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III: Technology and the Biblical Narrative: Human Creation and the World to Come

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Introduction

In the previous article, we assessed some fundamental conceptions of the Doctrine of Creation and the mandates given to humanity. We saw that Creation is to be considered a gift and that it remains fully dependent on God and his sustaining work. We also saw that God calls the world he has created 'good' and the human beings that were to inhabit it, 'very good'. However, that is not how the world was to continue to exist, for evil and sin entered the Garden, through the temptation of a snake and the exercising of the human will. This current brief article will aim to do two things: I) paint a picture of the current state of Creation by reflecting on the Fall and the hope that lies in the expectation that Christ will come again; and II) show how work and human activity in the current age are affected by sin. This article is the next in a series of articles in which Knecht and Wyatt explore the ways in which technology more generally, and Artificially Intelligent Technology more specifically, could be thought of and evaluated by those of faith. We emphatically try to be positive and constructive in our treatment of the issues, whilst remaining honest about the possible pitfalls and dangers of unfettered, uncritical technological advances. These articles are not meant to contribute to an academic conversation about these issues (the articles will be too broad in scope) but rather they will outline some of the crucial aspects of engaging with these questions.

Our goal is to provide a rationale, a way of thinking, which will support Christian engagement in these fields. We are convinced that the Christian voice and its concern for the wellbeing of people and the world, has a unique contribution to make at this time of

unprecedented technological advancement. The speed and direction of technological progress should not only be dependent on whether innovations are successful from a commercial or technical standpoint, but also whether the direction is a constructive and wholesome one. It is at this point that ethics and broader questions of individual, natural, and societal benefits and wellbeing should be on equal footing with the technological capabilities. We aim to make a case that technology should not be shunned by those of faith, but that proper attention should be given to those wider questions of human and societal flourishing. This article will continue the direction started in the first two articles and paint the theological scope in which this debate happens and is located: what is the eternal or wider significance of temporal work?

Salvation History

Christians live with the firm belief that the world will be transformed and renewed in the future. This conviction lies at the heart of the Christian hope, a hope built on the redemptive works of Christ: his birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension. Although Jesus' life is the supreme expression of God's work and purposes, it must be understood and placed in the wider context of God's activities on earth, most importantly his act of creation. Only when looking at the whole of what is often called *salvation history* may we understand the depths of God's regenerative work in Christ Jesus and so understand the future hope for humanity and this planet.

In brief summary, the hopeful story of Christianity runs something like this. In the beginning, God created a world because he so wanted. There was no compulsion, God did not have to create. Nevertheless, he did. The creation is a gift which flows out of the love and goodness of the triune Godhead. Out of nothing, God made all that is, because nothing had existence before God brought it into being. God intended for the entire cosmos and this particular planet to be. And, besides all the flora and fauna that are found on this globe, God also created humanity as guardians and his representatives within the creation. Humans were created to live in communion, in harmony with one another, with the world around them, and with their Creator. However, through their decisions, humankind broke that threefold harmony and in a mysterious way sin and evil entered the world. Brokenness and alienation were introduced into humanity, into creation, and into all the relationships that humanity is capable of having. The works of Christ, then, are God's way of remedying or healing that brokenness and opening a path towards regeneration and restoration of those relationships: with God himself, with ourselves, with our neighbours, and with the creation

we live in.¹ And an integral aspect of regeneration is the promise of our eternal communion with God, in the New Jerusalem, on the New Earth.

So, the Christian hope is grounded in the works of Christ and the promises of God that, even though regeneration and salvation was made available through Jesus long ago, we look forwards to the healing and restoration of the systemic brokenness which is still present in the world. So, people of faith live in the fullness of Christ's redemption but are still confronted with the terrible reality and power of creaturely suffering, alienated relationships and broken structures. This portrayal of the Christian situation is sometimes described as the 'already-and-not-yet' tension: salvation has already fully arrived, but we do not yet see the fullness of its arrival in all aspects of life.

Just as the Fall described in Genesis 3 was a momentous instant of sin and evil which contaminated the original goodness of creation and introduced the brokenness of our current condition, so too there will be a yet more momentous event in which God restores all things to a new and wonderful order, in which God will redeem and regenerate the whole of creation. This is what we are trying to focus on in this paper: how do we understand God's regenerative action in the present and the future?

When we think back to the biblical account of the Fall, it is clear that there was a strong continuity between the original world with the Creator proclaimed as 'very good' and the nature and reality of that same world following the Fall: the same people continued to exist, the animals and plants that were present in the garden then and there would have continued to exist after the Fall, although now in a mysteriously broken manner. So how about the world to come? Do we have hope for a similar continuation of our present existence, or do we start again?

