

Sierra Leadership Network Curriculum: Month 6, Year 3

Participation in the Sierra Leadership Network (SLN) is a process of adult learning. It is the responsibility of the participant to do their assignments and seek out the necessary accountability. It is the responsibility of the participant to schedule time with their mentor, not the other way around. Here is a checklist of this month's exercises and space for comments. All useful generated materials should be placed in your Sierra Leadership Network binder. The mentor will look over the exercises and be given opportunity to add their own comments. Be sure you take your binder to the meetings at Granite Springs Church to also be available to the SLN directors.

Month 6, Year 3

Date Completed

____/____/____ Doctrine of the Last Things [Estimated time: _____]

Mentor Comments:

____/____/____ Funerals: [Estimated time: _____]

Mentor Comments

____/____/____ Perseverance : [Estimated time: _____]

Mentor Comments

Participant Signature

Mentor Signature

I. Doctrine of the Last Things

Resources: Introducing the Reformed Faith by Donald McKim, Manual of Christian Doctrine by Louis Berkhoff, The Bible and the Future by Anthony Hoekema.

1. Read chapter 16 “Reign of God” in McKim’s book and the section on “The Doctrine of Last Things” in Berkhoff. If you can some time Hoekema’s book is a worthy purchase and a worthy read. He will go into far more detail than McKim or Berkhoff which can be handy when you are trying to evaluate many of the claims that surface in contemporary evangelicalism.
2. People in churches (and sometimes not in church) hobble together their “last days” scenarios from a variety of sources. There are books and movies from Dispensationalists like the Left Behind series along with every sort and variety of Hollywood horror movies in which the Anti-Christ comes to earth either as an infant or a monster and some determined group of secularists with guns or crosses must thwart their plans. For many people the final chapter in of the history of planet earth is imagined without much connection to the rest of the story. This is the first place to begin in order to start the correction.
3. The purpose of the end of all things in the Bible stands deeply connected to the beginning of all things, as is true in any good story.
 - a. God made the world for his glory and any version in which the world is not reclaimed, redeemed and restored makes God the loser in the conflict. The end of all things is, as McKim points out by the title of his chapter, the final, permanent, realized, happy reign of God over his now redeemed and renewed creation.
 - b. The Bible tells time in ages. These are not ages in the sense of a mere timeline, but more in the sense of broad epochs. When we say the “The Colonial Age” we can look at dates on a timeline, but we can also see that the boundaries of this “age” can sometimes be fuzzy and that the “age” is really about relationships. We also know that “ages” can at times overlap. In Biblical time, the two most important ages are “the present evil age” and “the age to come”.
 - i. The “present evil age” began with the fall and is marked by rebellion against God. The earth is cursed, the people rebel hurting themselves and each other, Satan incites and devours, and all suffer the consequences. We continue to live in the present evil age where it is NOT true currently that God’s name is hallowed, that God’s will is done in earth as it is in heaven.
 - ii. The “age to come” has been infiltrating the present evil age ever since God made a promise to Eve in the garden that one of her sons would crush the serpent’s head. It was sought after in the promises to Abraham and the establishment of Israel. It is marked by humanity once again living God’s way, under his reign. When Jesus came he announced that this age was “at hand”. The “age to come” is roughly synonymous in the Gospels with “kingdom of God”, “Kingdom of heaven”, “eternal life” and in Pauline literature with being “in Christ”. The “age to come” arrives in its fulness with

- the second coming of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, the final judgment, and the coming and marriage of the new heavens and the new earth.
- iii. All believers today live in two ages at the same time, the present evil age and life in the age to come. The dynamics of the conflict between these two ages leads to additional pain and suffering for believers because Satan and his followers are against the coming and present realization of the age to come. Two great illustrations of this are in Jesus' parables of the 4 soils (sometimes called the Sower) and the parable of the weeds and the wheat.
 - c. Another key Biblical phrase in terms of time is "the fulness of time". It has the sense that not simply of God picking a date on a calendar, but also of his providential care in history of making things finally ready for the next stage in his plan. The times between important events is not simply waiting, it is preparing.
 - d. A Reformed view of the doctrine of "Last Things" is in my opinion a minimalist, humble position that tries to hear the varying texts on the return of Christ without trying to force an extensive, prescriptive, detailed outline of how events will come to pass. The Reformed position tends to emphasize continuity with the overall flow of the progress of redemption while taking into account the fact that every major Biblical development came in surprising and unexpected ways. Jesus wasn't what his contemporaries were expecting and neither was the enfolding of the Gentiles. In the end God will wrap up history his way and wisdom dictates that we follow, rather than prescribe or prognosticate.
4. The major rival in American evangelicalism to Reformed Amillennialism is Dispensationalism. To understand dispensationalism you must understand what conflict it grew out of. In the 18th and 19th centuries the modernists/liberals were increasingly asserting that the assumptions about Biblical historicity were false and that the Bible as a whole should be taken metaphorically, not historically. The response from the Fundamentalist camp was to maintain the historicity of Scripture by asserting that the Bible ought to be read "literally".

