NEW HEAVEN, NEW EARTH:
ANALYZING THE RECENT RISE IN NEW CREATION ESCHATOLOGY

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Throughout the history of Christian thought there has been a multiplicity of conceptions about the eternal state of believers. According to Craig Blaising, the conceptions that make up this multiplicity can be categorized into two basic models.¹ The first model, the spiritual vision, tends to view the eternal state as heavenly, timeless, bodiless, and unrelated to the materiality of the present creation. The second, the new creation model, emphasizes an earthly, material, time-sequenced, embodied existence in a new heaven and new earth. Others have proposed models or categories that differ in various ways from these two, but Blaising’s models seem most helpful in distinguishing the manifested tendencies throughout the history of the Church.

Although there is evidence for some type of new creation view in various theologians from the Church Fathers through the current century, most Church historians agree that the overwhelming majority of the history of the Church has been dominated by conceptions that fit within Blaising’s first model, that of the spiritual vision. Over the past few decades, however, it seems that there has been a shift away from conceptions that emphasize the eternal state as primarily spiritual in nature. While not eschewing all aspects of a spiritual vision model, these new creation understandings of the eternal state emphasize those characteristics that have seemed to be absent, or at least minimized, in the historically dominated spiritual conception of the eternal state. In that the shift may

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¹Craig A. Blaising, “Premillennialism,” in Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond, ed. Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 157–227. Also, see Blaising, “New Creation
result in the heightened interest of eschatology in general and the eternal hope of the Christian in particular, it is encouraging. Like all aspects of theology, however, the shift in emphasis must be weighed according to its faithfulness to Scripture.

The purpose of this essay is to provide an introductory survey of what seems to be a recent shift toward a new creation understanding of the eternal state. Because of the length of the essay, it is impossible to survey every tradition or theologian who might be an influence to or has been influenced by the shift. However, by surveying key representatives involved in the shift, one can begin to see key Biblical texts that seem to be driving the arguments behind the shift, along with the key features of recent new creation understandings. By analyzing the key Biblical texts and the implications being drawn from these texts, I intend to show that the shift from the dominant spiritual vision toward a new creation concept should not be ignored. Rather, certain key features of the shift seem to be the result of a more faithful reading of Scripture. Nonetheless, it seems that the shift is incomplete. While the representatives seem to be taking note of certain elements in Scripture that in the past have gone generally unnoticed, they also seem to be neglecting other key features of Scripture that are consistent with their new creation concepts and would further inform their understanding.

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Eschatology and Its Ethical Implications” in Perichoresis, forthcoming.

2Some readers may object to my inclusion or exclusion of key representatives. The goal is to provide a sampling across various traditions and to emphasize differing concepts with the hope that a survey of this sample will lead to certain key features that broadly represent the recent rise in new creation eschatology. Also, it should be noted that while arguments for the Christian stewardship of the earth or creation care are numerous in our day, many of them do not have as their motivation or basis the eternal hope of the Christian. Therefore, while new creation conceptions of the eternal state may have implications for the role of the Christian in the stewardship of the earth and creation care, these topics are not the primary concern of this essay. Further, arguments for stewardship of the earth are not necessarily dependent upon a new creation concept of the eternal state.
I. HEAVEN AND THE ETERNAL STATE

Before analyzing the recent rise of new creation understandings of the eternal state, it is important to explain what is meant in the current essay by the eternal state of the believer. Contemporary discussions of personal eschatology seem to revolve primarily around passages of Scripture that inform a proper understanding of what occurs at the death of the believer. The term normally used to describe this state is heaven.\(^3\) These texts teach that when a believer dies, he is comforted in the presence of Christ, though without a body.\(^4\) The believer’s citizenship and hope is in heaven (Phil 3:20; Col 1:5). He has an imperishable and undefiled inheritance there (1 Pet 1:4). The Scripture even speaks of a reward in heaven that believers will receive (Matt 5:12; cf. Luke 6:23).

One should not underestimate the importance of a proper understanding of heaven within the discussion of personal eschatology. However, in personal eschatology, this proper understanding of heaven must be coupled with a discussion of those texts which seem to speak of the eternal destiny of believers as referring to something other than a disembodied state in heaven. Contemporary theology has tended to call this

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\(^3\)While the reference here is to the use of the term within the discussion of personal eschatology, it is generally recognized that the term heaven has a wide range of meaning in Scripture. In the Hebrew and Greek, the words מֵאָשָׁר יָסְדָה and οὐρανός are used, respectively, to describe a physical part of the universe and the dwelling place of God. While the Hebrew term occurs as a plural noun, the LXX translates it as singular. In the NT, the term occurs in both plural and singular forms but with apparently no difference in meaning. The phrase heaven and earth in both the OT and the NT is used to denote the entire universe as created by God. See Mitchell G. Reddish, “Heaven,” in The Anchor Bible Dictionary, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 3: 90–91.

\(^4\)In Luke 23:43, Jesus assures the thief on the cross that on that day they would be together in παραπάνω. Paul writes that he would rather be absent from the body and be at home with the Lord (2 Cor 5:8). In the context of his possible impending death, he tells the Philippians of his desire to depart and be with Christ (ἐὰν ἀναλίθην καὶ σὺν Χριστῷ εἶναι) (Phil 1:23). Not all texts that speak of the believers being with Christ occur during the disembodied state of the believer. For instance, the context of the believer seeing Jesus “face to face” (πρόσωπον πρὸς πρόσωπον) in 1 Cor 13:12 and “just as He is” (καθὼς ἐστιν) in 1 John 3:2 is subsequent to his return to the earth, not when believers die and are in the presence of Christ.
eternal resting place heaven, which has seemed to cause confusion regarding what Scripture says about both the nature of the disembodied state of death in heaven and the nature of the eternal state. In the future, Christ will descend from heaven and the bodies of the dead in Christ will rise followed by the “catching up” (ἀρπαζω) of those who are alive (1 Thess 4:16–17). Personal eschatology, then, must include a proper understanding of the resurrection of the body.\(^5\) Regarding Christ’s own ascension to heaven, we are told that it is only “until the period of restoration (ἀποκαταστάσεως) of all things about which God spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from ancient time” (Acts 3:21).\(^6\) Questions arise regarding the nature of this restoration and the place that believers play in this restoration. Where are they when it takes place and where do they go after it? Where do believers spend eternity? What happens to unbelievers, who also experience a bodily resurrection?\(^7\) What changes take place in regard to the creation? What is the new heaven and new earth in Revelation 21?\(^8\) New creation conceptions of the eternal state attempt to answer these questions, emphasizing those texts which point to something different than the state of the believer between his death and his bodily resurrection. Consequently, to avoid confusion, in the current essay the term heaven will

\(^5\)Rom 8:11, 23; 1 Cor 15:53.
\(^6\)I have used the NASB translation throughout this essay, unless otherwise noted.
\(^7\)John 5:28–29; Rev 20:5. While many of the proponents of new creation conceptions are also dealing with this question, the current essay will be focused primarily on the eternal state of the believer.
\(^8\)The phrase that occurs in Rev 21:1, οὐρανὸν καὶ γῆν καὶ γῆν καὶ γῆν, introduces what John sees as following the great white throne judgment and the passing away of the first heaven and the first earth (πρώτως οὐρανὸς καὶ η πρώτη γῆ). The phrase occurs in 2 Pet 3:13 with the plural οὐρανοίς and seems to have as background in Isa 65:17 and 66:22. Here “new heavens and new earth” (ποιήσων γαρ οὐρανοὺς καὶ γῆς) speak to God’s promise of restoration for Israel.
not be used to refer to the eternal state.\textsuperscript{9} When the phrases ‘eternal state,’ ‘new creation,’ or ‘new heaven and new earth’ are used, the referent is the final, everlasting condition of redeemed believers in a renewed creation.\textsuperscript{10}

II. PRIOR TO THE RISE: THE ETERNAL STATE IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

One may wonder why the recent rise in new creation eschatology, if in fact there has been a rise, deserves analysis. Ultimately, as we will see, the most important reason is that the key proponents of new creation eschatology seem to be drawing attention to certain texts of Scripture and perceiving key features in those texts that have not been widely emphasized in the past. Another reason, though, is the significance that the rise plays in the history of eschatological thought. There are various studies that, while focusing on different aspects of eschatology, have concluded that what Blaising calls the spiritual vision has been prevalent throughout the history of the Church.\textsuperscript{11}

\textsuperscript{9}While I prefer the term ‘new creation’ or ‘new heaven and new earth’ to refer to the eternal state, it is perhaps not inherently wrong for a person to use the term heaven to refer to the eternal state of the believer, providing that he understands that he is referring to the ‘new creation’ or ‘new heaven and new earth’ as the final destiny of believers. The issue does not seem to lie in the use of the term ‘heaven’ per se as in the understanding behind one’s use of the term. Seeking to point out a distinction in his own understanding while not eschewing the term heaven, John MacArthur writes succinctly, “Eternal heaven will be different from the heaven where God now dwells.” John F. MacArthur. The Glory of Heaven: The Truth about Heaven, Angels, and Eternal Life (Wheaton: Crossway, 1996), 89.

