

Based on: Roger Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief*, Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002.

The Church: Visible *and* Invisible (chap. 13)

Life Beyond Death: Continuity *and* Discontinuity (chap. 14)

The Kingdom of God: Already *and* Not Yet (chap. 15)

We'll wrap up our introduction to theology by looking at the final three chapters from Roger Olson's *The Mosaic of Christian Belief*, which addresses the church in chapter 13 and the future of God's redemptive work in chapters 14-15. Since there is much to discuss, each issue will be touched upon very briefly, and I would refer you to the text for more details. With each of these issues there is a great diversity of Christian perspectives, and a rather minimal list of views that are considered heterodox ("heretical" or outside the bounds of proper Christian belief). That being said, we'll begin our discussion of the Christian church, which Olson notes is both visible and invisible, before turning to a discussion of the future of the world from the Christian perspective.

We should begin with a definition of the church. By church we do not mean the buildings and organizational structures. Too often the question is asked, "Where do you go to church?" by which the questioner usually means, "What building do you gather at weekly to worship with fellow Christ followers?" We must remember that we don't go to church, we are the church. Therefore, when we talk about the church we should remember that we are referring to all Christians across the world and throughout all of history. The church is composed of any and everyone who has responded in myriad ways to Jesus' call "follow me." Or, as Olson put it, the essential Christian affirmation regarding this collective group of Christ followers is that "the church is a divinely-instituted community where Christ is present by his Spirit and is essentially one, holy, catholic and apostolic" (291). "One" refers to unity (many congregations that manifest and compose one global church). "Holy" refers to being set apart for a mission (not moral perfection). "Catholic" refers to universality or Christians throughout all of history (not the Roman Catholic Church, though they are a part of the catholic or universal Church).

Finally, "apostolic" refers to the role of the church in "carrying on the ministry and teaching of Jesus' own apostles" (290). These are the universal Christian affirmations regarding the Church, which stand true in all the diverse forms of church governance and views of the sacraments, which we will discuss in a moment. Before doing so, however, we should touch on two alternative understandings of the Christian church that Olson deems incompatible with the consensus just described.

These alternatives are sectarianism (a view regarding unity) and rejection of baptism and communion (a view regarding the sacraments or ordinances). *Sectarianism* refers to "the belief or attitude that the unity of the church is unimportant and that the true essence of the church may exist without unity" (292). Sectarians tend to isolate themselves from others, viewing their denomination or local congregation as the only true church, and therefore avoid (and sometimes denigrate) ecumenism (cross-denominational interaction) in any form. Those who *reject the practice of baptism and communion* set aside the two universal practices of Christian churches. As we will see, Protestants and Roman Catholics disagree on the number of sacraments, but they all affirm at least baptism and communion. Therefore, as Olson reveals, "while Christians may legitimately disagree among themselves about the significance of the sacraments, they must not drop them altogether," which is the error into which some groups have fallen. This brings us to a brief look at the diversity of Christian formulations regarding the unity and governance of the Church universal, and then at the Protestant and Roman Catholic understanding of the number and function of the sacraments.

In general, Roman Catholics tend to understand the unity of the Church as *visible and institutional* and the governance of the Church as *hierarchical and episcopal* (295). As Olson clarifies, this means that "the church *is* the body of believers in fellowship with the priests governed by the bishops and appointed by the pope. This is the one, true, visible and institutional body of Christ on earth; there is no invisible church" (295). Roman Catholics do acknowledge Protestants as Christians, though they tend to see them as "separated brethren" (296) and continue to affirm the Roman Catholic Church as the one, true, and visible Church. A third-century Bishop named Cyprian once proclaimed that "outside the Church there is no salvation." Catholics understand this to mean that outside of the visible and institutional Roman Catholic Church (with its leadership and sacramental system) there is no salvation. Protestants, by contrast, tend to understand the unity of the Church as *invisible and spiritual*, but the views regarding governance of the visible Church (that is, collective organization and interaction of the local congregations) are quite diverse and without any consensus. Regarding the Protestant view of unity, Olson cites the Lutheran *Augsburg Confession*: "the unity...resides in the gathering of believers among whom the gospel is preached in its purity and the sacraments (baptism and the Lord's Supper) are administered according to the gospel" (296). Therefore, Protestants understand Cyprian's statement to mean that outside of an encounter with the life and teachings of Jesus whereby one becomes his follower and a member of the spiritually united Church, there is no salvation.

