

RENEWAL OF CREATION IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

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The Then and There

I grew up singing the old gospel hymns. Many of them still reverberate in my mind and spirit. “Swing low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home.” “This world is not my home, I’m just a passing through.” There is so much that is great in these songs.

Inevitably, I learned theology from these songs. And a key contrast that I heard in these and other hymns influenced my eschatology, that is, my view of what God will do for human existence in the future—at “the end”. The eschatological contrast I heard in these songs was between the *here and now* and the *then and there*. As a Christian, my true home was not the here and now. The ordinary stuff of this world would be long gone when we arrived in the then and there. That’s what I learned.

Listen with me to the Stanley Brothers as they sing the initial verse and chorus of [“Angel Band.”](#)

If we sing along, we too ask the angels:
“Oh, bear me away on your snow white wings
To my immortal home.”

So here’s my question: Would Matthew, Paul, and John have agreed? Did the New Testament authors buy this contrast? Was their eschatology focused on the then and there?

The Here and Then

To help us think about this question, I’d like to suggest a ‘tweak’ on the language I’ve been using: here and now; then and there. I’d like to try out “the here and then.” What if the NT writers have a vision of the future that is not about flying away to an immortal home somewhere else but is about God’s restoration of this place?

OK, the “here and then”—sounds a bit strange, I grant you. But stay with me as we think about this language in conversation with Romans 8, a passage where Paul addresses the life to come—his eschatology.

We’ll start in v. 18: *“I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.”* This might sound like a straightforward example of here and now, then and there. In other words, we can easily hear this contrast not only in terms of now—present sufferings—and then—glory (which it is) but also about here and there. Something like, our present earthly suffering is not worth comparing with the glory we’ll have in heaven—in that other world we look forward to.

Yet we don't hear anything in Paul's words about location in this opening verse—there is no reference to here or there. And what follows suggests no such contrast of location. Instead we hear that God is in the business of restoring humanity and creation. Listen to Romans 8:19-23:

¹⁹ For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. ²⁰ For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. ²³ Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption..., the redemption of our bodies.

Creation will be liberated, Paul says, and we will be redeemed—not just “in our souls,” but *bodily*. Paul refers to salvation as “redemption of the body,” not “redemption from the body.”¹ And this embodied existence sounds like the here and then, not the then and there. Paul affirms this self-same vision in Philippians, where he speaks of Christ “transform[ing] our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body” (3:21).

A New Heaven and New Earth

And it's not only Paul who speaks this way. We read in 2 Peter and in Revelation, about God's intention for *re-creation*—to make a “new heaven and new earth” (2 Pet 3:13; Rev 21:1). Christians often stick the landing on the first part—“a new heaven”—and can't quite envision that last part—“a new earth.” Yet the picture in Revelation 21 is of the heavenly sphere—“the new Jerusalem”—coming from heaven to earth so that “God's dwelling is now among the people”! And as heaven comes to humanity—and not vice versa, we hear this exclamation:

“Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them.”

Richard Middleton sums it up this way: “the vision of the Scriptures is that a day is coming when bodies will be healed and human society will finally reflect God's ideas of mercy and justice.”²

What Difference Does This Make?

So here's where I could go on and on. Getting a New Testament scholar started on such a rich biblical theme like creation's renewal might be dangerous—or at least time

¹ Richard Bauckham, “The Story of the Earth according to Paul,” 96.

² J. Richard Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth*, 210.

consuming! But this is not the classroom and we don't have hours to talk New Testament eschatology.

So let me ask the question that might be on the front burner for many of us here: *What difference does this make?* Does a here and then perspective make any difference for the here and now? I want to suggest that an understanding of what God will do in the end has a great deal to do with the present. It has great impact because it tells us what God values.

If "this world is not my home, I'm just a passin' through," then, by implication, this world is not all that important to God. But if the end is about restoration, then God cares deeply about creation and about our whole selves—body and soul. We as believers and all creation are on the path to restoration—toward flourishing. So the daily and even ordinary ways we participate in human flourishing matter.

