

Anticipate Our Heaven Below: John Wesley's Precedent for Reclaiming *Wholistic* Salvation

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In this lecture I will focus on one specific aspect of Christian teaching, what we call “eschatology,” or teachings about “last things.” And I will relate this to a specific moral criticism of Christianity – a criticism first voiced strongly by Ludwig Feuerbach in the nineteenth century, but of increasing relevance today. Feuerbach framed his charge in direct connection to the typical assumptions about eschatology of Christians in his day. He noted that they pictured the *final* state of those who were saved as disembodied spirits in heaven, worshiping God. Assuming that whatever one thinks God cares about most in *final* salvation will influence what *they* care most about *now*, his charge was that:

Nature, the world, has no value, no interest for Christians. The Christian thinks only of himself and the salvation of his soul (Ludwig Feuerbach, *Essence of Christianity*, 1841).

I have two goals in this lecture. First, I would say that I fear Feuerbach was right about most Christians in his day, and today (at least in North America). But I will try to show that this is NOT because they believe the Bible; it is because they have allowed their understanding of last things to be reshaped too much by perspectives outside of the Bible. Second, I will argue that John Wesley can serve as an important resource for helping those of us seeking to live faithful Christian lives today to recover something more like the eschatology of the Bible.

I will begin by summarizing the convictions about eschatology that we find in Scripture, then trace briefly how these convictions changed over time in popular Christian imagination.¹ I will illustrate these changes with some typical Christian art.

Hebraic Hope for Long Life in an Ideal Creation

The Christian Bible opens with the clear affirmation that God created all things, that God looked upon each facet of creation and proclaimed it “good,” and that God intended for humans to live within this good world, *guarding and nurturing it* (Gen. 2:15). As we move further into the Old Testament, one of the most central convictions we find is affirmation of God’s “covenant faithfulness”—that the holy and loving God will honor those who live in the ways that make for justice and peace (*shalom*). In the earliest parts of the Old Testament this is expressed in a claim that the just will live long lives and be blessed with prosperity, while the wicked will die young (cf. Prov. 10:22, 27). The focus is on this life, with any suggested afterlife presented as, at best, a “shade” or faint image of present existence.

¹For a more detailed discussion and documentation of this section, relating particularly to Charles Wesley, see Randy L. Maddox, “‘Anticipate Our Heaven Below’: The Emphatic Hope and Abiding Tone of Charles Wesley’s Eschatology.” *Proceedings of the Charles Wesley Society* 17 (2013): 11–34. All of my articles are available for download here:

<http://divinity.duke.edu/faculty/randy-l-maddox> (scroll down the page).

Over time it became clear that *immediate* blessing and retribution are often not evident in the present age. In the book of Job we see the deep perplexity that this realization created, but we also see Job's refusal to surrender his conviction about God's justice! This same conviction permeates the Old Testament prophets. At times it led them to explain to the Israelite nations that the reason for their current misfortunes was their failure to live within the guidelines of God's covenant. But more deeply it brought the prophets to insist that God would soon act in a new way *in history* to remove current injustices, to change people's hearts (Jer. 31:31–34; Ezek. 36:24–35), and to restore creation to its intended state of peace and flourishing.

A painting by Edward Hicks titled "The Peaceable Kingdom" (1833), which is based on Isaiah 11:6–8, gives a glimpse of this hope for God's holistic redemption. [show Hicks slide]

Here we see the lion living peacefully with the lamb, children playing harmlessly over the holes of snakes, and everything flourishing. If anything is missing in the painting, it is the social-political dimension of God's promised redemption that is affirmed in texts like Isaiah 65:18–25.

I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight. ...
no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress.
No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days,
or an old person who does not live out a lifetime ...
They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.

Apocalyptic and New Testament Vision of Resurrected Life in a Renewed Creation

For all of its grandeur, Isaiah's visionary hope remained set in the present age, assuming the realities of birth and death. One might be blessed with long life, but not eternal life. More importantly, Isaiah's vision does not address how things might be made right for those who suffered unjustly *in the past*. Eventually some of the latest voices in the Old Testament began to express a more dramatic and more inclusive vision of hope—they promised God's cataclysmic judgment of present evil, followed by the resurrection of *all* persons (past and present) and recreation of *all* things (heavens and earth) in a state of unending life and abiding *shalom!*

This minority voice within the Old Testament witness was endorsed by the resurrection of Christ and became the normative expression of Christian hope. The New Testament clearly affirms the resurrection of *all persons* for judgment. It also retains the assumption that God's redeeming concern is for *all* of creation! Consider the witness of Paul: "We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies" (Romans 8:22–23).

