

New Creation
Rhys Thomas
January 21, 2018
Fulton, MO

2 Corinthians 5:17 reads, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.”

What does that mean? Most people who read the Bible or even hear that verse in a sermon or class immediately dive into dissection mode. Like whatever dead thing you had to dissect in Biology class, the more you worked at it, the smaller the pieces got and the less identifiable. Further, as Heisenberg astutely concluded in his Uncertainty Principle, “The act of measurement changes that which you measure.” We contaminate the field. Just when I confidently conclude that my biology frog had latex in its liver, I note the little hole in my glove which I had sliced out with my scalpel. We do that with the Word, unwittingly inserting little pieces of ourselves and our culture.

Rather, we need to back up and look at the context in light of the original audience. Context. The same weapon in the hands of a soldier, a hunter, and a criminal mean entirely different things. That’s why context is so important. So, how do we start? The passage begins with, “Therefore.” Paul was drawing a conclusion based on that which went before. Sometimes a “therefore” is the result of the previous paragraph, or the previous chapter, or even everything in the letter from the beginning to that point. I think the latter is the case here. Everything before 5:17 builds to the conclusion that faithful people are accurately characterized as “a new creation.” Everything after that illustrates what a new creation looks like.

I decided to outline 2 Corinthians so I could plot Paul’s train of thought. After reading through the first time, my impression was that Paul was trying to get the Christians in Corinth to look at the bright side. Having previously read 1 Corinthians, I already knew that the church there had a problem or two. Essentially, 1 Corinthians is about what happens when you drag your culture into the church. So, what would they be expecting from Paul’s next big communication? Paul surely knew that they were in the dumps, assessing their many failures and feeling like a bunch of dummies. So, Paul addressed them where they were, casualties of change, dressing their wounds with, “Look at the bright side.” And, I’m only going to get through the first part – the building blocks of being a new creation. The description of that new creation, the part of 2 Corinthians after 5:17, I will leave for you to check out at another time.

Paul’s first building block for a new creation is to have a positive outlook based on the promises of God (specifically about being comforted in all our tribulations), the glory of God seen in us, and being sealed or being given a down payment on heaven by virtue of the fact that the Spirit of God dwells in us (1:1 – 22).

To be a new creation, obviously, something about us must be new. But, my experience has been that a discouragingly high percentage of good, honest, church people missed Mr. Obvious. They try to re-invent themselves using the same materials that didn’t work out so well the first time. So, to be a new creation, something significant must be new.

Maybe the problem with those good-hearted church folks who opt for recycling rather than new is that they don’t see themselves as failures, just a little off course. So, a good wash and wax, perhaps degreasing the engine, reset the timing, checking the sparkplug gaps should be enough. Why? Because we are afraid of change. Like many people, I am hesitant to take something apart for fear of making it worse. But once I am convinced that it is really broken,

watch out! Until we see ourselves as irreparable, we will be too scared to buy any new parts, let alone install them. This first building block toward a new creation is a positive attitude about the promises of God, the Spirit that dwells in us, and the potential that we, the flawed we, can exhibit the character traits of God. These *must* be present for the new creation to make its appearance.

Thirteen times in this letter alone, the Spirit that is given to those whom God counts faithful is referenced. Certainly, Paul would have taught extensively on this topic during his year and a half in Corinth, so it's a reminder, not new stuff. In this first building block toward a new creation of having a positive outlook based on the Spirit, the divine promises, and our glory, he wrote in 1:22 of being given the Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee or a down payment.

Down payment. That's a banking illustration. We all know how down payments work. The questions are, if the indwelling Spirit is the down payment, what is the total price, and what commodity is being exchanged? God has given us a small part; shall we say 10%, or do you think 20%, of what? I propose the total price is an eternal family that will not fall apart, based on mutual trust and concern, just as quirky as this little family on earth but guaranteed to survive and prosper. And what are we selling to God? Remember the illustration. God is buying and has given the down payment. We are selling. Selling what? What does God need? He already owns all the stuff. The one thing that God needs and cannot create for Himself is our trust – the Bible calls it faith, to be more specific, faith expressing itself through love, but faith has become a religion word that conjures up images in other peoples' heads that I cannot predict. So, think trust; we act on the promises of God. If God created His own trust, we would be no more than robots and trust would be an illusion. The fundamental commodity of this empire is trust. God buys ours with a down payment of the indwelling Spirit and a purchase price of an eternal family.

