

A Covenantal Perspective on the Earth and its Human Management

Chris Gousmett

The Biblical perspective on the earth is rooted in the belief that the world and all that it contains was created by God, and is continually sustained and cared for by God. Human beings were created for two purposes: firstly to have fellowship with God and to offer a loving response to his goodness towards us, and secondly to care for the world he has made and to explore and uncover its riches, developing them in a stewardly way for the benefit of others. These two purposes behind God's creative act are not separate: they are intrinsically bound up together. God desired to have fellowship with the people he made stewards of the earth, and as responsible stewards of the earth, we must have fellowship with the One for whom we are stewards.

Neither of these purposes have been abrogated by human rebellion against God. We still are called to offer a loving and obedient response to God, and to care for his world in a stewardly way. This is the essence of the covenantal relationship between us and God: a relationship in which both God and humankind are partners, and in which the land is included as the context in which that partnership will be worked out, as well as being specifically entrusted to our care as the basis of that covenant. The most fundamental characteristic of humanness is therefore the covenantal relationship in which we have been placed by God, the senior partner in the covenant. Without that covenant, we cannot understand either our own nature, or our place in this world.

The accounts of the creation of the earth and its creatures do not stand in isolation, but are intricately linked to the rest of Scripture. The themes and ideas presented here are

restated, alluded to, implied and assumed throughout the Bible, and the covenantal bond which unites all of Scripture runs like a thread through the passages which speak of the creation.

Ever since Adam and Eve violated the covenant in Eden, humankind has been living in rebellion against God, continuing to violate the covenant relationship, and we see all around us the consequent despoliation of the land entrusted to us in that covenant. Therefore God initiated his plan of redemption, to restore us to intimate fellowship with himself, and to return us to a stewardly and obedient management of the earth, so that the earth too can be freed from its bondage (Romans 8:19-22).

The sin which holds the earth in bondage is not its own sin, but the sin of those who were appointed as stewards over the earth, to care for it and to develop it in harmony with the instructions of God. God's intention in creating this earth was to see it developed and its potential unfolded by the human beings he formed to serve him as his caretakers and stewards. However, human sin entered the picture and as a result distortion, corruption and brokenness have dominated the way we have treated the earth and its creatures.

Evangelicals have unfortunately focused on the first aspect of human life (personal redemption) to the neglect of the second (concern for our environment). That does not mean that we have neglected to explore and develop the earth and its riches. We cannot do otherwise, since we were not created *to act as* stewards, we were created *stewards*. The difference is immense, as on the first view, we could abdicate from that task (something which both Scripture and experience tells us nobody can do), while on the second view, our stewardly task is part of who we are and all that we do. We can, however, and tragically do neglect to consider this stewardly task in a Christian perspective, allowing our management and enjoyment of this world to be shaped by both idolatrous and secularising perspectives. These have the result of fragmenting our lives and lie at the root of the dualistic world-view which shapes the lives of most Christians today.

The Earth as our Home

Let us return to Genesis 1 and see what God has to say there about the earth he has created and the land which we inhabit. First God created the cosmos, then prepared the earth for living creatures. All these creatures have been created as an interdependent

community in bonded relationships. No creature can separate itself from any other. They are all bound together by the word of God which created them as a community and sustains them in existence as such.

God created this world to be our home. In the beginning, the earth was a watery turmoil; no land, no life, no suitable place for humanity (Psalm 104:6). The earth was not in chaos as some understand Genesis 1:2 to mean; it was the world that God had made, and therefore it had been given order and structure by the creative Word of God. All that Genesis 1:2 means to indicate is that the earth was not yet ready to fulfil the purpose God had in mind. The creative acts of God recounted in Genesis 1 simply indicate the further development of an already ordered but *empty* creation. The Hebrew phrase “*tohu wa-bohu*” (translated “formless and empty” in the NIV) indicates simply that the world was unsuitable for habitation by humans and other living things. This is shown clearly by Isaiah 45:18 where the same Hebrew word “*tohu*” is used, here translated “empty” in the NIV. Isaiah said that God did not create the earth to be empty, but to be inhabited. In other places in the Old Testament this same Hebrew word is used to refer to something without value and empty. It is used of idols, scorned as of little account (1 Sam 12:21, Isaiah 41:29, 44:9), empty pleas in court (Isaiah 29:21) and fruitless efforts (Isaiah 45:19, 49:4). Of special interest in this context is the use of this word to describe the trackless wastes of the uninhabitable desert regions (Psalm 107:40, Deut. 32:10, Job 6:18, 12:24) and uninhabited cities and countryside (Isaiah 24:10, 34:11, 45:18). It is also used to describe the empty void over which God stretches the North (Job 26:7). This usage indicates that “*tohu wa-bohu*” has the connotations of emptiness and uninhabitability.¹ The author of Genesis expresses himself in this way to indicate God’s special care for the living things he would make to inhabit the earth as their home.

