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Glimpses of heaven among friends: The utilization of film to draw interest in small group studies at the First Baptist Church of Albemarle

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GLIMPSES OF HEAVEN AMONG FRIENDS:
THE UTILIZATION OF FILM TO DRAW INTEREST IN
SMALL GROUP STUDIES
AT THE FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH OF ALBEMARLE

A PROJECT

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY
OF THE M. CHRISTOPHER WHITE SCHOOL OF DIVINITY
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BOILING SPRINGS, NORTH CAROLINA

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OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
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ROGER WILLIAM THOMAS

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GLIMPSES OF HEAVEN AMONG FRIENDS:
THE UTILIZATION OF FILM TO DRAW INTEREST
IN SMALL GROUPS AT THE FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH OF
ALBEMARLE, NORTH CAROLINA

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this project to my children, Sara Kate and Henry Thomas. The two of them have taught me more about the goodness of God than I have learned through all my life experiences or my theological education. They have also revealed to me a depth of love which I did not know existed, but helps me understand my heavenly Father's love with a new clarity every day. Sara Kate and Henry, I love you more than I can ever tell you with my words.

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I also want to thank my field supervisor Ken Massey, Senior Pastor of the First Baptist Church of Greensboro. I have learned so much from Ken, and count his friendship one of the great blessings of this whole experience. He was also there on

a very dark day for me in March of 2004. He does not remember, but something he said that day changed my destiny, and I am very thankful for that as well as all the other ways he has influenced me.

I would be remiss if I did not express my gratitude to the congregation of the First Baptist Church of Albemarle. Every member has inspired me in the nearly seven years I have served the church. So many of them also participated in the surveys, and for that I am grateful. I offer a special thanks to those who went through the small group experience that is at the heart of this project, and I say to each of them again, “You created a wonderful experience for me, the most fun I have had in ministry in a long time. Your participation was a precious gift to me.” I also owe a huge debt to my fellow staff members, Lindsey Burr, Marilyn Easley, Court Greene, Aza Hudson, Sandra Stone and Kevin Taylor for their assistance, patience and friendship as I pursued this goal. Each of them makes coming to work a true joy. And singling out one member of the church, I thank Bill Tucker, who was my lawyer first, then my friend, then the person who called me out in front of a group and said, “*It is time you get back to work on your doctorate and finish that thing.*” Without his words, I may not be writing this.

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**always believe that no matter what struggles you face, you can forge onward
toward your dreams.**

**Thank you one and all for your contributions to this project, to my life, to my
ministry, and to my well-being.**

ABSTRACT

A small group study about *heaven* in scripture and contemporary film was developed in order to create interests in small groups. Believing small groups, discussions of the after life, and the power of storytelling are affirmed throughout scripture, individuals were recruited and led through the study. Surveys measured opinions on *heaven* and *small groups* among the entire congregation and the small group participants. Following the study, the participants were surveyed one final time on both subjects. Ultimately the study did not always change minds with concern to the afterlife, but the overall opinions of small group experiences seemed to be broadened.

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CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION

My four-year-old son, attempting to sort out his grandfather's recent death, states to me, *"Daddy, I do not want to go to heaven. I don't care how good it is there. I want to stay with you forever. Is that okay, Daddy? Is that okay?"* A middle-aged church member and I have a casual conversation about the afterlife and what heaven will be like. I share with him and his wife some books and movies on the subject of heaven which I have enjoyed. Within a few months of our conversations, he dies unexpectedly. At his funeral I state, *"He now has the answers to all the questions we posed together."* A ministerial mentor of mine tells me of his experience before open heart surgery: *"You know, as I lay on that gurney, I suddenly had such a real sense of peace. I knew, live or die, it was going to be okay. If I did not come back from surgery, I was going to a better place."* An octogenarian in my congregation explains to me why he and his wife are selling the home they built together almost forty years ago by saying, *"We decided that when one of us goes on, the other would not want to live in this house alone."* "Goes on" to where was just understood in our conversation though never specifically stated. From the four-year-old struggling to understand, to the eighty-four-year-old standing with absolute assurance, each conversation I had was with someone who had an opinion about what was coming "next," or put another way, what was "after life."

Comedian and television commentator Bill Maher said recently, *"My main proposition is I don't know. And, therefore, if some other human being tells me or anybody else what*

happens when you die, my answer to them is, 'I don't know what happens when you die, so how do you know?'"¹ Quite the contrast to a church sign I passed at the beginning of a recent year which read, "*Look to Heaven in 2007.*" A recent national survey of teenagers concluded that 69% of young people between the ages of 12-19 believe that heaven exists. Among those who believe, over one third believes they will arrive in heaven in the next life because they have been kind to others. Of the total number surveyed, 5% stated that they did not believe heaven exists and 4% responded that they did not care if they go there.² In contrast to that survey, another poll questioned adults over the age of 18 who had not attended a religious service in the last 18 months. Among those polled, 52% said they never wonder about heaven and only 18% said they wonder as often as weekly or daily.³ When screenwriter and television producer Dan Merchant interviewed anonymous individuals in Times Square recently, one of the questions he asked was "Where do you think you will go when you die?" The answers he received were as varied as "Nowhere." "Hopefully Heaven." "I will probably go away... I will no longer be here when I die." and "Well, that's the million-dollar question, isn't it? I believe in life after death. What it is I do not know, and I'll probably be wondering that until I find out."⁴ In the preface to Hans Küng's *Eternal Life?*, Ann Arbor states that the answers to the

¹ Robert Parham, "*How Shall We Think about Bill Maher's Upcoming Anti-Religion Documentary?*" n.p. (cited August 29, 2007), Online : <http://www.ethicsdaily.com>.

² Libby Lovelace, "Lifeway Research Examines Teenagers Views on Eternity." *Facts and Trends*. Vol. 53, No. 5. (Nashville: Lifeway Christian Resources, 2007), 7-9.

³ Mark Kelly. "Evangelism Begins Beyond the Sanctuary for Christians Reaching Out to the Unchurched." *Facts and Trends*. Vol. 54, No. 3. (Nashville: Lifeway Christian Resources, 2008), 6-9.

⁴ Dan Merchant, *Lord Save Us From Your Followers: Why Is the Gospel of Love Dividing America?*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008), 1-13.

question "Do you believe in a life after death?" have become much more varied: theologians seem embarrassed by the question while many others respond, "No, I'm not religious."⁵ Neither of these responses is any more satisfying than Bill Maher's rant, "*I don't know what happens when you die, so how do you know?*" Just as I seem bombarded with discussions of heaven in my personal life (which would seem normal considering my profession as a Baptist pastor), I also seem of late to happen upon all sorts of discussions about the same subject: "*What awaits us on the other side?*" After all, is it not part of the role of a minister to consider, reflect upon, and share with others his thoughts about the destination for believers after this life? Or put another way,

While we may look to modern science for our answers to almost everything - only religious disciplines seem to provide reassurance for those concerned with our prospects in the hereafter.⁶

Setting and Statement of Problem

The First Baptist Church of Albemarle is a one hundred and nineteen year-old congregation located in the county seat of Stanly County, North Carolina. The ninety-year-old sanctuary with her rust colored dome is among the several downtown churches which form the striking Albemarle skyline. The church was started by seven charter members in 1889 in an area which was described as a place where Baptists were "neither

⁵Ann Arbor. Preface for *Eternal Life?* by Hans Küng. (trans. Edward Quinn. Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1984), xiii.

⁶ A & E, "Heaven and Hell", *The Mysteries of the Bible*, 1996.

liked nor welcomed."⁷ The entire first year the church spent only \$2.50; the following year the first pastor, Rev. J. M. Bennett, resigned.⁸

Since those humble beginnings, the church has grown into a vibrant body of believers, with approximately 650 resident members and an average worship attendance of 250. First Baptist is active in many community service projects including Habitat for Humanity, a local soup kitchen, the Stanly County Pregnancy Resource Center and the Stanly Community Christian Ministries, an organization dedicated to helping the poor and needy of Stanly County. The church is also involved with the ecumenical community, supporting and participating in interdenominational Advent, Lenten and Thanksgiving services as well as co-sponsoring an annual week of "youth breakfasts" and a community-wide Christmas Day luncheon. The church supports the Southern Baptist Convention, the North Carolina Baptist State Convention and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina as well as the national C. B. F. Like many other Baptist churches in the twenty-first century, there are numerous members who have strong opinions about denominational support, while there are others who have no interest in the matter. Ultimately, First Baptist Church is a faithful body of believers seeking to make a difference in the world for the kingdom of God.

During the one hundred and nineteen years of its history, the First Baptist Church has been served by eighteen senior pastors. Several of them had very short tenures while others stayed for more than a decade. The most recent former pastor, Rev. Harold McDonald, had the longest tenure in the history of the church. He served as the senior

⁷ J. C. Boone, *Caring and Sharing: A History of the First Baptist Church of Albemarle*, (Albemarle, NC: First Baptist Church, 2003), pg. 8-9.

⁸ Boone, *Caring and Sharing*, 9.

pastor for twenty-seven years. Rev. McDonald came to the church at the young age of thirty-seven on March 2, 1974, and retired from the church at the age of sixty-five on June 24, 2001.⁹ One of the many strengths of Rev. McDonald was his consistency. By all accounts, Rev. McDonald successfully avoided the conflicts which often plague churches, and the conflicts which were threatening the denomination and state convention in which he had been a part of his entire career. In the book, *Caring and Sharing: A History of the First Baptist Church of Albemarle* by J. C. Boone, the chapter dedicated to Rev. McDonald's tenure at the church is entitled "Progress and Unity." This is fitting, as he kept the congregation united as they moved forward into a future filled with Baptist conflicts.¹⁰

I followed Reverend McDonald's extensive tenure when I was called to be the Senior Pastor of the First Baptist Church of Albemarle in 2003. Early into my ministry here I discovered a reluctance toward several things to which I had grown accustomed in previous pastorates. First, during the Wednesday evening prayer and Bible study time, eliciting discussion seemed almost impossible. After consulting some of those who had been longtime attendees of this hour, I realized that the majority of participants were used to a lecture rather than a discussion. In the past, Wednesday Night Bible Study had been a monologue rather than a dialogue. And though some expressed an appreciation for my desire to remove the barrier between speaker and congregation, six years later, the conversation is still not as open as I would desire for it to be.

⁹ Boone, *Caring and Sharing*, 94, 121.

¹⁰ Boone, *Caring and Sharing*, 94.

A second area which seemed to be met with some reluctance was the formation of small groups for targeted Bible study or topical discussions. I soon came to understand that this was discouraged in the past because it could lead to "cliques" forming within the church. The only small groups that were previously encouraged were Sunday School classes and W. M. U. circle groups. During the two-year-interim between Reverend McDonald and myself, the Minister of Education and Administration, Rev. Charles Royal, had encouraged small groups to form, but he had met with some criticism for taking this action. In fact, when I began to serve the church, I was soon warned of some of the mistakes made during the interim time, one of these being the formation of small groups for study. As a former minister of education (with almost ten years of experience in the field), the idea of small groups being detrimental to the life and spirit of the church seemed quite alien to me. Early in my ministry here I decided I wanted to alter this perception that "small group studies" negatively affected a family of faith.

In the five years I have been at First Baptist we have made some progress in this area. First, I have approved every single small group proposed to me by any individual, couple, or group. I have explained to those interested in starting small groups how beneficial I believe these learning opportunities can be for the entire body. I have also approved finances for materials to be purchased for these studies and I have encouraged others to consider teaching such groups. Second, in the fall of 2005, the staff and leadership led the entire church through Rick Warren's *Forty Days of Purpose* program. One element of this program was to offer small group discussions for six consecutive Sunday evenings. This proved to be one of the more popular elements of the program, with some individuals becoming very close to the members of their specific groups. Third, during

the 2005-2006 church year, the Strategic Planning Committee and I wrote a five year plan for the church. (See Appendix C for a full transcript of the Strategic Plan.) Included in this plan was the formation of an Education Committee. One of the duties of this committee was to organize, schedule and implement small group studies making them a permanent part of our overall Christian education curriculum for our church. Thus, during my tenure, I have strived to increase the overall influence and participation of small groups in the life of the First Baptist Church of Albemarle.

One of the strengths of First Baptist Church, for which I believe Reverend McDonald deserves much of the credit, is the openness people have to discuss things with the senior pastor in a one-on-one setting. Though discussions in formal settings seemed to be discouraged, countless people have shared with me how open Reverend McDonald was to discussing a wide range of theological issues with anyone who desired to speak with him in a private setting. Reverend McDonald has a very warm and extroverted nature and easily makes individuals comfortable. I think this empowered the church members to raise issues with him that in some settings would be inappropriate. He was never the authoritative pastor giving absolute truths without allowing others to speak their thoughts. Though he sought to avoid conflict in the body of believers through a lecture style of teaching, in the privacy of his office he was quite open to differing points of view.

I believe his openness to individuals has made it easier for many members to come and speak with me on a plethora of issues. The one which stands out most in my mind is the issue of the "afterlife." What comes next? What will heaven be like? I have served five churches in my professional career, three of which I served as the senior pastor. No other church which I have served has contained as many members who desire to discuss

heaven. Or at least they did not voice their interest to me. This is not a question of belief. These individuals believe absolutely that there is something beyond this life. However, they are anxious to know what form the next life will take. Or if they cannot know, for obviously they cannot know with absolute certainty, these individuals at least want to discuss ideas and speculate about the future after death.

When I ask myself why so many members of this church have had conversations with me about afterlife issues, I come to three conclusions. First, this is the most educated congregation I have ever served. The vast majority of the membership is college educated, many have graduate or terminal degrees. I wonder if intellectual pursuits in other areas force one to question more philosophical ideas. Or put another way, knowledge breeds the desire to understand better that which cannot be proven.

Second, this is the most affluent congregation I have ever served. As near as I can tell, the vast majority of our congregation has more than enough in this life. A large percentage of the members of First Baptist Church are extremely successful in their chosen careers. Life here on earth has passed the stage of struggle and the next great obstacle, or perhaps the only obstacle left, is failing health and the end of life.

This brings me to the third characteristic I have witnessed at First Baptist. The church, like many Baptist churches, is aging. Many of the people, though not all who engage me in conversations about heaven, are well into their retirement years. Most still have a great lust for life, but they recognize that they are now enjoying their twilight years. As a forty-six-year-old man, I deal with mortality issues, and I am counting on at least forty more years. It is not surprising to me that people who believe something is coming soon want to discuss with others what that something just might be.

Considering these two isolated trends in the church, the lack of enthusiasm among some to participate in small groups and the desire by at least a small faction of the church to openly discuss with their minister the reality of heaven, I began to ask myself how I could address these two problems in a unique way. An additional element to forming the project proposal was my desire to incorporate my interest in film. As I allowed all three of these to stir in my mind, I resolved that I could design and implement a small group study on comparing film depictions of heaven with scriptural descriptions.

Personal Interest in the Project

My personal interest in this project begins with the belief that our church needs to do more to engage people in spiritual growth and create opportunities for new relationships to form and current relationships to flourish. This can happen in many different ways, but my experience in other churches suggests to me that small group studies accomplish both of these goals in ways that few other programs can. First Baptist must do some things differently in the days ahead. An active and vital “small group” education program is one step toward becoming something new.

My personal interest is also founded upon the type of small group I plan to lead. I have often stated that my hobby is “film.” Some people play golf, fish, or basket-weave. I watch movies. From a very early age, I have been captivated by the cinema. And as I have matured, I have discovered that the films which most intrigue me are those which inspire me to consider my faith anew. And I am not alone in this opinion. Many share the experience of film as a spiritual experience, including Ben Forest who writes the

following in the introduction of his book *God Goes to Hollywood: A Movie Guide for the Modern Mystic*:

To the mystic, every experience has the potential to be a spiritual one. God can be experienced when doing the dishes, walking the dog, and, yes, even while going to the movies. To the mystic, films can be seen as modern parables, stories infused with spiritual lessons that tell us something about our life and our relationship with God. To the mystic, going to see a potentially spiritual film is not entirely unlike going to church. Think about it-you travel a short distance, sit down in a large room filled with people, and together, everyone gazes forward hopefully and, with a little luck, is deeply touched by a message thoughtfully prepared. The only difference is that at church you generally are not allowed to eat popcorn during the sermon.¹¹

I also believe that the experience of watching a film is a unique experience when shared with someone else. I have watched many films alone throughout my life, and often times I yearned to watch the films again with someone who has not had the experience. For me, when a film ends, there is a unique intimacy in discussing what happened on screen, what was liked or disliked, what challenged or frustrated, what feelings arose, and ultimately was the experience worthwhile. Individuals can read the same book, or listen to the same music or lecture or even sermon, but I would argue, there is nothing quite like the shared experience of watching a film. The small group study that is central to the project allows me to share five films that I encountered at different stages of my life and all of which have challenged my thinking about the afterlife. For a cinema lover, one of the greatest joys is sharing a film with someone else. That opportunity and the potential of the discussions which would follow excited me as I planned and prepared for this project.

¹¹ Benjamin Forest, with Mary Kay Mueller, *God Goes to Hollywood: A Movie Guide for the Modern Mystic*, (New York: Writers Club Press, 2000), xiii.

Literature Review

Over the last few years a great many books have been written on the subject of faith issues in modern film.¹² In fact, it seems that a new one is released almost every day. Beyond this there are also journal articles being published on similar issues. Many of these texts focus on a wide range of subjects from ethics or the church, to love and joy. For this project I will be focusing only on the portions of the books or articles which address the afterlife and heaven, or offer some unique insight on how film has become a popular tool in theological discussions. All the texts consulted for this project approach the subject of faith and film with a confidence that an interest and study of the latter can produce thoughtful perspectives on the former. Or restated, consideration of modern film can be an enlightening experience for one seeking to challenge or expand one's theological presumptions. It is doubtful that anyone would author a book on faith and film who did not believe that knowledge of one is beneficial in the study of the other.

Beyond the texts which focus on theology and film, for the small group Bible study there will be five actual films used. I chose to use only five as I envisioned the study to be a six week experience. There are certainly others which could have been considered but I believe these five offer unique perspectives on heaven. The films were chosen because each depicts an individual idea or several ideas about heaven that are worthy of

¹² One can find many of these titles in the bibliography of this paper. Beyond those consulted for this paper, here are a few others published in the last five years: *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals and Rituals* by John C. Lyden, *Reading the Gospels in the Dark: Portrayals of Jesus in Film* by Richard Walsh, *Scripture on the Silver Screen* by Adele Reinhartz, *The Gospel According to Disney: Faith, Trust and Pixie Dust* by Mark Pinsky, and *Finding God in the Movies: 33 Films of Reel Faith* by Catherine M. Barsotti and Robert K. Johnston.

discussion. The films are *The Littlest Angel*, *Defending Your Life*, *Made in Heaven*, *What Dreams May Come* and *After Life*.

We started with *The Littlest Angel* which actually originated as a television Christmas Special. I chose to begin with this film because it offers several of the traditional elements we grow up believing about heaven: clouds, angels, God as a white bearded old man upon a great gold throne. I remember watching the film as I child, and I believe it greatly influenced my first impressions of what heaven was like.

I first saw *Made in Heaven* when I was a seminary student going to the movies with a dear friend. We talked about it for days after our viewing of the film. *Made in Heaven* offers a compelling vision of life in heaven, what it will look like and what we will do there. It raises questions about relationships in the afterlife and the issue of the soul. The film also deals with reincarnation, heaven as a place of wish fulfillment, and a “dominant intention” or destiny for every person’s earthly life.¹³

Defending Your Life is a comedy which deals with issues of judgment in the next life. In the film individuals are judged to determine how courageous they were in their earthly lives, and how able they were to put aside their fears. This is not the dominant measure of a successful life in Christianity; that measure would be a faithful life and the belief in Jesus Christ. However, the coming judgment of God is a pillar of the faith of many Christians. Therefore the question is what form will this judgment take and what attributes or actions in our lives will be judged? If we are judged for our love, is this not actually a judgment of our lack of fear? I John 4:18 states: “*There is no fear in love; but*

¹³ Ben Forest with Mary Kay Mueller, *God Goes Hollywood*, 149-150.

perfect love casts out all fear."¹⁴ This film was chosen to create conversation about how much of our lives will be reviewed in the next life, and to discuss for what we might be judged.¹⁵

What Dreams May Come is the darkest of the five films. The images of heaven in this film are stunning because of the brilliant and colorful art direction, set design, and the Academy Award winning special effects. Also there are issues related to relationships with one's earthly family, earthly memories, and earthly emotions. This is the only film in the study which offers an extended perspective of hell which generated some interesting discussion. One final compelling characteristic of this film is that, unlike any of the others viewed during the study, heaven, or at least one's personal corner of it, is uniquely his own, created by the individual.¹⁶

The final film, *After Life*, has been described as "extraordinarily sublime,"¹⁷ very "affirmative about (human) existence"¹⁸ and "quiet, poetic examination of life, death and memory, filled with gentle humor and blessedly free of any feel-good bromides."¹⁹ This Japanese film challenges one to ponder the question, if you could only take one memory from your earthly life with you into the next life, what would be that one memory? The

¹⁴ Unless otherwise noted, all biblical references are taken from the Revised Standard Version of Scripture.

¹⁵ Forest, with Mueller, *God Goes Hollywood*, 57.

¹⁶ Forest, with Mueller, *God Goes Hollywood*, 238.

¹⁷ Craig Detweiler and Barry Taylor, *A Matrix of Meanings* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic), 167.

¹⁸ Kenneth Turan. *Never Coming to a Theater Near You: A Celebration of a Certain Kind of Movie* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), 165.

¹⁹ Leonard Maltin, ed., *Leonard Maltin's 2004 Movie and Video Guide* (New York: Penguin Group, 2003), 14.

film does not have the production values of the others, and it does require that one is willing to read subtitles. It was a frustrating experience for some participants in the study, but ultimately the experience of viewing it was, I believe, worthwhile. I think the discussions which followed this film were the most honest and inspired.

Beyond these five films and the books on faith and film used for this project, I also consulted some books and articles on the nature of small groups in the church.²⁰ This has been a popular topic in church literature over the last decade or so. Just as there seems to be an overabundance of books on faith and film, and more coming out all the time, there are also many texts describing the benefits of a small group study approach in the local church. These will be helpful in defending my position that First Baptist Church needs to move toward a more active small group ministry.

A complete list of resources which I consulted for this project is included in the bibliography.

²⁰ The books referenced for information about small groups are footnoted in the Personal and Ecclesiological Rationale section and also listed in the bibliography.

CHAPTER TWO DETAILED PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Project Outline

The following is a brief outline of the project:

- 1) Surveys were given out to all the adult Sunday School Classes on two consecutive weeks. The first survey was concerning ideas about “heaven” and the second concerned small group experiences.
- 2) Sign-ups were held for those who were interested in participating in the small group study about “images of heaven in modern film.”
- 3) An organizational meeting was held where the structure of the study was described, questions were answered and the two surveys described above were distributed to those going through the small group experience.
- 4) The first session of the study was held. The first film, *The Littlest Angel*, was viewed and worksheets were distributed.
- 5) Three days later the small group met again to discuss the film and the worksheets.
- 6) The same schedule and structure was used for the next four sessions (viewing, a worksheet completed at home, discussion a few days following the viewing).
- 7) On the last night of discussion, two more surveys were distributed. The first was the same exact survey about “heaven” which had been used on the previous occasions described above. The second survey concerned “small group experiences” but differed from the one previously used,
- 8) All the surveys were collected, tabulated, and analyzed.

Project Goals

Theological Goals

The first theological goal was to foster conversation about the afterlife and specifically heaven. Scripture is filled with descriptions, writings and even conversations about what

happens beyond this earthly existence.²¹ If the creator had not intended for man to be interested in the subject, then why include references to heaven in his two greatest revelations: his only begotten Son who spoke of the subject often and his Holy Word which is filled with references. There was a curiosity about the next life from the very beginning of Christianity and that curiosity has continued throughout church history. From the writings of the early church Fathers who had diverse views of heaven but agreed that the redeemed will enjoy everlasting life with one another and with the Lord²², to the writings of Thomas Acquinas in the thirteenth century with his vivid descriptions of “glorified bodies, opinions have varied on the nature of heaven.”²³ From the American slaves who saw “heaven” as their only escape from bondage in the seventeen and eighteenth century,²⁴ to the writings of Baron Friedrich von Hügel in the twentieth century where he asserted that the afterlife is beyond endless existence but ultimately begins, rests and ends with God, ideas have stretched the imagination and challenged those pondering what comes next.²⁵ Much has been written, much has been spoken, much has been considered when it comes to the subject of what awaits the followers of Christ

²¹ Some of the specific references in scripture will be discussed in the *Rationale* section of the paper.

²² Brian Hebblethwaite, *The Christian Hope* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 53.

²³ Hebblethwaite, *The Christian Hope*, 63.

²⁴ Donald G. Mathews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago: University of Chicago), 221.

²⁵ Hebblethwaite, *The Christian Hope*, 154-155.

beyond this earthly existence. Contemporary books²⁶ and old songs still sung every Sunday²⁷ have been written about heaven (and hell also, for that matter) through the centuries. And at the dawn of the 21st Century, there are still people desiring, even yearning, to talk about what comes next.

One could argue that this curiosity and desire for conversation is, as Ludwig Feuerbach has stated, “a wishful projection,” or as Karl Marx called it, “a consolation for the oppressed,” or even “an unrealistic regression of the psychologically immature,” as Sigmund Freud said.²⁸ But ultimately, if it were any of those things only, then one would have to dismiss all references to the next life in scripture. And perhaps, that would also mandate a dismissal of the body of writings that make up the Bible. But if one chooses to believe in the truth of scripture, then it becomes difficult to deny that, from a theological standpoint, heaven matters. Anything that matters in our faith certainly deserves open conversation.

From a theological perspective, the second goal of the project was to increase awareness and involvement in small groups within the church. Scripture offers examples of small groups being brought together for learning. The most notable example would be the twelve disciples of Jesus. John the Baptizer also seemed to have disciples who appear several times in the gospels, such as the occasion in Luke 7 when John, while in prison, sends two of his disciples to ask Jesus “Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for

²⁶ Two of the more recent books on the subject of heaven are *Five People You Meet in Heaven* by Mitch Albom and *90 Minutes in Heaven* by Don Piper and Cecil Murphey.

²⁷ “When We All Get to Heaven”, “Heaven Came Down”, and the fifth verse of “Amazing Grace”- “When we’ve been there ten thousand years...”. Just to name a few songs about heaven.

²⁸ Ann Arbor, Preface to *Eternal Life*, xiii.

another?” Also in the writings of Qumran one can read of a system where the community initiates are instructed by their Teacher of Righteousness.²⁹ This seemed to be a model for learning in New Testament times and is still effective 2000 years later. Spiritual growth and insight can happen when Christian people gather and discuss, study scripture, share ideas, and think of things in new ways. The essence of Jesus’ ministry was the attempt to help people see God in a new way. He certainly tried that with large groups on hillsides or by the sea shore. He also tried this in intimate circles of his closest followers. Just as there is great theological benefit in opening up conversation between people and allowing them to speak openly about their beliefs about heaven, there is also great theological benefit to following the model in scripture which demonstrates that learning happens among the many, but also often among the few. Small groups is an idea endorsed in scripture.

The third goal of the project was to use film as a means of creating interest in a small group and also using film as a tool to facilitate conversation about theological issues. Film is such a powerful medium in today’s world, it has in many ways become the most popular storytelling outlet in modern history. Our faith is based partly on the power of a story. Whether the story is the history of the Israelites, the revelation of the passion narratives, or simple parables about a kind Samaritan or a wayward son, there is power in the telling. Though the written word is far from dead, box office numbers prove that stories told through film reach the masses. Brian Godawa wrote the following in his book *Hollywood Worldviews: Watching Films with Wisdom and Discernment*:

I remember some movies better than most sermons, probably because they put flesh

²⁹ Alan R. Culpepper, “Mark” *The Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary*. R. Scott Nash, ed. (Macon: Smyth and Helwys, 2001), 138.

onto the skeleton of abstract ideas about how life ought or ought not be lived.³⁰

That testimony could most likely be uttered by a great many of the Christians in America today. How many can quote lines such as “ET phone home.” “May the Force be with you.” or “Follow the yellow brick road.” quicker than they can quote scripture? If storytelling is valuable, as the authors of scripture have demonstrated, then can theological value not be found in the stories of at least some contemporary films? I believe they can be, and it happens in multi-plexes around the globe almost every day.

Pragmatic Goals

Building upon the second theological goal was the pragmatic goal that First Baptist Church needs a more active “small group ministry” in the church’s overall educational program. As stated above, small groups have been looked upon with suspicion for many years. If offering a small group study on heaven and film could create a new interest among at least a portion of the congregation, then a step should be taken toward making small groups more embraced and encouraged by the membership of the church. There are so many varied subjects that could be covered through a small group ministry that are currently not being addressed. The current Education Committee is being encouraged to create a two year curriculum of small group studies. They are very enthusiastic in their endeavors but ultimately what will it mean if they plan, recruit leaders and schedule small groups and then no one shows any interest? If offering this study on “Heaven in Film

³⁰ Brian Godawa, *Hollywood Worldviews: Watching Films with Wisdom and Discernment*, (Downers Grove, Ill: Intervarsity Press, 2002) 10.

and Scripture” could create a catalyst toward greater small group involvement, then something very practical and significant has transpired in the life of the church.

Another very pragmatic goal was to foster dialogue among the membership. With a great many of the Sunday School classes thriving on lecture style lessons on Sunday morning, and Wednesday night Bible study being almost entirely lecture driven, it would be a wonderful thing if a free flowing discussion on heaven would inspire a new-found freedom to discuss other issues as well. Perhaps, it would cause some to recognize, as they never have before, that everyone does not have to agree about all subjects. One person’s perspective on heaven may be completely removed from another’s. If that is true about heaven, it may also be true about the ordinance of Baptism or what color the interior of the sanctuary should be. The fear of disagreements can sometimes be stifling in a church and it should not be that way in a Baptist congregation. Baptists as much as any Christians should recognize that diversity of opinion is a great strength. If discovering that one’s longtime friend or neighbor has a different understanding of the afterlife than he does can foster greater respect for another’s opinions, then greater cooperation in the future would certainly seem to be a possibility.

A third pragmatic goal was that, through the study on “Heaven in Film and Scripture”, there will be a time spent reading scripture. Each week the reflection sheet on each film viewed included relevant scripture passages which were to be read and pondered as one answered the questions provided on that sheet. These scripture passages were also discussed during the class time together. Anything that motivates members to read the scriptures can be beneficial to the life of the individual and ultimately the church. As with any study, there were most likely those who did not spend as much time reading as

others, but ultimately, some took time out to read God's Word and this bore fruit during the discussions and hopefully in the life of the individual as well.

Laying the Foundation

The first step in the project was formally alerting the congregation to the fact that I was moving ahead with my doctoral studies. Many of those closest to me personally knew that I had been working on a proposal for my project for some time. Others in the congregation did not know that I had resumed work on my Doctor of Ministry degree. I soon discovered that there were some within the congregation who never knew I was enrolled in the program at all. These individuals fell into two categories. Those who were in the church when I was called to First Baptist and were just not paying attention to the information provided to the church about me made up the first category. The second group who did not know about my studies were those who had become active in the church sometime over the last four and half years, the time following my taking a leave of absence from the program. So a formal announcement that I was back active as a student and that I would be asking for the help of the congregation in the coming days seemed necessary. In September of 2008, I wrote about the approval of my project proposal and what my next steps would be in my weekly newsletter article. (A copy of the newsletter article can be found in Appendix D.)

In the newsletter article the congregation was alerted to a couple of ways they could contribute to my work. First, I shared with them that I would be asking all adult Sunday School classes to participate in a couple of surveys. Second, I shared with them that I

would like volunteers to sign-up to participate in a small group study about “heaven and modern film.” The title of this small group study would be “Glimpses of Heaven Among Friends.” (See Appendix D.)

At this time I also consulted with the Education Committee which was formed following the church’s adoption of the “Renewal Plan: 2006.” (See Appendix C.) I asked the Education Committee to assist me in implementing the two initial surveys throughout our adult Sunday School. The committee enthusiastically agreed to help.

