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Search for the Meaning of the Expression *kainē ktisis* in 2 Corinthians 5:17 and Galatians 6:15

Introduction

In 2009 I published a 42-page study at the Pedagogical Faculty of Matej Bel University on *The Transformation of a Person in Christ*. The texts which I have introduced in my heading were also important within its framework. Seven years later I felt the need to return to this study and revise it, going into more depth in some sections and in connection to Paul's expressions about "a new creation" (καινή κτίσις). Slovak translations of the New Testament render 2 Cor. 5:17 in a way which relates the phrase "new creation" to the Christian (that is, to the one who is ἐν Χριστῷ) and in this form it expresses a significant relationship between spiritual existence and the quality of life. In some commentaries, however, I discovered approaches which did not relate the expression "new creation" to the Christian but to the world. That means that they do not present an anthropological perspective but rather a cosmological one. If this were the original meaning of this text, then I should not include it in my observations about the transformation of a person in Christ. Therefore, I would first like to map out the range of interpretations found by expositors, to understand the basis for individual positions and to take legitimate viewpoints into objective consideration, when revising the above-mentioned study.

1. Foundational New Testament Texts

Paul uses the expression "new creation" (καινή κτίσις) in two places (2 Cor. 5:17 and Gal. 6:15). In 2 Cor. 5:17 it is a collective label for the

implications of “being in Christ” and in Gal. 6:15 he notes that what it signifies is neither the existence or non-existence of religious signs (circumcision or non-circumcision), but what matters is a new creation. Therefore, it is important that we test what these expressions communicate as well as attempt to avoid interpretative errors or a subjective preference for any particular version.¹

First we might study the text in 2 Cor. 5:17 (ὥστε εἴ τις ἐν Χριστῷ, καινὴ κτίσις· τὰ ἀρχαῖα παρῆλθεν, ἰδοὺ γέγονεν καινὰ; NA28), because here we find the relation between the existence ἐν Χριστῷ and its formative impact on man. The formula ἐν Χριστῷ will not be a subject for observation in this article because I will pay attention to it when I revise the older version of my work. Here I will focus on the expression καινὴ κτίσις and the interpretative connections, which we should take into account while examining it. We encounter the first problem with this text in the lack of verb in the Greek version. It was necessary to supply a verb when translating the text. Slovak translations insert the auxiliary verb “is” and relate it to the indefinite pronoun τις (‘anyone’).² W. Hulitt Gloer notes that English texts do this in similar fashion also but, in his opinion, the present context and apocalyptic background of the expression indicate that the translation ‘there is’ (a new creation) would have been preferable.³ Therefore, one of the objects of our study will be the question of how to translate the text in order to correctly grasp its meaning for an understanding of Christian existence in Pauline theology.

Another important question is what to understand by καινὴ κτίσις, when the noun κτίσις (‘creation’) can equally mean the result as well as

¹ J.D. Worthington, *Creation in Paul and Philo. The Beginning and Before*. Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2/317. Tübingen 2011, p. 97: “Many observers focus on Paul’s description of a new creation. But without a proper discernment of how Paul understands the model or framework for the new creation (that is to say, the original creation), observation in the area of the new creation is, to put it mildly, very prone to an inaccurate understanding of the new.”

² Rendering of the text in Slovak translations:

Ecumenical: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old things have passed away, new things have come;”

ECAV: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old things passed away and behold, new things have come;”

R.Cath: “Whoever is therefore in Christ, is a new creation. The old has gone and new is come” (2 Cor. 5:17 SSV);

Roh.: “So then, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, the old is gone, behold, everything is new.”

³ W.H. Gloer, *An Exegetical and Theological Study of Paul’s Understanding of New Creation and Reconciliation in 2 Cor. 5:14–21*. Mellen Biblical Press 5/42. Lewiston – Queenston – Lampeter 1996, p. 68.

the act of creating.⁴ One possibility is to understand it as the new existence of the person in Christ, which reveals itself to be new here and now in a new fellowship⁵. But as I will mention later, this is not the only possibility. Therefore, we will examine how this expression is interpreted in the exegetical discussion.

