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WHEN HEAVEN MEETS EARTH:
THE FINAL STATE OF THE BELIEVER

By
Doug Halsne

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE
FACULTY OF COVENANT THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

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Dr. Robert A. Peterson, Faculty Advisor



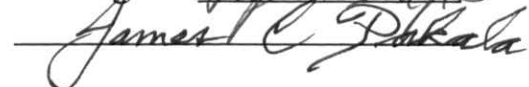
Dr. Gregory R. Perry, Second Faculty Reader



Dr. Philip D. Douglass, Director of D.Min. Program



Rev. James C. Pakala, Library Director



Abstract

It is a widely held belief that heaven is the final destiny where followers of Jesus Christ will spend eternity. This is confirmed through the overwhelming support in popular and academic literature on the final state of the believer. The purpose of this study was to understand why the final state of the believer, the new earth, finds such limited support in the literature, at both popular and academic levels. The assumption of this study was that laypeople, pastors, and many theologians have confused the temporary intermediate state of the believer, called heaven, with the believer's final state on a new earth. In order to address this purpose, the researcher identified three main areas of focus that were critical to understanding this topic: heaven as the intermediate state, the new heavens and the new earth as the final state, and the implications for the church about the difference between these two perspectives.

The following research questions served as the intended focus for this study: How do Evangelical theologians account for the limited focus on the new earth in academic and popular literature? What are the implications for the church with this difference in focus? How do Evangelical theologians, as professors who preach in churches, negotiate the differences between their own understanding of scripture regarding these issues and the default expectations of their listeners? The study followed a qualitative research method, utilizing semi-structured interviews with six theologians, analyzed in a constant comparative method. This study applied a model of heaven under two categories: the spiritual vision model and the new creation model.

The research explored the ongoing role of Platonism, Dispensationalism, and Fundamentalism in furthering the popular portrayal of the spiritual vision model of

heaven. The research concludes that the new creation model provides a more biblical and holistic view of redemption, evangelism, creation, and the resurrection of the body.

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Scripture taken from the HOLY BIBLE, ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION. Copyright 2001. Used by permission of Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

Chapter One

Introduction to the Problem

“I don’t want to go to heaven.”¹ These words are not the rant of a philosophical skeptic or an ardent atheist, but the sentiments of an evangelical theologian who teaches in a conservative Baptist theological seminary. What would lead theologian Michael Wittmer to arrive at the conclusion that he “does not want to go to heaven?” At first glance, such an admission would appear to deny one of Christianity’s most cherished beliefs – eternal life in the presence of God in a place called heaven. However, his unflinching statement leads one to consider a very important question: “Where will believers in Jesus Christ spend eternity?” The answer is not as obvious as would seem.

Popular Christian literature communicates the message that heaven is the eternal dwelling place of believers.² A review of popular titles confirms this case.³ A clear pattern emerges in these titles, which suggests that heaven is the eternal dwelling place of believers. On the other hand, one is hard pressed to find a single title that suggests that

¹ Michael E. Wittmer, *Heaven is a Place on Earth: Why Everything You Do Matters to God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 15.

² Throughout the paper I will use the terms “church” and “believers” interchangeably.

³ Ron Rhodes, *The Wonder of Heaven: A Biblical Tour of Our Eternal Home* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2008); Daniel Schaeffer, *A Better Country: Preparing for Heaven* (Grand Rapids, MI: Discovery House, 2008); Randy Alcorn and John MacMurray, *The Promise of Heaven: Reflections on Our Eternal Home* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2010); Tim F. LaHaye, Jerry B. Jenkins, Frank M. Martin and Frank Martin, *Embracing Eternity: Living Each Day with a Heart Toward Heaven* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 2004); Douglas Connelly, *The Promise of Heaven: Discovering Our Eternal Home* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000); Jerry L. Walls, *Heaven: The Logic of Eternal Joy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); David Shibley, *Living as if Heaven Matters: Preparing Now for Eternity* (Lake Mary, FL: Charisma House, 2007).

the new earth is the place where believers will spend eternity.⁴ This leads Michael Williams to observe,

When Christians talk about the point and goal of salvation, what they hope for, [it] is almost always about going to heaven. Indeed, if we were to judge by two millennia of Christian art and hymnody, popular literature and piety, we would have to conclude that the Christian faith is fundamentally about the belief that the point of salvation is going to heaven.⁵

In contrast to those who suggest that heaven is the place where believers will spend eternity is a growing number of scholars, represented by Christopher J. Wright, who say, “The heaven I will go to when I die is not my final destination. ‘Heaven when you die’ is only a transit lounge for the new creation.”⁶ He further states that heaven “is where we will be safe until God brings about the transformation of the earth as part of the new creation that is promised in both the Old and New Testament.”⁷ In a similar vein, Michael Wittmer states, “We will not remain forever with God in heaven, for God will bring heaven down to us.”⁸ Joining in this perspective is New Testament scholar, N.T. Wright, who demonstrates that the early Christians’ hope centered on the resurrection of the body, not on heaven. “The first Christians did not simply believe in life after death; they virtually never spoke of going to heaven when they died...When they did speak of

⁴ In the exegetical portion of the dissertation, the researcher will seek to demonstrate that there is a difference between heaven as the intermediate state and the final state, and that this distinction is not merely a matter of semantics.

⁵ Michael D. Williams, “I Believe . . . the Resurrection of the Body: A Sermon,” *Presbyterion* 36, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 1-8.

⁶ Christopher J. Wright, *The God I Don’t Understand: Reflections on Tough Questions of Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 194.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Michael E. Wittmer, *Heaven is a Place on Earth: Why Everything You Do Matters to God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 17.

heaven as a postmortem destination, they seemed to regard this heavenly life as a temporary stage on the way to the eventual resurrection of the body.”⁹

This brief survey indicates that there is not a single position on the matter of the eternal state of the church. The researcher explored various reasons for the divergent opinions. In the exegetical portion of the research, the researcher gave special attention to those passages of scripture which spoke directly to the issue of the final state of the church and believers. Isaiah 65:17 reads, “For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth, and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind.”¹⁰ The Apostle Peter writes, “But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.”¹¹ Finally, in Revelation 21:1, the apostle John writes, “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.”¹² These passages and more were examined to understand what the biblical text has to say about the final state of the believer.¹³

It has been demonstrated that within popular Christian literature there is an overwhelming focus on heaven as the final dwelling place of the church. Would the same hold true for academic literature? A brief survey of some of the more widely used systematic theologies provides some clues. Why choose the literature of systematic theology to understand how the academic community addresses the matter of the final state of the church? The first reason is that systematic theology seeks to answer this

⁹ N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 41.

¹⁰ Isaiah 65:17.

¹¹ 2 Peter 2:13.

¹² Revelation 21:1.

¹³ The researcher will examine these passages in the exegetical portion of the dissertation, but will also consider other relevant portions of Scripture that address the issue.

question: “What does the whole Bible teach about a given topic?”¹⁴ One would expect then that a biblically relevant systematic theology text would provide ample information on the final destiny of the church and believers. Second, seminaries and Christian colleges are training pastors and future professors using these textbooks, who in turn are teaching lay leaders, ministry leaders and the church. What is being read and taught in the seminaries eventually filters down to the people in the pew. For this reason, the systematic theology textbooks have relevance in seeking to resolve this problem.

Finally, the researcher considered many systematic theology textbooks and interviewed professors of theology, but this study will focus on some of the more influential works to consider why the majority of the literature focuses on heaven as the final destiny of the church rather than the new earth.

*Louis Berkhof, Systematic Theology*¹⁵

Berkhof’s *Systematic Theology* has been a standard text used in Reformed colleges and seminaries. In one sentence, on page 736, Berkhof states, “The final state of believers will be preceded by the passing of the present world and the appearance of a new creation.”¹⁶ Then, on the last page of his work, Berkhof writes two lines about the new earth: “There will be a new heaven and a new earth,” and, “The renewal of heaven and earth will follow the judgment.”¹⁷ On page 737 of 738, Berkhof mentions the “new creation” twice, and the only other references to “new heavens and a new earth” is a

¹⁴ Robert Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), xxv.

¹⁵ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1939).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 736.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 733.

direct quotation of 2 Peter 3:13. By contrast, Berkhof devotes sixteen pages to the subject of the intermediate state.

*J. Oliver Buswell, A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*¹⁸

Buswell takes numerous pages to discuss the new heaven and new earth, yet the main thrust of his discussion is limited to determining which passages refer to the millennium and which refer to the new earth. There is little exploration of the implications of the final state of the believer and the church on the new earth.

*Millard Erickson, Christian Theology*¹⁹

This publication is a popular evangelical systematic theology that is 1247 pages in length. Mention of the new earth is absent in the index of Erickson's work. Also missing is any reference to 2 Peter 3:13. In the end, there are a total of four sentences, out of 1247 pages, which make any statement about the new earth.

*Alistair McGrath, Christian Theology*²⁰

McGrath is a prolific writer and published his *Christian Theology* in 1994. This work also neglects to mention the new earth, either in its topical index or scripture index. A section entitled *Heaven* takes up the final eleven sentences of the book, and does not contain a single biblical reference.

This brief survey of some of the major systematic theology texts demonstrates that the topic of the final state of the believer on a new earth receives little or no

¹⁸ J. Oliver Buswell, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1962).

¹⁹ Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983).

²⁰ Alistair E. McGrath, *Christian Theology* (Cambridge, England: Blackwell, 1994).

comment. In the interview portion of this project the researcher investigated the reasons for the dearth of teaching on the final state of the church.

The desire of this researcher is to comprehend through interviews with evangelical theologian's reasons for academic and popular literature primarily focusing on heaven as the final destiny of the believer in place of the promise of life on a renewed earth.

Statement of Problem and Purpose

Questions about the afterlife abound inside and outside the church. According to a 2007 Gallup poll, more Americans believe in heaven than ten years previously. In 1997, seventy-two percent of Americans responding indicated they believed in a place called heaven, but that number had jumped to eighty-one percent in the intervening ten years.²¹

Dalia Sussman's research indicates, "Vast majorities of Americans believe in heaven and think they're headed there. But elbow room won't be a problem: About eight in ten believers envision heaven as a place where people exist only spiritually, not physically."²² What this indicates is a strong affirmation that upon death, Christians will go to heaven. Nevertheless, eighty percent believe that it is a place where people exist only spiritually. To this popular opinion N.T. Wright observes, "In much Western piety, at least since the Middle Ages, the influence of Greek philosophy has been very marked, resulting in a future expectation that bears far more resemblance to Plato's vision of souls entering into disembodied bliss than to the biblical picture of new heavens and new

²¹ Gallup, "Americans More Likely to Believe in God Than the Devil, Heaven More Than Hell," Gallup.com, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/27877/Americans-More-Likely-Believe-God-Than-Devil-Heaven-More-Than-Hell.aspx> (accessed June 12, 2014).

²² Dalia Sussman, "Poll: Elbow Room No Problem in Heaven," ABCNews.go.com, <http://abcnews.go.com/US/Beliefs/story?id=1422658> (accessed June 12, 2014).

earth.”²³ This variation on perspectives of the afterlife drive the purpose of this study, which is to investigate how evangelical theologians account for the way academic and popular evangelical literature differ in their focus on heaven as the eternal state of believers as contrasted with the idea of eternal life on a renewed earth.

Primary Research Questions

This study addressed main areas that are central to investigating how evangelical theologians account for the way academic and popular literature differ in focus on life in heaven versus life on a renewed earth. To that end, the following research questions were crafted:

1. How do evangelical theologians account for the limited focus on the new earth in academic and popular literature?
2. What are the implications for the church with this difference in focus?
3. How do evangelical theologians (as professors who preach in churches) negotiate the differences between their own understanding of scripture, regarding these issues, and the default expectations of their listeners?

Significance of the Study

Laypeople

What significance does this study have for ministry in the church? First, for laypeople, bringing clarity to vague generalities about heaven are not merely theological debates without significance. If believers do not understand that their final destiny is an earthly existence – although in a resurrected, glorified body – they may be inclined to dishonor this earth and may dismiss the continuity between this earth and the new earth as a motive for the pursuit of righteousness in this life. These are critical concerns that

²³ N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 80.

have far reaching implications for the church and its posture toward creation, vocational calling, sanctification and the mission of the church. Additionally, according to David Lawrence, “Once we have caught a vision of the continuity between life in this age and the life of the age to come, the fact that what we do now can have eternal significance will challenge us to aspire to ever greater achievements for Jesus.”²⁴

A second result of this study determined the need for a renewed appreciation of the human body that God has created. The promise of physical existence on a new earth is in line with the church’s belief in the bodily resurrection of the dead. “If our eternal destination was heaven then a new body would be unnecessary since...spirits are quite capable of enjoying heaven.”²⁵

Teachers in the Church and Seminary

An additional significance of this study is that it would benefit teachers in the church and seminaries. Greater clarity on this topic would provide a harvest of thinking about God’s good creation and stewardship of the planet; continuity between this life and the next; and, an anticipation of the restoration of all things, rather than its annihilation. Theologians and teachers have an opportunity to further develop this topic so as to bring clarity and a greater hope that our eternal existence will not be lived out in an ethereal sphere that is void of physical dimensions, but on a renewed earth with Jesus as the central figure.

²⁴ David Lawrence, *Heaven: It’s Not the End of the World* (Valley Forge, PA: Scripture Union, 1995), 140.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 75.

Pastors

In times of chaos and confusion, pastors can bring hope and comfort through the faithful ministry of the word of God. In times of crisis, people turn to the church – even though it may be short-lived seeking to find meaning to life in the midst of turmoil. When pastors are able to bring significance and meaning to this life through the gospel and are able to show continuity between this life and the next, people have hope. Pastors are regularly confronted with matters of life and death. Being able to minister to the flock with the scriptural promise of life on a renewed earth, in a resurrected body, seems more appealing and hopeful than the prospect of floating on clouds while strumming harps and singing with a choir of angels. When pastors and teachers in the church are able to articulate the connections between this life and the next in terms of vocation and calling, it gives greater significance to one's daily activities.

Definition of Terms

Evangelical – one who espouses the need for a conversion experience from spiritual darkness to light through faith in the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. This belief system also entails following Jesus in word and deed and seeks to reach the world with the gospel message of salvation through Jesus Christ alone.

Heaven – This term is used four different ways in the Bible: (1) as a metonymy for God; (2) as the special place of God's dwelling; (3) as part of creation, as in heaven and earth; and (4) as the place where dead saints reside awaiting the resurrection.

Intermediate state – the state between death and the final judgment prior to the reception of the resurrection body and the consummation of all things.

Resurrection of the body – the teaching that people, both just and unjust, will be raised bodily when Christ returns to judge the living and the dead at the end of the age.

Final state – This term refers to the eternal destiny of the believer, which will occur when God inaugurates the new heavens and new earth.

New Heavens and New Earth – an expression used in scripture describing the final dwelling place of the church, the bride of Christ. This new world consummates the purposes of God for the church and his creation, which results in the transformation and renewal of all things.

Dispensationalism – an approach to interpreting the Bible, which distinguishes between God’s working with Israel and the church during different periods of history, usually seven successive periods or ”dispensations.” One of the hallmarks of this movement is the belief that all scripture is to be interpreted literally and, thus, the promises to Israel are to be fulfilled literally. Recent developments within dispensationalism have shifted from its classical position to a modified and progressive way of interpreting the dispensations within scripture as well as softening the distinctions between Israel and the church.

Platonism – the view that there exist such things as abstract objects – where an abstract object is an object that does not exist in space and time and which is, therefore, entirely non-physical and non-mental.²⁶ This theory is the central theory of forms where the transcendent, perfect archetypes have imperfect copies on the earth.

Fundamentalism – a term which originates with Baptist editor Curtis Lee Laws in 1920 as a designation for those Christians who wanted to fight for the fundamentals of the Christian faith. Later, it was considered a reaction in the nineteenth and twentieth

²⁶ Mark Balaguer, “Platonism in Metaphysics,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2014), under “1. What is Platonism?,” <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/platonism/> (accessed June 14, 2014).

centuries to theological liberalism and modernity in culture. The modern historian, George Marsden defines fundamentalism as “militantly anti-modernist Protestant evangelicalism.”²⁷

Spiritual Vision Model – a term coined by Dr. Craig Blaising which “emphasizes biblical texts promising that believers will see God or receive full knowledge of God in the future state of blessing.... In the spiritual vision model of eternity, heaven is the highest level of ontological reality. It is the realm of the spirit as opposed to base matter. This level is the destiny of the saved, who will exist in that nonearthly, spiritual place as spiritual beings engaged eternally in spiritual activity.”²⁸

New Creation Model – proposes that we speak of a future everlasting kingdom, of a new earth and the renewal of life on it, of bodily resurrection (especially of the physical nature of Christ’s resurrection body), of social and even political discourse among the redeemed. The new creation model expects that the ontological order and scope of eternal life is essentially continuous with that of the present earthly life except for the absence of sin and death. Eternal life for redeemed human beings will be an embodied life on earth (whether the present earth or a wholly new earth), set within a cosmic structure such as we have presently.”²⁹

²⁷ George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1980), 4.

²⁸ Craig Blaising, “Premillennialism,” in *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, ed. Darrell Bock (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 161.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 162.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

The purpose of this study was to examine how evangelical theologians account for the way academic and popular literature differs in their understanding of the final state of the believer. Literature, at both a popular and academic level, is extensive on the topic of heaven and the afterlife. Perusing the titles of a Christian, secular or online bookstore results in a wide variety of offerings ranging from tales of near death experiences and tours of heaven to the blessings of eternal life with Jesus.

While there is a general consensus amongst evangelical scholars and laypeople that upon death the believer is ushered into the presence of Jesus, the question remains, is heaven the final destiny of the believer? With few exceptions, the literature about the final state of the believer focuses on a place called heaven, rather than everlasting life on a renewed earth. In the words of Anglican theologian Peter Toon, author of the book, *Heaven and Hell*, “[M]uch church teaching over the centuries has treated the intermediate state as if it were, to all intents and purposes, identical with the final state.”³⁰ Bishop N.T. Wright, author of *New Heavens, New Earth*, echoes the same sentiment when he says, “[T]he Christian hope is not simply for ‘going to heaven when we die,’ but for ‘new heavens and new earth, integrated together.’”³¹ This chapter seeks to examine the biblical

³⁰ Peter Toon, *Heaven and Hell: A Biblical and Theological Overview* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1986), 112.

³¹ N.T. Wright, *New Heavens, New Earth: The Biblical Picture of Christian Hope* (Cambridge, England: Grove Books Limited, 1999), 5.

and theological literature that addresses the intermediate and final state of the believer to demonstrate their distinguishing features.

To set the stage for our literature review, it is helpful to distinguish between what is known as general eschatology and individual eschatology. The latter addresses the topics of physical death, the nature of the body during the intermediate state, and the resurrection of the body. General eschatology deals more broadly with matters of the second coming, the “signs of the times,” discussions about a millennial reign, the judgment and the eternal state. From a pastoral perspective, these topics, though much debated, require answers as they touch on one of life’s most crucial questions: what is the state of the believer after death?

The purpose of this study was to investigate how evangelical theologians account for the way academic and popular evangelical literature differ in their understanding of the final state of the believer. One perspective teaches that believers will spend eternity with Jesus in heaven, while a second viewpoint states that the final destiny of the believer is on a new earth. The general consensus in theological literature, at both the academic and popular level, identifies heaven as the final destiny of the believer. As the literature will reveal, this position spans the perspective of academic and popular literature within the evangelical and Reformed community.

An Analysis Of The Biblical Teaching About The Afterlife

From a pastoral perspective, the teaching of scripture on the state of the believer at death is a pressing issue that is front and center in weekly sermons, pastoral counseling, and most predominately at funerals. The significance of the topic is reflected

in many hymns of the church as well as the volume of books on the topic. To put it simply, people want to know what comes after death.

When speaking of the afterlife of the believer, the literature at both an academic and popular level begins with the topic of death and the intermediate state. What the Bible says about the afterlife of the believer is both an academic and pastoral matter of great importance. The starting point for this topic begins with the question, “What happens to a believer in Jesus Christ at the moment of death?” From this point, the literature takes different directions on the final state of the believer.

The scriptures do not leave the believer in a state of mystery as to what happens at death. While the biblical information is not overwhelming, what it does say is sufficient to provide hope for the believer that there is life with God beyond the grave. Theologians describe the state of the believing dead between death and resurrection as the intermediate state. Greek scholar, Murray J. Harris, writing in the *New Dictionary of Theology*, says, “For the believer it is a period during which his bodiless soul, in conscious communion with Christ, awaits the resurrection of the body.”³² He goes on to say, “To a great degree the idea of an intermediate state rests on the dualistic assumption that physical death is the separation of the body and soul.”³³

Considerable theological debate has played out in church history over the nature of the intermediate state. Lutheran theologian, Oscar Cullmann, who taught at the Sorbonne, contends in his short but influential work, *Immortality of the Soul or*

³² Murray J. Harris, “Intermediate State,” in *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson, David F. Wright, and J.I. Packer (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 339-340.

³³ L.J. Kreitzer, “Intermediate State,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 438.

Resurrection of the Dead? that those in the intermediate state are “asleep.”³⁴ Contrary to Cullmann, *The Westminster Confession of Faith* states, “The bodies of men, after death, return to dust, and see corruption: but their souls, which neither die nor sleep, having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God who gave them: the souls of the righteous, being then made perfect in holiness, are received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God, in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies.”³⁵

What can be observed in the literature at both a popular and academic level is the blurring of distinctions between the intermediate and eternal state of the believer. This essential distinction has the potential for leading to a misguided view of the final state of the believer. So how does a discussion of the intermediate state contribute to the purpose of our topic? David Lawrence, writing in his book, *Heaven: It's Not the End of the World*, suggests that, “[i]f our eternal destination was heaven, then a new body would be unnecessary since... spirits are quite capable of enjoying heaven.... It is strange how many Christians claim to believe in physical resurrection whilst still entertaining notions of a ‘spiritual’ heaven being their eternal home.”³⁶ Wayne Grudem adds, “Christians often talk about living with God ‘in heaven’ forever. But in fact the biblical teaching is richer than that: it tells us that there will be new heavens *and a new earth* - an entirely renewed

³⁴ Oscar Cullmann, *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?* (London: Epworth Press, 1958), 48-57.

³⁵ *The Confession of Faith and Catechisms of the Presbyterian Church of America* (Brevard, NC: Committee for Christian Education and Publications of the Presbyterian Church in America, 1983), 31.1, p. 81.

³⁶ David Lawrence, *Heaven: It's Not the End of the World* (Valley Forge, PA: Scripture Union USA, 1995), 75.

creation - and we will live with God there.”³⁷ It is this failure to distinguish the difference between the intermediate state (heaven) and the final state (new earth) that drives this study.

The Biblical Evidence For An Intermediate State

Speculation about life after death is extensive, in both Christian and secular literature. The recent spate of books about journeys to heaven and back has intrigued readers to the point that those books have become best sellers.³⁸ Regardless of the decor of heaven or the state of personal relationships that are rekindled in the afterlife, the scriptures are clear on one thing – at death the believer is ushered into the presence of the Lord Jesus. Since the intermediate state is typically referred to as life after death, N. T. Wright is famous for speaking of the resurrection and renewed creation as “life *after* life after death.”³⁹

What evidence is presented in scripture for an intermediate state? The biblical testimony suggests a continuity of existence when at death the body and soul are separated and the spiritual component is brought into an intermediate state called heaven. This state of the believer upon death is designated “intermediate” because it is a condition of being in a disembodied state prior to the ultimate goal of attaining to the resurrection of the body.

³⁷ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 1158. Italics in the original.

³⁸ *Heaven Is for Real* was published in late 2010, and has spent 59 (nonconsecutive) weeks as the number one nonfiction paperback on *The New York Times* best-seller list as of April 2012. It was released as a feature film in 2014. Don Piper has sold over 5 million copies of his book *90 Minutes in Heaven*. *Proof of Heaven* by Eben Alexander has sold 13 million copies as of March 2013.