The other distinction between Roman Catholics and Protestants is found in the number and interpretation of the sacraments. Roman Catholics affirm seven (7) sacraments, which are understood as *means or channels of God's grace*. That is, God's grace is imparted to the person through the enactment of the sacraments administered by an ordained Roman Catholic priest. As Olson put it, sacraments are "visible ceremonies performed by duly ordained priests representing bishops that truly communicated sanctifying and justifying grace to the faithful people of God" (299). There is mystery as to how this actually takes place, but it is through the participation in these more-than-symbolic rituals that a person encounters God and God's redeeming grace. The seven sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church, which guide the believer through the progression of their life, are: infant baptism, confirmation, penance, Eucharist, extreme unction, ordination, and marriage. Protestants, on the other hand, affirm two (2) sacraments, which are understood as *symbolic reminders of God's grace*. That is, God's grace is imparted to the person through their encounter with Jesus and their choice to follow him in his redemptive manner of life. The sacraments do not impart, but serve as a reminder of, God's grace. Protestants believe the sacraments "symbolize vividly the work of Christ for and within believers...[they are] powerful object lessons that both teach and proclaim salvation and strengthen memory and hope" (302).

This brings us to chapter 14, where Olson discusses perspectives regarding life after (beyond) death, noting that the essential affirmation (dogma) is simply that there is continuity and discontinuity with our present and future life. While all Christians affirm that death is not the end, but (in the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer) "the beginning of life" (309), they disagree on the particulars. As such, we will look at three issues regarding life after death—the nature of heaven, the nature of hell, and the nature of the intermediate state. Before looking at the diversity of Christian ideas on these matters, we'll briefly touch on the three primary alternatives to Christian perspectives—immortality of the soul, reincarnation, and objective immortality.

Immortality of the soul (without an accompanying belief in bodily resurrection) is a largely Platonic and Gnostic idea which (at least implicitly) implies that the spirit/soul is good and immortal while the physical body is evil and mortal. *Reincarnation* (a.k.a. *transmigration of the souls/spirits*) includes any view that depicts "souls as departing from dying bodies and eventually entering new ones" (318). This view also contains Platonic influences (see Book X of Plato's *Republic*). Finally, *objective immortality* is a more recent idea that emerged from the theological musings of process theologian Alfred North Whitehead. Whitehead, and others who hold this view, suggest "that individual entities such as persons survive biological death only in their continuing contributions to the whole networks of which they were parts and in God's memory, which preserves all values" (319). Proponents of objective immortality believe that we "live on" in God's mind as God remembers of our existence, and as our physical bodies become part of the organic matter of the earth once more. All three of these views are deemed outside the bounds of orthodox Christianity because they either lead to the necessary denial of the incarnation of God in the person of Jesus or reject the Christian understanding of the future resurrection as an embodied state (see 1 Cor 15), which is foreshadowed by the bodily resurrection of Jesus in which there is continuity with the former body/self as well as discontinuity.

Now we turn to several perspectives within orthodox Christianity about life after death. Regarding *the nature of heaven*, some suggest great continuity and others great discontinuity with our present world. There is a wide variety of Christian views on heaven, but all affirm heaven as the locus of God's presence and a redeemed existence. While the topic may be intriguing for some, most conversations are speculative musings that aren't of any great significance. As Olson notes, "opinions [on the nature of heaven] all fall into a relatively low level of importance as neither Scripture nor Christian tradition point toward anything very clearly. Whatever one chooses to believe about these matters is relatively unimportant" (322).

Regarding *the nature of the intermediate state* there are three distinct understandings, with much variation in between. One view known as *soul sleep* suggests that upon physical death the person exists in a state of unconscious rest or sleep until the resurrection when the person "wakes up" in heaven. As Olson describes, "the dead are [said to be] completely unaware of anything including any passage of time. When they are raised [at Christ's return] they will not be aware of having 'slept' or of having been nonexistent for some period of time" (327). For the dead it will seem as if they close their eyes on earth and open their eyes in heaven, unaware of any passage of time on earth (whether it has been days, weeks, months, years, decades, or centuries). *Purgatory* is the second alternative, and is the view affirmed by the Roman Catholic Church. Purgatory is "the place where souls of persons who died in a state of grace but with the stain of sin still clinging to them spend some period of time before being admitted to paradise" (323). Most simply, this view of the intermediate state conceives it as a place where a person is further sanctified in preparation for heaven. Some believe all Christians must go through purgatory, while others

believe only some who did not receive last rites¹ and/or need extra sanctification in preparation for being in the presence of God must first go to purgatory. While most Protestants reject this idea because they believe it undermines the fact that we are saved by grace through faith and not by works, Roman Catholics respond by saying that “while eternal life is a free gift and cannot be earned, one must suffer temporal punishments for his or her sins and enter heaven truly righteous” (324). The final view, *two intermediate states*, posits a “conscious existence of disembodied souls between bodily death and resurrection” based on one’s standing before God at the time of death—some go to paradise (pre-heaven) while others go to the “outer-darkness” (pre-hell).

