few minutes). Thus the early church was not picky about the mode of baptism. Though this issue should not be a criterion for Christian fellowship, there are sound biblical reasons to favor baptism by immersion.

To begin with, New Testament descriptions of baptism uniformly point to the practice of immersion (Matthew 3:6; John 3:23; Acts 8:38). Along with this, the meaning of baptism - identification with the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ - is more effectively pictured by immersion than by sprinkling or pouring.

4. Proper Subjects for Baptism

Though we today usually consider this dispute to be between those who baptize infants and those who baptize believers, we should note in passing that a third option did at one time exist in the history of the church. During the persecution of the Roman Empire period, some in the church taught that, after baptism, a serious sin would not only cause a person to lose his salvation, but would also make it impossible for the person ever to be saved (based on Hebrews 6:4-8). Thus they advocated postponing baptism until immediately prior to death, when a person could be sure he would have no opportunity to turn away from the faith (this teaching is related to such Catholic doctrines as the last rites and the concept of mortal sin). Today, however, the choice is between infant baptism and believer's baptism.

Every instance of baptism found in the New Testament pictures the baptism of a professed believer ("household baptisms" such as that in Acts 16 cannot be used as evidence for infant baptism, since there is no way of knowing that any infants were involved). The New Testament order is always "believe, then be baptized" (Acts 2:38; 8:36-38; 16:30-33). If this is so clear in the New Testament, why then did the practice of infant baptism develop?

Infant baptism has been very prominent throughout the history of the church and continues to be so today. The practice developed gradually during the days of the Roman Empire, and for a period of about a thousand years, throughout the Middle Ages, the only people who baptized believers were scattered groups of heretics. There are several factors that contributed to the growth of the practice of infant baptism. One, which has already been mentioned, is the connection of baptism with circumcision. This connection is explicitly made in Colossians 2:9-15. Does this require us to baptize infants, however, just because infants were circumcised? The two ideas are connected by Paul because both symbolize initiation into the covenant community. Israel in the Old Testament was a physical community entered by physical means. Thus the initiatory rite was performed following physical birth, which was all that was necessary for one to be part

of the covenant community (of course not all who were of Israel were true Israelites, but they were still under the covenant). One does not enter the community of the New Covenant by physical birth, but rather by regeneration, the New Birth. One becomes part of a spiritual community by means of a spiritual birth, and it is appropriate that the initiatory rite be performed following that spiritual birth that makes one a part of the covenant people.

A far more negative factor associated with the spread of the practice of infant baptism was the belief in baptismal regeneration. Those who believe baptism actually saves would be highly motivated to baptize a person as early as possible. Thus Christian parents, wanting to assure their children a place in the kingdom, would have them baptized shortly after birth. This was particularly important in times and places where the infant mortality rate was high. While we tend to associate this practice in large measure with Roman Catholicism, we should note as well that the leading Protestant Reformers were not blameless in this area. In the early years of the Reformation, a group sprang up that practiced believer's baptism. They were known as Anabaptists ("rebaptizers" - their descendants today are the Mennonites and Amish, among others). They were severely persecuted by the paedobaptist Reformers (particularly Zwingli, and to an extent Luther also), because of the belief held by many that unbaptized children who died in infancy went to hell.

Conclusion

In concluding your discussion of baptism, emphasize to your students the importance of being obedient to Christ in this matter, while at the same time making it clear that it has no saving virtue. As far as the controversy over the practice is concerned, students should realize that, while it is important to believe and practice the truth in this area, differences relating to the mode and even the subjects for baptism should not be barriers to fellowship among Christians.

ORDINANCES OF THE CHURCH - LORD'S SUPPER

Lesson Aim

To help students understand the meaning and importance of the Lord's Supper.

Memory Verse

I Corinthians 11:28-29 - "A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself."

Lesson Background

While we may think of baptism as a greater subject of controversy than the Lord's Supper today, that has not always been the case in the history of the Church. In the days of the Protestant Reformation, everyone baptized infants (except, of course, the poor persecuted Anabaptists), but the issue of the Lord's Supper was a volatile one. Roman Catholics believed (and still do believe) in transubstantiation, the idea that the bread and wine actually become the body and blood of Christ when the priest says the words of institution. Luther taught a doctrine known as consubstantiation, which stated that, while the bread and wine did not actually turn into the body and blood of Christ, the body and blood of Christ were actually present with the elements. Zwingli taught that the Lord's Supper was a memorial of the death of Christ that had no more than symbolic significance, while Calvin saw Christ as being spiritually (but not physically) present in the bread and wine of the Supper. These disagreements were accompanied by tremendous bitterness on all sides. Luther and Zwingli met at Marburg in 1529 to try to resolve their differences and were able to agree on everything but the Lord's Supper. This one area of dispute divided them so sharply that many ugly incidents followed. Zwingli was killed in battle against a Catholic Hapsburg army because he could not

obtain help from the German Lutherans. The Lutheran and Reformed branches of Protestantism opposed one another almost as fiercely as they opposed the Catholics during this period.

We do not often fight over this issue today, but we need to realize that the differences stated above have played a major role in shaping the character of the churches involved. For instance, the churches that believe that Christ is really present in the celebration of communion tend to place greater emphasis on the sacraments (and on the mediatorial role of the priesthood) than do the churches that see it as a memorial or view Christ's presence as spiritual. The latter see God coming to His people more through the Word than through the sacrament. This difference has influenced church architecture as well. Churches that see the sacrament as central to the worship of the church usually have an altar at the center of the front of the sanctuary, with the pulpit located to one side. Churches that emphasize the Word have the pulpit in the center, with no altar, and a communion table located below the pulpit.

While all of this may hold some interest for you and your students, and should be included at least to some extent in the lesson, the main thrust should be on the meaning of the communion service itself. Your Christian students should know what it is they are doing when they take communion, and your non-Christian students should be severely warned about why they should not participate.

Lesson Procedure

Begin the lesson with a review of some of the historical material contained in the Lesson Background. Then ask your students to describe to you what the Lord's Supper is and what it is supposed to mean. Note that today, in seeking to answer these questions, we will look at both the institution of the Lord's Supper and Paul's discussion of how it is to be conducted in I Corinthians 11.

1. The Institution of the Lord's Supper

The institution of the Lord's Supper is recorded briefly in all three of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). We are told little more than the fact that, at the Last Supper, Jesus told the disciples that the bread they were eating was His body and the wine they drank was His blood, and that they were to continue to observe this ceremony until the time of His return.

More can be said about the institution of the Lord's Supper than this, however. The Last Supper was in fact a meal called the *Seder*, a ceremonial feast that opened the week of the Passover for the Jews. The meal was intended to commemorate the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt. Each part of the meal symbolized something about the Exodus. Though the observance of the Passover meal is somewhat different among Jews today than it was in Jesus' day, the following will give your students some idea of what was done on that night before Jesus' death, what it meant to the Jews, and what Jesus intended it to mean to His followers.

The Seder in the time of Jesus consisted of ten elements:

1. The first of four cups of wine (all of which were shared communally around the table), the cup of blessing, was passed around and drunk.
2. The food was brought out and placed on the table. This included a roasted lamb (the sacrifice), matzos (unleavened bread, representing the haste with which the Israelites had to leave Egypt), bitter herbs (horseradish, representing the bitterness of the bondage in

Egypt), and a sort of applesauce (representing the mortar the Israelites used when making bricks for the treasure cities of Pharaoh).

