

A FAMINE OF HOPE : CHRISTIAN MISSION & THE SEARCH FOR A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

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The Environmental Context – A movement in despair

In 2005, the Royal Society launched its Millennium Ecosystem Assessment – the most comprehensive analysis yet of the health of the earth and its ecosystems for human well-being. At that launch, Professor Sir. John Lawton, outgoing Chief Executive of the National Environment Research Council, described the report as *"hugely important and profoundly worrying"*, adding *"we have about fifty years to change things"*.¹

Globally, water supplies, fertile land, timber and biodiversity are all under severe threat from human action. Melting ice-caps in Greenland and Antarctica will lead to sea-level rises of perhaps 20-30 feet. Following a UK Government briefing on the latest evidence from the British Antarctic Survey, the environment editor of The Independent, Michael McCarthy, wrote in "The Tablet" of a conversation he had with his opposite number from The Guardian, Paul Brown :

*'I said, "The earth is finished." Paul said: "It is, yes." We both shook our heads and gave that half-laugh that is sparked by incredulity. So many environmental scare stories, over the years; I never dreamed of such a one as this. And what will our children make of our generation, who let this planet, so lovingly created, go to waste?'*²

We live at a time of crisis in the global environmental movement. It is more than anything else a crisis of hope. In their influential paper, *"The Death of Environmentalism"*, Shellenberger and Nordhaus wrote that the environmental movement needs to collectively re-think everything, ... to "tap into the creative worlds of myth-making, even religion, not to better sell narrow and technical policy proposals, but rather to figure out who we are and who we need to be." (p34)³

Today, the crisis facing the planet is reflected in a crisis of confidence within the environmental movement itself. There is a growing split between anthropocentric and eco- or bio-centric worldviews. The anthropocentric view says, in caricature, if we know what the problem is, we can fix it. Science, technology, the market and human ingenuity will get us through. The evidence does not support this. The more we know, the worse it gets, and yet human beings stubbornly refuse to change their behaviours or aspirations.

In contrast, the eco- or bio-centric view sees anthropocentrism as the heart of the problem. We have failed to recognise that we are but one amongst millions of species on planet earth, and to see the need for mutual interdependence to attain sustainability. The difficulty with the ecocentric view is that ultimately it offers no hope except that of removing humans – the virus species – from the equation. An ecocentric view has no ultimate ethical basis for decisive intervention by human beings in natural systems.

¹ Transcribed verbatim from Sir. John Lawton's speech at the MEA's launch, Royal Society, London, March 31st 2005.

² "The Tablet", 12th February 2005

As Christians, we believe that God is both creator and sustainer of the earth – he established the earth and it endures. In the search for a sustainable future for this planet, there is a real missiological opening within today's environmental movement, torn between the inefficacy of an anthropocentric worldview, and the paralysis of an ecocentric worldview. Humanity has caused the environmental crisis, but it seems that humanity neither can, nor according to some, should be trying to, solve it – yet who else is there? Bill Bryson, in his entertaining and wide-ranging "A Short History of Nearly Everything", concludes: *"If you were designing an organism to look after life in our lonely cosmos, to monitor where it is going, and keep a record of where it has been, you wouldn't choose human beings for the job. But here's an extremely salient point – we have been chosen, by fate or providence or whatever you wish to call it. As far as we can tell, we are the best there is."*³

There is open talk today in global environmental circles of the environmental crisis as a spiritual crisis, and of the need to involve faith communities in finding solutions. A theocentric worldview – one that puts God at the centre of all things – is increasingly being seen as a way forward in the environmental impasse. A theocentric worldview sees humans as those entrusted with the careful management and stewardship of God's earth. It gives great motivation for environmental action, which becomes a matter of worship - if Jesus is the one "by whom and for whom all things were made" and "in whom all things hold together"⁴ then we worship him as we tend and care for the earth.

The Missiological Context – The search for connection, community and rootedness

Today, mission agencies are beginning to take environment seriously as part of the spectrum of mission. The concept of the "5 Marks of Mission"⁵ has moved from theory to policy and, increasingly, **moves** to praxis.

Yet, I believe there is still a need for far greater theological integration if 'Creation Care' is not simply to be seen as a contemporary 'extra' tacked on to the main body of mission, but rather as a biblical thread that runs from Genesis to Revelation, interweaving with all the other key threads in God's mission to his world. It is about rethinking the whole of mission from a biblically ecological perspective. **Let us briefly run** We can show how each of the five marks of mission is enriched and made more biblical, when God's missional plans towards all creation are considered.