³⁹ N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2008), 148, 151, 169, 197, 198, and 231. Italics in the original.

The Old Testament Evidence

The Old Testament says little about the afterlife, but what it does say is that life does not end at death. The dead continue to exist in what is called Sheol, which is usually translated into English as “the grave” or “the pit.”⁴⁰ Psalm 88 captures the sense of unease at the prospect of Sheol:

For my soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to Sheol. I am counted among those who go down to the pit; I am a man who has no strength, like one set loose among the dead, like the slain that lie in the grave, like those whom you remember no more, for they are cut off from your hand. You have put me in the depths of the pit, in the regions dark and deep. Your wrath lies heavy upon me, and you overwhelm me with all your waves.

Psalm 6:5 presents Sheol as a place void of worship and fellowship with Yahweh: “For in death there is no remembrance of you; in Sheol who will give you praise?”⁴¹

Professor of Old Testament and author of *The Transforming Vision*,⁴² Richard Middleton makes this observation:

One of the contrasts between the Old Testament and the New Testament is their understanding of the afterlife. In contrast to the centrality of resurrection in the New Testament (and late Second Temple Judaism), the Old Testament does not typically place any significant hope in life after death. The closest the Old Testament gets to the idea of an afterlife is its references to Sheol as the place of the dead. As Psalm 89:48 puts it, “Who can live and never see death? Who can escape the power of Sheol?” While the numerous Old Testament references to Sheol, the grave, or the pit present a somewhat inchoate picture of a shadowy or diminished existence in the underworld (similar to the Greek notion of Hades), one thing is clear: there is no access to God after death.⁴³

⁴⁰ Psalm 30:3 and Isaiah 14:15. Unfortunately, the King James Version commonly translated Sheol as “hell,” though Sheol and Hell are two different locations in the biblical text.

⁴¹ Psalm 6:5.

⁴² Brian Walsh and Richard J. Middleton, *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian World View* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984).

⁴³ Richard J. Middleton, *A New Heaven and New Earth*. Unpublished manuscript, 157.

New Testament scholar Murray J. Harris, author of *From Grave to Glory: Resurrection in the New Testament*, summarizes the Old Testament concept of Sheol: “In the Hebrew mind, what is destroyed by death is all meaningful existence, but not existence as such. The doubts with which the Israelites wrestled were not uncertainties about whether human beings existed after death, but whether Yahweh’s power could release persons from the grip of Sheol.”⁴⁴ From this rather bleak picture of Sheol it can be assumed that, for the Israelite, what really mattered was a life lived out in the physical realm. Only in this realm could a person praise God and experience fullness of life. Nevertheless, the Old Testament does demonstrate that there is an intermediate state of existence before the promise of resurrection at the end of the age.⁴⁵

While the prospect of Sheol was less than desirable, the Old Testament gives evidence of consciousness and continuity after death where the residents are aware of one another and even address each other.⁴⁶ Psalm 16:9-10 offers the prospect that the person in Sheol will not be abandoned by God but will have a pleasurable future in the presence of God. In similar fashion, Psalm 49:15 gives the assurance that “God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me.”⁴⁷ In one of the clearest Old Testament passages about continuity between this life and the next, the Psalmist recounts this promise: “You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to

⁴⁴ Murray J. Harris, *From Grave to Glory: Resurrection in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), 46.

⁴⁵ Isaiah 26:19; Job 19:25-26; and Daniel 12:2.

⁴⁶ Isaiah 14:9-10.

⁴⁷ Psalm 49:15.

glory.”⁴⁸ In Job 19:25-26, there is clear evidence for not only an intermediate state, but also a future resurrection: “For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God.”⁴⁹

George Eldon Ladd, a professor of New Testament exegesis and theology at Fuller Theological Seminary during the mid-twentieth century, in his 1968 book, *The Pattern of New Testament Truth*, commented on the Old Testament texts about the intermediate state: “While such sayings hardly provide us with material for a doctrine of the intermediate state, they do express the undying conviction of the ‘imperishable blessedness of the man who lives in God.’ They cannot conceive of this fellowship being broken, even by death.”⁵⁰

The Intermediate State in the New Testament

Evangelical and Reformed biblical scholars agree that while both testaments teach an intermediate state, there remain many unanswered questions about its nature. A major debate over the nature of the intermediate state derives from whether or not humans are of a monist or dualistic nature. The philosophical debate often drives the exegetical conclusions, but for the purpose of this work that discussion will not be engaged in this study.

What does the New Testament teach about the state of Christians who have died? There are numerous passages, which indicate the believer is ushered into an intermediate state in the presence of Jesus at the moment of death. There are numerous passages that

⁴⁸ Psalm 73:24.

⁴⁹ Job 19:25-26.

⁵⁰ George Eldon Ladd, *The Pattern of New Testament Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1968), 38.

provide evidence for the concept of an intermediate state, which this study will seek to examine.

Jesus on the Intermediate State

This study of the intermediate state will begin with an examination of the teachings of Jesus. Following the Old Testament understanding of life after death, Jesus maintains a conviction of a coming resurrection,⁵¹ which implies the existence of an intermediate state after death. One example of Jesus' expectation of a coming resurrection following an intermediate state is seen in the crucifixion narrative of Luke 23:42-43.

Luke 23:42-43

As Jesus is being crucified, one of the men alongside him recognizes his guilt and addresses Jesus: "Remember me when you come into your kingdom." If this man had any sense of the Jewish understanding of God's reign, he would be expressing a desire to participate in a future kingdom on earth, so in this way he was requesting of Jesus a place in his coming reign. Jesus' promise to the repentant criminal was that he would be with him in paradise that very day.⁵² The irony of Jesus' statement is expressed by I. Howard Marshall, writing in his massive commentary on the Gospel of Luke: "The criminal's

⁵¹ Matthew 22:23-30; Luke 14:14; and John 5:28-29.

⁵² The word "paradise" is used three times in the New Testament, here and 2 Corinthians 12:4 and Revelation 2:7. The word ultimately comes from the LXX translation of "garden" in Genesis 2:8 and 13:10. Andrew Lincoln observes, however, that "nowhere in the OT does it refer to a future resting place of the righteous . . . [In Jewish apocalyptic literature] the term came to be used of the abode of the blessed whether after death or after the final judgment." Andrew T. Lincoln, *Paradise Now and Not Yet: Studies in the Role of the Heavenly Dimension in Paul's Thought with Special Reference to Eschatology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1981), 79-80.

petition expresses the hope that he will attain to life at the Parousia; Jesus' reply assures him of immediate entry into paradise."⁵³

Luke 16:19-31

In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, two important concepts are worth noting regarding Jesus' understanding of the nature of life after death. First, the parable teaches that death is final. Second, it teaches that there is a continuation of life after death for both those who follow Jesus and for those who don't. The story begins with a tale of two men who are experiencing the extremes of society: one is wealthy beyond imagination, the other is destitute. As Jesus recounts the story he highlights the reversal of the kingdom concept. Those who are wicked and wealthy may be so only in this life, while the righteous destitute will, in the end, find themselves in a place of comfort in the presence of God. While the parable is not about wealth per se, it does speak to the message of Jesus that one cannot serve God and money simultaneously. In the end, it is a story about the rich man's failure to repent for not being his brother's keeper.

Darrell Bock, professor of New Testament at Dallas Theological Seminary, observes,

The story's initial impression is clear: the rich man has a great life, while the poor man does not. The rich man throws away food; the poor man must scrounge for it. Some people have nothing, while others have expensive underwear. Observing this scene, we might well conclude that God has blessed the rich man, while the poor man must be the object of God's judgment. Lazarus must be lazy or sinful,

⁵³ I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Text Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), 873.

paying for his depravity with his destitution. But the parable will show that appearances can be deceiving. Jesus' parables often come with a twist.⁵⁴

Harris summarizes from the parable what may be known about Jesus' teaching on the intermediate state: "There is (at least) awareness of circumstances (vv. 23-24), memory of the past (vv. 27-28), and rational thought (v. 30; cf. Rev. 6:9-11)."⁵⁵ What cannot be demonstrated from this passage is any notion of heaven, since even the righteous Lazarus is stationed in a compartment of Hades.

What can be learned about the intermediate state from the teachings of Jesus? The following points are worth noting. First, persons do not go totally out of existence after death but go to a "realm of the dead." Second, in this realm of the dead, the ungodly shall remain, with death as their shepherd. The New Testament adds the detail that after death the ungodly will suffer torments, even before the resurrection of the body.⁵⁶ Finally, God's people, however, knowing that Christ was not abandoned to the realm of the dead, have the firm hope that they too shall be delivered from the power of Sheol. The New Testament again carries this hope one step further when it suggests that after death the godly are comforted⁵⁷

The Apostle Paul on the Intermediate State

There is a general consensus among theologians that at the moment of death the believer's spirit is taken into the presence of Jesus to a place called heaven. The nature of

⁵⁴ Darrell Bock, *Luke*. The IVP New Testament Commentary (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), <https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/ivp-nt/Parable-Rich-Man-Lazarus>.

⁵⁵ Murray J. Harris, "Intermediate State," in *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson, David F. Wright, and J.I. Packer (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 339-340.

⁵⁶ Luke 16:19-31.

⁵⁷ Luke 16:25.

that existence is not detailed in scripture, though Reformed and evangelical scholars alike recognize this existence as a disembodied state.⁵⁸ The significance of understanding the distinction between the intermediate and final state is evident in how often the two are confused. There are numerous Pauline texts that speak to the subject of the intermediate state:

2 Corinthians 5:1-10

The Apostle Paul had likened the human body to an earthenware vessel in 2 Corinthians 4, but in chapter five, he shifts the imagery to that of a tent:

For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling, if indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked. For while we are still in this tent, we groan, being burdened—not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.⁵⁹

According to *Second Corinthians* by Raymond F. Collins, “The image of a tent conjures up ideas of fragility, a lack of solid protection, a transitory condition, and a stark existence.”⁶⁰ Paul identifies the tent as one’s “earthly home,” which is synonymous with physical existence on the earth, and so sets the reader up for what comes after its destruction. Paul is suggesting that there is a difference between life in the physical existence, which he identifies as a “tent,” and a state of being “unclothed,” which correlates to the period between death and the reception of the resurrection body. As Kreitzer states, “Nakedness is equal to existence without a body (disembodiment) and is

⁵⁸ There are exceptions to this view as seen in the writings of F.F. Bruce and Murray Harris, both of whom suggest that at the moment of death the believer receives a resurrection body. Richard J. Middleton in his forthcoming book on the *New Heavens and New Earth* also contends for what is known as “soul sleep.”

⁵⁹ 2 Corinthians 5:1-4.

⁶⁰ Raymond F. Collins, *Second Corinthians*, Paideia: Commentaries on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2013), 105.

something to be abhorred while ‘being clothed’ is embraced in that it means being granted the heavenly resurrection body.”⁶¹

Middleton summarizes Paul’s thought when he observes the apostle’s ultimate desire and hope. He notes, “Paul hammers home the point that he fully expects ‘not to be naked,’ that he does ‘not wish to be unclothed;’ instead he longs to be clothed with his heavenly dwelling. In other words, Paul’s explicit hope is not for an existence as a ‘naked’ soul or spirit (presumably in heaven), but for eternal embodied life (on earth).”⁶²

Giving further explanation of the nature of the intermediate state, the Apostle Paul writes:

So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.

Paul’s instruction is both clear and yet without specifics. The body/soul distinction is emphasized at the point of death when the believer, devoid of a physical body, is “at home with the Lord.” Paul speaks as though he could be “away from the body,” which implies there is an aspect of his existence that continues after death.

Commentators and theologians alike stress that Paul is teaching that the intermediate state in heaven is a disembodied existence as opposed to being “in the body” in a physical state. Life in bodily existence does not mean that the believer is away from the Lord in a spiritual sense, but that at the moment of death, i.e., being “away from the

⁶¹ L.J. Kreitzer, “Intermediate State,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 439.

⁶² Richard J. Middleton, “A New Heaven and a New Earth: The Case for a Holistic Reading of the Biblical Story of Redemption,” *Journal for Christian Theological Research* vol. 11 (2006): 93.

body,” the believer is ushered into heaven where Jesus dwells, which is described as being “at home with the Lord.”

Michael Bird, author of *Evangelical Theology: A Biblical and Systematic Introduction*, makes an assertion regarding 2 Corinthians 5: “The most likely scenario as to what Paul means here is that he contrasts two phases of being in the body with being clothed in a heavenly dwelling ahead of the parousia.”⁶³ He provides the following chart showing the distinction between the present and postmortem state.⁶⁴

Present State	Postmortem State
earthly tent	building from God
naked	eternal house
unclothed	heavenly dwelling
home in the body	clothed
away from the Lord	away from it [body]
in the body	at home with the Lord
destroyable	immortal

Bird gives a helpful summary as to what 2 Corinthians is teaching about the intermediate state:

Paul had intimated an interval between death and resurrection that was a bodiless one (1 Cor. 15: 35– 38) and a temporary state (15: 32– 44). Now as he faces the expectation of death ahead of the parousia, he turns his mind to what lies in store for him. If Paul expected to receive a spiritual resurrection body after his death, it leads one to wonder why he would still anticipate the Lord’s return in the future

⁶³ Michael Bird, *Evangelical Theology: A Biblical and Systematic Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), Kindle locations 7141-7152.

⁶⁴ Ibid., Kindle location 7150.

since resurrection and parousia have been consistently bound together in his eschatology across the Thessalonian and Corinthian correspondences and also later in Philippians and Romans. What Paul appears to envisage immediately upon death is not a spiritual resurrection, but a future spiritual mode of existence that is transcendent, yet not fully actualized until the parousia. There is a transition from the sarkic (fleshly) and somatic (bodily) form of existence into a heavenly dwelling in the company of the Lord, characterized by a heightened form of interpersonal communion with Christ.⁶⁵

Philippians 1:21-24

In a very personal account of his heart's desire, Paul agonizes over his gospel ministry; he is torn between continuing his ministry in the face of conflict and departing to be with Christ through death. He writes, "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account."⁶⁶

New Testament scholar Gordon Fee, author of *Paul's Letter to the Philippians* in the New International Commentary, lays the groundwork for Paul's comments: "Up to this point, his [Paul's] primary concern has been with the 'advance of the gospel' (through his detention) and Christ's being glorified' (through his trial)."⁶⁷ Faced with the prospect of martyrdom, Paul explores the alternatives between life and death with deep emotional intensity. In the end, he ultimately sees the advantages of remaining "in the flesh" for the sake of the Philippians. The dilemma Paul faces is that death will usher him into the presence of the Lord, which is a "gain," while remaining in the flesh (physical existence on earth) will allow him to carry on his gospel ministry. G. Walter Hansen is

⁶⁵ Ibid., Kindle location 7150.

⁶⁶ Philippians 1:21-24.

⁶⁷ Gordon Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 139.

careful to note, “Dying is gain, not because it is an escape from life, but because it leads to union with Christ, the goal of life.”⁶⁸

Of interest to this study’s topic is the understanding that death impacts life in the physical dimension, which Paul calls “flesh.” P.T. O’Brien says the use of the word “flesh” is Paul’s way of speaking of “life here below.”⁶⁹ The advantage to remaining alive in a physical existence is the furtherance of the gospel; however, death brings about “gain” and an existence, which is “far better.”⁷⁰ Paul says, “To have departed from this life is to have taken up residence in the presence of the Lord.”⁷¹ What is evident in the passages observed so far is that Paul anticipated that death was not the end of life, but his soul would continue on in the presence of Jesus.

Commentators note that the dilemma for Paul is that being with Christ means not remaining in the body (i.e., “the flesh”) to carry on his gospel ministry. However, he would be in “heaven” in the presence of Christ Jesus, which, though in a disembodied state, is far better, because he is with the Lord. As Gordon Fee observes, “Hence death means ‘heaven now.’ At the same time, a person’s death did not usher him or her into ‘timeless’ existence. Hence the bodily resurrection still awaits one ‘at the end.’”⁷²

⁶⁸ G. Walter Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 8.

⁶⁹ P.T. O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, The New International Greek Text Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 125.

⁷⁰ Philippians 1:23.

⁷¹ P.T. O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, The New International Greek Text Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 130.

⁷² Gordon Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, The New International Greek Text Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 149.

Philippians 3:20-21

Another passage in the Pauline corpus indicates that the physical body of the believer is not the final body. The Apostle writes, “But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.”⁷³ In contrast to the enemies of the cross of Christ, whose minds are “set on earthly things,”⁷⁴ Paul offers a sharp contrast between the earthly and heavenly mindset. What distinguishes believers from the enemies of the cross of Christ is the realm to which they are united. The language of citizenship, which was particularly meaningful to the Philippians, is used to reveal their true identity, which unites them to the heavenly realm. O’Brien explains, “So writing to Christians in a city proud of its relation to Rome, Paul tells the Philippians that they belong to a heavenly commonwealth, that is, their state and constitutive government is in heaven, and as its citizens they are to reflect its life.”⁷⁵

Paul wants his readers to understand that their identity is already tied up with heaven, where God reigns. The present blessings of union with Christ that await future fulfillment are an example of the “already/not yet” motif that runs throughout the New Testament. Fee states, “They are citizens of the heavenly commonwealth ‘already,’ even as they await the consummation that is ‘not yet.’”⁷⁶ Paul explains that at the parousia, the

⁷³ Philippians 3:20.

⁷⁴ Philippians 3:19.

⁷⁵ P.T. O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, The New International Greek Text Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 461.

⁷⁶ Gordon Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, The New International Greek Text Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 379.

Lord Jesus “will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body.”⁷⁷ Jesus has a glorious body now by virtue of his resurrection and the prospect for the believer is that they too will have a “transformed” body like his.⁷⁸

Of importance for this discussion is the transformation of a “lowly body” to a “glorious body,” which indicates that the “body is the point of continuity between the present and the future...”⁷⁹ This transformation takes place when all things are demonstrably subjected to Christ.

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

This particular Pauline text has been used by dispensational premillennialists to advance the doctrine of the rapture of the church. However, the passage is occasional in nature and is correcting misinformation about the day of the Lord. The intent of this portion of 1 Thessalonians is to correct the ignorance of the believers over the state of those who have died before the parousia:

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore, encourage one another with these words.

⁷⁷ Philippians 3:21.

⁷⁸ 1 John 3:2.

⁷⁹ Fee, 383.

The Thessalonians wanted to know about the state of believers who had died before the coming of the Lord. Paul responds to their concern by describing those who have died as “asleep.”⁸⁰ Robert Gundry remarks, “The figure of sleeping refers to the supine posture of corpses lying in a tomb or a grave, not to the condition of disembodied souls (for which see 2 Corinthians 5:6–9; Philippians 1:21–23) so far as Paul is concerned.”⁸¹

The pastoral concern that Paul addresses involves the grief that the Thessalonians are experiencing at the prospect that those who have died before the parousia may not participate in the coming resurrection. In verse fourteen, Paul assures his readers that the resurrection of Jesus is the foundation for the resurrection of all believers: “For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.”⁸² The message of comfort is not that departed believers are in the presence of Jesus, though that is true, but that when Jesus returns, “the dead in Christ will rise first.”⁸³ The dead in Christ are not at a disadvantage with regard to the resurrection.

The Apostle John on the Intermediate State

Revelation 6:9-11

Moving on from the gospels and Pauline texts to that of the apocalyptic visions of John in the book of Revelation, it is important to note that scholars warn against

⁸⁰ 1 Thessalonians 4:13.

⁸¹ Robert H. Gundry, *Commentary on First and Second Thessalonians*, Commentary on the New Testament #13 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011), Kindle locations 565-567.

⁸² 1 Thessalonians 4:14.

⁸³ 1 Thessalonians 5:16.

interpreting apocalyptic texts as if they were a didactic genre such as the book of Romans. Nevertheless, even within apocalyptic texts, one can see trajectories of antecedent scripture, which provide a fuller expression of biblical teaching.

One particular passage in the Apostle John's revelation points to his belief in an intermediate state in which deceased believers are observed. Revelation 6:9-11 reads,

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. They cried out with a loud voice, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.⁸⁴

Following the announcement of the fourth seal, which depicts the pale horse of death, John describes a vision in heaven of "the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne."⁸⁵ The cry of the martyrs to the Lord is how long it will be until their righteous blood is avenged. Scholars disagree as to the nature of these martyrs. J. Ramsey Michaels, who holds a doctorate from Harvard, writes with obvious conviction: "These *souls* are not disembodied spirits. They are, after all, visible to John. Nor are they the 'lives' or 'selves' of slaughtered victims as a kind of abstraction, nor are they typical of what theologians like to call 'the intermediate state' (the interval between a believer's physical death and the final resurrection)."⁸⁶ Yet, not all scholars take this position. New Testament scholar, and author of a commentary on

⁸⁴ Revelation 6:9-11.

⁸⁵ Revelation 6:9.

⁸⁶ J. Ramsey Michaels, *Revelation*, IVP New Testament Commentary (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 106. Italics in the original.

the book of Revelation, Greg Beale writes, “The petitioning saints are those who have been exalted to a heavenly state, now separated from the sinful influences of the world. We may speculate that they are able to pray curses onto people because they now have God’s knowledge of who is *ultimately* rebellious and reprobate.”⁸⁷

Does the statement that John saw “souls” under the altar imply visibility of disembodied spirits? Philip Hughes argues that such a question is “entirely beside the point. The Apostle is simply granted an insight or perception that goes beyond the limits of what is ordinarily known to us. Presumably, for the purpose of this particular vision, these souls of the martyrs were made visible to him as persons.”⁸⁸

While the conclusions drawn from an apocalyptic text must be offered with humility, what the passage portrays is a continuity of this life with the next and it is presented in a manner that suggests conscious awareness. This pattern fits with the teachings of Jesus and Paul which points in this direction: heaven, the place where believers dwell in the intermediate state is “provisional, temporary, and incomplete.”⁸⁹ Yet, these passages also teach that believers, at death, experience a separation of body and soul and are not yet in their final resurrection state with a renewed body.⁹⁰

Relevant to the argument of this study, this chapter has shown that while the doctrine of the intermediate state is one fraught with difficulties, the consensus is that

⁸⁷ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Text Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 392.

⁸⁸ Philip Edgecumbe Hughes, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 88.

⁸⁹ Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), 95.

⁹⁰ “Although immediate resurrection is as consistent with some texts as temporary discarnate existence, other passages clearly state a general future resurrection. The fact that persons survive physical death and that they are resurrected in the future together entail an intermediate state. That conclusion is unavoidable.” John W. Cooper, *Body, Soul and Everlasting Life: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 146.

there is some sort of pre-resurrection existence that is not the final state of the believer.

Scholars seem to agree that whatever is said about the intermediate state, it is not where believers will spend eternity. Peter Toon captures the importance of distinguishing the intermediate state from the final state:

The separation of body and soul at death creates an abnormal situation. Unlike the angels who are pure spirit, the soul/human person functions normally and fully in, through, and with a body - be it physical or a spiritual body. So in a certain sense, the interim period between death and the Parousia represents an “inferior” or “diminished” mode of existence when compared with the final state after the Parousia and the general resurrection of the dead. In other words we would expect that the experience of God and the transcendent realities of heaven and hell will be necessarily limited because of the nature of the human receptivity, as well as by the fact that the culmination of God’s purposes has not yet arrived and thus the communion of the saints has not reached its final form. Nevertheless, much church teaching over the centuries has treated the intermediate state as if it were, to all intents and purposes, identical with the final state. This is probably best explained in terms of the heavy commitment to the doctrine of the natural immortality of the soul and the viewing of the soul as the essence of whatever it is to be human.⁹¹

The Final State

Moving on from the intermediate state of the believer to those passages that depict “life after life after death,” Hoekema lays the groundwork for this debate when he states,

The Bible does not have an independent doctrine of the intermediate state. Its teaching on this state is never to be separated from its teaching on the resurrection of the body and the renewal of the earth. Therefore, as Berkouwer points out, the believer should have, not a “twofold expectation” of the future, but a “single expectation.”⁹² We look forward to an eternal, glorious existence with Christ after death, an existence which will culminate in the resurrection. Intermediate state and resurrection are therefore to be thought of as two aspects of a unitary expectation.⁹³

⁹¹ Peter Toon, *Heaven and Hell: A Biblical and Theological Overview* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1986), 112.

