

## **Salvation Means Creation Healed: Creation, Cross, Kingdom, and Mission**

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E. Stanley Jones School of World Mission and Evangelism  
Asbury Theological Seminary

*They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain;  
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord  
as the waters cover the sea – Isa. 11:9*

*The creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the  
freedom of the glory of the children of God – Rom. 8:21*

What is the role of creation in God's plan of salvation? How are we to understand biblically, theologically, and missionally the relationship between God, ourselves, and the world in which God has placed us?

Severe hurricanes in the United States and Mexico, and disastrous storms and flooding elsewhere in the world, have made us more conscious of human dependence on the cycles of nature. Erratic weather patterns have also prompted theological debate about the environment and how it should be understood from a Christian standpoint. In the fall of 1006 Bill Moyers hosted a PBS program with the title, "Is God Green?"

Scientific climate research over the past few decades has taught us that floods, hurricanes, and similar disasters are not "acts of God" but are "natural" phenomena that can be made worse by human action. In the United States, for example, hurricane devastation is worsened by the destruction of absorbent coastal wetlands and also by rising ocean temperatures through pollution from automobiles, power plants, and other sources.

Christians, then, need to think clearly about God's creation—both its goodness and its groaning; both as God's gift and as the environment within which God is reconciling "to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of [the] cross" (Col. 1:2). This is a matter of theology, of discipleship, and of Christian mission.

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A missionary couple in São Paulo, Brazil, is working to plant churches among newly-arrived poor folks from the interior. But the missionaries and the people they work with are increasingly bothered by the worsening pall of air pollution over the city. The Good News

they proclaim is transforming people's lives. Does it have anything to say also about transforming the air?

Christians in a north African country are having to flee drought and famine caused largely by the destruction of forests and other ecological problems. They find strength and comfort in the gospel of Christ. Will they also find gospel answers to ecological disaster?

Scholars at a Christian university in Asia learn that certain species of birds are disappearing, but no one knows why. Is this of any concern to the gospel? How far does gospel transformation reach?

## CREATION, NEW CREATION, AND CHRISTIAN MISSION

We proclaim our faith in the Triune God, maker and sustainer of heaven and earth. God sent the Son into the world in the power of the Holy Spirit to bring redemption and the new creation that is the kingdom of God. This is the "mission of God," *missio Dei*. God the Spirit is still active in creation to achieve his purpose. "God is still at work in this creation and not just its maintenance engineer," Eugene Peterson reminds us (Peterson 2005:93)

The church is in mission because God is in mission. God loved the world so much that he sent his only Son to give us eternal life through faith in him. Therefore the church is to love the world and bring the Good News to people everywhere. Biblically speaking, this Good News is the healing of creation. Faithful mission therefore encompasses not only personal evangelism, compassion, and social justice; it includes proclaiming and living out God's intention for the whole creation.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is based on what the Bible teaches about creation, redemption and transformation through Jesus Christ. It envisions an eventual transformed New Creation. The new creation we now experience through Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 5:17) is the firstfruits not only of our own salvation, but of all creation healed.

Scripture presents salvation as an immense divine plan for the redemption of all creation, "the restoration of all things" (Acts 3:21). We read in Ephesians 1:10 that God has a plan (*oikonomia*) for the fullness of time to bring everything in heaven and earth together in reconciliation under the headship of Jesus Christ—all things, things in heaven and things on earth; things visible and invisible. The plan of redemption is as broad as the scope of creation and the depth of sin, for "where sin abounded, grace [has] much more [abounded]" (Rom. 5:20 KJV).

Significantly, the Bible grounds God's glorious work in Jesus Christ in both creation and redemption. Jesus Christ is both "the firstborn of all creation" and "the firstborn from the dead"—affirmations that unite creation and redemption (Col. 1:15, 1:18; cf. John 1:1–14). In the book of Revelation, God is praised in hymns celebrating both creation (Rev. 4:11) and redemption through the blood of Christ (Rev. 5:9). In the Old Testament the Sabbath, so full of eschatological portent, is grounded both in creation (Ex. 20:11) and redemption from Egyptian slavery (Deut. 5:15). In Genesis, God establishes covenants

both for the preservation of creation (Gen. 9:8–15) and for redemption (e.g., Gen. 17:1–8). In multiple ways Scripture weds the themes of creation and transformation. Redemption can never be understood in a fully biblical way unless the full story of creation, and not just human creation, is kept in view.

Salvation through Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit is thus the story of how God is redeeming and transforming his creation. And he calls us into mission with him to bring the healing of creation. The main story line can be summarized in five points:

1. *God created the universe.* “By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible” (Heb. 11:3). Therefore the world belongs to God, not to private individuals, economic enterprises, or national governments. Therefore we have no right individually or corporately to mistreat it or claim it solely for our own interests. Human beings are stewards of what God has made.

2. *The created order is in some deep sense diseased because of sin.* Although earth’s nonhuman biosystems cannot sin, the created order suffers the “enmity” that human rebellion brought into the world (Gen. 3:14–19). “The creation was subjected to futility” and is in “bondage to decay” (Rom 8:20–21). This complex spiritual-physical-moral-ecological disorder is pictured graphically in Old Testament passages such as Hosea 4:1–3:

There is no faithfulness or loyalty, and no knowledge of God in the land. Swearing, lying, and murder, and stealing and adultery break out; bloodshed follows bloodshed. Therefore the land mourns, and all who live in it languish; together with the wild animals and the birds of the air, even the fish of the sea are perishing.

Disorder, disease, disharmony crying out for healing through the Word of God.

3. *God has acted in Jesus Christ to reconcile the creation to himself.* God is bringing transformation and re-creation through the God-Man. In the biblical vision, God acts in Jesus Christ not to save people *out of* their environment, but *with* their environment. Just as God will not ultimately save us without our works, as Wesley taught, so God will not ultimately save us without his good creation—his great good work, human and nonhuman.

The New Testament makes clear the tremendous cost of Jesus’ reconciling work—his life of obedience and suffering, his death on the cross. Precisely because Jesus “humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death,” God “highly exalted him and gave him a name that is above every name,” and all creation will bow before him (Phil. 2:8–11). All will submit to him, and the time will come “for destroying those who destroy the earth” (Rev. 11:18).

As both Savior and Model, Jesus calls all who believe in and follow him to a life of discipleship and stewardship, marked by the cross. True disciples of Jesus are to “walk as he walked” (1 Jn. 2:6). Jesus forms a community marked by the cross,

participating in the birth pangs of the new creation.

4. *God has given the church a mission for this world and the world to come.* The redemption God is bringing promises a new heaven and a new earth. But what does this mean? Biblically, it *does not* mean two common but extreme views: It does not mean only saving the earth from oppression or ecological collapse. And it does not mean disembodied eternal life in heaven, with the total destruction of the material universe. Rather, it means a reconciliation between earth and heaven; the heavenly city descending to earth (Rev. 21:1–2); the reign of God that is in some way the reconstitution of the whole creation through God’s work in Jesus Christ. The model for the new heaven and earth is the literal, physical resurrection of Jesus.

5. *We are called to live our lives, churches, communities, and economies in harmony with biblical principles of justice, mercy, truth, and responsible interrelationship.* We thus learn to think interdependently in all areas, including in our understanding of the church and our relationship to the earth. Christians (and in fact all humanity) have a God-given responsibility to “care for the garden” (cf. Gen. 2:15). Good news for the earth, for all God’s “creatures great and small,” is an integral part of redemption and new creation in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit.

But if this is true, why do so many Christians not take creation care seriously?

## MISUNDERSTANDING CREATION

Biblical teaching on creation is clear enough. Yet, because of the distortions of sin which have worked their way into all human cultures, humanity persistently misunderstands creation.

This is true even in the church. Biblical teachings get distorted by philosophies, ideologies, and economic and political realities to the point that Christians miss the import of fundamental biblical teaching concerning creation. This makes it difficult for Jesus-followers to grasp the biblical meaning of creation—and therefore of creation healed.

### “NATURE”: FOUR DISTORTED VIEWS

The biblical view of “Nature”—that is, the created order—often suffers distortion in four ways:

1. **Romanticism.** Prominent in Western culture especially since the nineteenth century, Romanticism views nature as the primary source of beauty and truth. In our creative, imaginative engagement with nature we find meaning, truth, even transcendence. Nature lifts our thoughts and feelings to the sublime. Christianity has not been unaffected by this; many Christians have a more romantic than a biblical view of the created order.

Romanticism embodies both truth and error. Since all creation in some sense “images” God’s beauty and creativity, we do resonate with the beauty of nature. We revel in the colors of flowers and sunsets; we marvel at the intricacy and complexity of life forms and

the vast structure of the universe. We hear “the music of the spheres.”

But this is only half the story. Nature is “red in tooth and claw,” as Tennyson wrote. The animal kingdom is full of violence, predation, death—billions of creatures great and small devouring and being devoured. Scripture is frank about this. The biblical worldview is not romantic; it recognizes the fallenness and transitoriness of nature. “The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever” (Isa. 40:8).

