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The New Heavens and the New Earth

by Warren Krug

This writer over the past four decades has read quite a number of creationist books. Maybe it is just a coincidence or maybe there has been a subtle shift, but I seem to have noticed a definite change in how the writers, most of whom seem to come out of the Reformed tradition, refer to the last times. Years ago it was not uncommon to read direct references to millennialism, the belief that Jesus Christ will return to earth to set up an earthly kingdom that will last 1,000 years prior to the end of the world. Lately though, such direct references seem to have become much less common. Instead many writers in referring to the last times now seem to be using the phrase “the new heaven(s) and the new earth.” As Lutherans, we do not accept the notion of any earthly reign of Christ, but we can’t argue with the use of that phrase, for it comes directly from the Scriptures (Isaiah 65:17; Isaiah 66:22; 2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 21:1). However, we may find we disagree with how “new heaven(s) and new earth” is being interpreted.

What About Millennialism?

Millennialism takes its name from the Latin word millennium, which means “thousand years.” The support for this doctrine lies mainly in Revelations 20 in which Jesus is described as coming to seize and imprison the dragon (Satan) for a thousand years. There are postmillennialists who believe Jesus will come back to earth after a thousand years of peace during which the church will prosper, but also there are premillennialists who think the Lord will come back before the thousand years to set up an earthly kingdom that will last a millennium. Lutherans and some other Christians are called amillennialists because we believe this description of the thousand years in Revelations should not be interpreted literally and that we are already living in a figurative “thousand years” which will end when Jesus comes back to judge the world and take all believers to heaven. Our Augsburg Confession states: “They condemn also others, who are now spreading certain Jewish opinions, that before the resurrection of the dead the godly shall take possession of the kingdom of the world, the ungodly being everywhere suppressed” (Art. XVII, 5) **1**

1. Koehler, Edward W. A., *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, self-published, 1939.

There are at least two reasons to support amillennialism. First, Revelations is clearly written in figurative language; John is having visions (Rev. 9:17). Note the figurative language in the first two verses of Revelations 20: Jesus is called an angel holding a key; hell is described as an Abyss with a lock; and Satan is called a dragon. Secondly, other clear passages in the Bible clearly contradict any idea of a thousand-year warning prior to the Last Day. Paul in 1 Thessalonians 5:1-3 says the Last Day will come suddenly, like “a thief in the night.” Matthew 24 also describes the sudden coming of the Lord to judge the world, to accept believers, and to reject the unbelievers. No mention of coming to set up an earthly kingdom. Moreover, we are told to focus our spiritual eyes on heaven (Philippians 3:4), not on some earthly kingdom.

Do commentators who speak of “the new heaven(s) and the new earth” really mean the millennium?

It is, of course, not possible to read what is in the hearts and minds of these creationist authors if they don't further describe their interpretation of that phrase. Dr. Henry Morris, a Baptist who is often called the “father of the modern creationist movement” appears to view “new heaven(s) and a new earth” as a reference to eternity, and not to an earthly, 1,000-year kingdom ruled by Christ. In a short article about that phrase, he makes no reference to millennialism, and he says concerning the new age, “Then we shall have ‘a new name written’ by Christ Himself, sing ‘a new song’ with new voices, and live in that ‘holy city, New Jerusalem’ (Revelation 2:17; 5:9; 21:2). We shall have new bodies, new homes, new ministries, new lives, **forever.**” **2**

2. Morris, Henry Ph.D., “A New World,” *Days of Praise*, 1997 <<http://www.icr.org/article/20837/>>

However, Matthew Henry, a Presbyterian minister and author of a popular commentary who lived from 1662 to 1714, wrote the following (according to Wikipedia): In the grace and comfort believers have in and from Christ, we are to look for **this new heaven and new earth**. The former confusions, sins and miseries of the human race, shall be no more remembered or renewed. The approaching **happy state of the church** is described under a variety of images. He shall be thought to die in his youth, and for his sins, who only lives to the age of a hundred years. The event alone can determine what is meant; but it is plain that **Christianity, if universal, would so do away violence and evil**, as greatly to lengthen life. In those happy days, all God's people shall enjoy the fruit of their labours. Nor will children then be the trouble of their parents, or suffer trouble themselves. The evil dispositions of sinners shall be completely moritified; all shall live in harmony. Thus the **church on earth shall be full of happiness, like heaven.** **3**

3. “Isaiah 65 “, Bible Study Tools <<http://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/matthew-henry-concise/isaiah/65.html>>

How do confessional Lutheran commentators interpret “the new heaven(s) and the new earth”?

Here is a look at what several Lutheran commentators have to say about the four passages that mention the “new heaven(s) and new earth”. Paul E. Kretzmann uses the King James Version and the *People's Bible Series* authors use the New International Version.