On the second and third Sundays of September 2008, the two surveys, one each week respectively, were distributed among the adults who attended adult classes on these Sundays. Those adults who taught in preschool, children and youth classes were also targeted in order to get the largest possible sample of opinions. The response was overwhelming. The numbers of surveys returned implied that nearly every adult in attendance completed the survey on each given Sunday. The newsletter article seemed to have accomplished its mission of alerting people about their needed assistance and encouraging their participation.

Included in the same newsletter as my article about my project, there appeared an advertisement about the small group study on Heaven. (See appendix D.) Between the article and the ad for the small group study, several people seemed to be inspired. Almost immediately individuals and couples began to share with me of their interest in being a part of the study. A sign-up sheet was placed in the church office, and names began to fill the sheet. My original intent was to limit the study to thirty people, recognizing that some would not follow through till the end. After thirty had signed up for the study several others expressed interest and I granted them permission to come to

an organizational meeting. At one point, I did refuse to add one couple because we had reached a number that I felt was high enough and there were some other issues which caused me concern about adding anyone else to the group. With nearly thirty-five potential small group members, two church-wide surveys completed, and a plan with how to proceed, we were ready for the organizational meeting of the small group study: “Glimpses of Heaven Among Friends.”

The Initiation of the Project

On Sunday, October 5th, 2008, all those who had signed up for the small group study were invited to an “organizational meeting.” Of the forty who had signed up, twenty-six showed up for the organizational meeting. Three of those who did not attend the organizational meeting ended up being a part of the study. Seven of those who attended the initial meeting did not participate in the study because of scheduling conflicts. Ultimately, 22 participated in the study through its completion.

During this first meeting I explained to the group my vision for the study. I also allowed them to vote on the schedule we would follow during the study. I explained that the study was designed to have two meetings each week. The first meeting would be to view a film which depicted “heaven.” The second meeting would be to discuss the film. Reflection sheets would be given out at the end of each film viewing. These would guide our discussion during the second weekly session. I explained to the group that I did not feel it would be worthwhile to discuss the film immediately after viewing. This was true for a couple of reasons. First, all the films were between 77 minutes and 118 minutes.

After a viewing of this length of time, fatigue could set in. Second, I believe there is benefit in reflection, contemplating a film for several days and allowing one's opinions to ferment. From the vote that we took, the majority felt that a Thursday night- Sunday afternoon schedule would work best. We followed this schedule throughout the study except when there was a conflict with a church-wide "Fall Festival" on Thursday, October 30th, which was our regular viewing night. One other conflict arose with our last scheduled discussion time because I had to be in Georgia for a wedding. We made this one up the following Thursday, November 20th. Overall, the schedule we voted on in the initial meeting worked very well.

Beyond the scheduling and structure of the study, we talked about several other issues during this first meeting. We talked about how this was a Bible Study that offered "no answers" but simply raised questions, and hopefully inspired thought. We also discussed the fact that none of the films, as far as I knew, were made by Christians. Though it was not a consideration in choosing the films, none of them were overtly Christian in their storytelling. Certainly none of them affirm Jesus as "the way" to heaven. Several of them deal with issues that have little or nothing to do with Christianity, and some of these ideas could be seen as heretical by some. I also explained that some of the films would contain profanity and perhaps immoral behavior. I also called attention to the fact that all the films were rated "G," "PG" or "PG-13." We would not be watching any "R" rated films during the study.

After my explanation of the films' content, we moved on to discuss what happened if you missed a viewing. (Surprisingly for me, the participants were very eager to make up missed viewings. I made the films available to those who could not make a specific

meeting and several took advantage of this. One film circulated among at least five people between the viewing and the discussion.) I posed a question about whether they wanted refreshments at the viewing sessions and this question received a resounding response. We circulated a sign-up sheet for refreshments. Then we closed out the organizational meeting by circulating copies of the surveys which were identical to those given to the Sunday School classes throughout the church. Those planning to attend the small group study were asked to take the survey again and were excused upon completing both surveys. (See Appendix E.)

The first Thursday following the organizational meeting, the group met to view the first film: *The Littlest Angel*. Before viewing the film, I explained that we were beginning with this film because I could remember watching it as a child and I believed it shaped my early impressions of what heaven would be like. I also stated that of all the films we would watch, it would most likely be the least troubling. One thing that came out of the viewing which I had not considered was that one of the participants had lost a grandson a few years prior; a friend commented that she knew it was difficult for the grandmother. Later, in conversation with the grandmother, she shared the sadness she felt while watching the film. This situation reminded me again that we all come to movies with our own history and we all view films through the prism of our experiences. When the film ended, I passed out the first reflection sheet and sent the group on their way. (See Appendix F.)

The following Sunday afternoon we met for our first discussion. I shared with the group that my goal was for our discussions to not exceed one hour. I recognized that between the viewing and the discussion I was asking for three hours a week, and this did

not include the time spent on the reflection sheet. Therefore, I would strive to be a good steward of their time during the discussion. One thing became apparent rather quickly: the study participants did not care for the structure of the reflection sheet. Throughout the study, the reflection sheets were constantly changing; that had always been my intent, but it became essential after the feedback I received. Much of our time was spent discussing the images of heaven both positive and negative: clouds, golden gates, white robes, a hierarchy among the angels, windows to earth. Concerning the windows to earth issue, I shared with them the lyrics to a song “Holes in the Floor of Heaven.” I had once performed a funeral where the family insisted upon this song being sung during the service. In spite of the fact that I believed the song contained ridiculous theology I made arrangements for it to be part of the service. (The entire lyrics to the song can be found in Appendix G.) Though it was clear during the discussion that though some members had struggled with the format of the reflection sheet, they had also spent quality time analyzing a small TV movie from the 60’s that was intended to be a simple Christmas special. As I had expected, *The Littlest Angel* was the perfect first film for us to examine. In my mind, after this, each film was going to be more and more challenging.

On Thursday, October 16th, we viewed the second film. When we met, before we started the second film, I felt that I needed to warn the group. The first film, *The Littlest Angel*, had been made for television in the 1960’s. This week’s film, *Made in Heaven*, was made for the cinema and released in 1987; the film contained profanity, including one incident of a character “taking the Lord’s name in vain” and two brief shots of nudity. As I began to warn the group, they immediately put me at ease and stated that they were not holding me responsible for the content of the film. At that point I

explained to them my history with this film. It played in theaters during my seminary days. I had gone to see it with a dear friend and fellow seminarian. I remember how we discussed the images of heaven in the film for days and weeks after our viewing. Just as *The Littlest Angel* had shaped my views of heaven as a child, *Made in Heaven* had challenged my thinking as a young adult. After that explanation from me, we started the film. When it was over, the first comment voiced was “That was a weird movie.” I agreed with the statement. I also shared with them that of the five films we would be watching, this film spent the least amount of time in heaven. I stated that we could have watched only the part which happened in heaven, most of the first third of the movie, but the group all agreed that it was better to watch the whole film. After these brief remarks, I passed out the reflection sheets and everyone departed. (See Appendix H.)

When we came back together the following Sunday, we had a lively discussion about several ideas depicted in the film. I was surprised that more people did not find the “heaven” in the film as appealing as I had found it back in the 1980s when I first saw the movie. For the past twenty years I have often reflected on an “afterlife” like the one in the film. We also discussed several of the elements which made up this version of “heaven.” I asked the question of whether anything in the heaven in the film surprised them. After some effort on my part, I finally led the group around to a discussion on “sex” in heaven. This was only the first film where the issue of sex in heaven would be raised. After the topic came up in our discussion, I shared with them the following quote from C. S. Lewis:

I think our present outlook might be like that of a small boy who, on being told that the sexual act was the highest bodily pleasure should immediately ask whether you ate chocolates at the same time. On receiving the answer “No,” he might regard the absence of chocolates as the chief characteristic of sexuality. In vain would you tell

him that the reason why lovers in their carnal raptures don't bother about chocolates is that they have something better to think of. The boy knows chocolate: he does not know the positive thing that excludes it. We are in the same position. We know the sexual life; we do not know, except in glimpses, the other thing which, in Heaven, will leave no room for it.³¹

Much like my impressions of heaven in the film, I did not feel that the group found Lewis' argument to be as appealing as I did, so we moved on.

Another subject which we discussed was memory. There is a scene in the film where the main character, Mike, runs into his former mailman from his hometown. Mike informs the man that he attended his funeral. The mailman tells Mike that several people from the town gather weekly to discuss their former lives. He invites Mike to join them for their next meeting. For me, the issue of memory is one of the big questions about heaven. Much bigger than sex in heaven. I shared with the group that we will spend a great deal of time discussing the issues of memory with an upcoming film. The final film of the series is all about memories.

There were several other issues which we discussed briefly. The one that seemed to generate the most discussion was reincarnation. I shared with them that this was the first of several films that offered that idea among others. We discussed the Christian position on reincarnation, and the occasions that it is at least implied in scripture. I read to them the following quote from Hans Küng:

Are there not, even in the Old and New Testaments, at least hints of this doctrine, as when the return of the prophet Elijah in the person of John the Baptist is mentioned,...³²

³¹ C. S. Lewis, *Miracles*, (New York: Collier Books, 1960), 159-60.

³² Hans Küng, *Eternal Life?*, (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1984), 63.

Upon reading this quote, one of the group members raised the issue that Elijah never died thus his return would not be reincarnation. Looking back, I did not think quick enough; for regardless of how Elijah journeyed to heaven, through death or fiery chariot, to return to earth through the womb of Elizabeth would most certainly be called a “new incarnation” or a reincarnation. Again, the second film in our series sparked compelling discussions.

On Thursday, October 23, we met to view the third film of the series, *Defending Your Life*. I shared with the group on this occasion that all five of the films fit into different genres. Where *The Littlest Angel* was clearly a family film and *Made in Heaven* was a love story, *Defending Your Life* was most definitely a comedy. (It should be noted that the films used in the series were not revealed ahead of time, and each was revealed individually on the night it was to be viewed by the group.) This was the first film we watched which some of the group members had seen prior to the collective viewing. Again, I warned them of the content. There is some profanity in the film. Some references to sex are also present. And after the previous week’s discussion of reincarnation, I thought it should be pointed out that this issue was central to the plot. I also pointed out that it is stated in the film that the place depicted is **not** heaven.

Before we began the viewing, I shared with the group that I remembered as a child that I heard a preacher talk about your life being viewed on a big screen in heaven and that you were going to have to give account for your actions. You were going to have to literally “defend your life.” The idea of watching your past mistakes on screen is central to the plot of the comedy *Defending Your Life*. In the midst of the humor, this film deals with those issues just as scripture implies a judgment in the next life. After this

introduction, we watched the film. When it ended, there was a much more positive response from the group. Several individuals stated it was the best film yet. I then passed out the reflection sheets and we departed.

Once again, we met three days later, on October 26, to discuss the film. As I was writing the discussion sheet for this session, I tried to make some of the questions more personal. One of the reasons small groups successfully build relationships is because people begin to feel comfortable with one another and can share personal details. The first two weeks, from my perspective, were about voicing some of our thoughts and emotions about heaven. *Defending Your Life*, in spite of the fact many find it to be a hilarious comedy, raises some very personal issues about how one lives one's life. So that latter third to half of the worksheet was designed to challenge the group members to share things about their own lives.

As we begin our discussion, the first thing that surprised me was that some group members disagreed with my wording on the reflection sheet. They did not agree that "courage" was the celebrated virtue of the film but rather "the lack of fear." I never quite understood the difference for them, but they were sure there was a difference. It is true that "courage" is not mentioned in the film, or certainly not as often as the word "fear." Trying to move the conversation beyond debating the difference between "courage" and "lack of fear" I posed the question, "What is our highest virtue or priority as Christians if it is not the lack of fear which seems to be most important in the film?" After a brief silence, I asked, "Is it not faith? Do we not believe as Christians that faith in Jesus Christ is required to enter heaven?" I was amazed by the response. One member spoke up immediately stating that he was not sure that some would not find their way to the eternal

destination without knowing Jesus Christ. I was pleasantly surprised that this statement was offered up. I did not expect “universalism” or anything close to it to be raised in our study. I chose not to spend too much time on the subject, but I did affirm the group member’s opinion and stated that none of us ultimately know who will find his or her way to heaven. (It should be noted that not all members of the group were in attendance for this discussion and I still wonder if the conversation would have gone differently if some absent members had been present. One of the issues which continued to be raised about these secular films was that no one arrived in heaven because of their belief in Jesus.) This third discussion session proved to be as lively, surprising and enlightening as the previous two. (See Appendix I.)

We skipped the following Thursday because of the church-wide Fall Festival and resumed Thursday, November 6, with our fourth film, *What Dreams May Come*. Of all the films we viewed, this one was the most commercially successful. This is probably because it starred Robin Williams and Cuba Gooding Jr. This is also the only film of the five we viewed in the study which won an Academy Award (Best Visual Effects).³³ Several of the group members had seen it back in 1998 when it was released. Of those who had seen it, they said they could remember very little about it. I am not sure what that says about the film.

Before we started the viewing, I once again warned them that there was some language in this film, probably the worst of any of the films. I also pointed out that again, this film deals with the issue of reincarnation in the midst of its depiction of heaven. I am not sure if it was during the intro before the viewing or during the post-

³³ Leonard Maltin, ed., *Leonard Maltin’s 2004 Movie and Video Guide*, (New York: Penguin Group, 2003), 1537.

viewing discussion but some posed the question as to why anyone who had been to heaven would want to go back to earth. I replied, “Perhaps that just proves that filmmakers just do not get it.” As I had done last week, I shared with the group that this was a completely different genre than all the rest. While all the films had a fantasy quality about them, especially since they all depict a world no human can describe, *What Dreams May Come* is the most fantastical film we would be watching so I classify it as a fantasy. Finally I offered one other thought for the group. This is the only film we would watch which not only depicted heaven but also depicted hell. (I have been making a mental list of the films I have seen that depict hell though I am not sure there would be many who would want to be a part of that viewing and discussion.) I stated that we could spend some time discussing the hell section of the film but our main focus was on the images and ideas of heaven which we find in the film. After this we started the movie.

When the film ended, there were some clear expressions of exasperation. Several people stated quickly that they found the film to be too weird. One member commented that she had always wanted to see it before the viewing; after it was over she said, “Well, it was a beautiful film to look at, until they went to hell.” One man in the group said the only thing he could remember from his earlier viewing of the film a decade before was the scene where there are heads coming out of the ground and the main characters must step on the faces. Another person asked from where the title came. With some grumbling, they took the reflection sheets and headed out.

For me what makes *What Dreams May Come* an important film to discuss in a study like ours is the questions it raises about relationships. For me, memory and relationships are the two big questions about heaven. How heaven will look? What we will do there?

Will there be angels? All of this and so much more seem minor compared to the questions of relationships and memories. The last two films in our series deal with these issues in very creative ways.

In writing the reflection sheet for *What Dreams May Come* I structured some of the questions around issues concerning relationships. (See Appendix J.) There is even a quote mentioned in the reflection sheet which implies something about our relationship with God. I found it to be a very compelling quote. For the first time, I also used some of the statistics from the church survey in the reflection sheet. I had been sharing these statistics all along with the group when they were relevant to our discussion. In this week's reflection sheet, I built questions around the opinions of the congregation. I also focused some of the reflection time on the issue of suicide. This is a very prominent issue in the film and one I thought we should cover in our discussion.

On the Sunday night, November 9, when we met, the discussion about suicide was actually the most involved. Ultimately, our group concluded that we did not agree with the theology of the film which implied that all those who commit suicide end up in hell. After the discussion was over, one of the members of our group who rarely spoke up said to me privately that she feared the movie perhaps encouraged suicide because the mother in the film got to see her deceased children by committing suicide. I replied that this was an interesting theory but we would have no way of ever knowing what pushed someone to that extreme. I also shared this night from where the title originated. The title, *What Dreams May Come*, is the title of the novel upon which the film is based. The book's title is taken from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* during the soliloquy when he poses the question, "To be or not to be..." The entire passage states:

For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
 When we have shuffled off this mortal coil
 Must give us pause.³⁴

Even with the strong opinions that the movie was strange, we still had a hearty conversation and I was pleased with our fourth discussion session. I also knew that as much as the fourth film frustrated them, the fifth and final film was sure to exasperate the group even more.

Our fifth and final viewing took place on Thursday evening, November 13. I started with the good news. This week's film contained no nudity, bad language or violence. There were a couple of brief references to sex, but other than that there was little in the film that could be found objectionable. This was the longest film of the five coming in at 118 minutes. I also shared with them that this week's film was my favorite of the five. It had been almost ten years since I first viewed the film and I have never forgotten it. In fact, I find myself thinking about it often and trying to answer for myself the main question of the film. I assured them that no one in the group had seen it. I also stated that it made less than one million dollars at the box office. Then I read a quote to them about the movie from film critic Kenneth Turan:

You could spend eternity watching movies and not see one with the qualities of *After Life*. That's how special, how original this intimate Japanese film is. ...*After Life* is simple in structure but poignant almost beyond words in effect. A meditation on the randomness of pleasure, of memory, of life itself, *After Life*'s story of a week spent at an unusual facility starts slowly and simply yet ends up as close to transcendent as cinema gets....In its examination of what is fleeting and what remains, *After Life* is not only perceptive, it leavens everything it touches with a surprisingly sly sense of humor. Few films about death or about life for that matter, leave you feeling so affirmative about existence.³⁵

That quote alone was quite a build-up for what they were about to watch.

³⁴ Hamlet, III, i, 82-84.

³⁵ Turan, *Never Coming to a Theater Near You*, 163- 165.

Following the quote, I explained that while *What Dreams May Come* had been made with millions of dollars and won an Oscar for visual effects, this film was very cheaply made with no special effects and very simple sets. I also shared with them that this film dealt with the issue of memory in the next life in a way that no other film does. And even though the film is not actually set in heaven, but rather at a way station between earth and heaven, it poses great questions about what comes next. Then I finally gave them the bad news: “This is a Japanese film and you will have to read subtitles.” There was a lot of moans at this announcement. I ended up being very surprised at the number of people in the group who had never watched a foreign film. When the grumbling dissipated, I started the film. When it was over, one lady in the group spoke up about how much she enjoyed the film. Others were not so complimentary, but all took reflection sheets and departed.

Because of a conflict I had on Sunday, we would not gather for our last session until the following Thursday night. During the next seven days, this much-maligned movie passed through the hands and DVD players of several group members who had missed the viewing. Even though the film was not loved by the members, everyone seemed to want to see it before the final session. I personally was looking very forward to the final discussion session. I arrived for our last meeting extra early because I had wanted to set the room up differently. In previous sessions the room had been set up with tables and chairs and everyone sat at the various tables. In fact, during a couple of the sessions I had even allowed the smaller groups around tables to discuss things and then come back to the entire group with their thoughts. I wanted this last session to be as personal as

possible, so I arranged the chairs in a large circle with no tables present, nothing between any participant and all the others.

The final reflection sheet was designed to be the most personal. (See Appendix K.) I hoped and prayed that individuals would be willing to share their personal feelings about what they would most like to remember from this life in the next life. I knew to instigate this type of conversation, I needed to share my memory first. I had wrestled with the major question of the film for almost ten years since I first saw it in 1999. I had never concluded which single memory I would want with me for all eternity. Only a few weeks before the discussion time had I decided on a memory. Sharing it with the group would be difficult and challenging. I expected to become emotional, and I did not disappoint myself. But my honest reflection, and perhaps my tears as well, I believe allowed others to be absolutely honest. Not everyone shared, but of those who did, it was clear that they had put some thought into the exercise.

We also talked about the nature of memory and I reiterated to the group how important I believe the issue of memory in heaven is. We spent time going over the memory verses on the reflection sheet and discussing whether these actually affirm the reality of memory in the next life or not. Though the film was not enjoyed by most of the group, the ideas of the film seemed to inspire them and I was glad of that. As stated above, the fifth film, *After Life*, was my favorite film of the study, and it certainly fostered the best night of discussion.

After our discussion was over, I passed out the final surveys and asked the group members to fill them out and return them to me the next Sunday. Following our final reflection session, the majority of the group went out to dinner together and shared in a

wonderful time of fellowship. I was grateful to the commitment of those involved in the study, and grateful that I had experienced this study with this group of people. I hoped it planted seeds in all of them to seek out more small group experiences in the coming days.

Discoveries: The Church-Wide Surveys

The Survey on Heaven

The first survey, which dealt with perceptions of “heaven,” was given to all the adult Sunday School classes on September 14, 2008. (See Appendix A.) The survey was explained and administered by the members of the Education Committee and myself. One hundred and fifty-eight individuals filled out this survey; I was very pleased with this quantity of participants. There were 21 questions on the survey. Most of them I divided up into one of six categories because these were the main issues I wanted the small group to explore through the films and the discussions. The six categories were memory, judgment, relationships in heaven, returning to earth as spirits, angels, and the appearance of heaven. In compiling the data, I added statistics for one additional category: the view from heaven. This was added because I found the results interesting, and we did discuss this within the small group study even though it was not one of our main focuses. The results of the church-wide surveys revealed some interesting and often predictable results.

In the consideration of what one might remember in heaven from one’s earthly life the first question offered an eternity with no memories of the previous life. Only 17% of those surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that Christians will remember nothing from this

life in the next. 24% were unsure about no memories. The vast majority, 59%, of those surveyed disagreed or strongly disagreed with the idea that nothing would be remembered. The results were a little closer when the idea was presented of only remembering the good things from this life: 33.5% agreed or strongly agreed with this idea, 39.5% disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 27% were unsure. Though more still disagreed with this idea, the results were much closer to a three-way tie for this question than the others. This three-way dead heat would occur again in the following question. The last question on memory stated that one will remember everything about one's earthly existence when he arrives in heaven. 37% agreed or strongly agreed with this idea; 30.5% were unsure; 32.5% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the idea of remembering everything in the next life. Considering these statistics, the one thing which disturbed the most people was the idea of not remembering anything in heaven. As I would later state to the small group, often the idea of no memories in heaven is an idea that creates anxiety for me as well. It would seem that the congregation is in line with my preferences when it comes to memory. (See Appendix L.)

A second issue related to the next life was judgment. The statement posed was a simple one: "There will be a judgment in the next life." 76% of those surveyed agreed or strongly agreed with this assertion. This figure is over five times more than those who disagreed or strongly disagreed (15%) with this idea. Only 9% were unsure. It would be interesting to see the age breakdowns on the responses to this question. Considering that the majority of those participating in the survey were over fifty years of age, and most had probably grown up as I did, hearing harsh sermons about the coming judgment. And also most of those surveyed probably have at least some knowledge of what scripture

states about being judged in the next life, I am not surprised by the congregation's opinion on this question. I would very much like to interview the 15% who disagreed about a coming judgment. (See Appendix M.)

The third issue was another favorite of mine: relationships. Three questions were posed about the continuation of earthly relationships in heaven. The first question received the highest agreement totals of any question on the church-wide survey. The statement was "I will know people in heaven but the character of the relationship will be different." 84% agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. I am confident that all of those who agreed with the statement were thinking of Jesus' words in Matt 22:30: "*For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.*" Only 7% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the idea of the character of relationships changing in heaven, with 9% being unsure. When faced with the idea that earthly relationships would be meaningless in heaven, there was a notable shift. 45% disagreed or strongly disagreed with this idea; 18% were unsure; and 37% agreed or strongly agreed. These numbers were almost matched when the issue of missing those not with one in heaven. (This question really combines both the issues of relationships and memory.) For the idea of missing individuals from one's earthly life, 36% agreed or strongly agreed, 22% were unsure and 41.5% disagreed or strongly disagreed. Ultimately, the greatest consensus came from the question on the character of relationships, the one issue that seems most clearly addressed by Jesus in the scriptures. (See Appendix N.)

The fourth issue was raised in one question on the survey: "Individuals can come back to earth from heaven as spirits." As for the idea of ghosts, a great deal more people were

either unsure or totally disagreed with the idea than those who agreed with the thought of spirits returning. Only 20% agreed with the idea. 27% were unsure, which is obviously the safest answer. 53% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the concept that people could return to earth as spirits. We spent some time during the small group study pointing out that scripture does not categorically deny the possibility of spirits among us. Perhaps 53% of the surveyed congregation skipped those passages. (See Appendix O.)

Closely related to the issue of spirits walking the earth, there is the issue of angels and whether human beings become angels in the next life. I was pleased to see that only 25% of those surveyed agreed that humans do become angels, especially considering it is difficult to support this idea with scripture. Another 31% were unsure. If I had to guess, I would say that this group has been confused by movies through the years which depict humans becoming angels. (The fact that Hollywood has influenced an incorrect theology of angels is just one example of the ways films have shaped unbiblical ideas about the divine realm. The films we watched during the study offered many other non-biblical ideas of what one might find in heaven.) 44% pleased me by disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with the idea that humans become angels; that is almost double the number who agreed with that idea. (See Appendix P.)

There were six questions which dealt with the appearance of heaven. The issues considered were a banquet, plants and trees, streets of gold, clouds, everyone wearing a crown, and God upon his throne. 77% agreed or strongly agreed that God is seated upon a throne in heaven. 68% agreed that they expect to see a banquet. 57% believe there will be streets of gold. And 56% plan to see trees and plants in heaven. On the opposite end of the spectrum, only 17% agreed or strongly agreed with the idea that clouds will be

everywhere in heaven. And a mere 12% embrace the idea that everyone will wear a jeweled crown in heaven. 57% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the idea of the jeweled crowns; I would like to hope that was a rejection of earthly materialism existing in heaven. It should also be noted that crowns, clouds and plants in heaven all left almost one third of those surveyed unsure. In the midst of much certainty by some, perhaps others find it difficult to imagine the eternal destination. (See Appendix Q.)

One final area where the data from the surveys was considered: the view from heaven. This issue would be discussed during the small group study, and the results of the church-wide survey are quite interesting. When asked if one in heaven can see what is happening in hell, only 17% agreed or strongly agreed with this idea, 31% were unsure and 43% disagreed or strongly disagreed. When the question was about seeing what is happening on earth while in heaven, the numbers almost flipped exactly with 40% agreeing or strongly agreeing, 35% being unsure, and 25% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. Considering the parable of "*Lazarus and the Rich Man*" (Luke 16: 19-31), it seems that Jesus offered some support for the idea that one could see into heaven from hell. If this is true, one could theorize that an individual could also see into hell from heaven, if Abraham had a view of the rich man during their conversation. And yet, those surveyed among the congregation seem to believe in a view of earth from heaven far more readily than a view of hell from heaven. This too was discussed in the small group study. (See Appendix R.)

These seven categories cover almost all the information gleaned from the surveys and specifically they reflect the primary issues which would be discussed during the small group study. For the most part, the answers from the Sunday School classes were not

shocking or disappointing, yet upon occasion the responses were intriguing. How closely these results matched the surveys from the participants in the small group study will be considered below.

Discoveries: The Church-Wide Surveys

The Survey on Small Groups

When the congregation was surveyed about small groups on Sunday, September 21, there were few real surprises in the results. One hundred and fifty-five persons participated in the surveys and questions were asked about three specific small group experiences. The first experience was the small groups which were a part of the *40 Days of Purpose* study in which the congregation participated. 45% of those surveyed stated they participated in a small group during this event. Of those involved in the small groups, over 92% of them reported that the small group time enhanced their learning experience and their ability to retain information. 94% agreed that their fellow group members challenged and inspired them to think in new ways. The most interesting thing is that though these figures are very high, these three questions received the most negatives responses. This affirms the truth that for those who were surveyed, the small group experience during the *40 Days* was a beneficial time for the participants.

The second set of questions concerned participation in small group experiences other than the *40 Days of Purpose*. The population which has participated in these studies was less than those above with the totals coming in at 36%. This number confirms what was stated earlier concerning the resistance overall to small groups as a learning experience within the church. Barely more than one third of the congregation has been a part of a

small group outside of the *40 Days*. Again, all the data from those who participated in small groups was very positive. Two figures which stand out are 93% agree that small groups provide opportunities to meet new friends or get to know someone better and small groups enhance the ability to retain information. The surveys show that the vast majority of those who embrace the small group experience ultimately feel rewarded for the time and effort given.

The third set of questions concerning small groups was placed on the survey as a reminder or perhaps an effort in teaching. These questions were about the Sunday School experience. It was my desire to remind all those surveyed that small groups are not a new experience in church life. Ultimately, every Sunday School class is a small group. While often times small groups are structured around a specific idea of study, the small groups that make up the Sunday School of First Baptist Church of Albemarle are mostly structured around age. However, many of the same attributes of small group studies and Sunday School classes are identical. Remembering that this survey was administered in Sunday School classes, it is not surprising that 97% of those who responded stated that they are active in Sunday School. Most of the other questions received a 100% response except one. Of those surveyed 5.5% stated that their classmates did not inspire or challenge them to think about scriptures differently. Perhaps the individuals who stated this feel they already know all there is to know about the scriptures, or perhaps they have been in class together so long, they believe they already know everything their class members think about the scriptures. Again, including Sunday School in the survey was more about reminding the congregation that small groups happen every Sunday than discovering any original truths about the experience.

There was one final question on the survey which was a very general question. “Would you be willing in the future to be part of a small group experience at First Baptist Church?” Those surveyed were asked to answer yes or no to Sunday School and to other small group experiences. Surprisingly, 66% responded that they would be willing to be in a small group other than Sunday School in the future. If this percentage actually did get involved it would result in a major increase in those participating in small group studies. Ultimately, a shift such as this could change lives and change the church. At the very least the education committee should be encouraged by these optimistic figures. (See Appendix S.)

Discoveries: Pre-Study Surveys of Small Group Participants

The Survey on Heaven

At the end of the organizational meeting of the “Glimpses of Heaven” small group, all those present were asked to take the same surveys which had already been distributed throughout the congregation. The following data are the results from the Pre-Study Surveys.

Considering the questions about memory in heaven, which as I have already pointed out is my favorite topic of the study, some interesting trends appeared when the small group participants were polled before the beginning of the study. There were three questions on memory all grouped together. The first question offered a heaven where no memories from earth would exist and this was rejected by 57% of those taking the survey. In fact, excluding the 29% who were unsure, those who disagree outnumber

those who agree (14%) at a higher ratio than four to one. When asked whether one would remember only the good things from the earthly life, both the number of those who agree and those who were unsure increased as those who disagreed decreased. The final option was a complete memory of one's earthly life which again increased those in agreement and those who were unsure while continuing to decrease those who disagreed. One can certainly conclude from the responses that more of those surveyed felt comfortable with the idea of some memories going with one into the next life, though they were not conclusive on which memories those would be. (See Appendix T.)

It should be noted that the numbers of those surveyed during the pre-survey differed slightly from the surveys given to the entire church. Where 14% agreed and 57% disagreed about no memories in heaven in the pre-survey, among the congregation the numbers were 17% agreement and 59% disagreement. In the church-wide survey, 33.5% agreed that only the good things would be remembered in the next life, while only 18% of those taking the pre-study survey agreed with this idea. The largest increase on this question about remembering the good of one's earthly life came from those who were unsure: 27% among the congregation, 37% among the small group participants. The church-wide survey revealed that 37% believe one will remember everything about this life in the afterlife while only 24% would agree with this among the study participants. Those who disagreed with the idea of remembering everything stayed about the same at 32% (church-wide) and 32.5% (pre-study) respectively. Once again, those who were unsure increased dramatically from 30.5% among the entire congregation to a pre-study score of 41%. It seems for the issue of memory in heaven, those about to participate in a small group study on heaven are overall more uncertain than the congregation had been

about what memories they will carry with them into the next plain of existence. (See Appendices L and T.)

