

General Introduction:

Section 1: Is Eschatology Optional?

Chapter 1: Is Eschatology Optional in Holy Scripture?

The idea has become popular that the whole subject of biblical eschatology has little or no relevance to the Christian faith. What you believe about eschatology is entirely optional. *Panmillennialism* (the view of the “smart aleck” that “everything will *pan* out alright in the end”) has grown greatly in its popularity.

There are, indeed, some discussions about prophecy that have little or nothing to do with the Scriptures or the Christian faith. When I say this, I think, for instance, of the interminable discussions I overheard as a young man about America or Russia in prophecy and the nationality of the antichrist. There are some arguments about prophecy that are worth having and involve important issues—the relation, for instance, of the Second Coming of Christ to the Tribulation and the Millennium—but are still arguments among Christians. They are important, but no reason to question someone’s faith. There are, however, some prophetic issues that are at the core of the Christian faith. The Second Coming, the Judgment, and the Resurrection are prophecy and are essential to the Christian faith.

It is, however, one thing to say this, or even agree with it, but how can we prove that some prophetic issues are foundational and essential—are at the core of the Christian faith? I want to argue for the thesis in this chapter that the literal (bodily and public) Second Coming of Christ together with the events of the resurrection and judgment that are immediately associated with it are core issues of the Christian faith. Fundamental disagreement about these issues ought not to be regarded as unimportant, but as core disagreements that should, if not corrected, lead to a breaking of Christian fellowship with those who deny them.

Light on this issue of what in prophecy is foundational and what is not may be had from two sources. We will look, first, at the Scriptures themselves. Then we will look at the reflected light of Scripture in church history. The great creeds and confessions of the church help us assess what is truly foundational to the Christian faith.

I. What prophetic issues are central and foundational according to the Bible?

Introduction: The Central and the Peripheral

Everything the Bible teaches is important, but not everything the Bible teaches is equally important or vital to the Christian faith. Here is an extreme and silly illustration of this. The Bible teaches that there is one God and that Jesus is His eternal Son. The Bible also teaches that there was a giant with 24 digits—six on each of his hands and

feet (2 Sam. 21:20). But no one has any doubt about which doctrine is most central or important to the message of Christianity.

Of course, this does not mean that there is no significance in denying that there was a giant with 24 fingers and toes. If this denial is based on a denial of biblical authority, it would be very consequential. These important consequences are, however, not based on the centrality of 24-digitated giants for the Christian message. They are based rather on the foundational nature of biblical authority.

What puts this matter of some teachings of the Bible being more central than others beyond doubt is a distinction made by the Bible itself. It clearly teaches that some of its teachings are more basic to Christianity than others. Note the following passages:

Matthew 22:36 "Teacher, which is the **great commandment** in the Law?" 37 And He said to him, "'YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND.' 38 "This is the great and foremost commandment. 39 "The second is like it, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.' 40 "On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets."

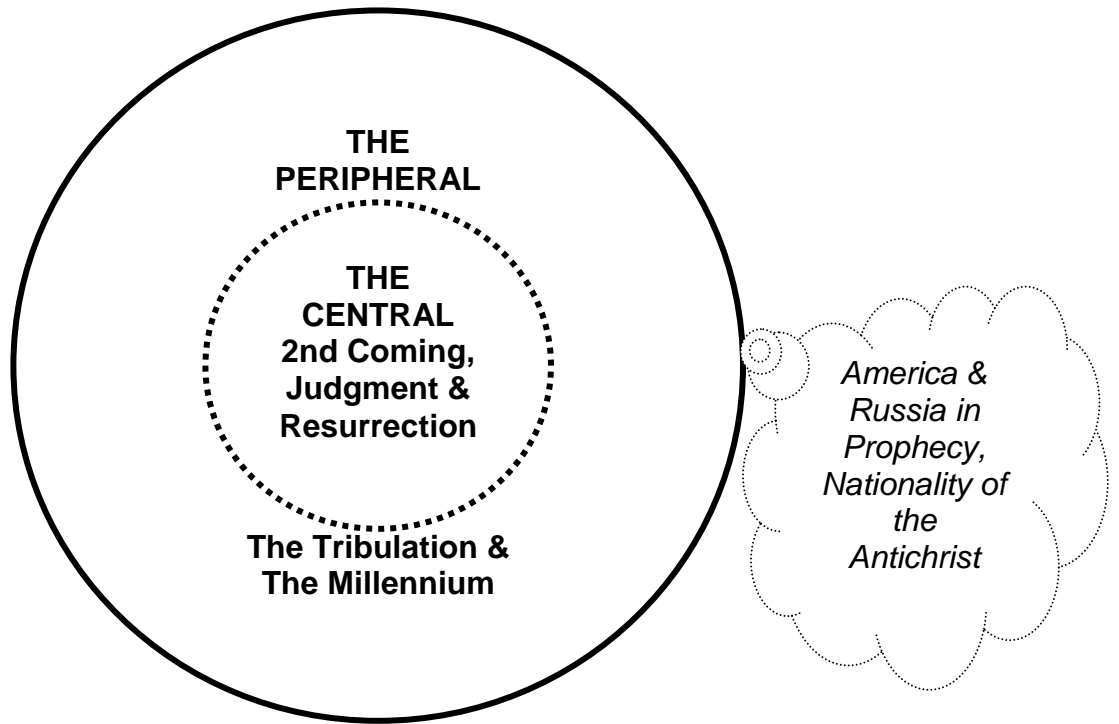
Hebrews 5:11 Concerning him we have much to say, and *it is* hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. 12 For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food. 13 For everyone who partakes *only* of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is an infant. 14 But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil. 6:1 Therefore leaving the elementary teaching about the Christ, let us press on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, 2 of instruction about washings and laying on of hands, and the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment.

