

## *NOT THE LEAST LASH LOST*

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**A not-very-accurate write-up of the sorts of things I said in two lectures at the Auburn Avenue Pastors' Conference ("To All the Nations: Obeying the Great Commission") in January 2007.**

Recordings of the lectures are available at Auburn Avenue Media: <http://www.auburnavenue.org/mp3.htm>

### **A very rough outline of what follows**

Introduction, identifying the question, preliminary observations:

- a) *The Underground Movement* and *Leaf by Niggle*
- b) continuity / discontinuity
- c) one particular question – *how* does what we do now last?
  - quotes from evangelicals
  - comments
    - confused, unworkable, potentially humanistic
    - in the background is a narrow reading of the GC
    - in the foreground is an assertion of the priority of evangelism
    - an 'argument' is presented in terms of what does and doesn't last
- d) clarify (All That Counts Really Is Evangelism)
  - ATCRIES realize that the "non-evangelistic" matters for other reasons
  - ATCRIES recognize that there are some things which last for ever
- e) acknowledge
  - lots we don't know
  - this is rarely addressed directly in Scripture or much elsewhere
  - this consideration doesn't solve ethical dilemmas
- f) the question, then ...
  - examples
  - *How* – on what basis and in what ways – do these things "last"?
- g) Matthew 28 itself gives us some leads
  - resurrection; providence; disciple; nations; trinity; all things; with us
- h) other texts come to mind:
  - Rev 11.15; 14.13; 21.24; I Cor 3

### **1) The bodily resurrection of Jesus**

- a) basic pattern
  - renewal but not replacement
  - not denying growth etc
- b) the body
  - flight recorder and seed
  - marks of the crucifixion
- c) resurrection of the cosmos

### **2) The songs of the redeemed**

- a) we'll sing about Jesus - how much do we want to know about him?
- b) and what will that require?
- c) an aside: affirming decreed will doesn't condone laziness or clarify revealed will
- d) shall we sing about sin?
- e) summary

### 3) The good works of Christians

- a) examples
- b) are works of Christ / the body of Christ
- c) are new creation or “eschatological” works
- d) which means that they “beyond the reach of death” works (not “in vain”)

### 4) The personal identity of the redeemed

- a) judgment, rewards, differentiation
- b) identity and fullness
- c) identity and “glorified agglomeration”
- d) what are these associations / appearances?
  - relationships
  - experiences
  - actions
  - language
  - relationship with Christ himself

### 5) The fact and shape of redemptive history

- a) basic structure of redemption
- b) there’s a shape to this – the check mark again; stories - servants accompany their Master
- c) the biggest discontinuity lies in the past

### 6) What it means to be taken into the life of the triune God

- a) Whose life is this?
- b) the Father’s knowledge of which Son? the Son’s knowledge of the Father – which Son?
- c) Jenson and “interpretation”
- d) thinking about what? the work of redemption

### 7) Metaphors / analogies – moving to a conclusion

- a) more on “interpretation”
- b) other analogies
- c) relating this to the Great Commission
- d) one more thing or the one thing? practical use of this
- e) C S Lewis / G M Hopkins
- f) summing up

### ***Some further reading:***

Herman Bavinck – *Reformed Dogmatics*  
Jeremy Begbie – *Theology, Music and Time*  
Jonathan Edwards – *Miscellanies*  
Julian Hardyman – *Glory Days*  
David B Hegeman – *Plowing in Hope*  
Gerard Manley Hopkins – *Poems*  
Robert Jenson – *Systematic Theology*  
James B Jordan – *Through New Eyes*  
Peter J Leithart – *A House for My Name*  
Peter J Leithart – *Against Christianity*  
C S Lewis – *The Last Battle*  
Cornelius Plantinga Jr. – *Engaging God’s World*  
J R R Tolkien – *Leaf By Niggle*

## To All the Nations: Obeying the Great Commission (AAPC 2007)

### *NOT THE LEAST LASH LOST*

#### **Summary:**

Some evangelical Christians appear to believe that all that *really* counts is evangelism and they base this view, in part, upon the idea that, while the consequences of evangelism last forever, most other things that humans do are merely temporary. In what follows I claim that *everything* we do “lasts forever” in one way or another and argue this from 1) the bodily resurrection of Jesus; 2) the songs of the redeemed; 3) the good works of Christians; 4) the personal identity of the redeemed; 5) the fact and shape of redemptive history; and 6) what it means to be taken into the triune life of God. Although demonstrating the error of the view that most non-evangelistic human activity does not last forever, these arguments do not directly affect our moral choices. However, more positively, they do provide affirmation of the eternal significance of *all* human activity from the most obscure “culture-building” endeavours through to the most mundane and repetitive acts of service and thus also provide theological underpinnings for the Reformed instinct that everything we do lasts and that everything we do matters.

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Two extended quotations set the frame for the discussion which follows. First, an extract from John Peck’s short story, “The Underground Movement”. In it, ‘the man’ has announced to his followers that, exposing and confronting the tyrant, he will go into exile. He continues:

“Back here, you must take my place. Oh yes, you can, and you will. Everywhere, you must prepare another social structure to replace this present one. It will mean new relationships, a new kind of family, a new kind of law, a new kind of monetary policy, of education, art, even language. It will be new, right at its roots, growing invisibly like a blade of grass forcing its way through the tarmac. On the face of it, and to those who do not know what to look for, it will often look so much like what is here already that the enemy won’t detect it until it’s too late (but for heaven’s sake make sure you’re clear about the difference!)”. He stopped, and looked at them so intently that many of them shrunk back. Suddenly there was something frightening about this man.

“Get as many people involved as you can,” he said. “It doesn’t really matter whether you gain open control of any of the districts or not – sometimes it will be good, if only for the experience, but in some places, it would be better not to do so. But you must create as much of this new order of things as you possibly can, down to the last details. You have my instructions and [ ... at any time you can ask for ...] further help. You’ll be taking a lot of risks, and you mustn’t be too frightened of making mistakes. It will be horrific for some of you, because the enemy is not only afraid, but afraid to admit they are afraid. Many of you – and your loved ones – will be threatened and captured and tortured and exiled, but, well, you’ll know where to find me, I’ll make sure of that.

“And when we come back to finish this business, every skill you have mastered, every small achievement in the programme I’ve outlined to you, every new relationship and understanding, every small growth in wisdom and will-power, every tiny detail, will be put to good service. And with all that you are doing now, there will rise such an empire of joy and freedom as you have not imagined in your brightest dreams.”

The second passage comes from J.R.R. Tolkien’s short story, “Leaf by Niggle”. Niggle is a little man with real potential as a painter (particularly of trees) but, through a combination of perfectionism, irritability, interruptions and distractions from outside, and kindness towards his selfish neighbour (Parish), Niggle never gets very far with his painting and particularly his ever-expanding and never-to-be-completed great work, the Tree. However, after he has taken his ‘long journey’ and received his ‘Gentle Treatment’ he comes to this:

Niggle pushed open the gate, jumped on the bicycle, and went bowling downhill in the spring sunshine. Before long he found that the path on which he had started had disappeared, and the bicycle was rolling along over a marvellous turf. It was green and close; and yet he could see every blade distinctly. He seemed to remember having seen or dreamed of that sweep of grass somewhere or other. The curves of the land were familiar somehow. Yes: the ground was becoming level, as it should, and no, of course, it was beginning to rise again. A great green shadow came between him and the sun. Niggle looked up, and fell off his bicycle.

Before him stood the Tree, his Tree, finished. If you could say that of a Tree that was alive, its leaves opening, its branches growing and bending in the wind that Niggle has so often felt or guessed, and had so often failed to catch. He gazed at the Tree, and slowly he lifted his arms and opened them wide.

‘It’s a gift!’ he said. He was referring to his art, and also to the result; but he was using the word quite literally. He went on looking at the Tree. All the leaves he had ever laboured at were there, as

he had imagined them rather than as he had made them; and there were others that had only budded in his mind, and many that might have budded, if only he had had time. Nothing was written on them, they were just exquisite leaves, yet they were dated as clear as a calendar. Some of the most beautiful – and the most characteristic, the most perfect examples of the Niggle style – were seen to have been produced in collaboration with Mr Parish: there was no other way of putting it.

The birds were building in the Tree. Astonishing birds: how they sang! They were mating, hatching, growing wings, and flying away singing into the Forest, even while he looked at them. For now he saw that the Forest was there too, opening out on either side, and marching away into the distance. The Mountains were glimmering far away.

After a time Niggle turned towards the Forest. Not because he was tired of the Tree, but he seemed to have got it all clear in his mind now, and was aware of it, and of its growth, even when he was not looking at it. ...

It is clear, even from these introductory quotations that the topic under consideration is a version of the continuity-discontinuity question. This is a bone which we Reformed dogs can't leave alone. We gnaw away at it for hours on end. Even if we go to chase off the birds, to sleep by the fire, to have a good scratch, or to leave our hairs all over the carpet, still we return to our bone. Continuity-discontinuity. We try and get our teeth around it this way, then that way. We growl at it, paw it, break off a piece and crunch it. We live with it, bury it, guard it, dig it up, and we gnaw it again. That's what you do when you're a dog and you've got a bone. And that's what Reformed thinkers do with the bone of continuity-discontinuity.

There are many different aspects of this, of course. There's the continuity-discontinuity question in relation to the Abrahamic promise and the Mosaic administration and the New covenant. There's the continuity-discontinuity question relating to typology and hermeneutics. And, arguably framing both of these aspects and others besides, there is the question of creation and redemption continuity-discontinuity which, in turn, feeds into continuity-discontinuity issues between this side and the other side of judgment day.

Here are two particular expressions of a continuity-discontinuity stance with regard to the matter of the relative priority of personal evangelism. It could be called the view that "All that counts really is evangelism – because nothing else lasts". From the pen of a well-known English evangelical, a currently serving pastor, we read:

One can polish shoes, mow the lawn or darn socks ‘for the Lord’ (i.e.: with holy motivations) just as one can run a *Christianity Explored* course for unbelieving neighbours ‘for the Lord’. But if we had to choose between them, for example choosing whether to spend a Thursday evening mowing the lawn or explaining the gospel to our neighbours, most Christians instinctively recognise that, while both are serving the Lord, one takes priority over the other. Our ministry of lawn mowing might improve our local reputation for having a tidy garden. But our gospel ministry might save someone from hell. ...

A series of arguments is then given for prioritising evangelism over mowing the lawn.

And one of them runs:

The relative benefits of each: the eternal benefits of gospel ministry seem to clearly outweigh the more temporary benefits of creation ministry. Put crudely, while medical help can delay death for a few years, it is only gospel ministry that can rescue us from an eternity in the horrors of hell for an eternity of joy in the new creation. The priority of gospel ministry is clear from the relative benefits of each.