Judgment was another issue we focused on in the small group study. (See Appendix U.) Of all the ideas surveyed, the participants felt the strongest about this. A total of 86% agreed or strongly agreed that there would be a judgment in the next life. The certainty of this above all else is based perhaps on a knowledge of scripture but also, I believe, this certainty lies in the innate need Christians have to believe that there will be justice, if not in this life, then in the next. Before we had even discussed anything about heaven, I already knew the group going through the small group study, at least 86% of them, were confident that “Judgment Day” is coming. It should also be noted that of those surveyed, no one involved in the study marked “unsure” during the Pre-Survey. Within the congregation, 9% of those surveyed stated that they were unsure. This 9% “unsure” and a 1% difference in those who disagreed with the idea is why the congregational agreement was at 76% versus the 86% registered among those participating in the study.³⁶

A third issue which was discussed a great deal during the study was the issue of relationships. There were three questions on the “Heaven” survey which deal with what earthly relationships will be like in heaven. One question asks about the character of relationships and a huge majority (89%) of the participants agreed that the character of relationships would be altered. When asked if earthly relationships would be meaningless in heaven, 50% again agreed that this was true. Of the questions posed about relationships, the only one which caused the majority to reject the statement was

³⁶ Within the congregation, 9% of those surveyed stated that they were unsure. See Church-Wide Surveys- Appendix M.

the question asked whether one would miss those who are not in heaven; 56% of the small group participants believed that those in heaven would not miss those who are not there. (See Appendix V.)

These numbers matched fairly close with those of the church-wide survey. 84% of congregation members agreed that the character of relationships would change which is very close to the 89% among the pre-study group. There was however some disagreement (7%) among the congregation. There were also more in the overall congregation who disagreed with the notion that earthly relationships would be meaningless in heaven. As for missing people who are not in heaven, 36% among the congregation agreed that they would miss others versus the 18% who agreed in the pre-study. This change came mainly from a shift of those who agreed to those who did not agree. It would seem that the participants in the study were overall more ready to dismiss earthly relationships once in heaven. (See Appendices N and V.)

Another issue that the small group participants felt rather strongly about was the issue of returning to the earth as spirits. As with the congregation, the study participants rejected the idea by an overwhelming majority. In fact, in comparing the two survey results there were only minor shifts of three percentage points or less. The final tally showed that those who disagreed with the notion of ghosts coming from heaven outnumbered those who agree with the possibility at a rate of almost three to one. Those unsure make up a little less than one third of the group and outnumber those who agree by a margin of 12%. If you add the “unsures” to those who disagree or strongly disagree those who agree are outnumbered more than four to one. Very few people participating

in the small group were comfortable with the notion of returning spirits before the study began. (See Appendices O and W.)

The matter of angels has been a topic of interest among Christians for quite some time. The one question concerning angels received varying responses among those participating in the small group study. 22% believe that humans become angels in heaven. 26% are unsure. The other 52 percent disagree or strongly disagree. Therefore, almost half of those participating in the study are at least open to the idea that humans can become angels even though there is nothing in the Bible which implies such an idea. Several of the films viewed during the study definitely imply this idea, thus it will be interesting to see if exposure to this concept followed by discussion will change any beliefs. The largest shift between the church-wide survey and the pre-study survey was the number of those who strongly disagreed; this went from 11% church-wide to 19% among study participants. Clearly, the study participants have a stronger resistance to the idea of humans becoming angels than the overall church does. (See Appendices P and X.)

The appearance of heaven was the last of the six primary issues we explored in the study. A majority believed that there will be a banquet (63% agreed), plants and trees (52%), and God upon His throne (68%) in heaven. (The question concerning plants in heaven is the single question for which I received the most casual comments from the general congregation and the small group participants.) On the other hand, more disagreed with the ideas that heaven would have streets of gold³⁷ (46% to 39% who agreed), jeweled crowns for the residents³⁸ (69% disagreed), and clouds everywhere³⁹

³⁷ See Rev 21:21.

³⁸ See Rev 2:10, 3:11.

(54%). Each of these ideas could be supported by scripture, and yet most felt inclined to disagree with these ideas. (See Appendix Y.)

The results of the pre-survey mirrored the congregation's responses in many ways. In fact, the congregation affirmed the idea of a banquet (68%), plants in heaven (52%) and God on His throne (77%) in heaven with greater majorities in two out of the three categories. A small percentage more agreed with jeweled crowns (12%) and clouds (17%) but overall, as with the pre-study, most disagreed with these ideas (57% and 50% respectively). The biggest difference was among the responses to the idea that heaven would have streets of gold. Among the pre-study group only 39% embraced this idea; among the congregation, 57% agreed that the streets of heaven would be made with one of earth's most precious metals. (See Appendices Q and Y.)

Though it was not one of the six primary issues of the small group study, one final set of questions should be noted. The second and third questions on the survey deal with the idea of what one can see from heaven. Put another way, "What is the view from heaven?" This idea of being able to see what is happening on earth is presented in *The Littlest Angel* and was discussed following that film. This idea, as already discussed, is prominent in the song "*Holes in the Floor of Heaven.*" (See Appendix G.) And the issue of seeing into hell from heaven was discussed following the viewing of *What Dreams May Come*. During the pre-study surveying, the greatest number of participants (48%) felt that one could not see into hell from heaven. However more people agreed you could see what was happening on earth than disagreed with this idea of watching over the

³⁹ Dan 7:13; I Thess 4:17.

planet. Over 40% of those polled were unsure about the ability to see earth, more than either those who agreed or disagreed with having a view of one's former home. 33% were unsure about seeing into hell. Jesus told a parable about the rich man seeing into heaven from hell and having a conversation with Abraham. One could argue that Abraham also had a vision of the rich man during the conversation and yet nearly twice as many believe that one can see earth from heaven than those who believe one can see into hell from heaven. Perhaps there is a comfort in the idea that one can see one's earthly family and friends from the beyond. (See Appendix Z.)

Comparing the numbers from the congregation and the pre-study group, there is very little difference on the question of seeing into hell: 17% agreement versus 19%; 31% unsure versus 33%, and 52% disagreement versus 48% respectively. When it came to the question on seeing what was happening on earth, the greatest shifts came from those unwilling to make a commitment. Among the congregation, only 35% were unsure; among the study group participants, the number of "unsures" increased to 44%. Those participating in the study were more eager to commit to a view or lack of a view of hell from heaven than they were willing to make a ruling on the view of earth from paradise. (See Appendix R and Z.)

The Survey on Small Groups

The participants in the small group study did not offer any surprises when they completed the survey on the small group experience. 100% of them were involved in the Sunday School program of the church, which I would have expected this level of involvement. 77% of them had participated in a small group during the "40 Days of

Purpose” experience, which is much higher than the response to this question on the church-wide survey (45%). 62% of them had been involved in other small group studies within the church at some time. This number is almost twice the number of those previously involved in small groups in the church-wide survey (36%). Therefore, only a little over one third of the participants were coming into this small group experience as novices. The question concerning this 38% is whether they would exit the study on heaven eager for more small group experiences or determined to never invest their time again. (See Appendices S and AA.)

There were some negative things, albeit from a tiny minority, cited about small group experiences. 6% had something negative to say about past small group experiences other than Sunday School or “40 Days” groups. 9% found something negative about the “40 Days of Purpose” small group experience. 4.5% found fault with their Sunday School class experience. And 2% admitted that they would probably not participate in another small group study following the end of the study on heaven. Ultimately, those who agreed to join the study came into the group with experience in small group settings, ready to be challenged about their ideas of heaven and mostly feeling very positive about the experience that awaited them. (See Appendix AA.)

Discoveries: Exit Surveys of Small Group Participants

The Survey on Heaven

The heaven survey given to the participants following the six week Bible study was exactly the same as the one distributed to Sunday School classes and taken by the participants at the beginning of the study. The goal was to see if any opinions had shifted

during the concentrated time of study, discussion and exposure to different ideas about heaven through the films viewed. Again the responses will be considered in groups of related ideas.

The first answers which were compared were those dealing with memory. In the intro-survey 14% believed they would remember nothing about their earthly lives in heaven with 29% being unsure. 57% disagreed with idea that nothing from this life would be remembered. In the exit-survey a shift had occurred among the small group participants with only 8% being unsure, and 92% disagreeing or disagreeing strongly. Much of the discussion time, especially following the viewing of *After Life*, centered on how much is remembered after death. A shift also happened with respect to the question about only remembering “the good things” from one’s earthly life. Those who agreed increased from 18% to 29%. Those who disagreed or strongly disagreed increased from 45% to 64%. However, the greatest shift happened among those who had previously chosen “unsure”; this shift moved from 37% to 7%. The third question, which stated that one would remember “everything” about this life in heaven, again showed a shift similar to the question before it. Those who agreed increased from 24% to 43%; those who disagreed increased from 33% to 50%; and only those who were unsure decreased from 40% to 7%. Perhaps in the Intro-Survey many of the participants had never really thought about these issues of memory, so “unsure” seemed to be the most honest answer. If nothing else, the small group study had raised new questions for them. (See Appendices T and BB.)

The second focus issue which is reflected in the surveys is judgment. In the intro-surveys 86% of the small group members stated that they agree with the idea that there

will be a judgment in heaven. Following the study, 100% agreed or strongly agreed. We spent a significant amount of time on this issue during the discussions and it is not surprising that all those involved believe there will be some type of judgment following this life. Once again, as with the latter two memory questions, the primary shift is away from an answer of “unsure.” (See Appendices U and CC.)

Relationships were the next subject of comparison between the Intro-Surveys and the Exit-Surveys. For the question which stated that one would know people from their earthly life but the “character of the relationship will be different” there was only a slight change of opinion: 88% to 92% agreeing; 11% to 8% unsure. There were no disagreements with this question before or after the study. The following question stated that earthly relationships would be “meaningless” in heaven and recorded surveys showed a dramatic shift in this area. In the Intro-Survey, 48% agreed or strongly agreed with this idea, 15% were unsure and 37% disagreed. In the Exit-Survey, only 23% agreed, 15% were unsure, and 61% disagreed or strongly disagreed. It should be noted that all five of the films viewed dealt with earthly and heavenly relationships extensively. Perhaps this influenced the issue. Also, this topic was prevalent in our discussion sessions, especially after viewing the films *Made in Heaven* and *What Dreams May Come*. The final question about relationships raised the issue of “missing those who are not in heaven.” 56% disagreed with this idea in the Intro-Surveys and 54% disagreed in the Exit-Surveys. The only shift that occurred on this question came from those who agreed or were unsure about this idea. Previously only 18% agreed with 26% being unsure. Following the study the numbers changed to 31% agreeing and only 15% being unsure. Once again the idea of “missing or longing for those not in heaven” is an idea

explored in several of the films viewed, and this may have led to the transition among some participants from “unsure” to “agreement” now that the idea that one will miss those not with him in heaven has been explored by some individuals for the first time. (See Appendices V and DD.)

The idea of returning to earth as a “spirit” or “ghost” was also present in two of the films the small group watched and this issue was discussed extensively. The group also considered the story of the Witch of Endor conjuring up the ghost of Samuel at King Saul’s request. Before the study, 18% agreed and 30% were unsure about the possibility of spirits coming to earth from heaven. Therefore, 48% were at least open to the idea with 52% disagreeing with the possibility. Even with a discussion which affirmed the truth that scripture did not offer a definitive answer on the question, a strong shift against the issue occurred. In the Exit-Survey, only 15% agreed with the idea of returning spirits, 8% stated they were unsure, and 77% disagreed with the idea. This is another example of a shift away from the direction of the discussion during the small group study. (See Appendices W and EE.)

The single question on angels in the “Heaven Survey” again received varied responses. Before the small group study, 22% agreed that humans can become angels; following the study those agreeing increased to 31%. Those who disagreed grew in number as well, 52% to 61%. The only group which decreased were those unsure; this group shrank from 26% to 8%. While I was glad to see the number of those who disagreed increased, I am a little concerned that the number of those agreeing increased. During the study, as stated above, we discussed that this is not a biblical idea that humans become angels. Ironically, this is an idea which has been promoted by Hollywood for

years in numerous movies.⁴⁰ This may be but one example of how the cinema is shaping theological opinion as much as the study of scripture. It was not however one of the goals of this study to encourage anyone to believe that humans become angels. (See Appendices X and FF.)

There were six questions which dealt with descriptions of heaven. On the issue of a “banquet table” those exiting the small group study showed little change in opinion. In the Intro-Survey, 63% agreed or strongly agreed that there would be a banquet table in heaven; in the Exit-Survey, there was a slight increase to 65%. Those unsure increased from 26% to 29% with those who disagreed decreasing from 11% to 6%. Only two of the films we watched focused in any way on the issue of food in the afterlife, but it seems important to those surveyed. Those agreeing that there would be plant life in heaven increased from 52% to 58% however there was an increase in those who disagreed with this idea as well: 11% to 21%. Only the unsure votes decreased on this question from 37% to 21%. Four of the five films depicted a heaven with foliage and the one film which did not depict plants, made an issue of the absence of plant life (*The Littlest Angel*). Oddly enough, the idea of God seated on the throne in heaven dropped among those who agreed (68% to 62%) and those who were unsure (11% to 0%). The only group that increased in this category was those who disagreed with this image of God seated on a throne (21% to 38%). Only one film of the five depicted God seated on a heavenly throne. Three of the others made reference to him, but never showed an actual figure. The fifth film did not mention him at all. In the Intro-Survey, 39% agreed that

⁴⁰ Such films as *The Preacher’s Wife*, *It’s a Wonderful Life*, and *Teen Angel* all depict human beings becoming angels in the afterlife.

heaven would have streets of gold; this figure dropped to 31% in the Exit-Survey. Those unsure dropped from 15% to 8%. The only increase on this question was those who disagreed (46% to 61%). None of the films we watched showed a heaven with streets of gold. All who had agreed with the idea of jeweled crowns in heaven during the Intro-Survey (11%) changed their mind for the Exit-Survey. Those unsure went from 20% to 23% and those who disagreed increased from 69% to 77%. None of the films we viewed depicted the rewards of the next life as material things, or at least not as trivial items like jeweled crowns. Only 15% of those taking the Intro-Survey agreed or strongly agreed with the idea that there were clouds throughout heaven. This number increased to 23% on the Exit-Survey. Those unsure decreased from 31% to 23%. The participants who disagreed with this often-depicted idea of heaven stayed the same at 54%. Only one of the five films we viewed showed heaven as a place in the clouds. (See Appendices Y and GG.)

Though it was not one of the six primary categories of consideration, a seventh category was considered during the summary of the Intro-Surveys. A consideration of the Exit-Surveys may be beneficial as well. There were two questions on the survey about the view from heaven: what one can see from the divine realm. The first question raised the issue of whether those in heaven could see into hell. In the Intro-Survey, 19% agreed that it was possible; by the Exit-Survey, this figure had dropped to only 9%. Those unsure also dropped from 35% to 27%. Only those who disagreed increased their numbers from 48% to 64%. As for the view of earth from heaven those agreeing with this idea moved from 30% to 46% while those unsure shifted from 44% to 46% and those who disagreed dropped from 26% to 8%. Only one of the five films depicted a window

to anywhere and it was to earth. However, during the discussion time we talked about this issue at great length and it seemed at the time that the majority felt a view of earth from heaven is unlikely. (See Appendices Z and HH.)

From these numbers, it is difficult to discern what effect the films or the follow-up discussions had on the opinions of the participants. In some cases there was significant shifting and not always in the direction toward conclusions drawn during discussion times. For some their opinions moved; for others, I believe, they only discovered support for their long-held beliefs.

I do believe several factors affected how individuals responded to the ideas of the films and following discussions. First, I think ideas about heaven are tied in many cases to early learning experiences. (This could be said about a whole host of topics.) What one was taught about heaven as a child by parents, Sunday School teachers or a minister produces a foundation which is difficult to move. My journey, as I have stated elsewhere, has been influenced by films through the years. Others may not have shared this experience, but were influenced by perhaps many years of sermons describing heaven in the same way. I also wonder if the conversations among study members did not influence some of the shifting or inactivity in the surveys. I know the group members talked about the films and the reflection sheets outside of the discussion sessions. Opinions were aired and perhaps debated. Conclusions may have shifted or been confirmed at these times. Finally, I stated many times to the group that many of the things we discussed cannot be answered in this life. Acknowledging this creates a great freedom for group members. Heaven is far too vague an idea, even taking into account what scripture says about it. Individuals may feel the liberty to make up their own minds,

in spite of what may have been promoted by the group leader as the soundest idea to embrace. So between long-held beliefs from one's past, the influence of others outside of the discussion sessions, and the announced freedom to discern the truth of these matters on one's own, on several occasions the shifts away from the ideas of the study occurred. And for the same reasons, sometimes opinions were not changed in spite of the information shared.

The Survey on Small Groups

Of course, the major goal of the project was not so much to change anyone's mind about heaven but to rather discern the opinions about this type of experience of study from those who participated in the small group. It should again be noted that all the participants in the "Heaven Study" went into the small group experience with fairly positive opinions of "small group studies." (Albeit this particular experience, with the use of secular films and follow-up discussions, is structured differently than anything anyone in the group had experienced.) It should also be noted that the Exit-Survey on Small Groups was a completely different survey than had been used at any other point with the entire congregation or the pre-study participants in the small group experience. The Exit-Survey was written to include both questions about the "study on heaven" as well as questions about small groups in general. (See Appendix II.) The following are the results from this survey.

The first two questions measured participation by those involved in the study. 85% of the participants watched all five of the films which were part of the study. Another 8%

saw four of the five. The participants had the option to watch the films at home if they could not attend the group viewing. This option allowed for 93% of the group to see at least four out of five of the films. As for the discussion groups that followed up the film viewing, 77% of the participants attended at least four of the discussion sessions and 85% attended at least three. Overall the participation in the film viewing aspect of the study was higher than the participation in discussions, but collectively, I was pleased with the overall commitment I witnessed among the group members. (See Appendix JJ.)

Questions 3 and 4 measured opinions on the content of the study. The first asked which film depicted the more relatable image of heaven. This was not intended to be a question about which film was liked the most. However, personal opinions about the qualities of the film may have influenced the answers. I was actually surprised that a film, *What Dreams May Come*, which had received little praise from the group following the viewing of the film, ended up scoring the highest. I was not surprised that no one chose the Asian film *After Life* which had been maligned for its pace and subtitles. I suppose most of the members struggled with the idea of a heaven where everyone does not speak English. This film, as stated above, is my favorite and offers an idea about the next life which I find very relatable.

Question 4 asked the participants to rate the six primary issues of the discussions by how interesting they found each of them. The order of interest among the six categories from most interesting to least is relationships, memory, judgment, angels, returning to earth as spirits, and the appearance of heaven. I was pleased to see the high ranking that relationships and memory received as I often emphasized to the group that questions

about these two issues with respect to one's experience in heaven are the most intriguing and profound questions for me. (See Appendix KK.)

Among the other questions asked on the survey, there were some interesting responses. Everyone agreed that small group studies were a valuable learning experience. Of those involved in the study, 84% had been involved in fewer than six small group experiences over the last five years. When the question was raised about facilitating a small group in the future, almost one fourth of the participants (23%) said that they would be willing to take on this leadership role. Of those involved in the study, only one member has prior experience in leading small groups, so I found it encouraging that others were willing to consider this role. When asked if they would get involved in another small group experience in the future, 92% agreed that they would. I am not sure whether the 8% would not desire to be involved in a small group again because of their experience with this study or because they were only involved in this study because of the nature of the study. One or two may have been in the study to help their pastor with his doctoral project. Of those in the small group study, 23%, almost one fourth, stated that they were currently involved in another small group experience. This is not surprising; as stated above, those who chose to be part of the study tended to be individuals who had already embraced the idea of small group studies. Finally, when asked to rank the most appealing aspects of the small group experience, the group sited "Being challenged to think" as the most appealing aspect of this learning experience. "Learning new things" was a close second. "Hearing the ideas of others" was a distant third. Surprisingly, the two aspects "Developing relationships" and "Getting to know new people" both ranked much lower overall than the three other categories. Considering

all the discussions of small groups creating opportunities to build relationships, for those who participated in “Glimpses of Heaven” that was far down the list of what makes the small group experience so appealing. All of these numbers are encouraging or insightful in their own way, but I am especially pleased that there some of the participants are now considering leading small groups. (See Appendix LL.)

After tabulating and reviewing data from six different surveys, the outcomes often display expected results, but occasionally offer new and unexpected conclusions. I am grateful to a congregation, and a party of small group participants who willingly submitted to these surveys.

CHAPTER THREE THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

From the beginning of the Christian faith, the idea of an afterlife and what that experience might entail has enthralled believers. In fact, Rabbi David Wolpe, among others, believes that the concept of a heavenly afterlife was adopted by the Hebrew people during their period of enslavement under the Egyptians, a population who already had a developed concept of what came next.⁴¹ Though some, like James D. Tabor, would say: “No concept of heaven and hell is anywhere in the Hebrew Bible.”⁴², others find one reference in the Old Testament, Dan 12:1-3, which has been described as “the only passage in the Hebrew Bible that refers unambiguously to life after death”⁴³ and which predates Christ by more than one hundred and fifty years (167 to 165 B.C.)⁴⁴ And perhaps there are other Old Testament passages which can be interpreted as speaking of an after-life destination. However in the Hebrew Scriptures there are not consistent doctrines for what happens to the dead. It seems that many feel this knowledge belongs with the secret things of God described in Deut 29:29. And just as the Hebrew people

⁴¹ The History Channel. *Heaven: Beyond the Grave*. Written and Directed by Douglas Brooks West. 2006.

⁴² A & E. “Heaven and Hell.” *The Mysteries of the Bible*. 1996.

⁴³ Anthony J. Saldarni, “Jewish Responses to Greco-Roman Culture, 332 B.C. E. to 200 C.E.” *The Cambridge Companion to the Bible*. Howard Clark Lee, Eric M. Meyers, John Rogerson, and Anthony J. Saldarni. eds.(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 335.

⁴⁴ S. B. Frost “Daniel,” *IDB*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962) 767.

may have been influenced by their Egyptians captors, the ancient Hebrews seem to have embraced the folk beliefs of the people of the region, concluding that the dead ended up existing in “some shadowy sense in a place called Sheol.”⁴⁵ The concept of Sheol in ancient times was often considered as an “unseen world where the dead sleep for all eternity.”⁴⁶ In spite of this indefinite understanding of the afterlife, the Scriptures are filled with references about a heavenly realm; it is this realm which will eventually become for the Christian community the eternal destination for all those who believe in Jesus Christ. From a theological perspective, these numerous testimonies seem to imply that consideration of what lies beyond this life is a worthy endeavor.

The word “heaven” appears in the scriptures (RSV) four hundred and sixty-nine times. There are two hundred and forty-six references in the Old Testament and two hundred twenty-three in the New Testament. In the Gospels, the term heaven appears one hundred and twenty-two times, twenty-seven times in the writings of Paul, and seventy-five appearances in the apocalyptic writings of the books Daniel and Revelation.⁴⁷

Of course, every use of the word heaven, especially in the Old Testament texts, does not denote the divine place where the redeemed will spend eternity. In some cases such as Gen 1:8: “*And God called the firmament Heaven. And there was evening and there was morning, a second day,*” the writer is obviously referring to the sky and the celestial bodies rather than a spiritual realm. However, considering the number of times when

⁴⁵ Tony W. Cartledge, “Sheol,” “1 & 2 Samuel,” *The Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary*, R. Scott Nash, ed. (Macon: Smyth and Helwys, 2001) 323.

⁴⁶ A & E. “Heaven and Hell.” *The Mysteries of the Bible*. 1996.

⁴⁷ The number varies in other translations and actually increases in the King James Version.

heaven is used to discuss a spiritual realm, it is difficult to escape the reality that considering heaven as the afterlife destination was a significant endeavor for the authors of scripture. If there was value in writing about heaven for the ancient authors of scripture, is there not also value for modern believers to discuss heaven today?

Heaven is described in many ways throughout scripture. Several of the descriptions are used to offer explanations for the weather, such as the windows or openings in heaven which are released to bring the rain. (Gen 7:11, 8:2, Isa 2:18)⁴⁸ Another image of heaven which relates to the weather is found in Job 38:37 where bottles or skins are described as holding the water which is emptied out upon the earth at God's command. There is an image of heaven being filled with storehouses which hold the winds of God (Ps 135:7; Jer 10:13), the hail (Job 38:22) and the darkness (Isa 45:3).⁴⁹ Heaven is also seen as the garment of God, a great curtain, and a metal strip which God is said to polish with the wind of his breath (Job 26:13).⁵⁰ Finally there is the image of heaven resting upon great pillars (Job 26:11), explaining how the upward realm could remain suspended above the earth and mankind.⁵¹ Ultimately, all of these passages are attempts by ancient man to explain the forces of nature and the location of another plain of existence.

For contemporary persons, or at least Christian believers, it is not the explanations of weather, or even the setting of heaven as a place in the sky that is intriguing. Science has dismissed all these ideas. Rather the curiosity in the twenty-first century is more focused

⁴⁸ T. H. Gaster, "Heaven," *IDB* (ed. George Arthur Buttrick and Emory Stevens Bucke, Vol. 2, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), 551.

⁴⁹ Gaster, "Heaven," 552.

⁵⁰ Gaster, "Heaven," 551.

⁵¹ Gaster, "Heaven," 552.

on what heaven will be for those who make the journey after breathing their last breath here on earth. As stated above, a recent survey shows that many (52%) of those not actively involved in the faith community have no interest in what heaven will be like; rather they report that they never think on it at all.⁵² I believe, however, that many contemporary Christians who *are* active in faith communities today, especially those who are older or have recently lost loved ones, may ponder heaven often.

The term heaven is used many times in the gospels. Matthew uses the phrase “*kingdom of heaven*” twenty-seven times in his gospel, unlike the other gospel writers who favor another term, “*the kingdom of God.*”⁵³ Matthew may have chosen kingdom of heaven because these were Jesus’ chosen words or perhaps because of the Jewish tradition of giving great reverence to the name of God; this reverence might have created a desire in Matthew to substitute the word heaven.⁵⁴ Some examples in the first gospel of using this phrase are found in Jesus’ parables: “*The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed...*” (Matt 13:24) “*The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed...*” (Matt 13:31) “*The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field...*” (Matt 13:44) And Matthew places these words on the lips of John the Baptist, “*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,*” (Matt 3:2), a cry that Jesus himself will take up when John is arrested.⁵⁵ How the term “*kingdom of heaven*” is interpreted may depend on how it is used in a given text. In some passages the phrase seems to be referring to the divine

⁵² Mark Kelly, *Evangelism Begins Beyond the Sanctuary*, 6.

⁵³ Ben Witherington III, “*Matthew*” *The Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary*. R. Scott Nash, ed. (Macon: Smyth and Helwys, 2001) 2.

⁵⁴ Witherington, *Matthew*, 96.

⁵⁵ Witherington, *Matthew*, 94.

activity of God taking place during the earthly ministry of Jesus. In other times, as when Jesus is remarking about “inheriting, obtaining or entering the Dominion,” these all seem to be references to some future events.⁵⁶

As for the seven topics which have been discussed previously in this paper, there are scriptural passages which shed light on these discussions. The first of these topics is memory. In Luke 16 Jesus tells the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. In this parable, it is quite obvious that the rich man in the story remembers a great deal of his earthly life after his death and arrival in hell. Some would argue that if the rich man in hell could remember his brothers, even if he was only a character in a parable told by Jesus, the story implies our earthly memories go with us into the next life.⁵⁷ Rev 6:9-11 is another passage which depicts those in the afterlife, this time martyred souls in heaven, who remember their persecution. References which speak of judgment like Matt 12:36, “*I tell you, on the day of judgment men will render account for every careless word they utter;*” seem to imply that those under the judgment of God will have the capacity to remember the words spoken for which they are being judged. These three passages among several others seem to challenge the statements of some like Salem Kirban who wrote, “We will not remember this old world we call Earth...nor will we even recall it! It simply will not come into our minds.”⁵⁸

Kirban’s prediction seems to be on the mind of the psalmist when he wrote these words found in Ps 88:10 “*Dost thou work wonders for the dead? Do the shades rise up to*

⁵⁶ Witherington, *Matthew*, 96.

⁵⁷ Randy Alcorn, *Heaven*, (Carol Stream, Ill.: Tyndale House, 2004), 61.

⁵⁸ Salem Kirban, *What Is Heaven Like?* (Huntingdon Valley, Pa.: Second Coming, 1991), 8.

*praise thee? Is thy steadfast love declared in the grave, or thy faithfulness in Abaddon?
Are thy wonders known in the darkness, or thy saving help in the land of forgetfulness?"*

Will heaven be a place where our memories continue or a land of forgetfulness? That is the question. And W. Stewart McCullough would call into question who exactly is doing the forgetting and what is forgotten: God forgets those who have passed into Sheol; a person in the afterlife forgets God, or is the truth that humanity forgets those who have passed away?⁵⁹ All three of these ideas offer a different perspective on memory after death.

The second topic which was a focus of the small group study was judgment. The Greeks were the first to adopt an idea that one's earthly ethics played a part in one's afterlife experience. This idea was soon embraced by the Christian community.⁶⁰ Beyond the verse from Matthew mentioned above, there are several other passages which reference a judgment in the next life. 2 Cor 5:10 states "*For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive good or evil, according to what he has done in the body.*" J. Paul Sampley sums up Paul's attitude toward the coming judgment in this way: "Paul believes in a final assessment regarding what we have done in the day-to-day transactions of life...The judgment Paul expects is focused on the works faith has produced in the individual's life." The believer will not be judged for their faith but whether they allowed their faith to inspire them to do good works in the

⁵⁹ W. Stewart McCullough, "Psalms," *IB*, Volume 4 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1955), 477.

⁶⁰ The History Channel. *Heaven: Beyond the Grave*. Written and Directed by Douglas Brooks West. 2006.

world.⁶¹ Mal 3:16 speaks of a “*Book of Remembrance*” for the names of those who “feared the Lord.” This implies judgment upon those whose names do not appear in the book. Finally, Rev 20: 11-13 speaks of the dead being judged by what was recorded in books while others will have their names placed in the book of life. Again, as with Paul in 2 Corinthians, there seems to be an assessment of one’s works at the judgment. How one lived out the faith on earth is not forgotten.⁶² All of these images affirm the idea of a judgment that awaits all mankind beyond this life. I am sure these passages among others shaped the attitudes of those surveyed within the greater congregation and the small group study who voted by a wide majority that there would be a judgment in the next life.

The third topic discussed frequently within the study was relationships in the next life. Perhaps the clearest statement comes from Jesus in Chapter 22 of Matthew’s gospel when the Sadducees pose a question about marriage beyond this life. It should be noted that the author of Matthew points out that the Sadducees come to Jesus with the claim that there is no life after death. This idea matches what Josephus reports: the Pharisees believed in a life after the earthly one, but the Sadducees held onto the older position that there is no existence after death.⁶³ Paul writes to the Thessalonians of “*our glory and joy*” when Jesus comes, seeming to imply that he believes his relationship with the Christians in Thessalonica will continue into the next phase of existence. Paul also seems to imply a truth about relationships in the afterlife when he writes of the comfort that will

⁶¹ J. Paul Sampey, “The Second Letter to the Corinthians,” *NIB*. Vol. XI. Thomas Long, sr. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995-2002) 87.

⁶² Christopher C. Rowland, “The Book of Revelation.” *NIB*. Vol. XII. Thomas Long, sr. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995-2002) 715.

⁶³ Anthony J. Saldarni, “Jewish Responses to Greco-Roman Culture”, 346.

come when all believers are “caught up together.” Randy Alcorn argues that “In fact, if we wouldn’t know our loved ones, the comfort of an afterlife reunion, taught in 1 Thess 4:14-18, would be no comfort at all.”⁶⁴ Abraham Smith expands this idea that the joy comes from the expectation that they will see those they love once again but also they can expect “a grand and permanent reunion for all believers.” Smith goes on to write “This hope- this distinctive hope- is a resource they can use even now to console each other.”⁶⁵ Linda Bridges states that Paul’s ultimate goal is not to reveal anything about the next life but is to bring comfort to those in Thessalonica. Bridges writes, “Paul does not say memorize these words... Paul does not say to recall these words as liturgy... Paul does not even admonish the readers to bring these words into remembrance. Paul says to use these words.” Paul is seeking to bring comfort to a grieving people whom he loves.⁶⁶ And Christians for two thousand years during times of persecution, struggle, hardship and challenges have discovered that comfort as well, comfort in the assurance of finding those dear to us and something better beyond this life.

