

New Creation Eschatology and the Eternal Experience: An Exercise in Theologically-Informed Speculation

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A distinction currently emerging in contemporary eschatological discussion is one between the “new creation” [NC] and “spiritual vision” [SV] models of the believer’s experience of eternity. This pairing of labels, to the best of my research, first appeared in Craig Blaising’s 1999 distinction between his own, material/earthly view of the millennium/eternal state from more esoteric approaches found chiefly within classical amillennialism.¹ His concern was that a persistent Platonic emphasis on the afterlife as a utopia void of particulars and change so invaded early church eschatology that, eventually, nearly all material/sensate expectations of the eternal state and its eschatological precursors (e.g., the Millennium) were eventually dismissed not only as crude but impious. Premillennialism faded not due to any lack of biblical warrant, but because there was no philosophical place for it in Platonic thought. This point of contention, he argues, undergirds nearly all eschatological debate.

New Creation Eschatology Summarized

The distinctive feature of all expressions of NC eschatology is its expectation of material/earthly elements in the experience not only of eternity proper, but to some degree every chapter of the believer’s eschatological experience:

- The eternal home of saints centers on a literal earth upon which a literal “Holy City, the new Jerusalem, [descends] out of heaven from God” (Rev 21:2). Here God himself will dwell with redeemed humanity forever *in sensate form* (i.e., visible to our physical eyes, audible to our physical ears, and tangible to our physical hands). We will not simply gaze endlessly upon God with spiritual eyes in heaven—in fact, we may not spend any time at all in heaven. Instead, we will chiefly inhabit and successfully exercise dominion over a renovated earth much like the original one over which Adam lost control.
- For premillennial NC advocates, the transitional home of saints (the Millennium) is likewise intensely earthy. The cosmological promises of the OT related to the kingdom (radical changes in geology, astronomy, meteorology, zoology, etc.) will be fulfilled literally, not spiritually; the sociological promises (whether political, economic, jurisprudential, medical, etc.), too, will also find literal realization. Many take the ritual elements literally as well (thrones, scepters, temples—even sacrifices).²

¹Craig A. Blaising, “Premillennialism,” in *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, ed. Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 160–81; cf. also his “New Creation Eschatology and Its Ethical Implications,” in *Ethics and Eschatology: Papers Presented at the Annual Theological Conference of Emanuel University*, ed. Corneliu C. Simut (Oradea, Romania: Emanuel University Press, 2010); 7–24.

²It is worth noting that the label “new creation millennialism” has recently been used to designate something of a middle way between the premillennial and amillennial approaches (so Thomas R. Schreiner, *Revelation*, BECNT [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2023], 677; cf. also J. Webb Mealy, *New Creation Millennialism* [Monee, IL: Author, 2018]; Eckhard J. Schnabel, “The Viability of Premillennialism and the Text of Revelation 20,” *JETS* 64 [2021]: 785–95). This view suggests, contrary to prevailing dispensational and most historic premillennial expressions, that the millennium is the “first age of the new creation” and thus “not part of the old creation.” In this model, “no one dies, weeps, or sins during the millennium,” and the conflict at the end of the Millennium is perpetrated not from within, but by a nether-earthly invasion (Schreiner, *Revelation*, 677). I am encouraged that this view generally accepts the

For NC advocates who hold to realized/inaugurated approaches to the millennium (i.e., those who do not see the millennium as a future or at least a *strictly* future phenomenon), new creation eschatology expands into something of a missional mandate for the Church: the church not only promulgates a gospel of personal salvation, but must fulfill a robust ecological/sociological mission as well.³

- Some NC eschatologists also espouse a material intermediate state (i.e., that all persons receive at death an “intermediate body” that is *not* the resurrection body), arguing that a material body is essential to being human and to “seeing” God (e.g., Matt 5:8), and citing, e.g., the physical appendages (fingers and tongues) of the rich man and Lazarus, as well their material experiences of seeing, speaking, thirsting, and suffering torment from flames (e.g., Luke 16:19–31).⁴

As one might expect, the NC model is embraced by a range of chiliasts (both premillennial and postmillennial) as well as Neo-Kuyperians of sundry millennial suasions, and is not restricted to any one strand of evangelical thought. The view has even attracted a number of ecologically-infatuated figures whose theology exceeds even the most generous of evangelical definition.⁵

The most thorough-going and consistent expressions of this model, however, are dispensational, and no treatment is more comprehensive than Michael Vlach’s recent work *The New Creation Model: A Paradigm for Discovering God’s Restoration Purposes from Creation to New Creation*.⁶ Adding to the allure of Vlach’s treatment is that it piggy-backs on his earlier work *He Will Reign Forever: A Biblical Theology of the Kingdom of God*,⁷ which argues for a pervasive governmental component connecting all of canonical history/theology.⁸ IOW, in Vlach the new

millennium as *material*, not simply spiritual; however, this use of “new creation” differs materially from the model under review in this presentation.

