

# THE CARE OF CREATION, THE GOSPEL AND OUR MISSION

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It is an encouraging and positive sign (which one hopes has not come too late in the day), that Creation care is firmly on the agenda of Christians committed to global mission. The Lausanne Movement in the Cape Town Commitment (2010), called on evangelicals globally to include creation within their understanding of the Bible, the gospel and mission. So I am happy to contribute these reflections to strengthen and deepen our understanding and commitments in this area. Let's think first of the glory of God in creation, then of the goal of creation in God's plan of redemption, and finally whether Creation care can properly be regarded as a 'gospel issue' and included in our mission.<sup>1</sup>

## The Glory of Creation

### *God's glory expressed through the praise of creation*

The first question in the Shorter Catechism of the Westminster Confession of Faith (as I recall from childhood!), is: 'What is the chief end of man?' To which the answer is: 'The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him for ever.' I believe the same question and the same answer could be applied to creation as a whole. Creation exists for the praise and glory of God, for God's enjoyment of his creation and its enjoyment of him.

So the ultimate purpose of *human* life (to glorify God) is not something that *distinguishes* us from the rest of creation – but rather something we share in common with the rest of creation. Of course, we as human beings glorify God in uniquely human ways – with our rationality, language, emotions, poetry, music, art – 'hearts and hands and minds and voices, in our choicest psalmody,' as the hymn says. We know what it is for us humans to praise and glorify God.

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<sup>1</sup> I have discussed Creation care in relation to both biblical ethics and Christian mission much more fully elsewhere: *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Nottingham, UK and Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2004), chap. 4; *The Mission of God* (Nottingham, UK and Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2006), chap. 12; and *The Mission of God's People* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), chaps 3 and 15.

But the Bible affirms that *all creation* already praises God and can be summoned repeatedly to do so – and that includes not just animals, birds, etc. but even the inanimate creation – mountains, rivers, trees, etc. (Pss 145:10, 21; 148; 150, etc). Indeed, John’s vision of the whole universe centred around the throne of God reaches its climactic crescendo of praise when he says, ‘Then I heard *every creature* in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea and all that is in them’ bringing worship ‘to him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb’ (Rev. 5:13).

Now, we may not be able to grasp or explain *how* creation praises God, or how God receives the praise of his non-human creatures. I really can’t imagine how that happens. I have a feeling (no more than that), that creatures praise and glorify God simply by being and doing what they were created for, and God is pleased and glorified when they do. The pleasure of God in his creatures simply doing their own thing in the places they belong is part of the message of Psalm 104. The non-human creation brings glory to God simply by existing, for it exists only by his sustaining and renewing power. But simply because we cannot understand *how* creation praises and glorifies God, we should not deny what the Bible so often affirms – namely, that it *does*!

### *God’s glory seen in the fulness of creation*

The glory of God is sometimes linked to the fulness of the earth (literally in Hebrew, ‘the filling of the earth’). The rich abundance of bio-diversity itself is celebrated in Genesis 1 as creation moves from ‘functionless and empty’ to ordered and full. Here are some more examples:

- Psalm 24:1 – ‘The earth is the Lord’s and everything in it’ (lit.) ‘its fulness’.
- Psalm 50:12 – ‘The world is mine and all that is in it’ (lit.) ‘its fulness’ (after listing animals of the forest, cattle, birds and insects)
- Psalm 104:31 – ‘May the glory of the Lord endure for ever; may the Lord rejoice in all his works’ (after a psalm celebrating the diversity of creatures).

This gives an interesting perspective on the cry of the seraphim during Isaiah’s vision of God in the temple. What they cry out is literally: ‘Holy, Holy, Holy [is] YHWH Sabaoth. The fulness / filling of all the earth [is] his glory.’ This is usually translated: ‘The whole earth is full of his glory,’ and that is true, of course. But reading the sentence in English in that way can marginalise the word ‘full,’ as if the earth is just a kind of glory-bucket. But the word ‘fulness’ stands emphatically first in the Hebrew sentence as a noun. And the fulness of the earth, as we can see in several Psalms, is a shorthand expression for the abundance of life on earth in all its wonderful forms. Accordingly, it would be possible to translate, ‘The abundance of life that fills the earth constitutes the glory of God’ – that is to say – ‘the glory of God can be seen in the abundance of God’s own creation.’