The Old Testament authors conceived of the world as the habitation of man (cf. Isaiah 45:18), and then conceived of creation as the establishment of this habitation. The numerous expressions for cosmology drawn from domestic architecture are relevant here: such expressions as door-post, cornerstone, gate, door, window, tent, etc., to represent the creation of the world as a great building operation.²

¹ Leupold states that *bohu* is derived from a verb meaning “empty.” H C Leupold. **Exposition of Genesis**. Columbus, Ohio: The Wartburg Press, 1942, p. 46.

² Thorlief Boman. **Hebrew Thought compared with Greek**. New York: Norton, 1960, p. 181.

This image of the creation as a habitation is a recurring one in Scripture. In creating the heavens, God “stretches out the heavens like a canopy, and spreads them out like a tent to live in” (Isaiah 40:22). The verb “*natah*” used here and in nine other places in the OT for the spreading out of the heavens is used principally of spreading a tent for pitching. Thus the creation of the heavens as a covering over the habitation of living things is alluded to in this language. There are also two explicit references to this concept which confirm the suggestion. In Psalm 104:2 God is the one who “...stretches out the heavens like a tent.” And in Psalm 19:4 we read “In the heavens he has pitched a tent for the sun.”

The care that God took to ensure that the environment was just right as a home for living things can be seen in the fact that the birds of the air, the fish of the sea, the insects and animals on the land, and human beings, all were created to enjoy and benefit from the environment they were placed in. God has made the seas, the air and the land in such a way as to support the creatures he had planned. This earth is our home. It is also home to many different creatures. We all share the same earth and benefit from the advantages of living here together. God the creator has taken special care over this earth. When we see the photographs of the harsh and hostile environments on other planets in the solar system, and consider how remote the possibilities are of finding intelligent life on other planets, we surely must think ourselves to be privileged indeed.

God separated the land from the water which covered the earth, and confined the waters to their own place. The sea and the creatures which inhabit it are also God’s creation, and have their tasks to fulfil in the order which God established on his earth. Having brought forth the dry land, God then prepared the plants which were to cover the earth, in their richly diverse kinds and functions. The Lord provides for the vegetation he has made, and cares for it with rain and sunshine (Zechariah 10:1, Psalm 65:9-13). The blessing of the Lord is seen in his provision of the increase of crops (Psalm 67:6; 107:35-38) and conversely, his judgement is seen where crops wither and starvation results (Psalm 107:33-34; Jeremiah 14:2-6; Joel 1:11- 12). The vegetation provides food for both humankind and the animals (Psalm 104:14-15). It is the Lord who sends this food: the idols of the heathen cannot feed themselves, let alone feed their worshippers. The Lord makes the grass to grow for the cattle (Psalm 147:8-9), feeds the fish of the sea (Psalm 104:25-28) and the birds of the air (Matthew 6:26). The plants do not grow because of some intrinsic life-force in them, but because God grants them life and sustains them. Unless God grants his gift of life to any creature, including the plants, they will die. Only

God can give life, although we often neglect this fundamental Biblical truth, or at least we often fail to consider the plants and animals when we are aware that life is a gift of God.