³Dutch Calvinism is the fountainhead here (see Anthony Hoekema’s discussion in *The Bible and the Future* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979], 274–87), with offshoots in Neo-Calvinism (e.g., Albert Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview*, 2nd ed. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005]) and historic premillennialism (e.g., Russell D. Moore, “Personal and Cosmic Eschatology,” in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel L. Akin [Nashville: B&H, 2007], 858–926). Blaising’s progressive dispensationalism also sports modest expressions of earthy, here-and-now socio-political concern stemming from its view of an inaugurated kingdom (*Progressive Dispensationalism* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993], 285–91).

⁴This understanding, fueled by a relentless critique of “Platonic Dualism,” has been visible in dispensational and esp. Grace Brethren life (see, e.g., Herman Hoyt, *The End Times* [Chicago: Moody Press, 1969], 46–47; more recently Rolland D. McCune, *A Systematic Theology of Biblical Christianity*, 3 vols. [Allen Park, MI: DBTS Press, 2008–2010], 3:325–28).

⁵A particularly helpful survey of these may be discovered in Steven L. James, *New Creation Eschatology and the Land* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2017), chap. 1. Among the mass of proponents, however, several stand out: Howard Snyder, *models of the Kingdom* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991; idem, *Salvation Means Creation Healed: Overcoming the Divorce Between Heaven and Earth* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011); N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008); J. Richard Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth* (Grand Rapids: Baker 2014); idem, “A New Earth Perspective,” in *Four Views on Heaven*, ed. Michael Wittmer (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2022): 65–94.

⁶Cary, NC: Theological Studies Press, 2023.

⁷Silverton, OR: Lampion Press, 2017.

⁸Charles Ryrie is (in)famous for his suggestion that a “doxological” center to all God’s activity is a feature unique to dispensational theology—a uniqueness that he pitted against the “redemptive” center of covenant theology. However incomplete his argument may have been, his point was *not* that covenant theologians are

creation model of eschatology expands to offer us a holistic approach to biblical theology in general. I find it compelling.

Spiritual Vision Eschatology Summarized

Theological modernism is infamous for its pattern of stripping the Christian religion of all that is transcendent/supernatural, and reducing Christianity to a here-and-now religion of immanence. Overwhelmingly postmillennial in its earliest forms, modernism quickly abandoned the gospel of personal salvation and its hope in the hereafter, and began investing all of its energies to perfect the existing social order here on earth. In a sense, theological modernists rejected eschatology (at least in traditional terms involving supernatural advent); their modest hopes lay in the present earth slowly perfected through industrial/technological advance and human altruism.

Oppositely, in SV eschatology, the spiritual and the material are in conflict, and the eschaton features the former's triumph over the latter. The believer's future is principally or entirely spiritual, consisting of perpetual, ecstatic union with God *coram deo* in a perfect heaven free of all undulation. Any conception of the eternal state that features physical/material or mutable elements is a dangerous reversion to theological modernism. So opposed are SV advocates to the Aristotelian and the impassive flavor embodied in modernism, in fact, that many actively lobby for a return to "Christian Platonism."⁹ Hans Boersma, represents this understanding and helps explain it by identifying five components of Platonic Christianity:

- Anti-materialism: bodies and their properties are not the only things that exist.
- Anti-mechanism: the natural order cannot be fully explained by physical or mechanical causes.
- Anti-nominalism: reality is made up not just of individuals, each uniquely situated in time and space, but two individual objects can be the same in essence while still being unique individuals.
- Anti-relativism: human beings are not the measure of all things.
- Anti-skepticism: the real can in some manner become present to us, so that knowledge [despite its objective elusiveness] is [nonetheless] within reach.¹⁰