If we move on to the second text – in Gal. 6:15⁶ the new creation is spoken of as of something that is essential, as opposed to circumcision and uncircumcision which are insignificant. We find a similar structure of statements regarding the difference between circumcision and uncircumcision as being beside the point in both Gal. 5:6⁷ and 1 Cor. 7:19. If in Gal. 6:15 it is the new creation which matters, in Gal. 5:6 it is faith working through love. In 1 Cor. 7:19⁸ it is the keeping of God's commandments that matters. Comparison of these texts leads us to identify the "new creation" with "faith working through love" as well as "keeping God's commandments." We must be cautious with this because these expressions do not necessarily completely overlap, even though we may see in them evidence of the new creation in the present. If we take 2 Cor. 5:17 into consideration in context we gain a picture not only of the manifestation but also the source, which is in being *en Christō*.

In commentaries we can, however, find a relatively wide variety of approaches, which diverge both in the interpretation of content and in an understanding of the timing in which the new creation becomes reality.

2. Questions Discussed

In connection to the expression "new creation" (2 Cor. 5:17a; Gal. 6:15) we can find various interpretations of the content and also varied time frames. Concerning 1) content, expositors understand under this either 1a) the individual, or 1b) the cosmos. Concerning the 2) time frame, we can find 2a) present, or also 2b) eschatological approaches.

Ad 1. The individual or the cosmos?

⁴ F. Stagg, *New Testament Theology*. Nashville 1962, p. 114.

⁵ M.C. de Boer, *Galatians: A Commentary*. Louisville 2011, p. 403: "The new creation is both, it is God's new creative act in Christ, as well as the result of this new creative act, the fellowship of reciprocal love and service through Christ's Spirit (compare 5:13–24), in which the divisions of the present world have been removed (Jew/Greek, slave/free, man/woman, circumcision/uncircumcision)."

⁶ Gal. 6:15 (NA28): οὐτε γὰρ περιτομή τί ἐστιν οὔτε ἀκροβυστία ἀλλὰ καινὴ κτίσις.

⁷ Gal. 5:6 (NA28): ἐν γὰρ Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ οὔτε περιτομή τι ἰσχύει οὔτε ἀκροβυστία ἀλλὰ πίστις δι' ἀγάπης ἐνεργουμένη.

⁸ 1 Cor. 7, 19 (NA28): ἡ περιτομή οὐδέν ἐστιν καὶ ἡ ἀκροβυστία οὐδέν ἐστιν, ἀλλὰ τήρησις ἐντολῶν θεοῦ.

We can open this section with Peter Oakes's comment, which compares the rendering of Galatians 6:15 and 2 Cor. 5:17 and notes that it isn't clear whether it refers to the renewal of the Christian or the world in general.⁹

a. *The individual as a new creation.* According to Rudolf Bultmann the expression new creation in 2 Cor, 5:17 as well as in Gal. 6:15 "clearly refers to the individual"¹⁰ (but he understands it from an eschatological perspective). We find the individual understanding among Moyer V. Hubbard's new works, whose work *The New Creation in Paul's Letters and Thought* is very interesting for various reasons and, besides being of benefit for the theme in hand, is a good text book for the history of exposition of the text. We will pay more detailed attention to his perspective in the conclusion of this article.

According to Gloer, Paul is speaking here of the new creation, which includes more than just the new being of individual believers, and he comments: "This new creation is an ontological reality, which includes the anthropological but transcends the individual perspective."¹¹

b. *The world as the new creation*

T. Ryan Jackson in his work *New Creation in Paul's Letters*, considers the concept of a new creation in the teaching of the early church. His view is that in the first place this was related to the individual's conversion initiated at baptism. As a second reality he mentions that they understood it in relation to a broader soteriology, which included all of creation. Although in his opinion individual writers of the early church placed an emphasis on the varied aspects of Paul's new creation, he states that "it is clear that many may have held together both an individual and a cosmological aspect of this concept."¹² An echo of these approaches can be found also in the works of contemporary authors. N.T. Wright in his work *Paul in Fresh Perspective*, represents the opinion that in Gal. 6:14-16, 2 Cor. 5:17 and Rom. 8: "Paul isn't speaking only of the individual Christian as a new creation, although that is, of course, true, but about the overall renewal of the cosmos. The Christian is invited to participate in it and that in two senses: as a consumer but also as an agent."¹³ Among older authors we find a similar position for example in Theodor Zahn, who sees in Gal. 6:15

⁹ P. Oakes, *Galatians*. Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament. Grand Rapids 2015, p. 189.