A fourth topic covered in our discussions during the small group study and also depicted in several of the films we viewed was the idea of returning to earth as spirits. The most obvious text dealing with the issue is found in I Samuel 28; this passage deals with Saul seeking out the medium of Endor who conjures up the spirit of Samuel. The early church patriarch Origen affirmed the truth of the story when he wrote: “To suggest that Samuel was not brought up by a medium is tantamount to saying that the Scripture’s

⁶⁴ R. Alcorn, *Heaven*, 346.

⁶⁵ Abraham Smith, “The First Letter to the Thessalonians”, *NIB*. Vol. XI. Thomas Long, sr. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995-2002) 725.

⁶⁶ Linda McKinnish Bridges, “1 & 2 Thessalonians” *The Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary*. R. Scott Nash, ed. (Macon: Smyth and Helwys, 2008), 127.

record of history is not true. Since the Holy Spirit speaks the words recorded in Scripture, their veracity is assured.”⁶⁷ Nowhere in the telling of this event is there the implication that the consultation with the dead either is impossible or is there anything which implies that Samuel’s appearance is a hoax created by the witch Saul has chosen to visit.⁶⁸ Tony Cartledge points out that not only does the spirit actually appear, but Samuel’s spirit is dressed in his prophetic robe and continues to exhibit the cantankerous disposition he held in life.⁶⁹ (In the first film viewed during the study, *The Littlest Angel*, there is a reference to Samuel returning to earth. Later on in the film, another character is allowed to return as a spirit but this action is frowned upon by the leadership of heaven.) Though one could argue against the possibility of spirits returning to earth, it is hard to do so without a formal dismissal of the story of Saul and the Medium of Endor. In Matt 14 and Mark 6, when the disciples see Jesus walking on water, they believe him to be a ghost but there is nothing recorded about him dismissing the idea that spirits can return to the earth. And in the 24th chapter of the gospel of Luke, Jesus assures his disciples that even though he died on the cross and has now appeared in their midst, he is not a spirit, not a ghost. The implication there could be that ghosts exist, but that Jesus himself is not one. Or merely that Jesus knew of the superstitions of his day and wanted to put his followers at ease. What is not included in scripture is Jesus making a definitive statement about spirits walking among the living. And there are a couple of conclusions that one

⁶⁷ John R. Franke, ed., “Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1-2 Samuel,” *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. Old Testament Vol. IV*, (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2005), 320.

⁶⁸ Ben F. Philbeck, Jr., “1-2 Samuel,” *BBC*, Vol. 3, Clifton J. Allen, Gen. Editor, (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1970), 81.

⁶⁹ Tony W. Cartledge, “1 & 2 Samuel” 323.

could draw from the disciples' response in thinking that Jesus was a ghost: either they misunderstood the nature of the resurrection of their master or they perhaps were concerned that a spirit was misleading them into believing their master had returned.⁷⁰

The fifth topic discussed during the small group study was the issue of angels. The Angel Michael is first named in Dan 10; the lack of description offered for Michael implies that the community knew exactly who the author was describing. Michael acted as the guardian of Israel.⁷¹ Angels are described as coming from heaven, returning to heaven or being in heaven eight times in the four gospels. One of those occasions is found in Mark 12 (which is the parallel passage with Matt 22 that is discussed above). The Sadducees raise the issue with Jesus about marriage beyond the grave. Jesus responds, "*For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.*" This idea that humans become like angels once they arrive in heaven was appealing to some ancient groups like the Essenes at Qumran, but for modern readers it raises questions.⁷² In what ways will we be like the angels? Is this a reference only to the issue of marriage in the afterlife? Or are there other ways we will be like these celestial beings? Heb 1:14 also describes angels. Here these celestial beings seem to be "*... spirits who minister in God's service. Unlike the Son who sits at God's right hand, angels are sent out on mission, and the beneficiaries of their service*

⁷⁰ Alan R. Culpepper, "The Gospel of Luke," *NIB*. Vol.IX. Thomas Long, sr. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995-2002) 485.

⁷¹ Sharon Pace, "The Angel Michael," "Daniel" *The Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary*. R. Scott Nash, ed. (Macon: Smyth and Helwys, 2008), 315.

⁷² R. Alan Culpepper, *Mark*, 418.

are those who inherit salvation.”⁷³ This description continues the idea that angels are distinctly different than humans and have a much different role to play in the cosmic plan. There are many other texts which discuss, describe or offer narratives where angels are active participants in the events. Scripture certainly supports the belief that angels exist and are a part of what lies beyond this life. Though many in the study seemed to lean toward the idea of humans becoming like the angels, I personally am more comfortable with the idea that the angels have a different role and identity than the one we humans will ever play in the universe.

The sixth issue covered in the study is the descriptive terms for heaven. In the “Heaven Survey” there were questions about streets of gold which are described in Rev 21:21. In the second, third and fourth chapters of Revelation there are references to crowns. Isa 25:6 describes a glorious banquet that the Lord will prepare. And there are countless descriptions of God upon His throne. The one descriptive idea which challenged many persons’ visual concept of heaven was the question of whether trees and plants exist in heaven. In Rev 2:7 and 22:2 there are references to the “*tree of life*” being in the paradise of God. Though these references could be seen as symbolic, some would argue that they affirm the reality of plants and trees in heaven.⁷⁴ Streets of gold, crowns, banquets, God upon His Throne, and plants and trees, all of these are five of the six descriptive concepts which were questioned on the survey and pondered during the small group study.

⁷³ Fred B. Craddock, “The Book of Hebrews,” *NIB: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*. Volume XII. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998, 31.

⁷⁴ R. Alcorn, *Heaven*, 56.

The sixth descriptive image discussed during the study can be found in several passages of scripture: clouds. Perhaps the popularity of this image is why, when heaven is depicted in films, books, cartoons and even many advertisements it is often depicted as a place in the clouds. The Son of Man is described twice in Matthew and twice in Mark as coming on the “*clouds of heaven*” and in Revelation as “*coming with the clouds in heaven.*” These references harken back to Dan 7:13 which states, “*with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man...*”⁷⁵ Also Paul writes in I Thess 4:17 of a time when believers who are still alive on earth will be “*caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.*”

One additional issue we have spent some time discussing elsewhere in this paper, and was an item of discussion during at least one session of the small group, is the issue of the “*vision from heaven.*” In the parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man described above, it seems obvious that the rich man can see into heaven from hell and that Abraham can possibly see into hell from heaven. The parable, being a story told to teach a lesson and not necessarily to state facts or realities, can be taken as fantasy or fiction. In Luke’s gospel, Jesus, the teller of the parable, makes no attempt to state that the events he is describing are accurate descriptions of the afterlife. One could assert however that they are and this would support the idea of a vision of heaven from hell and possibly vice versa.

As for the vision of earth from heaven, it has been argued that the spirit of Samuel had an awareness of what had been happening on earth since his death. Randy Alcorn states, “*Interestingly, Samuel remembered what Saul had done before Samuel died, and he was*

⁷⁵ Sherman E. Johnson, “*The Gospel According to St. Matthew,*” *IB: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, Volume 7, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1951), 550.

aware of what had happened since he died.”⁷⁶ If the story of the ghost of Samuel appearing to Saul is taken literally, one could argue that it affirms both the presence of earthly memories with one in heaven and a view of the present earth. As pointed out during the small group study, even if one could see what was happening on earth, would one truly want to watch earthly events and activities when one is in heaven?

Beyond the issues focused on with the surveys and the small group study, several other ideas about heaven were considered during the preparation of this project. The first of these is an issue which appears numerous times in the New Testament: the idea of one accumulating a reward or treasure in heaven. In all three synoptic gospels Jesus advises the inquisitive man commonly referred to as the “rich young ruler” to sell all that he has and give the money to the poor. If he will do this, he will “*have treasure in heaven.*” In 1 Pet 1:4 the early readers were assured that they have “*an inheritance which is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you.*” The first ones to read the letter probably thought back to the inheritance of Canaan by the Israelites in Deut 15:4. However, this new inheritance from God could never be corrupted or defiled and would never perish. It was an eternal inheritance from a gracious heavenly father.⁷⁷ This idea is also affirmed in Col 1:5 when Paul writes of “*the hope that is laid up for you in heaven.*”⁷⁸ These are just three references which address the issue of a future blessing in a realm called heaven.

⁷⁶ Alcorn, *Heaven*, 69.

⁷⁷ Elmer G. Homrighausen, “The First Epistle of Peter”, *IB: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, Volume 12, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1957), 94.

⁷⁸ Archibald M. Hunter, “The First Epistle of Peter”, *IB: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, Volume 12, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1957), 94.

Beyond the word “heaven” as it is found in scripture, there is the word “*Paradise*,” which appears three times in the New Testament in the Revised Standard Version of scripture. The word is borrowed from the Persian language where the term meant heaven.⁷⁹ The Greek word originally meant “garden” and is used for the Garden of Eden in the Septuagint. In later Jewish apocalyptic literature, paradise begins to mean a place of new beginnings for the blessed following the end of existence as it is currently known. This place called “paradise,” conceived by people living in an arid and in many places desert-like setting, was a place of rich vegetation and free-flowing streams.⁸⁰

The word paradise first appears in the New Testament on the lips of Jesus as he promises one of the criminals crucified with him that the man will join him in paradise on the very day of their deaths. (Luke 23: 43) This idea of immediate reward upon death was embraced gradually in Jewish thought, and contradicted the long-held idea that upon death disembodied souls remained in Sheol until the resurrection and the final judgment.⁸¹ For the early Christians, paradise came at the instant of death for all those who believed in Christ, as it did this criminal facing sure and certain death on a cross. This death would usher the penitent criminal into the presence of God.⁸²

⁷⁹ Malcolm O. Talbert, *BBC*, Volume 9, (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1970) 180.

⁸⁰ Alan R. Culpepper, “Luke,” n.p. *NIB on CD-ROM*, 2002.

⁸¹ S. MacLean Gilmore, *IB*, Volume 8, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1952) 411.

⁸² Malcolm O. Talbert, *BBC*, 180.

Personally, in my ministry, I have heard all sorts of explanations for what Jesus meant when he told the thief “*Today, you shall be with me in paradise.*”⁸³ I have had church members argue that paradise is not the same as heaven. It is a special place of limbo where the redeemed spend time until the second coming. Robert C. Tannehill seems to affirm the possibility of a duality existing between paradise and heaven. He writes, “In verse 43 it is understood to exist already, so that Jesus and his companion may enter it ‘today.’ Entering paradise is not necessarily the same as Jesus entering his kingdom, which may wait his ascension to the right hand of God.”⁸⁴

Still others, who seem to share my opinion, believe that paradise is used here by Jesus as a euphemism for heaven and there is not a need to create an alternative place in the afterlife to accommodate this one word. I recently heard a pastor speaking at a senior adult revival state that he once listened to a debate among fellow seminary students about what paradise meant. After a few moments of intense listening to his comrades, the pastor stated that he finally interrupted the heated discussion and said, “It doesn’t matter where paradise is, all that matters is Jesus promised the criminal He would be there with him.” Not a bad answer to the debate. I think perhaps much benefit could be gained by having open discussions about what Jesus meant here.

The second place where the word paradise appears is in the writings of Paul. In his second known epistle to the Corinthians, Paul writes of having met someone who fourteen years before had been caught up into the “*third heaven*” called paradise and had

⁸³ It should be noted that some have speculated that this account by Luke holds no historical merit and should be dismissed. Others have argued however that there is nothing here which creates problems with other texts. These ideas are pointed out by Paul Sherer in *IB*, Volume 8 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1952), 411.

⁸⁴ Robert C. Tannehill, *ANTC: Luke* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996) 343-344.

seen things that no one should repeat. The person he is describing in this text is himself. He does not state absolutely that he sees Jesus in Paradise, but some have cited this text as partial proof that Paul affirmed the theological idea that the righteous dead are already living in Paradise with their Lord. This idea seems to match the ideas Paul conveys in 2 Cor 5:8 and Phil 1:23.⁸⁵ So Jesus speaks of this place called “*Paradise*” from the cross, and Paul writes of a vision of the Lord in which Paradise is revealed to him. Furthermore he continues to write of his desire to be with the Lord.

The third New Testament reference to “paradise” is found in Rev 2:7. Here the author of Revelation writes that the Christians of the church of Ephesus who remain faithful will be rewarded with fruit from the “*the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.*” Clearly this is a reference to the Eden story, but where Adam and Eve were forbidden to eat from the “*tree of life,*” the faithful will have that opportunity because they will receive the gift of eternal life from God.⁸⁶ For John, as with Paul and possibly Jesus depending on how one interprets his words to the criminal from the cross, paradise seems to be a place where the Lord and the faithful arrive upon leaving an earthly life.

The word heaven appears in the book of Colossians five times in the Revised Standard Version of scripture. Beyond the direct use of the word, there are other less obvious references. In Col 1:12 there is a reference to sharing in “*the inheritance of the saints of light.*” James D. G. Dunn would argue that this is a reference to heaven, which is the ultimate inheritance of humans who seek righteous lives. Dunn writes that there

⁸⁵ H. K. McArthur, “Paradise”, IDB, Volume 3, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962) 656.

⁸⁶ Mitchell G. Reddish, “Revelation,” *The Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary*, R. Scott Nash, ed. (Macon: Smyth and Helwys, 2001) 55.

was an ancient understanding that here on earth the experience of worship both in the Qumran community and the early gatherings of Christian believers was a glimpse of what was to come in the next life to all who inherited heaven.⁸⁷ In the beginning of the third chapter of Colossians there is also a description of what one would find in heaven: God is seated on the throne of heaven with Christ seated in the throne to the right of God. Paul is affirming an earthly ethic and cites the reality of heaven with Christ as a motivation for seeking a righteous path here on earth.⁸⁸ This parallels the images we find in Heb 8:1 and 12:2 among other passages. It also aligns with Christ's own words in Matt 19:28 and 25:31. One finds the image of heavenly thrones in the book of Revelation.⁸⁹ Christ on a throne at the right hand of God and heaven being a place for the children of light to share eternity with their Savior, these are images that have become a part of our Christian theology. These ideas offer believers hope, and each has become a part of the shared concept of what awaits the saints after life.

The above consideration of various scriptures that reference an afterlife for believers is far from exhaustive, but only seeks to demonstrate that the Bible affirms the reality of heaven. Historically, the church has affirmed this reality as well. For the Catholic church salvation and ultimately eternity in heaven are gained through certain sacraments. For centuries within the Catholic Church there has been debate about the eternal destiny of the unbaptized. For Protestants, salvation comes through the acceptance of Jesus

⁸⁷ James D. G. Dunn, *The New International Greek Testament Commentary: The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 76-77.

⁸⁸ Brian J. Walsh, and Sylvia C. Keesmaat, *Colossians: Remixed*, (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2004), 154.

⁸⁹ James D. G. Dunn, *The New International Greek Testament Commentary*, 204.

Christ as one's Savior. The act of baptism, a holy sacrament in the Catholic church, is often postponed in Protestant congregations until there are outward signs that one has been converted. Heaven is ultimately only for those who have experienced conversion uniquely and personally. Therefore in Protestant churches the reality of heaven and hell have often been emphasized to encourage everyone to evangelize those who have not yet experienced salvation and who are not yet on the path to an eternity in God's heavenly realm.⁹⁰

It should also be noted that the understanding of heaven has transitioned among some traditions through the centuries. Or put another way, "The world's great religions as well as poets and artists from one generation to the next have passed down evolving portraits of heaven."⁹¹ E. Brooks Holifield writes, "In earlier Christian history, theologians had described the heavenly state primarily as one in which the redeemed would praise and adore God. By the eighteenth century, they began to speak of heaven more as a continuation of earthly life, with its social relationships, family ties and energetic activity." He goes on to write that "W. E. Channing urged Unitarians to promote a heaven filled with friends, family, and conversation."⁹² Could it be that for two thousand years we have been adapting heaven to fit our needs or to make it more appealing to the masses and a better sales pitch for evangelism? Or is it simply true that we all create a

⁹⁰ John Shelby Spong, *A New Christianity for a New World: Why Traditional Faith Is Dying and How A New Faith is Being Born*, (San Francisco: Harper, 2001), 172-173.

⁹¹ The History Channel. *Heaven: Beyond the Grave*. Written and Directed by Douglas Brooks West. 2006.

⁹² E. Brooks Holifield. *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 231.

specific “peg” of heaven which will fit neatly into the “hole” in our theology we have planned for it?

Bishop John Spong would point out that the idea of an afterlife became more challenging after the works of Charles Darwin became well-known and embraced by science. No one had believed that animals possessed souls and suddenly much of the evidence pointed to a reality that human beings, as advanced as we are, are still merely “highly developed animals.”⁹³ Between 1910 and 1915 “in response to biblical criticism and to challenge Darwin,” some Christians felt the need to begin publishing pamphlets which were entitled “*The Fundamentals*.” One of the “truths” that all authentic believers must embrace according to the pamphlet was “the certainty of heaven and hell as eternal places of reward and punishment.”⁹⁴ And the people of the early twentieth century did continue to cling to the idea of life after death because somehow it made their lives of hardship and misfortune seem meaningful.⁹⁵

Today, a century later, I believe when most Christians are questioned, the vast majority of them will respond that they believe there is something more beyond this life for the faithful. They may not say it is a certainty, but they will acknowledge their belief. Even one who is skeptical or even cynical about many matters within the Christian community, John S. Spong writes that he believes there is “life after death.” And beyond just the belief, Spong states that what comes after death is “so radically different from anything that has been proposed by the religious systems of the past that it is all but

⁹³ John Shelby Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die: a Bishop Speaks to Believers in Exile*, (San Francisco: Harper, 1998) 37-38.

⁹⁴ John Shelby Spong, *A New Christianity for a New World*, 2-3.

⁹⁵, John Shelby Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, 200-201.

unrecognizable.”⁹⁶ And that ultimately is what has made this project so theologically appealing. It is the “great unknown.” Or as Shakespeare described it in Hamlet, “the undiscovered country.”⁹⁷ The biblical authors wrote about it. Jesus taught about it. And Christians down through the centuries have discussed it, pondered it, and some even dismissed it. Some of the members I interact with at the First Baptist Church of Albemarle desire to discuss it. A great many people for various reasons reflect upon it almost daily. And none of this is because the answers are or will ever be clear in this life, but rather because the questions, the discussions and the ponderings of this idea of something “*so radically different*” can inspire greater faithfulness in all of us.

⁹⁶ Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, 201.

⁹⁷ Hamlet, III, i, 95.

CHAPTER FOUR CRITICAL EVALUATION

Theological Appropriateness

The project described in this paper has been conducted in a Christian setting, among Christians. It has been the desire of those involved in the various aspects of the project, and certainly has been my goal as the author of the project, to involve God throughout the various endeavors. The subject of heaven, as I said often to the small group study, raises more questions than can ever be answered in this life. I did not expect a conclusion or consensus concerning heaven. However, I do believe that conversations about heaven and participation in a Christian small group can bring about inspiration and revelation about God, His Holy Son Jesus Christ and His Holy Spirit. Therefore, I believe the efforts of this project have been theologically appropriate. With that said, I believe there are three main theological aspects which are the foundational blocks of the project.

First, as stated in the previous chapter, over and over again, heaven is a topic of consideration and discussion in First Century Christianity. Even several passages in the Old Testament can be interpreted as offering glimpses of the eternal destination Christianity would fully embrace in the coming centuries. The gospel writers record Jesus speaking of it to crowds, to his closest followers and even to a criminal being crucified next to him. Paul wrote about it in his various epistles including the verse quoted often by one member of the small group study: "*What no eye has seen, nor ear*

heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him," (1 Cor 2:9). The authors of Hebrews and James refer to heaven, and the author of the Book of Revelation fills the texts with vivid images of what awaits on the other side. All of these descriptions, and the discussions they must have inspired among early believers, seem to support the idea that a small study about heaven among Christians is a legitimate pursuit.

Second, scripture is also filled with examples of individuals learning and growing in small group settings. Whether it is John the Baptizer and his followers, Jesus with his disciples, or Paul and the other apostles teaching a small group of believers who have formed a congregation, small groups seem to be a biblical idea. There are times for large gatherings, and there is power in the collective worship of many. Jesus, John, Paul and Peter all preached to the multitudes, but they also knew that deep conversation, questions and answers, and discussion which led to new thought processes, were all beneficial tools for enriching the spirit and inspiring one toward greater service. Christianity has grown and thrived for two thousand years in various forms and through various actions. I would argue that in the midst of this growth and renewal on many occasions one could find the utilization of small groups. Small group settings for teaching clergy or laity. Small groups for evangelism. Small groups for developing spiritual gifts. Small groups for inspiration and encouragement. I believe this project has been theologically appropriate because the study of aspects of the faith through small groups has proven itself throughout Christian history.

Third, this project is theologically appropriate because of the utilization of narratives to instruct and encourage dialogue. Albeit, in this case the narratives were contemporary

films, at their essence, each was still a story told through the means of the day. How many times does Jesus engage someone in dialogue through a story or, as we often call his type story, a parable? And centuries before Jesus was doing it, the prophet Nathan intertwined David into a conversation about his own sin by weaving what has been called a “juridical parable.” This term is used for a story which intentionally misleads the listener so that he or she will find the character of the story guilty before he realizes he has passed judgment upon himself.⁹⁸ In the confrontation between Nathan and his king, David does not realize the parable is about him until he has passed judgment. Only then does the moment of recognition arrive.⁹⁹ I believe in that moment when David realizes that he is the villain of the parable, that story told by Nathan becomes very powerful. Our faith and our culture are filled with many powerful stories which offer insight into our humanity and often give us glimpses of the divine. I would not argue that any of the five films viewed in the small group were uniquely transcendent, but I would affirm that each, in its own unique way, can inspire thought and reflection. Both of these, thought and reflection, can be deeply theological experiences. Therefore, I believe this project has been theologically appropriate because standing upon centuries of narratives challenging and encouraging the faith, I challenged a small group of individuals with five stories about heaven.

⁹⁸ Simon Uriel, “The Poor Man’s Ewe Lamb: An Example of a Juridical Parable,” *Biblica* 48 (1967), 207-242.

⁹⁹ Bruce C. Birch, “The First and Second Books of Samuel,” *NIB*, Vol.II, Thomas Long, sr. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 1292.

Personal Significance

As I seek to evaluate the success of this project, I find myself reviewing what guided me to the project in the first place and how the experience of the project affected me personally. Careful contemplation and reflection have produced several responses to the question: “How has this project been significant to me personally and ultimately to my ministry as a pastor?” (In the following section, I will consider how the project was significant to the congregational setting where I currently serve and served during the planning and implementing of the project, and also what future implications the project has on the First Baptist Church of Albemarle.)

First and foremost, I have been personally driven for some time to find outlets to couple my love for theological discussion with my love for film. In the last twenty years, I have been thrilled to learn that there are many Christians like me, individuals who share a deep passion for film. I have built a vast library of books in my church study which connect the cinema with theological ideas. More often than not, in the opening pages of these volumes the authors write of their love for film and how it has inspired their faith. Two quotes have stood out in my mind since I first read them:

Film should be treated with the same respect as church or poison, for it can change your life.¹⁰⁰ and

Sitting in the theater, I can scarcely wait for the lights to dim. Here I am in my anonymity. I feel shut off from every distraction. The screen is remote, up there and I’m down here, able to relate or not relate to it as I choose. The film has begun. It is telling a story, and concerns persons. Now I recognize myself. I’m up there, too, Jesus, involved in trying to make a decision. It’s painful and I’m suffering. I feel the closeness of the other persons near me in the theater. I’m not suffering alone. We are so naked, Jesus, sitting here together and seeing ourselves (and each other) up there.

¹⁰⁰ Gareth Higgins, *How Movies Helped Save My Soul: Finding Spiritual Fingerprints in Culturally Significant Films*, (Lake Mary, Fla.: Relevant Books, 2003), xix.

Only the story isn't up there anymore. It's here. When the lights come up, and the movie has ended, will we remember anything of our closeness, Lord, or will we all be sitting quite alone. At first I wanted both escape and communion inside this theater. Now I know I can't escape, Jesus, and also how much I need communion.¹⁰¹

Both of these thoughts echo my feelings about cinema and the power it has to reveal truth, especially spiritual truths, to an audience.

In my personal experience, I have found few opportunities to utilize my theological education, ministerial experiences and my passion for film. But I have found a few ways to connect both. Beyond reading books which interlace faith and film, I have channeled my interest in other directions as well. In the past I have written film reviews for a Christian website, ethicsdaily.com (the website for The Baptist Center for Ethics). During a two-year period from spring of 2003 to spring of 2005 I wrote somewhere between sixty and seventy movie reviews for the site. I have given a few lectures on theological ideas found in contemporary films. And I have taught one series of Bible studies on Wednesday evenings utilizing the book *Useless Beauty: Ecclesiastes through the Lens of Contemporary Film* by Robert K. Johnston. All of these endeavors have been successful on some level but have ultimately only encouraged my desire to do more to create a merge of ideas from theological thought and film. Therefore, this project and the Bible study which is central to this project provided me with an outlet to once again use two of my keen interests in a way that would hopefully inspire others to think in new ways.

Another personal aspect of this project was that I truly wanted to do something unique for this church. I would offer that the use of media in a Bible study is not unique for First

¹⁰¹ Boyd Malcolm, *Are You Running with Me, Jesus?* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1965) 77. This second quote came to my attention in the book *Praying the Movies: Daily Meditations from Classic Films* by Edward McNulty. McNulty quotes Malcolm in the introduction of his text.

Baptist Church of Albemarle. As stated above, I have already done a Wednesday night Bible study which used film clips and ideas from the text *Useless Beauty* to offer insight into the book of Ecclesiastes. Years before I ever taught the study on Ecclesiastes, my predecessor, Rev. Harold McDonald, once taught a Bible study using clips from *The Andy Griffith Show*. So the use of media, especially popular secular media, to offer spiritual insight is not new for First Baptist.

What I think is unique about the study I created is that we are not seeking conclusions about the reality of heaven. Those conclusions will never be completely reached, or even distantly approached, by anyone in this life. Rather, I wanted to offer an occasion when people truly felt the freedom to state what they have believed, and how those beliefs may have been stretched, challenged or even broken as the conversation and dialogue on heaven has happened. Considering that much of the past teaching at First Baptist did not even open the floor to questions, I was attempting something new by stating at the outset of the study, “Our goal is not to find the answers, we will get to that soon enough when we leave this earth. Our goal is to think in new ways about an unfathomable subject.”

There is a plethora of theological subjects about which one could foster dialogue through a film series. Heaven seemed like an ideal choice for this congregation because there is already some interest in the subject. As stated in previous chapters, the people of First Baptist seem very intrigued by the question of what comes next for the believer. Even a few months before I started to write the project proposal, I was contemplating taking this project in a completely different theological direction while still maintaining the idea of doing something related to film. It was only as the people began to talk with me about heaven, and express a desire to dialogue about the afterlife, did I begin to

realize that my project and the interest among the people of the church could be brought together through the creation of a study on Heaven in scripture and modern film. The result of this realization brought me to the point of formulating and creating the study that I carried out with a small group at First Baptist Church of Albemarle, which is the study that is the heart of this project.

Another way this project was personally significant for me is that it brought me back to a small group setting for the first time in a great while. Looking back over my six years in Albemarle, I had not facilitated a small group during my entire tenure here. I participated in a small group during the “Forty Days of Purpose” experience in our church. In those small group sessions, I strove to listen more than guide the conversation. A lay couple in the church were the facilitators of the small group of which I was a part. This was done by design. It is easy for a minister to dominate such settings, and I desired to not allow that to happen. Other than the small group study, and teaching an occasional Sunday School class, I had not experienced the interplay, discussion, and challenges of the small group setting while I have served in Albemarle.

Looking back prior to previous settings I had served, during my two years as pastor of the Northeast Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, I also never led a small group. I spoke on two occasions to our “grief recovery” support group and I again taught an occasional small group, but I did not lead a study of this type.

I had to go back two churches and over eight years to remember a setting where I facilitated a small group study. During my tenure at the First Baptist Church of Lowrys, South Carolina, I led a small group study almost every Sunday night for five years.

Leading this small group study on heaven has reminded me how much I enjoy that setting. In fact, I said to the group the last night of the study, “This has been more fun that I have had in ministry in a long time.” I enjoyed every minute of it. I felt alive when we were in the middle of a discussion about some aspect of heaven, even when there was no consensus or conclusions among the group. The conversation was invigorating. And I found myself realizing how much I missed teaching in that sort of environment.

My personal life, as a single parent and a full-time pastor, limits my ability to be constantly involved in a small group. I invested a great deal of time in the “Glimpses of Heaven” small group study. I made some of that investment of time and energy so that this project would succeed. Some of the investment was because I desired to give my very best to the participants of the small group. I recognize that at this stage in my life, I may not be able to invest so much again in the near future. Piano lessons, homework, gymnastics, and other things crowd my schedule a great deal. But I do not want to forget the joy I experienced as I prepared for each discussion session. Nor do I want to forget the passion I feel in teaching and leading a small group. The day will come, sooner than I probably realize, when I can be more actively involved in the small group ministries of our church. This project has re-lit a fire that I had not known was extinguished, and that is perhaps the most significant personal aspect of this endeavor.

One final way the project affected me personally was the way it challenged to me to think anew about heaven. I do not preach often of heaven. It may get a sentence or two in a sermon or prayer, but it is rarely the focus of our worship time. As stated elsewhere in the paper, I have had numerous conversations about the afterlife during my tenure in Albemarle, but more times than not, I found myself regurgitating beliefs I have long held,

rather than challenging myself to consider things in a different way. During this project, I have read, studied, discussed and reflected more on heaven than I have on any subject in a long time. As I have described the small group experience for all those involved, I am not sure that I have reached any absolute conclusions, but I feel I have gained much from my contemplation. Looking back on all the ideas I have considered about the next life, I suppose the one I hold closest at this time comes not from a Christian source but from a Jewish Rabbi. It is not a unique idea, and I have heard it before, but when he spoke it, somehow it resonated with me in a very powerful way. Rabbi Aron B. Tendler states “Heaven and hell aren’t two separate places in Judaism. The soul returns to be in proximity to God. Closeness to God is heaven. Distance from God is hell.”¹⁰²

Effects on the Ministry Setting

Beyond the personal significance described above, at the outset of the project there were goals and effects sought for the church through the endeavors of the project. The first of these related specifically to the focus on small groups. Starbucks Coffee seeks to gain new employees by offering them the opportunity to “Create Community. Make a difference in someone’s day.”¹⁰³ Should that be a higher goal of a secular coffee vender than it is for the church of Jesus Christ? George Gallop has said, “Americans are the loneliest people in the world.” Our society is filled with people who work and live in

¹⁰² A & E, “Heaven and Hell”, *The Mysteries of the Bible*, 1996.

¹⁰³ Andy Stanley and Bill Willis. *Creating Community: Five Keys to Building a Small Group Culture*. Sisters: Multnomah Publishers, 2004, 20.

crowds and yet never develop meaningful relationships.¹⁰⁴ Lest Christians forget, in Gen 2:18 God proclaims, “It is not good that the man should be alone.” This passage is often used in wedding ceremonies as an affirmation of the value of the matrimonial relationship. One can certainly also argue that the passage affirms the basic human need to interact and nourish relationships with others.¹⁰⁵ It is not difficult to build a sound case for the need of churches to birth and foster growth in communities and this can happen through small group experiences.

Therefore, the first goal for the congregation was to foster a new greater interest in small groups. I have stated that I believe small groups allow people to connect with others, give and receive support from one another, learn from others, and perhaps even participate in the act of confession with and to others. These are biblical ideas of community that some Christians and ultimately some churches have been reluctant to embrace.¹⁰⁶ I also can affirm with no hesitation that we experienced all these things during the “Glimpses of Heaven” study. However, I am not ready to state that the small group study I planned and coordinated changed a lot of minds about small groups. As stated before, of those who participated in the small group study at the center of this project, 62% of them had participated in some small group study prior to this one. In spite of my offering of a unique study, drawing in contemporary material and a subject matter that seems to interest many, the vast majority of the participants were not first-time small group members. For First Baptist of Albemarle, like many other aging

¹⁰⁴ Stanley and Willis, *Creating Community*, 24.

¹⁰⁵ Stanley and Willis, *Creating Community*, 29-30.

