THE EQUIP INSTITUTE Theme: Christian Belief **Topic: Last Things** Spring 2024 Introduction The Equip Institute exists to equip members of Taylors First Baptist Church to think rightly about God and His Word for the sake of living rightly before God in His world. This week's topic is last things. What's the Big Idea? The Old Testament is filled with promises that the messiah will one day come and rule the earth. Christians argue Jesus Christ will one day return to earth and consummate the salvation that was inaugurated in His atoning death and victorious resurrection. One of the earliest Christian creeds, The Nicene Creed (381 AD), argues, "And he [Christ] shall come again with glory to judge both the quick and the dead, whose kingdom shall have no end." Following the second coming and the final resurrection of the dead, every person who has ever lived will stand before Jesus Christ and be judged on the basis of their lives. Those who are believers will be acquitted of their sins on account of Christ's perfect righteousness and substitutionary death. Those who aren't believers will be declared guilty and face God's just wrath against their sins. Those who've been saved will spend eternity with God on a redeemed earth which will be free of sin. suffering, and death. Those who haven't been saved will spend eternity in a terrible place the Bible compares to a "lake of fire," where they'll suffer for eternity on account of their sinful rebellion against God. What Does the Bible Say? The NT is clear that Jesus Christ will return at some point in the future. His second coming will occur suddenly, personally, visibly, and bodily. The final resurrection of the dead is tied to Christ's second coming. (John 14:3; Acts 1:11; 1 Thess. 4:15-18; Heb. 9:28; 2 Pet. 3:10; 1 Cor.



15:12-58).

There will be signs that precede the second coming, including the preaching of the gospel to all nations,

tribulation and persecution, false prophets, and the salvation of the Jews. (Mark 13:3 –13; Rom. 11:25–27) We don't know the exact timing of Christ's return; even Jesus didn't know during the time of His earthly ministry. We should long for his second coming and allow it to shape how we live. (Matt. 24:44; Mark 13:32-33; 1 Cor. 16:22; Titus 2:12-13; Rev. 22:20) Isaiah 65:1-25, 66:15-24, and Revelation 20:1-22:5 focus upon the last judgment and the new creation. For the sake of time, I'll summarize the timeline I think best accounts for these passages. Jesus reigns over the unredeemed earth for an extended period of time, during which time Satan is prevented from exerting influence over the earth Martyrs are resurrected and reign alongside Jesus and living saints during this millennial kingdom Near the conclusion of this time, Satan gathers his allies, and attempts a final rebellion against Jesus's rule Satan and his allies are finally defeated and cast into the eternal lake of fire The last judgment takes place, when all who have lived are judged according to their works The ungodly dead join Satan and his minions in the eternal lake of fire, which is the final fulfillment of what we normally think of as hell The remainder of the godly dead are fully glorified and receive resurrected bodies The present earth is fully redeemed as a new creation, purged of all sin and its consequences, and is inhabited by all the redeemed of all the ages At the heart of the new creation is a new Jerusalem—the garden-temple of Eden will be fulfilled as a city-temple of the new Jerusalem Jesus reigns over the new creation for all eternity What Has the Church Said? Christians agree on the reality of the second coming, but there are two key debates concerning the details surrounding Christ's return. First is the nature of the

millennium. Numerous OT passages speak of a future golden age on the earth wherein Christ will rule over the nations (e.g. Isa. 9:6; 11:1–12:6; 52:7–12; Jer. 33:17–22;

Ezek. 37:25; Zech. 9:9). Meanwhile, Revelation 20:1-6 speaks of a thousand year period of time that sounds in many ways like a golden age. Some Christians believe Revelation 20 speaks of a literal thousand years (or at least an extended period of time) and that the OT passages referenced above are fulfilled during this earthly millennium. Premillennialists argue Christ will return before the millennium and will physically reign over the earth during the thousand years. Postmillennialists argue Christ reigns spiritually through the church during the millennium and will come to physically reign over the new creation after the millennium. Other Christians believe that Revelation 20 is a figurative reference to the church age and that the OT passages are fulfilled in the new creation. Those in this camp, who are known as amillennialists, argue there will be no literal millennium. Christians are presently experiencing the blessings of Revelation 20, which are a foretaste of the

The second debate involves an intramural discussion among premillennialists. 1 Thessalonians 4:15–18 speaks of living Christians being caught up to meet Jesus in the air; this event is often called the rapture (Greek rapturo = "caught up"). Historic premillennialists argue the rapture occurs at the same time as the second coming. Postmillennialists and amillennialists agree that the rapture and second coming are two aspects of the same event.

new creation. (See the Chart 1 on page 6)

Dispensational premillennialists argue the second coming occurs in two stages, with the rapture occurring a few years before Christ's return. Pre-tribulational dispensationalists argue the rapture occurs prior to a seven-year period of tribulation, while mid-tribulational (or pre-wrath) dispensationalists argue the rapture takes place in the middle of the tribulation. Historic premillennialists, postmillennialists, and amillennialists all agree that the rapture/second coming is post-tribulational. (See the Chart 2 on page 6)

Historically, there have been five different views of eternity advanced by different professing Christians.

