



## CREATION AND EVOLUTION

### Our theology needs to be 'ecologically literate'

Simon Steer

The growing awareness over recent years of major environmental challenges such as ozone depletion, global warming, deforestation, bio-diversity loss, water and air pollution has provided Christians with a powerful reminder of the critical importance of a robust theology of creation. Our theology needs to be 'ecologically literate', that is cognisant of and reflecting upon the interconnectedness of all life and humanity's dependence upon and influence over the non-human creation. The rapid growth of 'eco-theology' over the past twenty years is a serious attempt to bring the resources of Christian theology to bear upon what is arguably the most crucial set of issues facing humanity. Many evangelical biblical scholars, theologians, scientists and environmental professionals are engaged in this process and I am delighted that LST is both benefiting from and seeking to contribute to this vital expression of 'applied theology'.<sup>1</sup> This year we have added an 'ecology' component to our 3rd year 'Bible and the People of God' course.

Let me suggest the outline of a biblical doctrine of creation that provides the foundation and motivation for our engagement with contemporary environmental challenges. To begin at the beginning, the first two chapters of Genesis emphasise the inextricable links between the human and non-human and view the whole as 'good'. The whole of creation reflects God's glory and 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).

Human dominion over the rest of creation (Gen. 1:28) needs to be understood 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. Exod. 23:4-5, 10-11; Deut. 22:6-7, 25:4, 13-15). 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 to our understanding of environmental issues. So the doctrine of the Trinity can help us to understand God as an interdependent ecology of persons, the root and pattern of all mutually supporting and interconnecting processes. 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 insists that matter matters. In his own life and teaching, 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. It is also true that the non-human creation is involved in the judgement of God (indicated, for example, in the withering of the fig tree, Mark 11:12-24, and the destruction of the swine, Mark 5:1-13), and this militates against any sacralising of creation. In broad terms, however, Christian eschatology needs to stress not the destruction of the present order but rather its restoration to wholeness (Rom. 8:19-23). Even those passages (notably 2 Pet. 3:7-13) that have frequently been taken to indicate the future destruction of the earth are, I believe, more persuasively interpreted in terms of purification, renewal and transformation. Given this reading, 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. The Bible has no time for a reductionist view of salvation but insists that the transformation of an individual's relationship with God be placed within a breathtakingly comprehensive vision of renewed harmony and justice between people and the rest of the created order under the lordship of Christ (Eph. 1:9-10; Col. 1:15-20). As Archbishop William Temple wrote seventy years ago:

'No object is sufficient for the love of God short of the world itself. Christianity is not one more religion of individual salvation, different from its fellows only in offering a different road to that goal. It is the one and only religion of world-redemption. Of course it includes a way of individual salvation ... But its scope is wider than that – as wide as the love of God.<sup>21</sup>

It is my hope that this biblical-theological vision will compel more and more Christians to be involved in 'missionary earth keeping' in its various dimensions of conservation, education, lifestyle choices and advocacy and by supporting such valuable ministries as A Rocha ([www.arocha.org](http://www.arocha.org)), the John Ray Initiative ([www.jri.org.uk](http://www.jri.org.uk)), Christian Ecology Link ([www.christian-ecology](http://www.christian-ecology)), Ecocongregation ([www.ecocongregation.org](http://www.ecocongregation.org)) and Climate Stewards ([www.climatestewards.net](http://www.climatestewards.net)).

Greater involvement of this kind is urgently needed for the sake of the Gospel and for the sake of the world.

A longer exploration of these issues can be found in Simon's article on 'Ecology/Environment' in the *Dictionary of Mission Theology*, IVP, 2007.

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<sup>1</sup> Notable recent examples include: Atkinson, D, *Renewing the Face of the Earth*, Canterbury Press, 2008

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Berry, R.J. (ed), *The Care of Creation – Focusing Concern and Action*, IVP, 2000  
Bookless, D, *Planetwise: Dare to Care for God's World*, IVP, 2008  
Deane-Drummond, C, *Eco-Theology*, Darton, Longman and Todd, 2008  
Harris, P, *Kingfisher's Fire*, Monarch Books, 2008  
Hodson, J & Hodson M, *Cherishing the Earth*, Monarch Books, 2008  
Spencer, N & White, R, *Christianity, Climate Change and Sustainable Living*, SPCK, 2007

<sup>2</sup> Temple, William, *Readings in St John's Gospel*, 1939