Of course, we need to be careful not to read pantheism into such a statement, as if there were nothing more to God and his glory than the sum of creation itself. God's glory *transcends* creation ('You have set your glory above the heavens' is a way of expressing that truth). But having said that, we can certainly affirm that the glory of God is mediated to us through creation itself, not only in the awesome majesty of the heavens (Ps. 19:1), but also including the abundance of life on earth. We live in a glory-filled earth – one reason why Paul says that we are without excuse when we fail to glorify God and give thanks to him (Rom.1:20-21).

Proverbs 14:31 says: 'Whoever oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honours God.' The principle is that since human beings are made in God's image,<sup>2</sup> then whatever we do to other people, we are in some sense doing to God (Jesus applied the principle in relation to himself in Matthew 25). I would argue that it is a legitimate extension of this same principle to conclude that, since the fulness of created life on earth in some sense constitutes God's glory (at least, as one of the ways we experience God's glory), then whatever fulfils Genesis 1 and 2, by developing, enhancing and properly using the resources of the earth while at the same time serving and caring for it, acknowledges and contributes to the glory of God. Conversely, whatever needlessly destroys, degrades, pollutes and wastes the life of the earth diminishes God's glory. How we treat the earth reflects how we treat its Creator and ours.

### The Goal of Creation

When seeking for a fully biblical understanding of creation, we should not only look back to the beginning of the Bible and the story of creation itself, or look around at the glory of God expressed in the praise of creation and the fulness of the earth. We also need to look forward to God's ultimate purpose for creation. And it is a very encouraging place to look!

#### *a) Creation is included in the scope of God's redemptive purpose*

The first thing we need to say is that creation *needs* redemption. From the very beginning of the Bible, it is made clear that sin and evil have affected the natural order as well as human and spiritual life. 'Cursed is the earth because of you,' said God to Adam. I think the primary focus of that statement is on the earth as soil, ground ('*adamah*, rather than '*erets*') in relation to human work, rather than on the geological structures and functioning of the planet. That is, I do not personally believe that we should attribute all natural phenomena that are potentially destructive (the shifting

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<sup>2</sup> See also Hermann Mvula's chapter, 'The Imago Dei and the Missio Dei: Loving Creation amidst African Poverty'.

of tectonic plates, earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions, etc.) to the curse. In fact, we know that without the movement of tectonic plates (that also cause earthquakes and tsunamis) there would be no mountains, which are the source of rivers and soil, etc.). Nevertheless, Paul does make the clear theological affirmation that the whole of creation is frustrated, subjected to futility in some sense, including ‘decay and bondage’ – and will remain so until it is liberated by God and ‘brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God’ (Rom. 8:19-21).

The truth is, then, that just as creation shares in the effects of our sin, so we will share in the fulness of creation’s redemption. For God’s ultimate purpose is ‘to bring unity to all things in heaven and earth under Christ’ (Eph. 1:10 – one of the most astonishingly universal and cosmic affirmations in the Bible). We are not going to be saved *out of* the earth, but saved *along with* the earth.

Where did Paul get such an idea from? Clearly from the Scriptures, the Old Testament. For the prophets certainly included ecology in their eschatology.

- Isaiah 11:6-9 – The messianic era will include environmental harmony
- Isaiah 35 – The restoration of God’s people will herald creational abundance
- Isaiah 65:17-25 – God is ‘creating’ (the word is participial) ‘new heavens and new earth’. The picture that follows depicts life on earth that is full of joy, free from tears, life-fulfilling, with deep satisfaction and fruitfulness in ordinary labour, free from the curses of frustration and injustice, and with environmental peace and harmony. It is a glorious picture that provided the images and vocabulary for Revelation 21–22.
- Psalm 96:10-13 – The whole of creation is called to rejoice because God is coming to put things right.