\textsuperscript{10}Based upon the development of the concept of new creation in Scripture, I am extending the phrase ‘new creation,’ which occurs only twice in the NT (καὶ ἡ κτίσις; 2 Cor 5:17 and Gal 6:15) referring to the renewal of the individual, to refer to the renewal of the entire creation order. The language of restoration, renewal, and the liberation of creation in Scripture seems to imply that the current earth will not be annihilated, but transformed to reflect the glory of God. However, it is not my primary concern in this essay to argue for a position regarding whether God’s redemptive acts involve a restoration of the present creation or the annihilation of the present creation and the establishment of a completely new creation. For an introduction to one of the primary texts involved in the discussion, see R. Larry Overstreet, “A Study of 2 Peter 3:10–13,” Bib Sac 137 (1980): 354–71 and Douglas J. Moo, “Nature in the New Creation: New Testament Eschatology and the Environment,” in \textit{JETS} 49 (2006): 449–88.

\textsuperscript{11}I am in debt to Craig Blaising for pointing to the import of these studies in Blaising, “Premillennialism,” 160–61 fn 2.
In his study on the kingdom of God, Benedict Viviano identifies four main currents of interpretation from the early third century to 1000 AD and beyond: eschatological, spiritual-mystical, political, and ecclesial.\textsuperscript{12} The eschatological, seen first in Irenaeus and Justin Martyr, hopes for a future millennial kingdom that is a transition to the everlasting state in which the earth will be renewed.\textsuperscript{13} In the spiritual-mystical interpretation, the Christian hope is reduced to the resurrection of the individual to eternal life in heaven and the kingdom of God is internalized within the individual.\textsuperscript{14} Viviano presents Origen as the primary influence of this interpretation.\textsuperscript{15} The third interpretation, the political, is manifested in Eusebius of Caesarea and in Constantine’s move to Christianize an empire.\textsuperscript{16} Emphasizing the presence of the kingdom in the Church, the ecclesial interpretation, Viviano argues, is influenced by neo-Platonic philosophy.\textsuperscript{17} The


\textsuperscript{13}Ibid., 32–38. Viviano notes Justin’s zeal for a particularly this-worldly understanding of eschatology, at least regarding the millennium, and includes the following quote from him: “I and all other entirely orthodox Christians know that there will be a resurrection of the flesh for a period of a thousand years, in rebuilt Jerusalem, adorned and enlarged, as the prophets Ezekiel and Isaiah, and others affirm.” From Justin Martyr, “Dialogue with Trypho”, in \textit{Writings of Saint Justin Martyr}, trans. Thomas B. Falls, FC 6 (New York: Christian Heritage, 1984), 277, and quoted in Viviano, 36. Interestingly, as Vlach points out, Justin may be the first writer to identify the Church as “Israel” (see, Michael J. Vlach, \textit{The Church as a Replacement of Israel: An Analysis of Supercessionism}, Edition Israelogie, Bd 2 (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2009), 51–52). So, Justin in some manner believes that the Church will inherit the earthly and materialistic promises made to OT Israel. Nonetheless, like other theologians within Viviano’s eschatological interpretation, Justin’s is a very this-worldly hope.

\textsuperscript{14}Viviano, \textit{The Kingdom of God in History}, 38–45.

\textsuperscript{15}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{16}Ibid., 45–51.

\textsuperscript{17}Ibid., 51–56.
ecclesial interpretation, evidenced most clearly in Augustine’s *City of God*, understands the kingdom in highly spiritual and other-worldly terms.18

Working off of these four interpretations, Viviano traces the decline during the Middle Ages of the worldly dimensions of the eschatological and political interpretations.19 While he notes that there seemed to be a rise in the recovery of Jewish apocalyptic concepts during the Renaissance, Viviano argues that some of the most influential reformers did nothing to advance the rise.20 During the Enlightenment, Kant’s concept of the kingdom as an ‘ethical commonwealth under divine moral legislation’ led to liberal Protestantism and the Social Gospel in the nineteenth century.21 The kingdom again became something that only God can build in Weiss, Schweitzer, and Barth. During the latter part of the twentieth century, chiefly in Moltmann, there is a theological affirmation of the implications of a future, this-worldly, divinely realized eschatology.

At the foundation of Howard Snyder’s work, *Models of the Kingdom*, is his identification of “six fundamental tension points or polarities” regarding the kingdom as

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19 He cites specifically the individualistic, private interior concept of Aquinas, Bonaventure’s attempt to link events of his own day with an imminent eschatological future while at the same time preserving continuity with the existing Church, and the spiritualizing tendency in Albert the Great (1206–1280). As an anomaly of the period, he mentions Joachim of Fiore, who renewed a this-worldly hope of a new period of salvation which would operate under the Holy Spirit (which he called a third status or dispensation). Viviano, *The Kingdom of God in History*, 57–80.

20 He concludes that Luther was influenced by Augustine’s ecclesial view, Bucer had more of a political view like that of Eusebius, and Calvin simply had other concerns than apocalyptic eschatology. Ibid., 85–99. According to Viviano, the only exception to the overwhelming spiritual concept of the kingdom was within the Anabaptists who tended to link the gospel message of the kingdom of God with socio-political concerns. Ibid., 95.

21 Viviano writes, “The problems that arise in neo-Kantian moralism, Social Gospel and liberation theology can all be reduced theologically to the problem of Pelagianism, the idea that we save ourselves, that our efforts are the will and work of God *tout court*, that we build the kingdom directly ourselves.” Ibid., 150.
it is presented in Scripture. He then proposes multiple models of the kingdom that have developed throughout the history of the Church as attempts to address these polarities. While the number of kingdom models differs from that of Viviano, there is a similar aim in taxonomizing the manifested emphases throughout the history of the Church. What becomes clear in Snyder’s historical analysis is the dominance throughout Church history of models that tend toward those polarities that are more spiritual or heavenly than material and earthly.

Works on the history of the concept of heaven have also revealed the dominance of a spiritual vision of the eternal state. In A History of Heaven: The Singing Silence, Jeffrey Burton Russell presents the early Jewish view of a new creation eternal state which focused on what he calls the “experience of heaven.”

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22Snyder identifies these as follows: present versus future, individual versus social, spirit verses matter, gradual versus climactic, divine action versus human action, and the Church’s relation to the kingdom. Howard A. Snyder, Models of the Kingdom (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), 16–17.

23While Viviano proposes four models, Snyder presents eight. Respectively, Snyder’s models conceive the kingdom as future hope (25–39), inner spiritual experience (40–55), mystical communion (56–66), institutional Church (67–76), countersystem (77–85), political state (86–100), Christianized culture (101–111), and earthly utopia (112–120).

24It must be admitted that Snyder’s conclusions regarding this dominance are not stated as clearly as Viviano’s. This is partly due to the distinct motives of each writer. While Snyder seems content to present the various views without pointing in a definitive direction, Viviano states his conclusion clearly that a move away from the dominant spiritual view would be a positive one. Nonetheless, Snyder admits that throughout the Church’s history “often the distinctiveness and potency of a particular kingdom theology is precisely its ‘ec-centricity,’ its stress on one side only of a polarity (the kingdom as fundamentally earthly or fundamentally heavenly, for example).” Snyder, Models of the Kingdom, 122–23. In analyzing Snyder’s historical survey of each model, what becomes evident is a dominance of the individual, spiritual, and ecclesial interpretation of the kingdom. In his works The Community of the King (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1977) and “Salvation Means Creation Healed: Creation, Cross, Kingdom, and Mission,” Asbury Journal 62 (2007): 9–47, Snyder is more explicit about his proposal of a new creation understanding.

25In the works mentioned here, as in most contemporary discussions, the term heaven is being used generally to refer to the eternal state of believers.