¹⁰⁶ Henry Cloud and John Townsend, *Making Small Groups Work* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 23.

churches just like us, there exists a whole generation of church members who still prefer learning through lecture without interaction, believing this is the best way to learn and grow or at least the easiest, least involving way. Though I believe that First Baptist Church of Albemarle needs more opportunities for intimacy and community building, I am not sure that my project work moved them any closer to this outcome.

Ultimately, most people are communal by nature. People hunger for community because this is how God created humanity.¹⁰⁷ God sought to commune with us through the coming of Jesus, and the public ministry of Christ offers a beautiful example of living and ministering with a community. Jesus even gathered a small community of followers around him in order to share with them certain truths that would inspire the majority of them to continue his work after he had physically left them.¹⁰⁸ The practice of small groups continued in the life and growth of the early church after Pentecost, and once the persecution of Christians began, and the followers of Jesus were forced to take their faith underground, small groups played an even more important role.¹⁰⁹ Certainly as Christians, we need the community of fellow believers just as his early followers needed community. In a day when individualism and self-reliance are prized, Christians must maintain the truth that people need one another.¹¹⁰ And the church must find ways to create community. I believe First Baptist Church is very good at doing large community.

¹⁰⁷ Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson, *Building a Church of Small Groups: A Place Where Nobody Stands Alone*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001, 21-25.

¹⁰⁸ Donahue and Robinson, *Building a Church of Small Groups*, 26-27.

¹⁰⁹ Jeffrey Arnold, *The Big Book of Small Groups* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 1992) 21.

¹¹⁰ Donahue and Robinson, *Building a Church of Small Groups*, 27-28.

Our fellowship as a congregation is healthy as long as it is not too intimate. C. J. Mahaney would question whether a church is truly “the church” without the intimacy of small groups, recognizing that people cannot be “known and know others” in a crowd.¹¹¹ Small groups could lead us to another stage in community for all those who choose to participate. I believe the benefits of growing our sense of community are vast. I also believe we could reap more of these benefits if we created a more active small group ministry. Therefore, even though I am not confident that my project has opened any doors to more small group activity within the church, I will continue to encourage the Education Committee and others to plan and implement new small group studies. And as stated above, after the positive experience I had during the study, I hope to have the opportunity to lead another one in the not-too-distant future.

As pointed out above, one of the most significant responses received from the Exit Surveys was the fact that 23% stated they would be interested in leading a small group in the future. I believe this is a resource that should be tapped. Among those involved in the study about 10% have led studies. Thus there are several potential leaders among the group. Just recently I began a conversation with one of the small group members who I believe has the qualities of a good facilitator. I have no idea of whether she stated in the survey that she would like to lead a group or not. I believe however she would be an outstanding choice for a small group. So perhaps the greatest impact from the project was not the involvement of new persons in small groups but rather the inspiring of new leaders for future small groups.

¹¹¹ C. J. Mahaney, “Why Small Groups?” in *Why Small Groups?* (ed. C. J. Mahaney; Pursuit of Godliness Series; Gaithersburg: Sovereign Grace Ministries, 1996), 3.

I also believe that the idea of community through small groups being beneficial extends beyond that of the longtime church member. The world has changed and the way churches reach people is continuously changing. One accurate description of how many churches continue to reach out to prospects or new converts is that we attempt “to harvest corn as we used to harvest wheat, never realizing that the harvest has changed.”¹¹² In a society that has become more secular we have reached the point where church members are reluctant to invite unchurched individuals and, if they do, they will not come or will only come once.¹¹³ Even pastors are reluctant to attempt anything new to draw in younger adults. In one survey almost half the pastors stated that they believed in order to reach the younger generations the church may have to compromise the message of the gospel.¹¹⁴ If there are churches where both the pastor and the members are collectively reluctant to reach out or change the way the church involves new people, then is there any hope for measured growth in the future for those churches?

My own experience is that one of the few occasions when the members of First Baptist have seemed most open to reaching out has been the times we have offered something unique like our annual Winter Bible Study or the *40 Days of Purpose* emphasis we had in 2005. We did not have any non-church members involved in the heaven study. I wonder if we had publicized the study in the newspaper, or if I did it again in a setting removed from the church building, would we create opportunities to

¹¹² George G. Hunter, III. *Church for the Unchurched*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 24.

¹¹³ Hunter, *Church for the Unchurched*, 25.

¹¹⁴ Kimon Howland Sargeant, *Seeker Churches: Promoting Traditional Religion in a Nontraditional Way*. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 115.

reach out to the unchurched? I believe churches will have to use various secular hooks, including film, as they reach this new generation. Though the heaven study did not set out to draw non-members, I believe small groups have that potential in our church's future.

Outreach to prospects is only the beginning. The fifth step of the "strategy for new members" at Willow Creek Church in Barrington, Illinois, is to involve new participants in a small group experience. After an individual embraces Jesus Christ as their personal savior, they are encouraged to be a part of a small group of believers. It is through this experience that the new convert finds fellowship, which is very important. Within the group the new convert will also experience discipleship, encouragement, accountability and support.¹¹⁵ First Baptist Church currently offers very little programming which is intentionally designed to assimilate new members into the fellowship. In the past there was a short-term new-member course, but this was more about teaching Baptist beliefs and traditions than assimilating one into the family of faith. After this course was over, if someone did not seek out a Sunday School class as a small group experience, one could fail to make any new relationships. If the church were to move toward a more active small group program, especially if the program was designed with predominately short-term experiences, new members could make friends, be discipled and receive support as they become more acclimated to the overall church. Small groups could become an essential tool in the cultivation of active long-term members who are fully integrated into the life of the church.

¹¹⁵ G. A. Pritchard, *Willow Creek Seeker Services: Evaluating a New Way of Doing Church*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 23-26.

The small group study which was central to this project succeeded in the area of building relationships. Several of the members of the heaven study were not long term members of the church. One who made it all the way through the study had been a member for less than one year. I believe this individual gained much insight into the church as a whole and the members of the group which he would not have experienced if the study had not taken place. It should also be noted that the highest-rated benefit of the small group experience in the Exit Survey was the building of relationships. One can only imagine the potential for the future if our church could build a small group program which reaches out to the community and brings new persons into relationship with us.

Small groups have become an important tool in the work of the church at the end of the twentieth century and the dawn of the twenty-first. The growth of this tool has been phenomenal. Though the way small groups are done varies from church to church, there seem to be a few common elements: the size, the Christian orientation, the fact that studying occurs in some form or another, and ultimately that people find relationships based in love and caring.¹¹⁶ First Baptist Church may benefit greatly from a more active small group program. Certainly three possible benefits would be the creation of a more intimate community, more opportunities for outreach, and better assimilation of new church members into the fellowship.

Currently our small group studies are not fully succeeding at any of these. The community building is not extending throughout the congregation but rather only touching a small faction. Though I hoped the study of heaven would inspire more involvement from the church, it was not successful in this way. Nor did it reach out to

¹¹⁶ Arnold, *The Big Book of Small Groups*, 10-11.

persons outside our church. However, I do believe that those involved gained something from the experience. Short-term members as well as those who have been in First Baptist for decades all gained insight of the fellow participants in the study. Some were inspired to lead small groups in the future. All were challenged to think anew about the afterlife, and to discuss their feelings, attitudes and beliefs. So there was some success and some failure, but in the end, I learned a great deal from the experience.

Bearing on Future Ministry

The final consideration of the project's success lies in what happens next. First Baptist is a great church with vital and active ministries. I do not look for small group experiences to necessarily replace anything that is currently happening, but rather enhance other programs and inspire individuals to become more involved than ever before in the life of the church. I pray this is a part of our future as a church. Time will tell if this will happen, and whether a vital small group ministry will revive a one-hundred and twenty-year-old body of faith.

Three years ago the church adopted a strategic plan which encourages small group studies. (See Appendix C.) The Education Committee was charged and has been implementing a program of studies. I, as well as our new Associate Pastor, have been encouraging them. I believe this is important for our future. Currently the program is small, but growth is coming. I hope that my small group study has shown others that there are numerous ways to study and ponder the truths of our faith. Already since the heaven study, someone has led a study on the popular book, *The Shack*. Perhaps, a study

about contemporary film and heaven will be a catalyst for others to think “outside the box” in the days ahead as someone else comes forward with a unique idea for small group studies.

I also think it is essential for the future of the church that we continue to recruit more and more individuals who will lead small groups. Currently, there are a handful of people within the congregation who are looked at as capable of teaching a small group study. I think this pool must be broadened. Some expressed interest in the Exit Survey, and my guess is that there are others in the church who would be willing if approached. I plan to challenge the Education Committee to create a pool of people who are willing to take on this role. More small group studies cannot happen without more ready and willing leaders.

Third, in the days ahead, I want our church to see small groups as a tool for outreach. I believe our current concept of this type of program is that it services our members. While there are great benefits for individuals within the church to be involved in small group studies, I also have become more convinced than ever that small group studies have the potential to reach out unlike anything else we are doing as a church. We have to be intentional in offering specific things targeted for those outside the church. And we must be practical and intentional about how we publicize these offerings. First Baptist Church, like many aged bodies of faith, has operated over the last few decades with the assumption that “Everyone knows where we are and they will come.” The reality of our community today is that we are not that well-known and the next generation will not come unless we are offering them something from which they can benefit. I pray our

small group ministry will become a great tool to reach out to those who have never noticed the “church on the hill.”

One final thought about the future, as for me personally, I do not know what the future holds. It was not that long ago that I was confident that my future in ministry was very limited and perhaps even coming to a close. Currently I love where I serve and the people I serve. I could grow old at First Baptist Albemarle, and be very happy. That being said, if the Lord and circumstances lead me somewhere else, or leave me here, I hope the future will offer more opportunities to teach in small group settings, for my experience during this project did relight that fire within me. I also hope that the future will provide me with more occasions when I can use my interest in film to inspire others to think anew about our faith and the calling on our lives. If both of these come to pass, it will be a bright future indeed.

CHAPTER FIVE CONCLUSION

This week, as I prepare to write the conclusion for this paper, the Southern Baptist Convention is meeting in Louisville, Kentucky. I used to attend those meetings many years ago, but no longer believe it is good stewardship to incur the expenses involved in the trip. An article I read this week stated that one of the primary issues of the convention is the decline in membership. In 2008 there was a slight decline in overall membership: about 0.2 percent or a decline of 38,482 individuals. The article implies that a scramble is occurring among the leadership. Some seem to believe that a new surge in growth will come with more dogmatic adherence to the fundamental ideas that have guided the convention for the last thirty years. Scott Thumma, a sociologist of religion at Hartford Seminary, believes people choose churches for reasons other than those outlined by the Convention leadership. He is quoted to say,

People find a new congregation based not on the denominational label but based on the congregational identity. What do they preach? What style of worship? Denominational identity may be a part of that, but it's not nearly as strong.¹¹⁷

None of this is new information; ministers have been hearing and recognizing the truth of these ideas for more than a decade.

I point out the ideas from that article to paint a comparison between the convention and the church which I serve and where I carried out this project. Just as the convention

¹¹⁷Yonat Shimron, "Southern Baptists Aim to Fight Decline," *The Charlotte Observer*, Tuesday, June 23, 2009; 3B.

continues to believe that if they beat the drum of social conservatism and strict fundamentalism ideals, that will be enough to draw people to them and grow the denomination. There are some within First Baptist of Albemarle, and some who have begun attending other churches, who believe that more conservative ideas will bring growth to this body. There are also those who believe that continuing to do what we have always done is the answer. This formula is tried and true. People will come if you do it long enough. There are those who believe that being the First Baptist Church of Albemarle will draw people to the congregation because two decades ago, that was enough. And there are some who look back on the congregation during the previous administration as a euphoric time when all was right with the church and the world, never acknowledging, just as the Southern Baptist Convention seems to reluctant to admit, that people are different now.

I believe in the First Baptist Church of Albemarle. I see this as a church with much strength. We have no debt or financial struggles at this time. In fact, this year is looking to be the strongest financial year for general budget giving in the church's history, even in the midst of a national financial crisis. Our church is filled with people who desire to serve, not just within the body but out in the community as well. We are blessed with great talent in so many areas. By far, our people are our greatest asset. And the capacity of this congregation to love and affirm has been demonstrated to me countless times in more ways than I can ever list. But with all of this in our favor, we still must adapt in order to survive.

I have never believed there is a single solution to fostering church growth. I believe it is determined by many factors. I believe some of those factors are out of a

congregation's control, and some of them are not. I also believe that the time has come for First Baptist Church to choose to do some things differently. It is time for us to acknowledge that we can alter some things for the good of the whole. I believe fostering a small group ministry, encouraging this program to thrive, nurturing it continually in its early stages, and allowing it to change as it grows, these things will not guarantee growth, but can possibly begin a new era in the life of the church.

Did my project add fuel to the simmering fire of a small group ministry at First Baptist Church of Albemarle? Perhaps for those involved, but not many others. Did the project alter the future for the church? Certainly not in any dramatic way. Were seeds planted which may eventually produce fruit? I certainly hope so.

In the days ahead, I will continue to encourage the Education Committee to pursue a small group program in our church. I plan to challenge them to seek opportunities for studies that may appeal to a broader group than just our congregation. Just this week I discussed with a mother of four (three young adults and one teenager) about her teaching a parenting seminar. This is the kind of study we need to be publicizing; I want to get the Public Communications Committee involved in this as well.

In the previous chapter I discussed how the project affected me both in re-energizing my zeal for facilitating small groups and the ways it opened my own contemplation of heaven. The work of this project has also reinforced the idea in my mind that small group studies have great potential for altering the church's future. Small groups alone cannot rejuvenate this congregation, but I do believe it can be one component bringing about new spiritual growth, as well as possibly numerical growth.

In closing I would like to return to the subject of the small group study I led. There are a lot of statistics in this paper about the attitudes and opinions of those within the church and specifically those involved in the small group study, “Glimpses of Heaven.” One could speculate all day about how people were challenged to think of heaven anew. As stated above, I found myself thinking a great deal about the subject. I had seen all five of the films before the study, some of them several times. Many times throughout my ministry I had read all of the scriptures we cited during the study. Over the last year, I have reread or read for the first time many opinions about the afterlife, and considered many different characteristics of what is coming next. I cannot offer a specific issue about heaven where my mind has changed, though I am sure there are several. What I can say without hesitation is that this intense focus, study and contemplation of heaven have brought me a great deal of joy. Tedious perhaps sometimes, but in the end, I have enjoyed the challenges of considering the ideas of others, in a way I have not experienced in many years.

With that being said, I will close with two quotes from my studies on heaven which struck me as very profound and echo my own feelings to some degree. First is the quote from the A&E Network series “*The Mysteries of the Bible: Heaven and Hell.*” These are the closing words spoken by narrator Richard Kiley as the episode concludes:

So far there has been no scientific evidence of a heaven, hell, or God. Yet most people on the planet believe we live on in some form after we die. Do we really want to know now what will happen then? Or is it perhaps better to live on not with facts but with faith? ¹¹⁸

¹¹⁸ A & E. “Heaven and Hell.” *The Mysteries of the Bible.* 1996.

I began this paper with the words of a child, my own son Henry, and his thoughts about heaven. I feel it is fitting to end it with the words of a child as well. These words are come from a girl called Mary who is quoted by author Robert Coles:

I know, it's hard to imagine what will happen after you die. I wonder how we get there, to heaven. I wonder where it is. My dad said you can't see heaven; it's not in the sky- we just think it is. You can't know for sure. My mom and dad say the one thing that we *do* know is that Jesus did come here, and He did His best for us, and He got killed, and they saw Him; He appeared to them- so He'll save us, somehow. But it's not something that you can just sit down and say: This is how He'll do it!"¹¹⁹ **Amen.**

¹¹⁹ Robert Coles, *The Spiritual life of Children*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990) 206.

Appendix A- Survey on Heaven

Congregation Survey

The purpose of this survey is to get some idea of what a cross section of our congregation believes about the afterlife. Please respond to each statement as honestly as possible. No one will know how you responded. There may be a tendency to answer with "Unsure" often. Please refrain from using this answer too much or the data will be less useful. Only when you are absolutely unsure what you think about a specific idea should you answer in this way.

Thanks for your participation in this survey.

Circle the one answer which best expresses your opinion.

1- When a Christian dies, he or she goes straight to heaven- no purgatory, no waiting period, no waiting for the Second Coming of Christ.

STRONGLY AGREE AGREE UNSURE DISAGREE STRONGLY DISAGREE

2- In Heaven, you can see what is happening in Hell.

STRONGLY AGREE AGREE UNSURE DISAGREE STRONGLY DISAGREE

3- In Heaven you can see what is happening on earth.

STRONGLY AGREE AGREE UNSURE DISAGREE STRONGLY DISAGREE

4- There will be a banquet in Heaven.

STRONGLY AGREE AGREE UNSURE DISAGREE STRONGLY DISAGREE

5- There will be trees and other plants in Heaven.

STRONGLY AGREE AGREE UNSURE DISAGREE STRONGLY DISAGREE

6- God will be seated on a throne in Heaven.

STRONGLY AGREE AGREE UNSURE DISAGREE STRONGLY DISAGREE

7- I will know others in Heaven but the character of relationships will be different.

STRONGLY AGREE AGREE UNSURE DISAGREE STRONGLY DISAGREE

8- Earthly relationships will be meaningless in Heaven.

STRONGLY AGREE AGREE UNSURE DISAGREE STRONGLY DISAGREE

9- I will remember nothing from my earthly life in Heaven.

STRONGLY AGREE AGREE UNSURE DISAGREE STRONGLY DISAGREE

10- I will remember only the good things from my earthly life when I am in Heaven.

STRONGLY AGREE AGREE UNSURE DISAGREE STRONGLY DISAGREE

11- I will remember everything about my earthly life when I arrive in Heaven.

STRONGLY AGREE AGREE UNSURE DISAGREE STRONGLY DISAGREE

12- I will miss those who are not with me in Heaven.

STRONGLY AGREE AGREE UNSURE DISAGREE STRONGLY DISAGREE

13- Heaven will have streets of gold.

STRONGLY AGREE AGREE UNSURE DISAGREE STRONGLY DISAGREE

14- There will be a judgment in the next life.

STRONGLY AGREE AGREE UNSURE DISAGREE STRONGLY DISAGREE

15- Humans become angels in Heaven.

STRONGLY AGREE AGREE UNSURE DISAGREE STRONGLY DISAGREE

16- Everyone will wear a jeweled crown in Heaven.

STRONGLY AGREE AGREE UNSURE DISAGREE STRONGLY DISAGREE

17- Clouds will be everywhere in Heaven.

STRONGLY AGREE AGREE UNSURE DISAGREE STRONGLY DISAGREE

18- Heaven will be the same for everyone.

STRONGLY AGREE AGREE UNSURE DISAGREE STRONGLY DISAGREE

19- Heaven will be a different experience for everyone.

STRONGLY AGREE AGREE UNSURE DISAGREE STRONGLY DISAGREE

20- There will be levels of occupancy in Heaven and the level upon which one resides will be determined by how one lived their earthly life.

STRONGLY AGREE

AGREE

UNSURE

DISAGREE

STRONGLY DISAGREE

21- Individuals can come back to earth from Heaven as spirits.

STRONGLY AGREE

AGREE

UNSURE

DISAGREE

STRONGLY DISAGREE

Appendix B Survey on Small Groups

Congregation Survey

The purpose of this survey is to get some idea of what a cross section of our congregation has experienced through small group studies offered by our church. Please respond to each statement as honestly as possible. No one will know how you responded to any particular statement. There may be a tendency to answer with "Unsure" often. Please refrain from using this answer too much or the data will be less useful. Only when you are absolutely unsure what you think about a specific question should you answer in this way.

Thanks for your participation in this survey.

Circle the one answer which best expresses your opinion.

1- Did you participate in a small group during the *40 Days of Purpose* emphasis in our church in the Fall of 2005? (These groups met on Sunday evenings.)

YES

NO

If you answered "no" to Question 1- please skip down to question 6. If you answered "yes" to Question 1, please answer Questions 2-5.

2- Did the "small group experience" enhance your learning during the *40 Days Study*?

YES

NO

3- Do you believe you were better able to retain the information because of the discussions during the "small group"?

YES

NO

4- Did you meet new people or get to know anyone better, perhaps begin a new friendship, through the "small group" experience?

YES

NO

5- Did the insight of your fellow "small group" members challenge you and inspire you to think about the material differently?

YES

NO

6- Have you participated in other small group studies that have been offered at First Baptist? (Examples- studies by Beth Moore, studies on family issues, etc.)

YES

NO

If you answered "no" to Question 6- please skip down to question 12. If you answered "yes" to Question 6, please answer Questions 7-11.

7- Did the "small group experience" enhance your learning during the study?

YES

NO

8- Do you believe you were better able to retain the information because of the discussions during the "small group"?

YES

NO

9- Did you meet new people or get to know anyone better, perhaps begin a new friendship, through the "small group" experience?

YES

NO

10- Did the insight of your fellow "small group" members challenge you and inspire you to think about the material differently?

YES

NO

11- Please list the studies in which you participated.

12- Ultimately, a Sunday School class is a small group experience. Do you participate in Sunday School class regularly? (At least twice a month.)

YES

NO

If you answered "no" to Question 12- skip down to question 17. If you answer "yes" to Question 6, please answer Questions 13-16.

13- Does the "Sunday School experience" enhance your study of the Bible?

YES

NO

14- Do you believe you were better able to retain the information because of the discussions during "Sunday School"?

YES

NO

15- Did you meet new people or get to know anyone better, perhaps begin a new friendship, through the "Sunday School" experience?

YES

NO

16- Does the insight of your fellow "Sunday School" members challenge you and inspire you to think about the scriptures differently?

YES

NO

17- Would you be willing in the future to be a part of a "small group" experience at First Baptist Church?

YES **Sunday School-**

NO

Other Studies

YES

NO

Thank you again for your participation in this study.

Appendix C

First Baptist Church: Demonstrating Christ's love to all

Renewal Plan: 2006

Preamble

Vision: Our vision is to be a community of believers demonstrating Christ's love to all.

Mission: The mission of First Baptist Church – Albemarle is to lead people into a growing relationship with Jesus Christ by creating an environment where people are encouraged and equipped to develop intimacy with God, to build a Spirit filled community within, and to reach out to others in partnership with Christ and the greater Christian community.

Descriptive Values:

The following is a collection of statements that help define who we are at First Baptist Church of Albemarle. This is in no way an exhaustive group, but rather a limited number of values that shape our identity as Baptists.

1. Our church seeks always to affirm all the principles which have defined Baptists historically including "Priesthood of the Believer," "Soul Competency," "Separation of Church and State," and "Autonomy of the Local Church." We embrace the "Baptist Faith and Message" (1963 version) as a clear and concise written document of what Baptists believe, we do not elevate it, or any other document, to the status of binding doctrine for the church.
2. Our church views scripture as God's inspired Holy Word. We also believe that the Bible helps us discover God's Will for our lives through a relationship with Jesus Christ. The Bible should never become the thing we worship, for God provided us with the Bible so we could better worship and serve Him. As Christians first and Baptists second, we also affirm that all Scripture should be interpreted through the life and teachings of Jesus Christ.
3. First Baptist respects all persons of faith, and though our theology and practice is based on historic Baptist principles, we affirm that other Christian faiths hold dear the essential truths of the gospel, and therefore, we strive to cooperate with all the churches of Albemarle regardless of denomination, and we specifically work closely with the downtown churches in planning and coordinating ecumenical events.
4. Our church affirms the reality that God's call is unique and personal to each life and it is not limited by gender. Both women and men are free to answer God's call of service.
5. Our church recognizes that some marriages fail, and we affirm the reality that God's grace covers the failures of all believers. Past missteps do not hinder opportunities for present and future service at First Baptist Church.
6. First Baptist celebrates the diversity of Baptists by giving members the freedom to choose

which national organization a percentage of their tithes and offerings will support. We currently have members who choose to support either the Southern Baptist Convention or the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. Corporately, First Baptist supports both organizations with our congregational gifts.

Goals:

Thrust A: Evangelism

Goal 1:	To lead members of FBC to be more intentional with sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with family, friends, and acquaintances who have not yet received His saving grace.
Strategy 1:	Have a period of emphasis on evangelism in the church including Sunday School lessons, sermons, recommended readings, etc.
	Responsible Party: Church Staff, Sunday School Director
	Time Frame: Ongoing
Strategy 2 :	Post age-appropriate versions of the Plan of Salvation in every Sunday School classroom.
	Responsible Party: Property committee, Sunday School Director, Prayer Committee
	Time Frame: August 2007
Strategy 3:	To create more opportunities for people to share their personal testimonies (i.e. Sunday School, Worship Service, Special Services, Small Groups, Retreats, etc.)
	Responsible Party: Church Staff, Sunday School Teachers, Small Group Leaders
	Time Frame: Ongoing
Strategy 4:	Purchase and distribute tools such as a “credit card style” tract containing the Plan and Prayer of Salvation.
	Responsible Party: Prayer Committee
	Time Frame: August 2007

Goal 2:	To intentionally provide opportunities for missions for the members of the congregation to spread the Word of God.
Strategy 1:	To lead every Sunday School Class from youth through adult in identifying a mission / outreach project on an annual basis (i.e. Community Table, Community Care Clinic, Tutoring opportunities, Clothing Closet, driving and shopping with elderly folks who live at home, writing birthday cards and notes to shut ins).
	Responsible Party: Outreach leaders
	Time Frame: ongoing
Strategy 2:	To explore creative ways of offering Vacation Bible School to others in the community (i.e. additional advertisement, offering VBS in community

	settings, “Backyard VBS”)
	Responsible Party: VBS Director
	Time Frame: Summer 2007
Strategy 3:	To sponsor special events for the community such as concerts, drama events, speaking engagements, etc.
	Responsible Party: Missions/outreach committee
	Time Frame: Ongoing

Goal 3:	To make the community and church aware of the evangelistic and missionary activities of First Baptist Church – Albemarle.
Strategy 1:	Establish a Public Communications Committee to improve communication both inside the church and within the greater community. (including establishing responsibilities and establishing budget).
	Responsible Party: Nominating Committee, Finance Committee
	Time Frame: October 1, 2006
Strategy 2:	Utilize professional services to revamp and maintain the church website.
	Responsible Party: Public Communications Committee
	Time Frame: March 1, 2007 and ongoing
Strategy 3:	Create a visitors package.
	Responsible Party: Public Communications Committee, Church staff
	Time Frame: April 2007
Strategy 4 :	Create a church brochure.
	Responsible Party: Public Communications Committee, Church staff
	Time Frame: April 2007
Strategy 5:	To develop a new church logo.
	Responsible Party: Public Communications Committee, Church staff
	Time Frame: February 2007
Strategy 6:	Research and choose items to be purchased with church slogan, logo, vision statement, mission statement, etc.
	Responsible Party: Public Communications Committee, Church staff
	Time Frame: August 2007
Strategy 7:	To pursue advertising opportunities in various media including the Stanly News and Press, Local Radio Station, TV stations, etc.
	Responsible Party: Public Communications Committee, Church staff
	Time Frame: Ongoing
Strategy 8:	Hold a Missions Fair on an annual basis.
	Responsible Party: Missions / Outreach Committee
	Time Frame: Ongoing

Thrust B: Discipleship

Goal 1:	To strive to enhance our relationship with Christ through intentional discipleship.	
Strategy 1:	Establish an Education Committee to assist with church educational materials, and small group organization, etc. (This committee will include but not be limited to the 4 age division directors for Sunday School: Preschool, Children, Youth, and Adults.)	
	Responsible Party:	Nominating Committee
	Time Frame:	October 1, 2006
Strategy 2:	Explore additional options to better utilize the Wednesday night hour for adults (i.e. small group studies, prayer service in the chapel)	
	Responsible Party:	Education Committee
	Time Frame:	January 2007 and ongoing
Strategy 3:	Hold educational opportunities for Education Committee for 4 age-specific specialists	
	Responsible Party:	Sunday School Director
	Time Frame:	Fall, 2006
Strategy 4:	Develop an educational plan to clarify the purpose and roles of Sunday School, small groups, Wednesday evening activities and other church educational programs.	
	Responsible Party:	Church staff; Sunday School Director; Education Committee
	Time Frame:	Spring, 2007 and ongoing

Goal 2:	To intentionally lead the congregation to discover and utilize their spiritual gifts.	
Strategy 1:	Offer a spiritual gifts inventory for the congregation.	
	Responsible Party:	Education Committee
	Time Frame:	May 2007
Strategy 2:	Match results of spiritual gifts inventory with service opportunities.	
	Responsible Party:	Education Committee, Nominating Committee
	Time Frame:	July 2007
Strategy 3:	Identify additional educational opportunities for church members.	
	Responsible Party:	Education Committee
	Time Frame:	Ongoing
Strategy 4:	Identify additional educational opportunities for church staff	
	Responsible Party:	Church staff; Personnel Committee
	Time Frame:	Ongoing

Goal 3:	To strengthen our Sunday School.	
Strategy 1:	Hold annual seminars for Sunday School teachers.	