This is not a case of ‘Old Testament earthiness’ – an earthbound materialism that gets transcended by the more spiritual message of the New Testament. Not at all!

Paul speaks of a new, redeemed creation being brought to birth within the womb of this creation – whose groanings are the labour pains of creation’s future as well as our own (Rom. 8:18-25). For we will inhabit the new creation in our redeemed bodies, modelled on the resurrection body of Jesus (Rom. 8:23; Phil. 3:21; 1 John. 3:2). That is why the bodily resurrection of Jesus is so vitally important. They thought he was a ghost, but he deliberately demonstrated to his disciples that he was fully physical – with body parts, flesh and bones, and the ability to eat food (Luke 24:37-43). The resurrection is God’s Yes! to creation. The risen Jesus is the first fruits of the new creation.

*Purging, not obliteration*

Some people struggle with the whole idea of the redemption of creation because they believe that the future of the universe is total obliteration in a cosmic conflagration. This is sometimes linked with an unbiblical dualism in which matter itself is seen as inferior, tainted and temporary, whereas only the spiritual realm is pure and eternal. They envisage the future, then, in terms of ultimate release from the shackles of physicality on earth into the enjoyment of a spiritual heaven with God. However, even those who are not infected by that kind of dualism still want to take seriously the language of destruction by fire in 2 Peter 3:10-12. Surely, they argue, the picture of the Day of the Lord given here portrays final destruction, not redemption and renewal?

However, we need to see the context and argument of the whole chapter. Peter is arguing against those who scoff at the idea of a coming future judgment, complacently believing that everything will go on just as it always has for ever (vv 3-4). What they forget, however, says Peter, is that such an attitude was around before the Flood, but God did intervene and act in judgment. So God will assuredly and finally do in the future what he prefigured in the past. What he did then by water, he will in the end do by fire.

Now the key thing to observe here is that the language of *destruction of the world* is used of both events. Look at the parallel points in verses 6-7:

By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and the destruction of the ungodly.

What was destroyed in the Flood? Not the whole planet or creation itself, but the ungodly human society on the earth at that time – ‘the destruction of the ungodly,’ as Peter says. The apocalyptic language of fire in the second part of the chapter, then, should be understood in its biblical sense of purging, cleansing judgment. The universe will be purged of all evil and ‘the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare’ – i.e. to the all-seeing eyes of our Creator and Judge. And after that fiery cleansing, after the destruction of ‘the world as we know it’ – in the sense of the world in its sinful rebellion against God – then Peter continues with the wonderful verse 13, ‘in keeping with his promise, we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth where righteousness dwells’.

*Reconciled to God through the cross and resurrection of Christ*

But how will all this be accomplished? In fact, it already has been! We may not be able to imagine with our finite brains what the new creation will be like or ‘how will God do it?’ But Paul assures us that it is already guaranteed, accomplished in anticipation, through the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Colossians 1:15-23 must be one of the most breathtaking passages Paul ever wrote about Jesus Christ. He paints in truly cosmic colours and dimensions. Five times he uses the phrase ‘all things’ [*ta panta*], and makes it clear by the addition of ‘in heaven and earth,’ that he means the whole of creation at every possible level. And he tells us that the whole creation

- was created by Christ and for Christ
- is sustained in existence by Christ
- and has been reconciled to God by Christ – specifically ‘by making peace through his blood shed on the cross’.

That last phrase is vitally important. We must ‘lift up our eyes’ and see the truly cosmic scope of Christ’s death. Paul says that, through the cross, God has accomplished the reconciliation of creation (not just people). And in that vast context he then goes on to add ‘And you also...’ (v 21). We tend to start at the personal level (Christ died to atone for our sins and grant us eternal life – wonderfully true); then we might go on to the ecclesial level (all of us who are redeemed by Christ are part of the church, the people of God, the body of Christ); and just possibly we might go on to the rest of creation (we have to live here on earth until Christ returns to ‘take us home’). In this text, Paul moves in exactly the opposite direction. He starts with Christ’s cosmic, creational Lordship over all creation (which incidentally is where Jesus himself also starts in the so-called Great Commission, Matthew 28:18), then he moves on to speak about the church of which Christ is the head, then he returns to the redemption of all creation through the cross, and finally comes to individual believers who have heard the gospel and responded in faith – ‘You also’. ‘This is the gospel,’ he says (Col. 1:23). And it is the biblical gospel that includes creation within the redeeming, saving, reconciling plan of God accomplished through the death and resurrection of Christ.