These passages do not indicate that the secondary or less central issues are unimportant or optional. In Matthew 22:40, the two great commandments have suspended from them the whole Law and the Prophets. One can scarcely say that the rest of the Law and the Prophets is unimportant. In Hebrews 5:11-6:2 the other teachings are associated with maturity and have to do with the a deeper understanding of the work of Christ as priest. No one should think that the Melchizedekian priesthood of Christ is optional or unimportant. Nevertheless, in both these passages there is a clear recognition that some things are more central or basic than other things to the Christian message. The other truths are more peripheral or have more to do with the superstructure of Christian doctrine.

This can be clearly illustrated from the debates among Christians about the relation of the Second Coming of Christ to the Tribulation and Millennium. Hidden in these hotly debated differences about the relation of the coming of Christ to the tribulation is a great unifying truth. Christians argue about whether Christ's coming is pre-tribulational, post-tribulational, mid-tribulational, or pre-wrath, but they do not disagree that Christ's future coming is a reality. Christians warmly dispute regarding the millennium. They argue about whether Christ's coming is postmillennial, premillennial, or amillennial. They do not, however, dispute whether Christ is actually coming back. Thus, though these

viewpoints disagree emphatically about the relation of the Second Coming to the Tribulation and Millennium, yet hidden in all this disagreement is a great core confession. All the different tribulational and millennial views hold in common the doctrine of the Second Coming. It is the core truth about which all agree.

THE CENTRAL AND THE PERIPHERAL IN CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE



A. The Centrality of the Second Coming of Christ to Judgment

The Return of Christ Is a Literal / Historical / Physical Event

There is in the modern, scientific mindset a tendency to spiritualize or understand figuratively all things religious and spiritual. It is important to note in such a climate that Christ's return is clearly not (merely) a spiritual event and certainly not a figurative event. It is a literal, historical, and physical expectation. This affirmation is supported by the following arguments:

- Like His departure it is bodily (Acts 1:11).
- As his departure means His physical absence from earth, so His return means his physical return (Acts 3:20-21).
- His return is described as including a certain, clear order of events: first—His descent from heaven, second—the resurrection of dead believers, and third—the transformation of living believers (1 Thes. 4:14-17).

- Christ's return is the pivotal event in a series of events that the Bible describes as literal, historical, and physical. It is an event like the physical creation of the world, the worldwide flood, the bodily resurrection of Christ, the bodily resurrection of all the dead, the physical destruction of the world; and the renewal of the physical creation (Gen. 1:1-2:3; 2 Pet. 3:5-7; John 20-21; John 5:28-29; 2 Pet. 3:10-12; Rom. 8:19-23).

For all these reasons we must think of Christ's return as a literal, historical, and physical event that will take place in the future. When some in our day (calling themselves Full Preterists) deny such a second coming, they fly in the face of not only many explicit New Testament texts, but the whole tenor of the Bible.

The Return of Christ Is a Public / Universal / Open Event

Another major emphasis of the NT is that Christ's return will not be secret, but universally visible and public. It would be possible in the abstract to think of a physical return that was secret, but the Bible everywhere teaches that the day of Christ's humiliation is over and the day of His glory has come. Thus, it would be unthinkable for His return to go un-noticed. This general consideration is confirmed by a number of explicit, New Testament passages: Matt. 24:26-31; Luke 17:22-25; 1 Thes. 4:16-17; 2 Thes. 1:5-10; Tit. 2:13.

The Denial of This Return of Christ Is a Damnable Doctrine

This is no doubt partly why Peter describes those who deny the Second Coming of Christ as mockers (2 Pet. 3:3-4; Jude 18). To describe someone as a mocker is to mark him not merely as one who is not a Christian, but as one who is the worst type of unbeliever. Though the same word is not used, the same concept is present in the Book of Proverbs when it contrasts the naïve with the scoffer (Prov. 1:22; 9:7-8; 15:12; 19:25; 21:11; 21:24). Thus, when Peter identifies those who deny the Second Coming as mockers, he makes clear that they have departed from the Christian faith and that the second coming of Christ is a central Christian doctrine.