Yes, the created order *is* a source of beauty and of truth—the beauty that comes from God’s profuse creativity and the truth of creation’s beauty and sublimity—and also the truth of its violence, fallenness, and bondage to death. We can enjoy and glory in the beauties of nature and yet see that something is deeply wrong in the created order—a creation-wide disease only God can heal.

2. **Commodification.** In contemporary Western culture, the romantic view of nature is largely overshadowed by another view: commodification. If poets are romantics, capitalists are commodifiers. Nature means “natural resources”; the created order is mere raw material for profit-making.

As with romanticism, the view of nature as commodity, as “raw material” and natural resource, contains both truth and error. Yes, the earth is rich and bountiful, though not limitless, in resources to sustain human life. God has set this good earth under our dominion and it is proper to use it prudently. But the earth belongs to God, not to humans. It does not belong to private individuals, to nations, or to corporations, whether local or transnational. “The earth is the Lord’s, and the fulness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein” (Ps. 24:1 KJV). Dominion means that the earth is to be held in trust for all humanity, including unborn generations. Nowhere does Scripture grant the absolute right to exploit creation for profit; to turn the whole earth into a commodity. Since the universe belongs to God, *all* humans are responsible to God for their use and abuse of the earth (and all planets) and all humanity must be held accountable to the common good. In fact *God* holds us all accountable for our responsible, sustainable stewardship of the created order. Commodification is not the biblical worldview; it is an exploitive distortion and a dangerous delusion.

3. **Worship.** Some people worship nature. The created order is divinized; becomes a god. The Apostle Paul pronounces God’s judgment on those who have “exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever!” (Rom. 1:25).

This ancient view—nature and its forces as god, or gods—is still common today. We find it in New Age mysticism and in various forms of pantheism—even in some strains of Christian theology. The key biblical distinction between Creator and creation gets lost or blurred; nature, God, and ourselves become pretty much the same thing.

There is, of course, a grain of truth here. Nature is sublime in the sense that it can open our minds and spirits to the spiritual, the transcendent, as romanticism teaches. But nature is

not God. We face the constant temptation of idolatry here. Idolatry can take the form of out-and-out nature worship, but it can take subtler forms of our worship of ourselves, another person, our cars or houses or books, our culture, our music, our land, our “right” to use and abuse the earth solely for our own purposes. Worship is a matter of one’s ultimate, dominating concern. If our dominant concern is with our own rights, our own stuff, our own land—even our own culture or nation—we are worshiping the creation rather than the Creator.

What do we worship? What are our idolatries? Do we worship God alone, and treat his good creation as gift through which we can worship and serve him more fully?

4. **Spiritualizing.** Christians can fall prey to any of these distorted views of the created order. But perhaps the greatest temptation is an unbiblical *spiritualizing* of the material world.

Spiritualizing is the view that creation has no value in itself, but only as it points us to spiritual realities. When we spiritualize that which is physical and material, we veer from the biblical understanding and actually open ourselves up to the distortions of romanticism and commodification. Romanticism: We enjoy nature, but only because it “lifts” us to “higher, loftier,” spiritual truths. And thus commodification: Since the material world has no value intrinsically, we can do with it what we will, using and abusing it for our purposes without regard to its own integrity and well-being.

Spiritualizing the material world has become the dominant worldview of popular American Evangelicalism. Matter has value only to the degree that it (1) sustains our physical and economic life and (2) teaches us spiritual lessons, reminding us of what is *really* important.

But this is not the biblical view. God did not degrade himself in creating material things; rather God honored and dignified matter by bringing it into existence through his own power—and supremely by incarnating his own Son within the material creation.

So there is truth and error in spiritualization. The truth, biblically speaking, is that all creation is shot through with spirit, spiritual reality, spiritual significance. This is inevitable because its very existence comes from God’s energy. This is why biblical figures and metaphors and Jesus’ parables work. Material things do teach us spiritual lessons.

But this is only half the biblical teaching. The other half is that the created order has its own reality, its own integrity, its own purpose, dignity, destiny, and “right to exist” because it comes from God’s hand and is sustained by God. Jesus Christ “sustains all things by his powerful word” (Heb. 1:3).

Jesus-followers should renounce unbiblical distortions and see the created order as Scripture presents it. We must inhabit it as it truly is, viewed from the standpoint of God’s creation of, continuing involvement with, and ultimate plans for the universe. We will not romanticize nature, but recognize its beauty and its violence. We will not simply commodify

the material world, exploiting it with disregard to God's ownership and the common good. We will not worship nature, obscuring the line between Creator and creature. And we will not spiritualize the material world, forgetting that the earth in its materiality and physicality is good and integral to God's whole plan of salvation—the healing of creation.

### **THE HOLE IN THE EVANGELICAL WORLDVIEW**

Reflecting on these four distortions helps us identify a major problem with popular Christianity today. Why don't Evangelicals, in particular, take stewardship and creation care more seriously? Why are efforts to confront climate change, species depletion, and the protection of lakes, forests, and rivers often viewed as politically misguided or even ethically wrong? Concern about environmental stewardship is viewed as representing a subversive political agenda that is anti-God and probably anti-free enterprise.

This is a puzzle. Evangelicals claim to believe in the full authority of the Bible. Yet in the United States especially, Evangelicals for the most part read the Bible in such a way as either to positively exclude creation care, or to relegate it to such a low priority that it gets lost among other concerns. My impression from living most of my life in the Evangelical community is that most American Evangelicals simply *do not believe* that the Bible teaches creation care as an *essential* part of the Good News of Jesus Christ, or that it must be an indispensable part of faithful Christian witness.

This aversion to creation-care concern is caused by is a gaping hole in the Evangelical theological ozone layer. Sub-biblical views of the environment rush in and the biblical perspective gets filtered out.

This hole in the Evangelical worldview comes into clear view when we trace the path Western Christianity has traveled. We can spot seven historical developments that have tended to distort contemporary Evangelical (and to a lesser extent Wesleyan) Christian worldviews. Together these seven developments largely explain the four distortions noted above.

The key elements in this sevenfold barrier are: (1) the theological inheritance from Greek philosophy, (2) the impact of the Enlightenment, (3) *laissez-faire* capitalism, (4) American individualism, (5) uncritical patriotism, (6) a general neglect of the biblical doctrine of creation, and (7) premillennial dispensationalism. Let's examine each briefly.

**1. The inheritance from Greek philosophy.** In the second and third centuries, the Christian Church had to come to terms with the Greek philosophical tradition which was intellectually dominant in the Roman Empire. Early Christian apologists did a masterful job of showing the coherence of the Christian Faith even when understood through Greek philosophical categories. The fruit of this interaction included such breakthroughs as the Nicene and other early creeds which established an essential theological consensus on Christology and the Trinity.

A price was paid, however, for these achievements. In a step away from biblical

teachings, Christian theology came to view the material world as separate from and strictly inferior to the spirit world. Since it participates in change and decay, matter was seen as imperfect, tainted, and therefore something to be escaped. Human changeability, including physical passions, was to be overcome or transcended. In what became classic Christian theism, God, as pure spirit, was seen as unchangeable and impassive. The Christian ideal was to deny or escape from the material world into the world of the pure spiritual contemplation of God.

In Western theology, this unbiblical “spirit is perfect, matter is imperfect” view became deeply imbedded through the writings of Augustine of Hippo (354–430), whose theology was strongly shaped by neo-Platonic thought. Augustine so emphasized original sin as to in a measure eclipse the original goodness of creation—the affirmation of the image of God in humankind and the secondary imaging of God’s glory in nature. Though Augustine did see creation as displaying God’s glory, he did not seem to value the very materiality of creation as God’s good gift.

The ideal Christian life in medieval Christendom—though it was not the actual *lived* life of the great majority of Christians—was escape from the world with its changeability and its passions. The natural world was a mere symbol, a metaphor pointing towards a higher eternal spiritual reality. It had little value in itself. For many the ideal, even if unattainable by most, was the saint who left the world and all material possessions and lived in the contemplation of God.

This tradition offers much that is good and true. It produced great devotional writings that still nurture us. But it upset the biblical balance, with disastrous consequences for the environment. The holistic biblical understanding was replaced by a split-level and hierarchical worldview in which pure, immaterial spirit was at the top and changeable, decaying matter was at the bottom. Spiritual growth was therefore, self-evidently, a journey of ascent from the material to the spiritual.

Much of this inheritance is still with us, especially in our hymns and devotional writing. But this split-level view is fundamentally unbiblical.

2. **Enlightenment rationalism.** Orthodox Christian theology rejected many of the central claims of the Enlightenment, with its over-reliance on reason. But Christian thinking has been leavened by it, all the same. In endorsing science and the scientific method, Protestant Christians largely accepted the subject-object split. Human beings were subjects examining “objective” nature. The natural world was increasingly objectified—something to be studied, subjected to technique, and used for human purposes.

