GROWTH AND WORK IN THE NEW CREATION?: DIVERSE VISIONS OF HUMAN FLOURISHING WITHIN A DYNAMIC ESCHATOLOGY

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INTRODUCTION

The Christian vision for eternal life in the new creation was once shaped primarily by a fear of material change. The body would be resurrected but not revivified: it was idealised but immutably so, suspended in a worshipful stasis. This vision is far distant from more modern conceptions of human flourishing that embrace flux, development, and activity. If human flourishing in pre-resurrection life entails aspects of growth and the outworking of vocation in the direction of human *telos*, what might this mean for post-resurrection flourishing in the new creation? This paper will explore the possibility of ongoing transformation within a dynamic eschatology through the lenses of work, disability, and developmental processes, using these as means to provoke reflection on the nature of human flourishing. It is our visions of new creation that expose what we really think about what it means to be human, to fulfill our *telos*, and to flourish.

Will we be resurrected in a body of the same age at which we died? It seems that this was the case for Christ, so perhaps it will also be for us. Augustine and many others suggested that regardless of our age at death, we will be resurrected in a body of the same age as Christ, that is around the age of thirty-three.[1] This conclusion is based on the understanding that Christ's resurrection body is the model for ours,[2] and also the assumption that this age represents the physical peak of the human lifespan—youthfulness before this point entails immaturity, and ageing beyond it involves decay. This would require that those more senior would be rewound somehow, though at least to an age which they had already experienced. It is more problematic to imagine that an infant or child is fast-forwarded to adulthood, skipping over adolescence and young adulthood, stages which are particularly influential in the personal formation of identity.[3] A disruption like this would produce a profound sense of dislocation to the continuing sense of

[1] This suggestion emerges repeatedly in the writings of Augustine (*De Civitate Dei* 22.14-15), Peter Lombard, Aquinas, and John Dunton. See Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 98, 122; Fernando Vidal, "Brains, Bodies, Selves, and Science: Anthropologies of Identity and the Resurrection of the Body," *Critical Inquiry* 28:4 (2002): 944; Lucia Dacome, "Resurrecting by Numbers in Eighteenth-Century England," *Past & Present* 193 (2006): 101.

[2] Both Augustine and Lombard in part base this conclusion on a confused reading of Ephesians 4:13 where we shall all attain to "the age of the fullness of Christ." Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* 22.15. Bynum, *Resurrection of the Body*, 98.

[3] Here we are working with an account of identity that encompasses both our theological identity in Christ and the ongoing formation of identity by the self and her experiences and relations.

self. It seems more likely that children will be raised as children. While Isaiah 11:6-8 paints an admittedly poetic picture of the new creation, it does include children of various ages.

Of course, these are speculative questions. We cannot think of post-resurrection life in pre-resurrection temporal terms; it is not just one point in our personal timeline that is picked out for continuation in eternal life, but the whole story is gathered up into God's presence. We also need to recognise the limitations of our own imaginations here. Yet despite these caveats, digging into our intuitive imaginings about the nature of post-resurrection life can be a helpful way to uncover our assumptions about what it means to be truly human and to flourish. Examining these responses helps us to get at our deeply-held beliefs about these core issues that shape so much of our present being in the world – both individually and communally.

If we come back to the question of our age in the new creation, we can critique the assumption beneath Augustine's claim that peak physical functioning is necessary for flourishing in the new creation. Rather, we would assert that the fullness of human life does not depend on us being at our best—however this is culturally described—but on the gracious action of God to transform the physical and social creation. In addition, it is quite possible that the answer need not be fixed or uniform. A dynamic eschatology would allow for human persons to be raised to life at a range of different ages, and to continue to grow and develop. Amos Yong suggests that by the work of the Spirit we may grow and develop in our post-resurrection lives just as much as we do pre-resurrection.[4] Though an infant is raised as an infant, she need not remain one eternally, but could continue to grow and develop in post-resurrection life, possibly within the same family unit, protecting relational continuity. In a similar way the resurrection bodies of octogenarians could experience "even further maturation and growth, relative to the infinite glory of God as redeemer."[5]