3. The Exodus story was then retold. In a family setting, the story was told by the father in response to a series of questions posed by the youngest son.
4. The first part of the *Hallel* (Psalm 113-115) was then sung.
5. The second cup of wine, the cup of bondage, was then passed around the table.
6. The matzos was then broken and distributed, often dipped in applesauce. It was at this point that Judas left the room. After Judas left, Jesus compared the broken matzos to His body.
7. The meal was then eaten.
8. The third cup of wine, the cup of redemption, was passed around. It was this cup that Jesus compared to His blood.
9. The remainder of the *Hallel* was then sung (Psalm 116-118). This was the hymn that Jesus and His disciples sang before leaving for the Mount of Olives. It is appropriate that Psalm 118 in particular contains many messianic references.
10. Under normal circumstances, the fourth cup of wine, the cup of communion, finished the Seder. Jesus and His disciples never drank it, however. Jesus had told the disciples that He would share wine with them no more until they drank together in the kingdom. The communion represented by this fourth and final cup could not be enjoyed until after Christ had accomplished His work on the cross.

The Lord's Supper is thus the fulfillment of the Jewish Passover, even as Christ Himself is the fulfillment of the Passover lamb. It represents redemption through a substitutionary sacrifice.

2. The Conduct of the Lord's Supper

The most complete discussion of the conduct of the Lord's Supper is found in I Corinthians 11. Since we will be studying I Corinthians next summer, we will not go into this passage in detail, but several points should be noted in general.

The first involves the way in which the Early Church observed the Lord's Supper. The ordinance itself was preceded by a communal meal called the *agape*, or love feast. The members of the church would eat together, then at the close of the meal would celebrate the Lord's Supper. It was during this meal that some of the abuses occurred that Paul is speaking against in I Corinthians 11.

Paul is concerned about the conduct of the Corinthians at the love feast because the Lord's Supper has both horizontal and vertical significance. It not only commemorates the sacrifice of Christ for His people, but underscores the unity of those who have been redeemed by Christ. It is to be a time when the church draws closer to one another and closer to Christ.

The Lord's Supper should be accompanied by self-examination. This is not to ascertain one's worthiness to participate - no one is worthy apart from the blood of Christ. It is rather to ascertain one's standing in Christ. One who is a believer is blessed by participation in the Lord's Supper, but one who is

unsaved is “eating and drinking judgment on himself.” This can have serious consequences, as Paul mentions in I Corinthians 11:30.

Conclusion

Conclude today’s lesson with a reminder to the Christians in your class of the seriousness of the observance of the Lord’s Supper, both because it was instituted by Christ Himself and because of the sacrifice it is intended to commemorate. Be sure to warn unbelievers about carelessly partaking of the Lord’s Supper. It is not a saving ordinance, and should not be taken by those who are not believers.

DEATH

Lesson Aim

To give students a biblical view of a subject about which most of them are probably reluctant to think - death.

Memory Verse

II Corinthians 5:8 - "We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord."

Lesson Background

This week we begin our study of eschatology, the doctrine of future things. We will include lessons on both individual and general eschatology. The first lesson involves something that is in the past for many of God's children, but in the future for all who will teach or hear this lesson - death. It is not a particularly pleasant subject to contemplate. While Paul considered being with the Lord far better than being on earth, we need to recognize the legitimacy of the dislike with which we all tend to view the prospect of death. Christ did not relish it, either for His friend Lazarus or for Himself. On the other hand, it is not in all senses the Christian's enemy. While death is one of the foes defeated by Christ, it is also a blessed release from the troubles of this world into the presence of God, and thus may legitimately be welcomed by the Christian.

Hopefully today's study will help to resolve this dichotomy somewhat. We will look very simply at what death is not and what it is, and in so doing should be able to help students understand why death can be seen as a friend and an enemy, a blessed release and a fearsome foe. A biblical understanding of death

is valuable not only as a basis for our other studies in eschatology, but also to help students cope with their own encounters with death, whether they involve friends, relatives, or themselves.

Lesson Procedure

Begin the lesson by asking if any of your students know the meaning of the word “eschatology.” Some probably will, but make sure that all understand that the word refers to the doctrine of future things. This doctrine will be the object of our study for the remainder of the quarter. The doctrine of future things begins where this life ends - at death. In the six weeks remaining in the quarter, we will be studying what happens to the individual after death as well as what will happen to the world in the years to come. Needless to say, this subject involves quite a bit of controversy and a large amount of speculation on the part of many people. We will try to treat the controversy fairly and keep the speculation to a minimum.

Today we will begin our study of eschatology by considering the topic of death. This is in the future for all of us (except those who are still alive when Christ returns), and is a matter of considerable fear to many people. Ask your students why people fear death. They should be able to come up with such factors as the fear of the unknown, the fear of separation from loved ones, the fear of pain, and the fear of punishment. Is it appropriate for Christians to fear death? In discussing this question, have your students look at passages such as John 11:35, Matthew 26:42, and Philippians 1:23. Do not at this point try to give a definitive answer to the question, but note that we will return to it later in the lesson. In order to give a suitable answer to the question of a Christian’s attitude toward death, we must look at what death is, and in the process discard some false views of death.

1. What Death Is

Defining death is not easy. Medical professionals today find that distinguishing whether or not a person is dead can sometimes be a difficult task. In past centuries, death was indicated by the cessation of certain basic bodily functions, such as the heartbeat and breathing. Today, with vast improvements in medical technology, breathing and heartbeat can often be restored after they have stopped, even for a period of several minutes. Even the EEG reading (electroencephalogram) is not a flawless indicator. While the absence of brain waves certainly indicates that life is not present, the presence of brain wave activity does not necessarily show that a person is alive (one scientist actually coerced an EEG reading out of a blob of Jell-O!). Though scientists (and lately, lawyers and judges) find it hard to define death, it is somewhat easier for theologians, though the Bible’s definition of death does not involve anything that can be measured or observed by scientists or doctors.

A. Death is Separation

The fundamental understanding of death that comes from Scripture is that it involves the separation of the non-material part of man from his body (Ecclesiastes 12:7). For Christians, this is seen as a step upward (Philippians 1:23). Why is this the case? The reason is not that bodily existence is inferior to “spiritual” existence (we will see in the next section that exactly the opposite is the case), but rather that the perfect presence of God is to be preferred to this sinful world. It is thus the escape from sin - its temptations and its results, including sorrow, guilt, despair, and disease - that makes death the Christian’s friend. Along with this, the believer can look forward to enjoying the presence of Christ in a way he cannot know while on this earth.

B. Death is Abnormal

When God created man on the earth, He did not create him to die. Death was a punishment for sin, and is therefore lumped with sin as the enemy of the human race (Romans 5:12; I Corinthians 15:26, 54-56). It is the final reminder in this world of the grip sin has upon mankind. It is this abnormality that makes the Christian's distaste for death natural. When Jesus wept at the tomb of Lazarus (John 11:35), it is perhaps this abnormality that He sensed, along with His normal sorrow over the departure of His friend. When He Himself sought to shun His impending death on the cross, the fact that death was the abnormal mark of sin's effects on man could have been part of His revulsion.

The fact that death is an abnormality also indicates that the intermediate state, the time between a person's death and the resurrection of the body (which will be the subject of our study next week), is an abnormal condition. The believer does not reach completeness until his soul and body are reunited. It is thus foolish to think of a disembodied condition as somehow superior to a bodily state - God made man to be a psychophysical unity, and the disruption of that unity is the result of sin, and thus abnormal.

2. What Death Is Not

Many false views of death circulate in our world today, some associated with other religions and some associated with the denial of religion. The following are the three most prevalent false views of death.

A. Death is Not Annihilation

Materialists, who deny the spiritual component of man, maintain that death is the end of existence in any form. When a person dies, he simply ceases to exist, since he is no more than the sum of his bodily parts. This foolish notion causes people either to fear death overly much or else to care nothing at all about it. They fear it too much because they believe that this life is all there is, and therefore they cling to life with all the power they can muster. Others realize that if there is nothing after death, then this life has no meaning, so they care little for this life or its cessation. This view of death is held not only by materialists, but by some professing Christians (largely associated with cults) who want to deny the reality of hell (do your students remember some examples from last winter?).