Similarly, another serving pastor, this time a very famous American Evangelical, writes that “your mission (i.e. evangelism) will last for ever; the consequences of your job will not.”

There are various possible responses to these passages and, before addressing the particular question of whether “creation ministry” is “temporary” and whether “the consequences of your job will not [last]”, some other comments are in order.

First, it should be observed that what is implied in these passages is confused, unworkable, and potentially humanistic. It is confused because it isolates the activities (lawn-mowing and evangelism, for example) from their concrete setting in an individual person’s life and further isolates the ethical decision to be made from any stated time-frame. If the choice between lawn-mowing and evangelism is presented at each minute of a person’s life in these terms then the lawn will never be mown. But if the author believes that the lawn should be mown at least occasionally, then *for that occasion* he has brought in additional considerations to those mentioned here. However, if those additional considerations influence the choice, at least occasionally, towards lawn-mowing, then it superficial to exclude them from the decision-making process on all occasions. The moment that is

conceded then the force of the argument is reduced from “choose evangelism over lawn-mowing” to “on balance, over time, choose more evangelism than lawn-mowing” which means, of course, “on occasion, choose lawn-mowing over evangelism”.

It is unworkable, if pressed along the lines just described, because if the fact that evangelism lasts forever whereas lawn-mowing is temporary means that evangelism should be preferred then surely the same could be said – over a one minute timespan, for example – about eating or sleeping. Eating is temporary whereas evangelism lasts forever so put off eating for another minute, then another and so on. If the response is, “but eating (or, in some sense, lawn-mowing) is necessary in order to make evangelism possible and effective” then, minimally, eating (lawn-mowing) should be seen as valuable means to a valuable end rather than as alternative ends which are to be eschewed.

And this is potentially humanistic precisely because the argument is presented in terms of an absolutized scale of values rather than the commands of God given in Scripture. Having (implicitly) declared that what lasts is more valuable than what does not last, the author is in danger of giving that scale of values the power to trump God’s word. If a choice is to be made between activities on the basis that some “do not last” and others do rather than on the basis of “what God tells us to do and not to do” then we are close to making ourselves wiser than God. This is like the totalitarian argument which takes God’s command to care for the poor and argues that if we love our materially needy neighbour then we will share our possessions with him, that there are billions of materially needy neighbours in the world, and that therefore all expenditure above the bare minimum required for survival is “luxury-spending” and therefore sinful. The trouble with this argument from a “scale of values” is that it conflicts with the explicit commands and commendations of God’s word. It is the argument of Judas and the other disciples which they used when Mary anointed Jesus at Bethany. The reason that this is potentially humanistic is simply that it puts the logic of our “scale of values” over God’s word in directing us in the use of time and money.

These passages provoke two further comments to be made before addressing directly the argument that “all that counts really is evangelism because nothing else lasts.”

Firstly, somewhere in the background of these quotations lies an unduly narrow reading of the Great Commission which virtually restricts it to evangelism. On the whole, Reformed Christians know how to respond to this. Comprehensivist, world-affirming, transformationist, creation-redemption continuist Christians frequently and cogently affirm that God's creation intention was to have a good world populated and ruled and taken from one degree of glory to another by a righteous humankind who were to obey God's commands, reflect his character and thus fulfill his purposes. And this creation purpose is not abandoned in response to the fall or narrowed in the work of redemption. The Great Commission, given on a mountain by the Lord Jesus Christ in expansive terms (all authority, all nations, all things that I have commanded you, all the days) is a repromulgation of the creation mandate. God still intends a world populated and ruled and taken from one degree of glory to another by a righteous humankind. God still purposes that the earth be subdued and filled and states it in unmistakable terms: "disciple all the nations".

Far from thinking that sin has narrowed God's purpose, Reformed Christians assert that his purpose – which was always an expansive and dynamic one – stands. While some Christians tell the story rather like this:

Once upon a time God made a beautiful though immature estate and gave it to humankind, instructing Adam and Eve to fill it up and make it even more beautiful. He told them what he wanted where - a lake there and a golf course there, some water-colours in this room, a mural in this one and some portraits in oils here. But then Adam foolishly opened the gate and the wild beasts of sin took over spoiling everything and seeking to kill the people of the estate. So God said (with a certain franticness in his voice), "Hurry, hurry, get inside the panic room and call for help and I'll let you out when the beasts have been killed and then we can start again elsewhere." And when some people asked, "but what about the golf course and the lake?" God said, "Never mind the golf course, there's no time for that now – and the beasts would tear it up anyway. I'm not interested in golf courses, I'm just interested in getting people into the panic room. We'll have to leave the estate-glorification project until much later."

the Reformed are more likely to think like this:

Although we are in the thick of a long and bloody war and although victory in that war is the single top priority for us, yet military engagement is not all that we are to do. Never mind the falling bombs, at four each afternoon we shall take tea in the drawing room, drinking from bone china cups



and doing the crossword together. Poems, plays, and novels shall be written, symphonies composed, roses trimmed, and the sick visited. To abandon all activity other than direct military action against the enemy would itself be to surrender to that enemy because it would be to adopt his worldview, his sense of what matters and what works, and thereby to lose the very civilization which he is attempting to destroy.

Jim Jordan has helpfully described God's purposes for and dealings with humankind as having three aspects: maturation, holy war, and redemption. If there had been no sin whatever then God would have done a work of *maturation* in and through humankind - bringing the race and the cosmos from one degree of glory to another. If Satan had sinned but Adam had not then God would have engaged in and won a *holy war* in and through humankind - defeating evil and excluding it from the world. And since Adam did sin, then God accomplished and applied *redemption from sin* in, through, and for humankind - the reversal of the curse which came upon the race for its sin. But the fall of Satan and commencement of holy war did not entail the abandonment of the maturation project; and nor did the fall of Adam and the need for redemption from sin entail the abandonment of either of the maturation or the holy war projects. God is simultaneously rescuing sinners, defeating evil, and maturing his creation. He redeems the lost, defeats the foe, and glorifies the world, building a civilization, all at the same time.

Secondly, these passages about the priority of evangelism do present a challenge which Reformed Christians often need to hear. I am fully persuaded that the recovery of the centrality of the Church is the key to Christian cultural advance; that suffering service is the path to and form of Christian dominion; that the nurture (rather than the conversion) of our children is a vital and neglected part of how Christ builds his Church; that covenant renewal worship and liturgical warfare advance the kingdom; and that consciously constructing an alternative-society, a rival civilization, the real humankind alongside and in order to replace the doomed and dying old world are at the heart of the Christian calling. Nevertheless, whatever may be true of others, I know for myself that in these emphases lie temptations to indifference, hard-heartedness, pride, complacency, and evangelistic laziness. Men, women, and children who have not heard or responded properly to the gospel need consistent and loving Christians to present that gospel to them in clear, biblical, relevant terms and in authoritative, compassionate, and wise tones and the powerful validity of these other emphases is not for a moment to undermine or belittle

our responsibility for evangelism. Concern to live as the real humankind and to build Christ's civilization will always properly place a high priority upon the ambassadorial, proclamatory work of evangelism through which God fashions his finest work of craft, namely, a human being who has been made alive by the Spirit, who has his or her sins forgiven, and who, brought into union with the Lord Jesus Christ, is moulded increasingly into his likeness.

These preliminary observations made, I can now further define the question which I intend to address. The day of judgment constitutes, in some regards (though see below for more on this) a major discontinuity in redemptive history but does this discontinuity reduce or relativize the value of what might be called non-evangelistic human activity? Or, put differently, does non-evangelistic human activity "last" through judgment day into the life of the Resurrection, or of what we often call the new heavens and the new earth?

I should make two things that I am *not* saying clear. Firstly, I recognize that those who do not believe that repetitive acts of service or culture-building activities last into the Resurrection, do, nevertheless, believe that some things last. In particular, and obviously, they believe that people last. And many would probably want to assert that, in some sense, this physical universe also lasts.

Secondly, I am not saying that those who believe that that repetitive acts of service or culture-building activities are essentially temporary (or "secular", in the sense of "belonging only to this age") do not, nevertheless, see real value in them. To extend a commonly used example, even if you believe that the ship is sinking, you may still believe that there are good reasons for polishing the brass upon it. Specifically, those who deny that "non-evangelistic activity" lasts into the Resurrection may still regard it as valuable and as our duty because it keeps us alive; it makes our evangelism more efficient or effective; it serves as an illustration of the gospel; it makes money so that evangelists can be supported; it puts us in touch with people to evangelize; it is explicitly commanded by God; it illustrates the beauties of a redeemed world and so on. Clothing the naked, playing chess, comforting the Christian bereaved, and mowing the lawn do not as such last into the Resurrection, these Christians might say, but there are still reasons for engaging in these activities.

Three further cautions may be given before, proceeding to a summary statement of the question to be answered and, at last, to an attempt at answering it. The first caution is that we know very, very little about the life of the Resurrection. How will billions and billions of people stand before Christ in his glory on judgment day? How long will judgment day take? How, granted that this physical cosmos is resurrected rather than replaced, will a piece of space which at different times has been occupied by lots of different trees and buildings, be filled when that piece of space is transformed in the Resurrection? These questions are easy to think up and, after a moment's thought, bring home to us how little we know.

A second caution is that, in terms of explicit and direct address, the Scriptures are largely silent on these matters.

A third caution is that even if we are able to provide an answer to the question, “on what basis and in what ways do we assert that non-evangelistic activity lasts into and is taken up in the life of the new heavens and new earth?” that, in itself, does not free us from the obligation to evaluate alternative courses of action with the usual ethical rigour. The fact that Christians who speak as though “all that counts really is evangelism” use “because the other stuff doesn't last” as an argument does not mean that if it can be demonstrated that “the other stuff *does* last” we have a reason not to evangelize. It may be the case that faced a thousand times with the choice of evangelism and lawn-mowing, the decision of those who believe that “non-evangelistic activity doesn't last” and of those who believe that “everything we do here is taken up in the new heavens and new earth” will be identical on every single occasion. It is simply that if the argument about to be presented is sound then the decision cannot be *based upon* the idea that “non-evangelistic activity doesn't last”.

Here, then, is the question: Does *everything* we do have *eternal* significance? Does all that we do – repetitive acts of service and culture-building activity no less than evangelism – last forever? Is history the “raw material” for eternity? And, if so, then on what basis and in what ways do we say this?