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENTS

Early discussions of the nature of the resurrection body are dominated by the fear of material change (whether development or decay) and even of organic materiality itself, that was shaped by influences from Greek Platonic thinking.[6] The early theologians used a variety of inorganic metaphors to illustrate resurrection as the reassembly of parts: a statue being reforged, a vessel remoulded without flaws, or a mosaic reassembled by a jeweller.[7] The hope is that however fragmented or scattered one's corpse might be, at the resurrection God will re-collect the body's particles and reassemble them into a new body.[8] But

[4] Amos Yong, "Disability Theology of the Resurrection: Persisting Questions and Additional Considerations–a Response to Ryan Mullins," *Ars Disputandi* 12:1 (2012): 6-7.
[5] Yong, "Disability Theology of the Resurrection," 6.
[6] Bynum, *Resurrection of the Body*, 96-7, 105, 13-14.
[7] See, for example, Justin, *De Resurrectione* 6.
[8] Bynum, *Resurrection of the Body*, 94-104.

by the time of Augustine, this reassembly is a side item to his central hope: that God will also add incorruptibility and a glorified beauty to the body. "Beauty" is defined by Augustine's culturally-bound aesthetic ideal: white, slim (but not too skinny), and for men, bearded.[9] Onwards through the Middle Ages, even though the body is resurrected it is not revivified: resurrection bodies are sanitised and hardened, sterile and immutable, almost crystalline.[10] Not much at all like the human bodies we now experience, which are forever changing.

The prospect that life in the new creation will also involve change is the foundation for a dynamic eschatology. Amos Yong has argued for this everlasting, ongoing transformation in what he calls "the eschatological long run" rather than an "eternal once-and-for-all" transformation.[11] That is, by the work of the Spirit we may grow and develop in our post-resurrection lives just as much as we do pre-resurrection.[12] This is a dynamic eschatology in which all persons experience "salvation as eternal transformation."[13]

Here Yong is building on Gregory of Nyssa's notion of *epectasis*, in which the soul perpetually ascends into the unlimited infinity of God.[14] This ceaseless progress entails perfection after perfection into the truth, beauty, knowledge, and love of God. It is a kind of unceasing evolution into eternal happiness—but it is largely disembodied. It is likely most helpful for us to take some elements of Gregory's perpetual transformative ascent, but work them out in reference to our nature as integrated embodied beings, so that we might look forward to ongoing growth, development, and activity in the eschaton. This is a more flexible account of the resurrection body which resists the Platonic fear of flux, while also allowing for a more dynamic understanding of what eternal life entails. Instead of being stuck in perfected crystalline form, post-resurrection persons are engaged in vigorous life and Edenic activity.

DISABILITY AND A DYNAMIC ESCHATOLOGY

James Barton Gould suggests that the eschatological growth of resurrected infants could be paralleled by the ongoing development of individuals with developmental delays who were "paused" as it were at the

[9] Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* 22.19.
[10] Nathan Hitchcock, *Karl Barth and the Resurrection of the Flesh: The Loss of the Body in Participatory Eschatology* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2013), 12.
[11] Amos Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimagining Disability in Late Modernity* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007), 288. See Amos Yong, "Disability, the Human Condition, and the Spirit of the Eschatological Long Run: Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Disability," *Journal of Religion, Disability and Health* 11:1 (2007): 5-25.
[12] Yong, "Disability Theology of the Resurrection," 6-7.
[13] Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 281.
[14] Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 274-78. "In sum, for Gregory, the afterlife is an unending journey of the individual as he or she is transformed from perfection to perfection into the glorious knowledge, beauty, truth, and love of God." Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 277. See J. Warren Smith, "Becoming Men, Not Stones: Epektasis in Gregory of Nyssa's Homilies on the Song of Songs," in *Gregory of Nyssa: In Canticum Canticorum*, ed. Giulio Maspero, et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 340-59; Liviu Petcu, "The Doctrine of Epektasis: One of the Major Contributions of Saint Gregory of Nyssa to the History of Thinking," *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia* 73:2 (2017): 771-82.

