

# *The Baptist Faith and Message:*

## **X. 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.**

“Last Things” refers to the doctrine of the end times or, as theologians term it, eschatology, coming from the Greek word, *eschatos*, meaning last or final. The BF&M 2000 has retained the exact wording of the 1963 version, which combined three sections from the 1925 version: “The Righteous and the Wicked”, “The Resurrection”, and “The Return of the Lord”, in that order. Overall, eschatology is what the Bible teaches regarding Christ’s return, the resurrection, final judgment, the consummation of the Kingdom, and our eternal destiny. Our understanding of the covenants in Scripture directs our understanding of the Kingdom of God (as was discussed in the prior chapter) and, ultimately, our eschatology. The BF&M addresses the main points: return, resurrection, retribution, and reward. However, another “r” word, “rapture”, is absent.

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Since the detonation of the first nuclear fission bomb and, later, the much more powerful fusion bombs, it has been thought that the end of the world would be brought about in a nuclear holocaust. More recently, the mismanagement of our planet has produced speculation that we would destroy the earth and ourselves by pollution and abuse of our environment leading to climate change and loss of food, breathable air, and potable water. Besides these catastrophes that could “end the world,” astronomers predict that, billions of years from now, the earth will be vaporized in the expanding hot gas cloud of our dying sun. Regardless of the means, the popular expectation is that man is the means to his own end, and when the world ends, it ends forever. God, and especially Christ, is not part of the equation. A new heavens and new earth are not a consideration. However, as Christians, we know better. Despite the wisdom of this world, the predictions of the ancient Mayans that world will end in 2012, and the ability of humans to injure the planet and its inhabitants, the world (and earth) will continue until God, “who has determined the end from the beginning,” brings to pass its appointed end. As He said through the prophet Isaiah, “Yea, I have spoken it; I will also bring it to pass. I have purposed it, I will also do it.” Jesus specifically states that no man knows the day or the hour, even the Son incarnate did not know. For this reason, Christians should avoid attempting to predict, either from the Scriptures or other means, the day or the hour of the end of the world. No prediction will ever be correct because it would contradict the Scriptures.

**According to His promise, Jesus Christ will return personally and visibly in glory to the earth;**

In many NT verses, Jesus speaks of His coming in clouds of glory with His angels. In the first chapter of Acts, angels affirm that He will return in the same manner in which He ascended into heaven. “Clouds” is probably the best description that human language can muster. Shekinah glory, as in the pillar of cloud that followed the Israelites, is what is meant. In using “personally and visibly”, the BF&M is indicating that Christ will return in His glorified, resurrected body. The timing of the Lord’s return and its relationship to the resurrection(s) and judgment(s) is conspicuously absent in the BF&M. When one examines the disparate and debated eschatological views that currently exist, it is easy to see why the BF&M avoided embracing a particular position.

At this point, it may be helpful to provide a closely clipped, thumbnail sketch of the four main eschatological views: amillennialism, postmillennialism, historic premillennialism, and

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dispensational premillennialism. For the sakes of spoken and written discussions, the long names have been abbreviated to “a-mil”, “post-mil”, and “pre-mil”.

The pre-mil view holds that Christ returns and establishes an earthly kingdom in which He reigns on earth for one thousand years (a millennium), which is based primarily on the Revelation 20 references to a thousand year period. They commonly refer to it as “the millennial kingdom” after which the end comes. The pre-mil designation comes from the second advent happening before (pre) the millennium. Within premillennialism, there are two main groups: dispensational (or pretribulational) and historic (or classical). The main distinction between these two groups is that the dispensational pre-mil group advocates a premillennial, pre-tribulation “rapture” in which “the Church” is taken up prior to (or in the middle of) “the great tribulation.” The dispensational pre-mil view is currently the dominant eschatology among Southern Baptists; however, there are many who do not ascribe to the pre-trib, pre-mil view point. Historically and theologically speaking, it is the youngest of the four eschatologies, originating in the mid-1800s and popularized by the Scofield Reference Bible.

The a-mil and post-mil positions hold that the one thousand years is figurative and represents the long age between the incarnation and second advent of Christ. Although the word “amillennial” technically means “no millennium,” the a-mil group ascribes to a non-literal, millennial reign of Christ in which He presently reigns from heaven. The post-mil designation comes from their belief that the second advent occurs immediately after (post) the millennium ends. The a-mil and post-mil views concur that His return marks the end of the non-literal millennium. They would say “we are presently in the millennium.” However, they differ in what happens during the age between the advents; the main difference being that the post-mil view envisions a “Christianization” of the earth prior to the Parousia (the return of Christ), to which the a-mil view does not ascribe. Otherwise, a-mil and post-mil have the same order for the main events; hereafter, for the purposes of this chapter, they will be discussed as a single position: a/post-mil.