Is there eternal significance in picking up a piece of litter from the floor of the church building or in passing the salt down the table without being asked? Do acts of kindness

such as brushing the hair of the old man or moisturizing the hand of the unconscious and dying woman last into the new heavens and new earth? Do deeds such as cooking steak, and spanking your child, and practising your scales on the piano, and learning your declensions and conjugations all get burned up and forgotten on judgment day or do they endure? Does the fact that the plates will get dirty again some time after we have washed them up or that the grass will need cutting again just a couple of weeks after we have mown it mean that these activities are temporary, passing, and, *for that reason*, of less value than other activities? Nice though they are, are not oil paintings a bit of a waste of money because they won't survive the fire of judgment day and because there'll be lots of other oil paintings in the Resurrection world? Appealing though it is as an illustration of the value of daily callings (and for use by Christian environmentalists), do we suspect that Luther's saying that if he knew Christ were coming back tomorrow he would still plant a tree today does not really stand up to sustained scrutiny?

How do these various activities last – on what basis and in what ways? And, if they do not last then does that not undermine 'comprehensivist', world-affirming, culture-building, creation mandate readings of the Great Commission?

Here we are, Reformed Christians who are keen on continuity and comprehensiveness but, at bottom, are we not susceptible still to the simple question of the fundamentalists, "but none of that will last, will it?"

Since we have given some attention to the last verses of Matthew's gospel, allow me to state that I believe that there is a *prima facie* case for asserting the durability of all human activity even around the words and ideas of the Great Commission itself. We could organize our answer around the themes of resurrection, providence, the nature of discipleship, the international and multinational authority of Jesus, the doctrine of the Trinity, the universal obedience owed to Jesus, or the promise of Jesus to be with his people to the end of the age.

Similarly, we could give close attention to certain individual texts of Scripture and arrive at the same conclusions.

- "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ" (Rev 11:15)

- “And I heard a voice from heaven saying, “Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.” “Blessed indeed,” says that Spirit, “that they may rest from their labours, for their deeds follow them!” (Rev 14:13)
- “The glory of God gives it light and its lamp is the Lamb. By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it ... they will bring into it the glory and the honour of the nations.” (Rev 21:23-26)

Rather than take these approaches, however, I intend to organize my answer to the question, “On what basis and in what ways does everything we do have eternal significance?” around these six ideas: 1) The bodily resurrection of Jesus; 2) The songs of the redeemed; 3) The good works of Christians; 4) The personal identity of the redeemed; 5) The fact and shape of redemptive history; 6) What it means to be taken into the life of the triune God.

### **1. The bodily resurrection of Jesus**

We know that the bodily resurrection of Jesus is the pattern and the paradigm for understanding several major points of continuity-discontinuity between this and the other side of judgment day. For example, the resurrection of Jesus is (inseparably connected with his ascension) his installation as Lord of all *and yet* that Lordship is not universally acknowledged until judgment day. Similarly, we are justified or vindicated in history as, by faith, we are united to Christ (he was, after all, raised for our justification) and yet we are also justified or vindicated on the last day when, on the (evidential, not meritorious) basis our of works Christ publicly acknowledges us as his people and grants us a body of glory like his own.

And what we have in the bodily resurrection of Jesus is emphatic. “He is not here” – the empty tomb shows the continuity in the resurrection. “He is risen” – the glorious appearances show the discontinuity in the resurrection. If there had been total continuity then we would not speak of the body of his glory and, moreover, the body in which he rose would itself still be mortal. If there had been total discontinuity then the corpse in the

tomb could have stayed there – it would have simply been replaced. And then the marks on his hands would have been a fraud – or the result of a second crucifixion.

So Jesus does not merely resume his pre-cross bodily existence. But nor does he entirely leave it behind with a replacement body. Rather, there is renewal or transformation, transfiguration, glorification, elevation, or exaltation.

Change is good, growth is good, becoming is good. But there is a something which changes, a something which grows, and a something which becomes. In the Resurrection that something is the body in which Jesus was crucified. It is not that in this argument we are denying growth in the new heavens and the new earth but simply that we are asserting that there is *something* which grows. It's not that we are denying transfiguration in the Resurrection but simply that we are asserting that there is *something* which is transfigured. There is continuity here – the tomb was empty, Jesus's body was raised. That's the pattern.

Let's think a little more about this and use a few lines from Robert Jenson to make the point:

“The body is the availability of the person to date, of his or her history as it any moment presents itself. The redeemed histories are complete in their deaths. ... Jesus' life is indeed that of a particular person: it is one sequence of events and not another, and it is made definite by his death.”  
(*Systematic Theology II*, 348)

It's almost as though our bodies were some sort of instrument which recorded everything that we were involved in like the black box of a flight recorder. So that our bodies are themselves an embodiment of our histories and our death is the seal of the particularity of our lives.

And this means that the resurrection of the body itself amounts – in some sense – to the taking up of the details of our lives. The body of Jesus which was crucified was the body it was because he had made precisely the door-frames he had made, eaten precisely the meals he had eaten, taken precisely the journeys he had taken, and so on. And – for all the glorification of the resurrection – *that* is the body that was raised. Though the oak tree of

Jesus's glorious body may have been very different from the acorn of the body of his humiliation, nevertheless, the DNA is the same and the DNA was itself what it was because of the exact life that he lived.

This is most easily illustrated in relation to the crucifixion marks on the resurrection body of Jesus – though this is an illustration rather than a principle to be pressed. Thomas was invited to touch the wounded hands, feet, and side of Jesus – in the resurrection body of Jesus. Or, put it another way, the Lamb at the centre of the throne looks like a slain Lamb. This raises the question as to whether the glorified body of Jesus – currently in heaven, wherever that is, and one day to be located in the new heavens and the new earth – still bears the marks of the cross. We sing of “those wounds yet visible above, in beauty glorified” and the instinct is sound. Or, to quote Jenson again, “the wounds he shows neither heal nor fester.” (I.200)

And what we illustrate by the wounds of Jesus can be asserted, in some sense, of all bodily resurrection. However great the transformation and the healing, the resurrection of the body implies that somehow or other, the particularities of Jesus's life are ingredients of, or represented in, or contributory to the life of the new heavens and the new earth.

For sure, some things – like the linen cloths – are left behind. “When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world.” (John 16.21) In the resurrection of our bodies our bodies will no longer remember the anguish – no longer feel the pain. And yet the “child” that caused that pain will be present. The resurrection of the body means that what we do here “lasts” – it lasts by being encoded, embedded in the body that is raised. It is the body that picked up this piece of litter rather than leaving it on the ground. It is the body that cooked those burgers for the party rather than watched TV and ordered them by phone. And so on. Or, to use an example that is right at the front of my mind at the moment, it is the body that moisturised the hand of that dying woman when she only had a very few hours to live rather than using those minutes to go and drink another cup of coffee.

If you believe in the resurrection of the body then in some sense you must believe that everything we do “lasts” or is taken up into the life of the new heavens and the new earth.

Related to this, if you believe in the resurrection of the body then I hope you believe in the resurrection of the physical cosmos rather than its replacement. I won't run through the various arguments right now but I hope you can see the connection. Just as the physical body of Jesus is the dwelling place of the fullness of God and is raised in glory, so the physical universe itself is the dwelling place of the fullness of God and looks to be raised in glory. And the hope of the physical cosmos is not for annihilation but for resurrection.

Romans 8 tells us that the created order is looking forward to freedom from its bondage to decay. What sort of freedom will that be? It will be the freedom of the glory of the children of God. And what sort of glory is that? It's the glory of child-birth for the cosmos which parallels believers' adoption as sons. And what is believers' adoption associated / equated with (in Romans 8) if not the redemption of the body?

Our body is the seed that is sown. It is sown mortal and corruptible and raised immortal and incorruptible. But it is the body which is the seed. It's as though the mortal body is the raw material out of which God fashions the immortal body.

By analogy, we might say that the physical cosmos is, like our bodies, a seed that is sown and will be raised glorious. And, to use an idea mentioned above, the DNA of that seed is itself constituted by the events of history. Let me say that again: the events of history form the DNA of the seed which is the space-time universe in its current manifestation or order. Just as the events of a person's life are embedded in their body and the resurrection of that body is in some sense the transformation and the glorification of that person's particular history, so the events which take place in the space-time universe are embedded in that universe and the resurrection of that universe is in some sense the transformation and glorification of that universe's particular history.

We should not privilege space over time or objects over events. The End is something that happens to all history, not just to the end of history. It is not only the last generation that is raised but all previous generations too and so with histories as well as with objects.

When the space-time universe is transfigured, renewed, glorified – or raised – then even though what appears may be as different from what we see now as an oak tree is from an



acorn, nevertheless, the DNA will be the same. Yes, there may be “stuff” that is left behind – like the childbirth pain of the mother and yet even that “stuff” – the husk of the seed – has contributed to the particular universe that this is. Without the stuff that gets left behind the universe would have been a different thing. And – as with the resurrection of the body – we find ourselves asserting that the specific history of the universe is the raw material out of which God fashions the life of the new heavens and the new earth.

So far, then we have asserted that the resurrection of Jesus is the paradigm we work with; that the resurrection of Jesus shows us that we are dealing with transformation not replacement; that, therefore, the specific history of Jesus is taken up into the life of the resurrection; that, since our resurrection follows the pattern of Jesus’s resurrection, then we expect that our specific history will be taken up into the life of the resurrection too; and that, further, the analogy might also be applied to the physical cosmos – and not just to the bare fact of its physicality but also to its specific history.

## **2. The songs of the redeemed**

Imagine that you are blind and have lived in a place where there are no sheep and where sheep have never been heard of. Imagine further that you are converted half a second before death with the barest minimum of gospel content. And then fast forward several hundred thousand years to the new heavens and the new earth.

It’s day one and you are given your songbook and instructed to turn to the first song which is entitled “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain” (Rev 5.12). You shout out, “Hold on, I’m not sure I know what a Lamb is.” So someone explains to you what a lamb is and how the idea of the lamb is used in redemptive history and how the Lord Jesus Christ is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. You start to sing again and you do so with somewhat greater knowledge and greater depth.

But it doesn’t take long for you to realize that you don’t really understand the very next phrase, “who was slain”. And so you ask, “How was he slain? What happened?” The death of Jesus is described and then, once again, you carry on singing with greater knowledge and depth.

You can see where this is going. Over and over you will ask to be told more about the Lord Jesus Christ who has saved you.

How much do you want to know? What a silly question. How much do you want to know about the Lord Jesus Christ your Saviour and Lord? If you were allowed to ask about each and every day of his life, would you do so? Would you be allowed to do that? Could that be part of the song?

Well, was the Father well-pleased with what his Son had been doing there in Nazareth over those last 18 years before his baptism? And if the Father was well-pleased with those years, do you think that you will be able to learn about them?

Take another example, would you want to understand what it meant for the Lord Jesus Christ to look at his mother from the cross and say, (with reference to the beloved disciple and yet with more in mind than that, surely), “behold your son”? If so, then you’d need to know as much as you could about the relationship between the Lord Jesus and his mother over all those years. And, to be as full as possible, that would involve every detail of every day, every conversation, every hug, every glance, every chore.