level of intellectual disability in pre-resurrection life.[15] The disabled person would not be healed suddenly, but by a gradual process in the eschaton, and so, "In heaven disabilities are retained in the short run but eliminated in the long run."[16] However, here Gould is only referring to intellectual disabilities, particularly developmental delays, as he goes on to argue that physical disabilities must be healed instantaneously.[17]

While these prospects of development as the progressive healing of impairment are somewhat appealing, we dispute the ableist assumption that the growth and change must occur within the domain of the person's diverse embodiment.[18] The orientation of eschatological development need not be in the direction of a "normal" body or mind. The *telos* of the human person is the image of Christ, not a normal human body with normal physical and intellectual capacities. The process of theosis that moves us toward the *telos* of human life, is, as Myk Habets writes, "about becoming more fully human than we ever dreamed possible."[19] But, contra Habets, we argue that being conformed to the image of Christ does not necessarily entail the amelioration of either intellectual or physical disability,[20] because the image of Christ is not primarily located in superior intellectual or physical capacity. Similarly, theosis in a communal sense, is not achieved by a collective increase in intelligence or in physical capacities; it is an increase in love, care, wisdom, and hospitality that cause us to image his Body. The presence of limitation and weakness within a community fosters the communal imaging of Christ in a way that an increase in the physical and intellectual brilliance of its members never could.[21]

WORK AND VOCATION IN THE NEW CREATION

Whilst the biblical vision of new creation is firmly grounded in bodily resurrection, contemporary conceptions of new creation are frequently reduced to vague, ethereal notions of an immaterial heaven or

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[15] James Barton Gould, "The Hope of Heavenly Healing of Disability Part 2: Philosophical Issues," *Journal of Disability and Religion* 21:1 (2017): 112-13.

[16] Gould, "Hope of Heavenly Healing Part 2," 113. He compares this to the elimination of sinful traits, which, he argues, must also be through a gradual process of sanctification in parallel with the notion of purgatory.

[17] He argues this with reference to the instantaneous healings of Jesus in the gospels, as well as Paul's assertion that "we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye" (1 Cor 15:51–52). Gould, "Hope of Heavenly Healing Part 2," 113-14.

[18] Here we distinguish "diverse embodiment" as the properties of a person's body and mind that produce the experience of "impairment" as it interacts with the physical world of the old creation (producing for example pain, limited functionality, or nonstandard modes of communication), and the experience of "disability" as it interacts with the social world of the old creation (producing stigma, discrimination, and limited possibilities for communication, community, and vocation). See S. J. Immanuel Koks, "Hope in the 'Mountain Manifesto': The Beatitudes' Alternative to the Social Model's Hope," in *Theology and the Experience of Disability: Interdisciplinary Perspectives from Voices Down Under*, eds. Andrew Picard and Myk Habets (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 235-49.

[19] Myk Habets, "Disability and Divinization: Eschatological Parables and Allegations," in *Theology and the Experience of Disability: Interdisciplinary Perspectives from Voices Down Under*, eds. Andrew Picard and Myk Habets (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 227.

[20] Habets continues, this must entail that "Those with severe mental disabilities will be healed and will find themselves able to function like Christ, as will the rest of us." Habets, "Disability and Divinization: Eschatological Parables and Allegations," 227.

[21] Richard Cross, "Disability, Impairment, and Some Medieval Accounts of the Incarnation: Suggestions for a Theology of Personhood," *Modern Theology* 27:4 (2011): 639-58.

gnostic visions of a life freed from creaturely constraints. While many Christians affirm ideas of new creation and the resurrection of the body, "this typically stands in some tension with the idea of an atemporal, immaterial realm."[22] A dissonance exists between Christian affirmations of a resurrected life with Christ and the contemporary visions of new creation found in Christian hymns, literature, and culture. Wright identifies that many popular hymns and funeral prayers are filled with Platonism and at times, even gnostic notions of heaven as they speak of leaving this world behind.[23]