	Responsible Party:	Sunday School director
	Time Frame:	Ongoing
Strategy 2:	Institute some sort of Sunday School attendance emphasis at least twice a year (i.e. High Attendance Sunday).	
	Responsible Party:	Education Committee
	Time Frame:	Ongoing
Strategy 3:	Develop a list of Sunday School classes to include the focus of each class and what distinguishes them from other classes that is to be disbursed in the visitor packet.	
	Responsible Party:	Each Sunday School class, Sunday School director
	Time Frame:	October 2006
Strategy 4:	Institute structure within our Sunday School program by having each class identify an Outreach leader, Communications officer, and some method of inter-class communication.	
	Responsible Party:	Each Sunday School class.
	Time Frame:	October 2006
Strategy 5:	Explore the option of additional Sunday School units.	
	Responsible Party:	Education Committee
	Time Frame:	Ongoing

Goal 4:	To strengthen our small group program as a complement to our Sunday School program	
Strategy 1:	Hold annual seminars for small group leaders.	
	Responsible Party:	Sunday School Director; Education Committee
	Time Frame:	Fall, 2006
Strategy 2:	Utilize outside guest speakers periodically for special study topics.	
	Responsible Party:	Education Committee
	Time Frame:	Ongoing

Goal 5:	To annually review the need for either a part time or full time Director of Education position.	
Strategy 1:	Survey the FBC church members for the need of a Director of Education on a part time or full time basis.	
	Responsible Party:	Personnel Committee; Deacon Board
	Time Frame:	Fall, 2007, and ongoing annually

Goal 6:	To place a periodic emphasis on stewardship.	
Strategy 1:	Have a stewardship emphasis week with a guest speaker to emphasize time, talents, and tithes.	
	Responsible Party:	Church staff

	Time Frame:	Fall 2007 and Ongoing
Strategy 2:	Encourage pre-school, children, and youth Sunday School teachers to emphasize giving and stewardship by teaching children to bring a regular offering each Sunday.	
	Responsible Party:	Sunday School teachers
	Time Frame:	August 2006 and ongoing

Thrust C: Fellowship

Goal 1:	To strengthen the overall family of faith through growing relationships between individuals.	
Strategy 1:	Encourage each Sunday School class to plan at least one quarterly activity outside of their weekly class.	
	Responsible Party:	Sunday School director, Outreach Leaders
	Time Frame:	Ongoing
Strategy 2:	Encourage inter-class social activities	
	Responsible Party:	Outreach coordinators, Sunday School teachers, Sunday School Director
	Time Frame:	Ongoing
Strategy 3:	Encourage class retreats.	
	Responsible Party:	Outreach leaders, Sunday School teachers, Sunday School director
	Time Frame:	Ongoing
Strategy 4 :	Encourage the formation of small groups of study and continue to offer support for those groups.	
	Responsible Party:	Education Committee, Sunday School Teachers, Sunday School Director
	Time Frame:	Ongoing
Strategy 5 :	Organize at least 3 church-wide events per year (i.e Wildlife banquet, Spring Banquet)	
	Responsible Party:	Recreation committee
	Time Frame:	Ongoing
Strategy 6 :	Intentionally provide fellowship opportunities for adults to gain a more intimate relationship with one another within the church body (e.g. have all who are willing to come to church one evening, put their names in a hat, and draw names and go to dinner together, and return to church for dessert).	
	Responsible Party:	Recreation Committee
	Time Frame:	ongoing

Thrust D: Ministry

Goal 1:	To create a welcoming atmosphere for guests.	
Strategy 1:	Develop a Guest Ministry Team (including establishing responsibilities).	
	Responsible Party:	Nominating committee
	Time Frame:	September 2006
Strategy 2:	Utilize a “pew pad” to gather information about guests.	
	Responsible Party:	Church staff, Guest Ministry Team
	Time Frame:	January 2007
Strategy 3:	Designate “guest parking” with appropriate signage around the church to direct guests to the designated spaces.	
	Responsible Party:	Property committee
	Time Frame:	September 2006
Strategy 4:	Utilize a guest center.	
	Responsible Party:	Guest Ministry Team
	Time Frame:	October 2006
Strategy 5:	Develop a systematic plan for follow up of guests by various congregational members.	
	Responsible Party:	Guest Ministry Team
	Time Frame:	October 2006 and ongoing
Strategy 6 :	Institute a quarterly guest lunch reception and offer information about our mission/vision, programs, beliefs, and philosophies.	
	Responsible Party:	Guest Ministry Team
	Time Frame:	April 2007 and ongoing
Strategy 7:	Have a new member orientation class that would include familiarization with ministry needs and opportunities.	
	Responsible Party:	Church staff, Guest Ministry Team
	Time Frame:	Spring 2007 and ongoing
Strategy 8:	Institute a training program for our ushers.	
	Responsible Party:	Church staff, Guest Ministry Team
	Time Frame:	ongoing

Goal 2:	To strengthen families within our church and the greater community.	
Strategy 1:	Intentionally offer various seminars and support groups in areas of family need (i.e. divorce recovery, grief recovery, various support groups, conflict resolution)	
	Responsible Party:	Education Committee
	Time Frame:	ongoing
Strategy 2:	Intentionally offer family oriented retreats and other activities with a focus on the family unit.	
	Responsible Party:	Education committee, Recreation Committee
	Time Frame:	Ongoing

Thrust E: Worship

Goal 1:	To develop worship services that appeal to wide variety of people.	
Strategy 1:	Establish an Ad Hoc committee that studies and researches the logistics of having a second worship service, assimilate that information, and present it to the congregation.	
	Responsible Party:	Church staff, Chairman of Board of Deacons, Ad Hoc Committee
	Time Frame:	Fall 2006 appoint committee
Strategy 2:	Reinstitute the 5 th Sunday night sing combining both traditional and contemporary music.	
	Responsible Party:	Music Committee
	Time Frame:	Fall 2006
Strategy 3:	Institute “70 minutes of continuous prayer” modeled after <i>40 days of Purpose</i> .	
	Responsible Party:	Prayer Committee
	Time Frame:	Fall 2006
Strategy 4 :	Institute “the greeting” during the worship service on a regular basis.	
	Responsible Party:	Church staff
	Time Frame:	Ongoing

Goal 2:	To foster personal worship.	
Strategy 1:	Identify an area of the church to create a prayer room.	
	Responsible Party:	Property committee
	Time Frame:	September 2008

Thrust F: Property

Goal 1:	To explore all avenues to increase our limited parking.	
Strategy 1:	Start a fund for the purpose of purchasing future property.	
	Responsible Party:	Finance Committee
	Time Frame:	August 2006

Goal 2:	To develop transportation options.	
Strategy 1:	To explore transportation options (i.e. bus, van).	
	Responsible Party:	Property committee
	Time Frame:	August 2007

Thrust G: Church Administration

Goal 1:	To improve the efficiency of governance within the church.	
Strategy 1:	Establish an Ad Hoc committee which represents the diversity of our church in terms of age and length of membership to evaluate our system of church governance.	
	Responsible Party:	Church staff
	Time Frame:	Fall 2007

Goal 2:	To define for our congregation what it means to be a Cooperating Baptist in the 21 st century.	
Strategy 1:	Review World Missions / Denominational Support Budgetary Line items.	
	Responsible Party:	Finance Committee, Church Council, Deacons
	Time Frame:	Spring 2007
Strategy 2:	Facilitate seminars or meetings to discuss denominational issues.	
	Responsible Party:	Church staff
	Time Frame:	Spring 2007

Goal 3:	To continuously evaluate the church's progress towards fulfilling our vision and mission.	
Strategy 1:	To continue the Renewal Planning team on a permanent basis for 3 year terms, after 2 years establish a new renewal planning team that would be responsible for the next Renewal Plan.	
	Responsible Party:	Nominating Committee
	Time Frame:	Ongoing

Appendix D

NEWSLETTER ARTICLE ABOUT MY PROJECT

This fall I am working on the final phase of my Doctorate of Ministry degree. Many of you know that I began this program several years ago, but took some time off from my studies. Recently I finished writing my proposal for the final stage of the degree. I am happy to report that the Doctorate Committee at the Divinity School of Gardner-Webb University “unanimously and enthusiastically” approved my proposal last week. And so the work has begun.

Over the next few weeks, I will be asking your assistance in this process. Starting this Sunday morning, September 14th, I and several others who have agreed to assist me will be surveying our adult Sunday School classes. The surveys will only take a couple of minutes to complete. I humbly request that as many of you as possible allow me to glean your thoughts with this tool. If you are unable to be in Sunday School and miss the surveying but would like to participate, I will make sure copies are available in the church office. Collecting data is an integral part of a Doctorate of Ministry project so your contribution is vitally important to me.

Also, you will note an announcement that appears in this edition of the “Tie.” Another facet of the project is a small group study that I will be facilitating. You can see the information about the study in the announcement. This study, obviously, will not involve as many as the surveying process will. To all those who participate in the survey or the study, I want to say, “Thank you” in advance.

I am fortunate to serve this great church and I already know that you support me in my pursuit of this degree, as you have supported me in countless other ways over the last five years. So once more, I humbly ask that you assist me with my studies through your participation in the process and also with your continued prayers.

NEWSLETTER AD FOR THE SMALL GROUP STUDY

SMALL GROUP STUDY *Glimpses of Heaven among Friends*

Roger will be leading a small group study about descriptions of Heaven in Scripture and contemporary film beginning Sunday afternoon, October 5. The group’s regular meeting schedule will be determined during this initial meeting. The study will last six weeks. You can sign-up in the church office. This small group study is

part of Roger's doctrinal project, and your participation will be greatly appreciated. See Roger if you have any questions about the study.

Appendix E

Notes for Organizational Meeting

Glimpses of Heaven: A Conversation among Friends

The Bible Study with No Answers, just lots of QUESTIONS-

Thanks for Being Here- your participation is truly appreciated in that you are supporting me in following a dream that I have had for six years and had to delay for a while.

- 1-** After tonight, nobody can say, “Well, we will all find out one day.” Let’s agree this afternoon that everything we will say from here on about heaven is speculation. There are no absolutes that we are sure about. Much of the language in scripture when it is talking about heaven is symbolic language. Therefore, something may or may not be exactly as it is described, and we will talk about some of that. But what I desire is for you to have the freedom to say whatever you think. You do not have to agree with me, and you certainly do not have to agree with anyone else in the room. Good chance they are wrong anyway. This study is all about dialogue and the sharing of ideas. It was planned, designed, and structured to stimulate thought and conversation. If it does not do that for you, then of course, there is something wrong with you. Seriously, I want us to develop a level of comfort where no idea is too radical or too traditional. All ideas are worthy of consideration and conversation.

- 2-** Having said that, here is how this course is structured. There are five movies that we are going to watch over the next five weeks. Each movie vividly depicts heaven. Today we will pick a night to get together this week and watch the first of the five films. At the end of the film viewing, I will give you a reflection sheet which will be one page, front and back. You will take this home, work on it, and bring it next Sunday. Notice what I said, I envision for us to meet one night each week for the next five weeks, a night that best fits the schedule of the majority. We will watch the film then. Then for the next five Sundays we will also meet on Sunday afternoon or evening to discuss the film. The Sunday meeting we will try to limit to one hour. The evening meetings will last about two hours because the shortest film is 77 minutes and the longest one is 118 minutes. I believe that after watching an almost two-hour movie, it will be too late to have good discussion. Also, I want you to

reflect on what you saw. That is why the study is structured the way it is. Are there any questions before we discuss scheduling this?

3- SCHEDULING-_____

- 4- Each film was chosen by me because I thought it would allow us to consider our own preconceptions about the afterlife. You have probably seen some of these but I doubt anyone here has seen all five. I am not going to tell you what we are watching until we watch it. We will start with the easiest film and we will conclude with the one which is the most challenging.

I need to point out a couple of things. First, none of the movies are overtly Christian. I do not think they were made by Christians nor do I believe their stories or ideas are necessarily Christian. You might not think they are very good movies or you might love them. We are not watching them to review their quality. We are watching them to consider how they depict heaven, how we feel about their depictions and how those depictions of heaven align with scripture or abandon scripture. None of the movies are rated any higher than PG but they are movies and there may be something in any one of the films which might be offensive to you. As a friend of mine says, "Offensive material is in the eyes of the beholder." What might offend you may not offend the person next to you. I ask that we be adults. If someone swears in a film, let's overlook it. The purpose again is to watch and see how heaven is depicted in the film.

- 5- If for any reason you have to miss a viewing, but you want to come to the discussion, or you want to catch up on what the others have seen, I will loan the DVDs out to you. Just know that not returning the DVDs is the surest way to guarantee that you will never see the real heaven.

- 6- I wonder if the movie-watching experience would be more enjoyable with food? I thought if maybe three people each week would agree to bring food, I could get drinks and paper products each week for the film viewing. Just a thought.

- 7- Surveys again.

Appendix F

Reflection Sheet Number One

Glimpses of Heaven among Friends

Reflection Sheet # 1- "*The Littlest Angel*"(1969)¹²⁰

“The content of this reality beyond the boundaries of death is so radically different from anything that has been proposed by the religious systems of the past that it is all but unrecognizable.” - Bishop John Spong

General Impressions

Using single words or short phrases list the images of heaven that you remember from the film.

What ideas, if any, about heaven in the film were most appealing to you?

What ideas, if any, about heaven in the film were most disturbing to you?

Quotes from the Film

¹²⁰ All questions pertaining to the film were inspired by and all film quotes were taken from *The Little Angel*, Directed by Joe Layton, Written by Patricia Gray and Lan O’Kun, 1969.

Here are some quotes from the dialogue of the film- respond to these ideas.

PRAYER: After praying in Heaven Michael says, "I wonder if he heard it?"

MEMORY: Patience makes two statements about his memory in Heaven: "I can hardly remember." and "Rarely do I miss my past."

GROWTH AND CHANGE: Patience says to Michael: "You are not a little boy anymore."

Reflections from Scriptures

Read the following scriptures and explain how they relate to the ideas about heaven in the film.

Daniel 7:13-14; I Thessalonians 4:16-18; Revelation 1:4-8

Genesis 28: 10-17; Revelation 21:21; Matthew 7: 13-14

I Samuel 28:5-25; Matthew 14:22-33; Luke 24:36-43

Matthew 18:10-14; I Corinthians 6:2-3; Hebrews 1:14

Matthew 5: 33-42; Mark 10:35-45; Hebrews 1:5-14; Revelation 22:1-5

Theological Reflections

Are there any other theological issues that the film has raised for you that are not covered in the reflections above?

Appendix G

Lyrics to "*Holes in the Floor of Heaven*"

One day shy of eight years old,
 When grandma passed away.
 I was a broken hearted little boy,
 Blowing out that birthday cake.
 How I cried when the sky let go,
 With a cold lonesome rain.
 My mom smiled, said: "Don't be sad
 child."
 "Grandma's watching you today."

"'Cos there's holes in the floor of
 Heaven,
 "And her tears are pouring down.
 "That's how you know she's watching,
 "Wishing she could be here now.
 "An' sometimes if you're lonely,
 "Just remember she can see.
 "There's holes in the floor of Heaven
 "And she's watching over you and
 me."

Seasons come and seasons go,
 Nothing stays the same.
 I grew up, fell in love,
 Met a girl who took my name.
 Year by year, we made a life,
 In this sleepy little town.
 I thought we'd grow old together,
 Lord, I sure do miss her now.

But there's holes in the floor of
 Heaven,
 And her tears are pouring down.
 That's how I know she's watching,
 Wishing she could be here now.
 An' sometimes when I'm lonely,
 I remember she can see.
 There's holes in the floor of Heaven,
 And she's watching over you and me.

Well my little girl is 23,
 I walk her down the aisle.
 It's a shame her Mom can't be here
 now,

To see her lovely smile.
 They throw the rice, I catch her eye,
 As the rain starts coming down.
 She takes my hand; says: "Daddy
 don't be sad,
 'Cos I know Mama's watching now."

"And there's holes in the floor of
 Heaven
 "And her tears are pouring down.
 "That's how you know she's watching,
 "Wishing she could be here now.
 "An' sometimes when I'm lonely,
 "I just remember she can see.
 "Yes, there's holes in the floor of
 Heaven,
 "And she's watching over you and
 me."

Watching over you and me.

Watching over you and me.

Watching over you and me.¹²¹

¹²¹ Wariner, Steve, "Holes in the Floor of Heaven," Online:
<http://www.lyrics007.com/Wariner%20Steve%20Lyrics/Holes%20In%20The%20Floor%20Of%20Heaven%20Lyrics.html>

Appendix H

Reflection Sheet Number 2

Glimpses of Heaven among Friends

Reflection Sheet # 2- "*Made in Heaven*" (1987)¹²²

“From opposite standpoints of the Christian world, from different quarters of human life and character, through various expressions of their common faith and hope, through diverse models of conversion, through different portions of the Holy Scripture will the weary travelers enter the Heavenly City and meet each other- ‘not without surprise’ – on the shores of the same river of life.” Dwight L. Moody

Comparing and Contrasting

In what ways are “Heaven” in the first film and “Heaven” in the second film similar?

In what ways are the two heavens from the films different?

With which “Heaven” are you more comfortable and why?

In “*Made in Heaven*” are there any items in Heaven that you have never considered being in heaven?

Quotes from the Film

Here are some quotes from the dialogue of the film. What are your thoughts about these quotes?

¹²² All questions pertaining to the film were inspired by and all film quotes were taken from *Made in Heaven*, Directed by Alan Rudolph, Written by Bruce Evans and Raynold Gideon, 1987.

"I'm the closest relative you've got up here right now. So they sent me to meet you." – Aunt Lisa

"It takes time, Mickey, but you'll realize where you are." -Aunt Lisa

"How did you die?" "Catch us up on all the news." -Al the postman says.

"What if I imagine something bad?" Michael asks. "You can't. You're in heaven." Annie responds. Michael then says, "So if I could, I would be someplace else?"

Reflections from Scriptures

Read the following scriptures and explain how these passages relate to ideas about heaven in the film.

John 1:19-28; Mark 8:27-30

Deuteronomy 25:5-10; Mark 12:18-27; Luke 20:27-40

Luke 9:28- 36; John 21: 1-8

Genesis 2: 7; Ecclesiastes 12: 7; I Corinthians 15:45; James 1:19-21

Theological Reflections

Are there any other theological issues that the film has raised for you that are not covered in the reflections above?

Appendix I

Reflection Sheet Number 3

Glimpses of Heaven among Friends

Reflection Sheet # 3- "*Defending Your Life*" (1991)¹²³

“Christian, meditate much on heaven, it will help thee to press on, and to forget the toil of the way. This vale of tears is but the pathway to the better country: this world of woe is but the stepping-stone to a world of bliss. And, after death, what cometh? What wonder-world will open upon our astonished sight?”

-Charles Spurgeon

Comparing and Contrasting

In “Defending Your Life”, one of the characters makes it very clear early in the film that the setting is not “heaven”. In fact, the setting is not a final destination but rather an examining site during a process of reincarnation. Understanding this, are there any elements in the film which parallel popular ideas of heaven?

In the film “courage” seems to be the defining emotion for a successful life. Is this an emotion that is valued in Christianity?

What other emotions or virtues might one assert as higher or equal priorities for Christians?

Reflections from Scriptures

¹²³ All questions pertaining to the film were inspired by and all film quotes were taken from *Defending Your Life*, Written and Directed by Albert Brooks, 1991.

Judgment following this life is described in scripture. It is an accepted part of the life beyond this one for many believers. In fact, on the church survey 123 out of 162 responses agreed or strongly agreed that there would be a "judgment" after this life. Only 24 disagreed and 15 were uncertain.

In scripture, there is the judgment after death. There is also the final judgment which would be dealt with during a study on the "end times." We will focus here on the judgment that follows this life.

Review the passages below and ponder them as they relate to judgment.

Salvation- Ephesians 2:8-9; Titus 3: 3-7

Inevitable Judgment- Romans 14:10-12; 2 Corinthians 5:10

Rewards for this Life- Matthew 6: 19-21; Luke 12: 32-34; I Timothy 6: 17-19

Books- Exodus 32: 30-35; Malachi, 3:16-18; Philippians 4:3; Revelation 20:12

Personal Experience

If our judgment as Christians was like that judgment depicted in the film, scenes of our life shone on screen and our intentions or emotions evaluated, are there any moments in your life you would especially hope would be presented? (You may or may not want to share these with the group but reflect on your life and consider what virtue/ emotion is prominent in those memories.)

And then there is the opposite...Without getting too personal, (we are not asking for scandalous confessions) are there moments in your life

**that if they were displayed it would cause you regret or distress?
(Again, no one will be forced to share anything with the group, but
take time to reflect on this.)**

Theological Reflections

**Are there any other theological issues that any of the films have raised
for you that are not covered in the reflection sheets or in our
discussions?**

Appendix J

Reflection Sheet Number 4

Glimpses of Heaven among Friends

Reflection Sheet # 4- "*What Dreams May Come*" (1998)¹²⁴

“If I knew that never again would I recognize that beloved one with whom I spent more than thirty-nine years here on earth, my anticipation of heaven would much abate. To say that we shall be with Christ and that that will be enough, is to claim that there we shall be without the social instincts and affections which mean so much to us here...Life beyond cannot mean impoverishment, but the enhancement and enrichment of life as we have known it here at its best.” - W. Graham Scroggie

General Impressions

One of the themes, if not the primary one, of this week's film depiction of "heaven" is relationships. Chris Nielson (Robin Williams) encounters several beings from his earthly life after he arrives in heaven: his son and daughter, his mentor, even the family dog, and, of course, his wife who he must save from "hell." Of those who have gone before you, who would you most want to encounter on the "other side"?

It will be good to discover loved ones who have gone on before us, but what if they are not there? The quote above speaks of not recognizing a loved one. And the film deals with that idea but it is only a limited time of no recognition and it is for a reason. The film also depicts a loved one who does not make it to heaven. Among those surveyed in the church, "I will miss those who are not with me in heaven." is one of the statements with the closest division- 59 agree or strongly agree, 67 disagree or strongly disagree, and 36 are undecided. So, do you believe that we will remember everyone from this life? Will we miss those who are not yet there? Will we recognize that some will never join us because their eternal destination is different from ours? Record your thoughts on these issues.

¹²⁴ All questions pertaining to the film were inspired by and all film quotes were taken from *What Dreams May Come*, Directed by Vincent Ward, Written by Richard Matheson and Ronald Bass, 1998.

Reflections from Scriptures

Read Jesus' parable found in Luke 16: 19-31 and answer the questions below.

What characteristics of heaven does Jesus share in the parable?

What do we learn about hell from the parable?

Should we take these descriptions given to us by Jesus as literal descriptions? If so, why? If not, why not?

Compare and contrast the ideas of "heaven and hell" in the film and the parable.

Suicide is a prominent theme in the film. There are seven suicides in scripture and we will review those in our session. The following verses are not about any of the seven but are rather verses that can be related to the issue of suicide. Read over them and reflect on how they relate to the act of taking one's own life and the life beyond this one.

Psalm 34:18 _____

I Samuel 16:7 _____

John 10: 27-30 _____

Ephesians 2:8-10 _____

Theological Reflections

There are other theological ideas from the film that are worthy of consideration. Here are a couple.

Chris asks Albert, "Where is God in all this?" And Albert replies: "He's up there, shouting down that he loves us. Wondering why we can't hear him." Is this a good or bad description of God? Why?

The residents of "hell" are described as "self-absorbed", "immoral", and "selfish". What other adjectives might we use to describe those who spend eternity in "hell"?

Appendix K

Reflection Sheet Number 5

Glimpses of Heaven among Friends

Reflection Sheet # 5- "*After Life*" (1999)¹²⁵

"I must keep alive in myself the desire for my true country, which I shall not find till after death; I must never let it get snowed under or turned aside; I must make it the main object of life to press on to that other country and to help others to do the same."

- C. S. Lewis

General Impressions

Memory. What will we remember in heaven? What will we forget? Will the bad memories linger yet hurt us no more? Or will they be vanished and we only carry the good memories with us? When asked about memory in the next life, the members of First Baptist Church offered several opinions. In response to the statement: "I will remember nothing from my earthly life in Heaven." 96 out of 163 strongly disagreed. Only 27 agreed with the idea that we will not remember our earthly lives. Almost four times the number disagreed than agreed. Even though the majority seems to agree that we will have memories, oddly enough those surveyed are almost exactly divided on what we will remember. Approximately one third of those surveyed believed we will only remember the "good things" of this life. On the other hand, a little more than a third believe we will remember everything about our earthly life. What is your opinion of what will be remembered? The good? The bad? The ugly? Or all of the above. Why?

In his book, *Heaven*, Randy Alcorn makes the following statement: "Memory is a basic element of personality. If we are truly *ourselves* in Heaven, there must be continuity of memory from Earth to Heaven. We will not be different people, but the same people marvelously relocated and transformed. Heaven cleanses us but does not revise or extinguish our origins or history. Undoubtedly we will remember God's works of grace in our lives that

¹²⁵ All questions pertaining to the film were inspired by and all film quotes were taken from *After Life*, Written and Directed by Hirokazu Koreeda, 1999.

comforted, assured, sustained, and empowered us to live for him." Do you agree with his ideas? Why or why not?

Reflections from Scriptures

All the following verses relate to memory. Look up the text and record what this scripture reveals about memories in Heaven.

Matthew 12: 36-37

Luke 16: 25

John 20: 24-29

Acts 1: 1-8

I Timothy 6: 17-19

Revelation 6: 9-11

Revelation 14:13

Personal and Theological Reflections

What is the earliest memory you can recall from your childhood?

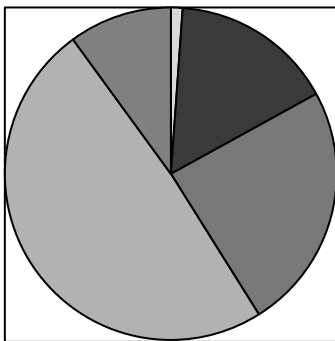
What would be your one memory if you, like the characters in the film, could only take one with you to Heaven? We will discuss these in our session. (Remember- if you don't have one you do not get to go on to heaven.)

Perhaps the most poignant quote from the film is the gentleman who says: "Say I choose a memory, from when I was eight or ten years old. Then I'll only remember how I felt back then? I'll be able to forget everything else? Really? You can forget? Well, then that really is heaven!" What are the benefits of being able to forget? What are the benefits in being able to remember for all eternity?

Appendix L

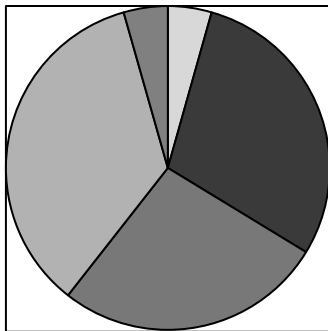
Church-Wide Survey on Heaven Memory

I will remember nothing from my earthly life in heaven.



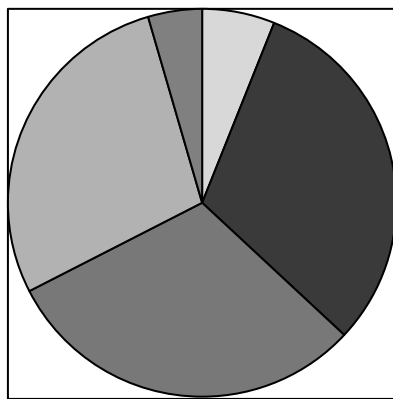
- Strongly Agree 1%
- Agree 16%
- Unsure 24%
- Disagree 49%
- Strongly Disagree 10%

I will remember only the good things from my earthly life when I am in heaven.



- Strongly Agree 4.5%
- Agree 29%
- Unsure 27%
- Disagree 35%
- Strongly Disagree 4.5%

I will remember everything about my earthly life when I arrive in heaven.



□ **Strongly Agree 6%**

■ **Agree 31%**

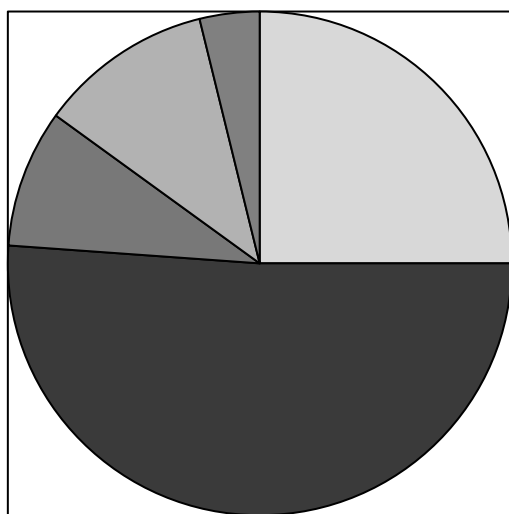
■ **Unsure 30.5%**

□ **Disagree 28%**

■ **Strongly Disagree 4.5%**

Appendix M**Church-Wide Survey on Heaven
Judgment**

There will be a judgment in the next life.



■ **Strongly Agree 25%**

■ **Agree 51%**

■ **Unsure 9%**

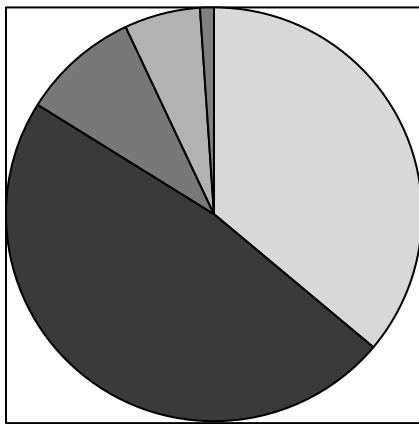
■ **Disagree 11%**

■ **Strongly Disagree 4%**

Appendix N

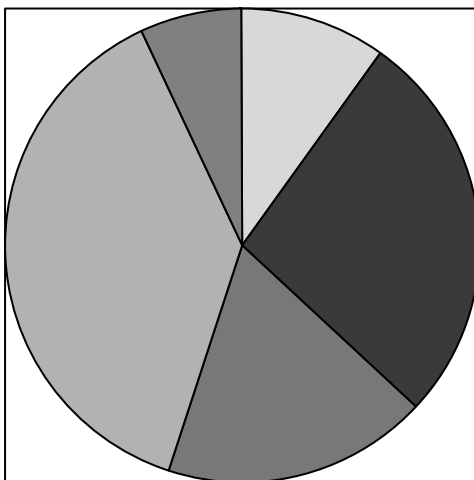
Church-Wide Survey on Heaven Relationships

I will know people in heaven but the character of the relationship will be different.



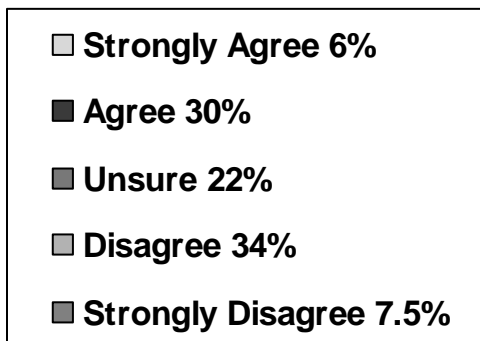
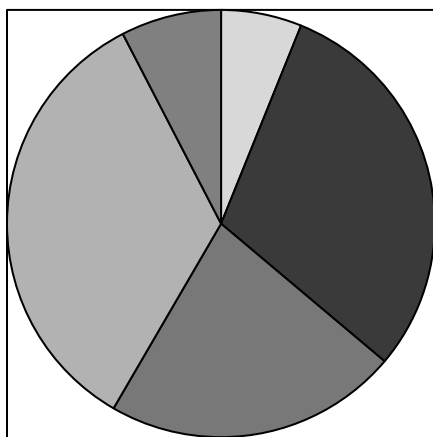
- Strongly Agree 36%**
- Agree 48%**
- Unsure 9%**
- Disagree 6%**
- Strongly Disagree 1%**

Earthly relationships will be meaningless in heaven.



- Strongly Agree 10%**
- Agree 27%**
- Unsure 18%**
- Disagree 38%**
- Strongly Disagree 7%**

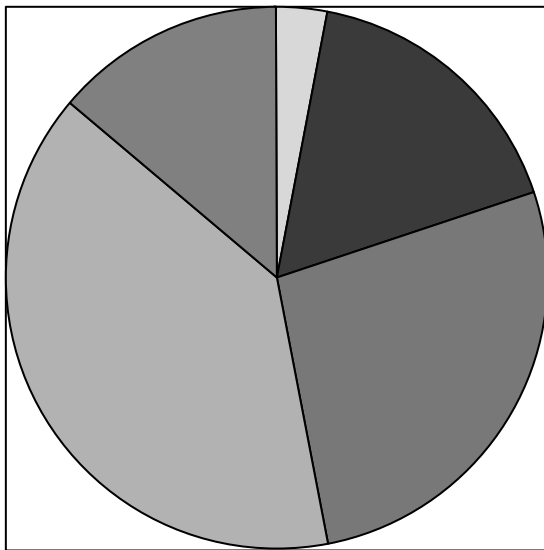
I will miss those who are not with me in heaven.



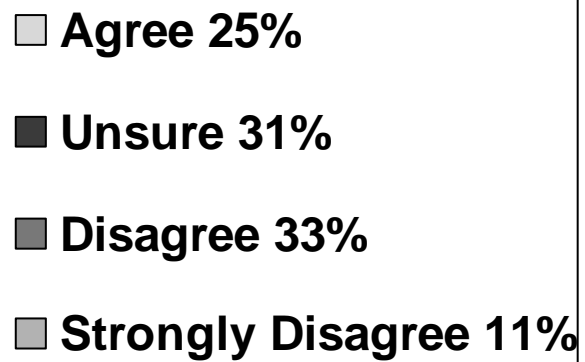
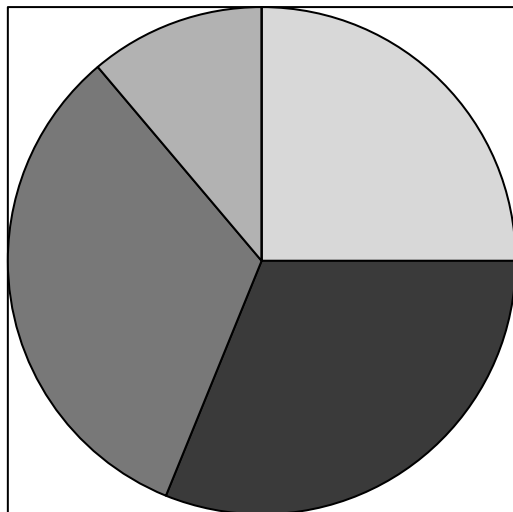
Appendix O

Church-Wide Survey on Heaven Returning to Earth as Spirits

Individuals can come back to earth from heaven as spirits.



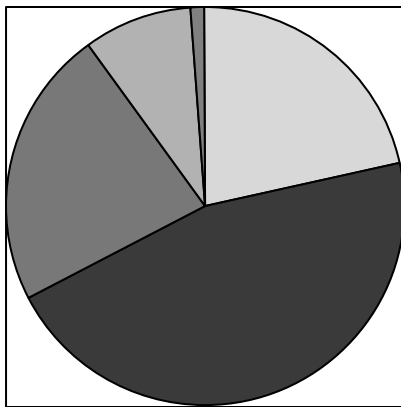
- Strongly Agree 3%**
- Agree 17%**
- Unsure 27%**
- Disagree 39%**
- Strongly Disagree 14%**

Appendix P**Church-Wide Survey on Heaven
Angels****Humans become angels in heaven.**

Appendix Q

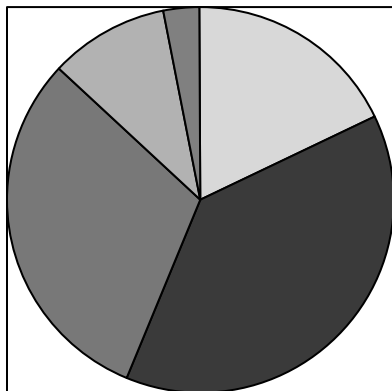
Church-Wide Survey on Heaven The Appearance of Heaven

There will be a banquet in heaven.