⁹² Hoekema is summarizing G. C. Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics: The Return of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), 32-64.

⁹³ Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), 108.

The Biblical Evidence for a New Heavens and New Earth

A possible reason for the paucity of books and articles on the “new heavens and new earth” is that it is only explicitly mentioned in scripture in four passages: Isaiah 65:17, 66:22, 2 Peter 3:13 and Revelation 21:1.⁹⁴ While the believer’s perspective of the new heavens and new earth should not be restricted to these passages, the explicit mention of these terms is the foundation for an understanding of the remaining texts. It is also worth noting that the texts referring to the new heavens and new earth are mentioned in both testaments and in various genres of literature.

Isaiah 65:17

The first occurrence of the new heavens and new earth appears in Isaiah 65:17, which reads, “For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth, and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind.”⁹⁵ Isaiah depicts a radically transformed world released from the ravages of the curse, death and suffering, in which the “wolf and lamb will graze together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox.”⁹⁶ The city of Jerusalem becomes “new” and is symbolic of the new creation.

To capture the setting of the expression “new heaven and a new earth,” Old Testament scholar John Oswalt suggests this usage is in answer to the question, “How will human beings ever be able to live the righteousness of God, to be the evidence to the

⁹⁴ There is a slight difference between 2 Peter 3:13 and Revelation 21:1 in that John uses the singular “heaven,” while Peter uses “heavens” in the plural.

⁹⁵ Isaiah 65:17.

⁹⁶ Isaiah 65:20.

nations that he alone is God? Only in one way: if God himself intervenes and exercises his creative power to remake us and our world.”⁹⁷

The prophet Isaiah spells out the hope for the nation, but that hope is not confined to mere deliverance from Babylon, for God has purposed that his people will be vindicated, not just spiritually, but in a way that encompasses the material realm as well. Of this new creation, Isaiah says, “But be glad and rejoice forever in that which I create, for behold, I create Jerusalem to be a joy, and her people to be a gladness.”⁹⁸ Alec Motyer comments on the word “create,” suggesting, “[h]eavens and earth represent the totality of things, as in Genesis 1:1.”⁹⁹ Richard J. Mouw, former president and professor of Christian philosophy at Fuller Theological Seminary, concludes, “God will redeem and transform that which is presently perverted and distorted by human disobedience to his will.”¹⁰⁰

According to Isaiah, one feature of this new creation is that “the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.”¹⁰¹ The German commentator Franz Delitzsch, co-author of the *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes*, states of verse seventeen that “Jehovah creates a new heaven and new earth, which bind so fast with their glory, and which so thoroughly satisfy all desires, that there is no thought of the

⁹⁷ John Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40-66*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 655.

⁹⁸ Isaiah 65:18.

⁹⁹ Alex Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 529.

¹⁰⁰ Richard J. Mouw, *When the Kings Come Marching In: Isaiah and the New Jerusalem* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 11.

¹⁰¹ Isaiah 65:17.

former ones, and no one wished them back again.”¹⁰² This transformation of the earth into a new creation encompasses the spiritual, physical, emotional, relational, ecological and agricultural dimensions of life.¹⁰³ Barber and Peterson provide this summary of the new heaven and new earth that the prophet Isaiah foresees: a future life that is new, joyous, secure, peaceful, unending, universal, and worshipful.¹⁰⁴

Isaiah 66:22

A second reference to the new heavens and new earth appears in Isaiah and comes as a promise and pledge to his people that there will be a renewed cosmos and endless worship of God as the nations declare his glory: “For as the new heavens and the new earth that I make shall remain before me, says the Lord, so shall your offspring and your name remain.”¹⁰⁵ Isaiah began his prophetic witness in 1:2 with a call to the cosmos to stand as witnesses against Israel: “Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth.”¹⁰⁶ Now at the end of the book, the witness is transformed into a promise and pledge of a transformed cosmos characterized by worship. The passage does not offer any information about the nature of the new heavens and new earth, the mere reference to it stands as a reality in the plan of God.

¹⁰² Friedrich Delitzsch, *Isaiah: Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 488.

¹⁰³ Old Testament Professor E.J. Young states, “Strictly speaking, the words ‘former things’ refer to former heavens and earth. But heaven and earth are employed as figures to indicate a complete renovation or revolution in the existing course of affairs.” E. J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), 3:514.

¹⁰⁴ Dan C. Barber and Robert A. Peterson, *Life Everlasting: The Unfolding Story of Heaven* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2012), 34.

¹⁰⁵ Isaiah 66:22.

¹⁰⁶ Isaiah 1:2.

2 Peter 3:13

2 Peter 3 addresses the matter of the “new heavens and new earth” in the context of eschatology and ethics. The Apostle Peter’s exhortation to remember the promise of the Lord’s parousia and the events that follow are rooted in the Old Testament prophets and the New Testament apostles. Included in this exhortation is a warning about a false teaching that distorts the call to righteousness based on a delayed parousia. In this context, Peter urges his readers to live in a manner that reflects the final consummation of all things.

Peter begins his appeal with a warning to believers that scoffers will call into question the promise of Jesus’ coming and the subsequent judgment. As a corrective, Peter rehearses the pattern of God’s judgment as reflected in the flood narrative. He continues to speak of a judgment that will involve the heavens and the earth that now exist, which are “stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.”¹⁰⁷ Nevertheless, the patience of God is held out as a prospect for repentance until the “day of the Lord.”¹⁰⁸ Verse ten provides a rather specific picture of the destiny of the heaven and earth “that now exist” when he states, “But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.”¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ 2 Peter 3:7.

¹⁰⁸ 2 Peter 3:8.

¹⁰⁹ 2 Peter 3:10.

The significance of the heavenly bodies and the earth being burned up and dissolved in verse ten draws out a question for the readers: “Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness?”¹¹⁰ Peter grounds ethical conduct in the prospect of the parousia, but then provides an additional incentive with the promise of a “new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.”¹¹¹

According to Peter, the promise for the believer is that the “new heavens and new earth” will not be characterized by the “sinful desires” of this age.¹¹² New Testament scholar D. A. Carson captures the essence of Peter’s pastoral vision of a new heaven and new earth when he writes, “It is doubtful that either Christian steadfastness or Christian morality, let alone Christian spirituality and Christian eschatology, can long be maintained without the dominance of this vision.”¹¹³

Several observations can be made about this particular text and its relevance to this study of the final destiny of the believer. In straightforward fashion, Peter announces that God’s promise culminates in a “fresh and perfectly ordered world.”¹¹⁴ Doug Moo makes a similar point that “Christians should live holy and godly lives, then, not only because this world is not going to last but also because a new world is going to take its

¹¹⁰ 2 Peter 3:11.

¹¹¹ 2 Peter 3:13.

¹¹² 2 Peter 3:3.

¹¹³ Greg Beale and D.A Carson, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 1061.

¹¹⁴ J. N. D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Epistles of Peter and Jude* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1969), 368.

place.”¹¹⁵ The passage concludes with the point that this earth is not the final destiny of the believer, because a new world is coming. The explicit language of a “new earth” in this passage indicates that something beyond heaven awaits the believer.

Revelation 21:1

One of the most explicit texts describing the final state of the believer is Revelation 21:1: “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.”¹¹⁶ According to the *Book of Revelation* by George R. Beasley-Murray, John has “described under varied forms the messianic judgments of the last times, the collapse of the antichristian empire and overthrow of evil powers which inspired it, the coming of Christ... and the last judgment wherein God’s verdict on mankind is made known. Now follows the unveiling of a new order not subject to the ravages of time.”¹¹⁷

Commentators often note the distinction between what John sees and does not see in his vision of the new heavens and new earth. In verse one, John sees a “new heaven and new earth.”¹¹⁸ This difference likely points back to 20:11, which reads, “Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them.”¹¹⁹ J. Ramsey Michaels, who holds a doctorate in New Testament from Harvard Divinity School, comments,

¹¹⁵ Doug Moo, *2 Peter and Jude*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 196.

¹¹⁶ Revelation 21:1. Scholars agree that the pairing of heaven and earth is a merism for the entire cosmos.

¹¹⁷ George R. Beasley-Murray, *Book of Revelation*, New Century Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981), 305.

¹¹⁸ Revelation 21:1.

¹¹⁹ Revelation 20:11.

“[H]eaven” and “sky” are the same word in Greek. The NIV, which translated that word appropriately “sky” in 20:11, has here obscured the similarity between the two passages by translating it as “heaven.” John’s point is that the “earth and sky” that disappeared (20:11) are now replaced with “a new sky” and “a new earth,” in other words, a new world – a whole new human environment.¹²⁰

This point is critical in one’s overall understanding of the destiny of believers because John is using a Greek word that refers to the “sky” and not “heaven.” This distinction in usage is also consistent with the following verses that speak of the “sky” and “earth” passing away.

A sampling of these texts include the following: Matthew 5:18 – “For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.”¹²¹ Matthew 24:35 – “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.”¹²² 1 Corinthians 7:31 – “For the present form of this world is passing away.”¹²³ 1 John 2:17 – “And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.”¹²⁴ Rev. 20:11 – “Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them.”¹²⁵

¹²⁰ J. Ramsey Michaels, *Revelation*, IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 233.

¹²¹ Matthew 5:18.

¹²² Matthew 24:35. Demonstrating that not all New Testament scholars agree on the language of Jesus’ statement regarding the demise of the existing heavens and earth, R. T. France, author of numerous works on the Gospels comments on Matt. 24:35: “To suggest, as some have done, that Jesus here predicts an actual dissolution of heaven and earth as part of his vision of eschatological events is to read this proverbial language too literalistically.” R.T. France, *Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 930.

¹²³ 1 Corinthians 7:31.

¹²⁴ 1 John 2:17.

¹²⁵ Revelation 20:11.

John's language is similar to these texts, but with the additional feature that the earth is not merely passing away, but will be replaced by a new earth. The evidence from scripture, both Old Testament and New, indicates a clear continuity with the previous world, but one devoid of the curse and death. As Westminster Seminary professor Vern Poythress suggests, "Everything is new (21:5), but the result is the redemption of the old, not its abolition."¹²⁶ Similarly, Nathan L. K. Bierma states, "God's declaration in Revelation 21:5 is not, 'I am making all new things,' but, 'I am making all things new!'"¹²⁷

Theologian Philip Hughes provides a beneficial comment on the relationship between Revelation 21 and Romans 8:19-22:

This indicates that the new heaven and new earth will be creation renewed and brought to the glorious consummation for which it was always intended. This is the sense, too, of the new birth or new creation of a person in Christ: "If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation; the old things have passed away; behold, they have become new" (2 Cor. 5:17). The terminology is the same as in the passage before us (Revelation 21:1), but it is obvious that the man-in-Christ who as such is a new creation or creation has not passed away with the old, but is the same creature as before, only now renewed and set free.¹²⁸

What characterizes this new heavens and new earth is not only what is present, but also what is absent. John observes, "[A]nd the sea was no more."¹²⁹ With some variation, scholars recognize that John's words are not a statement of the hydrology of the new earth, but is a metaphor indicating the end of death, chaos and opposition to

¹²⁶ Vern S. Poythress, *The Returning King: A Guide to the Book of Revelation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2000), 185.

¹²⁷ Nathan L. K. Bierma, *Bringing Heaven Down to Earth: Connecting This Life to the Next* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2011), Kindle locations 816-817.

¹²⁸ Philip Edgecumbe Hughes, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 224.

¹²⁹ Revelation 21:1.

God.¹³⁰ Paul Marshall writes, “The Bible promises us a new heaven and a new earth.... Here is a world healed, restored, and re-centered.”¹³¹

Having examined passages that utilize the specific language of the new heavens and new earth, the researcher will now turn to several texts that imply such a notion without using the exact language.

The New World

Matthew 19:28

In Matthew 19, the impetuous Peter wants to know if there are rewards for the sacrifice the disciples have made for following Jesus: “Jesus said to them, ‘Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.’”¹³² Jesus addresses Peter’s concern with the promise that for the apostles there is the promise of judging the tribes of Israel.¹³³ The sphere of this ministry is located in the “new world.”

The word Jesus used to describe the “new world” is used only twice in the New Testament and is usually translated “regeneration,” however, its meaning is debated. Richard Horsley, author of numerous books on the social aspects of the New Testament, suggests that *palingenesia* need not be read in the Stoic sense of regeneration of the

¹³⁰ Beale, Hughes, Michaels, Mounce, and Poythress are examples.

¹³¹ Paul Marshall, *Heaven is Not My Home* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 240.

¹³² Matthew 19:28.

¹³³ Scholars suggest that the primary sense of “judging” is to exercise authority in a governmental sense. Revelation 20:4 conveys the same idea, which is one aspect of reigning.

cosmos, as is usually assumed.¹³⁴ However, Craig Keener writes in his socio-rhetorical commentary on Matthew that a Stoic reading does not fit the Jewishness of Jesus' audience. He says, "The language of 'regeneration'...must refer to the time of the new creation, applicable especially to the time of Israel's restoration and the resurrection."¹³⁵

However one interprets regeneration, Jesus makes it clear that this period is a future era when the apostles will play a prominent role in the rule and reign of the Lord. This prospect also seems to indicate that Jesus' gospel will triumph in the end, despite his present rejection by the nation of Israel, and will culminate in a "new world." Barber and Peterson summarize the significance of the words "new world." Jesus predicts a world characterized by newness, the renewal of all things.... This new world is characterized by believers' exercising dominion under Christ,¹³⁶ as God intended from the beginning.¹³⁷ It is also described by abundance, rich fellowship, and eternal life¹³⁸—both a quantity of life, lasting forever,¹³⁹ and a quality of life,¹⁴⁰ one that involves knowing God.¹⁴¹

¹³⁴ Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence: Popular Jewish Resistance in Roman Palestine* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1987), 202. Horsley concludes that Jesus used "palingenesis" as a way to catalyze the renewal of the people of Israel.

¹³⁵ Craig Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 480.

¹³⁶ Matthew 19:28.

¹³⁷ Genesis 1:26.

¹³⁸ Matthew 19:29.

¹³⁹ Matthew 25:46.

¹⁴⁰ John 17:3.

¹⁴¹ Dan C. Barber and Robert A. Peterson, *Life Everlasting: The Unfolding Story of Heaven* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2012), 34-25.

The Restoration of All Things

Acts 3:19-21

The book of Acts recounts an appeal to the Jewish people by the Apostle Peter to repent of their sin of failing to recognize Jesus as God's messiah: "Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus, whom heaven must receive until the time for restoring all the things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago."¹⁴² A specific promise in verse twenty is held out to Peter's listeners that repentance would lead to "times of refreshing from the presence of the Lord."¹⁴³ I. Howard Marshall, writing in the *Tyndale New Testament Commentary* states, "That is to say, the coming of the 'messianic age' or the future kingdom of God, for which the Jews longed was dependent upon their acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah."¹⁴⁴

Peter continues his sermon explaining that in the plan of God, Jesus must remain in heaven "until the time for restoring all the things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago."¹⁴⁵ There is disagreement over the meaning of *apokatastaseos* ("restoring") and whether it is synonymous with the "relief" mentioned in the previous verse. New Testament scholar Robert Gundry says, "Seasons of relief" equate with "times of the restoration of all things" but in this context have special

¹⁴² Acts 3:19-21.

¹⁴³ Acts 3:20.

¹⁴⁴ I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), 94.

¹⁴⁵ Acts 3:20.

reference to God's relieving the nation of Israel from foreign domination or, as the apostles put it in 1:6, to Jesus' "restoring the rulership to Israel." In other words, "the restoration of all things" has as a special feature the restoration of rulership to Israel so as to give Israel its long-awaited relief.¹⁴⁶

Others do not take "relief" and "restoring" as synonymous, as can be seen in the comment of Robert W. Wall, professor of scripture and Wesleyan studies at Seattle Pacific University: "Peter now extends the scope of God's plan for restoring Israel to include creation and in doing so underscores the universal importance of Israel's repentance."¹⁴⁷ Likewise, Marshall states, "The 'times,' therefore, refer not to the period before the Parousia during which the various prophetically foretold events which must precede it must take place, but rather to the period of fulfillment of the prophecies concerned with the Parousia itself."¹⁴⁸

The theme of restoration in scripture implies that something is amiss and in need of being brought back into the sphere of God's blessing. Within Peter's sermon, there is a glimpse of a similar pattern in scripture regarding a time of restoration that will accompany Jesus' return from heaven. Critical to the gospel message is that Jesus is alive and will at the appointed time return from heaven to fulfill what was prophesied and to restore humanity to God's original creational design.

¹⁴⁶ Robert H. Gundry, *Commentary on Acts*, Commentary on the New Testament #5. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011), Kindle locations 735-739.

¹⁴⁷ Robert W. Wall, *Acts - 1 Corinthians*, The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 10:82.

¹⁴⁸ I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), 94.

The Redemption of Creation

Romans 8:18-22

Romans 8 does not use the technical language of the new heavens and new earth, yet this may be one of the clearest statements in all of scripture to indicate God's purpose for God's people and this earth. What God has done in redeeming his people, he will one day do for his creation. The theme of redemption applies not only to people, but to the cosmos as well. Romans 8 expresses God's purpose in this way:

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now.¹⁴⁹

Paul makes his case that the “the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.”¹⁵⁰ The structure of these verses indicates that “glory” is the overarching theme of this section as demonstrated by an *inclusio* in verses eighteen and thirty. However, as Doug Moo, professor of New Testament at Wheaton Graduate School suggests, “Paul is not so much interested in its relationship to glory as he is in their sequence. He assumes the fact of suffering as the dark backdrop against which the glorious future promised to the Christian shines with bright intensity.”¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁹ Romans 8:18-22.

¹⁵⁰ Romans 8:18.

¹⁵¹ Doug Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 509.

Verse nineteen reads: “For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God.”¹⁵² New Testament scholars have offered numerous interpretations of the meaning of *ktisis* (“creation”) though the consensus, which prevails is, in the words of C. E. B. Cranfield, author of the International Critical Commentary on Romans, “The only interpretation of ‘ktisis’ in these verses which is really probable seems to be that which understands the reference to be to the sum-total of sub-human nature both animate and inanimate.”¹⁵³

Creation is anticipating the final redemption of the children of God and the revelation of their true identity as the “sons of God.”¹⁵⁴ “The reason why present suffering cannot compare with the coming glory is because the whole creation is on tiptoe with excitement, waiting for God’s children to be revealed as who they really are.”¹⁵⁵ Verse twenty begins with *gar*, which gives an explanation as to why the creation is waiting in anticipation for the revelation of the sons of God. The phrase “creation was subjected to futility” suggests that creation has yet to fulfill its intended purpose due to the effects of the fall of Adam. In consequence of the first man's rebellion, creation also feels the frustrating effects of sin described in Genesis 3. N.T. Wright suggests that, “God did this precisely in order that creation might point forward to the new world that is to be,

¹⁵² Romans 8:19.

¹⁵³ C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans 1-8*, International Critical Commentary (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 411-412.

¹⁵⁴ Romans 8:19.

¹⁵⁵ Robert W. Wall, J. Paul Sampley, and N.T. Wright, *Acts - 1 Corinthians*, The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 10:596.

in which its beauty and power will be enhanced and its corruptibility and futility will be done away.”¹⁵⁶

The use of the words, “in hope,” reminds Paul's readers that God's judgment against creation included the promise that the curse would be reversed. In the words of Cranfield, “Hope for the creation was included within the hope for man.”¹⁵⁷ The anticipated hope is “that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (v. 21).¹⁵⁸ Nestled within this pastoral exhortation to persevere in the midst of suffering, Paul announces that “creation itself” will experience liberation from its present travails. This anticipates what Isaiah predicted in 65:17 and 66:22, which speaks of a “new heavens and new earth.” Professor Bruce Milne of Spurgeon’s College in London writes,

The goal towards which the presently frustrated creation reaches longingly is the “new life” which is waiting to emerge from the womb of the fallen creation. This life is nothing less than the emergent ‘new heaven and new earth of righteousness’ (cf. 2 Pet. 3:1; Is. 65:17ff.; 66:22), when the ‘children of God’ are revealed at the Parousia of the Lord (v. 19).¹⁵⁹

What God has done in redeeming his people, he will one day do for his creation. So the theme of creation and new creation applies not only to people, but to the cosmos as well. N.T. Wright objects to the notion that there is a parallel between the liberation of Christians and the creation. He writes, “Paul never says that creation itself will have ‘glory.’ It will have freedom because God’s children have glory; indeed, their glory will

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 414.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Romans 8:21.

¹⁵⁹ Bruce Milne, *The Message of Heaven & Hell*, The Bible Speaks Today Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 236.

consist quite specifically in this, that they will be God's agents in bringing the wise, healing, restorative divine justice to the whole created order."¹⁶⁰

However, other scholars see a connection between the redemption of the believer and creation. In the words of Asbury Seminary professor Ben Witherington, "The destiny of believers and the destiny of the earth are inexorably linked together."¹⁶¹ Dr. Sam Storms, former professor at Wheaton agrees, "As there was solidarity in the fall, so also there will be solidarity in the restoration.... To the extent that the created order is not wholly and perfectly redeemed, we are not wholly and perfectly redeemed. Thus the redemption and glory of creation are co-extensive and contemporaneous with ours."¹⁶²

The importance of this idea for this study is in demonstrating that creation has a future in the plan of God and is not merely an afterthought in the purposes of God. The intent of the passage is to point the reader to the culmination of the earth's purpose, which is freedom, not devastation nor destruction. Creation will be free at last.

Summary

Both testaments offer the comfort of being in the presence of God upon death, to one degree or another. Yet the ultimate prospect directs one to look beyond this temporary state to the final end of all things in a new heavens and new earth. What the literature has shown is that the intermediate state is not the end, but a transitional condition that awaits the resurrection of the body and the renewal of all things. While the biblical evidence for the nature of the intermediate state is slim, there are clear

¹⁶⁰ Robert W. Wall, J. Paul Sampley, and N.T. Wright, *Acts - 1 Corinthians*, The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 10:414.

¹⁶¹ Ben Witherington, *Jesus, Paul and End of the World: A Comparative Study in New Testament Eschatology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 185.

¹⁶² Sam Storms, *The Restoration of All Things* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 16.

indications that a person experiences consciousness and continuity between life in the physical realm and the intermediate state. Having examined the biblical texts concerning the intermediate and final state of the believer, the study will now explore how theologians, biblical scholars and popular authors present their opinions on these matters.

Two Models of the Eternal State

Throughout the history of the church, theologians and pastors have taught or preached that heaven is the final destiny of the resurrected believer. Recent works on the history of heaven equally agree that this has been the majority opinion since the influence of Augustine in the fourth century.¹⁶³ Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang, authors of *Heaven: A History*, propose that two major images (of heaven) have dominated theology, pious literature, art, and popular ideas:

Some Christians expect to spend heavenly life in “eternal solitude with God alone.” Others cannot conceive of blessedness without being reunited with friends, a spouse, children, or relatives. Using convenient theological jargon, these views have been termed theocentric – “centering in God,” and anthropocentric – “focusing on the human.”¹⁶⁴

New Testament scholar Scot McKnight, in his forth-coming book on heaven, provides categories similar to those of McDannell and Lang. In this chart, he lays out two views of heaven utilizing the categories theocentric heaven (God-centered) and kingdom-centric heaven (world-transformed-centered). In the theocentric heaven, the focus and unending characteristic is praise of God. The kingdom-centric heaven focuses on the new

¹⁶³ Historians of heaven attribute this influence to Augustine of Hippo. Cf. Jeffrey Burton Russell, *A History of Heaven* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997). “In 387, the year after his conversion, Augustine wrote that after death “the soul yearns for flight and escape from this body here below.” Cited in Lisa Miller, *Heaven: Our Enduring Fascination with the Afterlife* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 121. Augustine later modified his views to include the doctrine of the bodily resurrection. See *The City of God*, trans. Gerald G. Walsh (New York: Doubleday, Image Books, 1958), Book 22.