The debate over how to understand Biblical metaphor long predated this conflict and there have always been differences of opinion over what passages to understand as metaphor or symbolism and what to understand in a more literal way. The modernists' attributions of metaphor in Scripture were so sweeping that the Fundamentalist's reaction was equally dramatic. The modernists said "it is all metaphor" so the fundamentalists said "it is all literal". This would become the basis for Dispensationalism.

- a. Christians throughout the centuries have understood that God has worked with his people in different ways at different times throughout the history of redemption. These different ways of working with people have for a long time been called "dispensations". Dispensationalism increased the number of ways God worked with us and increased the discontinuity between these ways. this helpful chart illustrates the various dispensations. Different Dispensational groups will differ on many of these details.
http://www.biblebelievers.com/Dispensation_Chart.html

- b. This chart doesn't display the ways that Dispensationalism changes the assumptions of Biblical interpretation to the degree that much of the Bible is today for them simply not very helpful because it was intended for other dispensations. This is ironic because it came in the context of trying to preserve the helpfulness and authority of the Bible in the face of modernism.
 - i. One key way in which Dispensationalism differs from a Reformed understanding of the Bible is in understanding the fulfilment of OT prophesy. The OT Prophets predicted many things for the future salvation and glorification of Israel. In its literalism Dispensationalism demand that these prophesies must be fulfilled by ethnic Israel in the future. The Reformed tradition, along with other traditions of the church have long seen the fulfilment of these prophesies in true Israel (Jesus) and new Israel (the church). This transition is made clear many of Jesus' teachings on God rejecting those who rejected the Messiah and raising up a new Israel from among Jews and Gentiles who would now become the children of Abraham.
 - ii. The result of the different dispensations is often that different sections of the Bible do not speak to varying groups:
 - (1) The Law has nothing to say to us because we are not under the covenant of the law.
 - (2) Jesus' teachings were for the Jews, not for us. Therefore Jesus' teachings are not authoritative to the church and are not meant for this dispensation.
 - (3) The only Bible that really commands the Gentile Christian today are the Epistles in the New Testament.
 - c. Dispensationalism from our perspective amidst many Dispensational churches in America may appear to be a majority position, but it is important to recognize that it is a very recent movement (19th and 20th centuries) and outside the broader understanding of the other branches of Christianity, RC, Orthodox, and the historical churches not following American evangelicalism.
5. Chose ONE of the following depending on which you (in consultation with your mentor) will find most helpful in solidifying your grasp on this important doctrinal area.
- a. Write a Sunday School lesson or series on "Last Things". Often the best way to learn something is to write about it or teach it. It will force you to deal with the issues involved and find the language to describe them to common people.
 - b. Independent Study on Last Things: This way is best if you feel you have too much fogginess about the subject or that there are major issues you want to work through before you go teaching about it in your church:
 - i. Write down the key questions that bother you, trouble you, or just make you wonder.
 - ii. Do some extra reading, thinking, praying, studying and writing to try and sort out questions you may have regarding this area of doctrine.
 - iii. Produce something that can help you have a helpful discussion with your mentor or an SLN director if you find that most helpful.

II. Funerals

1. To those beginning in ministry, especially those who are young, funerals are sometimes one of the most intimidating ministry tasks there is. Ironically, most veteran pastors will tell you that funerals are sometimes the most enjoyable and fruitful ministry tasks they perform. I can't assign you to necessarily do a funeral this month, death is generally not accommodating to our calendars, so I want you to do some research on funerals with pastors.
2. Interview two or more pastors about doing funerals. Ask them specific questions to find out their patterns, habits and best practices when it comes to caring for the dying, those who are grieving, and following up with the grieving after the burial. Get specifics. How do they determine how often to visit? What do they put into a funeral message? How do they manage the desire to preach the gospel as well as their care for the grieving? How do they deal with funerals of persons whose salvation is not at all certain? What about funerals for those who died unexpectedly? What texts or resources do pastors use? How much eulogizing is appropriate and how does the pastor figure that out?
3. Write a brief report about what you discovered.

III. Perseverance

Romans 5:1-5 (NIV)

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

James 1:2-4 (NIV)

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

I would love to tell you that the Christian life is happy, easy, and comfy ride from start to finish. Anyone who claims such, or who preaches that it should be so has Paul and James to contend with. Perseverance is a necessary, vital, and crucial element in the Christian life and in ministry. There may very well be 10 days you feel like quitting for each day you'd rather do nothing else. There will be times when you have sweat and sacrificed only to have others question your motives. There will be many projects you start only to later down road wish you had never begun them. You need perseverance!

Examine yourself with respect to perseverance and discuss it with your mentor.

1. What are some times you've demonstrated perseverance? When were some times you've failed at it?
2. What are you being challenged by now on this score? How are you doing?
3. What are some long term callings that you will need perseverance to accomplish? What smaller steps do you need today?
4. Do you dare ask God for perseverance? Do you dare not?