B. Death Does Not Lead to Soul Sleep

Some of the same cults we just alluded to believe that the intermediate state is one of unconsciousness; that between death and the resurrection of the body, a person has no awareness of any kind. This teaching often results from an inability to conceive of the soul functioning apart from the body, and is usually derived from the fact that the Bible frequently uses "sleep" as a euphemism for death (John 11:11-13; I Thessalonians 4:13). Passages such as II Corinthians 5:8 and Revelation 6:9-10 clearly indicate that death involves no cessation of consciousness, however.

C. Death Does Not Lead to Reincarnation

Eastern religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism teach that the souls of those who die will be reborn into new bodies, and that this cycle will continue until something is done to escape it. Following this final release, the soul will be absorbed into the great Oneness (brahma, nirvana, or whatever). This position obviously denies the individuality of any person as well as the importance of the body. Hebrews 9:27 indicates clearly that a person dies but once, and then must face, not another lifetime in another body, but the judgment of God.

Conclusion

Conclude the lesson by returning to the question with which we began: Why do people fear death, and what should be the Christian's attitude toward death? Hopefully students will be able to see that those who do not know Christ fear death because, as Paul indicates in I Thessalonians 4:13, they have no hope. If they don't fear death, they certainly should. Perhaps this is why many unbelievers don't even like to think about death. Christians, on the other hand, have reasons both to fear and to welcome death. They have no reason to experience the horror of the unknown felt by unbelievers, but may legitimately abhor that which is abnormal, and which is the last great mark of sin. On the other hand, believers must realize that death ushers them into something far better, a deliverance from sin into the very presence of Christ Himself.

THE INTERMEDIATE STATE

Lesson Aim

To help students understand what the Bible teaches and does not teach about the time between death and the resurrection of the body.

Memory Verse

I Corinthians 3:11 - “For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.”

Lesson Background

Last week we began our study of eschatology by considering the subject of death. We now move on to discuss the intermediate state, the time between death and the resurrection of the body. This is a subject where, aside from a few basic facts, the Bible is relatively silent, and as a result speculation has been rampant throughout the history of the Church. This speculation includes not only the soul sleep idea we discussed last week, but also the Catholic notion of Purgatory, along with a rather complex view of the relationship between heaven and hell that has become popular among some contemporary evangelicals. While we will focus on the basic truths that Scripture sets forth clearly, we will also spend some time going over some of the speculative theories that have been set forth over the years, largely so that students are aware of their content.

In addition to the abnormality of the intermediate state (discussed last week) and the informative value of setting forth the various speculative views, the major application of this lesson lies in the emphasis that must be placed on the differing destinies of the saved and the unsaved. This distinction will be underscored even further when we consider heaven and hell two weeks from now, but should be brought out in this lesson as well.

Lesson Procedure

A generation ago, much popular attention was directed toward so-called “out of body” experiences, in which people who at one point were very close to death described a feeling of floating around the room, seeing the doctors working on their own bodies, then going down a long tunnel, at the end of which was a beautiful light. Sometimes they would also see what appeared to be friends and relatives who had died previously. They never reached the light, however, but returned to the hospital room, and eventually to their bodies. Some saw these experiences as concrete evidence of the reality of life after death, especially since some of the people who had these experiences were not religious people. Others denounced them as demonic frauds, largely because they implied a universalism in which all would pass through death into this land of bliss and light (no one ever left his body temporarily and reported about seeing fire and brimstone). Some simply wrote them off as psychological wish-fulfillment. Ask your students how such reported experiences should be evaluated. Hopefully, they will arrive at the fact that all such experiences must be judged against the truth revealed in Scripture. No experience may be made normative in itself, nor may it become the basis upon which the Bible is interpreted.

But what does the Bible tell us about the intermediate state, the time between a person’s death and the resurrection of his body? We will find today that the information given in Scripture on this subject is rather limited. This scarcity of revelation has not, of course, stopped many people over the years from speculating about what awaits people after they die. Today’s lesson will look first at the basic facts given in Scripture, then at some of the speculations that have been popular throughout the history of the Church.

1. Facts About the Intermediate State

As already noted, the Bible’s information about what happens after death is rather sparse, especially in the Old Testament. The Hebrew language uses the word *Sheol* to describe the place of departed spirits. Some confusion arises because the same word can also be used to describe the grave. The Old Testament does not differentiate between the destinies of the righteous and the wicked by saying that they go to different places - all alike go to *Sheol* (It should be pointed out that such distinctions are made in other ways by the Old Testament. For instance, the Kingdom of God is reserved for the righteous, while the wicked suffer destruction and judgment.). It is spoken of as being inside the earth, though that may be a figure of speech, since spirits do not occupy space.

The New Testament is a bit more explicit. The destinies of the righteous and the wicked are differentiated by the use of different terminology. The wicked go to *hades*, described as a place of suffering and torment, while the righteous go to a place variously called Abraham’s Bosom (the NIV uses “side”) or Paradise. The most extensive description of these places in the New Testament is found in the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31. [A problem arises with this passage because some debate whether or not it is a parable. In my opinion, the debate does not affect the validity of the information found in the passage. If it is not a parable, as some assert because of the use of a proper name for one of the characters, then surely it is to be accepted as fact. If it is a parable, we need only remember that Jesus based all of His parables on real-life situations to realize that, even if it didn’t happen, it could have.] Have your students go through the passage and list the facts that can be derived about the respective destinies of the wicked and the righteous after death. They should be able to see that the intermediate state is one of consciousness, and that it involves bliss for the righteous and torment for the wicked. One also might possibly conclude that the wicked are able to see the joy of the righteous, which no doubt adds to their suffering. The passage also makes it clear that a person’s destiny is fixed at death; one who finds himself in paradise or hell cannot ever anticipate relocating. This, of course, is the most sobering truth in connection with the whole subject of the intermediate state. The fact that once a person dies, his destiny is fixed for all eternity should motivate us all to be sure of our standing with God before it is too late.

2. Speculations About the Intermediate State

The information given above has not satisfied the curiosity of most people. They want to know more, and that desire has led to considerable speculation on the subject in the church over the years. Your students will without doubt run into some of this speculation if they have not done so already, so it is worthwhile to familiarize them with these ideas and give them a framework within which to evaluate them.

We looked at one such speculation last week when we talked about soul sleep. Today we want to examine two major speculations about the intermediate state, both of which have long histories in the Christian Church. The first of these is the Catholic notion of Purgatory, and the second is the teaching regarding Christ's descent into hell.

A. Purgatory

The doctrine of Purgatory is not one that has its roots in the Bible. (The only reference which Catholics could possibly use as support is found in the Apocrypha. II Maccabees 12:44-45 talks about praying and offering an atoning sacrifice for the dead. Catholics reason that if one can pray for the dead in order to free them from their sins, then they must be in a place where such prayers both are needed and could do some good.) Rather, it is derived from the tradition that accumulated in the early years of the Church's history. It relates rather closely to several other key Catholic teachings, such as the mediatorial role of the priesthood and the doctrine of salvation through the sacraments. The connecting link that brings all of these ideas together is the practice of penance. Catholics believe that a priest, who carries the authority of the apostles, is able to forgive sins on God's behalf. One who comes to a priest must confess his sins, and the priest will then assign penance, which involves good works (prayers, gifts to the church, austerities, pilgrimages, etc.) that the person must do in order to pay for his sins. If a person commits sins for which he does not do penance, he must bear their punishment. If the sins are sufficiently serious ("mortal sins"), the punishment involves eternity in hell. Less serious sins ("venial sins"), however, can be paid for through time spent in Purgatory, after which a person is able to go to heaven, having been cleansed from his sins by his own suffering.

In addition to having no biblical support of any kind, this doctrine contradicts the teaching of Scripture in a number of areas. In the first place, it is a blatant doctrine of salvation by works. It undermines the sufficiency of the death of Christ on the cross by making a person accountable for paying for his own sins. It contradicts the teaching of Paul that there is no judgment awaiting those who are in Christ (Romans 5:1). It also denies that a person's destiny is forever fixed at death.

