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Q&A#26 Does New Creation Undermine Natural Law?

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Today's question: "What implications does the promise of new creation have for Christian ethics? Specifically does new creation undermine natural law ethics since we are now to orientate our lives, not towards what is revealed in nature, but towards the new creation established by God in Christ. What implications does this have for issues in which Christians often appeal to natural law arguments - marriage, sexuality, gender issues etc...?"

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Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, what implications does the promise of new creation have for Christian ethics? Specifically, does new creation undermine natural law ethics, since we are now to orient our lives not towards what is revealed in nature, but towards the new creation established by God in Christ? What implications does this have for issues in which Christians often appeal to natural law arguments, marriage, sexuality, gender issues, etc.? Good question. I think it may be helpful in thinking through this to look, first of all, at Paul's treatment of some of these issues in 1 Corinthians.

1 Corinthians 6, verse 12, following, All things are lawful for me, but all things are not helpful. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any. Foods for the stomach and the stomach for foods, but God will destroy both it and them.

Now the body is not for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body,

and God both raised up the Lord and will also raise us up by his power. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them the members of a harlot? Certainly not. Or do you not know that he who is joined to a harlot is one body with her? For the two, he said, shall become one flesh, that he who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with him.

Flee sexual immorality. Every sin that a man does is outside the body, but he who commits sexual immorality sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price, therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's.

Paul seems to be dealing here with a position among the Corinthians, represented by some of their slogans, as people call them. Things like, all things are lawful for me, or foods for the stomach and the stomachs for food, and God will destroy both. They use these sorts of slogans in support of a particular spiritual understanding.

That what God really cares about are not the things to do with the body. The body is about to be destroyed. The body doesn't really matter.

What really matters is the freedom that we have in Christ, the spiritual freedom. And we can express that in ways that give us a certain liberty with the body, to do with the body what we will, to engage in sexual relations that formerly would have been prescribed. And that attitude is one that Paul directly addresses.

And so the idea that there is a cutting loose of spiritual norms from the natural order, he arrests that thought in his tracks. And what he points to is the fact of resurrection, that resurrection is not the annihilation of the natural order, but it's the true telos of the natural order. The new creation is not just the obliteration of the old creation as a norm or anything like that.

Rather, it's recognizing that the new creation, in the new creation, the old creation is glorified, resurrected, restored, perfected. From that vantage point, we understand the old creation is having a weight that we would not otherwise. And so Paul's arguments here are not natural law arguments.

Those wouldn't hold much weight with the Corinthians, because they would dismiss the order of the body. The body is about to be destroyed. What really matters is the spirit.

What really matters is this spiritual realm, this spiritual way of living, this way of living that isn't really concerned with the body in the same way and the norms that are attached to it. But Paul challenges that not by just asserting the norms of the body, but by showing that the spiritual norms and the norms of the body that they have opposed cannot be separated from each other. Because we are people shaped by the belief in

resurrection.

And resurrection presents us with a vantage point upon nature and a vantage point upon new creation. So on the one hand, from the point of the resurrection, we can look back to the old creation and see its full telos, its full purpose, that the old creation is not the final word. It's supposed to become part of something.

It's supposed to be raised into something more glorious. It's groaning so that it might be delivered into the freedom of the sons of God. And on the other hand, it helps us to understand the new creation not as a denial of the old creation, but as a glorification of it.

And so what we have here is not the negation of natural law, but the assertion of natural law's importance from the vantage point of the resurrection, where natural law is not just asserted in a flat way that this is the way that creation is, but that old creation is related to the new creation. That the old creation order is what will be glorified within the new creation. And so your body, which you might think of dismissing Corinthians, is the temple of the Holy Spirit.

Your body is the limbs and organs of Christ. Your body is set apart, marked out for resurrection on the last day. And so this natural order that you may, this natural order of the body that you may want to dismiss, that it's just foods for the stomach and the stomach for foods, and they'll both be destroyed, that's not actually true.

That this order of the body is one that has weight to it. That people who act in a way that is sexually immoral are uniting themselves to prostitutes, for instance. They're sinning against their own bodies, and their bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit.

And this claim is one that bridges the gap between old creation and new creation, that shows that natural law is not something that just floats free, that is unmoored and then floats away as soon as we have resurrection. Rather, resurrection is the greatest possible assertion of the old creation. Because God is not going to just allow the old creation be destroyed.

The body is going to be raised. And so the order of the body and the natural way that, the natural law of the bodily order is something that matters immensely. It matters more so because it is related to the new creation order.

