

FINISH THEN THY NEW CREATION

T. Scott Daniels, Ph.D., Nampa First Church/Northwest Nazarene University

Many years ago, when my oldest sons were little, it was part of our family routine to read stories after dinner. I loved this time with them and so I leaned into it by reading with as much animation as I could; even trying my best to imitate the voices of the various literary characters. One night, after a particularly delicious fried chicken dinner, Caleb and Noah begged me to tell them the story of *The Three Little Pigs*. Although this story is a classic and a favorite of mine, I wasn't excited to tell it to them. I knew this story had become so familiar to them already that it was highly likely that – knowing the ending so well – they would lose interest by the end of it, and I would be left trying to finish the story to myself. Nevertheless, they promised me they would listen to the end, so I launched into the tale.

They stayed with me through the house of straw, but by the time we got to the house of sticks, I realized I was beginning to lose them. I decided to play with the ending a bit to see if I could recapture their attention. When the wolf arrived at the house of bricks and began to huff and puff, rather than standing strong, I told them the bricks began to crack and the mortar began to crumble. The wolf blew again, and the four walls of the brick house collapsed. At this point, not only were they sitting straight up at attention, but their eyes were as wide as saucers. In my new version of the story the pigs made a desperate attempt to run away, but to no avail. The wolf captured the first pig in its claws. (There were a couple of drumsticks left on the center of the table from dinner, so I grabbed one of them and started chewing on it for effect). “So, the wolf ate the pig and was completely satisfied,” I said. “And the wolf lived happily ever after.”

Not only had I regained their attention, but their mouths were left wide open. “That’s not the way the story ends!” shouted Caleb. Noah, a small tear developing in his eye, said, “Dad, you are never allowed to tell stories again.”

The simple point, of course is that the end of a story matters. The ending determines whether a film or novel is a comedy or a tragedy. Caleb and Noah were not old enough to understand the differences in literary genre, but they intuitively knew, the little pigs dying, and the big bad wolf winning is not the way a good children’s story is supposed to end.

Humans are by nature storied beings. We understand ourselves and interpret the world narratively. As ethicist Alasdair MacIntyre has argued, “I can only tell you what I am to do if I can answer the prior question, ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself apart?’” In other words, for MacIntyre, I only know how to live, react, and make decisions, if I know the plotline and purpose of the story or narrative that I believe to be true about the world.

It is appropriate, therefore, that we often think about the Christian faith not as simply a set of propositions to adhere to, or to which we give mental assent, but as a particular storied way of understanding reality: the Story of God. Fannie Crosby was right; our “blessed assurance” derives from knowing that this Christian story is “my story.”

In good storytelling, every aspect of the plot matters. In the Christian story we often think of the plot as proceeding through various acts: the goodness of creation, the tragedy of human sin and destruction, God’s redemptive work in and through Israel, and (the high point of the story) the salvation wrought through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. But where and how does this story end? To what telos does the Christian story point? This question matters, because (to paraphrase Professor MacIntyre), I can’t tell you how I’m supposed to live faithfully in the present if I do not have some sense of where this plotline is heading.

Thinking theologically and biblically about the end of the story of God and creation comes under the umbrella of eschatology - a word taken from the Greek word *eschatos*, meaning “last.” It is the study of last things. Generally, the eschatology in the Western Christian traditions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries tended to be quite optimistic and hope filled. For example, postmillennialism - the belief that the reign of Christ has been established on earth through the resurrection of Christ and the advent of the Spirit, leading to the progressive expansion of the gospel to the vast majority of living people – was a dominant theological tenet among American Protestants who worked for the abolition of slavery in the 1850s, and was carried into the 20th Century by the leaders of the Social Gospel movement. Within the Church of the Nazarene, founding leaders such as A.M. Hills and Phineas F. Bresee both considered themselves postmillennialists.

Whatever optimism Western Christianity carried into the twentieth century, largely aided circumstantially by the rise of technology, science, and industry, was hard to sustain in the face of significant financial crises and the horrors that accompanied two devastating world wars. It is easy to understand how the more historically pessimistic premillennialism and in particular, dispensationalism – which initially had been dismissed as biblically problematic at best – could rapidly become the more dominant eschatological view of the average Protestant pastor and layperson by second half of the twentieth century. Aided by the rise of popular Christian books and films, it is not unusual for Western Christians – and evangelicals in particular – who were born and raised after 1950 to simply assume that the idea that there will someday soon be a rapture of believers prior to the advent of a massive global tribulation, is not only biblical but it is the primary eschatology of the Christian church throughout its history.