God's care for trees and plants (Matthew 6:28-30) is shown not only by the provision of rain and their other needs, but also by the admonition to Adam to care for the trees and plants of the garden of Eden (Genesis 2:15. Cf. Ecclesiastes 2:5-6). Humankind is not only to care for the trees and plants God has made, and to enjoy the fruit which they give (Psalm 104:14-15), but to respect them as fellow creatures of God (Deuteronomy 20:19-20. Cf. Revelation 7:1-3; 9:4). Trees are not to be exploited (Leviticus 19:23-25). Neither were trees to be worshipped; this abomination of the heathens brought the judgement of God (Isaiah 45:14-20; Jeremiah 10:3-4). Trees are creatures of God, made to adorn and serve the creation and to praise the creator. Humankind was to care for them and appreciate them, but not to worship them.

The creation of animals and birds followed on the creation of the plants which were to be their food (Genesis 1:30). Everything that lives and moves in the sea or in the air, and all the creatures on the land, are made by God. There are no living things which were not created by him. These creatures all belong to God. We cannot serve him by offering these to God as a sacrifice. He has no need of food, and even if he had, he would not come to us to have the need supplied. All things belong to God and he can take them for his own purposes (Psalm 50:9-12; Acts 17:24-25).

We are to delight in and work in the home that God himself has made for us, and which he himself has declared in the Scriptures to be "very good." God even became a man and came to live with us in our home, so that we could see what God is really like, and what he intends for us in our home on this earth. The tragedy of the Fall is that we are alienated from the world in which we live. It brings forth thistles and thorns as a result of the curse. We are no longer at home in the place which was made to be our home, in spite of all the care God has taken to prepare it for us.

A Christian Perspective on the Land

In Scripture the land is not in any sense either sacred or divine. It is not a god to be worshipped, nor is it the mother of life. It contains no spirits to be placated or appeased, and no powers which can be manipulated by magic. Thus all idolatry, mysticism and magic are precluded by the Christian faith.

The earth is not sacred, nor is any part of it sacred. There are no “holy places” which are holy in themselves. Because of God’s presence some places become holy but only for a time. Once the special “timely” presence of God has departed there is no longer any special sacredness to that spot. The whole earth is filled with God’s glory, and every creature is “sacred” because it is a creature of God in which his glory is made known. But no creature is any more sacred than any other, and no place is more sacred than any other, except when God chooses to use them for a time for his purposes.

The land is never viewed in Scripture as an entity in itself, but always in the context of the covenantal relationship between God and humankind. The significance of the land is the part it plays in this relationship: it has no significance in isolation from humankind, since it has been entrusted to humankind for them to care for and develop in a stewardly way. The land can never be viewed apart from human beings, and apart from its relationship to human beings and to God. It is the creature of God and therefore is constantly in relationship to him, and it has been entrusted to human beings to care for, and it is therefore constantly in relationship to human beings.

Human beings were not created in isolation either: they were created stewards of the earth. Being a steward of the creation God has entrusted to us is the essence of what it means to be human. Only in caring for and developing God’s creation in a stewardly (that is obedient) way, can we discover what it truly means to be human. Beliefs held by Christians which isolate us from human life, culture, and earthiness, our being situated in this time and this place, are beliefs which are falsifications of the faith.

We are created out of the earth, taken from its dust and dependent on it for our sustenance. We are not part of the earth, nor do we arise from the earth’s generative powers. Rather, we were created by God from the material of the earth, to be related to it, intimate with it, but distinct from it. We are its masters, not its slaves or its equals. We live from God’s provision which he brings forth from the land for us. It is not the land which gives us our food: it is God who uses the land to feed us. Thus it is God we praise and thank, not the earth. We are the beneficiaries of God’s care for the earth and its creatures, for it is God who gives the increase in food. We may live from the fruit of the land we care for. But we may not thereby deprive other creatures of their food, especially fellow human beings. The food which the land produces does not belong to us, it belongs to God. Therefore the produce of the land is to be shared with all who have need of it.

That does not mean farmers and agriculturalists must give away the food they raise; they are entitled to a return for their labour from those who benefit from it. But it does mean that we are forbidden to put into place policies which lead to stockpiling of food, price-manipulation and racketeering, and especially destruction of food to maintain a certain level of return. That means that human need must always come before profit: to exploit human need for economic gain is a sin before God.