This legacy has been positive in manifold ways. It has yielded the scientific, technological, and material advances that we enjoy today. But again, a price was paid theologically. Since the material world was already viewed as secondary and transitory, there was no ethical problem in dominating and using it—exploiting it—for human purposes. Nature was “here” objectively to serve us. It was the God-given natural resource for human higher purposes, with virtually no ethical limitations on the human manipulation

of the earth. Air and water pollution created by industrialization, which disproportionately poisons the poor, were minor annoyances compared with the benefits of new technologies and inventions. Environmental issues were not moral questions unless they directly threatened human health. Rather they were merely technological challenges to be conquered. The legacy of this view is both an over-confidence in reason and technology and an under-valuing of the earth.

3. ***Laissez-faire Capitalism.*** Capitalism is also part of our inheritance from European history. As an economic system, its roots go back before the Enlightenment. It grew out of the rise of cities in late-medieval Europe (also the lucrative trade in Crusades-acquired Christian relics and heirlooms!) and later was greatly fueled by the rise of the Industrial Revolution in England in the eighteenth century. Adam Smith published his *Wealth of Nations*, the Bible (almost literally) of capitalism, in 1776.

Capitalism has been the main engine of economic growth and prosperity in the Western world. It has brought tremendous material, economic, and in some cases political benefits. Combined with science, technology, and industrialization, it led to today's globalized economy. It is a key reason for the high standard of living in so-called "advanced" societies.

But here again, a price was paid. From the beginning, critics of capitalism warned of two major negatives: Its power to enslave and exploit the poor (especially laborers) who had no capital and therefore little economic power, and the power of wealth to enslave the wealthy. Although historically speaking the most revolutionary critique of capitalism was Marxism, many Christian voices have been raised over the centuries in criticism of the moral dangers of capitalism. In our day one of the most prophetic voices has been Pope John Paul II.

From a biblical standpoint, the primary critique of capitalism should be obvious. Human beings are corrupted by sin and will therefore use the freedom and power they possess to selfish ends and to exploit others. Capitalism is an effective way to "store up treasures on earth"—the very thing Jesus warned against. Yet Jesus' warnings and prohibitions regarding wealth are seldom heard in our churches. Preachers denounce sins of personal and sexual behavior but often ignore greed and laying up earthly wealth.

Surprising numbers of Christians have bought the central myth of capitalism: that the self-centered pursuit of profit inexorably works for the common good. It is very difficult to defend this biblically. Most Christian critique of capitalism has argued that this myth is true *only* if there are effective mechanisms, through government and/or the church, to limit the subversiveness of greed and the worst effects of capitalism.

Partly because of the factors mentioned above (Greek philosophy, Enlightenment rationalism), Evangelicals have tended to view economics as a realm unto itself, operating with its own morality, walled off from and independent of normal considerations of Christian ethics. Economic growth is by definition good, and the pursuit of wealth can never be questioned, for it is the engine that drives the economy. The "invisible hand" of

the marketplace is viewed practically as sacred, not to be slapped or fettered.

This is not *biblical* morality. It contradicts Jesus' teachings and does violence to the biblical worldview. Biblically speaking, *nothing* operates outside God's sovereignty or the ethics of God's moral law and the Sermon on the Mount. All economic systems, capitalism as well as communism and socialism, must be subject to thoroughgoing Christian critique. As with the prophets of old, Christians should be particularly outspoken in exposing the forms of exploitation that are most dominant in our age.

This is a key issue for environmental stewardship for a very basic reason. Capitalism depends upon the exploitation of natural resources. This was true of early industrialism, which relied heavily on coal and steel, but it is just as true today. All the key ingredients of the information age—plastics, silicon, copper, uranium, petroleum—come from the earth. Here most North Americans apply a simple moral equation. Since economic growth is by definition good, the exploitation of natural resources is morally necessary and not fundamentally to be questioned. This moral equation is compounded by the fact that most corporations simply do not take into account the depletion of natural resources as a real economic cost, even though in fact it is. Quite the opposite: in the United States the tax system works such that many industries are actually given tax credits for the depletion of natural resources rather than being expected to pay for the depletion.

Many Evangelicals thus oppose the protection of the environment because they see environmental regulations as an unfair burden on economic growth. And since spiritual, not material, things are what really matter; and since the material world has no real value in itself (points one and two, above) there is no theological principle to be invoked here in defense of the earth.

Biblically speaking, something is wrong with this picture. Responsible, humane capitalism can be a great blessing, but unfettered capitalism becomes inhumane and can destroy us and destroy the earth. North American society has long recognized this in some areas, protecting the public through interstate commerce regulations, pure food and drug laws, limitations on the exploitation of labor (especially child labor), and some minimal regulation of air and water pollution. Exploitation of God's good earth, however, has been largely overlooked (Snyder and Runyon 2002:143–46, 175–78).

**4. American individualism.** This also contributes to Evangelical dis-ease with environmental issues. The “rugged individualism” of North American culture tends to work against a sense of mutual responsibility and interdependence with the common good and for earth stewardship. Nature is something to be conquered, subdued, fought against, overcome, not something to be nurtured or cared for.

Here also there is a positive and a negative pole. The strength of American society traces in large measure to the freedom for individual initiative. U.S. society provides space for the entrepreneur, the innovator, the “self-made man.” But as many studies have shown—more recently, Robert Bellah, *et al.*, in *Habits of the Heart* (1985) and Robert Putnam in *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000)—the downside

to such individualism is the lack of a sense of social solidarity and mutual responsibility. Anyone who has spent much time in Europe must be struck with the fact that American society is considerably more individualistic even than is European society.

Today individualism is further compounded by consumerism and materialism. Much of society is dedicated to the promotion, purchase, and then speedy replacement of brand-name products whose prices bear little relationship to the actual cost of manufacture. We live in a branded society that in multiple ways daily contradicts Jesus words that a person's life "does not consist in the abundance of possessions" (Lk. 12:15).

Individualism compounded by consumerism undermines creation care in several ways. Although the heritage of American individualism often celebrates the values of living simply with nature (Thoreau, for example), in its contemporary form it insulates human experience from the natural environment so that people have little feel for our *actual* dependence on the welfare of the environment. And since material prosperity in its present form depends on the unfettered production of goods, Evangelicals like other Americans resist any environmental restrictions that would (hypothetically) put a brake on or add cost to such production. This is a myth, of course; more and more businesses are discovering that environmental stewardship results in cost savings.

A biblical theology of creation and the environment must address squarely the problem of individualism if it is to be persuasive. The Bible teaches the mutual interdependence of the human family and its dependence on the well-being of the earth.

**5. Uncritical patriotism.** A fifth ingredient in the mix that undermines a sense of environmental stewardship is unreflective patriotism. Nationalistic patriotism leading to arrogance, empire-building, and an exploitive attitude toward other nations and peoples seems to be a constant of history. When nations become enamored of their own greatness, however, they lose sight of God's concern for all earth's peoples and the welfare of creation and fall under God's judgment (Ezek. 31).

Understandably, the United States has seen a great upsurge in patriotic fervor since September 11, 2001. But unreflective patriotism is a long-standing dynamic in American history—as well as elsewhere in the world.

Love of country is good and proper, but when it leads to disregard for the well-being of other lands and peoples, it becomes a plague. When patriotism or nationalism turns into ideology, and when criticism of one's government becomes unpatriotic, we are in grave danger. Nationalism can be idolatry.

Christians should see uncritical patriotism as a theological problem. The Bible teaches that Christians are part of a new humanity, citizens of a new nation: the kingdom of God. The New Testament is very explicit about this. Christians are "citizens" and "members of the household of God" (Eph. 2:19). "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pt. 2:9). Christian identity thus

transcends national or political identity. Biblical Christians understand that they are first of all citizens and patriots of the kingdom of God. Allegiance to one's own nation is necessarily secondary to kingdom allegiance. True Jesus-followers understand that Christians in other lands—including Iraqis, Iranians, and North Koreans—are their own brothers and sisters in Christ, nearer and dearer to them than their fellow Americans who do not acknowledge Jesus. They are therefore as concerned for the welfare of people in these lands as they are for the welfare of the United States. Naturally, therefore, Christians will see creation care in global, not just national, perspective.

**6. Neglect of the biblical doctrine of creation.** In their understandable focus on personal new creation—salvation through the blood of Jesus Christ—Evangelicals often neglect the prior biblical doctrine of creation itself. Yet any doctrine of redemption will be deficient if it is not based on what the Bible teaches about God's acts in creating the world.

Evangelical theology often lacks a robust biblical theology of creation. Evangelicals have rightly emphasized God as the source of the created order but have not reflected deeply on the *nature* of the created order and the mutual interdependence it implies between humanity and the physical environment. Nor have they reflected deeply enough on what creation tells us about new creation—God's plan of redemption. Biblically speaking, the doctrine of new creation depends upon a right understanding of the original creation.

In practice, Evangelical theology often begins with Genesis 3 rather than Genesis 1. All are sinners in need of God's saving grace. But biblical theology does not begin with sin; it begins with creation. Human beings—man and woman together—are created in the image of God and placed in a garden which also reflects God's nature. If man and woman embody the image of God in a primary sense, the created order images God in a secondary sense. The beauty, order, coherence, and intricate design of the universe reveal something true and essential about God's himself (Rom. 1:20).