Universalists argue that all people will ultimately be saved on account of Christ's perfect life, atoning death, and

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victorious resurrection. Some universalists argue hell is real, but that it will one day be empty. Others argue the language of hell is figuratively referring to suffering in this life and claim that all people will be reconciled with God at the moment of death.

Annihilationists agree with those universalists who argue that hell is temporary, but they disagree all people will one day be saved. Instead, the ungodly dead will eventually simply cease to exist. Some annihilationists also advocate post-mortem evangelism and argue there will be a chance after death to repent of your sin and trust Christ as Lord. Those who reject this final offer of the gospel are annihilated.

Inclusivists argue some people who never hear the gospel will be saved apart from conscious faith in Jesus. These "anonymous Christians" are saved based upon their response to God's general revelation in nature. Some inclusivists argue for post-mortem evangelism immediately upon death to those who haven't heard the gospel. Those who reject this final offer of the gospel are consigned to hell.

Most modern Roman Catholics are inclusivists, though many are universalists. Both affirm **purgatory** as a postmortem period where the godly dead are purged of unrepentant sin before they can enter into the covenantal presence of God. Time spent in purgatory is different for each individual, but everyone in purgatory will eventually be fully redeemed.

Exclusivists argue that, as a general rule, only those who exercise conscious faith in Jesus will be saved. Many exclusivists also believe those who are developmentally incapable of conscious faith in Jesus are saved in spite of the absence of belief. Post-mortem existence is eternal for both the godly and the ungodly. For believers, it is an eternal life of flourishing in the covenantal presence of God. For unbelievers, it is an eternal death of experiencing God's ongoing wrath against sin.

What Should We Believe?

Nearly all confessions of faith affirm the second coming. It is a theological non-negotiable that Jesus Christ will one day return to earth to judge all people and consummate His kingdom. However, few historic confessions take a position on the nature of the millennium and the timing of

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the rapture because of the contested nature of these doctrine. For example, the Baptist Faith and Message (2000) offers a "mere Christian" account of last things.

God, in His own time and in His own way, will bring the world to its appropriate end. According to His promise, Jesus Christ will return personally and visibly in glory to the earth; the dead will be raised; and Christ will judge all men in righteousness. The unrighteous will be consigned to Hell, the place of everlasting punishment. The righteous in their resurrected and glorified bodies will receive their reward and will dwell forever in Heaven with the Lord.

Scriptures teaches we are embodied souls who will spend all of eternity in one of two places. Believers will enjoy God's covenantal presence on a renewed earth that has been redeemed from the curse of the fall and represents a restoration of Eden and a fulfillment of the cultural mandate (Gen. 1:28-30; 2:15). Unbelievers will forever endure God's wrathful presence in a place called hell or the lake of fire. God is sovereign over both these future realities and all people will understand, whether savingly or not, that Jesus Christ is Lord of all (cf. Phil. 2:10-11).

How Should We Then Live?

We should live in light of the second coming

We should contend for the exclusivity of Christ and the everlasting nature of eternal life and eternal death

We should be careful to make sure we remain consistently biblical in how we speak of the eternal state (especially for believers)

Recommended Resources

Southern Baptists and the Millennium, Baptist Press (June 1, 2014: https://www.baptistpress.com/resourcelibrary/sbc-life-articles/southern-baptists-and-themillennium/.

Stanley J. Grenz, The Millennial Maze: Sorting Out Evangelical Options (IVP Academic, 1992).

George Eldon Ladd, The Blessed Hope: A Biblical Study of the Second Advent and the Rapture (Eerdmans, 1956).

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1979).

Anthony Hoekema, The Bible and the Future (Eerdmans, 1979).

N. T. Wright, Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church (HarperOne, 2008).

Chart 1

| Premillennialism | Postmillennialism | Amillennialism |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Christ returns before | Christ returns after | There is no literal millennium |
| millennium | millennium | |
| Popular in Patristic era and | Popular in post-Reformation | Popular in Middle Ages and |
| from Civil War to the present | era and from 1600–1920 | Reformation era |
| Irenaeus; Justin Martyr; | John Owen; Jonathan | Augustine; Luther; Calvin; |
| Charles Spurgeon; Charles | Edwards; Andrew Fuller; | Louis Berkof; Anthony |
| Ryrie; Wayne Grudem; Millard | William Carey; J.P. Boyce; | Hoekema; J.I. Packer; John |
| Erickson; John MacArthur; Al | B.H. Carroll; B.B. Warfield; | Frame; Michael Horton; Tom |
| Mohler; Danny Akin; David | Iain Murray; R.C. Sproul; | Schreiner; Steve Wellum |
| Dockery | James White; Tom Ascol | |
| Most modern evangelicals | Most Puritans and early evangelicals | Most Reformed & Catholics |

Chart 2

| Historic Premillennialism | Dispensational Premillennialism |
|--|--|
| Rapture occurs along with second coming | Rapture occurs before second coming |
| Second coming (which includes the rapture) occurs after the tribulation | Rapture occurs before or during the tribulation, second coming after the tribulation |
| Tribulation represents the final years before the second coming | Tribulation represents a seven-year period in between the rapture and second coming |
| George Eldon Ladd; Millard Erickson; Wayne Grudem; David Dockery; Al Mohler | Charles Ryrie; John MacArthur; Danny Akin; Tony Evans; Craig Blaising; Darrell Bock |