1. Isaiah 65:17. “Behold, I will create *new heavens and a new earth*. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind.”

John A. Braun, *Isaiah 40-66* (People's Bible Series), Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2001: We focus our attention first on the new heaven and new earth. The first three verses of this section of the prophecy anticipate the new heaven and earth, which the apostle John saw in Revelation, chapter 21. The faithful do not remember their former troubles and difficulties. They will “be glad and rejoice forever.” So God pictures eternal life and bliss with him in heaven.

Paul E. Kretzmann, *Popular Commentary of the Bible*, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1924: **For behold, I create new heavens**, the plural being applied to the abode of the blessed in many

passages of the Bible, **and a new earth**, cp. Rev. 21; **and the former**, that which was infested with sin and its curse, **shall not be remembered or come into mind**, the very remembrance of the sorrows of this present world being erased by the overwhelming mercies of God.

2. Isaiah 66:22. “As *the new heavens and the new earth* that I make will endure before me,’ declares the LORD, ‘so will your name and descendants endure.’ “

Braun: The church on earth is the courtyard connected to the glorious eternal mansion of heaven. In that sense, the church on earth anticipates the new heavens and the new earth God will create. It will endure before God in time until the Lord calls an end to time and makes the church on earth the church triumphant and eternal.

Kretzmann: **For as the new heavens and the new earth which I will make**, the new creation of which He spoke, chapt. 65,17, **shall remain before Me, saith the Lord, so shall your seed and your name remain**, namely, that of the believers, the spiritual children of Israel, gathered from Jews and Gentiles alike.

3. 2 Peter 3:11-13. “Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a *new heaven and a new earth*, the home of righteousness.”

Mark A. Jeske, James, Peter, John, Jude, (People’s Bible Series), 2002: God is coming not just to take things away from us. After the dismantling of the universe is complete, he will utter his creative word once again and a new heaven and earth will spring into being. This will not be an entirely other sort of existence, strange and alien, but our own universe, dismantled and rebuilt, transformed and renewed. The new world will have some great advantages over the old: heaven and earth will be together, not separate, as John saw and heard in Revelation 21:3.

Kretzmann: But new heavens and a new earth we expect according to His promises, in which righteousness will have its abode. After this old earth has passed away according to the apostle’s description, there will be new heavens and a new earth. That is not a vain hope, a mere day-dream on the part of the Christians, but our faith is based upon God’s promises. Is. 65:17; 66,22. Since our expectation is founded on the Word of God, therefore we shall not be ashamed. This old earth is filled with sin and unrighteousness, the very creatures, the dumb animals groaning with the pain of the curse of sin. Rom. 8,22. But after the last day there will be no more sin; in the new earth there will live only righteousness and joy and peace.”

4. Revelations 21:1. “Then I saw a *new heaven and a new earth*, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea.”

Kretzmann: The eyes of the believers are here turned to the coming, complete salvation, Here we may look and lift up our eyes, for our salvation is near: And I saw the new heaven and the new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and the sea is no more. John sees the fulfillment of all the prophecies relating to the glory at the end, Is. 65, 17; 66, 22; 2 Pet. 3, 12. 13. The believers inherit the Kingdom which was prepared for them since the beginning of the world, Matt. 25, 34. The new heaven and the new earth they are called, because they are altogether different from this present world, steeped in sin as it is. Everything that has any connection with sin will be removed altogether. Therefore the sea also, from which the dragon came forth, will be no more.

Wayne Mueller, *Revelation* (People's Bible Series), 1996: John saw "a new heaven and a new earth" (verse 1). Throughout this closing scene, literal and figurative descriptions of paradise stand side by side. It is not always easy to tell whether John is providing us a painting or a snapshot of heaven. This is also true of the opening statement about a new earth and sky. Will our earth and sky be destroyed and entirely new ones be created? Will our present world, as we know it, be destroyed and a renewed earth be our eternal home? It is also possible that John's words are highly figurative. A new heaven and earth may be his picture for an entirely new place that we call heaven...The *new heaven and earth* are not meant to answer our curiosity about the afterlife. But they do make two important points. God will destroy the earth we know now, so we should not set our hope on it. Gone with the old world was the sea (verse 1). The sea was where the first beast came from (chapter 13). Along with the destruction of the old world came the end of antichristian threats. God will provide a new place that is safe and unshakable. Rather than demanding that our curiosity be satisfied, our response should be reverent worship (see 2 Peter 3:11,12,14).

Perhaps we should be cautious as was Wayne Mueller in trying to figure out exactly what is meant by "the new heaven and the new earth." It is safe to assume that when we get to heaven we will understand such things. We do know it can't refer to any temporary earthly kingdom of Christ. And we can gather enough information from the rest of God's Word to realize that heaven, despite not being sure of its exact nature, will be an eternal place of supreme peace and joy. That should be enough for us for now. **LSI**