
The Unity of the Spirit

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"In the Bond of Peace"

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Dear Fellow-believers,

In the Bible there is one God, one people of God and one hope for all of God's people - eternal life in the coming age of the kingdom of God. Though this hope was foretold and foreshadowed in the pages of the OT, it comes clearly into focus through the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. As a result of these events Christ has "brought life and immortality to light through the gospel" (II Tim. 1:10). Therefore, the hope of God's new covenant people is no longer seen "from a distance" as in OT times (Heb. 11:13) but is now centered on the clear and simple truth of Christ's own glorious resurrection and his future second coming for his people. At that time *all* believers - whether dead or alive - will be transformed so as to be with Christ in the glory of God's kingdom forever (I Thess. 4:13-18; I Cor. 15:50-54). This glorious "parousia" of Christ will also bring about the "universal restoration of all things" - as "foretold by all the prophets" (Acts 3:17-26) - so that even "creation itself will be delivered from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God" (Rom. 8:19-21). In short, the Christian hope for the future is now centered on the final fulfillment of God's foreordained plan "to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ" (Eph. 1:10).

In the NT this hope can be summarized in a single phrase: "Christ Jesus our hope" (I Tim. 1:1). This truth is the result of the incorporation of each

believer, by way of the Spirit, into the one body of Christ (I Cor. 12:13). Because of this incorporation "in Christ" the church of the body of Christ is now bound up in all of Christ's accomplishments - past, present and future. This can be seen quite clearly in many of Paul's Letters. Look, for example, at his Letters to the Ephesians and Colossians:

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ ... And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus. In order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus (Eph. 2:4-7).

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory (Col. 3:1-4).

Here we have explicitly stated the simplicity of the Christian life. *Christ* is our "life". For Paul and the other new covenant believers it was impossible to think of their lives - either in the present or in the future - apart from Christ. The life, death and resurrection of Christ, together with his giving of the Spirit on Pentecost, had forever changed the Christian believers' perspective on history. In the cross and in the resurrection the decisive events of history have *already* taken place. In Christ, God has accomplished victory for mankind over the forces of

sin, death and Satan forever. As a result the life of every believer is now bound up in their existence "in Christ."

Because of this Paul's entire life was focused on Christ - whether in this life or in the life to come:

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live. But Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (Gal. 2:20).

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.

Christ was Paul's "life." Paul's whole existence - both in the present and in the future - was determined by this single overwhelming truth. It was "in Christ" that he had been redeemed and now, by way of the Spirit, Christ lived "in him." Since even now Paul's life was "hidden with Christ in God," he knew that when Christ appeared, he also would "appear with him in glory" (Col. 3:3-4).

It is often thought that Paul's words "depart and be with Christ" indicate that Paul expected to go to heaven immediately after his death and to live consciously there "with Christ." However, this seems unlikely because Paul nowhere else speaks in these terms and even in Philippians it is the resurrection and Christ's return that he longs for (Phil. 3:10-21). In fact, other clear statements by Paul seem to make such a scenario almost impossible. This can be seen in I Corinthians and I Thessalonians where he clearly expresses his understanding of how believers will come to be "with Christ" forever:

For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him (I Cor. 15:22-23).

According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord

himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever (I Thess. 4:15-17).

In these verses it is crystal clear that Paul believed that Christians who died were "asleep in Christ" and would only be "with Christ" when they were "awakened" and raised to be "with him" at his second coming. This fits both the OT and NT pattern of the state of the dead as well as the future resurrection (cp. Dan. 12:2-3, 13; Acts 24:14-16). Most likely, Paul's words "depart and be with Christ" simply indicate the degree to which Christ was indeed Paul's "life" and that for him the next stage of conscious life after his "departure" (II Tim. 4:6) would be to be "with Christ in glory" - on the day of his appearing. Look at II Timothy 4:

In the Presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the Word ...

For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day - and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing (II Tim. 4:1-8; cf. Heb. 9:27-28).

For Paul, the next stage after death, on the chronological timetable of God's plan, was to "appear with Christ in glory" - on "that day" of "his appearing and his kingdom." This was the simplicity of Paul's life and hope - may it be ours as well.

Richie Temple

The Hope of Immortality

by Don Robertson

Rock Hill, South Carolina

One of the most important questions facing Christian believers today regards the subject of immortality. The word "immortality" is defined as the quality of living forever; never dying; or having everlasting life. Although the word "immortality" is not found that many times in the Bible, the concept of living forever, never dying, or having everlasting life is set forth many times in the Scriptures. John 3:16 is a very familiar example:

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life (John 3:16; Scripture verses are from KJV unless otherwise noted).

Since the Bible obviously has much to say about the subject of immortality we must ask: does the Bible present immortality as something that is *conditional* or does it set it forth as something that is *innate*? The word "conditional" is defined as "containing a condition; depending on something else; qualified; made on certain terms." Many parents make promises to their children such as, "If you graduate from high school, I will give you an automobile." In this promise receiving the automobile is *conditional* on the person graduating from high school. The promise is made on certain terms. It's qualified. It's *not* unconditional.

The word "innate" is contrasted with "conditional." The word "innate" means "inborn; natural; not acquired." It's what you have by reason of birth. That's the difference between something that is conditional and something that is innate, or something that you have within yourself by reason of birth.

So is immortality something we are born with? Are we born immortal? Are we born with a quality of living forever, never dying or having everlasting life? Do we have that by virtue of being a human being? Or, is immortality something that is conditional - something that is not natural to us, something that depends on something else, something that is qualified or is made on certain

terms? How does the Bible set forth immortality? Let's turn our Bibles to I John 2:15-17:

Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away and the lust thereof; but he that doeth the will of God abideth forever (I John 2:15-17).

Look closely at verse 17 and see if this verse is setting forth an *innate* immortality, something that man is born with. Or, is it setting forth a *conditional* immortality that man can attain if he meets certain conditions or requirements? The word immortality is not there but the expression "abideth for ever" means the same thing. Anything that abides forever is everlasting. Is the immortality that is set forth here something that one has automatically? No. John says, "... he that doeth the will of God *abideth forever*." Well, if all men were to abide forever whether they do the will of God or not, then what John says in that verse is misleading. Because here he says that in order to abide forever, we must *do* something. We must *do the will of God* in order to abide forever.

The Bible teaches that God is immortal but that human beings are mortal, not immortal. Look at Romans chapter one:

Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles (Rom. 1:22-23 NIV).

If immortal means the quality of living forever, never dying or having everlasting life, then mortal is just the opposite of that. Mortal would be not living forever; it would be dying or, being subject to death. Simply put, that which is mortal does not innately possess everlasting life.

The Old Testament View of Man

Let's go to the beginning where God created mankind. I think we can learn something about the nature of man by what is said concerning Adam. Let's look at Genesis chapter three and pick up the story in verse 17. This is just after Adam and Eve

committed sin and God is appearing to them and pronouncing a judgment on them as a result of their sin.

And unto Adam he said, "Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, 'thou shalt not eat of it:' cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of field; In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return" (Gen. 3:17-19).

Notice what God tells Adam is going to happen to him. He is going to return into the ground, "for dust thou art and unto dust shalt thou return." The word "thou" (the modern versions would have "you") is referring to Adam as a person. Adam is going to return unto the ground, to the dust. Look further at Genesis 3:

And Adam called his wife's name Eve; because she was the mother of all living. Unto Adam also and to his wife did the Lord God make coats of skins, and clothed them. And the Lord God said, Behold, the man has become as one of us, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever: Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden to till the ground from whence he was taken" (Gen. 3:20-23).