That this is the path through which we move towards the new creation. These earthen vessels are bearing heavenly treasures. That these earthen vessels testify to the age to come.

And so marriage is not just the original creation order. Christ draws our attention back to the original creation order, the way that God created them at the beginning. Male and female, he created them.

Man leaving father and mother and becoming one flesh, being joined to his wife and becoming one flesh. That's the original creation order. But then there's also the horizon of the kingdom.

And against the horizon of the kingdom, what you see is not the obliteration of that original creation order, but the raising up of that creation order into something more glorious. So now what we see is marriage not just related to that original order of male and female being created, leaving father and mother and being joined to wife and becoming one flesh. But now it's related to Christ and his union with the church.

It's related to the order of the new creation, the order of resurrection. And it's something that testifies not just to the original order, but to something that is yet to come. Now, once we have understood the significance of resurrection as not a denial and obliteration and negation of the natural order, but a raising up of the natural order into something more glorious, we'll be able to think more carefully and more fruitfully about the relationship between the two.

Because then it's not just a restoration of the natural order in its original form. The principle of generation in the natural order is sexual reproduction. Procreation.

But the principle of generation in the new creation order is not that, but resurrection. That's the principle of generation in the new creation order. Explains Jesus' argument with the Sadducees, that he can argue that the example that they give of the woman and the seven brothers is about marriage as ordered to bearing fruit, to bearing seed.

But when people are sons of the resurrection, the need to bear physical seed no longer has the same significance. Now, as Christians, we are those who are destined for resurrection. Our bodies are set out for this purpose.

And in that respect, we are those who belong simultaneously to two orders in the already not yet of redemption. We already participate in something of the resurrection order in Christ. We've not fully entered into that.

But we also participate in the order of the old creation, as we still have mortal bodies of flesh. And so bridging that gap or straddling that divide is important. That we need to think about how we inhabit both of those realms.

So within the New Testament, we see things like marriage, which is an institution that exists for this age. It's not going to exist in the age to come. Being taken up as something that bears and serves as a symbol of the kingdom.

And that also serves as a Christian vocation that leads towards the age to come. Male and female are heirs together of the grace of life. Now, that could be seen as the promise of bearing children, the blessing of bearing children.

But it's also the blessing of the age to come. That male and female are heirs together of that. And in marriage, that's a form in which our Christian pilgrimage can be worked out against the horizon of the age to come.

Now, that horizon, that vantage point of resurrection changes the way you view things. You're still existing within the same order, within the same norms, etc. But that vantage point makes you see things differently.

For instance, your children. That your children are not going to be defined ultimately by their origins. By where they have come from.

They're going to be defined by resurrection, where they're going to. And that changes the way that you view your children, for instance. No longer are your children primarily yours.

They are seen as those who will be sons and daughters of the resurrection. And you must learn to relate to them as such. There is a sense in which they are going to become something more.

Something that means that their belonging to the family will be exceeded. They won't just be part of the family. Your family descending or growing like a tree upwards as all the family and relations develop further over time.

There's something more than that. There's going to be a new form of generation and they'll be defined by that. And that changes the way that you relate to people.

It changes the way that you see yourself in relationship to them and positioned relative to them. That's an important thing to bear in mind. Also, the way that we view sexual ethics and things like that.

That if we see it in the light of the resurrection, that we are living as those who are sojourners. Who are pilgrims, strangers and aliens within this day. Within the old creation awaiting the new creation.

Who've grown within ourselves awaiting that. We'll be able to talk more faithfully and seriously about brokenness. About sexual struggles, about sin, about the difficulties that we face.

About the futility of the body. About the body not just as this realm where all our... That we place all our hopes upon finding sexual fulfillment in this life. But the body as something that is destined towards resurrection.

That our bodies have been marked out in baptism, for instance, for resurrection. We've been baptized into Christ's death, buried with him. So we exist in this sort of liminal realm.

Our bodies placed in that liminal realm. That realm on the threshold between death and life. Waiting for resurrection.

Our bodies are set apart for resurrection. And that changes the way that you live. If you truly grasp that.

Now as Christians, we often struggle to think about the body in a Christian way. We have lots of Christian truths directed to our minds. Far fewer truths directed to our bodies.

But when we are baptized, God is speaking directly to our bodies. He is declaring over our bodies that no matter what people say. Might have done to your body.

What you have done with your body. No matter what sense of mortality you feel in your body. The futility and the weakness that you feel in your body.