Alternative Greco-Roman Focus on Immortal (Human) Life

Expectation of a new creation, teeming with life, in which resurrected humans dwell, carried over from the New Testament to many early Christian writers. But we also see from the earliest years of the church the influence of a different model of hope for human afterlife, a model that was part of the Greco-Roman culture within which the church was taking root. In its popular form this model held that the spiritual essence of the human person was of such value that it simply could not be terminated at death—the *real* person does not die; instead, death

marks the point where one's spiritual nature is set free to enter a higher eternal state pictured as peaceful gardens (the "Elysian fields"). Note how this is pictured as still prominent in the fourth century of the Christian age on this catacomb of Vincentius, in Rome. [next slide]

Two characteristics of this alternative vision of hope should be highlighted. First, the state of the person immediately after death is fully conscious and filled with delight. Often there was stress that they were *more fully alive* after death; they were able, for example, to think faster, see more clearly, and feel more deeply than they could in physical bodies. Second, in this vision hope is focused almost entirely on human welfare. Plants and animals are present only as food.

Growing Christian Assumption of a Conscious Intermediate State

The emphases of the Greco-Roman model of the afterlife proved very attractive to Christians and were increasingly adopted—at first as a model of the state of humans *between* our death and the resurrection of our bodies. While the possibility of such an intermediate state is hinted at in a few places in the New Testament, popular Christian imagination was soon *taking for granted* that we enter this conscious "spiritual" state immediately at death. This assumption shines through in a fifteenth-century painting of the "funeral" of Mary the mother of Jesus by Fra Angelico. [show slide]

Note how the focus is not actually on Mary's funeral and burial on earth, but her immediate transfer to "heaven above." And notice that the bodies of those in this higher realm are ethereal (or spirit-like) at best – they float on clouds. There are few echoes here of the Old Testament image of the dead remaining in the grave, awaiting resurrection and a renewed earth

Patient Pilgrimage – A Spirituality Attuned to a purely Heavenly Hope

A change in understanding of our ultimate hope as far-reaching as we have just traced was sure to be reflected in other areas of Christian faith and practice. In particular, it promoted growing prominence of the metaphor of "pilgrimage" for present Christian life.

While there are strands of the pilgrimage metaphor in Scripture, they do not constitute the dominant pattern. The Bible *generally* presents peaceful human life in a flourishing physical world as God's loving gift in creation. Suffering and evil are portrayed as corruptions of this original ideal, and death (or at least early and unjust death) is considered a curse. God's salvific activity in the present corrupt age is focused on restoring the peaceful and flourishing condition of the whole creation, with humanity in its midst.

To be sure, Scripture also portrays life in the present corrupt age as threatened, and often short, and encourages readers to be prepared for death. These themes drew the most attention of Christians in the Middle Ages as they experienced repeated wars and frequent plagues, leading to embrace of pilgrimage as the *dominant* metaphor of life. Christians came to view themselves as placed in an *alien and dangerous* setting, with the task of making their way home. On these terms, the challenge for Christian life was less the need to contend with the *temporary corruption* of God's ideal creation, and more the *temporary endurance* of this probationary setting. Life in this world was less God's blessing than it was our dominant challenge (almost a curse); and death was less a curse than a desired release into a more ideal state (heaven above). Proponents were drawn less to the hope of Isaiah 65:8–15, than to the pessimistic conclusion of Ecclesiastes 7:3, "the day of death is better than the day that one was born." And there was little reason to guard and nurture the present world

The most developed and well-known articulation of this metaphor for the Christian life is John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678). [show slide] In this allegory we watch the pilgrim (named "Christian" and pictured in this slide) negotiate the many wearisome obstacles that comprise life in this world, like the swamp of despair. All of these obstacles tend to distract Christian from his heavenly goal, the Celestial City. But when he finally succeeds in reaching that City, he is transformed into glorious life. And there is no hint of any need (or desire) to return in a resurrected body to live in the world he just struggled to escape.

Loss of Earth and Animals in the Final Hope

In fact, as emphasis on the blessings that come immediately after death grew, expectation of a restored earth faded. The notion that any creatures other than humans would participate in God's final redeeming work was largely dismissed. It became common to argue that God only needed to redeem humanity, because humans were representatives of the whole cosmos (for we contain all dimensions of reality in our nature). The other beings whom God called "good" in creation, were increasingly left out of God's eternal blessing.