¹⁰ R. Bultmann, *Der zweite Brief an die Korinther*. Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament. Ed. H.A.W. Meyer. Sonderband 4. Ed. E. Dinkler. Göttingen 1976, p. 159.

¹¹ W.H. Gloer, *An Exegetical and Theological Study...*, p. 68.

¹² T.R. Jackson, *New Creation in Paul's Letters*. Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2/272. Tübingen 2010, p. 9.

¹³ N.T. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*. Minneapolis 2005, p. 114.

a new creation, not only in release from the bonds which previously tied believers in Christ to the present evil world,

but on the basis of his death, which redeemed us from the old world, a new world was created. It is unnecessary to say that this took place through Jesus' resurrection (1:1), the pouring out of the Holy Spirit (4:6), rebirth of sinful and mortal people to new and eternal life [...]. Because those, in whose heart the Spirit of Jesus Christ lives and who live in this spirit (5:25), know that they are a new creation, part of a new and eternal world. *Kainē ktisis* has this specific and individual meaning here as well as in 2nd Corinthians 5:17 comp. James 1:18 in contrast to the distinction which belongs to the old world – circumcised and uncircumcised people.¹⁴

Ad 2. Does this relate to present or eschatological concepts?

a. *New creation as the present.* Mathias Rissi understands a new creation as the Christians' contemporary existence. "They already are a new creation in Christ, because their life is determined by the One, who died for them and rose again."¹⁵ At the same time, he notes that the new creation is characterized by two elements: 1. the new creation needs daily confirmation, he lives from the daily presence of God's actions and 2. the new creation remains limited to the inner man."¹⁶

b. *New creation – the eschatological understanding.* Jackson finds in Theodoret that "the strict meaning of the new creation is the transformation of all things which will take place after the resurrection from the dead."¹⁷ We find an eschatological interpretation of the new creation also in Bultmann, who based it on the premise that 2 Cor. 5:17 has, in his opinion, not yet

¹⁴ Zahn T., *Der Brief des Paulus an die Galater*. 2nd edition. Leipzig 1907, p. 281f. George H. Guthrie (2 *Corinthians*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids 2015, p. 308) mentions a similar anthropological interpretation in an eschatological context: "Others, however, understand under the new creation the newly created order established by Christ (for example, 'there is a new creation,' Roetzel 2007: 80–81; NRSV, HCSB, TNIV), which naturally includes believers as the new creation but this expression places it into a wider, eschatological context. The new basis for understanding others flows not just from the individual person who has been transformed by the gospel, but also from the values of the kingdom which has been brought in by Christ's Lordship [...]."

¹⁵ M. Rissi, *Studien zum zweiten Korintherbrief. Der alte Bund – Der Prediger – Der Tod*. Abhandlungen zur Theologie des Alten und Neuen Testaments 56. Eds. H.J. Stoebe, O. Cullmann. Zurich 1969, p. 70.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*. And he continues: "Salvation, that is the new creation of the whole earthly existence of the soma remains a future hope (compare Romans 8:23). [...] The earthly existence of man is doomed to perish, but the believer already experiences in the inner man the renewing power of the resurrection."

¹⁷ Theodoret, *Epistle to the Galatians*, 6, 15. In: T.R. Jackson, *New Creation...*, p. 119.

been fulfilled¹⁸. But we mustn't overlook that he is also aware of the present implications of this reality. He understands the Christian existence to be an eschatological existence: "*En Christó* describes the direction of the believer's new life as of an eschatological existence. And this eschatological existence is described as *kaine ktisis*."¹⁹

Thomas R. Schreiner has a similar approach to the theme. In connection to the text of 2 Cor. 5:17 (v. 14–21) he observes that, "for Paul, the new creation is inseparably connected to the cross of Christ. The new creation began in Christ and will be completed at the end (eschaton), when the groaning, which characterizes the old creation, passes away (Romans 8:18–22)."²⁰