26Russell’s work focuses upon Christian conceptions of heaven up to Dante (1314–21), specifically his Divine Comedy. He notes that throughout the history of Christian conceptions of heaven
chronicles the shift of focus that took place from the second century forward from experience to concept.\textsuperscript{27} Although chronologically loose in organization and shaped by Russell’s own religious purposes, the historical analysis reflects the conclusions seen in both Viviano and Snyder, i.e. that throughout the history of the Church, at least the first fifteen hundred years, the spiritual vision was the dominant conception of the eternal state.\textsuperscript{28} Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang’s \textit{Heaven: A History}, while not a history of theological ideas about heaven, also indicates the dominance of the spiritual vision concept of the eternal state.\textsuperscript{29} The usefulness of the study seems to be that it shows the dominance of the spiritual vision in a multitude of sources outside of theological

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there “are tensions within the concept of heaven: between salvation of body and salvation of soul; between salvation through the intellect (knowledge) and salvation through the will (love); between salvation of individuals and salvation of community; between the theological need for an abstract heaven and the artistic and everyday need for physical images.” Jeffrey Burton Russell, \textit{A History of Heaven: The Singing Silence} (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 3. In some ways these tensions parallel the ones that Snyder presents regarding the understanding of the kingdom of God. See Snyder, \textit{Models of the Kingdom}, 23.

\textsuperscript{27}Included in this shift was a displacement of the majority Jewish view of the afterlife of Zion being reconstructed on the earth, wherein “The resurrection of the body and the judgment will take place in the geographical Jerusalem at the end of time, and there the Kingdom of the Lord will be established.” Russell, \textit{A History of Heaven: The Singing Silence}, 39.

\textsuperscript{28}Again, Russell’s work does not cover conceptions of heaven past the time of Dante because, as he concludes, “the concept [of heaven] was firm by the time of Dante” (Russell, \textit{A History of Heaven}, 186). Further, Russell’s elevation of Dante’s concept influences his chronological stopping point: “The \textit{Paradiso} of Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) is the most sublime portrait of heaven from the Book of Revelation to the present. I conclude this history of the concept of heaven with Dante, because beyond Dante no merely human word has gone” (Ibid., 151). Russell does, however, cover the concept of heaven during the centuries that followed Dante in Russell, \textit{Paradise Mislaid: How We Lost Heaven—and How We Can Regain It} (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2006.

\textsuperscript{29}Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang, \textit{Heaven: A History} (Princeton, NJ: Yale University Press, 1988). McDannell and Lang choose sources from individuals who are not theologians, such as painters, literary figures, and mystics, in order to present the variety of eschatological imagery that has influenced Christian thought throughout history. They propose two models of thought about heaven: anthropocentric and theocentric. While these models may be helpful in categorizing the manifested tendencies, they do not correspond to models that distinguish spiritual vision concepts verse new creation concepts since, in McDannell and Lang, both models can include both the spiritual vision and new creation concept.
discourse.\textsuperscript{30} In both of these histories, there is at the least an under-emphasis of the elements included in a new creation understanding of the eternal state.

The prevalence of mysticism from the first century onward also seems to point toward the dominance of the spiritual vision that is seen in the histories above. In his magisterial series \textit{The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism}, Bernard McGinn attempts to position mysticism “against the broader historical development of the Christian religion.”\textsuperscript{31} Focusing primarily on Christianity in its Western expressions, McGinn begins by tracing the development of mysticism from Jewish and Greek thought to Augustine.\textsuperscript{32} The remaining volumes show the diverse manifestations of the mystical tradition from Augustine through the emergence of mysticism in Germany between 1300–1500. McGinn’s primary focal point is not the relationship between mysticism and spiritual vision concepts of the eternal state. However, McGinn’s historical survey seems to show that the themes and practices of mystical thought, the impetus of which is a desire to be conscious of and prepare for a

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  \item In the preface, the authors state, “The most creative insights into the beyond often came from those seldom spoken of in scholarly circles . . . . Our eclectic collection of sources not only helps in understanding how Christians imagine heaven, but also serves as a reminder that Christianity is a diverse set of symbols, beliefs, rituals, and images. No one group or set of authors dominates.” Ibid., xiii.
  \item McGinn presents in detail “three main building blocks of the bishop’s mystical thought and his contribution to later Western mysticism: first, his account of the soul’s ascension to contemplative and ecstatic experience of the divine presence; second, the ground for the possibility of this experience in the nature of the human person as the image of the triune God; and third, the necessary role of the Christ and the church in attaining this experience.” McGinn, \textit{The Foundations of Mysticism}, 231.
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direct experience with God, are more in line with a spiritual vision than that of a new creation understanding.

In *The Travail of Nature*, Paul Santmire argues that, at least in Western Christianity, the relationship between nature and man is ambiguous, especially when it comes to redemption and the eternal state. Before promoting what he claims is a more comprehensive view of redemption as presented in Scripture, Santmire traces the historical tradition regarding nature and creation beginning with Irenaeus and continuing to the early twentieth century theologians Karl Barth and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. In classical Christian thought, what Santmire describes as the “consistent and comprehensive dominance by the spiritual motif” parallels the dominance of the spiritual vision type of eschatology that seems to under-emphasize God’s created order.

The preceding historical survey of the interpretation of the eternal state is offered to provide a context for what seems to be a recent rise in new creation eschatology. Even though the works cited range in focus from the kingdom of God to conceptions of heaven to mystical thought to understandings of nature and creation, there is commonality between them. In the literature surveyed, there seems to be a consensus that, while there have been a number of theologians who have argued for a new creation model, Church history has been dominated by what Blaising terms the spiritual vision model of heaven and the eternal state.


34 Ibid., 145.
III. THE RISE: KEY REPRESENTATIVES AND PROONENTS OF NEW CREATION ESCHATOLOGY

In 1979, Anthony A. Hoekema published a book entitled *The Bible and the Future.* One could argue that in some ways Hoekema began the current discussion about the nature of the eternal state. Interestingly, the discussion remained relatively quiet in the two decades that followed. Within the last ten years, though, theologians from various faith traditions have become very interested in many of the issues that Hoekema addressed over thirty years ago. Offering further insight and additional proposals, the key proponents in this section are among a relatively small group of conservative Christian theologians who have advanced the discussion regarding the materiality and earthly character of the eternal state.

1. **N. T. Wright—Life After Life After Death**

Well known in conservative Christian circles for his robust apologetic for the reality of Christ’s bodily resurrection and, more recently, for his controversial views on justification, N. T. Wright argues for what he believes is a more Biblical understanding of

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36 These issues include not only distinctions between the intermediate state and the eternal state of believers (and, hence, the relationship between heaven and the eternal state), but also the relationship between this world and the next (including whether the present universe would be annihilated or renewed and purified), ethical concerns regarding whether what humans do in this world will impact life in the new earth, the relationship of the new heaven and the new earth to history, and the idea that the work of Christ includes the redemption of the entire creation from the effects of sin, and not simply the salvation of individuals.

37 The concern of this paper is not to document the themes and trajectories of arguments for a new creation concept that are outside of mainstream Christian thought, whether among social, scientific, and cultural studies or concepts from non-Christian religions.
the eternal state of believers.38 His proposal is most explicitly presented in a book that was published in 2008 entitled Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church.39 Responding to what he conceives as ignorance within today’s Church, Wright confronts the idea that the Christian hope is encompassed with the idea of going to heaven when one dies and the idea that heaven is the ultimate destination or final home for the Christian.40 He makes the charge that this limited conception of hope actually demeans the bodily resurrection of Christ and the promises


40 In the preface, Wright speaks to this ignorance and states what he feels the Church needs to recapture: “the classic Christian answer to the question of death and beyond, which these days is not so much disbelieved (in the world and church alike) as simply not known . . . . most people simply don’t know what orthodox Christian belief is.” Wright, Surprised by Hope, xii. He offers the following works as evidence of the misunderstanding of the term heaven as the ultimate destination: Peter Stanford, Heaven: A Traveller’s Guide to the Undiscovered Country (London: HarperCollins, 2003); Alister E. McGrath, A Brief History of Heaven (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003) and the more thorough aforementioned historical surveys by McDannell and Lang and Burton Russell, respectively.
that describe God’s kingdom rule coming to the earth and the new Jerusalem coming down from heaven “uniting the two [heaven and earth] in a lasting embrace.”

Alternatively, a conception that consciously affirms the literal bodily resurrection of Christ (and of all believers in the future) gives a this-worldly hope that embraces life after death that is material and earthly. For Wright, this material and earthly hope raises doubts as to whether individual salvation should be the center and driving feature of the hope for the future:

“smaller type” Instead of looking first at the promise to the individual and working up from that to the renewal of creation, we begin with the Biblical vision of the future world—a vision of the present cosmos renewed from top to bottom by the God who is both creator and redeemer. That is the context within which we will then be able to speak of the second coming of Jesus and then of the bodily resurrection.

41 Wright, Surprised by Hope, 19.

42 For Wright, Jesus’ resurrection was the beginning of an entirely new world in which Christians could presently play a part. It signified “a very this-worldly, present-age meaning: Jesus is raised, so God’s new creation has begun—and we, his followers, have a job to do!” Ibid., 56.

