

The Cosmic Shock Wave: Christ's Resurrection and the Dawn of the New Creation

Introduction

How does your heart respond to good theology?

In his introduction to Athanasius's *On the Incarnation*, C.S. Lewis writes "I believe that many who find that 'nothing happens' when they sit down, or kneel down, to a book of devotion, would find that the heart sings unbidden while they are working their way through a tough bit of theology with a pipe in their teeth and a pencil in their hand."

I agree. And in the days before Easter I'm setting aside some time to focus on one of the many implications of Christ's resurrection: *how the resurrection marks the dawning of the New Creation*.

The resurrection makes it possible for the believer to be a new creation (2 Cor 5:17). But the resurrection of Christ is also inaugurates something much broader—the re-creation of the universe. At least this is the conclusion of a number of theologians. As one author puts it, "with the resurrection itself a shock wave has gone through the entire cosmos: the new creation has been born." Of course we await the return of Christ for the coming of the new heaven and the new earth. But the resurrection marks the beginning—the dawn—of this new creation.

As I prepare my heart for the Savior's resurrection, I want to study this shock wave that reverberates through the cosmos. And to help I've compiled a collection of quotes that I plan to study alongside my open Bible. What follows are my notes for reflection.

Two caveats should be mentioned here.

First, this theme of the resurrection and the dawning of the new creation is but one of many implications of Christ's glorious resurrection. I've chosen to focus in on this theme for my personal study but it's not the only significant effect, or even the most exegetically prominent effect, of Christ's resurrection. There are many.

Second, I have chosen to cite the writings of N.T. Wright. I don't endorse Wright, and I don't share the social implications that he draws from this doctrine. The excerpts I have cited are largely drawn from his exegetical explanations of biblical texts. Where Wright is most reliable, he is also most redundant. As you will see, some of Wright's most compelling themes on the resurrection and the new creation are topics that reformed theologians like Vos and Ridderbos articulated several decades earlier.

My notes and quotes follow this rough outline:

1. Christ as the “Firstborn” and “Firstfruits” in Colossians 1 and 1 Corinthians 15
2. In 1 Corinthians 15:35–49
3. In the two Adams of 1 Corinthians 15:20–23 and 42–49
4. In Ephesians 1:15–23
5. In Colossians 1:15–20
6. In Revelation 3:14
7. In Revelation 21
8. In the practice of the Lord’s Day
9. Summary Quotes

With a pipe in my teeth and a pencil in my hand, this is the tough bit of theology that I will meditate on over the next week. As I do, I pray that my heart will sing unbidden for the Savior, whose return will bring the new heaven and the new earth—a new creation that was inaugurated on Easter Sunday.

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(1) Christ as the “Firstborn” and “Firstfruits” in Colossians 1:18 and 1 Corinthians 15:20–23.

- Thiselton, *1 Corinthians*, 1229: “...unlike, e.g., the ‘raising’ of Lazarus in John 11, the resurrection of Jesus was not to restore life in the conditions of continuing earthly existence (and eventual death) but to initiate a transformed mode of existence as the firstfruits (v. 20) of the eschatological new creation.”
- Ridderbos, *Paul*, 56: “As the Firstborn among the many ... Christ not only occupies a special place and dignity, but he also goes before them, he opens up the way for them, he joins their future to his own. ... In him the resurrection of the dead dawns, his resurrection represents the commencement of the new world of God.”
- Moo, online article: “Jesus’ resurrection is the ‘first fruits,’ the down payment and guarantee of the future and eternal material existence not only of Christians, but also, as Rev. 3:14 perhaps hints, of the entire cosmos.”
- *Commentary on the NT Use of the OT*, 845: On Colossians 1:15: “Since Christ is the ‘firstborn’ of the new creation, those who identify with him also become subsequently born into the beginning of the new creation. They have been born through being raised from spiritual death to spiritual life by means of being identified with Christ’s own resurrection (2:12–13). In 3:9–10 Paul explains that this means that they have ‘laid aside the old man’ (i.e. their identification with the old Adam and the fallen, dead world) and ‘have put on the new man’ (i.e., have become identified with the last Adam and new creation. ... believers are the created progeny of the last Adam, who are beginning to fulfill in him the mandate given to the first Adam. The Gen. 1:28 language applied by Paul to them in 1:6, 9–10 indicates that they are a part of the inaugurated new creation and are beginning to fulfill in Christ what has been left unfulfilled in the primordial mandate throughout the ages.”

(2) In 1 Corinthians 15:35–49. Note Paul’s connection between the resurrection and the creation account in Genesis 1–2.