The indwelling Spirit is something new in us. We are not rebuilding or retuning or repairing ourselves to become retrofit creations. But can the addition of one new part, even one as classy as the Holy Spirit, rightly classify us as new? If you add a spoiler to the back of your car, is it a new car? How about if you add a turbocharger to your carburetor? What about this Spirit deposit makes us a *new* creation?

Good question, I say to myself. Now all I have to do is answer it. The answer is in the second part of this positive outlook of the first building block of a new creation, the promises of God.

What is a promise from God? Obviously, if the Scriptures include the word, promise, it's easy. But there are not very many of those. Here's what I do. I read the Scriptures and look for places where God says that something will happen that would not normally happen. For example, James wrote to pray for wisdom and, if you don't doubt, you will get it. We know from experience that wisdom does not just pop up on its own. Further, that line in James is also a promise about prayer – it does something.

The bulk of the promises of God in the New Testament are about character development. That is how I can say that I am a new creation. My flesh and blood did not change, which is OK since it's going to expire anyway. But my eternal part where my character lives, my mode of thinking, has been transformed (we will run across exactly that description in chapter 3). I'm not the same person, not because I beat the old man to death, but because I was transformed from the inside out.

And that is the connection to the third part of this building block of a positive outlook, of becoming a new creation, seeing the glory of God in me. Interesting word, glory. Many centuries before Paul, that word was used to describe the parade and celebration staged for a

returning victorious general. The Arch of Titus in Rome and the L'Arc de Triomphe in Paris were built for that purpose. The glory of the general was the parade of his troops and the spoils of war through the middle of town. Those spoils were important because that is how soldiers got paid and what kept the tax burden down for the ordinary citizen in the winning country.

Over time, the application of the term was broadened. So, the glory of a poet was his poetry. The glory of an architect was the finished structure. The sons of Laban complained that Jacob was stealing their glory – because Jacob was accumulating a significant portion of their livestock. By the time of Moses, glory was whatever made you famous, whatever made you important. So, the glory of *God* was a parade of His character traits. In Exodus 33 – 34, God gave Moses one wish. Moses said, “Show me your glory.” God promised to show Moses His goodness, essential quality, grace, and compassion. When the requested event occurred, God proclaimed His mercy, grace, patience, goodness, truthfulness, forgiveness, and justice.

So, the glory of God, the parade of God's character traits, passes through us (1:20). Just in chapter 1, the characteristics that are promised through the Spirit are several. In verse 2, “Grace and peace.” The majority of commentators pass this over as if it were a standard greeting, like we open letters with “Dear John.” The idea is silly. Who but Christians would wish such things? Outsiders want health and wealth. Later Christian writers copied this opening, but that does not imply that Paul thought it was just a throw-away line. The vast majority of the letters in the New Testament begin and end with this thought because the phrase encapsulates the point of each letter. The author was saying, “I want you to have the same gracious nature as God and I want you to be at peace with God, yourself, and others.” Each letter contains a different pathway to that goal, depending on the needs and situation of the recipient.

In chapter 1, we are to comfort others because God, through His mercy, comforts us.

Mercy is another poorly understood word. Modern Bible dictionaries in general are just wrong. Mercy, according to the usage in Paul's day, was one step beyond compassion. Mercy included not only empathy for the plight of another, but also an intense desire to fix the problem. Many people use mercy interchangeably with forgiveness, but those are two separate concepts, hence they are two different words. I think the mixing happened because forgiveness became the focal point of Christianity and transformation in this life through the work of the Spirit fell by the wayside. But, forgiveness just gets you even. Faith puts you in the black. By this faith, we receive the gift of the Spirit whose job it is to fix what ails us, to kill off the old person and produce the new creation. We are not forgiven failures doomed to repeat variations on a theme of disaster until Judgment when I am remanufactured into someone I have never met. No, God has an intense desire to fix what ails us, so He gives the Spirit to the faithful so that we can be new, not temporarily excused.