B. Christ's Descent into Hell

A late addition to the earliest statement of faith used by the church, the Apostles' Creed, says of Christ that "He descended into hell." The most direct reference to such an event that could be asserted in Scripture is found in I Peter 3:19. Other biblical teachings have contributed to it, however, as we shall see. In recent years, the teaching has been expanded to include the notion of a change in the location of the spirits of believers at the time of Christ's resurrection. The argument, with its scriptural support, runs as follows:

Before the death of Christ, all who died went to the same place (cf. undifferentiated use of *Sheol* in the Old Testament). This place of departed spirits was divided into two compartments, one a place of torment for the wicked and one a place of bliss for the righteous (Luke 16:19-31). When Jesus died, He descended into Paradise (Luke 23:42-43) and announced that the work of redemption had been accomplished to its inhabitants, as well as to the wicked in hell (I Peter 3:18-20; 4:6). When

Christ was raised from the dead, He brought the Paradise section of *Sheol* with Him (Ephesians 4:8-10 - were these the “captives?”), so that Paradise now may be legitimately described as being in the presence of God (II Corinthians 12:2-4). This shift also is said to have accounted for the strange phenomenon described in Matthew 27:52-53.

About the best that can be said for this theory is that it doesn't matter very much whether or not it is true. Whatever may have been the condition of believers prior to the death of Christ, there is no question that today those who die immediately pass into the presence of God. The view just presented is highly speculative in nature, largely because it involves stringing together very definite interpretations of some of the most difficult verses in the New Testament. If one verse in the sequence does not mean what it is alleged to mean, the entire sequence crumbles into nothing. Furthermore, as you may have noticed, the verses in question support the theory much better if they are read in the King James Version rather than the NIV.

Conclusion

Conclude the lesson by returning to the application given at the end of the first section. The second part of the lesson may have been informative, but it had little applicatory value, aside from the fact that Scripture should not be stretched beyond what it clearly teaches. The first part, however, should be emphasized - the eternal destiny of each person rests upon what he or she does in this life. Once a person dies, his destiny is fixed forever.

RESURRECTION AND JUDGMENT

Lesson Aim

To communicate to students what the Bible teaches about the resurrection of the bodies of all and the judgment that all must face before the throne of God.

Memory Verse

I Corinthians 3:12 - "If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw . . ."

Lesson Background

We saw last week that the intermediate state, in which the body and soul are separated from one another, is an unnatural situation caused by sin that is not intended to be permanent. God created man as a psychophysical unity, and it is as such that all will spend eternity. In order for this to occur, the bodies of those who have died must be raised so that body and soul may be reunited. It is this resurrection that provides one part of our study for today. Our other concern is the judgment that separates for all time the saved from the lost. When people have been reunited with their bodies, they will go their separate ways to their eternal destinies (which, as we saw last week, are actually entered into during the intermediate state), whether heaven or hell, which will be our subjects next week.

Aside from the basic fact that there will be a resurrection and judgment of everyone, the biblical teaching on the subject of resurrection and judgment has caused quite a bit of controversy. This controversy is largely associated with the timing of the events in question. Some maintain that all will be raised from the dead at the same time and subsequently judged, while others see many resurrections and many judgments, with various groups of people being dealt with by God at various times. The answer given to the question

of when the resurrection and judgment occur depends largely on the overall eschatological framework espoused by the person involved. As a result, we will approach the issue today by speaking of the different aspects of the resurrection and judgment (dealing with believers, unbelievers, angels, etc.), while leaving the question of timing more or less up in the air (aside from indicating that these eschatological events are inextricably tied up with the Second Coming of Christ). The application is much the same as last week: “Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming” (II Peter 3:11-12).

Lesson Procedure

In common terms, when we hear the word “resurrection,” we normally think of someone being brought back to life, such as occurred in the Bible with Jairus’ daughter, Lazarus, Dorcas, or Jesus Himself. But we saw last week that death is really not the cessation of consciousness, just a transition from one conscious state to another one. What, then, is the true significance of the idea of resurrection? Your students should be able to see that resurrection is not really “coming back to life,” but is instead the reuniting of the soul and body that were separated from one another at death. In reviewing the material from last week, ask the students why it is important that the soul and body be reunited. Hopefully, they will remember that the unity of man makes the intermediate state an abnormal one, and that only bringing the body and soul back together can rectify the abnormality of this condition.

Indicate as well that the concept of resurrection is inseparable from the idea of judgment. When people are raised from the dead, they are immediately sent to their eternal destinies - they do not have any prior probationary period during which they have a second opportunity to alter their spiritual condition. The resurrection of the body and the last judgment thus serve as a transition between the intermediate state and heaven or hell. This transition will be the subject of our study this week.

1. The Resurrection of the Body

There are three basic questions we want to answer concerning the resurrection: what, who, and when.

A. The Nature of the Resurrection

We have already seen that the resurrection will reunite the soul and the body, but what will the body that is reunited with the soul be like? Ask your students to respond to this one. Will it be the same body that belonged to the person when he died? Will it be the same age as at death? Will it have the same recognizable features? Will it have the same flaws? Much of the response to these questions can be no more than speculation. Several points can be made concerning the nature of the resurrection body, however.

First of all, the only model that the Bible gives us to help us understand the nature of the resurrection body is that of Christ Himself. The bodies of people such as Lazarus, who were resuscitated in order to continue normal earthly life, do not really tell us what the resurrection body will be like. In looking at the body of Christ following His resurrection, however, we can see the body that He took with Him into heaven. That body was material and tangible, not a phantom (Luke 24:39); it was capable of physical functions (Luke 24:42-43), though probably not requiring them; it was recognizable (Luke 24:37), though Jesus did on occasion prevent Himself from being recognized; it does not appear to have been subject to the normal laws of nature (Luke 24:36; John 20:19), though this could have been due more to the deity of Christ than to the inherent character of the resurrection body. We can also note that the resurrection body of Christ still bore

the marks of sin (John 20:27), though there is reason to believe that Christ may have been an exception in this respect (Revelation 21:4).

We may therefore conclude that, though there is little that can be definitely said about the nature of the resurrection body, we can affirm that it will be material in nature, and that it will be in some senses the same as the bodies we inhabit now, and in other ways different. There is no reason to doubt that believers will be able to recognize one another in heaven.

B. The Participants in the Resurrection

Who takes part in the resurrection of the body? The briefest answer to that question that can be given is a very simple one - everybody. Let's look at the scriptural evidence behind that basic assertion. Obviously we must begin with Christ Himself, who is described as the firstfruits from among the dead. His resurrection was unlike all who preceded Him because it was permanent in nature - all those who had been raised before died again. Thus in terms of the concept of resurrection in the sense in which we are discussing it today, Christ must be counted as the first.

When I Corinthians 15 describes Christ as the firstfruits, the ones who are to follow Him are His people, the believers who have been saved through His death. This resurrection is seen by Paul as a source of great hope and encouragement to Christians today, since they know that this life is not all there is, and that they will be reunited with believers who have already died. But it is not just Christians who will be raised from the dead. Revelation 20:11-15 indicates that unbelievers will also be raised from the dead and that they will be reunited with their bodies prior to judgment.

C. The Time of the Resurrection

This is a matter of considerable controversy. Some would affirm that all are to be raised from the dead and reunited with their bodies at the same time, while others suggest, on the basis of passages such as Revelation 20:3-5, that different people will be raised from the dead at different times. Issues such as this one are closely tied to various eschatological schemes, some of which we will be discussing in this quarter's final lesson. The chronological details of the end times are not a matter of great importance, and we are better off affirming what we can know with certainty. With regard to the time of the resurrection, we should then maintain that all will be reunited with their bodies when Christ returns, and leave the details of the time sequence in the hands of God.

2. The Final Judgment

Since the last judgment is tied so closely to the resurrection of the bodies of all people, it should not surprise us that some of the same controversy exists on this subject that existed with regard to the last one we discussed.