The sense of aging and dying that you know within your body. The feeling of judgment and shame that you feel in your body. All of these things notwithstanding.

God has set apart your body for resurrection. To be with him. To be the temple of his Holy Spirit.

To be the limbs and organs of his son. To be a realm of his presence to you. That your body might be raised up on the last day.

And that changes the way that you think about the way you live here and now. It doesn't just leave us with a flat natural law. Rather it leaves us with a resurrected natural law.

A law of the body and of nature that sees this nature not just as it is now. But as destined towards something so much greater. And as we live faithfully here and now within the conditions of this current creation.

We are preparing ourselves for the age to come when our bodies will be raised up. So this opposition between old and new creation that you see within the thought of the Corinthians. The spiritualizing of ethics.

Where you can dismiss the concerns of the ethics of the body and natural order. And these sorts of things. We've risen above that.

Paul absolutely rejects this. And what he leaves us with is something more than natural law. Natural law.

But natural law is something that's seen in the light of the resurrection. Natural law is something destined towards new creation. So as we live faithfully within our bodies.

We are not just obeying a flat rule that exists for this time that we must just live through and endure. But we're living faithfully in a way that prepares us for resurrection. We're

living faithfully as those who testify within these conditions of the age to come.

Now once we've recognized the telos of the natural order. It does give us a certain freedom with relation to natural. The natural necessities that we would otherwise feel maybe bound by.

And so for instance not bearing children is more of a possibility for Christians. Because we see ourselves not primarily as those who are going to perpetuate humanity by bearing children. But as those who are defined by more powerfully defined by the age to come.

Whose principle of generation is resurrection new birth. We are people of new birth primarily not the original birth. And when we think that way.

I believe we'll be able to have a clearer understanding of marriage as penultimate. Marriage is important. But marriage is drawing us towards something more.

And there are ways in which we can practice faithful. Unmarried vocations in a way that point people towards this fact. That move people away from the sort of natural necessity of marriage.

That that's all that we must do. That there's no choice. We must go through with this.

There's a sense that marriage is something that is destined towards something that will eclipse it. Something greater in the future. And once that is understood marriage will be understood differently too.

For those who practice. For those who are married. Once you understand that your marriage is penultimate.

It's not the final word. But that the body that you are faithfully living. The way you're faithfully living in your body is something that is preparing you for the age to come.

Testifying of the age to come. That changes the way you do things. And so I think what Paul provides us with.

And the New Testament more generally. Is not a natural law. And then you have a new creation.

New creation principles that kind of sweep in and overwrite that away. Nor is it a matter of natural law. And then you have this.

These laws to do with the age to come. That can maybe obscure it in certain places. Or allow us to ignore it.

Rather it's natural. The natural order being related to its proper telos. That the telos of

the old creation is new creation.

That the telos of the body is resurrection. And as a result it gives us a fuller understanding of natural law. A fuller understanding of the natural order.

To see it not just in its protological form. In the form that it originally appeared. But also more clearly related to its greater eschatological telos.

The point to which it is destined. The point to which it is developing. The point to which it is to be fulfilled.

And in Christ we see this. That Christ is raised from the dead. And in his body.

We see an anticipation of what our bodies will be like. When we see him we'll be like him. Or we'll see him as he is.

That we are going to participate in this new creation order. In our bodies. And as a result we behave in a manner here and now.

That gives honour to the body. That reflects the order of the body. And that relates the body to its proper end.

Seeing the body not as the final word. As the penultimate. Seeing the body in its fleshly form not as the ultimate word.

But as the penultimate word. Awaiting resurrection. And within Christian thought this is something that is concretely expressed in baptism.

So as you think about your baptism. Think about what that means for your body. Where your body is poised between death and resurrection.

Poised at that moment that helps you to understand what it means to live faithfully in your body here and now. To live as one who has a foot in two ages. A foot in two creation orders.

Your body is belonging to the original creation order. And must be lived in a way that is faithful within that context. But also in light of the fact that it is destined to be raised again on the last day.

Not to be obliterated and replaced with something else. But it will be raised. And so the way that you behave in your body matters considerably.

So I believe what Paul does is overcomes the dichotomy that I think this question suggests. So new creation does not undermine natural law ethics. And there's not a choice between orienting our lives towards what is revealed in nature.

And towards the new creation established by God in Christ. Because the new creation is

the resurrection of the old creation. And so we are those who live within the old creation as those destined for the new.

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