

# Death, Resurrection, New Creation

BY DAN EPP-TIESSEN

**Christian discipleship is the lifestyle that celebrates and embodies the new creation that burst into this world when God raised Jesus from the dead. Three recent books explore how the mission of the Church flows out of its future hope.**

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**E**schatology – the study of biblical teachings on the end of time, the return of Christ, and the working out of God’s ultimate purpose for creation – is central to Christian faith. The three books reviewed here highlight its relationship to discipleship and the Church’s mission in the world.

N. T. Wright’s encyclopedic knowledge of the New Testament, engaging writing style, and ability to discern the contemporary relevance of biblical texts, make it a joy to read *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008, 332 pp., \$24.99). The two questions that guide the book – “What are we waiting for? And what are we going to do about it in the meantime?” (p. xi) – illustrate how Wright links Christian convictions about the future and life after death with a vision for the Church.

Wright challenges popular misconceptions about heaven, the soul, and eternal life and the misinterpretation of biblical texts that underlies these misconceptions. Because “we have been buying our mental furniture for so long in Plato’s factory” (p. 153) where humans are dissected into body and soul, Christianity has been distorted into an otherworldly faith that envisions salvation in terms of disembodied souls experiencing a life of bliss in heaven. Such misconceptions undermine the mission of the Church by shifting the focus away from kingdom agenda such as feeding the hungry,

freeing the oppressed, and caring for God's good creation, in favor of saving individual souls.

According to Wright, God's resurrection of Jesus Christ is the proper starting point for all thinking about life after death. As part of God's final intervention to remake the world, an intervention that has begun already in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, God will grant the faithful disciple a new immortal body. Resurrection of the body does not mean that God will somehow need to re-gather our molecules, but the resurrection of Christ constitutes God's promise that our present embodied lives will someday become even more real and solid as they are granted an incorruptible physicality. Resurrection is body- and earth-affirming because the actions we engage in now to build for God's kingdom will be taken into and fulfilled in God's new heaven and earth in ways that we cannot yet imagine.

Resurrection is the defining event of God's new creation, and so the early Christians believed that God would someday do for the cosmos what God had already done for Jesus Christ. Hence, Revelation 21-22 depicts a new heaven and new earth no longer subject to the forces of death and decay. Popular beliefs in a rapture are profoundly unbiblical. The New Testament does not envision Christians being whisked out of a world destined for destruction, but envisions God coming to dwell with God's people on a purified and renewed earth. Prior to resurrection at the last day the faithful dead are with Christ as the Apostle Paul says (Philippians 1:23), or in Paradise as Jesus assures the repentant criminal on the cross (Luke 23:43).

The mission of the Church flows out of its future hope. Because the New Testament is not primarily concerned with individual eternal destiny but with God's plans to rescue and re-create the whole world, the mission of the Church is to participate in the rescue of humanity and creation as we see this rescue and renewal initiated in the ministry of Jesus. "What you *do* in the present – by painting, preaching, singing, sewing, praying, teaching, building hospitals, digging wells, campaigning for justice, writing poems, caring for the needy, loving your neighbor as yourself – *will last into God's future*" (p. 193). Christian discipleship is the lifestyle that celebrates and embodies the new creation that burst into this world when God raised Jesus from the dead.

Wright's book contains a wealth of material for sermons and the various chapters could provide grist for adult groups willing to engage in serious Bible study and theological reflection. I have only two minor critiques of the book. Much of the material has appeared in Wright's other books, but the repeated reminders of this fact become tiresome. Secondly, Wright is sometimes unnecessarily dismissive of theological perspectives with which he disagrees – for instance, when he writes "the worm has turned, theologically speaking, in the last twenty years" on the "liberal optimism in Western society," which has led to "the obvious failure of the equivalent liberal optimism in theology, driven as it was by the spirit of the age" (p. 178).



Donald G. Bloesch's *The Last Things: Resurrection, Judgment, Glory* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004, 336 pp., \$20.00) provides a fitting conclusion to his seven-volume *Christian Foundations* series. The book's chapters follow categories of traditional theological reflection, treating such topics as angels and demons, the day of the Lord, the millennium, the resurrection of the dead, the interim state between death and final resurrection, the communion between saints alive and deceased, predestination, God's plan for the Jews, heaven and hell, and Christian hope.

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One of the great strengths of the book is that Bloesch begins discussion of each topic with attention to a variety of biblical texts. Then he draws on the insights of Christian thinkers from the Church Fathers to the present, including evangelical, mainline Prot-

estant, Roman Catholic, Reformed, and Orthodox. As a result the reader acquires understanding and respect for the breadth of Christian thinking on any particular topic as well as insight into how such diversity developed.

One chapter begins by discussing biblical texts that look forward to the arrival of God's earthly kingdom, the roots of all millennial thinking. This leads into helpful summaries of premillennialism, dispensationalism, amillennialism, postmillennialism, and symbolic interpretations of the millennium. Bloesch observes that one of the reasons for such diversity of opinions is that far too often Christians, especially Evangelicals, literalize and therefore misunderstand the figurative language of the Bible. Bloesch suggests that the millennium of Revelation 20 is "a symbol of the earth in a stage of transition from history to eternity. It is a symbol of the world in the process of being transfigured by the glory of God" (p. 111). Bloesch's understanding of the millennium is consistent with his overall realized and futurist eschatology. The millennium is God's kingdom which burst into history through the ministry of Jesus and continues to advance despite constant opposition from the principalities and powers, until it will be fulfilled at Christ's second coming. Hence, the mandate of Christians is not to flee this world but to bring it into subjection to the advancing kingdom of Christ.