Applied firstly to hermeneutics, these principles disallow not only the historical-critical method of modernist vintage, but also her seemingly innocuous step-sister, the historical-grammatical

disinterested in God's glory, but rather that their biblical-theological center, viz., *redemption* (which functions in covenant theology not only as the biblical *mitte* [the covenant of **redemption**] but also as the substance of the biblical storyline [the history of **redemption**]) is too narrow to encompass the totality of the divine intention for his creation. Ryrie's weakness is in failing to identify a better "center." Vlach, writing in the train of Alva J. McClain, successfully identifies an alternative *mitte* (the Kingdom) and substance for the biblical story line (a history of the divine government). By so broadening the divine intention in creation beyond "spiritual" concerns (individual salvation and its climax in an eternal beatific vision), Vlach and McClain supply a more robust place for the physical/material in the immediate purposes of God. This in turn creates an expectation that the physical/material will feature prominently in eschatological experience as well. Randy Alcorn (*Heaven* [Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2004]), while somewhat more popular and speculative, fits within this tradition.

⁹See, e.g., Hans Boersma, *Five Things Theologians Wish Biblical Scholars Knew* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2021); *Scripture as Real Presence: Sacramental Exegesis in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2018); Craig A. Carter, *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition: Recovering the Genius of Premodern Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2018); see also Michael Allen, *Grounded in Heaven: Recentering Christian Hope and Life in God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018).

¹⁰Hans Boersma, *Five Things Theologians Wish Biblical Scholars Knew* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2021), 31.

method.¹¹ By contrast, Christian Platonist “premoderns,” reject as primarily literal/material (if at all) the many predictive prophecies that bristle with earthy elements (thrones, temples, nations, lands, waterways, crops, swords, animals, etc.). Instead, these are metaphorical, symbolic, typological, analogical, allegorical, and anagogical pointers to spiritual realities visible only to the eye of faith.¹²

The result for eschatological experience specifically, as one might expect, is a suppression of all things material and an exclusive emphasis on the believer’s spiritual experience, most especially the sustained rapture brought on by the beatific vision as the *principium unicum* of eternal life.¹³

While many in my audience represent and populate churches/schools that are majority premillennial and even dispensational, the idea of eternity as a perpetual beatific vision has not gone away. Ask the average church member or student what they anticipate eternal life to consist of, and the most common answers will include (1) being in heaven, where we will (2) see and know God fully and (3) worship and praise him endlessly, principally through song. Any objection that this might “get old” after a while is quickly shaken off with the firm insistence that once we see and know God for who he truly is, endless worship could never possibly “get old.” In short, a great many of our constituents have bought into the “spiritual vision” view of eternal

¹¹With its “mechanical” approach to language, linguistic rules of (ostensibly) “humanist” vintage, and most especially its “nominal” (i.e. univocal) approach to language, the grammatical-historical method strips out all but the literal meaning—which the majority historical church has by-and-large been loath to do. The solution for Carter and Boersma is to restore “premodern” exegesis, in which the words of Scripture supply something close to a Barthian *hinweis*—a “pointer” to other/fuller meanings that exist above the text, existentially but truly available to believers subjectively attuned to them (hence “anti-skepticism”).

¹²What is particularly dismaying is the mutual alliances being forged between figures like Boersma and Carter, deeply steeped in the Barthian tradition, with the evangelical biblical theology movement centered at Southern and lately at Midwestern Baptist Seminaries (see e.g., Carter’s endorsement of the biblical theological work of Hamilton, Gentry and Wellum, and Schreiner as important steps in the evangelical migration toward Christian Platonism [*Interpreting Scripture*, 23–26]; also Matthew Barrett’s podcast alliance with Hans Boersma [e.g., “What Is Christian Platonism,” *Credo* podcast 1 February 2022, available at <https://credomag.com/2022/02/what-is-christian-platonism-matthew-barrett-and-hans-boersma/>; idem, “How Shall We Then Read? Hermeneutics, Typology, and Trinity,” *Credo* podcast 26 September 2023, available at <https://credomag.com/2023/09/podcast-throwback-how-then-shall-we-read-hermeneutics-typology-and-trinity/>; etc.]).