¹⁶⁴ Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang, *Heaven: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), 353.

heavens and the new earth where God’s people will live with one another the life God intended for them. McKnight lays out a chart with the two different models.¹⁶⁵

Theocentric	Kingdom-Centric
God	God and God’s People
Glory of God	God’s perfect society
Mode of life: Worship	Worship and Fellowship
Atmosphere: Holiness	Justice and Peace
Gathered for worship	Social engagement
Family eliminated	Family perfected
Fellowship diminished	Fellowship emphasized
Location: Heaven up there	New heavens, new earth
Spiritual existence	Embodied existence

Dr. Craig Blaising, executive vice president and provost of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, in *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, offers two basic categories that he believes best depict conceptions of heaven. He labels these as the “spiritual vision” model and the “new creation” model.¹⁶⁶ For two reasons this study will follow the model of Blaising: first, the categories of McDannell and Lang do not factor in the differences between the spiritual vision model and the new creation model; and

¹⁶⁵ Scot McKnight, prepublication book on heaven. Title not yet determined, p. 35.

¹⁶⁶ Craig Blaising, “Premillennialism,” in *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, ed. Darrell Bock (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 160. Utilizing models in theological discourse helps to clear away the vagueness often associated with talk about heaven.

second, given this study's interest in retaining biblical motifs, Blaising's categories will be utilized in the remaining section of this chapter.

The Spiritual Vision Model

A prominent aspect of pastoral care involves ministering comfort to those who have faced the presence of death - a young mother dying of cancer, the death of a newborn, or an aging father suffering the ravages of Alzheimer's disease. In these situations, the topic of heaven comes front and center as the Christian's hope of deliverance from suffering, death, and loss of earthly relationships. The spiritual vision model of heaven provides an immediate sense of relief that those who have died are no longer suffering since they have been delivered from pain and the totality of sin's effects. Central to this position is the promise that at the moment of death, the believer is ushered into heaven to see the face of God.

Blaising proposes:

"The spiritual vision model of eternity emphasizes biblical texts promising that believers will see God or receive full knowledge in the future state of blessing. It notes that Paul speaks of the Christian life in terms of its heavenly orientation, and adds to this the biblical description of heaven as the dwelling place of God, as the present enthroned position of Christ, and as the destiny of the believing dead prior to their resurrection."¹⁶⁷

Blaising distinguishes the two models in this manner: "In the spiritual vision model of eternity, heaven is the highest level of ontological reality. It is the realm of spirit as opposed to base matter. This is the destiny of the saved, who will exist in that non-earthly, spiritual place as spirit beings engaged eternally in spiritual activity."¹⁶⁸ Below

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 161.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

are examples from popular literature and theological works which identify heaven as the eternal state and dwelling place of believers.

Heaven as the Believer's Eternal Home

Throughout academic and popular literature, one can see how writers promote the concept that heaven is the final destiny of the believer. Even for those who affirm a bodily resurrection for the saints, the statements in print indicate that the location of the resurrected body will be in heaven, or the authors are referring to the final state as heaven.¹⁶⁹

Popular Examples

Evangelist Billy Graham has written widely on the topic of heaven.¹⁷⁰ He states, “One of the Bible’s greatest truths is that we were not meant for this world alone. We were meant for Heaven—and Heaven is our ultimate home.”¹⁷¹ Further he answers the question, “Will we live in literal mansions or palaces in Heaven?” His answer is: “The Bible assures us that in Heaven we will be living in God’s dwelling place forever, and it will be glorious beyond description. It will be greater than any earthly palace or mansion.”¹⁷² Graham advocates two things about heaven in this answer: first, heaven is the ultimate home of the believer; and second; it is the place where believers will live

¹⁶⁹ Some theologians and popular writers distinguish between what they call the “now” or “present” heaven and the future heaven. In these instances they would identify the future heaven as synonymous with the new heaven and new earth, which distinguishes them from the spiritual vision model, yet in each instance they retain the use of heaven in their title (Alcorn, Barber and Peterson, and McKnight).

¹⁷⁰ Books by Billy Graham about heaven include *The Heaven Answer Book* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012); *Death and the Life After* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2011); *Facing Death and the Life After* (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 1987).

¹⁷¹ Billy Graham, *The Heaven Answer Book* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012), Kindle location 1.

¹⁷² Ibid., Kindle location 51.

forever. Notice that Graham references heaven as the believer's "ultimate home" and states, "we will be living in God's dwelling place forever."

A similar example can be cited where heaven is identified with the final state in Dr. Daniel Brown's book, *What the Bible Reveals About Heaven*. He states, "The view we have examined about the nature and the destiny of the world we live in now enables us to finish the puzzle depicting the place we call Heaven, where we will live forever."¹⁷³ Notice at the end of his sentence he claims heaven is where the believer will live "forever."

Popular Book Titles

Popular Christian literature communicates the message that heaven is the eternal dwelling place of believers. A review of popular titles confirms this case: *The Wonder of Heaven: A Biblical Tour of Our Eternal Home*;¹⁷⁴ *A Better Country: Preparing for Heaven*;¹⁷⁵ *The Promise of Heaven: Reflections on Our Eternal Home*;¹⁷⁶ *Embracing Eternity: Living Each Day with a Heart Toward Heaven*;¹⁷⁷ *The Promise of Heaven: Discovering Our Eternal Home*;¹⁷⁸ *Living As If Heaven Matters: Preparing Now for*

¹⁷³ Daniel Brown, *What the Bible Reveals About Heaven* (Franklin, TN: Authentic Publishers, 2010), Kindle locations 2208-2209.

¹⁷⁴ Ron Rhodes, *The Wonder of Heaven: A Biblical Tour of Our Eternal Home* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2008).

¹⁷⁵ Daniel Schaeffer, *A Better Country: Preparing for Heaven* (Grand Rapids, MI: Discovery House, 2008).

¹⁷⁶ Randy Alcorn and John MacMurray, *The Promise of Heaven: Reflections on Our Eternal Home* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2010).

¹⁷⁷ Tim F. LaHaye, Jerry B. Jenkins, Frank M. Martin and Frank Martin, *Embracing Eternity: Living Each Day with a Heart Toward Heaven* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 2004).

¹⁷⁸ Douglas Connelly, *The Promise of Heaven: Discovering Our Eternal Home* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

Eternity;¹⁷⁹ and *Heaven Your Real Home*.¹⁸⁰ Each of these titles conveys the message that the eternal dwelling place of the believer is heaven.

Academic Examples

J. F. Maile, who writes the entry for “Heaven, Heavenlies, and Paradise” in the *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, distinguishes Paul’s usage of the term under four headings. (1) Part of a description of the universe as the heavens and the earth; (2) The abode of angels; (3) The dwelling place of Christ from which he came down, to which he returned, where he now is and from whence he will return; and (4) The eternal home of the believer.¹⁸¹ In this article, Maile is an example of a biblical scholar who identifies heaven as the final state of the believer.

In his *Systematic Theology*, philosopher and theologian Millard Erickson discusses the final state of the righteous. The category he uses for the final state is the “heaven.” He proceeds to say this is the “future condition of the righteous.”¹⁸² Later in the same chapter, he says, “Heaven will be the completion of the Christian’s pilgrimage, the end of the struggle against flesh and blood, the world, and the devil.”¹⁸³ In similar fashion, Norman Geisler, former president of Southern Evangelical Seminary, and author

¹⁷⁹ David Shibley, *Living as if Heaven Matters: Preparing Now for Eternity* (Lake Mary, FL: Charisma House, 2007).

¹⁸⁰ Joni Eareckson Tada, *Heaven: Your Real Home* (New York: Walker and Company, 1995).

¹⁸¹ J. F. Maile, “Heaven, Heavenlies, and Paradise,” in *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 381.

¹⁸² Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983), 1126.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

of *Systematic Theology*, begins one of the book's chapters with the heading, *The Final State of the Saved (Heaven)*.¹⁸⁴

From the examples above, it is clear that both popular and academic literature present a well-defined focus that heaven is the final state of the believer. In some cases, the new earth is not mentioned in their presentations, which inclines one to embrace what Blaising calls, the spiritual vision model.

Biblical Basis for the Spiritual Vision Model

Seeing God

The prominence of the spiritual vision model throughout church history predisposes one to see that model within the pages of scripture. One significant feature of this model is the prospect that believers will see God.¹⁸⁵ The impact of the face of God can be observed within the pages of the Old Testament. This pattern can be observed first in a negative fashion, as the anger of God is expressed when he turns his face from a person.¹⁸⁶ Deuteronomy 31:17 is but one of many examples:

Then my anger will be kindled against them in that day, and I will forsake them and hide my face from them, and they will be devoured. And many evils and troubles will come upon them, so that they will say in that day, "Have not these evils come upon us because our God is not among us?" The Psalmist cries out, "Hide not your face from me. Turn not your servant away in anger, O you who have been my help. Cast me not off; forsake me not, O God of my salvation!"¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁴ Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology In One Volume* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 2011), 1247.

¹⁸⁵ Christian tradition refers to this as the *beatific vision*. Russell says this means "not only seeing but understanding and loving God and his creatures in peace and harmony and with dynamic and growing intensity." Jeffrey Burton Russell, *A History of Heaven* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 43.

¹⁸⁶ Cf. Psalm 132:10 and Ezekiel 7:22.

¹⁸⁷ Deuteronomy 31:17.

By way of contrast, God demonstrates his favor and kindness toward people when he turns his face toward them. This demonstration can be seen in the Aaronic blessing of Number 6:22-27:

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, “Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, ‘Thus you shall bless the people of Israel: you shall say to them, The Lord bless you and keep you; ^{the} Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.’ So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them.”¹⁸⁸

In parallel usage, the New Testament picks up this theme as a vital expression of God’s favor toward believers. Jesus offered the promise for those pure in heart that they would “see God.”¹⁸⁹ Paul says to the Corinthians they will see God “face to face”;¹⁹⁰ 1 John says, “we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is”;¹⁹¹ and in Revelation, the promise is that “they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads.”¹⁹² The ultimate goal of the spiritual vision model is expressed by Psalm 27:4: “One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in his temple.”¹⁹³

What Paul presents in 1 Corinthians 13:12 prevents the believer from seeing and knowing God: “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in

¹⁸⁸ Numbers 6:22-27.

¹⁸⁹ Matthew 5:8.

¹⁹⁰ 1 Corinthians 13:12.

¹⁹¹ 1 John 3:2.

¹⁹² Revelation 22:4.

¹⁹³ Psalm 27:4.

part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.”¹⁹⁴ In heaven, this limitation will be removed and the beatific vision will become a reality. With this pattern in scripture, it is reasonable to expect it to be disseminated by theologians and preachers. Jonathan Edwards preached a sermon in December of 1740 entitled, “The Portion of the Righteous,” in which he articulates the promise of seeing God.

The saints in heaven shall see God. They shall not only see that glorious city, and the saints there, and the holy angels, and the glorified body of Christ; but they shall see God himself. This is promised to the saints, Matthew v.8. “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” 1 Cor. Xiii.12. “For now we see through a glass darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then I shall know even as also I am known.” This is what is called by divines, “the beatific vision,” because this is that in which the blessedness of the saints in glory does chiefly consist. This is the fountain, the infinite fountain of their blessedness. The sight of Christ, which has been spoken of, is here not to be excluded, for he is a divine person; the sight of him in his divine nature therefore belongs to the beatifical vision. This vision of God is the chief bliss of heaven...¹⁹⁵

In the *Heaven Answer Book*, Billy Graham responds to the question, “What will we see when we get to heaven?” His response is that “[w]e will see many glorious sites in Heaven, but the most wonderful of all will be the Savior of the world and His glory. ‘Your eyes will see the king in his beauty and view a land that stretches afar.’”¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁴ 1 Corinthians 13:12.

¹⁹⁵ Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1986), 2: 900. Peter Toon provides a summary of Edward’s intellectual view of God in heaven. It is called “seeing God” (1) because the view will be very direct, as when we see things with the bodily eyes. In heaven God will immediately excite apprehensions of himself. (2) Because the knowledge of God will be most certain, for when people see things with their own eyes they are certain they are real. In heaven the sight of God will exclude all doubting. (3) Because the apprehension of God’s glory will be as clear and lively as when anything is seen with bodily eyes. (4) Because the intellectual sight which the saints will have of God will make them sensible of his presence, and give them as great an advantage of conversing with him, as the sight of the bodily eyes does an earthly friend. In heaven the souls of the saints will have the most clear sight of the spiritual nature of God. They will behold his attributes and disposition towards them more immediately and with greater certainty than it is possible to see anything in the soul of an earthly friend by his speech and behavior.” Peter Toon, *Heaven and Hell: A Biblical and Theological Overview* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1986), 156.

¹⁹⁶ Billy Graham, *The Heaven Answer Book* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012), Kindle location 32.

The emphasis of the spiritual vision model, with its focus on seeing God, knowing and being known, does not preclude the new creation model from advocating similar perspectives. However, the literature indicates a pattern that the spiritual vision model has a greater focus on the ethereal and heavenly than the material and earthly. The spiritual vision model certainly captures one aspect of the Christian's hope, as the ultimate joy for the people of God will be to gaze upon the face of their savior, Jesus Christ. Reformed pastor and theologian Ligon Duncan expresses this outlook in his book, *Fear Not! Death and the Afterlife from a Christian Perspective*,

...In heaven our greatest joy will be that we have a vision of God in the face of Jesus Christ. Peter talks about the fact that though we have not yet seen Him, yet we love Him. Though you and I have not seen the Lord Jesus Christ, we love Him. But when we arrive in heaven, we shall see Him face to face. One day we will behold Him as He is. We will see Him in His fullness. Beholding our risen Lord will be the greatest joy of heaven.¹⁹⁷

Millard Erickson adds an illuminating point to the discussion as he addresses whether heaven is a place or a state: "It is probably safest to say that while heaven is both a place and a state, it is primarily a state. The distinguishing mark of heaven will not be a particular location, but a condition of blessedness, sinlessness, joy, and peace."¹⁹⁸ This final statement, which sees heaven as a state of "blessedness," is a critical feature of the spiritual vision model.

Knowing God

Believers through the ages have comforted one another with the anticipation that one day they will know God and his ways in a fuller manner. This expectation is

¹⁹⁷ Ligon Duncan, *Fear Not! Death and the Afterlife from a Christian Perspective* (Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2008), 91-92.

¹⁹⁸ Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983), 1130-1131.

presented as one of the many joys of heaven, and it leads to a second characteristic of the spiritual vision model:

Following the classical tradition's identification of spirit with mind or intellect, the spiritual model views eternal life primarily as cognitive, meditative, or contemplative. With this point of emphasis, the place or realm of eternal life is really a secondary or even inconsequential matter. In its essential reality, eternal life is a state of knowing. Know what? Knowing what? Knowing God of course – and this in a perfect way, which means in a changeless manner. Perfect spiritual knowledge is not a discursive or developmental knowledge but a complete perception of the whole. The Platonic tradition spoke of it as a direct, full, and unbroken vision of true being, absolute good, and unsurpassing beauty.¹⁹⁹ There is more to heaven than seeing God as he is. The course of all Christian

theology points to an ultimate experience of knowing God in a manner that is not hindered by the influence of sin. Theologians are quick to warn that even in heaven, the believer's knowledge of God will never be exhaustive, but will always be confined to the limitations of our creatureliness. God can only be known to the extent that he reveals himself, and thus our knowledge of God is not exhaustive. According *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* by John Frame, "God's incomprehensibility follows from his transcendence over us, and his knowability follows from his immanence."²⁰⁰

The heart cry of believers for centuries has been to know God and to see him as he is. Yet, in 1 Cor. 13:12, Paul conveys the notion that the believer's knowledge of God is hindered: "Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known."²⁰¹ Catholic theologian, F.J. Boudreaux, understands this present hindrance,

¹⁹⁹ Craig Blaising, "Premillennialism," in *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, ed. Darrell Bock (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 162.

²⁰⁰ John Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013), Kindle locations 18805-18806.

²⁰¹ 1 Corinthians 13:12. "Paul rejects the notion current among some in Corinth that 'knowledge' can be fully achieved and mastered (3:18; cf. 8:1). Hence he prefers to use, not the noun 'knowledge' (gnosis,

For, with an imperfect vision of God, as he is reflected from the mirror of creation, believers can, and unfortunately do, withhold their love from him even when the light of faith is superadded to the knowledge they may have of him from the teachings of nature. This is not so in heaven. There, the blessed see God as he is; and therefore, they love him spontaneously, intensely, and supremely.²⁰²

Deliverance from Evil

A third characteristic that may be added to Blaising's model is what may be called the "deliverance from evil" theme. Blaising does not include this aspect in the spiritual vision model, however one of the broad ideas presented by the literature is that heaven will be a place where evil no longer holds sway in any of its forms. The common refrain offered at the death of a loved one goes something like this: "At least they're not suffering anymore." There are two possible reasons for this theme that can be detected in the literature. First, the biblical text of Revelation 21:4 provides abundant consolation that God "will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."²⁰³ Supporting this notion is the famous theologian Charles Hodge, who writes, "According to this view, the intermediate state, so far as believers are concerned, is one of perfect freedom from sin and suffering, and of great exaltation and blessedness."²⁰⁴

In a similar manner, Erickson writes, "Heaven will also be characterized by the removal of all evils. Being with his people, God 'will wipe every tear from their eyes.'

favored in Corinth), but the verb "to come to know" (ginosko, denoting a process). Anthony C. Thiselton, *1 Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical and Pastoral Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), Kindle locations 3207-3209.

²⁰² F. J. Boudreaux, *The Happiness of Heaven, By a Father of the Society of Jesus* (Rockford, IL: Tan Books and Publishers, 1984), Kindle locations 137-140.

²⁰³ Revelation 21:4.

²⁰⁴ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), Kindle locations 44405-44406.

There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away (Rev. 21:4).”²⁰⁵ He goes on: “The very source of evil, the one who tempts us to sin, will also be gone: ‘And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.’”²⁰⁶

When reading the literature on the subject of heaven, there is a strong pastoral component that offers words of hope and comfort for those either facing death or for people who have lost loved ones to death. The prospect of seeing God face-to-face, knowing God, and being delivered from the sphere of evil holds a prominent place in the spiritual vision model, and for this reason it has been the impetus for multitudes of books developing these themes.

Objections to the Spiritual Vision Model

The literature on the topic of heaven is heavily weighted in the direction of the spiritual vision model. Critique of the spiritual vision model is not directed against what it affirms – seeing God face-to-face, knowing him as each person is known, and being delivered from the heartaches of this fallen world – but rather by what it minimizes: namely, the resurrection of the body on a renewed earth. The recent critiques of the spiritual vision model come from several strands of thought. First is a rethinking of the passages that have commonly been understood to teach that heaven is the final destination of the believer. There is also a strong push back against a prevailing Platonic dualism that has inundated much Christian thought. Third is a passionate reminder that

²⁰⁵ Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983), 1128.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

the church has always affirmed the resurrection to be in a physical, though glorified, body.

Exegetical Objections

Numerous passages in the New Testament speak of the believer's connection to the realm of heaven. These particular texts lead some to conclude that the Christian's final destination is in heaven. The following texts are often used to support this perspective: "For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling."²⁰⁷ "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places."²⁰⁸ "But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ."²⁰⁹ "We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven."²¹⁰ "These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore, God is

²⁰⁷ 2 Corinthians 5:1.

²⁰⁸ Ephesians 1:3.

²⁰⁹ Philippians 3:20.

²¹⁰ Colossians 1:3-5.

not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.”²¹¹ “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.”²¹²

Those advocating a new creation model contend that the biblical texts given in support of the spiritual vision model are not actually saying believers will live in heaven forever with God. Their response falls along three different lines. First, each of these texts communicates a truth that heaven is the source of the believer’s eternal dwelling, spiritual blessings, citizenship, and hope. As Middleton says, these texts are not “talking about going to heaven, but rather about the source of our confidence to live on earth in a manner different from (and in tension with) the present fallen world, until Christ’s return.”²¹³ Commenting specifically on Hebrews 11, he says,

In none of these cases does the heavenly location of the items listed describe the destination of the faithful. Rather, this heavenly city (Heb. 11:16) is being “prepared” for us (or in this case, for “them,” the Old Testament saints), and this “prepared” is the same verb (*hetoimazō*) as in 1 Corinthians 2:9, Matthew 25:34, and John 14:3. The implication, if we follow the apocalyptic pattern, is that we are not going “up” to the heavenly city; rather, the heavenly city is coming here, and it will be unveiled at the last day.²¹⁴

²¹¹ Hebrews 11:13-16.

²¹² 1 Peter 1:3-5.

²¹³ Richard J. Middleton, “A New Heaven and a New Earth: The Case for a Holistic Reading of the Biblical Story of Redemption,” *Journal for Christian Theological Research* vol. 11 (2006): 274.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 276.

A second line of disagreement with the spiritual vision model of heaven, as suggested by these texts, comes from N.T. Wright:

For a start, heaven is actually a reverent way of speaking about God so that “riches in heaven” simply means “riches in God’s presence” (as we see when, elsewhere, Jesus talks about someone being or not being “rich toward God”). But then, by derivation from this primary meaning, heaven is the place where God’s purposes for the future are stored up. It isn’t where they are meant to stay so that one would need to go to heaven to enjoy them; it is where they are kept safe against the day when they will become a reality on earth.²¹⁵

A third response to the passages used to support the new vision model comes from Morna Hooker, the Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at Cambridge University. Commenting on Philippians 3:20, she says, “Although Paul has described our citizenship in heaven as something that exists (already) ‘in heaven,’ his picture is of heaven brought to earth, rather than of our being translated to heaven.”²¹⁶

When Paul refers to believers’ citizenship being in heaven, some conclude that this is an indication that the eternal state of the believer resides in heaven. N.T. Wright offers another explanation of such Pauline texts in his work, *New Heavens, New Earth*:

The point of being a citizen of a mother city is not that when life gets really tough, or when you retire, you can go back home to the mother city. The people to whom Paul was writing were Roman citizens, but they had no intention of going back to Rome. They were the means through which Roman civilization was being brought to the world of Northern Greece. If and when the going got tough there, the emperor would come from Rome to deliver them from their enemies in Philippi, and establish them as a true Roman presence right there.²¹⁷

²¹⁵ N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2008), 151.

²¹⁶ Morna Hooker, *Philippians*, The New Interpreter’s Bible: Second Corinthians - Philemon (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 11:535.

²¹⁷ N.T. Wright, *New Heavens, New Earth: The Biblical Picture of Christian Hope* (Cambridge: Grove Books Limited, 1999), 8.

Those espousing the spiritual vision model make the connection that the location of Jesus' current reign in heaven is also the same place where believers will reside eternally. Several passages in the New Testament teach believers that their inheritance and reward is reserved in heaven. However, according to Steven James, "These verses, while seeming to imply the idea that the reception of these requires believers going to heaven, actually correspond with a new creation conception in which the inheritance, reward, and the content of the hope is brought to believers on the earth and heaven is simply where they are stored to that point."²¹⁸

To summarize these objections the following may be noted: the believer's inheritance is reserved by God in heaven, who calls on his children to live out this heavenly citizenship on earth in obedience to God's will until Jesus returns to earth to establish his kingdom on the earth.

Platonic Influences

The literature from those espousing a new creation model directs much of the criticism of the spiritual vision model to its Platonic roots. In an interview with *Time* magazine, N. T. Wright blamed a Platonic influence on Christianity for a distortion of the doctrine of heaven. He explained, "Greek-speaking Christians influenced by Plato saw our cosmos as shabby and misshapen and full of lies, and the idea was not to make it right, but to escape it and leave behind our material bodies."²¹⁹ The roots of the misunderstanding go very deep and have led to a devaluation of creation and the human body, which can only find ultimate deliverance when the material is cast aside in favor of

²¹⁸ Steven James, unpublished paper, 22.