A similar curse is placed upon those who reject the truth of the Second Coming by John in the book of Revelation. There are, of course, a number of debatable passages in the book of Revelation, but its central message is clear. That is that Jesus is to return in judgment to the world (Rev. 1:7; 21:12; 21:20). This clear and central message of the book of Revelation must certainly be in mind when John pronounces the curse upon those who take away from the message that he had been given by Jesus (Rev. 22:18-19). The fearsome character of this curse makes clear, then, how central to the Christian faith is the return of Christ to this world.

B. The Centrality of the Bodily Resurrection of Believers

The Bible teaches that part of the final judgment is that all men will be raised from the dead literally and bodily. The three classic witnesses to it are Daniel 12:2; John 5:28, 29; Acts 24:15. Especially important is the promise of the resurrection of Christ's people. This promise is closely linked in many places with the bodily return of Christ (1 Cor. 15:23; 1 Thes. 4:13-17; 2 Thes. 2:1). This is a doctrine that, like the return of Christ, is taught literally dozens of times in the Bible.

In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul defends throughout the entire chapter the doctrine of the bodily resurrection of believers. He makes clear that he thinks that the denial of the resurrection of believers is a denial of the gospel of Christ itself (1 Cor. 15:12-19). The gospel of Christ is, however, the very basis of our salvation so that to deny the resurrection is to place ourselves outside the sphere of salvation. It is the gospel by which we must be saved (1 Cor. 15:1-2).

The resurrection is, thus, closely linked to the resurrection of Christ. His resurrection is the model and archetype of our resurrection. Since his resurrection was bodily and left an empty tomb, it is only this sort of resurrection that qualifies as resurrection in the biblical sense of the term. Resurrection in the Bible means an empty tomb (Matt. 27:52; 28:6; John 5:28-29).

Further evidence of the central nature of the doctrine of the resurrection to the Christian faith is found in 2 Timothy 2:16-19.

16 But avoid worldly *and* empty chatter, for it will lead to further ungodliness, 17 and their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, 18 *men* who have gone astray from the truth saying that the resurrection has already taken place, and they upset the faith of some. 19 Nevertheless, the firm foundation of God stands, having this seal, "The Lord knows those who are His," and, "Everyone who names the name of the Lord is to abstain from wickedness."

In this passage we have mention of a doctrinal error. It is an error concerning the resurrection. The error was the teaching that the resurrection had already taken place. Now we might not think that this was such a serious thing. One might say that those teaching this error are only wrong about the timing of the resurrection, but do not deny its reality. There are, however, a number of things in this passage that indicate that this was a most serious and central doctrinal deviation.

- In verse 16 this error is described as worldly and empty chatter. The words used are literally translated *godless* and *foolish*. Cf. the use of the same root here translated, *godless*, in 1 Tim. 1:9; 6:20; Heb. 12:16 where it marks someone as unsaved.
- In verse 16 it is said to lead to ungodliness. Cf. Romans 1:18; Jude 15.
- In verse 17 it is compared to gangrene. (The Greek word is the one from which derive our word, gangrene.) Here is one definition of this word: *a disease involving severe inflammation and possibly a cancerous spread of ulcers which eat away the flesh and bones (e.g., "ulcers, gangrene, cancer")*.

- In verse 17 Hymenaeus is named as one of the culprits spreading this error. He is probably the same Hymenaeus mentioned in 1 Timothy 1:19-20 who suffered shipwreck of his faith and blasphemed.
- In verse 18 Hymenaeus and Philetus are said to have gone astray from the truth in teaching this error. The Greek word translated *have gone astray* is used in 1 Timothy 6:21 of those who went astray from the faith into the early heresy of Gnosticism.
- In verse 18 this error is said to have upset the faith of some. The translation of the NASB is inadequate, and the translation of the old KJV is correct. The word means to overthrow. The faith of those who accepted this error was not simply upset. It was overthrown. This is the word used in John 2:15: “And He made a scourge of cords, and drove *them* all out of the temple, with the sheep and the oxen; and He poured out the coins of the money changers and **overturned** their tables.”
- In verse 19—finally—this error is contrasted with the firm foundation of God. The contrast implies that this false doctrine was a denial of a central and foundational truth of the Christian faith.

Superficially, we may think that teaching that the resurrection has already taken place would be a comparatively minor matter. The fact is that Paul regards it as a departure from a central truth of the Christian faith. The reason is, of course, that to say the resurrection has already taken place forces one to drastically redefine what the resurrection means. It is for this reason that the resurrection is classed as one of the basic or elementary teachings of the Christian faith in Hebrews 6:1. The resurrection of the body is, therefore, a central and foundational doctrine of the Christian faith.