Do you want to know that? Would it enrich and intensify and deepen your praise of the slain Lamb to know that? Surely so. And then that enriched praise would in turn deepen and transform you from one degree of glory to another?

Take another example. In asking about the crucifixion itself, would you want to know about the darkness that came over the land? What sort of darkness was it? What was the exact shade and weight and odour of that darkness? Again, you can see where this is going. If you really want to understand as precisely as possible the darkness of the cross, then you’ll need to know the exact position of every sub-atomic particle throughout the universe at that moment. The darkness of the cross took place in a universe which had a galaxy over here but not over here. And so on.

Push this further and you can see that in order to describe as fully as possible the Lamb who was slain, you will end up saying absolutely everything about absolutely everything

which has ever happened anywhere through all the universe. The universe in which Jesus died was *this* universe and not *that* universe. It's the universe in which you chose not to complain about that church member but prayed for her instead rather than the universe in which you chose to complain rather than pray. It's the universe in which you went to bed at 10.30 that evening not at 10.31.

Let me try and illustrate further. If I can say it reverently, let me describe Jesus's cry, "It is finished" as the ball falling into the hole for a hole in one on the difficult par four dog-leg fifth hole. It was the turning point of the match and it was what won the championship. (Or maybe it was what won the Ryder Cup for the Europeans against the Americans – yet again!) Now, would you be content with just watching the last inch of the ball's journey? Of course not! You say, "back, back" – you'd want to see the champion line up on the tee and select his club and take a practice swing and then the crowds go quiet and the flight of the ball and the first bounce and the second and the third and the roll and the drop. Then you want to see the grin on his face as he strides up the fairway, the lightness in his eyes as he tees off on the next hole.

So as you come to sing the praise of the triune God, starting with the saints' all-time favourite, "Worthy is the Lamb", you want to see the whole thing. And the whole thing, remember, is everything about everything. And from this we can argue that there is not a single thing which we do now which doesn't "last". Everything which happens and is done contributes to the particular facticity of the universe in which Jesus died. The kind or unkind glance, the weeded or unweeded garden, the cheerfully or grumpily answered phone-call.

(Perhaps, parenthetically, it is time to remind ourselves, that there can be no excuse for allowing a high view of providence to lead us into spiritual laziness. God has decreed the precise details of the history of the universe but, although now I recognize that everything we do "lasts", this operates at a different level from that of my moral responsibility. God's decreed will brings about exactly the universe which is raised and "replayed" in the new heavens and the new earth but that is of no immediate concern to me. My concern is God's revealed will: what does God tell me to do? That is, the assertion that *everything lasts*, though related to a strong view of God's sovereignty over all events, does not, in itself, provide direction to us in the moral decisions which confront us.)

Of course, all this raises a particular difficulty for us. If we are saying that one of the ways in which “everything lasts” is as part of the intricate picture at the centre of which is the slain lamb, then does this mean that even our sins last into the new heavens and the new earth?

Well, let’s start with an argument from authority. Bunyan and Edwards both address this issue:

“Wherefore, though the saints receive by faith the forgiveness of sins in this life and so are passed from death to life; yet again, Christ Jesus and God his Father will have every one of these sins reckoned up again and brought fresh upon the stage in the day of judgment, that they may see and be sensible for ever what grace and mercy hath laid hold upon them.” (Bunyan)

“*Saints Increasing Knowledge in Eternity*. It is undoubted that they never will have forgot what passed in their life upon earth, the sins they have been saved from, their regeneration, the circumstances which did heighten their mercies, their good works which follow them, their death, etc. They will without doubt retain innumerable multitudes of ideas of what passed in the first seventy years, so also they shall retain to eternity their ideas of what was done in the ages of the world, with relation to the church of God, and God’s wondrous providence with respect to the world of men.” (Edwards, *Miscellanies*, 105) [DF - this extract is incidental to the point of the entry]

“*The Saint’s Sorrow for Sin*. Though the saints in heaven will see their exceeding folly and vileness in much of their behavior here in this world, and will see a thousand times as much of the evil and folly of sin as they do now, yet they will not experience any proper sorrow or grief for it. For this reason: because they will perfectly see at the same time how that it is turned to the best to the glory of God, or at least will so perfectly know that it is so. And particularly they will have so much the more admiring and joyful sense of God’s grace in pardoning them, that the remembrance of their sins will rather be an indirect occasion of joy. Sorrow and grief for sin is a duty, because we are not capable of having so perfect views of those things. But that a right sense of the odiousness and folly of sin will, under all circumstances, necessarily cause grief, is not so clear. A sense of the great evil of sin is good, absolutely considered, but grief for sin is so only in a certain presupposed state and circumstance.” (Edwards, *Miscellanies*, 432)

In brief, “yes, even our sins will, by publication on judgment day and sanctified recall in the new heavens and the new earth, endure”.

The argument that all sins will be published on judgment day is ably made elsewhere (in Aquinas or in Dabney, for example). There are many Bible passages which teach it; there is good purpose in it; the arguments against it from the new covenant promises (Jeremiah 31, for example) fail to distinguish between what it means for God to “remember no more” in terms of cognitive awareness and in terms of covenantal disposition; the argument against it from the idea that “the former things shall be remembered no more” fails to distinguish between sanctified recall for God-honouring purpose, and regretful and painful memory; and the arguments against it from fear and shame and embarrassment vanish under any sustained scrutiny such as that provided by Aquinas in *Summa Theologiae*.

Return, then, for a moment to our song, “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain”. The singers ask, “Why was he slain?” and are told, “For your sins”. “What sins?” “Oooh, I couldn’t tell you.” No, we understand that the more a person with a purified mind and heart knows of his or her sins, the greater will be that person’s understanding of the grace of God, and the deeper his or her praise of the Lord Jesus Christ.

After all, if we were given the choice, “would you like to love the Lord Jesus Christ more or less?” then clearly we would choose the former. But Luke 7 teaches us that those who have been forgiven much love much. If we were allowed to remain ignorant through all eternity of thousands and thousands of sins of ours for which Christ had died and which had been forgiven us or to become aware of them in order to render louder praise of our Saviour then we would surely choose to be made aware of them. A similar argument could be mounted from I Corinthians 6.11ff.

This is, again, like the mother and her pains of child-birth. It is not that she experiences the pain again but the very presence of the child – the fruit of the pain – far from eradicating the memory of the pain actually contextualizes it.

This presents us with an argument from the less likely to the more likely. The least likely thing to be “present” in the new heavens and the new earth is an awareness of our sin and, of course, it will not be present in terms of repetition, enactment, or approval. But awareness is a sort of presence – a mental presence. And if our sin – by way of this

purified mental awareness – is “present” in the resurrection then it is hard to imagine that all other things are not.

Minimally, then, in order, properly to sing “Worthy is the Lamb” in the new heavens and the new earth, there has to be a full knowledge and memory of the old universe. In that sense the old universe in its specific history is taken up and transformed and glorified and understood in the light of the cross and resurrection of Jesus in the renewed universe. It is not possible to maintain the view that the only things which “last” are evangelistic activities and their fruit. Everything now is, one way or another, taken up as the raw material for “then”.

This doesn’t make our ethical choices for us. It does keep us from undervaluing repetitive acts of service or culture-building activities.

### **3. The good works of Christians**

However, although we spend a lot of our time and energy on it, committing sin is not the only thing that Christians do. Sometimes Christians pray for those in authority, sometimes they work with their hands so that they have something to give to the poor, sometimes they visit prisoners, clothe the naked, feed the hungry, and raise their children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. Sometimes they have sex with their marriage partners, take the apostle Paul his cloak and scrolls, anoint the feet of Jesus with expensive perfume, and wash each other’s feet, work hard as slaves, and so on and so on.

Do these things last? Are they to be excluded from the reach of the Great Commission or reduced in value because, unlike the fruit of evangelistic work, they produce nothing that will be seen in the life of the Resurrection?

Let’s give more attention to these things that Christians do – considered as good works. Do non-evangelistic good works have eternal significance? Do those which are done before judgment day have a place in the new heavens and the new earth?

We may start by asking whose works these really are. Philippians 2.12 tells us that in one sense the good works of Christians are the works of God (the sort of thing that lasts forever and is the matter of praise to him). Galatians 5 tells us that the graces of Christians are the fruit of the Spirit. John 15 tells us that the obedience of the disciples of Jesus is an obedience which flows from Jesus's own strength and life. And Ephesians 5-6 indicate that all that Christians do in their roles and relationships is to be done "in Christ" or "in the Lord", that is, in union with him.

This means that too sharp a distinction between the work of Father, Son and Holy Spirit and our work is itself pelagian. Of course we must distinguish (not divide) the work of Christ for us from the work of Christ in us but both are the work of Christ. And the work of Christ will last forever.

The church is, after all, the body of Christ. She offers her prayers in the name of Christ. She speaks as an ambassador of Christ. When she is persecuted, Christ is persecuted. When she is cared for, Christ is cared for. Christ and his body, Christ and his bride come together. And the moment we have recognized that we are left with the choice of either affirming that the "non-evangelistic works" of the faithful last forever or of denying that the works of Christ last forever.

At this point it is worth repeating the assertion that the *ways* in which the events of history have eternal significance will vary according to the nature of the actions under consideration. As we saw above, sins have eternal significance in that a purified recall of those sins will deepen the saints' praise of their Saviour. The sins themselves are not, however, taken up into the life of the resurrection any more than that. God is, using his Spirit-filled people, building a temple on the foundation of Jesus Christ. Or, put differently, the Lord Jesus Christ is building his church. What are the materials for that temple, that glorious dwelling-place for God in the Spirit, that church? The works, the deeds of the saints. Some of those deeds are displeasing to God and unworthy to be used in the temple construction. They are wood, hay, and straw and they will be consumed. Others of those deeds, as described in Philippians 2 or Galatians 5 or John 15 or Ephesians 5-6, are really done in union with Christ and are, in a sense, the works of God. These deeds are "gold, silver, and precious stones" and will persist through judgment day, in some sense forming the building blocks of the new heavens and the new earth.

Another way of framing this helps us see the eternal significance of all that Christians do. It is the recognition that deeds done in union with Christ – by the energies of the Spirit, according to the law of God, for the glory of God – those deeds are already, in one sense, “new creation” deeds. Everything which believers do in the present (their washing-up, doodling in meetings, weeding, or building a business *as well as* their teaching the Bible, speaking explicitly to people about Jesus, going to church and so on) lasts into the future because it “comes from” or “belongs to” the future. Tom Wright puts it this way:

“What we do in the present time, when we offer our whole selves to God's service, is the beginning of resurrection life. Of course, there will be an enormous change when the resurrection itself occurs (as Paul assures us it will, in 8.11 and elsewhere). Our present bodies will decay and die. But when we are raised, then, no doubt to our great surprise, the work we have done in the present, in the service of the new master, will turn out to be part not only of who we are, but of the new world he will have brought into being.” (*Paul for Everyone - Romans, part 1*, 109-110)

The resurrection of believers takes place in two stages. First, they are raised together with Christ, made alive together with him, brought to life spiritually, made alive in their spirit *in history* through the Spirit's work in the gospel of uniting them to Jesus. Second, *on resurrection morning*, their bodies are raised incorruptible and made like Jesus's glorious body.