The commitments of popular Christian piety are evident in a fifteenth-century painting of the final resurrection and Last Judgment by Hans Memling. [show slide]

Note how only humans are raised from the ground, to pass either into hell or eternal glory. Note that the final goal of the redeemed is the (heavenly) New Jerusalem—they leave the desolate earth behind. And note that only humans are entering the heavenly realm.

Near Loss of the Human Body in the Final Hope

And is it even *all* of the human person that is redeemed? While the New Testament and the creeds clearly affirm resurrection of the body, strong dualistic tendencies led much of popular Christian belief to verge toward a *purely spiritual* final state. Indeed, I think a poll of most Christians today (again, at least in North America) would show that they assume that their souls will remain eternally in heaven above (like angels on clouds, surrounding Jesus), and that they see little reason for taking up again bodily existence in a renewed physical creation. What began as a view of our intermediate state has become our hope for our *final* state [back to Fra Angelico].

This is what gave rise to Feuerbach's charge. If God does not ultimately care about the body, or the larger creation, why should we? On the other hand, if God does care about the whole of creation, how can we neglect it? This has become a particularly pressing question in the age of climate change and broad-spread species extinction. How do we answer critics of Christianity who charge that Christian faith is fundamentally opposed to care for the creation, and that this alone is reason enough to dismiss Christianity?

Recent Calls to Reclaim Redemption of the Human Body and of the Whole Creation

If the history I have just traced is even close to accurate, then we must begin with a word of repentance, because we modern Christians have tended to adopt an eschatology that focuses too much on heaven above and not enough on the fullness of God's creation. But we should not stop there. The critique of Feuerbach and others has led Christian scholars increasingly to encourage all Christians to recover the *biblical* emphasis on salvation for the whole creation. I have in mind books like those of New Testament scholar N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (2008); and theologian Richard Middleton, *A New Heaven and New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology* (2014).

The discussion such books have stirred up in Christian circles is at an early stage, and some have questioned whether emphasis on salvation of all creatures is an example of syncretism (adopting themes for other religions) or concession to modern culture. I hope that the history I have just traced raises the opposite possibility—that any concession to culture or mixing of ideas from non-Christian sources took place *earlier*; and that these authors are helping us to recover a truly Christian voice.

But the point to which I will devote the remainder of this lecture is that those of us in church traditions related to John Wesley's ministry have strong precedent for welcoming the current attempt to recover the Bible's witness to God's care for the whole of creation, and for joining in the search for practical implications of such a recovered eschatology.²

John Wesley's initial Assumption of the standard "Spiritualized" Eschatology

John Wesley was actually an important pioneer in helping recover the biblical model of salvation for the whole creation. But to see this, we need to pay attention to *development* in his comments on eschatology. The spiritualized model of the Christian hope, whose development we just traced, was standard among British Christians at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Wesley imbibed it with his upbringing and training for ministry. It remained in place well into his ministry, as can be seen in a well-known passage from the preface to the first volume of Wesley's collected *Sermons*, published in 1746:

I am a spirit come from God and returning to God; just hovering over the great gulf, till a few moments hence I am no more seen—I drop into an unchangeable eternity! I want to know one thing, the way to heaven—how to land safe on that happy shore. God himself has condescended to teach the way, for this very end he came from heaven (*Sermons*, Preface, §5).

Note both how this quote reduces human nature to just our spirit, and how the hope is for the spirit to get out of this physical creation, back to heaven above, to spend eternity there. This all sounds more like the Greco-Roman model of the afterlife than like Isaiah, Daniel, or Paul! But it was typical for Christian writing of the time, and much popular Christian belief still today. John Wesley was not saying anything new—he was repeating what he learned.

² For more details and documentation of the points that follow, see Randy L. Maddox, "Anticipating the New Creation: Wesleyan Foundations for Holistic Mission," *Asbury Journal* 62 (2007): 49–66.

John Wesley's Growing Recognition of the Breadth of God's Saving Concern

But as Wesley continued to immerse himself in the revival, he found himself drawn to a deep biblical truth that would lead him to challenge this spiritualized model. One of Wesley's favorite texts capturing this biblical truth was Psalm 145:9, "The Lord is good to *all*: and his tender mercies are over *all his works*." Through the years of his participation in the revival Wesley came to appreciate more and more of what this "all" included.