So why did God put Adam out of the garden? To prevent him from putting forth his hand and tasting of the tree of life and eating and living for ever. Would Adam have lived forever without partaking of that tree of life, whatever is involved in that? No, he wouldn't. The way Adam could have lived forever is partaking of that tree of life, whatever is involved in that. God put him out of the garden lest he partake of that tree of life and live forever. Adam wasn't created with the ability to live forever. There was an *opportunity* for him to live forever. If he had been obedient to God, if he had served God, then that tree of life would have been open to him and he could have eaten of it and lived forever. Because of sin, God put him out of the garden so he couldn't eat of that tree and live

forever. Living forever was something conditional on his *obedience*, on his *faithfulness* to God. But because of his *unfaithfulness*, he was put out of the garden so he couldn't partake of that tree. The judgment pronounced on him was that he would return to the dust from which God created him.

Look at Job chapter 4 and verse 17. This is a statement by Eliphaz, one of the friends of Job who had come to comfort Job in his misery. Eliphaz is raising a question here,

*"Shall mortal man be more just than God?
Shall a man be more pure than his Maker?"
(Job. 4:17).*

I think it is obvious that the answer to the question is "No." Man shall not be more just than God and man shall not be more pure than his Maker. Notice how Eliphaz describes man in this verse - "Shall *mortal* man be more just than God?" Eliphaz had the idea that man is mortal. Man is subject to death. Man is not immortal. We might be thinking, "Well, that is just Eliphaz's opinion that man is mortal." Let's see if Job himself thought that. Look at Job chapter 14:

*"Man that is born of a woman is of few days,
and full of trouble. He cometh forth like a
flower, and is cut down: he fleeth also as a
shadow, and continueth not" (Job 14:1-2).*

Notice how Job is describing man. Job is saying that man is *not* going to live forever. Man is just going to live a few days and he is going to die. Let's pick it up at verse 10 and read a few verses. Notice how Job describes man whenever he dies:

*But man dieth, and wasteth away: yea, man
giveth up the ghost, and where is he? As the
waters fail from the sea, and the flood
decayeth and drieth up; So man lieth down,
and riseth not: till the heavens be no more,
they shall not awake, nor be raised out of
their sleep. Oh, that thou wouldest hide me
in the grave, that thou wouldest keep me
secret, until thy wrath be past, that thou
wouldest appoint me a set time, and
remember me? If a man die, shall he live
again? All the days of my appointed time
will I wait, till my change come" (Job 14:10-14).*

That's a tremendous question Job asked: "If a man dies, shall he live again?" You can paraphrase

Job's question and put it like this: "If a man dies, is he *really* dead?" I say that he is and Job's question is, if a man dies shall he live again? The word "again" means "once more." Job's hope was that sometime in the future that he would live again. What would the state of man between the time he would die and the time he would live again. Notice in verse 12 he says, "So man lieth down, and riseth not: till the heavens be no more, they shall not *awake* or be raised out of their *sleep*." So that is the state man is in between death and resurrection. Job's hope for a future life was not that he would live on and on and not die. Instead, his hope was in the fact that he would live *again* in the resurrection.

The New Testament View of Man

Does the New Testament set forth the same view about man as the Old Testament; that is, that man is mortal and subject to death? Look at James chapter 4 and notice the way James puts it:

Go to now, ye that say, Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain: Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor, that appeareth for a little time and then vanisheth away (James 4:13-15).

Notice the way James states this: "For what is your life? It is even a vapor, that appeareth for a little time and then vanisheth away." The modern versions make it even more plain. Instead of saying, "It is even a vapor," they have, "You are even a vapor." You are a mist or a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. Notice it doesn't say your *body* is just a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away; it says *you* are. The King James version has "It is even a vapor ..." but the modern versions have "*You* are ..." You, the person, the personality, are a vapor.

Human beings then are mortal, not immortal. Immortality is something we seek and must put on. We don't have it, but we are seeking for it and we must "put it on." Look at Romans 2:6-7. It's speaking of the time of judgment when God will render to all their due:

Who will render to every man according to his deeds: To them who by patient continuance in well doing seek for glory and

honor and immortality, he will give eternal life (Rom. 2:6-7).

Notice what people are to seek for: glory, honor and immortality. What will God render to us, what will He give us, the ones who are seeking for immortality? Eternal life!! The ones seeking for immortality will get it. You don't seek for something that you already have or already possess. We're seeking for immortality and God is going to render it to us.

Look at I Corinthians 15. Paul tells us we must "put on" immortality:

Behold, I show you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, "Death is swallowed up in victory" (I Cor. 15:51-54).

When will death be swallowed up in victory? When will we gain the victory over death? Only when we *put on* immortality - at the time of Christ's return and the resurrection day. The word "incorruptible" means that it is not subject to decay. The resurrection body will be incorruptible, not subject to decay. The one we have now is mortal, subject to death. The one we will get at Christ's return is immortal, *not* subject to death.

Immortality is something we are *seeking* and must *put on*. We don't have it now. In the light of this we must state that human beings are mortal. There is no such thing as an "immortal soul." Instead, the Hebrew and Greek words sometimes translated "soul" define something that can die. The soul is mortal, the soul can die. Look at Ezekial 18:4 in the King James Version:

Behold all souls are mine; as the soul of the father, so also the soul of the son is mine: the soul that sinneth, it shall die (Ezekial 18:4).

God said, "All souls are mine; the soul that sinneth, it shall die." Notice the first sentence in verse 20: "The soul that sinneth, it shall die." We see that two times in Ezekial the scriptures state that the soul can die. Look at James chapter 5:

Let him know, that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul [i.e., a person] from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins (James 5:20).

When you convert somebody, what do you do? You save a soul, or a person, from death. That's what people are saved from. What about the souls not saved from death? They will die. God says in Ezekial that it shall. But you can be saved from that death by obeying the gospel.

Only God has Absolute Immortality

Only God has absolute immortality - no beginning and no end of existence and life. Look at Psalm 90:

Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God (Psalm 90:1-2).

So before the earth existed, there was a God. After the earth is gone, there will be a God: "from everlasting to everlasting". This is hard for us to comprehend. We're so time oriented and time conscious. We're so conditioned to things having a beginning and coming to an end, that it is hard for us to imagine something that didn't have a beginning and will not have an end. Yet, that is the way the Bible presents God.

I remember several years back when my oldest daughter Terry was about 6 or 7 years old and we were coming back from the church service. Something she heard that day prompted her to ask the question, "Where did God come from?" It surprised me that a child so young would ask that question and so I answered it something like this: "God has always existed; He didn't have a beginning." She didn't reply for a while and I thought she had forgotten about it. Then she spoke out and said, "You know, that is something to think about: God has always existed." That was pushing a six-year old mind to the limit. It can even push our minds to the limit. I don't care how much

education one has, that can stagger the mind; to try to comprehend something that had *no beginning* and will have *no end*.

Look at Isaiah chapter 57. Here God is speaking through the prophet Isaiah:

For thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones (Isaiah 57:15).

Notice especially the first part of that verse. God inhabiteth eternity. He lives in eternity. God is eternal. Look also at I Timothy chapter 6:

I give thee charge in the sight of God, who quickeneth all things, and before Christ Jesus, who before Pontius Pilate witnessed a good confession; that thou keep this commandment without spot, unrebukable, until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ: Which in his times he shall show, Who is the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord or lords; Who only hath immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto; Whom no man hath seen, nor can see: to Whom be honor and power everlasting. Amen" (I Tim. 6:13-16).