Regarding *the nature of hell* there are two primary Christian views—hell as everlasting and hell as annihilation. The everlasting view suggests that hell, like heaven, is a never-ending, post-mortem experience of conscious punishment through separation from the presence of God. Some view hell as a separation brought upon the person by an angry, wrathful, vengeful deity, a place of eternal pain and torment (see Jonathon Edward’s *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*). Others view hell as a separation chosen by the person who does not want God’s grace and love, and continually chooses to remain in hell by resisting the love of God available even after death (see C.S. Lewis’s *The Great Divorce*). The annihilationist view suggests that hell, in contrast to heaven, is a conditional immortality. In other words, they believe that “the everlastingness of hell is extinction... God punishes them by burning them up completely and shows them mercy by allowing them to cease existing as rebellious persons under condemnation” (329) (see Greg Boyd’s online article: <http://www.gregboyd.org/qa/end-times/are-you-an-annihilationist-and-if-so-why/>).

This brings us to our final chapter and topic, which Olson titles “The Kingdom of God: Already *and* Not Yet.” The Kingdom of God was central to everything Jesus did and taught, and it refers to the ethics of God, the manner of life proclaimed and embodied by Jesus. It is a way of life, not an abstract concept. It is present and in our midst anywhere that people put their faith and hope in God through Jesus, which means that we believe the way of life Jesus taught and embodied is right, holy, and redemptive in the end even if it seems foolish and crazy and fruitless in present. The Kingdom of God entered into history most fully in the person of Jesus, and is a present reality everywhere the non-violent, revolutionary way of life he taught and embodied is made manifest by his followers. However, the Kingdom will not come in all its fullness and redemptive glory until God returns to set everything into balance and renews creation. As such, the essential Christian affirmation (dogma) regarding the Kingdom of God is that it is already present in history, but not yet fully realized. More specifically, Olson sets for three essential statements regarding the Kingdom of God:

- (1) “Jesus Christ will return to the earth” (335)
- (2) “When Christ returns he will establish or completely manifest the rule and reign of God—the Kingdom of God—that is already at work within history” (335)
- (3) “In the end God will create a new heaven and a new earth that will endure forever” (335)

To sum up, “when Christ returns, God’s Kingdom—already inaugurated by Christ’s resurrection and the sending of the Holy Spirit to the church—will be completed and eventually God will renew his creation in a new world that unites heaven and earth” (341). This is the central and essential Christian affirmation regarding God’s Kingdom. Great diversity regarding the Kingdom of God emerges based upon one’s understanding of the biblical apocalyptic literature (e.g. portions of Daniel and Ezekiel and all of Revelation), which influences how one understands universal eschatology (that is, how one views the coming of God’s Kingdom in all its fullness).

The three Christian views of apocalyptic literature, which directly influence one’s understanding of universal eschatology, are *futurism*, *preterism*, and *historicism*. *Futurism* “assumes most or all of the symbols and images of biblical apocalyptic literature refer to realities still in the future” (350). For example, futurists believe that everything found in the book of Revelation is foretelling future events, most of which have not yet happened (even for us today). The exact nature and content what these foretold events is the subject of much debate, and futurists have linked the symbolic references to various events throughout the course of history. *Preterism* “regards all or most [of the symbols and images] as already fulfilled for us even if the fulfillment was future for the visionary and his first readers” (350). For example, preterists assume that much of the statements in Revelation were about events that were to transpire in the not-to-distant future (from the writer’s and reader’s perspective). Therefore, most (if not all) of the foretold events have already taken place and are now historical events from our vantage point.

¹ One of the seven Catholic sacraments is extreme unction (or last rites), in which the person confesses sins and receives God’s purifying grace before death, allowing them to go to heaven rather than to purgatory.

Finally, *historicism* “sees the symbols and images as codes for persons, entities, and events contemporary with the apocalypticists” (350). For example, historicists regard everything mentioned in Revelation as statements about events that occurred during the lifetime of the writer. Revelation, therefore, is a veiled commentary intended to provide a Christian perspective on these events and to give direction and hope to the recipients. To further clarify these approaches, Olson uses the example of Revelation’s reference to “the antichrist.” “For a futurist the antichrist is yet to appear. For a preterist, the antichrist has already appeared and may be an office or a kind of person or a political entity rather than a specific person. For a historicist, the antichrist was (for the seer of Revelation) the Roman emperor or simply Rome itself” (350).

