



Eschatology and the end times: secondary teachers' guide

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Introduction

This guide, produced by Westminster Abbey, contains key information on Christian beliefs about eschatology to support the delivery of Religious Education within your classroom.

Westminster Abbey has a distinctive role within the Church of England, which is part of the worldwide Anglican Communion. It is neither a cathedral nor a parish church, and it stands outside the normal jurisdiction of the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of London. It is instead a 'Royal Peculiar', which was a status granted to it in 1560 by Elizabeth I, under which the Dean and Chapter are directly answerable to the Sovereign. Building upon its origins as a monastery and the Benedictine importance placed on education, Westminster Abbey today strives to be a school of the Lord's service.

This resource discusses eschatology in broad terms based on Christian teachings. All Bible references are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

Eschatology - Life after death

The term eschatology is used to describe Christian belief about death, judgement and the afterlife, and is one part of Christian teaching about eschatology. Christians believe in life after death and that by leading a good Christian life on Earth, they will be united with God in Heaven in an eternal life.

"Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." (John 11:25-26)

Life after death is possible for Christians because of Jesus Christ's sacrifice. Belief in the resurrection is central to Christianity, as it shows that Jesus has destroyed death, that the last boundary between God and humanity has been taken away, and that Christ is the "first fruit" of this life beyond death.

"But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. (1 Corinthians 15: 20-22)

Whereas Jesus Christ rose from the dead with a body, St Paul teaches that human beings will have a resurrection body that is spiritual rather than just a resuscitation of their own body.

"So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised



in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body." (1 Corinthians 15:42-44)

2 Corinthians 5:1-10 offers Christians a way to understand the afterlife.

"For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens." (2 Corinthians 5:1)

During life on earth, Christians are preparing for the afterlife supported by the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

"He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee." (2 Corinthians 5:5)

This passage explains that the afterlife is a non-physical home in Heaven, separating the home in the body and the home with the Lord.

"So we are always confident; even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord – for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we do have confidence, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord." (2 Corinthians 5:6-8)

It concludes that a human being's place in the afterlife will be determined by God. God takes on the role of judge as He determines which humans deserve an eternal life with Him in Heaven or punishment in Hell, based on how they have behaved during their life on earth.

"For all of us must appear before the judgement seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil." (2 Corinthians 5:10)

Heaven and Hell

St Paul teaching's in 2 Corinthians 5:10 determine that human beings shall be judged to either have an eternal place in Heaven or Hell. On the whole, Christians do not consider Heaven and Hell to be physical places as such because they are outside of the understanding of time and place. By "Heaven", Christians believe in absolute union with God. By "Hell", many Christians believe in eternal separation from God.

On the cross, Jesus describes Heaven to one of the criminals as paradise.

"Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."" (Luke 23:42-43)

Heaven offers Christians' immortal souls the opportunity to know eternal rest and relationship with God.

In contrast, human beings in Hell will not know the presence of God. The Bible explicitly highlights the fear human beings should have about going to Hell.

"If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown to hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell." (Matthew 5:29-30)



Hell can often be seen in conflict with the omnibenevolent nature of God and some Christians reject the literal interpretations of Hell, seen typically in medieval doom paintings as a way of frightening people into obeying the Church.

Roman Catholics believe in Purgatory. Purgatory is a state whereby the soul is purified, prior to eternal bliss in Heaven. Protestants do not believe in Purgatory. Article 22 of the 39 Articles of the Church of England states that Purgatory does not exist as it is not referred to within the Bible.

“THE Romish Doctrine concerning Purgatory, Pardons, Worshipping, and Adoration, as well of Images as of Reliques, and also invocation of Saints, is a fond thing vainly invented, and grounded upon no warranty of Scripture, but rather repugnant to the Word of God.” ([Article 22, Church of England](#))

The Apocalypse

Christians believe that the world will come to an end. This is known as the Apocalypse, the complete final destruction of the world and the final reality of the new creation as described in the Book of Revelation. The language and symbolic imagery in this book is very dramatic and disturbing, including the Four Horsemen (conquest, war, famine and death). The final book of the Bible is a series of visions given to the writer John on the Greek island of Patmos.

“When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature call out, ‘Come!’. I looked and there was a pale green horse! Its rider’s name was Death, and Hades followed with him; they were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword, famine and pestilence, and by the wild animals of the earth.” (Revelation 6:7-8)

Amongst other metaphors, it also describes a beast who has seven heads and ten horns that comes out of the sea, associated with the number 666.

“This calls for wisdom; the number of the beast, for it is the number of a person. Its number is six hundred and sixty-six.” (Revelation 13:18)

After all the destruction, John describes the new heaven and earth,

“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.” (Revelation 21-1-2)

Finally, the Book of Revelation confirms that this is a space for Christians to be with God forever more. This new creation is the final reality where God’s life and love will be known eternally.

“And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign for ever and ever.” (Revelation 22:5)

Parousia – the Second Coming of Christ

As part of the Apocalypse, Christians believe in Parousia, the idea that Jesus will return at the end of time to judge everyone who has lived or died. It is also known as the Second Coming.

Before Jesus’ is arrested and crucified, he tells his disciples that he will return,

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare



a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also." (John 14:1-3)

At the ascension of Jesus, when He ascended into Heaven before His disciples, the angels repeat this message,

"They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." (Acts 1:11)

The Day of Judgement

Christians believe that the entire world will be subject to God's judgement. All people will receive this judgement, which will relate to how they have lived on earth. One place where Jesus explains this is in the Parable of the Sheep and Goats (Matthew 25:31-46). In keeping with other Biblical references to shepherds and their flock, this parable told by Jesus uses a farming metaphor by classifying people as either sheep or goats, which would have been clearly understood by a predominately pastoral audience.

"All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left." (Matthew 25:32-33)

Those on the right, the sheep, are told they are blessed because of the actions they did on earth:

"for I was hungry and you gave me food, and I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me." (Matthew 25:35)

Jesus describes how the righteous, confused, ask when they did each of those actions and are told,

"And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." (Matthew 25:40)

Then those on the left, the goats, are repeated the same list and that they did not help in all of those instances. Again, it is asked when they did not do each of those actions and are told,

"Then he will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me."" (Matthew 25:25)

Jesus shows that how people do or do not act will determine eternal life or eternal punishment.

"And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." (Matthew 25:46)

This parable echoes the teachings of the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), where Christians are taught to help anyone in need of help, rather than those that they might consider within their own community, whether that be defined by geography, race or culture.

The Apostles' Creed and The Nicene Creed

Creeds express the most important Christian beliefs and teachings. They were originally written down as Christianity spread to combat the spread of heresy by offering clear doctrinal boundaries of belief. The creeds were written to be recited during public worship and were part of the baptismal service. By saying creeds out loud and together as a congregation, Christians are united as a believing community with those across time and space.

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Learning



The Apostles' Creed, written down by the 4th century AD, was based on the teachings of the Apostles. The Creed is a statement of Christian beliefs, including the resurrection of Jesus' and his role in the judgement of humans.

“On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come to judge the living and the dead.”

The Nicene Creed, which was adopted at the First Council of Nicaea in 325AD, provides a summary of what the Church believes about the Trinity. It was devised during a large meeting of Christians leaders from across the Roman Empire in order to unify Christian belief, convened by Roman Emperor Constantine. It describes the Parousia, or Second Coming of Christ, and the everlasting nature of the afterlife.

“He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.”

Finding out more

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