

# WITNESS



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*E x t r a c t*



## “What does it mean to be a new creation?”

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What do you think of when you hear the following expressions: “the new world”, “a new heaven and a new earth”, “a new creation”?

“The new world” usually applies to the discovery of a new part of the earth, for example, the discovery of America. Or, it might apply to the discovery of a new planet, in addition to our own or even as a replacement for ours.

“A new heaven and a new earth” seems to imply a new universe. What that might look like is hard to imagine since the universe is everything that we can think of. Earth, our world, is only a small part of that. Even those who suggest the existence of “parallel universes” still think of everything as part of a larger material universe within which everything moves and, more importantly, as a result of which everything has its being.

“A new creation” speaks in the language of those who have read the first chapters of the Biblical book of Genesis. They usually imagine the creation as “the heavens and the earth”. Like “a new heavens and a new earth” it is hard to imagine a “new creation”, since creation is all that we have ever known. Perhaps “new creation” simply means a “renewed creation”?

But let’s think more about each of these nouns: “world” and “universe” and “creation”.

The “world” or “earth” was, for millennia, all that anyone knew. Certainly it was all that mattered. Scientists, inspired by Christian teaching, have helped us move away from a geocentric view of the universe in which the earth is at the centre. This ancient geocentric view envisioned planets and stars like insignificant celestial bodies revolving around earth, courtiers dancing around a king.

The heirs of those scientists have continued to help open our eyes to a vast material universe, the heavens, as well as the earth. True, most have also abandoned the ancient view that the universe was forever and have instead concluded that this uni-

verse had a start in time, beginning with a “big bang”. Technology is even enabling us to see some of the far, and beautiful, reaches of this universe that still pulse with the energy of the big bang.

Those who talk about creation, however, assert that before there was an earth,



and even before there was any universe in space and time, in fact even before there was the energy that brought about a material universe and sustains it, there was a God who brought everything into existence. This God brought not only the world and the universe into being but also the energy (light) that made everything possible. It was, in fact, the first of His creations: light.

But those who talk about creation are also aware of a complicating feature, namely, that things are not now as they once were, when God declared everything that He had made to be very good. Things now decay through space and time – age – and die. It is not just the Christian readers of Genesis who know this but also Jewish and Islamic readers. In fact, it is not even just readers of Genesis but astute observers of the creation like that vast array of scientists who also know that “even the things of nature which seem immortal and unchanging are subject to this universal aging: even the

Sun and stars and the very fabric of space itself.”<sup>1</sup> They might not know why this is – if, for example, something happened initially to corrupt everything, or whether things began to degenerate merely over time, or even whether perhaps something happened later in time that had repercussions backwards in time—but they know that something is wrong.

But, while all reflective thinkers and religions attempt to identify clearly what exactly happened, and many spend their whole lives trying to diagnose the problem of sin, explain entropy, find the origins of cancer (which is different from trying to find a solution to cancer), explain the catastrophic shifting of tectonic plates, etc., orthodox Christianity has nevertheless insisted that this is not time well spent.

No. Instead of spending time diagnosing the origins of the problem, Christians are encouraged to proclaim and live out the remedy to the problem. It

is a proclamation that astonishes everyone who confronts it.

The remedy that we proclaim is that the One through Whom everything came to be is the Word of God. As one early hymn about Him reads: “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers— all things have been created

through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (*Col 1:15-17 NRSV*).

“ His body was the first-fruits of a “new creation”... ”

He did not, however, simply bring everything into being. We proclaim that He took on the reality of the problem that creation had become in order to resolve the problem. He took on the problem in space and time –“the Word became flesh” –in a way that is mysterious beyond imagination.

Even more mysteriously He took on “flesh” in order to bring it the full way

to its conclusion, that is, to death. He took on flesh and died, and, by dying as the One who had given life to all, He destroyed death, which is what creation had become, a body of death.