Wright’s view of redemption, the plan of which is to liberate what has come to be enslaved, includes the entire cosmos.\textsuperscript{44} In his opinion, the NT is more concerned with life after life after death (i.e. life after heaven) than it is with heaven in the sense of a temporary bodiless state of death.\textsuperscript{45} It is this surprising future hope that leads directly “to a vision of the present hope that is the basis of all Christian mission.”\textsuperscript{46} Salvation is no longer seen simply as going to heaven when a person dies. Instead, it encompasses God’s promised new heavens and new earth and the believer’s participation in “that new and gloriously embodied reality.”\textsuperscript{47} The Christian hope becomes “smaller type” a full, recreated life in the presence and love of God, a totally renewed creation, an integrated new heavens and new earth, and a complete humanness—complete not in and for itself as an isolated entity, but complete in worship and love for God, complete in love for one another as humans, complete in stewardship over God’s world, and so, and only in that complete context, a full humanness in itself.\textsuperscript{48}

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\textsuperscript{44}At the conclusion of one chapter, he states, “What I am proposing is that the New Testament image of the future hope of the whole cosmos, grounded in the resurrection of Jesus, gives as coherent a picture as we need or could have of the future that is promised to the whole world, a future in which, under the sovereign and wise rule of the creator God, decay and death will be done away with and a new creation born, to which the present one will stand as mother to child.” Wright, \textit{Surprised by Hope}, 107.
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\textsuperscript{45}Wright introduces the concept of life after life after death in Ibid., 148–52.
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\textsuperscript{46}Ibid., 191.
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\textsuperscript{47}Ibid., 197. For Wright, this salvation should lead to a rethinking of the main work of the Church. He writes, “It’s no good falling back into the tired old split-level world where some people believe in evangelism in terms of saving souls for a timeless eternity and other people believe in mission in terms of working for justice, peace, and hope in the present world. That great divide has nothing to do with Jesus and the New Testament and everything to do with the silent enslavement of many Christians (both conservative and radical) to the Platonic ideology of the Enlightenment.” Ibid., 193.
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\textsuperscript{48}Wright, \textit{New Heavens, New Earth}, 23.
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For Wright, salvation is a transformation that began to take place at the resurrection of Christ within space, time, and matter. The result of the transformation is not an abandonment of space, time, and matter, but their renewal. When the final resurrection occurs, “we will discover that everything done in the present world in the power of Jesus’ own resurrection will be celebrated and included, appropriately transformed.”

2. J. Richard Middleton—Holistic Redemption

Professor of Biblical studies at Roberts Wesleyan College and professor of Bible and culture at Northeastern Seminary, J. Richard Middleton proposes that the Biblical story of redemption is holistic, encompassing all creation. For Middleton, it is important to distinguish between Scripture’s use of the terms creation and redemption and how these terms are understood in the modern western worldview. According to Scripture, he says, creation “includes the entire human socio-cultural order,” not simply nature. Likewise redemption includes the reversal of the fall and restoration to God’s good intention, not a dualistic Platonic redemption “conceived as transferal from a lower,

49Wright, Surprised by Hope, 294. While Wright does not fully explain what “everything” consists of, what is clear is that there are social, political, and cultural similarities between the temporal present state and the eternal transformed state (See, for example, chapter 13, “Building for the Kingdom,” and the Appendix in Surprised by Hope).


51Middleton, “A New Heaven and a New Earth,” 74. Middleton points to the parallels between the Biblical idea of creation and beliefs in ancient Mesopotamia, referencing his own work The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis I (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005), chs. 3–5.
inferior realm (variously understood as body, earth, matter, nature, or the secular) to a higher, more valued or esteemed realm (understood as soul, heaven, spirit, the realm of grace or the sacred).”\(^{52}\) He calls the traditional idea of heaven “a hybrid idea” because it conceives that the believer will experience eternal fellowship with God in non-physical realm, but with a resurrected, i.e. physical, body.\(^ {53}\) Consequently, Middleton is comfortable to place himself alongside Wright and others and do away with “the notion of ‘heaven’ as an eternal hope, since this notion is thought to be fundamentally incompatible with authentic biblical faith.”\(^ {54}\) The believer’s eternal hope of redemption should be cosmic in its scope, comprising all aspects of cultural life as a part of God’s redemptive plan and his righteous rule.\(^ {55}\)

3. **Russell Moore—Life and Life More Abundantly**

Russell Moore’s cosmic eschatological approach also leans in the direction of a new creation understanding of the eternal state of the believer. Describing God’s restoration of all creation in vivid terms, Moore writes that the picture “is not of an eschatological flight from creation but the restoration and redemption of creation with all that entails: table fellowship, community, culture, economics, agriculture and animal husbandry, art, architecture, worship—in short, life and that abundantly.”\(^ {56}\) After God’s

\(^{52}\) Middleton, “A New Heaven and a New Earth,” 75.

\(^{53}\) Ibid., 73.

\(^{54}\) Ibid. Middleton notes several works which, in varying degrees, have accepted this view. Ibid., fn 2.


\(^{56}\) Russell D. Moore, “Personal and Cosmic Eschatology,” in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel L. Akin (Nashville: B and H Academic, 2007), 859. Moore’s analysis of what the Church has believed (873–92) manifests the dominance of what Blaising calls the spiritual vision understanding of
ultimate triumph of all evil and death itself, believers will experience an eternal state in which they exist bodily upon the earth which has been transformed and regenerated.\textsuperscript{57} Like Wright, Moore writes that the “point of the gospel is not that we would go to heaven when we die.”\textsuperscript{58} Rather, the gospel points to God winning back his good creation by restoring and recreating “a world that vindicates his original creation purposes.”\textsuperscript{59}

4. Doug Moo—Nature in the Plan of God

While he seems to be more cautious than Wright in keeping the redemption of human beings at the heart of God’s plan and evangelism as the Church’s primary goal, Doug Moo proposes “that the attitude of an ‘either/or’ when it comes to evangelism and environmental concern is a false alternative.”\textsuperscript{60} Moo, professor of NT at Wheaton College, expresses concern at the lack of attention given to the cosmos within the eternal life and thereby parallels the histories covered earlier in this essay. It is also in general agreement with Middleton’s description of the hybrid idea that consists of a belief in bodily resurrection and an eternal state that is essentially spiritual and heavenly, implying non-materiality.

\textsuperscript{57}He writes, “This new earth includes all of the covenant promises of God fulfilled. God dwells with his people, in Christ. He welcomes them to the tree of life. The city of Jerusalem is rebuilt and glorious, with the wealth of the nations streaming into it (Rev. 21:22–26).” Ibid., 873.

\textsuperscript{58}Ibid., 912. He writes further, “Eternity means civilization, architecture, banquet feasting, ruling, work—in short, it is eternal life. The new earth is not the white, antiseptic, hyperspiritual heaven some Christians expect as their eternal home. Nor is it simply the everlasting family reunion with calorie-free food and super powers, as some hope.” Ibid.

\textsuperscript{59}Ibid., 913. For Moore, this idea should impel the Christian to action in the present life. For his understanding of the effects of a new creation eschatology upon the Christian’s present life (hope, ethics, social and political action, and corporate witness), see especially Moore, \textit{The Kingdom of Christ: The New Evangelical Perspective} (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004) and the section on how the doctrine of eschatology impacts the church today in “Personal and Cosmic Eschatology,” (917–25). One may also consult the various articles at http://www.russellmoore.com/papers/ which speak to these issues.

\textsuperscript{60}Moo, “Nature in the New Creation, 449–88. He likens this dichotomy to that of evangelism versus social concern during the 1960s and 1970s and understands both to be “profoundly out of keeping with the witness of Scripture” (454).
discussion of eschatological fulfillment.\textsuperscript{61} For him, the restoration of the cosmos, including both humanity and nature, should not be spiritualized.\textsuperscript{62} While he admits the difficulty of knowing with certainty the continuity between the present heavens and earth and the new heavens and earth, he concludes: “But this much can at least be said: the new world is a place of material substance. The phrase ‘heaven and earth’ is a merism that refers to the entire universe.”\textsuperscript{63} Like Wright, Moore, and Middleton, Moo contemplates an earthly, material existence for believers, one in which they are rightly related to the rest of nature as God intended from the beginning.\textsuperscript{64}

**IV. BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS: KEY TEXTS AND THEMES IN RECENT ARGUMENTS FOR NEW CREATION ESCHATOLOGY**

Because the ideas of the theologians in the previous section may seem somewhat novel, there may be an immediate temptation to dismiss much of what they conclude. However, in arguing for a new creation understanding of the eternal state, these key proponents and others who argue for new creation conceptions draw attention to certain Biblical texts. They claim that they simply are attempting to recover what has been at best neglected and at worst denied throughout the history of the Church. Are these theologians making some valid observations regarding the teaching of Scripture or are they formulating conclusions based upon incorrect readings of certain Biblical texts?