It seems clear to many contemporary theologians – both globally and in the West – that not only is the eschatological imagination that emerges out of dispensationalism biblically problematic, but it has also led to several other theological issues. It's emphasis on the heavenly, or other-worldly destination of people after death (or the faithful at the rapture) has often meant that biblical issues such as justice and peace are neglected – and at times even viewed with skepticism or contempt – in deference to the importance of the “saving of souls.” The conviction that at the end of history the earth and all its cultures and human creations will be destroyed has led many Christians to not only ignore, but even advocate against, any concern for the ecology of the earth or the preservation of unique human cultures and their creations. These two emphases together have also denigrated the place of the body in Christian formation, life, and faithfulness. It is not unusual for modern Christians to have an eschatological view of the body and soul more consistent with Plato's dualism than of the More unified view of Christ and the Hebrew people from whom he emerged.

Of course, the solution is not to throw off these dramatic shifts in eschatology and return to the prior more optimistic view of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For, although we might prefer its more hopeful convictions, in many of its forms it suffered from placing too much hope in the human ability to bring about God's redemptive ends in history, and too often equated the in-breaking of the kingdom of God with technological, scientific, and economic advances. We need an eschatology of hope, but also one that realistically pays attention to the personal and systemic nature of sin.

Perhaps largely due to the great dissatisfaction of either of these two options, there has been a return – especially in the last three or four decades – to the question of eschatology and how Christians should live in the light of the hopeful end of God's story. I would argue that

although the eschatology that has begun to emerge in the last decades – perhaps highlighted most clearly in the significant work of N.T. Wright – feels new to so many raised in the peak of the popularity of dispensationalism, it is actually a return to the rich hopes articulated by the apostles and the mothers and fathers of the first centuries of Christian faith. For lack of a better term, I will refer to this more recent eschatological thinking as a *new creation eschatology*. The language of “new creation” is found biblically first in the post-exilic hopes of Isaiah 65:17. “Look!” writes the prophet, “I’m creating a new heaven and a new earth: past events won’t be remembered; they won’t come to mind.” The language is also found most explicitly in two texts from the Apostle Paul. Galatians 6:15 – “Being circumcised or not being circumcised doesn’t mean anything. What matters is a *new creation*.” And 2 Corinthians 5:17 – “So then, if anyone is in Christ, that person is part of the *new creation*. The old things have gone away, and look, new things have arrived!”

In what remains of this paper, I would like to briefly articulate, in broad strokes, the view of a new creation eschatology and conclude with why it fits well within a Wesleyan theological perspective. In articulating the new creation theme biblically, let me begin by choosing three themes from the Old Testament: the goodness of creation, the return from exile, and the significance of the temple.

The repeated refrain in the creation narrative of Genesis chapter one is God’s affirmation of the created world’s goodness. The earth and its creatures are viewed with joy and gratitude by God.

God simply and gently speaks creation into being. We could say he delights it into being.

In its repetition, rhythmic quality, and sense of celebration, Genesis 1 resembles nothing

so much as a children’s play chant or song. God gives the creation a life of its own, permitting it to come alongside him and join him in the joyous chorus of life.¹

The creation of humankind as co-caretakers and co-creators with God is certainly narrated as the pinnacle of God’s creative act. It is significant, however, that humans are made from the very stuff of the earth, and though animated into life with the spirit of the divine, “from [the land] you were taken; you are soil, to the soil you will return” (Gen 3:19).

The Old Testament tells the story of three exiles. In reverse they are Judah’s exile into Babylon, Israel’s exile into Egypt, and humankind’s exile from Eden. Each of these exiles were viewed as a kind of death, a return to the chaos and nothingness of the pre-creation. However, in the prophetic imagination of God’s people, there was always hope beyond those moments of death. “Hope for YHWH’s covenantal renewal and new creation.”² Seen most clearly in Ezekiel’s valley of the dry bones, God’s redeeming of the people from bondage and restoring them into the land became a form of resurrection. As N.T. Wright has argued, although the explicit Jewish belief in bodily resurrection is a rather late development historically, it can be seen growing out of both the goodness of creation and the hope of God’s redemptive life-restoring power.³ In other words, if exile will not have the last word in God’s creation, neither will death itself.

The third significant theme is the temple. In the imagination of Israel, the temple was the center of the reconnection between heaven – the location of God’s reign – and earth. In its rich

¹ Rodney Clapp, *New Creation: A Primer on Living in the Time Between the Times* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2019), p. 11.

² N.T. Wright and Michael F. Bird, *The New Testament and Its World: An Introduction to the History, Literature, and Theology of the First Christians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2019), p. 281.