Due attention should be given to the concept of regeneration: God will make all things new; he will not make all kinds of new things. In other words, the biblical narrative makes plain that God's plans are not to wipe the slate clean and start again. Rather his goal is to take the marred and broken creation and to renew, recreate, redeem and transform the old into a new and glorious creation. This wonderful prospect has very significant implications for humanity's current activities in the world.

In the original creation narrative human beings were placed on the earth with a unique calling - to cultivate, steward, uphold and subdue the natural world. And this calling as humankind to tend, protect and cultivate the earth, should not be seen as something temporary, provisional or unimportant but rather something that has eternal significance. If

¹ Obviously, we are passing over the incredibly important history of God with his people as described in the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament. This is not to suggest nothing of relevance happens in this period, but for our consideration of the future state of humanity and our current hope, a broad discussion is not needed.

this is true, then two things must be acknowledged: First God himself honours and values the human contributions we continue to make to this world, and second, it becomes of crucial importance to think carefully about the ways in which we, as human followers of Christ, use the creative and developmental gifts that God has so generously endowed us with.

The World To Come

In the history of Christian theology, there have been two fundamentally opposing approaches to understanding the transition from the current world to the New Creation. One approach is to conceive that the only continuation between this current age and the new one lies in the continuing existence of our human 'souls' or some form of our individual personal identity: everything else is lost. The alternative approach is to conceive of the continuation between the current and new world much more widely—encompassing the whole of God's created order. We will discuss both ideas in turn.

The first approach takes its biblical justification from certain texts on the transition to the new age which focus on the imagery of fire and burning. A good example of this type of imagery can be found in 2 Peter 3 (here using the words of the 1611 King James translation):

But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up. Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness, looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God, wherein the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat?

Peter describes, in this King James translation of the text, that all elements and all that is on the earth shall be 'burned up' and that all shall 'be dissolved.' If this text is taken as the starting-point for further exploration of the end of times, many other verses seem to confirm this idea. Matthew 24:35/Mark 13:31, for instance, states: *Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.* Similarly, Revelation 6:14 writes: *The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.* If we follow the literal KJV translation of 2 Peter 3, the end of the world will include the complete burning, the absolute obliteration of everything that is on this earth, the complete destruction of the planet (and indeed the entire cosmos) before the New Earth is recreated.

It is not difficult to see how such a conception of the transition between the current world and the New Jerusalem tends to discount anything done on this earth as being of eternal

significance, beyond working for the salvation of souls. Trying to work for the wellbeing of anything but other human beings can be seen as frivolous and pointless. This perspective also tends towards the idea that any possible advancements of technology, whether they have positive or negative outcomes for society, only confirm the fundamental sinfulness of the world. It's all going to burn! Redemption and hope are only found in God's salvation of the soul, and not through the regenerating or sanctifying work of anything creaturely.

But we wish to argue that this negative and world-denying perspective is an unhelpful distortion of an authentically biblical understanding of the Last Days. If we take the biblical narrative as a whole, we see that in the transition from this age to the world that is to come, there is *both continuity and discontinuity*. This means that we don't underestimate or ignore the discontinuity between the old and the new, the gravity of the moment in which God breaks into history in order to bring evil to an end and to bring cosmic justice and peace. But at the same time, we look for the continuities between the old and the new.

We must understand texts such as 2 Peter 3 within the context of the entire biblical narrative. Most modern translations, in line with a more accurate evaluation of the Greek text, propose that the fire spoken of does not 'burn up' but rather 'lays bare.' In other words, the fire reveals the truth, it makes clear what impurities were present, and as it destroys the impurities it purifies. The gold is revealed as the impurities are destroyed. Fire is an important image used in Scripture in association with the Last Day, but, we argue, it is the fire of purification and not the fire of destruction. To speak with the words of Malachi 3:2 *But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap.* So within this biblical imagery fire is a means of regeneration, of recreation, burning out that which does not belong.

Similarly, the Apostle Paul uses the image of fire to describe how every person's work will be tested at the Last Day. In 1 Corinthians 3:13-15 we read *"...each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire."* The consistent picture of the biblical narrative is that there will not be a complete annihilation of all that exists, but that the world will be refined and transformed. As such, there is both continuity and discontinuity.

A similar pattern of continuity and discontinuity can be observed in the resurrection appearances of Christ on Easter morning. Having been resurrected and walking in glory, we see how Christ is somehow both the same and yet different. Mary Magdalene who must have spent many hours in the presence of Jesus, fails to recognise him at the tomb. Only when he speaks her name is there that wonderful moment of recognition "Rabboni...". On the road to Emmaus, two followers of Jesus lament his passing. Jesus walks with them for hours unrecognised, opens the Scriptures, but only when he breaks bread do they realise who he is. Lastly, when Christ appears to his disciples in the upper room, there is no

doubting who he is, but most telling is the fact that Christ still bears the marks of his death—even in his resurrected body. There is continuity and discontinuity.