Meaning in the Ordinary

Take a moment to think about your 'today.' What did you do today? Who did you meet? How did you experience the world around you, the people that you related to, the work you did? How does what we've been talking about influence how we think about what might have been an "ordinary day"?

I remember a particular time in my life when I felt this sense of ordinariness. It was 1997. I was doing my doctoral work as the mom of two preschoolers. I was primary parent to Kate and Libby; and I spent my days moving between two worlds—in one I was writing complex sentences for my professors. In the other, I was speaking mostly in monosyllables with my daughters. This was my daily vocation. It was my ordinary life. And I remember experiencing rather keenly that sense of the mundane. I remember feeling a bit "stuck."

In light of God's restoration plans for the here and then, we might need to reconsider how we think about the "ordinary." If God is about restoration, then our embodied life *matters*. If God is going to restore all things, then our work matters. Callings to create, restore, and produce, they all matter. Our play matters. Rest matters. What we do as participants in God's kingdom work today, in whatever form, matters. What we do Monday-Saturday—not just on Sunday—matters. Because every arena of life matters to God. *And the ordinary becomes just a little less ordinary.*

The Here and Then Revisited

As I conclude, I'd like to return to the apostle Paul. Because Paul offers us a little phrase that, in a sense, sums up what we've been considering about the here and then. Paul's phrase is *kainē ktisis*... (Come on, did you really think we were going to make it to the end without any Greek?) So would you say it with me? *kainē ktisis*—"new creation." Paul

uses this little phrase twice in his letters. And he uses it to suggest the reality that has already begun for the church—for those who trust and follow Jesus.

If anyone is in the Messiah, *kainē ktisis* [new creation].... (2 Corinthians 5:17)

Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; instead, *kainē ktisis* [new creation].... (Galatians 6:15)

What fascinates me about these two lines from Paul is that in both cases he gives us what we might call, dangling sentences. There is no explicit verb in the *kainē ktisis* part of the sentence. It's like Paul leaves us with an ellipsis: "new creation" dot, dot, dot. In doing so, he leaves the thought pregnant with meaning.

If anyone is in the Messiah, new creation, dot, dot, dot. What do we fill in here? As it has been traditionally rendered, that person is a new creation? Or new creation has arrived? Or what about: Look there, new creation!

In Galatians, where Paul has been strenuously arguing that Gentile believers in Jesus should not convert to Judaism and so be circumcised, his final words about circumcision are mind-blowing: "Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything, instead, *kainē ktisis*," dot, dot, dot. Fill in the blank: "Only new creation matters?" "New creation is everything?"

God is in the Usual

So what can we learn from Paul and *kainē ktisis*? Just this. That God's renewal of creation, the here and then, will most certainly happen. Because in Jesus *it has already begun*. If anyone is in the Messiah, then new creation has already started to spring up. The biblical vision of here and then has become a here and now reality. So much so, that Paul can speak of *kainē ktisis* as already having arrived in Jesus and for those who trust in him.

Back to 1997. Back to a moment when I was experiencing life as quite ordinary. I'd like to share a song—a lyric—I wrote after a particularly 'ordinary day.' I leave it with you as invitation to re-envision how "ordinary life" is bound up in God's restoration plans for all creation.

Ordinary day, nothing in the way of unusual
Doing all the things I usually do
Not so very wise, not so very spiritual
Oh, so very usual is my life.

But God was not afraid to come into this very usual world.

Entering our lives taking our humanity
Oh so very flesh and blood—the Savior's love

Eternal word of God from all time existing
Now to dwell among us eternally.

God was not afraid to come into this very usual world.

Ordinary day, nothing in the way of unusual
Doing all the things I usually do
But here in the mundane, reminded of reality
That God is in the usual—God with me.