Evangelism (Proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom) takes place today within the context of environmental hopelessness, and the search for rootedness. Many people across the broad stream of western societies, find echoes of God in creation. Rob Frost, the Methodist evangelist, now refuses to conduct a major mission unless there is a creation-care component. He says, quite simply: "When you take the earth seriously, people take the Gospel seriously."

1. One of the greatest blockages preventing people taking Christianity seriously, is our perceived lack of engagement with the natural environment and our pre-occupation with 'other worldly' matters. This is not a stumbling block in the biblical sense (as

³ p.572 Bryson, Bill (2004) *A Short History of Nearly Everything*

⁴ Colossians 1.16-17

⁵ The Five Marks of Mission, adopted by the General Synod of the Church of England in 1996
www.cofe.anglican.org/mission/missionevangeliism.html

1. To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom
2. To teach, baptise and nurture new believers
3. To respond to human need by loving service
4. To seek to transform unjust structures of society
5. To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the earth.

Christ is a stumbling block), but rather due to a lack of engagement by Christians with the bible's clear teaching, and a sinful anthropocentrism in our interpretation of scripture. If Paul, in Romans 1.20 wrote that God's existence and character is made clear 'through what has been made' (i.e. the natural world), then our Gospel must always begin with creation (not the fall), and must celebrate, affirm, and care for all that God has made and has entrusted to our care.

2. **Discipleship** (Teaching and Nurturing New Believers) must include not only 'spiritual' disciplines, but also teaching on biblical lifestyle and the mandate to steward the earth as a key Christian discipline. Too often, ethical discipleship has been limited to personal morality (sex, clothing, acceptable daily behaviour) and ignored both public morality (attitudes to race, gender, politics) and lifestyle. The consequences include some of the biggest tragedies in mission history, where societies have become converted to Christianity quickly but only very superficially, and have then either back-slid, fallen into syncretism, or been torn apart by ethnic hatred. Today western Christianity is perceived by many of our sisters and brothers as worshipping the false god of mammon. It is a discipleship issue both of obedience and of justice for us to live more simply in a world where, if everybody wanted to live as we in the UK do, we would need three planet earths to provide the resources.
3. Relief and Development (Responding to human need by loving service) are part of our mission, called as we are to 'feed the hungry' and 'heal the sick'. Christian agencies are waking up to the fact that Climate Change is already affecting poor communities around the world disproportionately. Elaine Storkey, President of Tearfund, states *"Inevitably the poor are picking up the tab. The poor are there when the hurricane hits, when the tornado comes, when freak weather conditions are there. 98% of those killed and affected by natural disasters come from developing countries."*⁶

When asked, "What's your definition of community?", the singer Bono brilliantly sums up the meaning of the Good Samaritan for us today. *"Through media, we have some strange faces in our backyard whom we weren't calling family until very recently, and we still don't really want to. But if you're going to enjoy having your sneakers and your jeans made by developing communities, you are already involved with those people. You cannot therefore just ignore some of the problems they're negotiating. They're living on your street. There was this old definition of generosity, which is at the very least the rich man looks after the poor man on his street. Guess what? Now, that street goes round the globe."*⁷

4. Reshaping Society (To seek to transform unjust structures of society).

Christian agencies were at the heart of the 'Make Poverty History' campaign, and are at the forefront of the 'Stop Climate Chaos' initiative, launched by a group including the RSPB, Christian Aid, Tearfund and now joined by A Rocha. Christian mission is not about escaping from society, but about transforming individuals, through whom society and (as we will see) ultimately creation itself are renewed and transformed. The massive injustices, and inequalities of today's world, the unsustainable use of resources and the wanton destruction of creation are issues that are fundamental to mission. The complicity of Christians in systems that perpetuate those inequities and abuses are amongst the main issues that prevent people hearing or seeing the Good

⁶ Transcribed from lecture by Dr. Elaine Storkey at A Rocha's "Hope for the Planet" conference, London 24th November 2005. Available on CD-Rom along with other lectures from A Rocha UK.

⁷ "Bono on Bono – Conversations with Michka Assayas" p.197, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 2005

News of Jesus Christ. We pray as we work that God's Kingdom may come, and his will be done on earth as in heaven.

"To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the earth." There is a genuine biblical rediscovery in the inclusion of 'creation-care' amongst the five marks of mission. [A few key pointers of how](#) a complete Christian worldview based on the paradigm of creation – fall – redemption, includes at every stage God's purposes for the whole created order, follow.