Notice in describing God in verse 16 that Paul states: "Who *only* has immortality." If angels have eternal life and we can receive eternal life through the gospel, why does it say only God has immortality? Because only God has *absolute* immortality - no beginning and no end of existence. Other beings receive life from God. God had no beginning and he will have no ending. Everything else came into existence as a result of God's creative work, including both angelic beings and human beings. God is thus the fountain or source of all life. Look at Psalm 36. Here David is describing something about God:

For with thee is the fountain of life: in thy light shall we see light (Psalm 36:9).

Why would God be called the fountain of life? I think the word "fountain" here is used in the sense of "source." God is the source, or He is the origin of

life. Just as a fountain is the source of water, so God is the source of life.

Let's look at some examples of God giving eternal life. Let's start with His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. When Jesus came he came as a man so that he could die for the sins of man. Hebrews 2:9 says,

But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honor; that he by the grace of God should taste death for every man (Heb. 2:9).

Notice in verse 9 that Jesus was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death. Jesus was born as a man so that he might die. Look at verses 14-16:

Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he [the Lord Jesus] also himself likewise took part of the same [he took part of flesh and blood]; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil. And deliver them, who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage. For verily he took not on him the nature of angels; but he took on him the seed of Abraham (Heb. 2:14-16).

Jesus was born as a man. The nature he possessed was not the nature of angels, composed of spirit, but it was the nature of man, the seed of Abraham. The reason he was made flesh was so that he would be able to die. But God raised Jesus from the dead - never to die again. When Jesus was resurrected, he was resurrected not to mortal human life anymore. He was resurrected to an *immortal* state - never to die again.

Look at Revelation chapter one. Here Jesus is speaking to John when he appeared to him on the Isle of Patmos. This is what he tells John:

"I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and of death" (Rev. 1:18).

Notice the phrase, "I am alive for evermore." Jesus lived as a man and died as a man, but he didn't stay dead. God raised him from the dead and he is alive for evermore. He was resurrected to immortality, never to die again. He is the first one to experience

that type of resurrection. That is why Paul refers to Jesus as "the firstfruits of them that slept" (I Cor. 15:20).

There are many examples of physical resurrection in the Scriptures. There were those whom Jesus raised from the dead during his earthly ministry such as Lazarus and the daughter of Jarius. The apostles also raised people from the dead. Why then does the Bible say that Jesus is the *first* that was raised from the dead (Acts 26:23)? The answer is clear: Jesus was raised to *immortality* - never to die again. All of these others were raised back to mortal life. That's why Lazarus and Dorcas and others are not around today. They were raised back to normal, mortal, physical life and they experienced death again at some later time. But Jesus was raised to immortality, never to die again. That's also what we will experience at our resurrection (I Cor. 15:50-54).

Look at Romans chapter 6:9-10. This is a description of the state the Lord Jesus is in since he experienced that resurrection.

Knowing that Christ being raised from the dead dieth no more; death hath no more dominion over him. For in that he died, he died unto sin once; but in that he liveth, he liveth unto God (Rom. 6:9-10).

Why doesn't death have any dominion, reign or rule over Jesus? Because Jesus was raised to immortality and a being that has immortality can never die. Instead, Jesus has everlasting life - he will live forever. Death simply can't touch someone who is immortal.

Immortality: God's Conditional Gift to Mankind

My final point is that eternal life, or immortality, is God's *conditional* gift to mankind. Look at Psalm 21:4. Here David is speaking of the king that would be rejoicing in the Lord:

He asked life of thee, and thou gavest it him, even length of days for ever and ever (Psalm 21:4).

Here is a king that is asking God for life. What kind of life? Eternal life, God is going to give people eternal life. Notice how it is described: "even length of days for ever and ever." This is a good definition of eternal life: Length of days for ever and ever. Notice in the verse, however, that God had to give

this to man. Romans 6:23 is a key passage in this regard. It sets forth several important truths:

For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord (Rom. 6:23).

What does sin result in? What are the consequences, or the wages, of sin? Wages is something you earn, something you work for, something that you have coming to you. God is going to pay the wages of sin - which is death. But look at the contrast: "But the gift of God is eternal life." Eternal life is a gift that comes from God. Man doesn't possess it by nature. He isn't born with this eternal life. Man isn't born with immortality. It's a gift from God. But does God give it to everybody? No! It's received only through our Lord Jesus Christ. Only the ones that are in the right relationship with Jesus Christ are going to get it. John tells us this very clearly in his first Letter:

And this is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life (I John 5:11-12).

Notice that this life is not in some denominational church. It's not in some man-made organization. This eternal life is in God's Son. It is a gift from God but you must be in right relationship with the Son in order to receive it. Eternal life is a *conditional* gift from God received through believing in his Son. It is not something that is innate or inborn. Instead, only those who "have the Son, have life."

[Don Robertson, who is the father of four and grandfather of six, lives in Rock Hill, South Carolina]

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Does Man Have an "Immortal Soul"?

Most NT scholars today recognize that there is nothing in the Bible about an immortal soul. Instead, the believer's hope is the resurrection and transformation of the *person* himself so that he can "inherit the kingdom of God" in the "age to come" (I Cor. 15:50; Luke 20:34-38). I quote standard works:

Although the Hellenistic term *psyche* (soul) appears more frequently in the later epistles of the NT ... it must not be imagined that this implies the concept of the soul

as the real and valuable part of man, the eternal and permanent element. That would be a misunderstanding. This kind of thinking ... deduces the immortality and permanence of the soul from its own particular quality. **This is just what the NT does not teach.** The soul is simply that area in which decisions are made concerning life and death, salvation and destruction. Moreover, every statement about the *psyche* in the NT is linked in context with eschatological statements about renewal and resurrection ["Soul," *The New Int. Dict. of NT Theology*, Vol. 3, p. 686, emphasis mine].

In Isaiah 26:19 and Dan. 12:2, it is the faithful individual members of God's people who are given personal assurance that their fidelity to God will be rewarded when they are raised up from among the dead. This hope was given concrete expression in the early Christian assurance that God raised Jesus from the dead and that his people will share in the resurrection of the faithful and in the age to come (I Cor. 15) ... In Hellenistic tradition there was a belief that the human soul would be released from the body at death and might ascend to the realm of the eternal and the divine ... But when Paul describes the state of the faithful in the new age, it is not in terms of a disembodied soul but as a transformed human body - the spiritual body (I Cor. 15:35-49). Similarly, in Rev. 20:11-22:5, the righteous find their ultimate fulfillment - not as souls ascending to heaven - but in the new order, the new city, and the new temple, which come down out of heaven to a renewed earth (Rev. 21:10) [*The Cambridge Companion to the Bible*, p. 544].

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The Church: A Theological Foundation

by Mark Mattison

Kentwood, Michigan

Ephesians 4:1-16 as Church Paradigm

When the last moments of life drained out of Jesus' tortured body, a new covenant was forever sealed with his blood. After he rose from his tomb in glory and ascended into heaven, he poured out his Spirit upon his followers, and into that covenant a new community was born: the church, the community of the redeemed. We write about this gospel and this community, because one can hardly talk about the one without also talking about the other.

The twofold theme of cross and community is spelled out in several places of the New Testament. In Titus 2:14, for example, the apostle Paul writes of Jesus Christ,

... who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good (NIV).

