

# Creation, Gospel and Mission

By Chris Wright

An evangelical mission organization such as OMF will always seek to ensure that its understanding and practice of mission is fully rooted in Scripture. I have been encouraged to hear that the society is increasingly taking note of creation care as a dimension of Christian responsibility in the world. This is in line with, and hopefully a positive response to, the call of the Lausanne Movement in *The Cape Town Commitment* that evangelicals globally should include creation within their understanding of the Bible, the gospel, and our mission. So I am happy to contribute these reflections to strengthen and deepen our understanding and commitments in this area. Let's think first of the glory of God in creation, then of the goal of creation in God's plan of redemption, and finally whether creation care can properly be regarded as a "gospel issue" and included in our mission.<sup>1</sup>

## 1. THE GLORY OF CREATION

### a. God's glory expressed through the praise of creation

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

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

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

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

### b. God's glory seen in the fullness of creation

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

- Ps 24:1 "The earth is the LORD's and everything in it" (lit) "its fullness".
- Ps 50:12 "The world is mine and all that is in it" (lit) "its fullness" (after listing animals of the forest, cattle, birds, and insects).
- Ps 104:31 "May the glory of the LORD endure forever; may the LORD rejoice in all his works" (after a Psalm celebrating the diversity of creatures).

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

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

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

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

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## 2. THE GOAL OF CREATION

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

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

The first thing we need to say is that creation *needs* redemption. From the very beginning of the Bible it is made clear that sin and evil have affected the natural order as well as human and spiritual life. "Cursed is the earth because of you," said God to Adam. I think the primary focus of that statement is on the earth as soil, ground (*'adamah*, rather than *'erets*) in relation to human work, rather than on the geological structures and functioning of the planet. That is, I do not personally believe that we should attribute all natural phenomena that are potentially destructive (the shifting of tectonic plates, earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions, etc.) to the curse. In fact, we know that without the movement of tectonic plates (that also cause earthquakes and tsunamis) there would be no mountains, which are the source of rivers and soil, etc.). Nevertheless, Paul does make the clear theological affirmation that the whole of creation is frustrated, subjected to futility in some sense, including "decay and bondage"—and will remain so until it is liberated by God and "brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God" (Rom 8:19–21).

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

- Isa 11:6–9. The messianic era will include environmental harmony.
- Isa 35. The restoration of God's people will herald creational abundance.

- Isa 65:17–25. God is "creating" (the word is participial) "new heavens and new earth." The picture that follows depicts life on earth that is full of joy, free from tears, life-fulfilling, with deep satisfaction and fruitfulness in ordinary labour, free from the curses of frustration and injustice, and with environmental peace and harmony. It is a glorious picture that provided the images and vocabulary for Revelation 21–22.
- Ps 96:10–13. The whole of creation is called to rejoice because God is coming to put things right.

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

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

### b. Purging, not obliteration

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

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

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

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

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

### c. Reconciled to God through the cross and resurrection of Christ

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

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

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

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

### 3. GOSPEL AND CREATION

This helps us to understand a phrase in the *Cape Town Commitment* (CTC) that has raised the eyebrows of some. It speaks of creation care as "a gospel issue". There are some people who have said that, while they agree that it is an important issue, a biblically-

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grounded responsibility, and even perhaps a legitimate part of Christian mission, they would not agree that it is "a gospel issue".

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

The earth is created, sustained and redeemed by Christ.<sup>2</sup> We cannot claim to love God while abusing what belongs to Christ by right of creation, redemption and inheritance. We care for the earth and responsibly use its abundant resources, not according to the rationale of the secular world, but for the Lord's sake. If Jesus is Lord of all the earth, we cannot separate our relationship to Christ from how we act in relation to the earth. For to proclaim the gospel that says "Jesus is Lord" is to proclaim the gospel that includes the earth, since Christ's Lordship is over all creation. Creation care is thus a gospel issue within the Lordship of Christ.<sup>3</sup>

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

*We love the story the gospel tells.* The gospel announces as good news the historical events of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. As the son of David, the promised Messiah King, Jesus is the one through whom alone God established his kingdom and acted for the salvation of the world, enabling all nations on earth to be blessed, as he promised Abraham. Paul defines the gospel in stating that "Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day, according to the scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter and then to the Twelve." The gospel declares that, on the cross of Christ, God took upon himself, in the person of his Son and in our place, the judgment our sin deserves. In the same great saving act, completed, vindicated and declared through the resurrection, God won the decisive victory over Satan, death and all evil powers, liberated us from their power and fear, and ensured their eventual destruction. God accomplished the reconciliation of believers with himself and with one another across all boundaries and enmities. God also accomplished his purpose of the ultimate reconciliation of all creation, and in the bodily resurrection of Jesus has given us the first fruits of the new creation. "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself."<sup>4</sup> How we love the gospel story!<sup>5</sup>

To put it the other way round: for someone to claim to be a Christian, to be a follower and disciple of Jesus, to be submitting to Jesus as Lord and King, and yet to have no concern about the creation, or even to reject with hostility those who do act on such concern, seems to me to be a denial of the biblical gospel which proclaims that Jesus Christ is the creator, sustainer and redeemer of creation itself.