Two common themes emerge in contemporary understandings of this heavenly life: a theocentric view of "an unending worship service of perpetual praise in God's immediate presence"[24] and an anthropocentric vision typified by reunion with friends and family and perfect community with God and others.[25] Work and culture are left behind, along with our old, broken bodies in the material world, as we embrace heaven. But human identity does not exist in isolation from activity. The self does not exist alone, but in relation to its context and "can never be described without reference to those around it."[26] Identity is constructed within context—it is our cultures, our interests, our relationships, and our communities that fundamentally shape who we are and how we live. Identity is shaped not only by physical embodiment, but by history, by behaviour, and by relationality. Human identity is functional and relational. We are shaped by our contexts, and we shape our contexts in return. Davis argues that culture is so deeply embedded in human identity that it cannot be divorced from it without making us less human.[27] Clifford Geertz takes this further, arguing that humans without culture would cease to be human at all.[28] To strip away work, culture and activity in new creation would strip away this diversity. To do so would be to make us less human, not more so.

The dismissal of work and culture in new creation stems more from Platonic philosophy than Christian theology.[29] Neo-platonism upholds leisure as the ultimate goal in life; with work only a necessary evil.[30] In Greek, work was described as *ergon* or *ponos,* burden or toil.[31] To escape the burden of work in return for endless leisure seems inviting. As McDannell and Lang note, anthropocentric visions of new creation are favored by those from more optimistic social conditions.[32] However, burden and toil are not

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[22] J. Richard Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 23.
[23] N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 20-25.
[24] Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth*, 23.
[25] John Jefferson Davis, "Will There Be New Work in the New Creation?" *Evangelical Review of Theology* 31:3 (2007): 258; Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang, *Heaven: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 355-56.
[26] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989), 35.
[27] Davis, "Will There Be New Work?," 264.
[28] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1973), 49. Cited in Davis, "Will There Be New Work?," 264.
[29] Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 26.
[30] R. Paul Stevens, *The Other Six Days: Vocation, Work and Ministry in Biblical Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000), 111.
[31] Stevens, *The Other Six Days*, 111.
[32] McDannell and Lang, *Heaven: A History*, 353-54. Cited in Davis, "Will There Be New Work?," 258.

fundamental to work itself, but rather they are a symptom of fallen work. Sin has severed humanity's work from its original foundation of worship. In the Garden of Eden, God's people were commissioned as image-bearers and priests, to participate in God's work on earth and bear his image in their activity. As Wright states, sin is as much "a vocational failure as it is a moral failure."[33] It is in Genesis 3, the Fall, that work is first described as painful and burdensome. While work still bears fruit, Timothy Keller describes work as "often profoundly frustrating, never as fruitful as we want, and often a complete failure."[34] Fallen work frequently exploits relationships, serves selfish ends, and misdirects worship, and it is often difficult and exhausting. Given the profound perversion of work's true purpose in our world today, frequently Christian understandings of new creation have adopted a Platonic view and do not feature work at all. The material is rejected as sinful and thus, work and activity, material in nature, are rejected also. In turn, this affects the way we live now, and Christian attitudes to work are, as Armand Larive states "plagued by a persistent hesitancy to have God involved in the things of this earth."[35] However, humanity is commissioned to work before the fall and so it would be inconsistent to assume humanity's final restoration is to a disembodied, immaterial realm. As Wright states, God "did not want to rescue humans *from* creation," rather, in the eschaton, humanity is restored to their vocational role in creation.[36]

In contrast to an immaterial realm, Isaiah prophesies a vision of new creation that is alive with activity: people build houses, plant vineyards, and enjoy the work of their hands.[37] Revelation 21 speaks of a city with gates that never shut, filled with the kings of the earth bringing in the honour and glory of the nations. Here humanity in their redeemed state are not less human; but transformed into truly human, with Christ as their paradigm. Redeemed humanity is not only restored to relationship with God and each other but restored also to their vocation—to live as image-bearers of God, participating in his work. This participation in kingdom community—growing, developing, creating, and shaping the world around them—is an essential component of humanness. Without vocation and mission, humanity is only a shadow of who they were created to be.