- **Genesis 1.26-28 & 2.15 The First Great Commission** – The creation mandate to rule over the earth and its creatures, and so 'image God', is a creation commission incumbent on all humanity. In terms of understanding Genesis 1 and 2, it is crucial that the two creation accounts are seen to complement, and even interpret each other. Thus male and female being made 'in the image of God' in Genesis 1 is counter-balanced with Adam (literally 'earthy' or 'dusty!') being made 'from the dust of the earth'. Similarly, the injunction to 'have dominion' is interpreted by the command to enter Eden to 'till and to keep it', Hebrew words well translated as to 'serve and preserve' the garden of creation.
- **Genesis 7-9 The Noachic Covenant** – This is a story of God's saving purposes at a time of climate change, and be subjected to some genuine theological reflection! It explodes any missiology that is exclusively anthropocentric, as human beings, whilst being the key agents of God's mission, are by no means the only objects of God's mission. God chooses to rescue representatives of 'every living creature on the earth', a text that has massive implications for animal welfare, and for today's extinction rates, which are calculated to be somewhere between 100 and 1000 times the natural underlying rates of extinction, as a result of human activity. Moreover, as well as making us ask, "Just who is included in God's mission?", the Noah story concludes with God initiating a covenant, which is affirmed seven times over in Genesis 9, that includes the whole non-human creation.

God, People and Land in the Old Testament – Writers such as C. J. H. Wright (*Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*) and Walter Brueggemann (*The Land*) have demonstrated that the narrative that dominates most of the bible – that of Israel - is about a three-way relationship between God, people and place. The Old Testament is centrally about how God calls a people to work out their relationship with him in how they live within the land of promise.

- As Wright suggests, the land, "*was not just a neutral stage where the drama unfolds... The land, in all its dimensions – promise, conquest, shared possession, use and abuse, loss and recovery – was a fundamentally theological entity*"⁸. Thus, Adam and Eve's expulsion from Eden is accompanied by environmental consequences as the ground is cursed, producing thorns and thistles, and Adam is reminded that he is no more than dust (Genesis 3.17-19). [In the very next chapter](#), When Cain kills Abel, his brother's blood cries out from the ground (Genesis 4.10) to be avenged. The land can, on the one hand, shout with joy and bow down to God (Psalm 66¹⁻⁴ and many other Psalms), and on the other hand, mourn for the people's sins (Hosea 4.1-3), and vomit out evil inhabitants (Leviticus 18.25-28). Time and again the Bible uses active verbs, [not to suggest that the land is an animate being, but](#) to emphasise that [it the land](#) is the active agent of God's blessing and curse. Today, mission needs to reassess our understanding of place, and of land in particular. Ultimately there is no relationship with God in the abstract – we are all placed somewhere and encounter God within our context.

⁸ Chris Wright, *Living as the People of God*, IVP, 1983, p.50

- **Christ and Creation** – However much creation theology we can find in the Old Testament, in the end Christian mission begins and ends with our Christology. Once again, an analysis of the Gospels and Epistles reveals how much we have failed to notice Christ's relevance to the whole of creation. See James Jones' book "*Jesus and the Earth*" for his own story of a sabbatical exploration of the Gospels.

At risk of being misunderstood, another starting point can be John 3.16. Whilst commentators are uncertain whether 'kosmos' in this verse refers to the whole creation, or the 'world' of humanity, what it illustrates is how we read scripture with anthropocentric spectacles. How many of us have heard 'God so loved the world' and only ever heard it as 'God so loved the people', rather than 'God so loved the cosmos'? Christ's incarnation affirms material creation, his teaching assumes an intimate knowledge of agriculture and biodiversity, and, most importantly, his death and resurrection have repercussions that shake the earth, darken the heavens, and, ultimately provide for the undoing of all the effects of the fall. Colossians 1.15-20 affirms that the whole of creation is created both by him and for him, and is held together in him. Ultimately all creation finds its meaning and purpose in Christ Jesus. Therefore, rejoicing in creation is part of our worship, and caring for creation in Christ's name becomes part of our mission. In him, the reconciliation of all things on earth and in heaven is achieved by the cross and resurrection (Col. 1.19-20).