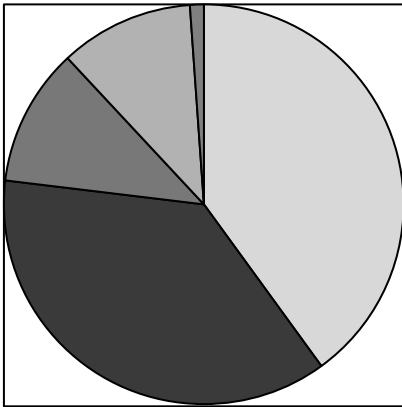
- Strongly Agree 22%**
- Agree 46%**
- Unsure 23%**
- Disagree 9%**
- Strongly Disagree 1%**

There will be trees and other plants in heaven.



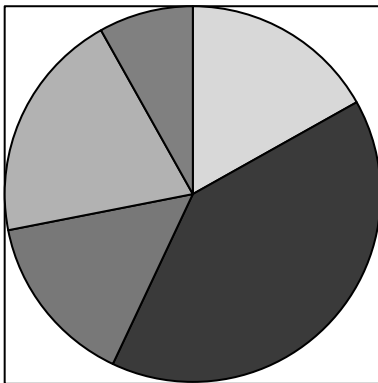
- Strongly Agree 18%**
- Agree 38%**
- Unsure 31%**
- Disagree 10%**
- Strongly Disagree 3%**

God will be seated on a throne in Heaven.



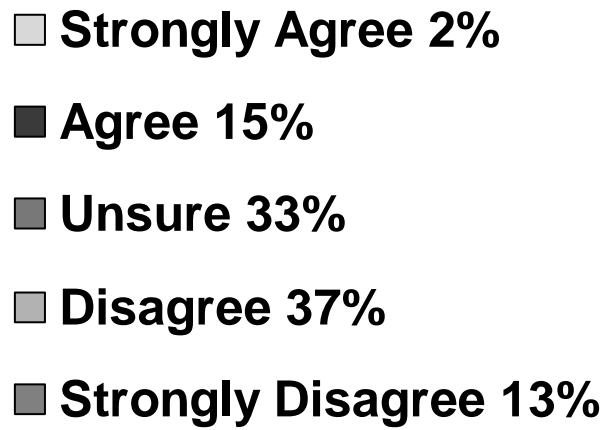
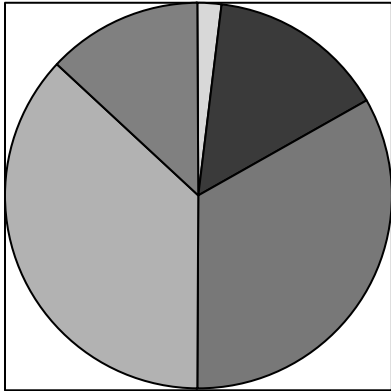
- Strongly Agree 40%**
- Agree 37%**
- Unsure 11%**
- Disagree 11%**
- Strongly Disagree 1%**

Heaven will have streets of gold.

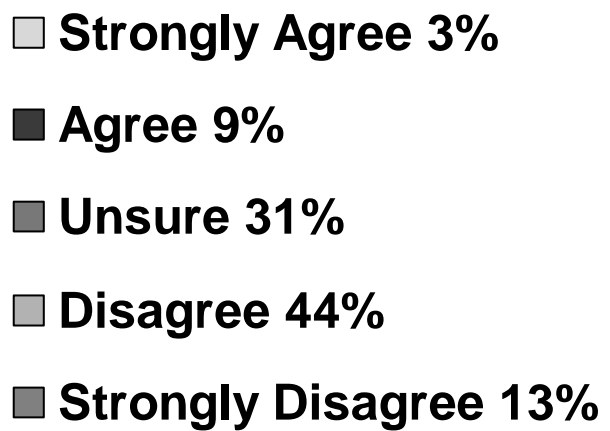
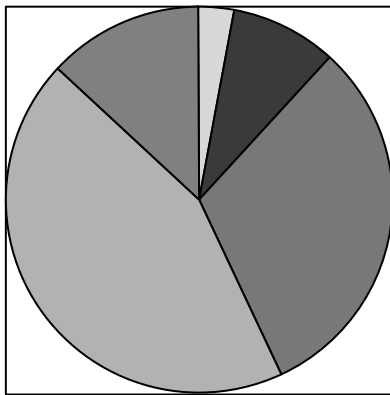


- Strongly Agree 17%**
- Agree 40%**
- Unsure 15%**
- Disagree 20%**
- Strongly Disagree 8%**

Clouds will be everywhere in heaven.

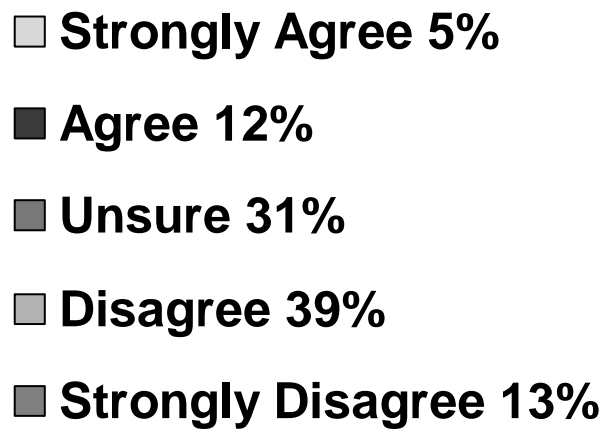
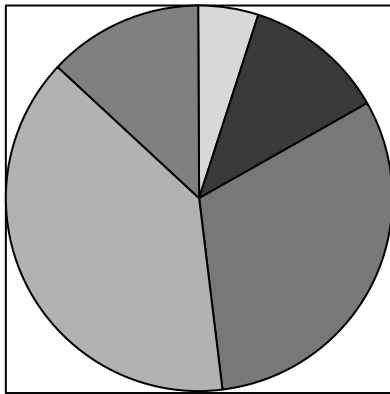


Everyone will wear a jeweled crown in heaven.

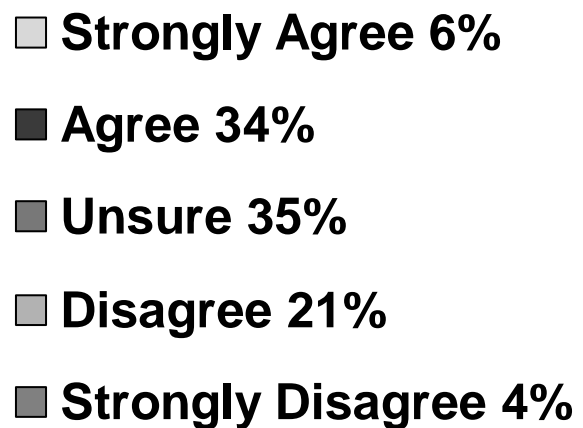
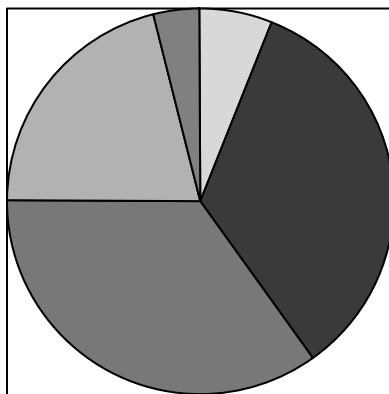


Appendix R**Church-Wide Survey on Heaven
The View from Heaven**

In heaven you can see what is happening in hell.



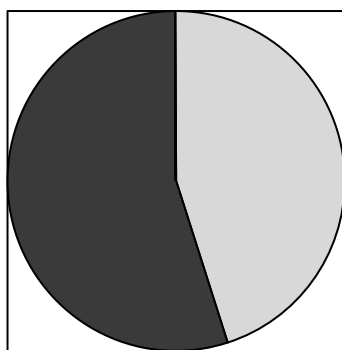
In heaven you can see what is happening on earth.



Appendix S

Survey on Small Groups – Church-Wide

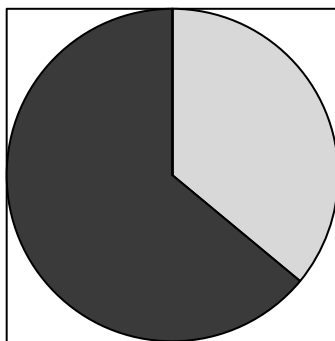
Participation in the “40 Days of Purpose” small group experience.



■ Participated 45%

■ Did Not Participate 55%

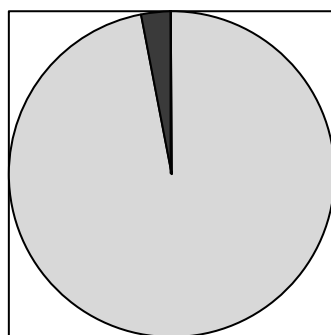
Involvement in other small group studies in the church.



■ Participated 36%

■ Did Not Participate 64%

Participation in Sunday School.



■ Participated 97%

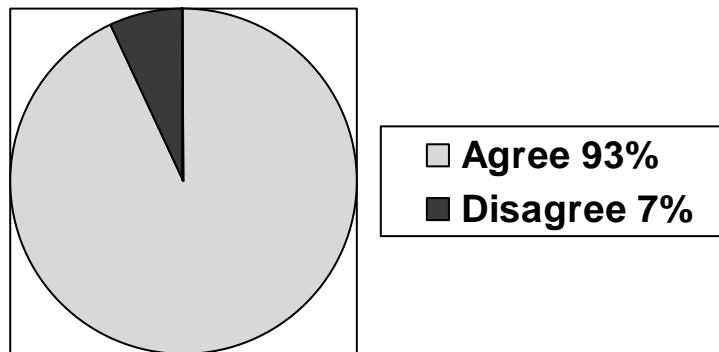
■ Did Not Participate 3%

"40 Days of Purpose" Small Groups

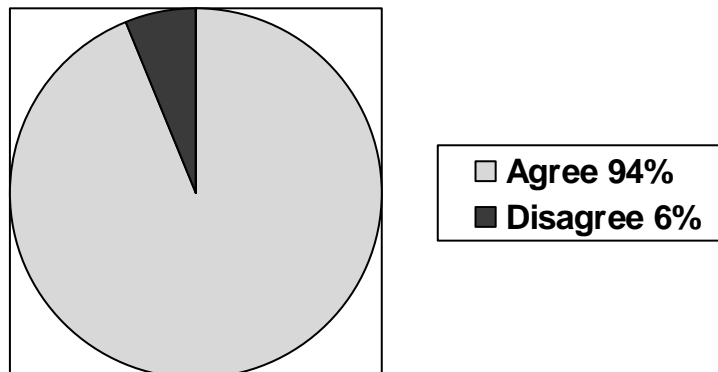
The small group experience enhanced my learning during the "40 Days of Purpose" study.



The small group experience during "40 Days" study enhanced my ability to retain information.

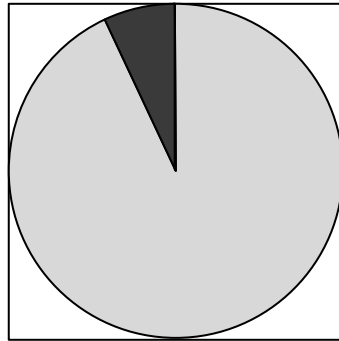


The insight of fellow small group members challenged me and inspired me to think about the material differently during the "40 Days" study.



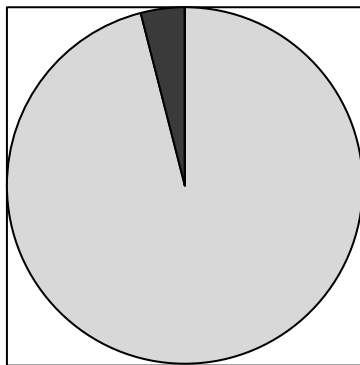
Other Small Group Experiences

A small group experience gives one the opportunity to meet new people, get to know someone better, or perhaps begin a new friendship.



□ Agree 93%
■ Disagree 7%

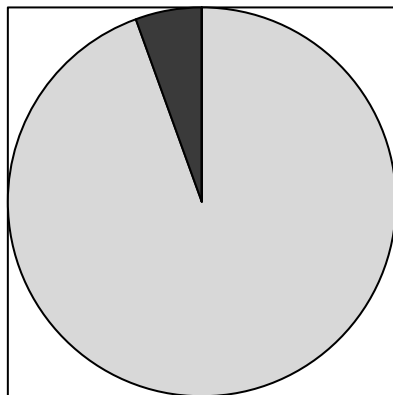
The small group experience during other studies enhanced my ability to retain information.



□ Agree 96%
■ Disagree 4%

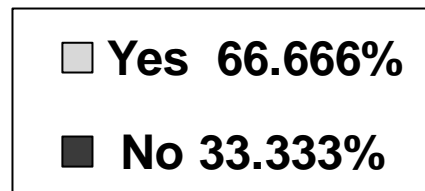
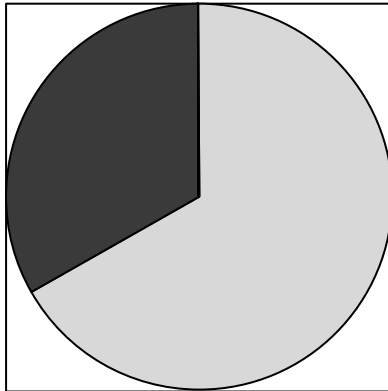
Sunday School

The insight of fellow class members in Sunday School challenges and inspires me to think about the scriptures differently.



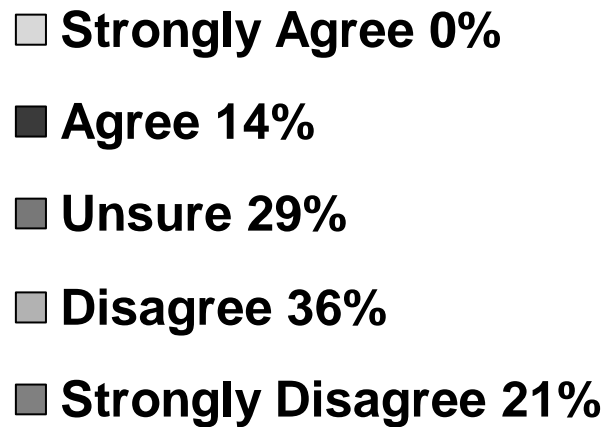
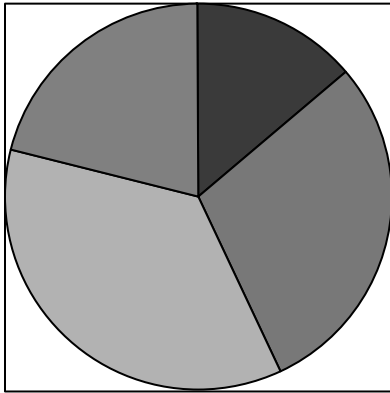
□ Agree 95.5%
■ Disagree 5.5%

Would you be willing in the future to be part of a “small group” experience at First Baptist Church? (This question covered all small groups other than Sunday School.)

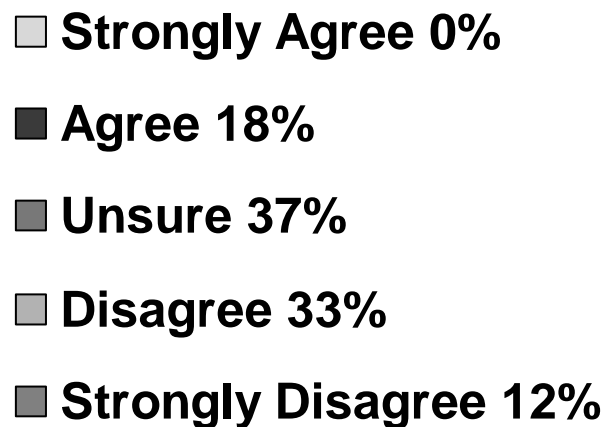
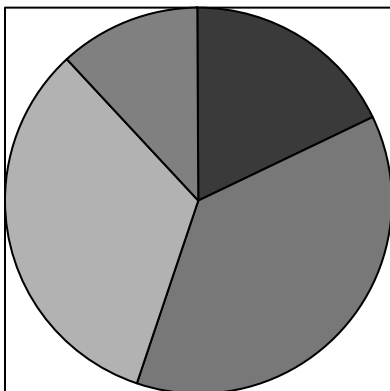


Appendix T**Survey on Heaven – Intro
Memory**

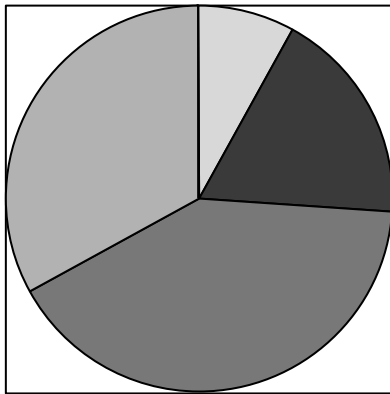
I will remember nothing from my earthly life in Heaven.



I will remember only the good things from my earthly life when I am in Heaven.



I will remember everything about my earthly life when I arrive in Heaven.

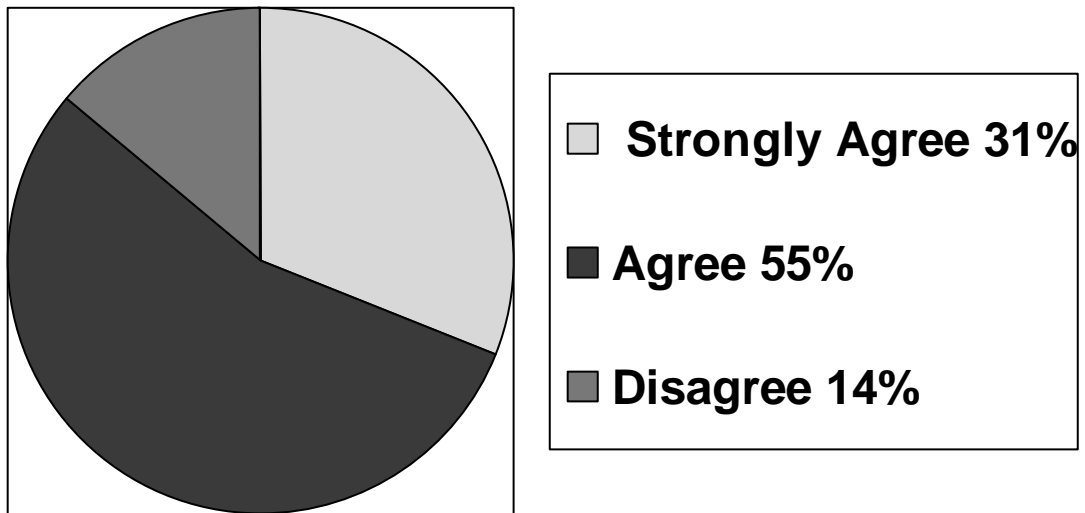


- Strongly Agree 8%**
- Agree 18%**
- Unsure 41%**
- Disagree 33%**
- Strongly Disagree 0%**

Appendix U

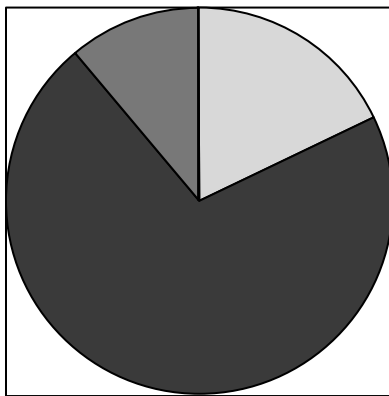
Survey on Heaven – Intro Judgment

There will be a judgment in the next life.



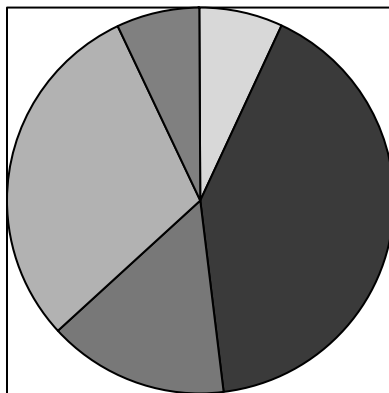
Appendix V**Survey on Heaven – Intro
Relationships**

I will know others in heaven, but the character of relationships will be different.



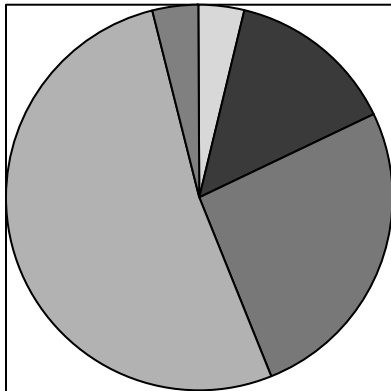
- **Strongly Agree 18%**
- **Agree 71%**
- **Unsure 11%**
- **Disagree 0%**
- **Strongly Disagree 0%**

Earthly relationships will be meaningless in heaven.



- **Strongly Agree 7%**
- **Agree 41%**
- **Unsure 15%**
- **Disagree 30%**
- **Strongly Disagree 7%**

I will miss those who are not with me in heaven.

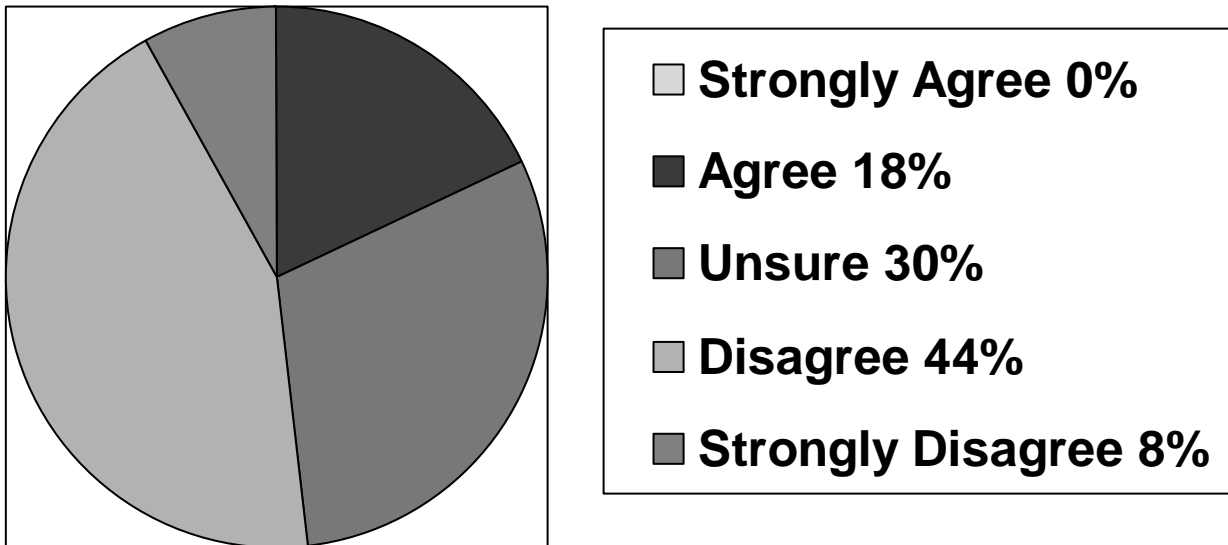


- Strongly Agree 4%**
- Agree 14%**
- Unsure 26%**
- Disagree 52%**
- Strongly Disagree 4%**

Appendix W

Survey on Heaven – Intro Returning to Earth as Spirits

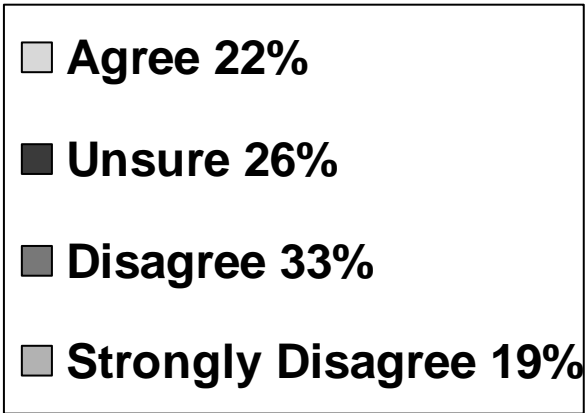
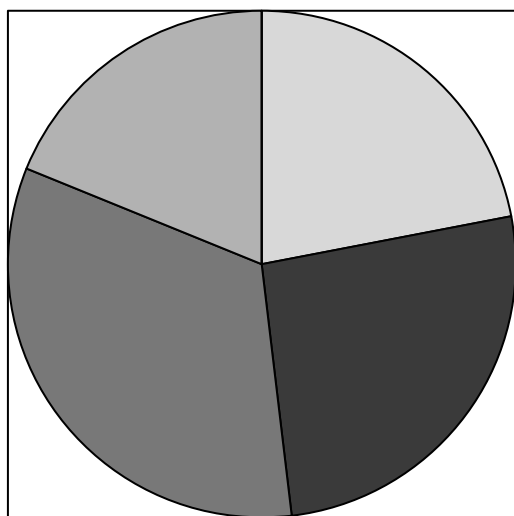
Individuals can come back to earth from heaven as spirits.



Appendix X

**Survey on Heaven – Intro
Angels**

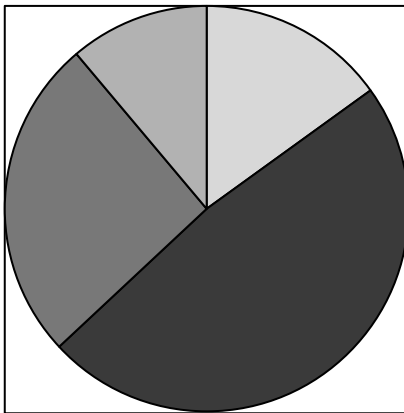
Humans become angels in heaven.



Appendix Y

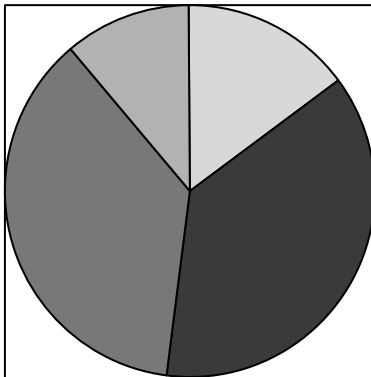
Survey on Heaven – Intro The Appearance of Heaven

There will be a banquet in heaven.



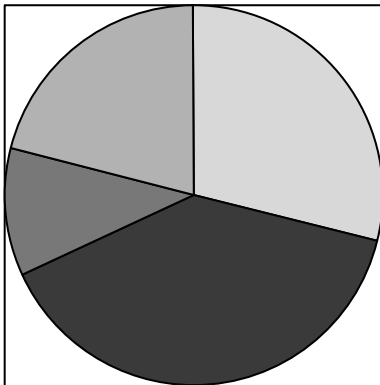
- Strongly Agree 15%**
- Agree 48%**
- Unsure 26%**
- Disagree 11%**

There will be trees and other plants in heaven.



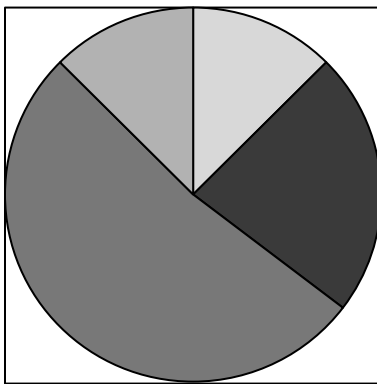
- Strongly Agree 15%**
- Agree 37%**
- Unsure 37%**
- Disagree 11%**

God will be seated on a throne in heaven.



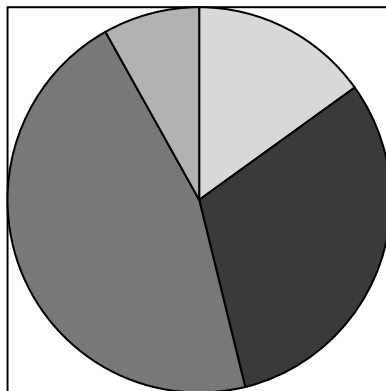
- Strongly Agree 29%
- Agree 39%
- Unsure 11%
- Disagree 21%

Everyone will wear a jeweled crown in heaven.



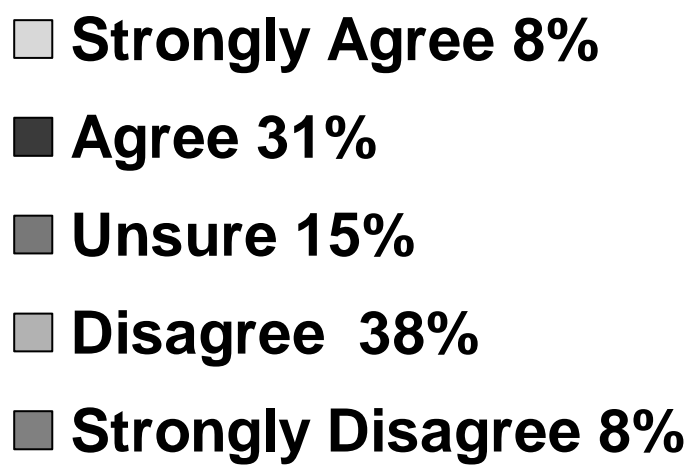
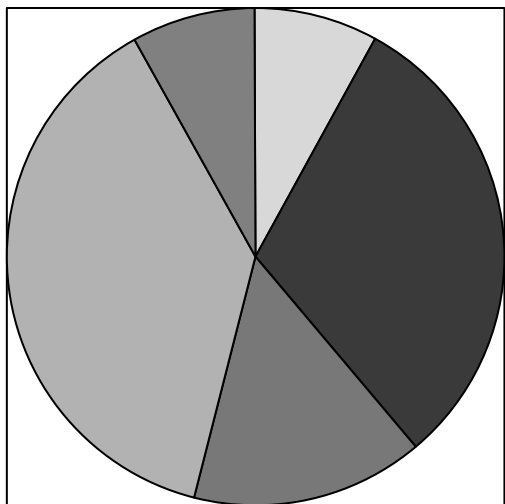
- Agree 11%
- Unsure 20%
- Disagree 58%
- Strongly Disagree 11%

Clouds will be everywhere in heaven.



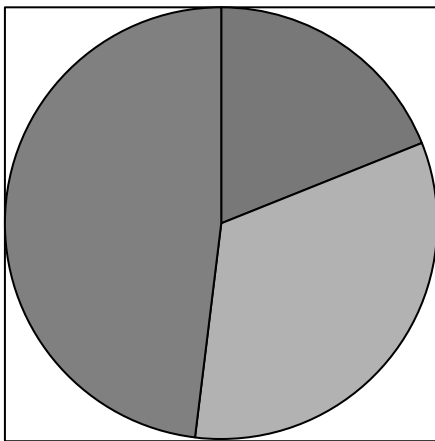
- Agree 15%
- Unsure 31%
- Disagree 46%
- Strongly Disagree 8%

Heaven will have streets of gold.



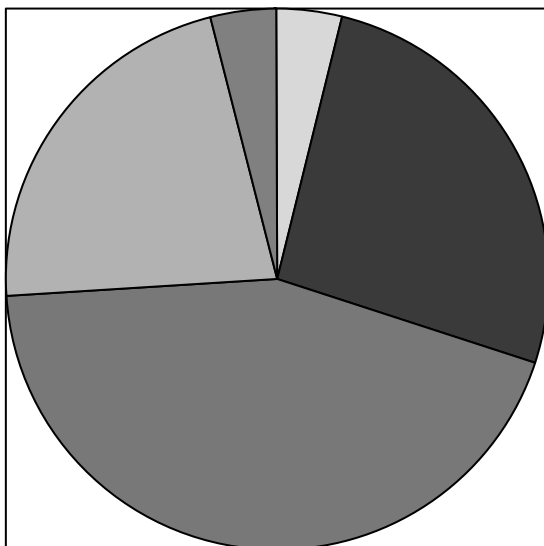
Appendix Z**Survey on Heaven – Intro
The View from Heaven**

In heaven, you can see what is happening in hell.