One of the first times Wesley quoted Ps. 145:9 to defend his conviction about an issue debated among Christians was in his sermon "Free Grace," where he rejected the notion that God offers the possibility of salvation to only a few elect persons. Since God's mercy is over *all* God's works, Wesley insisted that God graciously offers the possibility of salvation to all persons. Another time that Wesley cited Ps. 145:9 was in his *Thoughts upon Slavery*, when he rejected the argument being made by some Christians that God intended for some people to be slaves and other to be their owners. In both of these cases Wesley cited Ps. 145:9 to support views that he had held most of his life. But there is one setting in which this text was central to Wesley *changing* his mind in his later years.

John Wesley's Mature Commitment to Animal Salvation / Welfare

I am referring to Wesley's 1781 sermon titled "The General Deliverance." In this sermon Wesley bravely reclaimed the biblical model of salvation, insisting that not only humans, but *all animal life* will participate in final salvation — because "God's mercy is over *all* God's works." Indeed, Wesley claimed in this sermon: "The whole brute creation will then undoubtedly be restored, not only to the vigour, strength, and swiftness which they had at their creation, but to a far higher degree" (§III.3). That is, animals in the next life will have greater abilities than in this life. They will be able to reason, to talk, and so on. In case you are wondering, Wesley thought humans would also have greater abilities – we will be able to move all around the universe, exploring the wonders of God's creation on every planet!

I called this sermon brave, because it is widely recognized as one of the first sermons to defend the idea of animal salvation in the Western Christian church for over a millennium! Wesley was defending an idea that the vast majority of Christians of his day considered absurd (because they had been taught to quickly pass over the passages affirming it in the Bible). He did so because his deep conviction that "God's mercy is over all God's works" had led him to begin rereading these neglected portions of Scripture, and taking them seriously. And he continued to do so, publishing a sermon in 1785 titled "The New Creation," where he reminded readers that the Bible speaks of a renewed creation where even the physical elements (fire, water, etc.) are present, though dramatically improved over current conditions.

There are many particulars in these sermons by Wesley that we might debate. But I want to suggest that the most important thing to see is Wesley's recognition that beliefs about our *final* hope have *present* ethical implications (just as Feuerbach thought). Like his brother Charles, John Wesley thought that Christians were called to "Anticipate our heaven below" (the well-known closing line of Charles's hymn "O For a Thousand Tongues"). This is clear in the conclusion to John's sermon "The General Deliverance." He admitted some of his suggestions about future animal life were speculative (though I would note that he took them from Charles Bonnet, a leading French scientist of his day!). But he added that he hoped that they "may encourage us to *imitate* him whose mercy is over all his works" (§III.10).

To get specific, an important way that the elder John Wesley thought Methodists, and Christians more generally, should “anticipate our heaven below” was caring for animal welfare! For example, he specifically charged his traveling preachers: “Be merciful to your beast. Not only ride moderately, but see with your own eyes that your horse be rubbed, fed, and bedded.” (“Large Minutes” Q. 3). Similarly, in a sermon “On the Education of Children” (§25) Wesley exhorted parents not to allow their children to give pain to any living creature (including snakes!) but rather to extend the “golden rule,” of doing as they would be done by, to every animal whatsoever. Since God values all animals eternally, Wesley argued, we should treat them appropriately now! Wesley was also known to preach against bear-baiting and cock-fighting.

Wesley’s stance in this regard was so well known that by the later part of the eighteenth century any priest in England preaching in favor of animal welfare was accused of being a Methodist! And when the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals was organized in London in 1824, their first publication included as its opening chapter Wesley’s sermon on “The General Deliverance.”

Let me be clear that I am not trying to suggest that John Wesley gives us the specific model of how to *guard and nurture* our world today. He was an eighteenth-century man, sharing assumptions of his day. In particular, we are much more aware in the twenty-first century than Wesley was that authentic care for animals must include care for their eco-systems. But this should not prevent us from appreciating how Wesley played an important early role in recovering the wholistic vision of salvation in Scripture, and attending to implications of this vision for caring for the world we live in now. We who are descendants of Wesley’s ministry do not need to look elsewhere for a patron saint or model!

If I had time, I would develop the related point that John Wesley’s recovered appreciation for the resurrection of the body was a key reason that he structured the Methodist revival to care for human bodies and well as human souls—offering medical care and stressing practices of diet and exercise to promote wellness. As it is, I will leave you with a reference and perhaps some time in the discussion period.³

³See Randy L. Maddox, “John Wesley on Holistic Health and Healing,” *Methodist History* 46 (2007): 4–33; and the soon-to-be released volume of John Wesley’s Medical Writings in the Bicentennial Edition.