This means that at present believers are living in two worlds at once (this is very clear in Romans 8.10-11). Everything that they do in Christ, by virtue of union with him, in their real (spiritually alive) selves is a new world action, an action belonging to eternity and it is a display before resurrection day of resurrection life. And since those actions come from and belong to the new heavens and new earth, from and to the resurrection world, then, plainly, they will be a part of that world when it is fully established and fills all things. How could they not be? A good work is an eschatological thing, at home in the life of the resurrection. It has time-travelled from the future to be on in display in the present. When, then, we “arrive” at the future, it is impossible that that good work should be shut out.

Yet another way of putting this arises out of a comparison of Ecclesiastes and 1 Corinthians 15. In Ecclesiastes the thing that makes our labour a “vanity” (lightness, transience) is death. Death is the black wall into which all human endeavours crash.



Things do not last because of “death”. A key theme of the book of Ecclesiastes is that life and work and relationship are “vain” because of death.

But, we read in 1 Corinthians 15 that Christ has been raised from the dead. So “vanity” (temporariness, transience, emptiness) has been overcome. The Corinthians’ faith is not in vain – because Christ has been raised (vv.2, 14, 17). The work of God’s grace in Paul is not in vain (v.10). The apostolic preaching is not in vain – because Christ has been raised (v.14). *And* our labour is not in vain – because Christ has been raised and our work done in union with him (our labour in the Lord) will not be erased by death (v.58).

That labour – the work of 1 Corinthians 15.58 – is not simply work on church programmes – teaching children in the church, taking care of the cleaning in the church building, getting involved in church visitation programmes, although, the few times I have heard the verse preached on, this has been the application. No, it is precisely the labour that in Ecclesiastes is rendered vain by the universality and inescapability of death. The labour of planting and plucking up and killing and healing and weeping and laughing and mourning and dancing and keeping and casting away and so on. Be busy with these things, we can say with Easter confidence, because, since Christ has been raised and you do these things “in him”, they are no longer vain but enduring.

We are eschatological creatures. We are new creations. Three times Paul tells us that it’s not circumcision nor uncircumcision that counts and the three different ways in which he continues are mutually informing and interpreting. Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything but keeping the commandments of God (1 Corinthians 7.19), faith working through love (Galatians 5.6), and a new creation (Galatians 6.15).

When believers, in the power of the Spirit and in union with Christ, obey the commandments of God, when they exercise their faith through love, then they are being a new creation and doing new creation deeds. These things have their place the other side of judgment day for the very reason that they have, with the Spirit, so to speak “come from the future” into the present. The fruit of the Spirit is imperishable – it does not have a sell-by date. These things belong to the new heavens and new earth and therefore they will not pass away.

In summary, up to this point we have given several reasons for asserting that it is not only evangelistic work but – in a variety of ways – everything about the specific history of this universe that lasts into the resurrection. These reasons relate to the resurrection of Jesus’s body; the resurrection of our body; the resurrection of the physical cosmos; the fully-informed praise of Jesus (all history is redemptive history); the fully-informed praise of Jesus (praise him for every sin he bore in his body on the tree); and the resurrection good works of believers which are the works of God in them, which come from the future, and which, because of the resurrection, are not marked by the “vanity”, the temporariness and transience which death would otherwise impose upon them but are rather “death-is-beaten” works. All of this is to say that however strong the arguments for evangelistic endeavour (and they *are* gorgeously strong), it is wrong to include among them the notion that “other things don’t last”.

By way of interlude, let me include one of the most powerful and beautiful of all Gerard Manley Hopkins’ poems – *The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo* (Maidens’ song from St. Winefred’s Well) – which first expresses despair at the impermanence of all that is good and beautiful and then moves to an affirmation that, in relation to God, “beauty’s self and beauty’s giver”, things do indeed last and so much so that there will be “not the least [eye-] lash lost”.

*The Leaden Echo*

How to kéep—is there ány any, is there none such, nowhere known some, bow or brooch or braid or brace,  
láce, latch or catch or key to keep  
Back beauty, keep it, beauty, beauty, beauty, ... from vanishing away?  
Ó is there no frowning of these wrinkles, rankéd wrinkles deep,  
Dówn? no waving off of these most mournful messengers, still messengers, sad and stealing messengers of  
grey?  
No there’s none, there’s none, O no there’s none,  
Nor can you long be, what you now are, called fair,  
Do what you may do, what, do what you may,  
And wisdom is early to despair:  
Be beginning; since, no, nothing can be done  
To keep at bay  
Age and age’s evils, hoar hair,  
Ruck and wrinkle, drooping, dying, death’s worst, winding sheets, tombs and worms and tumbling to decay;

So be beginning, be beginning to despair.  
O there's none; no no no there's none:  
Be beginning to despair, to despair,  
Despair, despair, despair, despair.

*The Golden Echo*

Spare!  
There is one, yes I have one (Hush there!);  
Only not within seeing of the sun,  
Not within the singeing of the strong sun,  
Tall sun's tingeing, or treacherous the tainting of the earth's air,  
Somewhere elsewhere there is ah well where! one,  
Oné. Yes I can tell such a key, I do know such a place,  
Where whatever's prized and passes of us, everything that's fresh and fast flying of us, seems to us sweet of  
us and swiftly away with, done away with, undone,  
Undone, done with, soon done with, and yet dearly and dangerously sweet  
Of us, the wimpled-water-dimpled, not-by-morning-matchèd face,  
The flower of beauty, fleece of beauty, too too apt to, ah! to fleet,  
Never fleets móre, fastened with the tenderest truth  
To its own best being and its loveliness of youth: it is an everlastingness of, O it is an all youth!  
Come then, your ways and airs and looks, locks, maiden gear, gallantry and gaiety and grace,  
Winning ways, airs innocent, maiden manners, sweet looks, loose locks, long locks, lovelocks, gaygear,  
going gallant, girlgrace—  
Resign them, sign them, seal them, send them, motion them with breath,  
And with sighs soaring, soaring síghs deliver  
Them; beauty-in-the-ghost, deliver it, early now, long before death  
Give beauty back, beauty, beauty, beauty, back to God, beauty's self and beauty's giver.  
See; not a hair is, not an eyelash, not the least lash lost; every hair  
Is, hair of the head, numbered.  
Nay, what we had lighthanded left in surly the mere mould  
Will have waked and have waxed and have walked with the wind what while we slept,  
This side, that side hurling a heavyheaded hundredfold  
What while we, while we slumbered.  
O then, weary then why should we tread? O why are we so haggard at the heart, so care-coiled, care-killed,  
so fagged, so fashed, so cogged, so cumbered,  
When the thing we freely fórfeit is kept with fonder a care,  
Fonder a care kept than we could have kept it, kept  
Far with fonder a care (and we, we should have lost it) finer, fonder  
A care kept.—Where kept? Do but tell us where kept, where.—

Yonder.—What high as that! We follow, now we follow.—

Yonder, yes yonder, yonder,

Yonder.

#### **4. The personal identity of the redeemed**

There are four aspects of the personal identity of the redeemed which help justify the claim that *everything* has eternal significance.

First, we must consider judgment, rewards, and differentiation. In 2 Corinthians 5 a certain sort of embodiment is descriptive of the lives we live in this history before the End: we are told that “we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.” On judgment day everything is to be published and, more than that, the righteous acts and godly lives of the redeemed will be rewarded. Of course, we acknowledge that those rewards are all of grace, that the saints are rewarded according to their deeds not on account of them, and that the rewards are about capacity to serve others by reflecting the glory of God in a particular way which blesses others, rather than about some extra pleasure which leads others to resentment! And there is a lot more that we do not know about rewards.

But the very fact of rewards confirms that there is differentiation in the new heavens and the new earth and what is vital for our argument is that that differentiation relates to the deeds done this side of judgment day. Never mind how rewards work or what rewards are, we know that if I have lived *this* life then I enter and experience and serve in the new heavens and the new earth *this* way, whereas if I lived *that* life then it will be in *that* way. And since there is no such thing as a morally indifferent action then everything that I have been and said and thought and done will be reflected in the rewards I do or do not receive on judgment day. Robert Jenson puts it like this:

“...the saints’ blessedness will not be identical bliss. According to Paul the Judgment will test each one’s works “with fire” to see what they are ... Even a tale of shoddy works will be turned to joy in the Kingdom, interpreted as it will be by Christ’s death just on account of them, but someone with

many or only such works will nevertheless be differently placed within the community of *totus Christus* than will be, for example, the martyrs.” (*Systematic Theology II*, 359)

“The saints’ blessedness will not be identical bliss” and what differentiates the bliss of the one from the bliss of another is precisely the lives that they have lived in the body.

This is a statement that “the persons we have been in this life comprise the raw material for the persons we will be in the resurrection”. In glory, each person will have a unique complexion, an orientation which is only his or hers. Thus, as we all stand before the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ then the light of that glory will appear slightly differently as reflected in me from how it appears as reflected in you. My shape, my position, and my complexion all contribute uniquely to my experience and display of the glory of Christ and yet that shape, position, and complexion are themselves determined by the life that I have lived before judgment day and as purified by the grace of God. A forgiven and purified David Field will be different from a forgiven and purified Sue Field and the difference is the “raw material”, that is, the life lived and the deed done “in the body”.

The “you” that enters the new heavens and the new earth is a particular “you”, the uniqueness of which is shaped by each and every thing that you have done and suffered and been. And that uniqueness in turn shapes your life in glory and, consequently, everybody else’s life in glory. The life of the new heavens and the new earth for everyone concerned is, in part, determined by your thoughts, words, and actions today.

For all our likeness to Jesus, therefore, there will continue to be differentiation. Not merely in the fact that we are raised bodily and thus cannot occupy the same space at the same time. But also in the fact that the DNA of our resurrection personal identity is different. A perfectly obedient and happy terrier is different from a perfectly obedient and happy wolfhound – though both are perfectly obedient and happy.

Second, we can explore ideas of identity and fullness. It’s a wonderful “aha” moment when, perhaps reading James Jordan’s *Through New Eyes* or maybe reading Peter Leithart’s *The Kingdom and the Power* you arrive at their treatment of the business of definitions. One tradition says, “let’s define things by reduction and try to get to the

essence of a thing by stripping away all the non-essentials”. Take a pencil, list its attributes, and then strip away all the “non-essential” attributes. Being yellow, or four inches long, or made in 2006 are all non-essential. Strip away and strip away until you are left with the pure essence of what makes a pencil a pencil.