- Thiselton, *1 Corinthians*, 1195: “If creation itself is God’s gift, the new creation which begins with Christ’s resurrection and promises the resurrection of believers is no less so.”
- Wright, *Resurrection*: “A glance through Genesis 1–2 reveals how many of its major themes are alluded to in Paul’s present argument. The creator God made the heavens and the earth, and filled both with his creatures; Paul mentions these two categories in verse 40, and uses a discussion of them to distinguish the first Adam from the final one. The powerful divine wind, or spirit, moved over the waters, and the divine breath or spirit also animated Adam and Eve; the life-giving activity of both the creator and Jesus is seen by Paul in terms of the *pneuma*, the spirit, wind or breath (verses 44–6). The creator made the lights in heaven, which Paul mentions in verse 41. He created plants bearing fruit containing seed, so that more plants could be produced; Paul makes this a major theme in verses 36–8, and the draws on the language of ‘sowing’ in verses 42–4. The creator made every kind of bird, animal and fish; Paul brings them, too, into his argument (verses 39–40). At the climax of Genesis 1, the creator made human beings in his own image, to have dominion over the rest of creation, and in Genesis 2 he entrusted Adam in particular with responsibility for naming the animals; for Paul, too, the climax of the story is the recreation of humankind through the life-giving activity of the final Adam, whose image will be borne by all who belong to him. This is indeed a deliberate and careful theology of a new Genesis, a creation renewed.”

(3) In the two Adams of 1 Corinthians 15:20–23 and 42–49.

- Ridderbos, *Paul*, 56–57: “Paul speaks in 1 Corinthians 15:45ff of Adam as ‘the first man,’ and of Christ as ‘the last Adam,’ the ‘second man.’ The expression ‘the last Adam’ is again highly typical of the eschatological character of Paul’s preaching: Christ is thereby designated as the Inaugurator of the new humanity.”
- *TDNT*, 2:542: “The first and the second Adam are progenitors initiating two races of men. Each implies a whole world, an order of life or death. Each includes his adherents in and under himself. The NT view is distinguished from oriental speculations about the first man, even in their Jewish form, by the two facts, first, that it never equates the first Adam and the Redeemer, but sees them as two opposite poles, and secondly, that it thinks of the Author of the second creation as historically present, so that this new creation has already been inaugurated.”

(4) In Ephesians 1:15-23. Note especially verse 20.

- O'Brien, *Ephesians*, 139: "J. A. Fitzmyer appropriately remarks that this resurrection power 'emanates from the Father, raises Jesus from the dead at the resurrection, endows him with a new vitality, and finally proceeds from him as the life-giving, vitalizing force of the 'new creation' and of the new life that Christians in union with Christ experience and live.'"
- Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:473–474: "It is the crucified but also the resurrected and exalted Christ whom the apostles proclaim. From the vantage point of the exaltation of Christ, they view and describe his early life, suffering, and death. For the work he now carries out as the exalted mediator, he laid the foundations in his cross. In his battle with sin, the world, and Satan, the cross has been his only weapon. By the cross he triumphed in the sphere of justice over all powers that are hostile to God. But in the state of exaltation, consequently, he has also been given the divine right, the divine appointment, the royal power and prerogatives to carry out the work of re-creation in full, to conquer all his enemies, to save all those who have been given him, and to perfect the entire kingdom of God."

(5) In Colossians 1:15–20. Note the connection between creation (v. 15) and resurrection in (v. 18).

- Moo, *Colossians*, 138: "Because God in all 'his fullness' is present in Christ (v. 19), his death (v. 20) and resurrection (v. 18) have the power to initiate ('beginning,' 'firstborn' in v. 18) a new creation ('the body, the church,' v. 18). This new creation work rests on the universal reconciling, or 'peacemaking' power of the cross of Christ. It is God's intention to bring 'peace' to his fallen and fractured universe, to bring all things again into subjection to his sovereignty, to bring all his enemies into subjection. This intention will be finally accomplished only when Christ returns in glory to establish the kingdom in its final form (cf. 1:22b; 3:4)."
- Ridderbos, *Paul*, 85-86: "What we meet with in this 'double' Adamitic significance of Christ (as the Firstborn of every creature and as the last Adam) is not the conjoining of two interpretations of Genesis 1–3 that do not go together, but rather Paul's vision of the all-encompassing significance of the salvation that has appeared in Christ. One is disposed to think here of the describing of ever greater circles around one center and starting point. This latter is situated in the all-controlling fact of Christ's death and resurrection. It is there that the new creation comes to light, Christ appears as the Firstborn from the dead and the Inaugurator of the new humanity. It is from thence that the redemptive significance of Christ's advent and work is made transparent, first in his human existence before and after the resurrection (flesh and Spirit); then even in his pre-existence as the Son of God sent for this task of second man; and finally in his significance as encompassing the whole of creation and history. The ultimate objective of God's redemptive work brings us back to the Beginning. What was lost in the first Adam is regained in the second in a much more glorious way. For the second Adam is the Son of God. And the glory that Adam as the Image of God and Firstborn of every

