The Relevance of a Gospel of the New Creation for a Contemporary World

I once heard Steven Olford tell a story about his move from England to New York City to pastor a large Baptist Church in the 1960’s. He was unaware at the time that the church had a policy of segregation. He immediately called a meeting of the Board of Deacons to announce that he had not realized that the church had such a policy and that he believed the policy needed to be changed. The Board voted him down to the man. For the next two years he preached Sunday after Sunday on one text alone. After two years he called another meeting to discuss the need to remove the policy of segregation and this time all but nine voted to integrate. Of the nine, six came to say that although they voted against him they would stand by the decision of the Board. The remaining three—all were dead within six months. The text?—II Cor. 5:17, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come.”

This paper will briefly explore an understanding of a gospel of the new creation from a Biblical and theological perspective. I will then briefly describe a few issues relevant to the contemporary world. Finally, I will seek to demonstrate how the one can possibly affect the other.

The New Creation

The new creation turns chaos into order. Never has there been a better time for such as this. Masons have turned piles of stone into cathedrals. Cathedrals have turned the ordinary, the mundane into sacred moments. Sacred moments have turned anarchy into humane policy. Humane policy has turned injustice into opportunities for meaning and purpose. Opportunities for meaning and purpose have turned forgotten dreams into visions that can create a reasonable future for all humankind. The new creation says, describe your vision and I will predict your future. Let’s talk about vision.

I remember the night I first trusted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. I went to bed in black and white and woke up in technicolor. The whole world seemed different. What
seemed so important the night before had taken on new perspective. I no longer wanted to spend the rest of my life climbing ladders and chasing dollars. The vision that God gave was for my life to count for something eternal.

Wesleyan theology can be depicted as good news/bad news/good news. The first good news is that we were created in the image of God (an original righteousness where every fiber of our being is bent toward obedience). The bad news is that we have lost that image (an original sin where every fiber of our being is bent toward disobedience). The ultimate good news is that God is in Jesus Christ reconciling the world to Himself, restoring us to our original righteousness where once again we are bent toward righteousness. In a sense the new creation is a recreation of the intended order.

Although John Wesley actually wrote a sermon entitled, “The New Creation,” the reference there is to the eschatological creation of a new heaven and new earth. Using the text from Rev. 21:5, “Behold I make all thing new,” the phrase, the new creation, never actually appears in the sermon itself. In order to find Wesley’s understanding of the new creation in the sense of being restored to our original righteousness where the old has passed away and the new has come you must turn to another sermon, “On the Wedding Garment:"

What, then, is that holiness which is the true “wedding garment,” the only qualification for glory? "In Christ Jesus," (that is, according to the Christian institution, whatever be the case of the heathen world,) "neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision; but a new creation, — the renewal of the soul “in the image of God wherein it was created” (paragraph 17; cf. Gal. 6: 15).

Similarly, Charles Wesley writes in his sermon, “Awake Thou that Sleepest:"

Knowest thou, that “in Jesus Christ, neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision; but faith that worketh by love,; but a new creation? Seest thou the necessity of that inward change, that spiritual birth, that life from the dead, that holiness? And art thou thoroughly convinced, that without it no man shall see the Lord? Art thou labouring after it? — "giving all diligence to make thy calling and election sure," "working out thy salvation with fear and trembling," “agonizing to enter in at the strait gate”? Art thou in earnest about thy soul? And canst thou tell the Searcher of hearts, “Thou, O God, art the thing that I long for! Lord, Thou knowest all things; Thou knowest that I would love Thee" (II, paragraph 11; again cf. Gal. 6:15).

Although no reference to the new creation can be found in any of the ancient Creeds, the Apostolic Fathers, or the works of the Martyrs, occasional references can be found in the works of some of the old divines like Spurgeon, Milton, and George Whitefield. Compare these words from Whitefield’s sermon, “The Potter and the Clay:"

These are the precious truths, which a scoffing world would fain rally or ridicule us out of. To produce this glorious change, this new creation, the glorious Jesus left his
Father's bosom. For this he led a persecuted life; for this he died an ignominious and accursed death; for this he rose again; and for this he now sitteth at the right hand of his Father. All the precepts of his gospel, all his ordinances, all his providences, whether of an afflicting or prosperous nature, all divine revelation from the beginning to the end, all center in these two points, to show us how we are fallen, and to begin, early on, and complete a glorious and blessed change in our souls. This is an end worthy of the coming of so divine a personage. To deliver a multitude of souls of every nation, language and tongue, from so many moral evils, and to reinstate them in an incomparably more excellent condition than that from whence they are fallen, is an end worthy the shedding of such precious blood.