Two other terms associated with end times discussions are “futurist” and “preterist.” These terms are used to identify how one interprets Biblical prophecy, both OT and NT, relating to the return of Christ, establishment of His Kingdom, and various judgments. Some examples would be Daniel’s prophetic dreams, Jesus’ Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24), and much of the book of Revelation. Futurists interpret these prophecies as yet to be fulfilled and that they largely pertain to unfulfilled promises to Israel that will be fulfilled during the millennium. Preterists, on the other hand, believe that all of the promises to Israel have been accomplished and that the judgment predicted in the Olivet Discourse happened in 70 AD when the Roman army completely destroyed the temple in Jerusalem. Essentially all pre-mil positions are to some degree futurist with the dispensational pre-mil position holding the most futurist views. The a/post-mil position is mainly preterist. Some extreme preterists (sometimes called “full” preterists) believe that the second advent occurred in 70 AD. This extreme view is not Biblically supportable. Most people holding the a/post-mil view would consider themselves “partial” preterists. Within futurism and preterism, there are many variant views.

In regard to the return of Christ, everyone agrees that Christ returns bodily to the earth, once. The dispensational pre-mil view also has Christ secretly returning to rapture the Church prior to His return in which He occupies David’s throne in the rebuilt temple to rule His millennial kingdom. This secret return is not considered “the” return because the Church is caught up with Him in the air (i.e., He does not touch down). However, the other camps sometimes view this as actually two returns. The BF&M does not mention a secret rapture in which the dead in Christ shall rise and believers that are alive shall be caught up. In popular Christian literature, the “rapture” – a term not found in Scripture – is characterized as instantaneous (and from the world’s perspective,

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mysterious) disappearance of believers in which the unbelieving world is left behind to suffer in the great tribulation.

**the dead will be raised; and Christ will judge all men in righteousness.**

In the context of end times, raising the dead is here meant to be understood as resurrection. However, the language is a bit loose. It is worth noting that, with one exception, persons who have been raised from the dead later died again, for example, Lazarus. Bodily resurrection is the raising of dead bodies and transforming them either for eternal glory or for eternal torment. Regardless of the condition of the body (i.e., embalmed, cremated, or dissolved in the sea), we trust that our all-powerful, all-knowing God will reassemble every essential and personal atom of our old physical being necessary to His purpose. At the appointed time, these bodies will be changed and reunited with their soul/spirit. There has been only one resurrection thus far and He, Jesus, is the first fruits of a great harvest yet to come. Although many would disagree, His was “the first resurrection” mentioned in Revelation 20 in which all born again believers share spiritually.

In regard to the resurrection(s), both pre-mil views have separate resurrections occurring a thousand years apart, one for believers at the beginning of the millennium and one for unbelievers at the end of the millennium. The dispensational pre-mil view requires at least three: one for believers at the rapture, one for believers at the return, and one for unbelievers at the end of the millennium. In the a/post-mil view, although the dead in Christ shall rise first, both believers and unbelievers are resurrected in the same event: the second resurrection. The BF&M affirms that the dead will be raised but does not address the timing, whether there are separate resurrections, or the order of believers versus unbelievers.

The BF&M affirms that “all men” will be judged, both believers and unbelievers. However, it does not mention the judgment of the fallen angels that Scripture assures will occur. Satan and his fellow fallen ones will be consigned to Hell and be cast into the lake of fire at the end. Believers’ works are judged in view of their eternal reward and are not judged punitively. Every deed done in the body, whether thought or act, whether good or evil, will be judged in truth. While most of what will be judged for believers should be deserving of punishment, Jesus has taken the punishment due us upon Himself. What could be more humbling for believers than for the Lord Himself to review all of our sins so that the full weight of our pardon is our last experience of the old age? We only think we understand mercy now. But, praise God, heaven will not be a place to look back with regret. Thankfulness and love will swallow up all regret and sadness.

From the dispensational perspective, there are separate judgments associated with the separate resurrections. Based on Matthew 25:31-46, a judgment of nations will happen at the beginning of the millennium to determine who should enter into the millennium. There is also a judgment(s) for reward sometimes called the “bema seat” judgment, which is based on 2 Corinthians 5:10. The last judgment is the “great white throne” judgment spoken of in Revelation 20:11,12 for unbelievers. In the a/post-mil perspective, the judgment of believers and unbelievers occur as part of the same event at the second coming.