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\textsuperscript{61}Ibid., 458.

\textsuperscript{62}Moo uses the term nature to denote more naturally “the sub-human world of creation.” Ibid., 459.

\textsuperscript{63}Ibid., 464.

\textsuperscript{64}Interestingly, Moo is in the process of writing a book with his son Jonathan on creation care. The book, scheduled to be completed in September 2012, is a part of Zondervan’s Biblical Theology for Life series.
Further, are there not texts which appear to be inconsistent with the new creation idea? While the length of this essay does not allow full analysis of the many texts with which proponents of new creation eschatology are engaging, by introducing various key texts, one can begin to answer some of these questions.

1. *The Coming of God’s Kingdom*

During the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches his disciples the manner in which to pray. Part of this prayer is that God’s kingdom would come and that his will would be done on earth as it is in heaven. New creation proponents argue that Jesus’ prayer is pointing to a perfect rule that is to take place on the earth, something that can only be accomplished when sin and death have been completely eradicated. The reason for this conclusion seems to be the connections that are being drawn between Jesus’ prayer and Scripture’s teaching on the kingdom of God. A common theme among new creation proponents is the importance of a comprehensive Biblical theology of the kingdom. OT prophecies such as Isa 52:7–10 speak of a time when Israel’s God will return to be king, “*that all the ends of the earth may see the salvation of our God.*” The prophets promise that YHWH will overtake evil and deliver his servants. Parallel to these promises are texts that speak of a time of peace when there will be no sin, God will

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65 It may be concluded that Jesus’ model prayer conveys a desire that the rule of God on the earth prior to Christ coming again would parallel his rule in heaven, where God currently dwells (c.f. Heb 8:1–2; 4:14; 8:1; 9:24; 1 Pet 3:22). Understood in this way, Christians are to possess a desire that the rule of God would look as close to God’s perfect rule in heaven as is possible in a state where sin and death exist.

66 The future orientation of this understanding has implications for the Christian’s desire that there would be manifestations of that perfect rule during this age. This fact is not denied by most who promote a new creation understanding of the eternal state. However, the point of Jesus’ statement seems to rest in the desire that a future rule of God is going to have a comprehensive effect upon the entire earth.

67 See, for example, Ezek 34:12–24; 37:24–25; Zech 14.
dwell among his people in complete righteousness, and believers will inherit the kingdom. Receiving the kingdom is “one like a Son of Man” to whom is given “dominion, glory and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations, and men of every language might serve him” (Dan 7:13–14).

New creation proponents rightly affirm some sense of the already-not yet tension of kingdom fulfillment. They understand, however, the prayer that the kingdom of God would come and that God’s will would be done on earth as pointing to something that will be fulfilled on the earth following the return of Christ. Christians can join in this prayer with the knowledge that they will be a part of this fulfillment, having been made a kingdom and priests to serve God and looking forward to their part in the earthly reign (Rev 5:9–10).

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68 See, for example, Isa 2:2–4; 9:6–7; 32:16–18; Ezek 37:26; Mic 4:2–3; Zech 2:10; 9:10; Matt 25:34; 2 Pet 3:13; Rev 21:3; 22:3. Because of the many OT texts speaking to earthly fulfillment, new creation proponents do not limit the kingdom to the general rule of God over his creation. Russell Moore, for example, writes, “The kingdom is not seen in the Old Testament as simply the general sovereignty of God, although such divine kingship is everywhere affirmed (Ps. 103:19, for example). The kingdom of God is instead the reign of God through his human mediator-king over a world in submission to his righteous rule. This envisions the restoration of the Edenic order when God ruled through a human vice-regent, Adam, and put ‘all things under his feet’ (Ps. 8:5–8).” Moore, “Personal and Cosmic Eschatology,” 862.

69 This includes the affirmation that Christians are already citizens of heaven (Phil 3:20 and Col 1:13). The point that Paul is making about being citizens of heaven, though, does not require that we conclude that the eternal state of the believer is in heaven. Wright proposes a plausible understanding of the concept of citizenship in Wright, The Resurrection of the Son of God, 229–36. He summarizes his argument more concisely in Wright, New Heavens, New Earth, 8: “The point of being a citizen of a mother city is not that when life gets really tough, or when you retire, you can go back home to the mother city. The people to whom Paul was writing in Philippi were Roman citizens, but they had no intention of going back to Rome. They were the means through which Roman civilization was being brought to the world of Northern Greece. If and when the going got tough there, the emperor would come from Rome to deliver them from their enemies in Philippi, and establish them as a true Roman presence right there.” This understanding of Roman citizenship informs his understanding of the passage as lending itself more to a new creation understanding than a spiritual vision understanding. A new creation concept also seems to fit better with the context of the passage itself which states in the very same verse about heaven being the place from which Jesus, the Savior, comes.

70 As stated in fn 10, whether the consummation takes place on a renewed form of the current creation or an entirely new earth is not the concern in this essay.
The idea that when Christ returns to the earth, the kingdom is going to come and God’s rule will be comprehensive, covering the whole earth, fits well with the idea of the new city that John sees in Rev 21:10–22:5, another text which proponents of a new creation understanding utilize. The city, Jerusalem, is seen “coming down out of heaven from God” (Rev 21:2, 10; cf. Rev 3:12). The language of the city of God implies that it comes to earth. It is a city with a physical description, containing matter and form, though with cosmic changes. It even consists of nations and kings (Rev 21:24). It is a place in which “there will no longer be any curse; and the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his bond servants will serve Him; they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads” (Rev 22:3–4). That this is an everlasting (as opposed to timeless) existence corresponds to what John writes in the very next verse: “they [the bond-servants of God] will reign forever and ever” (Rev 22:5).

71 The concept of the city coming from heaven seems to fit with Jesus’ words of comfort to his disciples as recorded in John 14:1–3. Perhaps Jesus is referring to the city when he tells them that he is going to prepare a place for them. The idea that this eschatological city is currently in heaven may also be implied by Gal 4:26 and Heb 11:16; 12:22–24; 13:14. In a similar fashion, believers are assured that their salvation or inheritance is prepared and kept in heaven (Matt 25:34; 1 Pet 1:4) and that their hope and reward is in heaven (Col 1:5 and Matt 5:12; cf. Luke 6:23). These verses, while seeming to imply the idea that the reception of these requires believers going to heaven, actually correspond with a new creation conception in which the inheritance, reward, and the content of the hope is brought to believers on the earth and heaven is simply where they are stored prior to that point.

72 E.g. that there will be no need of the sun or the moon (Rev 21:23). A more comprehensive description of what John refers to in Rev 21 seems to be described in Isa 60.

73 Middleton makes this point, writing, “The word ‘forever’ is crucial, for it disabuses us of the idea of some temporary earthly ‘Millennium,’ to be followed by an eternal ‘heavenly’ state.” Middleton, “New Heaven and New Earth,” 92 fn 33. Along with the fact that there is no wickedness or curse in the city and that, if read chronologically, John’s vision is after the final judgment, the statement concerning the saints’ everlasting reign seems to exclude the possibility that there is a time in which Christ will reign on the earth (whether or not it is a literal thousand years) which will be followed by an eternal state that resembles more of a spiritual vision conception.
2. **Bodily Resurrection**

The reality of the resurrection of the body is generally a point of agreement within conservative Christianity.\(^{74}\) However, there seems to be at least a lack of emphasis on the reality that believers will be raised from the dead, much less that unbelievers will be resurrected bodily (John 5:25–29; cf. Dan 12:1–2). Among those arguing for a new creation concept of the eternal state, however, there is an explicit affirmation of the resurrection of the body and an emphasis on the relevant texts. According to them, resurrection should not be viewed as simply a description of life after death, nor should it be limited to a spiritual concept. Instead, it has specific reference to the physical nature of the human body.\(^ {75}\) In a new creation understanding, there is *bodily* life after the *bodiless* state in heaven. In his explanation of the tares of the field, Jesus explains to his disciples that after the Son of Man throws the tares into the “furnace of fire” (i.e. after the resurrection and the casting of the unrighteous into γέννα, cf. Matt 5:22 and 18:8–9), the “righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (Matt 13:42–43). Assuming a new creation understanding of kingdom existence as material and earthly, Jesus’ words look to a time in the future when believers are “shining forth” in bodily existence in the domain of an everlasting earthly kingdom.\(^ {76}\)

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\(^{74}\)Examples of texts that promise future resurrection and immortality include Isa 25:6–9; 26:19–21; Ezek 37:1–26; Dan 12:2; John 6:40, 54; 11:21–26; Rom 8:11, 23–25; 2 Cor 4:14; 5:1–5, 2 Thess 4:14–17; 2 Tim 1:10.

