

## Mission to the Whole Creation

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Is it time for humanity to be de-centred as the focus of mission? Do we need to repent of the anthropocentric bias of much missiology and recapture the radically inclusive biblical emphasis upon God's mission toward the whole cosmos? These are questions prompted by the engagement of theologians and mission practitioners with contemporary issues of environmental degradation and ecological sensitivity. The growing awareness over the last several decades of major environmental challenges, such as ozone depletion, global warming, de-forestation, bio-diversity loss, water and air pollution, has prompted a quest for a holistic understanding of mission relevant to the contemporary ecological crisis. Such an understanding needs to include a commitment to sustainable relationships between human beings and the non-human creation. A transformation of our understanding of this relationship is an aspect of our salvation in Christ.

The global nature of many of the environmental challenges adds further missiological relevance: these are issues that cross national boundaries, connecting countries and people groups. In this way they raise awareness of our interconnectedness as human beings inhabiting the same planet, as well as our dependence upon and influence over the non-human creation. Indeed, it could be argued that "ecology" is the most interconnected word in the English language, referring to the relations of organisms to one another and to their surroundings.

God's commitment to the integrity of these relationships is made abundantly clear in the first two chapters of Genesis. They emphasise the inextricable links between the human and non-human creation and view the whole as 'good'. A biblical doctrine of creation that can properly inform missiology emphasises that the whole of creation reflects God's glory and, as such, must be honoured and treated with respect. Humanity, while sharing all kinds of commonalities with the non-human creation, is distinguished from it and given a particular responsibility for creation care, a crucial component of what it means to be created in "the image of God" (Gen 1:26-27).

While some have accused Christianity of being responsible for environmental degradation as a result of the abuse of the principle of human dominion over the rest of creation (Gen 1:28), the verse needs to be interpreted in conjunction with Genesis 2:15 which combines legitimate development of the earth's resources with nurture and conservation. Thus the contemporary concept of "sustainable development" can be seen to be biblically rooted.

This emphasis upon creation care as a fundamental element of God's calling upon human beings is reiterated elsewhere in the Pentateuch. Many biblical laws relate to the responsible treatment of animals, trees, vegetation and the land itself (e.g. Ex 23:4-5, 10-11; Deut 22:6-7; Deut 25:4; Deut 25:12-15; Ex 23:10-11). Both Sabbath and Jubilee provisions (Lev 25) affect the non-human creation as well as human beings, while the story of Noah and the Ark has been called "the original endangered species act". It is highly significant that the first biblical covenant (Gen 9:8-17) is with every living creature and the text repeatedly emphasises the inclusive nature of God's commitment to his creation. Similarly, later biblical texts that look forward to the Messianic age depict a peaceable kingdom in which all creatures will dwell together (e.g. Isa 65:17-25).

Beyond particular biblical texts, it is important to relate the essential framework of Christian theology and missiology to our understanding of environmental issues. We properly begin with the doctrine of the Trinity in which God is understood as an interdependent ecology of persons and as such God is the root and pattern of all mutually supporting interconnecting processes. If the doctrine of the Trinity and creation are our starting points, the doctrine of the fall provides the proper framework in which to assess the root causes of environmental degradation. One important aspect of human sin is failure in our stewardship of creation. Rebellion against God is manifested in terms of over-consumption and the exploitation of natural resources, with insufficient attention being given to just patterns of distribution and the well-being of future generations. The Gospel, therefore, calls us to repent of all the ways in which we have failed to cherish and care for God's creation.

We also need to "green" our understanding of the person and work of Christ. The doctrines of incarnation, salvation and resurrection all have vital environmental resonances. The incarnation expresses God's commitment to creation and emphasises that matter matters. In his own life, Jesus acknowledged and celebrated the non-human creation, while the resurrection confirms God's commitment to the physical realm and points forward to a renewed creation. Following on from this, Christian eschatology needs to stress not the destruction of the present order, as has so often been the case, but rather its restoration to wholeness (Rom 8:19-23). In this way, creation care is a living out in the present of God's ultimate purpose of cosmic reconciliation.

Perhaps at the heart of the matter lies the doctrine of salvation. We urgently need to avoid a reductionist view of salvation, by supplementing the dimension of human individual relationship with God with a comprehensive biblical vision of renewed harmony and justice between people and the rest of the created order (Eph 1:9-10; Col 1:15-20).

This theological framework provides the foundation for a properly holistic or integral understanding of mission that emphasises the interdependence between people and their social and physical contexts. Although the environmental component of mission should not be viewed as a new phenomenon (St Francis, Calvin and Wesley are three examples among many in the Western tradition who promoted creation care), it has become significantly more prominent in recent decades.

Within the ecumenical community, since the 1970's the World Council of Churches has organised a series of conferences on the theme of Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation. Although some evangelicals have been concerned about perceived pantheistic tendencies and the radical political agenda of these conferences, they have undeniably contributed to the growing profile of environmental issues within the global church. Within the evangelical community notable developments have included the creation in 1979 of the Au Sable Institute in Michigan, USA (subsequently extended to other centres in the USA, Canada, India and Kenya), which has had an influential educational and advocacy role, and the Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation (1994) signed by hundreds of church leaders throughout the world.

In terms of praxis, missionary earth-keeping includes education, advocacy, field work and conservation, and community development initiatives which combine economic development with environmental conservation and opportunities for evangelism. Valuable case studies from Africa, Asia and Latin America are provided by De Witt & Prance (1992). One particularly successful example of environmental mission is A Rocha, founded in 1983 in Portugal and now working in over 15 countries across five continents. A Rocha projects combine science and research with practical conservation and environmental education.

There is a strong cross-cultural and communal dimension to the ministry, providing natural evangelistic opportunities. Numerous other examples of environmental mission around the world are evangelistically effective, demonstrating to an increasingly environmentally aware generation the relevance of the Christian Gospel to every aspect of life.

While there is growing recognition of the validity and value of missionary earth-keeping, it remains something of a Cinderella within the mission community. Many evangelical Christians still need to be persuaded that creation care, in its various dimensions of conservation, education, lifestyle choices, and advocacy, is an important component of Christian witness and worship. That task needs to be undertaken urgently, for the sake of the Gospel and for the sake of the world.

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### Resources:

Berry, R. J. (ed), *The Care of Creation: Focusing concern and action*, Leicester:IVP, 2000

Bouma-Prediger, S., *For the beauty of the earth: a Christian vision for creation care*, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001

Daneel, M. L., *African Earthkeepers: Wholistic Interfaith Mission*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2001.

DeWitt, C., & G. T. Prance (eds), *Missionary Earthkeeping*, Macon: Mercer University Press, 1992

Fowler, R. B., *The Greening of Protestant Thought*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995

Gnanakan, K., *God's World: A theology of the environment*, London: SPCK, 1999

Hallman, D. G., (ed), *Ecotheology: Voices from South and North*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1994

Hill, B. R., *Christian Faith and the Environment: Making vital connections*, Maryknoll, New York, 1998

[www.arocha.org](http://www.arocha.org) (A Rocha)

[www.creationcare.org](http://www.creationcare.org) (Evangelical Environmental Network and 'Creation Care' Magazine)

[www.unep.org](http://www.unep.org) (United Nations Environment Programme)

[www.jri.org.uk](http://www.jri.org.uk) (The John Ray Initiative)

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