Christ died not only to save us from our sins as individuals, but also to create a holy community in which we as individuals can better resist the harmful ravages of sin. That is why, for Paul, the doctrine of church itself is bound up in the gospel message: "Paul develops his account of the new community in Christ as a fundamental theological theme in his proclamation of the gospel."¹

In what way does the church grow out of the cross? What is it about church that protects us from sin, leads us to purity, helps us to become more like Christ in his death and in his life? In short, what is the theology of church? To consider these questions we will turn to Paul's epistle to the Ephesians.

A Starting Point

Why start with Paul, and why Ephesians? After all, Paul isn't the only New Testament writer to consider the topic of church, and Ephesians isn't the only epistle in which he writes about it. We could just as well start with Jesus' words in Matthew 16:13-20, or with Hebrews' teaching about the new covenant. Why Ephesians?

For the present study, Paul is a fine place to start because he wrote more about this topic than anyone else in the New Testament, and because he grappled with the theory of church as much as its reality. Ephesians is ideal because unlike most of his other epistles, like Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Colossians, and a host of others, Paul isn't dealing with immediate church crises. Rather, Ephesians recapitulates in a more measured way what Paul's vision was all about. In a telling chapter entitled "The Quintessence of Paulinism," F. F. Bruce writes that Ephesians "in large measure sums up the leading themes of the Pauline letters, and sets forth the cosmic implications of Paul's ministry as apostle to the Gentiles."²

This brings us to another reason why Ephesians is ideal for our purpose. Other Pauline epistles, like 1 Corinthians, may contain more detailed information about church order and practice, but those writings largely address local churches. The epistle before us was also written to a specific congregation ("To the saints in Ephesus"), but it lacks the local concerns of most of his other epistles. Paul doesn't include greetings to specific people in the Ephesian church at the end of his epistle, and he doesn't address issues of specific concern to the Ephesians. Many scholars believe Ephesians was intended to be a circular letter, carried and read to Ephesus and then to other churches as well. As such its teachings articulate basic, fundamental church issues, rather than grappling with specific issues in light of these basics.

The structure of Ephesians is also helpful. Of the six chapters, the first three outline the basic theory of church, and the last three spell out the practical implications. The primary theme of the first half revolves around "the mystery of Christ, which was

¹Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (Harper, San Francisco), p. 1996, p. 32.

²F.F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co.), 1977, reprint 1989, p. 424.

not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets" (3:5, NIV). The content of the mystery is spelled out in the following verse:

This mystery is that through the gospel Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus (Eph. 3:6, NIV).

These two groups of people, basically Israelites (people of the promise) and non-Israelites (Gentiles), were united into one body when Jesus died on the cross (2:11-18) to be formed into a spiritual household (2:19-22), the church. In our key text, Ephesians 4:1-16, Paul draws out the implications of Christ's death and resurrection for the overall structure of the church.

Local or Universal?

Before considering our text, however, it will be necessary to reconsider an even more basic question. Is Paul describing individual, local churches, or the "cosmic, universal" church - that is, the collective sum of all churches together? In other words, are the teachings of Ephesians intended as the blueprint of each individual church, or the blueprint of the abstract, collective church? Since it is very hard to conceive and practice these teachings on an abstract level, some have suggested that what Paul writes here applies only to each local congregation as a separate entity. This approach certainly brings Ephesians' goals into our reach.

However, this approach can hardly be sustained. Paul writes here, not of many churches, but of a single church, a single spiritual body whose head is Christ (1:10; 5:23). After describing Christ's resurrection and ascension in 1:20,21, Paul writes that

God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way (Eph. 1:22-23).

It is difficult to see how this "church" could be a single congregation. The scope is cosmic; the "church" in view is the entire church, the sum of every individual church.

This is not the end of the story, however. As we read through the final chapters of Ephesians we see that Paul does indeed place these principles within our grasp. Certainly his description of the church's activities in 5:18-21 are to be carried out in each congregation's individual assembly. We are to "Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs" (5:19) and "Submit to one another" (5:21). I can sing and submit to the brothers and sisters across the room, but it's a little more difficult to practice this in relation to my brothers and sisters in China. We are led to the conclusion, then, that the ecclesiology of Ephesians reflects both the universal church and the local church. Though Paul writes about the cosmic church as a single, universal entity, every local church represents, acts on behalf of, the universal church. How can this be?

The Unity of the Spirit

The dual tension between the cosmic church and the local church is reflected in Ephesians 4:1-16. The tension is compounded by Paul's apparent inconsistency as he writes about church unity. In the beginning of the passage, he urges us to "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit" (v. 3, NIV), as if this unity is already a reality. On the other hand, by the time he completes the passage he writes about our active ministry "until we all reach unity" (v. 13). How can these two ideas stand together?

Commenting on verse 13, Francis W. Beare points out that:

The unity is here presented as the goal toward which we strive, whereas in v. 3 it is a possession to be guarded. The two aspects are complementary. That which is given us by God must be made our own by progressive appropriation What was before described objectively **as the unity of the Spirit**, in terms of its source and sphere, is now described subjectively, in terms of its content of thought and experience - **of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God.**¹

There is another way to describe this dual reality. As in so many other aspects of Paul's theology, so here there is an "already" and a "not

¹Francis W. Beare, "The Epistle to the Ephesians," in George Arthur Buttrick, ed., *The Interpreter's Bible* (New York, NY: Abingdon Press), 1953, p. 692.

yet." On the one hand, there is only one church in the cosmos (1:22); this is:

God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone (Eph. 2:19b-20, NIV).

This is the church which Christ has built which will never be overcome (Matt. 16:18). This unity already exists in the spiritual realm. On the other hand, however, this household has not yet been perfected. In many respects it is in a state of disarray; the body has not yet fully matured (vv. 13); we have yet to "grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ" (v. 15, NIV). There is unity in the church, yet there is disunity. Commenting on the disunity in Christendom, Beare writes:

It is a mark of incompleteness, of spiritual immaturity, that we are still disunited; and the remedy is by no means to be found in a *reduced* Christianity, in a lowest common denominator of agreement; but in advance to the higher levels where the fullness of truth will overcome all our deficiencies.¹

These points will prove to be crucial later. For now, let's consider the positive side, the unity which we as a church already possess. This spiritual unity is communicated forcefully in verses 4 through 6 by an enumeration of seven "ones":

There is one body and one Spirit - just as you were called to one hope when you were called - one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all (NIV).

This intense description of unity, though unique to Ephesians, nevertheless reflects many of Paul's arguments in earlier letters. In his letters to both the Galatians and the Romans, Paul cites the truth of one God to argue for his doctrine of justification - Gentiles and Jews alike are united on one ground by one and the same God (Rom. 3:29,30; Gal. 3:20). Paul also invokes the truth of one God and one Lord when writing to the Corinthians about the knotty issue of whether it is permissible to eat food sacrificed to idols (1 Cor. 8:4-6). In chapter 12, Paul argues from the Corinthians' baptism "by one Spirit into one body" for unity in the church. Just two

paragraphs earlier, however, Paul had described "different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit....different kinds of service [ministry], but the same Lord....different kinds of working, but the same God" (vv. 4-6). Here we begin to see a critical aspect of the church's unity: The aspect of diversity.

This same dual aspect is present in Ephesians 4:1-16. Paul takes us from our unity in verses 3 through 6 to the diversity of our giftedness in verses 7 through 11. For unity does not mean uniformity; it means rather complementarity. That is to say, the strength of the church's unity is to be found precisely in the diversity which makes it up - a common theme in Paul's epistles, particularly as he develops his analogy of the human body (cf. Rom. 12:4-8; 1 Cor. 12:12-31). The members of the human body are not identical, nor should they (or could they) be if the body is to function properly.