²¹⁹ David Van Biema, "Christians Wrong about Heaven, Says Bishop," *Time.com*, <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1710844,00.html> (accessed July 12, 2013).

the spiritual. This idea coincides with the themes of the spiritual vision model: a basic contrast between spirit and matter, an identification of spirit with mind or intellect, and a belief that eternal perfection entails the absence of change. Blaising notes, “Central to all three of these is the classical tradition’s notion of an ontological hierarchy in which spirit is located at the top of a descending order of being. Elemental matter occupies the lowest place.”²²⁰

Wesleyan theologian Howard A. Snyder describes the spiritual vision model in his book *Models of the Kingdom* as an “inner spiritual experience model,” which he says “may be traced to the influence of Platonist and Neoplatonist ideas on Christian thinking....”²²¹ According to Snyder, in the underpinnings of this model, “[o]ne can sense the Platonism lying behind this model.”²²²

Randy Alcorn, author of the best-selling book *Heaven*, proposes that the modern notion of heaven within the evangelical church is inundated with what he calls Christoplatonism. He asks the question, “Why are we so resistant to the idea that Heaven could be physical? The answer, I believe, is centered in an unbiblical belief that the spirit realm is good and the material world is bad, a view I am calling Christoplatonism.”²²³ In a further comment he states,

If we believe, even subconsciously, that bodies and the earth and material things are unspiritual, even evil, then we will inevitably reject or spiritualize any biblical revelation about our bodily resurrection or the physical characteristics of the New

²²⁰ Craig Blaising, “Premillennialism,” in *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, ed. Darrell Bock (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 30.

²²¹ Howard Snyder, *Models of the Kingdom* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1991), 42.

²²² *Ibid.*, 35.

²²³ Randy Alcorn, *Heaven* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 2004), 52.

Earth. That's exactly what has happened in most Christian churches, and it's a large reason for our failure to come to terms with a biblical doctrine of Heaven.²²⁴

The above comments support the model that Blaising espouses for the spiritual vision model. The foundations of this perspective have greatly impacted the church since the time of Augustine and continue to influence the way the church views the final state of believers. New creation advocates are quick to point out the implications of Platonism and are challenging the church to reconsider how it has impacted and shaped its view of heaven and the new earth.

The Resurrection of the Body

Orthodox Christianity affirms the belief in the physical resurrection of Jesus as the first fruits²²⁵ of the experience of all those united to him. Biblical texts and creeds assert the reality of a post-death, physical existence prepared for an eternal existence.²²⁶ Middleton argues, "Indeed, it was the centrality of the resurrection that served to distinguish orthodox Christian faith from gnostic interpretations in the first centuries of the early church. Whereas the variant ancient traditions that came to be called "gnosticism" are suspicious of materiality (thus denying God's direct creation of the cosmos, as well as the importance of the incarnation and the resurrection), orthodox faith wholeheartedly affirms that God loves this world he made, became flesh in the man Jesus, and is committed to redeeming the created order with resurrection being central to that redemption."²²⁷

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ 1 Corinthians 15:20.

²²⁶ Isaiah 25:6-9 and 26:19-21; Ezekiel 37:1-26; Daniel 12:2; John 6:40, 54; and 11:21-26; Romans 8:11, 23-25; 2 Corinthians 4:14; 5:1-5; 2 Thessalonians 4:14-17; 2 Timothy 1:10.

²²⁷ Richard J. Middleton, *A New Heaven and New Earth*. Unpublished manuscript, 155.

Central to the new creation model is the continuity of the resurrection body of Jesus to his pre-resurrection body. In 1 Corinthians 15:20, Paul explains that Jesus' own resurrection from the dead is a "firstfruits" of those who have fallen asleep which inaugurates the ultimate harvest of resurrection for all who are united to Christ.²²⁸ Connected to the resurrection is the promise in 2 Timothy of ruling and reigning with Christ: "The saying is trustworthy, for: If we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him."²²⁹

The scriptural doctrine of the resurrection provides hope that what God has started, he will complete. This truth enabled and inspired believers to endure suffering and hardship for the sake of Christ. Paul affirms this in Philippians 1:6, "And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ."²³⁰ The resurrection provided both a present and future source of encouragement for the believer that Christ had triumphed over death and would one day rule and reign upon the earth. Revelation 5:9 says, "And they sang a new song, saying, 'Worthy are you to take the scroll and open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.'"²³¹

The new creation model emphasizes the reality of the physical nature of the resurrection body and does not reduce it to merely a way of describing life after death. Considerable emphasis is placed on the understanding that there is a bodily existence on

²²⁸ 1 Corinthians 15:20.

²²⁹ 2 Timothy 2:12.

²³⁰ Philippians 1:6.

²³¹ Revelation 5:9.

the new earth after a disembodied existence in heaven. N.T. Wright forcefully argues that in the ancient world the term “resurrection was used to denote new bodily life after whatever sort of life death there might be. When the ancients spoke of resurrection, whether to deny it (as all pagans did) or to affirm (as some Jews did), they were referring to a two-step narrative in which resurrection, meaning new bodily life, would be preceded by an interim period of bodily death.”²³²

Scripture speaks of this new reality as a new heavens and new earth. “Heaven and earth” is a Hebrew way of referring to everything there is, or in other words, the universe. So it can be said that God will make a new universe. It is a physical reality, appropriate to the believers’ resurrected bodies. The consummation of human existence doesn’t take believers above and beyond the physical. Rather, as with Jesus’ resurrection body, the believer’s existence in the new heavens and earth will be physical. According to scripture, there will be eating and drinking and travel through a city with streets. Doubtless much of the description of the new Jerusalem in Revelation is symbolic, but it does describe some heightened, consummate form of physical existence.²³³

The distinction between these two models rests on one’s view of the nature of resurrection life. Blaising further adds that the spiritual vision model sees the resurrection life as “essentially identical with the present state of the believing dead. The new creation

²³² N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2008), 36.

²³³ John Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013), Kindle locations 27513-27519.

model, by contrast, sees the resurrection state as significantly different - as different as life is from death!”²³⁴

*The New Creation Model*²³⁵

The case for the new creation model begins with a critical reflection on the texts that have traditionally been used to support the spiritual vision model. Exegetes, with a sensitivity to Platonic influences, have re-examined a number of the primary texts and have concluded that the evidence points, not to a disembodied existence in heaven, but a resurrected, physical existence upon a renewed earth. Blaising summarizes this model:

The new creation model of eternal life draws on biblical texts that speak of a future everlasting kingdom, of a new earth and the renewal of life on it, of bodily resurrection (especially of the physical nature of Christ’s resurrection body, of social and even political concourse among the redeemed. The new creation model expects that the ontological order and scope of eternal life is essentially continuous with that of present earthly life except for the absence of sin and death. Eternal life for redeemed human beings will be an embodied life on earth (whether the present earth or a wholly new earth), set within a cosmic structure such as we have presently. It is not a timeless, static existence but rather an unending sequence of life and lived experiences. It does not reject physicality or materiality, but affirms them as essential both to a holistic anthropology and to the biblical idea of a redeemed creation.²³⁶

In the earlier section of the chapter, the biblical evidence for the new creation model was spelled out by examining the primary texts that utilized the language of a new heaven and new earth. There is virtually no debate in the literature about the prospect of the new heaven and new earth, though the majority of the information in books and articles still identifies heaven as the final state of the believer.

²³⁴ Craig Blaising, “Premillennialism,” in *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, ed. Darrell Bock (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 163.

²³⁵ The biblical evidence for the new heaven and new earth was presented in an earlier section of this chapter.

²³⁶ Craig Blaising, “Premillennialism,” in *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, ed. Darrell Bock (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 162.

The Rise of the New Creation Model

In 1979, Anthony Hoekema, professor of theology at Calvin Theological Seminary, published the *Bible and the Future*.²³⁷ This seminal work launched a discussion that shifted the focus of the eternal destiny of the believer from a temporary, intermediate state to that of eternal life on a new earth. The reason for its importance is that it retained a belief in the fulfillment of the land promises given to Israel, but saw their fulfillment on the new earth, not in a millennial kingdom. Though the response has been slow in coming, more recently this model has seen numerous publications advancing Hoekema's original thesis.

In the final chapter of the *Bible and the Future*, Hoekema articulates his position on the final state of those who are in Christ:

The Bible teaches that believers will go to heaven when they die. That they will be happy during the intermediate state between death and resurrection is clearly taught in Scripture. But their happiness will be provisional and incomplete. For the completion of their happiness they await the resurrection of the body and the new earth which God will create as the culmination of his redemptive work.²³⁸

He concludes, "To leave the new earth out of consideration when we think of the final state of believers is greatly to impoverish biblical teaching about the life to come."²³⁹

What is the biblical evidence for the model articulated by new creation supporters? The literature points in two directions. First is a review of the exegetical evidence for the new creation model.²⁴⁰ In an earlier section of this chapter, the

²³⁷ Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), 274-287.

²³⁸ Ibid., 274.

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ This evidence was presented in an earlier section of this chapter, though only in a survey fashion. For this reason, the researcher will only focus on the biblical theology argument and the place of Romans 8 in this portion of the chapter.

researcher spelled out the evidence used by new creation advocates for the belief in a future, new earth upon which believers will live their lives in a glorified body. Next, a common theme among new creation proponents is the importance of tracing out the biblical storyline from creation to consummation. Finally, a great deal of weight is placed upon the continuity between the resurrection of the believer and the redemption of the entire universe, as spelled out in Romans 8.

The Biblical Storyline and the New Heavens and New Earth

The biblical storyline paints a picture of God's redemptive activity, initiated after man's rebellion and culminating in a new heaven and new earth. In between the fall and the consummation there is the story of God's redemptive activities finding their fulfillment in the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. Though the kingdom of God has been inaugurated in the ascension of Jesus to the Father's right hand, evil prevails and death continues to hold sway. Supporters of a new creation model challenge the dichotomy between the redemption of the body and the redemption of the soul. The incarnation itself gives substantiation for the role of the physical body in the ongoing purposes of God in the world. What began, as a good creation will find its fulfillment in a good, new creation, which will be devoid of the effects of the fall and will bring about a holistic redemption of God's people and his entire creation.

D.S. Russell, a specialist in Jewish Apocalyptic asserts,

The redemption which God will bring about will involve not only man himself and not only the nation of Israel, but also the whole created universe. The usurped creation will be restored; the corrupted universe will be cleansed; the created world will be re-created. Thus, throughout these writings, there is a close relationship between God's act of creation and his act of redemption.²⁴¹

²⁴¹ D.S. Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1964), 280.

Articulating a similar theme, Old Testament scholar Donald Gowan says,

Old Testament eschatology is a worldly home. The OT does not scorn, ignore, or abandon the kind of life which human beings experience in this world in favor of speculation concerning some other, better place or form of existence, to be hoped for after death or achieved before death through meditation and spiritual exercises. This sets the OT in sharp contrast to Gnosticism, to the otherworldly emphases that often have appeared in Christianity, and to the concepts of salvation taught by Hinduism and Buddhism.²⁴²

Wittmer asks his readers to place themselves in God's position after the Fall. He asks,

What is your next move? I doubt you would scrap the world, admitting that it is broken beyond repair. If you did, wouldn't you be conceding victory to Satan? You would be admitting that Satan had won, for the sin he introduced had overpowered your good creation, making it irretrievably evil. No, if you are God, you will never concede that. Instead, you will forcefully strike back at Satan with your plan of redemption (Genesis 12-Revelation 22). Not content to merely snatch a few souls from this mess and leave everything else to the devil, you will not rest until you have redeemed every last corner of your good creation from evil's grasp... According to Scripture, this is precisely what God is doing.²⁴³

Redemption of the Whole Universe

The advocates of the new earth model find the spiritual vision model lacking in that it presents what they consider to be a partial redemption; namely, the redemption of the soul. Citing Romans 8, new creation supporters contend that Paul is making a case for a holistic redemption where the redemption of the body is tied to the redemption of the earth. There is a robust resistance to the notion of the earth being decimated as though it were not part of God's original design. One aspect of this continuity between this earth and the earth to come is the significance of the meaning of "new" in Revelation 21:1. For example, theologian Ron Rhodes, when discussing the new heaven and new earth, comments,

²⁴² Donald Gowan, *Eschatology in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 122.

²⁴³ Michael E. Wittmer, *Heaven is a Place on Earth: Why Everything You Do Matters to God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 187-188.

The New Heavens and New Earth will be this present universe purified of all evil, sin suffering, and death. Bible scholars who hold this view tell us that the Greek word used to designate the newness of the cosmos is not *neos* but *kainos*. *Neos* means “new in time” or “new in origin.” But *kainos* means “new in nature” or “new in quality.” Hence, the phrase “new heavens and a new earth” refers not to a cosmos that is totally other than the present cosmos. Rather, the new cosmos will stand in continuity with the present cosmos but will be utterly renewed and renovated.²⁴⁴

The thrust of the new creation model seeks to make a strong connection between the resurrection of the body and the renewal of the earth. The physical body is not destroyed or annihilated at death, but awaits a bodily resurrection. The same holds true for creation. It too will experience a form of redemption when it is renewed as the place where God’s glory will be wonderfully manifest in and on the new earth. As George Ladd notes, “[T]he biblical idea of redemption always includes the earth.”²⁴⁵

Summary

The pursuit of fine theological distinctions might bring about the ire of some who disagree with making matters of eschatology debating points. However, as seen in the literature, the distinction between the spiritual vision model and the new creation model of the eternal state have significant differences as to the nature of the resurrection body and the location where that body will dwell for all eternity. One set of writings conveys the notion that heaven is the eternal state of the believer, while a growing number of publications support the idea that a new earth is the final destiny of the believer. What is increasingly evident is that the traditional model is being reconsidered in the literature to

²⁴⁴ Ron Rhodes, *The Wonder of Heaven* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2009), 133.

²⁴⁵ George Eldon Ladd, *The Presence of the Future: The Eschatology of Biblical Realism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 59.

the point that the various models are addressing each other and carving out their differences.

Some ramifications of each perspective may not be as weighty as others, yet the literature suggests that embracing the spiritual vision model has serious consequences for how one understands the overarching plan of God for his redeemed people and the creation. One can also see that there is considerable debate over how certain texts that support the spiritual vision model have been utilized. The seriousness of this debate is not merely one of theology, but ethics and how one lives out all of life under the sphere of God's sovereign rule and universal plan.

The purpose of this study was to examine how evangelical theologians account for the way academic and popular literature differs in their understanding of the final state of the believer. This section had as its goal the examination of the biblical and theological literature on the topic. The evidence presented demonstrates that there is a wide divergence of opinion on the subject of the nature of the eternal state of the believer in Jesus Christ. The predominant view for centuries has been the spiritual vision model of the eternal state, which is presented as ethereal, spiritual, etc. Scripture provides a basis for this position, but it is apparent that there is a recent body of literature that is pushing beyond the spiritual vision model of the eternal state to what has become known as the new creation model. Predictably, the literature on the new creation model has increased with the publication of several major works supporting this position. The level of intensity over this topic shows just how important this topic is for the church.

Chapter Three

Project Methodology

The purpose of this study was to examine how evangelical theologians account for the manner in which academic and popular literature differs in its understanding of the final state of the believer. The researcher sought to understand why the vast majority of literature speaks about heaven as the final destiny of the believer, while the biblical evidence points to the eternal state being on a renewed earth. The assumption of this study was that laypeople, pastors, and many theologians have confused the temporary intermediate state of the believer, called heaven, with the believer's final state on a new earth. In order to address this purpose, the researcher identified three main areas of focus that were critical to understanding this topic. These include the following areas: heaven as the intermediate state, the new heavens and the new earth as the final state, and the implications for the church about the difference between these two perspectives. To examine these areas more closely, the following research questions served as the intended focus for this study:

1. How do evangelical theologians account for the limited focus on the new earth in academic and popular literature?
2. What are the implications for the church with this difference in focus?
3. How do evangelical theologians (as professors who preach in churches) negotiate the differences between their own understanding of scripture, regarding these issues, and the default expectations of their listeners?

Design of the Study

The design of this study followed a qualitative approach as described by Sharan B. Merriam in her book *Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education*.²⁴⁶ She describes qualitative research as “interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is how they make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world.”²⁴⁷ Merriam identifies five characteristics of qualitative research:²⁴⁸ First, researchers are interested in understanding how people make senses of their world and the experiences they have in the world. Second, the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. Third, qualitative research usually involves fieldwork. Fourth, it primarily employs an inductive research strategy. Finally, the product of qualitative study is richly descriptive, utilizing words and pictures to convey what the researcher has learned.

This study employed a qualitative research design, and the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews of theologians and biblical scholars as the primary source of data gathering. This qualitative approach provided the researcher the best opportunity to discover the most comprehensive and descriptive data from the perspective of the theologians interviewed. In order to determine how theologians and biblical scholars understand the final state of believers, the qualitative research method held decided advantages over other research methods. One way in which this method proved helpful in data gathering was the flexibility of the semi-structured interviews, which allowed the

²⁴⁶ Sharan B. Merriam, *Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998).

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 6.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 6-8.

researcher to discover how the interviewees had come to embrace their positions, as well as how they applied those truths in their teaching and preaching ministries. This approach also allowed the researcher to include questions that related to each theologian's particular area of study. Since the topic covered multiple fields of biblical, theological and historical study, the ability to press deeper into the relevance of those areas provided a rich experience.

The qualitative approach also allowed the researcher to deal with a measure of ambiguity about the topic. As Merriam indicates, the researcher plays the role of a detective, "to search for the clues, to follow up leads, to find the missing pieces, to put the puzzle together."²⁴⁹ Since there was no consensus about the final state of the believer on a new earth, it was interesting to reflect with the theologians on how they had come to their current thinking on the topic.

Participant Sample Selection

This research required participants who were able to communicate in depth about the biblical/theological topic of the eternal state of the believer. "Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which most can be learned."²⁵⁰ Therefore, the purposeful study sample consisted of a selection of theologians within the Reformed and Evangelical tradition.

All of the participants had a conservative theological perspective, yet not all of them were situated within a Reformed tradition. Since the topic of the eternal state of the believer has little to do with denominational distinctives, this did not hinder the

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 271.

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 61.

researcher's ability to capture the necessary information. Each of the participants had earned doctorates in their respective fields, and all of them had published widely. All but one of the theologians was teaching in an accredited theological seminary or divinity school. One interview came from a pastor who had previously taught at two of the most well known schools in the Evangelical tradition. Participants were purposefully chosen because of their knowledge of the topic or because of their particular expertise in the field.

The initial selection of participants included professors from the fields of Old Testament, New Testament, church history, systematic theology, and world view/culture. This cross section of scholars provided a rich biblical, theological, and historical perspective on the topic, as well as one with a particular interest in the application of the topic for the development of a Christian worldview.

The final study was conducted through Skype and Facetime interviews with theologians from Reformed and Evangelical seminaries across the United States. Each participant was initially contacted by telephone or email, and all agreed to participate in the interview process. Before each interview was conducted, the researcher emailed the primary research questions to the participants. Several commented on how helpful this was as the participants prepared for the interview. During the interviews, the researcher also noticed that the participants had those notes in hand as the researcher began the questioning. This was an indicator that they had given considerable thought to the issues. The researcher also had numerous other questions prepared, with some particular questions for each interviewee based upon their area of expertise. Each participant signed a formal consent form to participate in their interview, which assured them that the

researcher would keep their identity confidential and that the recordings and the transcribed notes would be destroyed after the completion of the dissertation.

Introduction to the Theologians Interviewed in this Study

Six theologians were selected to participate in this study. All of these theologians were men over the age of forty, with at least ten years of experience in academic teaching. Three of the participants were engaged in writing books on the particular topic of this dissertation. This provided a remarkable level of interest on the part of those being interviewed. All names and identifiable information of participants have been changed to protect their anonymity.

Dr. Senterton is professor of professor of biblical worldview and exegesis at a theological seminary and is the current president of a major theological association. He is the co-author of a significant book that has been published in multiple languages. One of his publications received a Book-of-the-Year award from a prominent Christian magazine. Professor Senterton holds a Ph.D. in theology, and he is preparing a major work on eschatology to be published.

Dr. Wittstone received his doctor of philosophy in systematic theology, and he is the author of multiple books, with two more ready to be published. The researcher was greatly assisted in this research when he received Dr. Wittstone's pre-publication of a new book on living life in light of the coming new heavens and new earth. The researcher was able to spend several hours in the participant's home discussing the topic prior to the formal interview.

Dr. Rossner is a specialist in Paul's letters and in Septuagint studies. A member of the editorial boards of two major professional publications, he also serves an important

role in the Society of Biblical Literature. He received his Ph. D. in New Testament and taught in a well-known seminary for many years. He is the author of three technical works on the Septuagint and Pauline Studies.

Dr. McDay is a recognized authority on the New Testament, early Christianity, and the historical Jesus. He is the professor of New Testament at a theological seminary in the Midwest. Dr. McDay has given interviews on radios across the nation, has appeared on television, and regularly speaks at local churches, conferences, colleges, and seminaries. Dr. McDay obtained his Ph.D., and he has authored more than twenty books, as well as writing a well-read blog.

Dr. Penn holds a Ph.D. and is a specialist in culture and theology, postmodern Christian thought, and missional theology. He has served as president of a theological seminary for more than twenty-five years, and he taught systematic and historical theology at a major evangelical seminary prior to his current post.

Dr. Oksam received a Ph.D. in intellectual history and is the author of several books. He has written on issues related to this research and is also a specialist on Jonathan Edwards. He was the only participant who was not currently teaching at a graduate level, but is now in pastoral ministry.

Data Collection Methods

This study utilized semi-structured interviews for primary data gathering.

Merriam describes this approach:

In this type of interview either all of the questions are more flexibly worded, or the interview is a mix of more and less structured questions. Usually, specific information is desired from all the respondents, in which case there is a highly structured section to the interview. But the largest part of the interview is guided by a list of questions or issues to be explored, and neither the exact wording nor the order of the questions is determined ahead of time. This format allows the

researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic.²⁵¹

The open-ended nature of the interview questions facilitated the researcher's ability to build upon participant responses to complex issues in order to explore them more thoroughly. Ultimately, these methods enabled the researcher to look for common themes, patterns, concerns, and contrasting views across the participants.²⁵²

Six theologians were interviewed for sixty to ninety minutes. Prior to the interview, each scholar was informed of the research topic. In order to accommodate participant schedules, the interviews were scheduled in advance through emails and then confirmed with a final email to solidify the date and time. The researcher audiotaped the interviews with a digital recorder and video recorded the sessions via call recorder for Skype and a recording on an iPad using the application voice record as a backup. Having a video recording of the interviews allowed the researcher to review each interview to capture the body language, voice tone, and level of interest in the questions. The researcher completed the data gathering over the course of ten days. After each interview, field notes with descriptive and reflective observations were written, and a professional transcriptionist transcribed the recordings.

Analysis Procedures

This study utilized the constant comparison method of routinely analyzing the data throughout the interview process. This method provided for the ongoing revision, clarification, and evaluation of the resultant data categories.²⁵³ When the interviews and

²⁵¹ Ibid., 273.

²⁵² Ibid., 11 and 278ff.

²⁵³ Ibid., 159.

observation notes were fully transcribed into computer files, they were printed, coded and analyzed. The analysis focused on discovering and identifying common themes, patterns, and emphasis across the variation of participants, as well as congruence or discrepancy between the different groups of participants and whether or not they saw the value in pursuing the topic further in their own teaching.

Researcher Stance

The researcher brought some inherent biases to this study, which needs to be taken into consideration. Limiting the research to only include theologians within the Reformed and Evangelical tradition, some that had been the researcher's former professors, as well as the personal experiences of more than thirty years in pastoral ministry, affected the researcher's perspective during the research process. The researcher has frequently asked those under his care about the final state of the believer and has never had a person indicate that believers will spend eternity on a renewed earth. The default answer has always been, "We will spend eternity in heaven." With a desire to be faithful to scripture and to be as theologically exact as humanly possible, the researcher has felt uneasy about the lack of understanding about the final state of the believer in Jesus Christ.

A theological bias is also evident in that the researcher's initial theological training took place within a dispensational, premillennial, fundamentalist setting. While thankful for the influence, the researcher no longer holds that particular eschatological perspective and is very sensitive to the assumptions and hermeneutics of that background.