3. Search for My Own Position and Conclusion

The variability of objects and time structures delineated above apparently results from various interpretative starting points for the same text. From a biblical context it is certainly not possible to exclude either the anthropological perspective (because the New Testament reckons with man being changed) nor is it possible to overlook an expectation of eschatological renewal. While searching for the meanings which our two key texts communicate, Hubbard's work *New Creation in Paul's Letters and Thought* became a very significant help in the end which, with its structure and thorough elaboration, far surpasses the time and methodological possibilities available to me for reworking my study on the transformation of a person in Christ. After thorough research into the history of interpretation of this group of texts he comes to the conclusion:

There is no convincing evidence for a cosmological interpretation of *kaine ktisis* in 2nd Corinthians 5:17. The opposite is true. As emerges from the context of *kaine ktisis* in 2 Corinthians 5:17, we are dealing with an

¹⁸ Likewise also *ibidem*, p. 146: "Naturally, the tenses in 17b prevent us from understanding Paul's new creation primarily from the point of view of the physical universe. As Paul understood 'old' as that which has passed away and new as the present reality, the expression 'new creation' is not simply a reference to the renewal or renovation of the world. But if we take Paul's presentation of the eschatological perspective, as well as the connection with Christ's event, it begins in the resurrection of Jesus' body. This certainly doesn't present a problem to the evidence of a passage like 1 Corinthians 15:20,23, where Christ's resurrection is described as the 'first fruits' of the general resurrection, the arrival of which at the end of the ages is the subject of faith (compare Colossians 1:15–18; Romans 8,11.16f.29)."

¹⁹ R. Bultmann, *Der zweite Brief an die Korinther*, p. 158.

²⁰ T.R. Schreiner, *Galatians. Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*. Grand Rapids 2010, p. 379f.

anthropological motive which concerns the new situation of the individual in Christ.²¹

Hubbard bases his claim on commentaries dealing with the key texts (2 Cor. 5:17 and Gal. 6:15) from the fourth to the 5th century (Severian) and from the sixth century (Oecumenius), as they are rendered by Karl Staab (1933). He finds support in them for an anthropological reading of the text. He states that this reading was reflected in both Calvin's and Luther's commentaries and formed the standard interpretation in the great German theologies and monographs of the 19th and early 20th centuries. He finds a change first in Adolf von Harnack in his study *The Terminology of the New Birth and Related Experiences in the Earliest Church*, in which Harnack noted that Paul used a traditional rabbinic motif, unknown to his readers.²²

According to Hubbard an anthropological interpretation of Paul's theme of "a new creation" was dominant also in the commentaries and monographs in the period following the second World War. In spite of this, already in 1935 he finds a significant shift in Strachan's commentary on The Second Epistle to the Corinthians. Strachan claims that Paul had adopted "the speech of contemporary Jewish thinking" and so defines *en Christō* in 2 Cor. 5:17 as "being a 'new creation'" in "a new world."²³ "Applying this to both texts, 2nd Corinthians 5:17 and Galatians 6:15, Strachan defines *kainē ktisis* soterio-cosmologically as expecting the new age: 'There is a new creation, whenever a man comes to be in Christ'."²⁴ After a reference to Ernst Käsemann's influence on supporting this line through his interest in the "apocalyptic Paul," he finally arrives at the conclusion, that "the trend of contemporary monographs and commentaries is heading towards a soterio-cosmological interpretation of the expression *kainē ktisis* and, to a great extent, this is the triumph of one historical background over another."²⁵

On the basis of study of Hubbard's work, I consider this meaning to be convincing, and espouse its meaning also for the context of Gal. 6:15 and will work with it in the revision of my study *The Transformation of a Person in Christ*.

²¹ M.V. Hubbard, *New Creation in Paul's Letters and Thought*. Cambridge 2002, p. 183.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 3.

²³ R.H. Strachan, *The Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*. New York 1935, p. 113-114.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 113 (Strachan's translation of 2 Cor. 5, 17).

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 4.

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A b s t r a c t

The author of the paper is verifying the meaning of *kainē ktisis* ('new creation') in 2 Corinthians 5:17 and Galatians 6:15. It follows the exegetical discussion, according to which this term may be interpreted either in relation to the individual or to the cosmos, and, from a time perspective, it is seen as either a present or an eschatological reality. After an examination of the sources the author is inclined to an understanding of this expression as having a present impact on an individual's existence. Naturally this cannot be interpreted as being in opposition to the eschatological context of being a Christian.