What is the basis for this diversity? It is not at all founded in sheer disagreement or division, but rather in God's provision through Christ: "But to each of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it" (v. 7, NIV). What is the basis of this distribution of grace? The death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ (vv. 8-10). The diverse gifting of the body is rooted in the Christ-event; that is to say, it grows directly out of the cross.

Works of Ministry

In 4:11 Paul begins to specify some of the gifts which Christ has given to the church. Unlike Romans 12:6-8 and 1 Corinthians 12:8-11, however, Ephesians 4:11 lists gifts not as abstract abilities but as the people to whom the abilities are given. Four gifts are enumerated (not five, as is commonly believed):

It was he who gave some to be [1] apostles, some to be [2] prophets, some to be [3] evangelists, and some to be [4] pastors and teachers [or, "pastors-teachers"] (Eph. 4:11, NIV).

The leaders of the church, then, are themselves gifts to the church.

Notice, however, the crucial function which these leaders play in verse 12. Their task is not to minister to "God's people," but:

¹Ibid., p. 693.

to prepare God's people for works of service [ministry] so that the body of Christ may be built up (Eph. 4:12 NIV).

Preparing God's people for ministry in turn enables the body of Christ to build itself up toward full unity (v. 13). The body's ability to minister, then, is a necessary requirement for the body to achieve maturity and concrete unity. Why? Because, as verse 16 puts it, from Christ,

the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work (Eph. 4:16 NIV).

If *not* every member supports the others - if each part does *not* work - then the body is stunted in its growth toward perfect maturity in Christ.

Conclusions

If we are to consider church doctrine and practice in the context of this paradigm, we must ask some very basic but very important questions. How do we conform to God's blueprint of unity in diversity? What is it that equips each member of the body to function? We believe the answer is to be found in the open house church. The local church must be open in two ways: First, open in its relation to other churches, recognizing the cosmic "unity of the Spirit" of the overall church (Eph. 4:3, NIV); and, second, open to the participation of each of its members, not only allowing them but *enabling* them to perform their part (4:12,16). The open house church, we believe, best facilitates the type of body life described by Paul. And that's why we actively support and promote the concept of the house church.

[This article, along with many other interesting and challenging articles, appears in the "The Open House Church" website of *Christian Perspectives* at: www.mindspring.com/~mmattison Those who are able to access this website are encouraged to do so - but, be ready to think for yourself ! i.e. Acts 17:11]

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The understanding of "covenant" language and concepts is extremely important if we are to fully grasp Paul's "gospel of salvation" to both Jews and Gentiles. R. David Kaylor, Professor of Religion at Davidson College, has written an excellent book on Paul's covenant emphasis entitled *Paul's Covenant Community: Jew & Gentile in Romans* (John Knox Press, 1988). I quote from his book pp. 20, 23-24:

Paul addresses his letter to "all of God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints" (Rom. 1:7). The terms of this address reveal the extent to which his thinking is dominated by his central conviction: in Jesus Christ God has acted to form a new covenant community incorporating both Jew and Gentile. "Beloved," "saints," "called," and "all" imply the notion of one covenant community, elected by God ... Paul proclaims that in Christ all can know the unity of a new humanity as they come to celebrate the oneness given to all - whether Gentile or Jew, male or female, slave or free. The way out of human alienation was in Paul's view the reconciliation of all as one new human community, not the triumph of one group over another. Paul considered himself a minister of a new covenant (II Cor. 3:6); his task was to be an ambassador through whom God's offer of reconciliation was extended to all ...

The church in Paul's understanding is confessional, eschatological and charismatic. "Confessional" means that whoever through the Spirit makes the confession "Jesus is Lord" is within the "body of Christ" (I Cor. 12:3-12). "Eschatological" means that it is a community of the end-time, the people of God for a new age. "Charismatic" means that the church moves as it is impelled by the Spirit, who endows it with gifts for the fulfillment of its mission ... The early church shunned any technical conceptions of office so commonly seen in other religious associations of the time. It was expected that priesthood was universal since the Spirit was universal, granting gifts to all for the common good. There are differences among the gifts of the Spirit so that the church can function effectively; those who possess particular gifts are to be respected for the work they do, but they do not belong to a class or category separate from others.

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The New Covenant Church of the Body of Christ

The Significance of Music to the Believer

by Della Waite

Wendell, North Carolina

On a recent visit to Luray Caverns in Virginia, I was awed to hear music coming from the rocks. Until the early part of this century, tour guides would strike the rocks with a mallet to show how they sounded notes in perfect pitch. Then a music loving engineer on the tour was so impressed, he designed the current system and installed it free of charge. One hundred sixty-four feet below the earth, mallet-like instruments with microphones attached to the stalactites, forming a unique pipe organ, sounded forth "A Mighty Fortress is Our God."

Music is everywhere: in the songs of birds, a mighty waterfall, water tinkling over the stones in a brook or in a child's happy laughter. Scientists of the past believed the planets in their courses played a symphony they called, "The Music of the Spheres" and now, I know there's music in the depths of the earth!

In the Bible we see music used to comfort, to rejoice, to praise God, as memorials of special things God did for his people, and even to drive away demons. There are probably many more uses I haven't even thought of. One Biblical example of the effect of music is in Acts 16:22ff. Paul and Silas had preached the gospel in Philippi and, although some believed, they were met with resistance and persecution by others. As a result, Paul and Silas were stripped, beaten, severely flogged, thrown into prison and their feet were put in stocks. Instead of allowing their misery to overwhelm them, we see in verse 25 that it says,

About midnight they were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everybody's chains came loose. The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners

had escaped. But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!"

The Jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved - you and your household." Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized. They brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God - he and his whole family (Acts 16:25-34).

After Paul and Silas began to pray and sing hymns to God there was suddenly a violent earthquake and the foundations of the prison were shaken! Paul and Silas were released, the jailer and his family were led to salvation and the jailer was filled with joy. WOW! As the song goes, "We Have a Great Big Wonderful God"! How thankful that jailer must have been that Paul and Silas prayed and sang hymns that night when it would have been so easy for them to give in to despair.

Powerful results can accompany godly music. In I Samuel 16:14-23 King Saul, who was tormented by an evil spirit, found relief when David played his harp and caused the evil spirit to depart. What made David's music so powerful? In Psalm 33:1-3 David says,

Sing joyfully to the Lord, you righteous; it is fitting for the upright to praise him. Praise the Lord with the harp; make music to him on the ten stringed lyre. Sing to him a new song; play skillfully, and shout for joy (Psalm 33:1-3).

In Psalm 34:1 he said,

I will extol the Lord at all times (Psalm 34:1).

Study singing in the Psalms (which means "songs of praise") and you will see that rejoicing, praise and thanksgiving are the themes that made David's songs so powerful.

When David became King he appointed 288 men to minister with music at the temple of the Lord (I Chron. 25). They were to make petition, give thanks, praise the Lord, sing joyful songs, prophesy with harps, cymbals and lyres. The song David wrote for them is recorded in I Chronicles 16. Thanks, praise, rejoicing and remembering the things the Lord had done for them were the themes.