Another approach to identification and definition proceeds on the basis that if you want to define or describe something then you need to do so by fullness rather than by reduction. Say *everything* you can about a person, object, or event and you will get much nearer to its “essence”.

Of course, this is what we must do when speaking of God. This is what we mean when we say that our infinite God is simple. We are saying that there are no non-essential attributes in God. It’s not that God is wise, loving and good, and happens to be powerful but that he could have been wise, loving and good, and *not* powerful. No, take any attribute of God and you can say that if God were not that, he would not be God. Essence and existence are identical in God: he is life in himself, creator of all things, blessed for ever.

Although essence and existence are not identical in other things, nevertheless this approach is especially appropriate when we are trying to identify or define other persons. Six feet tall? Strip that away because once I was only twenty inches long. Wears glasses? Strip that away because I don’t wear glasses at night. Have a scar on my right leg? Strip that away because I only got it last year. It’s easy to see that this way of identifying a person is reductionist and achieves little.

The same is true when we consider what persons we will be as we enter the new heavens and the new earth. If persons (especially) are to be understood in their fullness – in all their relationships and attributes – rather than by reduction, then on judgment day we will not be stripped down. There will be no, “Britishness? Forget that. Born in 1962? Irrelevant. Underwent this particular grief in his twenties? Delete from record”.

Quite the opposite. *This* is the person who cleaned the toilet when it wasn’t his mess and no-one knew about it, who declined the last drink on that hot afternoon so that his brother could have it, who mowed the lawn, painted that painting, enjoyed that meal with thankfulness to God, worked for forty years in the factory, and on and on. On and on, in

fact, until every other single thing that a person does is seen to form a part of the person she is as she enters resurrection life forgiven, purified, and glorified. Locating personhood by fullness rather than by reduction means that the person who did tiny thing X and is glorified would be different from that same person who instead did tiny thing Y and is glorified.

We are understood and saved in our fullness – in all our associations, relationships, actions, and experiences.

Thirdly, we can take this understanding further in a consideration of our identity as “glorified agglomerations”. Though I’m not sure I understand all that he is saying and though he most definitely misapplies this to God and arrives at some distinctly unhelpful places as a result, Pannenberg’s teleological ontology captures something of this line of thought, I think. Here’s a summary from Chrisophe Schwöbel:

“The present reality of everything is constituted from its eschatological future. Therefore the essence of something can only be understood as the simultaneous totality of its appearances which must be conceived as being ‘located’ in eternity. The process of time is therefore both the form of the appearance and the process of becoming of any essence. If eternity is understood as the future perfection of everything, then this future is present in the processes occurring in time as the aim of these processes. Everything that occurs and perishes in time, Pannenberg claims, is preserved in God’s eternity which includes all temporal events.” (Christophe Schwöbel, “Wolfhart Pannenberg” in *The Modern Theologians* ed. David Ford, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, 1997, 201)

If, having read that, you return to the old question about “what age shall I be in glory?” then you have some sort of answer. Will I be one day old, innocent and all ready to be fashioned? Will I be forty-four years old, at the peak of my powers? Will I be the age at which I died? The answer that an ontology of fullness gives is this, “yes, to all of the above”. We will be the “simultaneous totality of our appearances”.

Think of my identity through time as a prism made up of time slices (each as thin as you care to imagine, perhaps a billionth of a second) which are (by the loving regard and personhood-sustaining goodness of God) glued together. Each time slice is a recording of all that I am and do and experience at a given moment. Then shine a light through that prism longitudinally and you will catch everything that has happened to me. (If you did

this with your paint pot you would end up with a muddy brown but since the light we are using is the flawless and radiant glory of God then it will mean that each prism (whole history of a human person) will produce an utterly unique and delightful colour.

And it is that “totality of appearances”, that “glorified agglomeration” which has captured everything about my life and has been purified by the grace of God that comprises my person as I enter the resurrection. Nothing has been discarded as irrelevant, nothing left behind as non-essential. Tom Wright expresses something of this sort in a comment on our “larger selfhood”:

“God’s people will be more truly themselves. We sometimes speak of somebody who has been very sick being ‘just a shadow of their former self’. But what Paul seems to be saying is that human beings are just a shadow of their *future* selves. God has prepared a larger selfhood which is the true fulfillment of all that they are at the moment, which will be the final glorious enriching of it. Everything that humans, at their deepest and best moments, are reaching out for, struggling after, longing for, and dreaming of, will finally be fulfilled.” (*Reflecting the Glory*, 41-42)

The fourth step in this exploration of the personal identity of the redeemed is to ask what are the associations and appearances which make up the fullness of our identity. What are the specks and colours and patterns on the time slices of our lives? What fashions the “you” who enters eternity?

In brief, the answer is “everything”. Every relationship enjoyed, every gift given (and how it is used or not used), every detail of every circumstance, every instantiation and display of the grace of God in your suffering. Everything. The “you” who enters eternity is the “you” who did X and not Y, who worked here, who said this, who made that, who responded to that trial in this way, who had these relationships. You were a member of this family. You were married or not. You were married seven times or not. Robert Jenson writes of sexual differentiation and Mark 12.25ff:

“From which it does not follow that the fact that she as a woman was united to them as men will be missing from the story she gives to Christ’s eternal interpretation: its delights to be examined in ever new ways and its miseries and problematics transformed into ever new instances of mercy. And since this eternal event of interpretation is the substance of created life as it is caught up in the



triumphant life, the fact that she is a woman and not a man, and that there are men, will somehow belong to the dance of that life.” (*Systematic Theology II*, 357)

The fact that she is a woman. The splendour of the nations. The fact that you are an American. The fact that I am a Brit. The fact that we lived at the times and in the places that we did. The fact that we spoke the languages that we did.

Pause there and think a little more about the languages of glory. Which language will be spoken in the new heavens and the new earth? Well, this is not a firm proposal but I use it illustratively. Clearly the lead candidate is properly spoken English. Other candidates include Hebrew and proto-Hebrew and the language of angels’ and so on. But, illustratively, we surely want to say that every one of the 6500 human languages there have been will be spoken and sung in the life of the resurrection. Yes, the fact that there are so many languages may have initially arisen from sin but God’s grace has superabounded that fact, human languages have been redeemed, and the Lamb has ransomed people from every language. And since no language is precisely the same as any other language then even if we used English for the first few million years with all its subtlety and variety and richness and precision and with its five hundred thousand words, still there would be a Swahili speaker who would catch us at a particular moment with, “yes, but you’re trying to praise and describe *this* aspect of the infinite glory of God and you’re a little bit stuck. We Swahili speakers have a word which says it, I think. Why don’t you try this phrase?” And so we do and it fits and we laugh and then decide that it would be exciting to do everything in Swahili for the next few million years. So we do. Then we move on to German, then Efik,. And so on. Since the Lord Jesus Christ is above every name that can be named in this age or the age to come we will never be bored and we will never exhaust the matter of praise. Additionally, the moment that we have sung a song in a new language for us then we ourselves have been changed and deepened and so to sing the same song in our old language will be richer than before.

We sing the praise of God in Christ once and that changes us. As changed persons we go about our glad and obedient service and in so doing we see more of the glory of God. And so, with ever new combinations of languages and permutations of idioms we take up his praise once more and in so doing we see yet more of his glory. There is infinite matter of praise to be expressed in an almost infinite range of language by persons whose growth is

itself endless and who thus experience ever-increasing delight in beholding and reflecting and adoring the glory of God in a way which always approaches but never reaches infinite depth.

But for all the possibilities, the praise begins at a particular and a delimited time and place. Although the knowledge and praise of God reaches towards infinity it begins *here* rather than *there* and the *here* is that of the specific history of the world. For all the development and growth and richness of the new heavens and the new earth, it is finite and because it is finite it is particular and the raw material which determines that particularity is everything that has existed and been said and done in the world which really happened and not in a rewritten or retrospectively fictionalised world.

A further component in the particularisation of the identity of the redeemed is their relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ before resurrection morning. A relationship is not simply a status; it is also a history. A relationship is built up by doing things together and by being together and, even when the relationship reaches decisive depths or climactic transitions, we do not at those moments discard what has come before. On our wedding day we do not say, “well, now that we are married we can forget all of the things we did together for the last three years. They were simply the path to this destination and now that we’ve reached the destination the path can be dug up.” No, these things are the foundation for the relationship and the content of the relationship. Our first meeting, those snatched phone conversations, the glances across the room are not simply the establishment of relationship, they are part of the content of relationship. And although the relationship may not be entirely located or contained in those shared actions, neither is it the case that those actions become irrelevant.

Relationship is a communication and all that is previous in the relationship is the language, the vocabulary with which we continue to converse as the relationship develops.

Relationship is a game and all that is previous in a relationship gives us the rules or the record of all earlier matches.

So, when we come to the eschatological wedding day, will we really say of all of the things that we have done with Jesus and all that he has said to us and we have said to him, our developing oneness of mind and conduct and the rest of it , “Well, now the wedding is

here we can forget everything that led up to it”? No, actions done in the strength of Jesus, for the honour of Jesus, in relationship with Jesus, in the company of Jesus, are not discarded on the wedding day but rather taken up in the wedding feast of glory. The resurrection banquet will hum with conversations between Jesus and his bride which begin “do you remember the time when ...?” and which end in peals of laughter and bundles of kisses.

## **5. The fact and shape of redemptive history**

In all this speculation we should not forget the basics of the structure of redemptive history. It is redemption and Bavinck reminds us of the significance of this

“Adam has been replaced by Christ, that the humanity that fell in the person of the first is restored in the second; that not just a few separate individuals are saved but that in the elect-under-Christ the organism of humanity and of the world itself is saved; that not only the persons of the elect but also the “structure of the organism” that they form in Christ is derived from the original creation in Adam. For that reason the covenant of grace does not leap from individual to individual but perpetuates itself organically and historically. It passes through a history and through different dispensations. It accommodates itself to times and occasions appointed by the Father as Creator and Sustainer. It is never made with a solitary individual but always also with his or her descendants. It is a covenant from generations to generations. Nor does it ever encompass just the person of the believer in the abstract but that person concretely as he or she exists and lives in history, hence including everything that is his or hers. It includes him or her not just as a person but him or her also as father and mother, as parent or child, with all that is his or hers, with his or her family, money, possessions, influence, and power, with his or her office and job, intellect and heart, science and art, with his or her life in society and the state. The covenant of grace is the organization of the new humanity under Christ as its head, as it links up with the creation order, and, reaching back to it, qualitatively and intensively incorporates the whole of creation into itself.” (*Reformed Dogmatics* III.231)

Redemptive history has a shape – the check-mark or tick. God does things by patterns and the pattern is “good to bad to better than ever”. God takes the good thing, moves it into darkness, depth, distance, or death and then brings it up to new levels of glory and life and light and intimacy. This happens to Adam so that he receives a wife, to Abram for the confirmation of the covenant, to Joseph as he moves to world rule, to the Hebrews in the

Exodus, to Elijah, and David, and Jonah, and the Jews, and the prodigal Son and Peter in Acts 12.