\(^{75}\)Wright argues that in the ancient world the term resurrection “was never used to mean life after death.” Instead, “Resurrection was used to denote new bodily life after whatever sort of life after death there might be. When the ancients spoke of resurrection, whether to deny it (as all pagans did) or to affirm it (as some Jews did), they were referring to a two-step narrative in which resurrection, meaning new bodily life, would be preceded by an interim period of bodily death.” Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 36.

\(^{76}\)Most commentators note the connection between the shining forth of believers in Matt 13 and Jesus’ transfiguration in 17:2 (in both cases a form of ἀκμαίος is used) and Daniel’s description of those who have been raised to everlasting life who “will shine brightly like the brightness of the expanse of
When speaking about the bodily resurrection of believers, new creation proponents build upon the reality of Christ’s own resurrection. Paul writes that Jesus’ resurrection is the “first fruits of those who are asleep” (1 Cor 15:20). One implication of him being the first fruits seems to be that there are similarities between Jesus’ post-resurrection body and the post-resurrection bodies of believers. Interestingly, following his resurrection, Jesus’ body is similar in many ways to the body that he had prior to his death. To new creation proponents the importance of the nature of Jesus’ resurrection body means not only that believers will be resurrected, but also that they will receive a body similar to the present one in its materiality. The difference is not one of spiritual vs. 

heaven” (Dan 12:3). The point seems to be that the shining entails both the experience and reflection of the glory of God. Regarding this time which has yet to be fully realized, Craig Blaising writes, “The promises in Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Ezekiel describe a people who have the law written in their hearts, who walk in the way of the Lord, fully under control of the Holy Spirit. These same promises look to a people who are raised from the dead, enjoying the blessings of an eternal inheritance with God dwelling with them and in them forever.” Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, Progressive Dispensationalism (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 208.

As stated above, one of the areas in which N. T. Wright has been lauded in conservative evangelical circles is regarding the historicity of Jesus’ resurrection. Receiving heavy criticism from liberal proponents who deny Jesus’ resurrection, Wright has argued that the resurrection of Jesus is foundational for Christian doctrine (see works listed in fn 38). Wright’s interest in the historicity of Jesus’ resurrection seems to be in line with his research on new creation eschatology, especially regarding the implications of Jesus’ resurrection upon the resurrection state of believers. The connection between the two is manifested clearly in Wright, Surprised by Hope.

For a discussion of ἀπαρχὴ, especially regarding the nuances of the concept of first fruits, see Anthony C. Thiselton, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, NIGTC, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1223–24. Thiselton concludes that implied is an “ordered sequence of temporality, representation, and promise or pledge of what is to come” (1224).

See Matt 28; Luke 24; John 20–21; and Acts 1. We must be careful to affirm both continuity and discontinuity between the mortal body and the immortal body. Wright concludes, “[I]n the renewal of our bodies, we may assume that there will be continuity without the suggestion of absolute physical identity. God does not need to search for the same atoms and molecules that once constituted us; if he did, there would not be nearly enough to go round, since we all wear second-hand clothes in that respect. We are all of us, as C S Lewis [sic] says, like a curve in a waterfall; our bodies are in a state of physical flux.” Wright, New Heavens, New Earth, 20. The emphasis among new creation proponents does seem to be on the continuity, probably since they are reacting against more of a dualistic approach to the spiritual and the material caused, at least in part, by a misunderstanding of the dichotomy in Scripture between the natural or fleshly body and the spiritual body, as, for example, in 1 Cor 15:44.
material but one of mortal vs. immortal. Therefore, the Christian’s resurrected body is at least as material as the present one, but vastly different in reference to its liberation from the reality and effects of sin and death.

Another aspect of 1 Corinthians 15 is the connection between Christ’s resurrection and the hope of the gospel. Paul writes that, without the resurrection of Christ, a believer’s faith and preaching would be vanity, death would still reign, that he would still be in his sin, and there would be no hope of resurrection (1 Cor 15:12–19). The reality, however, is that Christ was resurrected and believers will be as well. The reality of bodily resurrection, according to new creation proponents, excludes spiritual conceptions of the eternal state. Resurrection is about life, and life abundantly lived (John 10:10). As one of the key proponents writes, “Resurrection doesn’t mean escaping from the world; it means mission to the world based on Jesus’s lordship over the world.” In this way, bodily resurrection is at the heart of the Christian hope, pointing to the reality of Christ’s victory over sin and death.

Another text that seems to be emphasized among new creation proponents is Rom 8:23. Paul presents believers as looking eagerly for their adoption as sons on the basis that they have received the pledge (“first fruits”) of the Spirit. Interestingly, the way that he explains the consummation of this adoption in this verse is “the redemption of our bodies.” Regarding this verse, Middleton concludes, “[H]uman liberation is not

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80 For a treatment of Paul’s concept of spiritual body, see Peter Lampe, “Paul’s Concept of a Spiritual Body,” in Resurrection: Theological and Scientific Assessments, eds. Ted Peters, Robert John Russell, and Michael Welker, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 103–14; Also, for a technical treatment of the σῶμα πνευματικόν, see the excursus in Thiselton, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 1276–81.

81 Wright, Surprised by Hope, 233.

82 I am in agreement with Moo’s treatment of τὴν ἀπολύτρωσιν τοῦ σώματος ἡμῶν: “The
simply ‘internal’ (affecting only the ‘soul’), since salvation, portrayed as redemption—which continues the exodus imagery—is applied in verse 23 to our very bodies (a reference to the resurrection).” Along with others who emphasize this verse, Middleton is pointing out that redemption includes the physical in addition to the spiritual. The resurrection of the body itself, it seems, informs the Christian hope in that it points to the goodness of the materiality of human existence.

A final text should be mentioned that new creation proponents are forced to handle. In 2 Cor 5:1–10, Paul seems to be teaching more of a spiritual vision understanding of the eternal state of the believer when he contrasts the earthly tent with the dwelling from heaven. Middleton writes, “[I]t certainly sounds as though he is contrasting embodied life on earth with the hope of living in heaven forever.” Is this really the idea that Paul is putting forth? Middleton and other new creationists say no. While not denying that the context of Paul’s words is the prospect of death, Middleton concludes that, even in this passage, Paul’s ultimate hope is for the resurrection of the body: “He hammers home the point that he fully expects ‘not to be naked’ (5:3), that he does ‘not wish to be unclothed’ (5:4); instead he longs to be clothed with his heavenly dwelling (5:2). In other words, Paul’s explicit hope is not for existence as a ‘naked’ soul

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genitive, in light of the biblical stress on the permanence of ‘bodily’ life through resurrection and transformation, must be objective—it is the body that is redeemed—rather than ablative—‘redemption from the body’.” Douglas J. Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 521 fn 67.


84 Ibid., 93. Wright notes the appearance of this idea in 2 Cor 4: “If all we had were the final verses of chapter 4, it might be possible to say—and some do try to argue this—that Paul was referring to a future hope in which the body would be left behind and a pure spirit would remain . . . . Is this not three-quarters of the way down the road to Plato, eager to be done with the perishable mortal body and to be left with the glorious, immortal, and disembodied soul?” Wright, Surprised by Hope, 153.
or spirit (presumably in heaven), but for eternal embodied life (on earth)." Along with Middleton, Moore and Wright understand these verses in light of the ultimate hope of resurrection and seem to typify the new creation response to the spiritual understanding of these verses.

3. Reconciliation of All Things

New creation conceptions of the kingdom and of bodily resurrection lead to very holistic understandings of redemption. Reflecting the holistic view, Russell Moore writes, “The point of the gospel is not that we would go to heaven when we die. Instead, it is that heaven will come down, transforming and renewing the earth and the entire universe.” Those who espouse a new creation conception of the eternal state emphasize

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85 Middleton, “A New Heaven and a New Earth,” 93. For a technical treatment of the relationship between the terms γυμνοι (“naked”) and ἐκδύσασθαι (“to be unclothed”) and their negative sense in verses 3–4, see Murray J. Harris, The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 384–91. Harris’s conclusion is that the two terms “together form an allusion to some aberrant view of which Paul disapproves,” namely, “the view of the hereafter held by the precursors of Gnosticism at Corinth (1 Cor 15:12), who appear to have taught, as a corollary of baptismal resurrection, that the Christian hope consisted primarily of emancipation from corporeal defilement. Similarly, v. 3 may be Paul’s rebuttal of the fallacious deduction made by these Corinthian ‘protognostics’ that the expression ἐνδύσασθαι ἀθανασίαν (‘to put on immortality’) used in 1 Cor 15:53–54 implied that the believer’s final destiny was disembodied immortality—assuming, that is, that when we have put in on, we shall find ourselves to be not disembodied [but permanently disembodied].” Ibid., 389. For Harris’s detailed treatment of the influence of this ‘protognosticism,’ see “Paul’s opponents in 2 Corinthians” in the introduction, esp. 77–87.