¹³The beatific vision has long been celebrated as “the direct, intuitive knowledge of the Triune God that perfected souls will enjoy by means of their intellect: the final fruition of the Christian life, in which they will see God as he is in himself” (*EDT*, s.v., “Beatific Vision,” by J. VanEngen). Seated in texts such as Matt 5:8; 1 Cor 13:12; Heb 12:14; 1 John 3:2, 6; and Rev 22:4, many of the Fathers taught that beatific vision overcame the inaccessibility of God to ordinary sight, rendering him eternally visible to our “spiritual” eyes, typically at the moment of death. As time passed, the beatific vision swelled in theological import to eclipse nearly all other aspects of eternal experience—so much so that “Protestant Reformation theologians rejected most of [the Romanist teaching on the beatific vision] as too narrow” (*ibid.*). A more modest understanding of the beatific vision was preserved, however, among the Puritans, and the neo-orthodox turn in mid-20th-century Christian thought has led to further interest in contemporary evangelical discussion.

Particularly keen on recovering the beatific vision is Hans Boersma, whose *Seeing God: The Beatific Vision in Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018) is a massive survey of the concept in Christian history, with emphasis on its contemporary retrieval. He convincingly demonstrates the overwhelmingly spiritual/immaterial nature of the vision in its majority historical expression, and does so fairly, his work comparing with that done by Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang, *Heaven: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988); also Jeffrey Burton Russell, *A History of Heaven: The Singing Silence* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

life. But is that what the Bible teaches? The following is an attempt to tease out the implications (and perhaps engage minimally in some informed speculation) of the biblical data respecting the believer's experience of eternity, and the firm conclusion that the new creation approach to eschatology is to be preferred. I will begin briefly with the intermediate state and the millennium, then concentrate more fully on the believer's eternal experience.

Heaven Will Be Our Temporary/Intermediate Home

We begin our discussion with the "personal eschatology" of the intermediate state, easily the most difficult problem for NC proponents for its apparently *anima rationalis separata*.¹⁴ For some NC eschatologists, the problem is so great that they resort to "soul sleep" or something close to it.¹⁵ Others, as we have seen, propose intermediate bodies to resolve the tension.¹⁶ The biblical evidence, while not abundant,¹⁷ seems adequate to establish heaven, at minimum, as the temporary residence of the disembodied redeemed upon death. While the Bible does not actually say, "Christians go to heaven when they die," there is much evidence to suggest this:

- Paul expects temporary existence "with Christ" (1 Cor 5:8) as a "naked soul" (v. 4) that is "away from the body" (vv. 8–9) before [later] receiving his "heavenly" dwelling (vv. 3–4).
- Christ goes away to prepare us a place "where he is," (John 14:1ff) where we will be "with him" (Phil 1:23; 1 Thess 5:10). We note further that while the Second Person, is omnipresent, the theanthropic Christ seems principally to reside "in heaven" (e.g., Heb 8:1; 9:24, etc.).
- There is treasure awaiting our retrieval "in heaven" (Matt 5:12; 6:20; 19:21; Luke 6:23; 12:33; 18:22; Col 1:15; 1 Pet 1:4).
- Our vindication/recognition by God occurs "in heaven" (Matt 18:18), along with other end-times judgments.
- Stephen's spirit was received by Christ "into heaven" (Acts 7:54–59; cf. Elijah in 2 Kgs 2:11).
- The growing aggregate of the invisible church is gathered "in heaven" (Eph 3:15).
- Our citizenship is "in heaven" (Phil 3:20).
- Saints martyred during the Tribulation gather in heaven in anticipation of future vindication (Rev 6:9–11).
- The marriage of the Lamb takes place "in heaven," after which the saints join Christ in traveling "from heaven" to do battle together with him on earth (Rev 19; cf. Col 3:4).

The foregoing evidence suggests that believers have at least some level of communion with Christ in heaven, even though disembodied. Biblical description of this communion is very scant,

¹⁴The best theological discussion of the problem, in my opinion, remains G. C. Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), chap. 7.

¹⁵Middleton argues from a "holistic view of the human person" that "there is no consciousness without the body"; as such, "the next thing we will know after death is the resurrection" ("New Earth Perspective," 92–93). All references to the believer's heavenly reward/citizenship/place are either metaphorical or speak exclusively to their origin (i.e., we stockpile rewards *in* heaven that are bestowed on us by God *from* heaven; we have a citizenship in a kingdom of heavenly origin, etc.). Although more nuanced, Herman Dooyeweerd, when asked what activity remains for the soul separated from the body, felt comfortable replying, "Nothing" (Berkouwer, *Man*, 256).

¹⁶*Supra*, n. 4.