Paul gave three applications of this optimistic outlook, our first building block to being a new creation. First, we have a different attitude about tough times. We are optimistic because God will comfort us, and because we have an important job to do – to comfort others. Our love, which is doing what is best of the other person regardless of the effect on me, makes trouble an opportunity instead of a burden. Second, we boast in our simplicity, that we are understandable to ordinary people, whereas the world prizes complexity and the oligarchy of the intelligentsia. Third, we have confidence in one another, whereas the world trusts no one.

Do these new outlooks seem impossible? Good. Not until we seek the humanly impossible is the Spirit engaged. If we try to do it ourselves, we are not new, just repaired. I am

new only if I die and Christ lives in me. A parade of godly character traits comes out of my body when I trust the promises of God and turn over control to the Spirit that God has put in there.

The second building block for a new creation, from 1:23 – 3:6, is looking at the bright side of conflict. How many of us enjoy conflict? Of course, there are those who thrive on it, but we can be certain that such people are not Christians because Jude 19 states that divisive people do not have the Spirit. Conflict happens in churches with terrible results. Most have turned to authoritarian leadership styles to combat conflict, but with equally disastrous results. We cannot sacrifice liberty for the sake of a poor substitute peace that stifles investigation and actually increases division. As the section ends (3:6), “The letter kills but the Spirit gives life.”

We become *new* creations by having a different objective for conflict. Instead of defending what we each perceive as the truth, instead of correcting bad teaching and bad behavior, our new attitude is that the objective of correction is joy. If my proposed path does not end at joy, it’s a bad path. Not even Paul thought he had dominion over the faith of others, but considered himself a fellow worker for the joy of others. Others do not stand or fall by my teaching; they stand or fall by their own faith. Certainly, I am responsible for increasing the faith of all those around me, but I must do it wisely, not stamping out faith for the sake of my perception of truth.

If I make someone else miserable, where is my joy? If I display no confidence in the other person to make good choices, how are they built up? However, I cannot just let it go; I cannot let things spiral downhill for fear of making someone uncomfortable. How do I find the middle of the road that addresses the problem while still arriving at joy? And, just a little side note about joy in the New Testament – all of the sources of joy in the New Testament can be summarized as the result of the successes of faith, either yours or mine. That’s where true joy is – when I see myself succeeding by faith, or when I see you succeeding by faith.

How does this attitude of seeing the bright side of conflict qualify as an attribute of a new creation? Can you name any other human institution that operates this way? Certainly, civil governments are authoritarian, as they should be, as Paul reminded Timothy, “Law is not for the righteous person but for the lawless.” People settle disagreements by ridicule, baseless accusations, insults, and lawsuits. Joy is never the result. Even the winner is filled with ill will, sometimes to the point of hatred. For conflict to find its way to joy, we need a major change – a new creation.

To illustrate this concept of looking at the bright side of conflict, Paul reminded the Corinthian Christians, “It’s about people, not performance.” Here’s an example from about the same time as Paul wrote this letter. In 2:12, “a door was opened to me by the Lord.” The gospel was spreading rapidly around Troas in northwestern Turkey. Yet, because Paul was concerned about Titus, he departed for Macedonia. He was illustrating to the Christians of Corinth that they were, to him, like Titus, more important than theory or political correctness. Those looking for structure and authority and uniformity will be terrified by the church. Those looking for trust and concern and liberty will find the church a place to really live. Yes, we need to fix problems. But the plan must end in joy for both the one exhorting and the one being exhorted. That will require some major infusions of graciousness, patience, kindness, mercy, and wisdom – those character traits brought through the Spirit to build a new creation.

The committed family relationship between Christians is our proof to the outside world that what we have is truly from God. We don’t need organizational endorsements, doctrinal statements, lists of salvation issues. Love holds us together despite differences and shortcomings. Jesus prayed for this just before heading out to the Garden of Gethsemane in the night in which He was betrayed, for the unity of future believers which would be a proof that He

was for real. Our unity is not based on uniformity (identical organization or ritual) or unanimity (identical beliefs) or union (political affiliation) but a merging of heart and purpose. But, many good people object, how can we hold the church together without authority figures, without an expectation of the same experience, without identifying with the same goals? How can this work? Paul summarized the rising panic with, “Who is sufficient for these things?” Then he answered his own question, “Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God.”