- Agree 19%**
- Unsure 33%**
- Disagree 48%**

In heaven you can see what is happening on earth.

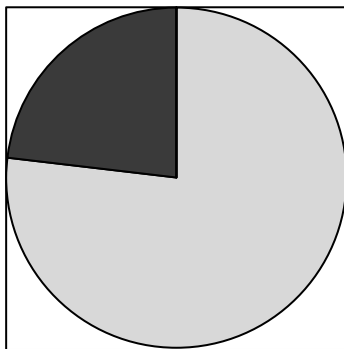


- Strongly Agree 4%**
- Agree 26%**
- Unsure 44%**
- Disagree 22%**
- Strongly Disagree 4%**

Appendix AA

Survey on Small Groups – Intro

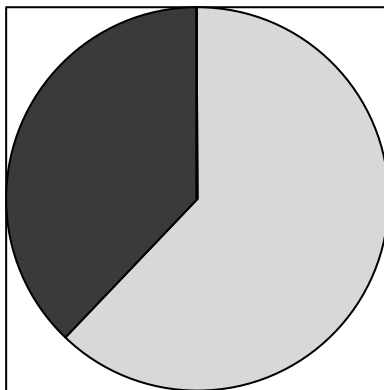
Participation in the “40 Days of Purpose” small group experience.



■ Participated 77%

■ Didn't Participate 23%

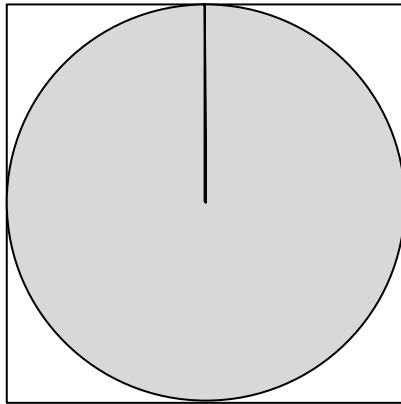
Involvement in other small group studies in the church.



■ Involved 62%

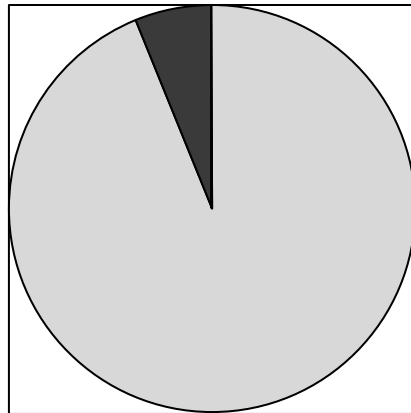
■ Not Involved 38%

Participation in Sunday School.



■ **Participate 100%**

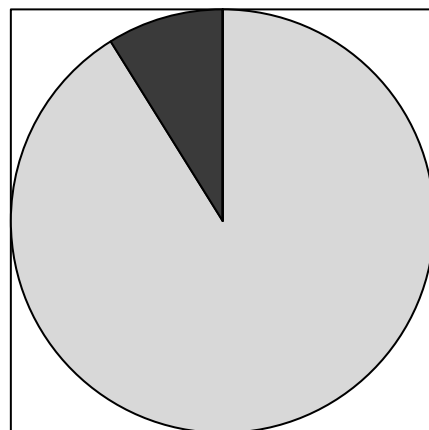
Those who responded positively about every small group within the church in which they had participated.



■ **Positive 94%**

■ **Negative 6%**

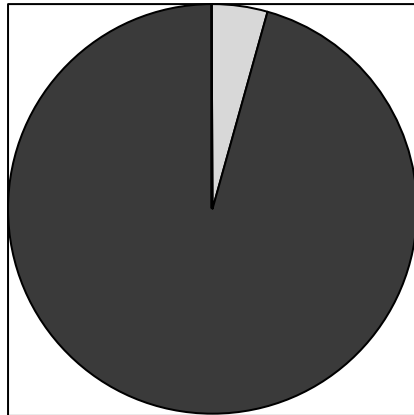
Those who responded positively to every question about the “40 Days of Purpose” experience.



■ **Positive 91%**

■ **Negative 9%**

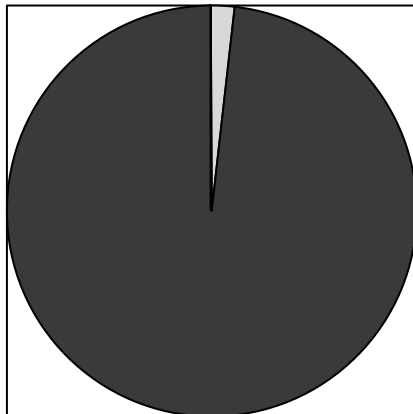
Individuals involved in Sunday School who described at least some aspect of the experience as negative.



■ Negative 4.5 %

■ Positive 95.5%

Of those surveyed, the majority stated that they would be interested in another small group experience following the completion of the study on heaven.

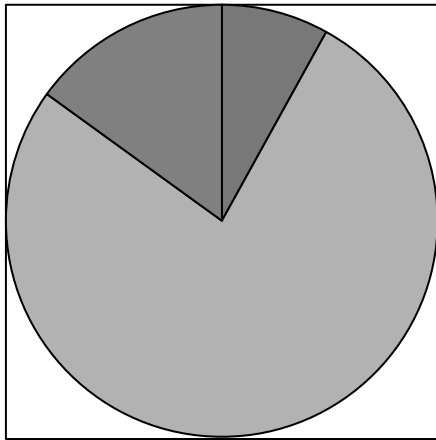


■ Not Interested 2%

■ Interested 98%

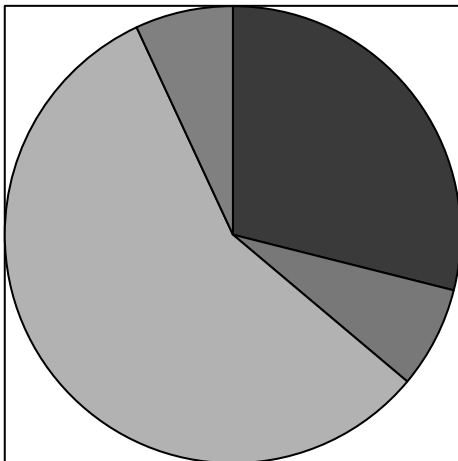
Appendix BB**Survey on Heaven – Exit
Memory**

I will remember nothing from my earthly life in heaven.



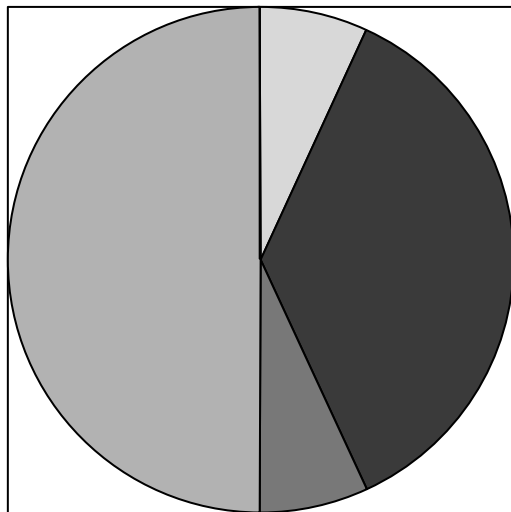
- **Unsure 8%**
- **Disagree 77%**
- **Strongly Disagree 15%**

I will remember only the good things from my earthly life when I am in heaven.



- **Agree 29%**
- **Unsure 7%**
- **Disagree 57%**
- **Strongly Disagree 7%**

I will remember everything from my earthly life when I arrive in heaven.



■ Strongly Agree 7%

■ Agree 36%

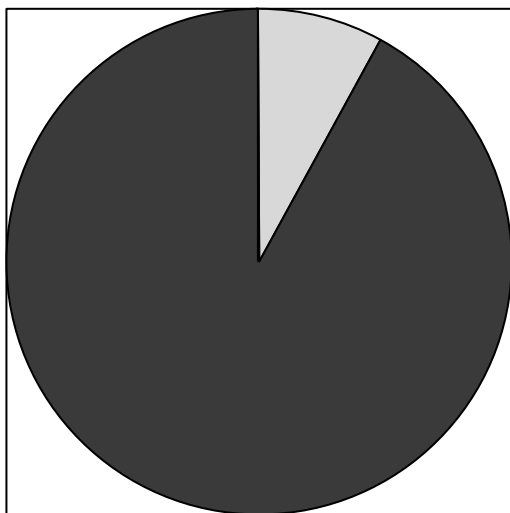
■ Unsure 7%

■ Disagree 50%

Appendix CC

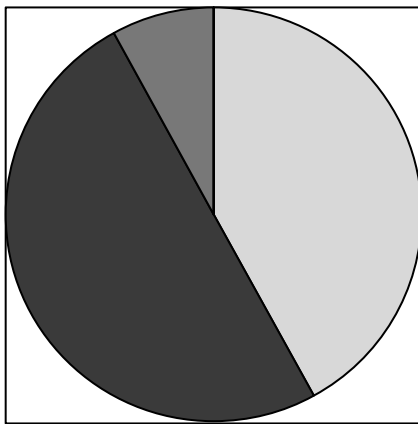
**Survey on Heaven – Exit
Judgment**

There will be judgment in next life.



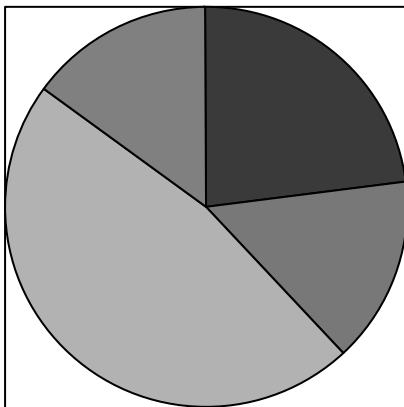
Appendix DD**Survey on Heaven – Exit Relationships**

I will know others in heaven, but the character of relationships will be different.



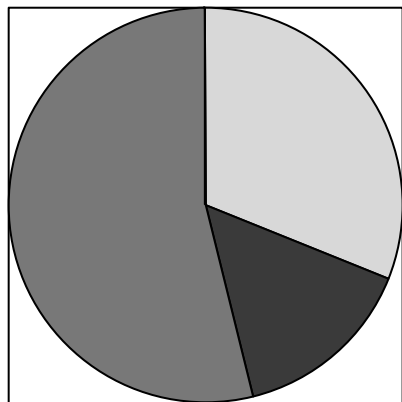
■ **Strongly Agree 42%**
■ **Agree 50%**
■ **Unsure 8%**

Earthly relationships will be meaningless in heaven.



■ **Agree 23%**
■ **Unsure 15%**
■ **Disagree 47%**
■ **Strongly Disagree 15%**

I will miss those who are not with me in heaven.



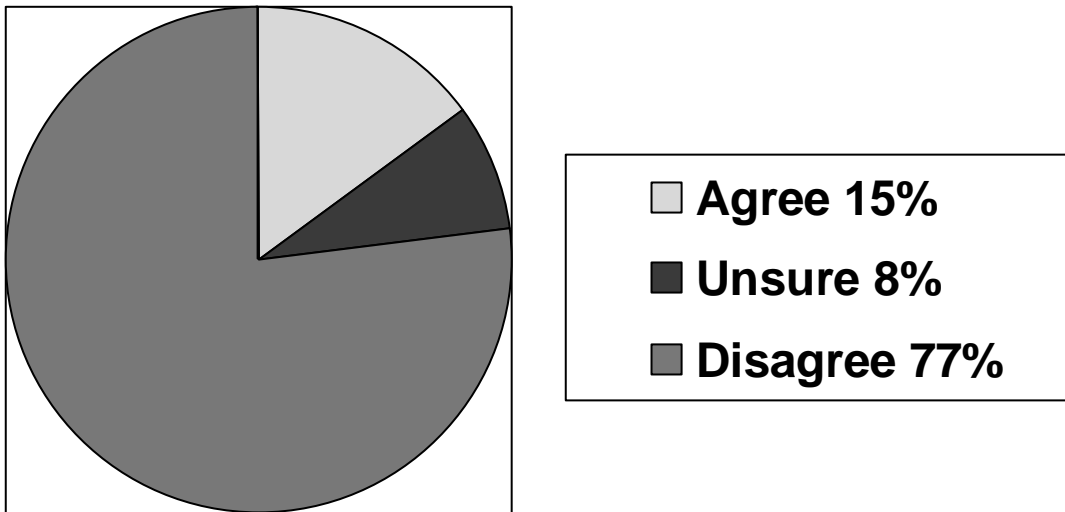
□ **Agree 31%**

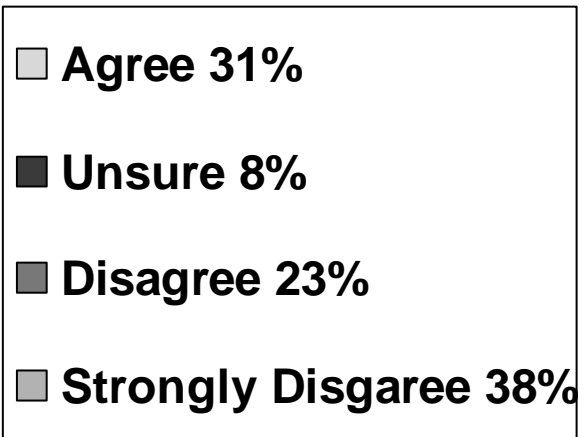
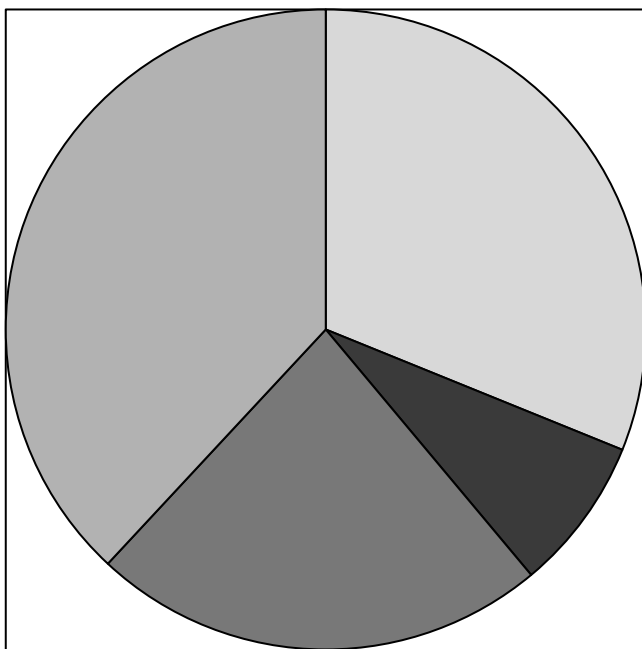
■ **Unsure 15%**

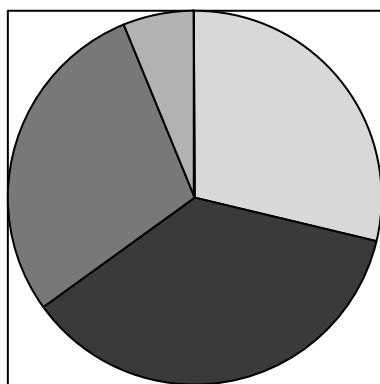
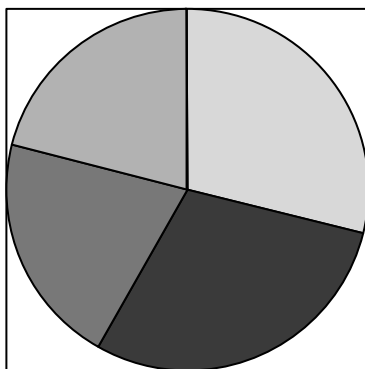
■ **Disagree 54%**

Appendix EE**Survey on Heaven – Exit
Returning to Earth as Spirits**

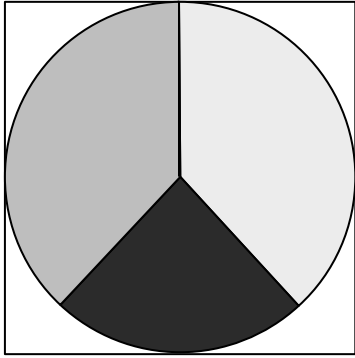
Individuals can come back to earth from heaven as spirits.



Appendix FF**Survey on Heaven – Exit
Angels****Humans become angels in heaven.**

Appendix GG**Survey on Heaven – Exit
The Appearance of Heaven****There will be a banquet in heaven.****Strongly Agree 29%****Agree 36%****Unsure 29%****Disagree 6%****There will be trees and other plants in heaven.****Strongly Agree 29%****Agree 29%****Unsure 21%****Disagree 21%**

God will be seated on a throne in heaven.



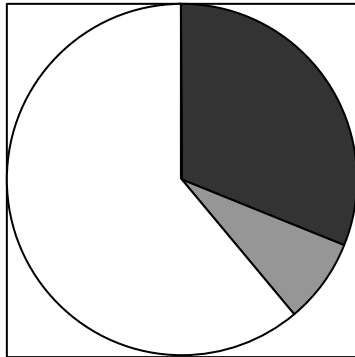
☐ **Strongly Agree 38%**

■ **Agree 24%**

■ **Unsure 0%**

■ **Disagree 38%**

Heaven will have streets of gold.

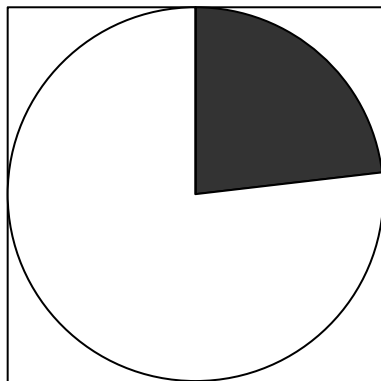


■ **Agree 31%**

■ **Unsure 8%**

☐ **Disagree 61%**

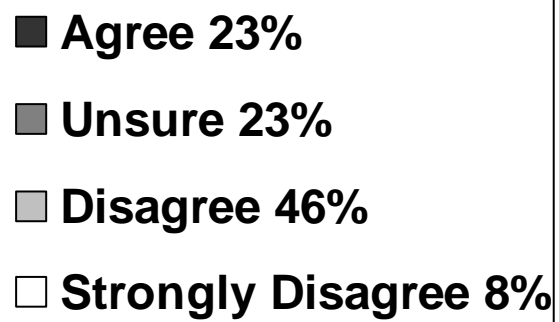
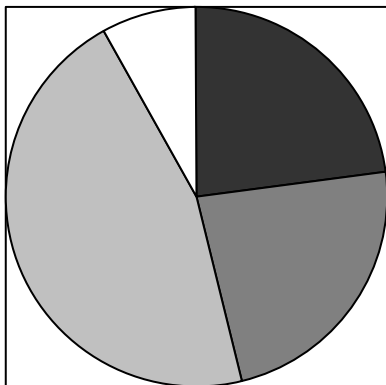
Everyone will wear a jeweled crown in heaven.



■ **Unsure 23%**

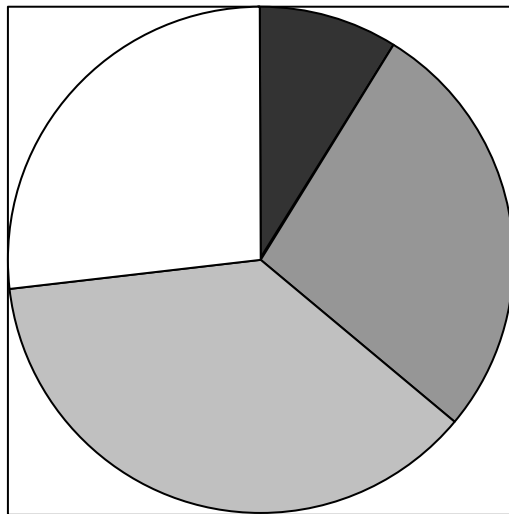
☐ **Disagree 77%**

Clouds will be everywhere in heaven.



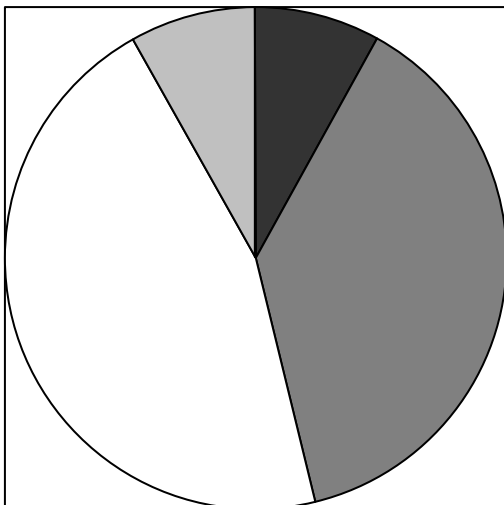
Appendix HH**Survey on Heaven – Exit
The View from Heaven**

In heaven, you can see what is happening in hell.



- **Strongly Agree 9%**
- **Agree 0%**
- **Unsure 27%**
- **Disagree 37%**
- **Strongly Disagree 27%**

In heaven you can see what is happening on earth.



- **Strongly Agree 8%**
- **Agree 38%**
- **Unsure 46%**
- **Disagree 8%**
- **Strongly Disagree 0%**

Appendix II

Exit Survey on Small Groups

The purpose of this survey is to get some input from you about the small group study "Glimpses of Heaven Among Friends" specifically and about small group studies in general.

Thanks for your participation in this survey.

Circle the one answer which best expresses your opinion.

1- How many of the films did you view with the group or at some other time?

1 2 3 4 5

2- How many of the discussion sessions did you attend?

1 2 3 4 5

3- Which film's depiction of "heaven" did you relate to most?

The Littlest Angel *Made in Heaven* *Defending Your Life*

What Dreams May Come *After Life*

4- Of the "heaven" issues which were discussed, rank the following with "1" being the most interesting and "6" being the least?

_____ Returning to earth as spirits

_____ Memory

_____ Angels

_____ Judgment

_____ Relationships

_____ Appearance of Heaven

5- What are some issues concerning "heaven" that you would like to personally explore?

6- Do you believe that small group studies are a valuable learning experience for our church to utilize?

YES

NO

7- The topic of this study was "heaven". Over the last couple of years our Education Committee has been striving to offer more "small group experiences" for our congregation. What topics do you think would be appealing to people in the future?

8- How many small group experiences have you been involved with over the last five years?

Only one

2 to 5

6-9

more than 10

9- Would you consider facilitating a small group study in the future?

YES

NO

10- Will you sign-up for another small group experience in the future?

YES

NO

11- Are you currently a part of another Christian small group study at First Baptist or anywhere else?

YES

NO

12- Of the things listed below, what is most appealing about the small group experience for you? Rank the following 1-5.

_____ **Developing relationships**

_____ **Getting to know new people**

_____ **Hearing the ideas of others**

_____ **Learning new things**

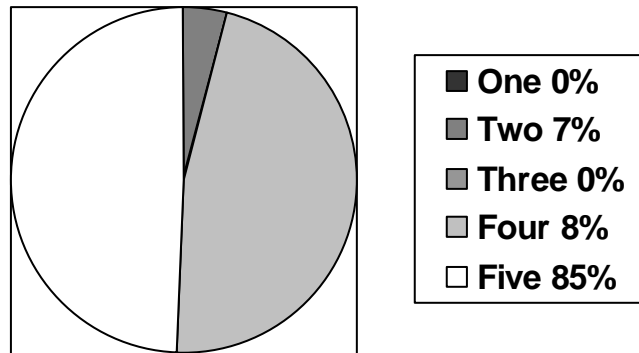
_____ **Being challenged to think**

13- Use the space below and additional paper if needed to make any further comments about the "Heaven" small group or about small groups in general.

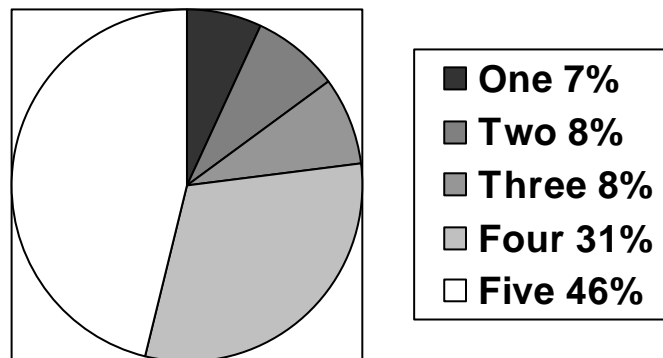
Appendix JJ

Survey on Small Groups – Exit Group Participation

How many of the films did you view with the group or at some other time?



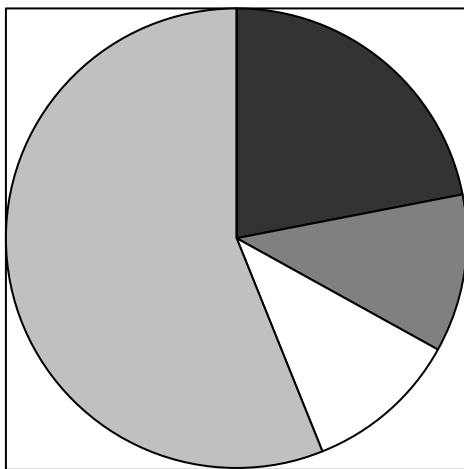
How many of the discussion sessions did you attend?



Appendix KK

**Survey on Small Groups – Exit
Areas of Interest**

Which film’s depiction of “heaven” did you relate to most?

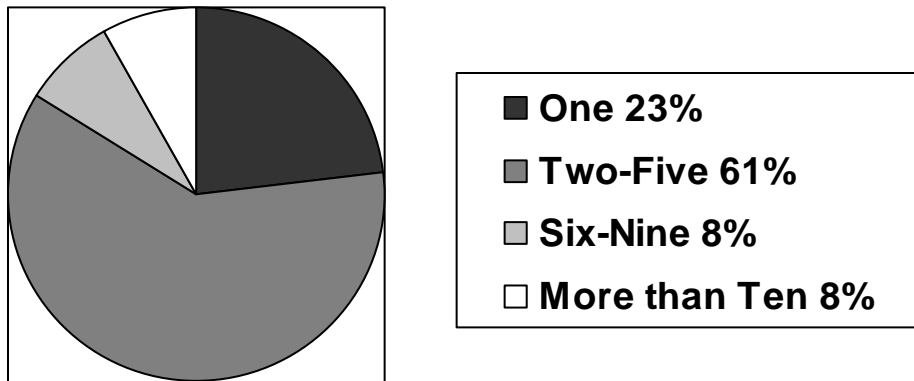


Of the “heaven” issues which were discussed, rank the following with “1” being the most interesting and “6” being the least. (The lower the points and the shorter the bar, the more popular the topic was for the participants.)

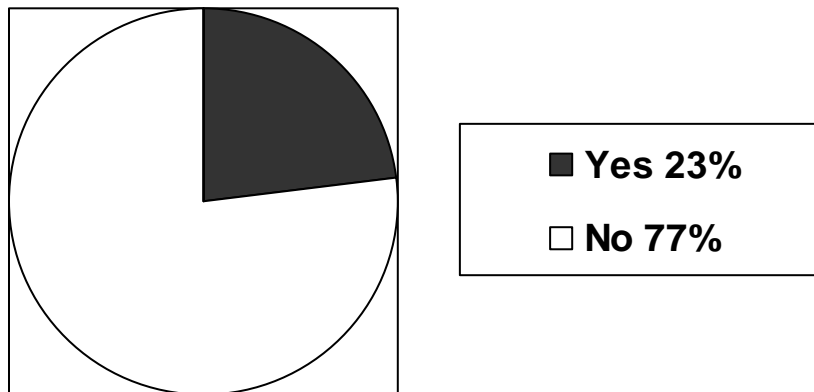


Appendix LL**Survey on Small Groups – Exit
Future Activity in Small Groups**

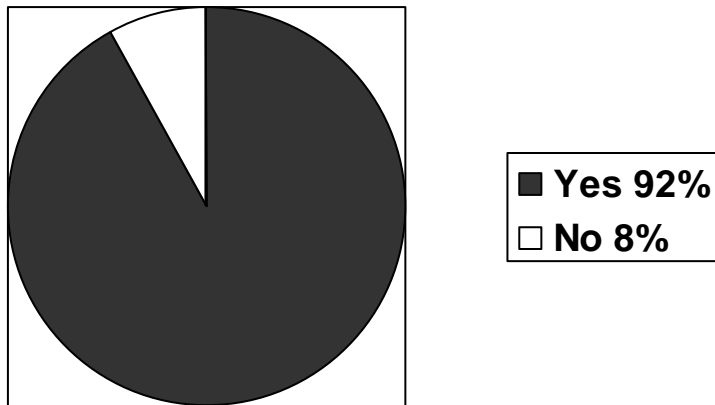
How many small group experiences have you been involved with over the last five years?



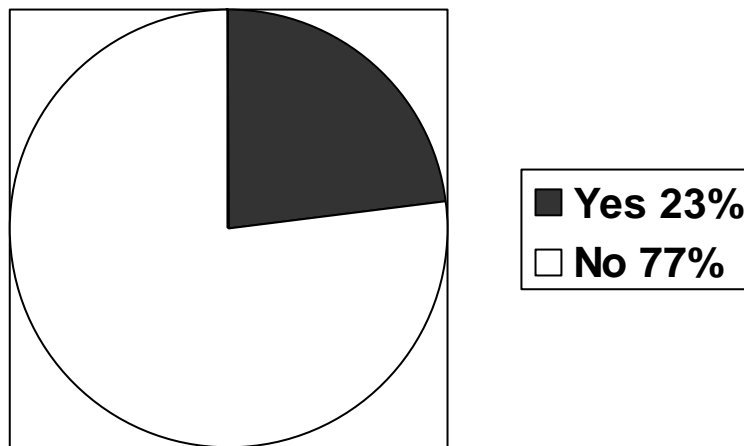
Would you consider facilitating a small group study in the future?



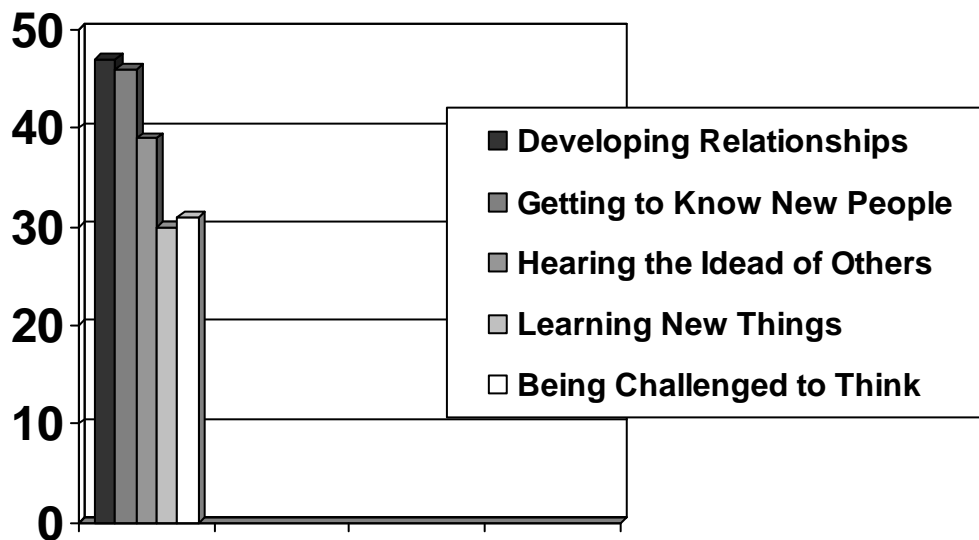
Will you sign-up for another small group experience in the future?



Are you currently a part of another Christian small group study at First Baptist or anywhere else?



Of the things listed below, what is most appealing about the small group experience for you? Rank the following 1-5.



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