### **The Gospel and Creation**

This helps us to understand a phrase in the Cape Town Commitment that has raised the eyebrows of some. It speaks of Creation care as ‘a gospel issue’. There are some people who have said that, while they agree that it is an important issue, a biblically-grounded responsibility, and even perhaps a legitimate part of Christian mission, they would not agree that it is ‘a gospel issue’.

Let’s first of all quote the full context of that phrase, since it is theologically important.

The earth is created, sustained and redeemed by Christ.<sup>3</sup> We cannot claim to love God while abusing what belongs to Christ by right of creation, redemption and inheritance. We care for the earth and responsibly use its abundant resources, not according to the rationale of the secular world, but

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<sup>3</sup> Colossians 1:15-20; Hebrews 1:2-3.

for the Lord's sake. If Jesus is Lord of all the earth, we cannot separate our relationship to Christ from how we act in relation to the earth. For to proclaim the gospel that says 'Jesus is Lord' is to proclaim the gospel that includes the earth, since Christ's Lordship is over all creation. Creation care is thus a gospel issue within the Lordship of Christ.<sup>4</sup>

The whole context of the words 'gospel issue' is important, since it defines the 'gospel' in relation to Jesus Christ as Lord of all creation, not just in relation to our human need for salvation. That points to another lengthy part of the CTC, which expounds a 'whole-Bible' understanding of the gospel (CTC I.8). It speaks of the gospel not just as a personal salvation plan, but in its full biblical richness as the good news of all that God has done through Christ and the imperative that it addresses to us. So it speaks of the story the gospel tells, the assurance the gospel brings, and the transformation the gospel produces. Here is the full summary of the first of those:

*We love the story the gospel tells.* The gospel announces as good news the historical events of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. As the son of David, the promised Messiah King, Jesus is the one through whom alone God established his kingdom and acted for the salvation of the world, enabling all nations on earth to be blessed, as he promised Abraham. Paul defines the gospel in stating that 'Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day, according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter and then to the Twelve'. The gospel declares that, on the cross of Christ, God took upon himself, in the person of his Son and in our place, the judgment our sin deserves. In the same great saving act, completed, vindicated and declared through the resurrection, God won the decisive victory over Satan, death and all evil powers, liberated us from their power and fear, and ensured their eventual destruction. God accomplished the reconciliation of believers with himself and with one another across all boundaries and enmities. God also accomplished his purpose of the ultimate reconciliation of all creation, and in the bodily resurrection of Jesus has given us the first fruits of the new creation. 'God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself'.<sup>5</sup> How we love the gospel story!<sup>6</sup>

### *More than the means of personal salvation*

Now, first of all, if you understand the words 'the gospel' to mean only 'the mechanism by which you can ensure your personal salvation – and the *only* means of doing so,' you will necessarily consider that the phrase 'a gospel issue' can be applied only to matters that affect *how* you get saved, or

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<sup>4</sup> 'The Cape Town Commitment,' I.7a.

<sup>5</sup> Mark 1:1, 14-15; Romans 1:1-4; Romans 4; 1 Corinthians 15:3-5; 1 Peter 2:24; Colossians 2:15; Hebrews 2:14-15; Ephesians 2:14-18; Colossians 1:20; 2 Corinthians 5:19.

<sup>6</sup> 'The Cape Town Commitment,' I.8b.

*whether* you get saved. But the biblical gospel is not just a means of personal salvation (though of course it assuredly provides that, thank God). The gospel is the good news that is contained in the grand story of God's good purpose for all creation, a purpose in which, by God's grace, we can have a share. 'Gospel issues' are much broader than those issues that only affect individual salvation.