¹⁷In Anthony Hoekema's words, "What the New Testament tells us about the intermediate state is nothing more than a whisper" (*Created in God's Image* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986], 222).

but should not be suppressed. It is probably best to conclude with Paul that this temporary state, while restful, is deeply incomplete, with Berkouwer that while in this state, believers will never become so “oriented towards their ‘private bliss’ that they forget the coming Kingdom,”¹⁸ and with Wright that we must never lose sight of the fact that true biblical hope is in “life after life after death.”¹⁹ As one hymn well reminds us,

The golden evening brightens in the West;
Soon, soon to faithful warriors comes their rest;
Sweet is the calm of paradise the blessed.
Alleluia, Alleluia!

But lo! there breaks a yet more glorious day;
The saints triumphant rise in bright array;
The King of glory passes on his way.
Alleluia, Alleluia!²⁰

It is the events attending this “more glorious day” to which we now turn.

The Kingdom Is Earth-Bound

Despite Matthew’s frequent label “kingdom of heaven” to describe it, there is little to suggest that any part of the Millennial Kingdom actually occurs in heaven.²¹ That does not mean that there is no access to heaven during this period, but there is no text that says as much. Instead, emphasis is on the abeyance of the effects of the curse *on earth* that corresponds with the arrival of the king from heaven, with the result that when the “Kingdom comes, God’s will shall be done on earth even as it is in heaven.” The Old Testament, especially, bristles with material and earthy descriptions of the Kingdom:

- “A king shall reign” (Isa 9:6–7; 32:1; 33:22; Dan 2:44; 7:14), ruling “with an iron scepter” (Ps 2:6, 9) from a throne in Jerusalem (Ps 48:2; cf. Isa 2:3; 24:23; Jer 3:17; Ezek 48:16; Zech 2:1–5)—not a heavenly Jerusalem, but rather a physical city “in the [very same] land that I gave to Jacob my servant, the land where your fathers lived” (Ezek 37:25).
- Jerusalem will also be the religious center for the Kingdom (Isa 1:26; 60:14, 18; 62:3, 7; Jer 31:6; Zech 8:3; 14:16), featuring a temple with elements and dimensions that do not match any historical building (Isa 56:7; 64:11; Hag 2:6–9; Ezek 40–48), together with the resumed residence of the Shekinah (Ezek 43:1–3, 7).
- Israel will assume her long anticipated place as a kingdom of priests for the nations (Exod 19:6), serving in the Temple and facilitating global worship. In this way they will continue to fulfill the Abrahamic expectation that through them all the families of the earth will be blessed (Gen 12:3).
- The nations will reciprocate, “streaming to her” to share their vast wealth (all of Isa 60–62, but esp. 61:6–9; cf. also Jer 23:4; 33:17–22; Zeph 3:20; Zech 8:20–23).
- Social justice will prevail (Jer 33:10–11, 15; Zech 8:4–5), including the establishment of property

¹⁸*Man*, 265.

¹⁹*Surprised by Hope*, 190.

²⁰William Walsham How, “For All the Saints,” 1864, text from the Sarum Hymnal, 1868.

²¹I understand the genitive in this phrase to be one of source/origin. The king/kingdom arrives “from” heaven and in this sense is a “heavenly” kingdom. The point is not that its outworking takes place in heaven.

and labor rights (Isa 65:21–22; Amos 9:11, 14), the implementation of poverty relief through industry (Ps 72:1–4, 12–13; Isa 42:1–4), the restoration of family values (Jer 33:10–11, 15; Zech 8:4–5; Ps 126:1–2), the resolution of ancient racial tensions (Ezek 37:21–22; Zech 8:13, 23), and the removal of language barriers (Zeph 3:9).

- Environmental damage will be undone (Ps 72:16; Isa 61:4).
- A stable global climate will be achieved (Isa 4:5–6; 30:23–26).
- Meteorological changes will ensure that timely and abundant rainfall occur worldwide (Joel 2:23; Ezek 34:26b), even in traditionally barren places (Isa 30:25; 35:6–7; 41:18). This will result in the elimination of famine (Ezek 34:29).
- Beneficial geographical and geological changes will occur (Isa 30:23–26).
- Fertility and productivity will abound (Isa 35:1–2; Ezek 34:25, 29; Amos 9:13).
- Animals will become docile (Isa 11:6–8; 65:25; Ezek 34:25; Hosea 2:18).
- Disease and deformity will be eliminated (Isa 33:24; 35:5–6; 65:22).
- Long physical life will be the norm (Isa 65:22).
- Even ordinary hazards associated with clumsiness will reduce (Ezek 34:23–31; Psa 91:10–12).