Limitations of the Study

This study carried with it some inherent limitations, which also need to be taken into consideration. The research included only theologians within the Reformed and Evangelical tradition. Had the study included Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Lutheran or Liberal scholars, the researcher would have been less likely to arrive at the specific information he was seeking, and the volume of data would have taken the study beyond manageable limits.

Another limitation of this study was arranging interviews with professors given their teaching and traveling schedules. The researcher started with a list of eighteen theologians who could address the topic with a particular degree of scholarly ability. The researcher intentionally chose scholars who had written commentaries or articles on the specific biblical passages that spoke of the new heavens and new earth or on heaven in particular, though that was not always possible. The number of interviewees was then reduced to six.

Another bias that must be noted is that two of the interviewees were former professors of the researcher during his theological studies. There was also the difficulty of not conducting face-to-face interviews. The theologians that participated in the study are scattered throughout the United States, and the time and expense involved made it impossible for the researcher to conduct face-to-face interviews with all of the subjects. Nevertheless, the interviews were very personable and casual, with only one technical difficulty, which required restarting Skype before the questioning continued.

Summary of the Project Methodology

Utilizing the qualitative research approach, the researcher sought to account for the way academic and popular literature differs in its understanding of the final state of the believer. The study included a semi-structured interview process examining what theologians believed contributed to the lack of literature on the final state of the believer, as well as the implications for such a view. This qualitative design allowed for deeper, emic analysis of the reasons heaven is predominately presented as the final state of the believer, as opposed to life on a renewed earth. While there were differences of opinion amongst the theologians, a sufficient amount of helpful information was gathered to accomplish the purpose of this study. The findings, which resulted from the qualitative research methodology, will be detailed in the next chapter.

Chapter Four

Findings

The purpose of this study was to examine how evangelical theologians account for the way academic and popular literature differ in their understanding of the final state of the believer. To that end, this chapter utilizes the findings of the six interviews on common themes and relevant insights pertaining to the research questions for this study.

The following research questions served as the intended focus for this study:

1. How do evangelical theologians account for the limited focus on the new earth in academic and popular literature?
2. What are the implications for the church with this difference in focus?
3. How do evangelical theologians (specifically professors who preach in churches) negotiate the differences between their own understanding of scripture, regarding these issues, and the default expectations of their listeners?

Common Themes Accounting for the Limited Focus on the New Earth in Popular and Academic Literature

In response to the first research question, it was apparent that the limited focus on the new earth was predominantly due to the tradition of referring to heaven as the final destiny of the believer. Senterton explained, “You could say the primary focus on heaven is what accounts for the limited focus on new earth.” One professor wondered if the new creation model could ever become the predominant view given centuries of the spiritual vision tradition. When asked why the literature, at both a popular and academic level, had

such a limited focus on the new heavens and new earth, the following reasons were given.

Hymnology

One of the primary instruments for perpetuating the spiritual vision model of the eternal state resides in the music that is sung in worship services. Dr. Oksam asserts:

I think the contemporary evangelical world has been massively shaped by our hymnology. That extends even more so perhaps to contemporary songs and not just the ancient hymns. I grew up Southern Baptist. We sang, “When the roll is called up yonder, I’ll be there.” Or “When we all get to heaven, what a day of rejoicing that will be.” Probably every hymn that I grew up with had an unconscious shaping on my thinking and expectation envisioned death to be followed by an eternity of this disembodied spiritual life in some upper part of the galaxies in God’s presence.

Dr. Wittstone made an appeal to musicians and songwriters to “change the lyrics.” Recognizing the power of songs to shape our thinking, he said, “It’s going to be hard to change people’s minds if we keep singing Platonic stuff.” Wittstone went further and pointed out that even some of the better hymns of the day depict heaven as the final state of the believer. “Even the popular song, *In Christ Alone*, has this line, ‘Until he returns or calls me home,’ which in a way can be okay, because Jesus is your home, but I just don’t think that’s helpful. People keep seeing my home is up there somewhere.”

The respondents were keenly aware of the impact of music for the transmission of theological truths and called for a rethinking of lyrics if the new creation model is going to make any headway. Given the rise of contemporary Christian music that is played on radio stations, Oksam commented, “That extends even more so perhaps to contemporary songs and not just the ancient hymns.” Dr. Rossner made this observation, “When I think about the music that we hear today, I don’t see much of anything at all in the

contemporary worship scene in which the lyrics focus upon the new earth or the idea of an embodied existence of resurrected life.”

There were two themes that each of the respondents believed contributed to the limited focus on the new heavens and new earth in the literature. The first was the subtle influence of Platonism on Christian thought, and particularly how it has shaped the Christian view of heaven. A second predominant stimulus was the role of dispensationalism. The fact that every professor identified these two influences upon how people understood the eternal state was significant.

*The Influence of Platonism*²⁵⁴

Without exception, each of the professors suggested that the most prominent influence on how evangelicals thought about heaven resided in the enduring influence of Platonism on Christian theology. Several suggested that it might be surprising for Christians to understand how much Platonism has affected their views of the eternal state.

²⁵⁴ Dr. Michael Vlach, professor of historical theology at Master’s Seminary, offers this summary of Plato’s thought: “Platonism is rooted in the ideas of the great ancient Greek philosopher, Plato (427–347 B.C.). Plato was one of the first philosophers to argue that reality is primarily ideal or abstract. With his ‘theory of forms,’ he asserted that ultimate reality is not found in objects and concepts that we experience on earth. Instead, reality is found in ‘forms’ or ‘ideas’ that transcend our physical world. These forms operate as perfect universal templates for everything we experience in the world. For example, all horses on earth are imperfect replicas of the universal ‘horseness’ that exists in another dimension. One result of Platonism was the belief that matter is inferior to the spiritual. Thus, there is a dualism between matter and the immaterial. This perspective naturally leads to negative perceptions concerning the nature of the physical world and even our human bodies. Plato’s account of Socrates in *Phaedo* is one such example. When sentenced to death, Socrates rebuked his friends for mourning over him by declaring that he longed for death so he could escape his carnal body and focus on higher spiritual values in a spiritual realm. For Plato (and Socrates), the human body is like a tomb for the soul. Plato’s ideas have had an enormous impact.” Michael J. Vlach, “Platonism’ Influence on Christian Eschatology,” [mymission.lamission.edu](https://mymission.lamission.edu/userdata/5Cschustm/5Cdocs/5CPlatonism_and_EarlyChristEschatology.pdf), https://mymission.lamission.edu/userdata/5Cschustm/5Cdocs/5CPlatonism_and_EarlyChristEschatology.pdf (accessed May 4, 2013).

Dr. Wittstone goes so far as saying Platonism is the “number one effect” on how people envision heaven.

The respondent’s summarized Plato’s concept of heaven as spiritual freedom from the material world. Plato believed that man is primarily made up of soul, and that man’s soul is trapped in a body, awaiting deliverance. Plato’s phrase “*soma sema*” means the body is a prison or tomb for the soul. To Plato, salvation occurs when the soul is set free from this prison-body. This concept gained a foothold with some of the church fathers, who in turn articulated a concept of heaven under the influence of Plato.

Dr. Oksam explained how Platonic thought impacts one’s view of heaven: There is a mindset, which says, “The body’s evil. Since I have to fight against sinful lust and temptations, heaven will be getting out of this body and just living as a disembodied spirit.” There is, to some extent, this notion that whatever is material and physical and tangible and empirically real is not just secondary to, but sub-spiritual. It’s not the ultimate for which I have been redeemed and toward which I’m moving. It’s this notion that [the] spiritual is somehow the antithesis to the physical is very much embedded in people’s minds. I quote to people C.S. Lewis’s comment all the time, “Matter is good. God created it.” Professor Senterton suggested that the influence of Augustine on Christian

thought has promoted the role of Platonism within theology. He noted,

Beginning with the second century, we have the rise of Platonic views and by the third and fourth century, with the stimulus of Neo-Platonism on Augustine, the notion was conveyed that there was a transcendent realm which is far better than the present reality. It wasn’t called heaven in Platonism, but the Christians put those ideas together that began to influence theology.

Wittstone agrees, “Augustine knew that matter wasn’t evil. He corrected that part of Neo-Platonism, but he did seem to think that matter was inferior and that physical life is inferior to a higher spiritual life. That, I think, has probably the greatest influence in Christian history.”²⁵⁵ This researcher asked the question about how this continued to

²⁵⁵ Philosopher Gary Habermas observes that Plato’s concept of forms, along with his cosmology and his views on the immortality of the soul, “probably has the greatest influence in the philosophy of religion . . . Christian thought also came under the influence of Platonism, as scholars of the third century such as

affect Reformed and evangelical theologians. He commented, “Even Calvin says about ten times in the *Institutes* that the body is the prison of the soul. That’s just embarrassing for Calvinists.”

The general consensus among the respondents was that Platonic thought had a profound influence upon the early church fathers’ theology of heaven. Consequently, heaven was viewed primarily as a spiritual realm as opposed to an earthly, physical reality. There appeared to be an embarrassment among the respondents to the widespread embracing of Platonism that remained in much of contemporary Christian theology regarding heaven and the physical body. Yet, what these professors observed is that the attempt to correct the influences of Platonism was extremely difficult. As one professor noted, “Incoming seminarians are steeped in Platonic thought. They just don’t know it.”

The Role of Dispensationalism

The second major influence that contributed to a limited focus on the new earth is the impact of the theological system known as dispensationalism.²⁵⁶ At its core,

Clement of Alexandria and Origen mixed this Greek philosophy with their theology. In particular, Augustine’s interpretation of Plato dominated Christian thought for the next thousand years after his death in the fifth century.” Gary R. Habermas, “Plato, Platonism,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1984), 859-860.

²⁵⁶ The history of Dispensationalism is traced in the followings works: C. Norman Kraus, *Dispensationalism in America: Its Rise and Development* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1958); Clarence B. Bass, *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism: Its Historical Genesis and Ecclesiastical Implications* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005); and Michael Williams, *This World Is Not My Home: The Origins and Development of Dispensationalism* (Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Mentor, 2003). The primary publications advancing Dispensational theology are associated with Dallas Theological Seminary and are espoused in: Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1965) and Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology in 8 Volumes* (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947). This movement has undergone a shift toward what is being called Progressive Dispensationalism. This can be seen in the writings of Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010); Darrell L. Bock, Elliott Johnson & J. Lanier Burns, *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism: A Comparison of Traditional and Progressive Views* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic & Professional, 1999); Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000); Robert Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism: The Interface Between Dispensational and Non-Dispensational Theology*

dispensationalism distinguishes sharply between Israel and the church in the plan of God. Israel is the object of the earthly promises of God while the church is assured of a heavenly reward. Under this model, God has two distinct peoples and separate plans for each. Dispensationalism understands Old Testament prophecies as applying only to Israel, the earthly people of God. Rather than “spiritualizing” such prophecies, they advocate a literal fulfillment of God’s promises sometime in the future. The primary hermeneutical feature of this school of thought is the necessary distinction between Israel and the church for all time and eternity. Dr. Oksam, who was trained in a dispensational school recalled, “We were taught in seminary that Israel is the earthly people of God and the church is the heavenly people of God. Since the church has no covenantal claim to the Holy Land, much less the whole earth, our expectation is to live in some supra-earthly realm that is unrelated to what's happening upon this planet.”

The view that there will always be two people of God, even into the eternal state, provides a powerful impetus for the spiritual vision model.²⁵⁷ The church will find its destiny in a heavenly existence, while Israel inherits the earth. Again, Oksam comments, “Christians, who have been immersed in dispensational teaching, have it in their minds that whatever purposes God has for this earth, only applies to the ethnic nation of Israel.” Several professors noted that progressive dispensationalists have begun to move away from such sharp distinctions. Rossner suggested, “Dispensationalism no longer captures the imaginations of younger Evangelicals to the degree that it used to.” He went on to

(Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010). For a fair, critical treatment of this system of thought one can read Vern Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1993).

²⁵⁷ However, it must be noted that those who espouse a spiritual vision model are not necessarily indebted to the dispensational framework.

suggest, “social media probably plays a role” in the demise of dispensationalism: “As I look at my own teenagers, there is a desire for a Christianity that is engaged with the world, that isn’t escapist, but more communal.”

McDay wondered how dispensationalism could be consistent on its major hermeneutical point since “the millennium is extraordinarily earthy.” He noted that much of dispensational eschatology looked to the millennium as the fulfillment of the prophetic promises, which are going to take place in the “real world.” Given the radical distinction between Israel and the church, McDay suggested that with this perspective, “in the long run, it’s hard to get the church located upon this planet in the eternal state.”

The profound influence of dispensationalism upon American evangelicalism is not in doubt, according to those interviewed. The consensus was that this hermeneutical system contributed largely to the spiritual vision model of the final state of the believer.

*The Impact of Fundamentalism*²⁵⁸

The foundations of modern American fundamentalism had what Dr. Oksam said was an “escapist theology,” whether they intended it or not. In an effort to combat the rising tide of liberalism within churches and seminaries, the fundamentalist movement started Bible colleges and divinity schools. Along with the development of its own institutions, there was a withdrawal from denominations that were trending toward liberalism. The clarion call of the movement was “separate” and “come out from among them.” This separatist perspective went hand in glove with its eschatology and assessment that culture was increasingly “worldly.”

²⁵⁸ For a defense of Fundamentalism cf. George Dollar, *A History of Fundamentalism* (Greenville, SC: Bob Jones University Press, 1973). For a critical review of Fundamentalism see George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2006). Modern Fundamentalism’s eschatology is largely grounded in Dispensational eschatology.

Oksam portrays fundamentalism's outlook in this way:

Our culture is corrupt. Society is going to hell in a hand basket. Post-millennialism is liberal. This world will be utterly destroyed. There's no hope for change in the political system or the educational system. This is Satan's world. He has dominion. He's the god of this age. What Christianity does, it comes to me with a message of, "You can get out of here. You can get out now by believing in Jesus. And you'll get out later when you're raptured. You can escape all the turmoil of this life."

Another stated, "Fundamentalism, with its highly individualistic viewpoint, conveys that life is all about me and Jesus, and getting my sins forgiven. Entering into His presence basically cuts off and severs any connection with what is going on globally, what is going on in any sense related to this Earth." Senterton observed that the larger theological framework of fundamentalism, with its dispensational eschatology communicates, "This world is destined for fire. And everything in it is irredeemable, except individual human souls. Let's get out of here and go to be with Jesus."

Dr. Senterton, reflecting further on the original research question said, "The lingering fundamentalist mentality is massive and perhaps primary in the failure to recon[nect] with the idea of a new earth. You talk to a fundamentalist about a new earth, they'll say, 'What? You're trying to tell me I'm coming back [to] live in the very place that I'm trying to escape from? That's insane. That makes no sense to me whatsoever.' That is a massively significant factor in this whole thing."

As this researcher probed further into how the fundamentalist/dispensational connection manifests itself in the church, Dr. Wittstone, who teaches a course on ethnic ministry, said he has been trying to teach the new creation model to African-American pastors, but, "[i]t does not fly because they want to leave this earth. They don't want to come back to the earth where they've experienced so much racism and poverty and

injustice. He said the creation model is going to be a really hard sell in the black church.”²⁵⁹

Inherent within some aspects of fundamentalism is the negative perspective it has toward creation and this earth. This mindset has ramifications for the future of this earth as described by Dr. Senterton: “When you come along and say, ‘God’s final consummate purpose is to redeem this earth and for you to live on it forever,’” to them, that’s just wrapped up in a whole worldview that is foreign to their way of thinking.”

The researcher was able to detect through the interviews just how tightly connected the ancient philosophy of Plato and the modern fundamentalist movement is in its disdain for the material creation and the physical body. For the latter, the eschatology of dispensationalism assumes a dire perspective of the earth, as it is seen as beyond repair and therefore deserves annihilation. The same holds true for the physical body, which is the instrument of lust and holds one back from a truly spiritual experience. With these perspectives, the interviews revealed a deep connection between Platonism, dispensationalism and fundamentalism that undermines the prospect of a new creation model of the eternal state in favor of a spiritual vision model.

Differences in Application Between the Spiritual Vision Model and the New Creation Model

The second research question addressed the potential differences between the spiritual vision model and the new creation model with its focus on heaven as a final destiny of the believer, as opposed to the destiny of the believer reigning with Christ on a new earth. What are the implications for the church with this difference in focus?

²⁵⁹ More will be said about this account in the section on preaching.

One may not initially see a practical difference between the spiritual vision model and the new creation model. In both instances, the believer is entering into an inheritance in the presence of their Savior, whether in heaven or on earth. Does this distinction have any discernable practical difference? From the response of those interviewed, the answer would be “Yes.” How a person views their final destiny impacts how they assess God’s purposes for this present earth, as well as how they understand their calling in life to pursue righteousness. The interviews revealed three implications of one’s view of their final destiny: a positive or negative view of creation, the significance of the resurrection of the body, and the distinction between the internal and external pursuit of righteousness.

Creation

The first implication of the difference between the new creation model and the spiritual vision model was the increasing interest in ecological concerns and creation care coming from the new creation camp. Each professor noted that segments of the evangelical church have often conveyed a sense of disdain for creation, driven by two beliefs: this present earth is cursed beyond repair and the physical realm is inferior to the spiritual. This way of thinking is consistent with the belief that the earth is going to be annihilated and is destined for destruction. Yet, to a person, the responders upheld the goodness of creation and saw the primary distinction between the new creation model and the spiritual vision model was how each understood the stewardship of the earth. The concern for drawing out the logical conclusion to the spiritual vision model was expressed by Penn: “I think of Christians who may be part of the tendency to take the

ruling aspect of the image of God in the wrong direction. It is a concomitant of thinking that the end of the earth is simply one of destruction.”

While each professor was in agreement that the new creation model was more likely to see continuity between this earth and the new earth, this did not mean that each respondent drew the same application for how one was to express creation care. In fact, there were deep differences. Nevertheless, if one embraced a Platonic outlook of the material world, with a dose of dispensationalism, then the outcome would likely be as Dr. Wittstone suggests: “suspicion of the material world, which then leads to a low view of the incarnation, and ultimately, to a low view of the resurrection.” Another stated, “It has led to a de-valuing of the here and now.”

Dr. Senterton expressed his opinion that holistic, new creation eschatology is really “a theology of creation:” “God made this world. He breathed into dust the breath of life. He got his hands dirty. He looked to the complex world he made and said [it] was very good. Concrete, finite existence is good.” Taking the idea further, he said, “The question is not just whether or not you think there is going to be a new earth. The question is whether you think God’s will is for the healing of the world. When you really believe that, it changes your life even if you haven’t consciously come to the new earth doctrine yet.” He went on to explain:

This world is where God has placed me. I’m an earth creature. I’m made for this world. I love this world God made because God so loved the world. I’m an image of God. I want to love the world too. That’s really the grounding of the vision of the new earth. It’s not just whether there will be, it’s this impetus to care for the world that God cares for. We [are to be] be like God, to love what God loves. That is really what makes the difference.

While all the professors recognized creation care as significant and biblical, there were distinct reasons for pursuing this venture. As Dr. Senterton argued, we should care

for the creation because it is good and God loves it. But Dr. Wittstone drove the argument in a different direction: We are to value God's creation, not only because it is good, but also because it too will one day be redeemed. He explained,

I see it as creation, fall, redemption; there's a complementary relation between creation and redemption. Redemption restores creation is one continued unified story, but there's also a tension between them. Redemption does trump creation. What I'm saying now is that redemption is more than creation but it's not less than. Redemption does restore creation, but that's not all it does. It saves us from hell. In one sense creation is foundational for redemption, because redemption makes no sense without creation. But I also want to give privilege of place to redemption. I want my children to be fine flourishing humans, but I want them to love Jesus. I don't want them to go to hell when they die.

Professor McDay and Wittstone noted the importance of tracing the biblical story line that culminates in the redemption of creation and not make creation care greater than the redemption of humans. Wittstone said, "There's this tension we have to embrace. I think the new earth helps us bring the story together, but we have to be careful that we don't minimize the specialness of redemption." McDay said, "While we are to care for creation, there is virtually nothing in the New Testament endorsing such an idea."

So while each of the professors endorsed a greater emphasis on creation care, which they sensed came from the new creation model, it was not clear how that was spelled out in practice. It was also apparent that adherence to a new creation model was promoted from two different directions. The first saw greater care for creation grounded in a creation mandate, while the other was driven by the biblical storyline that creation itself would one day be redeemed.

Resurrection of the Body

The bodily resurrection of Jesus is one of the fundamental tenets of the Christian faith. The New Testament affirms that believers in Jesus will experience a bodily

resurrection in like manner to Jesus.²⁶⁰ One of the critical distinctions between the spiritual vision model and the new creation model is that the latter puts the future, bodily resurrection of believers front and center in its model. Each of the respondents recognized that the spiritual vision model might leave one with the impression that the future of the believer is lived out in a disembodied state in heaven. This viewpoint is consistent with what was discovered in the literature review. However, Dr. McDay suggested that human bodies on the new earth “correspond to the resurrection body of Jesus.”

Several of the theologians were able to describe specific cases where the spiritual vision model and the bodily resurrection seemed in conflict with the default expectation of most students. Dr. Wittstone described a situation when he asked a class of college students in an evangelical Christian college about the resurrection of the body: “Two-thirds of the students did not believe their physical bodies would rise again, which is just amazing. If you knew that your final place was a new creation, this earth being restored, it would be much more difficult to not believe in the physical resurrection or [to have] a low view of the incarnation.” In a similar encounter, one of the scholars, who regularly meets for accountability with businessmen, recounted a conversation that demonstrated that the resurrection of the body does not seem to be significant to some believers. This man is on the board of a major Christian college and said, “I just don’t see the significance of a new earth. Why does it matter? What’s the big deal? I’m with Jesus, does it matter where?”

One of the more interesting exchanges during the interviews was when Dr. Senterton talked about the inability of many evangelicals to put together the fundamental doctrine of the bodily resurrection of the saints with the traditional view of heaven. The

²⁶⁰ John 11:25; Romans 6:4; 8:11; and 1 Corinthians 15:52.

words he used to describe the current evangelical view were “confused” and “unclear.”

He suggested that the best way to understand the resurrection of the body was to see its fulfillment on a physical, new earth. His chief question was, “How do you put together a physical resurrection with the notion of heaven as a place for disembodied souls?”

Positively, for the new creation model, the hope of the bodily resurrection makes sense for preaching at funerals when, as Dr. Wittstone counsels, “You can say when your loved ones die, they’re not gone for good. They’re going to come back.” He concluded that this is why the resurrection matters.

Several of the scholars noted the importance of the bodily resurrection in relation to redemption. One respondent said,

I tell people that their bodies, their future resurrection bodies, and the new earth have to be quite similar to their present bodies and the present earth. If the new earth and the resurrection body is too different from the present body they have now or the earth as we see it now, then they and the earth have not been redeemed, they’ve been replaced. The Christian hope is not for replacement. It’s for salvation, which include the redemption of the body.

The Pursuit of Righteousness

The impetus for this research question is grounded in the Apostle Peter’s words: “But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth,”²⁶¹ which grounds the impetus for the pursuit of righteousness in this life in a coming judgment, but also in the promise of a renewed earth.²⁶² In the literature review portion of this work the researcher noticed that the prospect of the new heavens and new earth as a motive for holiness was seldom addressed. Is it possible that there is a difference in the driving motivations of the spiritual vision and new creation models regarding the pursuit of

²⁶¹ 2 Peter 3:13.

²⁶² 2 Peter 3:14, “Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace.”

righteousness? For this reason an additional question was pursued: To what extent may a primary focus on heaven limit the church's understanding of calling and the pursuit of righteousness of this life?

Continuity

Within the literature debating the spiritual vision and new creation model is the question of continuity and discontinuity between this earth and the next as well as in this life and the next. When this research question was posed to the theologians there was a general sense that the new creation model offered a greater continuity between this life and the next. Dr. Rossner shared a personal example from his own life:

I John 3 has been a text that has spoken powerfully to me. We don't know what we'll be like, but we will be like Him. So with that hope, we purify ourselves. There is a connection between being pure now, because my ultimate destiny is to have this fellowship with Christ. If my vision of heaven doesn't really give me a strong view of the continuity between this life and the next, not just my body, but my being, now, it becomes less obvious why, for example, letting Christ bring my anger under control is going to help me enjoy fellowship with God forever more deeply.