### *'Obeying the gospel'*

Furthermore, secondly, if you reduce the gospel to something that has to do only with what you think in your head and assent to by faith (primarily a cognitive matter), then you will consider 'gospel issues' to be only those things that have to do with faith, or the lack of faith, or anything that might threaten the essential message of salvation by grace through faith. But Paul speaks of 'the *obedience* of faith,' and of '*obeying* the gospel'. That is, the gospel is something that we respond to not only by believing it, but by acting upon it and living in the light of it. We must live *now* in the light of the whole biblical story as *the* story – the story that begins with creation and ends with new creation, and that summons us to live in the first in preparation for the second. That is *gospel living* – living in faith and obedience in response to the good news, living a life 'worthy of the gospel'. And such *gospel living* includes creation within its scope since the *gospel message* does. 'Gospel issues,' then, include actions, not just beliefs; what we do, not just what we say. I think both Paul and James would agree with that.

### *The gospel of the kingdom of God*

And thirdly, if you see the gospel as primarily to do with 'me and my needs,' or 'other people and their needs,' you will see 'gospel issues' as only those things that either contribute to, or militate against, the solution to our greatest need, on the understanding that our greatest need is our sin and rebellion against God and our consequent need for forgiveness – a very serious issue indeed. There are real gospel issues at stake when we are dealing with people's eternal destinies. Of course there are.

However, while such concern is entirely valid, it can easily overlook the fact that the New Testament (including Jesus himself) presents the gospel as the good news, not first of all about us and our destiny (though, of course, including that), but about the reign of God. In a world that calls Caesar Lord, the gospel declares: 'There is another king – King Jesus'. The gospel proclaims the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the fact that he exercised that Lordship through his self-emptying incarnation, earthly life, atoning death, victorious resurrection, glorious ascension and ultimate return. Then the gospel calls us to respond in repentance and faith to that proclamation. From that point of view, 'gospel issues' take on a wider level of meaning



and scope. The essence of our responding to the gospel is that *we choose to submit to Jesus of Nazareth as Lord*. The gospel calls me to recognise Jesus as Lord, not just of my personal discipleship, but of the whole environment in which I live, for ‘all authority in heaven *and on earth* (i.e. in all creation) is given to me,’ said Jesus. If the gospel declares Jesus to be truly Lord of all creation, then how I live out my discipleship to Jesus must also include creation. It is, as the CTC says, ‘a gospel issue *within the Lordship of Christ*’ (that defining phrase is intentional and crucial, and should not be omitted when quoting the document).<sup>7</sup>

To put it the other way round: for someone to claim to be a Christian, to be a follower and disciple of Jesus, to be submitting to Jesus as Lord and King, and yet to have no concern about the creation, or even to reject with hostility those who do act out of such concern, seems to me to be a denial of the biblical gospel which proclaims that Jesus Christ is the creator, sustainer and redeemer of creation itself. I cannot claim Christ as *my* Lord and Saviour while at the same time denying (or acting as if I denied) what the biblical gospel proclaims, that he is *creation’s* Lord and Saviour too. It is, I would argue, for that reason and in that sense, a gospel issue.

### *Don’t read a damaged Bible*

It is baffling to me that there are so many Christians, including sadly (and especially) those who claim to be evangelicals, for whom this matter of Creation care, or ecological concern and action, is weak and neglected at best, and even rejected with hostile prejudice at worst. It seems to me that the reason for this is a very defective theology of creation among contemporary evangelicals. To put it bluntly, some people seem to have damaged Bibles, in which the first two and last two pages have got mysteriously torn off. They start at Genesis 3, because they know all about sin. And they end at Revelation 20, because they know all about the day of judgment. And they have their personal solution to the sin problem and