A. The Nature of the Judgment

The treatment of the subject of judgment in Scripture can be rather startling to those of us who emphasize the grace of God in salvation. What we find is that, every time the Bible talks about people being brought before the throne of God for judgment, it speaks of that judgment being rendered on the basis of the works done by the person in question, whether believer or unbeliever (Matthew 25:31-46; I Corinthians 3:12-15; II Corinthians 5:10; Revelation 20:11-15). How are we to reconcile this with the emphasis on salvation by the grace of God, through faith rather than works, that we find throughout the Bible?

The answer is a rather simple one. We tend to picture the final judgment like a courtroom with God as the judge. We thus think of the judgment as a sort of verdict rendered upon the life of the person being judged. What we need to realize is that the concept of judgment in Scripture corresponds not to the verdict in a human courtroom, but to the sentencing. The verdict has already been given - unbelievers are condemned by their sin, believers are justified by Christ's sacrifice. What happens at the last judgment is that sentence is passed on those who have already been declared guilty or innocent. This sentence is based on the works of the person who is being judged - for the believer, he is judged on the basis of the works of Christ, his Substitute.

B. The Participants in the Judgment

Even as all are raised from the dead and reunited with their bodies, so all must appear before the throne of God for judgment. The judgments here are of a significantly different character, however, and should be looked at separately.

i. Believers

The judgment faced by believers is mentioned in II Corinthians 5:10 and described in somewhat more detail in I Corinthians 3:12-15. The word used in II Corinthians 5 to describe the judgment seat of Christ is the same word used elsewhere in the Greek writings of the day to describe the reviewing stand in a parade, where the judges sit and award prizes for the best entries. In accord with this, the Bible in various places talks about "crowns" (cf. the laurel wreaths given to the winners in the ancient Olympics) that are to be awarded to those who serve God faithfully (I Thessalonians 2:19; II Timothy 4:8; James 1:12; I Peter 5:4; Revelation 2:10). Be sure your students understand that the focus of Christian service is not to be upon earning rewards, but rather upon gratitude for the salvation provided by Christ.

ii. Unbelievers

Non-Christians will also be judged after they have been raised from the dead. Their judgment will involve sentencing to the place of eternal torment, called the Lake of Fire in Revelation 20:11-15. Though there is some indication that there will be degrees of punishment depending upon the willfulness of a person's disobedience (Luke 12:47-48), we must understand that under any circumstances, hell is going to be a very unpleasant place indeed.

iii. Angels

The Bible does indicate that angels as well as people will be judged (I Corinthians 6:3; II Peter 2:4; Jude 6; Revelation 20:10). We know little of this judgment, except that believers will in some way participate in it, and that fallen angels will share the fate of unbelievers, suffering in torment forever in the Lake of Fire (Satan and demons are not the jailers and torturers in hell, but are the objects of torment along with unbelievers).

C. The Time of the Judgment

The same questions arise here as were mentioned earlier with regard to the resurrection. In order to avoid undue controversy, we should again simply assert that the last judgment follows the resurrection, which is closely connected with the return of Christ.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we should note that the reality of the judgment is far more critical than the time when it is to occur. Believers can joyfully look forward to the time when they will be rewarded for their service for Christ, while unbelievers must be warned of the fate that is theirs if they continue to reject the Gospel.

FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

RESURRECTION AND JUDGMENT

1. What basically occurs when a person is raised from the dead? Why is the resurrection necessary?
2. Who does the Bible say is to participate in the resurrection of the dead? What do we know about the nature of the resurrection body?
3. What is the significance of the fact that the Bible always talks about judgment as being based on works? How does this fit in with the teaching of the Bible about salvation by grace?
4. What will be the result of the judgment of believers? of unbelievers?
5. Why do you think that Peter, in II Peter 3:11-12, uses the fact of judgment to motivate Christians to holy living?

HEAVEN AND HELL

Lesson Aim

To give students a clear picture of the Bible's teaching concerning heaven and hell, and by it to encourage believers and warn unbelievers among them.

Memory Verse

I Corinthians 3:13 - "... his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work."

Lesson Background

The bliss of heaven and the torments of hell have been the subjects of much thought among Christians throughout the centuries. The promise of heaven has comforted many believers in times of trouble, while the threat of hell has moved many into the kingdom. It is also true that the vision of heaven cherished by believers has been mocked by the world as "pie in the sky," while many who call themselves Christians have asserted that we are better off concentrating on the needs of the world in which we are now living instead of focusing our thoughts on the world to come. Many of these same people have done all they could to eradicate the notion of hell, maintaining that a God of love could not possibly condemn anyone to perpetual suffering.

We are thus still in the realm of controversy, which seems omnipresent when eschatology is being discussed. The Bible is clear in affirming the reality of heaven and hell; no Christian who takes the Word of God seriously may deny that. It is instead the nature of heaven and hell that will be our subject for discussion today. We must realize that we are dealing with something that is totally outside the realm of

human experience. As with the visions of God Himself described in passages such as Ezekiel 1, all the biblical writers can do is use human experiences to draw analogies to what corresponds to nothing in human language. Once we realize that descriptions of heaven and hell given in Scripture are really analogies that use human language to approximate what is essentially indescribable, we will be in a much better position to understand what the Bible does and does not teach about the eternal destiny of men. (Please don't think I'm going off the deep end into allegorical interpretation or trying to explain away what the Bible says here. As we will see, the approach I am taking in this lesson is the one taken by Jesus Himself in discussing this subject.) For the benefit of your students, you should note that in your teaching, you should be no more reluctant to encourage your Christian students with a picture of the glories of heaven and warn the unbelievers in your class about the terrors and torments of hell than was Jesus Himself during His public ministry.

Lesson Procedure

Begin the lesson by asking your students first what heaven is like and then what hell is like. They will give you suggestions about pearly gates and streets of gold, then about fire and brimstone. Ask them if these descriptions are literal or symbolic. If they insist on the literalness of these descriptions, point out that one of the most graphic ones, found in the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus, describes the intermediate state, which as we saw a few weeks ago, is not a bodily state. How then can it be speaking about literal fire? If we are to understand what the Bible does and does not teach about heaven and hell, we will need to proceed systematically to examine each of these areas. We will look at each in turn by exploring the words and descriptions used for them in Scripture.

1. Heaven

A. Words for Heaven

We have already seen that heaven is also called Paradise or Abraham's Bosom (or Side), but that is not the real question facing us here. We must note that the word "heaven" itself is used in several different ways. Many puzzle over the reference to "the third heaven" in II Corinthians 12:2. According to the Jewish understanding of the cosmos, there were three "heavens." The first was the earth's atmosphere, where birds flew and clouds gathered (Genesis 1:20). The second was what we would call outer space, where the stars and planets followed their courses (Genesis 1:14-19). When the New Testament speaks of Jesus as ascending above or beyond the heavens (Ephesians 4:10; Hebrews 4:14; 7:26), it is these first and second heavens of which it speaks. The "third heaven" was a phrase used by the Jews to describe the dwelling place of God (sometimes called "the heaven of heavens" in the Old Testament - Deuteronomy 10:14; Psalm 68:33). It is our main subject of concern today, for it is here that Jesus now resides, and it is in this same place that believers will live with Him forever (Mark 16:19; Luke 24:51; Ephesians 6:9; II Corinthians 12:2-4; I Peter 3:22).

What, then, are we to say about the new heaven promised in the book of Revelation and elsewhere? We must note that this concept really merges all three of the above. The new heaven is described as a remaking of the material world (thus involving the first and second heavens), and pictures all as being the dwelling place of God.

