

Response

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The issue Dr. Lodahl raises in his paper is focused on the question, “Will God act irresistibly by overpowering human beings in order to bring all things into final consummation?” In answering this, John Wesley would definitely say, “No!” This is not how God would operate because “such an irresistible act of God would be a betrayal of creation, an undoing of the divine purpose in creating creatures of agency.” This is a disavowal of the very purpose of God in creating human beings in his own image because their responsibility before God and one another will be entirely annulled. In his sermon, Wesley insisted that God’s general manner of working would rather synergistically empower human beings than monergistically overpower them in bringing the eschatological hope into realization.

God’s work in the world is consistent at the times. God assists, enlightens, and strengthens human understanding and affections. As seen in the past, God, through the universal working of grace, helped individual souls to return to and believe in Him without destroying his or her liberty. Most likely, God will do the same thing to the whole world “without violating the structures of human existence and agency.” This is the optimism of grace. Although what Wesley envisioned here seems to be naïve optimism—for it far went unfulfilled—his hope will surely be carried out in eschaton because it is a hope in God’s good and ultimate intention for human existence created in the image of God.

Dr. Lodahl finally concludes that, in bringing all things into telos (true end of the world), God will not undo, devalue or nullify human thought, imagination, creativity, affection or activity—as parts of the restored image of God. It is the divine intention to create humanity to function as God’s image in (new) creation. Such a true humanity consequently will enable the members of Church to live as an eschatological community and to witness to the rest of the world in the future creation. The coming event of this new creation will be in less dramatic apocalyptic ways since God will gently and gradually renew “the face of the earth” in more ordinary, quiet, and communal ecclesiological ways. It is very similar to the growth of a tiny mustard seed.

Dr. Lodahl’s paper explains important teaching for Wesleyans to know, especially in countering today’s “popular eschatology.” We often hear people say that the new creation will come with the presence of “the final apocalyptic solution of all unresolved problems” in the cosmos. God will speak the final word. The good will go to heaven, the wicked to hell, and the earth will be annihilated in a lake of fire. However, this is not the main intention of God because what he is concerned most is not the final solutions but the process toward it. The focus then is

not on the end of life but on the beginning of it, the beginning of the Kingdom of God in human life. Wesleyan eschatology apparently, as Dr. Lodahl highlights, is in the same vein with that notion because its concerns are on the importance and the dynamic of divine-human relationship (God-world interaction) rather than on such dramatic-catastrophic scenarios of the end of the world.

New creation is a creation of new humanity in Christ. God's work in this created world is not only to save fallen human beings but also to transform them into his own image through the work of grace. In doing so, God uses a mode of activity, through persuasion and gracious enablement. It is divine involvement in assisting and empowering restored human beings to cooperate with divine grace. This reminds us to an ancient aphorism: *finitum capax infiniti* (the finite is capable of the infinite). Such a term is used to convey that the finite will be enabled to embrace the infinite, or, as Moltmann suggests, "The new creation will be fashioned to fellowship with God and to endure his glory without perishing from it." Therefore, new creation is not the end of the world but the beginning of it. It is not the downfall or the cut down of the creation (humanity) but the raising up of and the making things right in it.

Reflecting on Dr. Lodahl's paper from a biblical perspective, the idea of divine gracious assistance in enlightening and strengthening human understanding and affections is in accordance with the fulfillment of the messianic promise, "the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea" (Isa 11:9). The prophet Isaiah envisioned that at the coming of the messianic age, there will be "the sovereign execution of a new act of creation in which the righteous will of God is embraced and the whole earth now reflects a reverent devotion 'as water covers the sea.'" Such a condition, a just world peace, will only happen if the restored human beings respond the Holy One, who is righteous and faithful, in a mutual commitment. Again, the idea of God's work in empowering humanity is clear in the passage.

However, Dr. Lodahl's paper (Wesley in his sermon, too) does not give enough explanation on the "biblical" meaning of the phrase "the knowledge of the Lord" (*da'at yhwh*). It is simply asserted as "the loving knowledge of God, producing uniform, uninterrupted holiness and happiness." In fact, the meaning of this term in its literary context is broader than that and may contribute to deeper understanding of the divine empowerment on humanity in the new creation. The poem (Isa 11:1-9) offers a vision of restored creation that culminates in the last verse. Although the term may be related to cognitive knowledge or obedience, the term "knowledge" correctly means "intimate relationship" and "commitment" to Yahweh and his ways. That kind of knowledge cannot simply be meant as one having knowledge about but rather an intimate engagement with the Lord. Such a thought affirms the truth that the basis of the restored humanity is a restoration of *da'at yhwh*, an intimate divine-human relation (interaction).

Further, the usage of both “the knowledge of God” and “the fear of the Lord” is synonymous in wisdom materials (Prov 1:7; 2:5). The combination of the knowledge of the Lord and wisdom can lead one to an understanding that *da’at yhwh* comprises the right knowledge of Yahweh’s essence including his ways and his will as well as the right relation with him and obedience to his commands. The phrase then may refer to “an awed, discerning sense of responsible, liberated, and caring life in Yahweh’s world.” In any case, Brueggemann adds, “the phrase is a promise and expectation that the hoping human person may be, in the end, fully immersed in the wondrous mystery that is Yahweh—the overcoming of every distance between Yahweh and Yahweh’s cared-for human creature.” In Wesleyan tradition, this may refer to “human responsiveness,” an ability to respond to God’s grace brought through God’s renewal of the spirit of human mind in the image of God. Thus, the knowledge of the Lord here could be equated as the renewed human understanding and affections assisted by divine grace.

The context of the passage used in Wesley’s sermon also explains how God will make himself known to the whole earth at this messianic age. Divine work is essentially pneumatic where the Spirit of the Lord (Isa 11:2) will impart the knowledge of the Lord and will make such knowledge available to the whole earth. The purpose of it is that fellowship with the Lord “is made possible and easy, and the fulfillment of his pleasure is presumed in all.” Wesley mentioned “the Spirit” several times in his “General Spread of the Gospel.” He used this term in the context of divine all-embracing work. The Holy Spirit regenerates sinners, fills them for holy living, empowers them to witness and minister and, at the end, wins them in glorious triumphal at the day of the Lord. In Wesleyan tradition, the Spirit of God plays important roles along the via salutis (the way of salvation), because “salvation is the Spirit drawing us toward participation in the life of triune God. The Spirit summons us to the transforming friendship with God that leads to sharing life in the triune life.” The universal work of the Spirit prepares the restored human beings to anticipate sharing in God’s glory in the new creation. Unfortunately, Dr. Lodahl seems to have overlooked this important part in his paper.

Dr. Lodahl’s presentation today is very helpful for me personally to understand another aspect of Wesleyan eschatology, a relation between new creation and humanization. It is an in-depth and critical reflection on how God’s work will bring all things to the final consummation through empowering Christians to be truly human beings—restored in the image of God—so that they may bear Christian witness and bring transformation to the whole (new) creation in the future.