While one would be hard-pressed to validate that there is a necessary distinction between the motivations for righteousness in this life within the two models, there was general agreement that the differences were valid. If one believes that the "works" of this life will be burned up, then the sense is that our labors in this life are restricted to this age. However, as Professor Penn noted, "The prospect of a future accounting" as well as the concept that "our labor will not be in vain" was an impetus for what Professor Penn described as "living in light of the future." He argued,

There is reason to think that what I do now is important in terms of developing the qualities, the virtues that one can be using now, so that my current work and my current character development is meaningful now, but it also has potential meaning for the future because even though I may not understand what it looks like, I have this assumption that there is going to be creative God-given work to

do in the new earth. That's part of my calling as a human being here, with the assumption being that that will be part of my calling in the future.

Internal Focus

In the interviews, several professors observed that the spiritual vision model has a tendency to focus on internal matters of the heart to the detriment of community and living out one's calling in this life. The objection conveyed was that the propensity of the spiritual vision model communicates that God values the interior aspects of a person's being over the physical aspects of the Christian life. Senterton commented, "I think the new earth connects more with daily practice. However, heaven is perceived as connecting with the internal." He went on to say that his students often come to seminary with the sense that, "God only cares about the heart, not the externals." He lamented that this perspective circumvents living "holistically in the world."

While it was not necessarily the case that the spiritual vision model is only concerned with the interior matters of the heart, the interviews suggested that it might be a consequence of the Platonic, fundamentalist mindset that embraces the spiritual over the physical. Professor Senterton commented, "The point is not internal versus external. The point is which works are important to God now as we live out our calling as the embodied holy people of God?"

Doctors Penn, Whitestone, and Senterton wanted to see further development of the notion that the future draws us to ethical actions in the present, and not just because a person will give an account to God, Whitestone commented, "The future is in fact calling us. Do you want to be a part of that or do you want to be left behind? That's what we

want to live now, the presence of the future.”²⁶³ In this regard, the future may be said to inform the present day ethics of the believer because there is continuity in both body and spirit between this life and the next. McDay agreed that the pursuit of righteousness needs an outward, physical dimension. He suggested that with a bodily resurrection on a new earth, “it gives our vocation eternal value. I also think it means our bodies matter. Physicality matters. Materiality matters.” Oksam contributed as well, suggesting that Christians need to “build into people an appreciation for the physicality of spirituality.” There was a concern that the spiritual vision model would drive people toward a “pure individualism” in this life without capturing the significance of community fellowship depicted in the new creation model. Senterton even had a name for this distinction, which he called the “eternal global village.”

The researcher queried what a greater appreciation for the physical aspects of spirituality might look like in practice. Dr. Penn answered,

I think the strongest thing that it means for me is to be able to encourage people to say, “It makes sense that right now, in this life, you should be cultivating your own gifts that God’s given you. You should see life as significant, as important to sense God’s call, and you should be a person who seeks increasingly to embody the quality of life that Jesus had, that you should be seeking to deepen your friendship and relationship with God.”

He provided this caveat, “Now granted, there are certainly people who have a more traditional view of heaven who are working at deepening their relationship with God. I think practical matters of discipleship for the most part get a heightened emphasis if the idea is we’re getting ready to do something beyond the end of our lives.”

²⁶³ When asked who had the most significant impact on the understanding of this concept, five of the six professors referred to George Eldon Ladd’s book, *The Presence of the Future: The Eschatology of Biblical Realism* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1974).

The research question sought to capture what might be any significant differences between the spiritual vision and new creation model regarding matters of practical importance. There was a great deal of agreement that the distinctions were valid and the new creation model provided a more “holistic” perspective on life in the present. While the interviews revealed some practical distinctions with regard to creation, the physical body and a continuity of our life with the next, there remained a great deal of speculation as to fleshing this out in daily life.

When this particular research question was asked of the participants, there was more likely to be a pause before answering the question because as one professor said, “I haven’t thought about it much.” It was clear that the professor saw clear demarcations between the two models, but the specific application gave way to larger, general responses. Several of those interviewed indicated that the application of the new creation model needed further development in this area.

Common Themes That Emerged When Preaching the New Creation Model in Churches

Teachers in a seminary have a unique calling to train students for ministry and consequently, it is incumbent upon them to remain in ongoing collaboration with the church through preaching and teaching. Each of the participants in the interviews preaches or teaches regularly in a local congregation or leads seminars for churches. This regular engagement with the local church allowed the interviewees to speak with some clarity and experience on the topic of the eternal state of the believer. Several of those interviewed spoke of counseling the dying or those who had lost loved ones through death. This connection with the reality of congregational life was vital for the interviews.

At least four of the professors embraced the new creation model of the eternal state and all had preached on the topic in a local church, which provided firsthand experience on how well the new creation model was received compared to the spiritual vision model.

This research question had two primary purposes. First, it was an effort to grasp how teachers who preach in local churches were received when they taught on the new creation model. Second, the researcher wanted to see how they negotiated the differences between their own understanding of scripture and the default expectation of the listeners.

Several of the professors were specific in their assessment of how people in the congregation responded to teaching about the new earth as understood by the new creation model. After being asked how people responded to his teaching on the new earth, one professor responded, “Befuddled.” He described a recent situation when he was preaching in England and commented to the congregation “that we will not spend eternity in heaven. We will spend eternity in the new heavens and the new earth, on this globe, resurrected, regenerated, and redeemed as it will be.” He recalled with some emotion how angry some of the people were with his message. One particular response was, “I don’t understand what you’re talking about. I thought when we die we go to heaven.” But this irate response was not limited to England, as he’s had the same reaction here in the states. People will often say to him, “I’ve never heard that before. I thought the Bible said that this earth was going to be consumed by fire.” This professor has concluded that many people just assume the earth is going to be “vaporized.”

Dr. Senterton shared a similar experience while preaching on John 3:16. In an effort to convey a holistic sense of redemption, he illustrated that one could read what Jesus says about the kingdom and being born again in a super-spiritualized way, “Believe

in Jesus and when you die, you go to heaven. Or you could read it a different way in terms of the coming of the kingdom in this world.” The professor recounted with some amazement in his voice, that after the session a couple of people approached him and stated with some sharpness in their voices, “You’ve misunderstood the gospel. It’s about going to heaven when you die.”

One professor, who has written the most on the topic and often preaches in churches on the subject of the new heaven and new earth, recalls that early on, “I used to just offend people. There’s some truth to that. They won’t ever have me back now. I’ve matured since I started teaching this.” Dr. Wittstone then began to adjust his sermons and seminars to say, “I’m not taking away what you believe. I’m adding to it. It’s not, ‘No, no, no.’ It’s, ‘Yes, heaven, yes, Jesus,’ but that’s not the end. It’s heaven plus. It’s Jesus plus, and I also added some gentle corrections.” After wrestling with how to convey the truth of the final destiny of the believer being lived out on the new earth, Dr. Wittstone says, “In general, I’m trying to be much more positive now and say, what you believe is true, but it’s only half the story. It’s even more exhilarating than you know.”

One story seemed to have a particular impact on Dr. Wittstone. In a class on urban ministry, the topic of the new earth was addressed and to the professor’s surprise there was a great deal of resistance. The majority of students were black pastors who felt the message of life on the new earth would get them “stoned” or “shot” in their pulpits. When the professor pressed further, the reasons for such a response became clear. One pastor said, “Being black is so hard. You endure it, and you suffer, and you wait to get taken out of this place.” Not yet convinced, Dr. Wittstone appealed to them by saying,

I would think that the new earth would be more helpful for your people because it’s one thing to say this earth is miserable and I was always on the bottom and

mistreated and abused, and thank God that's over and I never have to come back. Wouldn't it be even more exciting to say, "No, you are coming back, and this time you're going to get over? You're going to win at the very place of your abuse and awful existence." I would think it would be even more encouraging to a black audience.

The pastors were not deterred, and Dr. Wittstone said the final statement was given by an African-American pastor, who said, "At a black funeral, it's all about thanking God they're gone, they're not suffering anymore. This life was a veil of tears, but no longer."

The interviews revealed that one of the more difficult tasks of preaching and teaching is the opposition encountered when teaching something different than the traditional spiritual model of heaven. The interviewees testified that there were multiple kinds of reactions to the new creation model teaching ranging from a "disdain for the physical" to imagining that life on a new earth would be too "limiting." Some listeners didn't want to have anything to do with the earth at all; they just wanted to be with Jesus. Nevertheless, the respondents who embraced the new creation model were ultimately convinced that the tide had turned in favor of a new creation model. As Dr. Oksam concluded, "People will generally start coming on board once you show them the text."

The experience of these professors demonstrates how difficult it is to present a model of theology that runs counter to what most instinctively believe. In some cases the results of their teaching resulted in thoughtful reflection and a desire to learn more. Dr. Oksam said, "When they see it in the text, they are more inclined to believe it." On the other hand, the new creation model comes across as radical to the ears of many evangelicals who, by default, expect to spend eternity in heaven. These examples from preaching and teaching in churches indicate the importance of this topic.

The Need for Humility in Teaching on the Eternal State

The consensus among the professors interviewed on how to teach this material fell along two lines: the first is teaching and preaching on the topic of the new heaven and new earth should be accompanied with a large dose of humility. Given that the new creation model can have a radical impact on people's traditions regarding the eternal state, the professors recommended that anyone preaching on the topic extend considerable grace to their listeners. One professor humbly confessed, "I've learned it's better to just not say, 'Look what I know and you stupid people have missed this.'"

Professor Penn elaborated on how to engage this topic while preaching and teaching:

I think a good dose of humility would be pretty helpful in presenting this material. In the evangelical world, I think it could probably help some relationships among different groups if we were a little less confident of our own, either our own position or our own heroes. That might have the effect of really stimulating our study of the scripture too, going back and asking some of the very questions you're asking which not many people yet are asking because they don't realize there's even any questions. All they think is there [are] just answers.

As an example of the need for humility, each of the professors was concerned about how certain writings on the topic were filled with more speculation about life on the new earth than could be justified from scripture.²⁶⁴ One must recognize, as Dr. Rossner stated, that "there really isn't a great deal about the new earth in scripture," so speculating about life on the new earth should come with a dose of humility.

Preaching the Larger Redemptive Story

A second reflection on how to communicate the idea of the new earth was to start from the beginning of the Bible and lay out the larger story of redemption beginning with creation and culminating in the new creation. One respondent communicated, "If I were a

²⁶⁴ The consensus was the popular book by Randy Alcorn, entitled *Heaven*, fell into this trap. Dr. Senterton said, "I started to read it and had to put it down. It was too speculative."

new pastor, I would start off with the big story; creation, fall, and redemption. I'd say, 'Here's how it all fits together. Here's the meaning of life. Here's why we're here. Here's where we're going. Here's why Jesus came.'"

Tracing out the biblical storyline from creation to consummation was critical in the thinking of those interviewed. Instead of relying on a few chosen texts that speak about heaven, the new creation model, in both the literature review and the interviews emphasized that redemption is not complete until the earth is redeemed. What that aspect of cosmic redemption looks like was not as important to the professors as much as seeing the end of creation look something like its beginning. Professor Wittstone was particularly concerned that there not be a division between God's plan for the earth at the beginning, as the arena where people live out their existence to glorify God, and the end, which may be reduced to some disembodied existence in an ethereal heaven. He asserted, "If the new earth is too different from this one, then we don't have redemption, we have this world being replaced, and that's an important point."

It is inevitable that people will have strong reactions to something new, particularly when it concerns the final destiny of a person. As this researcher has learned, which parallels the views of the professors interviewed, the typical response to the notion that eternal life will not be lived out in heaven, but on a new earth, brings about this response, "I've never heard anything like that before."

Summary of Findings

The interviews revealed what the literature had already confirmed, which is that there is a strong tradition of the spiritual vision model that pervades the evangelical church. The consistency of the professors identifying the foundations of the spiritual

vision model as Platonism, dispensationalism and fundamentalism was quite remarkable. Without having any interaction with each other, they consistently pointed to these influences on the view of eternal life as being one of a disembodied existence in heaven.

The various participants agreed that a subtle Platonism has shaped how many Christians view the physical realm of God's cosmos. This also includes how one views the human body and its ultimate end. In one example after another, the professors conveyed that this perception has engulfed many who think the body is the greatest obstacle to abundant Christian living. The conclusion that is drawn then is that it is only reasonable to expect that deliverance from the fleshly existence to a subsequent existence in the spiritual realm of heaven be seen as the ultimate deliverance. However, as Dr. Wittstone suggested time and again, "It is not that we are taking away your view of heaven, we are adding something that is far better!"

Chapter Five

Discussion and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to examine why the final state of the believer, the new earth, finds such limited support in the literature, at both a popular and an academic level. The following research questions served as the intended focus for this study:

1. How do evangelical theologians account for the limited focus on the new earth in academic and popular literature?
2. What are the implications for the church with this difference in focus?
3. How do evangelical theologians (as professors who preach in churches) negotiate the differences between their own understanding of scripture, regarding these issues, and the default expectations of their listeners?

The opening chapter of this dissertation presented the common belief that heaven is the final state of the believer. Chapter two affirmed this position by examining both popular and academic literature. It was observed that there was very little focus on the final state of the believer, which the biblical writers call the new earth. In chapter two, the helpful model describing the various views of heaven was introduced: the spiritual vision model and the new creation model as presented by Dr. Craig Blaising.²⁶⁵ Chapter three presented the methodology for this research and described the participants in the study, as well as how the interviews were conducted, including how the data was gathered and analyzed. In chapter four, the findings of the interviews were presented, and chapter five

²⁶⁵ Craig Blaising, "Premillennialism," in *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, ed. Darrell Bock (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 161-180.

will now bring together the literature review and the interviews to reach some conclusions and make recommendations for further study.

This study has shown that the vast majority of books and articles, at both the popular and academic level, identify the final state of the believer as heaven. The literature review portion of this research demonstrated that the spiritual vision model, as presented by Dr. Craig Blaising, has not only been the majority view throughout church history, but continues to hold sway among people in the church and in popular and academic literature. This study has sought to account for this particular theological position and press the issue forward to see the implications and differences between the spiritual vision model and the new creation model.

Summary of Study

How do evangelical theologians account for the limited focus on the new earth in academic and popular literature? This question was pursued through an examination of the literature as well as through in-depth interviews with evangelical theologians. In the analysis of this question, the influences and ideas, which have led to Christians' beliefs about their final destiny with Jesus Christ, are discernible. As evangelicals, with a high view of scripture, the biblical text is the primary source informing believers of matters that remain in the future. However, this study revealed that various other factors came into play when one seeks to understand how the final state of the believer is perceived.

Summary of Findings

The literature and interviews revealed that several influences might contribute to the limited support for the view that the new earth is the final destiny of the believer. The particular value of the interviews was that four of the six people who partook in this

process had moved from a spiritual vision model to a new creation model. I was not aware that this was the case when I began the interview process, but this made for an insightful learning experience, as these professors shared the obstacles they overcame to arrive at their current position. Without exception, these professors identified three influences that contribute to the ongoing, popular portrayal of the spiritual vision model of heaven. This study summarizes those influences as Platonism, dispensationalism and fundamentalism. Two final possible causes for the continuation of the spiritual vision model include how people read passages about heaven in the New Testament as well as the limited discussion of the new earth in the primary systematic theology texts of the twentieth century.

Discussion of Findings

This study has shown that the belief that heaven is the final state of the believer and is the dominant position within evangelical and Reformed theology today. This position is what Blasing calls the spiritual vision model, in contrast to the new creation model. Through the literature review and interviews with leading theologians, the researcher identified various influences that have contributed to the ongoing embrace of the spiritual vision model. This chapter will explore the literature and the interviews to identify the influences that have shaped people's views of the final state of the believer.

Why The Limited Focus on the New Earth?

The Lingering Influence of Platonism

The language of Christian writers is often peppered with unconscious Platonist themes. It was observed in the literature review that one of the most prominent aspects of the spiritual vision model was the release from the body, with its inherent bent toward

that which is evil. While affirming the body as an instrument through which sin tempts the Christian, the ultimate deliverance is not from the body, but the redemption of the body. Christopher J. Wright summarizes this influence:

Misplaced dualism from Plato and then through gnostic influences, folk Christianity has often polarized the physical and spiritual realms. In contrast to the Bible, which affirms that the whole material creation is “good,” this popular view regards the material world (including our bodies) as inherently evil and only the spiritual world as good. Or, in more evangelical language, only the spiritual world has real permanence because it is “of God” in some way, whereas the material world is temporary, decaying, and of no eternal significance. So it naturally follows, in this way of thinking, that nothing of the earth or on the earth will survive into the eternal future after “the end of the world.” How could it? Only the spiritual world (God, angels, and redeemed souls in heaven) will be eternal. Physical bad; spiritual good. Very platonic. Very not biblical.²⁶⁶

The conclusion that is easily drawn from the influence of Platonism and Gnosticism is that what really matters to God is the spiritual, and that the earth and physical existence are, at best, second rate. This line of thinking certainly promotes the notion of an ethereal, disembodied heaven where the highest form of existence is one which has escaped the bonds of the physical.

During the interviews, the researcher asked Professor Wittstone about the ongoing influence of Platonism upon Christian thought, and he suggested that the influence of Augustine is still felt within evangelicalism. He stated, “Augustine knew that matter wasn’t evil. He corrected that part of Neo-Platonism, but he did seem to think that matter was inferior and that physical life is inferior to a higher spiritual life. That, I think, has probably had the greatest influence in Christian history.” The foundational elements of the spiritual vision model have certainly been influenced by Augustine and continue to

²⁶⁶ Christopher J. Wright, *The God I Don’t Understand: Reflections on Tough Questions of Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 199.

this day. The literature and the interviews both indicate that there is a widespread, residual effect of Platonism on the Christian view of the final state.

The Influence of Dispensationalism²⁶⁷

Foundational to the influence of dispensationalism on the final state is the radical distinction between Israel as a nation and the church as a people. The early dispensationalists insisted that God had unique roles for the church and for the nation of Israel. For the Jews, the promises of God related to the earth and the fulfillment of the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants. The church, on the other hand, was the heavenly people of God and represented Christianity. Michael Williams summarizes the dispensational program: “Israel follows a theocratic-legal program while the church follows a gracious-heavenly course.”²⁶⁸

It is important to note that dispensationalism has undergone a series of transformations since its inception. Beginning in the 1980s, Dr. Robert Saucy began to moderate some of the more classical positions within dispensationalism, which eventually led to the Dispensational Study Group through the Evangelical Theological Society. The essence of this study group was to explore ways in which evangelicals could break down some of the old divisions of spiritual versus literal interpretation of scripture. There seems to be a softening of the distinctions between Israel and the church in what is known as progressive dispensationalism. Classical dispensationalists have critiqued this variant of dispensationalism on this very point, which has been the touchstone of the

²⁶⁷ Dispensationalism has undergone a series of adjustments and can be categorized as “classical,” “revised,” or “progressive” Dispensationalism. See Craig A. Blaising, “Premillennialism” in *Three Views of the Millennium and Beyond*, ed. Darrell L. Bock, Counterpoints: Exploring Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 160–81.

²⁶⁸ Michael Williams, *This World Is Not My Home: The Origins and Development of Dispensationalism* (Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Mentor, 2003), 180.

movement. As in all movements, it takes time for theology to make its way into the pew. Such remains the case with dispensationalism, as the older, classical dispensationalism still holds sway in the writings on heaven.

How this impacts a person's view of the final state is significant in that the church is uniquely identified with heaven. The theological system of dispensationalism has consequently contributed to the spiritual vision model of the final state, but for reasons different than those who have been influenced by Augustine. The plan and purpose for the church has a distinctly heavenly orientation. William's analysis is important in demonstrating how the spiritual vision model is influenced by dispensationalism. He remarks:

As there is a qualitative difference between heaven and earth, so the two peoples of God sustain different relationships to the world and its history. Israel finds her fulfillment within the stuff of history. Her hope is this worldly. The church, on the other hand, seeks another world, another time. She seeks the immortality of the soul more than the resurrection of the body. The dividing line between time and eternity is not the second coming but the individual's point of death. The Christian's interest is centered in heaven, into which souls enter one by one. The setting of the affections upon the transcendent and the eternal means that the Christian does not confuse the present order of the world with the order of grace and glorification. The believer's citizenship is in a distant country, a place of tranquility and peace far above this world, which is full of vanity and conflict. In short, finitude is good for Israel, but bad for the church.²⁶⁹

The Influence of Fundamentalism

Historically, fundamentalism had its roots in a defense of the orthodox doctrines of the faith. However, over time, it took on a cultural element that was marked by separatism from others who did not embrace the same theological perspective, as well as separatism from a well-defined worldliness. It was not a major jump to see this world (the earth) included in this negative, escapist mindset.

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 188.

Several of the professors interviewed for this study noted the connection between dispensationalism and fundamentalism in its assessment that this world is beyond repair and the only hope is for God to start over. This particular viewpoint also answered the second research question about the implications for the various models of heaven. If one embraces the escapist notion of fundamentalism, then the worse things become on this earth, the better. For this reason, those who adhere to the spiritual vision model are less inclined to share a concern for creation or physical expressions of the Christian life. While there are exceptions, fundamentalism's orientation is both negative and escapist, and consequently is not inclined toward a new creation model.

Not Distinguishing the Intermediate and Final State

The chief problem in addressing this topic concerns the imprecise language used by authors between the temporary place for disembodied spirits of believers – heaven – and the final state of eternal life on the new earth. The fact that this distinction is commonly embraced is seen in the massive number of books on heaven as compared to infrequent books titles on the new earth.²⁷⁰ Critically important to this discussion is the frequency with which authors mingle texts about the intermediate state and the final state. Barber and Peterson recognize this merging of the two states in their comment, “When most people refer to heaven, they speak of the intermediate state—that which follows death and precedes resurrection.”²⁷¹ As seen in chapters one and two of this dissertation, there are numerous instances where those advocating the spiritual vision model do not distinguish the intermediate state from the final state of the believer in Jesus Christ.

²⁷⁰ See chapter one for titles.

²⁷¹ Dan C. Barber and Robert A. Peterson, *Life Everlasting: The Unfolding Story of Heaven* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2012), Kindle location 338.

Peter Toon, expresses his concern when he states, “[M]uch church teaching over the centuries has treated the intermediate state as if it were, to all intents and purposes, identical with the final state.”²⁷² David Lawrence concurs and suggests, “If our eternal destination was heaven then a new body would be unnecessary since...spirits are quite capable of enjoying heaven.... It is strange how many Christians claim to believe in physical resurrection whilst still entertaining notions of a ‘spiritual’ heaven being their eternal home.”²⁷³

During the interviews, Dr. McDay suggested that most people understand that when they are talking about heaven, they really mean the new earth. However, I think this is far too generous a reading of the situation. From personal experience, when I have asked believers where they will spend eternity they always say, “Heaven.” When I pushed further and reminded them that the Bible teaches that the final destination of the believer is to be lived out in a resurrection body on the new earth, the response is usually, “I’ve never heard that before.” Personal experience as well as examining the literature does not convince me that people instinctively assume a new creation model. For this reason, I think it is necessary to preach and teach that the intermediate state is temporary, while the new earth is final.

Confusion Over the Meaning and Significance of the Term “Heaven”

The New Testament uses the word “heaven” in various ways, which may contribute to the misunderstanding that heaven is the final state of the believer. In chapter

²⁷² Peter Toon, *Heaven and Hell: A Biblical and Theological Overview* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1986), 112.