- **The Role of the Redeemed Community** – Romans 8.18-22 contains the vivid image of the whole creation as an expectant mother – groaning in agony as a consequence of the fall, but calling out in hopeful groaning ('eager expectation' v.19) awaiting the sons - and presumably daughters - of God. Whilst this passage, and hints elsewhere, need more theological work done on them, it seems to me that here are clues that the original mission of humanity in the garden (to serve and preserve), twisted and perverted by the fall (Genesis 3.17-19), is rediscovered through the work of the new Adam (the new 'son of the soil') and entrusted to the new community of Christ's followers. Along with Christ, whose resurrection prefigures the new creation, we are ourselves amongst the firstfruits as 'new creations' in Christ, and thus have a key role in renewing the face of our groaning creation. One American evangelical has described this role as 'Missionary Earthkeeping'⁹.

Revisiting Eschatology – Much missionary motivation has been based on somewhat flimsy eschatological assumptions. Today, a number of key evangelical theologians are going behind the 19C assertions that have dominated evangelical debates, to look again at the biblical texts. Key authors include N. T. Wright and Richard Bauckham.

A short summary of what is proposed here is in my own final chapter in 'Caring for Creation'.¹⁰ Essentially the problems have been caused by the existence of biblical material that suggests both continuity and discontinuity in the future of the planet. Many have simply ignored the passages about continuity and have been content to suggest a replacement theology, whereby this present world is completely annihilated before a brand new creation is revealed. What Wright, supported by Alister McGrath amongst many others, proposes is that the theme of continuity interrupted by radical judgement reflects more accurately the underlying commitment of God to all that he has made. This is in no way saying

⁹ Calvin De Witt (Ed.) *Missionary Earthkeeping*, Mercer University Press, 1992

¹⁰ Ed. Sarah Tillet, *Caring for Creation*, BRF / A Rocha, Oxford, 2005

that the future is about the earth evolving into a 'different level' as the planet heals herself! Nor is it about a return to Eden. Rather it is about the cleansing fire of God's judgement purifying the earth, and ultimately about 'the earthing of heaven' as Christ becomes all in all and God's home is once again with mankind in a radically renewed 'earthy' heaven. One of a number of key tools in making the transition towards this understanding is to realise that there are two Greek words for 'new' – neos and kainos. 'Neos' means brand new, never seen before, whilst 'kainos' means renewed, restored, or perhaps even in these terms 'recycled'. It is 'kainos' that is used consistently when the Bible speaks of the new creation, the new heavens and new earth.

In the light of this creation-renewing eschatology, mission is not about helping people escape from a planet heading for annihilation, although the motivation of avoiding the coming destructive cleansing holds as true as ever. There is though a new positive motivation for mission. Mission is about living in anticipation of what is to come – it is about preaching and modelling God's Kingdom that is both 'now and not yet'. As Jurgen Moltmann says, in writing of God's promises to creation : *'What does this mean for us? It means that in spite of all our justifiable mistrust in human history and history of nature, our fundamental confidence in reality can be greater still. Reality in its deepest foundations is worthy of trust, for it is good ... At the heart of everything is God's unswerving "yes".'*¹¹ Professors Richard Bauckham and Trevor Hart argue that *"Christianity is a faith which is essentially forward looking and forward moving, orientated towards and living now ever in the light cast backwards by God's promised future"*.¹² In other words, our hopeful vision of God's future enables us to work for sustainability today. Thus there is an imperative for Christians to be involved in practical expressions of sustainable living, and to campaign for a more sustainable world. Bauckham and Hart describe Christian projects which seek to embody this vision as *"scattered acts of recreative anticipation of God's promised future"*¹³ Elsewhere they have been described as *"small scale acts of resistance"*¹⁴ – resistance to the self-serving materialism of modern western lifestyles.

One Final Question : How big is our God? Are we prepared to rethink biblical mission?

In an era of environmental despair, and of a crisis in humanity's self-confidence, Christian mission needs to ask itself some hard questions. Humans may be the key agents of mission in the new creation inaugurated by Christ, but they are not the only objects of mission. Are we prepared to see mission as ultimately about the renewal of all things in Christ? The transformation of individuals by the Good News of the Gospel is still and always will be central, but the biblical Gospel of Jesus Christ is also Good News for all creation, and our mission must see individuals transformed in order to see transformed communities and signs of the transformation of creation itself.

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¹¹ J. Moltmann, p.11, *"Power of the Powerless"*, SCM, London, 1983

¹² p.82 Richard Bauckham, Richard & Trevor Hart, *"The Theology of the Book of Revelation"*, C.U.P., 1993

¹³ p.71 *ibid.*

¹⁴ Revd. Simon Downham in a talk at New Wine Christian Conference, July 28th 2005, available from ICC Tapes, www.iccspreadingtheword.com code: NEWA01305