Find also in Calvin's Institutes:

On the other hand, it may be proper to consider what the remedy is which divine grace provides for the correction and cure of natural corruption. For he is not there treating of universal government, but declaring that all the good qualities which believers possess are due to God. In using the term "all," he certainly makes God the author of spiritual life from its beginning to its end. This he had previously taught in different terms, when he said that there is "one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him," (1 Cor. 8:6); thus plainly extolling the new creation, by which everything of our common nature is destroyed (2.3.6).

So, in light of II Cor. 5:17 the apparent interpretation from these few references insists that in the new creation the old has gone and the new has come. We will return to that thought in moment, but in order to be relevant we must first look at the contemporary world.

A Contemporary World

For the last one hundred years the western world has become increasingly materialistic, hedonistic, and narcissistic. One has only to look at the devastating corporate greed of the failed American company, Enron, and its resulting affect on the world economy to see an example of the Dot-Com generation living high and then losing it all when it tumbles into a pitfall of its own making. Of course the rest of the world is not immune. All of us pray for the peace of Jerusalem where what appears to be a self-serving lack of understanding on both sides has plunged two nations into war against former neighbor and friend. Is not the God of Abraham the God of both Israeli and Palestinian alike?

It is not as if we have not been warned. If you read straight through the Bible two big sins come at you time and time again—oppressing poor people and self-reliance. I am presently reading the Psalms in my daily devotions. Let me illustrate these two sins with just two references. First, against oppressing the poor:

How long will you defend the unjust
and show partiality to the wicked?
Defend the cause of the weak and
fatherless;
maintain the rights of the poor and oppressed.
Rescue the weak and needy;
deliver them from the hand of the
wicked (Ps. 82:2-4).

Now against self-reliance:

For all can see that wise men die;
the foolish and the senseless alike
perish
and leave their wealth to others.
Their tombs will remain their houses
forever,
their dwellings for endless
generations,
though they had named lands after
themselves.
But man despite his riches, does not
endure;
he is like the beasts that perish.
This is the fate of those who trust in
themselves,
and of their followers, who approve
their sayings (Ps. 49:10-13).

It would appear that from the beginning of recorded time humankind has
struggled with maintaining meaning and purpose beyond its own self-interests. What
was true in the past is true today, and with great consequence. Is the new creation
relevant for the contemporary world? Let’s look for an application.

The Old Has Gone, the New Has Come

All of the above seems to suggest (as the text so clearly states) that the new
creation is an experience of God where the old has passed away and all things have
become new. Dying to an old self-centeredness (materialistic, hedonistic, and
narcissistic) was important in Biblical times and is important today—but how does one
die to the old?

Solzhenitsyn’s The Gulag Archipelago gives us an interesting perspective on
dying to the old. He documents the operation of a former oppressive Soviet regime from
1918 to 1956 by using personal interviews and remembrances from his time in the camps. He tells how prisoners were able to withstand abuse and interrogation even when they had done nothing wrong. Here is a small section from the book where he is asking one of the gulag survivors

‘How can you stand your ground when you are weak and sensitive to pain, when people you love are still alive, when you are unprepared? What do you need to make you stronger than the interrogator and the whole trap?’ He replies, ‘From the moment you go in prison you must put your cozy past firmly behind you. At the very threshold, you must say to yourself: ‘My life is over, a little early to be sure, but there’s nothing to be done about it. I shall never return to freedom. I am condemned to die—now or a little later. But later on, in truth, it will be even harder, and so the sooner the better. I no longer have any property whatsoever. For me those I love have died, and for them I have died. From today on, my body is useless and alien to me. Only my spirit and my conscience remain precious and important to me.’

Now let’s take this same theme and see if we can apply it to the new creation. Let’s ask a similar question to one who has experienced the new creation where the old has passed away and the new has come.

“How can you turn your back on all that seems precious in order to embrace a new life in Christ?” The reply, “From the moment you anticipate a new life in Christ you must put your cozy past firmly behind you. At the very threshold, you must say to yourself: ‘My old life is over, a little early to be sure, but there’s nothing to be done about it. I shall never return to a former bondage. I am free to live—now or a little later. But later on, in truth, it will be even harder, and so the sooner the better. I no longer have any property whatsoever. For me those I love take a different perspective, and for them I have died to an old self bent on destruction. From today on, my old self is useless and alien to me. Only my spirit and conscience remain precious and important to me.’”