This brings us to the three major Christian views on universal eschatology (*premillennialism*, *postmillennialism*, and *amillennialism*), which are shaped by one’s approach to the biblical apocalyptic literature described above. *Premillennialism* includes “any belief that Christ will return visibly to the earth at the end of this present age of world history and establish his kingdom—the kingdom of God in all its fullness—over all the world.” Moreover, “in order for a model of the end to be truly premillennial...it must include some earthly, socio-political (not merely spiritual), historical reign of God through Jesus Christ *after* the parousia and *before* the new heaven and new earth” (351). *Postmillennialism* includes any “belief in an actual kingdom of God on earth *before* Christ’s second coming. In order to count as true postmillennialism the model of the Kingdom of God must include a Christianization of the world prior to the parousia” (352). Finally, *amillennialism* refers to the “denial of any socio-political, historical kingdom of God before or after Christ’s return...[T]he primary form of the kingdom of God *within history* is not a utopian social order in which all the nations of the earth are Christianized or under Christ’s political dominion (as in millennialism), but God’s spiritual presence through Christ and the Holy Spirit in the church and in heaven” (354). While a futurist, preterist, or historicist could affirm any of the three views described here, futurists and preterists tend toward premillennialism and historicists tend toward either postmillennialism or amillennialism.

To further clarify these views of universal eschatology, the following interpretations would be given regarding Revelation’s reference to a thousand (1,000) year reign of God (see Rev 20). *Premillennialists* (whether dispensational or covenantal)² understand this as a reference to a literal and historical reign of God in the person of Jesus Christ upon earth. Jesus’ return will inaugurate this thousand year reign, which will be followed by a final judgment where persons will be sent to heaven or to hell (many premillennial formulations also suggest that the present earth will be destroyed and replaced by a new heaven and a new earth). *Postmillennialists* also understand the thousand years as a literal and historical reign of God upon the earth, but believe it is an event that will take place before Christ’s return and before a final judgment. It will be the reign of peace on earth for a thousand years, which will culminate in the return of Christ and the division of persons into heaven and hell. Though popular prior to WWI, few have held this view after the war-filled 20th century. Finally, *amillennialists* understand the thousand years to be symbolic or metaphorical. It does not refer to a literal and historical reign of God upon the earth, but rather, to the spiritual reign of God through followers of Jesus (the Church) during the time between the resurrection/ascension and the return of Jesus/final judgment.

In general, we must remember that most of the issues addressed in these chapters are non-essentials. There is room for a great and enriching diversity, provided that one affirms that the Church is composed of those who have chosen to place their faith and hope in God’s redemptive life taught and embodied by Jesus, that there will be a bodily resurrection of all peoples in continuity and discontinuity with our present bodies, and that the Kingdom of God is both in our midst and yet not present in all its fullness. More specifically, when we discuss the ultimate ends of history as we know it, Olson rightly states that despite our disagreements regarding particulars, “we need to recapture the notes of great promise and high hopes that infuse the biblical message about the future...[namely,] that every corruption of creation will be healed and God will be all in all or everything to everyone...We need to realize that the great kingdom of God inaugurated by Jesus Christ in his first coming will be completed and fulfilled by the same Jesus Christ in his second coming” (356). Whatever our particular views may be, we can unite in our common confession “that Jesus Christ will return...that God’s rule and reign of love and justice will be finally realized...and that God will renovate his creation and unit it with heaven” (356).

² Dispensational premillennialism (first popularized in the Scofield Reference Bible and more recently in the *Left Behind* book series) believes that God has divided history into seven period or dispensations. Six dispensations have already occurred (the time of the Jews). The current period of the church on earth is a pause or parenthesis until the church is “raptured” (taken up bodily from the earth; an ideas based on an exegetically questionable interpretation of 1 Thessalonians 4.17). When this so-called “rapture” takes place there will ensue seven years of tribulation followed by the return of Jesus to the earth, which will inaugurate a 1000 year reign of God on earth. This 1000 year reign will be followed by the final judgment where people will be sent to heaven or hell. Covenantal (or historical) premillennialism rejects the division of history into time periods (dispensations), believing that Christ will return upon the earth and inaugurate a 1000 year reign of God on earth that will be followed by the final judgment.