Scripture consistently grounds God's glorious work through Jesus Christ by the Spirit in both creation and redemption. Jesus Christ is both "the firstborn of all creation" and "the firstborn from the dead"—affirmations that unite creation and redemption (Col. 1:15, 1:18). In the Book of Revelation, God is praised in hymns celebrating both creation (Rev. 4:11) and redemption through the blood of Christ (Rev. 5:9). In the Old Testament, the Sabbath, so full of eschatological portent, is grounded both in creation (Ex. 20:11) and redemption from Egyptian slavery (Deut. 5:15). It is remarkable the way Scripture consistently holds together the themes of creation and redemption. The biblical doctrine of redemption through the cross presupposes the doctrine of creation, and redemption can never be understood in a fully biblical way unless the full story of creation, and not just human creation, is kept in view.

**7. Premillennial Dispensationalism.** In the 1800s a new theory arrived on the scene: Premillennial dispensationalism. This innovation, despite little biblical or historical basis, has become immensely influential in popular American Christianity, in part through such books as *The Late Great Planet Earth*, Peretti's *This Present Darkness*, and the "Left

Behind” series. Ironically, many American Evangelicals today believe that premillennial dispensationalism is what the Bible teaches!

Premillennial dispensationalism undermines creation care by locating the renewal of creation exclusively after the return of Jesus Christ. The present world is headed for inevitable destruction and any concern with saving it is a distraction from rescuing souls before Jesus returns. A striking example of this view is Frank Peretti’s novel *This Present Darkness*, where it turns out that anyone concerned with social justice or creation care is in league with the devil.

With premillennial dispensationalism, the belief that the earth and all the material creation is going to be destroyed has come into vogue. If destruction is sure and imminent, it is pointless to be concerned about creation care. This view is based on the King James Version of 2 Peter 3:10: “But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up.” The NRSV translates, “the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.”

Interpreting this passage in the context of the whole of Scripture, we should understand the heat and fire here in terms of refining, revealing, and cleansing, not of destruction or annihilation. “Creation will be cleansed and transformed, yet this new creation will stand in continuity with the old” (Field:6). Calvin commented, “[H]eaven and earth will be cleansed by fire so that they may be fit for the kingdom of Christ” (Commentary on 1 Pt. 3:10). Wesley wrote, “Destruction is not deliverance; . . . whatsoever is destroyed, or ceases to be, is not delivered at all,” and in fact no “part of the creation” will be destroyed (Wesley, *ENNT*, on Rom. 8:21). God is not in the destroying business; he is in the refining, recycling, and recreating business.

The pattern here is Jesus’ own death and resurrection. As Jesus died, the created order will be judged and refined. As Jesus rose again, the created order will be transformed through the power of Jesus’ resurrection by the Spirit. We don’t understand the mystery (1 Cor. 15:50–51), but we trust in new creation after the pattern of what happened to Jesus.

Many contemporary Christians fail to see 2 Peter 3:10 in light of the broader sweep of Scripture and so misunderstand both the meaning of new creation and its present ethical and missional implications.

In sum, these seven factors combine to undermine Evangelical concern for the environment. They make it difficult for Christians to understand and *feel* their responsibility for creation care. Combined, these developments have produced a narrowing of the full biblical meaning of salvation and of the cross of Jesus Christ. The cross has come to mean individual salvation to eternal life in the next world rather than the restoring of a fallen creation. The theological agenda for creation care certainly must include affirming the biblical doctrine of creation and exploring the meaning of Jesus’ death and resurrection for the healing and restoration of God’s own created order.

## THE GROANING OF CREATION

“We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now” (Rom. 8:22). All creation groans, but like a woman in labor the whole “creation waits in eager expectation” for the full revelation of God’s redemption and liberation. “For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God” (Rom. 8:19–21 NIV).

This we know, the Bible tells us: Creation is groaning in its bondage to decay, but waiting—waiting—waiting in *eager, hopeful anticipation* for God’s salvation to be fully accomplished.

How is all creation groaning in bondage to decay? Clearly this picture is not what we find in Genesis 1 and 2. The Fall has intervened. In ways the Bible does not fully explain, the whole created order now suffers the consequences of human sin. “Cursed is the ground because of you,” God tells Adam, meaning not that the earth itself is cursed or evil or under a malediction from God, but that it suffers the consequences of human sin. As Wesley says, “The ground or earth, by the sin of man, is made subject to vanity, the several parts of it being not so serviceable to [our] comfort and happiness as they were when they were made” (Wesley, *ENOT*). “From a biblical perspective, ecological brokenness is rooted in human sin. Creation groans in travail (Rom 8:22) because of the disobedience of the human steward of creation” (Walsh and Keesmaat 2004:195).

The earth is in bondage but its deliverance is sure. Creation’s “bondage to decay” is well documented today. The created order is subject to entropy, the second law of thermodynamics. It is running down; moving from order to disorder, and Scripture seems to teach that this is the consequence of the Fall, of human sin.

The groaning of creation is ever more audible today. Four of the most important evidences are climate change, the increasing threat to ocean currents, deforestation, and species depletion. Many other ecological issues confront us, but these are key ones that deserve our attention.

### CLIMATE CHANGE AND GLOBAL WARMING

The most pressing large-scale threat to the earth today is human-induced climate change.

As long ago as 1896 the Swedish chemist Svante Arrhenius worried that increased burning of coal, oil, and firewood was adding millions of tons of carbon dioxide to the atmosphere. “We are evaporating our coal mines into the air,” he wrote. The result would be “a change in the transparency of the atmosphere” that could heat the planet to intolerable levels. Discovery of global warming in the late 1970s showed that Arrhenius likely was on the right track (Snyder 1995:79).

Major UN scientific studies project a dramatic rise in global temperatures over the next

century unless humans stop pumping greenhouse gases into the air. A 1990 study by 250 leading climatologists predicted a rise in earth's average temperature of about one degree Celsius by 2025 and three degrees before the end of the twenty-first century. That would be the fastest increase in history. It appears that earth has a fever. Such temperature increases would raise sea levels about half a foot by 2030 and three times that by the end of the century. A rise of only five degrees Celsius (nine degrees Fahrenheit) is believed to have triggered Earth's last ice age (Snyder 1995:79).

Debates about global warming continue among politicians, the oil industry, and conservative Christians, but not among reputable climatologists and oceanographers. Kevin Trenberth, head of the climate-analysis section at the National Center for Atmospheric Research in Boulder, Colorado, says, "There is no doubt that climate is changing and humans are partly responsible." As a result, "The odds have changed in favor of more intense storms and heavier rainfalls" (*Time*, 10/3/05, 43). In August of 2004, a full year before Hurricane Katrina, *Business Week* magazine ran a cover story, "Global Warming: Why Business Is Taking It So Seriously." The *Business Week* article quoted Republican Senator John McCain: "The facts are there. We have to educate our fellow citizens about climate change and the danger it poses to the world." Senator McCain co-sponsored the McCain-Lieberman climate-protection bill in Congress, which Christians should support. Carnegie Institution ecologist Christopher Field notes, "It's increasingly clear that even the modest warming today is having large effects on ecosystems. The most compelling impact is the 10% decreasing yield of corn in the [U.S.] Midwest per degree" of warming. Now a number of more far-seeing companies are beginning to seriously invest in cleaner, more ecologically friendly sources of energy—absolutely necessary since the burning of fossil fuels is the major human source of global warming (*Business Week*, 8/16/04, 60–69). BP (formerly British Petroleum), for example, has run ads explaining the steps it is taking to counter global warming.

When you hear of global warming, don't think first of all of politics or economics, however. Think first of the groaning of creation.

### **THE GREAT OCEAN CONVEYOR**

In recent years scientists have confirmed the existence of the so-called Great Ocean Conveyor Belt, the worldwide circulation of warmer and cooler ocean currents that is a major cause of earth's moderate climate. (Type "ocean conveyor" into an Internet search and in twenty seconds you'll have abundant sources on this.)

The Great Ocean Conveyor is affected by the rate of the melting of the Arctic ice mass, so global warming is a major issue. With excess melting, "the conveyor belt will weaken or even shut down," oceanographers say, producing disastrous global climate change (United Nations Environment Programme 2005). In that case, as *Business Week* notes, "Europe and the Northeastern U.S. would be far colder. . . . This isn't science fiction: The conveyor has shut down in the past with dramatic results" (*Business Week*, 8/16/04, 68).

This is the science that lies behind the melodramatic movie, *The Day After Tomorrow*.

Though the movie was overdone and the timeline unrealistically compressed, the science behind it is real.

The Great Ocean Conveyor is the oceanic parallel to the earth's atmospheric circulation (to which it is of course ecologically linked). It is a life-giving flow, literally. But the burning of fossil fuels in our cars, SUVs, power plants, and military vehicles threatens it. The conveyor belt itself represents more the "breathing" than the groaning of creation but it is part of the larger picture of earth's ecology. It is a reminder both of the wonder and the vulnerability of God's good creation, and of the need for responsible creation care.

## **DEFORESTATION**

Although deforestation gets much less media attention, it is a major contributor to famine, poverty, and migration. Haiti is an outstanding example. It is doubly an ethical issue —both a matter of responsible creation care and of compassion for the poor.