Although we are the masters of the land, we are masters in subjection to God. We do not make our own decisions as to how to treat the land: we are placed here as responsible stewards. Stewards, in that we do not own the land over which we are masters; and responsible, in that we are accountable to the One who has entrusted the land to us. We are here to serve God's purposes for the land and its creatures, namely, to assist them to develop and flourish to demonstrate the richness, variety and splendour of the creation God has made, so as to show forth his glory. It is only as the creation is enabled to unfold its potential under our care that it is achieving that for which it was created.

However, because of our sin, the land is subject to bondage. Through the redemption that Christ has brought, we are set free from the power and effects of sin in our lives, corporate as well as individual. We are renewed and re-equipped for the task of caring for the earth by the indwelling Spirit of God. The power and freedom that God thereby grants to us through the redemption of Christ will have its impact on our mastery over the earth. Because of sin, we are no longer obedient stewards but arrogant tyrants, usurping that which does not belong to us. We have considered ourselves lords of the earth, free to make our own decisions as to what is best for the land. But the bondage and decay which is the result, shows that we are ourselves in bondage. If we are truly free, then that over which we are placed will also experience freedom. The earth under a renewed stewardship will find new life and new ways to express God's glory.

While we are certainly stewards of the earth, one of the problems with using this term is that it is understood in a very human-centred way. Stewardship is to be exercised for God, to whom all of creation belongs. But we are called to care for and develop the earth in a stewardly way. This has often been interpreted to mean that the earth must be developed if we are to be stewardly in our attitude towards it. But the earth is not developing solely because of our work with it; the earth develops because of the dynamic

work of the Holy Spirit who has been nurturing the creation ever since its formation in the beginning.

The relationship of the Holy Spirit to the creation is to urge it on to reach its fullest potential, to develop it and unfold it to the glory of God. The whole of creation is the field of action of the Holy Spirit, and no area of life is cut off from the Holy Spirit. The glory of God is the ultimate end of every creature and the work of the Holy Spirit is to lead and transform the creation to show that glory. That programme of development is not something which we determine, but it is something with which we can co-operate, and indeed we should be co-operating with it if we are truly faithful stewards who carry out the desires of our master, God, and not arrogant stewards who have usurped the right to determine the direction in which development must take.

We have too often seen stewardship as the need to use things and control them, so as to make the maximum profit from them. We need to understand stewardship in more hands-off terms so that we can be free to leave the creation to develop in its own way, and to see our stewardship as a protection of the creation from those who would wish to force it to serve their own ends rather than God's. This does not mean that we cannot till the ground and develop it for our use, but it should be more explicit in our view of stewardship, that we can at times care for the creation by enabling it to find freedom rather than through seeking to control it.

The issue of control and freedom is central to the Christian faith. It is the power of sin that drives us to dominate, to oppress, to subjugate. We can only find freedom in Christ who liberates us from sin, and in that liberation we find that we are truly free (John 8:31-36). If we have been given freedom in Christ, we will want others to find freedom as well, including the animals and plants. We have lost something of the grandeur of untamed nature from our Christian perspective: any sentiments we have in that direction will probably owe more to Romanticism than to our faith. God did not create a tame world; he created a world sometimes dazzlingly wild and very untameable. But we have insisted that the world must be tamed by us, rather than coming to recognise that the world is in turmoil because of human sin, and therefore seeking to tame ourselves. If that were to happen, maybe the world would become a tamer place. As we read in Genesis 9:2, the animals have become wild and untamed in order to protect them from human beings: they will no longer submit to our will but instead run from us in fear. Isaiah tells us that

in the new creation, the lion will lie down with the lamb. We tend to see this as a radical change in the nature of animals. Only the liberation of humankind from sin will make it possible for lions and lambs to co-exist peacefully. Our freedom in Christ brings liberation to the rest of the creation, since bondage in sin causes us to seek to control, to dominate and to exploit others and the rest of the creation.

The land is our home. Human beings are unable to develop their lives in response to God's call to form culture and care for the earth, if they are rootless and alienated from the place in which they live. Refugees and the unemployed suffer from a common lack of involvement in the society in which they live. They are not able to put down roots and develop; the one group because they have been turned out of their homes through violence, the other because they lack the access to resources to be able to develop themselves. Both refugees and the unemployed have had their relationship with the land and its resources distorted because of human sin. If the Christian community wants to manifest true freedom from sin it will seek to develop positive programmes to help the unemployed and the refugees to find themselves at home again in the world. This would do more to meet the needs of the world for answers than thousands of empty sermons which do nothing to address peoples' needs.

