

Christian Doctrines about “Life after Death”

Introduction

Virtually every religion holds some type of belief about the subject of “life after death” – that is, the subject of *what happens* to people, *after* their bodies die.

Of course, Christianity also has beliefs about life after death. However, there are many **different** doctrines about life after death, among the various Christian denominations. In other words, within the overall Christian religion, there are *radically* different ideas about what happens to people after they die. So, I think it is worthwhile to take a look at some of those different beliefs.

Before discussing the various Christian doctrines about life after death, though, it is necessary to define two other, more “fundamental” concepts. These two concepts are the “building blocks”, as it were, of the Christian doctrines about life after death. Here are those two concepts:

Concept 1: What is the soul?

The first concept to understand is the idea of the human **soul**. There are two main beliefs about what, *exactly* the soul is:

Belief 1: In this belief, a “soul” is: an **immortal, invisible presence**. Basically, this belief states that a soul is some sort of spiritual presence, which is immortal – *and* which contains a person’s consciousness. So, each human being *has* a soul. A person’s soul lives *inside* his body, while his body is alive – but the soul *leaves* the body – and keeps on living – when the person’s body dies.

Since the soul contains a person’s consciousness, this means that a person remains conscious, even after his body dies – because his immortal soul is still alive. As a result, in this belief, **no one** ever really dies – because every person has an immortal soul, which (by definition) lives forever.

Belief 2: In this belief, a “soul” is: a **conscious, living person**. In other words, a person who is alive is – himself – a *soul*. To put it another way, a living person does not **have** a soul – he **IS** a soul.

Since a soul is a living person, that means that a soul ceases to exist when a person dies. In other words, a soul *comes into existence* when a person is conceived – and that soul *ceases to exist* when the person dies.

As a result, in this belief, a dead person is actually dead. That is, when a person dies, he becomes completely unconscious – and he is not alive *at all*. One way of looking at this is that a dead person is “sleeping in the grave”, so to speak.

It is important to note, though, that this belief **also** holds that God can bring dead people back to life. In other words, God (or His agent) can *resurrect* dead people – so that people who have died can *live again*. Also, that resurrection will *transform* Christians’ bodies – from “natural” bodies to “spiritual” bodies. As a result, when Christians are resurrected, they will *never* die again.

Concept 2: Where will Christians spend eternity?

The second concept to be familiar with deals with the question of **where** Christians will spend eternity. There are two main beliefs about the *location* in which Christians will live forever:

Belief 1: In this belief, Christians will live forever in **heaven**. In other words, Christians will go to heaven – to be with God and Jesus – and they will live there for *all eternity*. As a result, in this belief, Christians will *never* set foot on the earth again, once they enter heaven.

Belief 2: In this belief, Christians will live forever on the **paradise earth**. Basically, this belief states that when Jesus returns, he will restore the earth to its original, paradise state. After that, Christians will live forever, with Jesus, on the restored paradise earth. So, in this belief, the Christian hope is to live forever on the restored *earth* – **not** in heaven.

Now that those two “fundamental concepts” have been defined, let’s take a look at some of the Christian doctrines about life after death.

The “Mainstream” Doctrine

First, consider the “mainstream” doctrine about life after death. This doctrine is held by the vast majority of Christians; probably at least 90% of Christians have this belief. In addition, *almost all* Christian churches teach this very doctrine. Basically, this doctrine contains the “default” Christian belief about life after death.

This doctrine holds two primary tenets:

- First, this doctrine states that the soul is an immortal, invisible presence. As a result, this belief states that no one ever *really* dies – because every person has an immortal soul, which lives forever.
- Second, this doctrine states that Christian’s will spend eternity in heaven. In other words, Christians will live in *heaven* forever, after their bodies die.

So, according to this doctrine, the following sequence of events occurs when a Christian dies:

- When a Christian dies, his immortal soul immediately *leaves* his body.
- Since the soul contains a person’s consciousness, this means that the person is still *aware* of his surroundings at that point – despite the fact that his body is dead.
- The Christian’s disembodied soul then goes up to heaven, to be with God and Jesus.
- Finally, the Christian’s disembodied soul remains in heaven, for all eternity.

The “Kingdom of God” Doctrine

Now, consider an alternate doctrine about life after death. This doctrine is essentially the “polar opposite” of the mainstream doctrine listed above – i.e., it is as far away from the mainstream doctrine as two Christian doctrines can get from each other. I call this alternate doctrine the “Kingdom of God” doctrine. Only a *tiny minority* of Christians holds this doctrine – far less than 1% of Christians subscribe to it.

The two primary tenets of this doctrine are as follows:

- First, this doctrine states that a soul is a conscious, living person. That is, a living person does not have a soul – he **IS** a soul. As a result, when a Christian dies, the soul in question *ceases to exist* – i.e., that soul does not exist *at all* any longer, when the person dies. As a result, when a Christian dies, he is *actually dead* – i.e., he is simply unconscious in the grave.

- Second, this doctrine states that Christians will spend eternity on the paradise earth. In other words, when Jesus returns, he will restore the earth to its original paradise conditions – and then Christians will live forever with Jesus, on the restored earth.