As Klaus Nürnberger notes, deforestation feeds a cycle of death. Population growth leads to an increased impact on nature: forests are chopped down, grazing is overstocked, agricultural lands are over-utilised, footpaths change into gullies, soil erosion takes away the topsoil, and water is polluted. The deterioration of the natural resource base again increases misery, thus leading to further population growth, further pressure against the system, greater security needs of the system, greater impact on nature, and so forth [in] a vicious circle, or rather a vicious network (Nürnberger 1999:29).

Deforestation, combined with desertification and related factors, lead "to the large scale migration of 'ecological refugees' in search of grazing, agricultural land or urban sources of income" (Nürnberger 1999:88).

These ecological and social impacts of deforestation are hugely aggravated by large-scale destruction of forests by transnational corporations that is increasingly part of the globalized economy. The forests of poorer nations are being ravaged in order to fuel the world's economic growth.

This is why planting trees is an important act of creation care. Reforestation, not only one-by-one but on large scales that deal with the political and social realities involved, is a key way to attend to creation's groaning.

## **SPECIES DEPLETION**

God has filled the earth with an amazing variety of creatures and seems to delight in the creaturely profusion he has made. "God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of

every kind. And God saw that it was good” (Gen. 1:21). “God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good” (Gen. 1:25). “O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures” (Ps. 104:24). Later when God mandated the ark he told Noah, “Of every living thing, of all flesh, you shall bring two of every kind into the ark, to keep them alive with you; they shall be male and female” (Gen. 6:19). God has established an everlasting covenant with the earth (Gen. 9:13). Specifically this is a covenant, God says to Noah, “between me and you and every living creature . . . , for all future generations” (Gen. 9:12). This covenant God has never revoked, and we are to fulfill our stewardship role in this three-way covenant.

God delights in his creatures and wills their protection as part of the well-being of all creation. This is one reason many Christians have supported the Endangered Species Act, passed two decades ago by the U.S. Congress with bipartisan and Administration support.

The Genesis 9 covenant values all living things and “places them just as squarely under God’s direct provision and protection” as are human beings. As Fred Van Dyke, *et al.*, put it,

What is the fate of those who set out by design, by ignorance or by selfishness to destroy what God has pledged himself to protect? What will be the outcome of having been on the wrong side of God on an issue of covenant preservation, the fate of the world’s endangered species? It is on the basis of God’s covenant protection of his creation, consistent with the value he has already imparted to it and with his determination to redeem it, that we believe it matters very much (1996:77).

Species depletion may seem a remote concern because we don’t see how it affects us directly. In fact, it does affect human well-being in multiple ways. Declining or dying species can be the first signs of environmental changes that threaten human life. Still undiscovered plant and animal species may provide cures to deadly human diseases. Genetic diversity is a key to planetary well-being. In the long run therefore genetic depletion probably represents as great a threat to humankind as does global warming.

But these are human-centered arguments. From a biblical standpoint, the reason to preserve earth’s creatures is that they belong to God, not to us. Life forms are not to be destroyed, abused, or patented. Whether we fully understand this or not, they exist for God’s glory and pleasure first of all, and only secondarily for our benefit. Kingdom Christians support the protection of endangered species as part of their service to God as well as for the sake of human flourishing.

These four issues are representative of a whole world (literally) of creation issues that fall within the circle of creation and the healing of creation. All these issues interlock; they all fit together ecologically. Biblically speaking, they are all part of God’s ecology and economy; of God’s *oikos* and *oikonomia*.

Creation is groaning because of human sin—not only the sin of Adam and Eve but the

ongoing sins of the unfaithfulness of God's covenant people, right up to today. Would-be Jesus-followers either increase the groaning, further burdening the earth, or we respond to the groaning, acting *now* on the basis of, and in the assurance of, the hope of all creation healed through Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit.

### **CREATION HEALED THROUGH JESUS CHRIST BY THE SPIRIT**

God is in Christ reconciling the world to himself in the power of the Holy Spirit. How are we to understand this in the light of biblical teachings on creation and new creation and in light of the present groaning of creation? Let us now revisit the gospel story.

#### **THE DISEASE AND THE CURE**

In the biblical picture, the redemption of human beings plays the central role in a story of transformation that begins with “substantial healing” (as Francis Schaeffer called it) now and leads to total restoration, a new heaven and earth, when God's kingdom comes in fullness.

God created man and woman in healthful harmony with himself, with each other, and with the created world. They were at peace (*shalom*) with God, with themselves and each other, and with the plants and animals God had made. In the garden “the man and his wife were not only not ashamed to be naked; they also were not uncomfortable” (Van Dyke, *et al.*: 90). As Sandy Richter writes, “This was the ideal plan—a world in which [humanity] would succeed in constructing the human civilization by directing and harnessing the amazing resources of the planet under the wise direction of their Creator. Here there would always be enough, progress would not necessitate pollution, expansion would not demand extinction” (Richter 2004).

Sin, however, brought disruption in a fourfold sense. As Francis Schaeffer pointed out years ago, human disobedience brought alienation between humans and God and as a result an internal alienation within each person (alienation from oneself), alienation between humans, and alienation from nature (Schaeffer 1970:66–68). These are the spiritual, psychological, sociocultural, and ecological alienations that afflict the whole human family. All derive from sin, and all distort God's good purpose in creation. Therefore they are all concerns of the gospel of reconciliation which help clarify the church's mission agenda. *Faithful Christian mission focuses on healing the four alienations or divisions that have resulted from the fall.* This means that working for reconciliation between humans and the created order is an indispensable element in Christian mission. It is part of the gospel, an essential part of the Good News which Christians offer to the world.

God brings salvation through the work of Jesus Christ—his incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and ongoing reign. Jesus' redemptive work is pictured in broadest scope in John 1, Hebrews 1, Colossians 1, Ephesians 1 and similar passages. These texts are fundamental to a biblical understanding of mission as transformation. Ephesians 2:8–9 states, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast.” This truth comes as

an elaboration of what Paul wrote in Ephesian 1:10, which proclaims God's "plan [*oikonomia*] for the fullness of time to gather up [literally, to join together under one head] all thing in [Jesus Christ], things in heaven and things on earth." This is God's "economy" (the literal translation of *oikonomia* and a key term in Pauline and early Christian theology. See Prestige 1952). It is God's "plan" or "administration" that he is accomplishing through Jesus Christ.

The plan of salvation as pictured in texts such as Ephesians 1, Colossians 1, and Hebrews 1 is this: *that God may glorify himself by reconciling all things in Christ*. The biblical vision is of all earth's peoples, and in fact of all creation, united in praising and serving God (Ps. 67:3–5; Rev. 7:9–12; 19:6).

The key idea and dynamic here is *reconciliation*. God's plan is for the restoration of his creation—for overcoming, in judgment and glorious fulfillment, the damage done to persons and nature through the fall. This plan includes not only the reconciliation of people to God, but the reconciliation of "all things in heaven and on earth." As Paul puts it in Colossians 1:20, it is God's intention through Christ "to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross." Jesus Christ brings peace, not only in the sense of forgiveness of sins but in the full biblical sense of *shalom*.

Central to this plan is the reconciliation of persons to God through the blood of Jesus Christ. But the reconciliation won by Christ reaches to all the alienations that resulted from our sin—within ourselves, between persons, between us and our physical environment. The biblical picture therefore is at once personal, ecological, and cosmic. As mind-boggling as the thought is, Scripture teaches that this reconciliation even includes the redemption of the physical universe from the effects of sin as everything is brought under its proper headship in Jesus (Rom. 8:19–21).

In all these passages, Paul begins with the fact of individual and corporate personal salvation through Christ. But he places this personal salvation within a picture of cosmic transformation. We see that the redemption of persons is the *center* of God's plan, but it is not *the circumference* of that plan. Paul switches from a close-up shot to a long-distance view. He uses a zoom lens, for the most part taking a close-up of personal redemption, but periodically zooming to a long-distance, wide-angle view which takes in "all things"—things visible and invisible; things past, present and future; things in heaven and things on earth; all the principalities and powers—everything in the cosmic-historical scene. To God be the glory in heaven and on earth!

Although this comprehensive picture of salvation is most fully elaborated in Paul's writings, it is also the larger biblical view. All the promises of cosmic restoration in the Old Testament apply here, reaching their climax in Isaiah's sublime vision (Is. 11:6–9; 35:1–10; 65:17–25). The basic message of the book of Revelation is the harmonious uniting of all things under the lordship of Christ as all evil, all discord is destroyed (Rev. 1:5–7; 5:5–10;

11:15; 21:1–22:5). In a somewhat different context, this same “summing up” perspective is evident in Hebrews 1–2. Jesus’ parables of the kingdom also point in this direction. And Isaiah, Peter and John speak of God creating a new heaven and a new earth (Is. 65:17; 66:22; 2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:1).