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<sup>7</sup> The Lordship of Christ over the earth also affects the way we think about the actual places where we and others live. Peoples and places are connected with one another, within the purposes of God. Both the Old Testament (Gen. 10; Deut. 2; 32:8) and Paul (Acts 17:24-26) affirm God’s sovereign distribution of the planet to peoples – and his overall involvement in their migrations too. So God is ‘interested,’ not just in whisking souls to heaven at some future point, but in the physical locations and environment of people’s lives. Ecology is much more than merely having a sentimental love of nature, nice views and endangered species. It is intimately connected with *human* well-being too. Comprehensive care for people (‘love’ in its biblical breadth) includes care for their physical environment – and whatever enhances or threatens it. It is a logical extension of the accepted view that our mission should attend to people’s physical, intellectual and spiritual needs (in medical, educational, evangelistic and pastoral ministries), since all three of those dimensions will be affected in various ways by the quality of the environment in which they live.

their personal security for the day of judgment, provided of course by the death and resurrection of Jesus. Praise God, I believe that too. But the Bible has a much bigger story. It starts with creation in Genesis 1–2 and ends with new creation in Revelation 21–22. This is the story of the whole creation, *within which* my personal salvation fits, and within which the good news / gospel fits. And the Lordship of Christ spans that whole story, not just my little slice of it. So I need to acknowledge Christ as Lord of my physical environment as well as my spiritual salvation, and behave as his disciple in relation to both.

### The New Creation

What, then, is our final destination? It is amazing (and regrettable) how many Christians believe that the world ends with us all leaving the earth behind and going off to heaven to live there instead. It may well be the influence of countless hymns that use that kind of imagery, but it is decidedly not how the Bible ends.

There is, of course, an important truth that gives great comfort and hope in saying that when believers die in faith and in Christ, they go to be with him – safe and secure and at rest, free from all the perils and suffering of this earthly life. But the Bible makes it clear that that ‘intermediate state’ (as it is sometimes called) is just that – ‘intermediate’. It is not our final destiny to ‘stay in heaven’. The Bible’s final great dynamic movement (Rev. 21–22) is not of us all going off up to heaven, but of God coming down here, bringing the city of God, establishing the reunification of heaven and earth as his dwelling place with us for ever. Three times the loud voice from the throne of God says ‘*with mankind... with them... with them*’. We should remember that Immanuel does not mean ‘Us with God,’ but ‘God with us’. We will not go somewhere else to be with God; God will come to earth to be with us – as the Psalmists and prophets had prophesied and prayed for. ‘O that you would rend the heavens and come down!’ (Is. 64:1).

And in that new creation, with God dwelling at last in the cleansed temple of his whole creation (so that no microcosmic temple will be needed, as John saw), the tribute of the nations will be brought into the city of God – the ‘glory of kings,’ purged and purified and contributing to the glory of God (Rev. 21:22-27).<sup>8</sup>

What does all this mean for our ecological thinking and action in the here and now? It means that in godly use of, and care for, the creation we are doing two things at the same time. On the one hand, we are exercising

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<sup>8</sup> I have discussed the theme of new creation, and what is implied by the glory and splendour of the nations being brought into the city of God, in *The God I Don't Understand: Reflections on Tough Questions of Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009).

the created role God gave us from the beginning, and in so doing we can properly be glorifying God in all our work, within and for creation. And on the other hand, we are anticipating the role that we shall have in the new creation, when we shall then assume fully our proper role of kings and priests – exercising the loving rule of God over the rest of his creation, and serving it on God’s behalf as the place of God’s temple dwelling.

This is what gives wonderful resonance to that song of praise to the crucified and risen Christ (the Lamb who was slain who sits on the throne), sung by the four living creatures who represent all creation and the twenty-four elders who represent the whole people of God:

You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they shall reign on the earth (Rev. 5:9-10).

Ecological action now is both a creational responsibility from the Bible’s *beginning*, and also an eschatological sign of the Bible’s *ending* – and new beginning. Christian ecological action points towards and anticipates the restoration of our proper status and function in creation. It is to behave as we were originally created to, and as we shall one day be fully redeemed for.