Like Wright, Bloesch espouses a thoroughly body- and earth-affirming eschatology. When we die nothing significant about our lives will be lost. There will be no rapture that allows the faithful to escape this world while God trashes it. The parousia involves the earthly appearance of Christ on the day of the Lord when God will renew all of creation and grant the faithful renewed bodies.

Bloesch deliberately tackles issues – like the communion of saints, for example – generally generally neglected by evangelical theologians. Common faith and the atoning work of Christ create a mystic communion between Christians and the saints in paradise who point us to Christ. Bloesch even encourages prayers for the ongoing spiritual growth of these saints, and suggests that they minister to those left on earth.

Bloesch agrees with Wright that at death the faithful enter an interim stage in God's presence called Paradise, a place of superabundant life, although he claims that even this stage involves some type of embodied existence. The vast number of people who have not embraced Christ remain in an interim state, described in Scripture as sheol-hades or the nether world of spirits, awaiting final judgment at the return of Christ.

Despite the many strengths and insights of this book, it has one significant weakness. Bloesch frequently imports his own theology into biblical texts, thereby distorting their meaning. He perpetuates the common misconception that Isaiah 14:12-15 and Ezekiel 28:14-15 describe the fall of evil angels prior to creation (p. 48), when these texts are actually part of taunt songs lampooning foreign kings (see Isaiah 14:4; Ezekiel 28:12). He claims that God's first victory over Satan's kingdom of darkness occurred already in Genesis 1:4 with the separation of light and darkness (p. 53). This interpretation distorts the thought world of Genesis 1 and the entire Old Testament, neither of which ever mention a kingdom of Satan. From an evangelical committed to the authority of Scripture one would hope for more careful use of Scripture.



The brilliant insights of Jürgen Moltmann make his *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*, translated by Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, paperback edition 2004, 390 pp., \$.25.00) as relevant today as when the hardcover edition appeared in 1996. According to Moltmann, Christianity is entirely eschatological because God is by definition a God who is coming. The eschaton is God's coming and arrival, and because the resurrection of Christ and the outpouring of the Spirit already make this future proleptically present, or present through anticipation, God's coming kingdom creates new possibilities for faithful life in the present.

Like Wright and Bloesch, Moltmann blames Platonic dualism for undermining a robust understanding of the resurrection. Hope for resurrection empowers Christians for discipleship and resistance to evil powers because it is body- and earth-affirming, in contrast to a Gnostic denigration of the body and the physical world that is the logical consequence of a Platonic dualism that emphasises the immortal soul's destiny to escape the shackles of its earthly body. Because Christians live in fellowship with Christ their earthly lives are already interpenetrated and empowered by the eternal life

that flows from the resurrection of Christ. After death Christians are safe in Christ as they await the corporate resurrection at God's final coming when all death will be banished.

Moltmann is appreciative of biblical apocalyptic which he views as subversive literature intended to empower resistance to oppressive imperial forces. One of the most insightful sections of the book analyses how Constantinianism – the form of Christianity that developed when Roman Emperor Constantine (272-337) made it the official religion – domesticated the coming apocalyptic reign of God that shatters evil empires, and identified God's kingdom with the Roman Empire, and after the fall of Rome with the institutional Church. Because the Church abandoned its earlier hope for the coming of Christ's kingdom in history, its eschatology shrivelled into personal hope that the immortal soul would go to heaven or personal fear that it would face the wrath of God's judgment. "Without millenarian hope, the Christian ethic of resistance and the consistent discipleship of Christ lose their most powerful motivation," Moltmann claims. "Without the expectation of an alternative kingdom of Christ, the community of Christ loses its character as a 'contrast community' to society" (p. 201).

Because the coming God who redeems is the Creator, and because there is no human life detached from nature and a physical body, there is no redemption for humanity apart from redemption of nature and a change in the cosmic conditions of life. God's new heaven and new earth will involve radical transformation, but in such a way that nothing from the old creation will be lost, only brought back in new form.

Moltmann's book is full of deep insights profoundly relevant for the life of the Church, but it is not for the faint of heart. Discussions of the works of philosophers and theologians provide excellent background to Moltmann's own views, but pose a challenge for readers to understand. Like too many academic theologians, Moltmann writes in a style that will appeal mostly to specialists, and few ordinary readers will possess enough determination to wade through the dense prose and absorb the book's important insights.



On most topics there is an amazing coherence of opinion among the three authors, with the exception of the final judgment. Wright and Bloesch assert that despite the enormity of divine grace, God's abhorrence of evil and the horrendous suffering that humans inflict on each other demand that persons who reject the offer of salvation experience the consequences of their deliberate alienation from God. Bloesch claims that God's grace continues to operate beyond the grave and offers departed sinners opportunities for healing and repentance, but final judgment and hell are real. While hell will be a place of alienation from God's new creation, it will not be a place of retributive torture at the hands of a vindictive God. In the end only one

kingdom will remain standing, the kingdom of Christ, and therefore the suffering of hell will be curative and may even restore some sinners to salvation.

Moltmann notes that the Bible contains both passages suggesting a universal salvation and texts emphasizing judgment of the wicked, and so our convictions must be based on other than purely scriptural grounds. He argues that God's grace is more powerful than human sin and that as final judge, Jesus will judge in keeping with the same love for enemies he demonstrated in his earthy ministry. Because the ultimate purpose of the last judgment is to put things right and establish the redeeming reign of God, this judgment will be a joyous affair that condemns and annihilates all evil, but ultimately heals and liberates even the worst of sinners. Not only will the world's murderers and oppressors finally fail to triumph over their victims, but in eternity they cannot even remain the murderers of their victims (p. 255).



**DAN EPP-TIESEN**

*is Associate Professor of Bible at Canadian Mennonite University in  
Winnipeg, Manitoba.*