The Earth as our Eternal Home

As we have seen, the earth can be seen to be our home from the imagery used in the Scriptures to describe it, especially in the creation accounts. But to consider the earth our home, where God placed us to dwell, where he intended us to love and serve him, is a foreign idea to many Christians. We often sing hymns which include words such as "This world is not my home," and we speak of those who die as being "taken home" by God. The Scriptures only speak positively about this "world" as the home God has created for us. However, the Scriptures also speak of God's judgement on "the world" referring to the rebellious society we have established in opposition to God and his righteous rule in our lives. We must be careful to ensure that in distancing ourselves from "the kingdoms of this world" we do not unwittingly denigrate this earth as God's good creation. While some would see heaven as our true home, this is not the Biblical message. Our desire to leave this earth behind to find some other home is rooted not in a longing for heaven, but in an alienation from this earth. It is a sign that we are not content to live in the world that God has made for us. The view that heaven is our home comes not from Scripture

but from pagan Greek religion. Death is an intrusion into God's plan for humankind, one which results in the greatest alienation and disintegration possible in human life. Death is not the goal of human life, the gateway to a better existence: it is an evil power, the last enemy to be destroyed, which removes us from the earth in which God placed us and entrusted to us. It is the attempt of the enemy of God to frustrate God's purposes.

So if the earth is so important to God, that he will leave heaven and come to dwell here with us, why is it that Christians are so keen to leave this earth? Our spirituality and our vision of life are not rooted in life on this earth, but in aspiring to life in heaven. We have been seduced by some of the pagan religions of Greece and Rome, shaped by people who were alienated from God and from the creation he has made, and which therefore devalued this earth and sought to avoid being entangled in its affairs. As a result, we have lost sight of God's intention for this earth, which he created for our eternal home. Because of our alienation from God, human beings have also been alienated from this earth which he has made. We Christians seek to have a relationship to God, but not a relationship to the earth which he has made for us to dwell in. Those who are fully reconciled to God will also be reconciled to their lives on this earth. God placed us here because he loves us, and so the earth cannot be anything but a good place to be, even though at present we see it only subject to sin and corruption.

Thus the redemptive plan of God is to mount a direct challenge to this power: death has been defeated by the resurrection of Christ, and its exercise of power over us will be ended when we too are raised from the dead. When the resurrection takes place at the return of Christ to destroy all his enemies, including death, we will be transformed and glorified, so that our bodies will no longer be frail and weak, subject to sickness and exhaustion, famine and violence. We will be raised renewed in every way, to take our place once more in the earth that was created for our home.

Human life is bodily life. As a result of seeing human life in this world as of little importance for spirituality, the hope of the resurrection of the body is minimised. It is rarely preached on or written about. This indicates an anti-creational stance in the church, which has not come to terms with life in this world. If we see human life in this world as the good thing which God declares it to be,³ and that this world is to be cared for

³ Throughout the Scriptures God gives instructions for us to enable us to live a long life on the earth and to find prosperity. The intrinsic goodness of human life on this earth is constantly reiterated, although we tend to overlook this message.

and nurtured in responsible stewardship, then a future hope which includes both our bodily activities, and the renewal and continuation of this world, will become significant and meaningful. It will also mean that we no longer treat this earth as temporary accommodation, and will treat it with more respect. The view that God will one day destroy this earth, and take us all to a better place, has had a considerable influence in distorting our sense of ourselves as bodily creatures inhabiting this earth as our home, placed here to care for the earth and all its creatures. A return to this perspective will make us all much more comfortable about earthly, human life, and less enamoured of illusory visions of a better place somewhere else.

At the end of the age the world will be redeemed and set free through Christ, since we are responsible for its bondage, and therefore our liberation from sin will result in its freedom. That freedom comes because of Christ, not because of us, since we are unable to free ourselves from sin. It is only the grace of God which sets us free from sin, and it is only the grace of God which will set free the creation as a whole. I am simply stressing that the redemption of human beings is essential to permit the liberation of the whole of creation.