All these are, of course, servant stories which point to the master story of the life, death, and resurrection of the Son of God. Good to bad to better than ever. Life, death, and resurrection. And as servant stories, they follow the master. The master story is described in Philippians 2 and so the servant story follows in Philippians 3. We apply this pattern of the flood, the exodus, and the judges to our own lives and actions. We see the spirals of God's purpose in history by which he breaks down one world to provide the raw materials for the construction of a better world and brings those raw materials through a discontinuity which does not annihilate them but which moves them from one degree of glory to another. We see that what has been built or won or thought of in one era is not left behind but transfigured in the next era.

This application of typology – God's habit-keeping – to the discontinuity of judgment day reaches beyond the resurrection of the body and the Resurrection of the physical cosmos to history itself. What is said of individuals or phases or eras within history can also be said of the whole of history. The content of history is the accumulation and the fashioning – away from the temple site itself – of the materials to be used in the construction of the new temple-world. The gold and the jewels are being mined and refined and polished and prepared and when the return of Christ brings resurrection morning it will be not just for individual persons but for history. All history, that is, and not just what's standing at the end. When it comes to persons we do not privilege the last generation but affirm that *all* shall be raised. If resurrection only came to those alive at the End the hopes for justice and vindication and relief of the saints of all previous generations would remain forever unfulfilled. And as with persons, so with histories – the personally filled regions of space-time. Bauckham and Hart explain:

“Unlike the myth of progress, Christian eschatology does not privilege future history over past history. The end of history will happen to all of history ...” (*Hope against Hope*, 39)

A further consideration in relation to the fact and shape of redemptive history is that the single biggest discontinuity lies in the past. For all the discontinuity of the tick-shape, since the resurrection of Jesus the world has passed the bottom of the tick. Judgment has

been passed. All authority has been given to the Lord Jesus Christ and he has given the new creation promise to be with his disciples always.

The biggest discontinuity of all has taken place. The world was established with an orientation towards the glory of God. At the fall of Adam the world turned 180 degrees and started marching in the opposite direction. With the completed work of the Lord Jesus Christ the world has been reoriented to the glory of God (though clearly some individuals do not join in that reorientation). Anyone united to Christ *is* a new creation. Anyone who believes in Christ *has* eternal life. And because of this, what happens on resurrection morning is not a further change in the direction of history but rather a speeding up or moving on in the direction it is already travelling. There will be a change in conditions, a change in environment, but not a change in fundamental orientation.

This relates to what was said above. The actions of those in Christ are new creation actions. They are new heavens and new earth actions. They belong to the resurrection but are found ahead of time in these conditions. Yes, there's an "end of the age" – a change of conditions. But that change of conditions is the consummation and confirmation and glorification of what is happening in this history not a reversal or annihilation of it. Luke 14 and 16, along with Matthew 6 and 25 show that deeds done now can be thought of as stored up in a way which shapes the life of the resurrection.

In dramatic terms, we could think of history as an audition or as a rehearsal. If it is an audition then the things done in history have no organic relationship with what is done in the resurrection. If, as a result of the audition you are selected for a part in the play then on arrival at the theatre you will be given an entirely different script from the one you used at the audition to secure your part in the play. If, however, history is a rehearsal, or a long series of rehearsals then we are even now working with the God-given script which is the script for the drama of the new heavens and the new earth. All that takes place in history, in the rehearsal – all those ideas about tone and positioning and gestures and glances – will contribute towards and be incorporated into the Great Performance. And thus, when it comes to the opening night, we will not be handed a new script but will, taking up all that has happened in the rehearsals, assume our positions, inhabit the characters, and play our parts in the longest running show there could ever be.

Each time you love God or love your neighbour this side of judgment day, each time you wonder at beauty and play with your toddler and craft a poem and go sailing and clear up the garden, you are practising your lines. You won't be told on resurrection day, "oh, those lines – no, darling, we're performing an entirely different play – that was just the audition".

## 6. What it means to be taken into the life of the triune God

Earlier we used the idea of the song that we shall sing in the new heavens and new earth to guide our thinking. A similar idea can now help us consider what it means to be taken up into the life of God and why this itself assures us that *everything* we do has eternal significance. Here Robert Jenson and Jonathan Edwards will be our guides.

With regard to the song, then, we note that it is not simply that we will praise Jesus. We will be taken up into the mutual loving regard of Father and Son in the life of the Spirit and this itself entails the eternal significance of all that happens in this history.

*Miscellanies* 741 seems to be everyone's favourite. Here are the lines in which Edwards speaks of the church being admitted to the divine family:

"Again, it shows how much God designed to communicate himself to men, that he so communicated himself to the first and chief of elect men, the elder brother, and the head and representative of the rest, even so that this man should be the same person with one of the persons of the Trinity. It seems by this to have been God's design to admit man as it were to the inmost fellowship with the Deity. There was, as it were, an eternal society in the Godhead in the Trinity of persons, and it seems to be God's design to admit the church into the divine family, so that which Satan made use of as a temptation to our first parents, "*Ye shall be as gods,*" shall be fulfilled contrary to his design. The saints' enjoyment of Christ shall be like the Son's intimate enjoyment of the Father, John 17:21-24, "That they may be all one, as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us, that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. And the glory which thou gavest me have I given them, that they may be one even as we are one; I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one, that the world may know that thou hast sent me, and hast loved them, even as thou hast loved me. Father, I will that they also whom thou hast given me be with me where I am, that they may behold my glory which thou hast given me, for thou loved me before the foundation of the world." John 17:26, "That the love wherewith thou hast loved me, may

be in them, and I in them.” The Son’s intimate enjoyment of the Father is expressed by this, that he is in the bosom of the Father. So we read that one of Christ’s disciples leaned on his bosom, John 13:23. These things imply not only that the saints shall have such an intimate enjoyment of the Son, but that they, through the Son, shall have a most intimate enjoyment of the Father. This may be argued from this: that the way which God has contrived to bring them to their happiness, is to unite them to the Son as members, which doubtless is that they may partake with the head, to whom they are so united, in his good. And so “our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ.” 1 John 1:3. (*Miscellanies*, 741)

In a bold, yet thoroughly Chalcedonian, assertion Edwards tells us that “this man [Jesus Christ] is the same person with one of the persons of the Trinity”.

But we already know that this man has a specific, particular history. Jenson:

Jesus’ life is indeed that of a particular person: it is one sequence of events and not another, and it is made definite by his death. (318-19)

And this means that the Father’s knowledge of the Son is a knowledge which incorporates and delights in the particularity of the Son’s human nature, of his specific history.

But this Son has a body. Christ and his body; Christ and his bride; *totus Christus*. The Father doesn’t know the Son according to his human nature apart from the body of the Son. And since the saints are the body of Christ, the very ones for whom the Son died, the ones in and through whom the Son, by the Spirit does his deeds, so the Father’s knowing, loving delight in the Son is a knowing, loving delight in the specifics and particulars of every member of his Son’s body. For God to know his Son fully will require that he knows every detail of the lives of the saints because these details give precise shape to the body of the Son whom the Father loves. For God to claim to know and love the Son apart or in isolation from the Son’s body and bride would be a Christological heresy of his own. It is impossible to assert that non-evangelistic activities or “mere” acts of service do not last into eternity – they are taken up in the Father’s infinite love for his own Son!

But as the Father knows the Son so the Son knows the Father. And so do those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. The infinite and blessed interchange of love of the Father and the Son is not exclusive but inclusive of the particulars of the incarnate life of the Son.

The content, so to speak, of the Father and Son's loving conversation is the history of redemption. Let's hear Jenson on this too.

Thus the Eschaton is the inexhaustible event of the triune God's interpretation of created history by the life of the one creature Jesus. The Eschaton is infinite created life, made infinite in that it is the life of creatures seen by the Father as one story with the story of the Son and enlivened by the Spirit who is the Telos of that story." (*Systematic Theology II*, 318-19)

"The body is the availability of the person to date, of his or her history as it any moment presents itself. The redeemed histories are complete in their deaths. And they are brought into the history of God as those for whom the Son died; they appear in God's life because and as Jesus' love infinitely interprets them. They are brought into God as the *interpretandum* of the inner dialogue of the Son's actual triune life. Therefore the reality in God of all the redeemed's past, and its mutual availability between each of them and Christ and so between all of them, again need nothing more than full congruence with the eternal *perichoresis* of the triune life." (*Systematic Theology II*, 348)

"As entry into the life of the triune God, Fulfillment is entry into his specific infinity. And this infinity is neither time that goes on forever nor time's cancellation in a still point at the center of a temporal wheel. The triune God's infinity is rather the inexhaustibility of a particular event, the Advent of Christ, that is, the interpretation and appropriation by and to Jesus of all that precedes his final coming." (*Systematic Theology II*, 319)

By virtue of their union with Christ, believers are taken up into life of God. As members of *totus Christus* they are the objects of the loving regard of the Father for the Son. Not only this. In addition to being taken up, in union with Christ, into the Father's love, believers are those who know the Father in the way that the Son knows the Father. That is, united to Christ, they know the Father with the mind of Christ.

Believers are loved by the Father as the body and bride of the Son he loves; they love the Father with the mind of Christ and as members of Christ; and both of these realities are given the precise shape they have by the specific and particulars details of the life of Jesus and the life of every one of his own. History is taken up into the life of God and nothing is longer-lasting than that!

Consider three lengthy extracts from Edwards:



“And there are no other ways but these four that the saints can see God. [in his image- Jesus; in his speech; in his works general; in his work of redemption] ... And especially do they see his glory as it is manifested in the work of redemption ... they see and know [him] as he manifests himself in the work of redemption, which [is] the greatest and most glorious of all God's works, the work of works to which all God's works are reduced.

“And [this] is the end, and as it were the sum of all God's works, to the purposes and ends of which work heaven and all its angels were created; and which is a work that the redeemed saints in heaven are concerned [with] far above all other works of God, in which the glory of the divine perfections, and especially the glory of his love, appears as much more brightly than in any other work, as the light of the sun is above that of the stars, and of which work all their glory and blessedness in heaven is a fruit and a part. And this work by way of eminency is THE WORK of Jesus Christ, the image of the invisible [God], by whom alone God is seen and known by the saints.