It is here that the SV eschatologists begin their Platonic assault in earnest. As Blaising correctly observes, “A future kingdom on earth simply does not fit well in an eschatology that stresses personal ascent to a spiritual realm.”²² The possibility that those who had long sojourned in heaven might be obliged to return to a material earth (much less one yet fallen) is a disgusting one. The kingdom must instead be realized spiritually—“in us” individually or “among us” corporately. And to that end, the whole body of biblical evidence is whiled away by Christian Platonic sleight of hand.

The Eternal State Is Earth-Centered

It is a material eternal state, however, that most troubles the SV eschatologist. So intense is the angst that even some who hold to an otherwise NC approach lose courage at this juncture.²³ Also looming large here is the general failure by Premillennialists and dispensationalists specifically to navigate successfully the transition between the Kingdom and the Eternal State. The result among many is a reversion (or at least a partial reversion) to the SV approach for this last chapter of the biblical storyline.

²²“Premillennialism,” 170. Blaising’s discussion of the intellectual turn of the historical church away from its early premillennial majority, starting with Origen and continuing through the Medieval period, is insightful (166–74), as well as premillennialism’s slow recovery since (174–81); cf. also and esp. Vlach, *New Creation Model*, chaps. 13–17.

²³From the very opening lines of John MacArthur’s book *The Glory of Heaven* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1996), for instance, assumption is made that believers will spend eternity in heaven. MacArthur admits that the first notes of the eternal state are sounded on earth, but God’s immediate arrival to make earth “his dwelling place” absorbs the earth by definition into heaven, thus expanding heaven beyond its original contours (p. 60, cf. 89ff). He further adjusts his definition of heaven into something akin to a state of being or experience, suggesting that “heaven is where holiness, fellowship with God, joy, peace, love, and all other virtues are realized in utter perfection.” As such, while living saints “aren’t in heaven bodily . . . , because of our spiritual union with Him, we have already entered into the heavenly realm” (61). MacArthur persists in identifying heaven as a “real place”; nonetheless, “Heaven transcends all space-time limitations” (62).

The Exegetical Argument

Revelation 21–22 offers relatively few details about the eternal state, but what we receive is informative and more than adequate to the argument of this presentation:

- The account commences with a description of resurrected humanity standing on a renewed earth with distinct topographical features—there is “no more sea” (v. 1).
- The “old order” will pass away, and with it pain, sorrow, death, sin, and sinners: everything will be “made new” (vv. 1, 4–5, 8). The material curse, significantly, will be repealed not by *obliterating* the earth, but by *regenerating* and *renewing* all things (cf. Matt 19:28; Acts 3:21; Col 1:20).
- The first scene features the descent of the “Holy City, the new Jerusalem, *out of* heaven *from* God” (Rev 21:2). These prepositions speak both to origin and also to the continued existence and otherness of their objects. The Scriptures offer no reason to conclude that heaven will be the eternal home or, for that matter, even an occasional destination of redeemed humanity.²⁴
- God will descend to dwell visibly with us where we are (21:3; 22:5),²⁵ further cementing the point made above that we do not properly rise to live with him where he is.
- The city of God, the new Jerusalem, will have objective dimensions (vv. 16–17) and will be constructed from known materials (vv. 18–21). The city will be enormous (about 1400 miles per side, including a vertical dimension); despite its size, however, the base of the city covers only about 1% of the square mileage of the existing earth.
- The population of the new earth will be divided into nations, each with kings (v. 24), facts particularly concerning to SV advocates. It assumes not only national distinctions,²⁶ but personal inequality of rank.²⁷

²⁴Contrarily, Feinberg opines, “As I understand biblical revelation about the new heaven and new earth (there is not a lot of it), we will have equal access to both” (“Traditional Evangelical Protestant Perspective,” 33), but offers no biblical evidence to this effect—and later adds the qualifier “perhaps” to a similar speculation (35). His earlier suggestion that glorified saints might be able to commute between heaven and earth during the millennium is also qualified by the word “presumably” (32).