The testimony of Scripture is consistent: The same God who created the universe perfect, and sustains it in its fallen condition (Heb. 1:3), will restore all things through the work of Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Christians know, therefore, that the gospel of Jesus Christ offers the essential necessary resources for facing all earth’s problems, including issues of ecology and the environment. Here the bold claim of Scripture that in Jesus Christ all things cohere (Col. 1:17) takes on deeper and broader meaning. As Charles Colson writes, “Every part of creation came from God’s hand, every part was drawn into the mutiny of humanity against God, and every part will someday be redeemed. This means caring about all of life—redeeming people and redeeming culture” (Colson 2004)—yes, and in fact all creation.

According to the gospel, the decisive act in history was the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This was the key triumph over death and despair, the reversal of discord and incoherence. Jesus’ resurrection *in fact* makes everything new.

And yet the battle continues. There will yet be many casualties. But we are energized by the assurance that the one who won the decisive victory over evil in his resurrection at a particular point in history will bring the story to final, glorious fulfillment. The goal of history is final harmony and reconciliation, justice and moral symmetry—the ultimate triumph of justice, mercy, and truth. The Apostle Peter called it “the time of universal restoration” (Acts 3:21).

#### **PREDATION AND ATONEMENT**

In his earthly ministry Jesus freed some people from the physical and demonic predation of sin and showed his power over the forces of nature—most notably in his sign miracles and in calming the sea. Yet in his life and in his cross he submitted to sin’s predatory powers— then decisively triumphed over them in his resurrection. His victory inaugurates the new creation *now*, in the Spirit’s power, but only in God’s way. Thus we wait for—but also live in—the new creation in expectant hope that “the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.”

Thus the new creation through Jesus’ death and resurrection means the end of death and predation. “The last enemy to be destroyed is death” (1 Cor. 15:26).

The prism of creation’s groaning clarifies the true nature of sin—more and more so, in fact, as we come to understand the pain and stress the creation suffers today because of accumulated human sin and its ecological effects.

In some sense, all sin is predation. Perhaps predation in fact goes to the heart of sin. At

least in terms of its behavioral manifestations, all sin is predatory. It is the willingness of God-imaged persons (and the proclivity of all God's creatures) to sacrifice the life of another for their own (perceived) benefit.

In this sense, the essence of sin may not be pride so much as it is the desire and willingness to exalt oneself, or prefer oneself, over another. Humans practice predation on each other and on many of God's creatures—on the earth itself. Foolishly (for sin blinds), humans even try to practice predation on God, using God for selfish ends.

The Bible explicitly teaches that God's purpose is to put an end to *all* predation. "The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. . . . They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain" (Isa. 11:6, 9). If the created order will indeed be "liberated from its bondage to decay" then this promise in Isaiah is not metaphor or allegory; it is a description of the new creation; the promise of deliverance from earth's bondage to decay and predation—and a signpost for how we are to live today.

The predatory nature of sin illuminates Christ's atoning sacrifice for us. God's offering up of his own son in Jesus' death could look like predation (some have called it "divine child abuse"). But what turns this argument on its head is that Jesus offered himself freely, and that Jesus' death and resurrection is a Trinitarian drama. God gave himself, refusing to follow the world's and Satan's way of predation. This was the only way to break the cycle and disorder of predation and set humanity and human history on the right course, the divine course of self-giving and loving concern for the other.

Jesus Christ died for our sins and rose in the power of the Holy Spirit. He is the firstfruits of the new creation, and by the Spirit we already with Christ become the firstfruits of the new creation (1 Cor. 15:20, Rom. 8:23, Jas. 1:8, Rev. 14:4). Jesus' resurrection brings healing and deliverance to both the human and the nonhuman creation. Presumably Jesus would not have died for the non-human creation if it had not been the home of his specially-imaged human creation. So helping people come to transforming faith in Jesus Christ is always a central focus of Christian mission. But this is not an either/or, for God wills, now as always, to save his people *and* his land and bring heaven to earth (Rev. 21:1–2)—not to take disembodied souls to a nonmaterial heaven; that view would be gnosticism, not biblical Christianity.

Jesus' atonement through his death and triumphant resurrection is a cosmic-historical act through which all creation is redeemed—potentially and partially now, and fully when the kingdom comes in fullness. Frank Macchia writes, "Justification is a trinitarian act of cosmic proportions that is based in the Father as the one who creates and elects, in the Son as Redeemer, and in the Spirit as the giver of life." It is "the Holy Spirit's work to bring about justice through new creation." A fully Trinitarian understanding of God's work in Jesus Christ, Macchia suggests,

would not confine the Spirit's role to the subjective or even interpersonal dimensions of the life of faith. . . . The Spirit's involvement as advocate and intercessor for creation is

implied in the Spirit's groaning in and through us for the suffering creation (Rom 8:26). The divine will and judgment to justify and redeem may be seen as a response to an advocate and an intercessor already present in all of creation. [Think prevenient grace!] If the "Father's" will to justify is expressed in the divine will to send the Son, and the Son's will is expressed in the willingness to be sent, the Spirit's will would therefore be in the cry from creation to receive the gift that will be sent and in the cooperation with the Son in the shaping of the christological answer (Macchia 2001:214–15, 217).

God the Trinity wills to heal all creation. The biblical promise is that radical, awesome, and hope-inspiring. New creation in Jesus Christ by the Spirit creates the firstfruits-community that *lives now* the new-creation life in the fullness of biblical "all things" hope (Rom. 8:28, 32; 11:36; Eph. 1:10; Col. 1:16–20).

### **CYCLES OF LIFE AND CYCLES OF DEATH**

Human history is linear but also operates in the rhythms and cycles of nature. History is the mixture of cycles of life and cycles of death (violence, decay, entropy) over time. Through the resurrection and Pentecost, God's Spirit gives the church the power to live in and advance cycles of life and hope and to ameliorate the cycles of death while we wait expectantly for final liberation, new creation in its fullness.

One thing I've learned from running regularly is that cycles can work either for you or against you. If I've put on extra weight from overeating, I tend to run a bit slower. But if I push against that and run faster, I tend to lose some weight. The more I run, the more fit I feel, and the more fit I feel the better I run. When I run regularly I tend to lose weight; when I gain weight, I run slower.

Now, this is an illustration only; many people aren't physically able to run. But the principle holds. We live by cycles that can work either for us or against us.

We know the same principle works spiritually. The more we exercise ourselves spiritually (in biblically sound ways) the more we grow spiritually, and the more we grow spiritually, the more disciplined we tend to be.

*The same principle holds with the physical creation and the way we treat it.* Humans have dominion over the earth—either constructively or destructively. Cycles of life and cycles of death interact and compete within the created order. The cycles of death have been introduced by sin, including the human sin of neglecting biblical stewardship or creation care. Cycles of life (including Sabbath, worship, and Jubilee) are God's way. They are living cycles of life in our ongoing discipleship on earth. Empowered by the Spirit and Christian community, these cycles of life are not just for our own spirituality. They *actually contribute* to the coming of the new creation in fullness. In our discipleship, we can learn to live by the rhythms of nature and the spirit, not just the cycles of the workday, CNN, or "Law and Order."

This is the deeper reason, for instance, why recycling makes sense. Recycling works *against* cycles of death and *with* cycles of life. Van Dyke, *et al.*, write,

We extend a Christian response to God's creation when we begin to use less and save more. Those who recycle their own bottles and cans live with integrity. Those who persuade the city council to make recycling part of the normal garbage-collection procedure have changed their world. The reason to recycle materials or to compost leaves goes beyond compliance with local ordinances. It is within compliance of greater ordinances, cycles that God created for the world in which we live (145).

Cycles of life and death are physically, materially, economically true for the created order just as much as they for our bodies and spirits.

### **LIVING IN NEW CREATION EXPECTANCY**

“The creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God. . . . and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies” (Rom 8:19, 23).

Waiting in eager expectation. Living in new creation expectancy. Groaning now—the whole creation, and we ourselves—but not without hope. Rather it is a “groaning in labor pains” (Rom. 8:22), confident that present groaning will lead to the new creation.

Here is hope, expectancy, optimism of grace, the grace of optimism. A hope based not on human intelligence or technology or ingenuity but on Jesus' resurrection, God's promise, and the present work of the Spirit in the world and in the church.

This God-breathed expectant hope is what inspires our evangelism, discipleship, and creation care. We seek to honor God in God's world. We seek the healing, spiritual and physical, of all people and all creation. “You cannot have well people on a sick planet,” says Thomas Berry. Someone else has commented, “If you love Rembrandt, you won't trash his paintings.”

Scripture presents a richly textured, comprehensive, and profound biblical mandate for honoring God through caring for his handiwork. Biblically, this is part of the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ, not a secondary add-on.

### **CREATION CARE IS HOLISTIC MISSION**

At least half a dozen biblical themes ground the mandate for creation care. The Bible plan of salvation is one of peace, *shalom*, which in the Bible is a highly ecological concept that highlights the interdependence between people and their social and physical context. The biblical theology of land, from the Old Testament to the New, “grounds” (literally) salvation in God's plan for the whole earth. The theme of the earth as God's habitation implies human respect for and care of nature. The key biblical theme of justice and righteousness—the principal basis for a kingdom of God ethic—rules out harmful exploitation not only of people but of the land. The incarnation and servanthood of Jesus Christ show us what it means to live righteous and godly lives physically, on earth. The biblical doctrine of the Holy Spirit and of the church as charismatic underscores the role of the Spirit in both creation and the renewal of creation (e.g., Ps. 104:30). Finally, the

doctrine of the Trinity itself is rich in ecological insights, as it implies mutual interdependence and self-giving in behalf of the other rather than self-centered dominance or exploitation. The created order is the way it is because of the way God is. Its unity and diversity reflect in some sense the diversity-within-unity that is the Trinity.