That home which God prepared for us in the beginning will also be transformed and renewed. We read in Scripture of the glorious hope of the new heavens and the new earth, which will be our eternal home. The earth is so much loved by God, that he has been desiring to dwell here with us and to have fellowship with us, ever since the dawn of time. The intention of God was not to make us fit to go to heaven to live with him, but to make us fit for him to come from heaven to live with us. God walked with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. He has dwelt with his people Israel in the tabernacle and in the temple. He has dwelt with us by his Spirit in the Church and in each of us who have been renewed. But God seeks to have full fellowship with us and to dwell with us in an unhindered way. That is why he intends to renew the earth so that he can join us here.

The prophet Isaiah was granted an insight into the marvellous character of the new age to come, a vision which is recorded for us in chapter 65. Isaiah too speaks of the new heavens and the new earth, and describes in terms of the faith of Israel what that new earth will be like. Isaiah did not have the full insight granted to those who come after Christ, since the prophets saw only partially what was to come (1 Peter 1:10-12). They did not see the full glory that was to be revealed in Christ, but we have been granted insight

denied even to such a great prophet as Isaiah. So Isaiah expressed his hope of redemption and the glory to come in terms of the redemption of Israel. And what we have recorded for us in the passage in chapter 65 is a very vivid image of the redemption of all things which is yet to come.

The new heavens and the new earth are so full of glory that the trials and tribulations of the present earth will no longer be recalled. This does not indicate that this life we now lead will not be remembered but that the “former things,” the former troubles will no longer be recalled. Instead of remembering the evil times of the past, the Lord exhorts his people to rejoice in his new creation. Jerusalem will no longer be a cause for distress, as it was for Isaiah. Earlier in this chapter we read of the idolatry and iniquity that plagued the city. Sacrifices at night on tombs, eating of swine’s flesh, burning incense in the high places; all these were an abomination to God. They were connected with worship of nature, a false righteousness which led people to despise others. In contrast to this, Isaiah prophesied of a time in which the earth will be renewed so that when the redeemed enter it they find only righteousness and peace. The same message is repeated in the New Testament.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying. Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. (Revelation 21:1-4)

The new heavens and the new earth which we are promised in the books of Isaiah and Revelation, are actually the result of the renewal of creation, not a replacement of it. The renewal of the earth is not the creation of something new, but the revelation of what always existed but has not until now been manifested because human sin has oppressed the earth. The creation did not wish to be subjected to frustration, but it has this forced upon it as a result of the sin of its stewards, the ones who had authority over it. It is because of our sin that the whole creation groans in pain, waiting to be delivered from its bondage, so it can find its glorious freedom in God. Because it was our sin, and not the

sin of the creation, that it is in bondage, it would be unjust of God to destroy it. God has liberated us in Christ even though we chose to sin, will he not also liberate the creation, which did not choose sin? But if Christ died to take away the sin of human beings, who were created to care for the earth, and whose sin has instead had such devastating results for the earth, what then becomes of the earth they were created to care for? Our perspective on redemption usually focuses on our individual salvation, and has little place for the earth and non-human creatures.

In some of the writers of the early church we find a Biblical perspective on the work of redemption which encompasses all God's creatures. They understood God's intention to liberate the creation as well as human beings. Cyril, bishop of Jerusalem in the third century, was convinced that the earth would be renewed.

So, our Lord Jesus Christ comes from heaven, and comes with glory at the last day to bring this world to its close. For this world will accomplish its course, and the world that once came into being is hereafter to be renewed.⁴

Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons in the second century, was convinced that the righteous will rise to reign with Christ in the same creation in which they were persecuted, and thus their sufferings would be rewarded. The creation will also be "resurrected" so to speak, being renewed by Christ.

For God is rich in all things, and all things are His. It is fitting, therefore, that the creation itself, being restored to its primeval condition, should without restraint be under the dominion of the righteous.⁵

The world will not be destroyed, according to Methodius, another third century writer, because since it was God who made the world, it is destined for a better fate than simply destruction.