But, as the life-giver, He did and could not remain in the power of death. So, He who began space and time, and who came to be in space and time, in human form brought about a “new creation”, one that would not be limited any longer by the space and time of the old creation. His body was the first-fruits of a “new creation” that would transcend both space and time.

It was of this reality that the inspired writer Paul wrote: “if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation” (2Co 5:17 RSV, *emphasis added*). Paul knew something about this “new creation” because he was already experiencing it. As you remember, Paul wrote his second letter to the Corinthians to remind them of what he and those close to him were experiencing, namely, how their sufferings and dying were daily being turned into new life. As he had written earlier in the letter: “we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God

and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but

not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh” (2Co 4:7-11 NRSV).

Paul knew this much. But he also knew more, or at least, knew that there was more to this “new creation” (cf. 1 Cor 2:7-11.) As such, Paul started us off on the right foot in the development of orthodox Christian doctrine by telling us what he knew and letting us know that there was much more to find out.

The first step was when Paul himself began to see that all those who received the message of this one that Paul was proclaiming – not just Paul’s suffering apostolic team – would also begin to experience what Paul was experiencing: death to death, and new life.

Soon others began to see other facets of

the “new creation”. The Evangelist John saw that “new creation” involves the creation of a new kind of person, a new Adam and Eve, who are not simply drawn from the earth, but now “offspring of God”. As he wrote in the opening verses of his Gospel, to all who received this life-giving Word, to all “who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:12-13 NRSV).

Still other authors began to realize that these new beings would have to have a place to live and that thus a “new creation” also meant a “new heavens and a new earth”. Some realized that this meant the destruction of the present universe: “the present heavens and earth have been reserved for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the godless” (2Pe 3:7 NRS). But another author, also named John, and whom we call “the Seer”, saw and recorded a vision of what would replace this universe, a new universe: “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away” (Rev 21:1 NRSV).

“...“if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation”...”

Still other authors, including some today, have now begun to ask: and

what is the energy that sustains that new universe as created energy (light) sustains this one? What is that which sustains the “new creation” from its beginning?

It is a good question. After all, “even if time were virtually immeasurable, there would still be discernible through the obscurity of billions of years, in the awareness of the temporality of being, that moment to which the Bible refers as the beginning - that beginning which points to him who had the power to produce being and to say: ‘Let there be...’ and it was so.”<sup>2</sup>

In the end, we will find that this creation, which we thought was held together by created energy, was actually held together by the same life-giving One who will be the only thing that holds together the “new creation”. One day – so to speak – He will be seen to be the energy of the new creation itself, holding together the whole fabric of the new creation. John the Seer even caught an inspired glimpse of this in the “new creation” when he saw it like a city which has “no need of sun

or moon to shine upon it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb” (Rev 21:23 RSV).

But, the mystery is not yet over. There is a yet more profound mystery here. For that light will emanate from a Lamb who sat from before the beginning of space and time in Trinitarian glory – that alone is wonder enough! – but who now sits in that same glory on the same throne but with scars in his new creation body, scars that evidence the marks of the Eternal One’s death in space and time and a victory that is beyond space and time. Those scars became His in a moment but they will remain with Him not just for all time but for all eternity.

But, how can it be, if this were not mystery enough, think: why are the scars there? They are there as scars borne to heal the fabric of the universe, to heal the universe itself, to heal the whole world, to heal all of mankind, and to heal even little you.

Centuries before Paul, the inspired author of *Psalms* 8 wrote: “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?” (8:3-4 NRSV). An equally inspired author today would perhaps rephrase his words, but not his meaning: “Of what possible interest could I, a decay-prone carbon-based creature, be to You, the One who has brought the universe, the world, all that is in the world, even energy itself into being?” He brought about the death of death and a “new creation” with me in mind?

It can’t be.

Can it?

Amazing love ... how can it be?

1. Stephen M. Barr, *Modern Physics and Ancient Faith* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 60.
2. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *In the Beginning: A Catholic Understanding of the Story of Creation and the Fall* (trans. Boniface Ramsey; Ressourcement; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1995), 22

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