The biblical narrative consistently supports the wonderful truth that, in words we used earlier, God's plan is to take the marred and broken creation and renew, re-create, redeem, and transform the old into a new and glorious creation. It has often been remarked that the bible story of salvation starts in a garden, but it ends in a city, the New Jerusalem. This is supremely important. God's ultimate plan for the world is not some kind of rural idyll, a pastoral paradise of God's creation in which all the works of humankind are banished and destroyed. Instead, the vision of the new creation is of a wonderful city whose gates are perpetually open and into which are brought 'the glory and honour of the (pagan) nations' (Revelation 21:26).

This mysterious and redolent text has sometimes been speculatively interpreted to suggest that the greatest artistic masterpieces of humanity will somehow survive in a redeemed form and be incorporated into the New Jerusalem.

The New Jerusalem is a garden city. The river of the water of life flows through its midst, nourishing the tree of life whose leaves are for the healing of the nations. Some commentators have suggested that this symbolic language points to a harmonious re-union between the natural world and the products of human creativity in the New Jerusalem. In the history of civilisation human cities and human technology have so often despoiled, abused and polluted the natural world. There is a millennia-long history of conflict between the urban centres of developing technology and economic power and the rural areas and natural wildernesses which have been raped and destroyed in the process of technological advance. But in the New Jerusalem there is the recreation of harmony and unity between the natural world and that which has been created by human craftsmen, "the glory and honour of the nations".

Human Work and the Age to Come

The fair question might arise: in light of all this, what will survive through the fire of the Last Day? If the greatest works of Rembrandt and Mozart represent some of the glory and honour of the nations, what about the drawing of my two-year-old child, which is after all an expression of her unique creativity? If cathedrals and architectural wonders, how about the greatest products of Apple, Microsoft or Siemens? Is it possible that advanced human technology will find a place in the new heaven and new earth? What about the garden we tend with much dedication, the peace we facilitate, the medical advancements we achieve, the faithfulness with which one executes their job?

One suggestion of the continuity of work specifically, spoken of above, is found in the book of Revelation 19:6-8, where we read: *“Hallelujah for the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the lamb has come and his Bride has made herself ready: It was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure – for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.”* The glorious clothing of the Bride in the world to come is composed of innumerable deeds of love, compassion, faithfulness, goodness, and justice: the deeds of countless faithful believers down the ages. These are not lost, not forgotten, and not ignored.

Clearly, as we have shown, we see in the Scriptural narrative that aspects of our temporal time on earth are represented in the world to come, be it the idea of a city, the empty tomb, the marks on Christ’s body, the glorious clothing of the Bride, or the recognition of who he is in his glorified appearance. However, there is also an important difference: the world will have gone through a process of purification, which will have burned away impurities. One can also imagine that those parts of our being (and maybe also more broadly those parts of the whole of creation) which are malformed because of the effects of sin will be reformed or ‘purified’ and thus be different.

As we try to lean into the mysteries of God’s future purposes we see “in a mirror dimly”. Anyone who claims to have certainty about the future is misguided. The truth is, we cannot be clear about what from the present age will be preserved and restored in the New Earth, and what will be lost. But the biblical narrative strongly implies that it will be more than *only* our human souls whilst at the same time less than everything which is present on this planet now. Some aspects of our present reality will be destroyed in the testing and purifying fire. The truth lies somewhere in the middle. However, if we maintain that ‘work’ is a good with which God blessed humanity, we may even conclude there is a good chance we will still be working to cultivate, steward, and order the world, even in the age to come.

Conclusion

So, given this perspective on the future, how then should we live? Where does the rubber hit the road? The inescapable conclusion is that there is an eternal *significance* to our work on earth. The biblical narrative emphasises both the significance and honouring of our work here and now, in obedience to the original creation mandates given to human beings by the Creator, and the significance our work for the age that is to come. The eternal significance and divine honouring of temporal work confirms the importance of our human calling from the beginning of human history.

The way in which we shape the earth and answer our call to contribute to the world’s flourishing matters. It matters, I) because it is how we respond to and how we are obedient to God’s primary call to humanity to be his agents and representatives, and II) because we

are shaping and moulding a world which will be redeemed, renewed and restored in the future. How we behave, how we create, how we develop and employ technological advancement in the physical world around us, these activities matter for believers and people of faith. These activities do not occur in a realm distant from our Christian calling, but they sit at the heart of it. They are not irrelevant because they are about to be destroyed. Instead, they are honoured by God even though they will also be the object of his refiner's fire.

Looking at technological advancements, then: they should be viewed in the context of this understanding of the life to come. They are works of our hands which can, if they contribute to genuine human flourishing and are thus a faithful expression of our call to cultivate, be seen as good works, which God might honour in the age to come, as He did with the city. However, as with all human work, it ought to be oriented towards flourishing and it remains subject to the unequivocal need of all creaturely work to be redeemed and regenerated.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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