Moses and Miriam composed a song for the Israelites to sing after the parting of the sea. It is recorded in Exodus 15 and begins, "I will sing to the Lord for He is highly exalted." The song of Deborah in Judges 5 begins, "When the princes in Israel take the lead, when the people willingly offer themselves, praise the Lord!" In Luke 1:46ff we find Mary's song. The first line is: "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." Again, in Luke 1 verses 68ff we find Zechariah's song which starts, "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and redeemed his people." In all of these songs acknowledgment of God's works with thanksgiving, praise and rejoicing is present.

One of the benefits of singing is in helping us to remember God's Word. Singing Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs can be very beneficial to the believer. In Ephesians 5:19 Paul writes,

Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord (Eph. 5:19).

How often have you spent an entire day with a "catchy tune" running over and over through your mind? I am pleased to say that now it is more likely to be "the joy of the Lord is my strength" than "I wanna hold your hand" running through my mind. Or "great is thy faithfulness" instead of "baby love." God's Holy Word put to music repeatedly sounding in our minds will help us to remember it for many years. I can still remember the words to many songs that made absolutely no sense like "Bye-bye Miss American Pie." How much better it will be for our children to grow up on "I Will Worship My God"!

Another benefit is that when we sing Godly music we are praising the God that has done so much for us. Even if we don't sing well enough to sell records, I am convinced that if we are doing the best we can then God is praised and we are blessed!

Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise (James 5:13).

When we are happy, or joyful it is time to remember from whom our blessings flow and praise him in song. Look at the following phrases of scripture:

"Sing to the Lord, you saints of his."

"Sing praises to the Lord."

"But I will sing of your strength."

"I will sing of the Lord's great love."

"I will sing of your love and justice."

These phrases are all "snatches" from the Book of Psalms that I found in my Bible's concordance. I think it is quite clear that no matter what the level of our ability, God wants his saints to praise him in song.

I also see great benefit in listening to "Gospel" or "Christian" music. There are so many to choose from you might feel lost in trying to make a choice. You will probably find theological differences in many of them and some may make you wonder why they are listed as "Christian" at all. However, there are some very good ones also.

We all have different tastes and preferences when it comes to styles of music. Our family favorites are: Glad, Twila Paris and Sierra. We also like the music of a close friend of ours - Don Baker. But unfortunately, you won't find his at any store.

The reason these are our favorites is that they are extremely skilled in what they do and they also sing a lot of their songs straight from the Bible or else sing the "old hymns" that are so beautiful to hear. I often listen to these musicians when I work or drive and they help me serve the Lord with gladness in whatever I do. I exhort you also to make Godly music, psalms, hymns and spiritual songs an integral part of your daily fellowship with God, your family and with fellow believers.

[Della Waite is a housewife and home-school teacher for her children in Wendell, North Carolina]

Living Letters

Dear *Unity*:

I read with great interest your article on baptism in the last issue of *The Unity of the Spirit*. Outstanding! Your treatment of this extremely

difficult topic was refreshing and thought-provoking.

Baptism is such a divisive issue. I appreciate your approach: bringing thought and common sense into the discussion usually dominated by a simplistic "chapter-and-verse" dogmatism.

Those who think every first century practice needs to be emulated to the letter today put themselves in a difficult spot. To be consistent, they should veil their women, forbid them to speak in church, have all possessions in common, attend synagogues, etc.

I especially like the fact that you invoke the broad-brush themes - that is, the spirit of the Scriptures - and subordinate individual passages. The spirit of the New Testament certainly contradicts any preoccupation with an external rite. It seems patently absurd to suppose that a man's redemption hangs on such a slender thread as whether baptism is by pouring, sprinkling, dipping or who the proper subjects of the ordinance are, etc.

And yet, you make allowance for those who get something out of baptism. Rather than being dogmatic yourself ("Anyone who baptizes is rebelling against God," etc.) you exhibit a refreshing live-and-let-live attitude.

Again, great job. Keep up the good work.

Sincerely,
Steve Jones
Jonesboro, Georgia

Dear *Unity*:

God's goodness and abundance to you. With the time of the celebrating of our Lord's resurrection still fresh in our hearts it is impossible not to think of the return of Christ and the gathering together of the family of God! Which of course reminded me of your wonderful sharing of the Word of God! God bless you and keep you mighty.

Bell Burnett
Chicago, Illinois

Dear *Unity*:

A brief note to let you know how much we appreciate you sending us *The Unity of the Spirit* newsletter. We have these friends who we think would like to receive *The Unity of the Spirit*. You can let them know we asked you to send it to them.

Keep up the good work. God bless you and fill your needs.

Your friends,
Jack & Dorothy Johnson
Alexandria, Indiana

[The following letter by Anna Frankowska is translated from Polish and is written in response to the letters sent to her after the death of her 19 year old son Marcin in March of this year after a long battle with muscular dystrophy]

Dear believers and friends:

Thankyou so very much for writing to me in this difficult time. Your letters were so important and precious to me and helped me to continue to live on despite the loss caused by the 'falling asleep' of Marcin.

I must say that I understand now a great deal of how Mary, the mother of Christ, felt when she saw her son Jesus die. For in Marcin I saw Christ - in his extraordinary humility, in his longsuffering and patience until the last hour of life, and in his unparalleled care and concern for me - concern, in which "he did not seek his own."

Marcin was to a certain degree aware that his time was passing and yet he struggled with this in himself - not wanting to worry me. And so, as always, I saw in Marcin an exceptional person for whom I had tremendous respect. It was almost as though Marcin was not my own child but someone with whom God allowed me to live during part of my earthly life. For now, this must be enough for me. I believe in the resurrection, yet in these moments I must admit that the pain is great. Thankfully, I am not alone. I am surrounded by believers and friends.

Asking for your continued spiritual support, I thank you all and I assure each of you that whether I know you personally or not, you are all present in my heart and prayers.

Anna Frankowska
Krakow, Poland

Books in Review

The Gospel of the Kingdom

and

The Blessed Hope

by George Eldon Ladd

These two books are clear, scriptural, readable, cheap and simply loaded with truth. I know of no better guides to help someone in coming to a clearer understanding of the biblical concepts of "eternal life," the "kingdom of God" and the "second coming" of our Lord Jesus Christ. Each book is written by the highly respected NT scholar G.E. Ladd - late Professor of NT at Fuller Theological Seminary.

The Gospel of the Kingdom (only \$5.95 from CBD) is particularly helpful in showing how God is working to bring to pass the ultimate victory of his kingdom - "on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10) - for *all* of his people. It is a collection of lectures that were originally given in oral form and then adapted for this book. In particular, I highly recommend the chapters: "The Kingdom is Tomorrow;" "The Life of the Kingdom" and "The Kingdom, Israel and the Church." I quote short excerpts from the book:

The Bible conceives of the entire sweep of human history as resting in the hand of God, but it looks for the final realization of God's kingdom in a realm "beyond history," i.e., in a new and different order of existence ... The entire sweep of man's existence is set forth in terms of this age and the age to come ... This Age had its beginning with creation, but the Age to Come will go on endlessly, for ever. This Age is dominated by evil, wickedness and rebellion ... while the Age to Come is the age of the Kingdom of God. In I Cor. 15:50 Paul says that "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God." Our bodies must undergo a transformation so that they no longer consist of flesh and blood but are incorruptible, glorious, powerful, "spiritual" bodies. Only in these transformed bodies will we enter the Kingdom of God [from chapter 2 "The Kingdom is Tomorrow" pp. 24-34].

The Blessed Hope is a wonderful book about the second coming of Christ. It gives a short history of differing views about Christ's *parousia*; deals specifically with "pre-tribulation" thought and then spends most of the book dealing with the

terminology and biblical passages about Christ's second coming. Both books consist of thorough scholarship coupled with an irenic tone and can be ordered from CBD: ph. 1-508-977-5000.