The earth is waiting with eager longing for the revealing of its appointed kings and priests – redeemed humanity glorifying God in the temple of renewed creation under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

### **Christian Mission**

I hope we have adequately sketched a biblical theology of creation and our responsibility within it. But does that amount to a biblical theology of *mission* in relation to creation? Does Creation care sit legitimately within the category of Christian mission? I believe that it does. I would certainly argue that, for all Christians, ecologically responsible behaviour is right and good as part of Christian discipleship to the Lord of the earth. But I would go further and argue that God calls some Christians to ecological vocation and work, as their primary field of mission in God’s world. Just as medicine, education, community development, and many other forms of service are viewed as God’s calling on different people which they can put as his disposal as intentionally missional, so there are many ecological functions that Christians can take up as their specific missional calling – scientific research, habitat conservation, political advocacy, etc. The work of A Rocha International, has been a pioneering and prophetic initiative in this.<sup>9</sup>

In *The Mission of God* I set out some reasons why I believe that Christians should regard such callings to specific tasks of Creation care as

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<sup>9</sup> See ‘A Rocha in Brazil and Elsewhere’ in this volume.

among legitimate missional vocations. In order to press the case for the relevance of this dimension of the mission of God's people, I quote selectively from that book here (the remainder of this section is abbreviated from pp. 412-20):

*Creation care is an urgent issue in today's world*

Does this need to be repeated? Only a wilful blindness worse than any proverbial ostrich's head in the sand can ignore the facts of environmental destruction and its accelerating pace. The list is depressingly long:

- the pollution of the air, the sea, rivers, lakes and great aquifers
- the destruction of rain forests, and many other habitats, with the terrible effect on dependent life forms
- desertification and soil loss
- the loss of species – animals, plants, birds, insects – and the huge reduction of essential bio-diversity on a planet that depends on it
- the hunting of some species to extinction
- the depletion of the ozone layer
- the increase of 'greenhouse gases,' and consequent threat of global warming and climate change, and the havoc it is already wreaking on some of the poorest communities on earth.

All this is a vast and interrelated catastrophe of loss and destruction, affecting the whole planet and all its human and non-human inhabitants. To be unconcerned about it is to be either desperately ignorant or irresponsibly callous.

In the past, Christians have instinctively been concerned about great and urgent issues in every generation, and rightly included them in their overall concept of mission calling and practice. These have included the evils of disease, ignorance, slavery, and many other forms of brutality and exploitation. Christians have taken up the cause of widows, orphans, refugees, prisoners, the insane, the hungry – and most recently, have swelled the numbers of those committed to 'making poverty history'.

Faced now with the horrific facts of the suffering of the earth itself, we must surely ask how God himself responds to such abuse of his creation, and seek to align our mission objectives to include what matters to him. If, as Jesus tells us, God cares about his creation to the level of knowing when a sparrow falls to earth, what kind of care is required of us by the level of our own knowledge? Granted that Jesus made that point in order to compare it with the even greater care God has for his own children. But it would be an utter distortion of Scripture to argue that because God cares for us *more than* for the sparrows, we need not care for sparrows *at all*, or that because we are of greater value than they are, they have no value at all.

However, our care for creation should not merely be a negative, prudential or preventive reaction to a growing problem. A much more positive reason for it is that:

*Creation care flows from love for the creator and obedience to his command*

‘Love the Lord your God’ is the first and greatest commandment. Now, in human experience, to love someone means that you care for what belongs to them. To trash someone else’s property is incompatible with any claim to love that other person. We have seen how emphatically the Bible affirms that the earth is God’s property, and more specifically, that it belongs to Christ, who made it, redeemed it and is heir to it. To take good care of the earth, for Christ’s sake, is surely a fundamental dimension of the calling on all God’s people to love him. It seems quite inexplicable to me that there are some Christians who claim to love and worship God, to be disciples of Jesus, and yet have no concern for the earth that bears his stamp of ownership. They do not care about the abuse of the earth, and indeed, by their wasteful and over-consumptive lifestyles, they contribute to it.

‘If you love me, keep my commandments,’ said Jesus, echoing as he so often did the practical ethical devotion of Deuteronomy. And the Lord’s commandments begin with the fundamental creation mandate to care for the earth. Obedience to that command is as much part of our human mission and duty as any of the other duties and responsibilities built into creation – such as the task of filling the earth, engaging in the rhythm of productive work and rest, and marriage.