B. Description of Heaven

Unfortunately, those passages in Scripture that refer to what we would call the third heaven include absolutely no description of the place. In fact, Paul implies rather strongly in II Corinthians 12 that such a description is impossible. If heaven is impossible to describe, what are we to do with the description given by John in Revelation 21:1-22:5? Two points must be noted. First of all, the description given here by John, as with the rest of the book of Revelation, relies heavily on the imagery of the Old Testament prophets. This would argue in favor of seeing the description as symbolic in nature. Secondly, John appears to be stringing together all of the most beautiful images he can conjure up in the minds of his readers in order to picture for them something that corresponded to nothing in the human experience or vocabulary. Thus when I suggest that heaven should not be thought of as literally having streets paved with gold and gates made out of gigantic pearls, it is important to realize that I am really saying that the poverty of human language prevented John from communicating anything close to the beauty that he saw in his vision. Heaven is thus far more glorious than anything we can possibly imagine. We should also note that the principal glory of heaven is not to be found in its physical environment, but in the presence of God in the midst of it.

2. Hell

A. Words for Hell

There are four different words in the original languages of the Bible that are translated “hell” in English. Two of these we have already examined when looking at the intermediate state.

i. *Sheol*

As we saw earlier, this Hebrew word can mean either the grave or the abode of the dead, and does not differentiate between believers and unbelievers. The Old Testament thus gives us virtually no information about hell as such.

ii. *Hades*

This is the Greek equivalent of *Sheol*, though it usually has a negative connotation and is generally reserved in the New Testament to describe a place of torment for unbelievers.

iii. *Tartaros*

This word is used only once, in II Peter 2:4, and refers to the prison in which fallen angels are bound.

iv. *Gehenna*

This is by far the most interesting of the four. The word is a Greek transliteration of the Hebrew words for “Valley of Hinnom.” The Valley of Hinnom is one of the valleys surrounding the mountain peaks upon which the city of Jerusalem was built. In the period of the Divided Monarchy, this valley was the site of idolatrous worship of all kinds, including human sacrifice (II Kings 23:10; II Chronicles 28:3; 33:6). When Josiah became the king of Judah, he destroyed all of the idol temples and killed their priests. By the time of Jesus’ ministry, the Valley of Hinnom was used as the Jerusalem city dump. Trash and garbage were taken there and burned, along with the bodies of executed criminals and others who could not be given a decent burial for one reason or another. It was thus a place of perpetual burning and incredible stench and

decay. When Jesus used this term for hell in Mark 9:42-48, it would have brought an immediate vivid image to the minds of those to whom He spoke.

B. Description of Hell

Aside from the description given in the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus, which, as we already noted, is a description of a non-bodily state and thus cannot be thought of as literal, the most graphic description of hell found in the Bible is that given by Jesus in Mark 9:42-48. As we just got finished seeing, however, Jesus was here speaking to His disciples about the Valley of Hinnom. The perpetual fire and the maggots feeding off the bodies of the dead made up a vivid picture of the city dump that they all had seen and smelled before. Thus we find that Jesus here does much the same thing with respect to hell that John does in relationship to heaven in Revelation. He puts together a word picture of the most horrible and disgusting things His hearers can imagine and compares them to hell. In effect, He implies that hell is like the city dump outside of Jerusalem, only indescribably worse! In the same way, then, that the glories of heaven are too marvelous to be comprehended by the human mind or described by the human vocabulary, so the horrors of hell beggar any human effort to put them into words. [A good example of the point I am trying to make is a film I saw many years ago in my first year as a teacher. The administration of the school in which I was teaching at the time brought in a film to show to the students in chapel that was called *The Burning Hell*. The film consisted of lurid descriptions of the horrors of hell, accompanied by pictures of fire, people screaming and writhing in pain, and worms crawling over the bodies and faces of various unfortunate “actors.” The special effects were terrible, and most of the students found the film laughable, to say the least. It illustrated graphically the trivializing effect of a serious human attempt to picture the reality of hell. And in truth, did Dante, with his brilliantly artistic *Divine Comedy*, do much better?]

Conclusion

The conclusion to this lesson must emphasize that none of the material discussed today may be taken lightly. Heaven is a place of indescribable glory and should not be trivialized by those who picture it as angels sitting around on clouds playing harps. Nor is it the boring place too many Christians tend to picture it as (Doesn't this show the poverty of our own ideas of what is interesting or fun?). Hell, on the other hand, is nothing to be shrugged off. Too many people think they will handle it with little trouble as long as their friends are there. They obviously have missed the point. Hell is as much worse than we can imagine as heaven is better.

THE SECOND COMING OF CHRIST

Lesson Aim

To impress upon students that the long wait for the return of Christ does not in any way invalidate the promise of His coming.

Memory Verse

I Corinthians 3:14 - "If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward."

Lesson Background

The church throughout the centuries has tended to go to extremes with regard to the Second Coming of Christ. At times, there has been interest in the Second Coming that has bordered on obsession, accompanied by date-setting, detailed speculations, and often bizarre behavior. At other times, the whole idea of the return of Christ has been ignored as irrelevant as the church concentrated on the affairs of this world. As is true with almost any area of theology, extremes of any kind on this subject can be harmful to the church. Those who fixate their attention on the return of Christ often harm the church's reputation by means of their foolish predictions and strange behavior, while those who live as if Christ were never coming back again deprive themselves and the church of a great source of power in motivating people to serve Christ and consider their spiritual condition. We must neither ignore the Second Coming nor dwell on it to the exclusion of all else.

There have been two major areas surrounding the Second Coming of Christ where most of the foolishness associated with it has been centered. These areas are the time of the Second Coming and the signs preceding it. Despite the fact that Christ explicitly stated that the time of His return is unknown (Matthew 24:36), many have sought to predict when it would occur. In the second century, a group of

Christians in Asia Minor known as Montanists became convinced that the return of Christ was near and would occur within their lifetime. They responded by giving up all material things and living as ascetics, at times even going so far as to court martyrdom in the Roman arenas. Even so great a theologian as Augustine, living in the early fifth century, predicted that the age in which he lived would last a thousand years and concluded that Christ would return in A.D. 1000. Needless to say, this generated considerable excitement in the Middle Ages as the end of the first millennium after Christ approached. Later in the Middle Ages, Joachim of Fiore predicted that Christ would return in the year 1260.

Medieval Catholics are not the only ones who have been bitten by the date-setting bug. German Pietist J.A. Bengel predicted that Christ would return in 1836. Meanwhile, in America, Baptist preacher William Miller was proclaiming that 1843 was the date of Christ's return (later amended to 1844 - remember the Adventists?). Cultists have the reputation of being prolific date-setters, of course. In addition to Miller, the Jehovah's Witnesses not only predicted that the Second Coming would occur first in 1874 and later in 1914, they continue to believe that it indeed happened in the latter year! Of course, they also predicted that the world would end in 1975. The Worldwide Church of God insisted that Christ would come back before the end of the twentieth century, and a similar prediction was made by an evangelical in Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth*.

With regard to the signs of the Second Coming, most of the foolishness has surrounded the perpetual attempt on the part of many to identify current events or recent history with some of the symbolism of the messages of the Old Testament prophets and the book of Revelation. Everything from the atomic bomb, airplanes, and automobiles to the European Common Market has been found in the visions of Revelation by some well-meaning scholar.

As far as our lesson today is concerned, we will look at these two areas for the purpose of gaining a proper perspective on them. The danger to the Church posed by foolish behavior on the part of Christians is too great for your students not to be exposed to these things. On the other hand, we must also spend some time talking about what we should know and do in relationship to the Second Coming of Christ. We cannot afford to ignore an important doctrine of Scripture simply because it has been abused by many.

Lesson Procedure

Ask your students if they have ever met anyone who firmly believed that the Second Coming of Christ was right around the corner. What made the person think that this was true? How did the person act as a result? The doctrine of the Second Coming of Christ has caused much controversy and much strange behavior throughout the history of the Church. If we are neither to ignore it nor to give it undue emphasis, we must understand what the Bible does and does not say about this important event.