Henry David Thoreau insisted that “Perfection is reached, not when there is nothing left to gain, but when there is nothing left to be taken away.”

II Corinthians 4:18 makes a similar point, “So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.” The new creation convinces us that the only things eternal are unseen—but how does one embrace the new?

The new creation is aware of a reality beyond the senses—a new perspective. Perspective is the key. The new creation cuts us loose from the old so that all things can become new. Paul writes in Romans 7:24, “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” From the Biblical perspective that creates a horrible image. It depicts the first century gas chamber where the condemned felon was bound mouth to mouth with a cadaver and expired by breathing the poisonous gases from within the cadaver. Paul’s answer is important. “Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!” Romans 8:1-2 then goes on to speak of the rescue.
Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.

John Wesley preached more from Rom. 8 than any other chapter in the Bible. These are the very words echoed at Aldersgate—and for good reason. Let me explain.

Wesley's experience at Aldersgate was the culmination of a thirteen-year struggle to turn his back on the old and embrace the new. Previously he had attempted to make the change out of his own attempts at self-justification, but with no success—a law of sin and death. The law of sin and death, now there's a concept. It is the law without Spirit, without the power or the inclination to obey it. The law of the Spirit of life is another matter altogether. It is the same law (Jesus did not come to destroy the law but to fulfill the law) enlivened by the Spirit so that now we have both the power and the inclination to obey it. At long last Wesley was willing to give up on his own righteousness and place his faith and trust in the righteousness of Jesus Christ—revival was soon to follow.

The new creation accesses the power of the Holy Spirit that enables one to see others as God sees them. Let me suggest an application.

I think of the troubled Middle East. I once made friends with some Israeli guards after spending several hours with them at a border crossing into Egypt. As I was then traveling on to Cairo and waiting for several hours for a bus I also had opportunity to make friends with the Egyptian guards on the other side of the border. When I returned to that same border several weeks later I was greeted with considerable fanfare by the Egyptian guards who remembered me from the earlier encounter. It was the Sabbath and no buses were running into Israel but a tour bus was there with a driver from Nazareth who was watching these guards pass me along their gauntlet kissing me on both cheeks. I asked him for a ride into Israel and he agreed to put me in the seat usually occupied by the guide at the front of the bus. As we approached the Israeli side of the border the guards there also recognized me, banged on the door of the bus and as I stepped out they passed me along their own gauntlet kissing me on both cheeks. The driver, somewhat dismayed asked, "Just who are you?" I said, "Nobody." He said, "You somebody. I've seen men kissed on one side of the border but never on both." As I remember that experience I remember just how open and receptive both Israelis and Arabs were to my friendship. I liked both sides—a lot! Why must there be war? The old must pass away and all things must become new. The message of the new creation is that we can be changed and affect change in the hearts and lives of others.

The new creation offers forgiveness—the cross. Can Israelis and Palestinians forgive each other for countless atrocities? Will Israel ever be willing to return to the borders of 1967, establish an international Jerusalem and become friends with a people who now live on the land they have occupied for 35 years? Will the Palestinians ever be willing to stop the senseless bombing and become friends with a people who now live on the land occupied by their forebears for hundreds of years?
The new creation offers power—the power of the Holy Spirit to be reconciled with God, with ourselves and with those around us. The context for the verse from II Corinthians 5 speaks about reconciliation. It also speaks of being ambassadors. I think once again of Steven Olford. Should we preach more on the new creation so that people (especially as a body of believers) might be reconciled and then become reconcilers—ambassadors of peace and good will? Can you make a difference? Can I? Can we? Listen to the words of the angel to Zerubbabel as he was attempting to rebuild Jerusalem following the exile, “Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord Almighty” (Zech. 4:6). Maybe we should return to our homes and ask God to direct us in ways that can make a difference in our churches and then in our nations’ attitudes toward peace in the Middle East? Surely that would be relevant to the new creation and to the contemporary world as well. Let God arise!

Questions for reflection:

1. Can a Christian understanding of the new creation bring anything to bear on a non-Christian world?
2. Can our own experience of the new creation impact the decisions of those who make for war and peace?
3. Is a view of the new creation compatible with ecumenical attempts to affect world peace? Among different denominations? Among other religions?