creature was permitted to possess was only a reflection of Christ's being in the form of God. Thus Christ's exaltation as the second Adam refers back to the beginning of all things, makes him known as the one who from the very outset, in a much more glorious sense than the first Adam, was the Image of God and the Firstborn of every creature. So the fundamental structures and implications of Paul's eschatological preaching of Christ are exposed to view. The new creation that has broken through with Christ's resurrection takes the place of the first creation of which Adam was the representative. It is, however, as much more glorious than the first as the second man, both in virtue of his origin and of his destiny, was superior to the first. In the description of this superiority of the second man in the categories that have been derived from the significance of the first man Paul comes to the full explication of the salvation that has appeared in Christ. In that sense one could call Colossians 1:15–20 the keystone of Paul's Christology; with the explicit addition, however, that it was not theological speculation, but pastoral care for the church and the warding off of what was alleged against the all-embracing significance of the salvation that has been manifested in Christ, that brought the apostle to this confession."

- *Commentary on the NT Use of the OT*, 854: "As widely recognized, while 1:15–17 refers to Christ's sovereignty over the first creation, 1:18–20 affirms his sovereign position in the second, new creation that has been launched. In this respect, the identical title of 'firstborn' is re-applied in order again to indicate Christ's rule over the new order by virtue of his resurrection from the dead (1:18c). His priority in the new creation entails his kingship over it."
- *Wright, Resurrection*: "The basis of the sequence of thought is the unveiling of the Messiah as the image of the creator God, the 'firstborn' both of creation and then of the new creation. Colossians 1.15–20, a spectacular early Christian poem, places Jesus' resurrection (1.18) in parallel with the creation of the world (1.15), seeing it as the ground and origin of what the creator has now accomplished and is now implementing, namely the reconciliation of all things to him. The very shape of the poem insists that Jesus' resurrection, as a one-off event, is an act not of the abolition of the original creation but of its fulfillment..."

(6) In Revelation 3:14.

- *Beale, Revelation*, 298: "Despite what most commentators think, the titles in 3:14 do not link Jesus to the original creation, but are an interpretation of Jesus' resurrection drawn from 1:5. His resurrection is viewed as the beginning of the new creation, which is parallel with Col. 1:15b, 18b, cf. 'first-born of all creation in Col. 1:15b, which may refer to the original creation in Genesis, and 'the beginning, the firstborn from the dead' in v 18. The latter phrase refers to the resurrection as a new cosmic beginning (as evident from the link not only with Col. 1:15–17 but also with 1:19–20, 23). ... Christ as 'firstborn from the dead and ruler of the kings of the earth' in 1:5 is interpreted in 3:14 as designating Christ as the sovereign inaugurator of the new creation. Consequently, the title 'beginning of the creation of God' refers not to Jesus' sovereignty over the original creation but to his resurrection as demonstrating that he is the inauguration of

and sovereign over the new creation.”

(7) In Revelation 21.

- Beale, *Revelation*, 314: “...it is not accidental that in 21:6 God or Jesus is called ‘the beginning.’ This may imply that the hoped-for new creation of 21:1, 5 has already been inaugurated by Jesus’ resurrection.”
- Beale, *Revelation*, 1052: “God says, ‘Behold, I am making all things new’ [Rev 21:5], which repeats for a third time the Isaiah prophecies of the coming new creation. V 1 has already appealed to Isa. 65:17 and 66:22, v 4b alluded to Isa. 65:17 and 43:18, and v 5 now draws on Isa. 43:19: ‘Behold, I make new things.’ In 2 Cor. 5:17 Paul sees the same Isaiah prophecy (Isa. 43:18–19 and 65:17) beginning to be fulfilled through Christ’s death and resurrection. Here, though, John portrays the complete fulfillment of Isaiah’s new creation prophecies. To highlight the consummate redemptive-historical fulfillment he adds ‘all’ to Isaiah’s words. The insertion suggests not thoroughgoing universal salvation but the culmination of the new creation previously begun in part. All the people of God together with the heavens and earth will be transformed into a new creation.”
- Wright, *Resurrection*, 475–476: “The judgment scene of [Revelation] chapter 20 gives way to the majestic and moving vision of the heavenly city, coming down out of heaven as a bride ready for her husband, the Messiah himself. Prominent among the descriptions of the city and its life are these: that death will be no more (21.4), and that everything less than the full, rich human life intended by the creator god is banished, cast into the lake of fire (21.8). These two final chapters are, in fact, full of indications of new creation. ... Death always was the ultimate denial of the good creation; now, with its abolition, the creator’s new world can proceed.”