1. The Time of the Second Coming

Give your students the information from the Lesson Background on examples of date-setting throughout the history of the Church. Ask them why such predictions harm the Church. They should be able to see that the failures of such predictions hold the Church, and thus the Lord, up to the ridicule of the world. Such foolishness justifies in the minds of unbelievers the wisdom of the course they are taking in separating themselves from Christianity. Furthermore, such predictions tend to distract the Church from the work in which it ought to be engaged. A church that is dressed in white robes and stands waiting on top of a mountain is not serving Christ in the way He intended.

If Christ said that the time of His coming could not be known, what can we assert about it? While we cannot know the definite time (or even a good estimate), we can assert that the Second Coming of Christ is imminent - in other words, it can happen at any time. This was as true in the first century as it is today. Paul firmly believed that the return of Christ could occur during his lifetime (I Thessalonians 4:17), and every Christian who has lived since the time of Christ has been able to affirm the same thing. When Jesus talked about His Second Coming, the thing He emphasized more than anything else was the importance of watchfulness. A Christian who “knows” when Christ is coming will not be watchful until the event approaches, but one who believes He could come at any time will be constantly ready and full of expectation.

2. The Signs of the Second Coming

Many Bible scholars have pointed to events in the news over the years as evidence of the coming of Christ in the near future. Ask your students for some examples, and if they don’t know any, give them some, including the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, the formation of the World Council of Churches, the European Common Market, the United Nations, the discovery of atomic energy, television, the Internet, etc. Point out that anyone who sees these things as signs of the coming of Christ is implying that before the occurrence of these events or discoveries, the return of Christ was not truly imminent - Christ could not possibly have come back before these things happened. Worse yet, this would produce the conclusion that Paul had been wrong when he asserted that it was possible for Christ to return during his lifetime.

If it is not possible to point to current events as signs of the coming of Christ, what did Jesus mean when He talked about such things? How can a perpetually imminent event be said to be preceded by signs? Have your students try to answer this question by reading Matthew 24:4-14. What is the nature of the signs given by Jesus in this passage? Make sure your students see that the signs given here are not one-time events that can be specifically pinpointed, but rather are broad characteristics of the entire age between the two advents of the Savior. These things have been present since Jesus left and will continue to be present until He returns. Jesus was not here giving His disciples the means by which to predict the time of His coming, but rather was preparing them for what they would have to endure in the meantime; they should not think that the horrors of the world around them should lead them to conclude that Christ had forgotten His people. Certainly no one could question Jesus’ description of the last two thousand years as a time of warfare, pestilence, and famine, as a time during which the Church suffered from those both within and without, but also a time during which the Gospel has spread throughout the world (note that even this “sign” had been carried out by the time Paul was writing to the Thessalonians - the entire known world had already heard the Gospel, many of them from the lips of Paul himself).

Thus we must not focus on the signs, but on the Savior. The watchfulness He commanded was one of service (see the parables of Matthew 25). We are not to look to the events of history for signs of our deliverance, but rather to the promises of God.

3. The Importance of the Second Coming

We have spent a lot of time so far today talking about the dangers of foolish preoccupation with the Second Coming of Christ. What about the positive aspects of the doctrine? Why is it important for Christians today?

A. To motivate us to service for Christ

The servant who knows his master may return at any time is likely to be more diligent in his service than the one who knows the master will be gone for some time. Jesus Himself warned His disciples against abuse of their responsibility and authority on this very basis.

B. To keep us from living like the world

Many non-Christians live as if this life will never end, acting as though the things of this world were more important than anything else. It is far too easy for Christians to fall into the same trap. The Second Coming should focus our minds on the fact that this world could come to an end at any time, and therefore the things of this world are of only marginal importance. As Peter says in II Peter 3:11, those who know that Christ may return at any time “ought to live holy and godly lives,” in contrast to the scoffers who really don’t think that the Second Coming will ever occur.

C. To encourage evangelism

The Gospel will not be freely offered to the lost forever. In fact, God could close the door on His kingdom at any time, leaving outside many of those to whom we speak daily.

D. To bring to a close the world’s rebellion

When Christ came the first time, He came as a humble carpenter. When He returns, it will be as a conquering King. Sin will once and for all be eradicated from the face of the earth.

E. To bring the believer’s state into line with his standing

The Christian is presently justified before God, but is still burdened with sin in his daily life. When Christ returns, standing and state will become one, and the believer will become as holy as God now reckons him to be.

VIEWS OF THE SECOND COMING

Lesson Aim

To familiarize students with the major views of the Second Coming of Christ that are held among Christians, thus preparing them to evaluate for themselves the issues involved.

Memory Verse

I Corinthians 3:15 - "If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames."

Lesson Background

The events associated with the Second Coming of Christ have been debated for many centuries in the church. Today many hold widely differing views and sometimes show great intolerance toward those whose views differ from their own. This has not always been the case. In the early years of Church History, the vast majority of Christians held a view that today we would characterize as historic premillennialism or chiliasm. They believed that Christ would return and would then reign on earth for a literal period of a thousand years. Premillennialism fell into disfavor largely due to the extremism of the Montanists and others like them, and was succeeded by amillennialism, largely through the influence of Augustine. This amillennialism, which dominated the eschatology of the church until after the Reformation, was not in all respects like the amillennialism popular today. As we saw last week, Augustine believed that the Millennium was in the present rather than the future, but he also believed that it would last for a literal thousand years. Only after A.D. 1000 was the concept of a thousand-year Millennium revised to incorporate an indefinite amount of time between the advents of Christ. Aside from fringe groups, amillennialism did not begin to lose its grip on the Church as a whole, whether Catholic or Protestant, until the nineteenth century. At that

time, two widely differing approaches became popular. One was a renewed premillennialism, accompanied by the detailed outline of future events developed by the dispensationalists (pretribulationism made its first appearance at this time). The other was postmillennialism, with its vision of the perfectibility of mankind and the conversion of the nations through the work of the Church. This optimistic view became popular both among missions-minded evangelicals and Social Gospel liberals, both of whom had their own versions of the world being prepared for the return of Christ by the successful ministry of the Church within it. Postmillennialism was virtually demolished by the two world wars of the twentieth century. The major dispute in the Church today is between the various versions of premillennialism and the still-popular amillennial view. The debate is an important one because of its implications in the area of biblical interpretation in particular, but the intolerance associated with it has done great damage to the unity and spirit of the Church. Christians cannot afford to throw bricks at one another over differences such as these.

Today's lesson will attempt to set forth the basic teachings and distinctives of the three major positions (along with some of the variations present in premillennialism), in addition to some of the implications associated with each one. The lesson material will not, however, attempt to draw conclusions as to the validity of the competing positions. [If you are able to discern the position I favor from my exposition of the alternatives, good for you. I am making a conscious effort to avoid bias, though that is never possible in an absolute sense.] Your students should be brought back at the end of the lesson to those truths clearly taught by the Word of God in connection with Christ's return and encouraged to emphasize those rather than the distinctives associated with the various eschatological positions.

Lesson Procedure

Start the class by writing a series of words on the board, such as "amillennialism," "dispensationalism," "postmillennialism," "covenant theology," "premillennialism," and "pretribulationist rapture." Ask your students if they know what any of these terms mean and if they can indicate which of them describe their own understanding of future things. Their responses should give you some idea of how much your students know about today's topic and enable you to gear your lesson to the appropriate level of understanding. Unless your students have had exposure to this material in a course in a Christian school, most will probably not have the slightest idea what the indicated terms mean or how their own views fit into them. If that is the case, indicate that today's lesson will involve the explanation of the major eschatological positions held in the Christian Church today, and that hopefully by the end of the session the students will be able to identify and distinguish the terms on the board in at least some rudimentary sense.

1. Premillennialism

As indicated in the Lesson Background, premillennialism was the eschatology of the Early Church, virtually disappeared from sight for the thousand years of the Middle Ages, but has experienced renewed interest in the last two centuries.