While I cannot disprove this speculation any more than Feinberg can prove it, I remain concerned that this and other speculations about the eternal state entail something of a softening of the creator-creature distinction in the interest of pitching the spectacular glories of heaven (see esp. below on speculations about the beatific vision). This is why I begin with the locative distinction: “God is in heaven and you are on earth” (Eccl 5:2)—and we have no reason from the salient texts to conclude that this reality will materially change. And even if we are given access to heaven in the eternal state, I am convinced that we will be acutely aware that we are visitors there.

²⁵I assume with the bulk of NC eschatologists that in this moment (1) we shall see God *in Christ*, as he alone of the members of the Trinity is visible (John 1:18)—there is no reason to believe that this persistent barrier between the Creator and creature will end. Nor (2) do I allow that this vision of God will be a moment of *comprehensive intuition* (firstly, because mankind was not created to learn via intuition, and secondly, because the suspension of divine incomprehensibility would erode the divine mystery and effectively ruin the balance of eternity). Finally, (3) as this passage itself demonstrates, this vision of God will not eclipse all else in the eternal experience.

I do not want to diminish that rapturous moment when we see Christ—a moment of incredibly concentrated revelation about God’s person and purposes that will result, no doubt, in an explosion of godliness, affection, and worship. But we cannot so elevate or extend this moment so as to omit other facets of the eternal experience.

²⁶Feinberg, who is modestly NC, asserts confidently that the new earth will not feature “one group sequestered in one place and another group elsewhere,” singling out “ethnicity” as irrelevant (“Traditional Evangelical Protestant Perspective,” 33)—but this denial seems curious in view of the normal definition of a *nation*.

²⁷We shall return to this point under the biblical theological discussion, below, but for now it seems that the

- Of particular interest to us is the fact that the “glory and honor of the nations will come to [the city]” (v. 26), an act reminiscent of and perhaps contiguous with similar events that occurred in the Millennium (Isa 61:6–9). If this is the case, we have reason to assume that the nations will develop industrially and technologically, become prosperous, and then engage in commerce and benevolence.
- We will also eat the fruit of a tree with historical pedigree from the Garden of Eden, and the fruit and even the leaves will “sustain” the nations (22:2). Many see a spiritual/representative dimension to this act, but there is no reason to think for this reason that there is no material aspect to it. We will receive physical sustenance in the eternal state.

At every turn in these verses we are met with physical, material, and sensory data. And there is no textual suggestion that these are strictly metaphorical of spiritual realities.

The Anthropological Argument

The biblical portrayal of man comes to us in neither Aristotelian nor Platonic terms. We are neither purely material nor purely spiritual beings, but a union of the two, with neither “part” eclipsing the other. We “know” by means of observation/acquaintance using physical, sensory organs, and we process the collected data in physical brains. Even what we know instinctively is not ours by mere intuition, but by objective recognition of revelation rationally synthesized and propositionally expressed (e.g., Ps 19:1ff; Rom 2:14). That we are persons means that we have the capacity to subjectivize this data and engage in theorizing/inference, self-determination, trust, affection, and worship. But we can do none of these things incorporeally.²⁸ In Anthony Hoekema’s words,

Man...exists in a state of psychosomatic unity. So we were created, so we are now, and so we shall be after the resurrection of the body. For full redemption must include the redemption of the body (Romans 8:23; I Corinthians 15:12–57), since man is not complete without the body. The glorious future of human beings in Christ includes both the resurrection of the body and a purified, perfected new earth.²⁹

The idea that intuition, telepathy, or ineffable epiphanies are superior to or destined to replace sensory perception, discourse, and propositional expression is wholly unknown in Scripture. On the contrary, the Bible’s teaching on the resurrected state is overwhelmingly sensate. Christ’s own resurrection body (which is paradigmatic of ours—1 John 3:2) was visual (Matt 28:9, 17; John 20:19–20, 26–28, etc.), tangible (Luke 24:39, 46), and propositionally expressive. That our resurrection experience would be less corporeal than that of our Lord’s is surely to be rejected. Rather, his resurrected self stands as sturdy proof that our eternal experience will be somatic: our knowledge/experience of God and all things will occur discursively—not by “spiritual vision.”

reward of rank assigned in the Kingdom (e.g., Luke 19:17, 19, etc.) will persist into the eternal state. This disparity of rank will not cause sorrow or lead to sin (which is hard to conceive in a fallen world), but it *will* exist.