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

Now, first of all, if you understand the words “the gospel” to mean only “the mechanism by which you can ensure your personal salvation—and the only means of doing so,” you will necessarily consider that the phrase “a gospel issue” can be applied only to matters that affect *how* you get saved, or *whether* you get saved. But the biblical gospel is not just a means of personal salvation (though of course it assuredly provides that, thank God). The gospel is the good news that is contained in the grand story of God’s good purpose for all creation, a purpose in which, by God’s grace, we can have a share. “Gospel issues” are much broader than only those issues that affect individual salvation.

### **b. “Obeying the gospel”**

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

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

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

However, while such concern is entirely valid, it can easily overlook the fact that the New Testament (including Jesus himself) presents the gospel as the good news, not first of all about us and our destiny (though of course including that), but about the reign

of God. In a world that calls Caesar Lord, the gospel declares “there is another king — King Jesus.” The gospel proclaims the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the fact that he exercised that Lordship through his self-emptying incarnation, earthly life, atoning death, victorious resurrection, glorious ascension and ultimate return. Then the gospel calls us to respond in repentance and faith to that proclamation. From that point of view, “gospel issues” take on a wider level of meaning and scope. The essence of our responding to the gospel is that *we choose to submit to Jesus of Nazareth as Lord*. The gospel calls me to recognize Jesus as Lord not just of my personal discipleship, but of the whole environment in which I live, for “all authority in heaven *and on earth* (i.e. in all creation) is given to me,” said Jesus. If the gospel declares Jesus to be truly Lord of all creation, then how I live out my discipleship to Jesus must also include creation. It is, as the CTC says, “a gospel issue *within the Lordship of Christ*” (that defining phrase is intentional and crucial and should not be omitted when quoting the document).<sup>6</sup>

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

### **d. Don’t read a damaged Bible**

It is baffling to me that there are so many Christians, including sadly (and especially) those who claim to be evangelicals, for whom this matter of creation-care, or ecological concern and action, is weak and neglected at best, and even rejected with hostile prejudice at worst. It seems to me that the reason for this is a very defective theology of creation among contemporary evangelicals. To put it bluntly, some people seem to have damaged Bibles, in which the first two and last two pages have got mysteriously torn off. They start at Genesis 3, because they know all about sin. And they end at Revelation 20, because they know all about the day of judgment. And they have their personal solution to the sin problem and their personal security for the day of judgment, provided of course by the death and resurrection of Jesus. Praise God, I believe that too. But the Bible has a much bigger story. It starts with creation in Genesis 1–2 and ends with new creation in Revelation 21–22. This is the story of the whole creation, *within which* my personal salvation fits, and within which the good news/gospel fits. And the Lordship of Christ spans that whole story, not just my little slice of it. So I need to acknowledge Christ as Lord of my physical environment as well as my spiritual salvation, and behave as his disciple in relation to both.

## **4. THE NEW CREATION**

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

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

And in that new creation, with God dwelling at last in the cleansed temple of his whole creation (so that no microcosmic temple will be needed, as John saw), the tribute of the nations will be brought into the city of God—the “glory of kings”, purged and purified and contributing to the glory of God (Rev 21:22–27).<sup>7</sup>

What does all this mean for our ecological thinking and action in the here and now? It means that in godly use of, and care for, the creation we are doing two things at the same time. On the one hand we are exercising the created role God gave us from the beginning, and in so doing we can properly be glorifying God in all our work within and for creation. And on the other hand we are anticipating the role that we shall have in the new creation, when we shall then assume fully our proper role of kings and priests—exercising the loving rule of God over the rest of his creation, and serving it on God’s behalf as the place of God’s temple dwelling.

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

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

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

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

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## NOTES

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

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

<sup>3</sup> *Cape Town Commitment* 1.7a.

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

<sup>5</sup> *Cape Town Commitment* 1.8b.

<sup>6</sup> The Lordship of Christ over the earth also affects the way we think about the actual places where we and others live. Peoples and places are connected to one another, within the purposes of God. Both the Old Testament (Gen 10; Deut 2; 32:8) and Paul (Acts 17:24–26) affirm God’s sovereign distribution of the planet to peoples—and his overall involvement in their migrations too. So God is “interested” not just in whisking souls to heaven at some future point, but in the physical locations and environment of people’s lives. Ecology is much more than merely having a sentimental love of nature, nice views, and endangered species. It is intimately connected to *human* well-being also. Comprehensive care for people (“love” in its biblical breadth) includes care for their physical environment—and whatever enhances or threatens it. It is a logical extension of the accepted view that our mission should attend to people’s physical, intellectual and spiritual needs (in medical, educational, evangelistic, and pastoral ministries), since all three of those dimensions will be affected in various ways by the quality of the environment in which they live.

<sup>7</sup> I have discussed the theme of new creation, and what is implied by the glory and splendor of the nations being brought into the city of God, in *The God I Don’t Understand: Reflections on Tough Questions of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009).