²⁷³ David Lawrence, *Heaven: It’s Not the End of the World* (Valley Forge, PA: Scripture Union USA, 1995), 75.

two it was demonstrated that the biblical texts given in support of the spiritual vision model do not actually suggest that believers will live in heaven forever with God. In fact, Dr. Senterton suggests that there is not a single passage in the New Testament that indicates believers will spend eternity in heaven. Biblical texts that are often cited to support the teaching that heaven is the final destiny of the believer are merely communicating the truth that heaven, where God dwells, is the source of the believer's eternal inheritance, spiritual blessings, citizenship, and hope. As Middleton says, these texts are not "talking about going to heaven, but rather about the source of our confidence to live on earth in a manner different from (and in tension with) the present fallen world, until Christ's return."²⁷⁴ A classic example of this is the massive work by Randy Alcorn. While I generally agree with the conclusions of Alcorn in which he identifies the final state as the new earth, he entitles his book *Heaven*. This confusion continues to propagate the belief that heaven is where Christians will spend eternity.

The Limited Focus on the New Earth in Systematic Theology Texts

Why choose the literature of systematic theology to understand how the academic community addresses the matter of the final state of the church? The first reason is that systematic theology addresses the question, "What does the whole Bible teach about any given topic?" One would expect then that a biblically relevant systematic theology text would provide ample information on the final destiny of the church and believers. Second, seminaries and Christian colleges use these textbooks to train pastors and future professors, who in turn teach lay leaders, ministry leaders, and the church. What is being read and taught in the seminaries eventually filters down to the people in the pew. For

²⁷⁴ Richard J. Middleton, *A New Heaven and New Earth*. Unpublished manuscript, 274.

this reason, systematic theology textbooks have relevance in seeking to resolve this problem.

It was apparent in the literature review portion of this study that the most popular systematic theology texts of the twentieth century spoke sparingly of the new earth as the final destiny of the believer. Two examples are Berkhof's *Systematic Theology* and Millard Erickson's *Christian Theology*, which have been the standard texts used in Reformed and evangelical colleges and seminaries. Berkhof remarks, "The final state of believers will be preceded by the passing of the present world and the appearance of a new creation."²⁷⁵ On the last page of his work, Berkhof writes two lines about the new earth: "There will be a new heaven and a new earth, Rev. 21:1," and, "The renewal of heaven and earth will follow the judgment."²⁷⁶ At the very end of the book, Berkhof mentions the "new creation" twice, and the only other reference to the "new heavens and a new earth" is a direct quotation of 2 Peter 3:13. By contrast, Berkhof devotes sixteen pages to the subject of the intermediate state.

Millard Erickson's *Christian Theology* has been one of the most popular texts of the late twentieth century. It is moderately Calvinistic, evangelical and baptistic. Erickson discusses the final state of the righteous in chapter fifty-nine of his thirteen hundred-page work. The category he uses for the final state is the term "heaven." He proceeds to say this is the "future condition of the righteous."²⁷⁷ Later in the same chapter he says, "Heaven will be the completion of the Christian's pilgrimage, the end of the struggle

²⁷⁵ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1939) 736.

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 733.

²⁷⁷ Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983), 1126.

against flesh and blood, the world, and the devil.”²⁷⁸ In the scripture index of *Christian Theology*, only one of the four key texts on the new heavens and new earth is mentioned, and that is Revelation 21:1-2, which is only quoted without comment.

It is likely that the paucity of biblical and theological articulation about the new earth in these major texts have contributed to the spiritual vision model of the final state of the believer. However, the recent publications of major systematic theologies by Grudem, Frame, Grenz, Reymond, Horton, and Bird all provide a significant advance in the new creation model, which bodes well for seminarians and pastors who will be exposed to a broader understanding of the final state than has been presented in the previous century.

Does it Matter?

This study has utilized the models of Craig Blaising to distinguish the two visions of the eternal state of the believer: the spiritual vision model, which has been the predominant view since the early centuries, and the new creation model, which has seen a resurgence in recent years. The question is whether or not there are significant implications for either view beyond mere theological distinctions? In the literature review and the interviews, at least three distinctions that result from the spiritual vision model were of concern to the respondents. The first was the impact of Platonism on how one framed the eternal state. The second was a negative perception of creation. The final one was that the spiritual vision model has a weak view of the resurrection of the body.

Christoplatonism

Randy Alcorn coined the term “Christoplatonism” to describe the blending of elements of Platonism with Christianity.²⁷⁹ The concern that Alcorn has with this merger

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 1230.

is consistent with what was uncovered during the interviews in this study. The elements of this worldview suggest that the physical realm is second-class and must be eventually annihilated to experience the superior spiritual aspects of life with God. Coupled with this Christoplatonic viewpoint is the belief that an ethereal heaven awaits the believer at death. Also evident in Christoplatonism is a mystical expectation of eternal contemplation that is characteristically passive.

The interviewees who addressed this research area were insistent that any mixture of Platonism and Christianity would skew the biblical storyline of creation, fall, and redemption. Professors Wittstone and Senterton were particularly concerned that the influence of Platonism essentially divorced God from completing his good purposes for the earth. Biblical redemption is just that – it redeems what was lost in the fall. The good earth is not rejected and replaced; it is restored and renewed.

Creation

The study of Genesis 1 and Romans 8 reveals a clear message that creation is both good and yet groaning. The fall of man had a remarkable impact on the current creation, yet God promises to renew creation rather than discarding it. This aspect of the consummation of creation is often missing in the spiritual vision model, and the presence or absence of this element distinguishes the two models. The final state of the spiritual vision model is depicted by Scot McKnight as “up there” (in heaven).²⁸⁰ In this way of thinking, the concept of a physically renewed and restored creation is certainly minimized or even dismissed. How does the distinction between a future, restored

²⁷⁹ Randy Alcorn, *Heaven* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 2004), 459-466.

²⁸⁰ Scot McKnight, prepublication manuscript on heaven. Title of book not yet determined. Chapter 6.

creation and an ethereal heaven shape one's view of this earth? The interviews revealed various perspectives on how we are to view this creation in light of the coming new creation. John MacArthur, whose viewpoint about heaven is a merging of the spiritual vision model and the new creation model, reflected on the significance of this creation in a sermon with these words:

The environmental movement is consumed with trying to preserve the planet forever. But we know that isn't in God's plan.... The earth we inhabit is not a permanent planet. It is, frankly, a disposable planet—it is going to have a very short life. It's been around about six thousand years or so—that's all—and it may last a few thousand more. And then the Lord is going to destroy it.... I've told environmentalists that if they think humanity is wrecking the planet, wait until they see what Jesus does to it. Peter says God is going to literally turn it in an atomic implosion so that the whole universe goes out of existence.²⁸¹

This perspective is but one example of how some view creation and what they believe God plans to do with it. This line of thinking seems to be a blend of Platonism and Gnosticism that encourages the belief that the material creation is doomed and only the spiritual world will remain. Professor Wittstone was particularly concerned with this perspective, “If the new earth is too different from this one, then we don't have redemption, we have this world being replaced, and that's an important point.”

However, Professors McDay and Wittstone wanted to note the importance of tracing the biblical storyline to a completion that culminates in the redemption of creation, and not make creation-care greater than the redemption of humans. Wittstone said, “There's this tension we have to embrace. I think the new earth helps us bring the story together, but we have to be careful that we don't minimize the specialness of redemption.” McDay added, “While we are to care for creation, there is virtually nothing

²⁸¹ John MacArthur, “Evangelicalism and the Environmental Movement,” gty.org, <http://www.gty.org/resources/Articles/A148/Evangelicalism-and-the-Environmental-Movement> (accessed May 12, 2014).

in the New Testament endorsing such an idea.” When it comes to the difference between the spiritual vision model and the new creation model, the topic of creation care is stark. If one believes the biblical revelation points to a consummation on a renewed earth in a new resurrection body, then it seems to drive a serious wedge into the core of the spiritual vision model.

Resurrection

The new creation model emphasizes the reality of the physical nature of the resurrection body and does not reduce it to merely a way of describing life after death. Considerable emphasis is placed on the understanding that there is a bodily existence on the new earth after a disembodied existence in heaven.

A Platonic view of the created order, when combined with a Gnostic perspective on the body, may subconsciously diminish what the New Testament says about the future bodily resurrection of believers. If material things, like the body, are unspiritual and considered evil, one can understand that the notion of a physical resurrection on a material new earth would come across as suspect. The literature that promotes the spiritual vision model can come across as confusing and lacking cohesion when it seeks to embrace a spiritual vision of heaven and yet embrace belief in the bodily resurrection. It seems that some of the authors have started with heaven instead of laying a foundation for the eternal state with a commitment to the bodily resurrection. For this reason there is, according to Dr. Senterton, much “confusion” over the final state of the believer.

How the New Creation Model is Received

At the outset of interviews, the researcher was uncertain which positions the various professors held with regard to the spiritual vision or new creation model. Initially,

all of the professors held the spiritual vision model for various reasons. Some were more influenced by dispensationalism, while others simply embraced it as tradition. In time, through research, reflection, and the influence of certain authors, four of the six people interviewed had come to embrace the new creation model, while the other two were leaning in that direction after the interviews. For the two that were somewhat ambivalent, the interview seemed to produce greater interest to investigate the topic further.

So, how do evangelical theologians (as professors who preach in churches) negotiate the differences between their own understanding of scripture regarding these issues and the default expectations of their listeners? For the professors who have taught on the subject in a seminary or preached in churches, the reactions to the new creation model have been mixed. Several told stories of being confronted with charges of false teaching, while a couple of the professors told stories of people being persuaded by their study of scripture.

When asked what the major objections to the new creation model were, they listed the influences of Platonism, dispensationalism, and fundamentalism. However, what was also evident in the experience of the professors, personally and in ministry, was the role that tradition played in how people understand their final destiny. So how do professors negotiate this dilemma when teaching and preaching? Three particular suggestions came out of the interview process. First, as Dr. Penn affirmed, was the need for “humility” in preaching about matters of eschatology. Dr. Wittstone was quick to admit that he carried a measure of arrogance when he first began preaching in churches on the new creation model. After some time, an awareness of how difficult this transition was, particularly for

those steeped in dispensationalism, led him to a more humble position, which led him to write more on the topic so that he could spell out in greater detail the new creation model.

A second objection that professors have to deal with in both the classroom and the pulpit is the lingering Platonism and Gnosticism that pervade much of evangelicalism. In practical terms, this manifests as a mild disdain for the earth and the physical body as an instrument of sin. The effect of fundamentalism is seen in what Dr. Oksam called a “hyper-spirituality,” with its despising of earthly pleasures and enjoyment of creation. The body must be subdued and eventually discarded in order to truly experience all that God has for people. Dr. Wittstone was leery of some of the preachers who continued to call people to greater sacrifice and radical application of their lives as though “helping my neighbor with his plumbing was less spiritual than praying and reading the Bible.”

While the spiritual vision model does not necessarily have a built-in default toward a minimized view of creation and the physical body, it does tend in that direction. This perspective is what the professors found so difficult to navigate when preaching and teaching. It is difficult to teach about the dangers of Platonism and Gnosticism without losing one’s audience. However, they can teach about God’s good creation and how God will one day renew, restore, and redeem that which was lost in the fall of Adam.

Finally, a positive aspect of preaching and teaching the new creation model is its presentation as the biblical and logical conclusion to the resurrection of the body. The bodily resurrection of Jesus is one of the fundamental tenets of the Christian faith. The New Testament affirms that believers in Jesus will experience a bodily resurrection in like manner to Jesus.²⁸² One of the critical distinctions between the spiritual vision model

²⁸² John 11:25; Romans 6:4; 8:11; and 1 Corinthians 15:5.

and the new creation model is that the latter puts the future, bodily resurrection of believers front and center. As Hoekema states, “We look forward to an eternal, glorious existence with Christ after death, an existence which will culminate in the resurrection. Intermediate state and resurrection are therefore to be thought of as two aspects of a unitary expectation.”²⁸³

If one is to appreciate the resurrection of the body, then, in the words of Dr. Oksam, pastors and teachers must do a “better job of teaching on the intermediate state.” He recommended that pastors distinguish what takes place at the moment of death and where believers will spend eternity. In the literature and the interviews, it was evident that the nature of the intermediate state is as an area of considerable debate. Dr. Senterton said he began his study of the intermediate state as an agnostic, and when he was done, he was an atheist! He admitted that at death the believer is with Jesus, but he is inclined to believe that it is not a conscious engagement with God. The other respondents were not convinced that the doctrine of a conscious intermediate state could be so easily jettisoned. However, the point that needs to be made is that there is a biblical distinction between the intermediate and final state of the believer.

David Lawrence, writing in his book, *Heaven: It's Not the End of the World*, asserts, “If our eternal destination was heaven then a new body would be unnecessary since...spirits are quite capable of enjoying heaven.... It is strange how many Christians claim to believe in physical resurrection whilst still entertaining notions of a ‘spiritual’ heaven being their eternal home.”²⁸⁴ Wayne Grudem adds, “Christians often talk about

²⁸³ Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), 108.

²⁸⁴ David Lawrence, *Heaven: It's Not the End of the World* (Valley Forge, PA: Scripture Union USA, 1995), 75.

living with God ‘in heaven’ forever. But in fact the biblical teaching is richer than that: it tells us that there will be new heavens and a new earth - and an entirely renewed creation - and we will live with God there.”²⁸⁵ It is this failure to distinguish the differences between the intermediate state (heaven) and the final state (new earth) that has driven this study.

Recommendations for Practice

Evangelism

The spiritual vision model of heaven is rife with potentially misguided images of harps, angels, and a perpetual worship service. As Dr. Penn suggested, “For those of us that are introverts, that kind of a mass pep rally is pretty frightening.” Human beings know nothing of life outside the body, and the prospect of an existence that is devoid of physical expression is mysterious and somewhat frightening. Mark Twain offered his opinion of heaven with these words: “Singing hymns and waving palm branches through all eternity is pretty when you hear about it in the pulpit, but it’s as poor a way to put in valuable time as a body could contrive.”²⁸⁶ While most Americans believe in the afterlife, many would agree with Mark Twain that heaven sounds rather boring for humans who have only known life in a physical body.

A practice that has the potential for ministry is the presentation of the new creation model as a means for a more holistic evangelism. The physical body has become a canvas for tattoos, while billions are spent annually on makeovers and diet and exercise

²⁸⁵ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 1158. Italics in the original.

²⁸⁶ Mark Twain, *Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven*. (Memphis, TN: General Books LLC, 2010), 20.

products. It would be easy to label this as idolatry, but when one senses that this body is all there is and there is no future for it, one understands the infatuation.

How might an evangelism effort incorporate the resurrection of the body on a new earth, void of the need for makeovers, diets, and pumping iron? How would the truth of justice prevailing and the making all wrongs right resonate with contemporary culture? This is not to diminish the spiritual dimension of Jesus Christ as the central figure of the new earth, but could we not include in our evangelistic message the point that eternal life is not a perpetual, disembodied existence of hymn singing? To depict eternal life on a new earth without the effects of the fall, where sin and suffering are no more, and injustice and evil are vanquished certainly would provide a greater interest than the vision of Mark Twain. Presentation of the gospel in a holistic fashion that includes the redemption of the body with the prospect of eternal life on a renewed earth may potentially raise the interest of many non-Christians.

Training of Future Pastors

The most common theme running through the literature, and specifically in the interview portion of this study, was the default commitment of incoming seminary students to various degrees of Platonism and Gnosticism. On one hand, Dr. Oksam saw no way out of the situation because it is so deeply entrenched within evangelicalism via historical fundamentalism. He lamented how these ingrained systems of thought had captured much of Christian thought about the eternal state. Dr. Wittstone was a bit more hopeful that the new creation model would begin to made inroads into evangelical thought. He cited the upcoming Gospel Coalition National Conference, which has as its theme, the New Heavens and the New Earth.

Dr. Rossner suggested that students simply are not aware of how frequently their theological opinions are formed, not by the biblical text, but by default beliefs that are merely passed on through their parents, pastors, and personal reading. One recommendation would be to consider a course for all incoming seminary students on the influences of Platonism, dispensationalism, fundamentalism, and Gnosticism upon Christian theology.

Preach the Resurrection of the Body for Life on the New Earth

It is remarkable that the eternal state continues to be referred to as heaven, given the rich, biblical language of the new heaven and new earth. Dr. Senterton, who travels the country preaching and teaching on this topic, has put out a financial reward to anyone who can find a single passage in the Bible that says the believer will spend eternity in an ethereal heaven. He has yet to pay up!

There needs to be a two-pronged endeavor to rectify the spiritual vision model of heaven. The first is a robust preaching of the resurrection of the body as fundamental to Christianity. If Jesus' resurrection is not physical, then neither is the believer's, and Christians are left to an ethereal, disembodied state of existence for all eternity. Second, there must be an emphasis on the resurrection of the body, which culminates in life on a renewed and restored earth. The vision of the redemption of the body in Romans 8 is tied directly to the redemption of the cosmos. Wright asserts, "Belief in the bodily resurrection includes the belief that what is done in the present in the body, by the power of the Spirit, will be reaffirmed in the eventual future, in ways at which we can presently only guess."²⁸⁷

²⁸⁷ N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 156.

Pastors and teachers must communicate that believers' future life will be more, not less, substantial than their present life. It is my contention that believers should not use the language of heaven as the final state of the believer for two reasons. First, the New Testament does not utilize that language, and second, the term carries baggage that needs to be deconstructed so much that the better terminology for the eternal state is the "new earth." Richard J. Middleton makes this case:

Not only is the term "heaven" never used in Scripture for the eternal destiny of the redeemed, but also [the] continued use of "heaven" to name the Christian eschatological hope may well divert our attention from the legitimate expectation for the present transformation of our earthly life to conform to God's purposes. Indeed, to focus our expectation on an otherworldly salvation has the potential to dissipate our resistance to societal evil and the dedication needed to work for the redemptive transformation of this world. Therefore, for reasons exegetical, theological, and ethical, I have come to repent of using the term "heaven" to describe the future God has in store for the faithful. It is my hope that readers of this book would, after thoughtful consideration, join me in this repentance.²⁸⁸

Communicating the Big Story

In recent years there has been a surge in literature presenting a meta-narrative approach to the reading of scripture. At its simplest, metanarrative is a telling of the "big story," or a comprehensive description of the smaller components of scripture. The metanarrative of the Bible is its story of the revelation of God's redemptive acts for his covenant people, and in a secondary sense, the entire cosmos. Approaching the Bible to capture its grand story of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation provides a grid through which to read the backstories. It is essential that preachers and teachers are grounded in the "big story" of scripture and are communicating where a particular preaching or teaching text is located within that larger narrative. This narrative grid may be one of the reasons that dispensationalism has held sway within a large segment of the

²⁸⁸ Richard J. Middleton, *A New Heaven and New Earth*. Unpublished manuscript, 293-294.

evangelical population. Dividing the Bible into seven dispensations enables readers to locate themselves within the storyline of the Bible as well as understand how God relates to people within that particular economy. One does not need to embrace this hermeneutical model to see that the Bible tells a comprehensive story.

Distinguishing the Intermediate and Final State

In chapter one it was apparent that the vast majority of the literature on the topic of heaven tends not to distinguish the intermediate and final state of the believer. Not only is this true in popular and academic literature, but it is evidenced in the many books of the popular accounts of people visiting heaven and returning to tell their stories. The images of what should be describing the intermediate state sound very much like the final state. Dr. Richard Mouw provides a helpful analysis:

There is, I think, a plausible explanation for the ways in which Christians go back and forth between these two different ways of understanding the heavenly state. In the New Testament scheme there are at least two stages of the afterlife that must be taken into account. One is the condition of those believers who have died before the end of history. Where, we might ask, are our departed loved ones now? The Bible doesn't give a very detailed account of their present condition. But it does assure us that when Christians are "away from the body" that are "at home with the Lord" (2 Cor. 5:8), because death cannot separate a believer from the love of God (Rom. 8:38-39). But this condition is only an "interim" or an "intermediate state" in which believers who have died are waiting for something further to happen. It is, in short, a condition of "waiting for the resurrection." Christian's bodiless presence with the Lord is not the final state of blessedness. Our ultimate goal is to be raised up for new life, a resurrected life in which we will realize our true destinies as followers of Jesus Christ. And it is with regard to this condition, our ultimate goal, that the biblical imagery of the Holy City must be viewed as central.²⁸⁹

One gets the impression from the literature, both popular and academic, that mere word studies covering the word "heaven" have too often been the sole basis for the

²⁸⁹ Richard J. Mouw, *When the Kings Come Marching In: Isaiah and the New Jerusalem* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 18-19.

development of the doctrine of heaven as the eternal state. This procedure was a particular concern for several of those interviewed, as well as those espousing a new creation model. Professors Wittstone and Oksam lamented the “absence of good teaching” on the intermediate state. I believe that there is a displaced emphasis on the nature of the intermediate state at the expense of teaching on the resurrection. However, Hoekema makes this important correction: “[R]esurrected bodies are not intended just to float in space.... They call for a new earth on which to live and to work, glorifying God. The doctrine of the resurrection of the body, in fact, makes no sense whatever apart from the doctrine of the new earth.”²⁹⁰

Recommendations for Further Research

This study focused on what accounts for the limited focus on the new earth in popular and academic literature. Given the limitations of this study, I could not pursue all areas related to this topic. Therefore, pursuit of the following areas of study could be highly valuable for developing a biblical and systematic understanding of the eternal state of the believer. I have identified the following areas for further study which, when taken together, may provide a more comprehensive picture of the new heaven and new earth.

Surveying People about How They Arrived at their Understanding of the Eternal State

It is evident that tradition plays an important role in how one envisions the eternal state. A rewarding study would be to survey a large segment of Christians from a variety of denominations to ascertain first, what model of the eternal state they espouse – the spiritual vision model or the new creation model – and then seek to determine what influenced them to embrace their particular viewpoint. The results would go a long way

²⁹⁰ Anthony Hoekema, “Heaven: Not Just an Eternal Day Off,” ChristianityToday.com, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2003/juneweb-only/6-2-54.0.html?share=60zOrs+4gvEi/60W1uq/Cc4zsZ3lFfNr> (accessed March 23, 2014).

in understanding whether one's concept of the eternal state were the result of biblical reflection, tradition, sermons, or the media.

Evangelism and the Eternal State

Alcorn remarks, "Trying to develop an appetite for a disembodied existence in a non-physical Heaven is like trying to develop an appetite for gravel. No matter how sincere we are, and no matter how hard we try, it's not going to work. Nor should it."²⁹¹ The modern image of heaven can come across as boring and as Dr. Penn said in the interview, "It sounds like an eternal church camp without the mosquitoes." If evangelism included a more robust explanation of the future bodily resurrection on a renewed earth, freed from the ravages of sin and without the curse, it might gain a greater hearing from modern people.

One way to approach the notion of heaven as a disembodied existence would be to provide a survey showing the distinction between the spiritual vision model and the new creation model, with the practical differences between the two. One would present what life on a renewed earth in a resurrection body might conceivably entail compared to an eternity in a disembodied existence. One caveat is that speculation about the eternal state can conjure up some rather fanciful imagery.

Creation Care

A third area of suggested study is to examine what creation-care might look like without minimizing the redemption of people. Within evangelicalism, there are varying degrees of interest in creation-care, with a great divide between those who advocate creation-care based on the redemption of the earth and those who see it as part of the

²⁹¹ Randy Alcorn, *Heaven* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 2004), 7.

creation mandate. What would creation-care look like if it was emphasized that the redemption of the earth is tied to the adoption of the sons of God as presented in Romans 8?

Final Words

Christopher Wright might well summarize the conclusions of this study when he says, “The heaven I will go to when I die is not my final destination. ‘Heaven when you die’ is only a transit lounge for the new creation.”²⁹² The research for this dissertation began as an effort to understand why people held to a disembodied, ethereal view of heaven, given the hope of the resurrection declared in the New Testament. After scouring the literature and interviewing experts on the topic, an enormous amount of information was uncovered which has only stimulated me to do further research on the topic of the final hope of the believer. The Bible’s great promise for followers of Jesus is that God is coming to make his eternal dwelling on the earth, transforming the entirety of creation into a new heaven and new earth wherein righteousness will dwell. Maranatha!

²⁹² Christopher J. Wright, *The God I Don’t Understand: Reflections on Tough Questions of Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 194.

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