(8) In the practice of the Lord’s Day. Evidence that the resurrection as the dawn of the new creation influenced the placement and priority of the Lord’s Day in church history.

- Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 142: “We do not sufficiently realize the profound sense the early Church had of the epoch-making significance of the appearance, and especially of the resurrection of the Messiah. The latter was to them nothing less than the bringing in of a new, the second, creation. And they felt that this ought to find expression in the placing of the Sabbath with reference to the other days of the week. Believers knew themselves in a measure partakers of the Sabbath-fulfillment. If the one creation required one sequence, then the other required another. It has been strikingly observed, that our Lord died on the eve of that Jewish Sabbath, at the end of one of these typical weeks of labor by which His work and its consummation were prefigured. And Christ entered upon His rest, the rest of His new, eternal life on the first day of the week, so that the Jewish Sabbath comes to lie between, was, as it were, disposed of, buried in his grave.”

- Wright, *Resurrection*, 579–580: “Where did resurrection show up in what the early Christians habitually did? Briefly and broadly, they believed as if they were in some important senses already living in God’s new creation. They lived as if the covenant had been renewed, as if the kingdom were in a sense already present, though, to be sure, future as well... This is especially noticeable in the remarkable transfer of the special day of the week from the last day to the first day. ‘The Lord’s Day,’ John the seer called it; and there is very early evidence of the Christians meeting on the first day of the week. This is hardly to be explained simply on the grounds that they wanted to distinguish themselves from their Jewish neighbors, or that they believed the new creation had begun; or at least, if either of those explanations is offered, they press us quickly back to the question of why they wanted to do the former, or why they believed the latter. The early writers face these questions, and give the obvious answers: Ignatius draws attention to the resurrection as the rationale of the new practice, and Justin connects it with the first day of the new creation.”

(9) Summary Quotes

- Carson, *John*, 544: “...the resurrection of Jesus is not merely a discrete event but the onset of the eschatological age, the dawning of the new creation...”
- Macleod, *New Dictionary of Theology*, 582: “Our Lord’s resurrection introduced a new creation. He died to the old age dominated by sin and entered a new era in which he now lives to God (Rom. 6:9–10). His emergence from the tomb at the dawning of the day is symbolic of this truth. As the old creation, the new creation signaled its arrival by the intrusion of light into the darkness.”
- Ridderbos, *Paul*, 57: “...Paul’s kerygma of the great time of salvation that has dawned in Christ is above all determined by Christ’s death and resurrection. It is in them that the present aeon has lost its power and hold on the children of Adam and that the new things have come. For this reason, too, the entire unfolding of the salvation that has dawned with Christ again and again harks back to his death and resurrection, because all the facets in which this salvation appears and all the names by which it is described are ultimately nothing other than the unfolding of what this all-important breakthrough of life in death, of the kingdom of God in this present world, contains within itself. Here all lines come together, and from hence the whole Pauline proclamation of redemption can be described in its unity and coherence. Paul’s preaching, so we have seen, is ‘eschatology,’ because it is preaching of the fulfilling redemptive work of God in Christ. We might be able to delimit this further, to a certain extent schematically. By speaking of Paul’s ‘resurrection-eschatology.’ For it is in Christ’s death and subsequent resurrection that the mystery of the redemptive plan of God has manifested itself in its true character and that the new creation has come to light.”
- Wright, *Resurrection*, 712: “The fact that dead people do not ordinarily rise is itself part of early Christian belief, not an objection to it. The early Christians insisted that what had happened to Jesus was precisely something new; was, indeed, the start of a whole new mode of existence, a new creation.”

- George Hendry, *Theology of Nature*, 216: “The resurrection of Christ is thus the link that binds the consummation of the world to its creation, and the decisive proof of the faithfulness of God. Christians who believe in the resurrection cannot restrict their hope to a future life for themselves; they extend it to the whole created world, which, as it proceeded from God in its entirety in the beginning, will, through his faithfulness, attested in the resurrection, proceed toward him in its entirety at the end.”
- Andrew Peterson, song, “All Things New”: “The world was good, the world is fallen, the world will be redeemed, so hold on to the promise. The stories are true that Jesus makes all things new. The dawn is upon you. Rise up, oh you sleeper, awake, the light of the dawn is upon you. Rise up, oh you sleeper, awake, he makes all things new.”