86 Regarding 2 Cor 5:8, Moore, writes, “This heavenly state is always in view of the ultimate day history, however, when bodies are raised and death is overturned forever (1 Cor 15:50–57).” Moore, “Personal and Cosmic Eschatology,” 871. Wright argues more extensively against the Platonic influence of dualism (Wright, Surprised by Hope, 153–56), concluding that Paul is referring to “a new house, a new dwelling, a new body, waiting within God’s sphere (again, ‘heaven’), ready for us to put it on over the present one so that what is mortal may be swallowed up with life.” Ibid., 153.

87 Moore, “Personal and Cosmic Eschatology,” 912. Likewise, Wright: “What has happened in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ . . . is by no means limited to its effects on those human beings who believe the gospel and thereby find the new life here and hereafter. It resonates out, in ways that we can’t fully see or understand, into the vast recesses of the universe.” Wright, Surprised by Hope, 97.
texts that address God’s promises of renewal and transformation of the universe, and conclude that these promises involve the transformation of nature and creation.

New creation proponents appeal to texts such as 1 Cor 15:27–28 which speak to all things being put in subjection to Christ. After the fall, nature was put under the curse (Gen 3:17–19; Rom 8:20) and the human calling of subduing the earth (Gen 1:26–28; cf. Gen 2:15) was interrupted as a result of the rebellion of Adam and Eve.\textsuperscript{88} Nonetheless, all creatures and all creation are in some way telling of God’s glory, rejoicing, and called upon to praise God (Ps 19:1–2; 65:12–13; 96:11–13; 148).\textsuperscript{89} However, texts such as Rom 8:18–22 and Isa 24:4 imply that the created order, including nature and creation, are not currently in subjection to Christ.\textsuperscript{90} “All things,” then, in 1 Cor 15:27–28, seems to include the created order as a whole, heaven and earth and all creatures.

The idea that all of God’s creation, including but not limited to humanity, will be in subjection to him implies that something has to be done to put them back into subjection. New creation proponents argue that it is by the work of Christ that this is

\textsuperscript{88}Although sin does not allow the task of subduing the earth to be accomplished perfectly, the task seems to be an enduring one. In Ps 8:6–8, for example, David rejoices in the Lord having made man to rule over creation and having put all things under his feet.

\textsuperscript{89}Interestingly, in Ps 96:11–12, the rejoicing of the heavens and earth, the sea, the field, and the trees of the forest is tied to the coming of the Lord in judgment in verse 13. In Ps 148, the enduring purpose of the creation can be seen in that “He has established them forever and ever” (v. 6). While new creationism does not inherently demand a view about whether the new creation is totally new or renewed (see fn 10), this verse seems point to the later view. It also should be pointed out that the curse does not negate that God’s creation and creatures are still “good” in some sense (John 3:16; Rom 1:20; 1 Tim 4:4).

\textsuperscript{90}Moo points out that “the transition from verse 22 to verse 23 excludes believers from the scope of ‘creation’ in verses 19–22; and Paul’s insistence in verse 20 that the ‘frustration’ to which this creation was subjected occurred without its own choice excludes human beings in general.” Moo, “Nature in the New Creation,” 460.
accomplished. In Col 1:19–20, Paul writes that all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, will be reconciled in Christ. For some new creation proponents, personal regeneration is the individual picture of what will occur at a cosmic level. Moore writes

“smaller type”  God demonstrates in individual lives what he one day plans to do with the entire universe, in the age of the Spirit. This is why Jesus speaks of the consummated kingdom in the age to come as the regeneration (Matt 19:28), and why he insists that personal regeneration is necessary to see the kingdom of God (John 3:3). God redeems individuals, transforming them through the Spirit because through redeemed human rulers, the sons of God, he will transform the creation itself, freeing it from its bondage to decay (Rom 8:18–23).

For Moore, the continuity that exists between the individual before and after regeneration is “key to understanding God’s plans for the earth and the heavens.”

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91 The nature of this essay does not allow for more to be said regarding the implications of this statement upon the relationship between Christ’s sacrificial atonement and the reconciliation of the cosmos.

92 Moore, “Personal and Cosmic Eschatology,” 913. Παλιγγενεσία (from which we get the term “regeneration”), occurring only twice in the NT, refers to the time “when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne” (Matt 19:28) and to individual salvation and renewal by the Holy Spirit (Tit 3:5). The new birth in John 3:3–7 is also normally included in systemic discussions of regeneration. In relating personal regeneration, specifically the new birth in John 3, to the consummated kingdom, Moore seems to be using the term regeneration in its proper Biblical-theological sense as a New Covenant promise (Jer 31; Ezek 11:19; 36–37; cf. Isa 59:19–21) fulfilled only following the glorification of Jesus (John 7:37–39). In this sense, regeneration, at least in a Biblical-theological sense, is neither the initial action of God to ‘open the eyes’ or ‘quicken’ sinners (a motivation in the Reformed tradition to see regeneration as preceding faith) nor is it a synonym for the broader systemic term salvation. Instead it is the new covenant gift of the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit described throughout John’s gospel as something that is happening for the first time (John 7:37–39; 14:16–17; 26; 15:26–27; 16:7, 13–14; and 17:25–26). This is not to deny that God changed hearts in the OT (e.g. Saul in 1 Sam 10:9–13), but to propose that what occurred at that time was not what is described as ‘regeneration’ or ‘new birth’ in the texts above.

93 This argument could be extended to argue against an annihilationist view of creation at judgment. Regeneration of the individual does not mean that he is a different ‘person.’ To say that the believer is a new creature (2 Cor 5:17; cf. Gal 6:15) is to say that he has experienced a radical transformation. If the regeneration of the universe is parallel to individual regeneration, then it seems that
Paul’s words in Colossians 1 promise a cosmic reconciliation of all things by which the entire created order is put back into subjection to him, “so that God may be all in all” (1 Cor 15:28). This reconciliation even has implications for the original task of humans to subdue the earth and its creatures in a context of a transformed natural order (Rev 21–22) and animal kingdom (Isa 11:7–8; 65:25).

V. POSITIVE FEATURES OF RECENT NEW CREATION ESCHATOLOGIES

Having introduced some Biblical foundations, we can now identify some general features of recent arguments for a new creation understanding of the eternal state. Because these features seem to be the result of faithful handling of a multitude of texts and tensions in Scripture, I present them as positive aspects of what I have called a recent rise in new creation conceptions. The first feature of recent new creation conceptions is a distinction between heaven as the intermediate, bodiless state and the eternal state consisting of the new heaven and the new earth. While disagreements may exist regarding the relationship between heaven and the new heaven and new earth, the primary point being made is that when talking about the eternal state of the believer, one must take into account the differing descriptions of the pre and post-resurrection condition.

Second, as a result of the distinction that is clearly delineated in Scripture and reflected in many new creation understandings, these conceptions seem to possess a better understanding of death as the temporary separation of body and spirit. This leads the creation itself will experience a radical transformation. Like in individual regeneration, the old has passed away and the new has come (2 Cor 5:17), so also the “first heaven and the first earth passed away,” and John sees a new heaven and a new earth (Rev 21:1).
to a more Biblical conception both of the current state of those who have died and of Jesus’ ultimate abolishishment of death when it, along with Hades, is “thrown into the lake of fire” (Rev 20:14). It also is an encouragement that the Christian has nothing to fear in physical death (Matt 10:28; Luke 12:4–5; 2 Cor 1:9).

Third, new creation conceptions seem to be emphasizing the resurrection of the body in a greater way than current teaching in conservative Christian churches in America. The result of this greater emphasis seems to be a deeper understanding and stronger affirmation of the Biblical doctrine of bodily resurrection and how closely it is tied to the Christian hope. The emphasis also has implications for how we view our current bodies, the bodies of those who have died, and the post-mortem practice of cremation. The combination of a proper understanding of death and of resurrection also has a significant impact upon how funerals are conducted. There seems to be no better environment than a funeral to proclaim the truths regarding the promises of salvation, not the least of which is the encouragement that death for the Christian is a temporary, yet blissful, state which precedes a time when he will once again have a body and be face to face with the Lord (1 Cor 13:12; cf. 1 John 3:2).