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Jesus, Paul and the End of the World

by Ben Witherington III

This book, published by Inter-Varsity Press and also available through CBD, is a very detailed analysis and comparison of the teachings of Jesus and Paul about the subjects of the kingdom of God, the second coming of Christ and the relationship between Israel and the Church. It is a thoroughly researched book and contains a tremendous amount of useful information - both in the text itself as well as in the footnotes. It is also enjoyable reading - *but*, it is written in a *very* scholarly format. I quote excerpts:

What is most striking in the teaching of Jesus and Paul is how they envision the ultimate future as happening in this world, not in heaven ... We have found absolutely no justification in the teaching of either Paul or Jesus for the notion that there will be two Second Comings of Christ - one invisible and one visible. The language about the rapture in I Thess. 4:17 does indeed speak of a meeting of Christ in the air, but the *parousia* imagery in the context strongly suggests that thereafter both Christ and believers return to earth. ... For Paul the *ekklesia*, which can also be called the Israel of God, is the legitimate development of Israel, but at the same time Paul can still speak of an "Israel according to the flesh," a non-Christian Israel for which God yet has plans. This means that Paul does not simply equate the term church and the term Israel without qualification ... For Paul, the Israel of God made up of Jew and Gentile united in Christ is the true or legitimate development of Israel in the present, but non-Christian Jews are not broken off from the true people of God forever ... God is not finished with Israel yet [pp. 230, 226-228].

Anyone looking for a detailed analysis of the concepts and terminology relating to the subjects above would be hard pressed to find a better book than this. I highly recommend it - especially in light of the "end-times" speculation that abounds today.

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Notes & Quotes on the Bible

The Hope of Glory

So, let us ask some basic questions: Was Paul a "pre-millennialist"? Or, did Paul believe in a "pre-tribulation rapture" of the church into heaven? How odd these questions would have seemed to Paul or to those who are most familiar with his life, thought and writings. Why? Simply because there is no certain evidence that Paul knew anything at all about a coming "millennium" or that he had ever even considered the concept of a "pre-tribulation rapture" of the church. *In all of Paul's voluminous writings he never, ever, mentions either concept.* Instead, for Paul the Christian hope was simple. It was based on OT promises that had been explained by Jesus himself and it focused on the second coming (Gr. *parousia*) of Christ and the complex of events that would follow: the resurrection of the just and unjust (Acts 24:15), the final judgment (Acts 17:31) and the ultimate establishment of God's kingdom in a renewed, glorious and transformed earth (I Cor. 15:50; Rom. 8:19-21). Paul's point of view about this Christian hope never varied throughout his Christian life. It is summarized in what he taught in all the churches he had founded:

*They [Paul and Baranabas] preached the good news in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. "We must go through many hardships [Gr. *thlipsis* = "tribulation"] to enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22; cp. II Thess. 1-2 for a detailed account of what is summarized here).*

Let us remember that Paul was rooted and grounded in the OT Scriptures. Wherever he went he "preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ" from those scriptures (Acts 28:31; cf. Acts 8:12; 14:22; 20:25; 28:23). More importantly, Paul's understanding of those OT Scriptures was based on all that Christ himself had taught and all that he had already accomplished via his life, death and resurrection. There was, of

course, no "New Testament" for Paul to consult; no Book of Revelation for him to try to "unlock;" and no multiplicity of books on the "end-times" to confuse him. Instead, it was his own understanding of Christ - begun on the road to Damascus, nurtured through the teachings of the other apostles and enlightened through the Spirit - that was Paul's "canon" in all that he did and taught. For him, the Christian hope for the future was based on all that Christ had *already* accomplished and the glorious transformation that had *already* begun to take place in the life of each Christian believer. This truth is summarized in the startling statement of Paul in Col 1:27 that each believer - even from among the Gentiles - has:

Christ in you, the hope of glory.

Simply put, for Paul *future glory was based on present reality.* Whatever he had to endure on this "road to glory" was for Paul simply part and parcel of the Christian life. *Christ*, via the Spirit, was already "in him" (Gal. 2:20) and each day he was being "transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory" (II Cor. 3:18). As Gordon Fee states:

We read the letters of Paul as part of the New Testament, the record of God's new covenant with his people, effected through Christ and the Spirit. But in fact Paul did not know that he was contributing to such a "new testament." For him the "new covenant" was not a written record at all but a historical reality, experienced anew at the Table of the Lord and through the presence of the Spirit (Gordon Fee, *Paul, the Spirit and the People of God*, Hendrickson Pub. p. 3).

As a "minister of the new covenant; not of the letter, but of the Spirit" (II Cor. 3:6) Paul firmly believed that the glorious transformation that had already begun in each believer would one day be completed in full at Christ's appearing (Col. 3:4). Like Peter, he believed that believers had *already* been "born again into a living hope" and were thus assured that they had "an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade, kept in heaven" for them (I Pet. 1:3-9; cf. Col. 1:5). It remained only for believers to "continue in the faith and be not moved away from the hope held out in the gospel" (Col. 1:21-23; cf. Acts 14:22). For, as "heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ" Christian believers are "heirs having the hope of eternal life" (Titus 3:7) and will one day,

with Christ, "inherit the kingdom of God" (I Cor. 15:50).

**“Inherit Salvation” = “Inherit Eternal Life”
= “Inherit the Kingdom of God”**

The believer's understanding of the second coming of Christ must be based first and foremost on a correct understanding of the terminology used by the NT writers regarding the topic of salvation. It is fundamentally wrong to read back into the scriptures concepts or ideas that the NT writers did not intend to convey by their words. Concepts such as a "pre-tribulation rapture" were not a part of their vocabulary or thinking. Instead, their thinking was rooted and grounded in the OT concepts of "salvation" "eternal life" and the "kingdom of God" - all of which are used almost interchangeably throughout the NT to describe that which the believer will "inherit" at Christ's return. Look at these verses:

*Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to **inherit the kingdom he promised** those who love him? (James 2:5).*

*I declare to you, brothers, that flesh and blood cannot **inherit the kingdom of God**, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Listen, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we will all be changed - in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable and we will be changed (I Cor. 15:50-51).*

*But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that having been justified by grace, we might **become heirs having the hope of eternal life** (Titus 3:4-7).*

*Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will **inherit salvation**? (Heb. 1:14).*

These terms were based on OT promises and concepts and then understood in the light of all that Jesus himself had taught - as well as in the light of all that Christ had already accomplished via his life,

death, resurrection and giving of the Spirit on Pentecost. The perspective of the NT writers was simple: Christ was "coming back" (cf. Acts 1:11) and when he did they would inherit "salvation," "eternal life" or "the kingdom of God." The synonymous use of these terms is recognized by almost all NT scholars today. For example, the *New International Dictionary of NT Theology* states:

The expression "eternal life" (*zoe aionios*) ... is to be understood primarily as life which belongs to God. From the Book of Daniel onwards "eternal life" is an expression of the longed-for eschatological blessings of salvation, **life in the age to come** (cf. Dan. 12:2) ... This is a life that is awaited in the future along with the resurrection of the dead, just as the term can be used ... alternately with ... **the kingdom of God** .. to denote **salvation**" (NIDNTT, vol. 3, p. 832, Zondervan).

This was simply the language of Judaism based on OT prophecies and promises. Let's look at each of these terms more closely.