The Gospel accounts of the resurrected Christ provide insight on the nature of eschatologically redeemed creation. The risen Jesus demonstrated both continuity and discontinuity in his resurrected body. He walks with two followers on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35), he eats on the beach with his disciples (John 21), and he invites Thomas to touch his scars (John 20:24-29).[38] Yet he is not immediately recognized by his disciples or others and displays other characteristics not possible in his earthly life. David H. Kelsey

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[33] N.T. Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began: Reconsidering the Meaning of Jesus's Crucifixion* (New York: Harper One, 2016), 103.
[34] Timothy Keller and Katherine Leary Alsdorf, *Every Good Endeavour: Connecting Your Work to God's Plan for the World* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2012), 95.
[35] Armand E. Larive, *After Sunday: A Theology of Work* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 26.
[36] Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 141.
[37] For an analysis of Isaiah's vision of New Jerusalem, see Richard J. Mouw, *When the Kings Come Marching In: Isaiah and the New Jerusalem* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002).
[38] David H. Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology* (vol. 1; Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 1:507.

argues that it was "familiar intentional bodily actions that were characteristically and peculiarly his that enable his disciples to identify him as the friend who had been crucified, had died, and was buried."[39] Christ's activity is a fundamental expression and marker of his identity. Similarly, we can expect at least some continuity of our identity-forming human activity, in a redeemed form, in new creation.

Kelsey argues that in new creation, humanity remains creaturely, finite in mutual limitation in community with others, and finite in their complete dependence upon God. He also states that social relationships remain a significant factor in constituting personal identity in new creation—in their contexts.[40] It is these features—total dependence on God; interdependence with others; identity formation within community and context; and continuing growth and development—that are part of what fundamentally makes us human. As Davis argues, God *could* provide for all human needs instantly in new creation, but just as in the Garden of Eden, he chooses to mediate this through human interdependence and activity, as we are invited to co-labor with Christ and participate in his work.[41]

This in turn, is an act of worship. In the creation story, we are introduced to a God at work, creating, shaping, and breathing life and *shalom* into earth and society. Humanity is created in the image of God and commissioned for vocation. Humanity's activity is an act of worship to God, performed in community and in dependence upon God and others. This in turn opens new possibilities for work in new creation. Freed from the fallen effects of sin upon human activity, what could continuing development and growth look like in redeemed human activity? What possibilities could this create for the arts, sciences, business, humanities, and all of society as human beings offer up their creative gifts in an offering of worship and a contribution to joy and community, and continue to develop these over time?

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Here we are clearly within the realm of speculation, but it is theologically informed and grounded—and this is speculation that has a firm purpose, in that exploring these intuitions and imaginings helps us to uncover, and at times expose, our deeply held beliefs about what it means to be human and to flourish. Human activity, lived out in the context of bodily existence, within limitations and in total dependence on God and interdependence with others, is a defining component of flourishing human existence. In the new creation to come, we will be defined not just by who we are but by how we live, as we live out our salvation and participate with God in the work of his kingdom. This rich vision of eternity in turn affects our lives today and gives purpose and hope to our work, as we bring heaven to earth here and now, living out our salvation in the already-not yet kingdom. A picture of static flawless human persons—all uniformly

[39] Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, 1:507.
[40] Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, 1:508.
[41] Davis, "Will There Be New Work?," 262.

beautiful and able-bodied, preserved at age 33—engaged in endless harp-playing and singing is diminished and distorted away from the rounded and rich picture of human flourishing that Scripture paints for us.

The suggestion of ongoing transformation and activity within a dynamic eschatology allows so much more room for the ongoing expression of the abundant creativity that characterises our God. There will of course be vast discontinuities between our current experience of human life and that to come in the new creation, but there will be continuity also—continuity that preserves our personal identity and that preserves the essential nature of human flourishing, undistorted by sin. It is hard to know how much our understanding of what it means to be human is embedded in our context in the old creation—limiting our eschatological imaginations. Our context will change as the old order of things passes away (Rev 21:4), and this will affect our experience of human life. But one defining characteristic of humans is our ability to adapt to different niches. Any transformation of our context into new creation surely must retain our essential humanness, that we might flourish as was always intended.