Creation care, then, is grounded in God's character, in Scripture from the beginning, and in the Good News we proclaim. Everything in the gospel, in the kingdom, becomes clearer once we see it in through the lens of creation and the promised new creation. These comprehensive considerations suggest five very good reasons for creation care today:

1. **Creation care for God's sake.** "The heavens are telling the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims his handiwork" (Ps. 19:1). God created the universe to glorify himself and to assist his human creation in praising him. We are to praise God through, and also because of, his beautiful but complex world.

The primary reason for faithful creation care, therefore, is that caring for God's world is a fundamental way of glorifying God. We glorify him by the proper stewardship of the world he has made. We should care for the environment for God's sake.

Scripture affirms that "whether [we] eat or drink, or whatever [we] do," we should "do everything for the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31). God is glorified when we see him in the created order, and when we take care of the world he has made. Creation care is part of our acceptable worship (Rom. 12:1).

One of the main lessons Job had to learn was that the created order testifies to the vast wisdom of God and therefore is a motive for praising him. "Hear this, O Job; stop and consider the wondrous works of God" (Job 37:14). We see God in his works, and lift our eyes from nature to nature's God—but *then look back again* at nature with new eyes, seeing the garden we are to tend. Fulfilling God-given stewardship through the God-like powers that have been given us for good, not for evil, we glorify the Creator.

As McGrath and others have documented, there is a long Christian tradition not only of seeing God in nature but also of the human responsibility that this vision implies. "Something of the torrent of God's beauty can . . . be known in the rivulets of the beauty of creation. This has long been recognised as one of the most basic religious motivations for scientific research," McGrath notes, and should stir our passion for creation care, as well. Thomas Aquinas wrote, "Meditation on God's works enables us, at least to some extent, to admire and reflect on God's wisdom" (McGrath 2002:16). Thomas Traherne (c. 1637–1674) said creation "is a glorious mirror wherein you may see the verity of all religion: enjoy the remainders of Paradise, and talk with the Deity. Apply yourself vigorously to the enjoyment of it, for in it you shall see the face of God, and by enjoying it, be wholly converted to Him" (Traherne 1960: 63). And the God who is seen and glorified in the created order is honored and served through creation care.

John Wesley is a good representative of what might be called the great tradition of Christian appreciation of the created order and the responsibility that implies. "How small a

part of this great work of God [in creation] is man able to understand!" he wrote. "But it is our duty to contemplate what he has wrought, and to understand as much of it as we are able" (Sermon 56, "God's Approbation of His Works," 2). Wesley argued that such contemplation is a theological, not just a devotional, exercise. In preaching from the Sermon on the Mount he affirmed,

God is in all things, and . . . we are to see the Creator in the glass of every creature; . . . we should use and look upon nothing as separate from God, which indeed is a kind of practical atheism; but with a true magnificence of thought survey heaven and earth and all that is therein as contained by God in the hollow of his hand, who by his intimate presence holds them all in being, who pervades and actuates the whole created frame, and is in a true sense the soul of the universe (Sermon 23, "Upon our Lord's Sermon on the Mount, Discourse III," I.11).

Wesley emphasized that the created order shows us God's wisdom, glory, and beauty, leading us to praise him and live responsibly before him in the world. Creation is the God-given "book of nature." It is in the light of this book of nature that we interpret the Scriptures, and vice versa. It is in the light of God's care for his creatures that we learn about our own stewardship.

Caring for and protecting the world God has made is part of our worship and service. We care for creation for God's sake.

**2. Creation care for our own sake**—for human well-being. We should care for creation as if our life depended on it—because it does.

We often forget how dependent we are upon the physical environment—"a few hundred yards of atmosphere and a few inches of topsoil," as someone has said. We are largely unaware of our actual dependence, though from time to time hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, or volcanic eruptions remind us of our vulnerability. Sometimes the popular media talks of "Mother Nature going on a rampage."

But we are no less vulnerable when the sun is shining, flowers are blooming, and birds are singing. We are just less aware. Here environmental science helps us, and we need to pay attention to what it teaches.

If we are passionate about people, we will be passionate about their environment. Christians have often been concerned with feeding the hungry and providing shelter for the homeless. This Christ-like human concern should expand to include the environmental conditions that enable food production and the well-being of the planet that is our home. In many places, people lack food and shelter because the forests have been destroyed or the water supply has disappeared. These ecological issues cannot be handled simply by relief work; they require careful, informed, sustained creation care.

Scripture is the story of God's people serving God in God's land. If God's people are faithful, the land prospers. Conversely, if the land suffers, we suffer. This is a repeated

theme in much of Old Testament literature—in the law, the prophets, and the wisdom literature. It comes to particular focus in the Jubilee legislation of Leviticus 25–26.

The key fact is ecological interdependence. If we care about people, we will care for the land and air and multiplied species on which our well-being depends.

**3. Creation care for creation's sake.** We should care for the created order because it has its own God-given right to exist and flourish, independently of its relationship to us. The world after all is *God's* handiwork, not ours. God created the universe for his good purposes, *not all of which are yet known to us*. We need, therefore, a certain eschatological humility and reserve. We are to honor God's creative work and to fulfill our responsibilities as stewards of what he has made.

In great measure, God's other creatures depend on us for their well-being and survival. Increasingly, in fact, we see that the whole biosphere is more dependent on human nurture and care than we would have imagined. We need to recover the biblical sense of why creation exists, how it proclaims God's glory, and of how all nature will participate in God's salvation. John Wesley had a profound sense of this. One of his favorite phrases was "the restitution of all things," the King James Version of Acts 3:21. In that passage the Apostle Peter tells us that the time is coming when God will "restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets." And so Wesley wrote,

While "the whole creation groans together" (whether men attend or not), their groans are not dispersed in idle air, but enter into the ears of him that made them. While his creatures "travail together in pain," he knows all their pain, and is bringing them nearer and nearer to the birth which shall be accomplished in its season. He sees "the earnest expectation" wherewith the whole animated creation "waits for" that final "manifestation of the sons of God": in which "they themselves also shall be delivered" (not by annihilation: annihilation is not deliverance) "from the" present "bondage of corruption, into" a measure of "the glorious liberty of the children of God."

Referring then to Revelation 21, Wesley notes that the promise of the destruction of death, evil, and pain is not restricted to humankind. Rather, we may expect that "the whole brute creation will then undoubtedly be restored, not only to the vigor, strength, and swiftness which they had at their creation, but to a far higher degree of each than they ever enjoyed." Then will be fulfilled the great promise of Isaiah 11:6–9 (Sermon 60, "The General Deliverance").

Since all God's creatures reflect God's glory and have a place in God's plan, they are part of legitimate Christian concern. If God cares for and about the creatures, so should we.

**4. Creation care for the sake of mission.** Another *major* reason Jesus-followers should be passionate about creation care is that this is essential for effective mission in today's world.

The biblical doctrine of creation assures us that holistic mission necessarily includes the church's mission to and in behalf of the earth. The biblical vision has always been God's people serving God's purposes in God's land.

The argument here is both theological and strategic. Theological, because a fully biblical view of mission will necessarily include the dimension of creation care. But also strategic and pragmatic, because a holistic theology and practice of mission that incorporates creation care is much more persuasive. Do we want people of all nations and cultures to come to faith in Jesus Christ as the Savior of the world? Then we should proclaim and demonstrate that Jesus is the renewer of the whole creation, the whole face of the earth. Salvation is that big. This is a grander portrayal of Christ than we sometimes present. It both honors our Savior and makes the gospel more persuasive and attractive when we present a gospel of total healing—the healing of creation; the restoration of all things. This is truly the whole gospel for the whole world.

**5. Creation care for the sake of our children and grandchildren.** There is a final persuasive motive for creation care today: For the sake of our children and grandchildren. For our descendants yet unborn. As Scripture teaches, we have a responsibility—a stewardship—in behalf of the generations yet to come.

Today we look back at the Protestants of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and ask, Why did they not have a sense of the Christian global missionary mandate? Or we look back at Christian slaveholders in the eighteenth and nineteenth century and ask, How could they not see that slavery was incompatible with the gospel? What did they think they were doing?

Our grandchildren, as they wrestle with ecological issues, will look back on this generation and ask: Why could they not see the Christian responsibility for earth stewardship? Why did they wait so long? What did they think they were doing when they failed to defend the forests and the seas and to protect earth's endangered species? Did they not understand what they were doing to their own descendants?

We today are the generation that must rediscover and proclaim creation care as part of the gospel, part of the mission of God.