³ See Wright and Bird, p. 285.

creation imagery, it symbolized the inbreaking of God's holy righteousness and justice entering back into the created order. From the temple, the light of God – and God's people – would radiate and draw the nations into its healing and restoring power.

Each of these hopeful eschatological themes from the Old Testament are recapitulated in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The incarnation – divinity taking on all that is human – is an affirmation of the goodness of material creation. The resurrection of the body of Jesus, and his physical reappearance to the disciples foreshadows the unique embodiment of post-resurrection existence. The Apostle Paul not only affirms and imagines the hopes of the resurrected body in 1 Corinthians 15, but also pictures the whole creation groaning – in Romans 8 – in the expectation from its release from the bondage of brokenness and decay as well. As Wright states, “Paul, as a good Jew, is no dualist: the new creation is what the old creation was meant to be but, because of idolatry, sin, and corruption, could never be.”⁴

If in his crucifixion Jesus embraced not only the exile and abandonment of Israel, but also the sin and brokenness of the world, in Christ's resurrection, the hope of a ransomed, restored, and renewed people also became a reality. For those articulating a new creation eschatology, what matters most in the resurrection is not that Jesus came back from the dead, but that he resurrected from the dead. Others in the Scripture who came back from the dead - the widow's son, Jairus' daughter, or even Lazarus - returned from the dead only to die again. In the resurrection of Jesus, the power of death has been broken. Death no longer has dominion over him. For the Apostle Paul in particular, the resurrection, that great transformative event that was to happen at the end of history, has now broken into the middle. Those who participate in the

⁴ Wright and Bird, p. 381.

death and resurrection of Jesus through baptism, are no longer waiting for the new creation to begin. The new creation has been inaugurated in the resurrection of Christ, and those who have put to death the old are now part of the new creation (2 Cor. 5:17). The old is gone. The new has come.

So too, in the resurrection, the temple is redefined. The veil that divided the old creation from the new has been torn in two. The unique presence of God embodied in God's Spirit is now at work in all creation forming a new temple – the church – built on the cornerstone of Jesus, empowered by the Spirit to be a foretaste of the new creation. The church, no longer divided from one another, is the location where heaven and earth meet, where the new creation is breaking into the old. Revelation pictures the New Jerusalem descending from heaven like a giant cube, like the Holy of Holies in the original tabernacle and temple and becoming the center of the new creation. The last chapters of Revelation end not with a vision of the saints escaping the good creation, but rather being restored to proper dominion within the renewed and life-giving garden.

There is much that is appealing biblically and historically to what I am referring to as a “new creation eschatology.” However, there are two aspects that I also find persuasive. The first is the way it navigates the problems previously described in the two dominant eschatologies of the last 150 years or so. For those drawn to the realism of premillennialism, it corrects its frequent body/soul dualism and the shallow escapism of its hopes. It invites believers to more than just mere survival amid an ever-darkening age hoping to gain as many souls as possible on our way to existence in another realm. New creation eschatology is filled with the hope that indeed God's grace is greater than the sin that infuses so much of the created world.

For those drawn to the optimism of postmillennialism, a new creation eschatology is appealing because it takes seriously our participation with God in the renewal of creation. In this eschatological perspective, there is reason to do justice and to love mercy because all that is done that reflects and embodies the new creation will carry into God's redeemed embodied world. It avoids, however, the frequent error of postmillennialism that viewed the inbreaking of the kingdom as constant and progressive and too often equated human progress with kingdom advance. A new creation eschatology, like Israel's history itself, recognizes the kingdom comes mysteriously, with significant moments of ups and downs, and it can often seem hidden. It proceeds, however, in the hope filled knowledge of God's sovereign love bringing all things to its intended glorious end. And it does not come in our own strength, but only in participation with the life-giving *ruach* or Spirit of God that reanimates all that is dead and brings it to new and everlasting life.

The second aspect of new creation eschatology that I find so persuasive is its fit and connection with the optimism of grace found in the Wesleyan tradition. In his presciently titled work, *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today*, Theodore Runyon argues that for John Wesley, "The cosmic drama of the renewing of creation begins, therefore, with the renewal of the *imago Dei* in humankind. This," argues Runyon, "is the indispensable key to Wesley's whole soteriology."⁵ Perhaps this rooting of Wesley's theology in the hopes of the new creation is why Nazarenes – although deeply influenced by the popular eschatologies of the last 150 years – have never quite found consensus or been completely at home in them. In true Wesleyan fashion, we are neither building the kingdom of God in our own strength, nor working without hope, we are

⁵ Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), p. 12.

praying along with Charles Wesley in his great hymn *Love Divine, All Loves Excelling*, “Finish then, Thy new creation.”