But it is not satisfactory to say that the universe will be utterly destroyed, and sea and air and sky will be no longer. For the whole world will be deluged with fire from heaven, and burnt for the purpose of purification

⁴ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures* 15.3. The Library of Christian Classics, Vol. 4. London: S.C.M., 1955, pp. 149-150.

⁵ Irenaeus. *Against Heresies* 5.32.1. Ante-Nicene Fathers. Vol. 1, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989, p. 561.

and renewal; it will not, however, come to complete ruin and destruction. For if it were better for the world not to be than to be, why did God, in making the world, take the worse course? But God did not work in vain, or do that which was worst. God therefore ordered the creation with a view to its existence and continuance.

Methodius cites Romans 8:19-21 to demonstrate that the world will not be destroyed but redeemed.

For the creation was made subject to vanity, he [Paul] says, and he expects that it will be set free from such servitude, as he intends to call this world by the name of creation. For it is not what is unseen but what is seen that is subject to corruption. The creation, then, after being restored to a better and more seemly state, remains, rejoicing and exulting over the children of God at the resurrection; for whose sake it now groans and travails, waiting itself also for our redemption from the corruption of the body, that, when we have risen and shaken off the mortality of the flesh, according to that which is written, "Shake off the dust, and arise, and sit down, O Jerusalem," and have been set free from sin, it also shall be freed from corruption and subject no longer to vanity, but to righteousness. Isaiah says, too, "For as the new heaven and the new earth which I make, remaineth before me, says the Lord, so shall your seed and your name be;" and again, "Thus saith the Lord that created the heaven, it is He who prepared the earth and created it, He determined it; He created it not in vain, but formed it to be inhabited." For in reality God did not establish the universe in vain, or to no purpose but destruction, as those weak-minded men say, but to exist, and be inhabited, and continue. Wherefore the earth and the heaven must exist again after the conflagration and shaking of all things.⁶

Another early Christian, Rufinus, wrote that Christ would not only release human beings from sin, but would also release the earth from the curse which had come upon it because of human sin.

⁶ Methodius. *The Discourse on the Resurrection* 1.8. Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. 6. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989, pp. 365-366.

It was appropriate that He who came to remove the sins of the world should at the same time release the earth from the curses inflicted upon it when the first-formed man sinned, and it received the sentence of transgression in the Lord's words: "Cursed is the earth in thy works: thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to thee." Jesus was therefore crowned with thorns in order that the primordial sentence of condemnation might be removed. He was led to the cross, and the life of the whole world hung suspended from its wood.⁷

We can see then the view that the earth will be destroyed and human beings taken to heaven is not the view held by every Christian. While there were those in the early church who had a negative view of the earth and of human bodily life, it was the ones who expected the earth to be renewed as a home for the righteous who had been raised from the dead who were expressing the true biblical hope. We must either understand redemption in a purely human-centred, individualistic fashion after the manner of the Platonising Christian writers of the early church, who obscured the hope of the resurrection and the goodness of human bodily existence, or else understand the richness of God in redeeming all that he has made through allowing the Scriptures to shape our perspective more radically than has often been the case.

Once a community has accepted a redemptive faith, the impact of their environment upon them forces them either to narrow their concept of redemption by giving it an otherworldly interpretation, or to widen its reference so as to include the whole of their environment.⁸

The creation will not be redeemed without us, nor will we be redeemed without the creation, for we are part of the creation. We cannot separate ourselves from the rest of the creatures God has made. Christ did not die to redeem only human beings, he died to redeem all God's creatures from sin and its effects (Colossians 1:15-20). While the animals and plants have not sinned themselves, they are affected by our sin, and so by liberating us from sin the animals and plants are likewise set free. That full freedom from sin does not come for us until the resurrection, the redemption of our bodies of which Paul speaks in Romans 8. The church has to a considerable extent lost sight of the

⁷ Rufinus, *Commentary on the Creed* 22. Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers. Series 2, Vol. 3. Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1989, p. 552.