Salvation

The terms "saved" or "salvation" are sometimes used in the NT in a comprehensive sense to speak of the whole experience of salvation. At other times they refer to what believers are "saved from." i.e., "saved from our sins," and therefore "saved from the coming wrath." This is a constant theme throughout the NT. The "coming wrath," refers to God's coming judgment against unrepentant sinners in the "the day of the Lord" or "the day of God's wrath" - which will take place after Christ's return. John the Baptist also spoke of believers fleeing from "the coming wrath" (Matt. 3:7) and Jesus spoke of "wrath" as the opposite of "salvation" (John 3:36). Paul, who used the term "saved from the coming wrath" several times (Rom. 5:9; I Thess. 1:10; 5:9), explained specifically what he meant by this "coming wrath" in Rom. 2:5-16. Instead of being condemned and destroyed in the final judgment believers in Christ are already "justified." Thus, believers will be "saved" from "God's wrath" and "inherit eternal life."

There is nothing in this concept of "salvation" that exempts believers from "tribulation" in this life - whether small or great - as Acts 14:22, II Thess. 1-2 and the rest of the NT clearly show. Nor does the term "saved from the wrath to come" mean that God cannot inflict "wrath" upon unbelievers in various

ways during this "present evil age" - even while Christian believers are present (cf. Rom. 1:17ff; I Thess. 2:16; cf. Luke 21:23).

Eternal Life

In the Bible the term "eternal life" is never presented as a vague or nebulous concept; instead, it has a fixed and definite meaning that would have been understood in the light of its OT background and, especially, in the light of the teachings, illustrations and explanations of Jesus about "this present evil age" and the glorious "age to come." Biblically, the words "eternal life" (Gr. *zoe aionios*) mean "life of the coming age." That is, life in the coming age of the kingdom of God. Joseph Fitzmyer explains when speaking about Rom 2:7:

This is the first Pauline mention of "eternal life," an idea derived from his Jewish tradition (Dan. 12:2; 2 Macc. 7:9; 4 Macc. 15:3; cf. 1QS 4:7); **It is life in the *aion*, in the "age" to come.** See further Rom. 5:21; 6:22-23; cf. Gal. 6:8. So Paul formulates the destiny of Christian existence, which he will further specify in time as a share in the "glory" of God (3:23; 5:3) and in the life of the risen Christ (6:4), i.e., being "forever with the Lord" (I Thess. 4:17; cf. Rom. 5:21; 6:22-23). Three qualities of that destiny are mentioned: Gr. *doxa*, "glory," Gr. *time*, "honor" and Gr. *aphtharsia*, "imperishability, immortality" [J.A. Fitzmyer, *The Anchor Bible, Romans*, p. 302].

Note carefully that there is nothing whatsoever in the term "eternal life" about:

- (1). The idea of dying and going to heaven;
- (2). A so-called pre-tribulation rapture of the church into heaven;
- (3). A one thousand year reign of Christ on earth with his saints.

Instead, the words "eternal life" always have a fixed and definite meaning - "life in the coming age" of the kingdom of God.

The Kingdom of God

According to Jesus and Paul the "kingdom of God" which believers are to "inherit" will be an "imperishable" realm in the "age to come" that will be inhabited only by people who have been made immortal (Luke 20:35-36; I Cor. 15:50-54). In addition, there can be nothing that causes sin or evil within this kingdom (Matt. 13:37-43). It is precisely for this reason that "the wicked will not

inherit the kingdom of God." Instead, *only* believers will have an inheritance in this kingdom for it is only they who will be made immortal. Since "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God" all believers must undergo a transformation at Christ's second coming into "glorious," "immortal" or "incorruptible" bodies - empowered by a "life-giving spirit" (I Cor. 15). Only after this will they "enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22).

Paul's End-time Perspective: Sharing in Christ's Glory

Paul's "end-times" perspective was based on the fulfillment of Old Testament promises that God had made to his people (Acts 24:14-15; 26:6-8). In turn, these promises were understood in the light of all that Jesus himself had taught - especially the truths of the "Olivet Discourse" as recorded in Matt. 24-25; Mark 13 and Luke 21. Paul's most complete end-times chronology is set forth in passages such as I Thessalonians 4:13-18 and II Thessalonians 1-2 and I Cor. 15 and it's easy to see the similarities in those records with the Olivet discourse. Nowhere, however, in all of Paul's writings does he ever mention such concepts as a "pre-tribulation rapture"; a "two-stage" second coming of Christ, or, even, a coming "millennium." - these concepts must be read *into* his writings. Yes, "secrets" were revealed to him about various aspects of this hope (I Cor. 15:51; Rom. 11:25-27), but it is still the same hope. Paul's point of view is always simple: Christ is coming back and when he does evil will be destroyed and believers will "inherit the kingdom of God."

These same truths are taught throughout Paul's letters - sometimes emphasizing one aspect of the believer's hope and sometimes another. The issues he deals with and the terminology he uses always depend on the group to which he is writing at any given time and the questions or issues with which he is dealing (e.g. I Cor. 15; I Thess. 4:13-18; II Thess. 2:1ff). However, in every case there was always a common basis of understanding that Paul had already taught them - usually in person - so there was never a need to rehearse everything again in its entirety.

As G.E. Ladd states, "*Our* problems arise when we begin to ask questions that were not in the minds of the authors" such as Paul. There are simply many questions about the second coming of Christ that no

one knows the answer to and that honest people may disagree about - e.g. such as what, or who, is the "restrainer" of II Thess. 2:6; etc. Dogmatism or pretending to "know" all the answers on such matters only causes unnecessary divisions. Ironically, it is normally those whose knowledge of biblical languages, history, culture, etc. is the *most* expert who are the *least* dogmatic in their assertions concerning such questions. Others tend to marshal their arguments to fit within pre-conceived interpretative programs that must be made to "fit" - usually, with great violence being done to the natural meaning of the biblical text.

Despite difficulties over details the biblical picture of Christ's second coming is basically clear. But the texts must be allowed to speak for themselves according to their natural meaning. The translators of versions such as the NIV, NRSV, NKJV, REB, NAB, etc. are the leading experts in their fields - compare their versions with each other and when necessary consult Study Bibles or Commentaries. No, they don't always agree with each other but the idea that someone else who is not an expert in the biblical languages, history, etc. is going to come up with a true "scoop" about something on this topic that hasn't been seen already is remote at best. From such "scoops," "insights," "prophecies," "revelations" etc. have come innumerable groups through the centuries claiming to have *the* truth - only to be proven wrong at a later

date, to the great spiritual and emotional damage of their followers.

As for Paul, all the evidence - as in II Thessalonians 1&2 - suggests that he viewed the second coming of Christ as a single climactic event when evil would be destroyed, the earth renewed and all of God's people - whether dead or alive - transformed so as to enjoy forever "the glorious freedom of the children of God." Paul's firm conviction was that "our present sufferings" - *whatever* they might be - "are not worth comparing with the glory to be revealed in us" (Rom. 8:19-21). It was the clear and simple hope of "sharing in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ" (II Thess. 2:14) at "his appearing and his kingdom" (II Tim. 4:1) that was Paul's hope. May it be ours as well.

[Highly recommended are the works reviewed on page 16 as well as commentaries such as the *Word Biblical Commentary, I and II Thessalonians* by F.F. Bruce. All are available from CBD]

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E-mail address: richie.temple@internetmci.com

Foundation for Translation of Biblical Studies, Inc.
P.O. Box 473
Cary, NC 27511