²⁸Not all *scientia* is of a kind. Some knowledge is strictly factual, other knowledge is recognitive, personal, skillful, and so forth. But in all of these, one must begin with the knowledge of at least some facts, always expressible as propositions. One must internalize these facts, surely, in order to cultivate acquaintance, affection, trust, etc., but knowledge always begins with material facts collected in the mind (see, e.g., Greg L. Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic: Readings & Analysis* [Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1998], 158–94).

²⁹*Created in God’s Image*, 218.

The Biblical-Theological Argument

God did *not* create mankind with the express intent of saving them; instead, soteriology emerged in the service of larger purposes detailed at the very outset of the biblical storyline (Gen 1–2). God did, of course, decree from eternity the fall and redemption of mankind and with it the curse and restoration of the whole creation; still, the broadest purpose of God in redemption has always been to reestablish and to perfect that primitive government that began in Eden. It should not surprise us, then, that this is precisely what we see as the climax of the biblical storyline in Revelation 21–22:

The picture is not of 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.³⁰

Stated positively, then, God created mankind expressly to glorify God by exercising dominion over the earth and all that was in it. God intended for Adam and Eve to multiply, to organize into hierarchical socio-political units (families, firstly, then broader collectives), work the land, exploit animals, engage in all the physical sciences, and build societies/cultures, consulting routinely with God who walked in their midst.³¹ This purpose has been occluded by sin, but has never been totally lost.³²

The question under review, then, is what we will be doing forever. I believe that the likeliest scenario will be that we will be perfectly executing God's expectations detailed in Genesis 1–2:

- We will likely spend much time working, not just laboring with our hands, but developing technologically, and cultivating/expressing chaste affections through art.
- We will do all of these things, with great satisfaction, in efficient and regulated solidarity with the rest of God's people.
- We will do all of these things in consultation with the God, who will dwell among us, in ordinary, sensate ways.
- We will engage in much formal worship of God, including but not limited to regular pilgrimage to his capital city with an abundance of offerings.

Many questions remain, the most thorny, perhaps, that of social restructuring and the apparent suspension of procreation—the very first line item in the dominion mandate.³³ This should not

³⁰Moore, "Personal and Cosmic Eschatology," 859. Cf. Vlach, *New Creation Model*, 21–23, 71–71; Snyder, *Salvation Means Creation Healed*, 140.

The prominence of *divine government* in both the beginning and end of the biblical story gives credence, I believe, to the structuring of the Bible according to that theme—the *dispensations* of the government of God (and not chapters of redemptive history). Particularly compelling is the existence of this emphasis (1) before redemption is expressly necessary (Gen 1–2) and (2) long after redemption is complete. This is where Vlach's treatment, with its robust kingdom *mitte* for the biblical storyline, emerges as superior to others favorably cited in this presentation.

³¹Vlach, *New Creation Model*, chaps 6–7.

³²In fact, the otherwise discouraging account of Cain's line (Gen 4) is brightened perceptibly in vv. 20–22, where, despite the horrors introduced by sin, Jabal, Jubal, and Tubal-Cain become masters of animal husbandry, music, and mining/forging.

³³Procreation has long been regarded as a principal way in which we image God, and especially his creative impulse. We know that *marriage* will not be practiced among resurrected saints (Mark 12:25). That this conclusion

distract, however, from the facts in evidence—that the eternal state will be not be one of endlessly transfixed rapture, but one of robust community, industry, economy, art, and the development of every capacity whereby humanity on earth images God.

Conclusion

The shadow of modernist liberalism, with its criticism/dismissal of all that is supernatural, has resulted in a pendulum swing of suspicion toward all that is material, corporeal, and mechanical. The reversion to Platonic Christianity that commenced in earnest with Karl Barth has for this reason proven attractive to many evangelicals. This is unfortunate, as the dark shadow of modernism, long as it is, is positively dwarfed in the whole history of the church by the much longer, darker shadow of Plato that produced first Gnosticism and many errors since.

That evangelicals are beginning freely to embrace Platonism as an alternative way of saving Christianity from its cultured despisers is troubling. The proposals of New Creation Model for biblical theology, hermeneutics, and eschatology are restoring a much needed and distinctively Christian *tertium quid* to the ancient debate between Aristotle and Plato, or perhaps more to the point, between Schleiermacher and Barth.

demands gender equality and/or sterility in all glorified relationships is not necessary and seems even a bit *inhuman*. I am unwilling and unable to speculate further. This topic and the questions raised under the intermediate state represent two of the more important areas for future study in NC eschatology.