Fourth, new creation conceptions offer a more holistic understanding of redemption which seems to do greater justice to various texts of Scripture than do


95See fn 4 for justification for connecting these texts with the return of Christ.
spiritual vision understandings. Unlike views that tend toward the spiritual vision, these more holistic new creation understandings widen the scope of redemption to all of God’s creation—nature, society, culture, etc.—without excluding the need for individuals to respond to the gospel. Stating clearly the minimum of the new creation understanding, Moo writes, “The continuity between this world and the next one is difficult to determine. But this much can at least be said: the new world is a place of material substance.” Ultimately, the result is a more extensive understanding of the effects of sin and, hence, a richer understanding of Christ’s atonement for sin and God’s power and grace in victory over that sin.

VI. AFFIRMATION AND CRITIQUE: PROPOSALS FOR FUTURE DEVELOPMENT WITHIN NEW CREATION ESCHATOLOGY

Time will reveal whether the recent rise in new creation eschatology will be short-lived, but it seems that interest across multiple traditions is increasing. For this reason, it seems beneficial to provide some proposals regarding how the discussion should proceed. Future proponents of new creation conceptions, like the four key proponents in the current essay, must affirm that the coming of the kingdom, the resurrection of the dead, and the reconciliation of all things will not take place prior to the coming of Christ. Any framework that excludes the necessity of the return of Christ to the earth to consummate the victory over sin must be rejected. Related to this, new creation conceptions of the eternal state must also insist that the consummation of God’s

\[\text{96Moo, “Nature in the New Creation,” 464.}\]

\[\text{97The four proponents chosen in this article are an example of this diversity. Wright is Anglican, Middleton has roots in the Wesleyan tradition and is a member of a Free Methodist Church, Moore is Southern Baptist, and Moo is a member of an independent Bible church.}\]
redemptive plan, whatever that may include, will be brought about on the basis of Christ’s sacrificial work in his death, burial, and resurrection.

New creation understandings of the eternal state should continue to affirm the cosmic effects of sin. It is not only humanity that is affected by sin, but the entire created order. Likewise, it is not only humanity that will be redeemed, but the entire created order. Underscoring the extensive effects of sin while also affirming the teaching from Scripture that God will reverse these effects will accentuate the grace of God.

At the risk of overemphasizing the cosmic and earthly aspects of redemption, new creation proponents must be careful to affirm the spiritual, individual aspect of redemption. This conscious affirmation will guard against adopting a Christ-less ecological perspective (“green theology”) and against the danger of losing zeal for calling sinners to salvation through Jesus Christ.

There is much to praise in recent new creation understandings of the eternal state. However, certain proposals could be made for the future development of new creation conceptions. While there has been some work among new creationists on the implications of holistic redemption upon various elements of the created order (i.e. culture and civilization, work, humanity’s relationship to nature, art, entertainment, government, etc.) new creation proponents should continue to expand upon these implications.98

98For examples of what has been said from a conservative standpoint, see the works from Wright, Middleton, Moore, and Moo referred to throughout this paper. A recent contribution to the discussion of the relationship between humans and the non-human creation is Richard Bauckham, *The Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010); and idem, *Living with Other Creatures: Green Exegesis and Theology* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011). Bauckham hints at the implications that a proper understanding of the key features noted here have upon the nature of the eternal state.
Probably the most deficient area within recent new creation conceptions is in the area of anthropology, specifically the question of whether there is a future for ethnic Israel. Within the tradition of dispensationalism itself, there have been few examples of connecting a new creation understanding of the eternal state of the believer to arguments for a future for ethnic Israel. Most recent proponents of new creation eschatology, including the four surveyed in this essay, do not affirm a future for ethnic Israel.

Interestingly, most of them embrace as part of their holistic understanding of redemption God’s ultimate purpose for social and political structures, elements which are normally not associated with the eternal state in spiritual vision conceptions. Moore even seems to allow for ethnic distinctions to endure into the eternal state of the new creation. To 

99 I am mainly referring to the most recent form of dispensationalism known as progressive dispensationalism. Two notable exceptions to the lack of new creation conceptions within dispensationalism are Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* and Michael Vlach, *Has the Church Replaced Israel? A Theological Evaluation* (Nashville: B and H Academic, 2010). Early forms of dispensationalism (normally referred to as classical or traditional dispensationalism) included aspects of both a spiritual vision eschatology and aspects of a new creation understanding. When discussing these texts in Scripture, they did not seem to emphasize the eternal state of the believer and, if they would have, their conception of a new creation state would have been vastly different based upon the eternal duality of the two peoples of God, heavenly and earthly. The lack of discussion within more recent forms of dispensationalism prior to progressive, sometimes called revised, can be explained partly because one camp within revised dispensationalism affirmed more of a spiritual vision concept of the eternal state, with the purpose of the Church/Israel fulfilled in heaven forever. Discussions during this time were centered more squarely on the perceived differences between classical and revised as opposed to the nature of the eternal state.


101 See Moore, “Personal and Cosmic Eschatology,” especially 872–73; and 908–16. The irony of Moore’s position is pointed out by Craig Blaising. Blaising writes, “One should note the irony that Moore’s view of future Israel creates for his new creation eschatology. Certainly, Moore expects and explicitly asserts that the redeemed in the millennium and in the everlasting order of the new earth will be sub-grouped and gathered as nations. This of course fulfills the corporate dimension of anthropology as it is taken up into redemption. Moore also notes that the redeemed will include both Jews and Gentiles. However, he is quite clear that there will be no national Israel among those nations receiving as an inheritance the covenantally promised land. The inescapable conclusion, and ironic in light of the whole thrust of restoration prophecy, is that the Jewish redeemed are permanently dispersed among the Gentile nations.” “A Review Essay of A Theology for the Church,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 51 (2009): 116.
be sure, those who do not affirm a future for ethnic Israel usually do so because of a variety of exegetical reasons or confessional beliefs, some of which lie outside of the realm of the discussion of the eternal state. Nevertheless, it seems that many of the points that they are affirming leave room for OT prophecies that promise a restoration of ethnic Israel in a particular geographical location on the earth and peace for both Israel and the nations. The discussion of new creation conceptions of the eternal state combined with continued exegetical discussions regarding the meaning and fulfillment prophecies about Israel perhaps will lead to a more comprehensive understanding of the eternal state, including the affirmation of the literal fulfillment of OT prophecies for Israel and the nations.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, new creation proponents should explore ways to engage the Church more directly with regard to Christian hope. Sadly, the topic of eschatology in general (much less the nature of the resurrection of the body, the reconciliation of creation, and the eternal state of the believer) is rarely preached or discussed in many churches. When texts such as the ones in this article are discussed, they normally are not connected to the topic of the eternal state of the believer. New creation proponents feel that these texts which speak to the coming kingdom, the bodily resurrection, and the reconciliation of all things inform the Christian hope and that a conscious affirmation of these teachings from God’s Word results in a desire to please God and to act in accordance with that “grace to be brought to you at the revelation of

\[102\]Cf. Psalm 122; Isa 2:2–4; 60:3; 61:11; Jer 3:17; Mic 4:1–4; Zech 2:11; 8:22.

\[103\]It even seems that within the Church we do not talk very much about the personal, bodily return of Christ to this earth, a point of Christian orthodoxy. This affirmation alone, it seems, bears many questions that the texts introduced in this essay can answer.
Jesus Christ” (1 Pet 1:13). After all, these are the very things for which we should eagerly wait (Rom 8:19–25).

VII. CONCLUSION

More could be said about what I have identified as a rise in new creation conceptions of the eternal state. It is my hope that in the previous paragraphs I have shown in an introductory manner that these conceptions deserve attention. They not only challenge the dominant view held throughout Church history, but they also claim to be based upon certain texts and themes in Scripture. While the proponents seem to be making valid contributions to the discussion of the Christian’s eternal hope, work needs to be done to further the conversation. Nonetheless, the fact that the conversation is happening, and that there are more joining the conversation, is encouraging. What Scripture teaches regarding the eternal hope of the Christian seems to be richer than the average conception today. In light of God’s promise of holistic redemption from the far-reaching curse of sin and death, perhaps it is the case that Scripture speaks more clearly than we may initially think about the relationship between the eternal state of believers and the creation, culture, government, work, ethnicity, relationships, and our physical bodies. Further, there seems to be profound implications upon both personal ethics and the corporate witness of the body of Christ. Ultimately, an eternal hope in a new creation may help Christians to be tastier salt and brighter light to the world around them as they look forward to the day when they “will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (Matt 13:43).