Being Christian does not release us from being human. Nor does a distinctively Christian mission negate our human mission, for God holds us accountable as much for our humanity as for our Christianity. As *Christian human beings*, therefore, we are doubly bound to see active care for creation as a fundamental part of what it means to love and obey God.

*Creation care tests our motivation for mission*

Our ultimate starting point and finishing point in our biblical theology of mission must be the mission of God himself. What is ‘the whole counsel of God’? What is the overarching mission to which God has committed himself and the whole outworking of history? It is not only the salvation of human beings, but also the redemption of the whole creation. Our eschatological section above made this clear. God is in the business of establishing a new creation through the transformation and renewal of creation in a manner analogous to the resurrection of his Son, and as a habitation for the resurrection bodies of his redeemed people.

Holistic mission, then, is not truly holistic if it includes only human beings (even if it includes them holistically!), and excludes the rest of the creation for whose reconciliation Christ shed his blood (Col. 1:20). Those Christians who have responded to God’s call to serve him through serving his non-human creatures in ecological projects are engaged in a specialised form of mission that has its rightful place within the broad framework of all that God’s mission has as its goal. Their motivation flows from an

awareness of God's own heart for his creation and a desire to respond to that. It is certainly not the case that Christians involved in Creation care have no corresponding care for human needs. On the contrary, it often seems to my observation that Christian tenderness towards the non-human creation amplifies itself in concern for human needs.

*Creation care embodies a biblical balance of compassion and justice*

Compassion, because to care for God's creation is essentially an unselfish form of love, exercised for the sake of creatures who cannot thank or repay you. It is a form of truly biblical and godly altruism. In this respect, it reflects the same quality in the love of God – not only in the sense that God loves human beings in spite of our unloveable enmity towards him, but also in the wider sense that 'The Lord has compassion / is loving towards *all that he has made*' (Ps. 145:9, 13, 17). Again, Jesus could use God's loving care for birds and adornment of grasses and flowers as a model for his even greater love for his human children. If God cares with such minute compassion for his non-human creation, how much more should those who wish to emulate him? I have been particularly moved in witnessing the compassionate care that is un-self-consciously practised by A Rocha staff as they handle every bird in their ringing programme. It is a warm, caring and, in my opinion, genuinely Christlike, attitude towards these tiny specimens of God's creation.

Justice, because environmental action is a form of defending the weak against the strong, the defenceless against the powerful, the violated against the attacker, the voiceless against the stridency of the greedy. And these too are features of the character of God as expressed in his exercise of justice. Psalm 145 includes God's provision for all his creatures in its definition of his *righteousness* as well as his love (Ps. 145:13-17). In fact, it places God's care for creation in precise parallel with his liberating and vindicating acts of justice for his people – thus bringing the creational and redemptive traditions of the Old Testament together in beautiful harmony.

So it is not surprising, then, that when the Old Testament comes to define the marks of a righteous *person*, it does not stop at his practical concern for poor and needy *humans* (though that is, of course, the dominant note). It is true that 'The righteous care about justice for the poor' (Prov. 29:7). But the sage also makes the warm-hearted observation that 'a righteous man cares for the needs of his *animal*' (Prov. 12:10). Biblical mission is as holistic as biblical righteousness.

## Resources

R.J. Berry (ed), *The Care of Creation: Focusing Concern and Action* (Leicester, UK, and Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2000).

- Dave Bookless, *Planetwise: Dare to Care for God's World* (Nottingham, UK: IVP, 2008).
- Edward R. Brown, *Our Father's World: Mobilizing the Church to Care for Creation*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2008).
- Robert S. White and Jonathan A. Moo, *Hope in an Age of Despair: The Gospel and the Future of Life on Earth* (Nottingham, UK: IVP, 2013).
- Noah J. Toly and Daniel I. Block (eds), *Keeping God's Earth: The Global Environment in Biblical Perspective* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, and Nottingham, UK: Apollos, 2010).