So, according to this doctrine, the following sequence of events occurs when a Christian dies:

- When a Christian dies, he becomes completely unconscious – i.e., the Christian is *actually dead*, with no awareness of his surroundings (or of the passage of time, for that matter).

- However, when Jesus returns, he will *resurrect* dead Christians – i.e. he will bring dead Christians *back to life*. This resurrection will **transform** Christians’ bodies from “natural” bodies to “spiritual” bodies – so that Christians will *never* die again, after being resurrected.

- In addition, when Jesus returns he will restore the earth back to its original, paradise conditions.

- Finally, resurrected Christians will live forever, with Jesus, on the restored paradise earth.

- This restored paradise earth – with Jesus ruling as king – is called the “Kingdom of God”.

The “Hybrid” Doctrines

The two doctrines listed above are “pure” doctrines, so to speak. In other words, the mainstream doctrine is a pure “immortal souls going to heaven” doctrine; and the Kingdom of God doctrine is a pure “resurrected humans living on the paradise earth” doctrine.

As it turns out, there are some *other* Christian doctrines about life after death, which fall “in between” the two doctrines listed above. In other words, there are doctrines which contain *some* elements of the mainstream doctrine, and *some* elements of the Kingdom of God doctrine. The three doctrines listed below are examples of these “hybrid” doctrines.

Hybrid Doctrine 1 – Millennium on Earth, Eternity in Heaven

This doctrine holds the following basic beliefs, about life after death:

- A soul is an immortal, invisible presence – so that no one ever really dies.
- When a Christian dies, his immortal soul leaves his body; and goes to heaven.
- When Jesus returns, he will cause *every* Christian’s immortal soul to get “reunited” with his body. Basically, when Jesus returns, he will cause **all** Christians’ souls to “re-enter” their physical bodies, on the **earth**.
- Christians will then live on the earth, with Jesus, for 1000 years.
- After the 1000 years, Christians will go *back to heaven* – and they will remain there for the rest of eternity.

This doctrine is very similar to the mainstream doctrine. In this doctrine, the soul is still an immortal presence; and Christians still spend eternity in heaven – as in the mainstream doctrine. The only real difference is that in this doctrine, Christians have a 1000 year “pit stop” on the earth, during the millennium, before they spend the rest of eternity in heaven.

A sizable minority of Christians have this belief – probably between 5 and 10% of Christians hold this view. This is primarily because a few large mainstream denominations are teaching this doctrine; and a *very* popular series of novels about the Tribulation culminated with this exact doctrine.

Hybrid Doctrine 2 – Millennium in Heaven, Eternity on Earth

This doctrine holds the following basic beliefs, about life after death:

- A soul is a conscious, living person – so that dead people are actually *dead* (not conscious at all).
- Christians will be resurrected after Jesus returns. In other words, when Jesus returns, he will bring Christians *back to life*.
- Immediately after being resurrected, Christians will go to heaven with Jesus – and they will live with Jesus, in heaven, for 1000 years.
- After the 1000 years, Jesus will restore the earth to its paradise state. Then, all Christians will leave heaven, and go *back to the earth* – and they will then live on the earth, with Jesus, for the rest of eternity.

This doctrine is very similar to the Kingdom of God doctrine. In this doctrine, the soul is still a conscious person; and resurrected Christians still spend eternity on the paradise earth – as in the Kingdom of God doctrine. The only real difference is that in this doctrine, Christians have a 1000 year “pit stop” in heaven, during the millennium, before they spend eternity on the earth.

A very small minority of Christians hold this view – probably less than 1%. There is only one large Christian denomination that holds this belief.

Hybrid Doctrine 3 – Some Christians in Heaven, Other Christians on Earth

This doctrine holds the following basic beliefs, about life after death:

- A soul is a conscious, living person – so that dead people are actually *dead* (not conscious at all).
- Christians will be resurrected after Jesus returns. In other words, when Jesus returns, he will bring Christians *back to life*.
- There are two separate “groups” of Christians – the “anointed” group, and “everyone else”.
- The anointed group consists of an **extremely** tiny *minority* of Christians. In fact, some denominations say that the anointed group only consists of 144,000 individuals – and there are over 2 billion Christians today.
- After Jesus returns, the anointed group will *immediately* go to heaven – and they will **remain** in heaven for all eternity. The anointed group will also assist Jesus, in ruling over the earth.
- All *other* Christians will live on the paradise earth for all eternity.

This doctrine is essentially “halfway between” the mainstream doctrine and the Kingdom of God doctrine. Basically, this doctrine’s belief about what will happen to the “anointed” group is quite similar to the mainstream view – i.e., that *that* group of Christians will live in *heaven* for eternity. However, this doctrine’s belief about what will happen to Christians who are not anointed is very similar to the Kingdom of God view – i.e., that *that* group of Christians will live on the paradise *earth* for eternity.

A tiny minority of Christians hold this view – less than 1%. There are only a handful of small Christian groups that hold this view – and only one of those groups is very well known.

Conclusion

As described above, there is a wide variety of beliefs on the overall “life after death” topic – even among the various Christian denominations. Hopefully this article will prove useful, in assisting people to clarify their *own* beliefs!