Do we demand that our biological family members all agree on everything? What fun would Thanksgiving dinner be? Do we exclude biological family members from holiday gatherings because of a drinking problem or even a felony conviction? I don’t know about your family, but mine has some real characters in it. Perhaps that’s why we have no problems with diversity in Fulton, but rather revel in it. We celebrate overcoming rather than highlighting shortcomings. We don’t ignore problems; we find ways to solve them so that everyone wins. Are we masters of human interaction? Hardly. The sufficiency comes from God. When we try to take over, we just mess it up.

The key is trust – faith. Do we really believe that God has equipped us to handle conflict in such a way that we all arrive at joy? The promise is outrageous. Never in human history has this been accomplished. That is why Jesus set it up as evidence. New creations can do it because of the Spirit given to us. Without confidence in the bright side of conflict, we cannot be new creations.

The third building block to being a new creation is looking at the bright side of change (3:7 – 4:14). What instills fear of a comparable level to conflict? Fear of change. Looking at the bright side of change is an essential step to being a new creation.

Think about being a Christian in the first century. If you had come from Jewish stock, you would be familiar with the Law of Moses. Stepping away from it would be really hard. After all, the Law had been given by God 1500 years earlier. Israel had a history with God, complete with a plethora of documented miracles. Even during the bad parts of the history of Israel, God was there for them. God’s correction testified to the value of Israel to God. So, Jewish Christians tended to try to work within the system, to fit Christianity into the Jewish structure. I understand the mindset because the church has developed in exactly the same way. Gentile Christians fell into the same traps because, although they were not part of the nation of Israel, the Law was the only code around that actually came from God, plus all those historically documented miracles in Israelite history, so it had a tremendous draw, which is why Paul kept finding significant numbers of Gentiles attending synagogue services.

Paul pointed out that the Law came to be viewed by Jews as a compilation of condemnations rather than a treasury of promises. Paul pointed out that rabbis had a history of manufacturing creative excuses to skirt inconvenient practices. Paul pointed out that the focus shifted to maintaining the ritual rather than circumcision of the heart. Those who are recycled creations rather than new creations have charted the same course. Change is a necessary element to being new, even if what you are following is the Christianity handed down to you over several generations from people you love and trust.

Every denomination started somewhere. If we make the assumption that we, after a very long period of time, finally got it right, then we are saying that God failed to keep the church alive for a period ranging from hundreds to thousands of years. In fact, I don’t think any of us would be comfortable in a congregation of our own denomination from a hundred years ago. Change is part of the package; it is a big part of what qualifies us as a new creation.

Some other points that Paul raised were that the Law was only designed to last until the Messiah, not forever, that the Law only allowed connection to God in fits and spurts, not continuously, that the stone tablets of the Law *described* the character of God, but had nothing to impart that character into the individual. Most churches focus on that which is passing away, connect people and God only at stated meeting times, and don't talk about being transformed into the character of God on earth, while you are still breathing.

Paul used the illustration of the veil that Moses put over his glowing face which resulted from his frequent face-to-face conversations with God, so the Israelites could not observe the fade, the veil symbolizing the lack of understanding by Israel. But, the new creations are promised, through the Spirit that indwells the faithful, the ability to capture the big picture. The promise is repeated at least five more times in other letters. But, 2 Peter 1 adds, it's a growth process. A new creation's understanding develops, it does not leap out fully formed. Change is a fundamental characteristic of a new creation – as long as you are breathing. Historically, church leaders have felt compelled to fill in the gaps in their understanding prematurely, resulting in doctrines that Paul characterized as “hidden things of shame,” “walking in craftiness,” and “handling the Word of God deceitfully.” If we think we have arrived, that our ideas need no longer change, we actually have reached the crafty, shameful, deceitful detour.

How do we recognize a new creation? Paul gave a list.

We have great boldness of speech – speech, not subtly influencing through good behavior.

We have liberty. Authority figures have no authority. They are resources.

We do not lose heart because we trust the promises about the work of the Spirit Who dwells in us.