**The unrighteous will be consigned to Hell, the place of everlasting punishment.**

Since the fall, all humanity has been and continues in a state of unrighteousness (sin) unless they are declared to be righteous by God. Righteousness has been granted to all persons who had faith in the future redeemer/Messiah that lived prior to the atonement of Christ. Since the atonement, it has been and will be granted to all who place their faith in Jesus Christ. Finally, righteousness has

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been and will be granted to innumerable persons who are incapable of understanding the gospel due to being *in utero*, in their infancy, or never granted the mental capacity necessary to exercise faith. The Scriptures do not speak of any redemptive plan for fallen angels. The angels who did not fall have been and continue in righteousness; however, Satan and the fallen angels have already been sentenced and are awaiting punishment.

The BF&M states that the unrighteous are consigned to Hell and refers to Hell as the place of everlasting punishment. However, Hell is not the final destination for lost souls and angels. According to Revelation 20:14,15, death, hell, and “whosoever was not found in the book of life” are cast into the lake of fire. Hell appears to be more like a holding cell. Hell is described already as a place of fire and torment. It is beyond painful to think that the suffering of our lost loved ones and others already in Hell will only increase in the lake of fire. In times when the concepts of soul sleep, non-existence of Hell, and annihilationism are prevalent, the BF&M has stood firm that judgment, Hell, and eternal punishment are real.

**The righteous in their resurrected and glorified bodies will receive their reward and will dwell forever in Heaven with the Lord.**

The “prototype” resurrected, glorified body is that of Jesus Christ. John says that when He appears that we shall be like Him. Given that Jesus’s body was a human body, we can expect that our resurrection body will be like His. Whether our resurrection bodies will have all of His body’s capacities (e.g., ability to dematerialize and rematerialize) is unknown. Over the years, books have been written by persons who claim to have died, gone to “heaven”, and come back. These near-death and revivification stories are amazingly popular. They provide highly detailed descriptions and experiences of “heaven” and, in some instances, meeting Jesus. One young man, who claimed to have had an out-of-body experience during surgery, stated that everyone in heaven had wings and that they could fly. A physician, who claimed to have been under water for 25 minutes and died, said she was held in Jesus arms. She said she was sent back to tell others about her experience. While these are compelling and miraculous sounding stories, these kinds of experiences should always be examined in the light of Scripture. Furthermore, there is a long standing misconception that people become angels when they go to heaven. There is nothing in Scripture to support that idea. Humans and angels are not interchangeable beings regardless of what Hollywood or fiction writers produce for entertainment purposes.

As to our reward, Christ’s substitutionary death for us, our glorified perfected bodies, and eternal life with Christ would seem reward enough. If that is not already infinitely generous, we will receive yet further rewards, crowns of glory, which we will cast at the feet of Jesus. We cast them at His feet because we understand that His grace made it possible for us to do any good thing. While still living on earth, we are told to build up our treasure in heaven. What an amazing thing that what we do (or do not do) in this life counts in eternity.

Sometimes, there is more emphasis placed on reaching heaven than on dwelling with Jesus. A recent sign in front of an SB church read: “Jesus died for my space in heaven.” What a pitiful, insipid expression of the gospel. The phrase is probably an allusion to the social media site, “My Space,” it envisions a heaven akin to storage space (like gigabytes in the “cloud”) as if there are limitations to heaven. Jesus died to pay for your sins, not to hold your space in heaven. The statement might be defended on the basis of John 14:2: “...I go to prepare a place for you.” But, what is not conveyed is the reason for His preparing a place, which the following verse explains: “that where I am, there ye may be also.” His presence is what makes heaven, heavenly. However, in our focus on heaven, we often forget that the Scriptures promise a new heavens (not heaven) and a new earth. All creation is said to groan in anticipation of it. The fall will be set straight

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either by renewal or replacement of the old creation. In the eternal state, heaven is not distinct from earth. They exist together and Lord dwells there with His righteous beings.

We should be as cautious about predicting what heaven will be like as we are about predicting the day and the hour of His return. Fallen minds can simply not conceive of heaven and the Scriptures provide little detail. Surprisingly, one theologian anticipates us learning, investigating, and inventing new technologies. The descendant of Cain, Tubal-cain, the instructor of every artificer in brass and iron, has led us down that road. Certainly we will have things to do, but building a better computer is not likely to be one of them. Whatever our expectations of heaven may be, Jesus will be there and that is all we should care about.