A. Basic Teachings

"Premillennial" means "before the Millennium." Premillennialists believe that Christ will return to earth before a thousand-year period known as the Millennium, during which He will physically reign upon the earth. The idea of a thousand-year reign of Christ on earth is derived from Revelation 20:1-9. As premillennialists take literally the thousand years of Revelation 20, so they take literally the seven years of tribulation mentioned elsewhere in the book of Revelation (11:2-3 cf. 12:6). Thus the thousand-year reign

of Christ on earth will be preceded by seven years of vicious persecution of God's people and judgments poured out upon the wicked by God.

B. Implications

The premillennial approach to eschatology is tied to a literal interpretation of prophecy. Premillennialists believe that the details of the prophetic visions have specific significance, and that unless they are clearly symbolic in nature, they are to be taken literally. Even those that are symbolic are understood to correspond to some literal truth. As a result, premillennialists tend to allow the messages of the Old Testament prophets to stand on their own ground rather than interpreting them in the light of the New Testament. Premillennialists have tended to emphasize the Second Coming of Christ more than those who espouse other positions, and have also generally been given to more speculation on the subject. They also often take a pessimistic view of history, believing that the world and the Church will continue to get worse and worse until the judgment of God falls upon the wicked and Christ returns to deliver His people. Though this is surely a stereotype, premillennialists have a reputation for being more interested in the future than in the present, and more concerned with the deliverance of the Church than with the changing of the world. On the other hand, premillennialism has proved to be a great impetus to missions, as people take seriously the fact that the day of salvation may be short indeed.

C. Varieties

There are at least four varieties of premillennialism, two of which are significant and widespread, while the other two are more curiosities than anything else.

i. Historic Premillennialism (Posttribulationism)

The premillennialism of the Early Church was one in which the Church was seen as bearing the brunt of the Tribulation that preceded the Millennium. This is quite understandable considering the fierce persecution the Church of that day was experiencing at the hands of the Roman Empire. Posttribulationists believe the Church will be preserved through the Great Tribulation, after which Christ will return and establish His kingdom on earth.

ii. Dispensational Premillennialism (Pretribulationism)

In the early part of the nineteenth century, a theological system was developed in England by the founder of the Plymouth Brethren, John Nelson Darby. It was based on two related principles. Believing that the experience of the Christian since the Day of Pentecost was something entirely unique in history, Darby drew two conclusions. The first was that Israel and the Church were completely distinct entities in the plan of God; the second was that all who had the Spirit of God were spiritual equals, so that any distinction between clergy and laity was unbiblical. The former was the cornerstone of dispensationalism, while the latter was the key concept behind the formation of the Plymouth Brethren. Dispensationalists see the Tribulation predicted in Daniel 9 and view it as a time during which God is dealing with Israel. Since this is the case, it cannot involve the Church. They thus conclude that the Church will be removed by Christ prior to the Tribulation in something called the Rapture, in which Christ removes His children from the world before directing His wrath against it. During this time of wrath, it is now-believing Israel that will be persecuted and will bear witness to the truth during the period of judgment. The sharp separation between Israel and the Church has been taken to extremes by some dispensationalists, and has thus been the object of considerable ridicule by those taking other positions. Dispensationalism emphasizes the unconditional

nature of the Abrahamic Covenant (Genesis 15) and looks for the eventual conversion of the Jewish people (Romans 11); it therefore places great significance on the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948.

iii. Mid-tribulationism

This position, held only by a few, maintains that the Rapture will occur in the middle of the seven-year Tribulation. Otherwise, it differs little from pretribulationism.

iv. Partial Rapturism

Again an historical curiosity, this position teaches that only those who are “watching” when Christ returns will be raptured before the Tribulation, while all others will be left behind to endure that time of great trouble. Those who take this position are guilty of dividing the Body of Christ even more harshly than dispensationalists are usually accused of doing.

2. Postmillennialism

A. Basic Teachings

As indicated in the Lesson Background, the postmillennial position had its greatest support in the nineteenth century. The tremendous spread of the Gospel through the work of missions around the world encouraged Christians to anticipate the conversion of the entire world in the near future. Liberals, on the other hand, had utopian hopes of social change that would eradicate from the world such evils as war, poverty, and disease. They believed that God was at work in the world through His Church, and that the Church would be God’s instrument for remaking the world. They taught that the Millennium (believed by some to be a literal thousand years and by others to be of indeterminate length) would be ushered in by the Church, and that Christ would return at the end of this Golden Age of peace and prosperity. As noted, this position was shattered by the First and Second World Wars. The nineteenth century had been one of peace, but the unprecedented brutality of the first half of the twentieth century convinced many that the Millennium was not imminent.

B. Implications

Postmillennialists are optimistic, both about the Church and about the course of history. Unlike premillennialists, they do not see things as getting progressively worse, but rather anticipate that things will get progressively better. This optimism fit nicely into not only the historical environment of the nineteenth century, but also into the teachings of the theory of evolution developed by Darwin in that same century. Man is evolving upward, and so is society, so why should not the Church be expected to be the leader in this general progression toward perfection? On the positive side, postmillennialists take seriously the promises made by Christ concerning the spread of the Gospel and the victory of the church over Satan.

3. Amillennialism

This was the dominant eschatology throughout the Middle Ages and Reformation, and continues to be the approach most widely accepted in the ranks of the Reformed churches today.

A. Basic Teachings

“Amillennial” literally means “no Millennium.” The term is a misleading one because amillennialists do believe in a Millennium; they simply deny that it refers to a literal thousand-year period (with the exception of the early exponents of the view such as Augustine). Amillennialists believe that the Millennium of Revelation 20 is a symbolic description of the present age, the time between the first and second appearances of Christ. The reign of Christ is not seen as a literal earthly reign, but as a spiritual reign in the hearts of believers. It proposes no complex series of events for the future, but simply maintains that Christ will return at the end of the age, judge the wicked, and take His people to be with Him in heaven. In the same way that the Millennium is seen as going on in the present, so the Tribulation is viewed, not as a discrete period of time, but rather a description of the experience of God’s people throughout the present age.

B. Implications

While premillennialism is often associated with dispensationalism, amillennialism is generally the companion of covenant theology. Covenant theology, unlike dispensationalism, teaches an identity of Israel and the Church, and thus sees the Old Testament prophecies fulfilled in the present age through the spiritual activity of God in the world, rather than looking forward to literal fulfillment of promises associated with the land of Israel, the Temple, etc. Thus amillennialists would see no significance whatever to the establishment of Israel as an independent state, and would not anticipate the future conversion of a significant portion of the world’s Jews.

An important implication of amillennialism relates to its interpretation of the prophecies of the Old Testament. Since they ascribe spiritual rather than literal significance to these prophecies, the details are seen as contributing to the overall effect of the prophecy (much as in the parables of Jesus), rather than having specific meaning in themselves. This derives from an emphasis on progressive revelation - the idea that God unfolded His truth gradually - and thus results in interpreting the Old Testament on the basis of the clearer teachings found in the New Testament revelation.

Amillennialism is neither optimistic nor pessimistic in its view of the Church and society, maintaining that both good and evil will grow side by side until the end of the world, when the wheat and the tares will be separated once and for all.

Conclusion

Conclude the lesson by bringing your students back to the basic truths concerning the Second Coming that we covered last week. Controversy about eschatology is counterproductive; what is really important is that your students live in the light of the fact that Jesus is coming back and that His return could occur at any time.

FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

VIEWS OF THE SECOND COMING

1. What are the three basic views of eschatology that have dominated the history of the Church?
2. What does each view believe about the Millennium? about the Tribulation?
3. What does each view believe concerning the future of the Church and society at large?
4. What are the distinctives of dispensationalism and covenant theology? With which views of eschatology are they generally associated?
5. What are the major differences between historic premillennialism and dispensational premillennialism?
6. Why do you think it makes a difference which of the positions discussed this week a person believes? If you don't think it does make a difference, why not?