We have hope. We have a confident expectation of acceptance. Why? Paul gave the evidence three ways in the space of eight verses. We observe miraculous character development. My analogy is with treatments for addiction. The objective of rehab programs is to change behavior from a destructive path to a socially-acceptable path. Unbelieving addicts can have their behaviors conditioned, but they fight the desire the rest of their lives. Believing addicts punt the addiction altogether through the work of the Spirit. Addiction changes synapses in your brain. Medical science cannot fix it. God can.

New creations start seeing undesirable character traits go away and desirable ones replace them. We stop making excuses to justify our personal anomalies. And, the biggest one, outsiders can see the change. (4:7) “We have this treasure in earthen vessels that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us.” The observer is certain that you didn't do it – you're just a cracked pot – and they want some of whatever made it happen. God's message passes through us. We do not enhance it. Rather, a new creation displays the character of Jesus to an obvious and miraculous degree. Have you seen a new creation – someone who completely changed? If not, that's a big red flag. Something is not working.

But change usually brings adversity – which is why we don't like change. But, through the Spirit, we convert adversity into opportunity. We are living sacrifices. And, just as a reminder, the outside world uses sacrifice to describe giving something up that you would rather have kept. That is pagan sacrifice, not godly sacrifice. God's idea of sacrifice is a celebration of forgiveness with family and friends in the presence of God – which is a whole lesson in itself. We have the same spirit of faith as Jesus had. Psalm 116 was Paul's summary of the concept, “I believed and therefore I spoke.” So, Paul concluded, “We also believe and therefore speak.” This is what new creations do; this is who new creations are. We are experiencing constant change – which is naturally humbling because what you believed last year is really embarrassing.

New creations can convert everything to the bright side because they trust the promises of God about the work of the Spirit. They wade through conflict to joy. They embrace change. And Paul's fourth building block to being a new creation, seeing the bright side of the unseen (4:15 – 5:16).

For most people, conflict is distasteful, change is frightening, and the unseen makes them nervous. For new creations, conflict ends in joy, change ends in transformation, and the unseen is where faith lives.

The crush of life on earth can push the unseen out of focus. But the unseen is the crux of faith; walk by faith, not by sight.

God created the universe as an incubator for faith because faith is a necessary ingredient in His terminal objective: a big family that will last. So, we must start practicing up for the long haul, learning to relate to the family of God.

New creations assume that other family members are “other centered.” One of the major downfalls of the church has been that leaders do not trust followers, and followers pass the idea along by not trusting each other. If everyone is in this for their own success, we have missed the point. If my objective is for me to get to heaven, it ain't happening. A new creation is focused on the interests of others; my own interests fall by the wayside.

New creations assume that the others are being transformed, even if I can't see the changes just yet. New creations thank God for those transformations especially before they see them. My old saying is, “If you ask God for something, it happens, and you thank God, you're late. Thank God while it is as yet unseen – walk by faith, not by sight.”

New creations see fellow believers as spirits, not humans.

New creations do not lose heart when they realize that their earthly dreams are not going to happen because the point is to develop faith, not to be comfortable. The love of Christ compels us.

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.

So, what does this new creation do? Are we biding our time, picking up a few pointers about faith before we lose the mud suit and hang out with a bunch of faithful spirits forever? No. New creations have specific jobs, which are described in the remainder of the letter.

Unfortunately to me, maybe not so much to you, I spent a lot of time describing the building blocks of a new creation, and do not have time to enumerate the tasks of a new creation. In short, the first one is that we are to be ambassadors, pleading with outsiders to be reconciled to God. The second is to develop personal relationships – which may seem odd on a theoretical level, but as people disappoint you, you are more and more inclined not to put yourself out there to be hurt again. The next task is to share with the faithful using the miraculous promises of God. And finally, a new creation is humble.

The *idea* of a new creation may be found in a number of other passages in the New Testament, just using different words. But 2 Corinthians gives us the longest and most complete description of how it works. It's a miracle. New creations are processed by God over time into something completely different than the starting material. Certainly, the flesh and bone remain the same, but the part that matters, the eternal part, our character, is made new, in the image of Jesus. We can be like the Israelites and focus on performance, or we can participate in the purpose of creation, building a big family that will last.