“*Corol. 1.* Hence that BEATIFICIAL VISION that the saints have of God in heaven, is in beholding the manifestations that he makes of himself in the work of redemption ... And so we may infer that [the] business and employment of the saints, so far as it consists in contemplation, praise, and conversation, is mainly in contemplating the wonders of this work, in praising God for the displays of his glory and love therein, and in conversing about things appertaining to it.” (from Edwards, *Miscellanies*, 777)

“*Happiness of Heaven.* God doubtless will entertain his saints according to the state of the King of heaven, when he comes to entertain them at the feast that he has provided with such great contrivance and wonderful amazing exercises of infinite and mysterious wisdom, showing the bottomless depths and infinite riches of his wisdom, and with such great and mighty ado, and innumerable and wonderful exercises of his power. In order to provide this feast, he has created heaven and earth, and done all in all ages, bringing such great revolutions in such an amazing wonderful series. And besides that, he has come down himself from his infinite height and become man, and also provided the feast at such infinite expense as that of his own blood. We read of Ahasuerus, a great king, when he made a feast unto all his princes and servants, he showed the riches of his glorious kingdom, and the power of his excellent majesty, and gave drink in vessels of gold, and royal wine in abundance, according to the state of the king, Est. 1. So doubtless the happiness of the saints in heaven shall be so great, that the very majesty of God shall be exceedingly shown in the greatness, and magnificence, and fullness of their enjoyments and delights.” (Edwards, *Miscellanies*, 934)

“*Happiness of Heaven.* When God had finished the work of creation, he is represented as resting, and being refreshed and rejoicing in his works. The apostle compares the happiness Christ entered into, after he had finished his labors and sufferings in the work of redemption, to this, Heb. 4:4, 10. Therefore we may well suppose that very much of Christ's happiness in heaven consists in beholding the glory of God appearing in the work of redemption, and so in rejoicing in his own

work and reaping the sweet fruit of it, the glorious success of it, which was the joy that was set before him. And as the apostle represents the future happiness of the saints by a participation of God's rest and Christ's rest from their works, Heb. 4:4-11. This seems to argue two things, *viz.*

1. That the way that the saints will be happy in beholding the glory of God, will be very much in beholding the glory of his perfections in his works.
2. That the happiness of the saints in heaven, especially since Christ's ascension, consisting in beholding God's glory, will consist very much in seeing his glory in the work of redemption. The happiness of departed saints under the old Testament, consisted much in beholding the glory of God in the works of creation, and in beholding which, "the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy." But their happiness, since Christ's ascension, consists much more in beholding the glory of God in the work of redemption, since the old creation, in comparison of this, is no more mentioned, nor comes into mind. But they will be glad and rejoice forever in this work.

The beatific vision of God in heaven consists mostly in beholding the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, either in his work, or in his person as appearing in the glorified human nature.

(Edwards, *Miscellanies*, 1137)

*Miscellanies* 777 tells us that the glory of God in Christ is especially seen in the history of redemption. *Miscellanies* 934 speaks of the life of glory as a feast but expands on this by describing the items on the menu as themselves provided by and consisting of the particulars of the history of redemption. God's shaping of redemptive history is his preparation of the banquet. But all history is redemptive history because the Lord Jesus Christ did his work in *this* universe – with all its minute particulars – rather than in any other universe. Combining these thoughts, Edwards's proposal is that the life of glory is a life of seeing and delighting in God as he is known in the redemption-history banquet. To pronounce over certain some events or activities, "these do not last" is to remove foods and drinks from the eschatological banquet.

Put it more simply: we enter the thought life of the triune God. What does the Father think about when he looks lovingly at his Son? Amongst other things, he thinks about us – in all the particulars of our lives because we are members of *totus Christus*. How does the Son think when gazes at the Father and with what eyes and mind does he see and think? He sees and thinks as united to and not as separated from his body, his bride. When the Son thinks lovingly of the Father we think with him. Come at it whichever way you will, the incarnation of the Son and the completed historical work of Jesus for particular,

concrete persons who live *this* life and not *that* life, means that everything in created history lasts for ever.

Filled with the fullness of God, thinking with the mind of Christ, animated by the Spirit of Jesus, revelling in the love of the Father, singing the praise of the Lamb who was slain, sharing the glory of Christ, seeing the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, declaring the wonderful deeds of God, seeing the face of God and the Lamb – this is the delight of the new heavens and new earth and in all this we see that everything we do now has eternal significance for we, with our specific histories are taken up into the life of God.

## **7. Metaphors / analogies**

In what ways do the things that we do now last forever? We have deployed several different ways of talking about this over the course of this address. Just one more statement from Jenson underlines one of his preferred descriptions, that of “interpretation”:

“When the redeemed are, as we have seen they will be, themselves a communal agent in the triune life, they will themselves think the movements of matter and energy, not as we may now trace a few of God’s intentions after him but with God as he thinks and just so determines them. The history of the universe will not proceed externally to the mutual human story; cosmic history after the End will not be abstractable from human history. As the universe is the stage for the story of God with his people, so the universe after the End will be the stage for the fulfillment of that story, for the eternal event of the interpretation of all lives by the life of Jesus.” (*Systematic Theology II*, 350)

This image suggests other ways of thinking about the relationship between history and eternity. Texts are interpreted and if history is a text then we know that every single detail is relevant to interpretation. Every semi-colon, every comma, every three-item list makes its contribution and is given due attention in interpretation. So every repetitive act of service, every “chance” conversation, every moment and action – evangelistic or not! – is taken up in the conversation and performance of glory.

The interpretation of texts in turn suggests understanding, explanation, validation, access to the primary sources, re-evaluation, the joy of seeing full implications and the rest of

arriving at resolution. This is the half-truth in Barth on the relation between time and eternity, here introduced by Hebblethwaite:

“Eternity is not more time; it is rather a matter of being caught up into God's time where we shall see our whole life and God's whole creation, in relation to what God has done in Christ. .... Eternal life, says Barth, ‘is not another and second life, beyond the present one. It is this life, but the reverse side which God sees although it is as yet hidden from us-this life in its relation to what He has done for the whole world, and therefore for us too, in Jesus Christ. We thus wait and hope, even in view of our death, for our manifestation with Him, with Jesus Christ who was raised again from the dead, in the glory of not only the judgment but also the grace of God’.” (*The Christian Hope*, 136-7)

(It ought to be granted to Hebblethwaite that he goes on to say, “It is to be doubted whether Barth's view of time and eternity and their relation makes much sense.”)

More, for those who know about music all sorts of other possibilities arise. History provides themes, melody lines, and scores, and eternity is the deployment of those themes, the symphonic development of those melody lines, the transcendent elaboration of those scores in interpretative improvisations.

Of the course of this lecture, then, we have spoken of the way in which all that we do now is taken up in the life of the resurrection and of how *everything* has eternal significance. History is the raw material for eternity. The events of history are the building blocks for the temple of resurrection life. The particulars of history are the DNA of the universe which will be resurrected more glorious than and yet still this universe rather than another. Present actions are nutrients in the soil in which the tree of eternity grows. Our lives are servant stories which follow the Master story wherever he goes. Our body is a flight recorder and its resurrection is the transfiguration of all that has happened to and been done in that body. The specifics of our lives are the previous experiences in a developing relationship and provide the vocabulary and grammar for future conversations in that relationship. This history is not an audition for a part in the Great Performance but rather multiple rehearsals for the same play destined for an eternal stage.

## Conclusion

None of the above is meant to solve questions about the moral choices we are required to make between competing lawful activities. Negatively, what I have proposed is simply that the argument that “all that counts really is evangelism *because* the other stuff doesn’t last” is wrong-headed and unbiblical and that this can be seen for all sorts of reasons and in all sorts of ways.

Positively, the insistence that *everything* we do has eternal significance and that nothing we do will be discarded as an irrelevance gives a seriousness and a depth to the details of our lives which is both awesome and inspiring. Those routine tasks of service which fill so many lives, and those non-evangelistic culture-building activities which we know to be good and yet fear to be temporary are confirmed and established as the building blocks of eternity.

In the new heavens and new earth all history is taken up and transformed; specific activities are transformed; personal stories are resurrected; actual, minute and particular events are played out and suffused with the glory of God. Yes, the universe is taken from glory to glory and we gladly speak of the Spirit-empowered transfiguration of history and not of its mere repetition. Yet there in glory we will speak and sing to God in the language he has given, which is the language of finitude, temporality, particularity, specificity, story, history, events, and actions.

As usual, C.S. Lewis captures this beautifully. Ignore the possible charge of Platonism and enjoy his expression of these truths in these paragraphs from *The Last Battle*:

“Of course, Daughter of Eve,” said the Faun. “The further up and the further in you go, the bigger everything gets. The inside is larger than the outside.” Lucy looked hard at the garden and saw that it was not really a garden but a whole world, with its own rivers and woods and sea and mountains. But they were not strange: she knew them all. “I see,” she said. “This is still Narnia, and more real and more beautiful than the Narnia down below, just as it was more real and more beautiful than the Narnia outside the stable door! I see ... world within world, Narnia within Narnia ...” “Yes,” said Mr Tumnus, “like an onion: except that as you continue to go in and in, each circle is larger than the last.”

“The light ahead was growing stronger. Lucy saw that a great series of many-coloured cliffs led up in front of them like a giant's staircase. And then she forgot everything else, because Aslan himself was coming, leaping down from cliff to cliff like a living cataract of power and beauty ...

Then Aslan turned to them and said: “You do not yet look so happy as I mean you to be.” Lucy said, “We’re so afraid of being sent away, Aslan. And you have sent us back into our own world so often.” “No fear of that,” said Aslan. “Have you not guessed?” Their hearts leaped and a wild hope rose within them. ‘There *was* a real railway accident,’ said Aslan softly. ‘Your father and mother and all of you are - as you used to call it in the Shadowlands - dead. The term is over: the holidays have begun. The dream is ended: this is the morning.’ And as He spoke He no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of their real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no-one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.”

As the family members build the tree-house or as they prepare for their expedition, the little children “help” by bringing all sorts of things to their Dad. Their Dad, that is, who has already resolved that *whatever* they bring, he will use. And so as they put in front of him one obscure item after another, Dad responds with, “oh, good idea – that will come in handy” and “splendid, splendid – that will look lovely” and so on. Just so our heavenly Father responds to the details of history over which he himself is sovereign: “Oh, that will look lovely in the new heavens and new earth ... splendid, splendid, we’ll be able to use that in the Resurrection”.

Luther wrote that, “as little as children know in their mother’s womb about their birth, so little do we know about life everlasting.” Only a fool would dissent from that but, for all our ignorance, one thing we do know is that it is not just a special class of activity confined to a certain class of Christians that lasts. The details, the specifics of all that we do are taken into eternity to be beautified by and for the glory of God.

Thus as the nations are disciplined and as the earth is subdued and filled and as we live *whole* lives in obedience to the Great Commission so, by the grace of God, at the end we will be able to say that “everything lasts” and that, in the kindness and wisdom of our great God there has been “not the least lash lost”.