We hope that our children and grandchildren will know and serve Jesus Christ, and we hope also that they will inherit a world that is not choked and poisoned by pollution or made scarcely habitable by environmental disasters. If that is our hope, the time for action is now. We should treat future generations the way we would want to be treated.

### **PRACTICAL PRINCIPLES**

The Bible is rich in its teachings about the created order. It gives us not only the big picture of transformation but also practical principles by which this stewardship can be carried out as a part of Christian mission. Calvin DeWitt (1995:838–48) helpfully outlines four principles that are rooted in Scripture and are highly relevant for the practice of creation care and ecologically sensitive Christian mission globally:

1. *The Earthkeeping Principle*: Just as the creator keeps and sustains humanity, so humanity must keep and sustain the creator's creation.

2. *The Sabbath Principle*: The creation must be allowed to recover from human use of its resources. Sabbath cycles become cycles of life, counteracting cycles of death.

3. *The Fruitfulness Principle*: The fecundity of the creation is to be enjoyed, not destroyed.

4. *The Fulfillment and Limits Principle*: There are limits set to humanity's role within creation, with boundaries set in place that must be respected.

When such principles are integrated into our discipleship and our global mission practice, we will see the healing power of the gospel as never before in history.

### **REDEMPTIVE PRACTICES**

How shall we live, then, honoring God in God's world? How do we put principles of simplicity, creation-sensitivity, and biblical stewardship into actual practice?

We will need to begin with repentance for covenant unfaithfulness, recognizing that violating God's covenant with the earth is sin. As "fruit worthy of repentance" (Mt. 3:8) we can adopt creation-care practices that reinforce cycles of life.

Here are several to consider. Not all of these will appeal to everyone, but we can each adopt some of these as part of Christian discipleship and an expression of the physicality of our spirituality.

1. *Bible study*. Study the Bible (personally and in groups) with creation-care eyes. Learn what the Bible teaches about the creation, earth, God's covenant with the earth (Gen. 9), and God's plan for creation restored. Key biblical themes worth studying are *earth, justice, land, shalom, the poor, the nations, Sabbath/Jubilee, and reconciliation*.

2. *Prayer* (singly and in groups) for the healing of the land and the nations. We can pray for reforestation in Haiti; peace in places where war ravages the environment; God's sustenance for frontline earth healers—and for discernment: "Lord, what would you have me to do?" "We do not know how to pray as we ought, but [the Holy Spirit] intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words" (Rom. 8:26).

3. *Recycle* things rather than throwing them "away," realizing that waste products never really "go away." Support community-wide recycling efforts. Remember that it is about 90% cheaper and more ecologically responsible to make recycled pop cans than to make new ones. Recycling has an economic as well as ecological benefit. It is a way to slow down rather than speed up the entropy of the created order. (The city of Lexington, Kentucky, saves a million dollars annually by encouraging recycling.)

4. *Support local, state, and federal legislation and international agreements that protect the environment and promote creation care*. Strengthening the Endangered Species Act, supporting legislation such as the McCain-Lieberman Climate Change

Bill, and working for international accords to limit “greenhouse” gases are good places to start. Locally we might work for bike lanes on city streets, for more parks and footpaths, and expanded recycling.

5. *Make Sundays (or another day) real Sabbaths* by spending at least an hour reading good books and articles on creation and on creation-care as a part of mission and discipleship. (See the bibliography below for suggestions.) Combine this with walks (alone or with friends) in fields and woods, paying attention to God’s other creatures.

6. *Form a group* that focuses on the creation-care dimensions of mission and discipleship—prayer, study, conversation, action.

7. *Write a poem, hymn, song, or meditation* celebrating the greatness of God as seen in his creation. The books of Psalms and Job provide wonderful models. Or: Figure out the creation-care implications of your regular teaching or preaching.

8. *Form some creation-affirming habits*—moderate eating, regular exercise, walking (if possible) instead of riding or using elevators, bird-watching, nature photography, gardening—whatever best fits your own situation. Use personal disciplines and exercise for the benefit of creation and others, not just for your own health.

9. *Practice energy conservation*—for the sake of the planet and the poor, not just to save money—in home-building or renovation, transportation, entertainment, and daily habits.

10. *Become active in an organization or network* that promotes the healing of creation from a biblical standpoint. The Evangelical Environmental Network is a good place to start and a source of information on various networks, resources, and programs. The book *Redeeming Creation* by Van Dyke, *et al.*, lists numerous Christian groups devoted to creation care in an appendix.

## CONCLUSION

We have a great commission and a wonderful opportunity to make Jesus Christ known today—to proclaim the gospel of the kingdom; to declare God’s glory among the nations. We have a stewardship to fulfill—a stewardship of creation, and a stewardship of God’s many-colored grace (1 Pt. 4:10), which is our essential resource.

The same God who is concerned with the renewal of the church is concerned with the renewal of creation. The same Spirit who hovers over the church hovers over the waters and wants to bring both into reconciliation under the headship of Jesus Christ. If we are concerned about mission in its truest sense, we will be concerned about every good thing God has made. Conversely, if we are genuinely concerned with God’s world, we will want to see the Holy Spirit renew God’s people, sending a revival of such depth that it not only

stirs our hearts but also heals our land.

We want to see creation healed, and we are hopeful because God has promised it will be so. We especially want to see our brothers and sisters throughout the earth healed of the disease of sin, brought into new-creation life through Jesus Christ and the Spirit. We want to live and proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God so that more and more people worldwide keep covenant with God and with his good earth—in the assurance that “the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay” and “the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.”

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All biblical quotations in this paper are from the NRSV unless otherwise indicated.

Man . . .

Who trusted God was love indeed  
 And love Creation's final law —  
 Tho' Nature, red in tooth and claw  
 With ravine, shrieked against his creed.

—Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "In Memoriam A. H. H." (1850).

An irony of contemporary globalizing society is the marketing of the romantic; the commodification of culture itself; turning indigenous artistic and cultural expressions into products on the world market. Global capitalism has discovered that romanticism has commercial value as commodity. See Rifkin 2000.

This view, which gave rise to classical Christian theism, has been roundly critiqued by process theology and, from an Evangelical perspective, the “open theism” of Clark Pinnock and others.

It is not of course the only reason. The economic prosperity of the United States, for example, is due not only to free enterprise and democracy but also to the suppression and exploitation of Native American peoples and cultures, slave labor, almost unbounded natural resources, a nearly constant flow of immigration, the legacy of European empire and colonialism, American military power and covert operations worldwide, government sponsorship and protection of business, unequal trade arrangements, and intellectual property laws. So one should be cautious about claiming that God has uniquely “blessed” America.

In conversations with Christian businessmen over the years I have been surprised how infrequently *any* ethical issues are raised except ones of individual morality and perhaps the avoidance of “sin industries” like alcohol, tobacco, and pornography. Almost never is environmental exploitation raised as a moral issue, and those who raise it are generally dismissed as “tree huggers,” persons more concerned about spotted owls and snail darters than about people, who are what *really* matter.

Genuine Christian community of course affirms the importance of personhood. The biblical ideal is not to lose or submerge individuality in the collective but rather responsible mutual community in which Jesus-followers find their true personal identity, freedom, and responsibility. See “The Mind of Christ,” chapter 9 in Snyder 2005.

For a brief overview and sources, see Snyder 1991:123–26.

The Bible does not specify precisely in what ways the created order was affected by the Fall and the flood. Some would object to drawing any connection between the creation’s “bondage to decay” and the scientific “law” of entropy. There clearly is at least a link analogically, and perhaps even more directly. Clearly climate and weather were affected by the Fall and the flood, according to Genesis, and these may be symptomatic of larger physical changes introduced into the created order through human sin. On the significance of (and debates about) entropy see Nürnberger 1999:334–55. “Even social structures, cultures and convictions have a tendency to disintegrate” (336). The certainty of creation’s liberation and human ethical responsibility for creation care do not depend on the equation of entropy with creation’s “bondage to decay,” but it is empirically true that wasteful lifestyles speed up the process of entropy (deterioration). Entropy and gracious “extropy” are discussed in Snyder 1989.

*Creation Care* magazine, published by the Evangelical Environmental Network, regularly deals with a range of environmental issues. It’s “Healthy Families, Healthy Environment” initiative is especially worthy of note.

The biblical meaning of “economy of God” is more fully elaborated in Snyder 1983, chapter 2.

Biblically speaking, we do not know this for sure.

The precedent of nineteenth-century abolitionism is instructive. The abolitionists advanced four arguments that have parallels in the current concern for creation care: (1) The Bible does not justify the practice of slavery today; (2) the issue is moral and spiritual, not just political or economic; (3) the only proper response therefore is repentance and the ending of slavery; (4) the primary theological issue has to do with creation—slaves are our fellow humans, created in the image of God. The abolitionist voice was a minority one in the 1830s and 1840s but now Christians widely accept the validity of their concern. Today we are in a similar place with regard to the stewardship of God’s good creation, which is now in bondage—a biblical concern, but in some places as controversial as was early abolitionism.

Biblically speaking, there are just two kinds of stewardship: Covenant care of the created order (including, obviously, time and money) and stewardship of God’s many-colored grace (1 Pt. 4:10).

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