⁸ Allan D Galloway. **The Cosmic Christ**. London: Nisbet & Co., 1951, p. 9.

promise of the resurrection that is our hope, yet to be fulfilled, but certain as it is founded in the promises of God. As a result of the loss of this vision, the Christian community has thereby lost sight of the significance of life in this world and its redemption in Christ. Human life is bodily life, life in this world. As a result of seeing this present life as of little importance, the hope of the resurrection of the body and the renewal of the earth are both minimised. This indicates an anti-creational stance in the church, which has not come to terms with this world.

By denying the goodness of the creation in which we live, we are in fact showing contempt for the handiwork of God, not to say his own clear approval of this world recorded in Genesis 1-2. There we read not only that each of God's creatures was good, but that the entire created order in all its richness and diversity, in its complex and intimate inter-relatedness, was "very good." However, if we see human life in this world as the good thing which God declares it to be throughout the Scriptures, and if we look for the renewal and continuation of this world as the Scriptures teach us to do, then caring for and nurturing this world in responsible stewardship, including all our bodily activities, will become significant and meaningful.

By considering the future of humanity separately from the future of the rest of creation is one indication that for us the rest of creation did not really matter, and our relationship to it is not that important. But if God created us to serve him as stewards of the creation, then for us to find redemption without the rest of the creation is to leave us less than we were originally created to be. God would then have stewards with nothing to care for.

But as a result of our alienation from this world, not only do we fail to grasp the significance and worth of our tasks here and now, we are also ready to see the whole place go up in smoke and to abandon it forever. What then of the passages which seem to indicate that the earth will be destroyed? For instance, 2 Peter 3:10 seems to say that the world will be destroyed by fire. But this passage does not say what it appears to in many translations. The NIV expresses it more accurately:

The heavens will disappear with a roar, the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.

Just what it means for the elements to be destroyed by fire is unclear. But it evidently does not mean that the world will be destroyed, since the earth will be laid bare, not

burnt up. Perhaps the best interpretation is that it will be revealed for what it really is, that is, it will be seen for its true self when the bondage placed upon it because of sin is removed. It is the purging of the earth from the dross of human sin that is envisaged, not the destruction of the earth itself.⁹ A Biblical eschatology is the story of the triumph of God's plan of redemption. It is not the abandonment of this earth but the final overthrow of all the forces of evil which seek to make this earth into something other than God's intention for it. The future of the earth is not to be destroyed so we can be set free from sin and evil, but for sin and evil to be destroyed so that we and the earth might be set free.

At the return of Christ we will see all things fully restored through the redemption of Christ, and on the new earth every area of life will be subject to the Father. Christ will rule in the world to come; all the kingdoms of this world will become his kingdom, there will be no other king. The dead will be raised, the wicked judged and the faithful servants of God will enter into eternal life. That eternal life will not be in some cloudy heaven, outside of time and unsullied with the things of this present earth. It will rather be a new life for the redeemed on an earth which has been purified from the contamination of human sin. The return of Christ to reign on earth is not a temporary interlude before we all are taken to heaven, but it is the culmination of the whole plan of redemption. The earth and all its creatures will be restored to newness at the return of Christ, culminating all the work of redemption which has been going on through all ages.

But not only will the redeemed be living together as God intended, on a new earth. Then the task of caring for the new earth will be carried out in obedience to God. We will then still be human creatures, with physical (though glorified) bodies, dwelling together on an earth which will continue to require our attention. We will then be able to fulfil our original calling, to care for and develop the earth in obedience and faith, as God has created us to do. And we will do this, as an enormous community of believers from every tribe, language and race, as well as every time. At present we still await this renewal, and can only do our work obediently, seeking redemption of our lives now, while we hold the hope of the renewal of all things before us. However, we can have confidence that our work in caring for the earth that He loves will be blessed by the Lord and that at His appearing our work will be revealed for the kind of work that it is.

⁹ For details of this approach see the article by A Wolters. Worldview and textual criticism in 2 Peter 3:10. *Westminster Theological Journal* 49 (1987) 405-413.

First published in *Christian-Brethren Research Fellowship Journal* 124 (March 1991):9-15.
Reprinted in: **Responsibility for our Natural Environment**. C Gousmett and A T Chimuka.
Potchefstroom: Institute for Reformational Studies, Study Pamphlet 350. February 1997, pp. 1-18.
